RADICAL RELATIONS:
EXPLORING POLYAMORY AS A TRANSGRESSIVE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore polyamory among queer women as a transgressive philosophy and practice. Through individual qualitative interviews, the daily lives, past and present experiences, relationships and life philosophies of five queer polyamorous women are considered. Interviews are analyzed with an eye towards the personal as political as well as the practical and philosophical elements involved in constructing romantic relationships consistently with one’s personal ideology. A critical understanding of the link between economics and social norms shows the importance of studying alternative relationship and family models. By attempting to create relationships that are consistent with their beliefs, these women are challenging the current dominant definitions of relationships, family and community. While polyamory can be a difficult practice, participants use it as part of a broader philosophy that transgresses Western social organization in a way that creatively combines the personal and political.
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PART ONE – BACKGROUND

Chapter 1: Background and Significance

The purpose of this research is to explore polyamory among queer women as a transgressive philosophy and practice. Five queer polyamorous women were interviewed about their daily lives, past and present experiences, relationships and life philosophies. Chapter 1 covers the background and significance of this research with emphasis placed on the practice of polyamory within queer communities as well as the direction of the contemporary LGBTQ movement. Chapter 2, Methodology, will explain how this research was carried out as well as the theoretical framework guiding it. Chapter 3 will provide an overview of the findings. Chapter 4 will look at the participants' critiques of the current ways of relating enforced through monogamous nuclear coupling and family. Chapter 5 will explore the participants' visions of alternative definitions of relationships, family and community. Finally, the Conclusions and Future Research section will provide a summary of the findings and make suggestions for future research directions on this topic.

Exploring Polyamory: The Personal is Political

Since my earliest days in the queer community, I noticed that non-monogamy and open relationships were fairly common. The prevalence of these non-traditional relationships certainly piqued my interest but it wasn't this interest alone that led me to explore polyamory among queer women. My attraction to this topic is rooted in my own journey to overcome some of the barriers and limitations I have found in long-term relationships. Of all the different ways to practice non-monogamy, polyamory appealed
Polyamory (poly) is a form of non-monogamy that is often talked about in terms of its politics; an element that fit well with my own ideology. Although it is a relatively common practice among women in the queer community, most literature does not focus on this population. In general, polyamory refers to “the practice, state or ability of having more than one sexual (or, for some, romantic) loving relationships at the same time with the full knowledge and consent of all partners involved” (Tweedy, p. 20). It has also been described as a principle of self-determination – the idea that individuals should be capable and responsible for structuring their relationships the way they choose to rather than relying on a pre-determined structure (Smiler, 2011). Building on this, Barker (2005) theorizes polyamory as a relationship orientation that assumes it is possible and acceptable to love many people and maintain multiple intimate and sexual relationships while emphasizing openness and honesty. The way I understand the terms, poly differs from other forms of non-monogamy in privileging the values of trust, communication and respect for everyone involved in a situation and strives to be an ethical and responsible way of practicing non-monogamy. This is coupled with the political elements of poly that are often present – ones that challenge mainstream definitions of relationships, family and community.

As I was trying to figure out what poly was, I saw the word used to describe many different practices – some that looked appealing to me, and others that really didn’t. By intentionally adopting the values of trust, communication, and respect into my practice of non-monogamy, I found myself facing some deep and difficult questions about my life.

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1 Non-monogamy is a blanket term that covers anything from infidelity to open relationships to swinging. Polyamory generally distinguishes itself by placing value on trust, honesty and consent.
and relationships, ones that would eventually lead me to question the political nature of intimate relationships within Western society. What elements of a romantic relationship are really important to me? How much of what I want can I compromise? What does my relationship ideal look like when it doesn’t match the representations I see in society? The more I attempted to answer these questions, the more philosophical my queries became – where did my romantic archetypes come from and can they bear scrutiny? I still don’t have all the answers to these questions but I became very interested to discover how others dealt with these dilemmas and approached polyamory.

In the beginning, I found some helpful books and blogs about polyamory. *The Ethical Slut* by Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy (2009) was among the first things I read and served as a useful practical guide to exploring non-monogamy in an open and respectful way. It covered topics such as deciding to open a relationship, different styles of non-monogamy, discussing boundaries and managing feelings of jealousy. While all of this was useful to my exploration, I have noticed that the resources available about polyamory are largely heterosexual-focused and often couple-centered. A lot of the time, these resources work on the assumption that those practicing polyamory are formerly monogamous (heterosexual) couples who have become open to taking secondary partners. With some notable exceptions, the resources I found on poly frequently failed to address my concerns and weren’t always relevant to my exploration as a queer woman trying to resist coupling in a pre-defined way. Although the practical how-to elements found in these resources were useful to my personal approach, they were missing the political element – an integral part of my attraction to poly. And yet, the political
resources about poly that I managed to find presented the opposite problem – they often left out the personal.

Academic studies of poly explore many different aspects of its practice and theory. Smiler (2011) describes polyamory as an example of every person’s right to self-determination, arguing that over the past few centuries, the Western world has shifted away from cultural determination and towards personal choice. This libertarian view of polyamory is not uncommon in academic literature; much of the current research on poly is rooted in identity politics and post-structuralism. Following this line of thinking, Tweedy (2010) argues that the definition of sexual orientation should be expanded to include disfavoured sexual preferences such as polyamory. She suggests that because the roots of sexual orientation are performance-based (as is any sexuality-based identity), the continuity of one’s identity is always theoretically in question. Tweedy describes polyamory as a theory of relationships that builds on the feminist understanding of monogamy as a historical mechanism for the control of women’s reproductive and other labour (2010). Furthering this notion, Barker (2005) believes that poly has the potential to challenge the active man/passive woman element of heterosexuality, arguing that challenging monogamy as the dominant institution is an important avenue for women to explore in order to radically rework gendered power relationships. She claims that poly can be seen as part of a wider transformation of intimacy and relationships in post modern society, reflective of the general move towards sexual relationships being based on equality rather than tradition or arrangement (2005). Although moving towards egalitarian heterosexual relationships seems progressive, it doesn’t actually contend with the pre-existing unequal gender dynamics in heterosexual relationships. While gender
inequality may be considered a social construct in postmodernism, it continues to have material consequences in the real world. Moving beyond these dynamics would require collective as well as individual change and must transgress the limitations of identity politics.

Delving deeper into polyamory among heterosexual and bisexual women, Sheff (2005) found that many women experience feelings of empowerment and disempowerment coexisting in the same relationships. She reports that the women in her study were struggling to find sexual liberation in a society that demands women’s sexuality to function in the service of men. Sheff points out that women who challenge society’s definition of sexuality do so at a cost and her participants periodically felt objectified as sex toys in their practice of poly. She further notes that polyamory was more accessible to women with class and race privilege and that these women reported feeling greater freedom in polyamorous relationships (Sheff, 2005). This study suggests that, at least for women, social issues of class, race and ability play an important role in the types of experiences that one has in polyamorous relationships. Noel (2006) elaborates on this, commenting that most of the research and texts about polyamory are geared towards a white, middle-class, able-bodied, educated American audience. She believes that in order to successfully challenge intersecting systemic oppressions, polyamorous people must build norms of inclusivity around shared issues such as expanding the definitions of relationships, families and communities. In Poly Economics – Capitalism, Class and Polyamory, Christian Klesse (2014) argues that while poly is generally considered an egalitarian practice within academic literature, this research lacks the in-depth class analysis needed to substantiate this claim. Klesse (2014) quotes a blog
by Peller stating, “Relationships are not objects that, depending on the formation, determines whether or not the relationship is ‘feminist’. Relationships are a social relation, one that necessarily falls within the paradigm of all other capitalist social relations, no matter what form it takes.” (p. 215). While it’s true that a relationship’s structure alone doesn’t challenge the social, political and economic context that it exists within, activism that combines the personal and political carries with it a powerful creative potential. What are the elements that, combined with a polyamorous structure can work to transgress the limiting social climate?

**Gay Marriage and the Fight for (Virtual) Equality**

One reason that I was having trouble finding relevant resources on poly within queer relationships might have been that a far more mainstream queer struggle was making lots of headlines – the fight for gay marriage. Although legalized in Canada in 2005 with the enactment of the Civil Marriage Act, gay marriage remained a controversial and debated issue. In 2006, the newly elected Conservative government made an unsuccessful attempt to repeal the Civil Marriage Act and heated arguments about this topic as the US-based movement gained momentum were maintaining interest and debate about gay marriage throughout the Western world. According to figures released by Statistics Canada, hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation more than doubled from 2007 to 2008 and about three-quarters of these attacks involved violence compared to 38% of attacks based on race and 25% of those motivated by religion (Laidlaw, 2010). The fight for marriage equality increasingly monopolized queer activism and gay rights were becoming conflated with marriage rights.
While I was exploring polyamory and trying to figure out where my own beliefs about relationships originated, the mainstream LGBTQ movement was inching toward the previously heterosexual institution of marriage. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year in the US alone to legally fight LGBTQ discrimination and sway public support for marriage equality. Yet, despite these large budgets, relatively few legal LGBTQ victories have resulted. In 2011, the largest LGBTQ advocacy organization in the US, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), had a budget of $38 million, yet had only managed to secure the full passage and implementation of one LGBTQ rights bill in congress over the past 20 years – the Shepard/Byrd Hate Crime Act, which was passed in 2009 (Vaid, 2012). More recently, an increasing number of States are moving towards the legalization of gay marriage, or have already done so. However, even as the gay movement continues to uncritically fight for the right to legally marry, marriage rates have been steadily declining. In 2008, the marriage rate in Canada was less than half of what it was in 1972. According to Employment and Social Development Canada, 147,288 marriages occurred in 2008 – that’s 4.4 marriages per 1000 people. In the US, the trends are similar. A report released in 2013 by Bowling Green State University’s National Centre for Marriage and Family Research found that the US marriage rate has hit its lowest point in history. According to this report, marriage has declined by approximately 60% since 1970. The current US marriage rate is 31.1, or 31 marriages per 1000 unmarried women (Cruz, 2013). It seems curious that although the institution of marriage has been on a steep decline for decades in North America, the fight for gay marriage is by far the most public and organized effort happening within the LGBTQ community.
In order to gain insight into why the struggle for monogamous marriage had become the most outspoken struggle within the queer community, and how this struggle fit into the larger Western social context, I decided to look at the history of heterosexual marriage. I was surprised at how many parallels I found between the working class struggle for marriage rights during the Industrial Revolution and today’s popular gay marriage movement. In the chapter *Colonization and Housewifization* (1998), Maria Mies outlines the rise of the monogamous nuclear family, as we know it today. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, the word ‘family’ had a distinct class connotation. Until this time, marriage and the nuclear family form were only possible among the propertied bourgeois. As opposed to extended family, the single-couple nuclear family, as a combination of co-residence and kinship based on the patriarchal principle, is only relatively recently normative for the working class. Mies points out: “[C]apitalism did not, as Engels and Marx believed, destroy the family; on the contrary, with the help of the state and its police, it *created* the family first among the propertied classes, later in the working class, and with it the housewife as a social category.” (p. 105). The case study of this process in Germany shows that between 1868-1871 legislation passed allowing non-propertied classes to marry along with laws that criminalized both abortion and sexual intercourse before and outside of marriage. Turning the working class woman into a housewife involved a process of socialization, legislation and police enforcement whereby “what the secular state called a crime, the churches called a sin” (Mies, p. 106). From the 1830s on, the attitude of German male workers and the Social Democratic Party reflected what has been called ‘proletarian anti-feminism’ – these groups were concerned that the entry of women into industrial production would threaten men’s wages and jobs.
The enforcement of women to the nuclear family form and the housewife category must be understood not as a simple maintenance of inequality but rather as a pervasive 'cluster of forces' ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness through which women were convinced that monogamous marriage and heterosexuality were inevitable, even if experienced as unsatisfying or oppressive (Rich, 1980).

Most working class struggles for a living wage were linked with and shaped by patriarchal aspirations for male workers to be able to marry and support a family as a single breadwinner. Legislation allowing non-propertied persons to marry and start a nuclear family was considered progressive by most working class leaders. The belief that a man’s wage should be sufficient to maintain a family was an important element in the eventual victory of higher wages for men (Mies, 1998). In what they perceived as moving towards equality with the propertied class, the male-led working class organizations fought for a status equal to bourgeois male's status in a nuclear family with strictly defined heterosexual monogamous relations where the man was the head of the family and the woman tended to the home. In this struggle, the patriarchal definitions of relationships and family were invoked and internalized and workers came to believe that the morality of the bourgeois was superior to their own. Thus, both by force and by choice, the nuclear family form came to be internalized as superior and commonly practiced (Mies, 1998).

