A Narrative Analysis of Women’s Desires and Contributions to Community, Sentience, Agency and Transformation
A Narrative Analysis

DISSERTATION

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By

Deborah Petrone

Graduate Program in Education, Teaching and Learning

The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Mollie Blackburn, Advisor

Caroline Clark

Mindi Rhoades
Abstract

This dissertation explores the narratives of groups of women and demonstrates how those narratives convey the participants’ desires and contributions to the world and the people in it. Critical literacy, narrative inquiry and complementary theories provide a backdrop for this inquiry and discussion through themes of women and community, sentience, agency and transformation as illustrated and informed by the narratives from the participants’ individual and focus group interviews. This work is grounded in the understanding that humanity is not finished nor is it humane at this point in its history but offers viable possibilities through the narratives in this study that may prompt individuals to action, to affect change, to touch the lives of others, to join together and to seek to improve the human condition.
To Edie
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Vita

June 1970 .......................................................Shaw High School, East Cleveland, OH

1986.............................................................B.A. Art, Cleveland State University

2007.............................................................M.Ed. Eastern New Mexico University

2011-2014 .....................................................Graduate Teaching Associate, Education,

Teaching and Learning, The Ohio State

University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Education, Teaching and Learning

Area of Study: Language, Education and Society
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... ii

Dedication .......................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments .............................................................................................................. iv

Vita...................................................................................................................................... v

Chapter 1: Entryway .......................................................................................................... 1

   Reasons and Rationale .................................................................................................... 1

   Relevance to education .............................................................................................. 5

   The Question ................................................................................................................... 7

   Overview of Chapters ................................................................................................. 9

Chapter 2: Theory and Relevance ..................................................................................... 12

   Critical Literacy ............................................................................................................. 13

   History, critics and supporters ................................................................................... 15

   Relevance to this study .............................................................................................. 17

   Relevant Research ........................................................................................................ 32

   Complimentary Theories ............................................................................................. 39

vi
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived and envisioned communities</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibility, hope, unfinishedness and the future</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentience</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection in relationships</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner knowing</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts in a patriarchal society</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The contribution of sentience</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The people vs the military industrial complex</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical feminism</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency as personal</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation and evolution</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to the collective consciousness</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating hope for humanity</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Entry into the Future</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed Outcomes</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New and relevant cultural narratives</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Entryway

The following dissertation represents an intersection of ideas that together explore the seeds of possibility in a world that can sometimes seem impossible. It is grounded in the understanding that humanity is “not yet finished or humane” (Shor, 1999) and examines impetuses that prompt individuals to action, to affect change, to touch the lives of others, to join together and to seek to improve the human condition. To this end, I ask, How do the narratives of unfinished women of heart on the path of critical consciousness reflect their contributions and desires for the world and the people in it? In the following, I explain the foundation of this inquiry from the impulse that set me on this path to an explanation and overview of the ensuing chapters. I begin with personal reasons for embarking on this study; continue with an explanation of the meaning and structure of my research question; and conclude with an overview of the goals and content of the chapters that follow.

Reasons and Rationale

Early in my education, as a student of the arts, I first learned that, regardless of whether rules are made to be broken, the rupturing of convention, norms and rules have led to uncharted territory and works of genius. Although I cannot ascribe to the latter, this dissertation proceeds in the spirit of exploration and “ingenuous curiosity” and of inspecting and rupturing tradition (Freire, 2001, p. 35). I do so for no other reason than
to apply the knowledge I have accumulated to this point to examine experience and ideas wrapped in possibility and hope, and to offer perspectives and directions that inform the momentum toward shaping an ethical human presence on this planet.

My interest springs from idealism, a word that entered my worldview during my high school years. As an inquiring adolescent mind of the late sixties, I was exposed to and pondered notions of radicalism, human liberation, and the actual meaning of democracy. As much as my parents would allow, I lingered at the fringe of radicalism with Students for a Democratic Society and Black Panthers. I attended women’s consciousness-raising meetings and stuffed envelopes for the Women’s Liberation Movement. While some students cut school for shenanigans, I cut school to spend the day at the art museum or attend an anti-war rally on the university campus. My parents worried, and rightfully so. I was treading into unknown territory that was frightening for them and fascinating for me. Although my youthful activism was short-lived, it was a time of questioning, wonder and excitement. Lucky for all of us, I was not the budding criminal mind of my parents’ worst fears, but impassioned to use my mind to shape a better world.

The label of idealist stuck. Being an idealist did not seem to be a bad thing. Although I never actually checked the official dictionary definition at the time, I believed idealism to be the pursuit of optimal conditions for all of humanity; it was fueled by dreams of a peaceful and compassionate utopian society. Among those adults responsible for my growth and well-being, the context in which idealism was repeated gave the word an entirely different spin. Usually preceded by words like “childish” or
“youthful,” idealism seemed to suggest a large measure of immaturity and naiveté. In other words, being called an idealist by my elders minimized my deepest desire for justice and dignity. It meant I was silly and inexperienced, the latter of which was undoubtedly true. I was told I was merely going through a phase, and that my idealism would disappear one day as would my infinite pimples, surging hormones and other adolescent blights.

I moved on, trying to fit into molds that were never my size and shape. I felt like one of Cinderella’s ungainly step-sisters, forced to fit into that glass slipper and pursue the kingdom and the prince, even though I was averse to walking on glass and would much rather ride on a horse than ride in a carriage. Moreover, I wanted no part of a corrupt aristocracy, and would shrivel up and die in a life relationship with an aristocrat whose best traits were handsomeness and charm. As I tried to fit, I never gave up wondering why the goal to uncover the latent sanity in what I perceived to be a largely insane world was considered a passing fad. Why was my idealism deemed an unattainable, fairytale fantasy, when the story I was given to live was an equally unattainable archetypal fairytale with an uncertain ending?

Time has passed. Today I can speak from life experiences. Of them, most have been mundane, many subtle, others profound and a handful have been life-altering. But with the exception of those experiences and the passing of years, my adolescent conditions have not disappeared, they have simply transformed. Pimples have become wrinkles. The bane of youth and childishness persists through renewed qualities of enlivened possibility and of being childlike. My hormonal surges have not disappeared at
all, but are a function of maturity—just like my nascent idealism, which continues to thrive despite predictions to the contrary. As for fairy tales, like all narratives, they provide rich allegories for life choices. Most importantly, however, I discovered that I am not alone. There are individuals who share my vision, some who have been moved to study it, write about it and live it—and all from whom I have learned.

This research and dissertation represents a snapshot of those individuals and what they offer to humanity and the world. Among them are sages and scholars. Most important of all are the women who bring their significant narratives to this inquiry. Although they have not gained notoriety, each of them informs this work with remarkable strength of character and invaluable stories, conversations and ideas. I have met them all prior to my research. Some are recent acquaintances, while others I have known for years. Many I call my friends. Together, these women, as well as the scholars and sages whose companionship I found through their work, inform my research with precious knowledge and insight.

In addition, I have found fitting words for my idealism in critical literacy, a democratic theory in literacy education centered on ethical formation and the creation of a humane world. Critical literacy reflects my unshakable commitment to hope for humanity that often left me feeling largely unrealistic and naïve but persisted just the same. Not until I stumbled upon the writings of Brazilian radical, Paulo Freire, did I realize that my sense of naivety arose out of my lack of knowledge, and as Giroux (2007) indicates, “I didn’t have the theoretical language” (p.120). In an interview with
Kinzeloe, Giroux (2007) explains that after reading Freire’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

I felt my life had changed because I had a language all of sudden that seemed to speak very directly about the kinds of issues I was involved in, but more importantly they gave me a way of theorizing an experience. Something was going on that was very profound for me: It was moving from a position of being voiceless to having a voice (p. 220-236).

Like Giroux, having the theoretical language gives me the voice and the wherewithal to theorize my experience, a testimony to the power of words, that they can indeed change lives. Where I once was unable to substantiate my nascent idealism, I now speak of human agency, justice and critical consciousness, words that hold specific meaning, form and depth. Before I discuss the specific language of my research question and an overview of the contents of this work as a whole, I explain how this particular study connects to the field of education.

**Relevance to education.** In quoting Lewis, Moje (2009) writes “we, as researchers and teachers . . . (across all domains), have to start thinking about how to do research and to teach [for that which] we cannot even imagine” (p. 359). This single sentence shifted my perspective of education. The statement caused me to no longer see teaching and learning as a matter of adapting old practices, but a matter of preparing for the future by creating the future. I had been focusing on literacy studies at the time, and I turned to those who theorized recent and future changes (Bruce and Hogan, 1998). In fact, Bruce and Hogan reframe Freire’s famous posit to read the world. White (1998) indicates the necessity for an astute critical awareness of the economic, political, and social currents in society. Although decidedly interesting, these scholars continued to
address adaptation. Furthermore, perhaps unwittingly, they advocate adaptation to the top down movement of changes influenced by neoliberal corporate entities that represent a privatized locus of dominant power in the United States (Giroux, 2005). Rather than studying how to adapt to power, I wished to explore ways to create ongoing engagement in critical consciousness in a rapidly changing world.

Freire (2001) encourages his readers to rehistoricize the context of their lives, and Bateson (1979), implores educators to teach students to identify “the pattern which connects” (p. 8). From the first paper and pencil to whatever tools happen to be current in the reading of this discussion, is the division of power (Brandt, 1998; Freire, 2001; Lippi-Green, 2007). As humanity faces the collective future, the problem is not our tools or how they are used, but how they are leveraged for power. Those without power are victims of inequities, injustice and atrocities. Yet, over the last century while science and industry have progressed beyond imagination, actual human social development seems negligible. Granted, tangible progress has affected change. Education is now a social and global function that spans all ages and nations. As a result, I have concluded that teaching for an unimaginable future is not about researching and teaching for a future “we cannot even imagine.” It is about researching and teaching a better way of being by expanding upon existing human resources. Importantly, I must emphasize that this study does not purport to offer certainties for humanity’s future, nor do I speak for all women. I simply offer a sampling of narratives through discussion and stories as real evidence of women whose expressed desires and actions point toward epistemologies that are not of the mainstream educational ilk.
As I planned this study, I turned to critical literacy, a guide for a way of being through ethical formation, unfinishedness, democracy and hope. Like a trusted friend, I found the courage to imagine the unimaginable through Freire (1991; 2001). Freire encourages humanity to aspire to unprecedented humaneness through ethical formation, justice, human decency and critical consciousness. In addition, he advocates experiential learning, ingenuous curiosity, the construction of new knowledge, and uncertainty and doubt. Within the frame of critical literacy, knowledge becomes a creative experience rather than a static commodity, something beautiful and vital rather than stale and lifeless. It creates space for change and new growth, thus as I am inspired by critical literacy; I am not wedded to it because being unfinished means to embrace change. However, critical literacy serves as both a theoretical framework and a point of departure in this study. I continue my reasons and rationale of this work by explaining the fundamental premise of my research question through the specific words and concepts I chose to craft it.

The Question

The driving research question of this study contains language of critical literacy that facilitates an understanding of this study. The question also suggests characteristics in my participants and my research methodology. With regard to critical literacy, two terms—unfinishedness and critical consciousness—serve as an entryway into a vision of social transformation, and are oft-repeated words throughout this dissertation. Because critical literacy treats unfinishedness and critical consciousness as processes rather than achievements, I indicate them as a path or a journey. Thus I sought to interview those
who are unfinished women . . . on the path to critical consciousness. The concept of
heart, although not directly taken from critical literacy represents the timbre of Freire’s
writing. Heart also represents the essence of humanness and a quality that inhabits
intellectual and sentient knowledge and cuts across cultural and epistemological
boundaries. My choice of women as my research participants stems from the desire to
better understand women’s oft-unnoticed impact amidst predominantly male
sociocultural influences.

My choice of terms in my research question begs secondary questions: Who are
unfinished women of heart on the path to critical consciousness and how did I make this
choice? As I explain in Chapter 3, I chose to invite women with whom I was already
acquainted. The criteria of unfinishedness, heart and critical consciousness served as
lenses through which to view the women’s narratives rather than a means of evaluation,
because theoretically every human being has the capacity for unfinishedness, heart and
critical consciousness.

Each of the above thematic choices represents an epistemological shift away from
the currents of the dominant operative paradigm of Western science in the form of
unfinishedness as opposed to certainty and stasis; the heart in lieu of the mind; critical
consciousness in exchange for resignation to the status quo; the female perspective in
place of a dominant patriarchal one; progress in human transformation in lieu of
industrial, technical and economic advancements; and narratives that reflect experiential
knowledge in contrast to data related to predetermined questions subject to the
researchers’ discretion. The purpose of these choices rests in simple logic and burning
curiosity. That is, if humanity is not resolving its problems along the current path, perhaps it is time to explore different trajectories.

As the aim of this study is to explore dominant themes among narratives from women who demonstrate various degrees of unfinishedness, heart and critical consciousness in their lives, every concept in my research question represents an important aspect of this study. In addition, each of the women in this research expresses those concepts differently, yet prevalent themes emerge in the narrative context that prompt me to consider how those themes shape my participants’ desires and contributions to the world and the people of the world. The following chapters lead my reader through the details of this research process from the theories that supports to the findings and direction of further study.

**Overview of Chapters**

I conclude this introduction with an overview of the chapters in my discussion and their contents. In Chapter 2, I set the theoretical foundation of my work in two parts. First I discuss critical literacy primarily through the work of Paulo Freire. I begin by locating critical literacy historically, discussing its beginnings, criticisms and evolution. I then return to the key words in my research question to guide my reader through a more comprehensive introduction of the significance of the terms unfinishedness, heart and critical consciousness within the context of critical literacy. In the second part of Chapter 2, I discuss Freire’s perspective of praxis, theories applied to the field of education that are related to critical literacy, and bring an interdisciplinary tone by extending the discussion further with theories with scholars outside the field of education that parallel...
and extend principles of critical literacy and facilitate my understanding of my participants’ experiences.

I continue with Chapter 3, which substantiates the logic of my research approach by explaining the basic premise of narrative inquiry. Since narrative inquiry encompasses multiple approaches, I discuss perspectives on both narrative inquiry and the human narrative from Bateson (1979), Bruner (1991), Clandinin (2007) and Leavy (2009). I then include examples of prior research that inform my inquiry. Moving on, I describe the general demographics of my participants, explain the types of interviews I used—the focus group and the individual interview—followed by the character of each focus group and a thumbnail description of the personalities of each woman whose story or narrative I include in the subsequent analysis. As I proceed to the methods segment of Chapter 3, I explain my approach and position as the researcher to the data collection, my procedure and the tools I employed. I conclude Chapter 3 with a narrative of the process of my analysis including the emergent themes of community, sentience, agency and transformation.

As I enter the rich and complex domain of my data, Chapter 4 begins with an explanation of the major themes that emerged from my data followed by an in-depth discussion of each theme. I begin with women and community and provide two narratives that each illustrate a contribution through experience and a desire through vision for the world and its people. I follow with a theme that encompasses the whole human experience of both body and mind through sentience. At this point I provide examples that illustrate sentient connections, one’s inner sentience and conflicts as a
result of authentic expression. I continue with agency with examples of women’s environmental activism, radical feminism and a discussion of the personal aspects of agency. I conclude this chapter with the theme of transformation providing examples of theory that presses the boundaries of this field of education and an extraordinary story of pain and healing.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings of my analysis through the emergence of new cultural narratives, the significance of sentience and women’s ability to create a force of peaceful power and hope for the future. I respond to my findings with a discussion of the implications of this study in education and research. Following, I consider the limitations of this study, and provide recommendations and solutions to remedy them. Finally, I offer concluding thoughts and directions for continued research. Now, having introduced this inquiry, I turn to my theoretical discussion where I identify the foundational elements of critical literacy, the significance of the terms unfinishedness, heart and critical consciousness and discuss other relevant theories that emerge throughout my data analysis.
Chapter 2: Theory and Relevance

This chapter creates a backdrop for my research in three parts. I begin with an overview of critical literacy, the theoretical foundation I employ in this work. I follow with a brief discussion of relevant theories that complement, extend or enhance critical literacy. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of related empirical research that inspired and informed this study, and illustrated its feasibility. To reiterate, the primary purpose of my work is to collect, analyze and understand narratives of women that reflect their desires and contributions to the world and its people as framed in narrative inquiry and the democratic principles of critical literacy. As I embarked on my primary aim, smaller goals or objectives lingered in the back of my mind. Each of the three sections of this chapter helps frame one of the following objectives, while the final goal relates to all three:

- Critical literacy. From a theoretical perspective, I wanted to know how unfinishedness, heart and critical consciousness emerged on a grass roots level, and if so, how did it impact my participants’ lives?

- Relevant research. I wondered about the phenomenon of women’s groups. I had valued my connections among the groups, but I also found them to be restorative, supportive and validating. If my experience was not unique, I wanted to know what made these groups serve such a powerful purpose in my life.
• Complementary research. In addition, presuming that humanity is indeed unfinished; that new knowledge can be constructed from experience; and that critical literacy must remain dynamic in its applications and relevance, I was curious how personal stories and narratives might inform and extend critical literacy in theory and practice in order to make it more relevant to current and future issues facing humanity.

• All of the above. And, as I mention at points during the larger discussion, what lies at the nexus between hopelessness and hope?

Critical Literacy

As I embark on my discussion of critical literacy, I draw from its roots in the writings of Freire to situate it historically and to explain its relevance to education. In order to illustrate possible strengths and weaknesses of my theoretical framework, I cite critics and criticisms of Freire and his theory and provide examples of relevant authors and scholars whose work has been influenced by critical literacy. Then, turning to my research question, I continue by explaining the meaning and relevance of the terms unfinishedness, critical consciousness and heart to critical literacy, including my rationale for choosing those words.

At this point I must note that I draw primarily from male theorists in critical literacy in lieu of the women who have taken up the same principles since Freire first published the Pedagogy of the Oppressed in English. I chose to do so because I believed it was important to study and consult his work first-hand. As I substantiate later in this chapter, in some cases I found his work to be rinsed of meaning or misrepresented.
Although I quote other sources of critical literacy, each had been students or colleagues of Freire who knew his theory well. As it turns out, with the exception of hooks (1994), these theorists and authors are all men. As I proceed with my theoretical discussion, I turn to both women and men. Among the female theorists and authors I have consulted, Bolen (2005) brings a background in psychiatry and Jungian analysis; Tannen (1990) holds a position in the field of linguistics; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) and Rendón (2009) have published within the field of education; Brown (2012) is a popular writer and professor in social work and King (2004) is positioned within the field of religious studies.

As illustrate in Chapter 4, these women bring unique insights into my discussion, for example, with community through observations with women’s circles (Bolen, 2005), cooperative language (Tannen, 1990), and the need for human connection (Brown, 2012); with sentience through insights into women’s inner knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986) and the effects of living in a patriarchy (Brown, 2012); and with transformation through the clarity that King (2004) brings to the writings of Teilhard. Furthermore with respect to sentience, I turn to Rendón (2009) in Chapter 5 who names her pedagogical approach feeling-thinking or sentipensante, a term gleaned from Eduardo Galeano (in Rendón, 2009) that signifies the “celebration of the marriage of heart and mind” (p. 131). On the whole, these women researchers, authors and theorists infused a poignant and necessary perspective that was unparalleled by other sources.
History, critics and supporters. Freire’s theories of education and literacy arose from his experience with abject poverty and oppression in his homeland, and evolved within the context of struggles in third-world Brazil. Born in “one of Brazil’s poorest regions,” Freire trained to be a lawyer, turned to social work and later became a Brazilian agent for the Brazilian literacy programs (Bell, Gaventa & Peters 1990, p. xvi). Freire (in Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990, p. xvi) has indicated that because his ideas are rooted in a third-world context, some North Americans have considered his theory to be inapplicable to their sociopolitical conditions in the first-world. In addition, his work has been subject to numerous other criticisms. “The style of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, for instance, has been criticized for being difficult, pompous, snobbish, elitist, convoluted, arrogant and metaphysical” (Schugurensky, 1998, p. 17). Other criticisms include his patriarchal stance (hooks, 1994, Schugurensky, 1998), “romanticism” (Bruner, 1986, p. 141), authoritative or autonomous voice (Schugurensky, 1998; Street, 1996) and lack of specific strategies or actualized proof of “social change effectively linking consciousness with liberation” (Schugurensky, 1998).

Because Freire’s (2001) vision in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed arose from the need to dissolve the oppressive Brazilian state in the 1960s, some scholars discount critical literacy as strictly applicable to the sociopolitical conditions of Brazil at that time (Horton & Freire, 1990). Those critics I believe have missed Freire’s point. Freire indicates that his principles of education must be appropriately adapted to suit individual contexts. However, theoretically, Freire’s (1991; 2001) work emphasizes the legacy of oppression throughout human history. Conditions of justice and human dignity are not
limited to time and space, but how they are enacted will vary. At the same time, Freire indicates that as unfinished creatures in an unfinished world, there will always be alternatives. Thus, ostensibly, how the principles of critical literacy play out can and will change as perspectives, conditions and alternatives change.

True to his tenets of unfinishedness and critical reflection, and in service of democratic ideals, Freire illustrates the applicability of critical literacy to first world cultures in a published dialogue with educator activist, Myles Horton, an American whose theoretical stance is remarkably similar to Freire’s (Horton & Freire, 1990). Freire, a Brazilian, and Horton, an American, draw similarities in their approaches to education and social change, thus illustrating the applicability of critical literacy. Freire goes further to explain that what he envisions is actually a world problem that requires theoretical adaptability: “I am speaking here not as a Brazilian, but as a human being just recognizing how much we have to do still all over the world in order to try to invent the world” (p. 91). In addition, Freire understood that “theory is always becoming” (p. 99). As such, he responded to his critics and even revised his theory in response to many of his criticisms including sexism, pompous writing style, theoretical ambiguity, and the absence of race and gender issues (Schugurensky, 1998). Importantly, despite his critics, Freire’s work has maintained popularity among first-world scholars whose theory and practice in education and literacy aim at eradicating social oppression and the deleterious power structures that perpetuate it (Aronowitz, 1998; Giroux, 2005; hooks, 1994; Macedo, 1994; McLaren & Lankshear, 1994; Shor, 1999).
Relevance to this study. The following details three theoretical premises of critical literacy that inform this research. The three most emphasized in Freire’s work are 1) Unfinishedness: Hope and possibility grounded in historical fact that humanity is “always unfinished,” 2) Heart: The qualities of character, ethics and way of being and acting on the world that facilitate the transformational process which I explain as heart, and 3) Critical consciousness: The active state of conscientização, or, in English, conscientization or consciousness-raising that describes an ongoing process of awareness through “reading the world,” not just “reading the word” (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

As noted in Chapter 1, these three themes are inextricably woven into my research question: How do narratives of unfinished women of heart on the path to critical consciousness reflect their desires and contributions to the world and the people in it? Unfinishedness and critical consciousness appear repeatedly in Freire’s (1991, 2001) writing as crucial and mutually dependent to the goals of a healthy democracy and social transformation. Unfinishedness indicates a self-referential knowledge of not being done or complete, and that the stuff of possibility and hope are attainable for self and humanity. However, according to Freire (2001), without critical consciousness--the ongoing awareness of messages and practices that feed injustices, inequities and deleterious power structures--the transformation process cannot be complete. Because critical consciousness is a process rather than an achievement, I indicate that it is a path. Thus my participants are those who are “unfinished women . . . on the path to critical consciousness.”
**Unfinishedness.** As I discuss unfinishedness, I explain its meaning in the context of critical literacy and provide examples illustrating the significance of being aware of human unfinishedness. Drawing from Freire, I continue with a discussion of unfinishedness as it relates sectarianism, right thinking and ethical formation. The assertion that humanity is *unfinished* is contingent on the reality of change rather than the illusion of completeness—of hope rather than hopelessness, of consciousness rather than unconsciousness, and of active and effective engagement rather than victimization. In short, according to Freire (2001), unfinishedness is essential for humanity to embrace in order to affect positive, ethical formation—both in ourselves individually and within the collective consciousness.

Thus, Freire’s (2001) assertion that humanity is *unfinished* holds significance beyond the simple idea that the world is in constant change. Instead, Freire (2001) positions his thinking from the perspective that “unfinishedness is essential to our human condition” (p. 53) and agency is necessary in order to affect change. The incompleteness to which Freire refers can be understood from different points of departure. Most simply, the mere awareness of human existence and being alive indicates one is not done or finished. This awareness fuels hope and possibility, and potentiates one’s ability to imagine and work toward improved conditions. Still, the idea of not being finished, done or complete can be daunting. Circumstances may cause individuals or groups to perceive themselves as finished, hopeless or done with no hope for change. For example, long-standing conditions such as poverty, inequity and injustice seem fixed and unchangeable. Although power relationships that give rise to these conditions may seem indelibly
forged, Freire (2001) insists they can be changed because “we are constantly in the process of becoming” and as such “capable of transgressing our ethical grounding” (p. 92). Thus, on a social level, unfinishedness opens the channels to a way of being in the world informed by hope and possibility.

Moreover, one might consider how history illustrates that change is not only a possibility but a probability—and I would even venture to say a certainty. Human action or inaction has influenced and continues to influence the continuum of change. In other words, unfinishedness when paired with human agency allows humanity to take a different path—to not only change one’s current conditions, but also one’s destination. Knowledge of being unfinished exposes not only the possibility, but the actuality of human agency and the ability to impact that continuous flow of change. Thus humanity is not only unfinished in exploring its capacity but unfixed to current conditions or to the current trajectory. As a result, “this process as well as its outcome is a generation of intervenors in the social and political life of this planet” (Aronowitz, 1998, p. 17). Unfinishedness empowers humanity’s ability to imagine a better future; to enact positive ethical formation and to engage in a collective critical consciousness that can create an increasingly humane world.

