

Telling Tales of Survival and Dislocation:  
An Ethnography of Single Mothers, Identity, and Social Space.

by

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1994

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*Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay*

Telling Tales of Survival and Dislocation: An Ethnography  
of Single Mothers, Identity, and Social Space

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## Abstract

The social category "single mother" has been constructed as marginal by discourses and practices that normalize and naturalize "nuclear family" and "married mother." This particular construction of single motherhood affects the identity formations of the women living within this category. This thesis examines the meanings that women ascribe to their experiences and identities as single mothers and shows how this social space is one of struggle and dislocation for them. This thesis is anthropological and is guided by literature in social and cultural anthropology, especially feminist ethnography, as well as by literature in postcolonial studies and feminist geography.

Through life narratives, the women assert the difficulties they are challenged with as single mothers, and how these challenges can be both oppressive and transformative for them. The women also impart how they must confront negative social images of single mothers in their everyday lives and spaces, and suggest that these marginalizing discourses are disruptive for them in various ways.

Narrative is used as the primary method of investigation, as a way of accessing personal meanings, interpretations and contestations. Life story narratives were collected through interviews conducted with eight women from various backgrounds and all living in the Vancouver area. Excerpts from these narratives are included in the thesis, and form the basis of the analysis.

The analysis explores the themes of survival and dislocation as salient experiences in the lives of these women. Their most pressing messages were that their lives were difficult, not only in terms of their material conditions, but also in terms of their social and emotional circumstances. By examining the specific ways that the women are affected by marginality, the thesis identifies various implications regarding the processes of categorization and identity. While the degree of resistance to the category "single mother"

varied across the women, all of them engaged in transformative work of one kind or another, in order to create positive multi-stranded identities as single mothers.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my son, Alex.

## Acknowledgments

There are many people I need to thank.

First of all, I am indebted to those who helped me with childcare and provided Alex with a warm and loving circle of caregivers and friends while I have been involved in this project. Rupy, Colleen, and Bev, at the SFU Crackers Daycare, have been consistently supportive to both of us over the past two years. Gulla and Willi's, and Nancy's, have truly been homes-away-from home for Alex. Simon and Julian have been the best pals a six year old could ask for.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge Tim, for negotiating with me our own terms of family and home, under what have been challenging times. We continue to learn so much.



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## Chapter One

### STARTING POINTS

I begin with the proposition that it is worth talking to women about their lives.  
-Diane Bell, Gendered Fields: Men, Women, and Ethnography (1993:30)

#### **Introduction: An Arrival Story**

On December 31, 1991 I arrived in Vancouver, on a plane from an island in the Caribbean that had been my home for ten years, with my three year old son and naive thoughts about my new life as a single mother. Six days later I had found us a place to live- a rented house near the university- and enrolled him in pre-school and myself in full-time course work to finish an arts degree I had started many years earlier. Four years later I was in the midst of fieldwork for this thesis, interviewing women about their experiences as single mothers. What I could not know on that first day in January was how much more difficult it would be to raise my son and live my life as a single parent than I had then imagined, nor could I have known that I would be speaking with women who had made similar frantic attempts to get their lives back in order, and who had also found their emergent identities as single mothers to be a source of both constraint and resource.

This thesis is about the women I interviewed during my fieldwork in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada in 1995 and 1996, and their "arrival" stories as single mothers as they recounted them to me. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson have told us that research problems and settings "are not naturally occurring phenomena" (1983:43) but are constructed out of the experiences and "foreshadowed problems" (Malinowski in *ibid*:29) we bring with us to the field. Therefore, I include myself here because my story is an important part of the historicity of this project. This project began with my own experiences, and has been an attempt at documenting, theorizing, and ethnographically representing the nuanced meanings

of single motherhood and diverse practices of single mothers, in a search to understand my own situation as well as theirs.

In Chapter One I outline the research problem and trace the emergence of this question from my own experience to the theory I have read within anthropology, feminist ethnography, postcolonial studies and feminist geography that provides a useful framework for examining what I call the social space of single motherhood. I then briefly contextualize the "problem of identity" within contemporary popular and scholarly discourses to suggest how identity is problematic for some women who are single mothers. Finally, I provide clarification of the analytical terms and perspective that informs my interpretation of single mothers, identity, and social space. Chapter Two provides an orientation to the feminist methodology I drew upon to collect data, analyze it, and write it up, and provides bibliographic sketches of the interviewees. Chapters Three and Four are the main ethnographic chapters and are outlined in the next section. Chapter Five provides the conclusion in terms of analytical, substantive, and methodological implications of my research.

### **Participant Observation**

Margaret spoke tonight about her situation at her son's daycare. The parent-run daycare has raised the monthly fee and Margaret cannot afford to pay it. She is already receiving the maximum subsidy and cannot get anymore funding from the government. She will have to move Brett to another daycare. She was very upset. This appears to be a situation which is causing Margaret to come to terms with 'being a single mother,' or at least, where her private life is becoming public, and she feels uncomfortable... She does not want the other parents to know [of] her 'situation,' and is afraid that she will somehow be categorized and discriminated against by the other parents and the Board... Margaret is determined to do what she can to keep Brett at the daycare... but refuses to make this an 'issue'... It is extremely personal to her (personal journal 1994).<sup>1</sup>

This entry from my personal journal is used to introduce a social situation and a set of ideas that has emerged from it. In the fall of 1993 I joined a single mothers' support group of eight women that met weekly at a local community centre. The purpose of the meetings was to provide support to one another in a broad sense, meaning that we spent much time discussing

the management, organization, and practices of our lives as women raising children "alone." Problems, and strategies for approaching those problems, were often raised. Various discursive practices of "support" and "resources" for single mothers in Vancouver were introduced to me (and I discuss them in Chapter Three) and I began to see single motherhood as a social situation framed by these, and other particular discourses,<sup>2</sup> and played out in the discussions of our group and the wider single mother service community (which is outlined further in Chapter Two). Moreover, I began to see the women as variously well-versed in the local and specialized knowledges required to navigate the often treacherous waters of single motherhood.

In this thesis I examine some of the ways and contexts in which women negotiate their identities as single mothers.<sup>3</sup> Through life story<sup>4</sup> interviews with eight women from various backgrounds living in the Vancouver area, I examine the influence of discursive and nondiscursive practices on the negotiation of the women's identities. This thesis is an attempt to respond to the narratives the women recounted to me about their experiences and identities as single mothers by documenting excerpts of their stories that I found as most salient and forceful, and theorizing these experiences. I am interested in looking at the ways the social category and label "single mother" is negotiated by the women themselves- the ways the women talk about it, use it, imbue it with meaning, and deal with it, in their everyday lives. These negotiations, in turn, say something about the way that the social space of single motherhood is constructed, through practices about gender and place, for example, that naturalize and privilege the social cosmology of "married mother" and "nuclear family." I explore and ethnographically map out some of the specifics of this social space in terms of the experiences, meanings and subjectivities generated in and constitutive of these sites, from the point of view of the women I interviewed, as I have come to understand it.

It is important that the reader understand that this thesis is a partial account of particular single mothers speaking in particular terms about their identities and experiences. I have intentionally focused on, for reasons that I discuss at length in the rest of this chapter

and Chapter Two, the struggles that the women encountered in their negotiations of their identities and the negativity that this brings to bear on their experiences and accounts. This thesis, then, does not represent, nor intend to represent, the full range of experiences in the women's lives. While the women recounted to me their tales of hardship and disdain for their situations as single mothers in response to a particular set of questions (see Appendix One), it is critical to also consider how this thesis might be different had the questions I asked been different. It is also critical to consider how the participants themselves might have differed (women for whom single motherhood is not a marginalizing experience, for example).

As Margaret's situation suggests, highlighting one's identity as a single mother is not always strategically effective since "single mother" is a highly contested identity mediated through myriad public images, professional and popular discourses and social-spatial contexts. My observations while in the group developed into a research interest that concretized over the next year. The narrative above serves to illustrate how my participation in this group was a turning point in this process of developing my research. Margaret's knowledge of available resources and necessary strategies was impressive, but so was her resistance to the seemingly punitive label "single mother" and its consequences. What can this resistance tell us about single motherhood as a socially mediated situation and as a cultural narrative? How can stories of single motherhood help us understand processes of categorization and marginalization?

*People don't want to understand, and they are not really called to. When they do hear about your struggles, they say 'wow' and they're amazed. But I find that it sets up walls between people, between me and regular folk. Sometimes it's good that you can share that, but it depends on the circumstances.*

*I didn't want to be a single mother, at all. But for at least the first five years I would get angry about the fact that I was on my own and had to do it myself, and I still find that hard.*

-Rose (interview 1996) <sup>5</sup>

*When I'm out there, in the playgrounds with my son and there's mothers and fathers I feel like a sore thumb. I'm labeling myself major! And it's not a good label. I don't ever think that people think of it as a choice. I think the majority of public out there thinks, 'oh she's been left.' Or they assume that 'she couldn't keep a man.' Or you*

*know... it could be my own fears, but it's as though it didn't work out for me. Not that I'm a bad person, but not as worthy as the ones that are married. I know those are my hang-ups, but...*

-Rebecca (interview 1995)

The narratives of Rose and Rebecca<sup>6</sup> serve to illustrate the major themes I deal with in this thesis. The most important things the women wanted to tell me, I believe, were the difficulty of their lives and what this meant for them in terms of material, social, and emotional consequences. Another fundamental point they raised referred to how they must confront their own and public images and stereotypes of "single mother," and how disruptive these images are for them in terms of trying to construct positive identities and "getting on" with their lives. Chapter Three, "Testimony to Survival," details some of the specific struggles the women testified to and the various social spaces these struggles took place in. I argue that the narratives can be read as testimonials to survival in that the women talked about experiences of "barely surviving" lives fraught with difficulties which they cast as particular to single mothers: isolation, financial strain, relentless hard work, and the experiences of not "being heard." I struggle with the analytical and ethnographic question of how this individual experience gets constructed as a collective experience or "common ground" of single motherhood. Chapter Four, "Dislocations from Public Space," examines the material and experiential, or "lived," conditions and consequences of being within this category, and seeks to go beyond a focus on the discursive strategies of identity. The women spoke of their "predicaments" as deeply felt experiences which were variously shaped by their locations in social, and public, spaces, and I attempt to enunciate some of these specific times and places of dislocation in their lives.

---

### **The "Problem" of Identity**

About this problem of 'identity,' I'd say that it's important to know the resonances, for as many hearers as possible, of what you are claiming... the politics would be more effective if you knew the different ways in which *you were likely to be heard*, what your assertion of identity was *doing*.

Denise Riley, in *Feminists Theorize the Political* (1992:121)

The central assumption in this ethnography is that the state of being "single mother" is, categorically, one of marginalization. In a particular way, single motherhood has become an exigency of recent historical prominence, at least in North America.<sup>7</sup> By this I mean that while "single motherhood" has been an experience and practice for many women in many times and places,<sup>8</sup> this "experience" has been given a historically specific name and constitutive set of defining features, and therefore a particular visibility, from about the 1920s to the present, in Canada and the United States (Gordon 1988, O'Connor 1981).<sup>9</sup> The existence of women raising children "alone"<sup>10</sup> is viewed in general public discussions, most notably the family values rhetoric of the politics of the new Right, as the root cause of a range of current social "problems" variously described under the umbrella phrase "the breakdown of the family" (Young 1994). What is important to recognize is the cultural inscription of particular social relations onto the women and their households such that specific identities and ascriptive characteristics have been created. Anthropologist Henrietta Moore has explained this process in this way,

Conjugal arrangements, residence rights... not only describe sets of social and economic relations, but also encode ideas about gender ideologies, and about the different natures, tasks and roles of men and women... Differentiated social identities are related to the exercise of power, because the very definitions of those identities are connected to normative or conventional explanations for the social order, as well as to legitimations of that order. This is most particularly the case where social definitions of identity are based on ascriptive characteristics which themselves form the basis for power relations and institutionalized inequalities. In such cases- for example, landowner/peasant, husband/wife... social definitions of identity serve to naturalize inequality (1994:92).

We are led to see then, the social construction of this category- of women-headed-father-absence households- as somehow deviant; or at any rate second-best to idealized nuclear family households; and importantly, as "the basis for power relations and institutionalized inequalities" (ibid:92). The language that is used to describe single mothers and their families and households reflects commonly held social ideas about "normal" and "natural" family configurations (Fineman 1995). "Broken," "incomplete," and "father absent," are terms often used to describe single-mother families (Febbraro 1994), while "intact" is used to describe nuclear families (Lero and Brockman 1993). This constellation of ideas is deeply

embedded in professional and public discourses. For example, literature on the sociology of the family considers that, "single parent families, by definition, are dysfunctional aberrations, rather than an alternate family form that can function well..." (ibid:92). This statement (which I use to represent a range of discursive practices that coalesce into what I consider the dominant social idea about single motherhood), although meant to legitimate single motherhood, ends up nevertheless constructing it as an *alternate* state of existence, while the "norm" remains protected. <sup>11</sup>

The problem I examine in this thesis is that which lies in the negotiation of marginalizing discourses in the everyday lives of women who are single mothers, particularly in relation to the creation of their own identities. Negotiations take place in a variety of settings that embody particular sets of social relations such as children's schools, the Ministry of Social Services, neighbourhoods, families, courtrooms, and so forth; and are enacted through various forms such as silence, as in the scenario of Margaret, and resistance and reconstruction, as in the following example taken from the local newspaper. <sup>12</sup> A single mother writes,

Perhaps if I were more spiritually evolved I'd be grateful to people who regularly irritate me by referring to one-parent families as 'broken homes' or 'dysfunctional.' Perhaps I'd thank them for the opportunity to experience for myself what it feels like to be unthinkingly stereotyped. Alas, I am not so evolved. Rather than gratitude, I feel misjudged and annoyed. I am tired of the headlines, tired of the thoughtless remarks, tired of the simplistic explanations that blame so many of society's ills on the 'breakdown of the family'...

The truth is, I prefer being a single parent. I love having the freedom to create my own life and I love the wonderful, close relationship I have with my daughter (well, most of the time)...(Sharon McInnes 1996).

Anthropologists Faye Ginsburg and Anna Tsing (1990), in their work on the negotiation of gender, offer a twofold use of "negotiation" as an analytical tool. Negotiation, as in "negotiating a deal," can show how "gendered terms and social relations are often debated and redefined by people pursuing particular and conflicting interests;" and negotiation, as in "negotiating a river," can show how people "struggle with the ideas and institutions they live in" (ibid:2). An emphasis on negotiation serves to historicize and particularize the social construction of "single mother," and operates on the assumption that, like "gender," "single



mother" is not a fixed, natural, or unified category but rather a multi-faceted one open to change and variation (ibid.).

Identity is a problem then, to the extent that women's lives are affected by what I am calling marginalizing discourses, and to the extent that the women are engaged in "transformative work" (Mullings 1995) <sup>13</sup> of one kind or another aimed at creating positive identities as single mothers. These marginalizing discourses reduce, constrain, and inhibit women's reconfigurations and representations of their own set of circumstances and the meanings these hold for them. The woman above has written, "The truth is...", and then she presents herself in her terms contesting the dominant stereotype. This kind of negotiation is on-going for many single mothers, and its salience as a "problem" is both reflected in, and facilitated by, the initiatives of local service organizations for single mothers. <sup>14</sup> The question that feminist scholar Denise Riley poses regarding how one's assertions of identity are heard and understood by diverse audiences is a crucial one, and it is prudent to look at the specific assertions of identity and the contexts in which it is a problem for the women.

### Theoretical Links

Theoretical links lie between the anthropologist's experiential, embodied knowledge, its continuing resonances and the ultimate printed text.

-Judith Okely, in Anthropology and Autobiography (1992:24)

Much has been written on the necessity of self-reflexivity in ethnographic texts in order to show how we arrive at our understandings (see Okely 1992, Hastrup and Hervik 1994). I attempt here to briefly trace the "continuing resonances" (Okely 1992:24) between my personal and fieldwork experiences and the emergent theoretical framework from which I analyze single mothers, identity, and social space.

#### myself as starting point

As I wrote in the introduction, I became a single mother four years ago when my son was three, and I left my marriage of ten years. A child of white, Catholic, working class, second-generation Canadian parents, who experienced a "stable" childhood- we lived in the same

suburban house for eighteen years- I was the only daughter to be divorced. I returned to Canada in my early thirties after a ten year absence during which time I had traveled and built a home and business in the Caribbean with my then husband. I now left behind relative financial stability for the financial insecurity I currently experience as a full-time student.

I did not find this new social location to be an easy one. I experienced it as a moment of multiple loss: of family, home, income, dreams, identity. I experienced this moment also as one in which I found myself categorized by socially marked difference. Up until that point, as a white woman of relative privilege and mobility, I had moved through life with an "unmarked and unnamed status" (Frankenberg 1993:1).<sup>15</sup> Postcolonial theorist Lati Mani has said, referring to her own resistance to a "falsely unifying and globalizing " "postcolonial" identity, "not having grown up as the Other in my society, I do not expect to be positioned as such" (Frankenberg and Mani 1993:397). This echoes my own prolonged experience of discordances in being repositioned *single* mother- a similarly false and unifying identity- after years of being *married* mother. I never *imagined* that I would be in this *position*, a seemingly indefensible one.<sup>16</sup> Yet, there I was, catching bits of conversation at my son's school, "well, she's a single mother, you *know*." <sup>17</sup> This was now talk about me, and for many reasons it affected me strongly. Looking back now, to the days when I was married, I see that my own image of a single mother had been mediated by discourses that cast divorced and unmarried mothers as default positions.<sup>18</sup>

Not insignificantly, my position as an "insider" ethnographer shapes this project in a particular way. Anthropologist Kamala Visweswaren has drawn my attention to the particular shaping power of an anthropology that seeks "the understanding of how identities (national, ethnic, gender) are determined by the exigencies of history" and which relies on the position of the anthropologist to implement (1994:139). In order to interrogate the historical and political determinations of *identity* one must *first be in a position* that begs, or moves, that interrogation (ibid; emphasis mine). And that position may be an insider, and oppositional, one:

... those of us involved in identifying ethnography may be moved by different sets of questions concerning power, domination, and representation... we may ourselves be positioned (and not only by choice) in opposition to dominant discourses and structures of power (ibid:140).

This notion of "being moved" to examine questions of identity, power, and categorization, is useful. More than just a subject position, it is also what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989) has called the emotional *force* of being in a position, that has motivated this analysis.

The origin of the research problem can be traced, then, to my personal experience of being "othered" in a social space where assertions and assumptions of nuclear home remind me of my "incompleteness." My own experiences of multiple dislocations and losses in the course of becoming a single mother has begged the understanding of what I began to see as a "predicament."<sup>19</sup> The examination of other women's experiences derives from my desire to understand their "exigencies of history" (Visweswaren 1994:139) and the significances they place on their identities as single mothers, and to locate myself and them on a social map. Finding myself in a category, circumscribed and named, also moves me to question the constructed commonality of "single mother."

What we read in the "field," of course, has much to do with the development of our research.<sup>20</sup> In the course of trying to comprehend single motherhood I saw theoretical parallels in feminist, postcolonial, geography, and the anthropology of space and place literature. The following synopsis outlines the most pertinent theoretical links in terms of how they contributed to the emergent understanding of my observations in the field.

#### identity as mobile and processual

One of the most striking ideas for me at the beginning of my research was that of conjunctural or processual identities, in contrast to essential identities, put forth by a number of postcolonial and feminist theorists (see Hall 1986, Frankenberg and Lati Mani 1993, Visweswaren 1994). What impressed me was a notion of identity as neither "pure" or homogenous, nor free floating. Identities arised out of complex relationships occurring within and between specific, yet shifting, time frames and historical locations.

In a paper for a theory course, I wrote:

In struggling with an answer to the question of how it is, in any essential way, that I am a single mother, images and memories of becoming, of accepting, of literally learning how to be, a single mother, come to mind. This identity, then, is hardly stable insofar as it has not even gelled completely in my own consciousness. In regards to my identity as a 'single mother' then, it can only be seen as in flux, partial, resistant... This is the general point with which this paper ultimately comes to... 'identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories (Malkki 1992:37)' (Krygsveld 1994).

What was clearly central for me was understanding the identity of single mothers as temporal and contextual. What seemed to reflect my own experiences was a notion of identity that was much more fluid and heterogeneous than the rigid demarcation of mother-without-male-in-the-house-raising-children-on-her-own alleges it to be. Some women I knew had male partners sharing household space and nevertheless called themselves single mothers, while another, the mother of grown children, no longer felt this identity was appropriate for her. Sometimes it mattered to be considered a "single mother," such as when applying for daycare subsidies at the Ministry of Social Services, or attending a single mothers' conference; other times it did not.

I saw how identity was both constructed and strategic in the contexts of the support groups and social groups that I had become involved with. But while a single mother identity could be framed as mobile (in that it mattered less in particular contexts and more in others), it was seldom discarded altogether. At the root of the strategic power of a single mother identity (to demand an audience, for example, in the case of the single mother's conference) was a wider social opposition to single motherhood insofar as it was historically and culturally constructed as a site of neediness and pathology. For many of the women speaking from within these settings it seemed to me that they were caught in a bind between identification with single motherhood as a badge of courage and strength, and as a label of need and pathology.

home as a contested site of identity

A concern for me at the beginning of this research was the problem of how to theorize single motherhood as a unifying identity. While it was quite obvious that there is no unitary "single mother," and that the meaning of this identity could be seen as highly contentious across individual women, there was a commonality that I felt needed to be theorized. While it is easy to deconstruct the category to the point of claiming no such thing (by virtue of heterogeneity, by virtue of the oxymoronic aspect of the term single/mother, for example) I felt that the predicament remains: drawn into one category by a marker ("the missing male") (Fineman 1995) single mothers share to some degree the consequences of this unifying partition. It became apparent in the community that I was part of, that there was a "list" of common issues amongst single mothers- child custody, support payments, access and visitation, childcare, housing, isolation, stigma, to name a few. While the women's experiences of single parenting were cross-cut by a variety of differences including age, number of children, occupation, extra-household and/ or familial support, cultural or religious beliefs about marriage, sexuality and so forth, there was nevertheless, as one single mother explained it, "common ground." <sup>21</sup>

I turned to feminist analyses of "home" (Kaplan 1987, Martin and Mohanty 1986, Rose 1993). What held my attention here was the power and appeal of home as a site from which to theorize single motherhood. Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty's (1986) scathing critique of unexamined sentimentalized notions of home as a familiar, safe, protected place that feed the political rhetoric of the New Right, drew my attention to home as a site wherein difference is socially constructed. Embedded in the discourse of "broken home" lies a differentiation that is naturalized by a cosmology of social space that conventionalizes home as "haven, hearth, field of care, man's, Mother" (Rose 1993). Home, as man's place where-woman-belongs, acts as a symbolic legitimation of a particular arrangement of social relations (ibid:51). This makes "home" a far from innocuous space. It is crucial to realize that home, for some women, according to Martin and Mohanty, was "an illusion of coherence and safety based

on specific histories of oppression and resistance" (1986:196), but yet it is the *desire* for home, for sameness, and for harmony that enables and enforces these repressions (ibid).

Home, then, can be seen as the site of constructed difference and "fracture." By this I mean that the homes of single mothers are constructed as "broken" by dominant ideas about conventional, ideal, nuclear, and "intact" homes that they are differentiated from. But home is also an experience fraught with multiple disruptions in that some women must cope with the material consequences of "breaking" and "remaking" nuclear home, for example, and the negotiations and reconstructions that takes place on the ground for them. There is another sense of disruption that some women must deal with, and this goes back to Martin and Mohanty's (1986) notion of home as a desire- the image of a *certain kind of home* is irreversibly broken. It seemed to me that for myself and other women I talked to that home was no longer the place "we knew," not only as a physical site but as a "place in our minds."

In this sense, home became an important analytical site from which to mark out fruitful differences between women because they were not "broken" nor "fractured" the same way. Furthermore, I saw that while home was indeed a site of disruption and contest for many of the women I knew, in terms of dealing with newly binucleated households<sup>22</sup> and often quite difficult custodial arrangements, for example, it was also a place of transformation and assertion of a positive identity. The point became to interrogate the degrees to which the circumscription of "brokenness" mattered in the lives of women, and to which home is an important identity-making site.

"matter out of place:" pathology of uprootedness

These conceptualizations of home and identity allowed me to see single motherhood as a complex constellation of practices and subjectivities produced by myriad agency, structure and social forces. The research problem was evolving from one that queried single mother as an individual experience of being "othered" and of "becoming, accepting, learning how to be single mother" (Krygvseld 1994) to one that wanted to push its social ontology. How did

"single mother" come to be a concept of pathology and deviance? What were the consequences of this in terms of experience, practice and selfhood?

I found that current ideas around the politics of space and place within anthropology were compelling perhaps because in a striking way they refracted back to me my own concerns with loss, difference, and geography. I began to explore the potential of theories that traffic in spatial-political explanations, ones that broadened the understanding of home to a wider sense of the meaning of "place." In a second paper I wrote:

What strikes me is the way 'home,' conceptualized as shifting, fragmentary, crucial, enunciates an axis or intersection, so to speak, in which single motherhood is about the struggle for renegotiating our own terms of 'home' and exclusion. By thinking of home as a negotiated and struggled-for space, single mothers can be seen as 'taking on' a political sensibility about our own territoriality/space. In this sense, single motherhood as an identity can be conceptualized not exactly as 'displaced person' or 'refugee' but yet not far from that either (Krygsveld 1995).

This idea of single mother as refugee came to me when I learned of a special apartment building being built locally to house single mothers fitting specific criteria.<sup>23</sup> There was to be a resource worker and counsellor on-site (similar to a concierge). In the material construction of building a space for women with "special needs" I saw two assumptions that led me to borrow from anthropologist Lisa Malkki's (1992) analysis of "refugeeness." First, "single mother" is seen as a transitional, liminal state of existence, circumscribed by specific indices such as age, and financial and emotional "need." Second, it is seen as a "stage" that requires intervention, in this case, by the resource worker and counsellor providing psychological, and therapeutic, and occupational (or "life skills") management.

Malkki's analysis of refugeeness, uprootedness, and the "national (read: natural) order of things," provided insight to understanding how widely held assumptions linking people to place enables a pathology of "rootlessness" for certain deterritorialized populations (1992:27). Malkki makes the point that refugees, as persons uprooted from their home soil, represent to some scholars and refugee "practitioners," the metaphysical antithesis of "rootedness" in that their "loss of bodily connections to their homelands... come to be treated as a loss of moral bearing... rootless, they are no longer trustworthy" (ibid:32). As persons

without roots, refugees require spatial correctives: they need somehow to be relocated, in a "proper" place. The refugee camp<sup>24</sup> can be seen as a technology of power entailing the management of refugee space and movement (ibid:34). Transporting this analogy metaphorically, to the context of single mothers living in the single mothers' apartment building, for example, it works on two levels. First, single mothers can be seen as "uprooted" from the natural order of the (conventional, nuclear) "family" and are thus symbolically displaced. Second, as persons without the "stability" that a so-called conventional home provides, single mothers are seen as needing to be re-located to a suitable (managed) site.

The danger for people who represent "matter out of place" (Douglas in Malkki 1992), is that displacement comes to be seen as an inner, pathological condition of the displaced rather than as a geo-political event. The "problem" for refugees and single mothers is seen not in the social, political and economic processes that contribute to their movement into the camps (and special apartment buildings) in the first place but in the selves that have (been) moved. This construction of an internalized pathology, then, turns selves into objects of therapeutic management (Malkki 1992).

The agency of the "displaced" person must not be obscured in this framework. As Malkki says, displacement and exile, and the claim to refugee identity is also a claim for "categorical purity:" the in-between-ness of a person in a refugee camp no longer a citizen yet not yet an immigrant can be seen as an assertion of "my (pure) culture" (1992:35). While some of the women in these examples were made to move by economic exigencies such as affordable rents they also made a choice to move to the special housing unit and certainly mediated whatever space they inhabited within it. Caren Kaplan has made the cogent point that whether it is possible for individuals to *choose* deterritorialization or whether deterritorialization is chosen for them, "both positions are constructed by world systems but hardly equal" (1987:191). The problem, then, becomes one of identity, power, and space, and the multiple and unequal ways that subjectivities are inscribed onto the women I research, and what this means to them.



### Points of Departure: "Displacement," "Space," "Location"

... what do we [as 'family'] hold onto and what do we need to let go; what do we translate ('carry over') through periods of change, at our peril and for our survival... what happens to the assumption of what 'family' is, when the family in question has been uprooted or otherwise displaced from its cultural mooring.

-Angelika Bammer, Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question (1994b:92)

In this thesis, I enunciate some of the specific ways that women negotiate their identities as single mothers. I operate with the assumption that identity (as discursive practices) and material conditions are not separate realms of experience. The struggles with identity that I have observed (and which are mapped out in Chapters Two and Three) must be seen as connected to material difficulties and constraints that the women, including myself, have experienced (and that I do not want to obscure or diminish) as well as to intervening discourses and the social-spatial contexts in which identity is expressed. It is crucial that the reader recognize that this understanding of single motherhood is a partial and particular one, grounded in theoretical discourses about displacement, uprootedness, loss, and home. Before proceeding with the rest of the thesis, I first want to clarify the way I am using the theoretical ideas about displacement and uprootedness manifested in my analogies to refugees and immigrants, and to outline my use of the terms "social space" and "location."

My emphasis on home and loss comes from the postcolonial and feminist writings I have outlined briefly in the last section, and from my personal experience. My own "return" to my place of origin, Canada, after years of living "away," concurrent with my becoming a single mother, has made me aware of constructions of home, identity, and movement, insofar as I have renegotiated selfhood under shifting conditions of residency, household, family, and social category. The postcolonial material underpinning my interpretation of single motherhood reflects a similar concern with shifting place and identity. The intent behind postcolonial projects, as Julia Emberley, who has posed a critique of postcolonial discourse, has claimed, is "an effort [by literary and cultural critics such as Said, Bhabha, and Spivak] to heal the dislocation and alienation that has ruptured the ties between a 'homeland' and

academic privilege" (Emberley 1993:5). While I see important resonances then, I am also critical of the tendency to essentialize place and identity in some of these materials.

It is important to clarify my usage of postcolonial theory. Although I see analytical similarities between the categories "single mother," "refugee," and "immigrant," I do not want to efface critically different and historically located experiences of specific geo-political exiles, migrations, and incarcerations. I understand that the very question of "post-colonial" is a different one for indigenous groups displaced by internal colonization, for example. <sup>25</sup>

Angelika Bammer has been expressed caution over the valorization of a generalized marginality in recent cultural theory:

... as we ever more obsessively attempt to specify our precise locations... our sense of identity is ineluctably, it seems, marked by a postmodern geography of identity: both here *and* there and neither here *nor* there at one and the same time. It is in this sense and for this reason that marginality and otherness increasingly figure as the predominant affirmative signifiers of (postmodern) identity. Indeed, it would appear, almost by definition, that to 'be' in the postmodern sense is somehow to be an Other: displaced... The problem with this notion of displacement is that differences, thus universalized, disappear (Bammer 1994a:xii).