The nuclear family, which quickly became the only socially and legally valid form of relationship and family structure, was decidedly heterosexual, monogamous and patrilineal. While working class men saw an increase in their wages and social status as a result of the adoption of this family form, women were left vulnerable and more
dependent on men (Seccombe, 1993). Women married for many reasons – to survive economically, to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, to remain respectable, to give their children a name – yet they increasingly brought neither social nor economic power to the marriage, thus entering the institution from a disadvantaged position (Rich, 1980). The family became private territory separate from the public sphere of economic and political activity and women were withdrawn “from the public sphere and shut into their cozy homes from where they could not interfere with the war-mongering, moneymaking and the politicking of the men” (Mies, p. 104). Women's economic and social independence was further reduced during this period.

Compared to previous patriarchal family forms, the nuclear family in many ways seems progressive. As opposed to arranged and purely economic/political unions, monogamous nuclear marriage allows individuals to select their life partners. The powerful aspiration of romantic love is an essential accompaniment to the triumph of the monogamous nuclear family as an embodiment of lifelong true love. The romance myth is an important element in this process as it is the basis on which nuclear coupling is considered to be the highest form of relationship. This myth enforces the idea that individuals today are lucky to have the option of choosing their lifelong partner based on true love. The romance myth is strongly propagated through popular culture in mediums such as books, movies and music. Although it is a generally held ideal within society, the romance myth is particularly targeted at women. One reason for this could be that it was women who lost much of their economic and social independence through the widespread adoption of nuclear relationship, marriage and family ideals, and as such, it is
women who need to identify with romance ideals more strongly to justify their subservient social location.

Learning the often-untold history of nuclear marriage and family raises many issues in considering the gay marriage movement. Moving forward to today, it is clear that winning workers the rights and resources to live in nuclear families has done little (if anything) to bridge the deep structural inequalities that exist. In fact, organizing Western society into nuclear family units has only helped in re-producing and intensifying the exploitative practices of capitalism through increased consumerism and individualism. Not only did it fail to address class inequality but it increased women's economic dependence. Furthermore, dominant conceptualizations of relationships, family and community became deeply entrenched. When society is comprised mainly of nuclear family units, the way people interact with each other changes; the place and role of extended family and community is undermined and dismissed. This ideology places sole responsibility of the upbringing of children on the biological parents and works to undermine the importance of the communal elements of society, encouraging the isolation of the nuclear family from the world around it.

In her book *Irresistible Revolution: Confronting Race, Class and the Assumptions of LGBTQ Politics* (2012), Urvashi Vaid explains the concept of virtual equality, “a partial, conditional simulacrum called equal rights … that would grant legal and formal equal rights to LGBTQ people, but that would not ultimately transform the institutions of society that repress, denigrate, and immobilize sexual and gender minorities” (p. 3). Similar to the workers of the industrial era, the gay marriage rights movement of today is generally thought to be progressive. After all, in a liberal society it seems almost absurd
to prevent two people from following their true love and participating in a valued romantic (legal) tradition simply because of their sexual orientation. Although there is unquestionable inequality in denying queers the marriage rights enjoyed by heterosexuals, the gay marriage movement is not actually engaging with the underlying structures and institutions that ground LGBTQ inequality. While the growing acceptance of queerness within mainstream society (which could be credited in part to the marriage equality movement) has facilitated a lessening of the social ostracism faced by the queer community, is it genuinely making Western society more equitable?

One way to begin answering this question is to look at the inequality plaguing the queer community. For various reasons, it is difficult to find statistics about LGBTQ poverty rates in Canada. However, the little information that does exist is enough to raise alarm. LGBTQ represent an estimated 25 to 40 percent of homeless youth compared to only 5-10 percent of the general population (Gaetz et al., 2013). Lesbian couple households are among those most likely to live in poverty in Canada and lesbian family households have a 14% low-income rate compared to 11% in gay family households ("Multigenerational Poverty", 2012). In the US, gay and lesbian couples are significantly more likely to live in poverty than married heterosexual couples, and these statistics only become more extreme when looking at the poverty rates for LGBTQ women and people of colour. According to data from the National Survey of Family Growth, 15% of gay and bisexual men are in poverty, a number relatively equal to the 13% poverty rate of heterosexual men. However, shifting our gaze to women, we see that while 19% of heterosexual women live in poverty, 25% of lesbians and bisexual women are poor in the US. Lesbian couples 65 years and older are twice as likely to be poor as heterosexual
married couples and children in same-sex couple households are twice as likely to face poverty as those in heterosexual married couple households. Furthermore, LGBTQ people of colour and those living in rural areas are far more likely to be poor than are white or urban same-sex couples (Vaid, 2012). Given these statistics, it’s hard to imagine how gay marriage will lead to greater equality for the LGBTQ community, particularly to its most vulnerable members. It seems that the gay marriage movement, well meaning as it may be, is actually assimilating diverse queer relationship and family structures into the dominant definitions, expanding the reach of the romance myth and leaving the heart of the inequality faced by LGBTQ people intact. It is within this context that queer women's practices of polyamory will be examined.

**Militant Polyamory in the Queer Community**

At the same time that gay marriage is being passionately debated by politicians, pundits and the general public, a very different movement is happening, perhaps partly in reaction, within the queer community. Many young, trendy and politically minded queers are adopting polyamory as their relationship philosophy. In these circles, poly is usually discussed in terms of politics – queers aren’t the same as heterosexuals, so why should our relationships be the same? A good point, but one rarely talked about in conjunction with the practicalities and emotional intelligence needed to engage in multiple meaningful relationships. In some radical queer communities, there is a shame around admitting to feelings of jealousy or struggle and the presumption that polyamory is a more evolved way of being in relationships. As I continued to engage in my own exploration of poly, I often found this type of community to be less than helpful in genuinely engaging with the questions and struggles that go along with practicing poly.
From a political perspective, poly seems ideal – it’s a way to balance one’s autonomy and creatively structure one’s relationships while treating everyone involved respectfully. However, I found the practice of polyamory as a political ideology often differed from the theory behind it. Although communication, trust, and respect sound like good cornerstones to any relationship, these things aren’t commonly taught and developing these skills takes a sustained effort. Many polyamorous relationships in queer circles where poly is primarily a political orthodoxy involve an anything goes assumption while communication about feelings and boundaries is rare and awkward.

My own struggles with poly ranged from the more practical considerations of how to best invest my time and energy so that my relationships didn’t take over my entire life to the more philosophical questioning of what I actually want my relationships to be and look like. Particularly in the beginning, I found myself facing new struggles. The freedom of polyamory had always appealed to me but being in complex committed relationships didn’t always feel so freeing. While I remained committed to my own poly philosophy, I found myself feeling isolated from a lot of the people around me who were exploring polyamory. Although poly was commonly talked about as politically transgressive, I saw a lot of people’s feelings get hurt as a result of the lack of emphasis on emotional intelligence and communication skills. Of course there are many ways of practicing poly but in this regard, I wasn’t finding a lot of relationships in these communities particularly progressive.

Communal History, Matriarchies and Monogamy

As previously noted, humans did not always organize themselves into today’s conceptualization of the nuclear family form; for much of human history, people lived
and survived communally. The family, defined as the common dwelling of kin who cooperate economically and in the upbringing of children, dates back to an unknown origin likely over 100 000 years ago. Initial family formation represented a qualitative leap forward in cooperation, purposive knowledge, love and creativeness (Gough, 1971).

In the chapter *Primitive Communism and the Origin of Social Inequality* (1990), Richard B. Lee states:

> Before the rise of the state and the entrenchment of social inequality, people lived for millennia in small-scale, kin-based social groups, in which the core institutions of economic life included collective or common ownership of land and resources, generalized reciprocity in the distribution of food, and relatively egalitarian political relations. This basic pattern, with variations, has been observed in literally hundreds of nonstate societies (p. 231).

Lee’s description of communal survival seems in many ways self-evident – historically, humans on their own or in small families would have been less likely to survive without a communal division of labour and resources. It’s hard to find much about the dominant relationship structures or patterns in these historic communal societies. There are many possible reasons why this might be hard to find. One of them could be that people’s sexual and romantic attachments to one another wouldn’t be as important to a society that didn’t rely solely on a child’s biological parents to be responsible for their upbringing. Another reason could be the patriarchal recording of history.

Feminist scholar Heide Gottner-Abendroth has extensively studied pre-patriarchal societies and believes that these matriarchies were the norm for most of human history². Her studies show that these are societies of reciprocity that do not think in terms of the

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² Contrary to popular belief, matriarchies are not a reversal of patriarchal hierarchies with women holding privilege over men. Rather, these are non-hierarchical and reciprocal societies.
hierarchical dualisms characteristic of patriarchies. In *The Structure of Matriarchal Societies* (1999), Gottner-Abendroth says, “It would never occur to matriarchal people to regard one sex as inferior to or weaker than the other, as is common in patriarchal societies. In that nondualistic view of the world, no principal distinction is made between the profane and the sacred. The entire world is divine and therefore sacred to the people” (p. 2-3). Women in matriarchal societies are respected for their ability to give birth and renew life and all members are valued for their contributions to individual and communal life. Cycles of growth, death and return of life are honoured as cycles of nature. These societies tend to be matrilineal, meaning that kinship, clan names, social position and political titles are passed through the female line (Gottner-Abendroth, 1999). Although not particularly relevant to this study, it is worth noting that in *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe* Goettner-Abendoth systematizes the principles of matriarchies based on her study of over 50 Indigenous matriarchal societies around the world. In this book, she extensively outlines different relationship approaches found in these societies, including those who practice polyandry, polygyny and non-monogamy as well as societies with no formal marriage rituals or expectations of permanent coupling (2013).

Lifelong sexual monogamy among humans has gone relatively unexamined as a social practice and its existence is largely taken for granted in societies where it is prescribed. Apart from humans, no monogamous primate species live in large social groups and in every monogamous human society, widespread adultery has been documented (Ryan & Jetha, 2010). Because the nuclear family structure is so often unquestioningly assumed to be natural, scientific researchers and anthropologists often
“begin by assuming that long-term sexual monogamy forms the nucleus of the one and only natural, eternal human family structure and reason backwards from there” (Ryan & Jetha, p. 75). As mentioned earlier, compared with other patriarchal family forms such as arranged marriage, nuclear monogamy seems progressive. Unfortunately, it has maintained elements of inequality and has come to be ubiquitously considered the only valid option within the Western world.

**Patriarchy and the Neo-Liberation of Love**

In general terms, patriarchy is the privileging of men over women within a society in the social, political and economic spheres. How this privileging manifests varies among cultures and societies. Western patriarchy is a particular form that consists of both subtle and overt elements of inequality, between genders but also among races, classes, ethnicities, levels of ability, age, and sexuality. The closer one is to the gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. that is privileged, the better off they are in Western society in ways both obvious and not. In the past, men’s higher status and value was more overtly stated – the separation of home from work that was produced during the Industrial Revolution made it nearly impossible for women to combine child-care with paid labour in early capitalism. As Eleanor Leacock put this: "It is the ultimate alienation of our society that the ability to give birth has been transformed into a liability" (as cited in Seccombe, 1993). Today, women’s subordination is much less explicitly codified yet remains embedded in our systems, institutions and social ideology – women’s lower wages and economic dependence as well as high rates of physical and sexual violence against women reflect the continuing inequality of women today. According to a Statistics Canada Violence Against Women survey from 1993, half of all women in
Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2014). While it would be better to have more up-to-date data, no subsequent Statistics Canada survey asked women about their lifetime experiences of violence. More recently, the overrepresentation of missing and murdered Aboriginal women continues to make headlines as Prime Minister Stephen Harper dismisses calls for a national inquiry, stating: “We should not view this as a sociological phenomenon. We should view this as crime” (Wyld, 2014). The mere fact that the Canadian government isn’t concerned with keeping up-to-date statistics and monitoring the situation of violence against women in Canada speaks volumes. Shifting our attention to economics, women working full year full-time still earn approximately 71% of men’s full-time wages in Canada and gender creates a vulnerability that cuts across all groups. Women are the poorest of the poor within Canada’s most vulnerable populations – Aboriginal, visible minority women, LGBTQ and disabled women (Townson, 2009).

In order to better understand the LGBTQ movements of today, it is critical to examine the current economic climate. Jumping back to the Industrial Era’s proletarian fight for marriage equality shows how this fight served the economic and labour needs of capitalist patriarchy. The assimilation of the working class into marriage and the bourgeois definition of nuclear family served early capitalism by channeling once diverse relationship and family structures into a predictable pattern – one that ties workers into dead-end jobs because they need to support their families while producing children to provide the next generation of workers for the continuation and expansion of the economic system. Despite the strength of the ‘American dream’, capitalist patriarchy
relies on the fact that not everyone can work their way up – in order to function, systemic inequality is not only inevitable but also a necessary pre-condition.