In light of the complexity of the world today, the need for possibility and hope remains imminent, as Giroux (2005) writes:

We are living in an age that is marked by a crisis of power, patriarchy, authority, identity and ethics . . . it is an age in which the notions of science . . . and reason are associated not only with social progress but also with the organization of Auschwitz and the scientific creativity that made Hiroshima possible (p. 31).
From a perspective of ethical decency, the mere fact that humankind has endured conditions that have made Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and other unconscionable acts possible indicates that humanity has much to learn about its potential, growth and capacity. From the perspective of this argument, the very reason Auschwitz occurred was that Hitler and those who followed and feared him took up an inflexible or finished position that allowed for no other position. The same might be argued of Hiroshima which demonstrates lack of responsibility to innocent lives and the long term consequences of deploying an experimental nuclear weapon. Freire (1991) refers to the lack of doubt or finishedness exhibited by these acts such as these sectarianism, a term I will return to in Chapter 4. In brief, sectarianism refers to a way of being where an individual or sect’s thoughts and beliefs defy reason and doubt regardless of the consequences that befall others as a result.

The above quotation by Giroux illuminates an additional point I wish to raise: That of social progress through science and reason. On one hand, modern constructions and innovations demonstrate humanity’s ability to intervene and shape the future (Freire, 2001). It is a testimony to vast possibilities and humanity’s unfinishedness through progress. However, as Giroux (2005) indicates science and reason are merely humanity’s handmaiden; how they are used rests in in the complexity of power relations and human agency. Therefore, although burgeoning scientific, industrial and rational progress is unprecedented, humanity continues to be plagued with problems wrought by dominant power structures that have little or no regard for humanity and the planet.

In contrast to the finishedness of sectarianism, Freire (2001) brings to light “right thinking.” In order to clarify “right thinking,” I draw from a discussion where Freire
specifically addresses teachers in *The Pedagogy of Freedom* (2001), yet the same principles apply to the larger social arena that he addresses in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1991). Right thinking includes “a capacity for not being overly convinced of one’s own certitudes . . . is irreconcilable with self-conceited arrogance, [and] ethical purity distinct from Puritanism (in other words an ethical purity that generates beauty)” (p. 34). In his call for thinking that is “right” or “correct,” Freire (1991; 2001), on one hand, desires for educators (and I dare say all citizens) to be models of unfinishedness outside the realm of certainty, certainty which he points out is exhibited through arrogance, conceit and sectarianism. Thus he indicates that teachers need not always be certain. Freire (2001) believes that knowledge must be framed as uncertain or changeable thus allowing students to construct their own knowledge under the ethical guidance of the educators.

**Heart.** Heart holds significance to this study because it manifests in Freire’s work, but also the role it plays in connecting critical literacy to feelings, senses and meaning. To explain my perspective, I begin with examples of Freire’s thoughts and ideas that convey heart; discuss the cultural meanings of heart as it relates to this research; and draw on Daniell (2003) to clarify my perspective. Along with his sociopolitical emphasis in critical literacy, Freire (2001) blends ideas of aesthetics, creativity, “the beauty of our way,” ethical purity, the absence of conceit and arrogance, “ingenuous curiosity” and “right thinking” (p. 34-35). Although these qualities may seem unrelated, they are not simply a miscellaneous category or potpourri of ideas. They are intentional choices. In fact, Freire (2001) speaks of them together in a voice of a
compassionate intellectual. Together they represent sentient states that are not altogether intellectual such as courage and passion. Moreover, effective engagement of principles such as equity and justice are often accompanied by empathy and “legitimate anger” as Freire (2001) acknowledges:

The kind of education that does not recognize the right to express appropriate anger against injustice, against disloyalty, against the negation of love, against exploitation, against violence fails to see the educational role implicit in the expression of these feelings (p. 45).

The anger that Freire addresses here is a kind of outrage that arises out of concern and caring. In the same discussion, Freire advocates affording students the “experience of assuming themselves social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative human beings; dreamers of utopias capable of being angry because of a capacity to love” (p.45). This anger and love are often attributed to the metaphorical representation of heart.

In speaking about the “bureaucratizing of the mind” that is a result of authoritarian power, Freire (2001) writes,

It is an estrangement, of the mind’s abdication of its own self, of loss of consciousness of the body, of a “mass production” of the individual, and conformity in the face of situations that are considered to be irreversible because of destiny (p. 102).

In this example, he acknowledges social conditioning that instructs the mind to detach from the self and the body. In addition, he indicates that this conditioning occurs purposefully at the hand of power and shapes individuals to conform to a fixed destiny. Once again, Freire points to finishedness or in this case, irreversible destiny, but here he clarifies its development through power as it instructs the mind to abandon the self and
the body. This point is particularly poignant to my discussion in Chapter 4. I emphasize the point because the act of severing the mind from the body and self succeeds in cutting off one’s feelings, senses and emotions. As a result, the anger and love discussed above is no longer felt and is perceived as impossible in the face of a hopeless future. Thus Freire does not only display heart because of his strength of conviction. He also advocates heart through the “[capacity] of being angry because of a capacity to love” which is necessary to learning and growth in a democratic society. Furthermore, hope and possibility arise from the connection of mind and body—the holistic self—which is necessary to resist complicity and fatalism. In short, heart is essential to Freire’s critical literacy in his words and embedded in his theoretical stance.

Freire is not alone in his advocacy of the emotional engagement that embraces compassion and passion. Some sociocultural theorists have also adopted qualities of heart in their work. Exhibiting a timbre much like Freire, Greene (1995) conveys a tone of compassion in her advocacy of social change and democracy in education. She writes about possibility, justice, freedom decency and hope:

No one can predict precisely the common world of possibility we will grow to inhabit . . . many of us, however, for all the tensions and disagreements around us, would reaffirm the values and principles like justice and equality and freedom and commitment to human rights since without these we cannot even argue for the decency of welcoming . . . unable to provide an objective ground for such hopes and claims, all we can do is to speak with others as eloquently and passionately as we can about justice and caring and love and trust (p. 167).

In a similar vein with Greene and Freire, Noddings (2013b) addresses democracy through the lens of caring. Most notably, Noddings’ (2013a) work focuses on care theory, drawing from philosophy and psychology to explore the multiple functions of caring as it
applies to education grounded in ethics. Both Freire (2000) and Greene (1995) speak to
the aesthetic or beauty of caring that prompts us to affect change.

Influenced in part by Freire, Grumet (1993) also exhibits passion in her critical
perspective that incorporates an aesthetic in the art of teaching and the stripping away of
the oppressive bureaucracy that distorts the mission of education. In addition,
contemporaries and colleagues of Freire, Horton and Kohl, have infused their life’s work
with compassion and the passion to affect change. In a published conversation, Horton
and Freire (1990) discuss the uncanny similarities of their theoretical positions including
the willingness to acknowledge love:

> I think if I had to put a finger on what I consider a good education, a good radical
> education, it wouldn’t be anything about methods or techniques. It would be
> loving people first . . . and that means all people everywhere, not just your family
> or your own countrymen or your own color. And wanting for them what you
> want for yourself (p. 177).

Committed to teaching and student advocacy rather than radicalism per se, Kohl’s (1989)
regards teaching much like an act of unconditional love. He submits,

> The love of nurturing and observing growth in others is essential to sustain a life
> of teaching . . . this implies that no matter how you teach or how you present
> yourself to your students, you have to be on the learner’s side (p. 5).

These few examples illustrate that the compassion and passion—or heart—that Freire
emits in his writing is not unique, which is all the more reason to emphasize its
importance as I proceed in this study.

Metaphorically speaking, the language of the heart takes on multiple meanings
that implicate abstract notions surrounding a center or core, compassion and love, bravery
and perseverence and passion and zest. At the same time, as a vital organ, the heart
clearly plays a significant role in human life. The actual function of the heart and its
cultural and linguistic representation may seem largely unrelated. After all, the metaphor
is commonly regarded as a device designed to the draw a relationship between tangible
form and abstract thought. However, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) provide both
philosophical and neurological evidence to illustrate that metaphor concretizes the
ineffable and inextricable interdependence of the body and mind. Moreover, research
over recent decades substantiates Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) findings. This type of
evidence may cause one to reconsider how closely the metaphors of the heart represent
less acknowledged and actual functions of the vital rhythmic organ.

For example, through case studies of transplant recipients, Pearsall (1998)
explains how the heart retains qualities of a donor’s personality—including habits and
emotional capacity. In addition, he indicates that the heart is not only imprinted with
memory, but creates a link between thinking processes and the body as well as the
capacity to heal. This conclusion also affirms recent findings from neurochemical
research that not only indicate an inextricable correlation between thoughts and emotions
through the body’s neural receptors, but also the significance of the heart as a receptor-
rich site in the human body (Pert, 2002). Although emerging evidence of the body-mind
connection and power of the human heart is no longer uncommon, Western science’s
adherence to the mightiness of the mind endures (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Pearsall,
1998). Conversely, although non-ordinary, unscientific matters of the heart are relegated
to the “hypothetical ‘other realm’” by Western science in disciplines such as religion and
mysticism, expressions of the heart continue to endure (Pert, 1986).
Understanding of the mind and heart creates a springboard for understanding Freire’s concept of unfinishedness from a physiological perspective. For the sake of contrast, consider another essential organ of the human body: The brain. Pearsall (1998) indicates that the brain serves as a monitor for self-preservation. “It is designed to constantly be on some level of alert” and locks into instincts such as territorialism, fear, and vigilance (Pearsall, 1998, p. 25). Thus it comes as no surprise that the cerebral-centric Western scientific model relies on its own preservation and certainty. In elevating the mind as a function of the brain, the Western paradigm actually becomes a closed system insulating it from other perspectives and means of perception. As I noted, Freire (2001) warns of this unwavering certainty that stymies hope, possibility, critical consciousness and human transformation. Conversely, the process of exploring matters of the heart in arenas traditionally relegated to the intellect involves a sense of ingenuous curiosity, unfinishedness and the willingness to transgress ethical ground (Freire, 2001).

In addition, inquiring into new sentient territory that partners the mind with the body requires a kind of knowledge construction that responds to Freire’s (2001) call for critical consciousness.

This vein of thought adds a dimension that suggests an aesthetic of living or an immersion into the beauty and aesthetics to which he speaks. That dimension is an aspect of Freire’s work that seems best described by Daniell (2003) who concludes “why Freire’s concept of literacy is so powerful: It taps into that striving in students, in his teachers and his readers for something beyond themselves” (p. 19). Freire does not name the “something” Daniell perceives in his work, nor does he offer definitions. However, he
clearly sets “ethical purity” in contrast to conceit, arrogance and Puritanism and indicates that beauty is a direct product of it. As I toil over the logical implications of these aspects of Freire’s writing, my interpretation seems to rest less in intellectual processes and theories and more in sensate understanding.

Daniell (2003) indicates that the striving for something beyond oneself elicited by Freire’s work substantiates her claim that Freire’s work holds a spiritual content. I would indicate that the same striving substantiates my claim that Freire’s work conveys heart. Since there is so little language for inner prompts and experience, I believe there is no argument to be made with regard to either of our claims. In fact, I agree with Daniell that Freire’s words evoke a felt sense that triggers a longing for “something” that has no name. However, I believe that striving presupposes a more ethical, just and egalitarian way of being than what exists today. From Freire’s sociocultural perspective, critical consciousness maps that way.

**Critical consciousness.** In the following, I discuss Freire’s concept of critical consciousness beginning with how it fits into Freire’s vision including how it applies to sociocultural conditioning and unfinishedness. I continue by illustrating the depth of critical consciousness with an example of a misconception that minimizes its meaning. Because “being conscious . . . is a radical form of being human,” the ability to apply human consciousness actively to improve conditions becomes essential to critical literacy’s vision (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 127). Thus, as Willis, et al. (2008) explain, *conscientização*—translated to *conscientization* or *critical consciousness*—represents the backbone of Freire’s goal for social change. As such, *critical consciousness* brings a
specific perspective to the marriage of the words *consciousness* and *critical*. On one hand, the term consciousness signifies a topic largely relegated to religious studies or metaphysical discussions. However, Freire extends the notion of human consciousness into sociopolitical idealism, particularly through democratic principles that elevate equity, justice, dignity and decency. Although Freire’s use of the word *critical* readily accepts the common practice of critical thinking, critical thinking is merely a subset or a function of a deeper meaning. In other words, the *critical* in critical consciousness and critical literacy carries a far more expansive meaning than the *critical* in critical thinking. This distinction, I believe, is significant and merits note. As with his use of *consciousness*, he presses beyond the common meaning of criticality to indicate a process of looking beyond conditioned thinking, openly examining deleterious impacts of power structures and challenging the epistemological foundation of the *status quo*, which might even include challenging the education of students in matter of critical thinking. Critical pedagogy asks for a deep examination and awareness of one’s own sociocultural conditioning, particularly those values and beliefs that uphold deleterious power structures in society. Critical pedagogy recognizes that education is never neutral. Even in purporting one’s neutrality, reveals a political position in support of the *status quo*. In addition, it requires deep reflection. Thus beyond taking into account how education is framed, critical pedagogy asks for excavation work of uncovering covert pedagogies perpetuated by dominant power that condition how citizens think and act (Freire, 2001; Giroux, 2005; Macedo, 1994).
This examination may not be an easy one. The cultural conditioning that must be made visible emanates from the unseen and unacknowledged processes, practices and messages that environ and permeate the culture. These communicative phenomena comprise a covert education that forms ethics, attitudes and biases that citizens bring to all facets of their lives including education. This type of pedagogy—what Banks (1995) refers to as a “hidden curriculum” and critical literacy theorists call “public pedagogy” (Freire, 2001; Macedo, 1994)—becomes reinforced in education milieu thus deepening its effect. Through reflexivity and systemic knowledge of the workings of power, critical pedagogy makes the underpinnings of public pedagogy visible.

In addition, because critical literacy frames the human condition as “not yet finished or humane” (Shor, 1999, p. 1), critical consciousness identifies an ongoing process rather than a static condition. Critical consciousness represents a continuum that serves “the creation of new knowledge” through the intentional application of human cognizance and agency. This process, in its most radical sense, suggests the creating and re-creating new epistemologies that best serve the well-being of humanity through a democratic ethos. Therefore, critical consciousness requires continued practice of deep inspection (and introspection) of one’s sociopolitical condition and active participation in forming an equitable and humane world. Interestingly, critical also expresses a dual meaning in this context. Not only does critical consciousness index an ongoing analysis of sociopolitical processes, it deems those matters to be critical and of the utmost significance and exigency.
Just as collective human awareness manifests through “a matrix of understandings,” interpretations of the concept of critical consciousness embrace a broad spectrum of perspectives and foci (Willis, et. al., 2008, p. 4). These differences in interpretation, I believe, illustrate levels of depth and breadth with which Freire can be understood. For instance, Willis, et. al. (2008) indicate that “what makes a person critically conscious is challenging the underlying assumptions that work in the internal and external worlds to privilege some while disprivileging others” (p. 2). McLaren and Lankshear (1994), on the other hand, frame critical consciousness by emphasizing it as a process, grounded in the requisites of dialogue, action-reflection, liberation, and human becoming, as does hooks (1994), who asserts that critical awareness is not “an end itself, but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis” or “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (hooks, 1994, p. 47, 14). Thus although the Willis, et. al. perspective addresses an important aspect of critical consciousness, McLaren and Lankshear (1994) and hooks (1994) more deeply embrace exigent aspects of unfinishedness, human agency and social transformation.

Discrepancies in point of view also appear with regards to Freire’s paradigm of the three phases to critical consciousness. These states, from the least to most critical consciousness, include 1) semi-intransitivity, 2) naïve transitivity, and 3) critical transitivity (Freire, 2005). The precursor to emerging critical consciousness, naïve transivity, is interpreted by Willis, et. al. (2008) as “a simple, trusting attitude toward reality” (p. 29). This understanding appears over-simplified when compared to McLaren (1994) who writes the following with regards to naïve transitivity: “Just as present reality
is the (undifferentiated) shaped and determined extension of the past, so the future will be the (undifferentiated) shaped and determined extension” (p. 181). In other words, the naïve thinker perceives himself and the world around him as finished, “reduced to passive adjustment,” and possesses “. . . no conception of reality as dynamic or as something to be shaped and created” (McLaren & Lankshear, 1994, p. 180). In a similar comparison, “critical transitivity,” according to Willis, et. al. (2008) names “the individual and critical awareness of problems and the ability to engage in dialogue in search of solutions” (p.29). However, although the awareness of problems and dialogic engagement become significant to critical consciousness, these aspects inhabit only part of the process of social transformation. Thus I believe Willis, et. al. (2008) takes up a position largely devoid of the transformative spirit to which Freire speaks.

My point serves to illuminate the potentially unlimited scope of critical consciousness and how reductionist thinking inhibits hope, possibility and collective transformation. To my knowledge, no scholar has ever been able to reliably predict with any certainty whatsoever the limit of human consciousness. Freire is no exception. He does, however, bring to light realizable possibility and hope based on human unfinishedness and the wherewithal to inspect our lives and cultures through conscientization.

Since the introduction of Freire into the North American consciousness, researchers have taken up critical literacy as a theoretical framework and critical pedagogy as an effective practice. Action research, for example, often employs critical pedagogy by actively engaging participants in consciousness-raising--or
conscientização—and thus tests Freire’s understanding of praxis—the marriage of theory and practice. However, the study herein takes a different approach by inquiring into individuals as they are rather than the effects of practices in critical pedagogy. As noted, in this research I study the narratives of women who have desires for—or made contributions to—the world and the people in it. In addition, I frame this inquiry through specific Freirean concepts expressed in the terms unfinishedness, heart, and critical consciousness. In order to situate the work herein within the existing body of research, I examine prior research that shares relevant perspectives or foci including but not limited to the study of women, forms of narrative content, and principles of or related to critical literacy.

**Relevant Research**

Among prior studies, three serve as a springboard for my current work. These studies that I discuss below are conducted by women. Daniell’s (2003) and Heller (1997) conduct their studies with only women, employ a qualitative approach to their participants’ narratives and speak to critical literacy. The third and chronologically the earliest among them is anthropologist Myeroff’s (1978) ethnography of the elderly Jewish community in Venice Beach, California that includes intimate glimpses into women’s lives, significant narrative content, and an analysis with a sociopolitical bent. Myeroff’s work was a model for the second study in this discussion for Heller’s (1997) inquiry into women’s writing group in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. The last is Daniell’s (2003) inquiry into the literacy practices of a group of women belonging to the anonymous fellowship of Al-anon.
I begin with Myeroff (1978) whose study, *Number Our Days*, touches on unstated but identifiable threads of critical literacy through an emphasis on agency, visibility, voice, advocacy and performance. Heller (1997) indicates that Myeroff conducted fieldwork for *Number Our Days* during the time Freire began to be recognized in the United States. However, her work predates the dialogue associated with critical literacy. Still, similar theoretical threads arise in her work. For example, in one instance, she writes:

[The Center community] provided a model of an alternative lifestyle, built on values in many ways antithetical to those commonly esteemed by contemporary Americans. . . Lacking hope for change, improvement without a future, they had devised a counterworld, inventing their own version of what made up “the good life.” (Myeroff, 1978, p. 20).

This 1978 interpretation contains similarities to critical theorist Shor’s (1999) perspective on literacy “as social action through language use that develops us as agents inside a larger culture” and critical literacy as a path to alternative means to self and social growth (p. 1).

A notable feature of Myeroff’s (1978) *Number Our Days* is her ability to portray the inextricability of the individual and community, and of the personal and the political. Speaking of the individuals of the Center community, she indicates that once established in the United States, they took up the political ideology of “Americanism, modernity, power and democracy” (Myeroff, 1978, p. 141). As a result, their narratives involve tradition, ritual, liberal and sometimes radical communist politics, and portray passionate political arguments regarding Israel and authentic Jewry. Still, her ethnography maintains a rich human element with deeply reflective individual accounts by both
participants and researcher. Although the participant demographics and focus of Myeroff’s work differs from my research, it is her theoretical approach that merits mention (as does her methodology which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3).

In *Until We Are Strong Together: Women Writers in the Tenderloin*, Carolyn Heller (1997) draws from and is inspired by Myeroff (1978), and acts as both participant and observer as she researches the dynamics among women as individuals, writers and a community grounded in literacy practice. She takes up critical literacy to explore agency, visibility and solidarity among women in a multicultural writing workshop in the ethnically diverse and economically distressed Tenderloin area of San Francisco. Heller (1997) frames her research through critical literacy with a focus on liberation education and literacy as it is used in communities and groups. Like Myeroff, she emphasizes the exigent need for agency among marginalized individuals and communities. The two researchers envision agency in similar ways within their respective work. While Heller (1997) experiences the Tenderloin Women’s Writing Group as gaining agency through a process of “self-creation and visibility,” Myeroff (1978) speaks to the significance of “definitional ceremonies,” as social acts become events that engender voice and visibility and define one’s position within the community (pp. 185-186, 220), and that certify the fact of being (Turner, 1978, p. xi).

Both studies embrace aspects of critical literacy. Heller (1997) states critical literacy as a motivating frame of reference for her research. However, due to the socioeconomic context of the participants of the Tenderloin writing group, the local and personal relevance of her theoretical framework take precedence over discussions of
political and social transformation which can not only seem daunting, but irrelevant in light of an individual’s struggle to survive. Comparatively, Myeroff (1978) takes up the political in terms of community as well as individuality; however, as a collective of poor, Jewish immigrants—and similar to the Tenderloin writers--their social and political agency was limited. In both studies, the researchers’ exploration of visibility and agency was less a choice than a ceiling or endpoint of the research which would indeed seem common among citizens who lives are lived far from the locus of dominant power.

However, I wonder, if the ceiling or endpoint of possibility was actual, perceived or representative of something else altogether? Herein is a nexus in critical literacy I wish to understand. It is a meeting place, of sorts, between hope and hopeless, the possible and the impossible, activism and resignation and being finished and unfinished. It involves the impetus that transforms inaction into action.

Critical literacy does not implicate human agency as an ultimate goal, but rather addresses a process wherein one comprehends the inequitable distribution of power; sees the pedagogical means through which inequities are perpetuated; realizes one’s own democratically vested agency; and becomes an active agent of change within society through resistance and healthy dissent (Freire, 2001; Giroux, 2005). Viewing critical literacy through a narrow aperture of the individual can obscure the larger goal of collective critical consciousness and transformation (Freire, 2001; Giroux, 2005; Giroux, 2006; Shor, 1999). Heller’s (1997) work illustrates the significance of personal agency and identifies the tension between her findings and the ultimate goal of critical literacy:

. . . however eloquently Freire’s interpreters evoke the sense of democratic possibility, the quality of our abstract conversations about critical literacy and
liberation education continue to outpace the quality of our conversations about what our enactments might look like, particularly in settings far from locations of power (p.16).

Thus, as Heller suggests, the theoretical component of critical literacy not only appears to outweigh its practicability, but a lengthy chasm exists between the marginalized citizen and the loci of power. In addition, as Heller’s statement suggests, it appears to be easier to talk about change than to create it.

Reimagining and resituating the problem, not in terms of binary oppositions of theory versus practice or the citizen versus power, but dualities belonging to a dynamic continuum draws the issue closer to critical literacy’s paradigm. From the perspective of critical literacy, learning begins with awareness and leads to understanding, then to action. It also begins with the individual, potentially reaching to the community and in turn to the larger collective. (Freire, 2001; Shor, 1999). Much like the momentum of the outward ripple effect of a pebble dropped into water, the personal incrementally extends to the community, nation and globe.

Logically, it would appear, in part, that because we live our lives privately and locally, that community, national and global transformations seem less imaginable, and therefore less practicable. But it is important to note that, even though some popular critical literacy theorists such as Giroux (2005); Kellner (n.d.) and McLaren (1988) often focus on larger social change, within ecological framing, the individual’s critical consciousness still remains essential to the whole (Freire, 2001). Thus although the idea that individual acts can change the collective may seem incomprehensible, the focus on agentive acts of critical literacy by the individual can arguably potentiate change on a
larger scale. In more relevant words, “[t]he transformation of silence into language is, as Audre Lorde argues, a victory over oppressive forces that silence members of marginal groups” (in Daniell, 2003, p. 139-140).

Beth Daniell’s (2003) *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery*, is an inquiry into the “private and personal use of literacy” among women within a community of practice. Daniell specifically examines the spiritual aspects of critical literacy and takes up themes of agency, mutuality, anonymity and power among women in an Al-anon twelve-step group, which is anonymous and centers on literacy. In her study Daniell (2003) examines small acts through little narratives, a term she gleans from Lyotard who uses it to indicate the postmodern deconstruction of the grand narrative that validates modern knowledge where the act of deconstruction, in turn, yields many little narratives (Daniell, 1999). What Daniell (2003) calls “little narratives of literacy,” offer valuable insight to literacy behaviors (p. 4)? However, these small narratives as such “seldom make statements that claim to be valid for literate persons in general or literate cultures in general” (p. 4). However, be they reminiscences, compositions, or little narratives—oral, written, or representational—they carry import as a creative act of individual agency within a community setting.

Daniell’s (2003) perspective on critical literacy takes on a distinct quality that merits mention. In a notable divergence from politically oriented theorists such as Giroux (2005), McLaren (1988), and Shor (1999), Daniell (1999) argues that “Freire's pedagogy results as much from his Catholicism as from his Marxism” (p. 402). She cites Freire’s frequent reference to love and how his work elicits the striving of “something
beyond” that I recently pointed out (p. 402). In addition, she adds, that matters akin to spirituality in general do not figure into the Northern academic metanarratives, this phenomena goes largely unnoticed (Daniell, 1999).

