

GENERATING FEMALE FREEDOM AMONG WOMEN'S  
RELATIONSHIPS IN RUGBY UNION

NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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## ABSTRACT

Women's rugby relationships are generally analysed from the point of view of men's rugby, otherwise they are overlooked, or treated as incidental. By contrast, the overall aim of this study is to make sense of women's rugby experiences and relations to rugby as a sport in terms of the feminine friendship relationships they forge and develop through on-field play and the informal culture surrounding the game. This research was conducted and written from the perspective of an active participant as both observer and "research subject". Within the framework of Italian sexual difference thought, it is a dialogue between the main concepts which ground this thought and data concerning women's rugby experiences as gathered from my recollection of personal experiences; participant observation in one team in Barcelona and two in London; twelve conversational interviews with my best rugby friends from Barcelona and London; as well as innumerable informal conversations with friends and other rugby women.

I have chosen sexual difference theory to make sense of women's rugby relationships because it allows me to approach women's experiences in rugby from the premise that women are not required to imitate or reverse men's rugby meanings in order to make sense of their experiences. This theory derives from Irigaray's premise that women and men are two irreducible subjects. Thus, this study challenges the existence of a neutral or abstract human being. In short, one of the central aims of this research is to challenge the belief that men's rugby experiences are neutral and abstract and, therefore, can be unproblematically applied to women's rugby. The premise that underpins this investigation is a belief in women's rugby experiences as both illustrative and creative extensions, through on-field play and off-field

friendships, of the biological, historical and socially interwoven specificity of women's relationships.

Thus, another purpose of this study is to engage the reader with the world of women's rugby and at the same time to delve into the analysis of the significant consequences engendered by women's intense relationships in rugby. The ultimate goal of this project is to show how meaningful relationships in women's rugby can strengthen women's beliefs in themselves and dissolve the doubts that women have about their specific ways of perceiving, organizing and "wording" the world (Richardson, 1996). This research is devoted to strengthening and supporting the concept of female existence as original in itself and capable of taking symbolic form.

This research also explores the possibilities that alternative ways of writing about women's rugby experiences and relationships offer to sport feminists' sociology. For this reason, throughout the data chapters I have combined sexual difference theoretical concepts with creative non-fiction narratives of women's rugby relationships and experiences. This means that, inspired by my own experiences, recollections and conversational interviews with other rugby women about their experiences, I have created stories that interweave my subjectivity as a rugby player and as a listener with the experiences of others as narrated to me.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

We change the world by changing the way we make it visible.

Denzin, 2002, p. 483

This research is about relationships of love, hate, disparities, inequalities, antagonisms, and physical contact among women for whom rugby is or has been one of the most important activities in their lives. As the fly half of the New Zealand team told me in the last Women's Rugby World Cup, that took place in Barcelona in May-2002: "Rugby is an 'addiction,' once it gets in your blood it is difficult to get rid of". This research attempts to analyse and represent these characteristics of "addiction" and the sport's symbolic meanings for some women.

I was eighteen when I started to play rugby at the Physical Education and Sports College in Barcelona - called INEF. Before playing rugby my main sport was basketball, another team sport, which I started playing when I was ten years old. Thus, my sporting life is full of memories about practicing sports in which the teamwork and relationships with other team mates are the key to achievement. From the very first day of playing rugby I could feel it was going to become my "addiction" in life. While my involvement in the rugby team was growing, my interest in basketball slowly declined. This was strange in a city like Barcelona, where basketball is the main sport after football, and rugby is a very minor sport even for men. I remember that in those days, I was asked very often what was it that I liked about a sport that was so physically violent and strange to our culture. Determined and proud of having discovered rugby I answered that my interest in this sport was twofold. Firstly, I felt completely attracted by the high level of physical contact allowed in the game. For me

this high physical contact with other female bodies was experienced more as an opportunity to explore my physicality and to challenge my physical limitations. Secondly, the “wildness” and intensity of the traditional socialising after games was something that held very strong appeal for me. From the outset I discovered that a rugby match, unlike a basketball match, is always organized in three halves: the first two are on the pitch and the last one in the pub. What has always fascinated me about rugby is its capacity to deal with, on the one hand, the fiery fight that takes place between two teams on the pitch; and on the other hand, the socialising of these two teams that goes on afterwards in the clubhouse drinking beer and playing drinking games. I cannot deny the relevance of the role played by the huge quantity of alcohol that is consumed by most of the team members of both teams in this “obligatory” socialising after every game. Traditionally there is a belief among rugby players that in order to beat the opposite team, a team needs to play better rugby on the pitch and drink faster and more beer than the adversaries in the third half. I found that this is especially true on tours, when the effects of alcohol are not incompatible with the physical demands of the competition. As an old team mate of INEF used to say: “The third half is when rugby, alcohol and friendship are the same thing”. Therefore, in some chapters of this thesis, the presence of this third half, alcohol, and other activities to bind the team spirit are considered as fundamental to making sense of women’s rugby experiences.

My aim in this research is to consider rugby as much more than a simple team-contact sport. Although my main focus is to explain the significant experiences and relationships among rugby women, I do not overlook the fact that the passion for the game played on the pitch is the actual source of meaning of all these experiences. In other words, to be able to delve into the intense experiences and relationships that



derive from playing rugby, one has to play the game, accepting all the high and often physical impact with other female bodies.

The driving force behind me carrying out this research is my strong feeling that after playing rugby for sixteen years and being so addicted to it - an addiction which made me start and organise a new team in Barcelona - rugby as a whole has provided me with much more than just the pleasure of the physical contact with other female bodies and the courage to do something that is out of the ordinary for a woman. My gamble throughout these pages is to represent “a” rugby responsible for deeper and more subtle changes that have influenced me and some of my friends’ ways of thinking about what it means to be a woman in this world. For example, through rugby I discovered the authority to decide for myself what to think about this world and what to want from it. Playing rugby and relating intensely to other rugby women has provided me with enough self-esteem to build up the strength to be “me” without feeling ashamed or putting into doubt my femaleness. Thus, the core of this thesis is to analyse the importance that the role of rugby has played in some female players’ thoughts and feelings about themselves and the world that surrounds them. For this reason the focus of the study is to discover women-specific ways of experiencing and narrating the world of rugby. The theoretical framework that guides the discovery and creation of these specific female ways is a sexual difference theory, the aim of which is to conceptualised female difference.

The election of this theory to explain women’s rugby experiences has not been a straightforward, single act. I had to ask my rugby friends about their experiences of being a woman and playing rugby and carry out research on women’s different “gendered sports” like football, volleyball or gymnastics to realise that the gendered connotations that sports had were more a barrier to understanding their experiences in



terms of women's subjectivity than a help. After several attempts at explaining women's sport experiences underpinned by an ideal of equality with the men and not being happy with the results according to my own experiences in rugby, an ex-teacher, and (currently) a very good friend, introduced me to the principles of sexual difference feminism through Italian feminist authors who call their theory *sexual difference thought*. This theory follows the two main premises of poststructuralism paradigm: a belief in the non-unitary or split subject and in the non-transparency of language (Braidotti, 2002).

In order to analyse in depth the symbolic specificity of women's rugby I have chosen to look at it through this sexual difference thought, which was originated in 1975 by a famous women's bookstore collective based in Milan – MWBC (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective) - and lately systemised and theoretically conceptualised by a women-only philosophy group called Diotima, located in Verona University. This thought derives from an original concept of sexual difference by Luce Irigaray, a Belgian philosopher, psychoanalyst and linguist, whose work challenges the ontological premises that sustain the assumed neutral-universal-male subjectivity. According to Irigaray (2000), to dare to question this universal subjectivity one must define “new values directly or indirectly suitable to feminine subjectivity and to feminine identity” (p. 10), and so demonstrate that the world is one but the subjects who inhabit it are two (Irigaray, 1985a; 1985b). I explore the premises of this thought in depth later in my dissertation.

As a woman rugby player, I found sexual difference thought a very interesting approach to women's rugby experiences because this thought gives full importance to female subjectivity as the original source of these experiences. What makes this thought original in sport feminist studies is an strong interest in recognising that a



woman must be entitled to take her experience as a measure of the sport world, her interests in participating in sport should become a legitimated criterion for judging it, her desires as a motive for changing it, so that the sport world with the good and bad consequences may then become her own responsibility (applying an idea of MWBC, 1990). By approaching women's rugby experiences from a sexual difference thought perspective I hope to overcome such dichotomies as liberation/oppression and masculine/feminine that seem to underpin earlier analyses of women's rugby research. Furthermore, I feel that this thought allows me not to constantly compare women's experiences to those of men.

To look at the rugby women's experiences I first attempt to expand any particular female knowledge that women gain through experiencing relationships with other women in rugby contexts. Secondly, I aim to represent such knowledge through narratives in which women simultaneously construct and are constructed by their reality. These narratives are written based on my personal memories as a rugby player, my participant observation in the field, and conversational interviews with some of my best rugby friends. Therefore, the driving force that guides the process of writing this research is to make sense of these narratives through sexual difference lenses.

An important challenge added to this research is *translation*. I am a researcher whose first languages are Catalan and Spanish, writing a thesis in English which tries to make sense of rugby experiences explained in Catalan and English. Then, to understand these experiences I have chosen to apply an Italian sexual difference thought, which is originally written in Italian with some (not all) translations in Spanish and very few translations in English. It is not easy to find the main authors of this thought like Luisa Muraro, Lia Cigarini, Aleassandra Bocchetti and others

translated into English. Therefore, translation into English is an added challenge. However, I consider it necessary to facilitate English speaking sport feminist research to reflect upon this thought and analyse to what extent it may be applied to other women's sport experiences. As de Lauretis (1990) comments, in her translation from Italian into English of the most emblematic book of sexual difference thought - *"Don't you think you have any right"* - translating Italian sexual difference feminism into English is not just about translating concepts or words, it is also about the difficulties of translating the "substratum of connotations, resonances, and implicit references that the history of a culture has sedimented into the words and phrases of its language" (p. 21). For example, Italian language does not work in the same way as English in relation to sex and gender terms. In Italian sexual difference feminists use "sexed thought" or "sexed subjects" when in English these concepts can be translated as "gendered thought" or "gendered subject". However, there is no norm. For instance, de Lauretis (1990) uses the second option, when Bono and Kemp (1991) use the first choice. I am more inclined towards the first option and call, in this project, the sexual difference thought a "sexed thought". In contrast, with the uses of feminine or female, most English translators translate "desiderio femminile", as "female desire" because this is more comprehensible for English language readers, although strictly speaking it should be "feminine desire". In this case I have also adopted "female desire" translation.



## Organisation of the thesis

The content of this thesis is organised into eight chapters. Following this introductory chapter there is an in-depth explanation of the theoretical framework that underpins this study. As I said earlier, this work is based on Italian sexual difference thought. In this chapter I bring in an analysis of Irigaray's work as the foundational premise of this sexual difference thought. However, before that I introduce the cornerstone of Irigaray's work: Lacan's psychoanalysis. Whereas Lacan bases his ideas on the phallogentric symbolic order, Irigaray focuses her critiques in the negative symbolic connotation that this order has for female subjects. Although I do not plan to apply Lacan's or Irigaray's work directly to my thesis, I believe that an introduction to their work is necessary in this thesis to demonstrate how sexual difference thought is conceptualised. The third chapter is the review of the latest women's team-contact sports research. At the end of the chapter I include the analysis of five women's rugby studies that I have found within North American and European sport sociological journals and books. The fourth chapter focuses on my qualitative methodology. In this chapter I trace my research process from developing the data gathering through memories, participant observation and arranged conversational interviews to the analysis and writing up of my findings on women's lived experiences in rugby. The following three chapters mix narratives with theoretical concepts of sexual difference thought aiming to represent an in-depth account of women's rugby experiences and relationships. In addition, chapter five has a special focus on my personal experiences and my realisation that to explore other women's rugby relationships I needed to start from my own experiences. Like Probyn (1993), my aim is to use feminist autobiography "as a tactic within the production of theory, or more precisely within the process of speaking theoretically" (p. 83). Chapter six



focuses on disparities and discrepancies that are key to understanding the meanings of female difference and women's relationships in rugby. Chapter seven aims to illustrate how an alternative order to phallogentrism, *the symbolic order of the mother* might engender specific relationships among women who play rugby. I conclude this thesis by reflecting, on the one hand, on the extent to which sexual difference thought contributes to improving the knowledge women have about themselves and about rugby. I also examine how this thought can further help explaining intensity and significance in women's rugby relationships. On the other hand, I reflect on the limitations of this thought for understanding women's rugby experiences and relationships in terms of an alternative symbolic order.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SEXUAL DIFFERENCE FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1. Introduction

Sexual difference is one of the important questions of our age, if not in fact the burning issue. According to Heidegger, each age is preoccupied with one thing, and one alone. Sexual difference is probably that issue in our age.

Irigaray, 1997, p. 11

Generally speaking, feminists share the idea that the world has been framed predominantly in male terms. They argue that male sexuality, male characteristics, and male values, among others, represent privilege. For several decades feminists have developed different theories and practices to resist this imposition and to find new ways of existing outside and beyond male sexuality, male ideology, male-defined language and male hegemony; in summary the *male norm*.

This chapter aims to explain how a group of women thinkers, mainly philosophers from France and Italy, have worked on ways of resisting *male thinking/ideology*, through strongly affirming – rather than erasing - the existence of sexual differences between men and women. In other words, they claim that the liberation of women comes from their affirmation of difference, not from the rejection of it (Lonzi, 1981).

Sexual difference aims to challenge the idea that that for a woman to become part of the social order she has a choice between two binaries: masculinising herself or ascribing to the stereotypical feminine role. My aim throughout this research is to be able to identify and to attempt to represent women's feelings, experiences and ways of being that escape this binary. When presented with these choices, women are unable to challenge either the masculine power or the society in which it is grounded. The main purpose of expressing sexual difference is not just to challenge the content



of masculine power by giving voice to a possible feminine power; it is rather to challenge the whole system that underpins the belief that one sex has to overpower the other. In other words, I aim to challenge the idea that a hierarchy between the two sexes is the only way through which they can relate to each other in our society. Consequently, the sexual difference thought analysed throughout this chapter is an attempt to name a female way of being in this world which goes beyond the constraints of patriarchy, phallogentrism and gender dichotomic order.

The work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is relevant a propos fully understanding how a sexual difference hierarchy has been constructed and legitimised through our ways of relating between the two sexes. It is not by chance that Irigaray – philosopher, psychoanalyst and former member of l'Ecole Freudienne de Paris, where Lacan was one of the main figures - starts her analysis of sexual difference from a Lacanian position. She shares with him the emphasis on the importance of language in the construction of subjectivity. Nevertheless, she vigorously contests the position that women have in his theory. The next section is based on Lacan's premises for understanding how the present social order – called phallogentrism - is exclusively represented by male sexuality and a male way of relating to and naming the world that surrounds men.

In this chapter, I will firstly explain how Lacan's psychoanalysis is central to constructing sexual difference discourses through which the supremacy of men's sexuality represented by the 'phallus' overshadows the mystery of female sexuality naturalised by its characteristic of 'lack'. Phallogentrism literally means that the phallus is at the centre of any life; thus men and women are differentiated by the possession or lack of a phallus. Secondly, I will introduce the basis of sexual difference as a concept developed by Irigaray and Italian 'sexual difference'



feminism. Thirdly, I will explain based on Irigaray's work on *women's specificities*, how phallogentrism needs to be deconstructed in order to give credence to the full meanings of the thought and practice of sexual difference. Also in this section, I will describe in more detail the concept of sexual difference articulated by Luce Irigaray. At this stage it is important to bear in mind that the purpose of developing Lacan's and Irigaray's work in this chapter is not that I am going to apply their ideas directly to my work. Rather they are a necessary theoretical background for understanding the later applications of sexual difference thought to women's rugby lived experiences. Fourthly and lastly, I will detail this sexual difference thought as conceptually systematised by an Italian women-only group called Diotima. Their thought is grounded in some parts of Irigaray's work and fully immersed in the feminist practices that have been taking place in Italy since the late 1960's.

## 2. 2. Lacan's Understanding of Sexual Difference

### 2.2.1. The Phallogentric Order

Lacan's concept of the phallogentric order is centred on the premise that the phallus – the abstract conception of the penis – is the driving force that gives purpose to our existence in this world. Jacques Lacan is generally acknowledged as one of the founders, with Freud, of psychoanalysis; and he has developed several key concepts about the unconscious and sexuality that explain how we act in society. According to Lacan men and women's sexuality have been constructed in a symbolic order that privileges male sexuality over its negative opposite: female sexuality.

For Lacan, the symbolic order is a "series of interrelated signs, roles, and rituals through which every society is regulated" (Tong, 1992, p. 220). Generally speaking, Lacan asserts that "the symbolic order is society" (Tong, 1992, p. 220). In



Lacan's theory, the symbolic order is known for being a stage that the child has to go through in order to achieve identity and what he later calls 'subjectivity'. The symbolic stage is twofold: on one hand, the child acquires the capacity of language; on the other, for the first time, a third element between the child (first element) and the mother (second element) comes into action - the law of the father. For Lacan this point is crucial, because it represents the separation of the child from his/her mother – an inevitable stage of becoming a conscious human being. This stage is characterised by the entry of the child into the "real" world. In a Lacanian framework, for a child to become part of society, s/he needs to internalise the symbolic order through language. For this reason, language becomes the device we use to relate to the world and at the same time it is a powerful and strict system of meanings which structures our reality. Therefore, language and symbolic elements become fundamental to the formation of subjectivity. One of the bases of poststructuralism is that language structures reality instead of just describing it. The belief that language does not just convey meanings, but rather constitutes and creates social reality is one of the key premises that grounds my research.

Borrowing from Saussure's linguistics, Lacan asserts that language constructs meanings through two elements. Linguistic signs consists of the signifier, the word, which is the material form of the sign, and the signified, the conceptual meaning generated by the signifier's differentiation from other signifiers. For instance, the signifier *tree* has an arbitrary rather than fixed, existential relationship with a biological category of objects . Through its interplay with other signifiers in language it generates the signified of a mental conceptualisation of that category. This means that becoming a human being entails socialisation into a world ordered by language. The Saussurian theory of the fixed relation between signifier and signified, together



with the notion of language as a system of differences, led Lacan to claim that the subject is the “subject of the signifier”. The realm of the signifier is the realm of the symbolic order, the order of signs, symbols, significations, representations, and images of all kinds (Letche, 1994). For Lacan the original signifier that the symbolic order of language is built upon is the *phallus*.

The phallus as the original and true signifier means that the first difference that the child recognizes through language is sexual differentiation: the mother does not have a penis, thus she represents the difference from the “the law of the father”. Throughout his work, Lacan strives to demonstrate that the phallus has an irreducibly symbolic status, and is the signifier of both sexes. Lacan argues, however, that the phallus does not have its bodily representation in the penis. Therefore, neither women nor men can have direct access to it. As Frye (1996, p. 993) argues, “the phallus and the penis are not the same... The penis is bodily and specific, the phallus is abstract; it has the status of being the *first signifier* of language”. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that one of the strongest feminist critiques of Lacan’s theory is its actual confusion of the penis as an organ of the body and the phallus as a signifier (Silverman, 1992). The “naturalized” identification of the phallus with the male sexual organ makes it the exclusive symbol of power. This leads Irigaray, among others, to identify the failure of the phallus to represent women’s existence in this world in positive terms. Derived from the phallus concept, *phallogocentrism* is the name given to the patriarchal language through which sexuality is defined. If language defines sexuality through the phallus it is easily derived from this statement, and from Freud’s work, that women’s sexuality is represented by “lack” of identification with it, with all the symbolic consequences that this “lack” implies. As Irigaray (1985b) states, “there is no possible place for ‘the feminine’, except the traditional place of the repressed, the censored”



(p. 60). In fact, the feminine has always been defined as nothing other than the complement to, or the negative side of, the masculine.

According to Lacan's theory, to become part of society one needs to enter the symbolic order. To become a subject, one has to mediate through language. To be able to mediate through language one has to become a signifier by having a presence in the symbolic order. Hence, to be a signifier one has to be identified with the phallus. As a result, the Lacanian subject is always male/masculine. This being the case, "What happens to women?" "What kind of subjects are those who are not represented by the phallus?" As Frye (1996) asserts, a female can only enter language at the cost of leaving behind her sex, "she has to operate as an abstract universal subject, an abstract 'same' whose concrete sexual distinction is unintelligible, unknowable, and inarticulate" (p. 996). Similarly, Irigaray asserts that a woman has no representation in the symbolic order. She does not have even one specific link to represent her, because she is inescapably included in the universal and abstract sameness of subjects. This means that she has to embody the contradiction of being reduced to a universal subject that does not have the ability to represent positively her sexual female existence. Irigaray (1985b) questions the assumption that female sexuality is dependent upon male sexuality. She tackles such questions as, "Where is female sexuality located if it always refers back to the penis?" "Where does female pleasure reside?" "What is female desire and what does it look like, if it looks like anything at all?" And, "Why does Freud insist that the penis is the only true sex organ?" (p. 69). According to her, "the 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex" (p. 69). Consequently, psychoanalytic feminists deconstruct and



challenge the taken-for-granted meanings that this “deficiency and atrophy” have in women’s every-day life representations.

In the next section my aim is to explain how Irigaray the main philosopher of sexual difference theory deconstructs the order described above. Broadly speaking, sexual difference thought claims that the experiences that are meant to represent humankind are nothing other than an example of men’s sexual subjectivity, men’s ways of relating to the world, and the presumption of men and of some women that women’s subjectivities are not able to find an independent different way of existence. To summarise, it is generally assumed that women’s subjectivities can only exist grounded in the fundamentals of masculine ways of relating to the world. Sexual difference theory aims to challenge this thought.

### 2. 3. The Frame of Sexual Difference

This is not the sexual difference that culture has constructed from ‘biology’ and imposed as gender, and that therefore could be righted, revisioned, or made good with the ‘progress of mankind’ toward a more just society. It is instead, a *difference of symbolisation, a different production of reference and meaning* out of a particular embodied knowledge, emergent in the present time but reaching back to recognise an image of the past which unexpectedly appears to those who are singled out by history at a moment of danger.

de Lauretis, 1994, p. 2 - emphasis added

In order to challenge the absence of women’s subjectivities in psychoanalysis, Irigaray began to search for symbolic references that had the properties of acknowledging and developing women as active and independent subjects. She derived her critique from the idea that there are two different sexes.

One of the major assumptions of Irigaray’s project is the belief that the difference between the sexes is radical, and because it is constitutive of the human experience “it should be listed alongside mortality as the ineluctable frame of



reference of the human being” (Cited by Braidotti, 1994, p. 131). Thereby, most of Irigaray’s work examines the possibility of conceptualising a philosophical understanding of the human being based on defining sexual difference as the *originary* human difference.

Sexual difference is a thought which does not demand a reversal of the already established gender order. Its ultimate goal is not to privilege women’s existence over men’s. It does not celebrate the feminine characteristics as better and more human than the masculine ones. In short, what sexual difference thought struggles to legitimise is that we are two sexes in one common world. This means that each sex is an entirely whole entity with an equally universal vocation of unrestricted existence which needs to be recognised as such in order to achieve free interaction between the two sexes. As Irigaray explains, it is through sexual difference that women are subordinated to men and it needs to be through sexual difference that women will be independent from men.

What does sexual difference mean in the context of this research? Sexual difference fundamentally refers to the original difference between the two sexed bodies and also implies that there is no equivalence between the two sexes. Put simply, there does not exist in the whole world a single “human” measure able to compare both sexes in the context of their practices. According to Irigaray [but expressed in Rivera’s words], “this thought seeks to unveil the presence of the sexual difference in human beings, this difference is displayed by two sexes: feminine and masculine. Sexes which are neither complementary, nor opposed, just *irreducible one to the other*” (1997, p. 32, my translation). Similarly, Irigaray (1987) affirms, “I shall never take the place of a man, never will a man take mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly fill the place of the other – the one is irreducible



to the other” (p. 124). In this vein, it is worth bearing in mind that “when we compare manhood with womanhood we inevitably lose something specific about the sense of being man/woman” (Hipatia, 1998, p. 88, my translation). What these thinkers are trying to communicate is a forceful belief in female autonomy. As Grosz (1992) remarks, “autonomy implies the right to see oneself in whatever terms one chooses” (p. 357).

Therefore, to ground a new symbolic order on sexual difference is extremely complicated. On the one hand, it first has to systematically deconstruct the phallogocentric order that has ruled our lives, accusing this order of being created by and for men’s experiences and not taking into account that women constitute a whole different sex in humankind rather than a mere derivation of the male. On the other hand, this new symbolic order has to face the complexities and difficulties of constructing and being constructed through a language that does not recognise women; a new symbolic order which neither adopts the reverse of the previous one, nor modifies the existing one. In other words, a symbolic order which defies not only the hierarchy between the two sexes, but also the premises rooted in the necessity of legitimising this hierarchy to achieve social order. Clearly, the aim of the women who are thinking this new order is neither to create a vulvacentric order, nor are their intentions to reference our sense of everyday life “solely” through female sexual organs in contraposition to the phallus. At this stage, it is necessary to detail Irigaray’s efforts in legitimating a way of thinking which simultaneously challenges the already established phallogocentric symbolic order without privileging an order based on women’s sexuality. The original attempt of this philosopher and psychoanalyst, as Jones (1981) stresses, is “the call for new representations of women’s consciousness” (p. 261). As Whiford (1991) has shown, Irigaray’s main



concern was with “the *symbolization* of the female body, with speaking what had no name in patriarchal culture” (Brennan, 1997, p. 278).

#### 2.4. The Work of Luce Irigaray

Women want to find themselves, discover themselves and their own identity. Which is why they are seeking each other out, loving each other, associating with each other.

Irigaray, 1993, p. 66

According to the above section, one of the main aims of Irigaray’s work is to challenge the belief perpetrated by psychoanalysis that male sexuality is the originary sexuality of human beings. Thus, the main argument of psychoanalysis is that any differentiated aspect of female sexuality is ontologically derived or modified from men’s sexuality. Irigaray’s work is of fundamental importance because she was one of the first to theorise women’s specificities and the need of a woman to relate to another woman if she wants to find herself.

It is important to locate Irigaray’s work in a poststructuralist paradigm to understanding her main principles. Poststructuralist authors relate language, subjectivity, social organisation and power (Weedon, 1987). In Irigaray’s work these are key elements. As we will see below Irigaray’s emphasis on creating a new language that recognises woman as original way of being corresponds to the belief that language structures reality and therefore, language is a powerful expression of the structure of subjectivity and social organisation.

According to Stone (1998), Irigaray’s work can be divided into two phases. The first phase is completely devoted to providing arguments for how a single subject, traditionally the masculine, has constructed and interpreted the world according to his sexed perspective – *sameness*. This phase is characterised by her attempt to *deconstruct the phallogentric order*. The second phase is dedicated to creating and



discovering *specific female qualities* that can allow women to have a presence in Lacan's Symbolic Order. As Stone (1998) points out, Irigaray's efforts in the first phase are addressed to critique the "auto-mono-centrism" that constitutes male subjectivity in Western philosophical texts. It is not surprising that Irigaray's deconstruction of Western philosophy is based on the work of a wide range of male authors, such as Plato and Aristotle, Hegel and Heidegger. Irigaray challenges their "natural" transformation of the world of two sexes into the existence of *one* universal-neutral sex.

#### 2.4.1. The Deconstruction of the Phallogentric Order

The task of thinking sexual difference is, thus, an arduous one since it lies in the erasure on which western thought has been founded and has grown. To think sexual difference beginning from the universal man means to think it as already thought, that is, to think it through the categories of a thought system which stands on the non-thinking of difference itself.

Cavarero, 1993, p. 193

If the language that gives existence to the phallogentric system does not recognise difference as a fundamental and necessary concept, it seems impossible to frame a concept like sexual difference in it. Irigaray wonders: "How can the feminine of/in/by women come into being in the sexually undifferentiated system of our culture?" (Cited by Braidotti, 1994, p. 131). According to Stone, one of Irigaray's main critiques of Western philosophy is that, "philosophers have traditionally defined mind as independent of body and conceptualised body in opposition to this disincarnated mind, and that such notions of mind and body are premised upon the denial of a specifically female subjectivity" (1998, p. 12). This leads to the conclusion that the male order in which we are inserted has been built upon denying the existence of a possible independent female subjectivity. This is translated into what Irigaray



(1985 a) names “monosexualism” and the “homosocial” tendencies of men when socially only one sex is recognised. She also asserts that “within Western culture, men have asserted that only they, men, are subjects: that there are no female subjects to whom they might relate... all theories of the ‘subject’ have always been appropriated by the ‘masculine’” (p. 133). According to Irigaray (1993), there is no just within the phallogentrism of Western culture way of presenting two subjectively different sexed human beings.

One of the starting points of sexual difference is to challenge what Irigaray (1985 a, b) describes as the process through which women have become the “presence of the absence”. For instance, Putino (1993) understands that women are the presence of the absence when a woman affirms that “something is visible precisely because of her exclusion” (p. 225). This challenge requires unmasking the process through which women’s presence is always said, represented and defined in relation to men and which does not allow women to achieve self-representation or even self-definition. Based on Irigaray’s work, deconstructing the phallogentric order is mainly based on three elements. The first is the *phallogentric language* in which we all – men and women - are immersed. Following the philosopher Adriana Cavarero (1993, p. 194, emphasis in the original):

Woman is not the subject of her language. Her language is not *hers*, therefore she speaks and represents herself in a language which is not hers, that is, through the categories of the language of the other. She thinks herself in as much as she is thought by the other.

Regarding Cavarero’s statement, Putino (1993), comments on the need to create ways for a woman to think for herself. Consequently, women are not able to think about their “specificities” through a language that has already defined their existence in terms that are not their own. Irigaray is absolutely convinced that



“language and the systems of representations cannot translate woman’s desire” (cited by Burke, 1994, p. 38). One of the elements that prevents a woman from becoming the subject of her language is this neutral-male gendered phallogentric language.

Secondly, Western philosophy does *not acknowledge sexual difference as originary-primary* human difference. As Teresa de Lauretis (1993) argues, “Instead of starting from an absolute dual conceptualisation of being-man and being-woman as originary forms of being; Western philosophy has started from the hypothesis of the one and from the assumption of a monstrous universal” (p. 4). Therefore, sexual difference, according to de Lauretis, is relegated to the status of a secondary difference contained in the gender marking of the feminine being. In other words, the differences between men and women are exclusively women’s responsibility, as if women have chosen to be born in female bodies instead of male. Similarly, Irigaray (1993) comments that to define women as part of a norm is “a way of not recognizing their own gender, their own individuality with a *universal vocation*” (p. 112 – my emphasis). It is important not to overlook what universal vocation means for women, if women do not want to be eternally bound to represent a part of the male universal vocation.

Finally, there is the assumption that the *universal gender*, so well rooted in Western philosophy, represents both sexes without difficulty. Due to the universality of the concept of human beings, the gender that represents it is legitimated as *neutral* and loaded with the capacity of speaking on behalf of the two sexed human beings. However, the greater power of this universal-neutral gender resides in its ability to transform the physical reality of the *two* sexes in the assumed constructed reality through the language of the *one* neutral-universal. For Irigaray, in order to recognise sexual difference in a language spoken by men and women it is essential to unveil the



neutral-universal-male rooted structure upon which this language is constructed and constructs. As she warns, we need to be suspicious of “everyone who claims neutrality without noticing that he is talking about *one* neuter, *his* neuter, and not an absolute neutrality” (1993, p. 116). Consequently, neutrality in language does not exist, nor is it possible to have a universality that recognises both sexes. For this reason one of sexual difference’s main emphases is to acknowledge the impossibility of mixing both sexes - one sex can relate to the other, but it cannot be substituted, nor can it be defined on behalf of the other.

#### 2. 4. 2. Specific Female Qualities

She does not enjoy just one orgasm nor necessarily a determined orgasm, in only one definite and definitive manner ...the pleasure of women is always multiple, and not of course uniquely genital.

Irigaray, 1991, p. 85

After negating the universal and neutral gendered existence by deconstructing the phallogentric order, Irigaray starts what is recognised by Stone (1998) as the second phase of her work. In this phase, Irigaray aims to give symbolic existence to *feminine subjectivity*. From the fruitful and extensive work of Irigaray I will only outline three main specific female qualities that I find most relevant to the purpose of this research. Firstly, she aims to prove by sexual bodily evidence that female sexuality does not need male references to become other than a “hole” or a “lack”. Secondly, women have the capacity of giving birth to another human being. This means that the possibility of becoming a mother gives special meaning to women’s subjectivity. Lastly, Irigaray’s emphasis on female-only biological specificities without men’s interference leads her to envision that feminine subjectivity is



originated in the relationship that a woman establishes with another woman; particularly the first relationship, that of mother to daughter.

After deconstructing the masculine structure that sustains symbolic order, Irigaray's aim is to show, and prove, that women have a specific sexuality that differs from the masculine sexuality. This sexuality cannot be defined as a modification of or in relation to the male one. Thus, it cannot be framed in terms of positive or negative, better or worse, having or not having, it must be framed in terms of its own *difference*. This means recognising the impossibility of creating a neutral-universal measure able to compare one's sexuality with the other or one's sex with the other.

For instance, as far as we know, women do not have erections, but this does not mean that women do not have sexual pleasure, nor does women's sexual pleasure exclusively depend upon male erections. As Irigaray asserts, "when one starts from 'the two lips' of the female sex, the dominant discourse finds itself baffled: there can no longer be a unity in the subject". She continues, "they (two lips) are always at least two, and [...] one can never determine of these two, which is one, which is the other: they are continually interchanging" (1985b, p. 83). Irigaray claims that, derived from these "two lips" women's genitals are irreducible to men's genitals: "Perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary. So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones" (1985b, p. 28). Irigaray's overall aim is to draw attention to the fact that for women there is no privilege of orgasmic unity and linearity. So women's orgasms cannot be poorly defined as a variation of men's because they do not work in the same way. They are not underpinned by the same economy.

Irigaray persists in emphasising how rich women's sexuality is. For instance, in her own words, "Women's erogenous zones are not the clitoris or the vagina, but



the clitoris and the vagina, and the lips, and the vulva, and the mouth of the uterus, and the uterus itself, and the breast...*what is astonishing is the multiplicity of genital erogenous zones in female sexuality*" (1985b, p. 64 – my emphasis). At this stage, it is important not to forget that Irigaray's purpose is to show that the sexes are absolutely irreducible, neither of them is better or worse, they just have incomparable differences between them. Irigaray continues to show the specificities of female sexuality: "a woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasures almost everywhere ...the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences. More complex, more subtle, than is imagined – in a system centred a bit too much on *one and the same*" (1985b, p. 103 – my emphasis). Consequently, Irigaray blames psychoanalysis for its arrogance in defining female sexuality exclusively in terms of men's sexuality, and for creating out of male sexuality *the* norm, without exploring the multiple irreducible existence of women's sexuality 'outside the norm'.

Irigaray's second female-specific quality is represented by the female capacity for maternity, which I have translated as maternal strength. The possibility of being a mother, of giving life to another human being is another one of women's specificities. Although the capacity of giving birth has been a reason to oppress women in many places and cultures, Irigaray reminds us that the answer is not to praise and over exalt this capacity because men do not have it. For her, this just represents the other side of the same coin. What Irigaray proposes is to contextualise the value of the capacity of giving birth in its own terms without embedding the meanings upon men's incapacity. Irigaray feels the need to divorce female pleasure from women's reproductive capacities without rejecting the existence and the consequences of these capacities in any woman's life.