In today’s globalized world, dominant neoliberalism is escalating exploitative capitalist practices towards women and other marginalized groups. In *Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction*, David Harvey argues that above all, neoliberalism is a project to restore class dominance, which has succeeded in channeling wealth from subordinate classes to dominant ones and from poorer to richer countries (2007). Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade” (p. 22). Harvey points out that neoliberalism has not been successful at generating economic growth but rather that its effects have been mostly redistributive [toward the wealthy] (2007). Neoliberalism is marked by an extreme expansion of economic markets where profit and international trade is valued above everything else. As a result of this ‘profit above all’ mentality, the age of neoliberalism is intensifying commodification in every area, including human life itself. In practice, the shift into neoliberalism has meant governments favouring big business over local business by removing barriers that stand in the way of transnational corporations maximizing their profits. In earlier periods, people in the Western world expected to benefit from economic growth. Today, however, with increasing corporate power and the adoption of austerity measures around the world, average citizens expect to serve rather than benefit from economic growth. Commodification and exploitation of human life is now commonly seen as an inevitable consequence of big business and
market expansion (Miles, 2001).

So, what does neoliberalism have to do with queer communities, gay marriage and polyamory? In *Irresistible Revolution* (2012), Vaid comments on the LGBTQ movement in the United States:

The LGBT movement operates within and is deeply affected by this era’s economic transformation. Curiously, while the external progressive world is increasingly skeptical of corporate power, critical about the increase in police control and surveillance on poor, brown and immigrant people, and alarmed by the collapse of political power into the hands of fewer and wealthier people, the LGBT movement embraces each of these arenas. … The alliances we make are opportunistic and not strategic: they reflect a short-term focus on the rights of only parts of our communities (p. 72).

By assimilating into the dominant culture and not targeting the underlying class, race, ability and gender injustices faced by queers and other marginalized communities, “the current LGBT mainstream, in effect, asks no more than the right to be equal to the average straight person trapped within a structurally unfair, racist, and heterosexist system” (Vaid, p. 10). The queer community can be granted equal rights and protections under the law, yet none of this need disturb the hierarchies and unequal institutions and traditions at the core of our society.

The mainstream marriage equality movement seems to mark a departure in queer activism from targeting the inequalities that plague its most vulnerable members. Of course radical activism is still present in queer communities but within the dominant narrative, the fight for gay marriage is reflected as the fight for gay rights. The governing meanings of relationships, family and community are influencing the goals and definitions of equality in the mainstream LGBTQ movement. It is in this context that the significance of queer women's practice of polyamory becomes clear. Although the
practice of non-monogamy is nothing new in the queer community, it is only recently that the romance myth and marriage ideals are becoming inclusive of the LGBTQ population. Exploring the perceptions of women who intentionally contradict the dominant narrative of romance, relationships and family can provide insight into the power of combining the personal and the political in ways that undermine current social conventions.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Theoretical Framework

In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), C. Wright Mills states “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (p. 3). Mills contends “No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey” (p. 6). Social arrangements must be critically examined in terms of whether and how they serve people as opposed to just considering their historical stability. This approach of bringing together biography and history, the personal and the political, has largely guided this work.

From a critical perspective with this sensibility it is clear that different groups hold different levels of power and possess differing interests. Within Western society, dominant ideology and social institutions serve dominant groups and reflect their interests. Oppressed groups under the dominant culture can resist the ruling ideology and make social change by collectively recognizing their interests. Marx analyzed this in relation to class and capitalism, arguing that as a result of their subordinate location within capitalist society workers could achieve an understanding that was more accurate than that of the bourgeois class. Collectively, the proletariat could achieve a class consciousness that reflected their true interests as opposed to the interests reflected in the dominant ideology that would otherwise define their world. In *The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism* (1983), Nancy Hartsock applies the idea of an achieved class consciousness to gender, arguing that women are a subordinate and oppressed class and analyzing an achieved feminist
standpoint she perceives in the current women’s movement. She outlines five key aspects of feminist standpoint theory:

(1) Material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations.
(2) If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse.
(3) The vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false.
(4) In consequence, the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate; and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations.
(5) As an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historically liberatory role (p. 107-108).

In keeping with this, Adrienne Rich in her speech, *What Does A Woman Need to Know?* (1986), urges women to hold on to their “outsider’s eye” (or situated knowledge) and poses the following questions:

Suppose we were to ask ourselves simply: What does a woman need to know to become a self-conscious, self-defining human being? Doesn’t she need a knowledge of her own history, of her much-politicized female body, of the creative genius of women of the past – the skills and crafts and techniques and visions possessed by women in other times and cultures, and how they have been rendered anonymous, censored, interrupted, devalued? Doesn’t she, as one of that majority who are still denied equal rights as citizens, enslaved as sexual prey, unpaid or underpaid as workers, withheld from her own power – doesn’t she need an analysis of her condition, a knowledge of the women thinkers of the past who have reflected on it, a knowledge, too, of women’s world-wide individual rebellions and organized movements against economic and social injustice, and how these have been fragmented and silenced? Doesn’t she need to know how seemingly natural states of being, like heterosexuality, like motherhood, have been enforced and institutionalized to deprive her of power? Without such education, women have lived and continue to live in ignorance of our collective context, vulnerable to the
projections of men’s fantasies about us as they appear in art, in literature, in the sciences, in the media, in the so-called humanistic studies. I suggest that not anatomy, but enforced ignorance, has been a crucial key to our powerlessness (p. 1-2).

The idea behind Marx’s class consciousness, Hartsock’s feminist standpoint and Rich’s “outsider’s eye” is that if a group which holds a subordinate social location can achieve the collective power to name their world, their understanding of society will be different and more accurate than mainstream understandings. Situated knowledge provides a valuable perspective on social relations (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1990).

Monogamy, as a cornerstone of our cultural beliefs of sexual relationships, with its enforcement rooted in the social mores of heterosexual romance and marriage, is more of a gendered institution than a classed one (rather, it is classed because it is gendered). The queer community has often been at the forefront of challenging dominant understandings of gender and sexuality. As a group that faces social ostracism, there is a rich history within queer communities of forming relationships and families in creative and subversive ways.

Five queer polyamorous women agreed to be interviewed in-depth about their lives, opinions and experiences. As a philosophy and practice that contradicts the dominant understanding of relationships, polyamory is a belief system that is achieved. The dominant definitions of relationships, family and community are a foundation of current Western social organization and deserve scrutiny and analysis. The situated knowledge of queer polyamorous women can provide an alternative insight into these philosophies and definitions. In addition to being women in a patriarchal society, the participants are queer within a heterosexist society and non-monogamous within a culture that strictly enforces a monogamous relationship norm. I was interested to speak to
women who have achieved an alternative relationship philosophy. I wanted to gain insight into their ideas and politics and to see whether and how their views and experiences offered alternatives to dominant institutions and traditions that guide our views on relationships, family and community.

**Methods**

*Participant Recruitment*

This thesis began as a smaller project for a research class by Professor Bonnie Burstow and it was through this class that I passed the ethical review process and began my first round of interviewing. The criteria to participate in this study was to be a self-identified queer polyamorous woman over 18 years of age and available to meet, in person, for an individual interview. In the recruitment flyer (Appendix A), I did not explicitly ask for women who saw their polyamory as transformative or in any way related to feminism. I did this because I was interested in seeing what themes would emerge naturally from the women without any prompting from the invitation to participate. Originally, I thought that the transformative potential of polyamory would be one of many aspects of this experience my thesis would explore. However, the wealth of interesting data on polyamory as a transgressive practice has enabled me to focus on this aspect alone.

The participants in this study were recruited in two ways. In the first stage of interviewing, I contacted Andrea Zanin, an educator in non-monogamy, and asked her to post my recruitment flyer digitally. I believed that this would increase the likelihood of reaching potential participants who were reflective of their practice of polyamory. Andrea agreed to post my flyer and also became the first participant in this research. Three of the
five participants (including Andrea) were recruited using this snowball method. Several months later when I was looking to interview more participants, I posted my flyer digitally on the website reddit.com, specifically in the polyamory sub-reddit. My last two participants were recruited through reddit.com and I included the first two women who replied to the invitation who I could schedule in-person interviews with.

I did not know any of the participants prior to this research and did not ask them about their personal lives, philosophies or relationship situations before selecting them for an interview.

When a potential participant replied to my flyer through the e-mail address provided, I responded with an introduction letter explaining the intentions of the study as well as the criteria for participation. I also attached the information and consent form (Appendix B) they would be asked to sign if they chose to participate. If the respondent fit the criteria and was still interested in participating, an in-person interview was arranged.

Data Collection

The participants were interviewed in an informal style. I asked each participant a few broad, open-ended questions with the intention of allowing space and flexibility for the interview to be shaped by the womens’ priorities. The areas covered included participants’ daily lives, challenges, relationships, and ideology (the full list of questions can be found in Appendix C). I asked probing questions whenever I felt it necessary to either clarify what the interviewee meant or to explore something unexpected. I invited the participants to ask me questions throughout the interview and provided space for participants to add anything to the discussion that they felt hadn’t been addressed.
Whenever appropriate, I encouraged participants to share their thoughts on what they would focus on if they were researching this topic. After each interview, I provided the participant with a copy of their transcript and invited them to make changes and provide feedback. Two of the women provided feedback – one in the form of minor corrections to the transcript and the other by following up with several thoughts and resources.

In general, the order of topics in the questionnaire in Appendix C was followed in each interview. At times, however, a theme came up in a different order and the natural flow was followed. Each interview took between 1-2 hours to complete. After each interview, I reflected on the interview and modified the questions and their order as seemed fit.

I interviewed all the participants once at OISE in a quiet space that was agreed upon by both parties. In addition a second interview with Andrea took place in her home. To avoid distractions, the participant and the researcher were in a private area and all electronic devices were turned to silent. To enhance comfort, snacks and drinks were provided. In order for the interviews to maintain a natural flow, minimal notes were taken. Notes taken include non-verbal information, new questions that came up, and new insights/understandings that arose during an interview. An iPad was used to record the interviews. A pen and paper were used to take notes.

Locating Myself in the Research Project

As an able-bodied 30 year old, white graduate student from an immigrant middle-class background, I tried to be cognizant of my social location and how this interacted with the social location of the participants in this study, which was largely similar in these respects. As a queer polyamorous woman myself, I also shared this important
commitment/practice with them. My shared status and practice with participants probably enriched the data collected and allowed me to carry out this study with a personal understanding of the topic. In many ways, my insider status allowed me to explore unexpected answers and ask relevant probing questions. On the other hand, I had to be consistently mindful to be guided by the topics and themes that arose in the interviews and not allow my own interests and views to determine these.

**Analysis**

Because I did not originally focus the interviews on participants’ philosophies of poly, I have data on many other aspects of the women’s practice of poly including many challenges, struggles and difficult times; relationship conflicts and break-ups; difficulties in finding housing; and in living in a homophobic, hierarchical and oppressive society that doesn’t know how to see multiple relationships as valid are some examples. However, personal/political data connecting sexual relationships with larger political, social and economic themes was brought up so consciously and extensively by all the participants that I have chosen to focus solely on the counter-hegemonic aspect of their practice and philosophy which is the basis of my own interest in polyamory. There is some danger in focusing only on the participants’ analytical and aspirational thinking as they might be misread as simplistic and pollyannaish. The data reported here does not fully reflect their complex engagement with the challenges and difficulties of this life choice.

The analysis process consisted of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts multiple times. Some aspects of Grounded Theory were used during coding, as the data was coded partly using Thematic Analysis. Data was also coded based on the saliency of
topics as well as the researcher’s interests. Over time, different themes and points of focus for this research emerged including very deep connections between the participants’ personal lives and political consciousness, fostered and enabled by queer and feminist collective contexts that all the women acknowledged and valued.

The participants described their practice of polyamory as a philosophy or personal ideology which is much broader than an approach to sexual relationships alone. The women all attempted to use polyamory as a tool to structure their relationships congruently with their commitment to personal growth. Participants often spoke of queer communities and feminist thought as an access point to non-monogamous opportunities. Participants identified several different models, or ways of doing polyamory – a non-transformative couple-centered approach; a narrowly ideological political approach and the political and growth-centered approach which they all identified with.

One participant, Andrea, was interviewed twice and is featured in the findings and analysis section more prominently than the other participants. This is because Andrea’s views are very much in sync with other participants’ views; and as an educator in non-monogamy, her philosophical and political comments were particularly articulate and lengthy.

**Ethical Considerations**

My primary ethical consideration revolved around creating a safe, respectful space for participants and trying not to trigger painful or traumatic memories for them. Due to the nature of the subject matter, themes of coming out to friends and family, past relationships and personal struggles often emerged. My aim was to respect the participants’ comfort level around what they wanted to share about themselves and I
attempted to do this by asking broad questions that allowed them to lead the discussion and decide what to contribute to it. I also refrained from deeply probing anything that came up that seemed highly personal.