Her interpretation of critical literacy frames her research with women from the Mountain City Appalachian community, specifically with the little narratives and discrete literacy practices surrounding non-denominational spiritual practices of wives of alcoholics in the anonymous, spiritually-oriented program of Al-anon. The requisite anonymity in Al-anon is designed to protect the lives of recovering alcoholics and their families from undue and rash judgments. Thus with Daniell (2003), and unlike Myeroff (1978) and Heller (1997), visibility becomes a moot point due to their commitment to anonymity. Instead, Daniell turns to power; however, it is not the dominant power to which Giroux (2006) and Macedo (1994) speak, but the power of community support through discourse (hooks, 1994; Shor, 1999) and the power of the human spirit (Greene, 1995; hooks, 1994), both of which are expressly addressed among the women’s community in Daniell’s study.

This setting provides an inroad for Daniell (2003) to examine the essential component of power as it relates to critical literacy on the individual or micro level. The grand narrative of the dominant power structure in the United States does not figure into her discussion, but her inquiry into the little narratives of power and spirituality as understood by her participants do. Her stance aligns with Myeroff’s (1978) understanding of the deeply engrained, common religious and spiritual practices among the elderly Jews in the Center community in her work. The intersection therein offers
possibilities to envision anew the position of critical literacy by adding a spiritual component that does not sport a dominant political agenda, so often masked as religion in our society (Giroux, 2005), but rather the acceptance of the needs of humanity as a whole. Daniell’s extension of critical literacy leads me to the final segment of this chapter which provides an overview of complimentary theories that enhance critical literacy’s relevance.

**Complementary Theories**

As I discussed in the latter examples, critical literacy has been applied and reworked in various fashions—which suggest that perhaps it too is unfinished. Because critical literacy attends to advancing human agency, expression and experience, its human focus remains as relevant if not more so. As I proceed with the theoretical overview of my work, I begin with a discussion of praxis through the lens of Freirean critical literacy. Then I focus on additional theoretical frames I draw on in my findings.

**Praxis.** The following dialogue comes from *We Make the Road for Walking* (Horton & Freire, 1990):

Paulo: . . . I can go beyond the common-sense understanding of how structures of society works—not to stay at this level, but starting from this, to go beyond. Theory does that.

Myles: Theory does that only if it is authentic.

Paulo: Yes, yes, but theory is always becoming . . .

In this conversation with Myles Horton, Freire indicates that theory is unfinished, and goes on to explain because “knowledge is always becoming.” His evidence lies in the historicity of knowledge, that “today’s knowledge about something is not necessarily the
same tomorrow” (p. 101). This basic but essential knowledge informs critical literacy’s concept of praxis which hooks (1994) explains as “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (p. 47). Explained through the framework of critical literacy, praxis gives momentum to critical consciousness which is not “an end itself, but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis” (p. 14).

Praxis indicates a continuous experiential process of practice and reflection which produces a theoretical position that must be returned to the cycle of practice and reflection for continued evaluation and theoretical reframing (Freire, 2001). Praxis, I believe, infuses beauty into critical literacy and creates its malleability. This process calls to mind a metaphor often attributed to art as a hammer rather than a mirror. Praxis indicates that theory like art is a tool that shapes and creates as it is a mirror that reflects. As I proceed with this discussion, I maintain that the theoretical extensions I provide herein arise from my reflections on my participants’ experiences and practices that offer possibilities to reshape critical literacy through reflection and reevaluation, rather than merely reflect it.

As such, the origins of the following theories I have chosen merit mention, particularly as they are contrasted to the theories commonly attributed to the field of education. Each of the theories below is for the most part interdisciplinary, connected by threads of psychology, religious studies and science. Among them, Bolen (2005) reflects her Jungian influence, grounded in the sciences of the mind, psychology and psychiatry. However, her years of work with women and women’s circles reflect a turn toward the sociocultural. Smith’s (1991) early writings emerge from his scholarship in world
religions. However, Smith’s (2009) more recent work might fall into the category of transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal psychology is a field best exemplified by Wilber who borrows language and concepts from a variety of disciplines such as Jungian theory, Eastern psychology, Western psychotherapy, world religions, physics and anthropology to shape what he calls integral theory. In addition, Teilhard, Berry and King as I discuss expound on evolutionary theory by infusing a spiritual perspective into science.

Bringing these theoretical perspectives into a discussion within the confines of the field of education begs the question, “Why and to what end?” As I have mentioned, I found these theories particularly relevant to my participants’ narratives. Bolen’s (2005) involvement with women’s circles informed the phenomena I experienced in the women’s focus groups of this study. In the case of Teilhard, Berry and King, two of my participants specifically requested I read about them in order to better understand their complex position regarding evolution and human spirit. In another instance, Smith and Eliade informed a parallel between extraordinary experiences and insights, and the phenomena popularly referred to as the sacred.

But why do I cross into interdisciplinary territory when education has rich and ample theories to draw from? First, inasmuch as the sociocultural was adopted as a new and beneficial paradigm in education, I believe the turn discarded some beneficial contributions of psychology and personal ethical formation, particularly in areas of accountability and values, not simply among students, but among educators and administrators. Second, because education is a part of all disciplines, I believed there
was no substantial reason to neglect the values of interdisciplinarity when informing my data. Furthermore, when addressing the unimaginable in the future of education, I felt a turn toward theorists outside of education—particularly in terms of models indicating the capacity of human potential—would help inform new possibilities. Thus, when the opportunity arose to reach outside convention to include Bolan, Smith, Teilhard and others, I felt that bringing them into my conversation would not only be relevant to my data, but could potentially provide a fresh contribution to the field.

Prompted by my narrative data, these complimentary theories extend critical literacy and highlight paradigms related to women and consciousness studies that lend meaning and relevance to this research. As noted, among the theorists I consult, Bolan (1999, 2005), both a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst, has facilitated and participated in women’s groups for thirty years. For this reason alone, her work is significant to this study. Yet, among her numerous books and articles I found positions that theoretically align with my narrative data and substantiate other theories I include below. Influenced by Jung, her work reflects explorations into the human interior condition of consciousness. Further influenced by her extensive work with women, Bolan (2005) has pressed the boundaries of traditional empirical knowledge of the mind into the mystical phenomenological territory. That in itself, I believe, is revolutionary. In addition, as I noted above, Bolan has extended her reach from psychological to sociocultural. Yet, in the spirit of exploration, I include her theory based in experience and practice.

Women’s consciousness. In addition to consciousness studies or transpersonal theory, Bolan (2005) draws from history, politics, evolutionary theory, phenomenology
and ecology to formulate her theory become vision of reviving women’s potential knowledge and capabilities as antidotes to the dominant, destructive and divisive hand of patriarchy. Her vision, summarized by the title of her book, *Urgent Message from Mother: Gather the Women, Save the World*, calls women to revive “the dormant power of women together [that] is an untapped resource needed by humanity and the planet” (p. 28). The dormant power, she identifies as a cooperative, solution-seeking quality that is egalitarian and compassionate. It is a peaceful, peacemaking power that Bolen predicts will shape the women’s peace movement, “third wave” of women’s progress evidenced by the movements for women’s suffrage and equal rights in the past.

Bolen’s theory dovetails into the earlier evolutionary theories of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry whose work arises from evolution and theology, as well as the phenomenological theories of Mircea Eliade and Huston Smith, the latter of whom details a reliable model for identifying the sacred. Admittedly, because I was a stranger to Teilhard, I found his writing to be metaphorically dense and difficult to comprehend. Thus I relied primarily on Ursula King (2004, 2014), but also Thomas King (2005) and Donald Gray (1975) to clarify Teilhard’s work. Albeit intensely complex, Teilhard’s theory illustrates the fundamental premise and terms from the narratives of my two participants who have studied his theory at length.

**The evolutionary impulse.** Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a French paleontologist and Jesuit priest who, through his scientific writings developed a theory of human consciousness based on evolutionary theory (King, 2005). Based on studies into geology and his religious background, Teilhard theorized that “life itself appeared and
developed only as a function of the universe” (p. 88). In other words, human life and form emerged from universal phenomena. The challenge he sets for the individual is to fully comprehend the illusion of individualism and immerse oneself in the unity of the cosmos “intellectually and emotionally” (p. 88). In so doing, he further challenges the individual to envision the self in the universe which in turn enables one to understand that “we are still subject to the network of forces that gave us birth; they will shape us further as they carry us into the future” (p. 88). As they do, we will be propelled forward by a “zest for life” (King, 2014).

In addition to clarifying my participants’ narratives, Teilhard’s theory extends and parallels critical literacy through concepts of life being linked to continuous change; awareness of possibilities; and the engagement in transformation. Yet whereas Teilhard focuses on the universal, Freire focuses on the social. I will discuss this parallel in more detail in Chapter 4. Another scientist and Catholic priest, Thomas Berry (1914-2009), who I discuss in Chapter 4 studied Teilhard, but departed from Teilhard’s focus by examining the exigent condition of the earth. Berry’s fundamental premise examines the eras of the earth’s development and humanizes Teilhard’s perspective. According to Berry (2010), the 65 million year Cenozoic period is drawing an end and we are now emerging into the Ecozoic period, when “human conduct will be guided by the ideal of an integral earth community” (p. 2). He submits that the tradition of religion will give rise to the “cosmologically oriented religion” (p. 2).

**Spectrum of consciousness.** As a complementary theoretical model, I briefly discuss Ken Wilber (1979, 2000), a philosopher and self-taught physicist who has joined
the ranks of theorists studying human consciousness. Wilber (2000) developed an integral theory that takes up similar concepts as Teilhard and Berry, but provides an exemplar of the stages of consciousness that arise along the path to “unitive consciousness” that Teilhard (King, 2005) names the Omega point and Buddhists nirvana. Integral theory assists the understanding of the evolution of consciousness through the human frame of reference but illustrates progressive stages of human consciousness from the persona to the environment and to the unity with the collective consciousness. In addition, he provides examples of therapeutic psychology and religious and spiritual practices that enable one’s progress through the “spectrum of consciousness” (Wilber, 1979).

**Identifying the sacred.** The last example in this overview comes primarily from Huston Smith (2000) and the field of religious and consciousness studies. Among the most seminal and widely read of Smith’s books is *The World’s Religions*, first published in 1958. For this discussion I direct my focus on Smith’s definition of the sacred. Smith (2000) indicates that although the sacred is often categorized as religious experience, that is not the case at all. Although sacred experiences are profound and deemed uncommon, they are not rare. The sacred, according to Smith carries three “marks” or identifying aspects: The sacred is incomprehensible, uncontrollable and when it occurs, one knows it is important. The three marks provide insight into the discussion of my data in Chapter 4 because many of the stories and examples I present illustrate the three marks. In addition to the identifying characteristics of the sacred experiences, Smith notes that the sacred manifests in three ways: Through life’s evolving frontiers, relationships and the
unconscious. The three manifestations of the sacred also appear in my data and I rely on them at relevant points in my discussion.

I now proceed to Chapter 3, which provides an overview of my methodology and methods I employed in this inquiry.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I turn to the background and particulars of my research. This chapter contains details of my research through three main sections: Methodology, participants and methods. I first explain the relevant theoretical perspectives that support narrative inquiry as a suitable methodology for this study. I follow by describing general demographics of my participants, a description of each focus group and a brief explanation of the individuals I discuss in my analysis. Next, I continue with an overview of my methods in five parts that include methods background followed by the general procedure I followed in collecting and analyzing my data. I end the chapter with a discussion of my positionality and of the drawbacks of my methodology and methods.

Narrative Inquiry

Here I provide the background of narrative inquiry and its theoretical relevance to this research.

Relevance. An inextricable connection between words and worlds exists in both narrative inquiry and critical literacy. Narrative inquiry regards the narrative as data and because narratives are a function of human experience, experience is fundamental to the inquiry process. Consequently, the data in narrative inquiry are not static moments or measurements, but a segment of the changing flow of experience (Clandinin, 2007, p. 39). Narrative inquiry embraces change and as a result coincides theoretically with
critical literacy, which is grounded in change as through the concepts of unfinishedness and critical consciousness. Freire (2001) asserts that individuals must not only read the word but also the world, a significant task that extends the traditional concept of reading into the realm of experience. Thus, in what seems to be a small leap of logic, the connection between words and worlds arises.

Narrative inquiry and critical literacy also share common ground through nonhierarchical knowledge, knowledge construction and the “disruption of dominant discourse” (Estrella & Fornash, 2007). The fundamental premise of narrative inquiry embraces knowledge as experiential and nonhierarchical, enables collaboration between the researcher and participant and allows for the dismantling of common or traditional knowledge. In terms of the experiential quality of narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2007) emphasizes that the experience conveyed in the narrative allows for the personal construction of knowledge. This perspective parallels Freire’s (2001) significant premise that “knowledge creation” arises through experience. Clandinin (2007) also emphasizes the quality of transaction in narrative inquiry which represents a turn away from the idea of a paradigmic, transcendent or universal truth. The movement away from the transcendent is a shift that Clandinin (2007) regards as “unprecedented and revolutionary” (p. 39). One reason is that transaction eliminates the hierarchy of knowledge that is fixed or unchangeable. Instead it relies on the growth of knowledge which Freire (2001) also advocates, particularly through his critique of the banking system of education where knowledge is deposited rather than experienced, constructed and created.
In addition to valuing experience and the creation of knowledge, narrative inquiry potentiates collaboration, as Leavy (2009) indicates,

... *narrative inquiry* attempts to collaboratively access participants’ life experiences and engage in a process of storying and restorying in order to reveal multidimensional meanings and present a compelling and authentic rendering of the data. (p. 27-28)

Conceivably, the more the teller of the narrative engages in the inquiry process with the researcher, the more authentic the data. Potentially, this removes the researcher from an authoritarian position and allows for a symmetrical, democratic process to emerge. Leavy (2009) also notes that the “narratives are constructed out of the data through a “reflexive, participatory and aesthetic process” (p. 28). Thus taking up narrative inquiry may not make a researcher’s work easier than other forms of research; however, it does create a research setting that allows for personal, symmetrical, democratic and humanistic engagement.

Thus through valuing experiential, transitive knowledge and collaborative narrative inquiry provides a “disruption to the dominant discourses within theory and research” (Estrella & Fornash, 2007), a departure from common practices and essential to the formation of critical consciousness. As such, narrative inquiry lends itself to a quality available through the narrative Bruner (1991) calls “canonicity and breach” (p. 11), which indicates that the narrative content can uphold and reinforce cultural rules or canons through a variety of forms such as, “stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing” (p. 4). At the same time, much like the goal of critical literacy, narratives can also challenge those same canons or collective beliefs.
One last point in support of narrative inquiry as a methodology for this study is the idea of connectivity put forth by Gregory Bateson (1979). Although not directly relevant to critical literacy, connectivity resonates with my desire to better understand the human as a whole and humanity as a whole. Bateson (1979) departs from common epistemologies through his critique of science’s tendency to dissect in order to analyze. Instead, Bateson (1979) advocates a holistic epistemology through patterns of connections, specifically emphasizing that when those patterns are disconnected or interrupted, “you necessarily destroy all quality” (p. 13). He identifies “the pattern that connects,” (p. 13) as intrinsic to all living things. Most relevant, the pattern that connects manifests in stories or as Bateson (1979) calls them, “knots of relevance” (p. 13). The knot metaphor suggests that stories provide solid connections and continuity among us. Thus from Bateson’s (1979) point of view, the story is a phenomenon that at once expresses relevance and is woven into the pattern that connects all creatures.

Stories, he notes, indelibly mark all living things. The story “does not isolate human beings as something separate” because “if the world be connected . . . then thinking in terms of stories must be shared by all mind or minds, whether ours or those of redwood forests and sea anemones” (Bateson, 1979, p. 13). The expansiveness of Bateson’s perspective toward narratives facilitates an understanding of interconnectedness and relationships of all life—a quality perhaps commonly unseen due to the limited purview of currently held epistemological perspectives. Significantly, the narrative potentiates connections in what often seems like an unconnected world of separateness and individualism. Bateson’s (1979) perspective is relevant here because it
ruptures the epistemological boundaries mankind has created which separates himself and all living things. In addition, Bateson (1979) emphasizes connections rather than divisions, a concept that appears in Chapter 4.

**The Settings and the People**

Gathering participants for this study was a process built on collaboration and synchronicity. Here, I describe that process, the general demographics of my participants and the focus groups and individuals presented in my analysis. The women I invited to participate in this study are friends who often gathered together for support, projects, laughter and impromptu discussions. While not all of those invited were able to attend the focus groups, some who did invited or suggested others to join the conversation. Each demonstrated qualities of unfinishedness, heart and critical consciousness that I sought for the participants of this study. Most of my participants I knew originally as groups once gathered on a regular basis to share common interests or for a common purpose. However, even though each group was drawn together by an interest, commitment or family connection, I found that when we assembled as groups, we created a dynamic of support and trust that seemed to imprint us all with a sense of collective community.

**Creating focus groups.** I used focus group interviews for the bulk of my data. As I had suspected, the focus groups added a depth of interaction to my interviews; however, sometimes problems arose, especially with scheduling focus groups at a mutually agreeable time and place. After scheduling the interview, some participants were unable to attend. Conversely, in one case, two additional participants joined the focus group at
the invitation of the woman hosting the group. I conducted a total of seven focus group interviews that included between two and five participants for a total of 22 participants. I discussed four focus groups in my data analysis for a total of 12 participants.

In addition to a few difficulties with scheduling and attendance, I was unable to set consistent criteria for the size and duration of each group. Because I could not ensure attendance, the sizes of the groups varied from as few as two people to as many as five. Time was constrained by my participants’ busy lives and various commitments, thus the group conversations lasted between 1-2.5 hours. From my past experience with facilitating group process and teaching, I understood that, like the individual, each group can take on its own personality. For that reason, I allowed each group take its course, following the group process rather than seeking a product--a position I will discuss further in a later section of this chapter.

**Individual interviews.** I conducted individual interviews for three purposes. The first was by request of a particular participant. The second was for the purpose of triangulation of data which I will reiterate later in this chapter. For this purpose, I scheduled a one hour individual interview with one focus group member following each group. The third purpose for conducting a personal interview was to revisit topics that I felt were unclear to me at the time of the focus group. In some cases, the individual interview served more than one of the three purposes. I conducted two follow-up interviews by participant request, four triangulation interviews and three brief clarification interviews.
Friends of heart. I travelled to various regions of the U.S. to conduct my inquiry with residents of Georgia, New Mexico, Ohio and California. My participants were all white women and their ages range from 24 to 91. Most were heterosexual while others identified themselves as lesbians and bisexual. All identify themselves as political liberals. In addition, their religions include liberal Catholicism, Judaism, Christian, agnostic and atheist. Some are married or in committed relationships, while others are not. Some are mothers and grandmothers while others consciously chose not to have children. Most are artists, creative craftswomen and have a fondness for literature. Although they are all intelligent, competent women, none have high-powered careers or have gained notoriety in a particular field. My participants have moderate to low incomes and are not driven by success or self-congratulation. The following segment describes the focus groups and the individual participants within each group. My discussion is organized by the state in which the interview took place and in the chronological order of each interview. I begin with New Mexico.

New Mexico. A few months before I began my data collection for this study, Dinah called me from New Mexico to ask if I would participate via long distance in a creative marketing collective of artist activists who wished to raise citizen awareness to the nuclear production and waste industries. I subsequently participated in meetings via Skype™, where I met Sage for the first time. When I arrived in Santa Fe for the focus group, Dinah and Sage were the only two who could meet at a mutually agreeable time. Another friend had an illness in the family in California and others I had known had
moved or we lost touch. Dinah invited one woman I had not met. However, she could not attend the planned meeting, so we met at a later date.

As members of this focus group, Dinah and Sage each bring over 30 years’ experience dealing with the nuclear weapons and waste industry. They are professional artists, activists and long-time residents of Santa Fe, NM. Because I had worked with Dinah in resisting the hazardous waste super dump permit proposed near my home, activism became an important part of our focus group conversation. Both Dinah and Sage are well-studied in the complex political, social and environmental issues that have resulted from nuclear experimentation and testing 34 miles from their homes at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). Through their activism with these issues, they have become acutely aware of the widespread threats to human health and the environment caused by nuclear and hazardous waste. Both Dinah and Sage are passionate about their activism and their longstanding commitment to their own social and environmental consciousness—which also speaks to their unfinishedness, heart and critical consciousness.

_**Dinah.**_ At the time of the focus group interview, I had known Dinah as both a friend and fellow activist for roughly fifteen years. I moved away from New Mexico in 2006; however, Dinah and I maintained our friendship and have collaborated intermittently on projects over those years. Dinah’s ability to quote statistics, regulations and scientific processes of the nuclear industry baffled me. I found her knowledge of environmental law remarkable and a testimony to her intelligence. She was, as my father would say, “sharp as a tack.” I remember wondering out loud that with the years of time
and effort she invested as anti-nuclear activist she could already have a law degree—maybe a few. She laughed, indicating she did not want the degree. As I recall we changed the subject, but I was left with the feeling that at the time she was perfectly willing to maintain her course as a self-employed graphic designer and part time activist. However, as I discuss in Chapter 4, she is currently rethinking the direction of her activism.

Little about her has changed physically and in appearance since I met her fifteen years ago. However, as I will illustrate in Chapter 4, she underwent an internal change or epiphany that caused her to rethink her activism of 30 years. In her focus group conversation with Sage, she spoke articulately and honestly. Her voice was clear and her words direct, but kind. Because she had spent years examining social conditioning and status quo, she demonstrated an innate critical consciousness and a humble confidence about the matters within her sphere of knowledge. Dinah argued her position with professional aplomb. While she exhibited passion about her focus, she was flexible enough to consider and inquire into the opinions and perspectives of others.

Sage. As I mentioned above, I had only met Sage via Skype™ before our focus group. However, during our focus group conversation, I soon came to know her better. Like Dinah, Sage is also a self-employed artist and volunteer activist who dedicated years to fighting the influx of nuclear production and waste into New Mexico. Dinah and Sage were in agreement on most of the issues they discussed. However, each had a slightly different approach. Dinah was investigative and detail oriented, whereas Sage focused on generalities and chronology of events. For example, whereas Dinah had studied and
committed to memory the regulatory and scientific details of a particular site, Sage tended to see the big picture of the issues at hand. In the interview Sage spoke frankly and passionately about reinventing her goals, about the patriarchy and widespread political corruption all of which illustrates her unfinishedness, heart and the momentum of critical consciousness.

The Sisters. While I was in New Mexico, Dinah introduced me to June and Mary, two nuns who belong to an intentional community of Catholic Sisters. Embedded in a Latino culture that is largely Catholic, their presence is widely accepted in their New Mexico community. However, their progressive perspective of community and the evolving future of humanity may be contested among conservative Catholics. June and Mary had studied the writings of several progressive scholars and scientists who contributed to their blended worldview of activism, the evolving human consciousness and the new ecological community. Among them is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a paleontologist and Jesuit priest whose theory of evolution was once prohibited by the Church. The Sisters continue to explore the science of evolution and emerging frontiers that connect science with the sacred, while on the ground they are activists committed to social and environmental justice and teach literacy skills on the border of New Mexico and Mexico.

June. Discussing her personal history, June indicated that she grew up in a rural farming area which contributed to her closeness to the earth. Her sister, born with Down syndrome helped her become a more compassionate person. In turn, June gravitated toward the work of helping those in need. This work, for June, is heartfelt--devoid of
pity--but rather acts of joy and compassion. As a young college student, June began to question her role as a woman in society. She spoke of there being more for her than tradition dictated. During that time, a priest introduced her to the work of Bede Griffith, a Catholic priest who became deeply involved in Eastern religious traditions and espoused the significance of the divine feminine. She was ultimately led to become female member of the Catholic clergy, but maintains her progressive perspective.

Mary. Although she did not discuss her early personal history, Mary explained that she was from the old tradition of nuns, who wore the identifying black habit. She discussed the harshness of the old rule and expressed remorse for the Church’s position decades ago, as well as for the devastation wrought by pedophiles and other sexual misconduct that occurred in the Catholic Church over the years. Mary spoke of her long history as a feminist and activist during her career as a female clergy. Today, like June, her activist efforts focus on social and environmental justice and on repurposing religion, which she believes no longer serves humanity, into communities that share the vision of assisting evolution’s purpose, reversing humanity’s deleterious effect of the earth and collectively “bringing forth our best selves.”

As women of the cloth, June and Mary bring heart to their work. Their dedication to studying the science of life and reaching beyond traditional religious doctrines to find new ways to address problems besetting humanity today speaks to their engagement with unfinishedness and the core purpose of critical consciousness. As I clarify in Chapter 4, as participants in this study, June and Mary have informed concepts of community and transformation that arose as significant themes that undergird my data.
Georgia: The Compound. Shortly after moving to Comer, GA in 2006, I joined a women’s group that met every other Monday evening. Many of the women from Comer and the surrounding areas lived in rural areas and had minimal social lives, so the women’s group served as a social venue for women to meet and talk. We met at the herb store in town which set the stage for discussions and activities that we as a group agreed upon amenably with little or no deliberation. The group was nothing like I had ever experienced before. Sometimes we wrote poetry, painted and meditated. And other times we would be a sounding board for one another’s problems and successes. We covered topics from creativity to divorce, from business logos to Tibetan singing bowls. And we did not always agree. Sometimes disagreements arose around topics such as a book or an opinion. At times, discussions would turn into a one-woman’s diatribe or cross into unsolicited advice-giving and result in ill feelings. Yet, as far as I could tell, the regular group members managed to resolve or accept one another’s differences enough to return for the next meeting.