The last feminine quality that Irigaray emphasises in her work is the figure of the mother as originary in our lives and the great impact that this has in our human existence. She also emphasises the need to retrieve the primary relationship between two women and explore the meanings of the relationship between mother and daughter. This relationship is an elemental structure which does not have a presence in patriarchy, and even further, the lack of acknowledgement of this elemental relationship between two women contributes to the perpetuation of the belief that phallogentrism is the only possible existential order. This lack of representation between mother and daughter is due to what Irigaray calls matricide: "Patriarchy is founded on the murder of the mother, which was committed to safeguard the power of the father and the husband" (cited by Muraro, 1994, p. 327). Similarly, Cavarero (1995) claims that, "Matricide allows men to appropriate the reality of birth, extracting it from the sexed territory of the feminine where it is rooted by nature" (p. 106). In short, due to matricide the father becomes the only recognised author of life. Accordingly, Berg (1991) asserts that, "Lacan relegates the maternal woman's body to the "real" of biological reproduction that lies outside of culture or the symbolic" (p. 58). Thus the mother originates biological life, but it is only the father who can provide access to the symbolic order - the "only" order in which the child can become a social human being, thus the figure of the mother is completely annihilated in this process.

Some Italian feminist groups like Milan Women's Bookstores Collective and Diotima are actively developing Irigaray's arguments by recognising the figure of the mother as the cornerstone in transcending the meanings, the significance that *personal* women's relationships have for women's politics. For example, the Milan Women's Bookstores Collective (1990) assert, "The relationship of one woman to another is

unthinkable in human culture” ( p. 48). They continue: “In the social order thought up by men, there are no forms of symbolic bond between woman and the woman greater than herself, who is her mother” (p. 128). I think one of our tasks as feminists is to discover this symbolic bond and to develop it in our own terms in order to create an alternative to a symbolic order that only privileges male beings.

In this regard Muraro (1994) starts by saying that, “it is when I recognise my dependence on the mother that I become symbolically independent” (p. 93). Similarly, drawing from her arguments, women’s greatest mistake is to attempt to obtain from men – the law of the father – that which only the mother can provide for us: the full acceptance of female difference, without masculine interference. The meaning of recognising the mother is to find out that the work of the mother in our first years of life is crucial to our being in this world; it is to acknowledge the effect of the mother on each of us. In the next section I will discuss figures in Italian feminism whose work is related to Irigaray’s in recognising the mother as the basis of their feminism, specifically the recognition of the mother is one of the bases of this feminism. Their work is characterised by their insistence that the source of knowledge, and the source of politics, is located precisely in the relationships between and among women. Their political practice consists in their endeavour to give symbolic meaning to relations between women, and having women as primary references *for* women.



## 2.5. Sexual Difference Thought

Perhaps a certain degree of obscurity is inevitable when one is trying to express new, unexplored concepts for which there is no existing framework within the tradition of western philosophical and political thought. The effort of formulating such a concept as ‘women as subject’ in language, which simply has the subject as male, the search for language of the other, impedes certain kinds of clarity and fluency

Bono & Kemp 1991, p. 8

Some Italian feminist have created and developed a thought in order to gather, theorise, and organise all their ideas and work on sexual difference. They called it *sexual difference thought*. This thought is mainly derived from Irigaray’s work and also from these feminists’ experiences in relating to other women. One of the things that worries these sexual difference thinkers is how to change the symbolic structures that underpin a language which does not recognise the concept of “woman as subject”. For this reason, one of the main tasks of these feminists is to name<sup>1</sup> – put into words, seek the language for – “the world in feminine” (Rivera, 1994).

The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective and Diotima, a philosophic community at Verona University that started to apply Irigaray’s work, have meticulously developed the theorisation of female political practice based on sexual difference. However, before these Italian women’s groups began to recognise the importance of theorising their experiences, the actual practice of female sexual difference began in the early 1960’s within women’s groups called *autocoscienza*. To highlight the history of Italian feminism and sexual difference thought, this second part of the chapter is divided into two main sections: the first explains the origins of sexual difference thought; the second outlines the practice of this thought.

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to call “naming” what the Italians call “nome.” In Italian “nome” has a broader meaning than in English. Italians name experiences, processes, feelings...etc. Because I could not find a more accurate term for “nome” I have decided to use naming, or to name.



### 2.5.1. The Origins of Sexual Difference Thought

I divide the origins of sexual difference thought into the three main stages that mark the progression of this thought from its origins to the present. Firstly, I will introduce the dynamics of the practices of the Italian women-only movement called *autocoscienza*. Secondly, I will expose the key role that the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective (MWBC) played in avowing the urgent need to search for names that allow them to give social meaning and transcendence to women's specific practices raised through *autocoscienza*. Lastly, I will present the work of Diotima: a work mostly based on giving continuity to the theorising task that the Milanese women started. It could be argued that members of Diotima have achieved a precise theoretical configuration of what is called *sexual difference thought* (Cavarero, 1996).

#### 2.5.1.1. Autocoscienza

Feeling oneself to be real is more than existing, it's finding a way of existing as oneself.

Winnicott 1971, cited by Minetti, 1993, p. 121

Those who have systematised sexual difference thought locate its origin in the decade of the 1960's when a women-only movement began in Italy: *autocoscienza*. The term *autocoscienza* represents the Italian adaptation of the North American consciousness-raising model. The term was first coined by Carla Lonzi to denote a philosophical and political practice. Her intention with this term was to transform "an old-age debased practice (gossip) into the self-determined and self-directed process of achieving a new consciousness or awareness" (Kemp & Bono, 1993, p. 6). These practices were carried out by small independent voluntary women-only groups in which the main emphasis was as much on sharing personal experiences as



experiencing personal relationships through talking to each other outside the male gaze (MWBC, 1987).

Autocoscienza was basically a tool for the constitution of women's identity in relation to other women (Minetti, 1993). In a more highly articulated expression, Kemp and Bono (1993) define autocoscienza as "the process of the discovery and reconstruction of the self, both the self of the individual woman and a collective sense of self: the search for the subject-woman" (p. 6). Therefore, it was in these among-women practices that the need of searching for the subject-woman originated. These searches for subjectivities have a key presence throughout the whole process in which Diotima group members have been able to configure sexual difference thought as it is known today.

It is argued that the autocoscienza period is clearly divided into two stages. During the first phase women participating in autocoscienza discovered the value of exchanging experiences with other women from a women-only point of view. This participation allowed women to enjoy the vital and beneficial experience of being part of something outside male structures. For some women, the autocoscienza experience was a new way of being political and then soon recognised the contradiction of what they called "double militia". Double militia refers to those women who simultaneously participated in autocoscienza groups and in the activities of organised political parties. The contradiction of this double militia arose when these parties, even the most leftist, were unable to deal with the full autonomy of expression that women who attended autocoscienza groups were showing. As a result, women's participation in mainstream politics diminished considerably in places where autocoscienza practices were growing (Kemp & Bono, 1993).

The second phase arrived after some years of practicing autocoscienza, and was characterised by two main contradictions. The first came when women became aware that they were changing a great deal, but other social relations outside the movement were not changing accordingly. As de Lauretis (1990) comments, “their sense of existence or their ways of being in the world were neither legitimated nor recognised” (p. 9). By experiencing this contradiction of achieving important progress and not seeing the expected modifications in society, the autocoscienza groups started radically to question the aims of their practices. They realised that they needed something that went beyond autocoscienza practices.

The second contradiction arose from the structural difficulty of recognising individual differences inside women’s groups. As Minetti (1993) asserts, “Within the groups there mushroomed the undeclared need to find space for the expression of individual differences” (p. 121). However, the expression of individual differences was not recognised in women’s politics whose political identity was strongly rooted in equality. Women needed to feel their sisterhood to confront male power. Afterwards the ability to acknowledge these individual differences within groups as a constituent part of women’s politics unchained subsequent crucial steps towards the configuration of a sexed thought.

In summary, practising autocoscienza were restricted to the area of the self, it only operated at the individual level “without taking into account the political dimension of relationships among women” (Bono & Kemp, 1991, p. 82). In other words, they were aware of their personal advances, but at the same time they were unable to move beyond these advances in order to influence the rest of their lives. Thus, the practice of autocoscienza needed a radical change which was the leitmotif



of creating and expanding new spaces of female sociality in which women started to practice more open and conflictual relationships among themselves.

#### 2.5.1.2. Milan Women's Bookstore Collective

The Libreria is on the one hand a bookshop, that is a 'public' space and an enterprise subject to economic laws; on the other hand, as a 'women's bookshop', it inevitably has a political dimension.

Bono & Kemp, 1991, p. 109

The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective (MWBC) is the most successful example of autocoscienza groups' transformation into new spaces of female sociality. Until then women's groups were established around the sole activity of talking about and relating to themselves. After 1975 new women's spaces were created with the aim of *doing* something. To fulfil this goal a women's collective founded a bookstore in Milan to provide a physical space to develop their thoughts. The MWBC was formed to collect and sell women-only writings, either books already written by recognised writers, philosophers, and novelists or to publish occasional pamphlets. The main role of these publications was to convey the advances achieved by women's relationships and exchanges among themselves. As a result, they irregularly published a pamphlet titled *Sottosopra* (Upside Down) that had the function of coordinating women's debates around women's politics that were taking place in the backrooms of the Libreria.

They were well organised and through their book sales they earned enough money to remain independent from any institution. As a consequence of their independence and the commitment of their membership, the MWBC became one of the most significant places of reference for any political and theoretical debate in the Italian feminist movement. Their work is mainly grounded in French feminist theory,

particularly in the work of Luce Irigaray, “with whom they entertain a relationship of reciprocal esteem and of collaboration” (Bono & Kemp, 1991, p. 109).

When the MWBC was founded, Italian women’s politics was stagnant; on the one hand, it needed “*conceptual tools* to develop itself and its relation to the world,” on the other, “these concepts could only arise from *autocoscienza* in order to be faithful to *women’s experiences*” (de Lauretis, 1990, p. 7, my emphasis). Soon, the task of naming women’s experiences and thoughts in order to respond to *autocoscienza*’s inability to modify the reality surrounding women’s groups became increasingly important to the members of the MWBC. Thus, they totally concentrated their time and efforts on searching for these names. Until then, it was believed that if the women who attended *autocoscienza* groups were able to change, reality would change automatically with them. This never happened. This difficult and uncertain endeavour of being able to name the first *female figures of freedom* – as they call them today - took place in the backrooms of the Libreria. From the very beginning they realised that first of all they needed a *sexed* language: a symbolic *sexed mediation* to name what was unnamed until then. They turned their energies first towards women writers in the hope of finding a starting point for naming their experiences.

They realised that they had to invent women’s original political practices in order to be able to discover a *sexed mediation*. For this reason they based their practices on reading and rereading women’s writings of any kind (de Lauretis, 1990). Without following any objective criteria, they chose to read their favourite writers: Jane Austin, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, among others. Unfortunately throughout these readings they did not find what



they were looking for: a starting point to break away from an already established sexed language.

Then, they suddenly became aware of an important discovery: “They were not equal.” For example in their preferences for choosing writers, they realised that some women in the group were more influential than others. They were looking for a language to express the unnamed words of sexual difference and the first thing they did was to name the “injustice” in their own relationships (MWBC, 1990). This discovery of not being compelled to conform to the idea of equality was a confusing and bitter feeling that little by little became gratifying. According to the MWBC, they were then able to rid themselves of the constraining ideal of neutral justice and instead contemplate the idea of how the existence of a female sexed way could represent the world. Regarding this important step of realising they were not equal, Minetti (1995) asserts, “What had previously been a question of recognising ourselves as equal, discovering common problems and paths (a process culminating in ‘woman is beautiful’) had turned into the real possibility of recognising ourselves as different” (p. 122). Putino (1993), I think, represents the feelings of the Libreria regarding disparity when she comments that she does not want to spend further energy talking to women who consider that “women’s space should be a homogeneous and neutral country, a cautious country of equals” (p. 229).

After naming this discovery, it was said that the MWBC wanted to establish disparity among women and to threaten the sisterhood that reigned among egalitarian feminists in Italy. MWBC members rapidly replied that “disparity already existed and should be recognized” (MWBC, 1990, p. 117). For this reason, they argued that the important issue was to acknowledge difference – disparity, as they prefer to call it - as an expression of richness and complexity instead of as a threat to the individual and



collective women's subjectivity process initiated through autocoscienza practices. They justify their emphasis on disparity among women on the basis that "equality has excluded the symbolic strength of our diversity" (p.143). Similarly, Cigarini (1996) claims that women were and still are equal in discrimination in front of men and in the lack of a symbolic means of expression of women as originally different from men. Nevertheless, at the moment that feminine desires arise, women need to recognise the differences among themselves in order to produce a theory that can account for women's political experiences. In other words, Minetti (1993) recognises the difficulty of tolerating other's needs if "one cannot recognise and tolerate one's own lack" (p. 126). She continues by arguing that women need to define their mutual limits if they want to make disparity a constructive practice. The importance of recognising disparity among women became crucial to consequent debates that took place. Kemp and Bono (1993), with a view from outside of Italian feminism, express the view that "women should be able to fight and to hate one another, but without losing sight of the fact that they are women, and that being a woman is a *value per se*" (p. 9).

In 1983 the Libreria edited a Sottosopra entitled, "Piú donne che uomini" [More women than men], but commonly known as "the Green Sottosopra" because of the colour of the print. This Green Sottosopra became a turning point in women's political practices in Italy. In the pamphlet the discussion centred on the nature of women's social difficulties. To overcome these social difficulties the MWBC proposed a theorisation of a relationship between women called *affidamento* – entrustment. What characterises *affidamento* is the requirement of always choosing another woman as the point of reference with whom to establish a privileged relationship. This definition of a *privileged* relationship between two women, which



goes beyond tenderness and sisterhood, inspired a large number of debates within the mainstream Italian feminist movement. The debates around *affidamento* and the later changes that it provoked in women's understanding of themselves were collected in the first book of the MWBC called, "Non credere averi dei dritti" [Don't think you have rights]. As the authors remarked, "This book is about the need to make sense of, exalt and represent in words and images the relationship of one woman to another" (1990, p. 9). This text represents a search for language and theoretical reflections on ways of representing relationships among women, in which women are the authors.

### 2.5.1.3. Diotima Group

Diotima is a group originated by the need to study how to translate into social strength, the strength and the knowledge achieved through relationships among women.

Muraro, 1996, p. 225; my translation

The issues discussed in the Green Sottosopra gave life to a women-only philosophical research group called Diotima. It could be argued that this group is the most intellectually creative group around the development of the meanings of *affidamento* to women's experiences of their relationships among themselves. Diotima, as the members prefer to define it, is a women-only philosophical community formed in Verona at the end of 1983 by women who were already engaged in the field of philosophy and who had a passionate interest in theoretical thought. Diotima is a group concerned with giving theoretical status to the political practices that take place among women. Diotima is the main group responsible for the theoretical founding and configuration of *the thought of sexual difference*. Since 1983 they have carried out the task of providing a philosophical "systematisation" of its concepts (Cavarero, 1986). Indeed Adriana Cavarero (1986), a philosopher



member of Diotima, claims that Diotima is for her, a “wish for a theory which would conceptually represent my being a woman” (p. 182).

Although the dynamics of authorship in the Libreria recognise no individual names behind the ideas since everything is done collectively, most Italian feminists would be able to name the two women most directly associated with the main ideas developed during its first years: Luisa Muraro, a philosopher; and Lia Cigarini, a lawyer. Luisa Muraro is particularly important, not just as a founder member of Diotima, but also because she is responsible for its name. Kemp and Bono regard Muraro as probably the most influential Italian feminist theorist to date. They note that she is an influential figure because she has been in the feminist movement from the very beginning and is still actively involved in it, “not because she’s an academic, but because she is a good thinker” (1993, p. 8). Lia Cigarini is also an influential feminist in Italy although her main interest is not central in this research; she is a lawyer and her main interest is to investigate female differences in law.

Muraro (1996) explains in a chapter called *Diotima community*, that she recognises that the development of sexual difference thought is fundamentally nurtured by everyone who has contributed to the recent history of the Italian women’s movement. For this reason it is extremely difficult to determine precise or collective authors, especially between MWBC and Diotima where today some women are members of both. The way both collectives reflect upon women’s politics and relationships responds to the way life revolves around them: everything is interwoven and one brilliant idea is not the fruit of one moment or one woman’s thinking, rather it is a collective effort which usually takes months or even years to articulate.



## 2.5.2. Feminist Practices of Sexual Difference Thought

The Diotima group argue that the thought of sexual difference is composed of two steps that take place at the same time in the political practice of women. The first recognises the value of *starting from oneself*. Only by reflecting her own practices can a woman reach the original female subject she represents. The second examines *relationships among women*, which are understood to be spaces without male interferences where women are able to discover and create their own original female sources, references and definitions in relation to the world. This second point is sustained by several feminist practices that I have detailed below. A further point that is attributed to the Diotima group and particularly to Luisa Muraro, is the effort of creating an alternative symbolic order by: starting from oneself and by practicing relationships between/among women. I also introduce this alternative symbolic order called *the symbolic order of the mother* in order to show the symbolic underpinning of the feminist practices of this group.

### 2.5.2.1. Starting From Oneself

A sexed thought would have to become the representative potency of and for a female subject able to name and think herself, *having herself as her starting point*, her originary and irreducible sexual difference: sexual difference as the foundation of thought for the female subject, neither absorbable in and by the other sex, nor mere accident.

Cavarero, 1986, p. 183, my emphasis

*Starting from oneself* is where the Diotima group physically situate the origin of the production of a “sexed thought”. By sexed thought they refer to a thought that conceptually represents being a woman and the need to think the woman self by women selves. This means that in this thought a woman finds herself being the subject, and not just the object of knowledge. To create original female ways of being



is grounded in recognising a sexed thought from a female subjectivity. The recognition has to start from discovering the sexed thought within oneself.

The Diotima group recognise that starting from oneself is a necessary origin in a sexed thought; an origin that gathers both the *female self* derived from the cultural and the historical context in which the *female body* is inserted. For these thinkers the importance of developing this thought resides in the possibility and the consequences of women relating to each other without excluding their female origin. This possibility allows women to start from themselves away from “the male gaze” or male sanctioning.

Diotima members are particularly concerned by the possibility that their practices could be confused with the wider radical feminist movement, because they strongly support women-only environments as spaces to carry out the fundamental process through which women can create their own subjectivity without the need to imitate, or to become a version of, the universal-neutral-male subjectivity. The segregation of women from men must be understood as separation not separatism. As Cigarini (1996) claims, separation is the notion that we are aware that the sexes are two but the world is only one. She does not agree with gender separatism in political parties or other associations, for separatism underlines the notion that the origin of the activity comes from a male universalist source. Separation emphasises Irigaray’s premise that both sexes are irreducible and according to Muraro, women need to be in homosocial or monosexual environments because these environments provide a physical space where women can actually start from themselves without male interferences. However, what distinguishes sexual difference thought from radical feminist groups is their understanding of separation. To achieve original female subjectivity, separation is necessary, more so in the case of women, because women



still have a long and arduous path to their original subjectivity beyond the confusing discourses that legitimise a sole neutral-universal-male subjectivity. In other words, it is not just about searching or creating the original sources that nurture women's subjectivity; it is about challenging the roots of the rationale that for many centuries has made men and women believe that there was a sole universal-neutral-male subjectivity.

Kemp and Bono (1993) assert that sexual difference thinkers want “to overcome a ‘static separatism’ – the idea of a separated woman’s world as a heaven of peace – in favour of a ‘dynamic separation,’ at play in the social arena” (p. 26). In summary, the importance of women-only environments is that female desire and freedom can more easily arise and these are essential to creating a sexed thought in which women are the original and only subjects.

In the framework of this research starting from myself represents the act of recognising my female subjectivity as primarily responsible for the approach and the writing adopted throughout the investigation. This means that the election of theories, concepts and ways of representing my data is basically grounded on my own experiences as a female rugby player and female researcher. In this research, I had first recognised an unconstrained female desire in myself to look for the female in me. Starting from my female desire and recognising the significance of my friends’ desire in rugby has allowed me to focus on issues that otherwise would have been overlooked: for instance, the importance of theorising about our differences on and off the field and the consequences of them in creating our original female subjectivities. Furthermore, my subjectivity in this thesis is widely represented through reflections about the meanings of my friends’ and my own experiences in

rugby. Therefore, I start from my experiences in which my female desire represents the most genuine object that I have to relate to the world.

#### 2.5.2.2. Relations between/among women

A “speaking (as) woman” might articulate experiences that are devalued or not permitted by the dominant discourse: the most important, in Irigaray’s view, are the sensual/emotional relationships of women with their mothers and with other women, which have been censured in psychoanalytic theory.

Burke, 1994, p. 39

To conceptualise feminist politics derived from the experiences embodied through female relationships is one of the Diotima group’s main strategies. Diotima group, deriving from Irigaray’s ideas, work toward understanding these sensual/emotional relationships with other women, that are often seen as chaotic and meaningless, in order to produce meaning and knowledge specifically rooted in women’s experiences. According to Ellis, “Understanding offers the possibility of turning something chaotic into something potentially meaningful” (2002, p. 401). The ultimate goal of the Diotima group is to systematise a sexed thought that, grounded on women’s experiences and relations, is able to enhance women’s knowledge and ways of being in this world.

According to sexual difference thought, women need to be conscious of all the consequences that being and thinking from woman’s subjectivity involves. For this reason, a woman learns to be herself when she recognises authority in another woman. Understanding the outcomes that can be produced when two women – who are not equal - relate to each other is the basic practice upon which the Diotima group bases their feminist practices.

The Diotima group’s starting point is the discovery of MWBC (1990): that women are not equal. Unlike liberal feminists, MWBC assert that there are



differences between women beyond static categories such as sexual orientation, ethnicity or age, for instance, in terms of power, wisdom, and interests. Diotima members recognise that a woman knowing more than another woman does not undermine solidarity among women because disparity among women has always existed in women's everyday life relationships. To a certain extent disparity is a necessary condition in any relationship. According to MWBC (1990) and Bocchetti (1996), recognising disparity promotes knowledge and understanding among women in women's terms. Furthermore, the Diotima group recognise that only through disparity can women achieve a self-referenced position, which "can be measured and not measured, which can judge and not be judged, a principle of gendered knowledge of the world" (de Lauretis, 1990, p. 14). The Diotima group then examined the consequences of *practising disparity* among themselves. The first necessary condition they discovered was to acknowledge authority in another woman, which they specifically have labelled as *female authority*. Muraro (1994, p. 331- my emphasis), for example, states:

I am not referring to the feminism of rights and equality, but to the movement that has led us to choose to stay among women, to choose to act in accordance with the judgment of our fellow women, *to accept the authority of women*, and to seek the nourishment of female thought for our minds.

Accepting the authority of women has allowed the Diotima group to name power relationships that do not imitate or reverse the omnipresent concept of power that underpins the phallogentric order. Bocchetti (1996) argues that there is one main difference between power and authority. Power is imposed: it is wielded by the person who has it. Authority needs to be recognised by those who do not deploy it. Female authority then, is equivalent to respect that needs to be earned through relationships, not a power through imposed or acquired status. As a result, power based on this



authority is achieved and used in more responsible ways. I am, thus, particularly interested to examine the key difference between power and female authority in women's rugby relationships.

Muraro has taken female authority further by naming a special relationship between two women as *affidamento* – entrustment. In this sense, Rivera (2001) asserts, “Affidamento is a privileged political relationship between two women, two women who are defined as diverse and disparate” (p. 45). Affidamento relationships are structured on the basis that two women are different and one recognises *female authority* in the other and so recognises in this woman a reference point with which to relate to the rest of the world. According to Whitford (1994), “The idea of affidamento is that another woman should provide the symbolic mediation between individual and society” (p. 25). Muraro (1995) asserts that affidamento simply means a relationship that occurs “when you tie yourself to a woman who can help you achieve something which you think you are capable of but which you have not yet achieved” (p. 123). This demonstrates a further difference between authority and authoritarianism, because affidamento relationships are not imposed, any attempt at authoritarian use of power automatically breaks the contract between the two women.

Affidamento relationship as a central concept of sexual difference thought can contribute to a better understanding of women's rugby relationships. There are several elements that make the exercise of illustrating this concept in women's rugby especially challenging. Firstly, the mutual recognition of the affidamento relationship: for affidamento to fully take place between two women, these two women have to agree on it. Secondly, the recognition of female authority: affidamento represents a very special relationship and usually this can only take place in between one or two women. It is not a chance encounter and needs time to develop. Lastly, the



recognition of a physical relationship: whereas sexual difference thinkers do not refer to the possibility of “physical” entrustment in *affidamento*, in rugby physical entrustment is one of the driving forces behind recognising authority in another woman. As a result I have slightly modified the meanings of *affidamento* to be able to apply it to my experiences in rugby.

As already noted, an *affidamento* relationship is a conscious choice between two women. They are, “those relationships in which there is a precise desire, where one woman searches for another woman to support her desire” (Cigarini 1996, p. 164). For the Diotima group, female desire, found in *affidamento* relationships, symbolises the main object of exchange that a woman must have in order to become the subject of her own.

When talking about female desire, Diotima members are not referring to female sexual desire, which often is understood as the counterpart to male sexual desire. Drawing on Irigaray’s work, Braidotti proposes desire “as the positive affirmation of one’s longing for plenitude and well-being – a form of felicity, or happiness” (1997, p. 306). In this research I aim to approach female desire in rugby in search of multiple meanings like sexual desire, desire for close physicality with other women on and off the pitch, and desire for developing one’s own subjectivity through relating to other team mates.

Moreover, the Diotima group aims to discover, create and name exclusively female symbolic mediations through which women can feel they are the originators of their own feminine ways of being in this world, not merely imitators. It is for this reason that Italian feminists have particularly worked on recognising and naming symbolic meanings, such as the female desire and female freedom produced through meaningful relationships between/among women (de Lauretis, 1994). When a woman



recognises female authority in another woman it allows her female desire to nurture and this eventually produces what the Diotima group has called *female freedom*. In this research, I understand female freedom as the act of being able to recognise the existence of female desire in each of my rugby friends with whom I have experienced a significant relationship. For these philosophers emancipation is not enough for female freedom to be produced (Cigarini, 1996). Emancipation, they argue, forces a woman to conceal her female difference, whereas female freedom is represented by the possibilities that a woman has of choosing and deciding for herself. In other words, female freedom frames symbolically the place where a woman genuinely finds herself, where a free interpretation of herself is possible.

In summary, the driving force of the Italian sexual difference scholars is to provide an exclusively female symbolic through which women can represent themselves and be represented. Their strength is to work towards the acknowledgement of the symbolic nature intrinsically attached to the everyday life relationships with other women.

The Diotima group's work assumes that "the 'real' world cannot be separated from an investigation of the symbolic structures which both express and shape reality" (Kemp and Bono, 1993, p.9). In this study, although rugby is a "real" world situation, and I am dealing with women who have played rugby, the intention is to also show the need of a female symbolic in order to provide means to change women's rugby. In this sense I totally agree with the Italian feminists that claim to change women's reality. First of all, women need a symbolic revolution, then a "real" change would take place. Due to the emphasis on theorising about this female symbolic dimension, the Diotima group is regarded as one of the most significant philosophical groups within Italian feminism. Their ultimate purpose analysed in this research is their



theorisation about a new symbolic order that acknowledges women's corporal, historical and social differences as an original source of female subjectivity. Muraro has called it the symbolic order of the mother. Regardless of the phallic order that privileges the sex that has a phallus, the symbolic order of the mother is originated from the premise that everybody - female or male subjects – needs a mother to come alive to in this world.

### 2.5.2.3. The Symbolic Order of the Mother

The need for a symbolic mediation that can transcend material reality to create a new power structure is identified with a symbolic figure that is able to name the feminine origin and which at the same time is intrinsically related to the symbolic dimension. Sexual difference thinkers have named this figure the *symbolic mother*. Muraro has grounded the symbolic mother in a broader symbolic order called *the symbolic order of the mother*. I will discuss this order in detail at the end of this next section. De Lauretis (1994, p. 25) explains the meanings of the symbolic mother as follows:

As a theoretical concept, the *symbolic mother* is the structure that sustains or recognises the gendered and embodied nature of women's thought, knowledge, experience, subjectivity, and desire – their 'originary difference' and guarantees women's claim to self-affirmative existence as subjects in the social; an existence as subjects not altogether separate from male society, yet autonomous from male definition and dominance.

This concept is also supported by Irigaray's work on the mother-daughter relationship as the originary relationship between two women. It is necessary to recognise the difficulties that this concept involves: to appropriately link the notion of the biological mother with its symbolic representation is never easy. As Cigarini (1996) clarifies, "My embodied mother is the woman who has brought me into the world, in contrast



the symbolic mother gives me the strength, the harmony and the richness to represent myself as a sexed being in this world” (p. 75).

Muraro is the main Italian thinker who has delved into the meanings and consequences of the order of the symbolic mother; as we shall see later, she is the main initiator of a new social order based on the symbolic mother. However, conceptualising this symbolic figure is rather complex. Firstly, the symbolic is a dimension that underpins our actions and relations but cannot be materially visualised. Recognising this difficulty, Muraro (1993) affirms that it was not through philosophy, but through women’s politics that she learnt that for a woman to be free she needs the symbolic maternal strength in her life, as she has needed her mother to come in to the world. What makes the sexual difference thought alive is that the Diotima group and other Italian collectives are constantly analysing and debating the main consequential developments that this new symbolic order provides in their lives. For instance, one of the consequences of framing the symbolic order of the mother is the capacity of these collectives to work on the idea of “the end of patriarchy” (1996). This radical claim has allowed these feminists to think the unthinkable and work towards those concepts and practices that until now have been regarded as impossible or non-existent. The purpose of proposing the end of patriarchy is to create a genuine path for a symbolic revolution in women’s politics to take place. One of the latest works of some of the members of Diotima applying this symbolic revolution is gathered in a book called *Una revolución inesperada. Simbolismo y sentido del trabajo de las mujeres* (2001) [An unexpected revolution. Symbolism and the sense of women’s work]. I assume that rugby might serve as one venue for an unexpected symbolic revolution and therefore, in my research I will look to illustrate these concepts through the politics of everyday rugby.



Secondly, the word *mother* has many connotations for women, some of which are problematic due to the wealth of emotions inherently involved with it. Therefore, one of the most complex tasks for Muraro has been – and probably still is - to articulate the symbolic representation of the mother without ignoring the embodied figure of the mother in each of us. Although the symbolic mother does not refer to a real mother, it is inevitably inspired by the figure of the mother. In my research, consequently, I will also bring in the “real” mothers of my rugby relations. Muraro’s most challenging issue in this order is how to make real the consequences that the symbolic meanings of the mother have for women’s relationships.

This symbolic order is based in the crucial change in women’s mentality. She cannot find freedom and independence in the men’s world, but only by recognising authority in another woman; by recognising the “symbolic debt” she owes to another woman (MWBC, 1990). As Diotima scholars write, it is not by chance that this symbolic order refers to the figure of the mother.

One of the premises of sexual difference thought is that the *affidamento* relationship only signifies women’s relationships if it is underpinned by the figure of the symbolic mother. At the same time, as I noted earlier, being able to name *affidamento* was made possible by acknowledging and exploring the richness that the practice of disparity among women provides.

To be able to place oneself in a new symbolic order that recognises women as subjects, one needs inevitably to explore and move forward the specific feminine symbolic mediations. These mediations are the symbolic ways through which one relates to other women, men, and to the world in general. It can be said that they are the kind of references through which one gives sense and legitimation to one’s actions and one’s sense of being in society. One also needs to start from oneself to allow the



symbolic order of the mother to give sense to oneself. As Muraro replies when she is asked about the political inefficacy of this order, the reason why the symbolic order of the mother is so slow to be understood is because it is like “giving birth to the world,” finding oneself with the need to invent mediations, be able to create a new reality (cited at Rivera, 1994). She is quite optimistic when she asserts that as tiring and slow as the creation of a new world is, the more fruitful this world will become.

In conclusion, Muraro’s symbolic order of the mother provides us with the notion of the importance of translating the real mother’s presence in each of us into a symbolic order (Rivera, 1997). I believe the symbolic order of the mother allows for a woman to create a new reality that recognises her experiences.

My purpose in this research is, consequently, to examine the possibilities that rugby provides for women to start experiencing a new reality. I ask, then, “Can women’s embodied experiences in rugby transcend the phallic order?” And, “Can women’s relationships in rugby act as a mediation that enacts a symbolic order of the mother? This is not an easy question to answer with a “yes” or “no”. Through my research, by interpreting women’s rugby experiences and relationships through sexual difference theory, I aim to analyse possibilities for women’s alternatives to the masculine order.

In order to fully understand why I have chosen this theoretical approach to my research on women’s rugby experiences I will revise, in the next chapter, the most relevant sport’s literature on women’s team-contact sports. Currently women participate in so many sports that I could not possibly deal with them all. For this reason, my aim is to analyse the theories and the main premises that underpin women’s team-contact sports literature, to compare them to sexual difference thought, and to be able to show how sexual difference thought might enrich feminist sport



studies. In the next chapter, I also detail five studies focused on women's rugby. I analyse these in-depth because of the direct connection with my topic.

## CHAPTER III

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### 3.1. Introduction

There is a body of literature review that discusses women's "positive" experiences in sport (Chu et al., 2003; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Menneson & Clément, 2003; Tsang, 2000; Scraton et al., 1999; Cadwell, 1999; Duncan, 1998; Young, 1997; McDermott, 1996; Young and White, 1995). I recognise that these are only a few of the many contributions to this issue. As I have stated earlier, social research into women's sport is currently so diverse that attempting to deal with all the references that refer to women's participation in sport, and the positive consequences of it, would surpass the aims of this PhD. It is for this reason that I have decided to focus this literature review on studies that specifically engage with women's rugby or women's team-contact sports (football, handball, ice hockey...), sports that, I consider, share some important elements with rugby, like the team spirit and the physical contact allowed on the pitch.

Consequently, this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I will present the latest research on women's team-contact sports in developed countries of North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. They are called *team* because of their need for several women to carry out the goals of the sports; called *contact* because some physical body contact is allowed in their rules. Most of the research on team-contact sports has defined these sports as "masculine". This is mainly because they have a long history in male culture and because it is believed that these sports develop traits identified by most sport feminists<sup>1</sup> as "masculine". It seems that doing physical activity with a group of "mates" and having physical contact with them are considered "masculine"

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<sup>1</sup>For practical reasons I label researchers on women's team-contact sports as *feminists*. I think it is not by chance that the majority of these researchers are women.



traits. In this section I will focus on research on women's football, ice hockey, rugby and handball. Secondly, I will review research specifically about women's rugby. I will review the aims, theoretical frameworks and premises that underpin these analyses and I will also comment on the results achieved in each study.

All the studies reviewed have used qualitative methodologies in order to comprehend the meanings and the motives of women who participate in team-contact sports. The common technique used in order to obtain data has been semi-structured interviews (Menneson & Clément, 2003; Thing, 2001; Scraton et al, 1999; Young, 1997; Kolnes, 1995). Some studies have additionally used observation techniques. For example, Theberge (1997) spent three years systematically observing a women's ice hockey team in Canada. Regarding women's rugby research, there are also several authors (Broad, 2001; Carle and Nauright, 1999; Wheatley, 1994) who have used observation techniques. Some researchers were also team players (Broad 2001; Cox and Thompson 2000).

### 3.2. Women's Team-Contact Sport Research

Most of the studies revised in this chapter are based on the critical concept of hegemony. Sport feminists have adopted the concept of hegemony in order to explain how gender relations of power are reflected in sport. For these feminists, hegemony is grounded in the assumption that "cultural practices, including sport, are arenas in which values, meanings, and ideologies are contested" (Birrell & Theberge, 1994, p. 326). For these authors sport is a constant changing process, an assumption that underpins the basics of hegemony. On the one hand, sport feminists look at sport as a masculine domain that oppresses women. Thus, one of sport feminists' goals in analysing hegemony in their research is to unmask the pervasive existence of



masculine power in sport (Hall, 1996; Theberge and Birrell, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994;). In this sense, Birrell (2000) views these sports as sites “for celebrating skills and values clearly marked as *masculine*” (p. 61). On the other hand, sport feminists analyse women’s participation in sport as a possible site for women’s resistance practices (Birrell, 2000; Cadwell, 1998; Hall, 1996; Theberge and Birrell, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994).