Another ethical consideration was for the privacy of the participants. Since only one participant decided not to be anonymous and the community of queer polyamorous women can be a small one, I had some concerns about being able to fully protect the privacy of the participants. I have tried to do this by not including geographical information as well as omitting any quotes or biographical information that could make them recognizable. While I didn’t change any details about participants aside from their names, I left out information where I thought it might make them identifiable.

I was also concerned to minimize any potential inequality between the participants and myself as the researcher. I tried to do this by interviewing in a conversational way and sharing information about myself where it seemed relevant to the discussion.

All of the participants interviewed self-identified as women, queer and polyamorous. All participants were recruited from the Toronto area, and all had or were in the process of obtaining post-secondary education. All but one were white; and their ages ranged between 20-40 years. I did not collect any formal demographic data about participants and the women volunteered information about their backgrounds and identities as they wished. The information presented about participants in the brief biographies below is representative of them at the time of the interview and may since have changed.
Limitations

There are several important ways that this research could be expanded and improved upon in the future. The most obvious limitation is the small sample size, dictated by the necessarily restricted time and scope of Masters research. Another limitation is the lack of diversity in the sample used. Four out of the five women interviewed were white, four were able-bodied, they were all between the ages of 20-40, and they all held or were in the process of obtaining post-secondary education. I did not specifically call for diverse participants and did not use the opportunity of a second call through reddit.com to expand the sample. More diverse participants would have added to the richness and interest of the data. However, with such a small sample size, even with more diversity, the study would still be able to claim only to identify themes of significance for future research to explore.

Participant Profiles

Andrea Zanin

Andrea is the only participant who chose to not be anonymous. She is a PhD student, as well as a freelance educator, translator and writer. Andrea lives with her poly family – not all the members of her family are romantically involved with one another but they live communally, share resources and define themselves as family. Andrea has been practicing polyamory for over a decade and is in two long-term relationships. In the way that Andrea understands and practices polyamory, she and her partners are all free to form new relationships wherever their interests take them.
Chloe

Chloe works in training and development and has also been practicing polyamory for more than a decade. Throughout that time, she has been with the same partner, a trans man, who she lives with and is legally married to. She and her partner are both open to relationships outside of their own. Her partner dates more frequently yet doesn’t often form long-term relationships. Chloe dates outside of her primary partner less frequently and forms deeper and longer-term relationships when she does.

Erin

Erin is a graduate student who has been practicing polyamory for about four years. She has three partners – two of whom are long-term and one that she had started dating recently at the time of our interview. She dates both men and women, as long as they are queer. During the school year, Erin lives in a different city from her partners and her relationships become long-distance. In the summer, she primarily lives with one of her partners.

Jenn

Jenn works in the publishing industry and has been practicing polyamory for several years. She dates both men and women and is recently divorced from her wife, a relationship that was not polyamorous. Before adopting polyamory as a practice in her own life, Jenn spent several years learning about and becoming more comfortable with poly.
Nina

Nina is the youngest participant in this study and has been practicing poly for only a year. She is a student and lives with her birth family, although she often stays with friends and partners. Nina dates both men and women and has one long-term male partner. She and her partner both regularly date outside of their relationship.
PART TWO – FINDINGS

Chapter 3: Overview

I found that for the participants, polyamory serves as a deep and meaningful philosophy that is congruent with alternative definitions of relationships, family and community. For all, this is both personal and political in terms of adopting a practice into their lives that transgresses certain social mores. While the women enjoy the personal freedom and intimacy they experience through their practice of polyamory, their philosophies are collective and are experienced as inseparable from their feminism and the diverse queer community. In the context of neoliberal patriarchy, these women are trying to structure their lives and relationships in ways that are inherently counter-hegemonic through challenging the dominant definitions of relationships, family and community.

The practice of polyamory for all of the participants in this study is guided by their desire and search for a deep alternative to the ways of relating generally prescribed today. All the participants expressed well-developed critiques of dominant relationship forms and articulate visions of alternative forms. Chapter 4, ‘Critique’, will present participants’ assessments of current patriarchal society and their sense of the limitations of dominant relationship models as artificial, restrictive and contradictory. Chapter 5, ‘Vision’, will look at the ways these participants attempt to practice polyamory as a deep alternative to the limitations they report in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Critique

Participants spoke often about Western society’s current forms of relationship, family and community. Themes of feeling limited and confused by these were common in the data. Furthermore, the participants felt a lack of fit with the rigid conceptualizations of relationships, family and to a lesser extent, community, which highlighted to them the ways that their values differ from the values underlying dominant society. While the participants articulated this philosophy to varying degrees, it informed all of the women’s responses. All the women in this study also spoke about their frustration with how polyamory is often practiced in both heterosexual and queer contexts in ways that fail to challenge the prevalent culture and institutions.

Dominant Definitions are Limiting and Artificial

Participants in this study noted that prescribed ways of relating are socially constructed and enforced and often fail to reflect the organic connections that form naturally between people. Social expectations, the dominant conceptualizations of relationships, and pop culture were commented on in this regard.

As queer polyamorous women, the participants stand outside of a lot of deeply internalized social expectations that come with the conventions of sexuality and relationships. In the quote below, Andrea remembers being informed by her father of the rules and expectations around sexual exploration when she was an adolescent. She says:

It was this moment of being in no uncertain terms told that I was expected to wait until marriage – which meant I had to be heterosexual, get married and then have sex – and that made me go ‘wow, is that what I want?’ … It was such a conviction the way my father expressed it. He was so
convinced that this is how it had to be and he was saying it as though it were an obvious thing, as though I was supposed to already know that. As though I was most certainly on board or else and I was just like wow, ‘I’ve got to think about that’ and it was a shift for me in my sort of happy-go-lucky, assuming that this fun thing would happen, to wow, ‘there’s actually these big rules about this that I will have to choose to break or not’. Again, it was the recognition that there were rules around me that I hadn’t really been 100% aware of.

It can be difficult to remember where our knowledge or expectations around relationships and sexuality were formed but as illustrated by Andrea above, we are not born with this knowledge. Andrea continues, speaking to her early realizations about her sexuality:

For me the narrative was I’m attracted to people of a variety of genders and realizing over the course of my childhood and early adolescence that I had to be very careful about only disclosing to the world some of those because … should I disclose [all of] them, [it] would create a situation of un-safety for me. So it wasn’t that I didn’t know I was attracted to women, it’s that I had to be really careful about how I expressed that. … So my experience of coming out was an experience of not figuring myself out but figuring out where the lines were in the world around me and how to keep myself safe as best I could.

What Andrea expresses here is not the classic coming out story of suddenly or gradually realizing she was queer, but rather an experience of knowing who she was but needing to learn the cultural and social rules around her in order to stay safe. Similarly, recognizing that there are social expectations that she is breaking, Chloe relates her dilemma of whether or not to come out at work:

I feel like we encounter the political barriers in terms of how some folks view the norms and acceptable boundaries of relationships and how what we do might buck up against what they accept because that determines who we’re out to. There’s a couple of co-workers of mine who I know have strongly identified Christian values and I mean, I try not to make those assumptions but when I know someone has strong Christian values, I tend to go on the defensive in thinking that they might not be queer friendly, they might not be poly friendly; they might sort of lump that [with] our weird overly hyper-sexual lifestyle and demoralize our sexual beliefs and practices.
Both Chloe and Andrea realize that their identities and relationships do not fit the dominant socially prescribed roles they are supposed to have and that this lack of fit could potentially have material negative consequences in their lives.

**Pop Culture**

Although the impact of popular culture is often minimized, three women stress its role, particularly through romantic comedies, in shaping and propagating relationship norms and social expectations. Speaking about her perceptions of mainstream society’s understanding of relationships as related to pop culture, Nina says:

I can’t watch romantic comedies anymore … they’re just extremely hetero-normative. Whenever the protagonist has to choose between two interests I’m like no! … And then you’re going to have to go on two dates at the same time, and go back between both of them simultaneously and shenanigans will occur. … The entire relationship escalator sort of thing where you can only go this one way and if you’re not going up, you just have to fall off and then you have to start over again from the bottom; which is really unfortunate because you can totally pursue relationships from any stage, at any time. It’s also a really big deal that I don’t believe that one person can fulfill all of your needs.

Relating this hetero-normative standard to the dominant vision of relationships, Chloe elaborates:

In general the cultural norm is monogamy so I feel like there’s many ways in which we’re constantly running up against those expectations and those boundaries and those cultural myths. If I was to do a research project on poly, I would look at film representations and cultural representations of poly and it’s sort of like no wonder people see monogamy as the only option when it seems like virtually every cultural representation of relationships takes that as the norm and takes the third person as the downfall of the relationship. How many romantic comedies gone awry is that the story structure, where the relationship gets interrupted by this new person and all of a sudden that automatically means that everyone’s lives are going to be hell for the next 20 minutes of the film? … [The third person is] ripping apart the relationship and you don’t love me anymore and am I not satisfying you and it’s like why? These don’t have to be the conversations.
Both Chloe and Nina reference romantic comedies as a powerful force within Western society and speak of the influence of the rigid relationship ideals they encourage. On the subject of dominant (previously-heterosexual) romantic relationship ideals that are becoming more prevalent in the queer community, Andrea says:

You take that thing and you make it a romantic ideal, like you load all of this emotional significance onto it, well of course people are going to want that thing. It’s very powerful. It’s a place to belong; it’s a place to make a family. It’s a place to feel like you’re safe for the rest of your life and someone thinks you’re awesome always, and I mean the real life lived experience of that for most people is not that at all. It’s not forever. We know that it’s not forever but there’s this really persistent dream that it could be and that it should be and that if you just do it right it will be, and there’s a lot of energy invested in the romance of that and people get really caught up in that kind of story. And I’m not the least bit surprised that queers get caught up in it too. It’s a really powerful story.

When considering the romance myth in relation to the fight for gay marriage, it’s clear that the nuclear relationship model is shaping this community’s fight for equality.

**Contradictory Expectations of Nuclear Monogamy: Ideals versus Reality**

A prominent theme that emerged during interviews concerns the contradictory expectations inherent within the mainstream understandings of relationships. Participants spoke about feeling confused and restricted by the rules of monogamous relationships.

Talking about why she finds monogamous relationships undesirable, Erin says:

I’ve always felt kind of restricted in monogamous relationships, … I didn’t really feel the same need to police who my partners spend time with. … I think if you take jealousy out of the equation, monogamy is less appealing.

It’s important to dig deeper into the conflict that participants experienced in attempting to live up to the rigid expectations of relationships. Above, Erin discusses feeling restricted;
here, Andrea describes her difficulty figuring out how to fit into a rigid monogamous relationship:

I just always found it so puzzling when I was trying to do monogamy because I wanted to do it right. I didn’t want to hurt anybody, I didn’t want to break any rules, but it was really hard to figure out what the fucking rules were. Every person thought everybody else already had all of the same rules in their head but everybody has different ones and nobody’s used to articulating them so I would ask questions. … So trying to figure out how to be respectful of a monogamous arrangement was always vastly more difficult for me.

Pointing out some of the reasons why it’s so challenging to figure out the relationship rules and expectations, Andrea continues:

The monogamy rules just didn’t make sense. … It’s a really mixed message. There’s the message that you’re supposed to be 100% honest with your partner. That’s the baseline. But you’re also supposed to not have feelings for anyone else. So what happens when those two things intersect? And so it’s a mixed sort of structural encouragement to lie in monogamy .. and depending on how you do your monogamy there might be room for that but then you get into these questions of what counts. So does porn count or not? For some people masturbation is a boundary. … What about strippers? What about hiring a sex worker? If you’re not emotionally engaged and it’s a .. financial transaction. What about holding hands with somebody if you’re not attracted to them? What about not touching somebody but being wicked attracted to them? Where is that line and everybody has a different one.

The disjuncture between the ideals of prescribed relationships, marriage and family and their lived reality came up to varying degrees in all of the interviews, often in relation to the participants’ own birth family or past relationships. Below, Jenn talks about her relationship with her ex-wife, a relationship that was not polyamorous, and explores some of her recent realizations about her role in that relationship:

I gave a lot of my energy to her over the years we were together and over the last months I’ve been realizing I gave so much to her and I basically put my own life on hold. And now we’re separating amicably and I’m
actually in a really amazing space because I’m like holy shit, I get to do all this stuff [now].