Ironically, despite the traditional conservatism in rural Georgia, the town of Comer had its share of free thinkers, many of whom were not only liberally inclined in the political sense, but tested traditional boundaries dictated by conventional religion, medicine and lifestyle choices. The women of our Monday night group were among those who crossed conventional boundaries thus our meetings were never dull, sometimes serious but nearly always balanced with laughter a sense of fun. I formed lasting friendships with almost all of the women. Nearly ten years later, some of members moved and others quit attending, but the concept remains intact with new members who,
I am told, attend regularly. Thanks to social media, the original group has maintained contact and I was able to locate some of them for a focus group interview.

I contacted Belle, her sister Penny and our friend Sarah. The three women have homes in a multiple-acre compound originally owned by Belle and Penny’s parents who had purchased the land years ago to ensure that each family member would have their own home. Today, it appears to have become exactly what the owners intended. With the exception of Penny, who keeps a cottage there but had moved to Athens, the women who attended the focus group lived on the compound. Sarah invited two additional women to the focus group. Both were single mothers who were living with Sarah and her family at the time.

*Belle.* Of the three women, I met Belle first. She frequented the Monday night meetings and often brought creative suggestions for group projects. I know her to be creative, intelligent and analytical. In addition, she is a woman who holds fast to her opinions and is forthcoming with her perceptions and analyses. As group members, I often disagreed with her and her with me, but we seemed to reach a point where we agreed to disagree. From my experience of Belle, she is a spiritual explorer who embodies the notion of being in the world, but not of it. At the same time I know her as an earth mother who is an artist, deeply committed to nurturing her family and friends and a proponent of personal expression as a means to reconcile and heal her fragmented and chaotic modern lifestyle.

I remembered from a conversation a few years ago, that during period of time after she moved to Georgia from Florida and shortly after her youngest child was born,
Belle acquired an inexplicable, untreatable illness that caused her severe and unrelenting pain. In response to the deeply painful and incurable illness, Belle underwent an extraordinary experience that ultimately lessened her pain and changed the direction of her life for the good. However, during the focus group interview, although Belle joined in the conversation and affirmed the other women, she did not tell her own story. So when I contacted her for a post focus group interview, I asked her if she would be willing to share the story of her illness, which I bring to light in Chapter 4.

Penny. Although a sensitive and gently-spoken woman, Penny emitted an aura of inner strength and security held together by compassion. I knew her to be fun-loving and always poised for an opportunity to smile and laugh. She could be the epitome of sweetness and while she could be surprisingly blunt, she delivered it in a way that invariably softened the blow. She often seemed pensive and contemplative, but navigated the shift from seriousness commentary to lighthearted humor with elegance and ease. I could not clearly identify the family similarities between Penny and Belle. They seemed quite different with the exception of the elfin glimmer in their eyes which spoke to their willingness to remain lighthearted and quick to laugh.

Sarah. When I first met Sarah, she seemed to bypass that introductory trepidation when meeting new people. In other words, while I was still navigating the common space between us, for Sarah, friendship was already a foregone conclusion. She was this way with everyone. Yet as easy as it was to feel included into Sarah’s circle, she seemed to maintain core support through her husband and Penny. I especially appreciated Sarah’s complexity, which is difficult to describe. She exuded a bohemian, almost
gothic, presence that was at once earthy and matter of fact. However, when she told her story, she framed it in such a humorous light, she had us all laughing, herself included. In addition, she displayed her creative penchant with everything she touched.

**Georgia horsewomen.** As a woman with horses in rural Georgia, it was not difficult to find others who shared my interest. However, it is more common to meet those who ride for accolades or regard their horse as a possession or a creature to control. It is less common to find those who delve into the undefined terrain of the relationship between the horse and the human. The Georgia horsewomen are the latter and the focus of the following.

**Beth.** Within a week or two of moving to Comer, at same herb store where the Monday group met, the owner introduced me to another woman, Beth. Although I had never met her, I immediately sensed a comfort and familiarity with her as if she had already been an old friend. I knew, at once, we shared common ground. Beth was an artist and horsewoman who loved her family, animals and garden. Our friendship was a given. As time passed, I began to comprehend that the familiarity I had upon first meeting Beth seemed closely related to our mutual connection to the non-verbal expression that is necessary to navigate human communication with horses. Over time Beth introduced me to other women who through their involvement with horse-woman-ship, delved into territory that is not commonly learned or inculcated in Western culture.

Beth is an accomplished horsewoman and artist; yet, those words alone do not do her justice. She is what Giroux (2013) calls a public intellectual, which on one hand, implies one who studies intellectual matters outside the boundaries of formal learning
institutions. Most important of all, the public intellectual uses knowledge in the service of speaking to the deleterious conditioning in society and culture. Thus, Beth possesses a nascent inclination toward critical consciousness. In addition, she simply loves literature, has a passionate connection to the earth and her garden, is a devoted mother and grandmother and approaches her life from a deep, heartfelt inner space.

During the week I was in Georgia for the focus groups, I stayed at Beth’s house. She had recently been experiencing second hand trauma as a result of events that involved individuals we both loved. So when we were alone, we took the opportunity to process the events together by talking or simply sitting quietly drinking tea or coffee. Much of what Beth shared was highly personal and I chose not to include her stories. However, I do include some thoughts and a short snippet she shared in an individual interview after the focus group.

*Sophia.* I first met Sophia when Beth had the two us over for dinner. Because she chose to not talk about herself much, I know few facts about her. I do know that Sophia is a degreed botanist, an elegant horsewoman and lover of plants, animals and the environment. She is highly intelligent and for many years had longed to be a writer. Although she was hesitant to speak up about her stories in the focus group, Sophia shared a story and poem about her deep relationship with her horse, Kahfess, the latter I discuss in Chapter 4. Although she was reticent to talk about herself, she was a dear woman whose well runs deep, whose heart is close to the earth and I believe she has hoof prints on her soul.
Gabriella. I had met Gabriella briefly at one of the many community social events in Comer. In the focus group, she was ebullient, energetic and willing to share her stories. Although Gabriella brought a different energy to the focus group than her sister, Sophia, I perceived similarities in their connections with the earth and their horses. I learned about Gabriella through her focus group narrative. In short, Gabriella had moved to England from where she and Sophia grew up on the east coast. When she returned to the United States, she landed in Georgia where Sophia and later their mother, had settled. In Chapter 4, I provide additional background as a preface to the story of connection between her and her horse Samir.

Ohio horsewomen. When I left Georgia to begin my doctoral studies in Ohio, I moved my horse to the barn where I met the women of this focus group. In contrast to Georgia, friendships did not come easy in Ohio, perhaps because of my intense preoccupation with school. However, over time, I formed a friendship with Alice and Marina. Among the horsepersons who boarded horses at the barn, all were women except one, so when I planned the group interview. I invited six women and all decided that the barn would be the ideal place to have our meeting. Four women showed up that day. However, due to the personal bent of the discussion, I only included two of the four participants in my final analysis and describe them below.

Alice. Some people appear to “have it all together” and Alice is one of them. However, she would be the first to admit that appearances are deceiving. In fact I would say she was a study in balances, perhaps because she has spent so many years finding balance on the back of a horse. I know her to be honest and blunt, but also tactful and
compassionate. She is an adept storyteller and although she generally an introvert, her stories are riveting and entertaining. Alice is sensible, scientific and intellectual, yet she is fun, eccentric and a skilled artist. Moreover, she is a vegetarian, but goes to great length to dry pork bellies and cow tracheas for her dogs’ treats. As a friend, she is true and honest. For many years, Alice has worked with horses as a trainer, a rider, a teacher and veterinary technician. She is married and chose to not have children. However, her horses and dogs have reaped the rewards of that decision.

**Marina.** Marina married Alice’s brother, yet long before they became sisters-in-law, they were the dearest of friends—as they continue to be. Marina is a horsewoman, a talented painter and a sensitive and intuitive woman who is at once kind, witty and thoughtful. Like many sensitive women, Marina tends to feel other’s distress and turmoil which is an asset when working with horses, but of uncertain value when it comes to people—a topic we have laughed about often. As one who is fascinated by life’s mysteries and the unknown aspects of life, she has developed a deep and indelible connection to horses and nature.

The women I introduced here furnished the narrative data for this discussion. As I proceed I will discuss the background for my methods approach, details of my data collection, data analysis and my position and limitations.

**Methods**

I now discuss the methods I used in five sections. The first section covers the background that influenced my choice of methods. In the second, data collection, I discuss my tools and approach. I follow with a discussion of my analysis and procedure.
My fourth section, positionality, explains the overall attitude I brought to my data collection and data analysis. I conclude the methods section and this chapter with a segment on my assessment of the limits of the study.

**Background.** The methods used in this study are, as I noted, grounded methodologically in narrative inquiry through focus groups and individual interviews. They are also informed by short-term ethnography (Pink, 2013), a method that is “designed to lead to informed interventions in the world” (Pink, 2013, p. 351) and employ “methods to create contexts through which to delve into questions that will reveal what matters to those people” (p. 353). This approach requires the researcher to become . . . a core element in the way that she or he comes to know about other people’s lives and experiences, takes a more deliberate and interventional approach to that of long-term participant observation and is also theoretically engaged (p. 353). As such, I drew on my years of experience with many of these women to conduct focus groups and interviews with them.

Although all stories are narratives, not all narratives are stories. As suggested earlier in this chapter, narrative content can take a variety of forms, “such as stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing” (Bruner, 1991, p. 2). Holstein and Gubrium (2012) also indicate that the narrative in narrative inquiry is not limited to the story, but has taken on forms that include a range from brief speech utterances to lengthy historical events. As such, “given the variety, it’s hardly surprising that narrative analysis seems ubiquitous in the social sciences” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012, p. 2). As a result, I
took up narrative inquiry according to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) “working concept:”

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration of researchers and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social action within milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social (p. 20).

Therefore, I chose to “learn to think narratively” about my participants’ conversations and explore narrative content in my data I ways that best represented the matrix of experience of my participants (p. 20).

In this study, I considered the narrative in a few ways. I began with stories, the most commonly held notion of narrative, but tapped into other narrative forms. The focus groups in this study provided rich interactions and discussions, thus I turned to the narrative in conversation and dialogue, what Hollingsworth & Dybdah (2007) refer to as conversational narrative inquiry, where the dialogue can tell its own story” (Bold, 2012, p. 27). In addition, I included a participant’s poem (see Sentience, Chapter 4), hypothetical narratives, and short narratives of personal experiences, reminiscences and narratives that encompass beliefs (Chapter 4). As the researcher, I also included brief autobiographical narrative (Chapter 1) and historical accounts to help contextualize participants’ narratives (see Agency, Chapter 4).

**Data Collection.** Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2014) regard focus groups as “fertile sites for empirical investigations of . . . new theoretical formulations of self” (p. 2), thus provide a relevant perspective to this inquiry. Equally so, they find inspiration in Freire’s early “study circles,” which later evolved into participatory action research
(PAR). The authors emphasize Freire’s position that inquiry nourishes education and his stance that the democratic process presupposes “we are ‘subjects’ of our own lives and narratives, not ‘objects’ in the stories of others” (p. 5). With this approach, the focus group allows participants to raise topics, become open-ended and unstructured, and speak to what matters to them. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2014) also emphasize “keeping notes, following up on key themes and gaps, listening for breakdowns and subtexts, and asking for elaboration on issues that remain” (p. 24).

I began my data collection by inviting my participants via email and once they agreed, I followed up with each of them according to their desired method of communication either additional emails, phone calls, texts or in-person conversations. I travelled to each site in New Mexico, Georgia and Ohio via automobile. To document each focus group, I used a Phillips digital audio recorder and two Canon video cameras with tripods and a Flip camera. I also used an iPhone camera for still photos, when appropriate. In addition to video recording the focus groups, I captured scenes from the local geography. Also, one participant shared poetry that I included in my analysis Chapter 4. A few others shared their artwork which, I photographed. Between each focus group, I wrote, sketched out or audio recorded field notes. After I completed the interviews in each state, I wrote a summative memo. Among the tools I used, the least effective were the video cameras. Each was an older model that malfunctioned at different times during the data collection and often produced poor quality videos. Although reviewing the videos was visually informative, it prevented me from
completing a video analysis. Although the video data was inconsistent, the Phillips audio recorder was highly reliable and provided me with quality data.

Before each focus group I took reflexive field notes that often revealed a range of thoughts, feelings, memories and anticipation of the impending focus group. Each group was uniquely different, like a finger print. When I arrived at the focus group location, I followed a simple procedure that began with a warm-up of sorts where the participants and I chatted casually for a few minutes. I provided my participants with IRB approved prompts beforehand; however, many did not read them before our meeting, so I redistributed them to each participant. I gleaned the prompts from my research question that addressed matters of unfinishedness, heart, critical consciousness and their desires and contributions to the world and the people in it. Since I designed them to gently direct the conversation, I was not concerned whether my participants read the prompts, just that I provided them. Then I explained the informed consent forms and I provided each participant with two forms, one for their signature and one to for their records. We continued to chat as I set up my cameras and recorder, answered questions about the forms and collected them. When I felt the women were sufficiently comfortable, I explained my research and answered any questions they had.

Although, the above process may seem lengthy and tedious, it happened quickly, usually taking place within about 15-20 minutes. As I noted above, each focus group last about 1-2.5 hours on the average. Some individuals had time constraints, while others were free to linger and chat. Regardless, each group conversational flow tapered off, and I chose to respect that. The interviews always energized me and I believe my participants
felt a positive effect as well. Invariably, after each group, the women expressed a desire to meet again regularly. After each group ended, I revisited my reflexive field journal as soon as possible. I also saved the encrypted audio and video recordings on my computer and a dedicated external drive. When I returned home, I arranged individual interviews via email or telephone with one member of each focus group. As I mentioned earlier, this process was designed to triangulate my focus group data and fortify the validity of my study. Since we had already reconnected in person during my visit, I had hoped that the memory of the focus group would still be fresh in their minds for the follow up interview. Each individual who I referenced in the subsequent analysis in Chapter 4 had the opportunity to review my data analysis for optimal accuracy and I made changes accordingly. Moreover, I conducted additional member checks as needed.

**Data Analysis**

For my analysis, I turn to Kincheloe (2001) who defines the use of multiple methods in qualitative research as *bricolage*. He explains that *bricolage* embraces the practice of using multiple and interdisciplinary methods in order to “synthesize contemporary developments in social theory, epistemology and interpretation” (p. 323). For the coding I drew from Saldaña’s (2009) definition of values coding and emotions coding. Saldaña describes values coding as a process that reflects the “participants’ values, attitudes and beliefs, representing his or her worldview” (p. 89), whereas emotions coding identifies “emotions recalled and/or experienced by participants, or inferred by the researcher about the participant” (p. 86). For the written analysis, I gleaned from Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) creative analytical processes approach.
which employs writing as a means to mitigate the analysis in the process of creation.

During the analysis as a whole, I adapted embodied narrative inquiry which required a multi-sensory approach to the analysis. Thus as I transcribed, coded and wrote, I focused on each story, as Bresler’s (2006) suggests, through “authentic, meaningful engagement with a story which involves getting inside it and letting it get inside you, internalizing as well as analyzing it” (p. 28). Sparks and Smith (2012) identify this embodiment phenomenon during the analysis as “indwelling.” Similar to Bresler, indwelling requires the researcher to engage with the narratives empathically rather than sympathetically. Both authors offer a stark contrast to the objectivity and the struggle to remain detached. Instead, the analysis becomes an act of dying into subjectivity by allowing it, embracing it and embodying my participants’ stories and accounts. McAdams (2012) validates the testing of extant theories in narrative inquiry thus the incorporating of critical literacy and complimentary theories was acceptable within the realm of narrative analysis.

My data analysis became a process that shaped a story of my experience and relationship with my participants’ narratives. Thus, as I proceed I will first discuss my logical first steps in preparation for the analysis, my immersion into the analysis process through indwelling and the emergence of the major themes, all followed by the final stage of the analysis--the writing--which I present in Chapter 4. As a beginning, the first step toward my data analysis was to simply review the data I collected from each focus group and individual follow up interview. The videos recordings, I found, were of inconsistent quality. The sound was generally poor and I was unable to view all the participants, even with two cameras. In addition, since I used older equipment, there were
times where one camera would stop functioning. Since the audio recordings were consistently crisp and clear, I relied on them to for my data source.

As I reviewed and transcribed the relevant stories for value, each of them took on a life of their own that hinged on common identities, interests, activities, beliefs and affiliations. Although their commonalities served as inroads to their relationships, I sensed that the sustaining power of their community rested within more complex and undefinable connections. Yet, defining the fullness of the bonds within each group was beyond my grasp. However, I turned to my research question to identify themes that indexed those connections and contextualized what my participants wish for and contribute to the world and the people in it.

Within this collection of stories and narratives I coded for values and emotions (Saldaña, 2009) and began to identify common threads that emerged that were also informed by my participants’ desires and contributions to the world and the people in it. As I expected, participants had significant stories to tell and information to share. What I did not anticipate was that each group conveyed its own story, most often without words. Each group held distinct qualities and codes; however, the group phenomenon represented a prominent characteristic of my data and thus became the theme women and community. As I reviewed and coded individual stories and content, I found that some of the women explicitly made their desires and contributions known. However, more often their stories and narratives illustrated the themes implicitly rather than overtly stating them. In many cases whether the coded content emerged explicitly and implicitly was not relevant; however, the distinction helped me identify emotional and sensory content
beyond common verbal cues and outside commonly regarded feeling and senses. For example, in one instance, which I discuss in Chapter 4, three friends’ brief comments adjoined into one sentence, illustrating a bond of trust among them.

   Belle: It is an understatement to say that her life is asking her to . . .
   Sarah: . . . to be still . . .
   Belle: . . . to change . . .
   Penny: . . . to change. I need a change. I should change.
   Sarah: She knows it

Although the words themselves seem unremarkable, their voices reflect an affirming continuity and a deep, unspoken connection among them. This type of occurrence in my data helped inform the second theme I discuss in my analysis, women and sentience, which emerged repeatedly throughout my data, such as through feelings, senses, hunches and expressions of inner knowledge.

The theme I named women and agency emerged overtly through stories of activism linked to my theoretical framework and to breaching the canons of convention that Bruner (1991) indicates is illustrative of the narrative. Also inspired by Daniell’s (2003) emphasis on small acts or agency, I chose to examine acts in the world that may seem infinitesimally minute on a macro level, but significant to the individual and the community. Therefore, I considered acts of agency on a continuum from activism on a state and national level; feminist resistance on an organizational level; and personal acts framed in the subthemes of surrender, accountability and integrity that impact human life on the individual, interpersonal and community levels.
I imagined each of the latter themes to have a dynamic of its own. Women and community was at once circular and complexly connected, calling to mind Bateson’s (1979) idea of patterns that connect and the knots of relevance that my participants’ narratives represented. While community is largely experienced as an externally oriented perspective, the theme of women and sentience affects the external in how we react and communicate in the world. Also, sentience represents the multiplicity of internal processes, which also seems to be vastly and complexly interconnected. When I imagine women and agency, I envision a continuum of acts in the world as humanity knows it that range from the deeply personal to environmental and global. Thus, the idea of women and transformation best represented the larger momentum of the combined effects and profound change. As such, I included transformation as a theme I envisioned as cumulative and with a distinct momentum of its own.

Positionality

As I approached my data collection and analysis, I found myself continually faced with a question posed by Rogers (2007) “is it possible to fully credit and respect the voices of participants in research while at the same time exerting interpretive authority over those voices?” (para. 8). As I proceeded with the task, I held this question in the back of my mind. Thus, my position in the research was not static, but shifted with each circumstance and task at hand, from being an active listener and observer during data collection; asking questions when necessary; becoming scientifically curious and methodical during coding; and taking up the spirit of critical literacy with a non-neutral
stance during my analysis. Thus I discuss my positionality in two parts through data collection and data analysis.

_Data collection._ Since I had minimal experience with interviewing, I approached my technique as an inquiry unto itself and allowed the interviews to take uncontrived course (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2014). I drew from my experience facilitating groups and group processes where each collection of personalities blended together to create a distinct group personality, a phenomenon is commonly understood among teachers and group facilitators. In my experience, the outcome of a “hands off” technique was democratic and often fruitful; therefore, allowing group integrity was my chosen position in the focus groups. As such, I allowed myself to be immersed in the symmetry of the group as an equal, a friend, a listener and an observer. In addition, because most of us had passed through the stages of the introductory formalities years ago, I believed that taking control of the conversation would hinder the flow of the group character. Furthermore, my position reflected the collaborative element of narrative inquiry about which Leavy (2009) speaks.

Therefore, as an interviewer and facilitator, I allowed the conversation among my participants to take shape. I took a gentle lead in the conversation only when I felt guidance was absolutely necessary. And I can count those times on one hand—I documented three. Although mostly a facilitator and observer, I joined the conversation when I was compelled to ask a burning question that helped clarify a narrative or to tell a brief personal story relevant to the conversation. In one case, with the Georgia women’s circle, the conversation immediately took off into a discussion of recent synchronistic
injuries among them. The conversation was rich and steeped with interpersonal connections. I felt it was important, even though I was not sure why, so I had no intention of intervening and destroying the flow and rhythm of their discourse. At one point, a participant in that group, Penny, stopped and asked, “So when are we going to start the interview?” I told her we already had.

Data analysis. While coding my data I was challenged to find the most prevalent ideas, topics and representations of my participants’ stories and narratives. Here I became more scientific, looking for themes and threads that occurred most often and that were of the most value to answering my research question. At the same time, I saw how my position was not neutral. As I distilled themes from my participants’ narratives, I noticed that the threads and how I named them were a product of who I am, how I think and my significant interests. In fact, I feel certain that had another person used these interviews for data analysis, their findings would be different. At first the realization troubled me and I felt inauthentic. I was struck by the realization that I am as much a part of this research as my participants. However, guided by Bresler (2006) and Sparks and Smith (2012), I embraced my subjectivity through embodiment and indwelling.

So, just as Freire (2001) contends that education is never neutral, I have come to understand that research is not neutral either. In fact, within human endeavors, neutrality is difficult to achieve, if not impossible. In short, I am embedded into this inquiry. My fingerprints and DNA are all over it. This fact became most evident in writing the ensuing final analysis. As I framed my discussion in critical literacy, my democratic and humanistic bias became even more pronounced. At the same time, I maintained a
reflexive attitude, allowing the presence of doubt and uncertainty as Freire (2001) willing to admit I do not have all the answers—perhaps not even some—but motivated to find a direction in which answers might emerge.

**Drawbacks of the Study**

The drawbacks of this research include many of the same qualities in the imperfect and messiness of human interactions. Bruner (1991) indicates that “we know altogether too little about how we go about constructing and representing the rich and messy domain of human interaction” (p. 22). Bruner’s choice of the words “rich and messy” describe a complex human dynamic that psychology cannot fully categorize or measure. He goes on to indicate that “the human mind cannot express its nascent powers without the enablement of the symbolic systems of culture,” which bear additional complexity to the analysis (Bruner, 1991, p. 22). In other words, while language and other symbolic systems provide a common ground for communication, it can complicate matters even further. In short, Bruner (1991) understands 1) the narrative as complex and important and 2) as a means of exchange that stubbornly defies strict scientific analysis.

However, I argue that even with the sciences that have contributed to a vast body of knowledge, each discipline reaches a point of the unknown. Biology, for example, can explain the miniscule functions of a cell, but not the vital essence that makes it alive. The unpredictable and messy quality of the narrative inquiry and narrative analysis is indeed a potential drawback of the methodology, yet placed into perspective of research as a whole, no study is flawless. As an emerging researcher, my best recourse was and is to
minimize messy errors by practicing continuous reflexivity, thorough member checks, triangulation of data and being open to the guidance of my dissertation committee.

As I conclude this chapter, I frame the analysis that follows. I begin with an overview of the chapter followed by each of the four major themes, beginning with community, and followed by sentience, agency and transformation, including a discussion and analysis of the stories that best represent each theme.
Chapter 4: Prevalent Narratives and Themes

In this chapter I discuss the significant aspects of my analysis through four major themes that emerged in my participants narratives. The first is the relationship of the women of this study with community and how their connections reflect desires for and to contribute to world and the people in it. As I will discuss below, community arose in different ways through the inquiry. Here, I provide two narratives that offer examples of community: One, as it is lived and the other as a vision for community of the future. As might be expected, my participants’ narratives displayed a range of sentient experience; however, a few of the narratives provided a deeper engagement with the sentient experience than commonly experienced. Thus I draw from stories that engage my participants’ heightened awareness in relationship, inner impulse and knowing, and through conflict that arise as a result of sentience in a patriarchal society.

I continue with agency, a theme that demonstrates its own set of nuances through my participants’ stories. I discuss the range of expression that agency exhibits beginning with a story from two women and their thirty year engagement with activism on a state level. I continue with an example of radical feminism during the women’s movement from the 1970s and conclude with a discussion of the personal manifestations of agency. My concluding theme embraces women and transformation, where I revisit the interview with two women from earlier in this chapter to illustrate a theoretical parallel to critical
literacy and offer a story from a participant that is at once profound and incomprehensible. I conclude with hope for possibility and questions of plausibility for a better future.

Community

Because my participants demonstrated qualities of community in the focus groups, women and communities became one of the major themes for the analysis. I introduce this theme by explaining the relevance of community to critical literacy. I follow with a discussion of perspectives of women’s engagement in community. Two vignettes illustrate my participants’ perspectives on community. I conclude each discussion with ways the stories might extend the reach of critical literacy.