One premise of this approach is to acknowledge that hegemonic male power in sport is not coercive or violently imposed against the will of those women who want to play sports that are not considered in popular consciousness to be appropriate for their gender. Instead, it is argued, power operates through more subtle forms of socialisation and ideological influence, which supports the belief that team-contact sports are “naturally” appropriate for boys and men. Consequently, the argument continues, “masculine” sports must “naturally” be inappropriate for girls and women. In order to explain why some sport activities are considered to be appropriate for women and why some others are not, it is necessary to engage with the idea that sport as part of society is organised according to traditional gender roles: feminine and masculine. It is argued that from an early age we learn feminine - and masculine-appropriate behaviours which are based on the ideology of masculinity. To understand further how this dualistic gender pattern is reproduced and maintained it is necessary to grasp the meaning of the ideology of masculinity.

Ideology is a set of ideas that works to maintain the hegemonic power that dominant groups exercise in society. The interesting notion here is that subordinated groups accept their subordination as “commonsense” and “natural” (Theberge and Birrell 1994) and as a result, there are no straightforward confrontations against this power. For example, there is general acceptance of gender inequalities “as natural”;



supported by the ideology of masculinity. According to Theberge (2000), “the ideology of masculinity is the dominant way of seeing the world that works to keep social gender order structures in place” (p. 64). This ideology is rooted in the polar opposition of the two genders and belief in the superiority of masculine characteristics above feminine ones. Regarding this, Krane (2001) asserts, “characteristics of hegemonic femininity<sup>2</sup> include being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate and gentle. On the other hand, strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence and independence are characteristics of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 117). There is a parallel assumption that the display of superior masculine hegemonic characteristics are linked to a male biological body. Therefore, the ideology of masculinity converts male dominance in sport into common sense, largely proved by biological sex differences. Consequently, one of the important tasks of most sport feminists is to unmask that the social constructions derived from biological differences between men and women are ideological constructions. The supposed “natural” male dominance in sport is something that needs to be challenged by the use of sociological theories of gender.

The most common aim of research about women’s team-contact sports is to provide evidence and explanations which confirm that the involvement of women in predominantly male sports is a sign of resistance to the already established gender order. Moreover, the most common result of these studies, after detailed analysis, is that women’s participation in traditional male sports is subordinated to male participation. A question arises: “How can women who play football, rugby, handball

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<sup>2</sup> According to Connell (1995) hegemonic masculinity applies upon all genders, therefore femininity can never be hegemonic in the same sense. However, for practical reasons I have adopted Krane’s (2001) terminology and I refer to hegemonic femininity as the femininity that is considered to be the stereotyped-emphasised one that every woman should be identified with. Regarding this research what really matters is that both terms incorporate compulsory heterosexuality.



and ice hockey resist the gender order in these sports, and at the same time, reproduce this gender order?" This is one of the main questions that sport feminists attempt to tackle in their analyses.

Most research about women playing "masculine" sports focuses on disentangling the ideology of masculinity that constrains the ways through which women engage in those sports. According to this kind of research, women's sports constraints are twofold. Firstly, the *ideology of masculinity*, as we have seen above, naturalises the social construction of sexual difference; thus, the pervasive belief that only some sports are appropriate for women is ideologically supported. This ideology also determines what is suitable for a "real" woman, so, women who play masculine sports are easily labelled as "not-real" or "deviant" (Hall 1996; Hargreaves, 1994)

Secondly, and related to the meanings of this gender deviation, women who participate in 'masculine' sports are required to demonstrate visibly that their sexuality is 'normal-heterosexual'. This leads us to the concept of *compulsory heterosexuality*, which, according to Rich (1996), reproduces the assumption that the majority of women are "naturally" heterosexual. This author also argues, "some of the forms by which male power manifests itself are more easily recognizable as enforcing heterosexuality on women than are others" (p. 133). Consequently, because team-contact sports are perceived to be so fiercely masculine in character, they enforce heterosexuality on women who play them. Compulsory heterosexuality is a concept that helps to explain the manifestations of the ideology of masculinity that take place in women's team-contact sports. Women playing team-contact sports need to follow a stereotyped heterosexual feminine appearance – not too muscular, and with make up, and long hair - which in some cases overrides the need for playing excellence in these sports.



In order to prove that the gender and the sexuality of female “male” sports players are perfectly normal, some studies have examined how women act, dress and behave outside the sport. It has been shown that women tend to present a stereotyped femininity or even a hyper-feminine image (Scraton et al., 1999). According to Kolnes (1995), “They [soccer and handball players] are constantly working out an acceptable balance between feminine and masculine” (p. 66). Most of the authors agree that these women are required to present themselves in terms of hegemonic femininity and compulsory heterosexuality in order to be accepted. This aim is reflected in the emphasis on femininity that some female players display through the use of make-up, having long hair, and dressing in feminine ways outside the sporting arena (Cox and Thompson, 2000; Scraton, et al., 1999; Theberge, 1997; Kolnes, 1995).

Results indicate that women in “male” sports comply with hegemonic femininity and heterosexual appearance. And in general, women playing team-contact sports are not challenging the essentials of hegemonic male power in sport. For instance, Scraton et al. (1999) claim, “they [female football players] challenge conventional standards of femininity (...) however this does not present a major challenge to the obdurate masculine/feminine dichotomy” (p. 108). The ideology of masculinity is rooted in the gender dichotomy which originates from the taken-for-granted ideas about gender differences – namely, that men need to be strong, tough, and competitive in order to perform well; whereas women need to be constantly worried about displaying femininity and heterosexual appeal in order to be accepted as sportswomen. In short, for men to perform in sport is the main issue; in particular for women who play team-contact sports, instead, the main issue is to struggle with the contradictory requirements of femininity in sport.



Some interesting questions related to women's participation in team-contact sports arise from this research. "Why do some women take pleasure in playing sports that do not emphasise hegemonic femininity?" "How do women play sports in which they are definitely second-class to men?" At this stage, we need to recognise that hegemonic male power over women is never total or complete (Hargreaves, 1994); subordinate groups, in this case women in sport, are able to contest dominant power. In addition, hegemony embraces the idea that people are active recipients of culture.

According to Hall (1996), sport is considered "as a site of cultural struggle where gender relations are reproduced and sometimes resisted" (p. 90). The phrase "sometimes resisted" is crucial for understanding research on women's team-contact sports. Generally speaking, most researchers agree that women involved in these sports are challenging the gender order. At least these women are breaking down myths that previously naturalised their inability to play these sports. In this vein, Theberge (1997) claims, "the movement of women into these sports is thus a particularly important instance of the shifting terrain of contemporary gender relations" (p. 70). In a similar manner, Scraton et al. (1999) recognise that the mere participation of women in football heavily disrupts the dominant notion of femininity.

Emphasising Hall's idea that gender relations in sport are "sometimes resisted", Theberge and Birrell (1994) argue that an act becomes resistant if the participants are able to recognise and theorise upon it. These authors have recognised three main ways to recognise women's resistance in sport. Firstly, women need to be conscious that their participation in these sports corresponds to an act of resistance and rebellion against the gender order. Secondly, women's protests against discrimination in sport must become public through media coverage. Lastly, there is a need to develop alternative forms of sports, especially forms linked with the ideal of



recreational sport, in which the main goals are participation, enjoyment and cooperation rather than extreme competition and winning at all costs.

Interestingly although competition is at the heart of team-contact sports, the main results obtained from the latest research on women's team-contact sport in developed societies (Menesson & Clément, 2003; Broad, 2001; Thing, 2001; Cox and Thompson, 2000; Carle & Nauright, 1999, Scraton et al. 1999) show that the most common reasons associated with women's motivation to participate in these sports are the pleasures that they provide to the female participants. The most remarkable pleasure is derived from their abilities to improve their physical skills through engaging in these sports. Cox and Thompson (2000), for example, suggest that, "the players expressed a sense of joy in their physical capabilities that had been developed through soccer" (p. 11). In addition, one of the results of Scraton et al. (1999) research on women's football shows that "being physical" is an important part of their experiences. According to Thing (2001), the sense of physical empowerment allows women to experience power because they are "able to control a situation" (p. 284). Furthermore, Theberge (1997) supports this idea from her findings when she says, "The satisfaction and sense of accomplishment women hockey players derive from their sport participation... are directly tied to the physicality of sport and the possibility of the exercise of skill and force in athletic competition" (p. 83).

The physical empowerment that these women achieve by practising these sports has been assumed to be one of the major acts of resistance. Nevertheless, results show that the physical empowerment of being able to experience control of their own bodies can as well end in reproducing the dominant model of male sport. For example, one of Theberge's conclusions around the risk of injuries involved in the high physical contact in ice hockey clearly illustrates the inherent contradiction of



women's participation in these sports. Theberge (1997) argues that, "The increasing evidence that women athletes readily accept violence inflicted on their bodies in competitive sport suggests an incorporation, rather than resistance, to the dominant model of men's sport" (p. 83). On one hand, it seems that to be able to penetrate very male sports is a sign of challenge to the gender order that for long has defined these sports; on the other, to be able to become part of these sports means unavoidably to be incorporated into and hence to accept, the dominant male model of sport. Therefore, the possibilities of challenging the hegemonic masculinity by women's active participation can also provide the basis of a critique.

Another pleasure that it is not regarded as an act of resistance per se, but also derives from being able to play team sports is the possibility of sharing goals and interests with other women. For instance, Young (1997) asserts, "The respondents stated that they enjoyed being in the company of other women who shared similar physical interests and goals" (p. 300). In this study Young interviewed female athletes involved in rugby, rock climbing, wrestling, ice hockey and martial arts. Similarly, Scraton et al. (1999) affirm, "The most frequently mentioned aspect of their experiences was the pleasure they gained from being together, their connectedness as women and as a team" (p. 106). I will argue later that most sport feminists have overlooked the potential for resistance embedded in women's ability to create their own meanings in sport; meanings which are not the same, but neither opposite, to men's sports' meanings.

The third way of recognising women's participation in male sports as an act of resistance resides in their ability to develop alternative forms of competitive sport. The work on women's softball as a recreational women-only activity carried out by Birrell and Ritcher (1987 cited by Theberge, 1997, p. 85) is an example "in which the



participants consciously challenged the ‘male model’”. De-emphasising the competitive side of the game and emphasising the pleasure and satisfaction of mere participation is a direct challenge to the controversial male model. However, most of the studies – except Birrell and Ritcher - that I have referred in this section (Cox and Thompson 2000; Scraton, et al. 1999; Theberge 1997; Young 1997) have analysed women who are playing their sport at the highest possible standard. It would, therefore, be very difficult to demonstrate that these women are attempting to resist the values of high-level competition when one of the motives that keeps them playing and training is the possibility of winning major events. It would be important to contemplate the possibility of theorising about the meanings that these women give to their experiences in high-level “masculine” sports.

Amongst some sport feminist scholars (Menesson and Clément, 2003; Krane, 2001; Cadwell, 1998) homosexual practices are also considered acts of resistance to the gender order in sport. For instance, Cadwell (1998) asserts that in sport, “lesbians and gays are adopting strategies to *destabilize, subvert and resist* the construction of heterosexual space” (p. 156). In another vein, Menesson and Clément (2003) do not specifically refer to female homosexuality as a resistance to the gender order. They are more concerned with showing how women’s homosocial practices in “male sports” such as football and rugby develop homosexual relationships among the players as a way of protection. As they comment, “Stigmatized by men, she [one of their participants] builds a positive self-image through her involvement in homosexual relations with those who are ‘like her’” (p. 325).

In general, all these studies recognise the impossibility of confirming that female “masculine” sports players are resistant to the already established gender order. The researchers assert that women’s actions and experiences in these sports are



complex, ambiguous and to some extent contradictory. These conclusions reflect the complexities that surround the fact that male hegemonic power in sport is never totally accepted by women who play team-contact sports, but at the same time, this power is not completely resisted.

The ideology of masculinity incorporating compulsory heterosexuality plays a key role in gender relations of power and in the ways we might understand possible resistances to them. It is argued that, in order to resist these ideological constructions, women who play “masculine” sports should display characteristics completely opposed to hegemonic femininity traits and to heterosexual conduct. For instance, Krane (2001) overtly supports this idea when she affirms that there are three groups of athletic women who directly challenge hegemonic femininity, “Muscular and physically assertive female athletes, feminist sport participants and lesbian sportswomen” (p. 124). But to challenge hegemonic male power in sport by imposing fixed ways of doing it is a slippery terrain that sport feminists have not yet resolved. If Krane perceives only that muscular, feminist and lesbian sportswomen are challenging hegemonic femininity: “How might she account for what all the rest of the sportswomen do?” “Are all these women compliant simply because they are not lesbian, muscular or feminist? “At the same time, “How can one be certain that these particular groups of athletic women are not reproducing the system in which male hegemony is grounded?” “What does it mean to directly challenge hegemonic male power, the ideology of masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality?” Moreover, “How can feminists from an academic perspective legitimise which sportswomen’s actions are challenging and which are not?”

After reviewing some literature on women’s team-contact sport, I will, in the next section, focus on studies that have as their only topic women’s rugby. My



election of five studies does not mean that there is not other women's rugby studies published. I have chosen these five studies because there are the ones that I have found in English, Catalan and Spanish writing sport Journals, women's sport and rugby books. I am aware there have been published some studies on women's rugby in Germany and French languages. However, my lack of knowledge of these languages has limited my search.

### 3.3. Women's Rugby Studies

The aim of this section is to present studies that have been carried out specifically about issues in women's rugby. I will concentrate here exclusively on five studies. Firstly, Wright and Clarke (1999) studied the media coverage of women's rugby in England and Australia. Their research is not directly related to women's experiences in rugby, but it gives a broad vision of how women's rugby is portrayed in the media. Secondly, Wheatley (1994) examined the discourses on sexuality that take place in men's and women's rugby songs in a team from the USA. These rugby songs have become an important way to analyse how women resist the gender order in rugby. Thirdly, Carle and Nauright (1999) explored women's experiences inside a women's rugby team in Australia. The main concern of these authors is how these experiences in rugby are, at the same time, liberating and oppressing women. Fourthly, Chu et al. (2003) offer an interesting insight into the experiences of the New Zealand women's rugby team, the "Black Ferns" – currently the world champions. The data were collected when the team was participating in the Tri Nations competition between New Zealand, Canada and USA held in Palmerston North (NZ) in 1999. Lastly, Broad's (2001) research about women's rugby in the early 1990's in a team from the USA is underpinned by queer theory, which follows

poststructuralist premises. Regarding my aim of applying a specifically poststructuralist feminist approach, Broad's study appears the most significant for my study.

The game of rugby was developed in England at Rugby School<sup>3</sup> in the mid-nineteenth century. In those days the main goal of the game was to build the "characters" (Young, 1988) of the upper-middle-class boy pupils. According to Sheard and Dunning (1973) it was in this atmosphere that rugby prospered as a legitimate channel for expressing masculinity. The game provided to these boys the necessary experiences of pleasure and excitement centred on traditional ideals of masculinity. Therefore, the game has been traditionally framed as a game that above all develops masculine traits in its participants. Also, to grasp better the meanings of the following analyses, it is important to remember that male rugby players in Britain have a very "particular" reputation for violating social taboos through, for example, their vilification of women and homosexuals, excessive alcohol consumption, public nudity, vandalism and the singing of obscene and profane songs (Donnelly & Young, 1985). Regarding all these traits, researchers of women's rugby ask, "What are the motives for women to participate in rugby?" "Do women want or need to develop masculine traits to play this game?" "Do women need to violate social taboos to be recognised as rugby players?" The next five studies deal with these questions from different perspectives.

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<sup>3</sup> A boys' public school



### 3.3.1. Sport, the Media and the Construction of Compulsory Heterosexuality: A Case Study of Women's Rugby Union

Wright and Clarke (1999) examine how women who play rugby are represented in the media. Their analysis is guided by the principles of hegemony theory and particularly the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. They argue that in women's rugby union there are "hegemonic versions of heterosexual femininity" (p. 227), and that "rugby acts as a form of social and sexual control through the naturalizing and normalizing of (hetero)-sexual relations" (p. 228).

Wright and Clarke's (1999) study is based on the analysis of six mainstream newspaper articles published in 1996 and 1997; three from the UK and three from Australia. This is the total number of articles about women's rugby published during those two years. It is obvious that women's rugby incites very little media attention in Australia and the UK. The researchers have classified these articles into three categories: descriptive, unsympathetic and sympathetic. The *descriptive* category consists of two articles, which focus on descriptions of play. Both are written by women who actually played rugby. It was surprising that the only way these two female players could describe women's rugby was to constantly compare it to the men's game. Secondly, the *unsympathetic* category consists of one article, written by Martin Johnson (1997) in The Sunday Telegraph that demonstrates a high degree of antagonism and misogyny against women's rugby by trivialising and ridiculing women who play this sport. For instance, it makes nasty comments about the possibility that women who play rugby can end up with cauliflower ears<sup>4</sup>. The articles in the final category are *sympathetic* to women's rugby. Although these articles should be the most supportive of women's rugby, in many ways they embrace

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<sup>4</sup> Rugby vocabulary to describe the shape of the ears of second row players.



heterosexist discourses. For example in these articles “the players are also described applying make-up and dressing up after the games” (1999, p. 235). In addition, the articles include descriptions of female rugby players’ private lives at home with boyfriends, husbands and children. It is argued that these discourses clearly undermine the importance of playing rugby in itself and subtly legitimate the compulsory heterosexual femininity that constrains all women who play rugby. The ideological control of women underlines the importance of representing these women as feminine and heterosexual. Wright and Clarke assert that such representations undermine women’s rugby and raise the questions: “Can women *really* play a man’s game? If they can, what kind of women are they?” (1999, p. 234).

At the end of their analysis, Wright and Clarke (1999) explain how rugby women frequently negotiate *contradictory discourses*: discourses that describe them as feminine and “non-threatening to the stability and order of the heterosexual gender regime of rugby” and also discourses that build up the seriousness of the women’s game by describing “the men’s and women’s games as similar with respect to what is valuable and intrinsic to the game” (p. 239). The authors go on to assert that in order to gain respectability the lesbian presence in rugby is denied through the adherence to the heterosexual gender regime. According to the authors, this fact reinforces dominant discourses about heterosexuality: women’s rugby, instead of challenging the gender and sexual orders, reinforces the values that legitimate male dominance and the heterosexual order. The authors conclude their analysis affirming, “the hegemony of heterosexuality remains largely unchallenged from both inside and outside sport” (p. 241).



## Critiques

One of my critiques of this study is its focus on women's rugby media coverage without any comment about the rugby experiences of the women who are portrayed by the media. In order to achieve in-depth analyses of the meanings that women's rugby representations have in the media, it could be interesting to confront Wright and Clarke's (1999) interpretations with the interpretations of some of the women players themselves.

The fact that women's rugby can only be explained by making references to the male game verifies what sexual difference thought denounces: the lack of independent female references in explanations of women's lives and experiences. The existing hierarchy between men and women in rugby will remain unchanged as long as women feel the necessity to legitimate their rugby by constantly relating it and comparing it to men's rugby. From a sexual difference perspective it can be argued that the media texts demonstrate that women are not recognised as original authors of the rugby they play and will therefore, easily remain dependent on, and inferior to, men's rugby. In order to challenge the gender hierarchy in rugby, women need to discover and create references that identify them as specifically female rugby players.

### 3.3.2. Subcultural Subversions: Comparing Discourses on Sexuality in Men's and Women's Rugby Songs

Wheatley (1994) is interested in gender relations in sport subcultures. She understands that "subculture articulates difference from and resistance to the mainstream or dominant order" (p. 194). Wheatley believes that the important role played by songs and singing in male rugby subculture makes them suitable elements for analysing the ways and purposes in which women who play rugby have



appropriated them. Therefore, Wheatley bases her research on the premise that the rugby male songs appropriated by women rugby players represents an act of *resistance* to the masculine hegemony of the rugby subculture.

Wheatley carried out an ethnographic case study. She was a team member and participant observer of three university teams during the 1986-89 period. The teams were located in the Midwestern and West Coast in the USA. Her methodology consisted of analysing the meanings of the lyrics of the most relevant male rugby songs related to gender and sexuality. She started analysing the songs which focused on male sexual domination over women. She followed up by examining the adaptations that rugby women made to these songs that inferiorised them.

The results show that women's adaptations of the songs tended to celebrate women's sexuality and lesbian practice and preference. This clearly supported Wheatley's (1994) idea that women's rugby songs constituted an act of resistance. For instance, as she asserted, "The song might be interpreted as an articulation of women's superior sexual powers in their capacity to experience multiple or frequent orgasms" (p. 193). It can be argued that this idea has some affinity with Irigaray's understanding of the need for women to be aware of the potential possibilities of their sexuality. However, unlike Irigaray (1985 a), Wheatley seems to resort to reductionism as she goes on to argue that these transformed songs are expressions of "women's sexual *superiority* and advantage" (p. 203 – emphasis added). In other words, Wheatley has not overcome the need of hierarchy between the two sexes.

Wheatley's (1994) study aims to show how male rugby songs adopted by female players become a resistant cultural practice. Nevertheless, she argues that this resistance that she analyses in detail throughout her study is sometimes "complex and contradictory" (p.194). In her conclusions she recognises *contradictory* tensions



between interpretations of resistant cultural practices. The author has identified three main points in her interpretation of women's rugby. Firstly, that complexities and contradictions characterize women's rugby as a social practice. For instance, she suggests that the songs' repertoires are "not unanimously endorsed, agreed upon, or settled" (p. 208). Secondly, that resistance is temporal; it just takes place during rugby activities – games, practices, trips, and parties. Finally, the author is fully aware of the existence of very differentiated feminist interpretations on the subject. On one hand, some feminists might condemn the adaptation of the male rugby songs for reproducing 'male' values on sexuality; on the other hand, other feminists might praise the songs as an instance of counter-hegemonic resistance. This situation underlines the latest debates around hegemonic male power in sport and women's resistance and who defines an act as resistant.

### Critiques

It was surprising that this analysis does not contain rugby players' views of the songs. Wheatley (1994) was, therefore, unable to address the questions, "Do these women consider their appropriation of songs as an act of resistance to male hegemonic power in rugby?" "What are their meanings about these appropriations?" "Are they just a mere opposition to men's strategies of abusing women and homosexuals?" Overall, Wheatley's textual analysis of women's rugby songs is not an attempt to transcend the system that sustains gender polar dualisms in which one of the gender polarities has to be superior to the other; she clearly claims that women's sexual difference is superior. Moreover, according to her, "The women's version of rugby disrupts the male, heterosexual hegemony of the rugby subculture by exposing female physical capability in a typically *male* enclave" (p. 207 –emphasis added). Therefore, she points out that to disrupt the male, heterosexual hegemony of the rugby



subculture necessarily means to become closer to men's enclave. And she supports this idea by claiming that women have superior sexual powers. I argue that this statement reproduces the hierarchical gender opposition between men and women. According to Irigaray (1985a,b,) claiming that women are superior to men is replacing one extreme - male - of the gender dualism for the other - female - without challenging the roots of sex/gender dichotomy. In order to avoid hierarchy between the sexes, sexual difference thought, proposes to understand each sex in itself and by itself. As Elam (1994) claims, "Hierarchy is always grounded on the assumption that differences are differences of degree, along a homogenous scale" (p. 43). Therefore, when the two gender polarities are compared and measured according to a homogenous scale there will always be a degree of hierarchy between the two poles. In contrast the application of sexual difference theory enables us to disregard the notion of either male or female superiority. It can provide us with theoretical concepts that purport to explain women's rugby issues beyond gender dualisms.

### 3.3.3. Crossing the Line: Women Playing Rugby Union

In their ethnographic case study of a women's rugby team located in Brisbane Australia, Carle and Nauright (1999) attempt to "unpack" the meanings that a group of women give to rugby. They interviewed women players, coaches and male members in the club. In addition, Carle, the female author, participated in training sessions and meetings and observed matches and parties after matches during the 1997 season. The authors' aim is to understand "how and why women play such a hypermasculinized sport and what they feel about the game" (p. 133). They theorise that rugby is first of all a "masculine" sport, and therefore women players' experiences are best defined with this notion in mind. At some stage the authors even



define rugby as a hyper-masculine activity. Carle and Nauright recognise that women who play rugby challenge the taken-for-granted male domination in this sport. They refer to hegemony theory, which explains that the power of the dominant groups is never total, and that subordinate groups always have strategies to resist dominant power. Through this lens the authors argue that rugby played by women becomes a contested ideological gender terrain. They focus on two aspects: women's experiences playing a "masculine" sport and the culture that surrounds women's rugby.

As a result of their analysis, Carle and Nauright (1999) identify four main outcomes. Firstly, they mention women's experiences related to their *bodies*, to *teamwork and to friendship*, and they comment that, "for these Australian women the links between physicality and bodily sacrifice for the team and team-mates is a significant part of the game which binds players together as a team and as friends" (p. 134). Based on female players' accounts, the researchers suggest that the intense physicality experienced on the pitch contributes to building good and intense friendships off the pitch.

Secondly, Carle and Nauright examine how women behave during drinking activities. They theorise that this focus might reveal a special women's rugby culture but conclude that women "conform to the dominant 'manly' tradition" (p. 138) in their drinking. This means that the women analysed did not display any behaviour that encouraged the authors to affirm that a special women's rugby culture was taking place in this club in Brisbane. I suggest that rather than searching for actual different behaviours in women's rugby drinking activities, the aim should be to explore how women make sense of their drinking after matches and what are their specific meanings attached to it.



Thirdly, Carle and Nauright (1999) examine the reactions of male members and players of the club to the women's rugby team. This analysis embraces two aspects. First, women's rugby players are marginalized in the context of the club. For instance, in administration they are in a minority; and there are none in coaching. Second, whereas the female players' accounts show that they obtain male support without problems, the authors have described that some men at the club used patronising or denigrating tones, such as, "as long they realize that 'rugby is a man's sport' and if they don't try to match us, things will be all right" (p. 140).

Consequently, the authors argue that women in the club are subjected to a subtle marginalisation of which they are not fully aware. For instance, they do not make an issue of the fact that the club provides them with inadequate playing time and some times fails to supply referees for their games. A female rugby player that has been in worse male rugby clubs could argue that this is better than nothing; a sport feminist would argue that this is the kind of subversive discrimination that needs to be unmasked.

Even though the authors endeavour to present an analysis of women's rugby experiences and the gendered culture that surrounds women's rugby, they easily lose the focus of women's own interpretations and tend to interpret what these experiences are within a framework of gender discrimination in rugby. Because their participants have not given explicit accounts of discrimination and marginalisation in the rugby world, the authors use the concept of subversive marginalisation in explanation. Accordingly, Carle and Nauright (1999) pay great attention to the gender obstacles that these female rugby players encounter and also to the ways that these women are reproducing masculine values in rugby - by accepting the male drinking culture, and not being conscious of their marginalisation in the club. Carle and Nauright conclude



that physical contact; teamwork and loyalties are the main elements that attract women to play rugby. They have not, however, explored the meanings that these elements represent for their participants.

### Critiques

To propose a relationship between women and rugby through masculinity does not leave many possibilities to create and develop alternative women's relations within rugby that goes beyond being *like* or *opposite* to men. It would be interesting to know how these women embody rugby masculinities when they are playing the game. Then, "What does it mean for a female sexed body to experience masculine features?" Can women have experiences defined as "masculine?" "Do women who play rugby need to endorse these experiences in order to resist male domination?"

Curiously, although women are marginalized, even discriminated against in rugby in their club, they do not show any act of resistance and rebellion (Theberge and Birrell, 1994) against the established gender order. According to Carle and Nauright (1999), they follow the male model while playing the game and also in the drinking culture. The authors resolve the contradiction by focusing on issues related to gender discrimination and by searching for small details that can account for how women attempt to resist the reproduction of male power in their rugby. Although the outcome related to the construction of good and intense friendships among the players is the most interesting for my study, the authors do not explore fully the meanings of these relationships to the actual players' experiences. This is a constant that I have found in women's team-contact sports literature: when it comes to friendship, teamwork and body contact off the pitch the layers of explanation tend to be quite superficial. In other words, the potential of developing women's meanings of physical contact, teamwork, loyalty and close friendships in their own terms is totally

overlooked in this research, whereas these aspects of women's rugby are central in my research.

#### 3.3.4. The Black Ferns: The experiences of New Zealand's Elite Women Rugby Players.

Chu et al. (2003) analyse the experiences of some women *who* took part in New Zealand's rugby women's national team in 1999. Their aim is to explain why and how these women became involved in a predominantly male sport. The authors carried out twenty-three semi-structured interviews during the Tri Nations competition played between New Zealand, Canada and USA held in Palmerston North (New Zealand) in 1999. The interviews were structured around some key issues, such as motives and reasons for participating in rugby, experiences participating in a male-dominated sport, and experiences of being a Black Fern.

Chu et al. (2003) state that the main reason mentioned for starting to play rugby by their participants is that their friends played and introduced them to the sport, as one of the participants explains, "Just a friend who said 'I played rugby last year, it's really fun, come on and play, you'll enjoy it.' So I went along to her club practice one night just to see what it was like and got into it from there" (p. 112). Also some Black Ferns started to play because it was an integral part of their family life, as another participant comments, "Dad and I would watch the rugby on Saturday and we'd bet on teams, it was an integral part of our family" (p. 112). Furthermore, reasons for continuing to play rugby were mainly because of the enjoyment, the friendship and the challenge; the friendship aspect is highlighted by the following comment:

Going along the first couple of practices and the first couple of games, it wasn't just the game; it was the friendship and the amount of people that are



involved in the game off the field as well. That sort of helped me get into it and decide yeah I really enjoy this (p.114).

In this sense, Chu et al. (2003) results on the enjoyment of practicing team contact sport echo other authors' results (Scruton et al. 1999; Wright & Clarke, 1999; Theberge, 1997, 1995; McDermott, 1996; Young & White, 1995). Although Chu et al., like Carle and Nauright (1999), do not further explore the possible consequences that intense women's relationships within the team of Black Ferns can have on their experiences as women who play rugby, it is implied from their results that playing with "friends" is an important element that cannot be overlooked. As Chu et al. claim, "it seems that female friends were the predominant influence in encouraging these women to take up rugby" (p. 113).

Two interesting aspects differentiates Chu et al. (2003) analysis from the rest of the studies on women's rugby reviewed in this chapter. First, their analysis is based upon elite female rugby players: the team which currently is the World's champion. Second, their research is contextualised in New Zealand, a country where rugby is like a religion.

### Critique

As an overall result Chu et al. (2003) state that participant experiences were positive, "All the participants were positive about their experiences of being a Black Fern, many describing the experience as 'excellent' and 'awesome'" (p. 117). While for Chu et al. this is a result, for my research this is a starting point. "What kind of women would play rugby intensively and for years if it was not positive in some way or other?" Moreover, because they did not use any theory to explain why women had such positive experiences in rugby, they failed to question such underlying assumption as the male/female dichotomy. This way they ended up taking such social constructions for granted whereas my aim, through theorising women's rugby



relationships, is also to challenge the social construction of gender and the power structure that maintains this social construction.

As a result, in my research these positive experiences are not opposed to possible negative experiences that women can have in playing “a male dominated sport”. From a sexual difference point of analysis these kinds of experiences are understood as those that women express from themselves. Women’s experiences are not measured as positive if they liberate the women who practice the sport or negative if they oppress them. My attempt to analyse women’s rugby experiences through sexual difference lenses is to go beyond this dichotomised understanding of women’s experiences at the same time as being able to recognise that for women who play rugby some experiences are positive and others are negative. For this reason it is necessary to acknowledge that my emphasis lies on considering women able to create their own experiences and their own sense and meanings of what is positive or negative, without the need to place themselves in one or the other extreme of the dichotomies: positive/negative; nor relate them to other dichotomies liberating/oppressing; or masculine/feminine experiences.

Chu et al. (2003) are very meticulous when they explain the method used and the data analysis package that they have employed in order to ensure validation. However, as I stated earlier, the lack of theoretical underpinning is manifested throughout the entire article. It seems that illustrative selected quotes from interviews’ transcripts can speak for themselves without the need of specifying any theory through which the authors are interpreting their results. I consider that asking the participants about their experiences participating in a “male dominated sport” is taking for granted an established way of looking at women’s rugby based on gender polarity. Then, a question arises, “If rugby is already defined as a male dominated



sport, what are the possibilities of naming women's experiences in rugby according to women's original terms beyond gender polarities?"

Generally speaking the insights provided by the authors about an elite rugby women's team such as the Black Ferns are very interesting and educational, especially for an ex-rugby player like myself. Reading how rugby produces female elite players is always a reason for joy. However, the lack of theory through which to analyse the results limits the authors' possibilities to expand and theorise on the specific developments that Black Ferns' experiences might contribute to deeper knowledge on women's meanings of their participation in rugby.

### 3.3.5. The Gendered Unapologetic: Queer Theory in Women's Sport

Broad's (2001) study attempts to analyse women's rugby experiences from a perspective called *queer theory* which shares a commitment to poststructuralist and postmodernism premises. According to Broad, queer theorists do not believe that the notion of stable sexes, genders and sexualities exists. Neither, she argues, do static identities deriving from these categories produce heteronormativity - an identity that is rooted in heterosexuality as the norm. According to Broad, what queer theory tries to deconstruct is the hierarchical dichotomy hetero/homo by appealing to the notions of sexual fluidity and multiplicity.

The main difference between the premises of this analysis and those of the rest of the studies presented in this literature review is that Broad (2001) does not question *if* rugby women resist or conform to the sport gender order. Her starting point is that these women *do* resist gender and sexual male rugby stereotypes by being unapologetic about their sport. However, in common with the other studies she is not able to justify theoretically why some acts she has identified are resistant and why



other acts are not. This position is also problematic because the majority of rugby women observed do not recognise their acts as acts of resistance.

Following queer theory, Broad (2001) argues that women's participation in rugby represents a type of resistance that can be understood as *queer resistance*. In other words, Broad aims to demonstrate how women's rugby in the early 1990's can be characterised by "an unapologetic marked by transgressing gender, destabilizing identities, and "in your face" confrontations of normativity" (p. 199). According to Broad, queer resistance is supported by the fact that women who play rugby "refuse to apologize for their "masculine" and sexually explicit sport culture" (p. 182). Therefore, these women develop an *unapologetic* confrontation. Broad's starting point is to accept that in some ways women's rugby players have managed to resist sexual and gender domination. She asks, then, "What tactics, strategies, and processes of resistance have these players employed in order to manage sexual and gender domination?" (p. 200).

According to Broad (2001) there are three main elements that characterise queer resistance in women's rugby: transgressing gender, destabilising the hetero/homo dichotomy, and the "in your face" confrontation of the stigma of playing female rugby. Firstly, she shows how *transgressing gender* is rooted already in the women's rugby situation. On one hand, these women are playing a contact sport (Csizma et al., 1988), which is seen as ultra-masculine and violent. On the other, media representations of women's rugby (Wright & Clarke, 1999) respond to hegemonic versions of heterosexual femininity. Unavoidably, this means that women who play rugby destabilise the boundaries between women and sport. She justifies this destabilisation by showing how women who participate in rugby challenge conventional beauty standards through their continued participation in the sport. They



also challenge traditional standards of passivity associated with hegemonic femininity by their increased self-confidence that results in the possibility of change to their self-image. In summary, she considers that women who play rugby are transgressing gender by being tough, assertive and not apologizing. This kind of consideration is what differs from my theoretical underpinning. From a sexual difference stance the importance of transgressing the gender order in rugby resides more in recognising that women are able to originate new meanings related to their actions – free of men’s interference - than emphasising the actions per se.