While social institutions (including laws, social conventions and pop culture) work together to enforce the dominant relationship norms, these ideals are far from reality for many people who are attempting them. Exploring the unreality of the assumption that people only love one person at a time, Andrea says:

To me it feels like, obviously for instance, I am not going to decide that you can’t go fall in love with somebody because when did you last choose to fall in love with anybody? When did that ever happen? Have you ever chosen? I’ve never chosen. It’s not a thing you choose, right, it happens. You’re not in control of it. It doesn’t have to do necessarily with how much time you spend with someone or whether you’ve had sex with them. You can be completely head over heels with someone and in love with somebody that you barely know. Or I mean whether you want to call that crushed out or real love or whatever terminology you want to use. You can have very strong feelings.

What Andrea describes above points to the unrealistic expectations of current relationship rules under which these types of conflict (i.e. falling in love with more than one person) are not supposed to happen. So, when these conflicts or others do emerge, individuals are not prepared and rarely possess the communication skills to deal with the situation.

**The Underlying Values of Dominant Definitions**

A major limitation of recognizing only monogamous relationships is that all romantic relationships are supposed to follow the same formula. In previous sections, we explored the ways that the participants find this formula limiting, artificial and contradictory. But the disconnect participants experience between relationship, marriage and family ideals and reality goes beyond their individual difficulties with unrealistic roles. There is a disconnect, for them, as well from the values underlying these
relationships. It also demonstrates the value that is placed on the importance of
relationships and nuclear family while dismissing the importance of the role of
community – an individualistic value reflective of larger economic and political
institutions.

We often learn and internalize our beliefs around love and romance during
childhood and adolescence. However, it’s not common to explore what tenets really lie
behind the beliefs we develop. Below, Andrea reflects on dating in her adolescence:

I started dating when I was probably about 12. I was pretty young and I
remember often seeing the relationships I would get into as having expiry
dates, and it was like the expiry date happens when the person starts
becoming an obstacle to me doing something else, whatever the
something else might be. And yes, it might be another person but it
wasn’t necessarily that, and I was never a cheater. I know for a lot of
people they end up non-monogamous because they were bad at
monogamy because they cheated, that’s the story you hear sometimes and
that was never actually the case with me. I never cheated on people but I
would notice myself wanting to and choosing not to because of ethics,
because I had principles, and wishing that a relationship didn’t have to be
a barrier to exploring other things. Like wanting to go, have fun with
someone else, and come home and tell my partner about it and talk about
that and have that be something that was I don’t know, a turn on, or just
like sharing in whatever way.

Although Andrea speaks of feeling restricted by the monogamous aspect of these
relationships, the deeper question is why a romantic relationship should preclude honesty,
growth and exploration. In practice, the structural encouragement to lie within the
prescribed relationship form reflects the value of adherence to norms over negotiation of
individual boundaries. Erin comments on the same issue, a barrier she faced in her last
monogamous relationship:

That [relationship] pushed me further towards poly because it was a very
restrictive relationship and I felt very resentful of him by the end of it. I
really resented not being able to do the things I wanted to do and there were multiple occasions where I had opportunities and I would just be like no, I can’t, because I’m a hugely moral person and I’m in this relationship. And I would remove myself from these situations. … I guess I’d suppressed a lot for the sake of our relationship so I felt really free when I got out of it and that was the last monogamous relationship I had.

Interestingly, it was Erin and Andrea’s unwillingness to live dishonestly within monogamy that pushed them to explore and adopt a polyamorous alternative.

**The Personal Is Political (and Gendered)**

The critique of monogamy, however, is not its only restriction on relationships. Below, Jenn discusses the connection between falling into pre-defined roles within relationships and the bigger institutions that underpin social convention:

The state supports certain types of relationships and gives benefits to certain types of relationships in very practical ways. It privileges certain types of relationships over others and it’s keeping us in certain ways of interacting or behavioural patterns. It gets down to a psychological level too of what’s ok for people and what’s outside of the norm and what’s like oh my god, I can’t handle that.

Here, Jenn raises the point that only certain forms of relationship receive economic, political and social privilege within Western society. Chloe connects this to the fact that these are forms that both support and reflect the gender inequality at the heart of our society:

[T]he role of women in our society is to be the caregiver and to be the mother and that dynamic in romantic relationships, it makes me gag. Unfortunately I think within … hetero relationships between people who aren’t used to breaking down the gendered roles and structures of relationships … it can be easier to fall into the dominant patterns that our society thinks are ok. And that includes the gendered ways that people relate to each other and that it’s a woman’s responsibility to take care of the emotional needs of everyone in the household. And it’s fucked up. Women are expected to be good communicators and men aren’t.
The gendered and prescribed roles and paradoxical rules within these relationships can leave those in them feeling confused and disillusioned by some of their deeply held relationship ideals. The participants felt that fitting people into boxes is not an organic way to allow a relationship to develop. In various ways, all spoke about feeling disconnected from the pre-determined and conflicting expectations they struggled with when trying to fit into the prevailing notion of relationships – with monogamy being only one facet of this non-fit. Relating gender roles to deeper inequality within Western institutions, Jenn says:

Even just coming back to the simplistic notions around connecting monogamy and hetero-normativity with patriarchy and how those structures reinforce each other. And division of household labour and gender binary boxes of things and placing people into them.

The connections between the strict yet abstract elements of what a relationship is supposed to be and the stereotypes about gender that are propagated in this form of relationship becomes evident when breaking down these constructs. These unequal elements of a relationship are continued, if not intensified, when expanding a relationship into the dominant definition of nuclear family.

**Non-Radical Non-Monogamy**

Although monogamy is still socially prescribed, different forms of non-monogamy are beginning to enter the dialogue. Every participant spoke critically about polynormativity – a hierarchical and couple-centered approach to polyamory that leaves the nuclear model intact except for the element of monogamy. In this form of polyamory, there is often a pre-existing formerly monogamous couple who remain primary partners, with each member being allowed to take one or more secondary partners. While each
couple can create rules and boundaries around how to open their relationship, in general, primary partners are privileged over secondaries and often have rules dictating what can and cannot happen outside of the primary relationship. Discussing this phenomenon, Andrea says:

There’s a lot of heterosexual non-monogamy that’s very embedded in the narrative of monogamy and just recently cranking it open just enough to do something slightly different but without doing a profound value shift.

Describing her experiences of interacting with couples practicing polynormativity, Nina says:

The entire primary/secondary thing is not a fun time when it’s prescriptive. You can’t really control your emotions and if [falling in love] happens. I also find it very odd that a lot of times primaries have veto power over secondaries which, you can’t do that; secondaries are people too. This is a relationship, it’s kind of independent from yours and why should a person not in that relationship have say over how it goes? That sort of thing irks me. … A lot of couples, when they date they will check back, it’s like I don’t know if my partner will be ok with this, I’ve got to check back on that, and it just makes you feel very secondary and not in a good way.

People who date as couples bother me a little bit just because they’re like a single organism, like a single unit. It’s like I’m not dating both of you, I’d like to know you guys as people on your own.

Erin echoes this sentiment and speaks to the ways that the polynormative model disenfranchises people:

I don’t really believe in the primary/secondary distinction that a lot of people who practice poly use to manage their relationships. … I think it’s crass. And I feel like the third person in that relationship is being disenchanted or treated as a means I suppose. They’re not being respected as a full agent and I feel like that’s really un-egalitarian and unfair to accept someone into your life without giving them; well basically telling them that there’s a trump card that takes precedence over their own feelings and decisions. I just find it really crass; it’s really common.
Chloe elaborates, explaining why she believes relationships shouldn’t be restrictive, but rather need room to grow and develop naturally. She says:

A hierarchy like that feels like a known structure and it’s like, we’re defining what everyone’s roles are and how they’re related to each other and I don’t think you can do that with the heart, and things aren’t static. So [my partner] and I are totally, like, we own a house together, we have become legally married, we are planning on having children together. But we don’t think we’re necessarily forever or that the arrangement that we have right now is necessarily forever. We’re totally open to the idea that one of us might meet someone else and fall totally in love with them and our situation might shift, and might change because that’s how people love. People are not static. People individually grow and change, and relationships grow and change and if they don’t then they’re not healthy. … because people are constantly growing and changing and learning more about themselves.

The observations and opinions expressed by the participants in regards to prescribed relationship models and to polynormativity point to a deep rejection of both these models and the institutions they uphold. For the women in this study, many of the alternative conceptualizations of relationships that exist are limited. Discussing polynormativity and its relation to the mainstream notions of relationships, Andrea says:

I think we have this idea in our heads a lot especially in Western society around hierarchies, that there’s supposed to be a person that you devote most of your time and most of your energy to and then other people that you devote less of it to and that kind of thing is very tiered based on status. … I think there’s a lot of our cultural baggage that tells us that we are supposed to prioritize people based on a certain status. Like they have the status of partner and that comes with this list of things … and then other people are seen as less important or less, they don’t have a certain status so they’re not entitled to the same things or what have you, and it’s a kind of polyamory that doesn’t speak to me. Some people do it that way and it really doesn’t speak to me because I’m more interested in things being a little less rigid than that. I mean it’s a mindset that is essentially relatively monogamous and then some people apply that same mindset to how they do poly whereas for me it’s a completely different mindset. I think for me it’s .. the idea that everybody who is affected by a given situation should have some input into how that situation goes as opposed to like ‘well,
clearly my partner and I are going to have more input into this situation because we’re partners’.

These statements are poignant in recognizing that when they break with monogamy but not its individualistic and patriarchal aspects, polynormative relationships end up reproducing the hierarchies and inequality that the participants are seeking to change.

Another and very different approach to polyamory rejected by all the participants is its militant political prescription often found in queer communities. Speaking about this form of political poly, Chloe says:

Within the queer community I feel like there’s more of an acceptance of poly and at times too much of an expectance of poly. … Especially when I was in university … the ‘we’re hip and progressive and politically active and really queer and really feminist.’ There was almost an expectation to be poly and there was this unfortunate view of poly as the more evolved way to be involved in relationships. … It’s almost as though there’s something wrong with you if you couldn’t get on board with being poly. I witnessed around me almost a dangerous assumption of polyamory that if you were flirting and getting to know and kind of hooking up with someone that you would assume it would also be ok, at the same event or at a different event, to be flirty and getting involved with someone else. … It’s like people who think they can do poly without being honest and without knowing how they’re feeling and how to communicate. … That doesn’t seem healthy for any relationship and poly feels like just a little bit more work.

Andrea also talks about this approach to polyamory that doesn’t incorporate the concrete skills necessary to build meaningful relationships:

Here’s where I see a lot of people, particularly young folks and particularly with radical politics who will do non-monogamy for an ideological reason, … as a matter of principle but without having the skills or resources or self-knowledge to back it up. … When you’re 19 or 20 and really ideologically committed to non-monogamy as a feminist practice or as a radical practice but you don’t know how to talk about your feelings, you’re going to fuck it up and you’re going to hurt people and that’s not especially radical.
These women felt strongly that choosing polyamory alone does not necessarily challenge the status quo. Practicing poly in a way that leaves out the personal or the political runs the risk of hurting people by strictly adhering to a political orthodoxy, or else reproducing the status quo, as reflected in polynormativity.
Chapter 5: Vision

The women’s powerful critiques of normative relationship ideals and practice are accompanied by articulations of the alternatives and visions that inform their own practice of polyamory. In their interviews, participants all shared the difficulties and pains of practicing polyamory, including the challenges of structural and institutional barriers and personal limitations and weaknesses that make this far from an easy road or simple solution to the limits of nuclear monogamy. However, for the purposes of this Chapter, quotations have been selected that throw most light on participants’ highest aspirations for their practice of polyamory.

Alternative Poly Ideology and Practice

In contrast to the monogamous relationship ideals they perceived to be limiting, contradictory and undesirable, the women in this study report that they find their practice of polyamory allows autonomy and trust in their lives and relationships which supports their growth. Although this can often be difficult as it requires examining challenges to move beyond them, participants find this struggle worthwhile for the growth they experience in their lives as a result. Talking about her past struggles in monogamous relationships and her hopes for adopting a polyamorous structure, Jenn says:

I’ve had a number of relationships where certain problems kept coming up and I search for people … or I quote on quote click with people [in an unhealthy way] and … I facilitate this in them and vice versa. I think exploring polyamory has actually been a journey … because I know that I tend to mother my partners, and try to be everything for them. I think it’s been a really good checkpoint … with me taking the time for introspection now as the separation is happening, and getting involved with other people that I’m like ok I really have to take care not to mother this person because I end up feeling shafted. … So it’s enacting those behaviours and recognizing they’re problematic but still catching myself doing them
repeatedly. So I think in having multiple partners I’m hopeful that this will teach me, or allow me to use the insight that I’ve been gaining … [so] that I can start to enact those boundaries and recognize where I should end and where somebody else has their own shit to deal with and it’s not mine.