With this critique in mind, I do not want to claim "single mother" as an experience or identity that compares with the conditions of "refugee." Visweswaren has warned, "Not all identities are equally hybrid, for some have little choice about the political processes determining their hybridization" (1994:132). I emphasize here, then, that the parallels to refugees, immigrant women, and conditions of "peril," "survival," and "exile" I present are *heuristic*, used to *problematize* the category "single mother," and to critically open it up. At the same time however, this means recognizing that these categories, although distinct, are not entirely disconnected. My thesis does not address this ethnographically and so it remains a theoretical issue. Yet, I do not want to obscure the reality that most refugees are women and children (Malkki 1995), and that many immigrant women are also single mothers. In this sense, while these analytical parallels are problematic, I use them to make claims about the social construction of categories and experiences because they hold resonance. The families that Bammer (1994b) refers to (in the opening quote above) are those families uprooted from their "homelands" through diaspora, transglobal labour, and civil unrest. I use "cultural mooring"

(ibid.) in a different way- to challenge our assumptions about what family means in socio-political terms and in everyday practices. What do families do to retain continuity through "local" (rather than "global") changes, such as divorce and separation, and household relocations? How do these changes and movements effect women's identities and everyday practices?

Feminist writings on home, place, and identity are also concerned with "local." Visweswaren has criticized an over-emphasis on a global displacement: "A blurring of the boundaries between 'here' and 'there' does not mean that we need to jump immediately from the local to the translocal, but that we need to rethink the construction of the local 'here'... instead of valorizing a certain placelessness" (1994:111). People live in "resolutely local places" and the point is to enunciate the "here" that matters to them (ibid.). Caren Kaplan (1990) has called for analyses that pay attention to the local production of strategic identities based in historicized struggles. This solution, posited under the rubric "politics of location,"<sup>26</sup> transcends the slipperiness of placelessness, by looking at how location, or place, orders and disqualifies certain experiences (Probyn 1992:186).

In this thesis my use of the term "social space" is in reference to the way in which single motherhood constitutes and generates experiences and subjectivities. Complementary to my use of social space then, is my reference to "location" which speaks to the way in which one's position within this space mediates these experiences and subjectivities. There are a number of ways that I use these terms. Location articulates "the ground and conditions we speak from" and "which voices are sanctioned" (Kaplan 1994:149). It incorporates not only "who we are" but importantly, "where we are," (Bondi 1993:98) and refers to "physical place and the more intangible parameters of being: subject positions in discourse and political and personal identity" (Kirby 1996:18). More specifically, I use location to refer to symbolic positionings such as "marginal," "outside," "inside," "alone," "separated," and "secure," the women describe, and material positions such as rented basement suites, and trailer parks, they occupy. These positionings delineate "what we hold as knowable" (Probyn 1992:178), and thus,

effect how we mediate and represent our identities and experiences. I use "social space" to denote the social and political constitution of spaces (how spaces gets "mapped out" by dominant knowledge claims) and subjects (the ways in which subjects are the effects of space). How are spaces made, imagined, contested, enforced (see Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Rodman 1992)? I see social space as a grid on which identities get charted by myriad discursive and nondiscursive practices. More specifically, "social space" in this thesis refers to the abstract terrain of imagination and ideas about single motherhood (discursive practices) that try to "pin down" "single mother" to one thing, such as "young, welfare mother," for example, as well as concrete places of social relations such as families and schools that are embodied in the spatial contexts in which "single mother" gets played out. I want to pay attention to complexity and nuance in the meanings ascribed to single mother, and therefore am compelled towards a notion of space that takes into account corporeal, discursive, geographic, social, and multiple dimensions (see Kirby 1996, Rose 1993). This use of space allows us to see how subjects are located within systems of meanings (for example, the discourses of "broken home," and "stability") that are fixed yet interpretable.

Importantly, my use of space and location is meant to show the specifics of how women "take up" and occupy space, or not, and is therefore political. Feminist geographers (see Kirby 1996, Massey 1994b, Rose 1993) argue that space can be oppressive for some women and an important register for embodied experiences and knowledges. Examining women's experiences of everyday spaces shows how their lives and subjectivities are delimited and imagined through not merely discursive but spatial practices as well, and shows how spatial contexts are important to the negotiation of identities. I want to claim a presence in order to subvert the assertion women made of occupying marginal, invisible, and incomplete spaces, and of wanting to disappear from some spaces. How do these women "acquiesce in being made invisible," in "occupying no space?" How do these women "participate in their own erasure" (Frye in Rose 1993:143)?

## Chapter Two

### (FEMINIST) ORIENTATIONS

This thesis is best located within feminist ethnography, and the methods of data collection and analysis draw from this work (Abu-Lughod 1990b, 1993; Bell 1993; Behar 1993; Cole and Phillips 1993; Enslin 1994; Visweswaren 1994). As a cultural anthropological analysis, this thesis provides an interpretation of the mediating discourses and practices that shape individual experiences of single motherhood. In this chapter, I orient the reader to some of the problems I encountered in the "field," problems that are specific to this project but contribute to methodological debates and concerns within feminist ethnography, and I introduce the interviewees. I first outline my research methods in terms of the interview process, then outline some of the problems I struggled with in the analysis and writing up, in terms of representational, interpretive, and ethical conundrums. I then provide brief biographical sketches of the women whose narratives appear in this text.

#### Talking to Women

The sense of dissonance of being a woman 'doing' research on another woman is brought to the forefront of the ethnographic process.

-Ruth Behar, Translated Woman (1993:302)

A distinct focus in feminist ethnography is on relationships between women, and this includes the relationship between the researcher and the women she studies, at various levels of engagement. <sup>27</sup> Anthropologists Sally Cole and Lynne Phillips have said that feminist ethnography (or as they say, "ethnographic feminisms") "makes women visible without denying the problematics of writing about and representing women's lives" (1993:2). The questions that have directed my research process are those regarding who this research is about, who it is for, who speaks, who reads, and who it will benefit (see Enslin 1994:545). I

answer them here as a means of making the production and location of my knowledge claims explicit,<sup>28</sup> and the problematics I encountered apparent.

I decided to research single mothers, for the reasons mentioned in Chapter One, but also because I wanted to practice what Visweswaren (1994) has called "homework," and anthropologist Mary John, "anthropology in reverse" (1989). These terms are used to provoke a critique of our choices of fieldwork sites, not a call to bring anthropology home *per se* but to question the ways localities are constructed and the ways women are connected to one another, and to urge us to choose our field sites on the basis of political engagement (Enslin 1994). My decision to do research on women within a community I was located and engaged in, then, was deliberate, and I decided to use the access I had gained through my participation in a local organization that provides services for single mothers.<sup>29</sup> A meeting with one of the directors of the programs, a willing gatekeeper, was a turning point in this regard. My fieldnotes read,

... [the director] thinks doing a research project on single mothers would be a great idea; she thinks women suffer from 'slaps in the face' to their self-esteem, and need to know their strengths. One of the biggest problems they face is how to reclaim their position, their status in life- society sees them as 'not quite right.' She can put a notice in their newsletter for me (fieldnotes March 1995).

I put a notice in the Summer 1995 issue of the Single Mothers' Services newsletter published and distributed through the Vancouver Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) (see Appendix Two), and a second notice in the Spring 1996 issue (see Appendix Three).<sup>30</sup> I wanted to interview women who identified with the category "single mother," and who wanted to talk about it in terms of the meanings it held for them, from a range of backgrounds and life experiences. Looking back, I realize that, through the wording of my first notice, I had somewhat unwittingly reached women for whom marginality was a salient aspect of their identities, through the wording of this first notice:

The purpose of my project is to capture and record the diverse set of experiences and circumstances we live as 'single mothers' in order to understand more fully the implications of our *categorization and often times, stigmatization*. I think that by telling our individual stories we can do much to help *break the stereotypical images* of 'single mother' (Appendix Two, emphasis added),

This choice of wording spoke pointedly to the assumptions guiding my project. Not surprisingly the women who responded had much to say about these images and experiences. Although I am unsure of the degree to which my own casting shaped the women's narratives, as I think my sense that stigma was a salient feature of their subjectivities was accurate, it nonetheless contributed to my own production of marginality. More accurately, it was a recursive construction in that my wording of the notice was informed by my prior and continuing observations in the field. At the time, I was concerned with simply getting women to participate. The newsletter editor had said to me, "make sure the women know why it would be a good idea to participate" (fieldnotes March 1995), and I was eager to do so.

Although I was looking for women from a "range of backgrounds and life experiences," this "diversity" was limited by the net I cast- the distribution demographics of the newsletter and my own circle of personal contacts. The newsletter was distributed to members of nineteen single mother support groups, and a number of community centres, women's centres and neighborhood houses, in the Vancouver area. While the service communities are ethnically and regionally diverse in that they include a Latin American, a Vietnamese, and an Indo-Canadian women's group, for example, and are located in various regions of the city including False Creek and the Downtown Eastside, and neighbouring cities such as Richmond and Surrey,<sup>31</sup> the women who responded to the notice were predominantly white. Only two of the participants were women of colour.<sup>32</sup>

I would have liked to have interviewed women from perhaps a more varied range of backgrounds, but at the same time did not want to assume any essential categories of difference. In other words I did not want to uncritically, or un-ethnographically, inscribe meanings of "single mother," or difference, within or across categories of women. I am concerned with the points of difference that mattered to the women themselves in terms of negotiating the meanings of their identities. Therefore, I was not concerned with finding a specifically segmented group of women (i.e. a "representative sample") so much as examining difference as it was presented to me ethnographically. At the same time, I did want a range of

experiences to draw from, given that I am interested in examining the connections between social location and experience. This presented a methodological problem for me that is reflected in my second notice (see Appendix Two). Isabel Dyck (1996) has made some insightful comments regarding inscribing difference onto women through academic discourses and in the context of the interview, but I just want to note here the particular way diversity was framed in this notice: "lesbians, women of colour, disabled women, and teenagers." Why did I not categorize "poor" women as different, and for that matter, why not "wealthy" women? The excluded markers of difference are telling.<sup>33</sup> For whom does this "difference" matter?

The ultimate diversity of the group was constructed and obstructed in part by my own subject positions- as a white, English-speaking, heterosexual woman, for example. Interviews with women in the Vietnamese women's group, a possibility at one time, were impeded by my inability to locate an interpreter. And, one of the participants informed me that she had been highly cautious in agreeing to be interviewed by a "*straight woman*." <sup>34</sup>

I began the interviews in July 1995 and completed them in April 1996. I interviewed fourteen women in all, out of a total of twenty women who contacted me to participate. Six women who contacted me were unable to follow through with the scheduled interviews, or else I was unable to. For example, one of the women lived in Sechelt, a community reached by ferry from Vancouver, and it was impractical for me to travel there. There were eight women who mentioned to me in passing they would like to participate but did not commit to an interview time and I chose not to pursue them. <sup>35</sup>

The interviews took place at the women's homes, except for one that took place in a restaurant. I wanted the women to feel as comfortable and safe as possible during the interview and asked them if their homes might be the best setting for this but did not assume so, and the offer was made to use my own home or the university if these were more appropriate settings. At two of the interviews the women's children were present, at the rest there was just the woman and myself present. The interviews lasted between two to three hours and were semi-structured in format. The interviews were tape recorded and the women



were informed of the implications of their consent to participate in the project before I started taping. By this I mean they were informed of their rights to withdraw from the interview at anytime, to refuse to answer any question, and to receive information on the results of the project (see Appendix Four). They were also told that excerpts from the interview may be included in my thesis, a published document. All of the women agreed with these conditions and signed informed consent forms.

I asked the women a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix One) in order to prompt them to talk about their experiences and identities as single mothers. I asked each woman to tell me about becoming a single mother; about being a single mother; about her household; and about her family ties. Some of the women, of course, required less prompting than others, and I tended to let the women speak at length when they were so inclined. I was listening for the words and phrases the women used to describe the details and circumstances of their lives as single mothers, in order to gain an understanding of their selfhoods as they understood them. I was also listening for the practices and conditions they described as part of their lives as single mothers. I encouraged the women to answer my broad questions in their own terms, and to contribute insights during the interview that may have seemed off-track but were nevertheless important to me in trying to understand their stories. All of the interviews were transcribed. Each of the women were offered a copy of the transcription and four of them requested and received them. Each of the women were asked about the interview process in terms of her level of satisfaction with it and were given my phone number and encouraged to call if she needed to change or add anything or wanted to get more information from me.

One of the issues I had to sort out early on was that of who the research was for. At the onset I had entertained the notion that my research might be *for* the women, and by this I mean my research might produce information of direct use, or effect, to the women I researched. The first notice for participants (Appendix Two) made an earnest but ultimately misleading claim: "I hope it [ my research] will ultimately improve and enrich our lives in some way." I am less hopeful two years later.<sup>36</sup> I had also asked the first few interviewees

what kind of information they thought needed to be produced on single motherhood, with the intent of providing knowledge of benefit to them. While their answers were telling,<sup>37</sup> I used them in developing theoretical insights rather than action-oriented research. Sociologist Judith Stacey, who has written about the ethical pitfalls of undertaking feminist ethnography, has cautioned, "The lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with the researcher are ultimately data- grist for the ethnographic mill, a mill that has a truly grinding power" (1991:113). My theoretical and disciplinary interests took precedence, and although this does not preclude the interviewees as readers, they are not the primary audience. (In what ways will this thesis be accessible to them?) What does this mean for my relations in the field?

Looking back, I suspect that I let some of the women down. Although I made it clear that the information I collected was for my thesis, I suspect that some of the women expected a book of stories, as my notice implied. On the other hand, the fact that I was collecting information for a public document shaped the stories in a particular way insofar as I represented "the public," and hence, they presented their stories as a kind of public testimony (this is discussed in a following section), and some women admitted being satisfied with this.

Anthropologist Ruth Behar has claimed, about the researcher as vindicator, "Telling her life story [to the researcher] becomes a means of seeking absolution" (1992:113). I think this can be said generally about the women I listened to as well, and this certainly made me aware of the potentially exploitive nature of the research encounter. Some women more than others needed to tell me their *truth*, and this became part of my analysis. What did they need to be absolved of, and why?

It was critical for me then, in light of the relative privilege I had in the research exchange, to remain professional, to impart useful information if I could, and to remain open to the continuation of a reasonable relationship after the interview was over, if so desired by the interviewee. There were times when I was able to offer contacts and resources to some of the women, and a couple of times I followed-up with a phone call afterwards to provide

information I felt I could get for them.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, the "dissonance" (Behar 1993:302) I experienced in the field stemmed mostly from my sense of not being able to do enough for them, and from knowing that I was likely to misinterpret and misrepresent them, to some degree at least.

How did my own subject positions, or "strands of identity" (Dyck 1996), play a part in producing identities, keeping in mind "the subject is performed on both sides" (Probyn 1993:139)? I do not have more than some preliminary answers. This is a question of "the intersubjective creation of selves and identities" (ibid.) in the context of the interview and interaction between researcher and subject, and a matter of accounting for specificities. As sociologist Elspeth Probyn has cogently pointed out, the importance of positionality cannot be doubted, but "how to do justice to all its instances is far from self evident" (1993:142). I have already mentioned the role of the notices in producing stories of marginality. The other obvious element I consider here is my representation to the women I interviewed, as a single mother and as an academic. Given the emphasis on "identity" in the interview, I was identified as a *particular* single mother: I have full legal custody of my son and family members living close by who help me out; my ex-husband pays regular child support and has regular, scheduled access and visitation. I was also held as a single mother "getting ahead," as one woman put it, a "role model,"<sup>39</sup> and, "a woman with privilege."<sup>40</sup> What disclosures and non-disclosures did these categorizations enable?<sup>41</sup>

### Writing About Women

How we write as feminist ethnographers is an integral part of how we approach fieldwork, since writing is one (for many anthropologists the only) goal. To produce a written work that does not marginalize women's lives is a difficult feat...

-Sally Cole and Lynne Phillips, in Ethnographic Feminisms (1993:10)

In this section I outline some of the problems I encountered "writing up," in regard to representation and ethics. Writing as a feminist about other women means considering the

implications of the analytical and editorial decisions I made for the women I researched and being loyal to the ethnographic material I had collected from them.

I decided to use life stories, or personal narratives, as a way of documenting "critical local knowledges" (Enslin 1994), that is, the social knowledge that many of the women had acquired in their social practices as single mothers, that I had observed and been impressed by at various single mother events.<sup>42</sup> I also wanted to use narrative because it reveals the complexity of gendered relations and the means by which women negotiate identities in varied contexts (see Gluck and Patai 1991, Personal Narrative Group 1989). This decision shaped my fieldwork in that I focused on individual interviews and a question format that would facilitate the telling of a "life story."

Importantly, "telling stories about particular individuals in place and time" (Abu-Lughod 1991:153) is used here both to deconstruct the "typicality" of a woman's experience and to uncover systems of asymmetrical relations and discourses that she is embedded in—central tenets of feminist theory suggested by feminist ethnographers Abu-Lughod (1991, 1993), Behar (1993), and Visweswaren (1995), and feminist scholars of women's oral histories such as The Personal Narratives Group (1989) and Gluck and Patai (1991). By analyzing the women's own words, I mean to show the effects of "extralocal and long-term processes" that are "manifested locally and specifically, [and are] produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives, inscribed in their bodies and their words" (Abu-Lughod 1991:150). In this sense, this ethnography focuses on the individual stories of women in order to "see difference" across their lives (*ibid.*), and to comprehend the terms available to them through which they define themselves and their experiences as gendered beings. "Writing about women" (see Behar 1990), then, is an explicit exercise in what Sally Cole and Lynne Phillips characterize as a feminist ethnographic project that "attempts to listen, to translate, to give women voice, to provide a forum for the documentation and presentation of the conflicting, contradictory, and heterogenous experiences of women cross-culturally" (1993:4).

After the interviews were completed I had to make decisions regarding which women, which excerpts, and how much of their narratives to include in the thesis. Out of the fourteen interviews, narratives from eight of these appear in this text. It was a difficult task to decide which women's narratives to include. While I could have edited shorter excerpts in order to include all fourteen, I decided to feature longer excerpts from fewer of the narratives. There are advantages and disadvantages to this way of writing it up,<sup>43</sup> but I wanted to contextualize the women's lives enough that the excerpts made sense. I wanted to demonstrate ethnographically the way the women cast themselves, the way they moved themselves in and out of categories, and the way they embellished or resisted their marginality. I wanted to centrally locate the women's own expressions of identity, their own words alongside my own analysis, but in the end "their voice" constitutes roughly one third of the text.<sup>44</sup> The eight I selected are those I feel provide a "richly textured" account which admittedly foregrounds some truths while excluding others. The interviews with the others certainly inform my analysis and I apologize to any of the women for whom this is no consolation. I want to assure any of the women who had hoped their story would appear that I gleaned much from their interview. I leave this problem aside for now but consider it an important methodological concern for future projects.

As far as deciding which excerpts to include, this, too, was difficult, especially given the lengthiness of the transcripts. I approached this problem by identifying what the most compelling messages were that each woman seemed to want to make to me, and then arranged the thesis around the excerpts that expressed them. This is consistent with what Behar has said about the importance of "capturing key images" and staying close to the narrator's "own conceptual categories," if we are to offer "interpretations that mirror the narrative forms they themselves use to tell their stories" (1993:272). Nevertheless, it was difficult to locate the parameters of "context" necessary for an interpretation that is meant to reflect the complexity of a woman's life and identity. Context is not script (Personal Narratives Group 1989), nor is it a wholism that pre-exists in the geography surrounding the subject (Hastrup

1995:57) and it was a matter of trying to identify prominent shaping influences. These were not self-evident, and I struggle with the implications of being the "ritual context-marker" (ibid.). What aspects and strands of their lives and identities have I obscured that they would see as making a difference to the interpretation?

Context that became critical to the analysis early on was that of the women's motives in getting involved in the research. Personal Narratives Group has urged,

In order to understand the configuration of the story- what it emphasizes, what it omits, what it may exaggerate- the interpreter must be sensitive to the narrator's purposes for telling the story. This sensitivity demands a profound respect for the narrator and what she says. Rather than labeling any story true or untrue, interpreters need to look for the reasons why narrators tell their stories (1989:202).

After the second interview I began asking the women why they had decided to get involved in the research and what had prompted them to call me,<sup>45</sup> and whether they had other opportunities to discuss their lives in this manner. This became a turning point in the project insofar as the idea of the narratives as "testimony" took hold. Some of the responses were: "*A lot of things happen to single mothers that people aren't interested in hearing,*"<sup>46</sup> "*Regular people don't want to understand and they're not called to,*"<sup>47</sup> "*People have no idea what it's like to be a single mother,*"<sup>48</sup> and "*I get to tell my story.*"<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, it seemed I had "fallen into my own net" insofar as I had made an appeal, single mother to single mother, for them to tell me their stories because others have the "wrong idea" or only "part of the story" about *us* (see Appendix Two), and they had testified- supplied me with evidence- accordingly. "Yes, people have the wrong idea." On the other hand, why were they testifying to *me* while recalcitrant or at least acquiescent to the others' desires for them "*not to talk about it?*"<sup>50</sup> The interview setting became "*a rare opportunity*"<sup>51</sup> for them to talk about being a single mother, clearly not a neutral aspect of their identities. It is not a simple matter of these women needing to talk, although this cannot be ignored, but a more complex matter of understanding what kind of audience I was for them. "The question is how, despite and because of our relation to power, informants will decide to trust our authority with their truth" (Ong 1995:354).

Doris Sommer's theorization of Latin American women's life stories as gendered

"testimonials" was influential:

When women... narrate their life stories to anthropologists (who have sought out these informants as representatives of particular historical struggles) we can hardly place the results in the familiar category of autobiography or even the heroic testimonial norm of male informants. Rather, these intensely lived testimonial narratives are ... [told] neither for individual growth nor for glory but are offered through the scribe to a broad public as part of a general strategy to win political ground (1988:109).

The motives, then, to tell "her" story, can be seen as strategic appeals to make a stand *among* others. Beneath the words, such as "*all our unique struggles*,"<sup>52</sup> "*connecting to other single mothers*,"<sup>53</sup> "*wanting to make our lives public*,"<sup>54</sup> there seemed to be an implicit appeal to identity politics. The challenge for me, the listener and translator, was to mark out the narrator's own difference and marginality in a "sea of marginality" in which she is a participant rather than "an ideal and repeatable type" (*ibid.*). In other words, I saw the women's narratives as at once "testimony" (to innocence) *and* "testimonials"<sup>55</sup> (to particular struggles) recognized by the women as both personal and social and which they wanted to make public, through me. This one more "round of interrogation"<sup>56</sup> was a way of placing themselves as much *out* of the category as in it, a way of showing they were not like *that* single mother (an idea I return to in Chapter Three), and importantly, an interrogation by me, someone with stakes in *our* representation. Similar to the way Behar (1993), as a "gringo" academic from across the border, was expected to "set things right" for her informant (who saw herself as a woman-out-of-place within her own border), I was possibly expected to represent the women as others do not.

Returning to the concern by feminist ethnographers with producing a "written work that does not marginalize women's lives" (Cole and Phillips 1993:10), I take this to mean at least two things for this thesis. First, I have tried not to marginalize the women in the pages of this text. While the women are not my primary audience, I have tried to centralize their words and acknowledge them as co-producers of this knowledge. Second, I have tried to avoid

uncritically reinscribing and reproducing marginality. This has meant trying to find an approach that at once recognizes it and reconstructs it in a complex and problematizing way.

### Telling Tales

Above all, the stories that we bring back in other women's words for translation on our side of the border need interpretive homes that will not turn out to be prisonhouses with yellow wallpaper.<sup>57</sup>

Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman* (1993:272)

While I am clear that Behar's (1993) caution is an apt one, I am less clear about how we go about avoiding interpretive "prisonhouses" for the women whose lives we retell. The notion of betrayal is a common and weighty one in feminist ethnographic work and is used as an allegory for contemporary feminist theorizing of difference (Visweswaren 1994:40). Behar is suggesting that we not *betray* the women we research. I think this is a fruitful way of examining the complex power relations between the researcher and subject, which I do in this section by way of explaining what I mean by "telling tales."

While I concern myself with adequately grounding my analysis in the women's narratives according to the principles of anthropology (that is what anthropology is about, see Hastrup 1994),<sup>58</sup> I am also concerned about the currency of my interpretation with the women whose stories appear here. I believe that it will register strongly with some of the women I interviewed but am less convinced about the "cultural continuity" between the text and local understandings.<sup>59</sup> My position as "interpreter," and the theory between us, is a critical axis of differentiation. Anthropologist Judith Abwanza has cogently pinpointed the tension that exists between theorizing women and presenting women:

I am forced to engage in benevolent dominance if I analyze, present, analyze. Benevolent because I insist their voices remain. Dominance because I interpret their voices. As Tedlock (1991) had said, we kill the women's voice by our own, we pin them like butterflies to the wall, as we provide the interpretation (1995:250).



The title of this thesis "Telling tales" is intended to reflect this tension and sense of betrayal. Telling tales evokes images of tattling, of betraying secrets, of "pinning them to the wall," for my own benefit and that of the discipline. While the women all agreed to the terms of the research, including giving me permission to include their narratives in this thesis, there were a few times when this agreement was muddled. For example, at one point during an interview one woman said "*I guess that got on tape.*" The implication was that it would not be included and, of course, it was not. Yet, it causes me concern, for did I sort through these public yet private disclosures correctly? When I recount one woman's brush with suicide am I stepping over that line? When I tell of another woman's angst against her friends and community, am I betraying an understanding of how this was meant to be represented?

I raise these conundrums here to illustrate the complexities I experienced in the field relationships between myself as ethnographer and my informants. "Telling tales" is also meant to evoke conflicting workings of power in the production of knowledge- what is the tale telling, and who is telling it? While disclosures of suicide and alienation required discretion on my part, they also required I pay attention, that I look at the world from their eyes. "And if that's not power, what is?" (Esperanza in Behar 1993:270). These were not insignificant experiences in these women's lives. Although I wanted to put much more ethnographic emphasis on their homes as sites of identity-making and contests over social space, the women's insistence on telling stories of struggle, survival, hardship, and marginality, did not allow me to stray as far as I would like in that theoretical direction. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong has argued that the concerns with betrayal, although valid,

are nevertheless blind to the complex and unexpected ways in which power can work. There is a tendency to consider the subjects' power as totally defined by the ethnographer... However, if one considers power as a decentralizing, shifting, and productive force, animated in networks of relations... then ethnographic subjects can exercise power in the production of ethnographic knowledges... what they demand and withhold, is part of the process whereby they persuade us to provide 'a point of access' to cultural conversations (1995:353)."

In this sense, the women are the ones telling important cultural stories, albeit through an interpreter. The first woman I interviewed in July 1995 confided in me that she had never told

her story about becoming a single mother to anyone before. In her words, "*Honestly, where I come from, my family, my background, there is no such thing as you end up being divorced and a single mother*" (fieldnotes 1995). This "confession" of hers had a significant effect on my articulation of single mothers and identity. Why had she not been able to talk of her single motherhood? What kind of cultural narrative is this? <sup>60</sup>

There has been much debate about the role of the female intellectual as scribe (see Abwunza 1993, Spivak 1988), but I just want to say that in my fieldwork I found that although the women had much to say, they were not in the same position as I am (as a graduate student) to say it. One woman said, "*we are just too tired to be going to meetings and writing letters- who has the time to write their story?*" <sup>61</sup> Another said that there was much to say, especially to the media, but it was not her place to say it. <sup>62</sup> These are indications, of course, of wider social asymmetries, and it has something to say about telling stories as both a risk and a possibility for speaking. Some of the women spoke of needing to be careful about who knew the details of their "situations," that some single mothers were at risk of being evicted from certain housing complexes, or of losing benefits, or even custody of their children. These are significant comments on the meanings of single motherhood as well as on the barriers that exist to some people being able to tell their stories. The greater betrayal then lies, perhaps, in *not* telling the tales in spite of the problematics of fieldwork and field relations (see Ong 1995).

What "telling tales" is meant to signify more than anything else is how *the women's lives are telling* in that they reveal cultural narratives, and assumptions, and processes, about the social construction of single motherhood, and about survival and dislocation as lived experiences. While an interpretation is always partial and contingent it nevertheless makes certain truth-claims. Anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has said that the "hallmark of anthropology is to experience the force of detail in practical life and to recast it in a theoretical mode that transcends it" (1994:22). I agree in part but think she has it a bit backwards. Rather than theory transcending lives, I think it is lives which must necessarily

always transcend our theories, and this is perhaps the point Behar (1993) is making, and the tension that I struggle with.

### **The Interviewees**

I include a brief biographical sketch of each interviewee here in order to provide some background context. These sketches are, firstly, my own distillation of the stories that emerged out of the interviews, which are between 25 and 45 pages of typed transcript; and secondly, fragments of their own much longer life histories, captured here as a mere slice of events, memories, and pertinent thoughts on a particular day in their lives that are obviously complex, and multistranded. I present the women in the chronological order that I interviewed them, and include, where relevant, their age, ethnicity, education, occupation, sexual orientation, number and ages of children, where they live, household or family configuration, and child custody arrangements. The women's names have been changed and any other identifying features have been omitted to protect their anonymity, except in the cases where I was specifically requested not to. I apologize to any of the women who read this and see themselves presented inaccurately. I have tried to "get it" but as Edward Said reminds us, "the act of representing 'almost always involves violence of some sort to the subject,' using as it must some degree of reduction, decontextualization, and miniaturization" (Said in Behar 1993:271). I use the present tense here to locate and "preserve" the ethnographic encounter fixed in a certain moment in time (see Hastrup 1992).

#### Kathy. July 1995

Kathy is in her thirties, the mother of a young daughter. Kathy was born in Canada and grew up in the Vancouver area and has family nearby including her parents and a brother. She describes her family background as "*normal, stable, and middle-class*" and her family ties as "*close*." She lives in an apartment located in a working-class neighborhood in a suburb of Vancouver that she purchased since becoming a single mother. She has worked full-time as a clerical worker for the government for six years. After she left her husband two years ago she

stayed with her parents for a few days, then moved into a basement suite, then a ground floor apartment, and finally into the apartment she now owns. Kathy supports her daughter without receiving child support from her daughter's father, Kathy's ex-husband, but receives a provincial subsidy to help pay for her daughter's daycare. Her daughter sees her father occasionally, on supervised visits. Kathy is currently in a relationship.

Elizabeth. July 1995

Elizabeth is in her thirties, the mother of a preschool daughter. Elizabeth was born in Canada and has always lived in the Vancouver area. She describes her family background as "*broken*," her father left their home when she and her three siblings were young, and her mother remarried and had two more children. She describes her childhood as "*terrible*," and she left her mother's home when she was a teenager, living with her father and "*in and out*" of foster care. Her mother raised the family while on income-assistance and Elizabeth lived in social housing for much of her childhood. Elizabeth has a university degree, works full-time as a social worker, and supports herself and her daughter independently. She rents a large house in the west side of the city, and is currently in a relationship and considering marriage. She receives no child support from her daughter's father, who is Elizabeth's ex-boyfriend, and her daughter's visits with him are irregular and unscheduled.

Rebecca. October 1995.