I begin my discussion of women and community by explaining the relevance of this theme to critical literacy. Early scholars in critical literacy apply their democratically-based, educational theory to matters of ethical formation, political awareness and sociocultural transparency. In addition they examine forms of education ranging from classroom milieux to messages that shape cultural values and attitudes, or public pedagogy. Consequently, Freire, Macedo, Giroux and Shor emphasize two main foci and the relationship between them: Society or culture and ethical formation. Among these theorists, references to community are few. In the case of Freire (1991) community is primarily framed through organizing the community to social action. However, the infrequent reference to community among scholars of critical literacy should not minimize its importance. For instance, community organizing unites citizens in a common purpose. In addition, both Freire (1991, 2001) and Giroux (2005) make
frequent references to solidarity and hope, qualities within a democracy that cannot be effective without social engagement and community.

Brown (2012) asserts that “we’re hard-wired for connection. It’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives” (p. 10). And community is one way to connect meaningfully and purposefully. While writing this paper, I became especially conscious of the prevalence of community everywhere. Even new communication tools and virtual inventions that are devoid of life or breath have gained popularity, I believe, because they facilitate connections and sustain communities. Yet, individuals continue to seek community through real time connections.

Among the many opportunities to create community, women continue to connect with other women—and for numerous possible reasons. One may be that an early age girls learn peer communication skills from girls and boys from boys (Tannen, 1990). In addition, women’s language demonstrate a tendency toward collaboration (Bolen, 2005; Tannen, 1990), which suggests the likelihood for women to form bonds and communities of common interest and support with other women. Although Bolen (2005) clearly indicates that her premises do not hold for all women, she has observed in her women’s circles that “women bond through conversations in which rapport and trust grow through what we tell each other and how we respond. Friendship is a matter of depth, of mutual self-revelation, of being able to be uncensored, unwary, and vulnerable” (p. 79). Thus, according to Bolen (2005) one reason women support women rests on a common foundation of understanding and ways of being.
Communities of women have taken on unique meaning throughout history. In a stirring history of women’s slavery in the plantation period of the South, White (1985) explains how female slaves, who occupied the lowest rung in an abusive hierarchy, were doubly burdened with evening housekeeping chores in addition to day work in the fields. In response to their oppression, the women formed strong communities of support, sometimes akin to a small society with specified roles and a matriarchal structure (White, 1985). Bolen (2005) cites instances where women’s communities throughout the world, from Nigeria to Argentina to the US have taken social action and successfully improved the quality of life for their families and themselves. White and Bolen’s examples are only a few that illustrate women’s ability for mutual support and the ability to affect change, the latter of which I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter. Stories of women affecting profound change in their lives and the lives of others can provide inspiration and hope for all people, women and men. For many, however, change occurs with local, interpersonal and intimate connections characteristic of the most participants in this study.

**Lived and envisioned communities.** As I noted, each of the groups of women are friends with common connections. In groups of horsewomen from Georgia and Ohio, the participants formed bonds of friendship through their common perspectives and relationships with their horses. The activists from Santa Fe, NM shared politics, history of social action and support—as citizens, friends and women—in the struggle for collective change socially and through environmental policy. In addition to the latter examples, two of the focus groups provide unique glimpses into community and will be the focus of this
discussion. With the first, I discuss the lived experience among a circle of friends in a rural community who have created intimate bonds of trust, empathy and mutual respect, bonds according to Bolen (2005) that are characteristic of a women’s circle. Following, I offer a narrative of two women who together have envisioned the community as a means to advance the trajectory of human evolution.

A women’s circle in Georgia. The following interactions and conversation best demonstrate the bonds of women and community through an “invisible power” that reflects the safety and symmetry characteristic of what Bolen (2005) calls a “women’s circle.” Since 1985 Bolen (1999, 2005), a Jungian analyst and psychiatrist, has experienced women’s circles as both a participant and facilitator. She indicates that although “a circle of women may appear to be just women talking, ... the invisible power of women’s circles on the women in them grows out of the power we have on one another, which can be healing, affirming and supportive” (Bolen, 2005, p. 130). In contrast to “visible power,” a term Bolen (2005) uses to describe acts by a circle of women that have visible results in the community and the world, “invisible power” is covert but nonetheless powerful and present in the way women connect. In the discussion below I explain how the Georgia women’s circle exhibited invisible power as well as symmetry and safety, qualities Bolen (1999, 2000) stresses as necessary to the healing, validation and support characteristic of a successful women’s circle.

I met the women of this focus group through a group that met two Mondays a month in a small town in Georgia where I had lived. The group was started by a few local women who wanted to connect with other women in the community at large. I
began attending, and was delighted to find that the group had no hidden agendas or sponsorship. All we needed to do was show up. Over the years that I attended, I found solace in the company of these women. We talked and listened, agreed and disagreed, laughed and cried and expressed our deepest fears, frustrations, and anger as well as our greatest joys. Together, we painted, wrote poetry, and discussed articles and books. I was told that after I moved from the area in 2009, new members joined and the group continued to meet: however, many of the original group members moved away or their life circumstances changed. As a result, this focus group I call the Georgia women’s circle was made up of three women I came to know through the original Monday women’s group along with two women who one of my friends invited to join us.

_Invisible power._ The Georgia women’s circle brought the warmth of Southern hospitality to their small community of friends, yet they also put their own mark on their hospitality by creating a space of comfort and bringing to it a generosity of spirit. When Sarah offered to have the focus group at her house, she asked if she could invite additional women to join us. Thus when I arrived for our group, I met Bonnie and Alicia for the first time. Bonnie and Alicia were both single mothers, and each of them had a daughter. The four of them lived with Sarah, her husband and their three children—nine altogether. With the exception of Bonnie and Alicia, I had known the other participants, Penny and Belle, before I met Sarah. All tolled five women participated in the interview that day.

Before we began, as I set up my recorders, women, children and dogs wandered in and out of the house. Sarah called us all back to see the work she had done on her
bathroom. All of us stood in the bathroom chatting and laughing. Without any sense of urgency, in what seemed like a spontaneous group process, we all migrated toward the living room still chatting and laughing. Sarah’s husband had started a fire in the wood stove and she called out, “Marty, pleeeze can we have more wood on the fire?” Marty responded with a smile and greeting as we all found a comfortable spot. I chose to share one of the couches, and when I sat, it hugged me as if to welcome me.

When we began, I was compelled to ask Sarah about how she came to share her home with Amber, Bonnie and their girls. I knew Sarah to be a warm and inclusive woman, so the arrangement seemed in character, yet I wanted to know more. Sarah explained that while growing up her parents opened their home to others outside their immediate family. So as the adage goes, Sarah came by her willingness honestly. Still, it was clear that the arrangement with her friends was a choice not an obligation.

Sarah explained that even her husband, who is an easy-going and kind man, did not object to sharing their home with Alicia, Bonnie and each of their daughters. As one might suspect, Sarah’s family living situation is not commonplace in the U. S. In fact, among the U. S. Census designations for living arrangements, no one category describes their unusual household (Vespa, Lewis & Kreider, 2013, p. 2). The lack of comparable data suggests the unusualness of their home. However, Sarah’s willingness to share her home speaks to her perspective on life far more than any Census data could measure.

Aside from Alicia and Bonnie who now lived with Sarah and her family, each family maintained their own homes within the context of the compound. Yet, in the context of Sarah, Belle and Penny’s relationships the boundaries of the compound
seemed more loosely defined. In a brief but telling example, a short time into the interview I felt compelled to kick off my shoes and curl up on the couch, commenting on how I felt at home. “We want you to feel that way,” Belle replied, encouraging me to make myself comfortable. I felt that to be true, that even though we were in Sarah’s home, Belle knew that comfort there was a given, perhaps even a gentle expectation.

As we talked, our conversation was peppered with similar talk. Penny offered for me to stay at her house at the compound anytime I am in town. Belle mentioned “We’ll take you in, feed you . . . take care of you.” Had I not known Belle before the interview, her statement might have seemed odd. Yet her invitation held a warmth and inclusive quality that in turn reflected her community lifestyle. During the time I knew her, she had called herself and her husband “old hippies,” which also inferred their sense of communal ethics. Belle substantiated the inference about six weeks after the interview when our mutual friend, Tanya, along with her husband and three children returned to Comer after living in Nevada for several years, and the whole brood moved in with Belle and her family.

Years living their lives in close proximity may contribute to a willingness to share space; however, I also felt a deeper interpersonal connection of trust, caring and acceptance among them. While reviewing my data and field notes, I was unable to nail down the words to describe the sense of comfort I had at Sarah’s. I wrestled with observations and cues to explain why the interview at Sarah’s house felt so relaxing and comfortable. I found an answer in Bolen (2005) who describes her observations. From her experience, “a circle of women is a nurturing and sustaining resource that can become
Symmetrical relationships. Although the circle can be a metaphor for the symmetry in conversation that Bolen’s (2005) women circles gravitated toward, it also explains how women often seat themselves for conversations (Tannen, 1990). Both points illustrate an egalitarian and cooperative positioning. I observed this in the Georgia women’s circle as well. About four months prior to the time of our focus group, Penny’s husband took leave from work for his intolerable back pain. Penny’s flexible work hours in her housekeeping business allowed her to care for him. However, the day after he took leave, Penny broke her foot. Penny reflects,

So we’re stuck together and he has his surgery in two weeks, and I’m trying to take care of him hopping like this [laugh] because I couldn’t do crutches because my shoulder hurt.

Penny explains that the year before, as a result of the physical stress of her independent cleaning business, Penny’s shoulder went out. Despite the seriousness of the condition, we all laughed as she explained in a humorous way,

I had a sling on my arm and I went to the doctor and he said, “You need a shoulder replacement, you can’t go to work and do this anymore.” I said “ok,” so I got up the next day and I went cleanin.’

Here Penny exposed her vulnerability allowing an opening where the conversation could have devolved into advice giving, shaming, or warning. Instead we all laughed and agreed: We all had put work before our health. Sarah and Belle and Penny continued,

Sarah: And you needed a shoulder replacement.

Belle: She was not listening,
Penny: Yes, I couldn't move my arm from here. So God was trying to tell me then: ‘Listen girl, listen now, you gotta slow down--this isn't good anymore.’ But I didn't. Then all of a sudden BANG he put me on my butt.”

Sarah: I think that's why God broke my leg and my arm at the same time, too.

Indeed, Sarah had a similar accident nearly at the same time as Penny, and as I discuss below, together they gleaned valuable insight from their difficulties. This brief exchange points to a synchronicity of events and suggests a kind of symmetry unto itself; however, the egalitarian balance of their relationship allowed them to find meaning that informed their lifestyles. Penny and Sarah understood the significance of their respective accidents to themselves and one another.

So Penny’s shoulder needed to be replaced and continued to bother her; however, she now needed surgery on her broken foot. In addition, Sarah who had broken her arm and foot in one fall was trying to help Penny when Sarah could barely help herself. The story got messier. Penny explained that her husband had four disks removed and subsequently developed a hematoma that almost took his life. After his recovery, Penny had surgery on her foot. Penny’s daughter-in-law helped, but she was pregnant and her visits were short-lived. Then her step-son came with his friends, and in Penny’s words, “That was a nightmare.”

From what I knew of Penny, she was never one to be sick or talk about illness, let alone complain. She was, as Belle remarked, “such a physical person, but Penny had to shut down.” Penny affirmed Belle’s observation. “If I would get up for even five minutes my body would start shaking. It was awful.” What followed was a brief
exchange that underlined their interconnectedness and the symmetry of their circle, which in turn allowed for mutual knowledge, understanding, and trust they had with each other:

Belle: It is an understatement to say that her life is asking her to . . .
Sarah: . . . to be still . . .
Belle: . . . to change . . .
Penny: . . . to change. I need a change. I should change.
Sarah: She knows it.

The synchronicity of events and their bonds as friends facilitated insight that demonstrated their ability to arrive at a joint interpretation and insights. Penny understood their shared mishaps as a symbol for the need to change and a catalyst to a meaningful course of action as a result. Although Penny was still grappling with taking action on her insight, she understood the importance of forging new paths for her life and work.

The point I wish to stress is that Penny’s personal insights took place in a supportive community of women on an equal ground that allowed them to be “uncensored, unwary, and vulnerable” (Bolen, 2005, p. 79). From their years of friendship and living close proximity Belle, Penny and Sarah have nurtured and honed a mutual connection that enable the symmetry necessary for an empathetic, affirming and supportive women’s circle.

A safe environment. In addition, as a group of friends, they enabled one another’s personal growth and ethos by creating a safe environment. They spoke honestly, humbly, and without pretense. Each woman spoke authentically and admitted her own foibles
without fear of judgment from the others. Several years before Penny and Sarah experienced their own incapacitations and near tragedies, Belle had undergone a lengthy illness. During that time Belle had been in constant pain and Penny thought Belle was exaggerating. During Penny’s recent injury, the tables had turned. Belle acknowledged, “When [Penny] said, ‘It hurts so badly I don't know what to do.’ I was like ‘I'm sure it does.’” In the midst of her pain, Penny had apologized profusely to Belle for her rash judgment from years before. “Penny said to me constantly "I did not understand, I did not understand," Belle recollects.

In this simple turn of events, Penny understood the complexities of severe, unrelenting pain that on one hand was real and enduring for Belle, while at the same time appeared contrived or exaggerated. Penny’s admittance of her judgment and apology demonstrated her reflexivity and accountability to her own thoughts and actions. Most important, she felt safe to do so. In turn, Belle understood Penny’s reaction because while Penny was suffering, she seemed almost unrecognizable to Belle. “I had never seen her like this before,” Belle revealed, “I'm still not sure who she is.”

Sarah also discussed her judgments and letting go of her pride that separated her from others in distress, or “those people,” and her own ability to ask for help:

Sarah: You know how judgmental I was? I would see people, not crippled--but people who were overly--overweight. The way they walked . . . and I would always say, “Really? If you were in that much pain would you just scoot over a little?”

After her accident, however,

Sarah: The first time a really, really fat person passed me, I was so humble I was like, ‘Oh my God.’ I realized ‘You've been so judgmental over a massive part of the population!’
Belle: I hear you.

Sarah: I was like ‘what were you thinking?!’ I'm going [in a quiet obsequious voice] ‘Could you help me? If... you could help me? [Deep breath] Please be merciful, next person, pleeease. Be merciful!’ It was terrible.

Penny: It is hard.

Since all three women had similar experiences, they were able to relate to each other which facilitated their conversation about judgments. Yet, that they spoke freely about their own imperfections and validated one another demonstrated the sense of safety of their circle.

In addition to demonstrating safety, the story illustrates Bolen’s (2005) premise that “whenever there is encouragement and practical support to make a significant change, change is more likely to happen” (p. 130). Like Penny, Sarah’s fall physically stopped her hectic lifestyle. The profound abruptness of the change commanded her attention. Being aware enough to assess the event for meaning, she became acutely in touch with her feelings. Through personal awareness, Sarah drew a humbling parallel between her lack of mobility and her past behavior toward others who had been in a similar situation.

*Learning from one another’s stories.* As the interviewer, I came away from the conversation having learned from the women’s circle. I could identify with Penny’s story of the pressures of her life. I empathized with her as she traced the series of difficulties in her life and learned from the insights she gained from them. In addition, I was baffled by the uncanny interconnectedness of Penny and Sarah’s injuries and how the stories
informed each other’s experiences, the synchronicity of which informed the women’s circle’s insights and knowledge.

While the difficult events in Penny’s life were just beginning to settle, Sarah’s story continued. After the fall that left her with a broken arm and foot, she continued to overextend herself. She invited her friend Jamie to move into her home along with Jamie’s three children. Jamie had, in Sarah’s words, a bizarre life. Shortly after Jamie’s husband was released from prison, he drowned in the river. Then, not long after that, in the heat of the summer, Jamie went to her nephew’s house and found him five-days dead with a needle in his arm. By this time, Jamie’s mental and physical health was faltering, and since Sarah had watched Jamie’s children off and on for years, the two women made arrangements for Sarah to assume custody of Jamie’s children. The children moved in with Sarah’s family without their mom, but as Jamie’s health faltered Sarah insisted she move in as well.

The story is a testimony to Sarah’s strong ethical fiber: She felt a moral duty to help Jamie and her children. But Sarah was also taking part in the compulsion to overdo to the point of personal distress and destruction. As a mother, Sarah felt compelled to take on responsibility for Jamie’s children. However, Jamie, after moving in, was rarely at home.

Sarah: Alicia was one that said, ‘Sarah, are you sure?’ You know she was saying passive aggressively, ‘Are you sure their mom shouldn't be here? Are you sure? When is their mom gonna come?"

Alicia: . . . because every time I'd go there [Jamie] would never be there. It would always be just Sarah and the kids--and [Sarah’s] kids of course. They used to go to the resort in Cleveland, for the summer--never the mom, the mom was never there. Sarah was always taking care of everybody.
Sarah: I said, ‘I'm going to have to get in car wreck before I give these children back.’ I was headstrong.

Belle: And she DID get in a car wreck.

Sarah: I did get in a car wreck--still taking on too much. I was getting Abby. I just had my cast off, two weeks, three weeks maybe. My mom had been put in the hospital. I stayed with her overnight and I came home and got a bath. And the next day my sister's children were gonna be in a soccer game. I said, ‘I'll go to the soccer game, and then I'll go to the hospital and then I'll go here--I mean all these other things, 24 hours is all I have in a day, hurry, you know, fill it up. This was after I got my cast off. You think I would have learned. I got Abigail--which is Jamie’s little girl who lived with us---Jamie stayed here at the house and I said, ‘I'll take her with me to the game--I'll go and get [Jamie] later.’ Driving toward the road--just right there in the driveway. Abby said something and I'm like ‘What baby girl?’ BAAAM--into the telephone pole.

And the car Sarah wrecked was not hers, but Penny’s. Sarah had the car that day to travel into Athens to take care of Penny. But Sarah’s focus turned to her mother who was admitted into the hospital the night before. Penny had just sold the car and would have money to the pay bills that accumulated as a result of her and her husband’s inability to work--as soon as Sarah returned it. Although the car was wrecked and the sale fell through, both women emerged with friendships intact and Sarah with an important insight into effecting changes in her life.

This story reminded me of my own experiences where taking on too much or rushing mindlessly from one task to the next often ended poorly. My ability to relate and learn from Sarah’s story validates Bolen’s (2005) assertion that women’s stories inform other women’s lives. As a group, when we discussed Sarah’s experience, we all agreed that it is often difficult to see the problem as it approaches because our conflicted behavior escalates. But when we are stopped in our tracks, the reason can become clear.
As Belle observed, “I'm sure when you woke up you went ‘ah—haaa’ you didn't just go ‘Holy crap! Why did this happen?’” Sarah agreed. The accident signaled a choice: Either she continue on a course of over giving and over doing, or become an agent of her own life and change her trajectory.

The stories that arose from the Georgia women’s circle emphasized the benefits of symmetry in relationships in lieu of hierarchy. Rather than engaging in “one-upmanship,” the women facilitated raising each other up. Moreover, the circle was a place of safety devoid of judgment and criticism. Combined, the symmetry and safety among the women created the invisible power that Bolen (2005) indicates is at once healing, affirming and supportive. I left the focus group exhilarated, feeling wiser and more open than I had before I first stepped onto Sarah’s porch. We shared a great deal of laughter about the events and happenstances, not from chiding each other, but from detaching from difficult events and enjoying a mutual understanding aliveness, learning, and a community with which to share.

From a mainstream perspective, which is shaped by a spirit of competition, dominance and social hierarchy commonly attributed to a patriarchal sociocultural structure, women’s talk may seem benign and insignificant. However, as Bolen (2005) indicates, egalitarian, trusting talk among women, whether in a circle or within an established community “needs to be recognized as a positive force” that can inform all conversations among all people. (p. 80). Consensus building, collaboration and cooperation are sorely needed qualities that facilitate the sensibility and creativity to address the complexity of global problems—today and in the future. Bolen (2005) insists
that the qualities of “women’s talk” are in fact essential for humanity “to take the next step toward planetary community” (p. 80).

Informing critical literacy. On a small scale, the women of the Georgia women’s circle model democratic relationships conducive to a healthy democracy. They do not take up sociopolitical matters related to critical consciousness. However, as demonstrated through their meaning making of events and experiences, they collectively revisit ways of being and operating in the world in order to improve their conditions. The ability to do so represents acts of critical consciousness at the personal, intimate level, which I believe sets a precedent for further development in society. In addition, self-development facilitates development of the community. In other words, as individuals develop, they bring that development to their community. This simultaneous growth illustrates the significance of Freire’s (1991, 2000) concepts of ethical formation and right thinking as they affect social engagement and citizen agency.

Bolen’s (2005) women’s circle theory and critical literacy share similar goals: The remaking of a world that is “not yet finished or humane” (Shor, 1999, p. 1). In addition, both theories direct humanity on a path of constructive social and self-development. Yet, while Freire (1991, 2000) grounds democratic principles in humanism, Bolen (2005) extends Freire’s reach to global and planetary well-being. Additionally, whereas Freire (1991, 2000) identifies power generally as an oppressive, divisive force, Bolen (2005) identifies that same power as the dominant masculine paradigm of patriarchy. Insomuch as the Georgia women circle functions as a local, insular community, they impact those they touch and create a prototype of a healthy
community that can inform the world and the people in it. In the second focus group that provides a glimpse into women and community, I discuss the commitment to a shared vision of community by the Catholic sisters and activists, June and Mary in New Mexico.

**A community of the future.** Here I introduce June and Mary, two Catholic sisters whose visionary advocacy of the sacred earth community is not far afield from Bolen’s (2005) vision of a planetary community. I had not known the Sisters when I arrived in New Mexico, but my friend and fellow activist, Dinah, insisted I contact June and Mary because she was sure they would be a valuable addition to my research. Dinah was right. In the following discussion I draw from my conversation with June and Mary to introduce their integral vision of evolution and the community of the future.

June and Mary draw from scholars in science and consciousness to inform their lives as they assist humanity into a new phase of evolution. We began our conversation with questions about my research. As I explained my work, we soon found common ground: They too had studied Freire’s work. In the tradition of meditative and contemplative practice, the Sisters study and reflect upon the future of humanity. Yet they bring a scientific basis to their theology with their scholarly position grounded in the work of Teilhard and extending into a wide range of contemporary scientists and theologians.

Much like Freire (2001), June and Mary’s evolutionary perspective of consciousness requires the understanding that the historical change humanity has endured as a means to inform the future. The Sisters address the history of human evolution through shifts in consciousness. June explains,
During the period where there were great teachers--Jesus, Buddha, Allah, Mohammed, and Confucius--was the axial period that occurred in a several hundred year period of time [where] the human was collectively moving out of the tribal and into a new phase of personhood and psychological development. All these spiritual traditions really are . . . ultimately about the sacred--but it’s about the development psychologically, morally and ethically of the individual and the individual within the community.

As June indicates, and Mary concurs, that over hundreds of years, humanity has evolved from a tribal consciousness to a consciousness of personal growth. According to the sisters, the trajectory of collective human evolution can be imagined as a spiral where humanity continually returns to developmental challenges but each time as a more evolved species. I imagine the spiral of evolution as contributing to the illusion that history repeats itself. However, as this model indicates, humanity passes through the spiral each time as an increasingly more evolved collective. June describes where that spiral trajectory has taken humanity today:

. . . There are those that have written that we have been, since probably the 50s, moving into a new axial period. Thomas Berry would call it the ecozoic era. Some would say it’s the ecologic--or moving beyond the anthropocentric era to the ecological era. But within that and within spiritual paths and spiritual traditions, it is moving out of the "me and Jesus" or "me and the Buddha" or “Confucianism and I,” taking that psychological development of who we are and moving it into where the boundary is blurred more and [it is becoming] “me within the community of people and life” and “I am part of the whole,” as Thomas Berry says the sacred earth community.

Thus the paradigm of collective evolution points to a return to community that was once tribal. Accordingly, having experienced anthropocentric growth humanity now continues to expand the self. Whereas the tribal is a condition of humanity’s distant past, the community of the earth or sacred earth community is a vision toward a more ethical and humane future.
Mary explains that “there is a critical mass that keeps moving forward that brings about a different kind of consciousness” which could easily be interpreted as a destiny beyond human control. If evolution occurs regardless of the humanity’s desires and will, does that mean humanity can sit back and enjoy the ride? Mary clarifies,

Our agony right now, is will we be able to change the consciousness for greed, for power, that we can move it to a different climate where we understand that we are one and we want the best and so we become co-creators, where we actually can affect the way life will evolve.

And the best way to affect how life will evolve, she emphasizes,

We have to live our lives in such a way that, that it is rooted in that spiritual impulse, for the more—for a divine consciousness, or for the sacred, that we understand life as being sacred. We believe we can be other, and that we need to create an environment in which we call forth our best selves.

The paradigm represents the falling away of prior religious doctrines and practices, and the emergence of a vision of an earth community based on a unifying ethos. In light of the once strict doctrine of the Catholic Church, in addition to humanity’s religiously motivated wars and genocide throughout history to the present day, the Sisters’ conversation struck me as nothing less than revolutionary.

As I will discuss later in this chapter, June and Mary are community activists. “On the ground” they teach English and literacy skills at the border and work on state wide environmental justice initiatives. Their overarching vision is to “help holy mother earth through her passion and agony.” Through their practice of study, meditation and contemplation, they respond to an inner call or “zest for life” (King, 2014) to assist evolution in doing its work. They seek to create an intentional community “where people are really trying to affect changes and transformation into the whole consciousness.” As
I listened to their interview, I envision the Sisters to be much like midwives who hope to assist the birth of their vision of community while humanity comes of age.