Andrea, who has been practicing poly for over a decade, describes the freedom she feels through this practice:

I don’t ever see my partner as a wall between me and something else I want, whether it’s to engage with another person, or to pursue a passion, or take a trip, or whatever. There’s a real freedom within the way that we understand polyamory too. It’s kind of like we all want for each other to grow and be, and if the price of that is that one day we leave each other behind, ok. Because I don’t want to keep one of them with me and they don’t want to keep me with them if the price of that is stunting each other in some way. And so that sense of beautiful powerful freedom means that of course I want to bring them with me, or I want to go with them. … That’s not intrinsic to poly but it is intrinsic to how we do poly and so it feels like one and the same to me. So I guess what I mean is I don’t think that everybody who’s doing poly feels this way or has this sort of encouragement vs. fear kind of structure. .. But by the same token, I don’t know, I want my partners to grow and do things and it makes room for an enormous amount of creativity. Like how we do things in order to best let each other go and then follow each other to go have fun with each other.

Participants often talked about polyamory as a means through which they can genuinely engage with and respect themselves and the important people in their lives. For all these women, the practice of polyamory is conscious, thoughtful and active. Erin reflects on why she values having a polyamorous structure in her relationships:

I feel like a lot of relationships are possessive and polyamory is basically the least possessive one that you can practice in a relationship and the way you can respect the people you’re with to the fullest extent and to trust them to the fullest extent as well. … There isn’t a clear boundary in polyamory between partner and friend sometimes, if things are going really well.

Below, Jenn talks about her approach to polyamory and the emphasis she places on honest communication in her relationships:
Another part of polyamory for me is being honest that people aren’t perfect and that people can fuck up and that’s what communication is there for and it’s not for blaming and it’s not for taking on the world. It’s for having those conversations and for admitting your feelings and where you’re at and I think I’m searching for people who are willing to have those conversations. … I guess I’m looking for people who want to approach polyamory with that lens because that’s how I’m approaching it.

What Jenn describes, a sentiment echoed by all of the participants, is the need for open and honest communication within any relationship. While open and honest communication is an important principle in mainstream conceptualizations of monogamous relationships, the requirement that couples fit into rigidly pre-defined roles and expectations can make honesty difficult when it would mean being inconsistent with these. The participants in this study all value honest communication, even if it leads to difficulties or break-ups. Nina says:

I emphasize communication and honesty because that’s how you maintain a relationship. There’s no point in keeping lies, keeping secrets from each other; you have emotions, you want to discuss them, you kind of want to bring them up rather than bottle them in. … Even in my first relationship, even as a couple, we still told each other when we were attracted to other people. It wasn’t a big deal but we never pursued it because the idea of polyamory wasn’t there at the time.

Recognizing that polyamory as a philosophy is at times difficult to realize within relationships, participants all agree that strong relationships are best achieved from within rather than by creating rules and restrictions. As Andrea phrases this:

Some people blame poly for a relationship crumbling, and my argument is that if there’s a weakness in that relationship and poly comes along and basically puts weight on the weakness then yes, absolutely. But that’s not because poly did it, it’s because there was a weakness underneath and whatever the stressor could’ve been would’ve pushed on the same thing. So whether it’s opening up your relationship or all of a sudden having your parents come and move in with you because they’re both really sick, or your kid gets hit by a car, or you have a major job loss or career change, like anything that sort of comes in and puts pressure on the relationship
then whatever the weak spot is [feels it]. So to me, the best way to ensure that you stay together is not to create a bunch of rules around what can happen outside you, right, it’s to work on all the weak spots. Go looking for them.

The women in this study all found a polyamorous approach to life better equipped to handle honest communication about difficult issues in relationships. The participants practice polyamory in different ways yet each spoke of the ways it has helped them overcome the frustrations they experienced under the dominant relationship expectations. Two participants drew diagrams to illustrate the complex and intricate relationships that they and their partners are involved in. The one I kept can be found in Appendix D. The strategies around such practicalities of poly relationships as scheduling ranged from a communal online calendar where all parties could keep track of their plans and book time together, to a set schedule with date nights and trips planned well in advance. Despite the differences in approach, the participants all agreed that flexibility and compassion is an important trait in poly relationships and that even when there are pre-existing plans, people’s needs must come first. All of the participants spoke about valuing diverse organic connections with others and wanting their partners to enjoy this as well. Talking about using her partners as a form of support during difficulties, Nina says:

It’s so nice because your feelings are always legitimate and you get to discuss it in a legitimate way instead of ‘well why are you feeling jealous, you shouldn’t be feeling jealous, we’re in an open relationship’ sort of thing. It’s like ‘I understand, how can I make you feel better about it?’ That always reinforces that this relationship is fantastic and your relationship with other people is also great.

In this quote, Nina is saying that although she still faces struggles in her relationships, the way that these challenges are dealt with can reinforce the strength of her relationships and legitimize her feelings in a way that is not possible when communication about painful
issues is avoided. Describing the depth of what a polyamorous philosophy and practice means in her life, Chloe says:

Being polyamorous means to me personally the ability to follow my heart quite literally. The ability and the freedom; the space within a relationship to be able to form intimate connections wherever life draws me to people. The ability to engage in those relationships without set boundaries about what kind of intimacy can be created and what kind of relationship can happen with someone because as much as humans try to predict those kinds of matters, you can’t anticipate how a friendship might become something more intense and where your attractions might fall. … I think it’s an attitude I adopt now toward poly where my partner talks about [the] heart and your ability to feel and connect as not a finite thing. It … can often be a fear of folks who aren’t familiar with poly and how it works, that your heart is somehow a pie and if you give a piece to one person then everyone else is going to get less, or you can only piece it up so much, you know? To bust up that kind of model and say that our ability to connect with people is not finite and that the ways that we interact with people are not static. That relationships will flow and flux and what starts as one thing can shift to something else and one partner can become a friend, and a friend can become a partner, and someone can be a lover without being more of an intimate emotional relationship. And so that idea of the infinite nature of the ability to connect and to feel and to love I think is one that stands behind my view of polyamory.

Erin echoes Chloe’s sentiments, describing what setting her own boundaries in relationships and allowing them to form organically means to her:

I like to be able to have all of these different relationships that exist on their own terms independently of each other and I get to make my own decisions just on the basis of my desires and my feelings and I love the people I’m with and I trust that they’re fine with that. If they ever weren’t fine with it, that would be ok too because we could be friends. I trust the people I’m with to be able to tell me if the way we’re being intimate doesn’t work for them or if it isn’t conducive to their happiness.

Here, Erin expresses the philosophy behind structuring her relationships in a way that is not possessive – even if that means that the relationship changes over time. Talking about her poly family, Andrea says:
So there is this unit and we understand ourselves as family. We have all these jokes about it, right, we are the failed daughters club, because two of us are trans men and two of us are anything but what our mothers had hoped we would be and we do meals, we share resources in various ways, … we divvy up the tasks, we live in this way and we very much understand ourselves as family.

In the quote above, Andrea relates her family dynamic to the way she has intentionally chosen to structure her life and relationships. In breaking with mainstream marriage and family norms, Andrea’s definition and practice of family has significantly expanded.

Although adopting a polyamorous approach or structure does not alone transgress social mores and conventions, these women practice poly with a deeper philosophy which allows them to attempt to move beyond the limits of current sanctioned ways of relating. The following section explores the poly philosophy of the participants and the intentional ways this shapes their practice of poly.

**Self-Awareness and Political Intentionality**

Participants’ lives and relationships varied significantly, yet several underlying similarities became clear. In the previous section, we explored the potential for freedom and self-determination the women experience through their practice of structuring their lives and relationships beyond prescribed norms. In this section, we consider the philosophy that shapes participants’ practice. For all of them this is broader than sex. They have core ethical beliefs which they strive to create and maintain in their lives and relationships. In addition to openness and honesty, the women who participated in this study spoke about forming diverse connections and allowing those connections to develop naturally – again, this is a general philosophy which is applied to all of the
participants’ relationships, not just sexual ones. Below, Erin speaks about the philosophy that informs her practice of poly, saying:

I feel like polyamory subverts so much about the traditional heteronormative relationship model that it’s really something that’s caused me to grow a lot as a feminist and a lot of polyamory is about treating people with respect and trusting other people and not needing to limit the behaviour of other people.

Erin was not alone in talking about the growth she experiences through her practice of poly transferring into other areas of her life. Below, Chloe relates her openness to change to her practice of poly:

It’s a beautiful openness to possibilities that I try to transfer to other areas of my life where the uncertainty and the unknown freaked me out. … Learning lessons about knowing yourself and communicating your needs and being comfortable with uncertainty and being comfortable approaching change, it can provide beautiful growth that can transfer well into other parts of your life.

Explaining polyamory as a broad approach to life and handling challenges, Andrea says:

If I know that one of my weaknesses is that I’m terribly insecure, for instance, it doesn’t matter if it’s in a relationship or at work or with my family or walking down the street. That insecurity is going to be in me and things are going to trigger it. So then work on the insecurity. … [Polyamory] shines a really big spotlight on whatever’s going wrong with an individual and then in how two individuals interact, for sure, no question about it. I’m not going to tell you that poly is an easy thing to do, it’s not necessarily. … So for those who have an appetite for actually going out and finding the shit that’s going wrong and excavating it and fixing it and healing, it’s great, this is one more place to do it. But you don’t need to be with someone or several someones in order to do that work. You can be working on your poly basically by becoming a healthier, happier, more secure person all the time, even if you’re single. And again, this is how poly is not per se a relationship thing; it plays out there.

Also speaking about her poly philosophy in conjuncture with her approach to life and challenges, Jenn says:
I love connecting with people in a way that is really passionate, like curious. I’m a very curious person and I love asking people about their lives and learning about them and sharing my experiences and having lots of dialogues. I feel like exploring polyamory helps feed that. But I think I’m also in the space … to connect with people in a way that is honest and upfront about communication, or upfront about that people can have feelings or be attracted to different people in different ways. I think that’s the way that I approach polyamory, because it does challenge mainstream notions of monogamy and we all know we’re attracted to so many people, in different ways too, and I think the emotional and mental piece is just as important as physical stuff for me. So the amor y part is really integral for me.

While the women all raised the importance of the physical aspects of the freedom they experience within polyamorous relationships, it was much broader than this for all of them. Describing the impact that relationships have in her life and the importance she places on this transformative growth, Erin says:

All really romantically intimate relationships are kind of transformative in a way. You learn about what people like and you take on some of their hobbies, you end up reading all of these new books, or they tell you about their experiences and you can kind of inhabit their perspectives or at least listen to their voices and hear things about what they’re experiencing. And I find the romantic relationship to be the relationship in which people open themselves up the most to other people. I’m sure there are really deep friendships where that happens but I find that in my life I tend to have a couple of very intimate relationships and then friendships that are not as intimate. I think people who have different lifestyles have a lot of really deep friendships as well. But those deep friendships tend to be romantic in my life I suppose so being able to have more than one of those relationships at once [is important]; I guess I feel like if I were monogamous then I would still be having this deep intimate transformative experience with one person and more subdued experiences with other people. … I feel like the romantic relationship for me is especially personal and transformative and I open up to people more … so being able to be in more relationships like that is really cool.

In various ways, participants describe the importance they place on allowing connections with others to form naturally and on being open to more and deeper connections in their lives. For some, this means the opportunity to participate in more
transformative relationships while for others it means having the space and flexibility to allow connections to form in varying and creative ways. Talking about balancing her long-term relationship and the new connections that she forms, Chloe says:


[Polyamory] has allowed me to not put those boundaries on my heart, to not be drawn to someone and then have to immediately say ‘oh but I can’t’. That’s where the idea of poly as giving space and flexibility, that description of polyamory resonates with me because I feel like polyamory gives me the opportunity to explore how I connect with other people, explore different possibilities with other people and different relationships. And there’s not a concern about getting too involved, there’s not a concern about falling for someone else as something that’s not allowed, and all the beauty that that entails. Just the beauty of absolute wonderful growth and opportunity and learning that comes from connecting with someone else, however you do that. … It goes way beyond sex. It goes way beyond lust and desire. It’s an ability to connect with people and all the wonder and growth that can come from that when there’s a space to connect.

Also speaking about the different types of relationships that can form when there’s space to connect, Jenn says:


It’s sort of a philosophy of loving and engaging with people that I think allows for both physical and emotional and mental, spiritual relationships with different people. And just recognizing that we can each bring out different things in each other and support different things in each other in different ways. The ways in which I click with person A might be different from the ways that I click with person B but we both get stuff out of it. We can enjoy those connections without having to put pressure on them to be one and all, everything; if you can’t meet all of my needs then we’re failures in some regard. I think it’s a respect, a way of being, of loving people that’s respectful of their capacities.