Rebecca is in her thirties, the mother of a young son. Rebecca was born in Canada and has lived in numerous places in Canada and the United States while growing up because her father was in the Air Force. She describes her family background as "*traditional*" in that they lived in big houses and her mother "*stayed at home and cooked and cleaned.*" Rebecca has two sisters who are also single mothers and one married brother, living outside the province, and one married sister with two children living on the next street over from Rebecca. Her mother, who is divorced, also lives in the neighbourhood. Rebecca rents a house on the North Shore,<sup>63</sup> that has a backyard and is close to her son's school and daycare. Her landlady lives in the suite downstairs. Rebecca works full-time as a secretary, and supports

her son basically on her own, receiving little child support from her husband who she left two years ago, and who has since moved to another province. Rebecca maintains close ties with her son's paternal grandparents, but not with her own family.

Michele. November 1995.

Michele is in her thirties, a mother of two young children, one who has been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She was born in Canada but moved to the United States when she got married, and lived in military bases in Europe and the United States with her husband who was an officer in the Army. She grew up in Quebec and her mother, father, and married brother still live there. She moved to Vancouver two years ago immediately after her divorce in order to be with her sister. She lived with her sister for a month before moving to the basement suite on the North Shore she now rents. She wanted a house rather than an apartment so that the children could ride their bikes on the streets. The landlady lives upstairs. Michele has an accounting degree and works full-time as an accountant, and receives some child support from her ex-husband who continues to live in the United States. The children visit him once a year for a couple of weeks, and otherwise Michele gets little help with childcare, given that her son with ADHD requires special care.

Raine. January 1996.

Raine is in her twenties, the mother of a young son. Raine was born in England, the daughter of Canadian "*working-class hippies*," as she calls her parents, travelling through Europe and India. Her father remained in Europe when she and her mother returned to Canada when Raine was very young. She grew up outside of Vancouver with her mother and her step-father, until her mother got divorced and moved to the Vancouver area when Raine was just starting high school. Soon after that Raine was living "*in and out of foster homes, group homes*" and at her step-father's. Raine describes her childhood as "*abusive*," and very "*isolated*." She was suicidal at the time of her pregnancy when she was a teenager. She broke up with her boyfriend soon after her son was born, and "came out" as a lesbian two years later. She lives in a co-op on the East Side of the city,<sup>64</sup> and goes to school part-time. Raine receives income

assistance from the Ministry of Social Services (welfare), and a very small amount of child support from her son's father who he sees on a regular basis. Raine does not maintain ties with her mother or sister or step-father.

Marie. January 1996.

Marie is in her twenties, the mother of two young children. Marie was born in Canada and grew up in the Vancouver area. Marie's family "split up" when she was young, and she lived with her mother until her early teens, her father for a short time, and then in several group and foster homes. Marie recently met her biological father, who is Native, a few years ago and who she now maintains ties with. She considers herself "*very white, very British.*"

Marie has, in her words, been "*in and out of a relationship*" with her children's father for the past few years and recently started living with him. Marie rents a large house on the East Side of the city with her boyfriend, her children, and three room-mates. She has been on income assistance, but has recently started a full-time programme at college and will receive funding from the First Nation she is a member of. She receives some financial support from her children's father but is largely independent.

Jenneffer. April 1996

Jenneffer is in her forties, the mother of two young daughters. She was born in Canada and grew up in the Vancouver area. She describes her family background as the "*proper suburban*" home that was "*abusive on the inside.*" She grew up in the "*hippy*" era of the 1960s, and went to a treatment centre for alcohol and drug abuse in her twenties, and has "*since been sober.*" She was the only child of parents who died before her children were born and she has no other family ties. Jenneffer rents a house in a working class suburb, works full-time, attends university, and is politically active with various women's organizations. Her youngest daughter lives with her but spends weekends with her father or her father's sister who has court imposed access rights. Her oldest daughter was apprehended and taken into care by the Ministry of Social Services a few years ago for reasons Jenneffer has tried to protest through the courts.<sup>65</sup> Her daughter currently lives with a foster family in a community outside of the

Vancouver area. Jenneffer sees her on school holidays. Jenneffer receives a daycare subsidy for her youngest daughter but no support from the child's father. Jenneffer receives a small income from her parent's estate.

Rose. April 1996.

Rose is in her forties, the mother of two teenagers. Rose was born and grew up in England and came to Canada when she was eighteen as a secretary. She describes her family background as "*dysfunctional*." Her parents were elderly, and her father, an alcoholic. Her parents still live in the same house Rose grew up in. Rose has not been able to afford to see them since her children were very young. She has a sister living in the Vancouver area, who she sees occasionally. Rose owns her own house- the house she and her husband lived in until they separated- in a middle-class neighbourhood outside of the city close to her children's schools. Rose and her husband had a business together and Rose lost most of her assets when she left him, but managed to retain the house. Rose found out she had multiple sclerosis after her son was born, fourteen years ago, and is unable to work. Her husband provides some financial support. They are legally separated and Rose has legal and physical custody of her children.

## Chapter Three

### TESTIMONY TO SURVIVAL

*I was just trying to survive, and it wasn't very glamorous or urbane. But it was very real.*

-Raine (interview 1996)

*It's just a matter of survival, of getting to the other side, and keeping my head above water.*

-Michele (interview 1995)

Telling stories of expulsion, uprooting and life as a refugee was an attempt to lessen the distance between the Palestinian and the other, to create knowledge and thus empathy.

- Julie Peteet, in Mistrusting Refugees (1995:178)

This chapter draws out ethnographic details that support my claim that the women's narratives emerged as testimonials to particular struggles within various social spaces. The significance of this interpretation lies in the way these narratives cannot be seen as neutral castings of their lives, but ones that strive to convince me of their innocence and truth in the wider social context of "pervasive single mother blame" (Febbraro 1994). This appeal "to produce complicity" (Sommer 1988:118) and "to create knowledge and thus empathy" (Peteet 1995:178) serves to underscore the marginality of their social locations. In other words, their narratives, in which they present themselves as survivors and conquerors, convey the needfulness with which they are compelled to explain their lives as heroic feats, rather than reprehensible acts.

Postcolonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha has theorized the autobiographic narratives of Third world writers of diaspora this way:

For not every detail of their individual lives bears recounting in such an 'autobiography,' and what they choose to recount no longer belongs to them as individuals. Writing from a representative space that is always politically marked... they do not so much remember for themselves as they remember in order to tell (1994:10).



The women I interviewed insisted on making their individual stories be heard, in order to "set things right" <sup>66</sup> and to inform those "who don't know." <sup>67</sup> In a similar way then, the women spoke from what Minha-ha referred to as a "representative space that is always politically marked" (1994:10) and that seemed to require a defensive plea of innocence. How is "single mother" a politically marked space? How is it that suffering and survival become prominent motives for the telling of their life stories? <sup>68</sup>

As I said in Chapter Two, the various motives behind the participation in the research by the interviewees led me towards viewing their emergent selves as unique beings who located themselves in a "sea of marginality" (Sommer 1988). Each set of experiences was put out to me by the women as evidence of a distinctive struggle within a category of struggle ("single mother"). More specifically, their stories seemed to be individual accounts of conditions that the women expressed as burdens exclusive to single mothers. The guiding assumption beneath their stories was that the lives of single mothers are unusually difficult. Hard work, isolation, financial difficulty- are themes that ran through each of the women's life stories in varying degrees, and suicide was mentioned in two of the stories. In this chapter I examine the narratives that most clearly manifested each of these themes to me, in order to highlight, rather than take for granted, these struggles and in order to articulate them as experiences constitutive of the social space of single motherhood.

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### Surviving the Exile: "Wishing I were dead" <sup>69</sup>

Understanding displacement as a human tragedy and looking no further can mean that one gains no insight at all into the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for specific people.

-Lisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile* (1995:16)

I begin by looking at how "struggle" translated into an especially poignant survival in the narratives of two of the interviewees, Michele and Raine. Michele related to me how she asked god to take the lives of her and her children during events that took place in the months following her divorce. The degree to which she despised her exigency, demarcated by

isolation and hard work, and to which there was no escape route in sight, she said, was seemingly unbearable at times. Raine told me how she, too, in the course of being a single mother, at times could not live with herself in a social space marked by multiple forms of abuse and alienation. According to Raine, however, it seemed that becoming a single mother saved her from taking her own life, while later on being a teenage mom and a lesbian-coming-out, was a predicament untenable to the degree of her questioning whether she wanted to survive it or not.

One of the most important things I felt that Michele wanted to tell me about her recent life as a single mother of two young children, one of them diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), was the state of solitary exile it seemed to have imposed on her. She pointed out a stark contrast between staying at home with the children alone in her dark basement suite and the active social life she experienced as a military wife. When I asked Michele to tell me a little bit about herself, this is what she said, and I let it stand as critical context for understanding the rest of her story:

*I am basically on my own. I do have some friends to support me. I work one night a month, I go to one parent support meeting [for parents with children of ADHD] once a month, I might have one social [night out with friends] a month, so three times a month I ask my friends to babysit. Because of the ADHD I can't hire a babysitter, plus I can't afford one...*

*I was thinking of you coming over tonight, and one thing I really wanted to tell you is that one of the terrible things I find in being a single mom is that nobody invites you. People will invite couples over but nobody will invite a single mother and her kids. Unless it's another single mother. And I find that the hardest. I'd love to be able to be invited out for dinner. Before we got divorced my husband was a good rank in the army, we had a nice home, we entertained constantly...*

*In the [United] States our friends were from all over the place, we were always entertaining, it was great...*

*The States provides well for its military in terms of recreation, and now I find myself here without military wives around, without the support, without the nice house. Here I am in a dark basement suite for \$800 month (Michele, November 1995).*

Michele described her experience as a single mother as that of being alone. What is interesting to me is that she told me how she was also alone as a married mother. There is a paradox to her situation wherein one of the reasons she left her husband was because she was tired of being alone yet found herself unbearably alone as a divorced woman raising her children on her own. Her experience of despair, and her testimony to the "sheer survival" of

her life as a single mother, made sense when I heard that she had been struggling with aloneness in her life for some time and that the condition of single motherhood had exacerbated it and not offered her a way out. This is what Michele said when I asked her to tell me about becoming a single mother:

*Well, I was a military wife... They were often gone... I delivered the second one [baby] alone, I unpacked alone, I moved alone, I did everything alone. I thought I can handle it [her decision to leave her husband], because I've basically been a single mother all my life. But I had no idea! You don't take into consideration that most of the time you might be alone but that once in awhile he comes home and you got to dump on him, you can have pillow talk, the pay cheques, the quarters were provided... there were a lot of things I didn't consider...*

*The last Christmas the kids and I were left alone while he went skiing... He left us with no money. I cooked a chicken instead of a turkey, it was just me and the two babies. I spent the whole day crying and thought this was enough... I had to go [end the marriage]... I couldn't handle it...*

*The mind games, the forced isolation, the abuse, the affairs... It was horrible... I tried so hard to make it work. I didn't make any plans [at first]. I thought we could conquer it all...*

*I never thought I would be a single mother. I wish I hadn't been that strong [to keep the marriage going long enough to have a second child]. It's a hard thing to admit. There are many days...*

*I want to tell you something private. <sup>70</sup> When I first got here [after she left her husband and traveled thousands of miles to relocate in Vancouver] and was at my sister's house, so many nights I would lay awake at night at two in the morning, wishing I were dead. I would go to work in the morning on the seventeenth floor of the building downtown and I would be in the elevator and would kind of hope that it would break... I would look out the window and wish that I could fall out, or I would think that if God would come down and say 'I have to take half the population, are there any volunteers?,' and I would say 'please take me and the kids.'*

*So that was a pretty bad time. There was a time when I would gauge my progress by how many times a day I would cry, and after awhile I was down to two times a day, and I thought I was doing so well. Now, it's never. But with the latest condition [of her son's ADHD] there are times...*

*As much as I can appear to be strong there are days when I can admit defeat. I don't think I can ever do it [commit suicide], I hope not anyway, but to actually plan where to do it and when to do it, and how ... (Michele, interview November 1995).*

Being on her own translated for Michele as a situation she could not cope with nor see a way out of. When I asked her about finding support for herself through contacts at her children's schools and daycares, she was skeptical. She retorted, "You think? Tell me something to look forward to!" "Support" here can be seen as a code, or a particular discourse, about family as a unit that is bounded, self-sufficient, "inside" the home, blood (see Collier et al., 1992:39). I was thinking of support in terms of occasional help with childcare but for

Michele it was not so easily reducible. Instead, support for her was analogous to father-living-in-the-same-household, and as such was irreplaceable with any other pair of hands whether it be those of friends, family members, or community members.

Discourses, then, about the sanction of marriage and nuclear family, played a central role in Michele's understanding and negotiation of her identity as a single mother. This is what Michele said, when I asked her if she felt as if she were a family:

*I don't know if I can put it into words but I do have an incredible amount of guilt. It doesn't fit the norm... As a mother I want to do the best I can do, and that's where I've failed. The norm is to have the mother and the father, and I can't do that. We could argue that it was best for the kids... but that doesn't change the way I believe in the family unit. As much as I think my ex-husband was a bastard, he's still the father, always will be, and he had much to add to their lives (Michele, interview November 1995).*

When I asked Michele how her situation in terms of support would be different if she were still married, her answer highlighted to me the impossible terms she had constructed for herself as a single mother. She could not tolerate the aloneness of the space within her marriage, she said, nor could she tolerate the isolation of the space without her husband. Looking back to her married life, she framed his husband's presence in her life, however sparse and problematic it was in the past, as the key to the current impasse she experienced in achieving a reasonable level of sanity in her life:

*Let's look on the bright side. Should I have stayed with him, I would have the ability to walk out when I reached my limit. I can't do that now. I reached my limit yesterday, about supper time. All I could do was go to my room and lock the door and turn the music up. All the time I could afford to take out was five minutes. If I had someone to live with I could have taken an hour, two hours... Logistically, to do grocery shopping it's a pain. There are times when I do it at ten at night, I just take off and go, when they are asleep. But I'm tired. It's not like I can sleep on the weekends. I don't have weekends.*

*I get through by the skin of my teeth. And that's not like me. I'm usually such a planner. But there are things- oh well! I'm reading [parenting books], I'm learning a lot. But the number one resource is the parent and there is only one, and that has a limited amount of patience. No matter what the books say, sometimes you want to do something but you come home and you just can't do it, you can't move from the couch. Maybe you're physically exhausted or emotionally drained. It took me about a week to be able to do something at night. I'd just go to bed and think how rough it was... People just don't know...*

*I'll tell you one thing that is probably going to infuriate you. When I talk to people I tell them how being a single mother is the worst possible life one could wish on somebody, and if they have an unhappy marriage stay in it. Maybe it's just because*

*I'm too new at it, but I tell them if you've got a difference with your husband, then work it out, because what's ahead sucks.*

*I was no way ready for the heap of crap I jumped into. Maybe it's because I was cocky and thought because I had lived without him [during the marriage] that I thought I could do it. But I had no inkling. And it really is a heap of crap. I left home when I was sixteen, I've always supported myself. I gave myself my education, my parents never did... I took pride in how I got ahead... It was hard [for her to get her certificate for General Accountant], but I had no idea (Michele, interview November 1995)!*

I heard Michele's narrative, punctuated by her accounts of near-suicide brought on by desperation and isolation as a single mother, as an appeal for me to listen to her. She said, "let me tell you something personal," and "let me tell you something that is going to infuriate you." She knew, of course, that as her "translator" I wanted very much to hear both. What she emphasized to me was the challenge of her involuntary solitude. I suggest that the force behind her words "I wished that I were dead," and "one of the most terrible things about being a single mother is that nobody invites you" are seen as linked. I interpret a connection between these two claims as the key to understanding how she sees herself in social space. Michele, it seems to me, was testifying to a kind of survival of, in her words, "the worst possible life," and "a heap of crap," that hinged on her finding ways to mitigate what I call her exile to the basement suite alone with her children. When I asked her about plans she might have for a rosier future, she replied that she found it impossible to think beyond "survival:"

*I would like to have a nice home... but right now I want to keep my head above water, and see if I can make it to shore. It's still just a matter of survival. Keeping my head above water (Michele, interview November 1995).*

One of the last things that she and I talked about was a series of "chat lines" she belonged to on the internet. After her children were asleep and her work done for the evening, she told me, she would get on-line and engage in a social life of sorts, one that is increasingly meaningful to her insofar as it was, at least, tenable. Michele's narrative draws our attention to the contrast in social conditions she experienced before and after her marriage, and how her understanding of this experiences (of exile) is mediated by her expectation of sole support by her husband with childcare. This expectation is not unreasonable given the wider cultural narrative about nuclear families as autonomous, bounded, self-sufficient, and intensely private entities (see Collier et al. 1992).

Raine's testimony registers with a different appeal. When Raine replied to my question about becoming a single mother, she recounted to me a story punctured by three separate occasions of near-suicide that marked off her shifting social locations as "*an abused and lonely teenager*," as "*a coming-out lesbian*," and then as a "*thrice-marginalized teenage-lesbian-mother*." Raine's appeal to me to listen to her story seemed very much to be a challenge to attend to politics of class and privilege. Her narrative points to social causes as well as material consequence of her state of exile brought on by single motherhood. As Raine insisted, she alone was expected to "*deal with it*" and many times, "*it*" was barely survivable for her. What strikes me are the number of times and degree to which survival is a real issue in Raine's narrative.

Raine was less reticent, more matter-of-fact than Michele in her accounts of brushes with suicide. It may have to do with their contrasting backgrounds, a point that Raine drew my attention to when she described "*divorced, middle-class, liberal women*" (such as Michele?) as the referent category for the "*whole scene*" (of single mothers) in which she herself was marginalized. The connection Raine made between her own conditions and those of other women leads me to understand that the fact that Michele's "growing up place"<sup>71</sup> was marked by a protectiveness that Raine's lacked, is significant to understanding Raine's narrative. Raine said, "*I never had a cushy life, not at all. I want that [story] out there.*" Central to Raine's testimony to survival is her self-definition and contextualization as poor-and-lesbian-and-single mother within a space that privileges heterosexual, middle-class, liberal, and childless women. She set this cartography out for me right at the start of the interview when I asked her why she chose to get involved in the research:

*I feel like I'm a real survivor. I think we all are. I was reading the YWCA single mother's newsletter<sup>72</sup> and I never hear lesbian mothers mentioned in those newsletters. Young mothers are mentioned a bit more, but I've often felt marginalized by the whole scene. It seems sort of middle-class and liberal. They assume that everyone was married and then divorced. That's not my reality at all. Poverty is often dealt with, but often there seems to be the assumption that we were married and living some kind of middle class lifestyle (Raine, interview January 1996).*

Raine stated that she was a survivor, but that hers was a particular survival story: "I have an unique voice, not totally unique, but I don't know a lot of other lesbian single mothers who had their kids when they were seventeen." For Raine, it seemed as if being a single mother and talking about it in meaningful terms could not be pulled apart from an array of aspects about herself, that included her sexual orientation but was not limited to it. When she described herself she gave variously emphasized the categories poor, abused, young, under-educated, addict, and activist.

In talking to me about her life as a single mother, then, Raine described herself in terms of multiple marginalities.<sup>73</sup> She said that, survival for her was hardly "glamorous" or "urbane." It appeared that for Raine "survival" was enacted within a social space filled with barriers to privilege that many women Raine referred to, including myself,<sup>74</sup> take for granted. This is what Raine told me when I asked her to tell me about becoming a single mother:

*Well, basically what happened is I was sixteen, I was in grade eleven I was very suicidal. I was being abused pretty severely, psychologically, emotionally, at home, by my mother, and neglected. So I was pretty unhappy, so I was pushing my friends away from me. And then I got together with [her son's] father and we just became inseparable. He became my world, of course. I didn't have a loving parent, and I pushed away all my friends so this guy could become my world. I had bad boundaries about birth control... So, I thought, 'great, I'm pregnant, I'm going to quit school.' My mom didn't know I was pregnant but she found out I had stopped going to school so she kicked me out....*

*I went into foster care and they treated me pretty badly. Emotional abuse and neglect. So what happened? Me and him weren't living together, and of course welfare wouldn't allow that... By the time I was five months pregnant the whole foster home care thing had become intolerable. I didn't have a place to live. It was really scary. I spent two days sleeping in [her son's father's] car- five months pregnant! So that was really awful.*

*And then I went and lived with my aunt until [her son] was five months old. That was really great in a lot of ways, and it was also awful in a lot of ways. I got manipulated by her. It was never okay for me to come from the background that I came from. She was always making digs about my mother. They had this Brady Bunch sort of family.<sup>75</sup> I felt like an outsider and was treated as an outsider, if they were displeased with me. So, as long as I behaved, I wasn't treated that way... I went back to live with my mother.*

*I moved out on my own [when her son was about six months old], into a basement suite. And then I got evicted because of by-laws...*

*The following fall I went to university. I moved into a co-op [near the university] and that was great... I had been in counseling since I was seven months pregnant, almost straight through. But I started to do shitty at school... It was a lot.*

*And then I started coming out as a feminist. And then I started coming out as a dyke. By now [her son] is about two years old. Wow, that was quite something... Basically I had a breakdown, whatever that is, and became suicidal for the first time since before I was pregnant. That was pretty significant, pretty scary. I had this idea that [her son] had made my life worth living and I had to keep it together for him and all of a sudden I couldn't anymore. All this abuse stuff was coming out for me. I went into a mental hospital, into an in-patient unit for two and a half weeks. While I was in there my boyfriend broke up with me. That was really awful, and really devastating.*

*I should mention that meanwhile through this whole time [her son's father] is taking me to court periodically, for custody or joint custody, or his mother will take me to court because she wants to have access... So things are really awful. I was badly suicidal. I was at a bottom I guess. Then I went into an out-patient program for two and a half months, which was good...*

*Then, I quit school, quit prozac, quit everything- it was great! Had a summer of hanging out... I was coming out and that was great.*

*In the fall we moved out here [to the east side of Vancouver]...*

*The room-mates treated me kind of badly. There was a lot of class stuff going on, and mother stuff. A lot of shame. I was supposed to keep it together. Meanwhile I'm totally depressed. Here I was finally out, but I wasn't totally embraced by the lesbian community- I was a mother, right?*

*I was getting involved, doing community activist stuff, but I was pretty depressed. I was trying to keep it together but I had these room-mates pressuring me: clean up the bath toys!*

*Then I moved out on my own with [her son], into a really small suite. That was really hard. It was great to be away from the room-mates but it was hard to have the small space. I got severely depressed, I got suicidal. I felt really alone... I had a community of friends, who were there to do childcare for me when I was depressed, so that was good. But they couldn't be there all the time so there were a lot of times I felt really alone.*

*It seems kind of boring [her life story] and I guess it is because I'm telling it in a distant way because I'm not telling you the total traumas that I went through. But basically I was going to a lot of meetings, doing a lot of politic stuff, and having a lot of run-ins with other women in the community over issues of class and privilege and mothering and feeling like I was marginalized in the community and that there wasn't much support... I was getting tired of seeing all these middle-class, skinny, healthy-looking, happy, carefree urbane chicks getting all the recognition for their art work or music or whatever... I was struggling day to day to survive and here are these- everyone- who didn't recognize what a hard job I did and that I was just trying to survive and that it wasn't very glamorous or very urbane but it was very real.*

*I really like my chosen [lesbian] community but I still feel like there is a lot of shit in it. That's been a real struggle for me. It's made me really jaded. There is a lot of privilege in the lesbian community. I was out as a mother before I was out as a lesbian. That's no coincidence. It's no coincidence that it took a year and a half for me to come out... Why did it take a year and a half? .... I didn't have the same kind of options that a childless lesbian has when she's coming out. I went into a dyke bar twice that whole year and a half. I lived out [of the city]. I was dealing with poverty, dealing with hard-core shit just trying to survive. I was going to school. So there's that.*

Raine's narrative focused on the traumas she experienced as single mother. Her story, she insisted, represented a fraction of the "total traumas" she has gone through, and there is a distance, she said, between what she told me and the whole truth of her life. It is through



this distance that Raine created an appeal for me to listen: there is more, she was saying, and she may or may not disclose it all (to me, at least).

"Struggle," then, is significant to Raine's identity and the set of experiences she recounted to define herself. She wanted me to listen carefully to "*her reality*," to the trauma in her life, to convince me of her invisibility<sup>76</sup> and, equally important, of the ways she was made invisible, by "*women who do not own up to their own privileges*." The "*hard shit*" she had to deal with was the point of her story but so was the complicity of those, including myself, who contributed to it (see n.74). Michele's narrative drew my attention to the deeply felt experience of exile and isolation, but Raine's narrative politicized it as a particular social location, through her various references to privilege, uniqueness, and marginalization, and the discourses these are embedded in (lesbian politics and popular psychology, to name two).

Given the potentially dire circumstances in both Michele and Raine's lives, as they recounted them to me, I was an empathic listener to their struggles. I interpret survival in their lives in terms of coping strategies rather than merely improving one's "quality of life" (Bauman 1995).<sup>77</sup> Raine sardonically explained, "*I would like to have the opportunity to self-actualize, thank you very much, but when do I have the time or resources?*" The exile she spoke of was to a margin circumscribed by external forces of power and privilege, and her sense of injustice was much less internalized than Michele's seemed to be. Her choices are also different. Michele's struggle, to me, might be resolved for her in part by the reinstatement of heterosexual marriage, i.e. getting married again. But for Raine, she might say that her struggle is more complex, in that within a homosexual relationship she still cannot escape marginality. In this sense, Raine sees herself as up against, in her terms, many more barriers to surviving single motherhood.

What Raine's account makes me question is the relationship between survival (as a narrative and a set of experiences) and identity. Returning to Minh-ha's notion of certain groups of persons such as Third world immigrant women who recount aspects of experience that highlight evidence of their political markedness, it is useful here to think of these stories as

"arrival stories." By this I mean that they are accounts of "what the women have come to" rather than "where the women have come from" (John 1989:57). When speaking of immigrant women, anthropologist Mary John has suggested, the language of arrival has been valorized, and therefore it is the women's "modes of survival in this new land that are extensively addressed" (ibid.). The point I want to make with this analogy is that the questions I asked about becoming a single mother and about being a single mother, inscribes single motherhood as a scene of arrival and thus implore the tales of surviving this space and the journey there. Rather than asking the women where they have come from and why, I begin from the premise they have arrived at some new and foreign place, and therefore take part in their markedness as "single" mothers.

This focus on arrival draws attention to the power implicit to the construction of categories and experience, to the "inexorable demand that people reconstitute their identities within its borders alone" (John 1989:57).<sup>78</sup> I asked, "what is it like here?" and they replied, "it is difficult, but we are surviving." There are a number of things to be said about this. First, the experience of survival for women who are single mothers must be seen as social and historical rather than personal and ahistorical. Experience is not immediately accessible, understood and named, nor is it mere individualism (Scott 1992, Mohanty 1987). Following from this, as feminist theorist Joan Scott has suggested (1992:25), we must examine why this experience gets constructed as different in the first place. Third, the testimony to, and assertion of, particular experience must be seen as strategic in part. In the case of Michele and Raine's accounts of exile and near-suicide, I see them using these to negotiate their relationships to the symbolic boundaries of the social category "single mother." They are single mothers but they are not *that* single mother. The rest of the chapter explores these ideas.

**Incredibly Hard Stuff: "I shouldn't have to do this"<sup>79</sup>**

Pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing are no longer seen as easy routes to womanhood, but as fraught with sacrifices, perils, and challenges that women must surmount.

-Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, in Uncertain Terms (1990:282)

Comprehending the women's narratives as arrival stories allows us to see the assertions of "modes of survival" (John 1989:57) as evidence, of sorts, to belonging to the category "single mother." Geographer Liz Bondi has said that, "to claim experience is valid is not the same as claiming it is true; rather, it allows experience to be understood as a salient but contestable, rather than as foundational, phenomenon" (1993:95). I take the experiences that Michele and Raine recounted to me- isolation, despair, near-suicide- as salient, therefore, to understanding single mother identity, but not as "inevitable" or "god-given" experiences constitutive of single motherhood. Instead the claims to these experiences, and the recognition that they are common, is seen here as an identification with the category "single mother." In other words, I am suggesting that the testimony to "survival" is used by the women to mark off boundaries of belonging and difference. I am suggesting that the women essentialize "single mother," to some degree, and that this serves a strategic purpose.

Rather than taking experience as evidence of difference, I treat it "as a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world" (Scott 1992:25). What kinds of experiences seem to constitute "single mother," then? How do these experiences get constructed as different by the women themselves?

All of the interviewees recounted the hard work and almost insurmountable challenge for them involved in being a single mother- as one woman says, "*I have no desire to do this alone again, that's hard stuff!*"<sup>80</sup> This kind of testimony is worth listening to because it draws attention to the materiality of their lives, but also because it sheds light on how the women located their sets of experiences and selves in social space. The women imparted their

sense of understanding this work as an unjust amount of work that others not similarly positioned do not have to bear the burden of. Hard work seemed to be, for many of the women, a distinguishing mark of "single mother." Underpinning the narratives are overlapping discourses, about hard work as heroic, or "authentic," or unjust, experience, and about "pure" and "impure" single mothers, and the sense of belonging, or identification with, that categorization the women held.

Michele drew my attention to the connection between hard work and (essential) "single mother," when she discussed what she called "*the common ground*" of single motherhood:

*I have a friend who calls himself a single dad but I'm sorry, you're a single dad if you have physical custody and if you're in the same boat as I am. Seeing your kid one weekend a month, he's not a single dad. Men call themselves single fathers, but they have no inkling, yet they want to be labeled. Are they looking for a sense of belonging? (Michele, interview November 1995)*

Being in "*the same boat*" as Michele- suffering and having the same relentless work load- is criterion to a "belonging" that is clearly gendered, and, for Michele at least, laudable. She imbued this suffering and hard work with meaning in the sense that it came to represent, for her, belonging to single motherhood. She said, "*when someone else is a single mother it is a sign of strength and initiation, you've passed the same test.*" According to her analysis, single mothers, as a collective identity of women who pass "*the test*" (of belonging) by virtue of this capacity for carrying such burdens, are essentialized, heroized, and inscribed with strength.<sup>81</sup>

In this section I draw from two of the women's narratives to illustrate some contestations that stem from this "mark" of hard work. Raine expressed her sense of injustice in shouldering such a burden. While hard work was something she performed automatically when she was first a single mother, she strongly resisted the same performance now, and resented the exigency of having to do it all alone. Rebecca claimed that the work involved in being a single mother is harder than anything she had anticipated. While she described the accomplishment of this work as that which makes her "*feel best about being a single mother,*" it was also a troubling mark of difference for her.