Visions of new types of community may not be new; however for June and Mary, their vision shapes their commitment for creating a better way of life for humanity through community. They are not alone in this goal. Bolen (2005), as I mentioned earlier, speaks to the emergence of a planetary community as does Berry (1993; 2010) who first envisioned the *sacred earth community*. While Bolen (2005) advocates “women’s talk” and “women’s circles” as an antidote to patriarchy and a means to integrate women’s wisdom into the planetary community, Hubbard (1999) explores “Evolutionary Circles as imaginal cells in the social body, part of a ‘critical mass’ that holds pictures of the emerging human in community” (p. 59). Sheldrake (1987) provides the scientific argument that the collective consciousness is a morphic field that both influences and is influenced by humanity. Wilber (1979) draws on multiple scholars from various disciplines and arrives at a paradigm of evolving consciousness that explains the evolution of consciousness as a progressive and cumulative process of unifying the dualities in one’s reality. These examples represent only a few of those who are exploring positive possibilities of humanity’s future. Such keen interest potentiating the evolution of humanity begs the question, “How can this reality be plausible?” This is a question that as yet may not have an answer.

**Possibility, hope, unfinishedness and the future.** The Sister’s vision shares common ground with critical literacy, and contemporizes its applications. When addressing the future of humanity, there are innumerable unanswered questions, many of
which have become fodder for contest and conflict, particularly in the political arena in
the United States today. However, in light of critical literacy “humanity is not yet
finished or humane” (Shor, 1999, p. 1). As such, critical literacy offers hope in its most
radical form; it “challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for
social and self-development.” (p. 1). Importantly, these examples illustrate that “we can
redefine ourselves and remake society, if we choose,” thus we are not only unfinished,
our conditions, lives and societies are unfixed, changeable and malleable (p. 1). The
stories from the women’s circle in Georgia represent a means to share resources,
household space and intimate inner space. In choosing to undertake self-development
within their small community through their inclination for “women’s talk,” they exhibit
hope, unfinishedness and an emerging critical consciousness. As activists, June and Mary
have tapped into a vision aimed at advancing human evolution toward a future where
humanity understands that they must, as June remarks, “bring their best selves forth” for
a harmonious future.

Whereas the theme of community emerged among the women of my study
through interpersonal and social conditions of human experience, my next theme,
sentience, centers on the individual experience of the human condition.

Sentience

In the context of this study, I chose the word sentience to represent qualities in my
participants’ narratives that revealed an innate holistic experience. These can include but
are not limited to thought, feeling, emotion, perception, instinct and the senses. I begin
with a fuller explanation of those qualities I observed that led me to identify and name
sentience as predominant theme. I continue with three sets of examples that convey sentience through connections and relationships, followed by examples from my participants and a discussion of inner knowing, and with examples of how sentience presents conflicts within a patriarchal society. I conclude my portrayal of this theme by discussing sentience as a realm of untapped resources that offer possible contributions to the world and the people in it.

**Defined.** As noted, sentience describes the complex intersection of capabilities illustrated in my participants that include thinking, sensing, feeling, and more. Because I observed these qualities manifesting as a unified experience, I sought one word to describe that unity. My participants’ stories’ illustrated intuition, premonition, proprioception, heightened awareness, insight and shifts in consciousness, none of which I could identify solely as thoughts, feelings or emotions—yet they seemed to exhibit many qualities simultaneously. In addition some were unexplainable. As I proceed, I use sentience to describe all of human experiences arising from the body and mind.

To illustrate, in the first section of this chapter, sentience emerged among my participants in a variety of ways. For example, the women’s circle in the Georgia community displayed an “invisible power” through emotional intimacy, mutual care and empathy that could not be named by a single aspect of sensing or feeling—nor can it be fully explained in rational terms. The impetus for Sister’s June and Mary to study human consciousness, engage in meditation and contemplation, and act on the world to improve the human conditions caused them to extend beyond the *status quo* to find solutions has led them on their extraordinary path. Like the relationship among the
friends from the Georgia circle, the Sister’s impetus, desire or call is complex and multidimensional. It cannot be described as simply an idea or an emotion. Instead it seems to have emerged from a complexity of experiences that are unnamable. The stories from my participants emphasize sentience in relationships. Among them, the following examples illustrate sentient connections with animals, specifically horses.

**Connection in relationships.** I focus now on three stories from women whose experiences highlight sentient connections through nonverbal communication and through poetry. The first story comes from a horsewoman in Georgia whose connection with her horse and the nonverbal communication they shared saved her from a potentially treacherous predicament. In a similar vein, the next story from a horse woman in Ohio depicts nonverbal communication with horse as well, which validates the uncanniness of these relationships that sometimes defy logical explanation. The last example is a poem, also from a horsewoman that reveals the complexity of the sentient connection with her horse.

**Nonverbal communication in Georgia.** This story emerged from a three-woman focus group of life long horsewomen in Georgia. We met in my friend Beth’s kitchen on Sunday afternoon over a pot of vegetarian holy black rice and black beans, a southern favorite reinvented. The dishing up of food encouraged a lot of cross-talk. However, the conversation slowly gained clarity and turned to horses. Although I had known Beth and Sophia for some time, Gabriella, Sophia’s sister was a brief acquaintance. As the group ate and chatted, I asked Gabriella about herself. Gabriella had moved to England as a young adult. Quite a few years later, when she returned to the United States, she
acquired an Egyptian Arabian gelding, Samir. As Gabriella continued to brief me on her adult history, she increased her emphasis on Samir.

As a well-schooled horsewoman, Gabriella thought she knew what she wanted in a horse, and she believed Samir was not the horse for her. “He was not this and he was too much that, and I was thinking of selling him and finding a bigger, better, whatever.”

She continues,

. . . and something happened during that time where I got the sense that he really knew that my intention was to sell, to let him go, to just discard him, and it affected our relationship together. He changed. He felt discarded and he felt used and abused by this. So I did some soul searching in that time--with him and my feelings. Why was I thinking he was not good enough? I reached a place in my heart where I knew he was absolutely perfect and there was no reason to go through this selling and finding another horse. So when I told him. The relationship changed again but it came to this connection that was just incredible. I'll never forget him--some of the experiences and that storm.

“The storm?” I thought. The others may have heard about the storm, but rather than ask at that moment, I waited to hear more.

Gabriella went on to talk about her connection with the horse. They were, in her words, “soul partners.” They understood each other and they could communicate. Samir showed her how to trust and let go, and that “there is an expansion that comes through that” which she learned in the storm with him. She related her story:

I tell you, I've never been through a storm like that before. The rain was in sheets because the wind was blowing so hard so it was just a sheet of water and the wind was blowing and there was thunder and there was lightening all overhead. We were out in the middle of Ginny's pasture, and I cut a trail through to mother and Sophia's but I couldn't find that one little entranceway into the woods to get back into creek and up into the house. I couldn't find it. And this weather was just . . . it was saturated. I felt like I was going to be hit by lightning any minute. You know, it was really very scary. So I had us walk up and down a line of trees looking for the entrance way. Finally I said, ‘Samir, I cannot take us home. You have to take us home. I cannot do it. I am so sorry, but please, take us to
safety.’ I didn't have a tight rein anyway, but I just completely dropped the rein, and that little horse walked up a few paces, took a left into what seemed to be no way through. It was the path, and he took us home, all the way, through all of that. I just sat on his back and let myself be carried.

She spoke warmly of that experience as “the little story of Samir's brave heart,” and what she called their “beautiful connection.”

The relationship between Gabriella and Samir transcended the most common idea of animal-human companionship through reciprocity and non-ordinary communication. During a time of Gabriella’s heightened fear, the horse and rider experienced a sentient collaboration when Gabriella chose to surrender to Samir’s horse sense. Grandin (2009) indicates that his type of communication commonly occurs among sensory based individuals such as those with Asperger’s syndrome or dyslexia, neither of which applies to Gabriella. But Grandin (2009) also indicates that this type of communication can also be nurtured by those who learn to read the nuances of a horse’s body language.

Grandin’s assertion points back to the sensory, yet there was more nonverbal information exchanged between Gabriella and Samir than the experience of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell--information that words may not be able to fully describe.

How often I have heard that when a mount is unruly it is responding to the rider’s fear. Samir’s Arabian breeding predisposed him to react quickly, and often recklessly, to perceived danger. Even so, he showed no inclination to respond to Gabriella’s fear. Instead he allowed her to lead them along the tree line back and forth in the midst of a Georgia deluge. Certainly, as Gabriella emphasized, this was a story of Samir’s brave heart. Aside from enduring the intense storm without reacting with the flight instinct characteristic of horses, he demonstrated bravery through his trust in Gabriella’s
leadership and his patience with Gabriella in the midst of her fear. When she was ready
to let Samir take the lead, she surrendered to his instincts and he took them home. And as
is often the case with human beings, Gabriella needed to be ready to let go of control.

Granted, it is difficult to trust a beast, let alone another human with one’s life. However,
in her utter hopelessness, she allowed Samir to give them hope and a way out of the
storm.

The human capacity to form a trusting relationship with animals is not new.
However, it speaks to the creation of a deeper symbiosis with life not readily
acknowledged in modern culture. Experiences like Gabriella and Samir’s show up in
popular culture, but often as human interest stories or children’s books. Even though
these events actually occur, they are minimized as is the deep connection to all that is
sentient. However, both women and men who maintain strong sentient relationships with
horses understand how profound it can be. For many, this sentence and nonverbal
connection with their horse has become a way of life.

*Nonverbal communication in Ohio.* Another story from a participant several
hundred miles north of Georgia, in Ohio, validates Gabriella’s experience and illustrates
the sentient communication that is often reported among humans with close relationships
with horses. A participant from a group of horsewomen in Ohio, Alice, relates one of
many stories about her horse, Silas, and their uncanny communication. One summer, in
order to preserve the quality of the grass and the soil, she divided the pasture in two.
Silas and other horses in the herd were given hay in the grassless sacrifice area, the
section of the pasture where the horses stayed while new grass was replenished in the
other division. One evening during feeding time, Alice and her business partner stood in
the barn in front of Silas in his stall discussing the readiness of the new growth for
grazing. The two women expressed concern about the horses tearing the grass up with
their hooves, but decided to treat them to a little time on it that evening,

Silas was the leader of the herd, and he was able to manage the other horses
without outright attacks. That evening, when the horses walked out to feast on the fresh
grass, one of them, perhaps in his enthusiasm, ran out kicking and bucking. One can
imagine what a frolicking 1000 pound animal can do to the ground. Silas ran up to the
bucking horse, grabbed him by his throat. When Silas released him, the bucking horse
retreated to the sacrifice area and continued to carry on until he finally became calm.
Then he walked back to the new grass and grazed quietly with the rest of the herd. It was
obvious to Alice that something was communicated between Silas and the other horse.
As with Gabriella and Samir, Silas acted on Alice’s intentions.

Gabriella and Alice’s stories reflect their horse’s ability to read human intentions.
However, the women had devoted a significant amount of time and energy forming a
relationship with the horse. How the symbiosis in the communication came about is
difficult to determine. In past decades, a growing trend in equine training may begin to
explain the phenomenon. Often referred to as horse whispering, the method often
focuses on a proprioception and a heightened visual understanding the horse’s smallest
movements. Grandin (2009) indicates that trainers have difficulty teaching this method to
others because the trainers “do not consciously see the tiny changes [in the horse]; they
just feel them” (p. 124). There is so much to be said of the terrain of understanding a
horse—as well as other sentient beings, humans included. True or not, some sentient knowledge seems to defy skills of sensory observation; at least the English language has no words to succinctly identify them. In addition, how a horse or any living creature simply knows a human’s intent presents another unknown level of understanding that defies words and explanation.

We are often told in our culture that women are drawn to horses, and speculations surrounding these relationships range from philosophic to mythic. One myth portrays women’s relationships with horses as sexual. From a different point of view Ackerman (1995) submits that horses are “metaphors of a complex inner process” and represent an “ancient connection hidden deep within the collective unconscious” (p. 200). When I returned to my participants post-interview to ask their opinion on various opinions of women and horses, most believed that the eroticization was ridiculous attributing it to lore drawn from isolated cases of historical hearsay. Beth, a participant who has had horses all her life, provided a specific insight. She explained, “Not the sexual part, but the ancient connection. It is like a tribal connection between species. There is something almost religious about having a relationship with a horse.” In response to the sexual claims, Alice indicated,

> It is a Freudian view of the relationship. Horses are powerful and yet they enable us in ways no other being can. Especially for women, that's a very powerful feeling but it's also in the context of a partnership. How often does this happen in our relationships with other people? It's a unique relationship and for someone to try to trivialize it as ‘sexual’ is demeaning.

I could relate to both of their responses. I understand the relationship to be powerful, cooperative, tribal and almost religious. The sense of power does not come from control
but from cooperation, of tapping into a connection to “a reality of a wholly different order” (Elide, 1959, p. 10). Although the sexual connection might be true for some, it trivializes an important experience that illuminates human sentience, reflects the sentience of all beings, and exposes the possibility within the holistic human experience.

Expressing a bond through poetry. From the focus group with Gabriella and Beth in Georgia, Sophia shared a poem that reflects her relationship with her horse, Kahfess which I include in Appendix B: Elementary. Through the subtleties of poetry and prose, she seeks to feel what her horse feels, and know what he knows. In her poem, Elementary, I was particularly struck by how Sophia uses pronouns to illustrate a perspective of oneness with her horse, a perspective that departs from the objectification common to animal ownership. In other words, she does not indicate the horse belongs to her, as I often do when I refer to Kahfess as “her horse.” Instead she communicates directly to him, through him and with him. She begins apart from the horse as she wonders about his sentient life. “Oh if I could but walk with hooves with four big toes and a ballet of moves. Oh if I could have a dexterous muzzle . . .”

She follows with a subtle shift in her perspective the third stanza, line 8, where she uses “my” as though she is a new inhabitant in the body of a horse, longing to empathize with him: “Oh if I could but flare my delicate nostrils wide . . .” In the five subsequent stanzas she maintains that perspective until the ninth stanza when she once again becomes the woman speaking to the horse but still wishing to be like it: “Oh if I could but roll as you . . .” Immediately following, she refers to a partnership of “you and I” and continues to inquire into their collective sentient experience.
In the last stanza, she asks, perhaps pondering to herself or addressing Kahfess or her reader, “But for what reason do I ponder these odd things?” and answers, “because I seek to unravel a persistent questioning.” The subtle shift in her point of view from longing to be the horse, to speaking as though she were the horse, and to joining the horse in a partnership of communication reveals Sophia’s sense of unity with Kahfess. At no point does she objectify Kahfess with words associated with animal ownership. She does not speak of Kahfess as her horse, but speaks to Kahfess about his life and their partnership, emphasizing a desire to understand his complex range of experience. However, in doing so, she displays a sense of knowing Kahfess, but without the words to explain her understanding.

**Explaining the inexplicable.** Among the three examples of a woman’s relationships with their horses, the ineffability of their experiences arises repeatedly throughout, leading me to consider how these kinds of events are perceived among scholars. In the above discussion I referred to Eliade (1959) who speaks to “a reality of a wholly different order from ‘natural’ realities” (p. 10). Those realities, of course, would be those that are naturalized to cultural way of life. The “reality of a wholly different order” he calls the sacred, a term often relegated to religion and steeped with unscientific and mythological biases. However, the qualities attributed to the sacred lend themselves to sociocultural adaptations.

Similar to Eliade, Smith (2000) indicates that the sacred is not something relegated to religion, but “announces itself” through revelation, epiphanies, and “unheralded manifestations that cast things in a different light” (p. 141). As such, Smith
(2000) indicates, these events conform to three characteristics, or “marks:” 1) They are not subject to our control, 2) They wear the stamp of importance, and 3) They outstrip our understanding (p. 141). These marks call to my mind an image, perhaps from television or the movies from years ago, of purported civilized people showing up among a primitive tribe with an instant camera and instantly proclaimed as gods by the tribesmen. The three marks of the sacred are simply related to the line drawn by normative reality, a line which is unfixed and changing. Smith (2000) also explains that the sacred manifest through life’s expanding horizons often through interpersonal relationships (p. 139). In light of my discussion, I would include relationships with nature and its creatures as well.

The stories from my participants bear all three marks of “a reality of a wholly different order” (Eliade, 1959). Clearly when Gabriella surrendered to Samir, she relinquished control. In addition the event was highly significant, for one because Gabriella understood this to be an event that saved her from tragedy. Lastly, there was no hard factual explanation for what happened, it indeed outstripped her understanding. The same holds for Alice who observed her horse behave according to her desires that would normally be impossible to communicate short of maintaining a fence. Of each event, if I ask was it uncontrollable, was it marked with importance, and was it unexplainable, the answers are all “Yes.” For Sophia, who seeks an answer to the ineffable connection to her horse, she arrives at the same answers.

I cannot help but wonder if psychology, a field that has contributed an abundance of knowledge of the human mind, has also contributed to relegating the sacred to
hallucinations or ideations of the insane. In the previous chapter, I noted Bruner’s (1991) assessment of the human interaction as “rich and messy” (p. 22). On one hand, I agree with Bruner. However, I also understand that as a psychologist of the 90s, his scientific approach limits him. Because science emphasizes rational mind apart from all other human capabilities, at the current point in human development, it seems to be an insufficient instrument by which to assess the full capacity of the sentience of a living being.

**Inner knowing.** Although the women of this study do not speak to the existence of the integrated sentient self, they express it as a given by bringing forth stories that illustrate a range of sentient experience that cannot be explained solely in rational terms. In some cases, they name sentience, intuition or an unnamable inner voice. Beth told a brief story of how she drove near an elderly friend’s home almost daily and had not stopped to see her for weeks. When she finally decided to visit on a Saturday afternoon, her friend, who was alone at the time, had just fallen and needed help. How did she know to stop on that day at that time? Her choice certainly involved thinking and feeling, but why *then*?

One participant told a story of her twelve year old daughter who saw her mother upset. Concerned, her daughter asked what was wrong. Her mother explained that she was facing a very big decision and could not decide what to do. The mother would not dream of burdening her young daughter by asking advice, but the twelve-year-old instructed, “Listen to your voice inside.” “Ah, but, you see, there are conflicting voices,” her mother replied. The child thought a moment and said, “Which is the louder voice?”
The mother was stunned by her daughter’s fragile understanding that decision making functions are multifaceted and not simply a product of reason. Similarly, how did Gabriella’s horse Samir know his way home? How did Silas know Alice’s desire to keep frolicking horses off the tender new grass? Why did Sophia care to know what it was like to be Kahfess? To my knowledge, science has no way to predict or validate these experiences. And to my knowledge, these events are common, but often slip off into our collective memory as society and culture expect a rational presence.

Intuition or the inner voice represents subjective knowing and can be explained in part though experience. However, it ultimately defies reason. Subjective inner prompts do not necessarily occur independently of the mind or to outer stimuli such as sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and touch. But there seems to be an invisible, unnamed sensory terrain that defies what dominant culture calls thinking and is not relegated to any one of the five senses. One might consider it to be intuition, insight, hunch or even extrasensory perception. Bolen (2005) names this ineffable terrain intuition:

Intuitive insight comes in many ways, including an inner voice that comes through loud and clear to let you know when an assignment is yours. Your heart may do the selecting. You may find yourself unable to walk away from someone who needs something you want to provide, or away from something you want to do. And in either case, you don’t even know if you can. When your heart is your guide, this assignment has your name on it (p. 163).

Whatever one chooses to name it, the intuitive terrain does little to inform the explainable rational intellect except that one reaches a level of knowing.

Unlike the quintessential school math problem where the solver must show their work, with the unseen internally prompted phenomena, words or reason cannot explain intuition. There is nothing to show but the answer. The latter stories reify the notion of
ineffability or the sacred from a nonreligious, nonsectarian point of view. The distinction is simple. Whereas religion is often accompanied by faith in a requisite doctrine, these stories represent the reality of one’s own personal inner experience. The only faith that is necessary is in one’s inner sentient knowledge.

**Conflicts in a patriarchal society.** Sentience is not without its pitfalls, as demonstrated by the following narratives that explain the conflicts of sentience in a patriarchal society. The first example draws from a participant’s initial reticence toward taking part in the study because of the implications of the word heart and being a woman. The second emphasizes the potential difficulty of being an authentically feeling, sensing, and emotional individual living in a patriarchal society.

**Danger of feelings and inner knowledge.** Because sentience contradicts the dominant, rational masculine paradigm (Seidler, 1998) mere feelings, senses and emotions pose problems for women as discussed in the following vignette. In the Santa Fe focus group, Sage brought a perspective that illustrated how the act of revealing perceptions beyond the rational can be harmful—particularly to women. Before our interview, Sage forewarned me that I may not want to hear what she had to say. Although I assured her that I welcomed all opinions, she remained adamant. When the day of the focus group arrived, I was surprised to discover that her resistance had to do with the word “heart” as it relates to her work as an activist:

I don't want to do things that are not effective. And that’s exactly why when you and I spoke before, and I was saying when you talk to people about heart and what does heart mean to you and how does heart play into your activism--I said I think that is an extremely dangerous territory for women activists. I think it's the fastest was to de-legitimize your work, to marginalize yourself. You use that
terminology and next thing you know everybody thinks you're rainbows and unicorns and tripping around in the woods.

Clearly, some words agitate bias, stereotypes or highly-charged opinion. Sage explains that if she uses the word *heart*, she can be easily discounted as a sentimental woman. She explains the importance of her image as a woman:

> . . . I don't want to be seen that way. We are living in patriarchy. Men run everything. It is hard enough for a woman to pull a seat up to the table get a chance to mouth off and you know, I think it goes without saying if you devote your life to working for peace or justice or environmental protection or trying to dismantle the power structures that are so unjust in our world, you're obviously coming from a place of heart. It goes without saying. So sometimes I think we're better off not talking about it.

I agree. Words that suggest sensing, feeling or intuitive processes cast a less than favorable light when used in context that purports rationality. In addition, women live with the stereotype of being oversensitive, over-reactive, and reliant on feelings and intuition. Ironically, the same biases, stereotypes and opinions that are triggered by feeling-sensing words like “emotional, sensitive, and sentiment” are generally not based in reason either, but represent irrational and ill drawn conclusions based in bias instructed by dominant power.

Sage’s point returns me to the stigma involved with fully knowing one’s integral humanness rather than hiding or denying it in the dominant context of rational norms. Freire’s (1991) use of the term sectarianism helps explain how rationalism is political and decidedly not neutral. Whether rightist or leftist, the sectarian is one who devises or underscores difference for the purpose of discriminating the sect (self) from others. The sectarian cannot understand a reality beyond his or her held truth, is “blinded by his irrationality, does not (or cannot) perceive the dynamic of reality—or he misinterprets it”
(Freire, 1991, p. 22). Therefore, as in Sage’s example above, as benign as the word heart may seem at face value, she knows that using the word would delegitimize her within highly male dominated sectarian context.

Of course, any aversion to heart has no basis other than its sentient connotations that subtly refute the dominant paradigm set by a sectarian mindset. The sectarian perceives oneself as finished and the final word on truth, and seems adept at convincing others to believe his truth. One example is the fundamentalist neo-conservative sectarians in the United States today who in support of their personal, unwavering beliefs, have gained considerable support in extending their beliefs to restricting the rights of other citizens (Giroux, 2005). Although “blinded by irrationality” the sectarian lays claim to rationality, even to the point of declaring himself the sole voice of reason.

Freire (1991) sets radicalism as the opposite of sectarianism, indicating that subjective thoughts based on experience and individual feelings, senses, perceptions and intuition are contrary to the force of dominant power—as are forms of radicalism. In contrast to sectarianism, which is characterized by certainty and the lack of self-doubt, “radicalization, nourished by a critical spirit, is always creative; . . . it criticizes and thereby liberates” (p.21). Although the word raises red flags and conjures up a mythic image of revolution and destruction, radicalism joins the ranks of sentience as a threat to dominant power. Considering the number of centuries humanity has submitted to the divisiveness of dominant power and the rational paradigm, there is much to learn about this inner domain of the self that has been split off, undermined, rejected, and ignored.
Moreover, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) explain that humans are conditioned to accept knowledge and truths that are generated externally rather than internally. This insight further substantiates the claim that dominant power’s survival hinges on the obfuscation of inner or self-knowledge. Because knowledge is driven by the dominant male perspective, the authors indicate that external knowledge is more foreign to women than men, often leaving women feeling disempowered, voiceless and silent. In contrast to men who tend to identify and ally themselves with the external source of knowledge and truth, women perceive the external source as a wholly separate authority.

Of those who discussed their unusual experiences, none offered apologies in the presence of other women. For the circle of women from the Georgia compound, support and validation of their sentient voices informed their personal growth and agency. They spoke of self-awareness and displayed security within their relationships in their circle. In the context of their friendship, the horsewomen from Georgia and Ohio spoke with strength, and autonomy. For all of these women, they knew what they knew. Their experiences were fact.

In other words, women are more likely to feel estranged from received knowledge than men. Thus the emergence of subjective knowing for women constitutes a profound shift. In their research with women, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) found that,

For many of the women, the move away from silence and an externally oriented perspective on knowledge and truth eventuates in a new conception of truth as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited . . . Truth now resides within the person and can negate answers that the outside world supplies (p. 54).
In this study, the participants as women among their own gender, and friends among friends, most connected strictly as women, thus minimizing the male perspective within their circles. As a result, the danger of feelings and inner knowledge was removed and the women were free to reveal their authentic selves.

**Authenticity and patriarchy.** Among the women I interviewed, some clearly expressed their viewpoints of being a woman in a man’s world. Sage was one. Another, who identified herself as a feminist triggered a reaction in me that, from a sociocultural perspective, caused me to consider the difficulty of negotiating one’s authentic sentience in a patriarchal society. Because she was eager to be interviewed but could not attend the focus group, we made arrangements for me to come to her home. Without hesitation she spoke both eloquently and adamantly about women’s rights. She had been groomed by an influential political organization that is dedicated to putting women in public office, and she spoke with force and conviction.