The women interviewed in this study are all deliberately creative in attempting to balance their relationships and resources to best suit their needs and wants. The theme of having partners that provide strong and positive friendships in their lives came up often. Below, Andrea describes the ways that communal living and resource distribution play out in her poly family and household:
It’s not like there’s some big philosophical guiding principle behind it, we just figure out what each person needs and see who can help meet it. It’s not like there’s a contract drawn up. If we have something we can afford to give and someone else needs it, then we give it and if we don’t, well, it’s nobody’s fault and if you need something and ask for it then maybe you’ll get it. Maybe I’m so close and embedded in it that I can’t .. articulate it for you but it doesn’t feel to me like a well articulated, politicized, revolutionary act. It’s just a bunch of people coming together for their own survival and caring for each other and I mean people have been doing that since the dawn of fucking time.

Although communal living and culture is nothing new to humans, striving to help meet everybody’s needs is a big philosophical guiding principle. Challenging the predominant social organization of coupling opens the door to challenge the prevailing definitions of family and community as well. Speaking about the role of choice in creating a family (or expanding its definition), Andrea continues:

It just re-affirms this idea of committing to an ideal. .. We’re family because we’ve decided we’re family … but that has concrete consequences; … things actually happen as a result of it. It’s not pie in the sky; it’s not made up except that it is made up. But that makes it real. Which sort of points to all the other stuff we do. We make it up and that makes it real, right, so there’s this creative potential that I find [my poly family] make[s] very concrete, like they’re absolutely real.

Because the dominant definitions of relationships and family receive so much social, political and economic privilege, it can be easy to forget that at their base, these are constructs – ideas, like any other, that materialize through our beliefs and actions. Alternative family formations can become a lived reality through challenging the dominant definitions and creating alternate structures.

While this thesis has focused on the ideals of these queer women’s holistic personal and political poly philosophy, polyamory is not an easy thing to do. Each participant spoke about difficulties and barriers they have faced in relation to being poly.
Many of the challenges participants spoke about had to do with living in a society that enforces nuclear monogamy. Topics such as the struggles of coming out as poly, having difficulties finding housing as a result of living in an unorthodox poly family and having meaningful relationships that are not acknowledged as valid came up in the interviews. Four of the participants also spoke about the personal challenges they face in their poly relationships. Feeling unable to reach out to support systems during times of difficulty, struggles with balancing their own needs with those of their partners as well as the partners of their partners, and making tough decisions as relationships and needs change over time are some of the personal difficulties faced by these women. These difficulties and others are reflective of the conflict between participants’ approach to poly and the valued social traditions and institutions of the context they live within. When engaging with mainstream institutions such as marriage, participants spoke about making a conscious effort to do this in a way that doesn’t reinforce the dominant ideology. Talking about getting legally married to her partner, Chloe says:

We were really clear when we wrote our service for our big special ‘I love you’ party that we didn’t say forever and didn’t say you complete me, or I am nothing without you or all that kind of language that implied that somehow I am not enough on my own and that it’s only through my union with you that I can survive the world. … What if they died tomorrow? You would have to pick yourself up, you know, with the support of your friends but you would have to pick yourself up and carry on. You are your own person and in my opinion that’s the healthiest way to approach a relationship. .. You have to take care of yourself and then you can engage in healthy relationships with other people.

All five of the participants consciously stood outside and against the dominant nuclear ideology. Four of them spoke about experiencing difficulties occasionally because of this outsider status. Below, Andrea describes her family’s difficulty finding a place to live together, saying:
This is like this emblematic experience for the world, right? I was just like who gets to decide what makes a family? Is it not people taking care of each other and dwelling together and contributing financially and feeding each other and taking care of each other when they’re sick and is that not a family? And if we understand ourselves as such, who the fuck is anybody else to say different? How dare they? It offends me on a really core level for some reason.

Although the practice of poly in a society that enforces a rigid relationship ideal can be difficult, it became evident that these women nevertheless see poly as allowing freedom and space to create meaningful alternatives to the status quo. Erin says:

To get really philosophical I see polyamory as a manifestation of Kantian ethics … [that] hinges on respecting people as ends in and of themselves, not as any sort of instrumental means for feeling good yourself or substantiating from the picture of a perfect relationship or whatever other use value it could have … and respecting them as persons with their own desires, and respecting those desires.

Even though there are struggles in doing this, Erin describes a philosophy and structure that allows the flexibility to pursue what she wants and respect the fact that her partners are doing this as well. She continues:

I guess it’s supremely anti-patriarchal, at least the way I practice it. So the people you’re with aren’t obligated to be with you, you’re not setting limits on their behaviour, you’re not treating them in a way that’s possessive, you’re not demanding that they, because they’re romantic interests, fill some particular role because you can explore a lot of different things with different people. If you need a certain amount of companionship or emotional support, you don’t need to ask one person for all of that. So I feel like it’s the relationship model that imparts the fewest obligations on the people you’re with.

By not placing restrictions on her own or her partners’ behaviour and desires, Erin is attempting to structure her life in a way that is not limited by the assumption of lifelong coupling. In trying to remove obligations from her relationships, Erin is making an effort to creatively construct space for her and her partners to fulfill their needs.
While these women differ from one another in many ways, all have a conscious underlying philosophy that directs and informs their practice of polyamory. Their commitment to their philosophy pushes these participants to examine their beliefs and work hard at overcoming the challenges they face, in an attempt to resourcefully integrate their values with their lives and relationships.

**Transgressive Poly Philosophies**

Under current definitions of relationship and family, a lot about love and romance is made to seem personal and individual. However, when we consider that the monogamous romantic relationship is the base of the nuclear family – the only officially recognized family form today – it becomes evident that love and romance are social institutions. Here, Andrea comments on the fact that there are many family forms (not necessarily related to poly) that exist all over the world, saying:

[R]adicalism … just means going to the root, right, so of course that pre-dates the system. Of course radicalism is a return to and not just a progress past. Those things come together and how we do family and how we survive and how we fuck, all of it pre-dates. … One of my partners describes her Italian family as, you know, you’ve got mom, dad and kids living on the ground floor of a house and the grandparents living in the apartment upstairs and some sort of wayward relative who’s always taking shelter in the basement and that was kind of the normal Italian way of doing things. But that too is its own kind of fuck the system; it’s not a nuclear family.

Expanding on her ideas around family, community and survival, Andrea explains that her poly philosophy is just one part of a broad rejection of the capitalist system as she perceives it:

I would like to challenge the idea that our best chance for survival is by each of us being the best and beating out all the rest. … I think we should
have systems in which people get to excel but that excellence isn’t tied to
whether or not they get to eat. … So I guess if I go from there into how
that works in non-monogamy, I see a lot of parallels. And I won’t say it’s
the same but I see parallels to a whole lot of other places in the world that
don’t ascribe to a capitalist, individualist, industrialized nation kind of
way of approaching survival. There is a little bit more of a sense of
communal sharing and mutual support and taking people at their strengths
and supporting them where they’re not [strong]. … It’s so not particular
to non-monogamy and poly that I almost have a hard time; it’s not that I
can’t link the two, it’s that one does not come from the other. Or perhaps
a philosophy like this informs the way I end up doing non-monogamy and
the people I end up doing it with but not because I think that non-
monogamy and this philosophy are one and the same. I think a lot of
people in the world operate on a more communal model without that
necessarily having anything to do with their romance and relationship life
and sometimes by necessity and sometimes by cultural tradition. …. I
think if anything all of these things challenge the .. Western patriarchy
capitalist norm at its base.

In this quote, Andrea’s definition of capitalism seems to focus on the individualistic
approach to survival characteristic of current Western society. Throughout a lot of human
history, survival depended on cooperation and division of labour – under the prevailing
conceptualizations of community, the importance of these collective elements of survival
has been dismissed while the importance of individual relationships and the nuclear
family form have been inflated. Each couple or family learns to be concerned primarily
with their own survival, and to view their survival as separate from that of their
community. Andrea rightfully points out that this approach to survival is not a philosophy
that is shared around the world. Relating the way she intentionally structures her
relationships with her attempt to move beyond the current prescriptive ways of
connecting, Chloe says:

I see how I structure my relationships as a very conscious political
engagement with the world around me, that I’m very aware of the ways in
which I do my relationships differently. … I challenge myself to be more
open about poly because without self-aggrandizing, I think there’s a
wonderful opportunity to share with people. Sometimes I feel like I just
want to shake people and be like you don’t have to have relationships like this, you don’t have to play that role in your relationship even though you’re a woman. There are other ways of doing it. You decide, you make up the rules, you put the boundaries on things, don’t let anyone else tell you how to run it. This is your conscious choice and maybe you’ve lived in such communities that you don’t see it as a choice and you don’t see what your options are but I want to be the little red flag in the corner being like ‘look how differently we do things, this means it’s possible for you too.’

Through most of human history, community has been understood to be key to survival. Today, however, the importance of community is dismissed and its strength and prevalence has weakened over time. Interestingly, while rarely referencing the idea of community directly or as an important collective element, participants reference queerness and feminism as collective philosophies and contexts that provide them with access and language to think critically and break away from conventions and restraints. While not always explicitly referring to these as communities, participants referenced collective queer and feminist ideologies and identified with others who thought similarly to them. They all essentially described community but only three of them called it that. It is worth considering participants’ thoughts on the importance of queer and feminist ideas and community in their counter-hegemonic poly practice and philosophy.

**Collective Community as Access to Alternative Worldviews**

Queerness is a large and complex topic and was referenced by participants in many different ways throughout the interviews – both positive and negative. Topics such as queer visibility and policing and the lack of support from family as a result of one’s queerness were covered. All of the participants also referenced queerness as access to an alternative worldview that necessarily challenges dominant definitions of gender and
sexuality in political ways. For all of them, this worldview is connected to the philosophy that informs their practice of poly. This is summarized by Andrea below:

I would be curious to see how many people in a queer-specific .. research project are going to come at it from a .. ‘this comes as part and parcel of me being queer and it’s about having a different value system and way of doing things in the world’ vs. ‘I’m queer, my girlfriend and I got married, and we decided that we were going to open up our relationship.’ … I’d be curious to know if [alternative approaches to poly are] as connected to queerness as I think they are, like … if the orientations and the worldviews are related to each other or not.

Entering this research, I also suspected that I would find a connection between participants’ identification with a queer worldview and the ideology that informs their practice of poly and this connection did indeed emerge in the interviews. Below, Chloe explains her view on why queer communities tend to have more diversity within their relationship structures than mainstream society, saying:

[There’s] a history by necessity within queer communities of needing to dismantle what normative relationship structures look like. And I feel like there’s less of an expectation, unless you buy into or you desire ‘my knight in shining armour to come, my one and only’, unless that’s your romantic fantasy and dream. But I feel like it’s more common in the queer community to let go of some of those trappings of what a relationship should look like, and I think that’s one of the beauties of being queer and being involved in queer communities that can define relationships in multiple and diverse ways. … You’re suddenly given a flexibility to have different kinds of relationships.

Related to Chloe’s statement, Andrea talks about the social rejection faced by many queers being connected to a type of freedom that allows one to break away from the dominant conventions in society. She says:

If you’re queer, you’re already off the cliff so whatever else you pick up on the way down doesn’t really matter nearly as much as it would if you were still on solid ground, if that makes sense. … [Being polyamorous is] the same kind of ‘not easy’ as everything else you’re already dealing with
potentially. I know that this really is not everybody’s story but .. for me, being a pervert, being poly and being queer .. all kind of goes together in a big package and I can’t necessarily pull them all apart. So I don’t know, my parents didn’t want to meet my female partners for 10 years or more .. but that was partly about female. Me saying there’s two of them wouldn’t have made a difference, they still didn’t want to meet them. … And that meant that when my parents finally were like ‘hey gee, if we don’t ever invite our kids to bring their partners home, we might not see our kids anymore’ then all of a sudden I got the invitations and I was like well, yeah ok, but you’re going to meet both of them and they were like ok; off the cliff. … Certainly that has all been a struggle but .. I don’t know what to attribute to what.

It’s not uncommon to hear stories like Andrea’s – where family, workplaces or societal institutions are not supportive of a queer person. It’s less common to consider the freedom that accompanies the queer identity, yet as Andrea and Chloe’s statements demonstrate, queerness can act as a gate through which an individual can break away from social rules and expectations. By breaking away from these conventions, queerness can feel like one is no longer standing on solid ground. For the participants, this lack of security and status within society is difficult in many ways, but it also creates the potential to challenge dominant definitions and norms of relationships.