Secondly, Broad (2001) attempts to demonstrate how women who play rugby destabilise the hetero/homo binary and heteronormativity by applying the notions of sexual multiplicity and fluidity. To illustrate her argument she examines women’s rugby songs. Women’s adaptations of rugby songs are clearly texts where women do not see themselves as compulsory heterosexuals and passive receivers. The analysis of the songs tells us that female rugby players are rather inclusive of players of all sexual preferences who want to have control of their own sexualities. However, it is difficult to understand how the author links the diversity of sexual preferences with sexual multiplicity and fluidity. One could understand that sexual fluidity means that women who play rugby are changing sexual preferences constantly. But it seems to me that replacing “static” identities by multiplicity and fluidity is not enough. Also from sexual difference thought the attempt is to dissolve the static identity of “female sex,” but not by implying multiplicity or fluidity. Rather Italian sexual feminists’ aim is to create female sex identity through relationships among women. So the essence of this identity is no wherein women’s biology but it is created only by women.

Lastly, Broad (2003) discusses what she labels as confrontational perversions: the way that these women like to “show off” their active participation in rugby or, “to



display their rugby identities” (p. 195). She illustrates this position by showing women’s pride in belonging to rugby teams. For instance, Broad argues that rugby paraphernalia worn by the players identifies them as rugby players. Furthermore, Broad suggests that the witty sayings that they wear on their clothes, such as, “Rugby, elegant violence” or “Give blood play rugby” are evidence of their pride. Broad identifies these acts as a way through which the players construct a ‘rugby’ identity. However, according to Broad, “many players do not articulate their playing as a ‘political act’, nor do they necessarily see themselves as activists per se” (p. 197). Broad explains this attitude by saying that queer politics includes all those that display “individualized self-expression”. This means that although women rugby players do not see themselves as organised activists, they could be at an individual level. This highlights my question again, “What is women’s resistance against the male rugby model?” Broad argues that women who are “cocky”, “strong” and “proud” confront the line between normal and deviant; and celebrate their “perversions” of playing a game which is not ordinarily suitable for them.

### Critiques

Broad’s (2001) attempt to make sense of women’s rugby experiences through queer theory is a very complex task. To destabilise fixed traditional categories like gender and sexuality is a big challenge. It is difficult to work through categories that do not classify the social world statically. In other words, these categories explain to certain extent how social realities take place.

Drawing on Halberstam’s (1998) interpretation, Broad (2001) calls for “female masculinity” which illustrates “a type of resistance that does not reproduce gender and sexual bounds by existing within them” (p. 190), and she then links it with Butler’s (1990) idea of “cultural fiction”. Unfortunately, Broad does not develop this



interesting concept any further and that leaves her whole argument unclear. She attempts to transcend gender dichotomy by describing female rugby players' femininity as "female masculinity". One might interpret that this "female masculinity" means that women can adopt masculine features. This question also points to my own research, "Is it possible to challenge male hegemonic power in sport without necessarily imitating this power?" In short, "Is it possible to challenge masculinities in rugby without adopting the 'masculine' characters and meanings of the sport?"

I also find difficult to grasp the meaning of sexual multiplicity and fluidity in this context. Broad's (2001) definitions of concepts are rather ambiguous. It seems that for her, fluidity means acceptance of any sexuality by female rugby participants. I think this has little to do with destabilising static hetero/homo sexual identities. Another unclear point emerges at the end: Broad uses *rugby identity* as a concept to explain the pride of the female players. This appears to contradict the attempt to destabilise static identities. In my view, Broad does not solve the problem of deconstructing the "naturalisation" between gender and sexuality. Women do not have to be masculine in order to practice homosexual sex; in addition, women can challenge hegemonic femininity and heterosexual appeal without necessarily practising sex with other women.

### 3.4. Conclusions

Unfortunately, none of the studies reviewed resonate with me as an ex-rugby player and as a women's rugby researcher. Although Carle and Nauright (1999) and Chu et al. (2003) have included in their analyses women's experiences as rugby players, I find their theoretical underpinning rather problematic. My point is that if one defines rugby according to masculine traits one is easily caught up with showing that women relate to rugby in a dichotomic way: either reproducing or resisting these masculine traits. In another sense, Broad's (2001) analysis framed in queer theory shares with my research poststructuralism principles about disestablishing sexual identities through analysing the language that produces them. However, her explanations are sometimes too complicated and not very clear according to my personal experiences in rugby. It is clear that our experiences are quite distant; hers are contextualised in USA and mine in a South European country.

As MacKinnon (1987) suggests, some major female characteristics – such as in “pleasure in motion, cooperation, physical self-respect, self-possession and fun” (p. 121) appear to be left out of athletic discourse because they are not important from a male view. This does not mean that these female features are the only ones that take place in women's rugby experiences. However, I think that these aspects also need to be analysed through a lens that is the opposite of high-level competition. To examine this, I suggest that we need to go beyond dualistic gender thought to radically change the roots of our dichotomic thinking. It is mainly for this reason that I have chosen to frame my research on women's rugby experiences and meanings within poststructuralist feminist principles and specifically within a sexual difference thought.



While the studies discussed above argue that women's experiences relate to male hegemonic power and are complex, ambiguous and contradictory, sexual difference thought focuses on how women's experiences can have value on their own; and also how these experiences do not necessarily need to "compete" with male hegemonic power. In other words, sexual difference scholars are more concerned with the meanings of women's experiences from a self-referenced women's point of view than on describing how women's participation in sport reinforce or resist the masculine order. It is for this reason that sexual difference scholars reaffirm the unavoidable existence of sexual difference and at the same time emphasise the need to frame and create concepts beyond gender dichotomies in order to explain and make sense of this difference.

Before analysing and representing my data on women's rugby experiences, in the next section I will detail the main methods that I have used to gather the data on which my analysis is based. It has been through qualitative methods that I have been able to gather meticulous data about women's rugby experiences. Also in the next section I explain the possibilities of representing qualitative data according to alternative ways of writing. In this sense it is important to acknowledge that the two crises – one of representation, the other of legitimation – which have challenged the basis of qualitative social research cannot be ignored.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

#### 4.1. Introduction

The aim of the account of qualitative methodology that follows is mainly to explain the processes I have pursued to gather the data that I have analysed and transformed into narratives. The chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part is principally dedicated to exploring how qualitative methodology as personal recollection, participant observation and conversational interviews contribute to making sense of women's relationships in rugby. The second part details a new kind of research writing generically entitled alternative ways of representation. The creation of these alternative ways derives from a crisis of representation in social sciences and its consequences for research and writing. This crisis has inspired a "narrative turn" in social scientific writing, and to a variety of experimental approaches to writing. The main goal of this second part is to show that in writing social science research, playing with the possibilities that literary techniques offer does not conflict with thoughtful and meticulous sports feminist analyses of women's rugby. Thus, new ways of writing and representing data are suggested in this part.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Methodology

Kvale (1996) writes that the original Greek meaning of the word *method* is "a route that leads to the goal" (p. 4). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), research that deploys qualitative methodology stresses the structured nature of reality. At the same time this reality is unavoidably filtered through the relationship between the researcher and what is being studied. In other words, qualitative researchers are concerned with the close and intimate individual sense of reality: qualitative research aims to understand participants' subjective experiences without denying that a researcher's own point of view influences this understanding.



My qualitative methodology consists of several methods: recollections of my personal experiences as a rugby player; participant observation through being an active member of several women's rugby teams for a number of years in Barcelona and London; as well as conversational interviews with some of the women who also were active members of the Barcelona and London environments that I belonged to. Presently I will explain how each of the methods has contributed to gathering the necessary data to later represent women's experiences and relationships in rugby.

#### 4.2.1. Personal Experiences Recollection

One of the methods applied in order to make sense of women's rugby experiences and relationships has been the recollection of my own experiences in rugby. As Clandinin and Connelly (1994) claim in every research about people's experiences, "one of the starting points is the researcher's own narratives of experience" (p. 418). Thus, my starting point in this research has been my own memories and reflections about my most meaningful past relationships in rugby.

Among the several personal experiences methods proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (1994) – oral history, annals and chronicles, family stories, journals, letters etc. - I identify my own personal recollections in what they call autobiographical writing. In my case this writing encompasses my feelings towards the actions that have characterised my relationships with my four best rugby friends in Barcelona. Although I always knew my research was going to be about exploring women's rugby experiences, it was only when I delved into sexual difference thought that I realised that I had to start from myself and my own intense relationships with other women playing rugby. This awareness has allowed me to examine the multiple selves that I write about in recalling my own relational experiences with other women. As Braidotti (1997, p. 303) asserts,



The women who undertake a feminist position – as part of the process aimed at empowering alternative forms of female subjectivity – are split subjects and not rational identities. Each woman is a multiplicity in herself: she is marked by a set of differences within the self, which turns her into split, fractured, knotted entity, constructed over intersecting levels of experience.

Being able to reflect upon my own personal rugby experience has permitted me to recollect the multiple “I” that each of us undergoes, in my case: Catalan woman, rugby player and captain, sociological researcher, daughter, sister, friend ... etc. I chose to represent the theoretical concepts that help me to make sense of rugby women’s experiences through a narrative style of writing instead of dissertation because the expression of my multiple “I” and my own experiences in rugby contributes to enriching the knowledge on women’s rugby experiences instead of being something that I need to suppress. Therefore, adopting a narrative form of “telling” (Richardson, 1997) about women’s experiences in rugby has allowed me to draw out my several selves without constraints.

Moreover, the reflection on these recollections has become the guide for my conversational interviews and they have also, together with the transcripts of the interviews, become my “raw data” (Markula & Denison, in press) from which to organise and later write my narratives of women’s experiential relationships in rugby.

#### 4.2.2. Participant Observation

In general terms it is said that participant observation is an excellent method for getting further data into the participants’ world. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996; Prus, 1996; Eriksen 1995; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). For instance, Eriksen (1995) asserts that “Participant observation refers to the informal field methods which form the basis for most fieldwork, whether or not it is supplemented with other techniques. The aim of this method is to enter as deeply as possibly into the social and cultural field one researches” (p. 15). According to Prus (1996), “The participant-observer role allows the researcher to get



infinitely closer to the lived experiences of the participants (...). Their experiences as participants may afford researchers with invaluable vantage points for appreciating certain aspects of particular life-worlds” (p.19). Therefore, my intense and long participation in rugby has strongly influenced my motivation for doing this research on women’s rugby experiences and relationships. Moreover, my participant observation, as well as my personal recollections, informed my participant selection and the way I conducted my interviews. Due to my particular biography, my participation in the field of women’s rugby started before being aware of the significance of observing this field in a social scientific sense. At the beginning of my rugby career I participated in the rugby team of my university for seven years and I enjoyed the team and the sport without any further enquiries into the meanings of women playing rugby. However, when I finished that period I started asking myself why rugby was becoming so important in my life. Afterwards, I set up a new team in Barcelona called BUC and I was the captain of that team for four years. In those years the importance of retrospectively observing my past participation became the main object of my interest in women’s rugby experiences. At the same time I was studying a degree on mainstream sociology at Barcelona University, this degree contributed to convincing me that it was possible to do “serious” sociological research on women’s rugby. As a result, I first started to informally question and share with some of my team mates, the theories I was reading on sport feminists’ analyses. “In what terms did we feel oppressed by a society that did not accept women playing rugby? And to what extent did this affect our everyday rugby play?” These were not easy questions to be answered with a simple yes or no. Above all my uneasiness about studying women’s rugby derived from my desire to explain why rugby, socially considered “a masculine sport”, was becoming so special and important for my friends and myself. Alongside my participant observation in BUC I kept asking myself questions that were not related at all to the gender that society attributes to rugby players.



“Why were some relationships with other women through rugby so intense and special?”  
 “Why did rugby have the ability to strongly unite us while at the same time creating such bitter rivalry between us?” Those were the kinds of question that I tried to address in the course of my participant observation.

The unusual approach (participant, then observer) that defines my relationship with the participants in the field has allowed me to gain their unconditional trust. My participation has been essential in this context because all qualitative research requires winning the trust of research subjects and mutual trust is an essential component of team sport, particularly dangerous contact sports like rugby - thus, accumulated trust in the course of play has formed the basis for trust in the course of this research. My participant observation in London took place in two different rugby clubs. For one season I was in a club located in South West London. After the first two years of this research (2000-2002) I was a player member of another club also situated in South West London. As a result, the selection of the participants in this research is not random at all, but rather I have chosen each participant consciously and carefully, particularly those from Barcelona who are the most meaningful to my participant observation in rugby.

#### 4.2.3. Conversational Interviews

Qualitative interviewing is based on conversation.

Kvale 1996, p. 6

According to Kvale (1996), “An interview is a conversation that has a structure and purpose. It goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation, and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge” (p. 6). Reinharz and Chase (2002) discuss conversational interviewing when women interview women. For them, “An interview is typically a



conversation between two people” (p. 224). It is not spontaneous talk, but it follows the main structure and the character of a conversation. This conversational approach requires the researcher to be an integral part of the research. As it was important to immerse myself in this research, all my interviews with participants have followed this conversational principle. I will now discuss the interactive nature of conversational interviewing in more detail.

Regarding this idea Johnson (2002) states, “In-depth interviewing involves an interactive process in which both interviewer and informant draw upon and use their commonsense knowledge to create some intelligible sense of the questions posed and the ensuing discussions about them” (p.108). Although one consequence of conversational interviews is their semi-structured organisation and the achievement of in-depth insights into the participants, my point here is to emphasise that conversational interviews already imply a close and valued interaction between researcher and participants. Thus, considering the interview more as a talk between friends than a formal questioning-answer interview between researcher and participants has allowed me to be highly involved with the whole process of exploring my reactions to their words and observing their reactions to mine. Supporting this idea of the interview as a conversation, Reinharz (1992) argues that such interviews “refer to a research approach whereby the researcher plans to ask questions about a given topic but allows the data-gathering conversation itself to determine how the information is obtained” (p. 281). In this sense conversational interviews already challenge the constraints of an objective and detached scientific methodology.

The need for a conversational approach to better understand others’ worlds and other people’s meanings lies beneath Kvale’s (1996) claim that, “The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of people’s experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (p. 1). For my research about women’s rugby relationships, this “prior to scientific explanations” was



my starting point to engage with the meanings of women's experiences in rugby, experiences that are not discussed in terms of male experiences, as explained earlier according to sexual difference thought. Listening to women's experiences away from the male gaze, without male interferences and above all prior to considering male knowledge as universal, will result in women's ways of explaining their original experiences subjectively, unconstrained from male reference points or patterns. This means being able to talk about women's rugby without references to "rugby as a masculine sport" or "playing rugby develops 'masculine' features," or the consequences of such statements. Therefore, my goal through conversational interviews has been to explore women's abilities to recount their own experiences in rugby as original sexed human beings without constant comparison to men's rugby. This is not a simple task as men's rugby is seen as the universal mode that everybody should experience if one plays the game. However, "What happens when one has a female body instead of a male body?" "Can the meaning be automatically transferred from a man to a woman without considering the presence of female sexed bodies, female history and female social conditions influencing the experiences?" And if it can, "is it only as a variation of men's rugby, or does it have its own original female source for experiencing rugby? Can women name it?"

#### 4.2.3.1. Conversational Interview as a Technique

I started each interview by explaining what my research was about. I also explained why I had asked my interviewees to be part of this research. The conversational interviews had five main topics as guide: (a) Rugby background; (b) Physical experiences of rugby; (c) Meaningful relationships with other women in the team; (d) Rugby as a female space; (e) Any other issues. This resulting interview guide derives from my theoretical stance and the literature review that I have carried out on women's team contact sports. Above all I used the first topic as an "icebreaker" where I encouraged the participants to talk about their first



contact with rugby, as well as when, how and where they became aware that women's rugby existed. Then I probed them about some particularly significant experiences of the high physical contact involved on the pitch and the implications for relationships off the pitch. I was also very keen to make them talk explicitly about their experiences of intense relationships with other women on their teams, which could be sexual but did not have to be. With the idea of rugby as a specifically "female space," I tried to make sense of what they were telling me.

The interviews that I carried out with my four most intimate rugby friends ended with us telling each other the things we did not like about one another when we were playing rugby together. Although initially becoming aware of the existence of these raw feelings was a shock, later these particular interviews became the basis for explaining and starting to name women's differences amongst ourselves in a rugby context.

Based on the principle of conversational interviews my friends also asked me questions which were not always comfortable. I felt like Berger when she explains what happened to her when she was interviewing one of her participants. "Witnessing her deep emotional reaction, I think about my own emotional discomfort when the conversation turned to me and my beliefs. Am I being dishonest by not telling her the things that trouble me?" (Ellis and Berger 2002, p. 856). Although I wanted the interview to be a conversation between two friends rather than between a researcher and a participant I did not feel very comfortable all the time. For instance, one British friend asked me about my feelings when I got into close physical contact on the pitch. I had to tell her that I did not really know. Rather embarrassed I explained that in order to find a way of expressing and naming my own feelings I had to keep asking her.

The average length of each interview was around an hour and a half. Even though I recognise that it was essential to record the interviews to then be able to analyse in detail the



transcripts, we all noticed a great difference when we were speaking, knowing when there was a “red light” on and when there was not.

All the interviews took place around the summer of 2002. I started in Barcelona in May because the World Cup was on and it was possible to meet several rugby women on this occasion. I carried out the British interviews later, during July and August. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. However, I used a native English speaker to aid me with my English. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, I asked a woman who had nothing to do with rugby (none of the participants knew her), and who hardly knew me, to help me understand some of the participants’ expressions.

#### 4.2.3.2. Participants

Choosing the participants for my research was not a straightforward task. I was a Catalan woman who had played most of her rugby in Barcelona but who was conducting her research in London. Eventually, I chose rugby women from both countries, interviewing six women from Barcelona and six from London. Most of the twelve rugby players I had met while playing rugby. Although the majority of the six participants from Barcelona no longer play, rugby is still our main point of assembly. We still watch rugby matches together, and we also share time doing other “pleasant” activities like snowboarding in winter or going to the beach in summer.

In London it was not easy to find friends with whom I was close enough through rugby. Firstly, I have only played rugby in London for three years and for two different clubs. Secondly, these three years were at the end of my career, during a period when playing and learning rugby in itself were not so important. For me, the aim of playing was to make friends and to do something on Sunday to combat the loneliness of being in a big city like London.



At the same time it allowed me to continue my participant observation while I was doing this research.

To select my London participants I used a sampling technique. According to Carol Warren (2002) “Using a theoretical sampling strategy, the interviewer seeks out respondents who seem likely to epitomize the analytical criteria in which he or she is interested” (p. 87). According to my theoretical background the analytical criteria used here were twofold. One criterion was that the participants should have been very involved in rugby in order to be able to start from themselves when they explain their experiences. So, for them and for a while, rugby was *the* activity of their lives. The other criterion required was that our personal relationship in and out of rugby was quite intense and deep in order to be able to analyse how relationships with other women through rugby create a female subjectivity which goes beyond imitating or reversing male experiences of rugby. Five British rugby women met these two requirements very well. For the sixth interview I used the snowball technique. Although I did not know Lydia very well, Jane, another participant, told me that Lydia was interesting because she had been very involved in women’s rugby since its early years. After interviewing Lydia I realised how important it was for me to be friends with the participants in order to get more intimate stories of their experiences. The sixth interview was definitely different from the rest, being more about facts and situations than explanations about the active women behind these facts and situations. This is the reason I have decided not to randomly interview my team mates. For my research it was not enough to interview any woman who played and was very involved with rugby. Hence, I needed to rely on personal friendship aspects in order to turn conversational interviews into an excellent method for acquiring women’s subjective and qualitative data.

I also wanted to preserve the anonymity of my participants. Therefore, I have not specified the names of the rugby teams in London. However, I have specified the teams in



Barcelona. They are the core of this research and I have named them to make the data representation more understandable. However, I have replaced all participants' names with pseudonyms.

### Participants in Barcelona

Lia is 36 years old and she is from Breda, a small town 65 Km north of Barcelona. She came to Barcelona to study a Physical Education (PE) degree. I met Lia in July 1985 when we were in the same fitness club preparing for the physical tests for the PE college in Barcelona which is called INEF (Instituto Nacional Educacion Fisica – National Institute of Physical Education). We joined the INEF women's rugby team together in September 1985. I played in the same team as her for five years, my first five years of rugby. She is now a PE teacher in a State secondary school in a town near Barcelona and the mother of three little girls. She is the first on my list because of what we experienced together in those five years of college and playing rugby, experiences I have had with no one else. Because of our youth and the physical requirements of our PE College and rugby team, our relationship evolved very intensely and deeply for a while. She was my party partner and a shoulder to rely on when I was tired and upset.

Louise is 35 years old and she is from Barcelona. I met Louise in September 1987 when she started her PE degree at INEF and she joined the rugby team. She played rugby for almost fourteen years. Six of those were for INEF and then she co-operated with me in setting up a new team called BUC – Barcelona Union Club - in 1993. She played in this team until 2001. She was part of the Spanish national squad from 1991 until 2000, and she has participated in two World Cups – in Cardiff in 1991 and in Amsterdam in 1998. She is the woman with whom I have played the most and the best rugby of my life. Our friendship really strengthened after experiencing the first Women's Rugby World Cup in 1991 and



deteriorated after setting up BUC. She is also a PE teacher in a State secondary school near Barcelona and the mother of a little boy.

Adriana is 33 years old and she is from Barcelona. I met Adriana in September 1992, when she joined the INEF rugby team; she was already in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of her PE degree. She is currently studying art, and works as a PE teacher in a State secondary school in a very rough area of Barcelona. She played rugby for about eight years, first for INEF and later for another team around Barcelona. We became close when we shared a flat for two years in an area called Gràcia, in the centre of Barcelona.

Luce is 25 years old and she is the youngest of the participants. I met her in September 1994 when she joined the BUC team with whom she is still playing. Currently she is a nurse and works in a hospital in Barcelona and she is also studying for a degree in statistics. Our closeness stems from a coincidence, for when I started this doctoral research in London in September 2000, she came to Guildford for a year to work in a hospital there. In that year we spent a lot of time together talking about rugby and about her “coming out of the closet”. I really owe her some very warm moments in a cold London.

Emilia is 32 years old and she is from Ciutadella-Menorca. She came to Barcelona to study her PE degree in September 1988, and she joined the INEF team at the same time. She was one of those responsible for setting up a new team in the Barcelona area, called Hospitalet, in 1996. She has played for this team ever since. She has also been a member of the Spanish national team from 1995 until 2002; she has participated in two World Cups – in Amsterdam in 1998, and in Barcelona in 2002 – and in all the European competitions of those years. She is a PE teacher in a State Secondary school in Barcelona.

Amalia is 28 years old and she is from Durango, a town located in the Basque country. She came to Barcelona in September 1996 to improve her rugby and ended up joining Hospitalet. She was also a member of the Spanish national team from 1996 until 2002



and has participated in two World Cups – in Amsterdam in 1998, and in Barcelona in 2002 – as well as in all the European competitions of those years. Currently she is in the last year of her studies for a PE degree in Barcelona.

### Participants in London

Lizzy is 37 years old and she studied PE and geography at Birmingham University. She is a special needs secondary school teacher. She is divorced and she lives with her fifteen-year-old son, her partner Jane, another participant, and Jane's one-year-old son. I met Lizzy in London when I joined the first team I played rugby with in 1997 and we played together for one season. She helped me a lot with my English for my Master's course and I baby-sat her son several times. I kept in regular contact with her when I went back to Barcelona for two years. After my interview with her, Lizzy expressed interest in my research and has read some of my drafts. This has helped us to get to know each other better.

Virginia is 35 years old and although she was born in England, her blood is totally Welsh and she feels proud of it, i.e. her mother and father are Welsh. She studied Latin at Manchester University and she is a librarian. I met her in September 2001 in my second season, playing for my second team in London. She started playing rugby then and we became good friends. Virginia always helped me with my English and now she is my most faithful proof-reader. She has been to Barcelona with her partner to visit me. Although we have not known each other for long I feel we are close friends now. I always found it interesting to explore why she started to play rugby when she was 34 years old.

Emma is 29 years old and has a degree from Oxford University. She came to Barcelona in September 1993 as a part of her degree and she stayed for a year. Before playing rugby she was a hockey player. However, when in Barcelona she could not find a women's hockey team and so started playing rugby in the first season of BUC. She has been playing



rugby ever since and has played for England since 1997. She has participated in the Amsterdam 1998 and Barcelona 2002 World Cups. I am very proud that her rugby career started in my team in Barcelona.

Cassandra is 32 years old and she is Welsh, from Cardiff. She has also studied at Oxford University. I met her in Oxford during BUC's first tour to England to play against Emma's team in December 1994. Cassandra came to Barcelona in January 1995 to learn Spanish and to teach English. She stayed in my flat for three weeks and played for BUC until June 1996. In September 2000 I joined her team based in London and I played in it for two seasons. She has also played rugby in France and Wales.

Jane is 35 years old and she studied at Edinburgh University. She is a manager in a service computer company. I met her in September 1997 when I started my Master's degree at Roehampton Institute in London and joined her team. At the beginning of my time in London I stayed for three weeks in her house, sleeping in the front room while I was looking for a place to live. I played with her for a season. She has played rugby for 12 years and lives with Lizzy and Lizzy's son. Also she has a one-year-old boy herself for whom I have baby-sat on several occasions.

Lydia is the sixth participant. She is 39 years old. I interviewed her because Jane strongly recommended it. She played an integral part in founding Jane and Lizzy's team in 1986, which I joined in 1997.

Due to the complementary nature of all three methods used in this research to gather data, none of the used methods can be understood individually. What really makes them worthy for this research is the intermingling of all three. That is to say, all three methods inform each other and they have provided me with meaningful data. As a result, my personal recollections and participant observation have guided my conversational interviews and at the same time the analysis of the transcripts of these interviews has modified my personal



recollections and the discourse about my active participant observation in women's rugby. In the next section, called alternative ways of representation, I will detail why and how writing my gathered data in the form of narratives contributes to better understanding the goals of this research. Writing narratives to represent women's rugby experiences and relationships is emphasised as a means of constantly discovering and constructing female subjectivities that do not imitate or reverse male subjectivity.

### 4.3. Alternative Ways of Representation

In the social sciences, there has been a recent search for alternative ways of writing qualitative research. It is mainly since the mid 1980's that there have appeared new forms of writing in which the main consequences are the legitimisation of using literary techniques and literary styles of writing in social science research (Richardson, 1990, 1994, 2000; Denzin, 1994, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 1996, 2000). These new forms of representing qualitative research challenge conventional use of language applied to the representation challenge conventional research writing technique. These social sciences researchers believe that language is neither transparent nor innocent. Any language, even the scientific, has purposes beyond the task of just conveying meanings. In short, language expresses and also *creates* meaning. As I stated earlier, this poststructuralist premise is shared by Irigaray's work (chapter II). One of Irigaray's aims is to show the need to invent a new language that can express and create female subjectivity in a world which is one but where the sexes are two. Besides, the emphasis of the Italian sexual difference feminists is to name, put into words, the processes that women necessarily go through in order to make sense of their differences with men and within themselves. Therefore, in social sciences we need to develop alternative ways of representing qualitative research that take on board this premise of language as a contested terrain in which plural identities are constructed. Following the poststructuralist belief that language can only creates subjective meanings, new methods of writing emphasise the need



for researchers to clarify and analyse in the ways in which meanings are created in their research. To understand how researchers' subjectivity unavoidably influences their writing new ways of writing are necessary; new ways that challenge the supposed transparency and the innocence of conventional research language. But before addressing such possibilities, it is necessary to review the crisis of representation as proclaimed by some social sciences researchers who are also worried about their own use of language in their investigations.

#### 4.3.1. The Crisis of Representation

Times of crisis are, or may become, favourable occasions for adventurers.  
And we are adventurers.

Muraro 1995, p. 1

Times of crisis are necessary for changes to take place, but also for changes to take place it is necessary to be adventurous and risk previous knowledge for the sake of creating new knowledge. The crisis of representation symbolises a time in which some social research adventurers have risked previous knowledge of writing and are working towards creating new possibilities that might be closer to capturing lived experiences in writing. Denzin (1997), one of the sociologists who has worked intensively on explaining this crisis of representation asserts that, "A single but complex issue defines the representational crisis. It involves the assumption that much, if not all, qualitative and ethnographic writing is a narrative production, structured by a logic that separates writer, text and subject matter" (p. 4). Thus, this crisis challenges the assumption of the separation between writer, text and subject matter by taking very seriously the inevitable influence of the researcher on the text and the subject matter.

In another sense Probyn (1993) claims that "one of the central problematics that has emerged from postmodernist debates is that of representation" (p. 7). The crisis of representation problematises the assumption that qualitative research can directly capture



lived experience at the same time as it acknowledges the unavoidable influence of the researcher in representing this lived experience. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), “this crisis asks the questions, Who is the Other? Can we ever hope to speak authentically of the experience of the Other, or an Other? And if not how do we create a social science that includes the Other?” (p. 577). Marcus and Fischer (1986) and Clifford and Marcus (1986) started to delve into, and write about, the consequences of writing about lived experiences observed in ethnographic fieldwork. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identify this interest in representing research as the crisis of representation: qualitative researchers have started to realise that they cannot directly capture lived experience through their texts. Writing is no longer a mere tool that transparently depicts human experience. Deriving from a poststructuralist stance, several authors such as Richardson (1997), Lather (1992) and Denzin & Lincoln (1994, 2000) have questioned the complex consequences of writing about other people’s lives. Therefore, one of the premises underpinning the crisis of representation is the belief that language is not transparent. Language can no longer be considered as a mere depiction of experiences; on the contrary, it constitutes the experience in itself. As Richardson (1990a) emphasises, “Writing is not simply a ‘true’ representation of an objective ‘reality’; instead, language creates a particular view of reality” (p. 116). With these poststructuralist critiques of language in mind, I ask myself: “How can I, as the producer of my research text reflect this meaning of language in my writing?” “How can I represent experiences of other women without objectifying them?” I recognise that I am attempting to represent subjects who think, feel and express themselves. However, I am also the author of their experiences; and, hopefully, later on, readers will be authors of new interpretations. Inevitably other questions arise: “What is the impact, the meaning, of my authorship in this research? Can I reflect on all these ideas of authorship in my representations without privileging my authority as the researcher?” To approach these questions it is necessary to



thoroughly analyse conventional ways of representing social science research and the possible existence of a narrative turn that helps qualitative researchers to obtain closer contact with their participants' lived experiences. I will now explain in detail the meanings and the consequences of a narrative turn and also the new forms of writing derived from taking this turn seriously.

#### 4.3.2. The Narrative Turn and New forms of Writing

The narrative turn moves away from a singular, monolithic conception of social science toward a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and toward meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of the disinterested spectator and toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories.

Bochner, 2001, p. 134-5

The narrative turn has profoundly impacted on the ways qualitative researchers now experience their practices. According to Richardson's (1990a) definition, "Narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes." (p. 117). For Markula and Denison (in press), narrative means a shift from an objective researcher to a researcher who is fully aware of her/his involvement and ultimate responsibility as the author of the final report. It is this awareness of my responsibility and my active involvement as one of the researched participants and as writer of the research that also frames the meanings of my narratives. Following Richardson, narratives in this investigation serve "both as a means of 'knowing' and as a method of 'telling'" (1997, p. 58).

Norman Denzin (1994; 1997) and Laurel Richardson (1994; 1997; 2000), as mainstream sociologists, have called for a more creative and engaging writing in social science research. According to Richardson (1994), social scientists are entitled, in the present



poststructuralist context, to write in a more evocative manner; in such a manner that the reader can feel closer to the stories expressed in the text. The aim of researchers immersed in this trend is not to privilege these evocative ways of writing over the traditional ones (Richardson, 1994; Denzin, 1997), but to challenge the conventional academic writing as the only valid option for representing research findings. In addition, Richardson (1994) claims that experimenting with several forms of writing can help to improve conventional writing: “even if one chooses to write a final paper in a conventional form, experimenting with format is a practical and powerful way to expand one’s interpretative skills and to make one’s ‘old’ materials ‘new’” (p. 521).

These new forms of writing as an alternative to the conventional style have also attracted the interest of sport researchers since the mid 1990’s. Personal experiences and the personal experiences of others in sport are an open field to explore for writers of evocative and “vital” texts (Bruce, 1998). In sport studies, there are several examples of this type of writing. According to Markula and Denison (in press) there are two types. Firstly, *personal sport experiences* (e.g., Denison, 1996; Duncan, 2000; Markula, 2003; Miller, 2000; Sparkes, 1996; Tsang, 2000). In these stories the data is collected about the researchers’ own lived experiences. Secondly, there are *research stories* (eg. Bruce, 1998; Denison, 1996; Rinehart, 1998; and Rowe, 2000). In these stories the data is collected from interviews with others. I have chosen to represent my data through a mixture of personal experience and conversational interviews that I have interwoven into one text. Based on recollections of my personal experiences, the stories cannot be divorced from my intense experiential relationships with some of my participants and my conversations with them about our past experiences. Therefore, I felt this was the most appropriate way of representing my collected data: in a form that blends personal experience narrative with research stories. This



combination responds to the need to make sense of my personal experiences through my participants' experiences, and vice versa.

In this sense, writing research stories allows me to introduce some creative non-fiction devices. For instance, through flashbacks and memories I introduce key background information for the reader to understand the overall situation and the cultural context in which these stories are framed (Bruce, 2003). By using creative non-fiction devices to craft my research stories I claim that although my writing at some point is fictional in form – I have invented the scene and the plot to give sense and coherence to represented data - it is completely factual in content. In other words, bending some of my memories and flashbacks for aesthetic purposes does not dismiss the fact that “I was there.” I have added research stories to my personal narratives because it allows me to reflect on the complexities of the overlapping relationships in women's rugby experiences, the theory used to interpret them, their memories and my memories about our common past in rugby, and narrative ways of expressing them.

But including personal experiences and rigorous self-reflection in all these new forms of writing about experiences and sport is not unproblematic. According to Brackenridge (1999), “There is also, of course, a danger of attempting to become ‘more reflexive than thou’, leading to one becoming inside a circular reflexivity” (p. 400). In other words, to fall into the trap of becoming “excessively” reflexive about what one is doing can produce a vicious circle that takes the researcher nowhere. In addition, self-reflexive authors are often accused of being narcissistic and self-indulgent. These authors are normally accused of putting themselves above the researched. This is because, in general, non self-reflexive authors misunderstand the nature of the genre or the purposes of it (Sparkes 2002), which are to delve into the personal in order to transcend it and create a shared consciousness of what



living in a community means (Richardson, 1990). Furthermore, the purpose is also to make readers aware of the qualitative research processes that weave together theory and method.

Self-indulgence and narcissism are heavy charges as they might make feminist research “emotional” and “hysterical” (Probyn, 1993). Therefore, according to Bruner (1993), the writer must always guard against “putting the personal self so deeply back into the text that it completely dominates, so that the work becomes narcissistic and egoistical” (quoted by Denzin, 1997, p. 218). Similarly, Sparkes (2002) asserts that “producers of ... narratives of self (like any other pieces of research and forms of representation) need to be aware that their writing *can* be self-indulgent and masturbatory rather than self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing or self-luminous” (p. 90, emphasis in the original). Therefore, one of the dilemmas in this research has been how to be able to represent myself in an embodied position that influences theorisation on women’s rugby relationships without falling into the trap of self-indulgence or narcissism. Thus, to overcome this danger of self-indulgence, I have aimed to embed my narratives in a critical theoretical reflection. In other words, my challenge has been to make sense of women’s rugby experiences, mine and other women’s, through the lens of sexual difference thought. However, I also wanted to represent my findings in a manner that other rugby women can identify with, even though they may not know how to express them.

In summary, the ultimate purpose of self-reflective research is to examine how individual experiences are shaped by cultural contexts and at the same time represent these findings in such a manner that they echo the experiences of a larger audience (Richardson, 2000). Therefore, my goal in this research is to theorise women’s rugby relationships within their cultural contexts, not to describe the experiences for the sake of them. I assume that it is not enough only to narrate the particular circumstances of the research context. Nor is it enough to place myself as an active character in the tale, to write a good account of the complexities of doing research, but rather to write a narrative in which my own



circumstances as a researcher and a rugby player, and other women's experiences interweave into multiple interpretations of the cultural contexts of women's rugby, understanding these cultural contexts as anything that surrounds women's rugby when they explain their experiences. For instance, in the story research in which I narrate my relationship with Lia (Chapter V) the emphasis on the "tapas" food is an element that contributes to culturally contextualise our particular relationship which takes place in Barcelona, a Mediterranean city.