Like Sage, she ascribed to the belief that to effect change, she must be accepted into the inner sanctum of patriarchal power. I was highly impressed by the strides she had made in her work. At the same time, hers was the only interview where I felt actually nervous and inept in my research and interview skills. When it came to reviewing recordings of all my interviews, I arbitrarily chose hers first. Within a few seconds, I could barely tolerate listening to myself. Although she willingly volunteered to be interviewed, the woman appeared angry and uncomfortable in my presence. Although she seemed likeable enough, I was extremely uncomfortable with her. In short, I was concerned and confused by my reaction.
Brown (2012), a social worker, recalls a story that illuminates my experience. An interview with men made her acutely aware that, in her words, “Holy shit! I am the patriarchy” (p. 95). Her insight revealed that despite her wishes to the contrary, she had internalized patriarchal values, which can be habitually imposed on others or on oneself, a phenomenon Lorde (1984) calls “that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (p. 123). As the participant and I conversed politely, a small but mighty emotional hurricane of ineptness and shame engulfed me. Admittedly, my interview triggered feelings reminiscent of past experiences. Something within me caused me to react by feeling worthless and incompetent, the same way I felt when I was confronted by unshakable, irrational power and anger. As I absorbed Brown’s insight, and applied it to my reflexive inner sense, I began to understand the dynamic to the best of my ability. From a sociopolitical perspective, I believe that while my participant spoke to the deleteriousness of the patriarchy, our conversation was awash with the symptoms of the same.

Although I could not say in all certainty that this dynamic was at play, framed in this study, our interaction—and my response—can be explained as a sociocultural response to the perception of dominant power. I perceived her as decidedly overpowering and I reacted to her by emotionally recoiling. My knee-jerk response left me reeling with powerlessness which is a testimony to how easy it can be to take on long-existing roles of conditioning set by patriarchal standards, which are guided by domination rather than cooperation (Bolen, 2005; Lorde, 1984). The experience underlined the threat that patriarchal power has on the authentic self that is inhabited by
thinking, but also by feeling, sensing and the entire range of sentient capabilities in being alive.

**The contribution of sentience.** In the context of dominant power with “... living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive” (Lorde, 1984). The patriarchal culture conditions the populous to disregard the whole self and to operate as compartmentalized selves championed by rational thought. This divisive paradigm instructs “distrust of the indications of [the body]” (Seidler, 1998) which Bateson (1979) emphasizes serves as a conduit for all subjective experience. Consequently, both women and men withdraw from the sensate, experiential, intuitive and subjective in an act of “inner rejection” and rely on knowledge from the outside (Seidler, 1998, p. 25). Under such conditions, the individual normalizes external rational knowledge as truth, while inner holistic knowledge becomes suspect. In this context, to reclaim the whole of one’s thoughts, feelings, emotions, and entire sentient experience seems revolutionary. Claiming one’s sentience represents a movement toward the authentic self and becomes a vehicle for exploring uncharted territory and possibilities for the future. Although the stories in this section do not actually prove outright the value of sentience, they do suggest a direction for exploration and learning that illuminates a deeper engagement with humanness and all living things, as well as index a realm of possibility within an integral aspect of life that has been habitually been denied. In the following segment of this discussion, I consider agency, a theme that arose in this study that demonstrates the desires and contributions my
participants as they take action to make a positive contribution to the world and the people in it.

Agency

The next major theme involves my research participants’ action in the world and their capacity to affect positive ethical change in their lives and the lives of others.’ I begin with an introduction of agency as it relates to critical literacy followed by a discussion of the problems that arise with citizen agency in the United States today. I then offer up two stories of social agency that exhibit different aspects of activism, one on the state level that also impinged on the interests of the United States’ military industrial complex, and the second that deals with radical feminism in service of the greater good. I follow with a discussion of agency as personal action as demonstrated by my participants as it connects to sentience, integrity, accountability and surrender.

The people vs the military industrial complex. The following story draws from a conversation with Dinah and Sage, two women who have dedicated nearly thirty years to the “good fight” only to find that the process designed to enable their participation, was actually designed to fail. I begin with background of both women by returning to Sage’s perspective on heart and sharing Dinah’s narrative of her early commitment as an activist. I include a brief background of the nuclear weaponry, waste and disposal issues germane to the story along with an explanation of my participants experience with a public participation system that failed them. I complete the discussion by examining the obstacles to democracy in the United States today and by offering historical insights into a democracy gone awry.
It began with heart. Despite Sage’s reticence to offend my sensibilities with her opinion of the term heart, her favorite artwork at home, that she looks at every day, reminds her: "Your heart is a muscle the size of your fist, keep loving keep fighting" (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). This only begins to explain the Santa Fe, New Mexico focus group’s strong sense of ethics. These women have been artists, activists and feminists for since the 1960s, yet their vibrancy and energy did not betray their ages. Each is a transplant to Santa Fe, New Mexico from other areas of the country, but they have lived in the area for many years. The rolling mountains and mesas of northern New Mexico is their home. This is the home they have fought to protect for nearly 30 years. As artists, I believe their love of beauty inspires them to protect their homes and the land they love. However, they also seek to protect their lives, the lives of others and the earth that holds them.

The endurance it takes “to keep on loving and keep on fighting” for so many years reflects their unwillingness to become stagnant or finished. Moreover, they are unwilling to give up. Instead they have begun to re-vision their work. Dinah talks about where she began.

It did start a long time ago because I was a draft counselor during the Vietnam War, and I was very active in that--it was at least five years of my life--my entire college career and after. But in fact as a small child, I'll never forget, I used to write these poems about peace and I was . . . um . . . seven, and all the while my parents were arch conservative, pro-war. You know my father was a Spiro Agnew Republican if you can imagine.

We all laughed and understood.

So where I got that I have no idea because my parents purposely tried to isolate me so that I wouldn't have any of these influences, and yet I just became a rebel at that early age.
As a draft counselor in Berkeley, California, she was able to make a difference. She emphasized how that work “was a very defining part of my life. Many of the people that I worked with back then are still my closest friends to this day.” Yet her first success was not a reliable barometer for her future activism. When she moved to Santa Fe, the work became harder.

**Nuclear weapons, waste and disposal.** A large area of New Mexico houses the facilities for testing and production for the United States military industrial complex. The first hydrogen bomb was detonated as an experiment in 1945 at the Trinity site in the white gypsum sands of southeastern New Mexico. A month later, a second H bomb ended World War II while decimating untold numbers of innocents in Hiroshima, Japan. The ethics behind that nuclear weaponry continues to be a topic of study, but also remains a significant ethical issue as Japan and its citizens continue to be affected by the event personally, medically, environmentally, socially and psychologically (Sanders, 2013). Because the weapon originated 36 miles from Santa Fe at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in Los Alamos, NM, residents watched carefully as nuclear weaponry continued (and continues) to be tested and developed along with the generation of a complexity of nuclear wastes.

Within this context, about thirty years ago, the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) was proposed, and with it, Dinah began her journey into a harsh reality invisible to most Americans. It seems the common image of activism in the U. S. suggests demonstrations by less than sane individuals who must be restrained, silenced and removed by police to maintain social equilibrium. That is not Dinah’s story at all. Just
as Sage emphasized the care in presenting herself in a way that the patriarchal system
would take her seriously, that was the case for Dinah as well. As participants, they were
required to follow strict requirements of public participation mandated by the New
Mexico state agencies. In order “to take a seat at the table,” they read technical permits,
testified at hearings, participated in public meetings, and researched various aspects of
the nuclear industry including geography, hydrology, public health statistics, legislature
and even nuclear physics. And neither did this in their spare time—because they had
none. Instead they stole time from other obligations. Dinah did this while raising two
children alone and maintaining her work as a map designer.

They worked to bring intelligent, fully informed voices to the discussion. They
brought scientific evidence that shed light on flaws in the government’s plans. As
members of a democracy, they were promised a voice. However, no one promised that
they would be heard, let alone taken seriously. The industry purports to be grounded in
science and engineering. However, it is not about science: It is about political science.
The system was not or is not democratic, but a kingdom of done deals fashioned to
appear like democracy. Dinah spoke of time, and frustration she invested in resisting
environmental injustice within a system designed to exhaust and out-finance any forms of
dissent:

I probably spent 10-20 hours weeks for about 25 years before I realized that it was
all a complete waste of time, that I had wasted 25 years times fifty-two times
twenty (16, 000 hours). You know, think of how many months—years—of
time—I felt went completely wasted--did nothing. And so then I went into several
years of depression, you know. I just cannot do that: Looking at the permits,
going to the permit hearings, doing this type of activity anymore because for one
thing, I can't read that stuff anymore, and for another I think it’s completely 100%
ineffective.
As young women of the 60s, Dinah, Sage and I grew up emboldened with a passion to work towards justice, equality and maintain a healthy democracy. Unfortunately, we may have mistaken passion for real agency to affect change.

Renewed activism. Yet as Dinah and Sage communicated—and I concur—our culture is unfixed and changeable, and as it changes, new ways to approach old problems begin to appear. Dinah shared an insight that has changed the trajectory of her activism: “I did actually come to this conclusion that there are only two things that work to affect change: One is marketing techniques and the other is organizing.” I knew about her insight, because a few months before I drove to New Mexico to conduct interviews, Dinah called and invited me to participate in a marketing and organizing initiative to raise citizens’ consciousness of the issues surrounding plutonium pit production and radioactive waste. Sage planned to join us along with several other women and men. To date we have made little if any progress. Why?

Dinah: Now I am not an organizer. I’m not good at that.

Sage: It’s also because we have trouble figuring out what to do.

Dinah: And we are doing too many things

Sage: Yes, we’re also doing too many things.

As Dinah and Sage brainstormed, I thought about how the tasks of organizing and marketing development sound easier in theory than in practice. With community organizing, scheduling a time for people to meet can be a difficult task, and the expectation of ongoing participation is unrealistic.
**Obstacles to democracy.** In Alinsky’s (1971) historic primer on democratic participation, he insists that a democracy requires full and ongoing citizen participation to be wholly realized and effective:

> From the beginning the weakness as well as the strength of the democratic ideal has been the people. People cannot be free unless they are willing to sacrifice some of their interests to guarantee the freedom of others. The price of democracy is the ongoing pursuit of the common good by all of the people (p.26).

The imbalance among citizens in this regard is immense. Frankly, those who “stand to sacrifice some of their interests,” or who have something to lose, are far less apt to be malcontent and thus less motivated to political action. However, those who might gain are often not able to devote time, energy and resources to affect change. Instead they are immersed in “making ends meet” and what Dinah calls “the minutia of life.” In 1835, Tocqueville forewarned the same predicament as a hindrance to democracy: “. . . it is especially dangerous to enslave [citizens] in the minor details of life” (Tocqueville, 1898, p. 354). One hundred and seventy-five years later, it seems that little has changed.

Negligent power. From the conversation that emerged in the interview, Dinah and Sage have contributed to bringing awareness to the citizens of New Mexico. Their focus today is to bypass the red tape and corruption of a system that is designed to fail its citizenry long before any voices of dissent strain to be heard. After many years, these women know the system inside and out. They see it for what it really is. The hamster wheel of bureaucracy is only one mechanism in a system riddled with problems. In fact, the futile bureaucratic cycle creates a barrier that hides deep systemic problems. Among them is government negligence. As noted above, in an urgency to end World War II, the United States took action, and justifiably so. However, that they dropped a hydrogen
bomb “the peaceful atom” (Sanders, 2013) on Hiroshima, Japan only a month after the first actual experimental test displays irresponsibility. This act displays a lack of foresight and concern for the future of humanity as a whole by a power structure that continues to display disregard for the future generations.

One case in point is the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) that is nestled within canyons of nearby volcanic Jemez Mountain range. Today, LANL stores radioactive waste in open containers under tents, and the same Santa Fe River that runs through the city has tested positive for radioactive matter (Dinah and Sage). Despite the work of many citizen activists and groups and serious flaws in safety mechanisms and procedures, WIPP was approved and built in southeastern New Mexico. That same power closed WIPP in February 2014 due to an underground explosion of nuclear contaminated waste. Citizens continue to voice their concerns regarding the future integrity of the facility. However, the government plans to reopen it in the near future, and continues to entertain lucrative possibilities for the site including a joint venture between the U.S. and Russia to bury 74 million tons of plutonium waste. These examples are a few of the many. An untold number of instances such as these are taking place in the U.S. and the world today.

_Historical insights into a democracy gone awry._ Immersed in the small details of life, citizens of the new millennium have become the embodiment of Tocqueville’s warning of 1835. The problem facing humanity almost two centuries ago may not be so far afield from those confronting citizens today. Education offers one possible solution to this seemingly endless problem; however, as evidenced by the recent turn back to the
educational assembly line of standardized testing, systems of learning are slow to progress. Social media has been a powerful instrument in raising citizen consciousness, and although individuals can express their viewpoints and exert a sense of agency, the long term effects of these sites on maintaining the core principles of democracy remains to be seen. The concern Dinah voiced—that her years of service to her community, nation and planet were all for naught—presents and represents a centuries’ old problem. I do not wonder why Freire’s critics find critical literacy to be oversentimental and idealistic (Bruner, 1991). If humanity has not changed at this point in our development, why would anyone be so naïve to think that change can occur now?

From hopelessness to hope. In a less than functional democracy, the small effects of individual agency even multiplied by a group number pales in comparison to an impenetrable system of power. In this light, personal agency seems a worthless pursuit. However, Tocqueville (1898) maintains the importance of exercising one’s freedom in small acts:

Subjection in minor affairs breaks out every day and is felt by the whole community indiscriminately. It does not drive [citizens] to resistance, but crosses them at every turn, till they are led to surrender the exercise of their will. Thus their spirit is gradually broken and their character enervated (p. 354).

As if they engaged in a game where the rules constantly changed to suit the designated winner, Dinah and Sage were “crossed at every turn.” Still, they emerged with indomitable spirits and a new vision. They have begun to consider new ways to exercise agency.

Tocqueville’s words, although written over a century ago, capture the historical and political significance of agency. In most cases, small acts of agency are all that
citizens can give. Even the years Dinah invested to affect positive change seems small and worthless to her. In both cases, the actual impact may be unseen. As Bolen (2005) wrote, “You know when an assignment is yours . . . When your heart is your guide this assignment has your name on it” (p. 163). Some aspects of life remain unclear, unknown and ineffable. Does that mean one should do nothing or not care? From Sister June and Mary’s perspective, alignment to the evolutionary trajectory and “bringing forth one’s best self” is the best recourse. Bolen (2005) ascertains that when intuition prompts, not caring is not an option, or as Mary emphasizes, “You cannot not do.” In the next story, June and Mary discuss their activism as women in the Catholic Church. Because June and Mary take up Freire’s challenge in “the service of the greater good,” I introduce their story by revisiting Freire’s concepts of ethical formation and radicalism as an antidotal force to sectarianism. I continue with Mary’s story of the history of feminist activism in the Catholic Church and her first-hand experience as a feminist in a sectarian culture.

Radical feminism. Once again, I turn to June and Mary with a story of their radical feminism in the service of the greater good. Before embarking on June and Mary’s story, however, I wish to illuminate Freire’s premise of radicalism, which is particularly relevant to June and Mary who as feminist nuns, have resisted the sectarianism present in the Catholic patriarchy. When Freire (1991) encouraged “radicalism nourished by a critical spirit, is always creative” what did he mean (p. 21)? As I have noted, he sets the statement against sectarianism, but he also indicates that “sectarianism fed by fanaticism, is always castrating” which adds clarity to Freire’s
context and choice of the words “radicalism,” “critical,” and creative.” Radicalism is every sense, perception, action and way that does not ascribe to dominant power. According to Freire (2001), a feeling even as benign as hope is radical. In the same vein, “critical” frames one’s ability to see through systemic external conditioning and assess that which is deemed the truth. Consequently “radicalism nourished by a critical spirit” impels the new by remaking, reforming, and as June and Mary suggest, “beginning again.”

The idea of “beginning again” resonates the Sisters adherence to the spiral of evolutionary development which I will discuss later in this paper. However, it also illustrates their unfinishedness and unfixed conditions, and their ability to return to the feasibility of their agency as women, citizens and clergy. As they tell their story, June and Mary interweave their experience into an historical overview of feminism in the Catholic Church, their own feminist history and their resistance to the masculine sectarian paradigm by walking with the people in service of social and environmental justice. In addition, they discuss the relevance of their feminism on a deeper understanding social justice, of dominance and divisiveness and on their ability to articulate it.

As feminists, activists and women who have devoted their lives to human transformation, June and Mary, exemplify “radicalism,” “critical spirit,” and the “creative” impetus Freire (2001) advocates. They are members of a long tradition of male sectarian clergy. Historically, however, they also belong to a quiet legacy of feminist reform that they identify as reaching back to the Middle Age as early as Abbess Clare of
Assisi (1194-1253) who Mary refers to as “the first woman resistance.” Throughout her life as clergy, Clare held to her own “rule” or set her own precedent for principles of religious practice, clearly a testimony to her ability to follow her inner prompt regardless of any reaction from the governing powers. The Pope did not approve Clare’s rule until after her death in 1253. Centuries later, in 1979, Theresa Kane, along with 40 other nuns, donned blue arm bands of resistance and confronted “the Pope—the power,” in support of being granted the “fullness of ministry,” which to date, they have still not received.

June and Mary bring a significant history of carving their own path in a highly traditional, patriarchal religious system. In our interview, Mary explained an early moment in her own resistance near the same period Theresa Kane and her cohorts made their demands know to the Pope. Mary explained that in Jesuit school, men and women were trained theologically in the same way. However, even though the only difference between them was gender, the men were granted ordination while the women were not. In protest female students wore characteristic blue arm bands at the priest’s ordinations. As was customary, during the induction, the ordinates would stand in line and the Bishop would ask each of them individually, "Are you willing and able?" At one ordination, as the Bishop walked his way down the line, each ordinate would reply, “I am willing, and able.” On one occasion, as the Bishop performed his ritual, the women novices who were seated in the congregation, also spoke up one by one in kind: "I am willing and able," "I am willing and able," "I am willing and able." “The ordination was subsequently closed down,” Mary spoke with a smile.
Over time, they gained more autonomy. Today, they are not subservient to the male clergy or to the Vatican. After a mandate from Vatican II “to read and respond to the sign of the times,” many nuns shifted their focus. Where they once had founded schools to educate the immigrants or hospitals to care for the poor, now others could take over their work. So they channeled their efforts into areas of need such as housing, social work, prisons, environmental justice, and peace and justice. Mary describes the change as a “shift in consciousness,” which, she indicates has not always been well-received:

And now the powers that be do not like that. The Sisters are no longer on the forefront of talking about abortions, or contraceptives or women's ordination or gay marriages. That is not where we are. They are saying “Oh! They're doing social justice work!” And you know we are proud that we have been identified as people who are walking with the people, walking with the struggles. Bringing forth all sorts of policy levels, ecology issues, the devastation of our land. And now there are different kinds of communities all over that are doing that so we have contributed to a shift of consciousness.

Thus, where they once pressed for equal representation, they now bring a different perspective to feminism. They are less like the blue-arm-banded activists of the 70s wanting a part of men’s power, and more like Clare of Assisi who held to her own convictions and developed her own way. Yet, Mary adds a caveat of accountability, “That doesn't mean we're perfect. Oh my God, I'm not saying that at all!”

Mary indicated--and June concurred--that the feminist movement became important to their entire worldview. Through it, they could better understand “the critical dynamics of oppression and domination.” They had seen it through racism and classism, but feminism opened their eyes to patriarchy. Importantly, it helped them identify the hidden mechanisms within the culture and gave them the ability to articulate what they felt but could not integrate. “When you have the articulation and more and more
people are articulating it,” Mary indicates, “more and more consciousness comes about so therefore you could understand solidarity--and you began to understand solidarity and the struggle.”

Here Mary and June raised an important point about agency and also provide an example of how critical consciousness grows. The ability to identify racism and classism as a means to dominate and oppress offers one aspect of critical consciousness. However, the ability to understand domination and oppression also deepens one’s critical awareness. Thus understanding the workings of a patriarchal structure creates a means to better understand all forms of the domination and oppression common in the US and the world. Remarkably, June and Mary belong to a legacy of quiet resistance. The source of dominant power in their subculture seems to disregard the social and environmental service of those nuns who choose to walk with the people. Thus, despite the tension between the two factions of clergy in the church, June and Mary’s work continues. Unlike Dinah and Sage, dominant power has not significantly hampered the Sisters’ ability to enact change through their service to human equity and the environment. Yet also unlike Dinah and Sage, their activism does not immediately encroach on “the consciousness for greed [and] for power” (Mary). Both stories exemplify action on the world and the people in it, and locate the feasibility of democratic principles, or the lack thereof, beyond the personal. However, as I listened to my participants’ narratives, I wondered about what Krishnamurti (1970) calls “the only revolution,” that within oneself, which brings me to agency as a personal phenomenon.
Agency as personal. As I conclude the theme of women and agency, I briefly consider its validity when offset by the scope of world problems, and subsequently explain Freire’s position on personal agency and ethical formation with emphasis on integrity and accountability. Following, I revisit the concept of dominant rationality in contrast to sentience to argue that accessing the holistic sentient experience is also an expression of agency. I then return to Dinah and Sage’s story to illuminate the significance of individual agency, noting instances of integrity, accountability as well as surrender that contribute to their personal agency, unfinishedness and growth.

With looming problems throughout the world, it seems that human effort would be better spent improving the collective rather than the self. At the same time, achieving collective, critical consciousness seems nothing less than a Herculean task. An important key rests in Freire’s emphasis on ethical formation and right thinking, processes that occur at the personal level. Freire (2001) characterizes ethical formation in a variety of ways. He indicates what makes humans ethical is “the capacity to ‘spiritualize’ the world and to make it either beautiful or ugly” as well as the capacity to assess and analyze situations (p.53).

Moreover, Freire (2001) embeds humility and keeping oneself in check into right thinking, and folds concepts surrounding integrity and accountability into his discussion on ethical formation. On teaching, the teacher, and the learner, he writes:

The beauty of the practice of teaching is made up of a passion for integrity that unites the teacher and student. A passion that has roots in ethical responsibility. This is not beauty that is sullied by superficiality or by coarse pharisaical posturing. It is beauty that is pure without being puritanical (p. 88).
Freire explains integrity as a condition of honest representation and authenticity that require humility and a lack of pretense as well as the practice of self-awareness and the acceptance of responsibility for one’s own actions. As a case in point, in contrast to a politician who must lie about past wrong-doings in order to be elected for office, an individual with integrity who is accountable for his or her own actions not only experiences personal freedom but has nothing to hide and no reason to lie.

**Sentient wholeness as radicalism.** In this discussion I have used *integrity* to identify personal honesty but I also use it to explain the holism of the sentient experience—which, in my opinion, also requires honest awareness. I specifically mean the kind of honesty that allows one to recognize sociocultural conditioning and to identify oneself as an individual “who socio-historically has arrived at the point of becoming conscious of the condition and unfinishedness” (Freire, 2001, p. 54). In terms of alternative experiences, sentience and ethical agency, the “condition” is a set of norms fashioned by the paradigm of dominant masculinity that holds rationale apart from--and superior to--other human functions (Seidel, 1998). I continue to press the point of dominant rationality because, as I hope to have argued effectively, it disservices humanity’s full sentient capacity.

**Integrity, accountability and surrender.** Within the examples of agency I have discussed to this point, subthemes of integrity, accountability and surrender play a role as well. These qualities offset the absence of doubt characteristic of sectarianism because they require honest introspection and self-awareness which informs one’s actions on the world. For example, with Dinah and Sage, integrity and accountability was built in their
work. From the beginning, had they not listened to their own inner voices and their fighting hearts, they would have never responded to the assignment to take on the dominant power structure of the nuclear waste industry. Their activism was not a matter of “I think I should do this,” but a holistic impetus to channel their energies to effect change. Despite the lack of systemic credibility and accountability of those in power, to be credible participants in the public process—especially as women--accountability and transparency was an absolute given. After years of dedication to their cause, both women reached a point of critical consciousness that caused them to give up the work as they knew it.

Even though Dinah had devoted decades to reading volumes of official documents, attending hearings and more, she reached a point where, after a few years of depression, she firmly concluded. “I just cannot do that . . . I can't read that stuff anymore,” nor could she participate in the same way again. She surrendered to a personal epiphany that the system’s rendering of public participation was designed to fail. So, just as she intuited the impetus to begin the work, she accepted the assignment to walk away from the bureaucratic busywork that once gave her hope for democratic change. Importantly, her surrender and depression did not defeat her. She was not fixed to her former way of approaching the problem. As a result, together with Sage and others, they have begun to reformulate new ways to achieve new goals through community organizing but also through the same advertising and marketing strategies employed by dominant power. Most important of all, they have demonstrated through their unfinishedness and unfixed-ness that they could creatively reassess a strategy that
conceivably could circumvent the barriers and impediments set forth by the government bureaucracy.

**At the nexus of hopelessness and hope.** One of my favorite stories as a teen was *Lysistrata*, a fictional Greek play by Aristophanes that depicts an unusual twist on agency. In the plot, the female character, Lysistrata, organizes the women of Athens to force the men to end the Peloponnesian war by withholding sex from them. The story portrays the patriarchy in ancient Greek society, which stands in part unchanged today. Important to this discussion is the story illustrates a highly innovative way to affect change, a message in the stories among the women of this study. Dinah and Sage chose to refocus their activism from working within an ineffective system to organizing and adapting the same techniques that currently serve dominant power. For the Georgia women’s circle, they gravitated toward one another to form support for their personal and interpersonal growth. Others found agency by listening to their inner voice, resisting dominant masculine power, following an intuitive path, and formulating visions for their future and the future of humanity. As unfinished women, they understood that in situations that seem absolutely hopeless, there exists a nexus where hopelessness meets hope, and, in the words of Martin Luther King who was a testimony to his words, “a way will be made out of no way” (Mieder, 2010, p. 63).