While I expected I would find a strong connection between the participants’ queer worldview and approach to polyamory, I didn’t expect to find the strong and articulated connection with feminism that all the participants expressed. This is not because I didn’t think I would find elements of feminism in participants’ practice of poly, but rather because feminism has in many ways become an unpopular term. In-fighting and disagreement within feminist communities, a shift towards identity-based politics within feminism and the constant undermining of feminist principles in the context of a patriarchal society are some of the reasons why much of the collective unity that second-wave feminists strove for has dissipated under third-wave post-structuralism (Martin,
1994). Although this is a feminist research, this was not listed as a criteria for participation in this study and I did not mention the term in my flyer. However, all of the women in this study identified themselves as feminists and spoke of their feminism as formative of the way that they understand and practice polyamory. Nina says:

I think it’s just really fantastic that [feminism] takes away the power of slut shaming; which is lovely because the entire idea that ladies can’t have sex with more than one person or they’re a slut, they can’t enjoy sex, etc. you don’t have that as much in polyamory. Especially if you are working as a free agent because you make your own decisions, you do what you want and it’s very important for you to know what you’re doing, to be comfortable with your identity. … From my point of view it’s empowering, it puts you on an equal playing field as everyone else and I appreciate that.

Erin also sees the freedom she experiences within polyamory as connected to her feminism, saying:

I guess monogamy is less appealing from a feminist perspective. I don’t see why I shouldn’t have the right to get to know other people as well, or my partners shouldn’t have the right to do that. I’m happy for them if they meet someone cool that they enjoy spending time with. It’s nice to be in a relationship that isn’t a decision, that isn’t this is the person I’m going to spend the next two years with at the expense of other possible opportunities. It’s nice to just be able to explore relationships and always be interested in people you meet who are amenable to it.

Chloe talks more specifically about the influence of feminist thought on the types of relationships she pursues:

There’s something very feminist about seeking egalitarian relationships and about questioning hierarchical structures. … I think some of the freedom I experience in my polyamory is a product of my feminism. … The awareness of structures of power and the critique of structures of power is another place that feminism exists for me and I think that’s a beautiful thing to bring into any relationship, and poly relationships especially; when the relationships are multiplying and potentially becoming more complicated or complex.
Chloe continues, reflecting on the ways that feminism challenges gender and sexuality norms and how this has created space for her to challenge dominant relationship norms:

Because of how feminism has cracked those eggs open and scrambled the contents, I feel less bound by a particular set of rules and obligations and expectations. One of the beautiful things about poly is that different relationships allow me to explore different aspects of my gender. … I think when you become more involved in feminist thought and practice that you become more aware of your gender and how you enact your gender differently in different spaces, and the expectations of your gender and the ways in which your gender is constructed and so I think I bring that awareness to different relationships with different people and it takes some of the boundaries and the rules off that. Feminism relates to poly because it’s about an embracing of sexuality in women, unabashedly and unapologetically that a woman can have many lovers, and a woman can have many relationships, and a woman can ask for what she wants sexually. A woman can take care of her own needs and not need someone else to take care of her emotional needs, her sexual needs.

Jenn, too, describes the affinity she sees between feminism and polyamory as transgressive ideologies:

I think the fact that feminism continues to even challenge itself and challenges itself to get messy and honour where people are at and give space for that and to engage in those dialogues and self-critique and that’s part of what I like, is the getting messy part. … The way that feminism has tried to give space for that often and isn’t always perfect, and neither is polyamory. That it’s ok, the fact that they’re willing to get messy as philosophies and transgress those boundaries and boxes.

Andrea comments on the political and structural elements of her feminist beliefs and practice:

I don’t know if these things have ever not been political for me, at least since my late teens and my understanding of feminism and that such questions could be talked about, that there was language to talk about them. From that point forward I think everything to me feels like it translates into the political almost immediately. Because I don’t think I’m an island. Don’t get me wrong, I am my own individual for sure, but anything I experience, someone else in the world has also experienced it. I am so aware of that and the more systemic it is … or any sort of
interaction with a system, to me is an immediate indication that whatever I’m encountering, I am not alone in encountering it. And, by the same token, that whatever I’m encountering is only one manifestation of that system and that other people who come into it from a different place get a different manifestation.

Here, Erin elaborates on the connection she feels between her feminism and practice of poly, saying:

For me it’s a feminist practice, it’s liberating. One thing I like about dating multiple men is it totally subverts the typical relationship model. I guess it’s more socially acceptable for men to date multiple women but for a woman to date multiple men in a meaningful way is extremely socially transgressive and I like that about it. I like being able to have a relationship with a man that subverts traditional relationship paradigms to that extent and I think that’s really feminist.

For all of these women, polyamory is a philosophy and practice which, used along with their feminism and access to diverse queer communities, allows them to experience and practice their romantic relationships in ways that break from and challenge dominant conventions. In this context and with these values, polyamory for the participants is a deep and meaningful alternative to enforced definitions of relationships. While their identification with queerness and feminism is often more related to their worldview than to a concrete community, these women’s views reflect, draw on and contribute to a collective philosophy. A more conscious sense of community in their awareness of the collective queer and feminist philosophy reflected in the interviews with these women would enhance the capacities of poly to transgress current social norms and develop their alternatives.
CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

For the participants in this study, polyamory as a philosophy and practice is informed by a much broader egalitarian philosophy. It becomes tangible and thus is a product of collective identification with broader communities and movements. Through feminist thought and access to diverse queer communities, participants are articulating engaged alternative values and worldviews. In their practice of polyamory, participants are attempting to bridge the gap between their transgressive ideology and the way they structure and approach relationships.

By sustaining an alternate standpoint on relationships, family and in some ways community, they are challenging the dominant definitions that current social structures rely on. Seeing the participants’ individual biographies in the larger social and historical context of queer and feminist collective consciousness reveals the possibilities of polyamory as transgressive activism, which powerfully combines the personal and the political.

Ultimately, the potential of polyamory doesn’t lie in simply adopting a polyamorous relationship structure. There are many ways of practicing poly that reinforce the nuclear model minus the element of monogamy. Whether an individual chooses to practice poly or not is not necessarily reflective of resistance to the status quo. However, interviews with the participants in this study show that polyamory can provide an important space from which to engage subversively with dominant definitions and structures. Much of participants’ practice of polyamory as transgressive was grounded in
their broader philosophies – ones that incorporate feminist thought and a queer worldview.

There are many potential areas for future research that would further expand upon and explore this topic. Research seeking to further explore the transformative potential of polyamory could examine whether and how this potential is tapped into among different demographics. Looking into the differences and similarities in the practice of poly among bisexual and heterosexual women as well as in the trans community could provide more information about this phenomenon and could also provide insight as to whether different groups understand their polyamory as intentionally transgressive. It could also be worthwhile to explore the practice of poly among diverse ethnic, racial, and disabled groups, as well as across different age ranges. Poly could further be studied to see if there are differences based on how long an individual has been practicing poly. All of these areas are worth exploring to see how polyamory is used politically, whether the struggles of poly differ by level of privilege, and to see if diverse groups are using this practice in an attempt to move beyond prescribed relationship norms. How family plays out in a poly situation and what differing definitions of family mean within a Western context when dependents are involved could also provide useful info. Moving into social action, future research could explore the particular and many ways that collective contexts both enable and are built from individual resistance.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A: Digital Flyer for Participation

ARE YOU A
QUEER WOMAN
WHO IDENTIFIES AS
POLYAMOROUS?

Then I’d love to hear from you!

I’m an OISE/UT grad student looking for volunteers to participate in a research study on the experiences of queer polyamorous women.

To be eligible for the study you must be a woman 18 years of age or older and identify as queer and polyamorous.

It will only take 1 - 2 hours of your time and contribute to a better understanding of this under-researched area.

To volunteer or for more information, please contact me by August 1st 2013 at: efrat.gold@mail.utoronto.ca.
Appendix B: Study Overview and Consent Form for Participants

Information/consent Letter to Participants

From Researcher Efrat Gold

Date: ________________

Dear Potential Interviewee,

Thank you for considering participating in or contributing to my research project. I am currently completing my Masters thesis at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, supervised by Dr. Angela Miles and Dr. Bonnie Burstow. I am doing this research as part of the requirement for the completion of this program. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information that you will need to understand what I am doing and to decide whether or not to participate. Participation is completely voluntary, and, should you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. Should you have any concerns about the research, you may at any time contact Dr. Burstow at (416) 978-0887 or the researcher at (647) 213-6832.

The name of this research project is ‘Bridging Theory and Practice: Moving Towards an Understanding of Polyamory’. The nature and purpose of the research is to better understand, from a feminist perspective, the ways in which queer women define and navigate polyamory. The number of participants in this study will range from three to six.

What, essentially, I am doing is interviewing queer polyamorous women with the idea of exploring the various aspects of polyamory from a feminist perspective.

The reason that I am inviting you to participate is because your knowledge and experiences as a queer polyamorous woman would be very valuable in informing this research project.

Your part in the research, if you agree, is to take part in one interview with the researcher. The interview will be informal and will last approximately one to two hours.
To give you more information about what you can expect in this interview, I have listed below some areas of discussion and examples of questions that we may explore.

We will be engaged in an open interview or dialogue. I hope to touch on areas including your motivations for engaging in polyamory, the challenges and opportunities that polyamory presents in your life, and opinions around the way you experience polyamory.

Please be assured that I will not be inquiring about your sexual practices, but am approaching polyamory as a lifestyle. Examples of questions that I have in mind but may or may not ask depending on priorities which emerge and how the dialogue evolves include your experiences around coming out as polyamorous to family, friends and co-workers, negotiating roles within polyamorous relationships and the unexpected consequences of polyamory in your life.

Once the audio tape of the interview have been transcribed, the original or raw data will be encrypted on a hard drive in the researcher’s home. Only Dr. Bonnie Burstow, a transcriptionist and I will have access to this raw data. In the transcripts, names and other identifying information about you or your organization will be systematically eliminated. Identifying codes that could connect you or your organization with pseudonyms provided will also be encrypted on the same hard drive designated above. The timing for the destruction of the tapes and/or the raw data is two years.

As interviewee, you will receive a copy of the transcript of your interview. Any section which you request to have deleted from the transcript of your interview will be deleted. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and you may request that the entire transcript of your interview be destroyed. Additionally, you may choose not to answer any question. I will be sharing major aspects of my preliminary analysis with you and you will have the opportunity to provide feedback. I will be doing this by providing you with a written summary of my preliminary analysis at which time you will have the opportunity to share your input should you wish to provide it.

As is clear from the foregoing, I will be taking measures to protect your confidentiality. The potential limitation in my ability to ensure your confidentiality and privacy is a scenario whereby the law requires me to break confidentiality, which is highly unlikely. There is also the possibility that someone might recognize who you are despite my best efforts to ensure your anonymity and confidentiality.

While there will be no compensation, potential benefits which you might derive from participating in this research are gaining insight into your experiences as well as helping to further research in the field of polyamory.

Potential harm to the participant is minimal. It is possible that reflecting on your experiences may bring up unpleasant memories. In the event that this happens, I will be happy to debrief with you and provide further resources for support.

Additional information:
Please note that in the future, this data may be analyzed differently and for different purposes such as a thesis or other writing(s).

Below, there is a place for you to sign to give your consent, should you decide to do so. There is also a place for you to add any stipulations. Should you decide to participate, please return one signed and dated copy to me and keep the other for your reference. All participants will receive a summary report of the research findings.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

252 Bloor St. W
Toronto, ON
M5S 1V5
(647) 213-6832

To Be Completed by People Choosing to Participate

I have read through this document. I understand and am satisfied with the explanations offered, feel that my questions have been addressed, and agree to participate in the ways described. If I am making any exceptions or stipulations, these are:

Please note that by default, your participation in this research project will be made anonymous and the raw data of your interview will be destroyed. If you do not wish to remain anonymous or do not wish to have your data destroyed, please check off the appropriate box(es) below.

☐ I do not wish to be anonymous
☐ I do not wish to have my data destroyed

__________________________________ (Signature)
__________________________________ (Printed Name)
__________________________________ (Date)
Appendix C: Interview Guide

What does being polyamorous mean to you?

What does being polyamorous look like in your daily life?

What are some of your motivations for engaging in polyamory?

What is your philosophy/personal ideology around polyamory?

Are you out as polyamorous to your friends, family, co-workers? If yes, what are some of your most memorable experiences around coming out? If not, why not?

What are some of the biggest challenges you have faced as a result of living a polyamorous lifestyle?

Have you developed any coping strategies to handle these challenges? If yes, what are some of your strategies? Do they help? If not, how do you deal with these challenges?

What are some opportunities that polyamory has presented in your life?

Is living a polyamorous lifestyle what you expected it to be? If yes, what did you expect polyamory to be? If no, what were your initial expectations and how has your experience been different?

Do you feel that you have a strong support system around dealing with some of the challenges and opportunities that polyamory has presented in your life? If yes, please describe your support system. If no, what are some barriers that you face in building a strong support system?

What relationship, if any, do you see between polyamory and feminism?

Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion?
Appendix D: Diagram Drawn by Erin to Explain her Current and Previous Relationship Configurations

Figure 1 Erin draws a diagram to explain her current relationship configuration. The circle in the middle represents her and the line with an X over it represents a relationship that has ended.