#### 4.3.3. Criteria to Assess Data Representation

I have always felt some discomfort with efforts to make qualitative inquiry look and sound more scientific, as if being artistic was a serious flaw in the search for a truthful foundation for practice.

Sandelowski, 1994, p. 60

The crisis of representation discussed earlier is tied in with a crisis of legitimation, which arose when qualitative researchers challenged the singular-or-precise scientific criteria that have unquestionably been used to evaluate their work. Thus, the crisis of legitimation challenges the assumed traditional criteria for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). According to Denzin and Lincoln, this crisis seriously questions the applicability of concepts such as the validity, generalizability and reliability of qualitative research. As Sandelowski (1994) explains, "What distinguishes art from science is not the absence of evaluative criteria in one domain and the presence of them in the other domain, but rather the nature of criteria" (p. 54). In summary, whereas the crisis of representation questions the premises of representing other people's lives, the crisis of legitimation questions the applicability of conventional criteria to qualitative research writing.

The aim of the authors who support the thesis of a crisis of legitimation in social sciences is to legitimise the "validity" of other criteria for judging their work. The criteria



required to assess the quality of a narrative are totally different from the criteria used to evaluate scientific reports. Richardson (1999) delves into the roots of what legitimates scientific criteria as *the* valid criteria. According to her, a continuing task is “to create new criteria for choosing criteria” (p.665). The backbone of her argument is to raise the underlying assumptions of why scientific criteria have been thought for so long to be the only possible criteria for evaluating sociological research. Hence, it is not about legitimising one kind of criteria over another, but about the purposes of the chosen criteria on what are the right criteria to adopt for a specific research. Richardson (2000) offers five criteria for qualitative sociologists. She calls her proposal of criteria a temporary resting place which symbolises the constant change and evolution of narrative writing and, therefore, its criteria to judge it. With this tactic she avoids falling into the trap of simply substituting singular-or-precise scientific criteria for singular-or-precise narrative criteria.

To write academic research in an alternative way does not mean that “anything goes”. As Richardson (1994) claims, “the greater freedom to experiment with textual forms (...) does not guarantee a better product. The opportunities for writing worthy texts are multiple. But the work is harder. The guarantees are fewer. There is a lot more to think about” (p. 523). Writing good narratives is very demanding, in some aspects even more so than realistic tales which are based more on description and do not question the researcher’s role in the tale. In bad narratives the images do not flow or their intrinsic purposes are mixed and confusing to read (Richardson, 1994; Denzin, 1997). Clearly, if sport sociologists want to improve the standards of their research writing it is essential to differentiate the good narratives from the bad and also to be aware of the existence of the different levels of difficulty implied in each narrative. In other words, to transgress the conventional and traditional social science writing does not mean that there are no rules to follow, nor that anything can be accepted as research represented in alternative forms of writing. It means that objective criteria are good for one



kind of research writing but one has to accept their limitation for judging the procedures and purposes of new, evolving ways of writing. For me as the author of this research, writing following the narrative turn principles has meant much more than just changing one kind of writing for another, it has implied continually questioning myself on the “what,” the “why” and “how” I blend and write about my personal experiences and other women’s experiences.

At this point finding adequate criteria to assess my narratives becomes crucial. As Sparkes observes, “*Any* kind of research can be dismissed, trashed, and trivialized if inappropriate criteria are imposed on it” (2002, p. 199, emphases in the original). In this sense, Bochner and Ellis (1999) provide an insight into the criteria used to assess narrative ways of writing: “What makes narratives believable is the sense of reality they create, their intimacy, economy, accessibility, verisimilitude and their capacity to evoke and provoke identification, feeling, empathy and dialogue” (p. 492). Looking through several authors’ proposals for criteria to evaluate new forms of writing research I have chosen to detail those five criteria that Richardson (2000, p. 15-6) looks at when reviewing papers submitted for social scientific publication:

1. Does the writing make a *substantive contribution*? Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) social scientific perspective? ...
2. Does this piece have *aesthetic merit*? Does the text invite interpretative responses? ...
3. How does the author deal with *reflexivity*? How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the points of view? ...
4. What is the *impact* of the text? Does this affect me emotionally? Intellectually? Generate new questions? ...



5. Does the writing *express a reality*? Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem true – a creditable account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the real?

The purpose of detailing Richardson's criteria is to let the reader know how I would like my narratives to be judged. Although I am aware that these five criteria are quite demanding, Richardson is a very experimental social researcher in a wide range of alternative ways of writing, I consider that these five criteria are those that fit better into my data representation of my own and my friends' feelings and experiences in rugby. As I said earlier there are different levels of difficulties in narrative writing, so I expect that through applying these five criteria to my stories, they will be judged according to a degree in which these five criteria are or are not achieved. In the next part I will specify the methods I have developed to start writing the narratives that represent my data and my theoretical analysis of these data.

#### 4.3.4. Starting Data Representation from Myself

The purpose of this section is to explain how representing the data I gathered through the three different methods I have used in this research through narrative interweaves with the theoretical basis of sexual difference thought. According to this Italian thought, to achieve an original source of female subjectivity a woman needs to start from herself and later develop this subjectivity through relating to other women. In this case, through my data representation I want to reflect an important shift occurring in myself in relation to the narrative turn: a shift in the understanding of "data" that goes beyond the concept of a disembodied researcher to understand that to represent my gathered data truthfully to myself and my participants I need to *start from myself* (Bochner, 2001; Denison & Markula, 2003; MWBC, 1990).



When I started this research I thought naïvely that I could explore women's rugby without taking into account my own experiences. I always thought that in order to be scholarly one really ought to avoid any personal bias in academic research. The most I could do to be faithful to my experiences and at the same time be considered scientific was to state as accurately as possible my relationship with the object of my study in the introductory chapter. I simply thought that by making explicit that I am a Catalan woman and I have played rugby for sixteen years (thirteen in Barcelona and three in London) the reader would automatically understand the significance of my rugby biography and would empathise with some of the deep and complicated experiences derived from being a female rugby. Thus, I took for granted that the research would be able to capture other women's lived rugby experiences, without the need for any further personal involvement by the researcher.

Only after delving into sexual difference thought premises and also into the crisis of representation of lived experiences and the narrative turn as an answer to this crisis I have realised that my personal influence on this study is not just accidental or unavoidable: it is a structural part of the research per se.

The turning point in the process of this analysis is underlined by what the Italians call: *starting from oneself*, which literally means to start right at the site of one's own experience. Italian sexual difference feminist thinkers recognise that nothing original can be created or discovered if women do not practice the premise of starting from themselves when they relate to other women, men and the whole world in general. Thus, my point of view in this feminist practice is a preliminary condition in order to be able to immerse myself in a research practice that is fully aware of the influence of the researcher in her research.

Once I understood the inescapable influences of the crisis of representation in my own research and I realised my incapacity to unproblematically transcribe other women's rugby experiences in a text, I started to seriously consider the possibility of writing about my friends



and my own experiences in an alternative form - a form that embodies all the intensity and depth of what playing rugby represents for women like my friends and myself. However, I am aware that searching for evocative and new ways of writing about my own experiences and the experiences of others in rugby requires a better knowledge of the language in which I am writing and more sophisticated knowledge of literary devices, which for me as a non-native English speaker makes it even harder.

As I locate myself within the poststructuralist paradigm, I do not claim to embody an objective position when analysing my interview data. Like Clifford (1986), I acknowledge that all our truths are always necessarily partial truths as our research knowledge inevitably derives from the cultural context of the researcher and the researched. Therefore, my following analysis is negotiated as a result of the dialogues between the Italian feminist sexual difference thought, my rugby experiences and the rugby experiences of my participants.

While I aim to represent women's varied experiences in rugby through the lenses of sexual difference theory, I have chosen to act as a narrator of my stories. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, I needed a "character" whose voice acts as a connecting thread throughout my narratives and thus enables me to create a coherence to my story as it moves between characters, between different time periods and between different countries. Secondly, to be true to my theoretical perspective I aimed to *start from myself* before fully immersing myself in the experiences of other women in rugby. It is important to emphasise then that my voice in the following chapters acts as a facilitator for creating a "collective" rugby story (Richardson, 1990b) and therefore acts as a focal point through which all the events evolve. While my stories are often filled with emotions and recollections of personal experiences, I consider that they do transcend the accusations of self-indulgence by embedding my voice



and rugby women's voices into women's contemporary cultural conditions through my theoretical perspective: sexual difference thought.

The narratives in the following chapters are based on data gathered through my personal experiences recollections, my participant observations during my past years as a rugby player and on the analysis of conversational interviews with some of my intimate rugby friends. As a result, the narratives are organised in three chapters, each of them focusing on one of the main concepts theorised by sexual difference Italian feminists and later analysed through women's rugby experiences lenses.

The following chapter is an expression of what it means for me to start from myself. Furthermore, *female desire* is the concept chosen for this chapter. Sexual difference authors recognise female desire as one of the principal motives for women to start recounting their own experiences from themselves. For this reason this first chapter is mainly focused on my traumatic and intense relationship with Lia, my first ever rugby friend. The aim of narrating this relationship is to show how I recognise and analyse my female desire in those early rugby years which I shared with Lia. At the same time being truthful to myself and Lia through this story gives me the necessary conviction that I am able to narrate other women's rugby experiences starting from myself. The reader will soon notice that apart from rugby there were other aspects of our lives that powerfully united us, such as studies, hobbies, a will to go out and discover the outside world. It is difficult to say what was a consequence of rugby and what was due to other aspects of our common life. This difficulty strengthens my choice of writing narratives to represent my special relationship with Lia and then be able to represent how rugby has always been there between us, although a direct connection between rugby and our past intense relationship is not always clear. This challenge justifies my emphasis on delving into the crisis of representation and its consequences in the previous section and searching for an answer beyond conventional forms of writing about women's



rugby experiences. Moreover, in this chapter I also focus on the engendering and development of female desire in some other rugby women apart from myself.

The second chapter of narratives is mainly focussing on my long relationship with Louise, my best ever rugby friend. A friend with whom I have experienced the most intense and important moments of my rugby career. With Louise I have felt how rugby has strongly united us during some occasions and also how rugby during some other occasions has disunited us. We needed to give up rugby and look back together to reflect on the power of homogenisation that rugby had upon our relationship. The stories narrated in this chapter are about our *disparities*, and explicitly the consequences of recognising mutual *female authority* between us - as Italian sexual difference feminists called it - in our past relationship as leaders of a new rugby team in Barcelona.

The last narrative chapter represents an attempt to examine to what extent the *symbolic order of the mother* takes place in a women's rugby context. Due to the symbolic character of this concept the focused narrative in this chapter is a dream. This dream allows me to reflect upon the possible explanation and consequences of considering that a symbolic order of the mother might take place among women who play, or have played rugby.

In summary, in the next three chapters I represent the good and the bad, the black and the white of being a woman, like myself, and playing rugby with other women, like my friends, in a society that does not easily recognise the possible capacities of rugby in producing female symbolic and female original ways of relating to this world. However, we (my friends and I) create a female space through rugby in which, without constraints, we can recognise the female desire by acknowledging female authority in each other and are thus able to engender freedom on our own terms.



## CHAPTER V

### GENERATING FORMS OF FEMALE FREEDOM IN WOMEN'S RUGBY RELATIONSHIPS

It is almost three o'clock in the morning in Fast Taff, a nice night bar in Gràcia. Gràcia is nowadays a fashionable youth neighbourhood, very well situated in the Northern part of Barcelona, close to the city centre and to some of the posh areas of Barcelona. I cannot deny I have a deep emotional attachment to Gràcia, the place where I was born and where I have spent all my childhood and adolescence. The streets are so narrow and full of small squares that often one gets lost and forgets that Barcelona is actually a city of three and a half million inhabitants. Two centuries ago Gràcia used to be a town of its own where upper class Barcelonians had their second residence. Now it has become trendy and well-known as a neighbourhood for bohemians and intellectuals. It is now impossible to get an apartment in Gràcia. Luckily my mother still lives there in the same flat I was born and grew up and I love going to Barcelona to see her and going out in Gràcia. Before starting University, my entire world was in Gràcia, my primary and secondary school, my basketball team, my catechesis group, and my trekking club. When I started to go out with my secondary school friends, our meeting places were always in Gràcia. By our eighteenth birthdays we knew all the cheap and even some dodgy bars and nightclubs. For me, Gràcia represents the perfect place to grow up.

My old team, BUC, has played the final today and some team players and ex-players are celebrating the defeat of the Spanish champions. What a great match they have played. As usual, some of the players are drinking and recalling loudly some of the greatest situations that had occurred today on the pitch. Some others are dancing and listening to one of the last songs of the night. It's a melody sung by Ana Belén, a



famous Spanish singer, which talks about the difficulties that a woman goes through when she finds herself alone after having been in a relationship for so long. Living alone seems hard at the beginning, but she knows she needs to find herself to be totally independent.

*Sentada en el andén  
mi cuerpo tiembla y puedo ver  
que a lo lejos silba el viejo tren  
como sombra del ayer*

*Sitting on the platform  
my body trembles and I can see  
that in the distance the old train  
whistles like a shade of yesterday*

*No será fácil ser  
de nuevo un solo corazón  
siempre había sido una mitad  
sin saber mi identidad*

*It will not be easy to be  
a single heart again  
it had always been a half  
without knowing my identity*

*No llevaré ninguna imagen de ti  
me iré desnuda igual que nací  
debo empezar a ser yo misma y saber  
que soy capaz y que ando por mi pie*

*I will not take away any image of you  
I will go away naked as I was born  
I must begin to be myself and to know  
that I am able and that I stand on my own feet*

*Desde mi libertad  
soy fuerte porque soy volcán  
nunca me enseñaron a volar  
pero el vuelo debo alzar*

*Since my freedom  
I am strong because I am a volcano  
they never taught me to fly  
but I must rise in flight*

Lia goes to me and takes my hand to invite me to dance, as we used to do when we were playing rugby together in the PE College team, a long time ago. I'm very happy to feel Lia's hand and see her smile.

“Mons! I want you to know... by the way I'm not pissed ha, ha, ha... (with that drunken intonation that has always characterised Lia at this stage of any party, we move very slowly and we hold each other's hips)... that talking to you about our past has been great. It was not an easy thing for either of us, but I think we had to do it. So, thanks to your research, we did it. I think it's great! I have really missed you all this time and I felt troubled because I knew I made you suffer. Nobody knows how much, you're the only one who knows that. But I really feel something strong inside me wanted to tell you: I made you suffer, I suffered a lot as well, and I feel very sorry for it. But this is gone, I'm here now, and I want to be your friend. That's it! I just want



you to know that although I didn't want to see you for a while and I needed my space back to think for myself; you have always been and always will be an important part of my life. Please, promise me you will never forget this".

*"LIA!" I am completely silent. I know there are not words outside us that can explain what we feel in those moments of brutal honesty and vulnerability. I just hug and squeeze her against me in an attempt to communicate my deepest feelings. However, I'm uncertain. Does she really feel the full meaning of my strong feelings for her at this moment? In that hug I let myself go. What we have gone through only she and I know for certain. In the past, she tried to be herself but I was a strong woman to deal with. Through rugby we became very "special" friends. We had no categories to rely on, no previous models, no previous advice, just handling raw feelings that we experienced from relating intensely to each other. "It isn't a normal friendship", her mum said once. And here we are, listening to this song in the middle of the dance floor as though we were a couple of women who have just re-discovered the pleasure of each other's company after repressing our desire to be together for so long. I kiss her neck while I whisper in her ear: "I LOVE YOU!"*

It's eight o'clock the next morning. I'm in my mother's flat, in my old room, the room where I grew up as a teenager. Before that I had to share another room in the flat with Luisa, one of my older sisters. This little room where I am now, with only space for a single bed and a desk, has always been the most precious one among my sisters and me because of its autonomous location. From this room, one can come and go without being heard or seen from the rest of the rooms. Like my older sisters, living in this room gave me a sense of independence. When my oldest sister, Raquel, left home the room was for Luisa. By then, Carmen, who is older than Luisa, was not



interested in it. I was always the fourth. Finally, when Luisa left home I was fifteen and the room was mine.

In bed, I catch myself reliving the emotional and bodily feeling of that hug that took place scarcely five hours ago. Although I'm exhausted because yesterday was a very long and tiring day, my eyes are wide open. I can't sleep. I feel uneasy in bed. I need to get up. I go to the toilet and then I decide to go to the living room. I feel physically tired. I let my weight drop on to the most comfy blue sofa imaginable. As soon as I hit the sofa I feel its extra softness along my whole body - I feel "Hmm" – while a Mediterranean breeze caresses all my skin's curves. I feel it. I am alive and what happened yesterday was real.

The feeling of that hug with Lia at the end of last night is enchanting me. I am worried, very worried. I think of my PhD I want to write about the deep and emotional meanings of my relationships with other women in the context of rugby and I do not know where to start. I believe it would be a very good idea to start reflecting on the meanings of that hug, but... I don't know how to do it. It's too close to myself, to my emotional life. I can't seriously attempt to theorise about it. How could anyone theorise about a hug between two women when the emotional connotations of it easily occlude its possible social and political transcendence?

How will I ever be able to relate the reflection of a hug to a theoretical framework? It sounds impossible! However, Bocchetti's (1996, p. 7) words are echoing in my mind, "To think is not to recognize itself in something already thought, but to become lost: it is to try to invent new forms of perception and new forms of reflection".

Never mind! This advice must seem worthy for courageous women. I am not! Recalling Bocchetti's words I feel even more strongly my inability to carry out



research that has at its core the reflection on the meanings of a sensuous and corporeal hug with another woman. After all, what happened yesterday between Lia and I was a simple and natural reconciliation between two women, who for long did not understand each other. I will never forget that cold night in middle of February in 1990 in Lia's place.

"Look Montse, I can't bear the situation any longer, I can't see you any more. I need time to think and organise my life, by myself".

Surprised, I ask, "What do you mean? What have I done wrong?"  
With a trembling voice, she utters, "It's not you. It's the overwhelming relationship we have. I need my own space and time. I need you to leave the flat and my life".

"I don't get you. I have always tried to help you. You know that.  
What's really going on?"

"I know it. And I thank you. But now I'm in love with Tom and I can't be with him being your friend".

"Why not? I like Tom. We had a great time together today! Hadn't we?" I smile trying to relieve some of the tension of our conversation.

"It's not this! You know what I mean. You are so demanding, so when I'm with you I lie to him and I say I'm studying when maybe I'm at rugby or going out with you".

"What's wrong with that? You like rugby, parties, and being with me.  
Don't you?"

"Montse, we are in our last year of College, we need to think seriously about our future. Rugby and you won't be here for me next year. I'm scared of

being on my own out there. I need to be myself. You know that being so close to you I have almost stopped thinking for myself, at the end I was embracing your decisions because I was getting lazy and unable to decide anything in my life. Isn't this scary?" She starts weeping.

I try to hug her, to hold her as I used to do. But she rejects me. "So, what do you want me to do?" Searching for her eyes to focus on mine and get her honest answer.

Screaming and crying like she needs to believe herself, the painful words she is uttering, "To leave me! Be out of my life for ever! L-e-a-v-e me, let me alone!"

With mixed feelings of rage and desperation, I exclaim, "This is impossible! You're a big part of my life! If I let you go, I'll let myself go too". Choking back the tears, I ask. "Why don't we try to talk about it tomorrow and find a solution?"

"Montse, there is no solution, I've been thinking a lot. And I know it's not your fault. The rugby's to blame."

Upset and confused I ask "What? Do you mean that rugby is making you unhappy? Why?"

"It's because of rugby that I have been encouraged to be so easy with sex, that I have immersed myself so much into partying, alcohol, and some times even drugs, you know all that, you are the same. And what is worse, not worrying about what the rest of the world thinks about me. It's because of the sex and drinking parties in rugby that I had to lie to my parents, my poor parents! I can't stand this any longer, I need peace with myself". She bursts into heavy crying. She cannot stop.



Looking at her totally wounded and perplexed, I retort "Lia! This is awful! You are regretting playing rugby with me all this time when for me this has been the greatest time of my life! You, rugby, College, doing whatever we felt at the moment we desired without giving a shit about other people's opinions...The important thing was that you supported me, I supported you. I don't get you! What is wrong with you? What has changed now?"

What is the point in trying to go beyond this? Why not just let it be? I have to confess that reading and understanding Italian sexual difference thought has made me seriously reflect about some of my "intense" relationships with other women in rugby, and subconsciously I'm sure that my "unresolved" relationship with Lia was always leading this reflection.

However, I would need to find sociological motives as well. Do they exist? How would anyone react if they read in the introduction to my PhD: "The main motivation for this research is to make sense of a reconciling hug that took place between one of my best rugby friends and myself after twelve years of total lack of communication." I am sure it would sound like very self-indulgent and selfish research...that I impose myself as the most important subject in the investigation and I do it just for my own sake. I am sure people would ask me why I don't go to psychotherapy instead of doing research. This is definitely not what academia expects me to do. Academia expects me to reflect on other women's experiences without bias. So, my personal experiences and feelings cannot be the object of academic research. I cannot relegate the "truth" and "objectivity" of my empirical data, gathered from my interviews and field notes, to my personal interpretations of them. Can I?

Nevertheless, I catch myself identifying the feeling of the warmth of the sofa against my body with the tenderness of Lia's body close to mine. She was so comfortable. I felt as I used to feel in our years of intense relationship when our bodies and minds were so well connected: protected and at the same time strong enough to confront the whole world by ourselves. In that hug I felt courageous again about telling anybody who I am without being scared of sanctions or misinterpretations. I realise how important it is for me to have Lia's relationship in my life again. During the period we did not speak to each other I thought I could live without her support for the rest of my life. Now I know I was deceiving myself.

Suddenly, I have a feeling of discomfort: maybe this is not the subject of an "orthodox" research project, but it is definitely an important turning point in my life. My inability to reflect on the meanings of that hug is slowly vanishing. Although I can see why my personal emotions involved in relating to other women are not interesting enough for scientific research, I have read that new poststructuralist trends in social sciences are reinforcing the researchers' task of delving into their personal experiences before analysing other people's lives.

Thinking on these new trends makes me feel comfortable again and I figure out that I do not have a choice: the emotions involved in my intense past relationship with Lia will inevitable influence any attempt to explore other rugby women's experiences.

A whole twist of thoughts and feelings run through me. On the one hand, I understand it will be hard to do it because I am in academia and analysing this hug with Lia will have some problems to be accepted as suitable scientific research. On the other hand, there is this need inside me to reflect on the meanings of that hug or other hugs between women in order to delve into women's intense experiential relationships in rugby. If, at least, I could convince academia that my goal in dealing



with this hug as a starting point is not to analyse the hug per se, but rather to be able to understand other hugs and the complex meanings that these kind of physical close contacts represent in some women's rugby scenarios. Embraces that involve high sensual corporeal meanings after playing rugby for 80 minutes and throwing oneself onto the pitch for the benefit of the whole team, physical connections intensely felt, but so difficult to explain and represent in words.

I remember that Spanish championship final in 1990 in Madrid. I was in my last year of College and I was playing flanker.

Our first choice number eight cannot come to Madrid. So, the coach has designated Alessandra instead, a good second row and our best and most stylish lineout jumper. Alessandra represents the kind of woman that everybody in the team likes to be friends with or even better, to be like her. She is tall - about 1'75 m - long dark brown curly hair, big deep blue eyes and beautiful olive skin. She is also very well proportioned. Apart from doing her PE degree and playing rugby, she works as a teaching assistant in a famous contemporary dance school in Barcelona; she also does some occasional work for a modelling company. I particularly admire Alessandra because she has never showed off her physical attributes nor even mentioned them. I wonder what it feels like playing rugby in the forwards and being such a pretty dancer at the same time.

I'm thrilled to play third row with her, we have always understood each other very well on the pitch, although we are not very close off the pitch; we definitely move in very different circles. Inevitably preparing for this final game we have become closer; practising third row movements has united us

substantially. In several training sessions we have been practising her picking up the ball from the scrum, she bashing the opposite fly half. “Montse remember you are the first support for Alessandra, if you are not there, she will get hurt, she needs you to protect her as soon as possible”, the coach often said to me.

We are in the final and we are losing by one try. Alessandra and I are working very hard to stop the scrums going backwards. In one scrum Alessandra picks the ball up, bashes the opposite fly half, and goes immediately to the ground to form a ruck, protecting the ball with her body. I am the first support and I see how an opposite forward comes off side and steps on her arm. “Shit! What the fuck are you doing?” I scream at this forward, she gives me a filthy look and keeps stepping on Alessandra’s arm. I can’t help but head butt her. In return she punches me quite hard in the face, so I feel my nose hurts. The ref whistles scrum to them, obviously he has not seen what has happened. Enraged I look at her thinking *if I get you in a tackle I’ll kill you*. Alessandra gets up and helps me with my nose, which has started bleeding. She says, “Montse, don’t worry, leave her alone, let’s do our game. I’m fine, she did not hurt me much, but you had better get some help with your nose.” Our coach comes towards us and stuffs my nostrils full of cotton wool to stop them bleeding. Straight away I’m ready to scrum. I look at Alessandra and say, “Let’s win this scrum and score.” Alessandra replies with a bemused expression: “This is exactly what I have been trying all this bloody game,” she smiles wisely before immersing her head between the arses of the two second rows.



When the ref whistles the end of the match we are still one try down. I stare at Alessandra with a helpless expression. We look at each other and we can't help but hug. Then, I realise this is my first close physical contact with her body off the pitch with such a deep meaning and strong desire of sharing sadness and powerlessness. "It's been a real pleasure to play next to you on the pitch," I comment, while we disengage. She looks at me with her beautiful blue eyes wide open and utters: "In my life I have never felt so well protected, thank you."

From a woman belonging to a rugby team in a championship game the hug of a teammate represents the sharing of complicit feelings, comprehension of the "battle" just fought, acknowledgement of the importance of each other in this battle, acceptance, protection... In other words, very often the magic of playing rugby with fourteen teammates on the pitch expands the feelings from complicity to love and in some cases even sexual desire.

Looking at hugs in these terms leads me to think how wrong I was when in the past I tried to find out the meanings of my close physical contacts in rugby by listening to anonymous female rugby players' experiences that I gathered in other interviews. In other words, I have moved from thinking that doing abstract research on women's rugby relationships will help me to understand my relationship with Lia, to convincing myself that it is exactly the other way round. Only through my self-reflection on the meanings and the consequences of my past relationship with Lia can I investigate other intense relationships in rugby and even other women's own relationships.

What a crazy thing I did! After twelve years of not speaking to each other I had suddenly phoned her. I still remember Lia's reaction to my desperate call, "Hi Lia! Do you remember me? Montse here! I'm phoning you because I'm doing research about women's intense relationships in rugby and I have just discovered that to be able to carry out my research I need to investigate our private relationship. Do you mind if we meet one day and I interview you and tape it for my research?"

What woman in her wits would have answered to that? In that phone call I fully embodied what Richardson (1997) means about how your life becomes your research and your research your life. I could not detach them at all. Was I going to interview Lia just for the sake of my research? That would have made me an unethical friend-researcher. I knew that deep in my heart this "unresolved" relationship with Lia needed to be analysed for my research and also for myself, who "by chance" is the author of the research.

In fact I'm still amazed how positively she answered to my demand. She was not very sure about the tape and I had to convince her, but finally she accepted it as part of the deal. "If this is going to help you" she said on the phone, "I can say 'no,' can't I?" Certainly not! I thought. This is so important that I need to tape it, in order to be able to go over it as many times as I need. That was the first time I felt I was becoming a researcher about women's rugby on my own terms, as the Italians say *starting from myself*. It was the first step in embodying what it means to transcend women's private worlds and break down the silence that surrounds women's social representations. How excited I was!

While I lay down on the sofa I close my eyes and remember... I have to admit that it was a relief and it was much easier than I thought:



It's a sunny Saturday mid-May 2002. I'm going to meet Lia in ten minutes to have lunch together in a bar in Barceloneta, the old harbour town of Barcelona. Although some buildings are now new and modern because of the Olympics, this part of Barcelona still conserves some of its past and remains one of the emblematic places of the down town. She wanted us to meet here, I don't know why. She said, "You tape the conversation, I choose the venue". I've never been in this bar before.

It has been 12 years since we have talked about ourselves. We have seen each other a few times at rugby and college celebrations but we were always surrounded by lots of people and said nothing important. Today is the first time in twelve years that we are going to talk about ourselves, about what happened and how we have overcome the experience of our falling out. I wonder how much has she changed, will she still be as uncomplicated and honest as she used to be with me? Should I kiss her when I see her or just shake her hand? I am tense like a little girl who plays for the first time in a team game. Ready to play without knowing very well how, just with a strong will to be in the game, learning to score, and feeling like I am someone important in the team. I saw her come into the bar and suddenly all my fears disappeared at once. She is Lia. We don't kiss but we exchange deep meaningful looks. We both know what is going on. I feel I'm ready for this...(.)

"So, tell me again exactly what you are looking for in this research"

Lia starts breaking the ice before she wolfs down three "patatas bravas<sup>1</sup>" at once.

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<sup>1</sup> Potatoes in a brava sauce, usually hot

“I want to explore the intensity and overwhelming relationships that some of us have had in rugby. What makes rugby such an important sport for us”. The waiter brings the “chocos<sup>2</sup>.” *Great! My preferred tapa! I have missed it so much in London.*

She sips a beer to help the “bravas” go down and she exclaims: “Oh this is an easy question, because it’s fun and lots of team-work is involved in it. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, but you didn’t say that 12 years ago”. I respond sharply to make her aware that today we need to be brave and talk about the serious matters that affected our relationship in the past.

With an absolutely clear voice she states: “Montse, I was ill, psychologically ill! Do you know I went to a psychiatrist once and later on for psychological treatment?” She eats the first “choco” and sips more beer. “Ow! They are hot! Be careful! I’ve burnt my tongue.”

Following her advice I blow on one and wait until it cools down a bit. I reply with a softer voice. “No, I didn’t know, nobody ever told me”. Ashamed of my ignorance I put the “choco” in my mouth. *How stupid I was I never knew she was under psychological treatment I always thought I was the one who suffered more from our breakdown and now I realised she was deeply ill because of me. Why did I never bother in going beyond my own feelings, my own wounds? How arrogant and immature I was!*

She swallows the last bits of croquette she has in her mouth and tells me, “Well I didn’t spread it around. I wasn’t proud of it. My parents, especially my mother, were so worried about me that she forced me to go. I

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<sup>2</sup> A kind of squid.



have to admit that it went well; the woman there helped me to understand my relationship with you, with myself, with Tom, with rugby, with my life in general. You were always in my psychotherapy sessions, I even dreamt about you, you were stuck in my mind and I didn't know what to do. I think the psychotherapist couldn't really work out why I was so traumatised by you, why I couldn't be your friend any longer, if I was telling her how good you were to me. I'm sure she eventually thought I was completely mad..." She looks at the table and plays with her fork and some bravas' sauce. She raises her eyes, starting to brim, over towards me and she says with a worried voice, "Montse, I know I shouldn't have told you the things I told you in the way I did, but then I didn't know how to handle the constraint I felt every time you were near me... my chest clenched when I thought of you or saw you. My mother was right when she said that our friendship wasn't normal at all. I have never experienced a relationship like this with anyone else. Have you?" She carefully picks up a brava and swallows it. After, she drinks a long gulp of beer.

"Of course not!" I awake from my astonishment and I reply. "You were very special. It was a strange feeling being with you. I think that for a while I devoted myself totally to you, don't ask me why. In those years life was extremely exciting and fast, don't you think? For me the most important thing was to experience with you all the new things were happening to us". I keep eating "chocos" as a way to avoid her deep look. *She has caught me up. I don't really know how to respond to her words, they are sincere and harmful. When we were together I was the one who always knew how to react in front of any difficult situation. In this one I feel I'm completely lost.*

Breaking the seriousness of our conversation she exclaims, “Oh, sorry I have finished them all” with the last crumb of croquette in her mouth and knowing that she is being naughty on purpose. “Do you want me to order another one?” She points to the empty croquettes plate. “Do you want more beer?”

Hesitating I answer, “I want another beer, but no more croquettes”.

“Yes no probs, two beers is that all?” She asks me while she gets up off the chair.

“I think so. What about you?” *How many times should I have asked her this question and I never did? And now it just came out naturally. I’m glad, at least I ‘m learning something from all this.*

“I think I’ll go for octopus. Here they cook it very nicely with lots of extra virgin olive oil and sweet red pepper, not too hot, not too mild, just the right taste. I remember you liked it very much when we went to Galicia on holiday the summer before our falling out. What a great summer we had together! I have recalled that summer lots of times in mind. So, do you still like Galician octopus?” She asks me in a way that means she knows for certain that I still love octopus.

I can’t help but chuckle at her intonation. *She knows me so well!* I got excited, thinking about the taste of octopus in my mouth. “Oh yes! Please, Lia! Octopus”. She heads to the bar while I finish my beer. I grin thinking about the funny and crazy things we did that summer. *Like meeting two guys in a bar at ten o’clock at night and going to place of one of them to sleep because we didn’t have anywhere to go. Luckily everything went all right and the guys were lovely. They took care of us as if we were friends for years.*



Lia comes back cheerful and with two big beers in her hands. She sits while she puts the beers on the table and says, “Well, the octopus is on its way. Where were we? Is this tape recorder still on?” She searches for the bright red light with her eyes.

“Don’t worry, forget about it. I will be the only one listening to this tape, I promise... You were telling me about how nice I was...ha, ha, ha,” I become serious again and I utter “No, you actually were telling me about your traumas with me.”

She starts talking thoughtfully. “I remember going through your problems as if they were my own. I suffered a lot when you fell so madly in love with one of our rugby lecturers who was also a married man. Do you remember all the crazy things we did in order to meet him? I felt all the pain involved in that relationship and I couldn’t really help you apart from being your cover for your secret meetings. Do you remember we went out several times all three together pretending we all three were very good friends, when you were so in love with him? Then, I didn’t know what to do, how to react, it was difficult and painful for you, but for me as well. Sometimes I felt I wasn’t helping you enough and as a consequence I felt it was my fault that you were suffering so much...It was weird, wasn’t it?”

With an ashamed expression I answer back, “ Damn! I was so in love with that man and I guess he wasn’t the right man for me to fall so deeply in love with. I learned a lot from that affair.” I drink half of my beer in an attempt to erase in vain that episode of my past. *She is really making me think thoroughly about my past actions and myself. Why did she keep being my close*

*friend? How come I'm learning so much about myself just listening to her?*

*This is a feeling I hardly have had with anyone in my entire life.*

“Learning?” Lia says enthusiastically, looking like she has discovered something. “I learnt a lot from our relationship as well!” She looks at me intensely and she continues: “I have to confess something to you: as a result of our falling out and my ensuing depression I became stronger. I think that all the pain involved in confronting my own decisions and my own preferences that last year at Uni have largely contributed to making me a very strong and determined woman”. She breathes deeply, sips her beer and continues talking: “Look at me now with three little girls, as you know the last two are twins. Tom and I were planning to have the second kid and then came two at once and girls again. Now the little ones are two years old and still Tom gets stressed very easily, but I am fine, and he didn't even undergo the hard physical pregnancy as I did, imagine the last two months. Getting up off the sofa was a nightmare!” The waiter comes and leaves the octopus and some bread in one corner of the table. *I can't help but look at it and start to salivate. However, I make an effort not to start the octopus and listen with all my attention to her words.*

“Sometimes when Tom gets very stressed and irritable, after coming back home from working eight hours in his office as an accountant, I tell him to go away to calm himself down and leave me alone with the three girls. I'm always fine. The three girls are physically very demanding, some nights I'm so knackered that I fall asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow, but my mind is always ready to handle this exhausting physical work”.