When I asked Raine to tell me if life had become less difficult over time for her as a single mother, she presented a cogent argument about the politics of home work.<sup>82</sup> She understood the "*hand she has been dealt*" to constitute experience different from that of women who are childless, or women with more resources than she, or women raising children with the help of involved fathers or partners. She also understood that it was less difficult for her when she accepted the burden of housework and childcare as part and parcel of who she was- in her words, she "*just did it.*" Her awareness of the "*unjustness*" created a contest for her between a set of conflicting commitments and desires. She condemned herself for whining about the work she asserted "*needs to be done,*" and for lacking the capacity she used to have to perform the work involved, yet was critical of the position she felt she had been put into. The detail with which she described a particularly memorable day is telling:

*It seems like back then I had a greater capacity for work. I didn't procrastinate as much... I remember around [her son's] first birthday, my sister had stolen my car from the school parking lot and smashed it, so I had no car, and I needed to get [her son] to daycare which was across town and get myself back to school... so I was having to wrangle a ride everyday to daycare and school and back. That was hell--I had no transportation, it was late October, it was Halloween, I was making him a costume, the apartment that I was living in was being sprayed for cockroaches, so it was about three days before his birthday, and I was having two parties, one for the relatives and one for the friends. The place was being sprayed for cockroaches and I had to move absolutely everything in the entire place to the middle of each room and then clean everything and then put it all back. Just a couple of days before his party, plus I had midterms. I was totally alone. I had just gotten a boyfriend but he didn't do childcare or housework... So, all this stuff was coming down on me, and I just did it! I didn't sit around whining about it. I would stay up all night, and work and work and work. I find that I don't have the energy anymore. I find that I'm just a little too aware of how unjust it is... So I sit around analyzing, theorizing about how I shouldn't have to do this... and meanwhile it still has to be done. And I'm so bitter about the hand I've been dealt that it keeps me from getting the work done that needs to be done. I'm having to struggle with that. This is my life, I have to do it. No, its not fair. I'm tired of seeing my childless friends be happy-go-lucky. But its not going to help me or [her son] if I'm just so bitter I can't get anything done. So it was so hard but I kept doing it and then there's been other times where it seems even more hard but I'm doing less. So, I guess it goes up and down. I've just had so much shit happen to me... (Raine, interview January 1996).*

To understand how this relates to Michele's representation of a "pure" single mother, we need to understand Raine's location within "lesbian-mother politics" (see Lewin 1990, 1995a) and her own notions of "single mother" identity. Raine asserted that there is no popular social imagery of a lesbian single mother because, for the most part, lesbian single mothers "*are*

*just invisible.*"<sup>83</sup> There is a contradiction inherent to being both mother and lesbian, and the mother aspect of Raine's selfhood was often denied or at least ignored in "*her community*"<sup>84</sup> because something about it "*screams straightness.*" As she explained, "*what is so lesbian about being a mother?*"<sup>85</sup> While Raine resisted the invisibility rendered by this intervening discourse about lesbian mothers, she understood that her home work constrained her self-development as a lesbian insofar as she had to operate these practices and spaces. I think that Raine's assertion about the "unjustness" of having to do home work has in part to do with her own growing awareness of and embeddedness in lesbian politics. She outlined to me, for example, the divisions held between lesbian mothers who had had their children through "artificial" reproduction, and those who had had them through a heterosexual relationship, and her own growing concern over such divisions. Lynda Johnston and Gill Valentine has suggested that home is a site where identity can come under surveillance from other lesbians: "'Political correctness,' which has come to haunt the lesbian feminist landscape, or other 'orthodoxies,' can be invoked by some women to regulate the performative aspects of others' lesbian identities within the domestic environment" (1995:109).

Raine spoke of being confronted by the persistent imagery of "*the dominant image of single mothers*" that is, significantly, an equally dominant image within the lesbian community:

*She is straight, wears lots of slutty make-up, has lots of boyfriends over, lives in a basement suite, has at least two kids that are bratty and make lots of noise in the big grocery store... We're leeches off the system, and we just want to get a man, and within the lesbian community, stemming from that, that we're out looking for a partner; we're very needy!* (Raine, interview January 1996).

But Raine insisted that she does not fit this stereotype, "*I don't even shop in those stores!*"

What strikes me is how Raine created a category and image for herself that corresponds more to her own attitude towards home work than does this dominant image she described. The image she used was that of "*queer mother.*" When I asked her about her own image of single mothers, she claimed:

*...all single mothering is queer mothering. It is not what society wants mothers to be doing. This society wants mothers to be at home cooking dinner for their husbands who are off being executives... It wants women to be basically co-dependent and willing to put up with the men's shit. And to stay with the guys for the good of the children and then when the shit hits the fan the men can go off and the woman is stuck with the kids (Raine, interview January 1996).*

In this light, I interpret Raine's contestations over the hard work as resistance to a category she is circumscribed into but does not identify with. The core images and concepts of "Mother" are fixed by a male-dominated family ideology (Fineman 1995:103) that Raine rejected. She was, proudly, a "queer" (impure, deviant) mother, and she struggled with making home work a transformative act, or as Johnston and Valentine have described, a performative act. The "lesbian home" is an important site of lesbian construction wherein "performative acts of a lesbian identity" can be restricted but also subverted by acts of resistance (1995:111).

For Rebecca, her burden of hard work seemed also to be laden with meaning for her identity. By working full-time to support herself and her son she had achieved the status of a single mother "not on welfare." At the same time, this full-time job served as a painful reminder of an identity she had lost in becoming a single mother. When Rebecca responded to my question about becoming a single mother, she emphasized the difficulty she had experienced. What underlies this difficulty it seems to me, is her location as a woman with middle-class aspirations to a big house, children, and a husband with a well-paying job that would enable her the privilege of not having to work outside the home. She told me, speaking about her dreams as a young woman growing up in Canada in the 1970s in a traditional military family:

*... it was a given, for myself and my friends, to own a house and not work. How many kids we would have, how many cars... that was to be decided, but it was a given to have a house and that I wouldn't work and he would (Rebecca, interview October 1995).*

Rebecca compared herself to her married sister and other friends her age who have, in her words, "*accomplished this*." One of the most worrisome aspects for her about being a single mother is that she does not "*fit in*," in this middle-class configuration of social space she

described. For her, going to the park on a sunny Sunday on the North Shore where she lives in a rented house was an act that induced self-denigration and a sense of loss. Seeing families, and it is critical to note that she excluded herself and her son from this category, caused her to think of herself as a failure. The families she saw at the park represented to her something she was not, and something she had lost. In this light I begin to understand that the "hard work" Rebecca referred to is not reducible to the manual tasks of childcare, keeping house, and a full-time job, although this is a large part of it, but it was also psychological and ideological.

*It was easy at first. [Her son] was an easy baby, and then he turned fourteen months and became a little animal and that lasted until two weeks ago. So that was a year and a half! I wanted someone to be there... it was really hard, and I regretted having [her son]. I regretted getting involved with this guy. I was sad a lot, I cried a lot. I felt bad for [her son] if he ever knew what I thought. I wallowed in self-pity. I spent a year and a half buried alone, isolated, hating my life, thinking that if it wasn't for [her son], if I felt that way, I would commit suicide. I was convinced I would. I don't think of suicide now but sometimes I think its just so hard, its not worth it. Sometimes. But I've never gone so far as to do anything. But I slept for a long time. Because it was sort of like being dead I guess. I'm out of that now, and its a lot easier (Rebecca, interview October 1995).*

Calling me and participating in the interview was part of the process of "coming out" of her depression, for Rebecca, a process that seemed to include reconciling discordant identities "within her own mind." She referred to herself as "a solo single mother," implying a location in social space doubly isolated. But it was difficult for her to "reach out," because she said she was afraid to befriend other women who could possibly lend support but who might also judge her. The shame she harbored, as a person out-of-place, kept her away from others- in exile, different. It was her improving psychological health, Rebecca claimed, that allowed her to begin to confront the conflicting messages- "the inward things"- that obscured for her a more positive self-perception as single mother.

When I asked her to tell me how her feelings about being a single mother have changed over time, inklings of a presentation of herself as a strong person appear and they are clearly linked to the heroics of overcoming the difficulties in her life:

*Yes, they've changed, because every stage with a child is different. I think I'm feeling the best about it because I'm able to pay my bills, and keep my car going, and keep a*



place, and [her son] is happy and fed, and I feel very proud of myself. I've done it all on my own without any money, but I scrimp and save and don't really buy myself anything, to pay rent on time. But it's my choice though, to live here [a house on the North Shore]. But it has changed because he's older and because I've done it, so it is hard, but it's not the outward things that are hard, for me. What's hard is the people in your brain that are telling you you can't do it and all that stuff. But it's a lot harder than I ever thought! Because when my older sister was splitting up [with her husband] she told me, 'I'll tell you one thing- it's hard.' I remember thinking, well, if it's that hard I can do it. But it's not hard, it's out of this world. It's the hardest thing in the world. It's too simplistic to say that it's hard. It's the most challenging thing that I have ever done... When you look at it, it shouldn't be that hard. A sweet little kid. But it's what goes on-- your lack of freedom, no life. That's what I find. It's harder than I ever imagined it would be (Rebecca, interview October 1995).

"The hardest thing in the world," then, to Rebecca, involves as many discursive as material constraints.<sup>86</sup> For example, she was confronted by the image that her married sister, who Rebecca believed was embarrassed by her, tried to pin on her, "*All single mothers are poor, not well spoken, not well read, kind of hard, they all smoke, they all drink too much, they all sleep around.*" Rebecca said, "*that's not me.*" Yet, her and her son were often excluded from Sunday dinners, and birthday parties, and other social activities taking place at her sister's household because, as she recounted to me:

*most of my sister's friends feel bad for me. I wonder if my opinion is not as important because I'm not like them? All of them on her street are mothers and fathers going to [community] school. I get an inkling that I'm not taken that serious because I haven't done it exactly the way that they think is right. So, I might be a nice person [to them] but I don't know as much as if I was married and owned a house (Rebecca, interview October 1995)*

Yet her own expanding image of a single mother is one of strength, similar to Michele's essential single mother. Rebecca described this image for me: "*they're just like everyone else except that they're doing it on their own and they're a lot stronger than the ones that can depend on a man.*" Rebecca placed herself in this category, although reluctantly, when she described this image to me:

*... I've been able to do it which makes me a little bit proud. I allow myself a little bit of pride and appreciate myself for having done it, and not having sunk into depression and not given up and let welfare take care of me (Rebecca, interview October 1995).*

Another constraint Rebecca faced was her devaluation of herself as someone who is not married and does not own a home. She condemned herself for "*standing out*" as a single woman and a "*person who rents*," and in doing so placed herself in relation to married middle-class

women, and constructed her own set of experiences as different, and marginal. Rebecca was haunted by the fear of not being "able to do it;" the "it" signified as much the mental work, of acquiescing to the self she is now potentially characterized as, than the physical demands of the housework and childcare involved in single motherhood. When I attempted to affirm her claim that she does much of the work on her own, and therefore confirm the label "solo" single mother she gave herself, her reply reflects the precarious relationship she held between the hardship in her life and her sense of self:

*I don't want to be reminded of how hard it is because if I get reminded of how hard it is and I think about it I might not be able to go on sometimes. People say, 'I don't know how you do it. I can't manage without my husband,' and I think, I don't want to hear it... I don't allow myself to believe that I do it, that I'm a strong person (Rebecca, interview October 1995).*

Rebecca seemed to have contested the mark of hard work others tried to pin on her because she wanted to resist the difference signified by this, and that which deflated her ability to "go on." This mark carried with it, perhaps, the tacit awareness that other women do not have to bear this work alone as she does as a "solo" single mother.

This contestation manifests an understanding of single mother as an identity constituted along class borders, that is, an identity and social placement outside the perimeters of middle class mothers "who do not have to work." Although her full-time employment renders her someone outside the category "welfare mom," and for this she is proud, at the same time it separates her from the women she would like to identify with- the housewives she saw at the tennis club where she used to work who would "come and play tennis and then pick up their kids." Rebecca's narrative reflects what seems to be a sense of marginalization that stems from exclusion from the middle-class. She said, "Even if that wasn't good for me [being a housewife], I would rather go with the crowd, because this way [being a working single mother] I feel like I stand out and I don't like that." Rebecca did not want to "stand out," and by this she implied that she did not want to be seen as different from the "crowd," which, clearly, signified middle-class married women. Her out-of-placeness ,

and social representations of particular mothers are, of course, interconnected. She does not construct her difference in a social vacuum. Anthropologist Leith Mullings has argued:

Elements of strongly held ideologies concerning race, class, and gender are reflected in the public discussion of women who head households. Ideologies of race portray them as promiscuous women and inadequate mothers; ideologies of class blame them for their poverty; and ideologies of patriarchy label nontraditional family forms 'pathological.' The convergence of these beliefs and their reproduction at so many locations render the representation of women who head households particularly deleterious (1995:25).

What Rebecca's almost urgent need "*to fit in*" brings to light are the deleterious workings of this "convergence of beliefs" (ibid.) that produce a dominant popular image and categorization of single mother as pathological, deviant, and needy, against her growing identification with single mother as inherently strong and capable. Rebecca's numerous references to "*not wanting to stand out*" or "*to feel like a sore thumb*" and of wanting to "*blend in,*" illustrate the difficulty she faced accepting her circumstances and identity. Although she described the conditions of her life as a single mother as an unbearable struggle at times, her narrative focused as much on the implications of these conditions in terms of a loss of belonging, than on the difficulty and politics of the conditions themselves. She did not argue, for example, "I need to be paid more for my work," but expressed her need for a place where her life and selfhood as positive can be accepted. <sup>87</sup>

Returning to the notion that Rebecca's story be seen as an arrival story in which she recounted her hardship as evidence to me of the markedness of her identity in a "new place," her assertions of wanting to be accepted is a significant part of this story. I use Minh-ha's articulation of the "refugee problem" to draw a parallel to Rebecca's internalization of the pathology attached to the category "single mother."

Refugeeism may be said to be produced by political and economic conditions that make continued residence intolerable. The irreversible sense of 'losing ground' is... however, often suppressed by the immediate urge to 'settle in' or to assimilate in order to overcome the humiliation of bearing the too-many-too-needy status of the homeless-stateless alien. The problem that prevails then is to be accepted rather than to accept. 'We are grateful. We do not want to be a nuisance.'... Or else, 'We are a disturbance. That's the word. Because we show you in a terrible way how fragile the world we live in is...' (Minh-ha 1994:12).

The parallels I want to make are as follows. First, Rebecca's narrative touches little on the violence and mistreatment she received as a married woman, never mind the social conditions and discourses that produce the ideal of marriage in the first place. Instead, she focused on where she has come to (single motherhood) and how she must deal with that- as the locale of social displacement and disruption it has become for her. Second, because of the obfuscation of "single mother" as a category and experience produced by socio-political and economic conditions, not only in her narrative but public discussions as well, the difficulties she encountered and asserted are those of assimilation and accommodation rather than refusal.<sup>88</sup> Her sense of "losing ground" (Minh-ha 1994:12) was suppressed. As a single mother living in a middle-class neighbourhood and going to parks frequented by what seemed to her as predominantly nuclear families, Rebecca worried about what her presence there represented. Whether she saw herself exactly as a "nuisance," (ibid.) remains a mere possibility but it is certain that she saw herself, and not the others, as the disturbance in the social landscape, and for this she suffered humiliation and shame. Clearly this focus on arrival (to single motherhood), and who she has become, triggers a loss.

I want to return now to an earlier point made, concerning the notion that "people reconstitute their identities within [national] borders alone" (John 1989:57). There is something useful to be gleaned from this. While women are categorized and made to be "out of place" by "a constellation of symbols and beliefs about what constitutes a 'natural' or 'normal' family" (Fineman 1995:102), and by a particular social scrutiny that reflects "a fear of women [heading households] without men" (Mullings 1995:131), they also "categorize back" (Malkki 1995:8). In other words, while the women reconstituted their identities as single mothers within these powerful discourses, they also subverted and reconstructed and transformed them. Both Raine and Rebecca's narratives elucidate this process underway, of engaging with their categorization and marginality (see Tsing 1995). Their heroization of single mother as a collective identity- quite lucid in Raine's story and more intimated than asserted in Rebecca's- can be interpreted as an attempt to subvert their marginal social locations. Membership and

belonging ("passing the test"), is associated with authenticated experience (struggle, hardship, and Herculean feats). Thus, a pejorative and "colonized" category (Fineman 1995)<sup>89</sup> is refigured and its borders are opened up and rendered with multiple meanings, and contestations, and possibilities.

Nevertheless, however much these borders are opened up, it is crucial to pay heed to the experience of loss for Rebecca, and invisibility for Raine. Rather than only romanticize their resistance to categorization, as a sign of "the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (Abu-Lughod 1990:42), it is crucial to also read them as "diagnostics of power" (ibid.). The wider cultural narratives about the "welfare mother," the promiscuous mother, and so forth- images used by Raine and Rebecca- may produce porous but not indissoluble borders in which their own reconstructions of identity take place within.

Anthropologist Anna Tsing has put it this way:

Women's strategies to face these challenges are shaped in part by stories of other women. Personal stories of mothers... are supplemented by more public stories that tell of successful or frustrated superwomen with careers and children, sacrificing but satisfied 'postfeminist' mothers, or monster mothers who stuff their children in garbage bags and take them out with the trash. Monster stories, in particular, advise women of a new public agenda in which children must be saved from their own mothers... Like other cautionary tales, these stories advise and inform about acceptable ways to live (1990:282).

It is not enough, then, to notice that Michele and Raine have presented heroized single mother stories but that they have been placed in a position that compels them to do so.

### **Sacrifice, stability, resources: "I can keep my head above water"<sup>90</sup>**

In the national order of things, the rooting of peoples is not only normal; it is also perceived as a moral and spiritual need.

- Lisa Malkki (1992:30)

In this section I expand on the notion of internalized pathologization raised by Malkki (1992), in addressing the final theme of this chapter, testimony to financial difficulty. All of the women spoke of experiencing financial difficulty in the course of their single motherhood to some degree, as well as the need to make sacrifices and be resourceful. The narratives of two of

the women, Elizabeth and Kathy, seem to reflect in an especially cogent way a sense of the culpability that single motherhood constitutes. It seems to me that they felt compelled to defend themselves as capable and competent mothers in the face of "one more round of interrogation." <sup>91</sup> Beneath their testimonies lies a critical cultural narrative about single mothers as bad mothers (see Tsing 1990). Sacrifice and stability are important claims with which they stake out their own social locations in relation to other single mothers, or rather, the mythical "bad" single mother who keeps popping up in their stories.

Elizabeth rents a large house in the west side of the city, a space that enabled, as she described, "*a more expansive sense of who she is.*" Her family, too, was described in expansive terms that included a vast array of supportive friends. Her narrative is about self-development and personal growth, and about reaching out to friends and community in order to provide well for her daughter. She saw herself as someone outside the popular imagery of single mothers (as incompetent and dependent) that she described for me, and she asserted that her identity as a single mother be recognized as "*part of a process.*" In other words, she imbued her identity as a single mother with meaning in terms of its transformative potential. Beneath this expression of potentiality are a number of telling assumptions about single motherhood as a space differentiated by class and education, and as a site of rehabilitation.

Elizabeth elucidated for me the understanding of single motherhood as a range of ways of operating in the world enabled or constrained by the "*skills*" and resources women employ. When I asked her what she wanted to tell me about being a single mother, she emphasized her resourcefulness, and in doing so implicated this as a marker of difference between herself and other single mothers. This particular casting of herself is critical context for understanding how and where she located herself within the space of single motherhood:

*I think that the way I handle it [single motherhood as an experience] is reflective of who I am. When I need help I ask for it. [Her daughter] just got a bunk-bed. In total it cost \$1000. I had seven people involved in purchasing that. I get a goal and invite people to be part of it, and lo and behold I have people to help. That's how I ensure we have a standard of living, that our basic needs are met... [Her daughter's] swimming is paid for by [a family friend]. If I need help, I like to involve everyone. Those are the things I use to make sure what we need is met. I have the money to pay the bills. I just don't have the money for incidentals. I have friends I can call when I*

*need a prescription... it's just being educated. That helps a lot to be able to find the resources...*

*My mother always told me to be proud of myself, and she taught it in terms of how you stand, how you come across. I don't feel shameful, I don't feel that I've done anything wrong. I think that I'm adding to the quality of society, the way I'm raising [her daughter]. This is an incredible challenge for me. I feel like I should be given a medal! (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

The pride that Elizabeth asserted seemed to stem from her achievement of stability "against the odds." She located herself in a social space evinced by accomplishment, competency, and pragmatism. Her "stance" in the world contrasts with Rebecca's, for example, insofar as Elizabeth drew people into her life to ensure her needs were met, whereas Rebecca hesitated, out of shame, to ask for support. Elizabeth's material location amidst supportive friends who helped pay for the bunk bed and her daughter's swimming lessons, for example, reflected, and perhaps, enabled an acceptance of her identity as a single mother. This contrasts with Rebecca's out-of-placeness (in the park, and at her sister's) and concern with being accepted. Elizabeth does not appear to experience a sense of not belonging.

Elizabeth's narrative is a particular survival story in which she told me how she transcended her family's poverty ("their lower economic existence") by getting herself an university education and a "skill." She told me not only to which "class" she belongs (the middle-class) but that it was her own hard work and agency that put her there. This is Elizabeth's reply when I asked her to tell me about her family:

*I come from a family that was broken; my own father had four children with my mother, and he left when I was about eighteen months, and then my mother got together with another fellow when I was three, and my two older brothers went with my dad, and my mother had two more children. So I've been in and out of, and experienced, different family types. I've been on income assistance with my mother as a child... Left home at thirteen, from my mother's home, and moved into my father's at fifteen. Went into [foster] care and have been on my own since seventeen. I've always been very independent. Not by choice! Actually, it's because my parents weren't very together!*

*My mother was on income assistance with the four of us; my dad was in and out of the picture but not very consistent because of drinking and womanizing. I think he had money, he just wasn't into sharing it with us. My mom had to put food on the table. We lived in BC Housing [rental housing subsidized by the provincial government]. I've experienced the lower economic existence. Which really motivated me as a teenager and an adult to make sure I had a skill so that I could support myself. Just in case I brought someone else in I could support them (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

Elizabeth told me of her current financial location many times during the interview. She said that her family background was fraught with barriers but she made sacrifices (she was still paying off a university student loan) and had acquired a "skill" ("I've got a certificate that let's me earn \$20 an hour"). Moreover, she was able to remain in her financial position through continued personal sacrifice. This is what she told me in the course of telling me that her daughter's father needed to start paying child support payments, which he had not been paying until then:

*I'm about \$500 short every month in my budget. So we sacrifice. To be able to provide her with the ability to go to [private] daycare, live on the west side, to live in a two bedroom house (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

There is a performative, almost probative, tone to this narrative. In declaring herself a "survivor," Elizabeth pointed out her capabilities and competencies. She presented herself as a competent, deserving single mother in view of, what seems to me, a list of her "credentials" that includes the financial independence and resourcefulness her education had made possible. It was her "decent salary," she asserted, that earned her the "choice" to become a single mother in the first place. It was her ability to access resources that has maintained her credibility and innocence. By this I mean that when I asked her about becoming a single mother, her narrative read like a defense, as though she was addressing an unspoken accusation: why did you do it, why did you have a child as an unmarried woman? She said:

*I was really upset, I remember saying that there must be something wrong with me because I was doing this alone, where was the partner. I never knew I had any of those feelings or thoughts until the moment arised that I was giving birth to a baby, and I was doing it as a single parent. It wasn't anything that I wanted...*

*I didn't want children, I really didn't. In my 20s I had been in a relationship with someone... we were going to get married and have a family, and that was fine. Under the auspices of a household I would be willing to do it. But I never wanted to be a single parent.*

*[But] I was also very realistic and I was never going to set myself up for not being able to afford it. So I got my bachelor's degree, I got a certificate that lets me earn \$20 an hour. I'm financially stable, I pay my bills. I've got the usual statistical debt like anyone else because of student loans and things but I'm stable.*

*So, on the realistic end I was prepared. When I found out I was pregnant I was perfectly fine with it... It wasn't a traumatic thing for me ... I felt like I could cope (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*



I interpret Elizabeth's testimony as a response in part to powerful social ideas about her culpability as a single mother, more specifically, as an unmarried mother, insofar as "stability" and ability to "cope" are emblematic laudable actions. Un- or never-married mothers, in Canada and the United States, historically have been marked as objects of moral reform (Gordon 1994, O'Connor 1981). In contemporary public discussions they remain at the heart of the formulation of single motherhood as a social "problem." Fineman has claimed, when speaking of current political discourse about single mothers,

... [a] woman's decision to become or remain a single mother is the decisive consideration for determining whether she is considered a 'good' mother. If she is not single as a result of death (or, perhaps, divorce), she is deemed a 'bad' mother. Her conduct is considered to have 'earned' her this designation, and stereotypes about her motivations and behavior abound (Fineman 1995:118).

More generally, Febraro has stated, "single mother blame is pervasive" (1994:8). In this light, Elizabeth's testimony makes sense in that she must operate as a notably marked mother in a social space punctured with references to this (mythical) incompetent, bad, and even dangerous mother.<sup>92</sup> She has found herself in the position of having to deflect this categorization a number of times, as she pointed out to me when she replied to my question about becoming a single mother. One of the most salient aspects of becoming a single mother for her it seemed was refiguring and asserting her position as a particularly competent and articulate and educated mother. This was part of her story she wanted very much to tell me:

*I got kind of weeping [after her daughter's birth] and started crying. They [the hospital staff] assigned a social worker to me, and I found it interesting that they did this. I assumed they did it because I was a single mother. 'Those single mothers need help you know' [sarcasm]. The social worker was an old girlfriend of mine... I find it interesting that they assume that I wouldn't be confident enough to be able to deal with my own emotions. I mean I appreciate the fact that they offer resources and stuff, but I know very well from working at [the Ministry of] Social Services, that the reason a mother is checked out by a social worker is they are concerned about competency. I didn't appreciate it. Because I present myself well and speak well, the social worker who came to visit me knew I would be fine. I cried when I left the hospital. I was totally overwhelmed by the responsibility (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

It is interesting to speculate about Elizabeth's experience of "*overwhelming responsibility*" upon leaving the hospital as a new mother. It seems to me that, in part at least, this was induced by the presence of the social worker and the public suspicion and

scrutiny this might have set in place for Elizabeth. Regardless, Elizabeth can be seen to refuse this kind of dislocation in that she ultimately deflected the pathology, that is inscribed over and over in public imagery of single mothers as inherently "dysfunctional." She ascribed her "problem" to social misperception about single mothers, and to the injustice of using nuclear family as the basis for economic logic and policy. Nevertheless, although she deemed herself "*not unusual*," at the same time she laid claim to a particular location and as such differentiated herself from other single mothers, especially those who may fit the profile of "the" "bad" single mother. Her ability to "*present herself well*" and "*speak well*" are the tools with which she negotiated herself out of the category "*incompetent mother*."

When I asked her to describe the popular image of a single mother that she held, she used this strategy again. It is worth noting, that as a social worker, she is frequently exposed to a particular, professional discourse about single mothers,<sup>93</sup> and this has implications for the ways she casts her own identity:

*There seems to be this need when you are dealing with a dysfunctional person in society that you need to connect it with single parenthood<sup>94</sup> - give me a break! I am flabbergast by the comments I get from my co-workers, who are professionals, in terms of their thoughts towards single parents- supervisors, financial aid workers- people who are professional in terms of dealing with all types of family types- their level of ignorance... The other thing is that half of us working there are either current single parents or their children are grown up, and these people have the audacity to make these stupid comments about them. Ugh! They make the comments that they [single parents] don't seem to have as many skills in terms of disciplining their child so their child is out of control. That they don't take financial responsibility for themselves. If you look at the income assistance statistics, only 12 to 15% of the cases are single parents.*

*Sure enough, a lot of single parents are forced on income assistance, whether it is through their entire family cycle, but they are set up to lose.*

*I only get little dollars in terms of what is potentially available, but I make \$20 an hour...*

*The comments made are that they don't know how to control their money, and that they're dependent. Just by them having to apply for income assistance they prove that they are not taking responsibility for themselves...*

*My comments are that this person is devoted to raising a child so perhaps they do need help from society... I don't think that the lifestyle they get out of being on income assistance is any great deal.*

*I get \$1000 every two weeks. They get \$1000 a month. That's not much money to live off. You're barely meeting your shelter costs, and you're not providing very good food...*

*I think in society there is a pecking order... There always has to be someone to be different, at the bottom. The need to control is based on whether your relationship is condoned, whether it is accepted or not.*

*I think it is very prevalent out there that being a single parent there has to be something wrong with you- whether you are sexually promiscuous or whether you intend to support yourself... I don't think it should apply to everyone. I don't think I'm particularly unusual. I think I reflect my generation, my peer group... I'm well-educated. I speak well, but I don't think I'm particularly unusual (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

What strikes me again is how Elizabeth saw single motherhood as a set of practices, a range of ways of operating within a hierarchical social space in which some ways are exonerated and others are not. She understood the management of single mothers as a practice based on stigmata of difference ("*whether your relationship is condoned... or not*"). Her own location in this space is enabled, then, by the skills and resources she is able to employ, and this includes her adeptness at negotiating the things she needs, such as childcare, material goods, and housing "*to ensure we have a standard of living.*" Elizabeth is well-connected, well informed, and plugged-in to the available matrix of support and potential resources for single mothers in her community. She asserted:

*I know the system well... I qualify for a small daycare subsidy [from the Ministry of Social Services] of about \$100 per month, I qualify for a tax credit of about \$70 per month, I qualify for GST [goods and services tax] rebate... I'm a very resourceful person and the first thing I did was call the YWCA to see if I could join a single mother's group <sup>95</sup> because I was taking on a role I knew nothing about... There was no support group in the neighbourhood so I ended up setting up my own ... I got to listen to what seemed to be the theme with single parents- maintenance- which seems to take two years through court. Custody too is a very important issue. There also seems to be a lot of frayed boundaries in terms of the relationship between the father and mother, so you're listening to the women talk about that. Their frustration of being alone, and from stereotypical remarks from family and friends... (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

Elizabeth's narrative points not only to the impressive amount of social knowledge she had amassed regarding single mother issues, but to the way this kind of knowledge gets constructed and used. Elizabeth's aptitude locates her in a field different than that occupied by other single mothers (the ones she refers to as "*not knowing how to find the resources*") and brings to the fore the discourses and practices of intervention within local service- oriented "programmes" for single mothers. It can be seen as a "way of operating" that allows her to

"reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production" (de Certeau 1984:xiv), in this case, the services for single mothers.

Implicit to the discourses of self-development that Elizabeth used is the social construction of single motherhood as a site of rehabilitation. Fineman has noted that, "intervention and supervision are the norms, [rather than] privacy and the presumption of adequacy" in single mother headed homes (1995:178). Until "paternal presence" is legally reestablished to complete the family structure, at least metaphysically (ibid:102), the assumption is, in political and professional discourses, that single mothers are incompetent and in need of supervision (ibid:178). We see this in the case of Elizabeth's visit at the hospital by a social worker concerned with her "*emotional stability*" and "*competency*."

This view is played out in a number of other contexts as well that include local venues such as the "YWCA Annual Single Mothers' Conference" <sup>96</sup> (which Elizabeth has attended), and the "Vancouver Single Mothers Support Network Wellness Centres." <sup>97</sup> Within these social spaces women are provided the opportunity to participate in workshops, resource gathering, and self-help <sup>98</sup> within discourses of "empowerment" and "support." <sup>99</sup> Offered at these places, are not so much material resources ( although food vouchers and free tickets to concerts, for example, are often available), but "emotional, psychological, and spiritual" <sup>100</sup> resources to facilitate personal change and transformation, and, ostensibly, stability and competency.