She stops talking to drink and eat some of the octopus. I rapidly follow her. *Hmm! The octopus melts in my mouth. It's so tender. For a sec it makes me forget the seriousness of our conversation.* With her mouth half full she keeps telling me, "I have several female acquaintances from my job that have gone through postpartum depressions and things like that". She drinks to help the octopus go down. "In contrast, look at me, here I am with three girls, working full time and having a husband that some times goes away to calm himself". She smiles as a sign of her superiority over Tom. "I feel happy and secure in my strength and ability to handle my personal situation. I really learnt a lot from our relationship. From our falling out I learnt that the most important thing in this world is to be myself, to firmly choose what I want and to work for my own benefit. You don't learn this at school. Do you?" She makes haste to eat octopus, *she knows that otherwise I'll finish it all and octopus is very expensive.*

"I'm glad hearing this, but still I feel guilty of your psychological illness. I should have realised you were different from me and you needed your own space to live your life. I really feel I could have avoided you breakdown and all the rest...and now I feel ashamed I wasn't aware of your deep traumas with me". *How stupid I was. I know things are not as easy as she explains them.*

Engulfing her last crumb of octopus, she exclaims: "Guilty, ashamed of what? Of helping me as much as you could? For really taking care of me?" She drinks more beer. *How can she think like that when I was very negative in her life, when I was the one to blame for her depression?* She gathers energy and with a firm voice she asserts, "Montse it wasn't only your fault! You

never, ne-ver forced me to do anything I didn't want to. I was too lazy to think or to stand up for myself, I just let myself go with the flow of the rugby team and I accepted without questioning all the things you and others told me. For years it was the easiest choice until I fell in love with Tom and the last year of College came. Then, I suddenly panicked, I realised you and rugby wouldn't always be there for me. I needed to think about myself and for myself if I wanted to survive in the 'real' world".

*I never thought about our problems in these terms. After the break down I felt confused and lost for so long. She says I was in her dreams; in contrast she was always present in my inebriated state after rugby matches, more than once I got hammered just to forget her but unavoidably I ended up crying and telling the one who was next to me how miserable I felt because she had abandoned me. I felt so wounded that I could never put myself in her place. She keeps talking, "For example, this year the managers' team of the high school where I work as a PE teacher have offered to renew my position as sub head teacher of the school. Don't be very impressed, in my high school this position is not very important, it's between the head teacher and the deputy who do all the heavy work. In summary, you could think that this position is advantageous because it implies easy work, less PE classes, and most important I can choose my schedule, which allows me to better combine my hours with the school hours of my oldest daughter and the nursery of the twins. However, this year I told the head teacher that I didn't want it. I stood in front of him and told him that I wasn't interested in his offer. Imagine his reaction...ha, ha, ha...you know what I mean? I was sick of stupid meetings and not being recognised enough in the managers' team. I know I'll have more*



problems to handle with the girls but I'll manage, I always do. I'm sure that if I didn't believe in my strength I'd have accepted the position just to keep with the flow of the high school. Nevertheless, I didn't and I'm very proud of it. Do you see?"

"Wow! Yes! I do! For me it is really important to hear this. I realise that you are not the easily influenced, Lia, you used to be, the one I knew seventeen years ago". Saying this I can't resist picking up the last bit of octopus. *Comforted I feel that Lia is fully back in my life!*

"Of course I'm another Lia, a stronger one, but the bottom line I'm still the Lia you met. This is why I have tried so hard to get you back as a friend in every INEF rugby anniversary. Do you remember I was always the one who came and said hello, when you pretended to ignore me?" Her glass is empty; she takes my beer and drinks. *Without asking, as we used to do when we shared everything in our lives.*

I say with a guilty expression, "I know and I appreciated your effort in those occasions. But I wasn't ready yet".

Nodding she says, "You know the funniest thing? That I knew you were a very stubborn woman. So, I just tried to talk to you without upsetting you: a bit here a bit there...and now that you have this research on your hands, suddenly one day you phone me at home telling me that you want to talk about our past and tape it for your research. Life is funny, don't you think?"

"I totally agree!" *I feel so embarrassed. It seems like because I have an interest in our past for my research, I have agreed to talk to her about it. Life-research-life, what is the difference?* Choking back my tears of happiness and

holding her hands, I say gently, “Thank you for your words. They are really important to me”.

She also grips my hands “Thank you for letting me talk about all this uneasiness that has been inside me for so long”, she replies while kissing my cheek. *Feeling her lips against my cheek again is so enjoyable and special that inevitably some tears well up in my eyes.* She looks at me and asks, as if she were a little girl wanting an ice cream: “Can we stop this bloody tape for a while and have a bit of intimacy? I want to cry as well!”

I rapidly press the stop button “We are off.” We join our chairs and we bind to each other in an intense, sensuous and corporeal hug while we cry as a result of a blend of sadness and relief for the lost years between us and the difficulty we’ve been through. We also cry with the joy of being together again. We are aware of the important meanings of all the words we have just interchanged and the deep emotional feelings involved in them. *I realise we haven’t had close physical contact for twelve years. Suddenly I become aware of how much I have missed feeling her body against mine.*

I whisper in her ear “I’ve missed you every single day of all these years”.

She adds softly while she smiles with this cheeky expression that I have always adored about her, “I’ve missed you every hour, of every single day, of all these years, ha, ha, ha...”

I open my eyes and I see the metal Guinness picture on the wall in front of me, which says, “Lobsters love Guinness”. I brought it from my first rugby tour with INEF to Ireland. I thought my mother would like it but I was wrong. She just put it up



because of me. Since my father died thirteen years ago she hasn't cared much about the flat's decoration, she is above all very pragmatic. The main things one will notice in the living room are a big black dinner table needed for Christmas family celebrations (now with new Amanda, Luisa's daughter, we are twelve), a huge TV and a comfy sofa. It is on this sofa she passes most of her time: watching TV, talking on the phone, reading, or having "siesta". I look at the picture again and I realise that it does not match the rest of the living room decorations. Already, my sister Luisa has asked me several times when I will remove it. I always reply, "Don't worry, when I have my own flat I will take all my things with me".

I feel good recalling that interview with Lia. However, I hear an assertive voice inside me, "Well Montse now you need to think about how you are going to make sense of this physical hug and happy ending with Lia. What does it have to do with your research on women's rugby relationships?"

Uneasy, I sit up. I suddenly remember the Italians argument about *female desire and female freedom*. They do not deny the sexual aspect of desire, but their main point is that desire is the driving force that allows a woman to start and believe in herself. Therefore, female desire in rugby might be a desire to find oneself through physicality, sport, and relationships with other women and even sex ... In this sense female freedom is the freedom that directly derives from recognising this desire in oneself and other women. I could argue that in my past relationship with Lia I recognised this female desire of being myself. Being with her encouraged my female desire to surface without constraints, "Without giving a shit about other people's opinions". With her constant support for my actions I found myself being the woman and the rugby player I wanted to be. Maybe this is why I always felt so comfortable with her; between her and I there were no significant male interferences...well until

Tom appeared. Is it Tom's fault that we lost our female freedom? I don't think so. I suppose Cigarini (1996) is right when she says that not all women's relationships produce female freedom by the mere fact of two women being in relation to each other. To be able to generate female freedom something else is needed. For me, I realise that the relationship allowed me the freedom to start from myself and to nurture my female desire. For Lia, it was completely different. It was constraint and pain. She needed to find her desire and freedom somewhere else.

However, I like to think that she found female freedom when she overcame her depression. As she said, she became a strong woman thinking about herself and becoming what she wanted to be. These words of Lia about herself confronting life from herself reminds me of the email that Lizzy sent me the morning after I interviewed her. I get up off the sofa and go to my room to fetch it. I am sure I have this email with the British interviews. Here it is! Contented I go back to the living room. However, before I sit on the sofa I look for a moment through the window and I realise what a strong attachment I feel to Barcelona. Although I have been living in London for two years now and I like London, I can't ever see myself living in such an anonymous city that it is for me. Looking at the people on the street I feel close to them, although I don't know them. I suppose it is recognising myself in the way they look, brown hair, brown eyes, olive skin. In the way they dress, now it is a hot spring and they wear light clothes. But more than anything in the way they say hello with that wide smile that I so often missed in London. I sit by the window and I start to read Lizzy's letter under a bright morning summer light:



Hi Montsy,

I hope your way back home went all right last evening.

I'm so sorry that Ian did not stop crying. He was awake until midnight! I think the pain of one tooth growing didn't let him relax and sleep. As a consequence nobody in the house has slept very well.

I've been thinking about all we talked of yesterday. Especially the last question you asked me that we couldn't properly discuss because of Ian's screams. "What is it about rugby that you love most?" Then, I thought that we had already covered that matter when at the beginning I told you about the woman who was a film student and wanted to make a short film about women's rugby and came down to our rugby club and the captain chose me to be one of the interviewees because I had a child. And I remember saying to her, "I just found it amazing, rolling around in the mud, you know, simple things, being in the rain, being outside". Last night after thinking about that for a while, I became aware that this is only one part of what I love about rugby. Moreover, I know in my life, rugby has other meanings than just rolling around in the mud.

When I started to play rugby I was very happy to be doing it even though I was probably a bit old, mid twenties, and I was the mother of a five-year-old boy, and a wife. Maybe in that situation what you're supposed to be doing is going to cocktail parties, cooking meals and having people for supper... I don't know. The thing is that I was very happy to be able to go down to rugby on Thursday night and feel quite free. I realised that being with a group of women made me feel very confident. Confident about playing rugby and not having any feeling about "I shouldn't be doing

this, this is not what women do,” if you know what I mean. What I felt for rugby then was a real attraction, not just playing it, but the social aspect of it. I felt very comfortable with people and I found it was very “refreshing” to be able to be myself, and not have a role to fulfil. When I think about it I realise that what rugby did was to allow me to be totally myself at a time when the rest of my life didn’t allow me that. Does it make sense?

Thanks to rugby I discovered that I didn’t have to do things in a certain way, you don’t have to follow everybody else’s rules. You can be different and you don’t have to be ashamed of it. For instance, when people bold enough ask me, “Why do you think you are gay?” Or “Did rugby make you gay?” Most of the time I don’t know the answers. I think I’ve probably always been gay since I was born but I think that being part of a rugby team allowed me to be, I guess, a lot freer, a lot less confined, controlled *and* constrained and therefore it felt natural to want to have a relationship with another woman. I think, in my days, rugby probably attracted also a lot of women who were not gay and who were completely confident and happy with their sexuality. Women who never had any problem with having really close relationships with gay women, and that I think is quite special really, because I think, as you know, that there are quite a lot of women who find it quite difficult to get close to gay women.

Imagine, in my case, discovering I was gay with a son and a husband. You expect a certain amount of rejection because you are doing something that is different; therefore, there is an expectation of rejection from certain areas of society. And one of those areas is quite often other women, straight women who have; this is a very



generalised view I know, quite a negative view towards some gay women. And you know I don't come from the point of view, "I'm gay; I'm proud". I don't come from the point of view either that, "I'm gay; I'm ashamed of it". But I come from the point of view that I'm gay and it's personal for me. It's not everybody's business. So, what was refreshing about my rugby team was not having rejection from straight women. The straight women were really comfortable with me being gay.

What I really wanted to tell you is that in the rugby team I felt I was more able to be myself, which is probably to be more "Lizzy", if you want to call it that, because there was a full acceptance of who I was by the rest of the team that by then I hadn't found in other areas of my life.

I hope this can help you in searching for women's meanings of rugby. Sorry again about yesterday. Remember we need to set a date for you to come around for dinner. This time we'll cook for you. You've already cooked too many lovely paellas, garlic prawns and omelettes for us. Take care.

Lots of love xxx

Lizzy

Smiling and lying back I recognise that this letter is a beautiful ode to a woman's own desire for free existence in this world. Although Lizzy's situation was quite different from Lia's or mine, I identified with Lizzy's feeling that being with a group of women made her feel very confident. However, I am aware that for her it was a difficult task to overcome her fears and rejections to accomplish her desire to be herself, while she was married and with a son, while Lia had to overcome a depression and I was studying and discovering life. Although, the ways we three

experience the confidence derived from relating to women-only environments are different in themselves, the outcome of finding confidence in other women's relations is quite similar: being able to "be ourselves".

Key questions arise in my mind: Aren't these meanings what I was looking for: the *female difference* experiences in rugby? These meanings of rugby that Lizzy is telling me about are the meanings that go beyond the physical description of what rugby is. In many senses these are the consequences of relationships among women in a specific women-only environment where high-physical contact and the feeling of doing something a little out of the ordinary, are accepted challenges for these women. Is not this the important originary female difference source that the Italians are working on? As Braidotti (1997, p. 306) affirms, "What the feminism of sexual difference wants to free in women is thus their desire for freedom, justice, self accomplishment and well being". Are not Lizzy's experiences a good example of this search for self-accomplishment and well-being? As she says, by being accepted by the straight women of the team, she became the Lizzy she wanted to be. However, it is worthwhile to note that not all women's relationships allow women to be the woman they want to be – in Italian sexual thought this refers to female desire for free existence in this world. As Lia Cigarini (1996) says, women's relationships engender female freedom when in these relationships a woman recognises in another woman female authority as a way to also recognise female mediation, female reference and female measure. In this case, it can be affirmed that female freedom produced in these relationships is relational, non-individual.

These Italians really have an obsession with relationships! For them everything that happens in a woman's world is relational. I think this is a clever way to avoid simplistic misinterpretations of female essentialism. Maybe as the Milanese



Collective see it, this is the only way to create women's genuine ways of understanding meanings of the world, which can only come from women, and not from anyone else. It seems that the only plausible option for women to generate female freedom is by the consequences of a woman relating to another woman, recognising this female authority that the Italians have explained so well. But now what really amazes me is Lizzy's emphasis on being accepted by the straight women of the team. It seems that for her, recognising her homosexuality was not the last goal of recognising her desire and freedom. Where was it that Muraro talks about lesbianism? I think it is one of the few places in which a sexual difference thinker has positioned herself regarding women's sexuality. Curiously though, while for Anglo-American feminisms sexuality is one of the main issues that define feminist practices, for the Italians this is a minor issue. I found it; here it is in that letter that Muraro sent to De Lauretis when she was translating [Don't you think you have any right]

\* \* \*

*...It is wrong (in our opinion, of course) to claim that not mentioning choice (hetero-homosexual) is a "major cause of opacity" in the current debate...Why? (1) for the reason, fairly obvious, although not to be disregarded, that many of the differences between women, like this one, are induced or overdetermined by a social order that is not autonomous; (2) for the reason that we are working exclusively toward female freedom, which is the only thing that can constitute a goal common to all women, and hence the reason for a politics of women; and this makes us relatively indifferent to the possible consequences and possible uses of that freedom. That a woman may freely love no one or the whole of humanity, that she may make love with other women, with men, with nobody, with children, with animals – these are but*



*consequences, each worthy of attention and respect as a source of experiences and knowledges valuable in strengthening female freedom.*

*From the way you speak of lesbianism, it almost seems as if you are making sexual choice a principle or a cause or a foundation of freedom. If that were what you thought, I would say to you: no, the principle of female freedom is of a symbolic nature. It is not an actual behaviour, however valid and precious such behaviour may be toward the empowering of women in society. Did I manage to make myself clear?*

\* \* \*

Without knowing why, these words: *The principle of female freedom is of a symbolic nature. It is not an actual behaviour...* stay longer in my mind. So being lesbian or playing rugby, or doing both things at the same time is not the principal cause of resisting the taken-for-granted male gender order that shapes rugby. Although this is what the majority of sport feminists claim, for instance that muscularity, feminism or lesbianism (Krane, 2001) are recognised as resistant acts to male power in sport. Muraro is saying quite the contrary, that female freedom needs to be generated *before* choosing to be muscular, or feminist, or lesbian. Thus, Muraro refers to these choices as outcomes, never the causes that produce female freedom, not to be confused with emancipation.

Now I understand clearer Virginia's interview, the idea that the women with whom we play rugby represent this option of choosing freely what they want to be and do in their lives. It is not the actual choice: being lesbian, professional, muscular, playing rugby... that make them/us freer, it is to recognise the woman-subject that actually chooses. What exactly was it that she said? I look at my folder where the British interviews are and I easily find it, luckily I had it already highlighted:



It's true you're deliberately putting yourself outside mainstream society because women don't play rugby, it's not a women's sport. It's not considered feminine to wind up with bruises ha, ha, ha... Standing up to society and saying: 'I'm different, I'm unique, I'm an individual' and at the same time they are not, they are not throwing away their femininity... The women who play rugby in our team, once a guy starts talking to them he realises how sexy and feminine they are, because they are. They are still women, in fact they are probably much more womanly than the kind of girly-girl who wears lots of pretty make up and hasn't got a brain in her head...because they know what they want, they are prepared to go out and get it. I love watching M., the way she goes for the ball and I'm just thinking yeah! Go for it because of their individuality on the field... so, they are assertive off the field and this is good, I like that. Too often I find people are shit, they are too afraid of what opinion and society are going to say about them, so...they conform and they aren't happy, they conform anyway because they are scared if they cross the line and they are ashamed of it or whatever... and it happens so often, and ... it was very refreshing being with people who could talk about things other than men or other than children or other than... I'm not saying that they can't talk about men and children, but it is not their sole raison d'être, they have a life, they have a full life. Men, children and family can be part of that, but it's not the sole purpose to get married and have children and grow up in a small town. You know if they want to do that it's fine, but it's their choice. They've not done it because they were forced to do it... They are making choices and then can talk of other things...I don't think it's a coincidence that most of our team are middle class, professional, because I think they are much more likely to be individualist and not care so much about society because of their independent means. They are already not relying on anybody else, they got themselves an education, they got themselves a job, they go off and do whatever they like including playing rugby and whatever is in that. It's their choice and they don't expect to have to ask anybody's permission to do it. But having said that I know that our team probably are quite unique in that...

How right Virginia is. I also think that being middle class and professional is a trait of my family, maybe this is one of the reasons that I feel so close to the women who play rugby. When we were kids my mother very often repeated to us (my sisters and I) how important it was to study, to get a degree and have a job. She insisted on how vital it was for us to be economically independent from men. My mother got married at twenty-one years and stopped studying and doing anything for herself. She had four daughters and two abortions and she has been a housewife and dependent on my father's money her entire life, obviously until my father died. I don't think it is by chance that all my sisters are well educated and professional. Raquel is a medical



doctor, Carmen is an art historian, Luisa is a mathematician, and I am a PE teacher. We all learnt our mother's lesson and we often recognise that our mother was completely right in this matter.

I heard some noises in my mother's room, the room where I was born thirty-six years ago. That room was the first I ever saw in my life. What a strange feeling invades me sometimes when I'm there with my mother looking at her clothes or jewellery she has kept for so many years. Sometimes I ask her how come she had me there. Why she didn't go to the hospital? And always this answer, "You know Montse, in those days that was normal and easier". Easier for whom, for what?

I look at my watch: Wow! Already ten o'clock. I had better get up off the sofa and start doing something useful. Listening to my stomach I decide I will have breakfast first with my mother that I hear now is in the toilet and then I will write some notes down about all these thoughts. I will definitely start envisioning how Italian sexual difference thought ideas could help me make sense of my friends and my own relationships in rugby. I feel relieved.



## CHAPTER VI

### RUGBY WOMEN FEMINIST PRACTICES: PRACTISING DISPARITY

It's in the afternoon; my mother has just left the flat to play cards with her friends, as she does every Monday. In Barcelona it is quite common that old people, specially lonely people, attend social benefit associations where they can usually play cards or any other table game. Moreover, these associations also offer some other activities at a very low cost, such as physical activity for the elderly, cooking courses, films, theatre, conferences, and day trips. However, my mother loves playing cards and this is what she does every single Monday during term time. Fortunately, after my father passed away, she found three other widows who also like playing "Rummy", their favourite card game. I am glad that at least she has something to look forward to during the week.

I put some chill-out music on and sit at the big living room dinner table to start jotting down some notes from yesterday's ideas about the possibilities of theorising about my hug with Lia two days ago. I am ready to write something...I try... but nothing comes out of my pen.

Damn! I should have written this yesterday, now I don't remember the exact train of thought. Uneasy I look around and I see on one of the shelves next to the Lorca, Machado and Quijote 1930's and 1940's editions with leather covers, the troll I brought for my mother when I came back one summer from picking strawberries in Norway. Trolls are typical over there. I thought she would like it but she didn't. "Montse whenever you have your own flat you can always take this troll with you", she said once not so long ago. "Mum, that was a present", I told her bothered. "Was it? Well you can take it with you anyway, you like it, don't you?" She made her point.

“Yeah, by the way I also like this black and white picture of your wedding in 1955 on the top of the telly”. I made my point. “Well I think this picture has a long queue, all your sisters want it as well”. As usual, she lets me know that I am still the last in the family.

I look at what is on the big table where I am sitting and among my papers I find my favourite book on *sexual difference thought* written by *The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective*. I think I like it best because somewhere I read that this book is intentionally written in a non-academic, non-bookish and non-scholarly style. Its main goal is to narrate and reflect the simplicity of the authors' feminist practices - the book includes thirty-eight authors. I can imagine thirty-eight Italian women in the backroom of the bookstore, talking loudly at the same time and wanting to write their own version of events. However, in another place I read that most of the writing was done by Luisa Muraro and Lia Cigarini. Although some of the authors are well educated and professional, they intentionally avoid highly specialised jargon and focus on narrating their own feminist experiences as plainly as they can, their goal with this book being to reach as large a female audience as possible. I really appreciate their efforts. I wish I could do something like them with my rugby relations. But, as always, my problem is, where to start? What do I write first? Suddenly I get up off the chair, I take the book with me and I sit down comfortably on the sofa. I will write something later. On page 110, I have a note, which says: “important”. I start reading:

\* \* \*

*As was natural, the preferred writers were not the same for all readers in the group, and some had no preferences. It was precisely this circumstance, which one would tend not to consider at all, that brought about the crisis...*



*It was a question, in fact, of finding a language, and the order of things depends on language. In the absence of language, one is forced to try every possible combination with an open mind. In the abstract, it could be objected that this is a never-ending undertaking because the combinations possible are innumerable. But in the concrete, we were guided with an iron hand by the need for language, or rather, by the need to find a meaning for the things that concerned us most directly. When this appeared, we would not fail to recognize it.*

*This happened when the number one opponent of Jane Austen, in the middle of a discussion where she was again in the minority – caught between the “scholastics” who were pressing her and the others who were watching and waiting to give an opinion until everything was over – stopped arguing and said, as if she were making an observation: “The mothers are not the writers; they are really here among us, because we are not all equal here”. When this simple truth was put into words that first time, the words had a horrible sound, in the literal sense of the term: sour, hard, stinging... No one doubted that they were true, and everyone understood that they had a close relation to our research.*

*Indeed, that was its first result. We wanted a language to signify the unspeakable of gendered difference, and the first words we found served to name the “injustice” present in our relations. It did not take long to accept what for years we had never registered, though we had it in front of our eyes. We were not equal, we had never been equal, and we immediately discovered that we had no reason to think we were. The horror of the first moment changed into a general feeling of being a bit freer.*



\* \* \*

Through this “wild” strategy, as they called it, the Milanese group discovered that to acknowledge women’s “injustices” and to expose the practice of disparity among themselves inside the Collective was an indispensable principle for developing theorisation about the meanings of women’s relationships to each other. Suddenly, I realise that their goal underneath their attempt to systematise a sexed thought is to transcend socially the particularities and personal connotations of relations between two or more women. An argument arises in my mind: I should use this as my starting point to delve into the meanings of my intense relationships with other women in rugby.

*It did not take long to accept what for years we had never registered, though we had it in front of our eyes.* What do I have in front of my eyes that I have never registered? Naturally I start thinking about the conversations I had with my closest friends from Barcelona when I interviewed them a month ago: Lia, Louise, Adriana and Luce. Rapidly I become aware that there is a strong link between the Milanese discovery and our conversations about past rugby experiences. I was hoping for my friends to tell me their most intimate *unspeakable* experiences in rugby because I was sure such experiences would easily illustrate female difference in experiencing rugby. Instead, what I found was myself listening to their painful and sometimes enraged feelings towards me (or other players) when we played rugby together.

After re-reading The Milan Collective I get excited, I can’t help standing up and verbalising quite loudly: “What a coincidence! Searching for a new language and words to name women’s rugby experiences, the first thing that came out were our problems - “injustices” - in relating to each other, our deepest feelings of dislike between us because of our differences in experiencing rugby situations”. I never



thought that raising these differences could be so crucial to finding and creating original ways of expressing women's subjectivities in rugby as well.

As other researchers on women's rugby did before me (Carle & Nauright, 1999; Wright & Clarke, 1999; Wheatley, 1994), I thought I was searching for differences in the content of the game: passing, kicking and tackling or socialising in the pub after matches. I was convinced that I would find female differences represented in specific rugby situations. For instance, that in general, women's ways of socialising in the pub after match characterise their gender because they usually never end up undressed, they do not usually sing misogynist or nasty anti-male songs, and they do not practice sexual harassment of women or men when they are hammered in order to prove their "superiority".

Thinking of differences with men in socialising in rugby reminds me of one of the heaviest drinking nights I had when I was still playing for INEF.

I am in my fourth year of PE college; it is April 1989 and I am with the INEF rugby team in Vitoria – in the Basque Country - where two parallel championships of the rugby teams of Spanish PE colleges are held, one for women and another for men. The truth is that these championships are better for partying and bonding within the team than for improving game skills, which, especially in women's games, are usually very poor.

It's our last night and the championship has been very good fun so far. The team decides to go to have dinner together without the boys. We decide we will meet them later down town. We go to a very nice "pinchos-tapas", a typical kind of bar in Vitoria, and we start playing drinking games and eating a few tapas. We ask for five big jars of beer three litres each to start with, and each of us has a half-pint glass. We have put together three simple square

wood tables and we manage to fit all eighteen players around the tables. The captain, who is in her fifth and last year of College, starts a game called, (“Jee-ha”). Basically the game consists of having to point to the person next to you with your elbow and say, (“Jee-ha”). Once this is learnt it gets more complicated, for instance, changing direction: (“How-down”), jump one: (“home”), or change and jump at the same time (“Cooley-cooley”), and then later you have to add several hand and arm movements to do it right. We don’t know why, maybe because she’s been drinking before, but Louise, a second year student, is getting it wrong quite often. When one makes a mistake one has to down the beer in one. If you don’t do that, then you have to drink twice. Also we add new rules to the game like left-hand drinking and no pointing. Any excuse is valid to make one’s neighbour drink. Lia who is next to Louise does not help much and Louise ends up drinking lots of beer. I notice that Lia is doing a very good job with Louise!

The beers finish and the captain gets up to order more. Alessandra who is next to her suggests that this time we could get “calimotxo” instead of beer, a typical Basque drink made from bad quality red wine and coke. So, in a moment we have these five jars of calimotxo in front of us. Lia suggests a new game. One where everyone has a vegetable name and has to say a phrase and call another by a vegetable name without making a mistake. Of course, Louise starts by making a mistake and she is the first to taste calimotxo. The game goes on and calimotxo jars disappear quite fast.

Suddenly, Alessandra and Andrea, third year students, propose going to the hotel, to their room to play another drinking game. They say they have whisky in their room. Other people can bring what they have. Lia and I have a



bottle of Martini and a bottle of Cava that we'd obviously bring to the game. We manage to leave the bar as best as we can (it takes us a while) and Lia is holding Louise who by then cannot walk properly. I have never seen Louise in such a state. I thought she did not drink that much. She is so shy in training sessions and games; she's still a mystery to us all.

We are all in Alessandra and Andrea's room seated wherever we can, on the two chairs, the beds, the table, and the floor. Andrea starts explaining the game: "This game is called 'I've never.' Has anyone played it before?" Most of us answer: "No, no, no". "Well everybody needs to fill their glasses first". Luckily, Andrea and Alessandra thought of this and have managed to get a couple of dozen plastic glasses from the bar. Of course, Louise can't fill her own, and Lia helps her. "OK?" Andrea makes sure everybody is ready. "For instance, I say something that I have never done in my life, like I have never been to Tahiti. So those of you who have been to Tahiti have to stand up and drink the full glass. You got it?" She looks at us and makes sure we follow her, she needs to give us time because our grey cells are not working at normal pace anymore. "By the way, the most important rule in this game is that all that's said in the game stays in the game forever. Is that OK? This rule is very important, because we have to be very honest". She pauses and waits until everybody has processed the information. She repeats the basics of the game: "So, if you haven't done something you don't have to drink, however, if you have done it, you must get up and drink. Is that clear? Any questions?" Louise raises her hand and asks with a very drunk voice slurring her words, "Whax happns if I'm not suuure if I hat donit?" Andrea answers: "Come on Louise, I'm sure you'll know if you have or haven't done the things we are going to

talk about. Let's start..." She looks at her roommate and says, "Alessandra! You go first" Alessandra concentrates and goes, "OK? I have never shagged in my parents house with my parents in it". Several get up and drink. *Wow! Shagging, knowing that your parents are in the flat! I'm not sure if I'd ever be able to do that...(...)... As long as the game goes on I find it very interesting. It's good fun knowing these intimate secrets from other players; I don't know why but a feeling of closeness to them grows inside me.* However, the worst was still to come. Andrea, who can be quite malicious, says, looking directly at me, "I have never shagged a PE College lecturer". *I blush inevitably, I feel my blood pressure getting very high, Shit! How does she know? I admit she is the master gossiper in the team; however, I've really tried to be very cautious about this. Well, I suppose I have to get up and drink,* but then I realise that Carolyn also gets up and drinks. *Fuck! With which lecturer has she shagged? I'm very intrigued.* I can feel all those inquisitive gazes looking at us. Suddenly, Louise gets up and drinks; we ask her if she knows the question. Of course, she doesn't. She was thirsty and she wanted to drink, she does not even remember what game we are playing.

Then, Carolyn goes, "I've never had a shag with a woman". Everybody is silent, some older players look at Lia and I. *I don't understand why. We have never shagged.* But then, suddenly Mireia, a first year student, gets up and drinks. *How courageous she is. She is the first girl I've met that has been with another woman. I have to admit that this is new for most of us. What is it like to shag with another woman?* As a result of our astonishment, I'm sure that later we won't be able to avoid gossiping about her.



When all the interesting “I’ve never” finish, such as sleeping with two men at the same time, sleeping with two different guys the same night, but not at the same moment, having more than four orgasms in one night and experiencing the most strange sexual positions in the most far-out places, we decide it is time to go down town to meet the boys. There’s no way that Louise is going to make it, so we decide to undress her and make her more comfy in bed. We are sure that in the morning she will feel all right. None of us knew this side of Louise and we agree that she is pretty funny and we should encourage her to come out with us more often. Before I leave the room though, I look at the messy room we have left behind and I realise that my shoes are sticking to the floor and are squeaking because the Martini on the floor has dried. Then, smiling, I look at Louise and wonder if the men’s team play these kinds of games as well. Suddenly, I hear Alessandra yelling, “Come on Montse, everybody is waiting for you downstairs”. Shutting the door I scream: “I’m coming”.

Back in the present I realise how wrong I was when I was searching for women’s differences in experiencing rugby as imitating or reversing men’s rugby experiences. Although I am aware I need to go beyond these superficial comparative descriptions, I do not really discern how I will be able to make sense of women’s difference, or my own difference playing rugby aside from the physical features of rugby. Then, I remember some basics of sexual difference theory: “The danger is that difference may come to be seen as something which characterizes certain objects of research, instead of there being a researching subject who expresses herself in her difference” (Bono & Kemp, 1991, p. 19). Is it possible to think in terms of female

meanings of rugby that do not just reverse or imitate those that already exist? Some of the Italians' words that I have just read return to me: *We wanted a language to signify the unspeakable of gendered difference, and the first words we found served to name the "injustice" present in our relations.*

I can't wait, anxious I get up off the sofa and I go to my room to fetch the Catalan interviews. I am sure there is something in them that represents what I have just read. I remember Emilia's bitter words when she told me that for her rugby put her and her friends at "war" because after some years of playing together they couldn't cope with the conflict of seeing things in rugby quite differently, even in mutually opposed terms. Through the corridor that leads to my room I pass this big painting on the wall. Its title is, "A goose on the wind". It is basically a head of a white goose with an orange beak and the background is a kind of dark green, that's it. I bought it from an artist friend several years ago. My mother has never understood why I paid two hundred pounds for it. This painting is definitely mine and I'll take it with me when I buy my own place.

I recall Emilia's words, after Laia left the Hospitalet team (Hospitalet is an industrial town on the southern outskirts of Barcelona) in 1999, a new team that they both set up in 1996. Laia thought that Emilia was very selfish in the team, because she just wanted to play to get into the Spanish national team and nothing else. Emilia thought Laia was extremely obsessed about bonding the team together and forcing the players to meet and be friends. For Emilia bonding needs to start in the desire of each player, not as an imposition. For Laia facilitate bonding should have been, without question, one of the priorities of veteran players.



Once, Emilia explained to me about her traumatic relationships with Laia:

I'm the first to recognise that I was very obsessed with rugby as Laia was. I remember I was especially obsessed before getting into the Spanish national team for the Amsterdam World Cup in 1998. I confess that then rugby was everything to me. But my fixation was about training, fitness, games, playing the best rugby I could, showing the Spanish national coaches I was worthy of being included in the team, this kind of stuff, you know. I think hers is a different kind of obsession. However, what most amazes me is the gradual decline of our relationship. We were good friends before starting to play rugby together, when we met in our first year of INEF. It took me three years to convince her to play rugby with us. Right from the beginning when I saw her playing whatever team sport, I realised that she was one of the most gifted players in the class. I was sure she would become an outstanding fly half if she trained. Then she joined the team and in two years she was the first choice as fly half and I was the first choice as scrum half in INEF, we matched very well. Then, the Spanish national team was doing well and we worked hard to make it, we both wished so much to play high-standard rugby that we spent lots of evenings training specifically our passing and kicking skills. I have to admit that the best rugby I've ever played has been with her. We understand each other so well on the pitch that we knew each other's movements and thoughts in any situation of the game. Then, in 1996 we decided to leave INEF and start a new team in Hospitalet, as you and Louise did before with BUC. We were very eager to spread women's rugby and get more teams to play against and we did very well recruiting new players. The club was really interested and helped us a lot, and also through the town Council of Hospitalet

we got some free advertising and it worked really well. A month after starting the team, we already had 25 players! Until then everything ran smoothly, we both enjoyed ourselves. Nevertheless, after The World Cup in Amsterdam she started to be more and more demanding and asking me to spend more time socialising with the Hospitalet team, even when sometimes I didn't want to. She started being very bossy and telling me what to do and how to do it and I didn't like it. I think Laia has never understood that different, even opposite ways of experiencing and getting involved in rugby exist. By then, I was the captain of the Spanish national team and Lisa who was also in the Spanish team was the captain of Hospitalet. Lisa and I have always got on very well, and I think Laia didn't like that. She always saw us as very cliquey and very interested in keeping our play at the highest level we possibly could.

According to her we were not working enough for the sake of the Hospitalet club, which is not true. We were not as keen as she was on producing social networks among the players. I think the beginning of our falling out was when she started a new girls' youth side in the club and we did not pay enough attention to it. By then, we did not have time, and we were not interested.

Maybe we were selfish, but she could not force us to work for something that we didn't want to. Once I told Laia "If you want to start a female under eighteen side this is great. I really think it is a very good idea, go ahead, but don't expect me to get involved with it because at the moment it is not my priority in rugby". She got very upset and after that Laia started to challenge me in team meetings and even on the pitch. Although we were winning and our rugby performance was going well, at the end of that season the atmosphere in the team was awful. We managed to qualify for the final of the



Spanish Championship though we lost. I suppose the lack of connection off the pitch inevitably influenced us not complementing each other on the pitch when games were tough. Also our performance with the Spanish national team in the European Championship of that year was not so great. We inevitably lost the magic of our play. You know the rest...

Laia left Hospitalet and started a new team in St Boi (another industrial town south of Barcelona, not far from Hospitalet) and took with her several loyal players...and now I'm relieved, but we had problems with numbers. However, the pressure to bond with the team that Laia exercised on me was driving me mad. Don't get me wrong I liked the team, but I wanted to bond with the players on my own terms, not on hers. So, I'm pleased she is gone. Although, as you know, we are still playing together for the Spanish national team and we'll play in the next World Cup, which is to be held in Barcelona in 2002. When I think about it I find it very weird. I wonder how could we be such good friends for so many years while now I feel that nothing meaningful remains between us?

Back to the living room, I sit again on the sofa with a folder in my hand. I still think of some of the Italians' words: *We were not equal, we had never been equal, and we immediately discovered that we had no reason to think we were.* Anyway, the first interview I find in my folder is Louise's. I look through it. Yes! I remember she was the most tenacious in telling me how difficult it was for her to feel integrated in the PE College rugby team when she first joined: "I didn't feel accepted... it took me a while to integrate myself, I saw you all as too revolutionary. I found you were a tight-knit group and I felt myself always an outsider, it was very difficult... and then

everything changed after that night in Vitoria, do you remember? I got terribly drunk...and then the next morning everybody laughed at me and told me all the things I did that I didn't remember and...suddenly I felt I was part of the team, then I thought: Amazing! I had to be very drunk to be accepted into this team". She also told me in that interview her first particular reaction to me: "When we went to Italy I became your friend, but before that I was very scared of you, you were very loud and aggressive!" We went to Italy in June 1989, two months after Vitoria. It is not until recently that I have been made aware of how cliquey and scary we four veterans (among whom was Lia) came across to some of the newcomers. We were very often drinking in the College's bar and we were loud, aggressive and impertinent, we made fun of anyone in front of us without caring about the consequences. In our second year we were already well known among our college classmates and the two rugby teams: men and women.

However, what I remember clearly about my relationships with Louise in those days, are our strong discrepancies about the meanings and implications of starting BUC, a new women's team, in September 1993 in a city like Barcelona where the rugby culture among men is very small. Therefore, among women it is non-existent. It was very hard work to start the team. It was exhausting to convince women to join the team, to play a sport that they hardly knew existed and what they did know was that it is a very violent and "masculine" game. I remember Louise not being very good at promoting rugby among women and we had more than one argument about it. She said I was good at it, but she was not because she was very shy and she did not like begging women to join our team.

I could not easily identify that these discrepancies are what the Milanese have named *the injustice present in our relations*, but for us these strong disparities were



latent in the whole process of establishing a solid base for the team to play in competition. As a result, I sense that in that period our relationship suffered the consequences of these *unspoken* differences. This is the starting point that I am looking for: that there is an original female way of experiencing rugby beyond the mere physical description of the game and it has to do with recognising our differences and inequality in experiencing the game. While Lizzy expressed the existence of this original female difference in terms of being able to produce female freedom and desire in her relationships, I think my relationship with Louise when we were starting this new team and playing together is a good example of the existence of power relations between women.

The differences between Louise and I were related to specific personal ways of acting and reacting and to the more general problems and misunderstandings of the team as a whole - to ways of relating to the rest of the players, the coaches and the club in general. By then, I was too obsessed with finding committed players to make a strong team in the league. Louise shared the goal of becoming a strong team but she was handling the situation differently. Although she was not afraid of me anymore and by then we were very good friends and we trusted each other, we never talked about these niggling matters that really bothered us and also constrained the full capacity of our relationship. It seemed that talking about our disparities when we were working for the team's common goals was a way of undermining the team's unity and I suppose also our "vital" relationship on which the team's progress was depending so much. This situation reminds me of what the Milanese say about solidarity; it is a precious element but clearly is not enough to keep women's interests going.

Having a fleeting look at the interview I read: "You know you can be lovely, and the players really liked you, but when you told people off, you were not Montse



telling them off, you were the leader telling them off. Then the team was in uproar, and I contributed to calming the team's irritability. I think it went fairly well. You didn't realise but I always thought our combination worked extremely well. You did one job and I did another. For the players you were the hard one, I was the soft one."

I can't cope with her words! I can't believe it! It has taken me so long to realise, as the Italians describe, that women's main strength and primary source of subjectivity in making things work, is our capacity to relate to each other without male interferences and Louise was experiencing that already. What amazes me more is that she did not even need to read Italian sexual difference theory to understand the importance of our practical relationship for our team. I can hardly believe it!

Apprehensively I jump off the sofa and to my feet without knowing what to do or where to go. I decide I need something to drink. I head towards the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. An uncomfortable feeling runs through my mind. I should start writing down all these thoughts to see if they make sense... But where do I start? I am sure that tomorrow this will not be as great a discovery as it sounds now. Besides, I'm too excited to write anything that makes sense.

In the kitchen waiting for the water to boil my mind goes back to my childhood. How many good memories this kitchen brings back. Although it is tiny, tiny, when we were kids, my sisters and I, on weekdays, used to have breakfast and dinner in it, as it was more convenient for my mother. I remember that when someone had forgotten to take something out of the fridge when we had sat down, we had to get up and move the table to be able to open the fridge. At that time, it was a pain in the arse and a huge motive to blame the one who had forgotten or the one who wanted something from the fridge. Now I think it was fun and I'm sure it has contributed to



our strong bonding today. It reminds me of an Irigaray's article, something like "And one doesn't stir without the other<sup>1</sup>".

Anyway, I need to make sense of Louise's words, in an attempt to clear my mind I state: "She is telling me that during those years, when I was the captain of the team, I was the visible leader but she did the job of leading in the shadows". I realise that without her being in the shadows the team wouldn't have worked as well as it did. I have to admit that she always supported me publicly. She never confronted my ideas, my ways of leading the team in front of the players. But now I see that she created and followed her own way of doing things: such as listening carefully to the players, helping them individually. I never had time for these "small things" as I was more worried about the organisation of the team, having enough players for games – what a nightmare it was calling players at the last minute...

It is Saturday an hour and a half before the match starts mid-season 1996. I arrive at the club and I see that there are already eight players sitting in the bar waiting for the rest to come. Suddenly Louise comes to us screaming, "Montse, have you heard that Angela and Stela cannot make it?"

"No! You must be joking. They know that with them we are twelve and we cannot play with fewer than eleven. Shit! If we don't play the game we lose the points and any chance to qualify for the Spanish championship and the club gets a fine!".

"Stela has just called me at home saying that Angela couldn't make it and because she comes with Angela who drives, and you know they live in

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the title of Irigaray's (1981) article

Gavà (an industrial town south of Barcelona half an hour's drive away) no tube, and the bus combination is very bad, she won't make it".

"Shit!! We need to think of something. I have the list of the players here. Ok let's start ringing them one by one", I tell Louise. We go to the office of the club and we ask nicely if we can use the telephone, as it was an emergency. We realise that the opposing team are arriving and we get nervous.

"We need to play this game", I say to Louise determined.

"Hi, can I speak to Maria?"

"Oh, she is not there, do you know where she is?"

"Oh I understand she is working today, thank you. Bye".

"Hi, can I speak to Chris?"

"Oh, I see, she is in France, she left yesterday and she is not coming back until Monday, thank you. Bye".

Louise comes to me and asks, "Any luck?" I shake my head "The INEF team are going to the changing rooms", she warns me.

"How many are they?" I ask, thinking that maybe they are also fewer than eleven.

"The captain just told me that they are not fifteen, but she hopes they would be thirteen at least".

"So if we managed to get eleven, it won't be too bad, will it?"

I reply optimistically.

"What do you want me to do with the team? Shall we get changed?"

Louise asks me.

"Of course!" We won't call it off until the last minute. Let me keep trying". I answer desperately.



“Oh hi Gloria! How are you doing? Why aren't you coming to play today?”

“Can't your mother let you come and you'll help her later, the game just will take you three hours at the most. Ask your mother again, please”.

“No? Is that your final answer? If we are not eleven we can't play. Come on Gloria, we need you....”

“I see it is a very important event in your family and you can't miss it, but here without you we are fucked. I just tell you so you know”.

Louise comes back to the office with her rugby kit on, “Let me do the rest, get changed and talk to the team, they are not very motivated. I don't know what else to tell them to cheer them up”.

“Ok, next on the list is Carmen, only three more to go, if none of them can make it, we are out”.

I get into the changing room and I see their sullen faces. Luce asks me, “Nobody else is coming today, are they?”

“Don't be so pessimistic. We'll make it and we'll win this match, you will see”, I answer with the best smile I can muster. I change as quick as I can and I go to see Louise.

“Any luck?”

“I'm calling Monica back, she said that maybe she could manage to come”.

“Cool! Fingers crossed!” I cross my fingers in front of her eyes.

I go to the bar to fetch the key to where we keep the rugby balls to start the warming up and my eyes can't believe it. Stela is coming towards me with her bag.

"I thought you couldn't make it", I exclaim.

"I felt remorse because I knew you could not play with ten players, so I convinced my father to drive me down". She points out a man behind her.

"Bloody Angela! She always does the same, at the very last moment she phones me saying she can't come", Stela protests.

I hug her very tightly relieving all my stress, "I'm so pleased! Thank you". We go to the office to tell Louise and we find that Monica can also make it. "Good! We'll be twelve. At the end it is not too bad, twelve against thirteen, we can win this match", I say to Louise.

Louise also reminds me that the full back, the most dangerous player on the opposite team is injured and she will be watching the game from the sidelines.

"Cool! OK, we'll play without the two flankers and without one winger. What do you think? Will you manage to cover full back and a wing?"

"It's fine, but let's wait and see how the opposite team organises their thirteen players". Relieved we go to the changing room to join the rest of the team and start warming up. The game will start in half an hour.

In women's rugby it is equally important to take part in the social events around the actual games because traditionally it is said that in rugby there are three parts: the first two are on the pitch and the last one in the pub. All three parts are inseparable and form part of the game as a whole. Thus, in order to improve the



team's performance and to know each other better off the pitch, the first year of the team I used to organised some bonding activities. However, in those years I found that Louise was not so supportive as she was on the pitch. I remember some specific situations that really upset me.

We (BUC team) are at Sants train station waiting for Louise to come. Today we have decided to go to the beach to do some practice and to spend the day together. The train is leaving in 15 minutes. I phone her.

“Hi Louise, what are you doing at home? You're supposed to be here at Sants station”.

“Didn't you get my message?”

“No, what's happened?”

“I don't feel very good. I prefer to stay at home”.

“Oh come on, don't leave me alone with this”.

“Montse I told you I prefer to stay at home, see you on Monday at training”.

On another occasion she was even more assertive:

It is Friday, most of the team are at Chris' happy birthday party, suddenly I realise that Louise is not there. I ask Alice

“Where is Louise?”

“Oh, yesterday at the end of training she apologised to Chris because she couldn't make it”.

Eager to know what was more important than a party with the rugby team I call her from Chris' house.

"Hi Louise, what is going on?"

"Sorry Montse, I'm tired I don't feel like partying tonight".

"Me neither, but I came for the team. I think it is important we bond with the team, don't you think?"

"Montse, don't talk to me like that. I do whatever I think is best for the team".

"You know Louise, sometimes I don't understand what is going on with you. I thought we both were responsible for the team, but I see that sometimes you prefer to disappear and leave me with all the responsibility".

"Montse, I don't feel very well".

"Yeah, Alice has just told me that yesterday when you already said you're not coming". She hangs up. I'm really cross with her. *What's her problem?*

How blind I was! Now I understand that she knew that beyond our personalities, our working relationship was crucial for the team. As a result, she did not show up because she was avoiding confrontation with my style of leading the team. She respected me but she did not fully accepted my leadership style. How bad it would have been for the team if we had confronted each other? How clever she was! She was aware of our differences and she did not deny them or confronted me, instead she worked around them. Nevertheless, because she did not have words to name these differences, she only had the option to disappear, to stay silent. I am sure that recognising disparities between us would have helped us to overcome our moments of



anger and work together towards more understanding of what it meant for each of us to play and to be the leaders of a new team. Italian sexual difference thought definitely makes sense of my own experiences with Louise.

The kettle whistles and brings me back to the kitchen. I make myself a cup of tea and I go back to sit on the chair in front of the blank paper and the pen. I take a deep breath, I try to relax and hold my pen tightly, now I need to write something, this is important stuff. I write “Practising Disparity with Louise”. However, I catch myself again thinking of the challenge of exploring to what extent Italian sexual difference thought, which has nothing to do with sport, can make sense of my relationships and experiences in rugby.

I start thinking of any other important practice or basic idea from sexual difference thought that helps me to understand my intense relationships in rugby with other women. I glance through the notes I have taken from my reading of this thought and I find a curious one:

“The practice of disparity among women’s relationships is created to be able to understand and take advantage of women’s differences at the same time as it avoids the envy and the jealousy that usually takes place among women, when one or several are better than the rest. This recognition of disparities or differences among women is basic for women to be able to create women’s original ways to relate to this world”.

Therefore, for women to practise and acknowledge disparity within themselves, they must recognise power in other women, or what the Italians prefer to call authority. This note echoes Bocchetti’s refreshing and plain style of asking other women about the difficulties of understanding the practice of disparity: “Can anybody

tell me what does a woman imagine she loses when she recognises that another woman is better, is more capable of thinking and doing things than her?" (1996, p. 142).

Usually without being aware, we confuse the term authority with that of power. This is not saying that there is no power among women. However, it is crucial to mark the differences between the two. I am lucky that Bocchetti (1996), again, gives me an easy differentiation. I read in my notes, "Power is when it is imposed by the one who deploys it. In contrast, for authority to exist and circulate, it can only be acknowledged by those who do not deploy it". Then, I say: "Interesting!" To make it clearer, they call the act of recognising authority in another woman *female authority*. Thus, with this differentiation the Italians are also searching for a genuine women's way to deal with power, in order not to be confused with the power professed by men in the phallogocentric order, as Irigaray calls it. A power derived from the practice of relations between/among women, and which does not reproduce the phallus or the desire to have the phallus.

A bit confused I finish my tea and while playing with my empty mug I give up the attempt to write something down. Then, I decide I will be more comfy sitting on the sofa, feeling my body sink into the sofa I let my head hit the headrest. I close my eyes and I keep thinking about female authority...power...p-o-w-e-r...

Today is a very thrilling day for Louise: Pere, the coach, wants her to play scrumhalf in a quite important league match. Louise is eager to play in a position other than full back. She already knows she is good at it, this is why she plays full back for the Spanish team but she does not like it very much; when the games are not very high standard and the opposition do not kick



much she gets bored very easily. She positively prefers to play in a position where she can be more involved at the core of the game. However, she is not very sure about today's decision as she is aware that the scrumhalf has lots of responsibilities and tasks in a game. Moreover, she hasn't done it before. She does not know if it will go well, but she definitely wants to have a go. Before the game starts, already on the pitch, ready for the kick off, she looks around and she feels from her heart. *I want to do it very well. I want to be useful to the team. I want to show that I can be a good scrumhalf if the team needs me to be.*

(...)

“Come on Louise take the ball out, Chris is suffering a lot down here”.

Montse yells at me from the top of a maul.

“I do my best!” I answer her back a bit irritated. *She is really pissing me off. I see she doesn't like me here and she is making my life very hard. However, she should understand that I play for the team; she's really influencing me negatively. I didn't think it was so difficult to play next to her. I didn't know she was so bossy. I usually play full back so we never got this close on the pitch. We never had this shouting at each other before.* I grasp the ball by taking out several bodies on the top of it. My body position is not great to make a smooth pass, but the defence is coming quite fast and I need to get rid of the ball. I pass the ball under pressure to the fly half.

“Damn! Núria, concentrate on catching the ball, the forwards are very tired, we need you 100% on the pitch,” Montse shouts to our fly half. The scrum is forming. I take the ball from Núria's hands and give it to the other scrumhalf. *I feel really uncomfortable playing here, but I can't give up now; at*

*least I need to finish this match. Rugby is so amazing! How negative and influential people can be around you if they don't like you. I need to talk to Montse about this, it was not Núria's fault, it was mine.*

I scream, "Núria a bit further, you're too close to the scrum, look at your opposite number. We are in defence." *We have done this hundreds of times in training sessions, what are you thinking about?* I scream again. "Núria, organise the centers to be in a straight line with you. We are in defence! As soon as the ball gets out we need to get them all at the same time". *How easily they forget, on which planet are they?* I look at my opposite scrumhalf from the corner of my eye while I talk to our hooker. "Chris, I need the scrum a step forward. Second row a bit lower; you're lifting the first row, they need more room to be comfy to put their heads under the opposite front row". *I'm sure Montse thinks the scrum is not my business but I see it so clearly from here that I can't help it.*

The front rows crush; the opponent scrumhalf bends her knees and shows the ball to the scrum waiting for her hooker to give her the signal. Suddenly she shouts "One- two..." She introduces the ball...and... it's theirs.

*Damn Gloria! Our left prop needs to push a bit harder.* "The ball is out - OUT!" I scream very loud for the second row to hear me, although their ears are squished between the front row's legs. I follow the ball in defence.

Running and yelling, "Núria the fly half, watch the fly half! Come faster, tackle her or the inside centre will penetrate". *Where is Eulàlia?* I look around. *Shit! She's still too far behind.* "Anna, go for the winger, I'll stay inside". The outside centre accelerates her pace and tries to break through between Anna and I. *I'm determined, she won't pass.* I grip her firmly around



her arms and I can still shout, “Come on forwards we need you in this maul!” Anna is helping to hold the maul. I hold the opposition player up with the ball in her arms, if we resist long enough the scrum will be for us. “Come on!” *I won't be able to resist much longer. Where are the bloody flankers, where are you Montse?*

“Beep!” the ref blows, “Scrum to BUC” *Uff! That was touch and go!*

Núria screams, “Well done Louise!”

Montse looks at me and says nothing. *I don't mind. I don't need her to reward my play.* I pick up the ball from the ground. I talk to the forwards while they are forming the scrum, “Let's do this scrum very nice and tight and also very, very low. Look we are in their 22, we need a very good ball for the backs to attack and score”.

Suddenly a prop from the other team needs to lace her boot. We break the scrum formation and wait for her to come back to the scrum again; I leave the ball on the ground. Montse comes towards me with a not very friendly expression, she utters, “Look, Louise can you shut up a bit, some times you are telling everybody exactly what they have to do. I think most of the players of the team need a bit more responsibility on their shoulders. Don't you think?” Very irritated I stare at her. *What the hell are you telling me? Don't you see that this game is a nightmare? What are you trying to tell me?* I make no retort to her comment *I actually try to ignore it, but I know I can't.*

The scrum forms. I pick up the ball again from the ground and I go to my position in the middle of the scrum to put the ball in. I'm completely silent. I just mutter “One-two...” I put the ball in the corridor. Chris, the hooker, is working a bit better and the ball is on our side. The scrum is quite

steady and the ball gets safely to the back of the scrum. I pick it up from Montse's legs. I'm going to pass it to Núria but I see a spot on the blind side. I do a dummy with Núria and desperately yell, "Eulàlia come with me, with me!" She does not understand my intentions quick enough and the opposite flanker tackles me, a bit high though, I don't have any support to pass the ball, and I drop it forward.

"Beep!" the ref whistles. *Shit! My ankle is sore.* I calm down and I get up slowly with Eulàlia's help... "I'm fine I just twisted my ankle. I'm fine, my ankle is fine". I stand up by myself and I walk a bit to make completely sure my ankle is fine. I hear from behind "Louise go to hell! Why didn't you pass the ball to the backs? We are sick of scrums. Can't you tell?" Montse tells me off. *You go to hell. I'm fed up with you and this bloody game.* I choke back tears of anger. *I can't cry here in front of everybody. I hate you Montse! I hate you with all my heart! I'm not going to talk to you ever again in my whole life. You are a bloody nightmare!*

The scrum forms. The ball is theirs. *I observe Núria is still too close to the scrum in defence. However, I'm not going to tell her. I don't give a shit anymore.*

From the sideline I hear Pere shouting at me, "Louise tell Núria to be in front of her number 10". *I can't stand this situation any longer!* "Tell her yourself!" *Oops! Pere won't be very happy with this answer... Damn Pere! Don't you see that I'm trying to do my best? I can't please you and Montse at the same time. One is telling me to shut up and the other to organise the backs. I can't do both things at the same time. Leave me alone!*



Pere persistently shouts at me again, as he hasn't heard me, "Come on Louise! Tell the backs to be wider, they are too close to the scrum and be extra-careful with the full back, she is very dangerous".

"I know, I have already told them several times", I rejoin. *I feel nobody is happy with my performance today. I feel I want to go home and forget about this whole match, rugby and all this shit...I'm fed up!*

(...)

"Beep, beep, beep!" The referee blows the end of the match. Relieved I think of the quickest way to get my bag and dash off before anybody sees me. *I don't want to speak to anyone; I can't stay any longer in here. Before I go I realise that the players like her, she is definitely a good leader. I can't confront her. I don't belong here.* I run to the changing room I take my bag and I leave through the back door.

Already outside of the club heading towards the underground I let myself cry as much as I need... *Fuck you Montse, I hate you!* Meanwhile an old woman passes near by and asks me, "Are you all right?" She looks at me very surprised. I sharply answer back: "Yes!" Then, I realise I'm still in my rugby kit with some mud on my legs and my boots on. I calm down and sit down to make myself more presentable: I change my boots for trainers and I wear long sport's trousers. I make straight for the underground. *I'm sure Montse won't miss me this evening. I hate her. I will never speak to her again.*

(...)

Inside the club house after showering, Montse asks, "Núria have you seen Louise?"

“Yes I saw her just after the game ended rushing to the changing rooms and leaving the club. Didn’t she have some commitment with her family today?”

“I don’t know, she hasn’t said anything about it. Lately she is missing the socialising bit very often. Doesn’t she know that in rugby, equally important to the game is the time socialising with the other team? I definitely need to have a word with her next week about this”; Montse is talking to Núria who wasn’t listening to her because she is going to the bar to grab a beer.

I open my eyes and I’m still thinking about power...female authority...my thoughts fly away... This confusion between power and female authority represents in many ways the “vital” relationship between Louise and me as leaders of the team. On one hand, it is clear after reading Louise’s interview that my acting as captain of the team was closer to a relation of power: I imposed my ways of seeing and living rugby. On the other hand, I am aware that the team players also recognised some authority in me, otherwise the team couldn’t have worked as well as it did. However, the relationship of the players with Louise was different. I am convinced they recognised this female authority in her. This recognition of authority in her was even more evident on the pitch. By then, she was playing for the Spanish team and she was recognised without needing to say it as the best player of the team. She could tackle and score in very key situations, something that none of us could match. What amazes me is that she never used this authority to impose her views or her ways of doing things. I mean she never converted the status of this recognised female authority into imposing her power. Conversely, in her interview she praised my aptitude for leadership: “...and then you said this is the way of doing it and everybody was able to



follow you blindly... Damn! This is more than a simple sport..." She also said, "...because I knew that for you to feel secure I was important, you relied a lot on me, despite it being a false sensation because you did everything very well and you always knew what to do... Players came to me telling me, 'Oh Montse is very hard' and I said, Yes! But it's necessary if we want to win the league... I don't know..." I don't know either. Did I wield my power over the team in what the Italians call female authority or were my actions closer to the traditional understanding of male power?

Abruptly I sit up. I cannot be so lazy. I need to write down something, anything! I go to the loo, I put some music on and I go back to the chair. I keep thinking of Louise. Smiling I recall her voice inside me: "I don't know why but you won this moral battle. Did you know that Pere tried to put me as scrumhalf the next match and I told him: 'No!' Because you didn't like me being scrumhalf and everybody in the team respected your opinions so much that I felt compelled to respect your opinion in this matter as well". Could I interpret this as her choosing to recognise my female authority, a woman playing next to her on the pitch, rather than the male power, a coach watching it from outside? Is that what the Italians mean about choosing another woman as reference, as measure, as mediation of one's own way to relate to the world? I don't know, maybe I am forcing sexual difference thought too much to make sense of this specific experience with Louise, and maybe after all that game is a good example of our fight for power over the team.

I have my pen in my hand and am totally determined to write something next to "Practising Disparity with Louise". Nevertheless, my eyes cannot concentrate on the paper in front of me and rapidly I shift my attention to my notes where I come across what the Milanese have called: *affidamento* relationship, which in English is



translated as *entrustment*. Affidamento describes a relationship between two women, which Luisa Muraro considers a foundational practice in creating women's knowledge. She also believes that by practising affidamento with another woman, a woman can discover in her sex the source of its value and its social measure. Since I have read about the social practice of this relationship, I have been searching for these kinds of relationships in my world of rugby and I cannot easily identify them. I think I have experienced them outside of rugby. For instance, in my studies I can find an emblematic female teacher that helped me to reach important goals in my life as a woman, but not in rugby. Why? I understand female authority and I recognise authority in some women such as Louise, Lia, Adriana, and Luce, but I cannot affirm that I have an affidamento relationship with any of them in Muraro's terms. For Muraro, affidamento is a conscious and strong relationship of authority between two women. Furthermore, it has to be agreed between the two, it cannot be established by chance. Therefore, affidamento is based on recognising that another woman supports my desire for free existence as a woman in this world. I have never really understood the meaning of these words. Here is where the philosophical features of the thought overwhelm me. Did my relationship with Louise support my female desire for female free existence? According to the Italians, this desire is most likely created through entrustment in a relationship with a female authority figure (someone to whom you have given, consciously, your respect). I admit that Louise and I have never talked about giving each other mutual authority consciously, yet Louise means something very special to me in comparison with the rest of my relationships with other women in rugby. I believe that the intense moments around rugby that we have gone through together is something unique that goes beyond mere trust, working together, or solidarity. It is something that needs to be theorised in order to achieve symbolic



existence. Although it might not be an *affidamento* relationship in Muraro's terms, I have the intuition that is not very different.

Avoiding the blank paper in front of me I delve into my British interviews, maybe searching for something that Louise has not told me. I start with Emma, she plays for the English team and her experiences are mainly related to being able to play at a very high-level of rugby. For instance Emma told me several times that for her rugby is a place where *physical trust and friendships* easily develop alongside each other. Physical trust...? Hold on a moment! Suddenly I realised that *affidamento* has been translated into English as "entrustment". Exalted I verbalise: "Could this not represent my original contribution to sexual difference thought?" Intrinsic to rugby, is this need for physical entrustment among players a way to achieve rugby's goals.

A key feature of the Milanese feminist practices comes back to my mind: "When we were discussing the way to resolve the contradiction between extraneousness and the wish to win, and the idea came up that a woman can succeed by entrusting herself to a fellow woman, this idea seemed very new to us" (1990, p. 119). Could not the need for physical entrustment on the pitch be understood as a way to resolve the contradiction that Milanese feminist talked about? As Emma, Jane and Cassandra told me, when we were talking about the meanings of physical contact, "Every time you take to the rugby pitch you are literally putting your body on the line for the benefit of the team...It is not just socially looking after you, but also physically looking after you and this breeds a huge closeness among us". Does this closeness erase our differences and disparities? Clearly not, we have to be close on the pitch but every single player has a different commitment to the team. We are close and we need each other on the pitch, but as Louise's experience of that game shows, or Emilia's- Laia's falling out, women playing rugby can also strongly hate each



other. So, what are the meanings of an entrustment relationship in my experience? I cannot work it out. I find it very complicated. The Italians are not talking at all about the possibility that these relationships could have a great physical component to them when they theorise about them.

Uncomfortable on the chair I get up and I go to my room to fetch my watch, which is on the top of the computer. It's six o'clock. Mum said she would be here around eight. I definitely need to write something by then. I sit on the bedside and looking at the computer I recall that on line course that I did with Muraro through Barcelona University. What a great thing it was to be able to contact her during the two months of the course. I still remember the first email I received from her commenting on my work: "I've read your text and I think you have the capacity to think in the first person. I'll try to help you answering your questions". Nevertheless, what I remember most is her advice in the last email she sent me: "Remember you are not a philosopher in 'strictu sensu', your own inspiration is another, it is specific to your experience, your feelings in a sport, in a history, and to be able to write about it, it is crucial to be near, very near your inspiration. Remain always attached to your personal experiences. Don't fall into the trap of generalising women's rugby experiences". Her emphasis on my own experiences in rugby takes me to those extreme feelings that I embodied when I was playing competitive rugby.

Two teams are ready for the kick off. The kicker is setting up the ball on the tee. The kick off is always the most important and tense moment of the game. In those couple of minutes when the kicker ritually prepares the ball to kick everything comes to my mind at once. Being happy because I am on the pitch feeling part of something much bigger than me. However, I can't deny I'm



tense and very scared of the first physical contact with the opposition: the fear of getting injured shows its ugly head. My stomach always knots when I run to chase the first ball of the match. For a forward the first contact is the most challenging one: constant questions are in your mind: “Will I get hurt, or will she get hurt?” “Who will win the first battle?”

Soon the first scrum of the match takes place. The first scrum is also the most important; feeling the bodies of the rest of the forwards helps me to place myself into the game. I feel secure and strong, I feel backed up and I back up the rest of the forwards. It is like saying to the opposition: “Here we are and we are going to fight, and we are strong because we are a compact pack”.

Tightening my arm on the second row back and feeling the arse of the prop in my shoulder is a recognised bodily routine to hook me up to the scrum, it is like bodily talking to my prop: “Do you feel me? I feel you, I’m not alone, and you are not alone. We are together in this! Let’s do it!” The ball reaches the corridor “the fight of the titans” begins and the eternal question remains, “Who will win the first battle?”

Remembering Muraro’s advice makes me feel lighter. So, according to my experience in rugby, female authority and entrustment with other women could be represented in the recognition I feel when I’m watching or playing next to a woman who throws herself into the game, who puts the team’s interests always before her own, who is skilful, and who is not scared of getting into hard contact with the adversary. I have recognised this female rugby authority in several women. How nice it is to coincide with Farah Palmer (the New Zealand World champion’s team captain)

when I read her dissertation: “The attributes that members admired were generally agreed upon and included physical toughness, playing good rugby, confidence, strength in personality, camaraderie, team unity, the ability to confront sexism in the rugby situation, and also the ability to drink large amounts of alcohol in a short span of time”(1994, p. 87). I think this sense of admiration of these women is an expression of recognition of their female authority in rugby. So, I interpret that Muraro is advising me to believe that my relationships with other women in rugby are interesting enough to inspire and improve the knowledge of women’s entrustment and women’s creation of original ways of subjectivity in a rugby context.

I leave the pen on the table and get off the chair. I feel uneasy; I don’t know where to go after this. I change the CD. I look at the table with my pen on it and I give up the idea of writing something today. I pick up the phone in order to call Louise to go out this evening, but my feeling of guilt tells me I should stay at home and work on my dissertation, at least until mother comes back from her card-playing afternoon. I hang up the phone again and unconvinced go back to sit on the chair in front of the blank paper. “I hate blank papers. Where should I start?” The Milan Collective’s book is still open on page 110, I inevitably read:

\* \* \*

*At that time, we thought that we were freer simply because a regime of pretence had ended along with the obligation to maintain it. However, this first result of our research, seeing that we were not equal and we had no compelling reason to think we were, was an important result but an incomplete one. What was missing was the realization that, having released our minds from subjection to a neutral symbolic, we*



*had released the symbolic power of the maternal figure. It was not by chance that the disparities among us had been named in relation to the mother.*

*It was a short step, in theory, from accepting the fact of inequality to thinking that we get value from a female source, the mother, in a symbolic sense. It was not simple, however; it is not simple.*

\* \* \*

That's it! This is what Adriana was telling me the other day and I couldn't understand. Her words were something like: "I think rugby has something special...maybe if we were English, where rugby is a mainstream sport it wouldn't be the same, but here, rugby is so minor, hardly anybody outside of rugby and PE College knows it, then it is as though it were "our" thing, it's like a secret that we keep carefully amongst us and nobody knows how good and special it can be. Just because they don't know what the feeling of getting in a scrum actually is. You know I'm a forward; I talk from a forward's point of view, the feeling of being very united with the rest of the team... I think this is amazing! What do you think?" At the moment she was telling me these things I didn't pay attention because I thought I already knew them, the things I have felt in rugby for so long, but what I realise now is the strength and the original way of representing rugby as a careful and precious secret that we keep and that belongs to us.

Now, I think it's a lovely way to illustrate the process through which, without violence or upfront confrontation, women's values and subjectivities acquire a privileged position among women's relationships in some women's rugby teams.

Here is where the *magic* of playing rugby with other women starts and the "secret" involved in the game unfolds. As the Italians name it, and I follow it, this

*magic* on the rugby pitch is represented by women's original attempt to exist in and for themselves by constructing their own symbolic. That's it! My gamble in this research is to look at how experiencing intense and meaningful relationships with other women in rugby contribute to constructing a women's genuinely symbolic order and therefore develops women's politics.

Determined I take my pen and I write in the middle of the page:

**“RUGBY WOMEN FEMINIST PRACTICES: PRACTICING DISPARITY”**

Satisfied and determined I look at the title and I verbalize “ No idea what this chapter will look like, but this will definitely be its title”.



## CHAPTER VII

### DREAMING WITHIN THE SYMBOLIC ORDER OF THE MOTHER

It is Monday evening, almost eight o'clock. I am waiting for my mother to come back from her card games and to do a bit of socialising with her. I am going to leave soon for London and I have not spoken to her properly. Moreover, I feel guilty because I had promised my mother we would do something together yesterday. But, an old school friend surprisingly called me in the morning to spend the day together, so I had to cancel going out with her. How upset my mother was.

I sit comfortably on the sofa and I try not to think, just relax and enjoy the moment. Nevertheless, I cannot avoid feeling confused being immersed in so many words, ideas, concepts, and representations. I am happy with the title of the chapter that came out of so much thinking but I do not really know how to link the symbolic order of the mother to my embodied experiences in rugby.

Feeling the warmth of the sofa on my body and without knowing very well why, I recall the Saturday morning breakfast I had with my mother before the Rugby Final took place.

Mum gets up, and she catches me in the tiny warm kitchen preparing my breakfast.

“Mum! Please pass me the cereals”.

“Do you want me to heat your milk as well?”

“I'll make the tea, then?”

“Not for me, I want decaf coffee”.

“Again your tension?”

“The doctor said I just have to be a bit careful”.

“Are you following the diet she told you to?” *My mother’s blood pressure really worries me.*

“Are you coming home for dinner tonight?” *Obviously, she is ignoring my concerns.*

“No, I don’t think so. BUC is playing the final of the Spanish championship at Montjuich and I think we’ll stay around for a while”.

“Who are “we”?”

“Louise, Lia and Adriana are coming to watch the game. I think it’s a great opportunity to spend some time together. I haven’t seen them since Xmas”. I answer her. Then I realise how much I miss being in Barcelona. *I know my friends will be my friends forever if I take care of them. However, I can’t help feeling an outsider among them when they talk about situations when I wasn’t present because I was in London. It’s not easy to keep long-distance friendships.*

“Well, Xmas was the last time you came to Barcelona, don’t you remember?”

“Yes mum, you’re always so clear-sighted that I keep forgetting how lucky I am to have you as my mother”. I reply with blatant irony.

“At what time will you come back?”, she asks me inquisitively.

*Oh no! I’m sure she’ll be making me feel guilty because I’m not spending enough time with her. What a bad daughter I am! What can I do? “I don’t know... Late! I suppose... Don’t wait up for me”. I feel she is getting upset. I hold her right hand and look directly into her deep brown eyes. I realise her hands have more wrinkles than last time I held them and now they also have more of those brown stains that I always observe in old women. She’s almost seventy. Nevertheless, I don’t understand why after such a long time she is still practising these tactics with me. Anyway, she’s right I’m never at home, this is true, but... I*



*have never been at home very much.* Suddenly raising my voice I say,  
 “Tomorrow... maybe we could do something together!”

“Are you sure? Or will it depend on any of your friends’ calls telling you that there is something important on at rugby or whatever, that you can’t miss? Your friends are always more important than me”. She says sounding both sad and reproachful.