Mullings has argued that, "Despite the lack of significant evidence that single-headedness is, in itself, harmful, these households are invariably described as inherently pathological" (1995:131). Furthermore, "As women attempt to raise children in crisis conditions, they find themselves the focus of representations that in effect obscure and even blame them for these conditions" (ibid:129). In the contexts of the conferences and the "wellness centres," the women are encouraged to "empower" and fix themselves, and to stabilize, at the same time they are expected to "move on." <sup>101</sup>

Although Elizabeth did not seem to have internalized the pathologization inherent in these discourses of "therapeutic intervention and management" (Malkki 1992), like Rebecca and Michele seemed to have done, she nevertheless spoke of her understanding of single motherhood as an in-between space, in which she had had a chance to "*work on herself*," but that she was ready to "*move on*." When I asked her whether she thought of herself in terms of "single mother," her response reflected a transitional, remedial framing of her identity:

*Yes, I do, but I also think family is an on-going process.*

*I created what I want and I got what I want, but in the slice of all that experience I was alone. I didn't have the male and the male was part of that.*

*I'm moving towards getting married and having another child, because I'm not really interested in having another child outside marriage. I have no desire to do that alone again- that's hard stuff!*

*[But this] has been incredible stuff... I think I am very healthy, and very stable, and some lucky guy will get me.*

*I rejected [her daughter's father] because I wasn't willing to have someone who doesn't do a lot of work on himself... (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

Elizabeth has done "*a lot of work*" as a single mother. Like Rebecca, the work she referred to has been as much mental as physical. Both of the women's narratives reflect a desire to "fix" themselves, although each in different ways. This desire to fix obviously has many social dimensions and explanations. What I focus on here is the connection between social ideas about "stability" and the conceptualization of the "problem" as located in "bad" mothers, and therefore solved through rehabilitation. I return to the point by Malkki (1992), raised in Chapter One, that displacement comes to be seen as an inner, pathological condition of the displaced rather than as a sociopolitical event. Malkki has attributed the casting of internal pathology onto refugees to ideas about people and place associations that view "uprootedness" and "rootlessness" as "a loss of moral bearings" (ibid:33): "Rootless, they are no longer trustworthy as 'honest citizens'" (ibid:32). It is fascinating to note that an adage which appears on the brochure of one of the local service agencies for single mothers reflects a similar linkage between "rootedness" and moral, psychological health. It reads, "helping to heal the roots." <sup>102</sup> Single mothers, in this case, are naturalized, pathologized, and medicalized; they are made the object of management and intervention through ideas about stability and trustworthiness, and are expected to "heal", mend, and "grow."

Febbraro's work on the psychological construction of single motherhood affirms this pathologization. She has argued that, "the linguistic category of single mother is [used by researchers and mental-health professionals] in ways which suggest that, without intervention, negative outcomes are inevitable" (1994:5). Furthermore, these interventions are directed primarily at the individual level of change, for example, seeking to teach "parenting and social skills," and to "improve family dynamics, including the resolution of enmeshment and boundary issues" (ibid:6). Single mothers, in this light, are seen to bear an inherent vulnerability (ibid.), by virtue of their liminality. <sup>103</sup>

I conclude this section by returning by the notion of culpability. Single mothers have been blamed for many things. <sup>104</sup> For example, as Fineman has shown, "Single mothers have become the explicit objects of punitive and deeply suspicious public and political discourses that characterize them as dangerous to their children, and derivatively, to the rest of us as well" (1995:178). Here I want to focus on an aspect of the scrutiny that derives from the alleged constitutive "instability" of single mothers. By this I mean that, as I outlined in Chapter one, by definition single motherhood is a state of brokenness, and incompleteness (Febbraro 1994, Fineman 1995, Moore 1994), and of transience (McKie 1993). Rehabilitative treatment, offered by a range of practitioners including psychologists, social workers, and counsellors, is meant to "repair" and "contain" this "essence" of precariousness and disintegration. A psychologist has made this generalization, in the context of discussing a specific case concerning a single mother's difficulties with her teenage daughter: "The single parent <sup>105</sup> may need the support of a *holding* environment to achieve psychological *integration...*" (Simon 1990:197, emphasis added). <sup>106</sup> The symbolism here is telling. My interpretation of Simon's claim is that "the single parent" (read: mother) may need to be held ("in place") to be made whole ("rooted," "healed"). This relationship between stability and completeness lends insight to my interpretation of Kathy's testimony.

Kathy had recently purchased an apartment at the time of the interview. I interpreted Kathy's most urgent message to me to be the success she had achieved at taking

care of herself and her daughter independently and that, most notably, she had been able to provide them with a home- not merely a "sense of home" but a home they owned. Her testimony to survival must be seen in light of her pride and emphasis of this. She seemed to cast her own image as financially secure not so much to show her competency, as Elizabeth did, but to prove her stability, autonomy, and I argue, her locatedness. She framed herself as "innocent" from public accusations of single mothers as "needy" or as women "*who take from the system,*" and the evidence of her home ownership seemed to serve to vindicate her. I asked her to tell me about the house she currently lived in:

*...When I talk like this [about buying her own apartment], I make sure that all the single mothers at work hear this message. You're not just on the bottom, you're climbing back up. And depending on how fast you want to climb up is how fast you'll move on stuff.*

*I had a bit of extra money saved, and my mom and dad were constantly telling me that now was the best time to buy... So, I had this money set aside that I would need one day, so last year I bought the apartment [that she and her daughter live in]... Just over one year I've owned this place.*

*I've always had this inclination that I could survive anything.... My brother and I are both successful, not successful in having millions of dollars, but I guess survivable, to survive (Kathy, interview July 1995).*

Kathy's testimony as someone who could "*survive anything*" is interesting. For one thing, single motherhood takes on a perilous quality, as though it is an existence that one must necessarily work hard at and be very fortunate to survive, like climbing a mountain. Moreover, her identity as someone with a full-time job and her own home seemed to locate her outside the space of, and antithetical to, "*welfare recipients,*" when I asked her to tell me how being a single mother was important to her:

*I think it is important for me [being a single mother] because I think I'm doing a good job. I think the situation is better now than if I stayed where I was [living with her husband]... And I also think it's important because people stereotype single moms as being welfare recipients, and that they'll never get out of this system, and that someone is going to have to support them. That kind of gives me a bit of a push. I'm not super-rich but I also don't owe very much money, so I'm not terribly wealthy but I can keep my head above water, and on one income, bringing up a child.*

*I like to tell my girlfriends who are single moms, as long as you can keep your head above water, you'll be okay. So that to me is important, that I can do what I preach (Kathy, interview July 1995).*

Kathy set herself apart from women who do not own their own home and who are not as firmly established as she is. She said, "*I make sure all the other single mothers at work*

hear this message" and in doing so, she held herself and her "place" as exemplary. Her words were, seemingly, addressed to the women "who never get out of the system." When I asked her to clarify what she meant by "the welfare single mom," she offered her advice to "these women:"

*Even though women don't put themselves in that situation, whatever can happen can happen, all of a sudden women are in that situation, and I sometimes think that rather than the government giving out that money once a month... I think that sometimes when these women are on welfare, on care like that, rather than the government giving them... I have no idea what they get, \$1000 [per month] isn't much, but the government should hold back a little bit and set it aside and call that an education fund, and set them up so the woman can get out three days a week [to] get her skills up. That, to me, would be a bonus. Rather than give these women all this cash- I shouldn't say 'all' of it because I know they don't get that much. Sometimes I think if it were allocated differently, it might be in better interest for the moms because a lot of times the moms want to go to work... It's just like me, with my daughter. Once you start being away from my child all day, those long hours, all that for bringing home an extra \$300, I'll just sit on the system and that way everything is taken care of. My medical, my dental, my housing. So, unfortunately, the longer they [the single mothers] stay with that idea [of 'sitting on the system'] the longer all these other computer things are changing, and you have to get up-dated and up-dated, and they keep getting pushed back. It's too bad there's not some kind of educational funding (Kathy, interview July 1995).*

Her narrative reflected a sense of agency and power that she seemed to hold that contrasted with the other women she referred to. While they "have everything taken care of," she has taken care of herself, and did not allow herself to get "pushed back."

Kathy's narrative served to separate herself from "others in the same situation," based on her progress as a single mother. It had been an uphill climb, but she had "gotten this far" as she said it, on her own, without posing many demands on her daughter's father, or friends, or community, or the government. Despite the difficulties she experienced getting her daughter to daycare and getting to work without a vehicle and often times not having enough money to pay bills, Kathy expressed her gratitude for "where she is now," when I asked her if there were times when being a single mother felt negative to her:

*Yes, there are times when it [being a single mother] feels negative. But at the same time, I have a small voice telling me that I could be doing a lot worse. So I think of that and everything is going to be alright in the years to come... I do okay. Sometimes I think 'oh god, I've got to pay the Roger's [cable television] bill and I've got this much money to last me the next two weeks, how am I going to do it?' Something tells me, hey Kathy, look, you've got that much to get you over the next two weeks. So I'm always thinking that I'm doing just a little bit okay, it could be worse.*



*I think of the others in the same situation who are not as well off as I am, and I think of myself as being pretty lucky , to have gotten this far, and to where I am now (Kathy, interview July 1995).*

I want to make a connection between Kathy's sense of identity as a home-owner, and her gratefulness as someone who has "*gotten this far*" despite the difficulties of her situation. I suggest that these expressions of identity are shaped to some degree by the social accountability demanded of those categorized and censured as "rootless." Minh-ha has said that, "However they are relocated, [refugees] are a burden on the community... those who fail to secure happiness in their adopted lands are accused of being ungrateful" (ibid:12). If we accept that houses, and particularly the ownership of houses, provide a cultural framework for "interpreting and describing what is going in within them" (Holstein and Gubrium 1994:241), then Kathy's assertion of ownership of her home can be taken as an assertion of familial order, stability, responsibility, and successful relocation. In symbolic terms she is "in place," and "re-rooted," in that she has "integrated" not only into a community and neighbourhood, but into the work world as well. As a home owner, she is unlikely to be a welfare recipient. The meaning of her home as property, then, reaches beyond use as a display of wealth, as I understand it, but, as Madigan, Munro and Smith have stated, is "also bound up with the conditions of housing occupancy, that is, with the structure and organization of family... " (1988:639). Home, as an arena of family, cannot be divorced from "policies and practices that shape family life" in particular social economic settings (ibid.).

Kathy informed me that she did not want to be a burden nor accused of being ungrateful. Unlike the "others" she is not "*taking from the system.*" Her assertion of progress in the form of ownership of an apartment represents a claim to stability and locatedness as a person circumscribed to a category that is held to be notoriously unstable. "The relation of people to houses is also one of contained to container," Carsten and Hugh-Jones have claimed, "so that the contrast between body [self] and house can be made to relate to differences in scale and relations of encompassment between individual and society or between levels of social groupings" (1995:42).

This locatedness came at a personal cost. When I asked Kathy what being a single mother meant to her, her reply that it was "a little extra work," translated into making personal sacrifices in order to spend more time with her daughter. She also made it clear to me that obtaining financial security and stability required "discipline."

*Being a single mother to me? It just means that you have a little bit extra work to do. You have a little bit extra when you come home after working all day. And, when I first left [her husband] I told myself that no matter what, that she will always come first in my life, so that meant if there was a choice between spending an hour sitting on the couch or reading her a book, I chose reading her a book.*

*Its hard too. There is a lot of times someone will approach me, and ask if I am interested in getting a VISA [credit card] or a Bay [department store credit card], and I say, that's poison! I own zero plastic. Do you know how hard it is to write a cheque? You need a VISA or Mastercard [credit card] just to write a cheque. I don't want a card for that reason, to be able to write a cheque. So that was a lot of discipline for me, not getting caught up in that (Kathy, interview July 1995).*

Sacrifice is part of her narrative. When I asked her to tell me what her life has been like since becoming a single mother, she described all that was entailed for her in terms of setting her life in order after her divorce:

*Just after we left I knew we didn't have a vehicle so I knew her daycare would have to be close to my work. So, just up the hill there was a daycare that operated from 8am until 6pm, but my work started at 8am, so I thought, here I go jeopardizing my job. Plus, it was a co-op daycare which meant that I had to give up two hours every Monday to help supervise these kids. I asked my boss [if she could get to work later], and that I had to leave every Monday by 3pm... And, I had to walk... But that was the only way I could do it. But, you know, when you realize that's the only way you can do it, you just learn that its not going to be forever, that you can change daycares maybe, or maybe get a car, or whatever.*

*But every Monday I had to put in the hours, and then I had to do weekend work every other weekend, at the daycare, but by doing that it cut down my daycare costs (Kathy, interview July 1995).*

Kathy told me that she willingly made personal sacrifices for the purpose of spending more time with her daughter, remaining financially solvent, participating in her daughter's daycare, and working full-time. In doing so, she represented herself as a "good" mother, one who makes sacrifices for her child's well-being, for providing well for her. Her narrative of sacrifice needs to be seen as a claim made by someone vulnerable to public scrutiny, with stakes in presenting herself a particular way. Kathy claimed that she willingly gave up credit cards and time for herself in order to put her daughter's needs first. Her identity as a mother is thus protected, and perhaps, necessarily so, given that single motherhood is a public space, as

Fineman (1985) and others (Eichler 1993, Klodawsky and McKenzie 1987, Moore 1994) have argued. She asserts that she "*does it on her own*," and by this she meant she did not receive child support payments from her ex-husband- because she did not want him to be able to dictate access, or visitation rights, to her daughter- and little outside help. Doing it on her own, then, seems to represent to Kathy, autonomy and privacy. Sacrifice, then, as a narrative (or discourse) seems a useful strategy in negotiating this space. Sacrifice is also a narrative used to resist or counter the widely circulated "bad" single mother images. Attesting to sacrifice also draws attention to her material circumstances. It was as if Kathy was saying, "this space is perilous and I must make sacrifices in order to survive it."

### **Summary: Refugees, Monster Mothers, and Heroes**

Living with the label 'bad mother' is a truly burdensome occupation.

-Henrietta Moore, in *A Passion for Difference* (1994:99)

In this chapter I have examined specific ways women cast their experiences and identities as single mothers, and I have used the analogies of refugees, "bad mothers," and heroes, to examine these castings. The narratives of each of the women in this chapter can be read like a series of dislocations whereby they place themselves in and out of various representations of the category "single mother." For example, Elizabeth differentiated herself from women less educated and competent than herself, and Raine used the term "*queer mother*" to distance herself from the "*promiscuous, needy single mother with bratty kids*." In the construction of themselves the women used references to "that" kind of single mother as a marker from which to reinterpret and negotiate their own identities. Stacy Leigh Pigg, in her work on social categories in development discourses, has said something useful about this process, "The construction of the village... lends itself to infinite dislocation. Someone else is a real villager; that kind of villager. By recognizing someone else as a villager, a person places him or herself on the side of bikas [development]" (1992:501).

On another level, I, as the researcher have contributed to this series of dislocations. By using "refugee" and "immigrant women" rhetorically I cast a particular light on their experiences by describing single motherhood as a site of exile, rehabilitation, peril, and pathology. These are not indifferent constructs. My use of John's idea of "arrival stories" (1989) implicated my role in the dialogic and intersubjective constructions of the women's identities and their, in part, resultant emphases on "modes of survival."

Most importantly, in this chapter I have tried to convince the reader that survival is a salient experience for the women I interviewed, and that what they wanted most to express through me was the difficulty of their lives as single mothers. By taking seriously these claims to specific struggles, I want to draw attention to the material conditions of single motherhood, but as well, to draw attention to the way this "experience" has become part of the expression and repertoire of their identities. Arguably, the heroization of single mother, for example, can be seen as a strategy of resistance and transformation, although this heroization takes place within different contexts of "collectivity." For example, Michele has drawn an unequivocal line between single mothers and single fathers, while Raine has marked out lines of privilege and class between women. Each woman expressed her marginality within different spatial contexts, as well. Rebecca felt out of place with families at the park, whereas Michele felt closed in and socially abandoned in her basement suite.

Importantly, the images and stereotypes of "single mother" that are part of their narratives (and in part a consequence of the dialogic nature of the interview), and are used to imbue their own identities with contrary meanings, are widely circulating and tenacious. Therefore they have much shaping power. Tsing has said this about stories of "monster mothers,"

Stories of inappropriate mothering are built from diverse symbolic resources. What brings them together is their cultural opposition as 'unnatural' alternatives to more appropriate forms of womanhood and diversity. By setting a 'bad example,' these women, in all their diversity, direct those who hear stories toward the singular path of propriety (1990:296).

In contrast to "these women" who set "bad examples" (ibid.), the women in my project set themselves as exemplar, but, as Tsing has suggested, the women are nonetheless directed, by these cultural stories of "inappropriate mothering" (ibid.) on a "singular path of propriety" (ibid.). I continue to explore this idea in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

### DISLOCATIONS FROM PUBLIC SPACE

... some people's place in the world is more precarious than others.

-Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, in Mapping the Subject (1995:49)

... the experiences of being constrained, the feelings that come with the knowledge that spaces are not necessarily without constraint... 'women's sense of security in public spaces is profoundly shaped by our inability to secure an undisputed right to occupy that space.'

-Gillian Rose, Feminism and Geography (1993:34)

Chapter Three focused on the women's narratives as testimonials to survival, and how these testimonies underscores the specific ways in which single mothers as a category are framed in social ideas, imagery, stereotypes, and public discussions as incompetent, deviant, unstable, and pathological. I also showed how these marginalizing discourses shaped the women's meanings of their selves as single mothers, and how they negotiated their identities in relation to them. This chapter attempts to go beyond the discursive effects and strategies of identity in order to examine the material consequences of being within the category, where these social ideas are enacted on the "ground" (Ardener 1993).<sup>107</sup>

The women's narratives in this chapter are testimonies to the ways they are made to "move" or re-orientate themselves within spaces such as neighbourhoods, churches, and court-rooms, for example, that are at once material and public. By this I mean that these spaces are important and salient sites with which to examine identity-making precisely because they are everyday, lived spaces open to public scrutiny and organization. Everyday space, feminist geographers argue, is bound up in the social political dynamics of subjectivity (Rose 1993:37). I do not want to make uncritical distinctions between public and private spheres, and I leave aside important debates over the problematics of these analytical terms,<sup>108</sup> but want to show how the women's lives are open to public scrutiny in particular ways, and how their identities

are delimited by this scrutiny. The "intensity of affect and scrutiny of single mother headed households" (Mullings 1995:131) stems from their social vulnerability. Fran Klodawsky and Suzanne McKenzie have stated: "the mother and child unit requires and elicits a range of social interventions... and it is the nature of these social relations which becomes a 'public issue'" (1987:12). The notion public/private is used here to draw attention to a relationship (like center/margin) in which some persons are able to lead lives more private than others.

In this chapter I employ the women's narratives to enunciate the locations the women find themselves in. "Location" refers to physical places and to subject positions. I use the term "dislocation" because it describes their experiences accurately to the extent that they recounted to me the ways they were dislodged from various places of residence and relationships, and the ways their "categories of knowledge" (Probyn 1990:178) were discounted. The themes that I address are "brokenness" and "mobility" as salient experiential aspects of the women's identities.

### Uncovering Brokenness: Negotiating the "abyss"<sup>109</sup>

Like our bodies, the houses in which we live are so commonplace, so familiar, so much a part of the way things are, that we often hardly seem to notice them.

-Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones, About the House (1995:3)

One of the most striking dislocations that emerged from the interviews is that which stems from the language of "brokenness" that defines single mothers, and which presents a paradox for them. There was, not surprisingly, a strong resistance by some of the women to the pejorative subjectification inscribed on them by this discourse.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, their insistence on drawing my attention to the material consequences, and subsequent reconfigurations of home and identity, caused by their marital, household and family separations, can certainly be considered in terms of fracture and loss.<sup>111</sup> This paradox reflects the inescapable predicament single motherhood seems to pose for some of the women, in that the "abyss," as Elizabeth has described the affect and set of practices created by the father's absence from the home, was something very real to be dealt with on a number of levels.<sup>112</sup>

I use an excerpt from Elizabeth's interview to press this point before moving on to other narratives. When I asked Elizabeth to tell me about her arrangements regarding her daughter's visits with her father, she recounted her difficulties getting him involved in their daughter's life:

*He wanted to marry me [at the time of her pregnancy]... but I said 'You are welcome to be part of [their daughter's ] life but I am not interested in having a relationship with you.' He broke down emotionally... and during the pregnancy he made no contact, and that is what he has continued to do with her. Last time he saw her was her birthday, and I told her he would call her and he never did. All he's done is broke and canceled appointments all the way through.  
To this point which I've basically terminated contact with him and told him to go through Family Court... (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

When I asked her what this absence meant to her in terms of having to deal with it, her response evoked a useful metaphor that I use to identify what I see as a concern shared by many of the other women:

*It doesn't matter what I do, it's always my fault. He's very angry at me. He senses an abyss between us and he doesn't seem to be able to walk through the abyss to the other side. I remember sitting on this couch breast-feeding and him sitting over there. I can remember the look in his eye: [her daughter] and I are this total unit and he's not connected to it and doesn't know how to make himself connected to it. I have never taken responsibility on for him... he needs to create his own role, but still I am left with an abyss of my own...  
[To him] I've taken what should have been, in his mind, his family and not given it to him. From my perspective, he made a wish, half of it came true, why not take the half he's got? What I do for [her daughter] is make up for it. There's a friend of mine that takes her swimming on Saturdays... (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

The language that Elizabeth used to describe her situation is one of partiality-halves, gaps, disconnections. This is significant insofar as Elizabeth spent time and energy "picking up the pieces," so to speak, of the relationship between herself, her daughter, and her daughter's father. Her struggle with the contestation over the role of her daughter's father in their lives seems to suggest that if only he would participate and cooperate there would be wholeness. Ultimately, she approached this "abyss" through legal channels in an effort to enforce his involvement and achieve completeness, but it remains that Elizabeth spent much time and energy negotiating it.

Two of the women's narratives clearly elucidate dislocations that seem to stem from this abyss and the negotiation of it. Rose, a single mother of fourteen years, spoke of her



experience of "brokenness" as shaping her life and identity in a sustained and deeply felt way. Her "dislocation" derived from her exclusion from married families in the community she wanted very much to be part of. Jenneffer's power to claim a multi-stranded identity as mother, student, and activist, as well as rights to her children, was discounted by court litigation that gave custody rights of her daughter to a foster family. <sup>113</sup>

Rose talked to me about the meaning of being a single mother in terms of "*getting on with life*" and with "*accentuating the positive*" aspects of herself. The most important thing for her as a single parent, she said, was to "*set the tone,*" "*I don't want to hide the struggles because they are important aspects of my life but I want them [her children and people in her community] to see the joy.*" This lends considerable insight to understanding how "brokenness" shaped her identity as a single mother. When I asked her if she could identify with the way single parented families are sometimes framed as "broken home," she replied:

*Yes, one of the things that used to really bug me was that you always ended up telling people about your woes and never telling them about the good things. All people ever heard was how broken you were and what a mess you were. You would just have to apologize for it, you weren't able to give them anything. I didn't have anything but tears and sorrow to share with them because it was really hard (Rose, interview April 1996).*

For her, then, brokenness inscribed her as "*a mess,*" and this "*mess*" was "*really hard*" for her. Rose implied that the grief and sadness involved in her "*family break-up,*" disabled a more "*giving,*" more "*joyful*" self-representation. Crucially, it also obstructed or dislocated her from access to people in the community she longed to be involved with and to emulate. This dislocation, in turn, shaped her evolving identity as a single mother that was constituted in part through a kind of spatial segregation that took place in the public space of the church community to which Rose belonged. <sup>114</sup>

I asked Rose if she had experienced any shame as a single mother, and if so, in what settings this had occurred:

*I started to go to church when [her daughter] was three... Sundays were a very blank day for me. When [her husband] first left us, went off with this woman, I was just devastated... I was hurting [when she and her husband were first separated]. People didn't understand because they had never been there [had not gone through a separation or*

divorce]. Then I started to realize that those people had their little world and didn't understand somebody who was derelict inside. I was in emotional pain. I was very devastated by that in some way. Yet some people were very loving and kind, and I needed to know that they weren't going to give up on me. They weren't hurting me, it was me. I had to get closer to them and they let me, they didn't push me away. They were loving and supporting. I needed to have that...

Then I found that being a single parent with two children, you don't really fit into some lifestyles. They were afraid of you because you weren't like them, and they didn't know what to say. I didn't really want to seek out other single parents. I did and I didn't. Because I wanted to be... the families that I liked, that were nice, I wanted to be with, like them!

I didn't really understand that at the time. That I craved for things I wasn't able to... they became my family but they still didn't let me in, to their families, the way I wanted.

I spent a lot of lonely time [as a single parent]. I wanted to be part of people's lives, not just going [to church] every Sunday and coming home... I wanted more, but didn't know how to ask for what I wanted. I was scared. I thought people would come to me... It still hurts me.

We are such private individuals, and we think that we're so different from everybody, and that separates us, but we're not. And then what happens is we don't get close to people. I know now that I'm close with single parents, because they can relate to me, but they're not going to drill in the dullness about being a single parent...

It's okay to be with other single parents, that is what I am trying to say, because that was the hard part for me. To understand that. I wanted to be with married people... I didn't want to be with the single folks. But that was part of the refusal. Of wanting your husband back and having this perfect thing. I was in denial about that.

I felt comfortable with couples because then I didn't have to dwell on my single parenthood. I could just pretend I was married again. I knew I was in denial. It was a game. It didn't work. I was in the middle (Rose, interview April 1996).

For Rose, then, her location as a separated woman with children within the context of a church community comprised predominantly of married couples and their families produced a displacement that pushed her towards a classificatory space of other "single folks," and moved her away from "the married families that she liked." This process is significant in that it illustrates not so much that Rose was not able to have the friendships she desired, but that certain relationships became unavailable to her as her own situation changed. As she said, it was not that they pushed her away, but that "they did not let her in." Her identity as a single mother can be seen as a public marker or boundary that others as well must negotiate. The important point is that her "brokenness" transcended a mere psychological or personal state to the social and political arena of a public space that exonerated and made room for certain relationships and not others.

What also strikes me is the evolution of her identity, from one that resisted associations with other single parents to one that identifies with them ( "*I know now that I am close with other single parents*") that can usefully be seen in spatial terms. She said, concerning her reluctance to befriend women who were single mothers, "*I thought I would be drawn into things I didn't want to be drawn into. I had a lot of fear about that.*" But, as she recounted, it was a matter of a situation that was not working, that her own denial about her husband's absence kept her in a "*middle position*" that she found increasingly intolerable and isolating. It is important that this "*denial*" be seen in social context. Feminist geographer Gillian Rose has made a connection between a woman's confinement in space to her sense of being publicly observed, which fits well here:

Skin colour, class and gender are all social attributes which are inscribed onto bodies; and part of women's sense of oppression, of confinement, is their awareness of that process. I think that much of the buffeting and bruising, the confinement and stumbling, of women's experience of space is part of a self-consciousness about being noticed: women watching themselves being watched and judged (1993a:145).

Rose may have been all too aware of her public inscription as a "marked" woman (without a husband) at the church she went to, in a similar way that Rebecca felt herself marked in comparison to nuclear families when she was at the park. Rose sought out a less conspicuous place to be, with other single mothers. Not insignificantly, the meetings and gatherings with them took place, not on Sunday mornings at the church, but in the evenings, at "*pot luck dinners at home*" where, arguably, she did not feel as scrutinized.

Rose's dislocation must be seen in light of the wider social narratives and developmentalist discourses about the "risk" constructed in single mother-headed homes.<sup>115</sup> The assumption that "children need fathers to develop normally" is still widespread, at least in North America and Britain (Jain Campion 1995:210). Much time and energy was put into trying to find people in her community to replace what her children "missed" by their father's absence; an absence that carried ambivalent meaning for Rose. Her attempts to "*replace him*" ultimately failed in that she felt that the loss of his presence was indelibly inscribed onto the experiences of her children and thus, her own identity as a mother. To reinscribe completeness

and overcome inherent pathology necessarily entails reinstating the father- as opposed to anyone else- in the home, or so we have heard from Fineman (1995) and others (Febbraro 1994, Mullings 1995) in Chapter Three. We see here the paradox of "identity that is at times about what we are essentially not but are also not free to dispense with" (Bammer 1995:xiv).

When I asked Rose about the family ties she maintained, her reply reflected this socially legitimated sense of permanent loss. This loss is compounded by Rose's physical disability of multiple sclerosis:

*I feel like my children missed out on having a father. That's a terrible thing. It's sad. They have to deal with that themselves. I can't cry for them anymore. They have to cry their own tears for that loss. They don't know the loss. I understand the loss more than they do, but even then... I know it has ramifications. I know what they've missed. I've tried to replace it with people in the church. I hoped that was enough. I was doing everything, we had lots happening in the house, lots of other people invited in, and I thought it was enough, but the fact is it probably was not. Even though I did not feel broken when my husband left because I had been doing it on my own all along, I grieved that I was doing it on my own because it was not my job alone. My children will be effected by the circumstances, they cannot not be. They don't have a parent that participates in sports, because their father doesn't participate... I try to find things to do with them outside of the home, but it's really hard. I can't go on a walk. And it can't cost much money. Playing ball, playing tennis, that's the hardest area, being active with them, because I'm not. I can't... They don't have that in their lives (Rose, interview April 1996).*

Even though Rose said that she did not "*feel broken*" because little had changed for her in practice after her husband had left the household, she spoke at length of the consequences she experienced that his absence produced. Even though her children were very young when she and her husband separated, and even though he had not been present most of the time up to that point so in effect she had been functioning as a single parent all along, her narrative revealed an identification with loss and fracture. She had decided to leave her husband because, in her words, he was an "*alcoholic and workaholic*," and he did not "*contribute*." His presence was something that drained her and thus his departure from the household, in her words, "*gave her energy*." Yet, she could not "dispense with" (Bammer 1995:xiv) the meaning his absence imbued onto her identity; the abyss translated into a set of dislocations and practices from which Rose's identity was cast in negative terms, as she said, "*having nothing to give*." It is important to note in her words, "*all people ever heard was how*

*broken you were*" the complicity Rose suspected. This assertion underscores to me a tacit understanding of a kind of intersubjectivity that took place wherein her "tales of woe" were not only read as, but initiated by, a cultural script. This aspect of herself became foregrounded, or so Rose implied, through interaction with others, in her case, "married" others.

For Jenneffer as well, "brokenness" had strongly felt consequences. In our interview I became the (public?) audience through which she could redeem herself, in view of a court report that had been used in a custody battle over Jenneffer's daughter, between Jenneffer (the biological mother) and her daughter's foster parents. Jenneffer "won" the battle insofar as the foster parents were not successful at adopting her daughter, and Jenneffer was granted joint guardianship, although they retained physical custody. Her visitation rights "allowed" her to see her daughter on school holidays, although Jenneffer and her daughter both wanted more time than this together, she said, especially away from the observing eyes of the foster parents. <sup>116</sup>

"Dislocated" would seem to describe Jenneffer's situation in a couple of ways. First, Jenneffer attempted to dislocate herself from the representation of "*Mother Jenneffer*" in the court report that she shared with me and wanted to prove was defamatory. She felt that the court's rendering of her was unfair, and Jenneffer seemed to want to correct this "skewed" view by presenting herself to me as a capable mother. Jenneffer's own authority was discounted and her agency constrained in the public space of legal proceedings, through the court processes and principles that, as legal theorist Lucie White (1991) has argued, are indifferent to, and silence, the lived experiences of some women. <sup>117</sup> Marginalized, then, by processes that were able to legislate the conditions and practices of her life and family, Jenneffer was left to deal with the consequences, which were far from satisfactory to her or her daughter.

The negotiation of the absence of the father from her home took place in a public space far less innocuous, it seemed to me, than the church and community in which Rose's negotiations took place. Jenneffer was subjected to a literal defense of her perceived and reified incapacities as a mother, that were attributed in part to her singleness, but more

importantly, facilitated by the very public nature of her singleness (see Fineman 1995).

Fineman has explained,

Occupying either the category of poverty or single motherhood places women (along with their families) into the realm of 'public families.' These women potentially can have many aspects of their lives cast as public, and therefore appropriately placed under some form of state supervision. The nuclear-family form dictates the form 'normal' or 'natural' families should take. Mothers who fail to conform are 'made public'- portrayed as in chronic need of state supervision in making decisions about their families. Divorced mothers [or unmarried mothers] are not secure in their custody of children as are the mothers in marriages. Custody determinations can be modified (1995:190).

The jurisdiction of custody is an ubiquitous concern for single mothers, definitionally, in that the right to custody of their children can be exercised at anytime by any number of persons. <sup>118</sup> Furthermore, custody law "governs the most important interests in the lives of those subject to it... it determines who will raise children, the nature of the relationships children will have with their parents, and the conditions under which the child and custodian parent will live" (Sheehan 1986:135). The "award" of custody to a mother, of course, is not programmatic.

Rather, it is contingent upon the mother reflecting the image of a "good mother." Susan Boyd has argued,

the preference [for awarding custody to mothers] only operates when the mother demonstrates conduct of a lifestyle which accords with the assumptions of the ideology of motherhood... Mothers who work in the home are assumed to be the norm, and mothers who deviate from that norm, for example, by being employed, may be adjudged to be somewhat deviant (1989:119).

This, in brief, is the social legal context within which Jenneffer must operate as a woman raising children without the presence of the father in the home, and as a woman with many "outside" interests. For example, she was a university student, a social activist, an active member in women's community groups, as well as a full-time wage-earner. Each of these strands of her identity were an important part of her narrative, and were public in such a way that they became "evidence" used against her in a way that the identities of married mothers and fathers (married or single) are often not (Fineman 1995, White 1991).

The following narrative is a brief excerpt from the lengthy interview I had with Jenneffer in which she spent much of the time seemingly defending herself against the

judgment imposed on her by the court, as manifested in the court report document she frequently referred to. I asked her what it was like for her now as a single mother:

*... It was really hard up in [her community] trying to do everything myself, coming down here [Vancouver] to work. People at [an agency for single mothers services], their attitude is still that even if you're a single mom you should stay at home and look after your kids, but I was never like that, I was coming down here to work...*

*In the court counsellor's report [used in the custody hearing], I'm sure this [statement] comes from [the agency]. Some of it is totally inaccurate. When I pointed it out to my lawyer she said there would have to be a trial if we were going to try to disprove it.*

*'Mother Jenneffer, an only child, found life as a single parent difficult, and herself subject from time to time of reports to child protection authorities concerning the care of her daughters.'*

*Now that is not true. The only time was in the motel, and that was partly malicious...<sup>119</sup>*

*And the only other time, which was disproved, was my neighbour, who was about 80 years old, and she saw me by myself for a long time, and one night she saw me coming home with a guy, who was actually my cousin, and she phoned a report saying that we came in at one in the morning and that from one to two in the morning my girl was playing in the yard with a dog... The only reason she did that was because I was with a guy... It was disproved.*

*'... reports concerning care of her daughters...'*

*No way, there was just that one time in the trailer park. And my neighbour, which was disproved. Anyway, I just want to get to the part, this is the report basically on me:*

*'...Although subject to criticism for poor household management, lack of structure or routine, inattention to the children's nutrition and hygiene, and emotional detachment if not indifference, mother Jenneffer is also praised as a hard worker willing to accept overtime, responsive to all of her support groups and qualified advisors, and for successfully overcoming her own difficult childhood as well as alcohol and drug abuse.'*

*To me, that is half a sentence, and it covers a lot of time where I have worked with single mothers and young women who have been on the streets- there is nothing in there about that!*

*Now, listen to this.*

*'While some would interpret her willingness to give her daughter up to [the foster parents] as abnegation of parental responsibilities, an alternate view recognizes her unselfishness in allowing the child to benefit from a more conventional and proper environment. At the same time she appears to appreciate the strength of the blood-tie and wants to maintain the sibling relationship of her two children as well as her own parental bond.*

*[The foster mother] and [foster father] both are well-established in the community...*

*Their household is a traditional pattern, in that [the mother], who does not hold a driving license, devotes herself to homemaking and child-rearing full-time while [the father] is chief bread-winner and back-up of her authority. I noted no power imbalance between them.'*

*Although to my way of thinking that is a big inequality.*

*This is what I really wanted to get to:*

*'Discussion with collateral contacts confirmed the impression that [her daughter] would benefit from more extended contact with her mother and sister, as a 'reality check' to offset possible exaggerated expectations that could lead to disappointment and disillusionment... There has been no evidence of reactive behavior following access visits but this could be because the visits have been relatively infrequent and brief... There is*

*general agreement that little or no physical risk in Jenneffer's care is likely and that her daughter] needs to come to a credible understanding of her mother's lifestyle and nature, including strengths and weaknesses before she reaches the usually turbulent adolescent years...'*

*I just thought this business that she should be allowed to visit "as a reality check" [was a problem]. I mean I could see the point where she might have some kind of fantasy about our life but I work, go to university.*

*The other thing [to clarify], I'm involved in women's groups. They [the court ] go on about how active they [the foster parents] are in their community, and of course they [the court] wouldn't want to hear this, but I belong to [various groups].*

*They don't say anything about me being involved, or going to school and having goals, because that takes away from the "good mother" image because you don't spend time with your kids. But if you stay home and you're on [social] assistance then you're put down too.*

*Although it [staying home] is glorified in the [foster mother's] case because she's married, and does not even have a driver's license! When it's a supposed "proper" family who own their own home and business and have a good job...you don't have a chance.*

*I've always thought I was in the wrong (Jenneffer, interview April 1996).*

Jenneffer's admission, that she "always thought she was in the wrong" is especially telling. I interpret it as a justification, uttered out of desperation, for a series of prolonged legal events in which her "mothering acts" have been misinterpreted and misrepresented, and in which she unwittingly complied. In other words, she was saying to me, "I have been lead to believe, by those more powerful than me, that I have been an unworthy mother and I went along, but I see now that I have been constructed as one by social ideas about 'proper' family and motherhood." Her necessity to be heard (by me) and redeemed must be seen as related to the number of times she has been involved with either the Ministry of Social Services or the provincial courts and not had "her side of the story" heard.

At the onset of our interview Jenneffer stated that her involvement in the research had to do with wanting "people to hear our stories and how we are stigmatized,"<sup>120</sup> and that there were very few places for her to speak about her experiences as a single mother. What I want to foreground here, although there is much more to be gleaned from her narrative, is the shaping force of the silencing she encountered as someone who had to operate within the shadows of what Jenneffer views as the "judgmental" arena of the law, on her sense of self and identity as a single mother. The law, as legal theorist Carol Smart has cogently put it, disqualifies women's experiences and knowledges in that it embodies "a claim to superior and unified knowledge and concedes little to competing discourses" (1989:4). Jenneffer was not



regarded within these public spaces as a "speaking being" (White 1991:52). When I asked Jenneffer to tell me about becoming a single mother, part of her reply included a narrative about her experiences in court, after the Ministry of Social Services apprehended her daughter the first time:

*They kept stopping me [from speaking]. They had this nasty lawyer. They said, 'you can only ask questions on the testimony he gave, the assessment worker.' I wasn't allowed to get my side out. I had to think... and said, 'Do you realize I was living there [in the motel court] temporarily ...?' I was trying to bring my side out in question form. It was difficult. I had never been to court before. They tried to make out that I had a history with [the Ministry of] Social Services. I hasn't allowed to speak- they were telling their side of it!*

*They were trying to speak as though I had a long history. I wasn't allowed to speak, and I guess if I had a lawyer she would have been allowed to rebut, but when you are trying to do it yourself...*

*I actually would have to say 'excuse me' [in order to speak].*

*They told me I had to stand when I was talking to the judge, I had never been to court before! (Jenneffer, interview April 1996).*

Jenneffer, then, was put in "her" place, by those "with the authority to speak" (White 1991:52). Her understandings of the possibilities of who she could be were, as I interpret them, shaped by a logic dictated for her. I argue that the negotiations of the abyss, for Jenneffer, were pre-determined, and that her multiple dislocations stemmed from this. In the "public eye" she was deemed an "improper," "unconventional," "emotionally detached," "inattentive," "permissive" mother. And Jenneffer did not have the ability to contest these knowledge claims in this space. She "won" the custody "battle" but remained "*in the wrong*." Her understanding of being duped is reflected in her claim, "*You don't have a chance [against a supposed 'proper' family].*" This sense of pre-determined identities that I am trying to explain is captured well by geographer Gillian Rose:

*Although women now are rarely physically debarred from entering archives of knowledge, a sense of difficulty still arises in part from a feeling that we are caught within the effects of something strong and powerful which restricts us by claiming to know who women are. We are physically restricted, but there is also a sensation that the limits of what we are and can be have already been mapped by somebody else (1993:147)*

### Tracing Mobility: "I just want to stay put" 121

I want to suggest that the concept of home seems to be tied in some way to the notion of identity- *the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story others tell of us*. But identities are not free-floating, they are limited by borders and boundaries.

-Madan Sarup, in *Travellers' Tales* (1994:95)

*I am very fortunate to live in this house, because it stabilized me, to stay in one place. Otherwise, it would have been very difficult to have a stable life. I'm really blessed.*

-Rose (interview April 1996)

In this section I address the theme of mobility raised in the women's narratives. By "mobility" I mean the physical relocations from one residence to another that many of the women spoke about, and the difficulties associated with these oftentimes series-of-relocations. For example, Raine told me that she had moved nineteen times by the time she was fourteen, and had never lived in any one place for "as long" as four years. Her son has "moved more times than he is years old-" "*the legacy [of moving] continues,*" she said. 122 Rebecca and Michele both spoke of the perils involved in living in basement suites, or ground floor apartments, that were too dark and unsafe. Jenneffer was displaced from her trailer park for EXPO, 123 then again from a house she bought in a community where it turned out that there was no work for her, and moved numerous times after that, looking for a "*decent place that wasn't infested with fleas... or where people weren't always drinking.*" Within Vancouver, housing is a salient concern for many women who are single mothers (Klodawsky and McKenzie 1987, Solomon 1992), and there are a number of agencies in Vancouver that are set up to deal specifically with these concerns. 124

In Jenneffer's narrative in the previous section, she made two references to mobility that illustrate its significance to understanding the shaping of women's identities. One was her reference to the court's representation of the foster mother as a "*mother who does not hold a driving license,*" and the second was her reference to her own attempt at getting the court to understand that her residency in the motel and trailer court was just "*temporary.*" These inverse castings of an immobile woman, on the one hand (one who does not drive), and a mobile

woman, on the other (one whose residency was temporary), are provocative in that they suggest a complex relationship between movement and containment in social space, and the available identities for some women. Jenneffer's desire to convince the court that her "mobile" home was only a temporary home- implying she knew it was not "proper"- is interpreted by me as a tactic to prove she was nonetheless capable of emulating the "proper" stay-at-home mother. Ironically, Jenneffer interpreted the foster mother's inability to drive as a symbol of inequality while at the same time recognizing it as an entirely different symbol for those in the court who held the power to inscribe Jenneffer as they saw fit.

An examination of mobility, then, can reveal "the borders and boundaries" (Sarup 1994) of gendered identities insofar as ideas and practices of mobility are cultural narratives about the inscription of stability, home, and propriety onto a woman such as Jenneffer's identity. Geographers Cindi Katz and Janice Monk have asserted, "The possibilities for various women are variously constrained and enhanced by the places in which she lives and the spaces she must negotiate" (1993:265). I agree but want to emphasize that these "places and spaces" are those circumscribed by social processes and not merely freely chosen. The ability to move through public spaces, or to remain put, is not the same option for every person, nor does it have the same meaning. Geographer Doreen Massey has pointed out the relation between mobility and women's identities in her argument that the mobility of a (western?) woman "is troubling to the patriarchal gaze", and, that "'the masculine desire to fix the woman in a stable and stabilizing identity' may be tied in with a desire to fix [her] in space and place" (1994:11). What, then, can be said about a woman who has moved at least once a year, but longs for "her own place" and for "stability"? How do these moves get interpreted as dislocations?

Marie's narrative resonates strongly with these tensions between mobility and identity. One of the most urgent concerns of hers at the time of the interview, as she expressed it to me, was finding a way of remaining in the house she was currently renting with her boyfriend, her two children, and three room-mates. Her reluctance to move from this

particular house centered around her need for security and support, and especially to provide stability for her children. She said, *"I feel that the children should have stable people in their lives and not just a turnover of different faces coming through. It gives them a better sense of security and trust."* Marie used the image of a mother lion to represent herself as a mother, *"I consider myself a mother lion where my children are concerned. I watch them really closely and I like to keep them at arm's length."* For Marie, then, it seems as if stability was spatially enacted. She said, *"I just want to stay put."*

Marie described to me how difficult it was, however, to remain living at this house- the rent was too expensive for her alone, yet she no longer wanted the room-mates sharing the space. She wanted a *"place of her own"* and described the atmosphere in the current place, with the current room-mates, as *"living hell."* Part of Marie's narrative was a tracing of the history of her mobility, in terms of the moves she has made over the years since becoming a mother, and it sheds light on her struggle to *"stay put"* and reveals the meanings she attached to her relocations in terms of her identity as a single mother.

I asked Marie to tell me about the house she lived in and whether it felt like home:

*At this point it is, yes. We've [her and her boyfriend] always talked about moving out. But it's the initial, 'I don't want to go anywhere unless someone else is moving out with us,' so that I can have someone else as support. There's just so much out that you can't trust nowadays, that it's not worth it. My friends have had children who have been sexually assaulted by baby-sitters. I know that they just wanted to go out, and they had this person baby-sit, but I just couldn't do that with my kids... I live in a very beautiful house but it's filled with too many people. I want very much to have just my own family in a home. I think that goes back to the control thing, where I can have my things out... it's been put on hold until I can get my own place. The woman that I share my house with now... both of her children are high-strung and undisciplined and they turn the house into complete chaos... I just don't like it. [But] the house is beautiful. It's a full house- basement, main floor and top floor. It's nice to have the whole house. We have the top floor. I've always had a basement suite [in the past]- and the dingiest, darkest room, so to be able to have the top floor of a house with lots of windows and a panorama view, I'm very spoiled and I don't want to give it up. So, it's tough [living with her friend whose children she dislikes]...(Marie, interview January 1996).*

I asked her if it would be hard to move from there:

*Yes. I love it here. And I hate moving, period. It's such a hassle. I hate packing things, unpacking things. And that goes along with having a stable environment. If they're [the children] moving to three different houses a year they don't know if*

*they're coming or going, but if they have one home they always know home is going to be there. If there's not much change in their life they can focus on other things. So, we'll see... (Marie, interview January 1996).*

I asked Marie to describe the other places she had lived in since becoming a single mother:

*... I lived downtown. I lived in a small apartment by myself with the two kids. It was a one bedroom. When I first moved in there I was pregnant and only had one. You were only allowed to have one child in this apartment, but they let me get away with having two for a couple of months. They were accepting landlords, 'you only have two, we'll keep it hushed.'*

*It was too small though. The kids couldn't go out to play and we were on the eighth floor of an apartment building so it was dangerous. And then when they were running around we had to be concerned about the people below us...*

*Before that was when I lived with [her oldest child's father] which was another apartment downtown... It didn't have a lot of pleasant memories.*

*Before that I lived in the west side, and had two room-mates with me. They were really weird. I don't know what I got myself into! When I was living at an apartment before that, by myself, they were the landlords... They lost that job and were going to move out. We became friends and we thought we would try it together. But I found two cigarette burns on [her child's] hand. I don't know if they were put on her person or if they were careless with the ashtray or something but it just made me leery. They were very, very weird. So it was another not-so-great place to live in.*

*Before that, I had my own apartment for awhile. That was okay. My first initial living on my own. It was only a bachelor's suite with a huge walk-in closet which was converted into my son's little bedroom.*

*After that I had a room-mate who turned out to be a cocaine addict, so we didn't stay with her for very long...*

*That was it. That's all the places I've lived [since being a single mother] (Marie, interview January 1996).*

I asked Marie if she thought that this had been a lot of places:

*Well, yes and no. I guess on average I would have moved about once a year in [her oldest child's] life. A lot of it was in the very first few years and then as she got older we were a lot more stable and trying to stay in places longer. Maybe that's one of the reasons I just want to stay put here. And our landlords are very open to having tenants stay a long time and I would love to be those tenants- its a beautiful house (Marie, interview January 1996).*

Marie moved seven times since becoming a single mother seven years ago. The places she lived in were, in her terms, "not so great" and she encountered problems with room-mates and affordable rents, as well as an "abusive boyfriend following her from one place to the next," and chronic lack of space and safe places for the children. Marie did not emphasize the material problems she experienced through the course of these relocations, however, but expressed instead how these moves were part of a search, that stemmed from her childhood,

for stability. She told me that her own family split up when she was young, and that she went through numerous group homes and foster homes before becoming a single mother in her early twenties. Although different from Michele's narrative in which Michele lamented the loss of the "*huge, brick home*" she lived in when she was married, Marie's narrative reflected a sense of loss- but not in the sense of having had a married home. She desired stability but had as yet been unable to obtain it, as she explained.

I analyze this situation in two ways. On the one hand, Marie has been impeded from having "*her own place*" by economic and social processes that accommodate certain persons over others.<sup>125</sup> By describing her "mobility" as a series of dislocations, attention is drawn to the politics of this movement from one housing space to another every year in search of a safer, more affordable, more permanent place. We can see that Marie has been made to move, and part of the reason for this is that, as a poor, single mother, the housing market is limited for persons like her (see Solomon 1992),<sup>126</sup> and she is open to public scrutiny, by those in control of renting her the space, for example. It is not insignificant that her current home was rented to her and her boyfriend as a couple. The landlord, in fact, was more interested in renting to them as a couple than to "the household" which included room-mates (thereby accommodating nuclear families). In this sense, I see her "mobility," like Jenneffer's and Raine's, as emblematic of a marginality wherein "some people's place in the world is more precarious than others" (Pile and Thrift 1995:49).

But on the other hand, going back to the notion about "the masculine desire to fix women in place... and to stabilize their identities" (Massey 1994:11), Marie's "mobility" can be seen as resistance to this cultural inscription. Massey has said, "the limitation on [women's] mobility in space, the attempted consignment/confinement to particular places on the one hand, and the limitation of identity on the other" are crucially related (ibid:179). The point I want to suggest here is that while Marie's experiences of mobility have not been altogether pleasurable for her as she recounted them to me, and while she views herself in terms of "*wanting one home*" for her children and being a "*home-body*," there is also a way in which

her mobility can be interpreted as emancipatory. What I mean by this, is that it reflects her understanding of her identity as a single mother as positive, and importantly, as negotiable. More than any of the other women I interviewed, Marie used her identity in an explicitly strategic manner. When I asked her if she considered herself a single mother, she replied, "yes and no," and went on to outline for me the contexts in which she did and she did not:

*...Legally, for social services purposes, going to school purposes, I still classify myself as a single mother. That's because I get more benefits that way and it's a lot easier. But... we've become more of a family unit [her and her boyfriend] and it doesn't always feel like I'm the sole parent anymore.*

*Still, when it came to the grant [for school] I claimed him [her boyfriend] as a "room-mate." As I said, I still keep my identity as a single mother to help me get through all this. It's a "catch-22," because I do want to get married but I will lose a lot of my rights. (Marie, interview January 1996).*

The "borders and boundaries" (Sarup 1994:95) of Marie's identity as a single mother are nevertheless demarcated in a particular way. While she can "choose" to be a single mother in order to qualify for benefits, and she can "choose" to be part of a couple in order to rent a house, she still cannot get a place of her own. The identities available to Marie, it seems to me, still inscribe her as a dependent person- either on the state, or on her boyfriend. While viewing her mobility in terms of emancipation is useful in that it does not uncritically relocate her to one "proper" place (nor reinscribe her as being "deviant"), it is important that her precariousness not be obscured, nor her inability to secure an "undisputed right to occupy that space" (Rose 1993:34).

Ultimately, viewing mobility as dislocation hinges on Marie's understanding of stability as symbolically and/or spatially enacted. For example, she said that wanting a family, meaning a nuclear family, for her is "more of an internal thing," meaning, perhaps, it is more of a deeply felt desire for symbolic security or social legitimacy than necessarily a desire for specific concrete household arrangements. She liked being a single mother, and expressed it in terms of being a source of strength and power for her. She said that it was easier for her being a single mother and that when her boyfriend lived with them she had less control over the children's routines, and so forth. Yet, Marie longed to be married, for "security reasons," she said. Her ability to realize stability and security, and her "available

identities" and social locations- as someone extremely vulnerable to both government funding and housing markets- must therefore be seen as inextricably connected. Although Marie's mobility well deserves to be seen in terms of resistance to cultural narratives about "women fixed in place," and it can be seen as a journey that is both a "creative transfiguration as well as an affliction" (Sarup 1994:96), like the others, her out-of-placeness has been socially sustained.

... the others of the master subject are marginalized and ignored in its gaze at space, but are also given their own places: the slum, the ghetto, the harem, the closet, the inner city, the Third World, the private (Blunt and Rose 1994:16).

### **Summary: Loss, Fracture, "Home"**

Living in such a 'perilous territory of not-belonging' is more than a state of mind, a sense of alienation and difference; it also signifies danger and exposure, a stripping away of the protection that can come from belonging to a... recognized state.

-Julie Peteet, in Mistrusting Refugees (1995:175)

In this chapter, I have drawn out some of the experiences recounted to me by the women and shown how they are mediated by the women's social locations as single mothers. In enunciating these lived conditions, I have tried to make a claim about the mutual construction of their identities and everyday spaces. For example, Jenneffer's legal repositioning by the courts as an "improper" mother shaped her experience of home in that her daughter became a temporary resident. This experience of loss in her everyday life, in turn, recreated her as a "co-custodial" parent. Rose's identity, too, was shaped and reshaped by social impositions of "brokenness" that in turn altered her everyday spaces and practices. Importantly, these identities and spaces were rendered marginal in public spaces such as courtrooms and church congregations that participated in the women's erasure or silence from that space. For example, Rose was made invisible by virtue of her "exile" from "married families" to "*single folks*" like herself.

By conceptualizing single motherhood as "perilous" and "precarious" social spaces, I want to show that these women's lives are open to public scrutiny and stigma that leaves them



vulnerable and culpable and creates specific dislocations. I believe that the women wanted to tell me how difficult their lives were but also to protest the situations they had been put in. I gathered from their narratives that they had been put into a set of conditions not their own making,<sup>127</sup> and more than this, that they had been "wronged," or certainly misjudged. It was important for Rose that, in her terms, she "*not be cast in stone*" (in and out of the interview context) and for Marie to be listened to "*unconditionally.*"<sup>128</sup> These requests were interpreted by me as petitions for "fair hearings" and highlight the stigmata of difference attached to the category "single mother," and the spatial contexts these are played out in. I agree with Gillian Rose, who has stated about the experience of space evoking a sense of difficulty for some women, "Being in space is not easy" (1993:143), although this is my understanding and not the women's.

By drawing out the materiality of social categorization, I have made important ethnographic connections between home, as a metaphor for family, and loss and fracture as salient experiences the women must deal with. I have drawn attention to the specific ways the women's identities have been circumscribed to some degree by cultural narratives about home and stability and propriety. Home, narrowly defined by discourses about nuclear family, for example, produces conditions such as the "*abyss*" Elizabeth described, as well as "broken" and "deviant" mothers, and implicates the homes of the women as fractured.<sup>129</sup>

The most important point I want to raise here are the difficulties the women had in securing "protection" and "recognition" of their own home spaces. The women have sought to renegotiate the meanings of their identities and the continuities of their households under social conditions that dictate these possibilities. For example, Jenneffer had to deal with custodial arrangements and a version of her identity handed down by a judge, and Marie was dependent on the provincial government and its policies on social housing and social assistance as long as motherhood for her meant "staying at home." Critically, Jenneffer's vulnerability to the court's definition of home and mother, Rose's exile to her own home, and Marie's numerous dislocations from safe and secure places, must be seen as linked to tenacious social

ideas about place and identity. As long as "home" remains defined by masculinist discourses as "man's place" (Rose 1993:53), the category "single mother" remains a perilous social space in that it is an identity imagined in the contexts of these political social determinations (Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

Minh-ha had said:

Home... tends to get taken for granted; like Mother or Woman it is often naturalized and homogenized. The source then becomes an illusory secure and fixed place, invoked as a natural state of things untainted by any process or outside influence, or else, as an indisputable reference on whose authority one can unfailingly rely (1994:14).

I am trying to get at the constructed nature of loss. While the experience of loss was real for the women- the deeply felt loss of stability and "one place" for Marie, and the loss of her daughter's presence for Jenneffer, for example- it is critical to see that it is socially constituted. By this I mean that our taken-for-granted notions of households, as assumed physical places and "part of the way things are" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:3), enable an illusory sense of "naturalness" and "fixedness" to particular configurations of home (I am thinking of nuclear, middle-class homes), such that seeming deviations from that "indisputable reference" (Minh-ha 1994:14) get constructed as deviations, transitions, fractures. "Loss" stems from these illusions in part, at least to the extent that the women "adjust" their lives accordingly, bridging gaps between "then" and "now" (in the case of Rose), or between now and a future imaginary of stability (in the case of Marie). "Home" is a problem for Marie, and for the others, too, and it is important to recognize this in social terms.

## Chapter Five

### CONCLUSION

What, now, can be said about the social spaces of single motherhood? What kind of cultural narrative have we constructed? What do the women's locations, and my own, have to do with these constructions? How can these stories of the women's experiences of survival and dislocation help us to understand processes of identity and marginalization? I will readdress these questions here, and in doing so invoke many new ones. In the first section I approach the theoretical problem of how to interpret and analyze experience, and how my location as anthropologist and single mother has produced a particular interpretation. In the next section I challenge the rehabilitative discourses about single mothers to suggest that although the women are embedded in these discourses, they also transcend them in terms of refiguring their identities through the practices of "transformative work" (my term). I then outline some of the strengths and limitations of the theory underpinning this analysis; and finally, assess the value of an interpretative project through the perspective of critical feminist ethnography.

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#### **Field Encounters and Arrival Stories**

Mary Pratt (1986) has written about the "arrival story" in ethnographic accounts as a trope in which ethnographers insert their selves into the local scene, thereby gaining the credibility and authority of "being there" and setting the stage for what follows. However, this practice assumes that the "scene" exists unmediated by the ethnographer (ibid.). Mary John (1989) has similarly argued, as I discussed in Chapter Three, that the focus on arrival by scholars collecting the stories of immigrant women to the United States, produces ready-made stories. Two questions arise here. How do our constructions of these ready-made scenes shape the interpretations and representations that follow? Why it is that the scene (or site) of *arrival* has been so important? It might be fruitful to ask, "where the women are coming from and

why" (John 1989:57)? This brings us back to my own arrival story, then, to understand how the direct experience of the ethnographer can be used as a resource and a tool for reflexivity, rather than to dismiss it as "a mere literary trope" as Pratt has suggested (Hervik 1994:80).

This thesis is about the stories that particular women have told about single motherhood in response to a particular set of questions. There is "a huge leap," anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has pointed out, "from the native voice to anthropological vision. However many voices speak in the ethnographic texts, they must be edited and reformulated through analysis and reflection if they are not to remain mere voices, speaking to no one in particular" (1994:5). The "leap" I have taken with their stories- about the hard work, the isolation, the financial difficulty, the peril, the dislocation (the struggle), that is involved in being a single mother- is to theorize these experiences. Experience is, as I understand it, following Scott, not the "authoritative evidence that grounds what is known but rather that which we seek to explain" (1992:26); it is "at once always already an interpretation as it is in need of an interpretation (ibid:37). In this sense, it is not enough for me to say that when I asked the women to tell me about being single mothers they replied that their lives were difficult ( I think we already knew that), but to try and understand *as well* why it was important for the women to tell me so, and what significance this holds concerning the construction of their identities. What processes lead to these experiences and their expressions? My own "anthropological vision" (Hastrup 1994:5) sees these stories as testimonials that evince a wider social context in which single mothers are held up to censure and scrutiny, and in which the women's heroization of their feats and accomplishments are a resistance to this. My use of the word "testimonial" to describe the women's accounts of themselves is meant to draw attention to what I see as consciousness about their locations as marginal, and awareness of their suffering as a social injustice. "Life stories have been defined as testimonials, a 'process of struggling towards a particular consciousness' that both reinterpret and remake the world" (Ong 1995:355). These life stories can be seen as part of a strategy (on my part) for recording the history of particular struggles (Sommer 1988:109).

Part of my motivation, then, for recounting the tales of struggle, has been a response to words like Elizabeth's, *"It's so hard to make your opinion known and into the community because this lifestyle is so consuming. There is little time left over- it's hard to get a word out."* Or Michele's, *"People don't realize what it's like to be a single parent. People have no idea! So when I saw your notice I saw it as a way of publicizing .."* The women spoke out, as I have said earlier, in order to protest the conditions of their existence and isolation, and the wish to change them. [Although I am not in the position to claim solidarity with the women (or they with one another, for that matter)- Stacey has cautioned feminist researchers about any "delusions of alliance" between themselves and their informants (1991:116)- I believe that I have used their stories as they desired, to qualify the countless negative images of single mothers, and to provide a glimpse of the complexity of their identities and the ways they negotiate them (see Ong 1995:355).] We must not forget, however, that this is what I, too, desired from them (see my notice for participants, Appendix One). My own arrival story, as recounted in the introduction, is imbued with upheaval and difficulty and a struggle towards consciousness.

At the same time that "testimonial" is meant to draw attention to the lived experiences of the women, the use of "survival" is meant to draw attention to the constructedness of experience. Journalist Mary Russell, who has written about the history of women travellers' tales, has this to say about survival strategies (as a trope):

Like stealthy chameleons, travellers negotiate the nets and snares of border crossings, traverse deserts, ford treacherous rivers, edge down mountain glaciers, emerge from skies... How on earth, everyone wants to know, did you manage to survive? How indeed, for what was one to do when you lie alone somewhere in Africa... or when your tiny plane, flying low over an endless sea, starts running out of fuel?... The experienced traveller gradually builds up a store of knowledge which, to the outside, looks like intuition (1994:194).