*Here it is. My problem with her feelings on this matter is that I never know how to deal with them. I’m aware she is getting older and lonelier, however, she needs to understand that my friends are my actual life, but then... what does she represent in my life?* Hugging her tightly and kissing her neck and her cheeks I mutter: “Mum, I promise that tomorrow we will do something together. You choose.” Raising my voice I pronounce, “I heard there is a new Gaudí exhibition at the park Güell. We could go together? You like Gaudí, don’t you?”

“You said I choose. I’ll tell you tomorrow,” she says sharply.

“Not very early though, I’ll be tired. I’m sure it will be a very good party tonight after the game”, I answer smiling at her authoritative tone and leaving her in the kitchen. I’m late for the final.

Coming back to the present I start thinking about the symbolic order of the mother and I catch myself thinking of what the Italians try to convey with the “unclear” and difficult concept of *symbolic mother* which is so crucial to understanding the meanings of sexual difference thought.

Cigarini (1996) warns us that the symbolic mother is not a woman of flesh and blood because the figure of the mother belongs to a symbolic order instead of a factual reality. So, maybe the symbolic mother is recognised sometimes – it does not

have to be always – in some women’s rugby teams when the relationships and the dynamics of the team among the players produce it. As I understand it, the symbolic mother could be a place in which the most valued figure of interchange among the women who belong to this place is the acknowledgment of female authority. The symbolic order of the mother was established as a concept by Muraro in order to recognise and show the original ways that women create power among themselves and how women shape this power for their own benefit.

What does symbolic mother mean in my own experiences? I’m sure this obsession is not healthy and does not let me see the “truth” of what is really going on underneath women’s rugby: that women who play rugby are marginalized, discriminated against and a bunch of dykes. Why do I want to complicate my life so much trying to see women’s rugby experiences from other angles? A voice inside me replies rapidly: “Montse, you know that your friends’ and your own experiences make sense with this Italian thought, you feel deeply that this thought represents the meanings of your important relationships with other women in your rugby teams”.

Comforted I relax and lean back on the sofa while I feel its warmth. Once I have my own house I’ll buy a couch like this. I’m quite tired and in an instant my mind flies back to BUC’s final. I relive the images of some sequences of the game... how well BUC played! I start comparing it to when I used to play with Lia, Louise, Adriana and the rest... Mixed up images, some becoming visible in my mind ...the hard work of the scrum when the opposite team is stronger and I have to firmly stick all my boot’s studs into the ground in order to stop going backwards... Getting in a maul and being surrounded by bodies in front, behind, on top of me that strongly press my chest, feeling winded... “Where is the f...ing ball? Take it out!”... Nevertheless, what I most enjoyed was playing open flanker and being the first in



making the hardest tackle on the opposite fly half. How proud of myself I felt in those moments... although sometimes I left the scrum too soon and the ref whistled: “Beep!” “Offside number 6!”... Hold on a minute...! I recognise this voice... I raise my head and I see... “Ah! My God! Mother! You scared me! What are you doing here?” She rapidly replies with an authoritative voice, “You thought that by playing rugby you could become independent from me? As you see I do the impossible to take care of you, to make sure you are all right, my daughter.” Annoyed I answer “Mum, for God’s sake, I’m not a little girl anymore. I don’t need you. I am old enough to take care of myself. And please get off the pitch, we are playing rugby”.

Louise is coming towards my mum and me, yelling, “Montse! What is going on? Why don’t we play?” Sounding surprised I answer back: “I don’t know, my mother thinks she is the ref”. Louise does not understand and asks: “What is wrong with her? Has she never played rugby before?” Suddenly, I realise that something is behind this whole confusing situation; “I’m sure this has something to do with my problems in understanding the symbolic order of the mother as an order that some women’s relationships engender in rugby!” Emilia, our scrumhalf, playing with the ball in her hands comes towards us, followed by the rest of the team. While she sits, like the rest, on the ground she asserts: “Well if your mother is not going to leave the pitch, you’d better explain what the hell this *symbolic order of the mother* is and maybe then we can understand what she is doing here”. “Hmm, it’s not easy”, I murmur, kneeling down and looking at the whole team who are in front of me, “I just know that Muraro, the author, argues that for a woman to achieve her real independence, she needs to recognise her symbolic debt to a woman who is before her and even bigger than herself and she specifically refers to the figure of the mother, who is inspired by the mother in each of us, although it is not our flesh and blood mother”. At that moment



Adriana determinedly exclaims, "So, if I think I don't owe anything to my mother because I feel she doesn't love me I won't ever be able to be independent? What a sad thing to recognise in my life! I don't like this Muraro, who is she to universalise this kind of personal and private relationship between a mother and a daughter?" I react to such a desperate comment, "Well, Muraro knows that understanding the meanings and the consequences of the symbolic order of the mother is not easy, therefore she always emphasises that our relationships with our mothers are real but the meaning of dependence on the mother is symbolic". Luce excitedly says, "Maybe your mother is here to warn us that what we are searching for in men, only another woman can give us? It does not mean this woman has to be our real mother. You know I don't get on very well with my mother either". "Good point", Lia exclaims, "Maybe real independence is to recognise that being supported by other women, as we support each other here, is the necessary strength for each of us to confront the outside world, on our own terms, and then to achieve our real freedom". Adriana, still not convinced about Muraro's argument, questions: "I don't get this: it is symbolic, but it is real at the same time? How come?" "Wow!" Looking astonished I admit, "You girls have understood in less than five minutes what has taken me a long time of reading and reflecting". "Well Montse," Luce tells me, "Sometimes it is better to be closer to the experiences than the theories, to understand what is going on in your real life. I always have felt that rugby gives me the female strength required to be myself and to act accordingly in the rest of my life. I mean, my job, my studies, my family, and especially my difficulties in dealing with a mother who does not accept that I'm lesbian. You knew that, didn't you?" "Of course! This is why I interviewed you. I always had the intuition that you were very interesting and might show why and how a rugby environment can become extremely important for some women throughout



their lives. My problem is that when I started reading the symbolic order of the mother I didn't realise that it could be embodied in my actual relationships with you, Lia, Adriana, Louise... and some other important women in my life in whom I recognise this female authority". I sit down and looking at the ground. I remain silent captivated by all the meaningful words we have just exchanged. Suddenly, Amelia, yawning and getting up asks, "Are we going to play or talk about our problems and the miseries of being women and not always having very nice and understanding mothers? I don't really give a shit about this symbolic order of the mother, for me rugby is fun and physical exhaustion, which is what I like most..." She takes the ball from Emilia's hands and plays with it. "And I bet you this is the same for all of us, if not we wouldn't be here. Come on, let's play!" She says, determined and with authority. My mother blows the whistle in order to restart the game...the whistle still blows, I don't understand why...Beep! Beep! Beep!

It takes me a while to realise that what I am hearing in my dream is the doorbell ringing. Confused I get up off the sofa. What time is it? I open the door.

"Oh! Hi Louise! Hi Luce! What a nice surprise! What a coincidence! I was going to phone you, to see what you were up to tonight".

"What were you doing? We have been ringing the doorbell for hours?" Louise protests.

"Oh sorry! I was sound asleep on that comfy sofa that my mum has and I had the most strange dream I've ever had about my research and our team".

"What about?", Luce inquires curiously. "Was I in it?"

"Later I'll tell you the details. Come in; let's go to the living room. Anything to drink?", I ask as a good host while they are sitting on the sofa.

“A coke is fine for me”, Luce replies.

“I want a beer. Does your mother have beers?”, Louise asks ironically.

“Of course!”, I say, heading to the kitchen. I also open a bottle for me.

Coming back from the kitchen I put down the tray on the table by the sofa and I ask Luce, while I pick up a chair and sit in front of them, “So, did you see the flat this morning?”

“Yes!”, Luce exclaims very thrilled.

“And?”, I ask impatiently.

“We both like it very much, it needs some changes in the kitchen but that’s it! The rent is not too bad and it is in Plaça Espanya, so for me to get into the hospital is fine and for Teresa and her job at the shop it is not too far and we’ll be ten minutes from La Fuixarda, where we train. We are going to sign the contract tomorrow, first thing in the morning”.

“Isn’t this great?”, Louise intervenes. “Luce is only one step away from her total independence. Luce, you know there is no step back?”, Louise looks deeply at Luce’s eyes searching for confirmation.

Luce chuckles, “I can hardly believe it. Soon I won’t have to stand my mother putting down my sexuality any longer. Do you remember, Montse, all my troubles before I told my mother I was gay?”

*How could I forget?* My mind suddenly goes back to that day when Luce told me she had found out that she loved a woman.

It’s a Friday at the end of October 2000. I’m very excited because Luce is coming up to London from Guildford, an indifferent, grey city one-hour



drive south of London. I have just started my PhD and she has started a one-year work practice abroad in a hospital as a nurse.

We are in the kitchen of a house in Isleworth that I share with two other rugby players. Luckily tonight they are out. So, we have the whole house to ourselves. We're in the kitchen cooking omelettes and salad for dinner. I open a bottle of red wine and as I pour the wine into her glass I exclaim, "By the way, this morning I got an email from Louise wondering why Teresa has spent two weeks in Guildford, do you know anything about it?"

"She got her holiday and she did not know where to go, so I told her if she wanted to, she could come to visit me in Guildford", Luce explains while trying to be calm and pretending that was a normal choice.

"Two weeks in Guildford just because of that?", I probe her.

"Well, we are friends", She is getting nervous.

I look at her with an inquisitive gaze. "Just friends?", I say very slowly and emphasising every syllable. "Just-fri-ends?", I repeat.

"Well we are... very good friends", Luce blushes inevitably.

"I see", I mutter with irony.

"Actually... actually... we...we are in love." Her voice trembles and she goes very red, for a sec and I think she might explode.

"Cool, this is very cool," I exclaim, "I think she's a nice girl, she's a good rugby player as well". I try to calm her. "How long have you been together? It seems nobody in the team knows yet", I insist.

"Not very long, we found out in the middle of summer and then I had to go to Guildford in September. So we did not really have the time to know what was really going on between us. However, fortunately, she managed to

take two weeks off from her work in October and she came to stay with me in Guildford”.

“And?”, I ask eagerly.

“It’s too new and too soon to say anything about it. Neither of us has been with another woman before”. She expresses, sighing, “The only thing I know is that we had great sex and a great time together. But this might be just because we were in Guildford, where nobody knows us”. She smiles contentedly knowing that Guildford it is not solely responsible for the great time she had. “I’m not sure what will happen in Barcelona. And I’m not sure if I will ever be able to cope with my mother, she is so homophobic... You know that when I started playing, she told me once, “Luce be careful, I’ve heard that there are lot of lesbians in rugby and I know you are not one, but they can always make you one”. And then she came to that game, and leaving the club she saw Chris and Anna kissing in the shadows. My mother was very upset about it and wanted me to leave the team...” Relieved, she goes, “ Well at the moment I don’t need to think about it, it makes my stomach knot”, she says looking at the bowl of salad she has just made.

“Look Luce, if you like Teresa and I think you do - I already felt there was something going on between you two last year - you should tell your mother as soon as possible”.

“No way! You don’t know my mother. She can be very nasty and make my life extremely miserable, no way”.

“Yes, but think about it, you won’t be able to hide this from her when you go back to Barcelona next year, remember you’ll have to share the flat with your mother, at least for another year before you get an established job,



you know Barcelona is not an easy place to find work. I think you should tell your mother as soon as possible, and do you know why? Because if you tell her while you're here she will have plenty of time to reflect on her own and she won't hassle you as much as if you were there. Well, she'll phone you that is for sure, but better on the phone than face-to-face, don't you think?"

"I don't know, I hadn't thought about it in these terms. I need time to get ready to confront my mother, she is so..."

"I know what you mean. I have a theory on mothers, that some of them have this 'wonderful' predisposition to make daughters feel guilty as often as possible. With my mother I call it 'psychological terrorism.' I think some mothers are very good at it. I wonder why..."

She smiles and says nothing. Dinner is ready and Luce sets the table while I refill the glasses with more wine. I have the feeling tonight will be a fantastic "open-night" with Luce.

Back to reality, I realise that Luce is still talking, "...and now I just *have* to tell her that I'm going to live with Teresa". Sounding worried, she goes, "I hope this is really the last lap of the race".

"You will be fine. After all you have gone through I'm sure this is the last and the easiest one. Believe me. I do remember all those funny moments we had in London talking and laughing at your mum's intricate mind". I pause for a second and then I exclaim, "Mums! What a complicated matter!"

"Oh no! Don't get philosophical now. Come on Montse! Tell us about your research. What have you done with our interviews? What have you found or discovered... are we 'normal' rugby women?", Louise asks.

“I have discovered lots of things ha, ha, ha...Do you know that you’re very intelligent women and your words are very valued and wanted in the academic world? Nevertheless, what really matters today is that you are both here. I really miss you in London”, I say with a melancholic emphasis.

“Montse leave the romanticism for when you go back to London. Now tell us about this strange dream with the team”, Luce exclaims impatiently.

“Well, the dream was about...”

While I’m explaining the dream as best as I can I observe their faces, sometimes they nod to confirm they agree with what I’m saying, other times they smile at the fantasy, but most of the time they open their eyes wide and they raise their eyebrows, then, they drink their drinks in order to avoid further eye contact with me... when finally I end my speech Luce is the first to speak.

“What a strange dream you had. How would Freud analyse it? At least one thing: I’m glad I was the one to realise that this mother symbolic, or however you call it, has its own presence in our relationships in rugby. I’m glad that for once I’ve understood something better than you”, she says ironically. *Suddenly I realise how much Luce has grown over these years. She’s not the 16-year old girl that joined the team some time ago anymore.*

“Well, Montse I think you still have a lot of work to do in delving into this order to make sense of our relationships. It is not very clear yet”, Louise thoughtfully utters.

Contented I answer back, “Yes, I know, but I think I’ll do it once I finish my dissertation. That will be my next research project after getting my PhD. What do you think about the idea of interviewing the mothers of my lovely rugby friends?” I can’t help but giggle.



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### The end's dream / the dream's end

This title searches for ambivalence. On the one hand, the end's dream refers to the specific dream with which I have decided to finish my representation of data. On the other hand, the dream's end refers to the end of this research metaphorically understood as a dream. Eventually the dream comes true: the end of three years of research.

The dream at the end of my story could be a faithful record of a dream that I had when I was intensely reading Muraro's book: *The symbolic order of the mother*. Why not? One of the experiences that I have undergone throughout this research has been my painful obsession with finding ways of illustrating how the symbolic order of the mother could contribute to explaining the importance of my relationships with other women in rugby. Why painful? It has been painful because although from the beginning I had a strong intuition that this order was vital to my research, for a long time I was unable to explain what this *symbolic* order of the mother had to do with my *experiential* relationships in such a physical sport as rugby. My first thought about this symbolic order was that Muraro, an established and well-known figure in women's philosophy in Italy, had created this order to understand, from a philosophical standpoint, women's original ways of being in this world. My sincere feeling when I read her book was, Muraro can affirm the existence of a symbolic order of the mother that challenges the premises of the phallogocentric order - but I certainly cannot - because her ideas are respected and she is acknowledged as one of the main female thinkers in Italy - but I am not. So, I left this order at the back of my mind and I concentrated on the *practice of relations between/among women* that I found were more helpful in making sense of my emotional-bodily experiential relationships with other women in rugby.



At the beginning I was totally convinced that the practice of relationships among women was all I needed from the Italian feminist thinkers to carry out my investigation into my own relationships. It seemed that the symbolic order of the mother was not necessary at all – why complicate my life by untwisting the symbolic meanings of my relationships when there are other interesting concepts to delve into such as the practice of disparity, power/authority, and affidamento? Thus, I decided to start writing my story about my difficulty in representing the importance of sexual difference thought in my friends' and my own relationships in rugby without paying attention to what women's symbolic could mean in these relationships. I interwove the concepts the Italians have systematised to analyse women's relationships with my own experiential relationships. Then, Lizzy's letter came into the picture. It was really a manifestation of the symbolic nature that some women's relationships have. After that discovery, a dream sounded the most suitable device to represent the meaning of the symbolic order of the mother in my rugby experiences. At this point I acknowledge Richardson's (1994) interest in "writing as a method of inquiry". The act of writing my story without a format that could constrain the possibilities of exploring a symbolic order, which is not universally legitimised, has allowed me to write the "unwritable," as Derrida (1986) would say.

The main purpose of the dream is to represent an imaginative reconstruction of the difficult problems I encountered trying to reflect the embodiment of the symbolic order of the mother. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994), "The dream is less a descriptive account than an interpretative, semi theoretical expression" (p. 419). The outcomes of writing how the symbolic order of the mother takes place in rugby using a dream's device are twofold. On the one hand, it allows me to go beyond my constraints and show my difficulties in explaining it. On the other, the dialogues with



my friends in the dream show that this symbolic order of the mother already takes place in some of our rugby relationships, as Luce states in the dream without having read anything about this symbolic order. It was at this point I realised that Muraro's intention in naming the symbolic order of the mother was to embody it in the everyday life practices of women's relationships, not just as a philosophical exercise. Then I fully understood her claim that this order already exists in the dynamics of some women-only environments. However, Muraro is conscious of the difficulties in giving a practical sense to this order, as she says: "It was not easy to write the symbolic order of the mother and, still it is not an easy task"<sup>1</sup>.

It is not by chance that in the dream Luce is the one who realises the important influence that relating to other women in rugby has on the rest of her life. I have chosen the voice of Luce to be the one who opens my eyes to the symbolic order of the mother because Luce has had a very tough time relating to a mother who does not accept who she is. Although Luce has noticeable problems of relating to her mother and she does not know what the symbolic order of the mother is or means, my goal is to illustrate with her example that the embodiment of the symbolic order of the mother not necessarily to do with the kind of relationship that one can have with one's flesh and blood mother. This is even more obvious when I represent the kind of relationship she has with her mother through the telephone conversation. Therefore, Luce's relationship with her mother illustrates a key premise of the symbolic order of the mother that it is not based on the mother as an essence. Luce's experience exemplifies the idea that she can recognise this order in her relationships with other women in rugby, however, she does not recognise it in her relationship with her real

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<sup>1</sup> Muraro's personal email to me when I was doing a course on line with her from February-April 2003



mother, a mother that tries to suppress Luce's desire (not only the sexual one), but also her freedom to choose and be who she wants to be.

Adriana's commentary in the dream is also crucial to understanding that the symbolic order of the mother is not experienced by a carnal daughter-mother relationship. Muraro recognises that for women who have traumatic relationships with their mothers it is very difficult to go beyond the meanings of their relations with their own real mothers and grasp the meanings of what signifies the necessity of loving the mother as acknowledgment of the life received, a necessity that more than moral is above all symbolic (Muraro, 1994). The goal of bringing one of the players' raw feelings towards her mother into the dream is to illustrate the difficulties of detaching the real mother from the symbolic mother. This is what Muraro (1994) explains about those women that sometimes in conferences ask her: "So, according to what you say, I'm lost because I will never be able to love a mother that has not loved me." These words represent what for Muraro is the most difficult step forward for the female human condition, that a woman needs to seek in other women what she thought that only men were able to give her: the acceptance of herself and the measure to judge her interchanges with others (Muraro, 1994).

As I said above, the idea of representing my personal experiences with the symbolic order of the mother through a dream came about because it gave me more freedom to show how this quite unknown symbolic order might take place in my women-only rugby environment. However, I have to admit that women's explicit goals of playing rugby have nothing to do with creating or even enhancing women's subjectivity or women's symbolic meanings. For female rugby players these are not goals to pursue in their rugby practices, as Amelia shows when she exclaims that she wants to play rugby and does not care about this symbolic order. I think this point



makes full sense of my intervention as a woman rugby researcher of my own rugby friends: to be able to remain close to my experiences and at the same time to reflect thoroughly on these relationships and their consequences. It is relevant to make sense of the existence of female difference in rugby experiences in order to avoid rugby women being destined to play on the periphery of men's rugby without finding their own original sources and goals for playing and making sense of it. The fate of these women (I am one of them) will be to be forever identified as "pseudo-men" or not "real women" always from an ubiquitous male gaze. The female desires and subjectivities that give life to these images will not have a symbolic presence until the original female source that nurtures them is widely recognised among the women who play the game. My work is devoted to disclosing this recognition.

When I was writing the dream, I felt totally unbridled and I learnt one more important lesson from my relationships with my friends; that they have "rescued" me from my sceptical attitude towards the symbolic order of the mother by showing me that into this order our relationships become so special, intense, meaningful and above all practical. The dream represents my original way to pay tribute to what the MWBC (1990) call "the unpaid symbolic debt to other women."

At the end of my dream I have realised that without acknowledging the key importance of the symbolic order of the mother in my relationships, this research would not have been able to be written in the way it is now. My intuition was right; my relationships with my closest rugby friends are very important because they are more than mere friendships or female relations described from a universal-neutral-male way of thinking about them. As the Milanese women say, "Society has absolutely nothing to teach us about this" (1990, p. 134). I am glad I became aware of it at the end of my dream.



## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I set out to examine women's rugby relationships through sexual difference thought, a thought that meticulously theorises about women's relationships and their consequences for creating original female ways of being and relating to this world. Researching a field in which I was also an active participant has allowed me to analyse in-depth the meanings that women give to their experiences and relationships with other women in a rugby context.

In order to illustrate this analysis I have gathered data in the form of recollections of my personal experience, participant observation in different women's rugby teams and conversational interviews with close friends. In analysing the data through sexual difference thought, three different theoretical concepts began to emerge: *female desire* and its development in the search for female freedom; the *practise of disparity* and the later development of female authority; and *the creation of a new power structure*, that Italian feminists have labelled as the symbolic order of the mother. The main goal has been, then, to challenge the roots of masculine symbolic power in order to be able to break with the masculine power in women's everyday rugby lives.

In the first chapter dedicated to data representation through narratives, chapter V, I have analysed how the rugby context might allow women to search for female desire. In other words, how rugby players might have been awakened to the oppressive system of phallic order and, furthermore, how rugby might aid its participants in understanding what it means to be "a woman" in women's terms without being considered a victim of the phallic order (Rivera, 1997). This chapter has also proven to be emotionally very demanding as I could only reach the concept of female desire by coming to terms with my traumatic and intense



past relationship with one of my closest friends, Lia. When analysing how we were both obsessed about rugby and living in the rugby context as intensively as we could, I had my first hint of what sexual difference thinkers might mean by female desire and the need, for a woman, to start from herself to recognise it. Through this self-reflection, I have been able to further interpret the meanings of female desire and how it was actualised in other rugby women's lives. For example, I have represented my interview with Lizzy in this new theoretical light to illustrate some ways in which a women-only rugby context can engender and develop female desire.

The second data chapter focused on the sexual difference theorists' concept of *disparity*. In the previous chapter I had explored how it was possible to awaken female desire through rugby; in this chapter I have analysed how this desire was formed particularly in my relationship with Louise and our lived rugby differences along the four years we were leading BUC, the club we formed together. Sexual difference thought assumes that only certain kinds of relationships – *affidamento* relationships – can facilitate female desire. A necessary condition for such a relationship is an acknowledgment of disparity – the acceptance of differences - among women. In this chapter, then, I have explored whether such relationships might exist in a rugby context. I illustrate how such relationships were possibly formed through my relationship with Louise. Disparity, discrepancies and differences dominated the interview I had with her when we aimed to make sense of our joint leadership of this new team. We were both important leaders to the team, we both had our strong personalities but we often differed in the ways we looked at running the team. Interpreting disparities in women's relationships allowed me to make sense of what is happening underneath some team dynamics. I further illustrate this through the narratives on Emilia and Laia, whose relationships also demonstrated the existence of disparities between two women who have lead a rugby team near Barcelona. Differences – or disparities as Italian feminists call them -



among women need to be theorised in order to overcome the taken-for-granted social meanings that very often underpinned these differences, like envy and jealousy. With the stories narrated in this chapter, I particularly aimed to challenge the stereotyped vision of rugby women as members of a somewhat homogeneous group who deny their differences for the sake of their common battle against societal stereotypes and oppression. For Italian sexual difference feminists being able to name and create meanings for these differences among women is a starting point to challenge a pervasive phallogocentric order.

My ultimate, yet the most challenging, task has been to analyse whether the rugby relationships allow women to challenge the oppressive power structure of the phallogocentric order. The sexual difference theorists have envisioned this "new" power structure as the symbolic order of the mother and have since spent significant effort looking for practical applications and contexts for this new order. Therefore, my attempt here has been to examine whether rugby might have provided a context in which female desire formed within women's *affidamento* relationships can emerge and create a new structure of power that allows women to define themselves in their own terms. In order to search for a way to represent the possibilities for the formation of this symbolic order in my relationships I chose to narrate a rugby dream with my mother and all my Catalan participants. The dream setting gave me the perfect framework to explore the possible understandings of this new power structure, the symbolic order of the mother, through my friends' voices. Therefore, through this analysis I aimed to use a dialogue of multiple voices, including my own, to illustrate how our intense relationships through rugby might be interpreted as a meaningful site for this order. Although I do not aim to definitely confirm that it is through this order that my friends and I have related to each other, I consider that the symbolic order of the mother is a very powerful symbolic tool to create and develop ideas about women's own ways of existence. In other



words, this order offers to sport feminist research great chances of explaining and giving sense to women's sports experiences that can exist beyond the phallogentric order.

I chose to represent the possibilities for the construction of an alternative symbolic order through narratives. My choice emerged from my reading of the sexual difference thought and the difficulties that I encountered when aiming to embed my participants' lived experiences within a theoretical, rather than descriptive, framework. However, by writing stories I was able to contextualise diverse women's rugby environments and moments. This has allowed me the possibility to show flesh and blood female rugby players as subjects who think, feel and relate their own experiences. Thus, by applying sexual difference thought, my aim has been to provide original and adequate language through which women who play rugby represent their own original experiences. In summary, these experiences are framed by a poststructuralist premise that recognises that women's realities in rugby are created by, and at the same time create, language.

Furthermore, the use of narratives and story telling has allowed me to exponentially enrich my data by giving detailed accounts of situations, conversations, thoughts and actions from women's rugby environments. The goal was engaging readers with narratives, which have a plot to follow through the last three data chapters. The goal also was to offer a deep insider vision of what it is to be a female rugby player in specific contexts. Regarding these issues some of my friends who have read the narrative chapters have commented that some times they have forgotten that what they were reading was a Ph.D. Some of them got so engaged with the story that they asked me eagerly about characters they were unaware of in our rugby context.

My main purpose in this research has been to represent how this alternative symbolic order can theoretically frame meanings for women who experience. As I demonstrated in my literature review, I am not, of course, the first feminist to engage in an analysis of women's



experiences of team contact sports in general and rugby in particular. Several previous studies examine these experiences through a variety of theoretical frameworks, but mainly through the lens of hegemony theory. While their theoretical approaches are different, many of these studies (e.g., Chu et al., 2003; Foudy, 2003; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Menneson & Clément, 2003; Tsang, 2000; Scraton et al., 1999; Cadwell, 1999; Duncan, 1998; Young, 1997) recognise women's positive experiences when participating in sport. For example, Foudy (2003) asserts "I have always been able to express myself through competition, through my involvement in sport" (p. x). However, it is noticeable that while recognising the positivity of women's contact sports, these studies have a tendency to dichotomise women's experiences into positive or negative, liberating or oppressive and consequently, label sports women either as masculine or feminine. I was looking for a theoretical framework that enabled me to break out of these dualisms that didn't seem to correspond to my rugby experiences. I consider that sexual difference thought allows a deeper analysis because of its emphasis on theorising women's experiences beyond positive or negative connotations. Italian feminists' main emphasis is on creating and naming what positive and negative experiences might mean for women who are not assimilated to a masculine order, who frame their experiences in an alternative symbolic order developed through women-only relationships. In my opinion sexual difference thought provided an opportunity to analyse women's rugby experiences from a new perspective. Instead of focusing on whether rugby liberates/oppresses women, or rugby masculinises women instead of feminising them, or rugby provides positive/negative experiences to the women, I aimed to go beyond these dichotomies to theorise how rugby might participate in the creation of an alternative order to the phallogentric symbolic order. My analysis of the construction of an alternative symbolic order is based on the work of several Italian feminists whose main interest has been to gather and make sense of the original female differences that women have expressed in relating their



everyday life experiences. For these feminists it is not enough to account that women do not pay any attention of what men think about them; it is also necessary to frame this act in a symbolic order that gives existence to original ways of acting which are not derived from men's ways of acting or its reverse. Through sexual difference thought, I believe, I have been able to frame further political meanings for rugby women's relationships that I felt were missing in the previous studies of women's experiences in rugby (e.g., Chu et al., 2003; Carle & Nauright, 1999). According to my experiences of playing rugby for several seasons, I consider that this sport has provided me with "a" time and "a" space in which I was able to recognise my original female sources of who and how I am without the need to conceal my female body, subjectivity and desire.

While sexual difference thought enabled me to focus on a construction of an alternative power structure through women's rugby, this theory, like any theory, has certain limitations. Sexual difference continental scholars have been criticised by American feminists for essentialism (Braidotti, 2002; Olkowski, 2000; Chanter 1995), universalism, they disregard cultural diversity (Braidotti, 2002). Lastly for heterosexism, "it plays down the creative subversive force of lesbianism and homosexual desire" (Braidotti, 2002, p. 29). However, one of the most challenging tasks, often overlooked by American feminists, is the attempt of Italian sexual difference thought to make conscious an alternative symbolic order which is characterised by rising spontaneously through women's relationships. The driving force that underpins this research has been to theorise according to this alternative symbolic order. I aimed to overcome the limitations of making visible the invisible, of speaking of the original feminine that we have no words for by being immersed in specific literature on sexual difference and delving intensely into my own experiences in rugby. I have now demonstrated how the symbolic order of the mother can frame some rugby experiences, and have become conscious of this order myself. However, does this mean that my rugby friends



are conscious of it too? If I am fair to my personal effort and my female desire, I have to recognise that this is a very slow process that cannot be easily noticed, either imposed or generalised. Furthermore, for other rugby women to make it conscious it is necessary that they start from themselves and recognise their own explicit desire to make it conscious. As the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective and Diotima group emphasise, to be able to theorise about the importance of women's relationships, these relationships need to be consciously negotiated between women. For this reason I asked some of my Catalan participants to read my narratives.

When we gathered together to discuss what I had written, the participants' reactions were quite varied. However, most felt that they could easily recognise themselves in the narratives and, therefore, felt strongly identified with the situations I have described and what I wrote about them. A reaction from one INEF younger rugby player who has not participated directly in the research told me that I was pretty accurate with the stories. She has not participated in some of them but she can imagine them happening. However, not all were like that, for instance, Laia, a bit upset told me: "It's only Emilia's version! This is not objective at all. If you try to demonstrate something this cannot be valid at all. You have explained what happened but it's only Emilia's version". Adriana's words illustrate this the best: "This is a strange PhD, one expects objectivity and scientific values and you don't have them. I know sociology works differently, but still it is hard to understand what are you trying to do in this PhD. I don't follow your argument when you explain sexual difference theory". Finally, it emerged in our discussion that the narratives were all right and my friends could follow them but the theoretical underpinning was very hard to understand. As Luce commented,

What has happened to me has happened to more women. I'm not special at all. Your theories are difficult to understand. When you talk about female desire and all the rest I don't get what you want to say. Are you sure my experiences and women's rugby in general are important enough to be explained in a PhD?



A month later, Luce told me in the form of a letter, “Don’t hesitate so much about your work. I still feel ashamed every time I read it because it is hard to believe that I told my mother and I accept to myself that I am lesbian but I know that at the same time that it is positive for me to see it written”. When I now reflect on my participants’ comments, I feel like I had encountered these issues myself as a researcher. For example, I was frequently asked what meaning might this Ph.D. have as it is so subjective and really only about my own relationships to other women. How can one generalise anything out of such a Ph.D.? While I struggled with this myself, I still feel that my examination is significant because instead of objectifying my friends and my own experiences in rugby, through our discussions about the narratives, it became clear that my friends felt they played an integral role of the research. As Emilia told me: “your narrative made me reflect upon my own experiences with the women on Hospitalet team” Similarly, I was questioned as to why I used a single theory, such as sexual difference theory, that is difficult to conceptualise and difficult to represent through experiences. Like my participants, I struggled to make sense of this theory. However, I embraced it because it provided me with new aspects to analyse in women’s rugby experiences. I find that reading about the need to originate an alternative symbolic order based on women-only relationships that does not imitate or reverse the phallogocentric order is quite innovating in sport feminist research.

Luce was not the only one who asked if women’s rugby experiences were sufficient material for a Ph.D. thesis. I was also questioned as to whether this research was about rugby at all, or just women’s relationships. This was a difficult question because I could not isolate which were the consequences of strictly rugby relationships and which had other components in them. However, from the feedback provided by my participants, several further questions surfaced in my mind: “Would it be different if I start a new team now, after finishing this research?” “How would my relationships with my team mates be?” “Can this research have



an influence on the future involvement of my participants' in rugby such as referees or coaches?" "Will they search for female authority to surface in their relationships?" I think it was also significant, that while my participants' comments on the epistemology and ontology of my research were deeply embedded in the traditional understanding of research as an objective, generalisable science, their comments on my choice of representation were quite positive. They commented, for example, that they liked the stories because they were written in a style close to their everyday life. This feedback was important for me because it illustrated the importance of feminists writing research in a manner that is accessible not only to sport feminist academics, but to all women interested in the subject.

The innovation of this research, therefore, is that it is above all addressed to women who have felt the magic of the rugby in themselves. I support the idea (Rivera, 1997; Muraro, 1994; MWBC, 1990) that "real" changes will take place in women's rugby when the women who play it are able to critically analyse their experiences and their representations in a world that does not recognise women's subjectivity as different from a fictitious universal subjectivity. I strongly believe that the symbolic order of the mother allows a woman to create a new reality that fully recognises her experiences. Therefore, the underpinning purpose of this research has been to show the need for a female symbolic in order to provide means to "real" change in women's rugby representations.

### Further Research

As I pointed out in chapter VII, beyond my own research on my rugby friends and their relationships with their mothers, Italian sexual difference thought might in future be more broadly applied to sportswomen's experiences. Although relationships with mothers does not seem to be a specific issue with women who do sport, I consider that taking on board this issue in qualitative research might enable a better understanding of women's



participation in sport. I have the intuition that digging into female rugby players' relationships with their real mothers is important in order to recognise the influences of those mothers that do not share their daughter's female desire for free existence.

In this research I have mainly emphasised differences between women who have led a rugby team in their youth. I consider that other important differences should be taken on board in order to have a more detailed picture of the meanings of differences among women in a rugby team. For instance, female players differ from each other in terms of their level of rugby skills and their beginner or veteran status. Are the relationships among these women based on power or authority? How can feminist sport research develop methods and create language in which the meanings of these relationships can be gathered and expressed? Are these relationships, between beginners and veterans, or more and less knowledgeable female rugby players, embedded in a new symbolic order of the mother or are they reproducing the male order in sport? These are some of the questions that further research on women's sport experiences through sexual difference lenses might tackle in order to improve sport feminist knowledge.

Another issue that still needs reflection is the meanings of female desire in myself and other rugby women. This is a matter that needs deeper and more detailed data about women's experiences in rugby. In this research I have mainly been able to unearth and to analyse that form of female desire related to homosexual desire. But the Italian theorists and Braidotti (1997) assert that female desire is broader and goes beyond a sexual practice.

In summary, the purpose of this thesis has been to analyse how rugby as a whole, I mean not just as the game played on the pitch, but also as the socialising sport, influences women's experiences. The lead motive for carrying out this thesis has been to represent "a" rugby experienced and related by female subjective practices. It has been through sharing rugby goals and experiences on the pitch, and through placing our relationships in a rugby context that the experiences storied here make full sense. Rugby is the basis of the origin of our intense and special relationships. Thus, my overall intention has been to show that rugby plays an important part in female rugby players' relationships. While rugby is not the only influence on these players' lives, I believe that it is important to put into words some of the intense and special relationships among women that rugby, as physical practice, provides to the women who participate in it.



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