I use this excerpt to illustrate the irony that survival tales, told in a different context, can evoke. Similar to these travellers' tales, however, were the responses I received in the interviews. How indeed, does one survive a predicament like single motherhood? I am thinking here of how our tales can also be scripts, as Rose's narrative, raised in Chapter Four,

illustrates. She said that all people ever *heard* was how broken she was and what a mess she was. I have found myself conjuring up my own tales of woe when pressed to tell an anxious listener how difficult, indeed, my life as a single mother is. Rebecca, too, recounted incidences in her life, where she said that she didn't want to hear people tell her how difficult her life was. "It is not they but we that project the image of danger, an image which is distorted by our own... attitudes" (ibid:190).

It is important to see here how categorization works to order our experiences. Anthropologist Peter Hervik has argued that categorization "is an ordering device for both inner understanding and social interaction. Categories may be applied for real-world experience, or in presupposed, simplified worlds, but once established their significance and adequacy are reflected upon" (1994:97). He is talking about the ways that anthropologists often must engage with categories before they understand their significances to the people they are studying. I acted upon my own ordering of the category "single mother" as one fraught with difficulties, and I was an empathetic listener for this. Rather than see the survival strategies that the women recounted to me- sacrifice, resourcefulness, discipline, keeping your head above water, confronting stereotypes, asserting strength and stability, for example-as "intuition," that is, rather than naturalize or take them for granted, I have taken them as significant social knowledges. The critical point is that "survival," as well as a set of strategies, conditions, and experiences, is also a discourse. If we want to keep open the inquiry into "the ways female subjectivity is produced, and the ways agency is made possible... the ways identity is a contested terrain, the site of multiple and conflicting claims" (Scott 1992:31), then it is prudent to consider "survival" a discourse that mediates or orders experience. Is it also, then, perhaps, a set of claims to authentic experience? Can this be a way that difference gets asserted, by the women themselves? What does this say about marginality? Solomon (1992) has suggested that single motherhood needs to be seen in public discussions in terms of specific needs rather than special needs. Young (1994) has pointed out that some married mothers face similar kinds of problems that some single mothers do. At the

same time, we hear claims by single mothers about essential strengths and heroic capabilities. This, indeed, is a complex story.

We have seen, then, how the construction of a ready-made scene, meaning my own entrance to both single motherhood and to the research setting, has shaped in part the interpretations of the experiences that I have encountered. I have "walked into" a highly charged setting- a social space- wherein "identity" is already constructed as a problem, and by this I mean that the community in which I was a participant observer already held "identity" (as marginal) as a major concern, as I outlined in Chapter One. Looking back to the fateful meeting that I had with one of the directors at the beginning of my research, she had told me that the single mothers she came in touch with through the service organization were, to her, like "fallen angels," fallen from grace in the eye of the public (fieldnotes March 1995). That they were already "fallen" women, became my starting point. Although my use of "arrival stories" is meant to uncover how "single mother" is circumscribed, or "colonized" (Fineman 1995), by wider professional, legal, state, and public discourses, I am aware of my own reinscription of the women with identities too narrowly bound. At the same time, this is a tension that I think registers with the women, including myself- this dual sense that we are "mapped by somebody else" (Rose 1993:147) but also "moving on" <sup>130</sup> and attaching new meanings to our identities as single mothers.

This focus on "arrival" has obscured a whole set of experiences. Where have these women fallen from? (From the center to the periphery?) I have focused on the everyday dilemmas, difficulties and strategies of Being a single mother, perhaps at the expense of examining Becoming (see Arshi et al: 1994:230) a single mother, and in doing so have obfuscated a whole realm of social relations that mediate these spaces for these women in a significant way. This thesis has perhaps glossed over too easily the conditions which led the women to their "predicament."

Having said that I want to outline briefly the reasons and circumstances the women gave me for becoming single mothers. The following narratives are the responses the women

gave me when I asked them to tell me about becoming a single mother. For purposes of brevity, some of the narratives are my own descriptions as they were recalled to me, while others are direct quotes. My intention here is to shed light on how the meanings of single mother identity are negotiated vis-à-vis the *arrival to* single motherhood. How did these prior social locations shape the women's experiences and accounts of themselves?

We know Raine's story fairly well (see Chapter Three). She became pregnant at the age of sixteen in grade eleven, with her boyfriend who was her "*whole world*." She was unhappy at the time, near suicidal, and neglected and abused by her mother, and alienated from friends at school. It was not her "choice" to become pregnant, but at the same time she saw the pregnancy as a way out of her situation. By the time her son was six months old she had ended the relationship with his father. She was living on her own, receiving assistance from the Ministry of Social Services, and trying to finish school. She was seventeen.

Michele's story, as well, was told in part in Chapter Three. She left her husband, who she claimed had been abusive to her for a number of years, in the United States and moved back to Canada. She told me how she had to forego her share of assets in the course of the divorce. She said that all she took was the money she had earned and kept "*going down and down with the [child] support*" because she had to go. It was tax time in Canada and if she wanted work she had to leave immediately. Michele started a full-time job the day after she arrived in Canada. She said that she would have started earlier but that she had to find daycare.

Rebecca said that she got married for all the wrong reasons, and regretted that:  
*... my husband went on vacation and I told him not to come back.... It was a definite choice. Well, either that or else stay and be verbally abused. I married the same type of man my father was, and I've had a lot of problems in my life... I think it's easier for [her son] to grow up without a father than with an abusive one. He wouldn't have hit him, but ignored him, screwed him up... I didn't want that for me either. I deserve better* (Rebecca, interview October 1995)."

Jenneffer said that she has always been a single mother, from the start, and she alluded to why she wanted to have children:  
*After my parents died, and I was sober six years, I had good jobs, back then I was word processing, and I dian't have any family, some cousins, but they were older. Maybe because of my childhood and the abuse... I've always been more independent than alot of women...* (Jenneffer, interview April 1996).



Kathy recounted this experience:

*When [her daughter] was very young I didn't like the situation. Her dad had two boys from a previous marriage, and so all of us were all living together in the same house, and then just like any young kids when they're not getting the right supervision they start to go off in the wrong direction... So, the year went by and the next year, and then I thought, no, I have to work on getting out of this, so that's what I did. I talked to a lady at work... she was always saying the only way that you can make change is you, so one day I told her what happened the evening before, how we had a bit of a fight, and she said what you should do is just go home and pack what you need and leave immediately, go stay with your parents. So that's what I did... I lived with my parents for two days, and found a place to live in Vancouver, a basement suite, so I went there to live for a few months... and from there to a ground level apartment, and from that I bought this apartment (Kathy, interview July 1995).*

This is what Rose told me:

*I was living with my husband and had children before we got married, after I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. My husband is a workaholic and an alcoholic and is in denial about the fact that what that has done to his life. The choices he was making, I couldn't live with it. I didn't have the energy, and I just had to concentrate on the kids and myself, that was all the energy I had. He wasn't participating in giving me energy, to help me. He was just using it as a stopping place- see you later, bye! And that was adding me more stress. I couldn't live with that lifestyle anymore, it had to be slower... I didn't know what to do because it seemed so wrong to leave... But then my husband did something that wasn't right. We were married for six months and then he went off with someone else... he was so much of a mess. I couldn't have him there like that, it was hard enough for me. I had to get him out of my life...I had to ask him to leave... So even though I still love the person it's not about love, it's about responsibility and commitment. And about being there. It's been a number of years... twelve years now. I was doing everything on my own anyway (Rose, interview April 1996).*

Elizabeth told me how she found out she was pregnant a week after ending a relationship with a boyfriend. Elizabeth was prepared for the arrival of a child in terms of resources and support (as I discussed in Chapters Three and Four), but at the same time felt betrayed by the father's lack of involvement. She said:

*The time I wanted him there the most was when my own life was most endangered [she had hemorrhaged after the birth]... Here I was, as a result of something the two of us had done. I wanted him to be there for that. It wasn't out of my being in love with him. It was more out of- he should be there. The need to be protected... I remember thinking that I wanted him to be there... (Elizabeth, interview July 1995).*

This is Marie's story:

*When I became pregnant, I was in a very, very abusive relationship, very very abusive. And again, luckily I had my mom. She pulled me out of the relationship, she kept me at her house for the last few months of being pregnant. At that point we had to get a restraining order against this person... Once I got out of that I had already talked to lawyers and my baby was going to go out for adoption, and I had parents picked and everything ready to go. I was in the hospital for ten days... and I asked for extra days because she was going out for adoption... I was in the hospital under an alien name just so I couldn't be reached, and on the last day when I had to go sign the papers I decided against it. I decided to bring her home with me. The hardest thing I*

*have ever had to do. It was very, very difficult...You can't predict the future. You don't know what the right answer is. I was very young. I didn't have any job, any schooling, nothing behind me. To bring home a child is a big responsibility, and I didn't have the resources. So I just went out on a limb and did it ...* (Marie, interview January 1996).

These arrival stories cast more light on the spaces of single motherhood. "Choice" is not a particularly useful word to describe the terms of their circumstances, yet, arguably, none of the women were "left." As Rebecca said, *"it was a definite choice... [but]."* It is significant to note that many of the women recounted leaving their husbands and marriages in order to escape what they deemed abusive relationships. Michele's declaration that *"you don't know what I walked away from,"* is a telling comment on the quiescence and peace that she, and others including Rebecca and Marie, described single motherhood to be for them.<sup>131</sup> For others, like Jenneffer and Raine, marriage was never a consideration for them, yet they also said that single motherhood complicated their lives and identities in ways that they had not imagined. Most of the women had not anticipated nor desired being single mothers. Apparently, most of the women's financial situations, except for Rose and Michele's, did not change. Marie was *"better off"* financially when her boyfriend was not living with her.

For many of the women single motherhood was much more difficult than they imagined, and this is an idea that has been raised in a number of places in the thesis. Concerning my own entry into single motherhood, as I said in Chapter One, I had never imagined that I would ever be in this position. This is a common phrase. *"I never expected to be in this position- unmarried, and a single mom- especially at this stage of my life"* (Vancouver YWCA Single Mothers' Newsletter Fall 1992:3). *"It was never meant to be. I never thought I would be a parent and a single parent never entered my mind..."* (Rebecca, interview October 1995). *"I'm so judgmental, the thought never crossed my mind. Ever seeing myself as a single mother? No, no. I thought we could conquer it all..."* (Michele, interview November 1995). While single motherhood in these cases, and my own, might then appear to be a "default" position, the agency with which the women work to transform their circumstances and identities, and to imbue this space with transformed meanings, is a critical dimension. It

is important to consider "negotiation" as both "negotiating a river" and "negotiating a deal" (Ginsburg and Tsing 1990:2), as I outlined in Chapter One. It is also important to consider that "identity is always... processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others..." (Malkki 1992:37). As I have tried to show, the women talked about their difficulties in terms of having to negotiate social relations and ideas, as much as in terms of material hardships. In this next section I want to map out briefly the transformative work that I saw as a constitutive experience for many of the women within this social space.

### **Transformative Work: The Practices of Single Mothers**

In Chapter Three we saw single motherhood constructed as a site of rehabilitation by social services in Vancouver that seek to facilitate personal change for single mothers through various support groups, networks, and workshops. We saw the desire that some of the women manifested, including Rebecca and Elizabeth, to "fix" themselves through this nexus of resource, support, and therapy. I suggested that part of the rehabilitative "program" within the community of practitioners that includes social workers, resource workers, and counsellors, was an agenda to "stabilize" and "heal" single mothers. I want to suggest here that the women also went about, not merely fixing themselves as if to repair something broken, but reconfiguring and transforming the meanings that they ascribed to their lives and identities as single mothers. "Transformative work," then, is different but not separate from the discursive practices of rehabilitation that some of the women were embedded in (at least three of the women were participants in support groups at the time of the interviews, for example). By this I mean that the everyday practices that the women engaged in, such as letting non-single parents know, at every chance they got, what the lives of single parents were like, or protesting that their child's school curriculum materials presented and upheld the nuclear family as the norm, or searching for a place where they felt safe and supported and not judged, seemed to be transformative in that it changed the structure *and* consciousness of single motherhood they held.

Mullings has described "transformative work " as "efforts to sustain continuity under transformed conditions and efforts to transform circumstances in order to maintain continuity" (1995:133). I want to suggest that while this does seem to reflect the women's experiences as I saw them, I think it is crucial to note that identity-work plays a significant part of this process as well. The women were not merely engaging in "efforts to sustain continuity" or "transform circumstances" (ibid.), but in efforts to remake their identities. The circumstances that they were seeking to transform were not merely material but social, emotional, and ideological. Significantly, the women engaged within a multiplicity of discourses that effected their identities, that included but were not limited to these professional ones, within a variety of contexts that included the single mother service community in Vancouver as well as the women's everyday spaces- neighbourhoods, schools, churches, daycares, children's playing fields. "While institutions and cultural domains of meaning have a profound impact on shaping ideas and practices, people do not necessarily organize their everyday actions according to these divisions," Yanagisako and Delaney have argued, "Rather, people think and act at the *intersections* of discourse" (1995:18). This suggests to me that single motherhood is a highly mediated space and set of practices. Furthermore, becoming a single mother for some women is a process rather than a onetime bounded event. For many of the women the temporal dimensions were not so clear-cut, such as Marie and Jenneffer, in that their relationships ended and resumed a number of times and their identities as single mothers were held and then discarded, or like a woman I interviewed who was now remarried but "still related to being a single mother" (fieldnotes January 1996).

I use Michele's narrative to show how categories such as "single mother" are embodied, practiced, and reshaped (see Hervik 1994), and how I came to see "transformative work" as part of the practices of single mothers.

*... it was more like a milestone inside my head to see that things were okay. A recognition that I could provide for them. When I got off the plane I had a job... then when I found a place to live, and then when I found the appropriate daycare for the kids, all these things made me at ease... So, all these things- I've got a car, a house, a job, daycare- then I eased up a bit...*

*I used to judge people... if they weren't working hard at their marriage then... I'm not saying that all single mothers were there because of their own wrong-doing but I thought a lot of them could have tried harder because there I was, being cheated on and I could swallow my pride.... There I was- just like the others [single mothers]. I did walk a mile in someone else's shoes...*

*You know what I thought their biggest concern was? How can they offer the balance to the children to be the mom and the dad at the same time. I thought this was their biggest obstacle they had to conquer. Well, hardly!*

*Now, when someone else is a single mother, it's such a sign of strength and initiation.*

*-(Michelle, interview November 1995)*

Importantly, the women appear not to be "fixing" themselves in the sense of changing themselves, but rather they are engaged in a process of altering their own understandings of what it means to be a single mother. I now look at my situation as a single mother in far more pragmatic terms that I used to four years ago. For example, I struggle with how I can get my son's school to accommodate our "binucleated household," rather than the other way around. At the same time that I am viewing these transformative practices as a critical aspect of single motherhood for many of these women, I do not want to romanticize it either. The term "predicament" is still a useful one, given that most of the women wanted to be married or in long-term relationships again. In this sense, their narratives suggested that they were transforming single motherhood but perhaps not so much to remain in this space but to make the most of it.

### **Deconstructing Home: Using Postcolonial Theory**

I return here to the idea raised in Chapter Four about home as an "illusory secure and fixed place" (Minh-ha 1994:14), and attempt to explain the specific utility of my application of postcolonial theory (from which this quote derives)<sup>132</sup> to the experiences and meanings of single motherhood as I have come to understand them. There are problems involved, as I outlined in Chapter One, in terms of using sets of ideas meant to theorize and critique particular times and places and social relations. Mani has argued, "there is something about the privileging of the concept of 'postcoloniality,' the particular way in which it is globalized, either as a description of the world or of identity, that makes me exceedingly

anxious (Frankenberg and Mani 1993:295). Yet, it is useful to begin looking here, at constructions of relationships between home and identities.

"Home has always been hard for me" (Raine, interview January 1996). I maintain, as I set out in Chapter One, that home is a critical intersection at which to study single motherhood. Home can be seen as a common predicament in terms of a set of discourses, practices, contexts, social relations that variously position, define and circumscribe women who are single mothers. Additionally, as I suggested in Chapter One, families work within these spaces to retain continuity through specific and local changes that include divorce, separation, and multiple relocations. As I have said earlier there is a list of single mother "issues" corresponding to home that include, for example: child custody and child access negotiations and practices; competing public and individual definitions of what constitutes an "intact" family; and, securing safe and affordable and housing spaces. Stemming from this, however, is the need to be critical of cultural meanings and social practices of "home." The women's testimonies to survival and dislocations are connected to notions about "home" as a "fixed, stable, harmonious place" (see Martin and Mohanty 1896, Minh-ha 1994). Raine's statement that home has always been difficult for her, and by this she means she has struggled with home as both a symbolic site of a legitimate family and a physical place of respite, and Rose's statement that she realized that bringing her husband back into her home "*would not solve her woes*," casts light on what geographer Doreen Massey has called "home as a nostalgic act" (1994a:10). While Rose's longing to have her husband back to complete her family and home is, clearly, deeply felt, this cultural experience of loss must also be challenged as hinging on essentialized notions of nostalgic place. A home is imagined in the past tense, that was complete and stable, and at the same time she knows that it was not. Home then, can be a "search after a non-existent lost authenticity," (ibid:11). Where have the women fallen from? How *can*, and is, stability be realized under shifting family conditions? What does stability look like as a practice?

Postcolonial theory is useful as a *starting* point then, to explore cultural meanings and narratives about "family," "home," "place," and "identity." Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have claimed,

All diasporas are not alike; we must learn how to demarcate them, how to understand their specific agendas and politics. Furthermore, in order to problematize the separation of a pure 'home' from a 'contaminated' diasporic location, we have to pay attention to how people distinguish their diasporic locations from their 'home' location (1994:16).

Massey adds to this,

the migrant moves neither from nor to a 'pure' place... This does not mean that there are no differences between the experience of migration and that, for instance, of living generation and generation in one relatively 'undisturbed' locality. What it does mean, however, is that displacement occurs between contexts which are themselves already complex constructions. It is not only recent migrants, the recently displaced, who are in that sense culturally complex (1994b:118).

It is in this sense that I have sought to highlight the conditions of disruption in the women's lives, and their "complex localities." Fran Klodawky and Suzanne McKenzie have stated that "Mother-led families are not just families in which one member- the financially and publically responsible male- is missing. They are families that create a new set of associations using a variety of public and collective resources and interventions" (1987:10). It may be prudent to interrogate these sets of relations and practices, many of which involve the state, in terms of the implications they have on the subjectivities and conditions of the women. While the important point remains that not all persons in this so-called "transglobal" world are displaced in the same way, these are nevertheless lived experiences worth examining, many of which occur between "already complex contexts" (Massey 1994b:118): "... looking no further can mean that one gains no insight at all into the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for specific people" (Malkki 1995:16).

I suggest that the women's stories reveal ambivalence about "broken home" and single mother identity. The women are broken, and they are not broken, and we struggle with this ambivalence in our everyday lives. What might liberate single mothers from this view is a reconfiguration of what is meant by home, so that their identities, and I include myself in this, are not trapped within such a limiting space. "Postcoloniality begins," Ong has

suggested, " when subjects cease to feel that they need to apologize for their lives just because they differ from more centrally placed others" (1995:367). This thesis is a jumping off point, then, for a more thorough critique of postcolonial theory and other theories that rely on uncritical notions of home, identity, and stability.

### **The Last Word: The Limits of Feminist Ethnography**

An interview is not a telling of a life.

- Ruth Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matters (1993:41)

As I have outlined in Chapter Two, some of the women expected that my research would lead to a collection of single mother stories. My intentions at the beginning of the research were to produce something "useful" for the women I was researching. Elizabeth Enslin has made an important critique of the need for feminist ethnographers to go "beyond writing," if they want to engage in a process of "building theory through struggles for change" (1994:545). I conclude by outlining briefly the limitations of this feminist ethnography.

While I have, perhaps, leaned too far towards building a "theoretical prisonhouse" as Behar (1993) has cautioned, I have also tried to open up our understandings of single motherhood, by writing about "common knowledge that often does not get told" (see Haraway 1988, John 1989): "Far from being *a priori*, the connection between women and knowledge about them is a *result*, struggled for, constantly negotiated, and learnt anew" (John 1989:63). In this sense, while I have not told the women's stories as I suspect they wanted me to, I have tried to pay attention to the force of the details of their lives as they recounted them to me. Blunt and Rose speak of "transparent space," following Henri Lefebvre, as a "space that assumes that the world can be seen as it really is and that there can be unmediated access to the truth of the objects it sees" (1994:5). What I have tried to present is not a transparent space of single motherhood, but an opaque and muddy one, complex, ambiguous, and contradictory. At the same time, I recognize that "transparent" understandings of single motherhood, manifested in phrases like, "she's a single mother, you know," are what the women must deal with in their everyday lives, and this was made very apparent to me. I have tried to document this.



Enslin has criticized interpretive studies for "entailing more rumination than action" (1994:540). In a similar vein, Lynne Phillips has said that "to make self-critique the only purpose for reflexivity in feminist ethnography misses a major point: the underlying goal of feminist social science is to *make* a difference and not just understand it" (1933:31). While I think that these are valid points, I also think that I have a much longer way to go towards "understanding difference." To understand "specificities of location" (Probyn 1992:142) we need, of course, to confront our "heretofore unexamined points of privilege and blindness" and to "locate ourselves in and against the master discourses of race, class, and sexuality that inscribe it" (Visweswaren 1994: 104). One of my most embarrassing moments in the field was when I asked Marie if she had ever considered going to live in her father's "community." She looked at me with a funny look and said, "what, live on a *reserve*?" and then told me how her "native-ness" had little to do with who she was.

While this may not be feminist ethnography that concerns itself with experimental textual styles or compelling narrative (although I think that the women's narratives are very compelling), it is, I believe, ethnography that has emerged from the "concrete engagements with the clarifications of struggles of women in all their diversity" (Enslin 1994:559). While I still struggle with the ethical question of how the knowledge I have gained can now serve those struggles, I "can be held accountable for seeing and knowing in various spaces of struggle" (ibid:560).

The last word I utter is to take issue with Hastrup's comment, raised at the beginning of this chapter, concerning the "native voice" needing "anthropological vision" "if they are not to remain mere voices, speaking to no one in particular" (1994:5). While "remaining mere voices" may not be anthropology, it is nevertheless, or perhaps in spite of this, a vital and legitimate practice. I do not think that my vision holds any more clarity than that through which the women see their own situations. It *is* our positions, however, that are "different." And there is much to learn about that.

## Appendix One

### Interview Schedule

1. Why did you choose to participate in this research?
  - do you get an opportunity to talk about your life like this? when?
2. Tell me about yourself and your family.
  - number and ages of children
  - who are the other members of your family?
  - any "extended" family nearby?
3. Tell me a little bit about your life.
  - what do you do?
  - who takes care of your children?
  - what kind of support do you receive?
4. Tell me about becoming a single mother.
  - when?
  - how?
  - was it something you had imagined?
  - do you think of yourself in this term?
  - how has your situation changed or evolved?
5. Tell me about being a single mother.
  - what does it mean to you?
  - what does it mean to those around you?
  - have your feelings changed over time?
  - do you have an image of a single mother?
6. Tell me about your household, and where you live.
  - does it feel like "home"? why or why not?
  - do you relate to "broken home?"
7. Have your ideas and experiences of home changed over time? If so, how have they?
  - what was your home like you grew up in?
  - have you continued to think of home this way?
8. How do you maintain family ties?
  - what ties are important?
  - custodial arrangements?
  - visions or dreams of living somewhere else? e.g. "ideal home"?
9. How does "nuclear home" affect your life and experiences?
  - where?
10. How did you find the interview process?

## Appendix Two

The following notice was published in the Summer 1995 YWCA Single Mothers' Newsletter.

### Notice for Research Participants

#### Stories of Single Motherhood

My name is Susan Krygsveld. I am a single mom and graduate student at Simon Fraser University, doing a research project on single motherhood.

The purpose of my project is to capture and record the diverse set of experiences and circumstances we live as "single mothers" in order to understand more fully the implications of our categorization and often times, stigmatization. I think that by telling our individual stories we can do much to help break the stereotypical images of "single mother."

I am currently at the preliminary stage of my research, and seeking stories and insights from single mothers from a broad range of backgrounds. What I want to hear about is your experience as a single mom, including how you came to be one, what it's like for you, how you arrange your everyday life, and what you like and don't like about being a single mother. I am also interested in hearing your views on what kind of information needs to be published about single motherhood.

I think these things are important because the way in which we manage and experience our lives are influenced by ideas that others have about us and it may be that these ideas are wrong or at best, only part of the story. What I would like to do is tell our rich and varied stories, with the hope that this will ultimately improve and enrich our lives in some way.

If you would like to take part, I welcome and appreciate your input. It is your participation that will shape the project.

## Appendix Three

The following notice was published in the Spring 1996 YWCA Single Mothers' Newsletter.

### Notice for Research Participants

I am trying to become more aware of diversity in the lives and stories of single mothers, for my own research at SFU. I am currently seeking interviews with single mothers from a broad background including lesbians, women of colour, disabled women, and teenagers.  
If you are interested, please call me.

## Appendix Four

The following research information sheet was handed out and discussed with each participant at the time of the interview, prior to them signing the informed consent form.

### Research Information Sheet

My name is Susan Krygsveld. I'm a graduate student at Simon Fraser University and the person conducting this research project.

The purpose of my project is to investigate and document the experiences of single mothers in the Greater Vancouver area. I shall be interviewing a number of women in order to gain an understanding of their experiences as single mothers.

Each interview will be tape-recorded but the name of the individual being interviewed will not be recorded. Your name will not be used in any report or publication connected with this project.

Your willingness to participate in this project is appreciated. Before we start the interview, I would like to explain that:

- your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.
- you are free to refuse to answer any question at any time.
- you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.
- your interview will be kept entirely confidential and will be available only to myself unless you wish to receive a transcript.
- excerpts from this interview may be made part of the final research report and other publications, but your name will not be included in such a report or publications.

This project is supervised by Drs. Noel Dyck and Dara Culhane at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University. They can be contacted at 291-3146 should you have any questions or comments that you would like to address to them about this interview or the project overall. Any complaints should be addressed to the Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Dr. Ellen Gee, at the same phone number. I can be reached at 291-6292 should you have anything to add to this interview, or questions or comments about it, or would like to receive information on the results of my research.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This observation was made prior to the research for this thesis, and comes from my personal journal. The names have been changed to ensure anonymity to the persons involved. My participation in the group in which this observation was made ended prior to the start of my formal research.

<sup>2</sup> I use "discourses" in this thesis as Abu-Lughod and Lutz have outlined, in the Foucaultian sense, as a wide range of ideas, images, verbal productions and "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (in Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990:9). "Discourse" is helpful in drawing out the strategic and pragmatic use of cultural symbols, and the social production and constitution of (rather than mere reflection of) experience through discursive practices. But, as Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) have cautioned, we have to be careful to read across discourses or else we slip back into a distinction between "ideas and practices or text and world" (Abu-Lughod 1991:147) that Foucault wanted us to refuse. Single motherhood must be analyzed as social action constituted by and interpreted through a multiplicity of discourses (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:18). Critically, I use "discourses" as a way of showing how the women draw from, and deploy, a range of culturally available and historically specific constellations of ideas and claims, in various social-spatial contexts, in constructing their "single mother" identities. In this sense, "identity" is a practice and an experience produced by multiple and imbricating, and contradictory and competing, discourses, some more powerful than others.

<sup>3</sup> See the following sections in the chapter for the various ways that I am using the concept "identity."

<sup>4</sup> Parin Dossa has made a useful distinction between life history and life story approach in anthropology that I employ here. The term "life story" takes into account the specialized context of the ethnographic setting and production ("where the interpreter's voice is not excluded"), as opposed to the full life history (Dossa 1994:351).

<sup>5</sup> From hereon in, the women's own words, taken from the interviews, will appear in italics and will be in block quotations whenever the narrative is continuous, and the women's name will appear in brackets at the end of the narrative. Their own words, used in my commentary, will appear in italics and quotation marks, and if it is not obvious who the speaker is, I will footnote it.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about Rose and Rebecca, see their biographic sketches in Chapter Two.

<sup>7</sup> Sociologist Craig McKie has stated that the rates of lone parenthood in Canada have been increasing and accelerating since the turning point of 1976, and that, according to 1991 census figures, lone parents, of which 82% are female, form 14% of all family types (McKie 1993:53). "What was once the exception has now become the reality" (ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> Personal correspondence with Dara Culhane June 10, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Historian Linda Gordon has explained that single motherhood is not a recent phenomenon but that the "present alarm about single motherhood does not carry the same meanings as that of early twentieth century [North America]" (1988:33).

<sup>10</sup> What is fascinating about the term "single mother" is its signification to singleness as a necessary experience of women raising children without a *particular kind of partner*, notably a sexual partner- but even more specifically- the father of the children. A mother, of course, is hardly a "single" person in that definitionally she has a relationship with another person (her child or children). But of course this is not the relationship which defines single mothers. "Single mother" is a modification of, and deviation from, the institutions of motherhood that "assumes a primary connection between husband and wife" (Fineman 1995:147). The phrase, "women raising children *alone*," then, although it is often conflated with "single mother," is

used here to provoke a more ironic understanding of how women such as "single mothers" are labelled.

<sup>11</sup> Personal correspondence with Dara Culhane July 10, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> "Voices" is a daily column in the Vancouver Sun, the largest local newspaper, that encourages readers to write about social issues of concern to them. Sharon McInnes, the author of this "Voices" column makes the main point that poverty, not 'broken home,' is the central problem for Canadian families.

<sup>13</sup> Anthropologist Leith Mullings' research with low-income single mothers in an African American community in Harlem, has shown that these women have been engaged in transformative work that included "efforts to sustain continuity under transformed circumstances and efforts to transform circumstances in order to maintain continuity" (1995:133). I borrow this idea from Mullings but expand on it and localize it, in Chapter Five, to show that transformative work for the women I interviewed also included the work of transforming their identities.

<sup>14</sup> An illustration of the "initiative" I am referring to can be seen in this article in a local newsletter for single mothers that reads:

How often have you been out in public, when you are approached by a stranger wanting to know whether you are married or not? How often have you received questioning looks? How often have you felt uncomfortable because of someone's reaction to you as a single parent? Chances are we have all experienced these and other similar scenes at some time or another.

How many of these curious strangers have stopped, asked, listened, and appreciated the inner strength that each of us possess as a result of our circumstances? Isn't it about time that we are fully recognized and appreciated for our strength? (YWCA Single Mothers' Newsletter, Summer 1995)

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Frankenberg has argued that "whiteness" is an identity that shapes white women's lives in a particular way:

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (Frankenberg 1993:1).

While I do not want to simplify my "position" as a white women in a very complex world, especially given that I lived for many years in a country where my "whiteness" both "marked" and "named" me, I want to make the point that "race" has not been a marginalizing experience for me the way that I have found being a single mother has been.

<sup>16</sup> I mean this in the sense that being a single mother for me meant first of all, that I had to defend to other people my decision to divorce and become a single mother, and second, that none of my reasons seemed satisfactory, either to myself or to others who questioned me.

<sup>17</sup> There have been numerous occasions while waiting outside the classroom at my son's school that I have heard people make references to a particular woman with words like, "Well, she is a single mother, you know," as if to explain away with this claim a particular aspect of her being. Other times the references have been more direct. For example, at my son's gym class, his instructor once said to me, after hearing my son would be at his father's for the entire summer, something like, "oh, you're a single mother," as if to imply she suddenly knew all kinds of things about me she did not previously gather (without that identifying mark). Sociologist Margit Eichler has made a similar observation that people often assume "one knows something about a family because it is led by a single mother" (in Febraro 1994:15).

<sup>18</sup> My own image of "single mother," then, is mediated by classist and racist stereotypes as well as patriarchal discourses about marriage. When I was growing up it was assumed that my sisters, and I, would marry and have children and remain married to our husbands "until death do us part." Back then, in the 1960s and 1970s, I did not have any frame of reference for a

"single mother" except for cultural stereotypes. No person in my family or neighbourhood that I knew of was a single mother, and if a single mother was talked about it was in terms of misfortune or pity. Later on, in the 1980s when I moved to the Caribbean, I became aware of local black women raising their children in what anthropologists call "matrilocal" households, and while I was impressed by, what was to my eyes, a freedom of sorts, the women were mostly poor and not women I intended nor desired to emulate.

<sup>19</sup>I use the term "predicament" in an ironic sense to critique the social perception of single motherhood as a "plight." For example, McKie states,

What is the current reality facing lone parents today? For all but a lucky few, the prospect includes a stressful life lived in social isolation, bound by limitations in an unreconstructed labour market, poverty if not destitution, and knowledge that intergenerational transfers of status will afflict many of their children with low social standing (1993:71).

Single motherhood is framed in public discussions as an unfortunate but persistent current reality (see Jain Campion 1995), and a position that women *get themselves into*, and to which there are no solutions. The figures used to quantify this "plight" seem to focus on the "never-married" single mother (see e.g. McKie 1993).

I also use the term to reflect what I see as women's experiences that contradict the perception of "choice"- that for the women I talked to at least, single motherhood was a situation they did not choose so much as they one day found themselves in (I address this in Chapter Five), and furthermore, it is a situation often filled with dilemmas, quandaries, and difficulties.

<sup>20</sup>See Visweswaren's luminous discussion on the relationship between the reading and writing practices of ethnographers, between the literature read while in the field by ethnographers such as Malinowski, Mead, and Bohannon (e.g. "trashy novels," Virginia Wolf, and Hamlet respectively) and the ethnography they wrote (1994:1-9).

<sup>21</sup>Michele (interview November 1995). For more information about Michele see the biographic sketch in Chapter Two and her narratives in Chapter Three. Here I want to point out Michele's lucid articulation of this sameness/ difference tension: "*From all the women I've met as single mothers, they all have a factor that makes them different... whether it is a husband-beater, maybe a rape thing, whatever issue, everybody has a skewing factor. So I'm telling you what my skewing factor is...*" (Michele, interview November 1995).

<sup>22</sup>"Binucleated households" is a term used in legal material on custody and refers to households circumscribed within joint custody arrangements that are intended to reproduce nuclear family form in post-divorce organization of the family unit (Pickett 1991:32).

<sup>23</sup>I learnt of this at a conference for single mothers I attended in the fall of 1995.

<sup>24</sup>Lisa Malkki is referring specifically to Hutu refugee camps in Tanzania, formed in 1972 as an outcome of the Tutsi violence taking place in Burundi during that time.

<sup>25</sup>Thanks to Dara Culhane for pointing this out to me.

<sup>26</sup>See Caren Kaplan (1994) and Kathleen Kirby (1996) for useful histories and critiques of this theory, from Adrienne Rich (1986), "Notes Towards a Politics of Location," to Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1987), "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," to current usage.

<sup>27</sup>Anthropologist Ruth Behar has pointed out this distinction, "Feminist ethnography has begun to emerge as distinct from feminist anthropology in its reflexiveness about the politics of practicing feminism and experimental cultural writing, and in taking as its focus women's relationships to other women" (1993:301).

<sup>28</sup>This is consistent with a feminist methodology that recognizes the situational and relational construction of knowledge (see Donna Haraway 1988).

<sup>29</sup>By spring 1995 I was involved with a local organization on a volunteer basis as a co-organizer for an annual conference for single mothers, and as a paid workshop facilitator.



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<sup>30</sup> The Vancouver YWCA Single Mothers' Services, and some of the services they provide, are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

<sup>31</sup> False Creek is a mixed housing neighbourhood in a gentrified area of the city on the waterfront. Downtown Eastside is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada, located in the downtown core. Richmond and Surrey are suburban cities south of Vancouver.

<sup>32</sup> Two participants out of the fourteen I interviewed. Only one of these two women's narrative appears in this thesis.

<sup>33</sup> "Single mother" is often conflated with "poor" (Fineman 1995), not entirely inaccurately given that studies show the majority of single mothers in Canada are poor. Lois and Brockman state that 1986 census shows 56% of single mother headed families in Canada had annual incomes that fell below the poverty lines (1993:92). However, I participate in this conflation by not considering income as a marker of diversity.

<sup>34</sup> Raine (interview January 1996).

<sup>35</sup> I did not want to be pushy and wanted to leave the initiative up to the woman herself to participate.

<sup>36</sup> My own life has certainly been enriched by the research but more to the point I have done nothing for the participants, an issue I comment on in the conclusion.

<sup>37</sup> The responses included "*people need to know we're normal*" (Elizabeth, interview July 1995), "*hearing stories of strength and how other women have coped*" (Michele, interview November 1995), and "*need to know more about resources available to us in the community*" (Rebecca, interview October 1995).

<sup>38</sup> I provided information on suicide hot-lines and crisis centres to one woman, and custody and access support group information to another woman.

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca (interview October 1995)

<sup>40</sup> Raine (interview January 1996).

<sup>41</sup> For example, one of the women, Rebecca, made a comment to me about, of all things, the car that I drive. She told me that she had watched me drive up and when she saw that it was a new vehicle she thought, "*oh god, she's got a nice car. My car is on its last legs. Are you still a single parent?*" She said that when her neighbours see her car they must know that she rents, rather than owns, the house she is living in. I did not want to misrepresent myself and proceeded to tell Rebecca that I did not have any money as a student, and that it was my son's father who had recently purchased the car for me. Rebecca was silenced by this, then she asked, "*He bought you a car?*" It turns out that her son's father had not paid child support for many months, and even then it was a very small contribution. The point I want to raise here is how my position as someone with a "new car" and a supportive, middle-class ex-husband may have affected Rebecca's references to herself as someone who rents and does not own a decent car. Is this "difference" that matters?

<sup>42</sup> Such as legal information and resource information.

<sup>43</sup> For a useful discussion of these see Emerson (1995).

<sup>44</sup> More specifically, the women's narratives make up roughly one third of the text in Chapters Three and Four.

<sup>45</sup> Thanks to Dara Culhane for making this suggestion.

<sup>46</sup> Jenneffer (interview April 1996).

<sup>47</sup> Rose (interview April 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Michele (interview November 1995).

<sup>49</sup> Rebecca (interview October 1995).

<sup>50</sup> For example, Jenneffer said, "*I've been bringing it [her own experiences as a single mother] up for twenty years and people do not want to hear about it.*" Rebecca spoke of how the

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interview was important for her because I was someone "*who wanted to listen to her,*" that being silenced was a significant experience for her as a single mother.

<sup>51</sup>Rebecca (interview October 1995).

<sup>52</sup>Raine (interview January 1996).

<sup>53</sup>Michele (interview November 1995).

<sup>54</sup>Marie (interview January 1996).

<sup>55</sup> The distinction that I make here is that testimony is a statement under oath while a testimonial is a declaration certifying a person's character or conduct, attesting to the value (Random House Dictionary 1980). I use "testimony" to connote the public and interrogational aspect of providing information in an interview setting, and "testimonial" to connote the self-promotional aspect of the material that derived from the interview. Either way the statements are public and a response to interrogation, and importantly, rhetorical and meant to convince me of something.

<sup>56</sup> Thanks to Noel Dyck for pointing this out to me.

<sup>57</sup>The reference that Behar is making to "prisonhouses with yellow wallpaper" is a reference to the story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), which tells of a doctor-husband that "confined his wife to a room with yellow wallpaper where she was not to tire herself by doing any kind of thinking or writing" (Behar 1993:272). Behar has said that feminist ethnographers are "now in the ironic position of being able to mime the doctor-husband" (*ibid.*).

<sup>58</sup>"While the scope of anthropology lies beyond the retelling of local stories, these and their experiential grounding remain the foundation of anthropology" (Hastrup 1994:10).

<sup>59</sup> Marilyn Strathern has argued, "The personal credentials of the anthropologist do not tell us whether her/she is home... But what he/she in the end writes, does: whether there is cultural continuity between the products of his/her labours and what people in the society being studied produce by way of accounts of themselves" (1987:17).

<sup>60</sup> This was the story of a Chinese Canadian woman in her twenties who had immigrated to Canada eight years ago from an island off the coast of Africa. Her family were wealthy and established business owners, of a traditional Chinese background. Although her family, some of who has immigrated to Canada and some of who have remained on the island, knew of her divorce, as this woman told it, "they try so hard to pretend it is not so." She was held in disgrace, she said, especially by her married sisters, even though her ex-husband had since died. Unfortunately, this women's narrative has not been included in this thesis.

<sup>61</sup>Elizabeth (interview July 1995).

<sup>62</sup>Rose (interview April 1996).

<sup>63</sup> The North Shore is a district to the north of the city of Vancouver. The term is often used to signal affluent, or at least "nice" neighbourhoods.

<sup>64</sup>The East Side of the city (as distinct from the Downtown Eastside) consists of predominantly working-class neighbourhoods, although areas are becoming increasingly gentrified. Significantly, parts of the east side, especially the area locally known as "the drive," has recently attracted a so-called "alternative" crowd.

<sup>65</sup>This is a complex story that took Jenneffer hours to recount to me. Basically what happened was that Jenneffer became quite ill when her two daughters were very young, and without family around to provide her with the needed support, she asked the Ministry of Social Services for assistance with temporary foster care. This happened on two occasions over the course of a few years, and after the second time it seems as if Jenneffer was denied custody of her oldest daughter. The foster parents by this time tried to legally adopt Jenneffer's daughter at which point Jenneffer sued them for custody. Jenneffer was awarded joint guardianship of her daughter, but not physical custody.

<sup>66</sup>Cynthia (interview October 1995)

<sup>67</sup> Michele (interview November 1995).

<sup>68</sup> I borrow this idea from Behar, who talks about suffering as the explanation Esperanza, the Latin American woman who is the subject of Behar's research, gives as the right to tell her story: "When I told Esperanza that I thought her life narrative would make a very good book, she completely agreed... Why? The answer, in her mind, was obvious: She had suffered. Suffering gave a woman the right, and the need, to write a text... it is by suffering and surviving, laughing through the tears, that a woman earns the privilege of telling her life" (1992:111).

<sup>69</sup> Michele (interview November 1995)

<sup>70</sup> I do not include the full narrative here in order to protect her anonymity and remain sensitive to her disclosure.

<sup>71</sup> Visweswaren (1994:104).

<sup>72</sup> The Vancouver YWCA has a Single Mothers' Services Program that provides support groups, conferences, workshops, and other services for single mothers in the area, and puts out a small newsletter four times a year to the women on a mailing list and at various community centres in the city. This is the newsletter than my notice was published in.

<sup>73</sup> See anthropologist Ellen Lewin (1990, 1995a, 1995b) for a detailed discussion on the politics of lesbian motherhood. Lewin's research on lesbian mothers and identity in the United States shows how lesbian mothers are located inside but outside social categories 'mother' and 'woman' (1995a), for example, and thus echoes Raine's account of herself as multiply marginalized. Raine, of course, is also talking about how being young and poor are also marginalizing for her.

<sup>74</sup> It is important to show how "my privilege" became part of Raine's narrative. At many points during the interview Raine made reference to other women's "privilege." For example, when I had asked her about how her son's father's presence in her life shaped her identity, she told me about "the layers of difference" across women in the lesbian community and how her marginalization within this community was due to her position as a mother, especially a mother through a heterosexual relationship. One of the things she said was, *"I'm tired of having to call more privileged women for their shit. I'm sick of it. I think that's dividing the community, when women don't want to look at their privilege..."* In response to that statement I asked Raine to tell me more about what she meant by "looking at privilege," and in her reply she drew me into her analysis: *"... I'll give you an example. You've got some privilege as a straight woman. One way for me to challenge, one thing I actually want to say to you is, how come I'm the only lesbian mother in your study... Part of privilege is not realizing that there are others out there with less privilege, that have a reality just as valid. One privilege that privileged people have is associating with others who have just as much privilege as them and its like blinders, you don't see everything that's out there. So you might not know where to advertise to get lesbian mothers to participate in the study ..."* In this sense, Raine made a statement about the construction of her own subject position through the positionality of who she categorized as "straight," and "privileged women" (like myself). In my response to Raine I tried to explain how "interrogating difference" was something that I was very interested in, and that while I was sure "privilege" had much to do with how women negotiated their identities as single mothers, I was "cautious" about how exactly it played itself out. The points I want to make here are first, that "my privilege" as Raine constructed it, was an important part of the intersubjective production of her identity in the interview context, and second, that my naiveté about lesbian politics and the psychological discourse Raine was conversant in, enabled a particular testimonial about her life (how would her story be different as told to another lesbian-poor- single mother, or someone with "less privilege," for example?).

<sup>75</sup> She uses "Brady Bunch" to denote an idealized American middle-class nuclear suburban family, popularized by a television series in the 1970s of the same name.

<sup>76</sup> Raine's claim to "invisibility" is interesting in light of Lewin's claim that, "Whereas in 1976 most people did not think lesbian mothers existed, by the late 1980s they had been discovered" (1995a:109). The question Raine might have for Lewin is, discovered by whom? where? I believe that Lewin is referring to popular writings by lesbian mothers whereas Raine is referring to her experiences in everyday spaces such as her neighbourhood, and the lesbian community.

<sup>77</sup> Zygmunt Bauman (1995:78) has made a useful historical distinction between "survival" and "quality of life" as social discourses, the latter being distinctly postmodern compared to the Marxist focus on "survival." The use of the term "survival" implied a foreseeable resolution to specific and definable human conditions (by the state), while "quality of life" lacks definite content and resolution. In this sense, my use of "survival" may seem "modernist" (Bauman's term) but is consistent with the women's descriptions of their experiences of struggle, exile, and suicide attempts, in explicit rather than vague terms.

<sup>78</sup> The borders Mary John is referring to in this quote are those of the United States. She argues that the fact that modes of survival in the new land are so extensively addressed by scholarly and public discourses may have something to do with "America's *raison d'être* as an immigrant nation," and thus the demand to reconstitute identities stems from the discourses on nationality (1989:57). I am extending this analysis to include an identity such as single mother that is also circumscribed by public and state discourses but more to the point here by those of us who may reinscribe its borders uncritically.

<sup>79</sup> Raine (interview January 1996).

<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth (interview July 1995).

<sup>81</sup> The inscription of "strength" onto the category "single mother" is a common one within service-oriented literature for single mothers. For example, in a newsletter for single mothers, one of the articles, entitled "The Strengths of Single Mothers," written by a single mother, states, "My journey has not ended, but... I have the *strengths of a single mother* to finish it!" (Vancouver YWCA Single Mothers' Newsletter Fall 1992).

<sup>82</sup> I use the term "home work" here, to be distinguished from housework, to denote the expansive range of practices involved in the work at home for Raine, which she outlines for me as including not just the housework but such jobs as entertaining her son, e.g. "looking at his latest lego creation"; finding an affordable, decent place to live; making home a place where her and her son can "do meaningful activities"; and, "finding the motivation to put more holes in the wall [for pictures she will only take down months later]." In her words, "home for me has always been hard" and by this she means much more than daily household chores.

<sup>83</sup> Lewin has stated that "popular images of mothers and lesbians tend to be mutually exclusive" (1995a:107). Furthermore, this separation has implications for the cultural "invisibility" that Raine referred to, and for undermining lesbian mothers' claims in custody cases (ibid.), for example. Lewin seems to make a distinction between the visibility of lesbian mothers within the lesbian milieu and their invisibility within popular (heterosexual) milieu, that Raine does not.

<sup>84</sup> It is important for me to clarify what Raine meant by "her community." The definition that came out of the in-depth discussion we had around this term, and which Raine expressed as the "subject of a lot of debate," "her community" is taken to mean the local lesbian community in her own neighbourhood as well as in the wider urban region, and more specifically the particular groups of women who show up at the events to which Raine referred such as activist, artistic, and other cultural events. Despite the largesse of this community- Raine guessed around 50,000 in the lower mainland- she described it as a face-to-face community, where "you can mention somebody's name and its 'oh, I worked with her'." Raine admitted that this working definition is problematic because it excludes the lesbians "who can't come out- because they're living in poverty, or in the suburbs, or are married, or for cultural reasons it might not be safe to come out," and because it cannot capture the contextual meaning and

fluidity of the term. "Sometimes I say lesbian communities, or lesbian community, because sometimes I don't feel like it is a community... Sometimes I'm very cynical about it. I guess its a convenient word to refer to a bunch of us and yes, it definitely does change depending on the topic." Obviously the community is not homogeneous, and although Raine's adurance about the dangers and power implicit in my mis/representing any schism within the community needs to be regarded, her point that women with more privilege and resources to "get out in the community more" marginalize those who are mothers, rendering them invisible by processes of exclusion, is a crucial one to understanding her own self-definition as invisible, and marginalized within "her own community" as well as the broader social landscape.

<sup>85</sup>Lewin (1995a, 1995b) would concur with this contradiction between lesbian and mother identity that Raine is describing. The identity of "mother" for lesbians deploys constructions of gender that accommodate traditional family ideologies that is in contradiction to lesbian's subversion of tradition gender orientation (1995a:113). Lewin also found that the degree to which motherhood superceded other aspects of lesbian's identities was quite wide. Moreover, she found a rift between mothers and nonmothers in the lesbian community she studied:

While bringing together seemingly contradictory identities as lesbians and mothers challenged traditional constraints on who may be a mother, lesbian mothers constructed motherhood in a way that validated and intensified the long-standing division of women into mothers and nonmothers (1995b:331).

<sup>86</sup> Discursive and material are not exclusive realms of experience and therefore cannot be easily separated when talking about experience. Yet, I want to bring to the fore the ideologies that shape Rebecca's sense of identity here.

<sup>87</sup> Rebecca spoke of wanting to find a social life where she did not feel singled out. This was a strong goal of hers and we spoke at length during the interview of groups she could join and places she could go, such as Parents without Partners, and local single mother support groups, where she could experience the sense of normalcy she spoke about longing for.

<sup>88</sup> Rebecca's narrative itself, however, serves as a form of protest and resistance, so I am not suggesting that she does not resist in some fashion. My point, though, is that she did not say to me, for example, "my sister needs to change her attitude, and become more aware of other realities, and accept me for who I am." Instead, she laments, "I am not like her."

<sup>89</sup>Legal theorist Martha Fineman considers motherhood a colonized category in a legal sense: motherhood is a legally significant category that was "initially defined, controlled, and given legal content by men" (1995:38). "Male norms and male understandings fashioned legal definitions of what constituted a family, of what was good mothering, who had claims and access to children as well as to jobs and education, and ultimately, how legal institutions functioned to give or deny redress for alleged (and defined) harms" (ibid.). I am using the term however, in a less legalistic, and more broadly social and symbolic, sense.

<sup>90</sup> Kathy (interview July 1995).

<sup>91</sup> This idea has been raised in Chapter Two.

<sup>92</sup> See Fineman for more discussion and evidence of this:

The assumption of official and unofficial monitors of single mothers is that they are incompetent and in need of supervision. Single mothers have become the explicit objects of punitive and deeply suspicious public and political discourses that characterize them as dangerous to their children and, derivatively, to the rest of us as well (Fineman 1995:18).

<sup>93</sup>Thanks to Dara Culhane for drawing this out.

<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth's reference to single *parent*hood rather than *mother*hood is telling, and reflects a much wider social tendency to conflate the two.

<sup>95</sup> The Vancouver YWCA sponsors free weekly on-going support groups for single mothers. There are currently 19 of these small groups (six to eight women plus a facilitator) operating in various neighbourhoods in the city. The format varies from group to group but the purpose of

the groups is to provide space for receiving and giving support for a wide range of single mother related concerns and issues such as custody and access problems, self-esteem, relationships, housing, and so forth.

<sup>96</sup> The YWCA Single Mothers' Conference is an annual event whose unofficial mandate is to provide single mothers in the community with an opportunity to gather resources and information of help to them, as well as to "create community" (1992 conference brochure). It is attended by approximately 100 women, most of who are on income assistance at the time. The Ministry of Social Services subsidizes the cost of the one-day conference for these women (fieldnotes 1995). There are numerous other agencies in the city that offer services for single mothers, and the YWCA should not be misrepresented as the only one. That said, it has been providing services to single mothers in Vancouver longer than any other agency, more than 18 years (fieldnotes 1995).

<sup>97</sup> I am not personally familiar with this centre in the way that I am with the YWCA services. As I understand it, however, this fairly recent centre is a non-profit organization that offers an array of services (outlined in n.98) in the form of thematic and therapeutic programs.

<sup>98</sup> A program guide from "The Vancouver Single Mothers Support Network" (1994) lists the services offered at these centres. Some of these include; "Stress Reduction Techniques," "Women's Healing Circle," Intuitive Guidance," Energy and Bodywork," "Personal Growth and Healing." A program guide from the "YWCA Annual Single Mothers' Conference" brochure (1994) offers workshops entitled "Creating Positive Family Rituals," "Lowering the Barriers: Women, Friendship and the Community," "Beyond Survival: Thriving as a Single Mother," and "Discipline Without Tears [a parenting workshop]."

<sup>99</sup> The same program (as n.98) reads: "Our mission is to empower the lives of those we serve by providing physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual support in a safe, confidential environment."

<sup>100</sup> See the 1994 program guide to "Vancouver Single Mothers Support Network."

<sup>101</sup> The support groups sponsored by the YWCA have a two year policy. That means that the women must ordinarily leave the group after two years of continuous participation (fieldnotes 1995). Implicit to this policy is that the women will have gained adequate information and resources and will have stabilized and/or entered into a new situation (such as a relationship) such that the support from the group is no longer vital. Similarly, the policy at the apartment building for single mothers, previously discussed, reflects this tension. The intent of the space is to provide a context of and for stabilizing, but this is conditional. Women are not allowed to remain in the building if they have romantic partners (living with them). This policy, to me, serves to de-stabilize at the same time it intends the opposite, given that dislocation is mandated by virtue of having to move out when your circumstances change.

<sup>102</sup> From the 1994 program guide for the Vancouver Single Mothers Support Network.

<sup>103</sup> This idea that single motherhood is a "stage" manifests itself in literature on sociology of the family. For example, McKie has pointed out that the actual activity of lone parenting is a transient one, given that "the average duration of lone parenthood for unwed mothers in 1984 was 3.5 years" (1993:58).

<sup>104</sup> For example, single mothers have been held blameworthy for their poverty, alleged promiscuity, dependence on the welfare system, bad parenting skills, and more generally, for threatening social breakdown. Brenda Thompson, an advocate for single mothers' rights has expressed this multifarious culpability this way:

Single mothers are often looked upon as the problem instead of the victim. She is somehow responsible for her own fate either through a bad marriage or through 'sexual promiscuity' before the marriage certificate was secured.

'She made her own bed, let her lie in it,' is the justification of so many people. It is as if our social system pushed a single mother into poverty and then punishes her for being there. She is suddenly blamed for not having a higher education, for not having

the ability to overcome gender and wage discrimination, the support of an affordable daycare, or even the support of a national Maintenance Enforcement program which would guarantee that wayward fathers relieve the taxpayers for financially supporting their responsibility for the children (1988).

105 Again, the term "single parent" is used to denote "single mother."

106 The rest of this quote is telling as well. It reads, "Without a cooperative mate and with societal prejudice, the psychotherapeutic situation may be the only nurturing environment [for the single parent]. The therapist empowers the single parent by providing a supportive, nurturing environment" (Simon 1990:197).

107 Anthropologist Shirley Ardener has made the claim that social relations and "rules," such as gender relations, are realized ("mapped") on the "ground" by the placing of individuals in space (1992:3). I want to show how ideas about single motherhood have consequences that are physical and spatial, and ideological and "in their heads." But it is also critical to remember that spaces and behavior (discourses, practices, identities) are mutually dependent: "while divisions of space and social formations are intimately associated, no simple one-way 'cause and effect' pertains, and their cumulative interdependence suggests that we should think in terms of 'simultaneities'..." (ibid.).

108 See Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose (1995), and Gillian Rose (1993) for feminist geographical accounts of these debates. See Michelle Rosaldo (1974) for one of the first feminist anthropological analyses of the public and domestic spheres, and Micaela di Leonardo (1991) for an historical perspective on the development of the dichotomy from an explanatory universal model to a research tool.

109 Elizabeth (interview July 1995).

110 For example, Raine said, "*No, I don't feel like this is a broken home... I have no doubts that we [her and her son] are together in this life, and we are not waiting for somebody else to come along and complete our home or family. This is our home and I have no illusions about anybody else coming in to make it anything else. Not at all!*"

111 For example, while Raine was adamant about not identifying with the label "broken home," she also pointed out that home is an "enigma" for her, in that "*home has been hard*" for her, in part because she moved a lot because "*no home has been perfect*" for her. Moreover, she talked about the recent "*broken dream*" of a home she and her lover had imagined together, but which was no longer possible for Raine given that her lover was the one with the resources. The "loss" of home, expressed in the terms she used- "*enigmatic*," "*broken*," seemed to have struck Raine in a deeply felt way. Another example is Michele. While she did not describe herself in the terms "broken home," she nevertheless cast her and her children in terms of "*one important person missing- their father*," and spoke of the difficulties she had when the children brought material home from school that represented "home" as "*a mom, kids, and dad*." Again, for her, loss and fracture were salient experiences, but these are my terms.

112 What I mean by "inescapable predicament" is that the absence (of the father) translated into a "presence" that can therefore never be "escaped." This should make more sense by the end of the Chapter.

113 See n.65 for the details on this story.

114 See Isabel Dyck (in Rose 1993:25) for her analysis of mothering practices within a suburban community and the way this creates "a spatially segregated social world in which women endow mothering with their own collectively negotiated meanings."

115 See Angela Febbraro (1994) for a discussion on the construction of single mothers as a population "at risk" in clinical and developmental psychology, and Mukti Jain Campion (1995) for a discussion of the public concern in Britain over mothers raising children without fathers present.

116 Jenneffer explained to me that she felt she had been watched closely by the foster parents on a number of visits Jenneffer had with her daughter. She recounted to me a story wherein one of the foster parents' children followed Jenneffer and her daughter when they went to a nearby park and friend's house, observed them, and then reported this back to his parents.

117 It is important to keep in mind that not all of the proceedings, of course, took place in the courtroom *per se* but also in the lawyer's offices, and Ministry of Social Services', for example.

118 The British Columbia Family Relations Act, Chapter 121, Section 42 states:

(1) ... the persons who may exercise custody over a child, where

(a) the father and mother live together, *the father and mother jointly*

(b) the father and mother live separately and apart, the parent with whom the child usually resides...

Section 35 states:

(1) On application a court may order that one or more persons may exercise custody over a child or have access to the child...

(4) An order for custody and access may include terms and conditions the court considers necessary and reasonable in the best interests of the child (Continuing Legal Society of BC 1986:8, emphasis mine).

119 The motel incident Jenneffer referred to was part of a story she had recounted to me earlier in the interview. A brief recap of that story goes like this: She was living in a motel at a trailer park in a suburb of Vancouver where the father of her youngest daughter was living at the time. He was taking care of her eldest daughter for her while she was running errands and while Jenneffer was gone he let the little girl run outside in the rain in her underwear.

Neighbours reported this incident to the Ministry of Social Services who, in turn, apprehended both of Jenneffer's daughters until Jenneffer could "re-locate" to a "decent place." Jenneffer claimed that this was a malicious act by her neighbourhoods at the motel and trailer court, and one that led to her criminalization in the eyes of the courts from thereon in.

120 It is interesting to note how closely Jenneffer's reasons for participating in the research reflect my own words in the notice for research participants I placed in the Single Mothers' Newsletter (see Appendix Two).

121 Marie (interview January 1996).

122 Raine moved nineteen times in her childhood.

123 EXPO was the international exhibition that took place in Vancouver in the summer of 1986. Many residences in rooming houses, trailer parks, and other "short-term" accommodations were pushed out to make room for tourists.

124 For example, Entre Nous Femmes Housing Registry, YWCA Homesharing Network (although I understand this network's funding has recently been cut), Vancouver Housing Registry, Single Mothers Housing Registry.

125 For example, single mothers sometimes have difficulty securing places to rent. As Brenda Thompson, from Mothers United for Metro Shelter (MUMS), in Nova Scotia, has claimed, "they apply for an apartment and the landlords tell them that single mothers are considered 'unsuitable' tenants" (1988). Also see Klodaswky and McKenzie (1987) and Solomon (1992).

126 Rosemarie Solomon has claimed that in Canada women's housing needs have been ignored; more specifically, single parent families' housing needs have not been addressed because these families are viewed as "temporary anomalies soon to be resolved through remarriage" (1992:34).

127 For example, Rose said that she never wanted to be a single mother, and expressed anger at having been put into that situation. Marie said that although she enjoyed being a single mother it was more important for her to be married and that she had been frustrated for some time that marriage to her children's father was not an option for her.



<sup>128</sup> When I asked Marie how she found the interview process, she replied that it was "*great, better than therapy to have someone listen unconditionally, without judgement...*"

<sup>129</sup> See James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (1994) for a more in-depth discussion of the ways that family is discursively constructed. They make the critical point that houses are assumed to be the

... natural sites of family life and provides a framework for interpreting and describing what is going on with them... the household location signifies the domestic order assumed to reside within... To note that a family 'barely has a roof over its head' suggests more than inadequate shelter; it can convey a sense of familial instability, disorder, or irresponsibility as well (1994:241).

<sup>130</sup>I borrow this expression from an article written by a single mother entitled "Moving On," in which she talks about how becoming a single mother for her has meant "moving on," "past expectations of ourselves, and all the judgements that go along with it." (Vancouver YWCA newsletter Fall 1992:4).

<sup>131</sup>This comment about the "almost tangible" experience of "peacefulness" is a common narrative, and worth noting. In *The Single Mother's Companion*, a woman writes:

As I lie in my bed my first night as a single mother, I am struck by the silence- the wonderful silence... The silence brings wonderful solace- a sense of peace and long overdue calm. It is not the calm before the storm- the next round of screaming and accusations, but rather a true calm. This calm is almost tangible in depth (Leslie 1995:xiii).

<sup>132</sup>I do not attempt to define "postcolonial" in this thesis, but use it, *not* to signal a historical moment wherein "colonialism" no longer continues, but rather, as Grewal and Kaplan have outlined, "as a term that positions cultural production in the fields of transnational economic relations and diasporic identity constructions" (1994:15). Much of the postcolonial material I have read (see Bammer 1994a, 1994b; Frankenberg and Mani 1993; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; John 1989; Minh-ha 1994; Mohanty 1986, Visweswaren 1994), concerns itself with the problematics of multiple axes of difference that matter across the category "woman," and thus stems from Third World critiques of "white" "western" feminism and assumptions of "home" as well as the experiences of exile, displacement, and re-making home in a so-called transglobal world. Material that has been useful to these debates are critiques of constructions of "local" (see Probyn 1990, Rodman 1992).

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