**Transformation**

As the final theme of this analysis, I consider my participants’ relationship to the transformational process as it manifests in my data. Because transformation is all encompassing process, it contains threads of the prior themes I discussed to this point. It
is a term used in different disciplines and contexts, and manifests in different ways. In this study, I use transformation to index profound change both in the social context as applied in critical literacy and through its meaning in consciousness studies, religious studies and transpersonal psychology.

In the ensuing pages, I enter the conversation of women and transformation as informed by my data beginning with June and Mary’s perspectives on evolution and human transformation. I continue with a story from Belle from the Georgia women circle by discussing possible meanings of her transformative experience through a shamanic archetype. I conclude this section with a summation of the implications of these examples as they relate to hope for humanity’s uncertain future.

**On transformation and evolution.** The following narrative excerpts from June and Mary illuminate their understanding of evolution and human transformation. At the beginning of our conversation, June points out the contemplative and meditative impulse of their lives, how they have become self-reflective. As such, June speaks to her consciousness of her life as a part of the evolutionary flow

. . . biologically, consciousness-wise emotional wise—everything. I’ve come to see it as an evolutionary path and so even the quantum leap is part of this evolution, but it's not so much a leap as it is recognizing where I come from, that I come from stardust and this organic part of movement throughout the ages—all the other creatures, the plants the trees, the human ancestors, the cultures, the traditions, the languages, the technology, all of that. And that my call right now and challenge is to live within that context which is enormously complex, exponentially complex, even from twenty years ago and discern in my life, communally and collectively, how to move forward into this consciousness. But I think it’s not like a one-time event. I think it’s this organic evolution . . . the shift is clear because the shift is happening all the time.
The evolutionary path of consciousness June explained seemed other-worldly to me, but at the same time familiar.

As I began to explore the theories June and Mary had discussed, I understood that the other-worldliness of June’s language represented concepts in Teilhard’s theory. She spoke from a frame of reference of holistic change on a universal scale rather than change that occurs in daily life or what Dinah had called “the minutia of life.” Teilhard’s perspective, as I believe June’s to be, arises from positioning himself “integral to the cosmos and the cosmos integral to us” (King, 2005, p. 89). Teilhard (in King, 2005, p.89) writes:

I allowed my consciousness to sweep back to the farthest limit of my body, to ascertain whether I might not extend outside myself . . . to discover whether in the deepest recesses of the blackness within me, I might not see the glint of the waters of the current that flows on . . . With terror and intoxicating emotion, I realized that my own poor trifling existence was one with the immensity of all that is and all that is still in process of becoming.

Here, Teilhard writes of an experience, best described as mystical, that portrays an experience of delving into “the deepest recesses” inside himself, revealing at once the smallness of his existence within the universe and that the universe is “in the process of becoming,” a realization that was both terrifying and intoxicating.

Although the fullness of his experience is beyond my comprehension, I grasp a familiarity that I also felt with June’s words above through parallels to Freire and critical literacy. Critical literacy and evolutionary theory envision change similarly. One fundamental difference rests in the contexts. Evolutionary theory encompasses living creatures, the earth, and in Teilhard’s case, the universe (King, 2014). Critical literacy addresses the sociocultural. The concept of individual and social unfinishedness relates
to the universal becoming to which Teilhard speaks. In addition, Freire (1991, 2001) emphasizes the examination of history as evidence of humanity’s unfinishedness, while evolution relies on scientific and historical evidence. Furthermore, both theories examine transformation: Freire, through critical consciousness and social transformation, and Teilhard, through the evolutionary transformation and collective consciousness (King, 2014). Interestingly, whereas critical consciousness hinges on history to make sense of humanity’s unfinishedness, collective consciousness represents all of history and knowledge which is present in the becoming that is evolution.

Mary clarifies the concept of collective consciousness as “cumulative knowledge of all the past,” explaining how it links to evolution and transformation:

For example, this little kid who is 2 years old, if the mother gives him an iPhone, what is that kid receiving at 2 years old? He's receiving the cumulative knowledge of all the past and he's got it at 2 years old. He can take this and move it further. And that’s what I think happened with the Jesus and the Buddha. You know we have Jesus the son of God in our tradition . . .What made him special was that his aperture into the holy, into the sacred, was deeper than ours.

June adds to the explanation from an evolutionary perspective, indicating that “one never goes back to something that has been. You can't go back because cellularly you have the memory. You're being propelled into the future by the evolutionary momentum.”

**Zest for life.** Thus, from this perspective, it seems that human invention and industry have been instrumental in moving consciousness forward by making knowledge from the past and prior ages accessible. As it does, the aperture to the ineffable and unexplainable deepens. As invention and industry progress at an increasingly rapid pace, evolutionary momentum increases. In line with the evolutionary theory to which Mary ascribes, progress cannot be reversed because it resides in the cellular memory. Yet, as
material progress propels forward, human suffering and destruction endures. I revisit the question I asked Mary, “what if I choose to do nothing and allow the evolutionary path without my cooperation? “You do, because you can’t do other,” Mary replied.

Mary suggested I read Ursula King (2014) who has studied Teilhard’s oft-repeated expression “le goût de vivre” translated as “the zest for life” (p. 185). King (2014) studied the many contexts of Teilhard’s use of the phrase, and she concluded that “the zest for life--the will to live and love life to the full, and contribute to its growth--is an indispensable requisite for the continuity of life . . . it also shows itself in a more integrated, stronger global community that will give priority to promoting more equality, justice, peace as well as a planetary ethic” (p. 192). King (2014) specifically likens Freire to Teilhard, both of whom address generative themes that indicate progress, momentum and transformation.

Teilhard describes “le goût de vivre” as an evolutionary and transformational impulse, while Freire, she indicates, “touches people so deeply that it can stir them to action for creating profound social change” (King, 2014, p. 185). This comparison infuses a new depth into Freire’s concept of unfinishedness which suggests that human agency is an inner drive that when nurtured, grows. Fundamentally, on a more scientific level, Teilhard experiences “le goût de vivre” as energy that propels universal evolution toward transformation. Humanity’s part involves a responsibility to participate in human transformation by bringing our best selves to our endeavors (King, 2014).

June emphasizes that “there is not going back, even in our behaviors, in consciousness, in our morality as well as biologically. We are on this movement, this zest
for life, this impulse.” At the same time, the very idea of collective consciousness indicates the potential to access all knowledge through the ages. In June’s words,

. . . the primal moment where that impulse opened up all possibilities—that held ALL the possibilities. That consciousness, that memory is not gone, because you can see folks where something has been lost for 1000s of years and someone gets it because that have been able to tap into that DNA. It might come in a dream, a prayer, a ritual, artistic centering practice, it comes through this crack, this opening which I call grace.

The word grace springs from June’s background as a Catholic nun; however, the opening or crack has been named morphic field (Sheldrake, 1987), archetype (Bolen, 2005), or the sacred (Smith, 2000).

What I find to be most profound is that the information that emerges from the collective consciousness does not arrive in material form from outside the body, but from within, clearly a testimony to the uncharted possibilities of our sentient human condition. In addition, as my reader might recall, Ackerman (1995) considered the longstanding connection between women and horses to be informed by an ancient archetype. In our conversation, Beth described the connection between woman and horse “an ancient connection.” The collective consciousness, I surmise, is not reserved for humanity alone. In a story from of the Georgia women’s circle, Belle tells of a seemingly implausible experience that connects to June and Mary’s narrative, and bears characteristics of a shamanic archetype that can be understood as emerging from an aperture in the collective consciousness.

**Access to the collective consciousness.** This story from Belle models the form of a traditional shamanic dismemberment journey which illustrates the possibility of accessing ancient archetypes through the collective consciousness. The story also defies
normative experience and offers a testimony to the sentient wholeness as an active element in Belle’s transformative experience. During the conversation with the women from the Georgia compound, Belle alluded to her struggles with illness years before but did not tell the story. She had shared her in our Monday women’s group in Comer, but not in detail and not in the context of my research. So, when I interviewed Belle alone post-focus group, she shared her experience in more detail.

About two years after she moved to Georgia from Florida, Belle began feeling foggy mentally. After a time, the doctors prescribed a medication that along with daily jogging brought her back to normal. However, her health worsened. She had been religious during those years. Although she felt she was on a healing path spiritually, she was not healing physically. In fact, the more spiritual she became, the more she became physically ill. As her health continued to decline, her life began to fall apart. Her husband was hurt at work, lost his job and they declared bankruptcy. Her church that had a worldwide congregation fell apart. They lost their home and moved into her husband’s shop where she wound up taking care of her children from her bed. It was not until she “turned off, just shut down” that her life began to change.

I refused to think. Anything I depended on or clung to became fragile--dis-integrated. It was as if to me a message from somewhere saying ‘Don’t hold on--to anything.’

Belle talked to me about her terror. Physically, she could barely move. Yet she was at peace, but peace with death. Today she refers to that state as being “frozen in time.” She could not hold a glass and could not walk without crying in pain.

It was terrifying. Only being very still--almost lifeless--gave me relief. I felt the burden of life had taken me as far as it could so I made peace with my family
and my god and decided to die. At some point years before, I read about the Tibetan monks, that when they decided to die, they went on a journey into themselves to find their way out of this world . . . so that’s what I decided to do. Bob had taken all the kids on an outing that day so I chose that day to go. It was rare all the family was out and left me to myself for any length of time, but I asked him to take them. I told him I needed some time to myself.

I don’t know how long that inward journey took. I first had to face my fear of death by seeing it lived in my mind by going there. I started by seeing my family throw my ashes off the Broad River bridge. It was a fear I held close to me day and night all my life, since my marriage and my first child: Not being there for them. So I just watched it happen in my mind’s eye . . . then I watched them move on in life, finding happiness. And from there I turned to my journey--as the ashes.

All my life I have loved water, so I turned to experience being ashes in the water. I literally came alive. I bubbled with joy and freedom, being me, the ashes, and being carried by that which was my first love in life - from my memory: Water. I was not just one entity, but many. My mind jumped and leaped from one bit of ash to another. As I followed the river to its natural destination, the sea, I was overjoyed because I was brought up at the sea and always wanted to live there one day. I was heading there forever!

I was very excited to get there, thinking that’s where I would find my way "out," but when I got to the sea, the waves were stronger than my ashes and they just shoved me back onto the shore. I was crushed. Here I thought I would finally make it to the sea and instead I end up as the sand by the sea? Give me a break, God!!! For a while I contemplated - now what? Then I watched as my ashes literally, before my mind’s eye, began to form a body. They mingled with the sand, and then there I was, a brand new body.

Right on time, the family showed up and woke me. I was completely in shock when I went to hug everybody, I had no pain . . . I sat up by myself; no pain. I got up by myself, and went to the bathroom, no pain. For almost 2 weeks . . . I was nearly pain free.

That was when my life journey changed. Until then, I did not know my own power as a human. The experience gave me a job to do--a path to take--a direction to go: Inward.

Although Belle did not find the end of her life by diving into the sea, she did dive in—

“but it was the true sea: The sea of me”—the vast potential of her aliveness.
Belle’s pain returned, but it was never as intense as before. Soon after, she found a new, effective treatment for her condition. Most important,

I learned from that time on, whenever I was on the right track, my deepest needs were met--one by one. I’ve loved my journey since... every moment. I found peace with my past. It led me to that moment. Everything became worth it, and still is.

Belle’s experience connects to the prominent themes throughout this study. It carries the three qualities of inexplicability, importance and uncontrollability that marks the sacred and displays an alternative path to understanding the world. In addition, it represents a revelation of inner knowing.

_Transformative journey to the underworld_. Belle’s remarkable pain-free transformation after years of suffering with no relief illustrates one profound aspect of her experience. Ultimately she directed her life journey inward into unknown sentient terrain and illuminated her power or agency as a human being to affect positive ethical change. Consequently, the experience pressed her to surrender to old ways and take responsibility for the new. A significant insight from the journey for Belle was “diving into the sea of me.” As she reported, her involvement in religion and her reaches outward into the spiritual during the religious period of her life only caused her more sickness. It was not until she reached within—until she figuratively and literally dove into her inner sentience—was she able to set on the path of healing and transformation.

The process in her story of becoming ashes and transforming into a new body also typifies a transformative experience indicative of an ancient shamanic dismemberment archetype (Ryan, 1999). Although Belle had read about the Tibetan practice of directing one’s own death, she knew nothing about the dismemberment experience before the day
she decided to die. The shamanic dismemberment journey is purportedly a transformative trancelike experience that mimics death and rebirth. It is told to take place in different plane of existence--usually the underworld, which should not be confused with hell, but rather the earth’s healing depths. Within the earth, shaman’s body or the body of a journeyer with the assistance of the shaman dissipates into the earth. The way the body comes apart varies. However, the process is complete when pieces of the former body reemerge from the earth, only to reform again into a renewed, healed version of the former self (Harner, 1996; Ryan, 1999).

But what caused Belle to reenact an ancient but foreign healing process?

According to Mindell (1993), many accounts exist where severe pain triggers spontaneous archetypal experiences. During the time leading up to her experience Belle underwent severe pain, lucid or waking dreams and experienced moments when she “went into a wormhole.” Whether her experience was a dream, a trance or an imaginative ideation she did not know; however, she reenacted an ancient archetype, which caused a profound change in her body and how she perceived and lived her life.

**Locating hope for humanity.** Mary raised a point in our conversation I believe to be relevant to Belle’s experience. She indicated that Jesus, the Buddha and Confucius were notable examples of individuals capable of freely accessing the consciousness and knowledge accumulated through the ages. Mary indicates that humanity has the capability to develop the same consciousness as the great spiritual examples that emerged as genuinely extraordinary anomalies. To date, humanity at large simply has not evolved to the point where the cumulative collective consciousness is fully and freely accessible.
However, according June, as humanity evolves, the cumulative collective consciousness continues to emerge at various times and intensities causing leaps of consciousness and moments of clarity into human possibility. “This is my thinking, but not my idea,” she clarifies.

This discussion leads me to question the future of humanity and life on and of the planet. As clergy, June and Mary speak of transformation in a way most common to consciousness studies and transpersonal psychology: Transformation is profound change in form, quality and being. As proponents of evolutionary theory and those of radical thinkers, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Ileo Deo, and more, they believe humanity’s trajectory moves in a progressive spiral toward expanded consciousness and improved conditions. In contrast, during my many conversations with a 90 year old participant whose hope hides in the shadows while she watches the irrevocable human condition on television, she has declared that humanity never changes. She creates strong arguments supported by daily crimes and atrocities hand-picked by the news. As we talk, together, we are convinced, at least for the moment, that humanity’s future is a hopeless endeavor. In addition, when Mary warned of the human consciousness for greed and power, it was not until the writing of this paper did I understand the enormity of the threat. As consciousness for greed and power grows within the context of the collective consciousness, so do concomitant destructive human tendencies. So which is it? Is there hope or has humanity finally exhausted its ability to affect positive change?

Divinizing everyone. To my knowledge, Teilhard’s theory has not been proven empirically. However, there have been individuals throughout history whose stories
demonstrate profound states of evolved consciousness. As I noted, they are anomalies, of sorts, who illuminate human possibility. Mary perceives these individuals as those who were able to access the collective consciousness, not simply through the whole of humanity during their time on earth, but also through past knowledge. Thus religious leaders such as Jesus and Buddha were prodigies of consciousness who had shown humanity the evolutionary path before them. Regarding Jesus, Mary emphasized,

What made Him special was his aperture into the holy, into the sacred, was deeper than ours. So he was able to become that kind of religious leader. That's not to minimize Him. You can divinize Him, but let's divinize everybody else. All of us are learning how to love and to live. Do you think Jesus didn’t make any mistakes? So it's demythologizing those kinds of people. Lift them up as people that were open to a greater reality, and that the choices that they made were for the betterment of humanity. Some people have apertures and were geniuses but not for the betterment of humanity. So it was those kinds of things that I would say relativize these great incarnations of divine energy--of divine impulse--they carried it.

Ongoing transformation through the evolutionary flow of the universe permeates all aspects of the human being, as does the fully sentient zest for life that cooperates with evolution rather than resists it. Framed in this manner, transformation represents a human process that minimizes the strangeness of the sacred, the human holistic sentience, and the process of ethical formation that empowers human agency. In a culture and world where dominant power divides, parses, dissects the human condition, the whole of humanity appears to have lived out the dismemberment archetype over centuries, even millennia—and it continues. Perhaps now is the time to return the “underworld” which is, in fact, the healing beauty of the earth, in order to reintegrate that which we have destroyed.
Chapter 5: Entry into the Future

As I conclude this dissertation, I divide my discussion into two parts. I begin with a discussion of my findings, followed by implications. I then continue by addressing the limits of this inquiry followed by recommended adaptations. I conclude this inquiry with final comments and directions for future research. I now continue with my findings.

Informed Outcomes

In the following I discuss my findings in three parts. The first reframes Sisters June and Mary’s evolutionary perspective as a renewed narrative remade from one that has since lost its relevance. I then review sentience and the possibilities it offers, followed by the significance of women’s knowledge as it reflects the spark that may transform hopelessness to hope. As I step back from this inquiry I hope to bring with perspective relevant to the realities of the world as we know it to consider how the desires and contributions of these women’s narratives might affect the world and the people in it. Having framed my work in critical literacy which addresses the social, I will do the same. As I do, I consider the recent terrorism, military escalation and the looming threat of war in the back of my mind. I wonder if this will be the war that ends all wars, the earth and all humanity. June’s assertion that we come from “stardust and this organic part of movement throughout the ages” might make this possible fate easier to accept as the earth
and its inhabitants return to the atoms from which it originated. However, that scenario is only one possibility.

**New and relevant cultural narratives.** As the world changes, so do our cultural narratives that inform our lives. If we assess the reasonability of content within narratives of this inquiry, some challenge mainstream cultural beliefs. Even with the above example, June’s notion that we come from stardust resonates of fantasy. However, that atoms comprise the earth fits well within our current impression of the world and its make up as it is informed by modern science. I fully understand how concepts and theories raised by this study can seem fictional, because I am constantly questioning. However, if I were to situate them among the stories upon which we were raised, how might they compare? For example, in the Sisters’ conversation Mary restories the foundation of her religion by explaining that Jesus, like Buddha, Confucius and Mohammed, had access to an aperture into the collective consciousness and were emergent consciousness’ that demonstrated possibility and hope for an evolving humanity. She does not berate or minimize Jesus, but revises and re-visions symmetry among all beings when she says, “. . . you can divinize Him, but let's divinize everybody else.” She diffuses and reframes the idea of an authoritarian patriarchal religion which, she reminds us, has outworn its purpose, because the world is ready for a holistic ecological community.

Comparing the reality of old narrative of Jesus to the new, the latter is not any more impossible or improbable. However, the new narratives push the boundaries of conditioned sociocultural beliefs and challenge common preconceptions of our
experiences. As I reflect on Sister June and Mary’s understanding of evolution through the work of Thomas Berry (1993), that we are entering a new ecology era of an earth community, I wonder if humanity and earth are actually “shedding those things that are not working,” “taking the psychological development of who we are and moving it into where the boundary is blurred into a community of people and life” and “coming together out of necessity but also out of zest for life or that evolutionary pull,” as June explains.

The new narrative addresses values and a worldview that finds relevance in contemporary life and an evolving global consciousness. The Ecozoic transition that Berry (1993) predicts seems like an implausible fairy tale. However, as one who was raised on the Cinderella narrative gone awry and the American dream unfulfilled, I am willing to consider other more fitting narratives in line with possibility for humanity and the planet.

In many ways, we seem to be teetering between hopelessness and hope, not at a nexus as I had first imagined but a fulcrum where any gross imbalance could determine our fate. When I contextualize June and Mary’s position that Jesus and Buddha were emergent consciousness, that we must divinize everyone and that religion as we know it is no longer, I am dumbfounded by the primitive thinking behind religious wars that have been fought for ages and continue to be fought throughout the world as well as within the United States’ political milieu. I am perplexed by purported stolid religious devotees who are triggered by creating devastation and destruction. If it is greed and power masked as religious righteousness, it no longer matters, because greed and power are like gods in a system of beliefs based on an overblown sense of privilege, entitlement and supremacy fed by the patriarchal paradigm. Still, as a collective people we are
unfinished. Moreover, we are “not yet humane” (Shor, 1999, p.1). In other words, there is still work to be done. As long as we are aware of our unfinishedness and the unfixed states of our lives, it is possible to locate hope. As difficult as it is to believe, Mary insists that “all of us are learning how to love and to live” on our path to humaneness.

In Chapter 4, I pointed out June and Mary’s desire for the world and its people through their vision of a sacred earth community. It is indeed a vision and not a tangible manifestation. But Freire (2001), Shor (1999) and history remind us that visions are a place to begin. It is for this reason I believe that June and Mary’s contribution is that they point the way. Whether their new narrative of Christianity is accurate is beyond my ability to discern. However, I do know the outrage that might ensue as a result of their position, which is all the more reason to consider how inflexible our sociocultural narratives can be. They have changed over time and continue to change. There were older narratives long before those we adhere to today, and new narrative will continue to replace the old. Historical change over time returns me to Freire (2001) who implores us to examine history to understand where we have come from so that we can envision a better future. Not historicizing the stories we live by places us in the stasis of sectarianism that announces our unfinishedness and inability to reshape our lives. Whether one believes June and Mary’s perspective is irrelevant when compared to what the process of restorying tells us: There is possibility.

**Sentient possibilities.** As with June and Mary, the desires and contributions of the women in this inquiry offer possibilities through visions, dreams, knowledge and power. For example, the women of this inquiry touch on sentient knowledge that is
unseen and often unspoken. The stories of women and their sentient experience with their horses point to a level of consciousness with life and the environment that I have left undiscussed. However, I find it possible that human sentient engagement with all creatures, the environment and the earth can revive an ancient respect and stewardship that has long been lost. They spoke of ancient connections and illustrate that humans are not the sole source of knowledge on this planet. The stories illustrate that we can learn from our sentient fellows about many aspects of living including but certainly not limited to instinct, cooperation, empathy, community and communication. In some fields such as ecology, environmental science and animal behavior, the science is already in place to inform our sentient experience and enhance our lives. We use animal stories to entertain children and news from mass media provides us with special interest stories to punctuate the load of misery they bestow on us. Yet, we are bereft of knowledge about the earth and its sentient validation (Berry, 1993) in public pedagogy as well as all forms of education.

In addition, sentience is an innate guide already built into humanness. Yet, dominant paradigm dictates sentience as foreign, unnatural and unreliable, when in fact it is the innate, human and reliable (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986; Seidel, 1998). Moreover, some sentient connections and experiences demonstrate marks of the sacred that are outside one’s conditioned reality (Eliade, 1959). While the sacred can be a frightening and precarious concept in the secular context, if we keep in mind that we are surrounded with evidence of realities that once were “a wholly different order,” but have become commonplace, the sacred no longer becomes a mystery, but part of human progress. Simple logic illuminates that the shutting off of our sentience also denies the
sacred which does not simply manifest rationally. For example, intuition appears devoid of logic and is experienced as a felt sense that is not among the common five senses that directly connect to our outer world. Yet intuition occurs organically, as do important experiences with the unexplainable and uncontrollable which arise as individuals learn and grow. As I write, I imagine June and Mary adding that experiences with the sacred are commensurate with the zest for life and the impulsion within the evolutionary process. I find the idea of silencing of our sentient potential an act of extreme denial and I wonder what sacrifices humanity has made a result of that denial. Once again, I consider how far material invention has advanced while the progress of the human race, emotionally, socially and culturally, has stood motionless.

**Women, power and hope.** As I proceed, I continue to see hopelessness and hope rocking precariously with every word as if I have the power to add stability and security. I do know better, yet as I reflect on the power of women perhaps the power is not mine, but ours. Admittedly, when I first acquired Bolen’s (2005) book, *Gather the Women and Save the World*, the title kept me at a distance. Though I embarked on this inquiry with a lingering optimism for the future, I was not prepared to give myself over to a book with a title that purported to hold an answer. Yet, while I conducted this inquiry, and reviewed stories and narratives, I cracked the Bolen book. I realized that beneath the title was a wealth of information that validated much of the phenomena I had already experienced that drew me to this research. Bolen’s (2005) explanation of women’s talk, women’s circles, and women working together to create better communities, societies and world were a part of my reality.
When I saw that Bolen (2005) had a similar focus, I began to pay attention and to consider her important ideas of advancing hope and possibility for an unfinished human condition, particularly through her practical experience with women’s circles, her evidence of women gathering together to affect change, and her vision of the third wave of the contemporary women’s movements, the women’s peace movement. As I ponder the matter of agency and women, I return to Lysistrata, possibilities and Bolen’s (2005) call for the women to gather to find answers for a faltering world. The safety and symmetry that occurred in the Georgia women’s circle is a testimony to each women’s “kind of amazing.” As a community of women they held a peaceful power that was nurturing and supportive. As a friend, I also knew that they could be fierce and unrelentingly--as a community, not as a militia and with their minds and hearts, not with guns and war. I began to consider a new “assignment” because the peace movement we began mid-twentieth century has not yet fulfilled its intended purpose. Peace on earth is long overdue.

Since Dinah and I worked together to fight the influx of the radioactive industry in New Mexico, I began to see the scope of power that needs to be addressed. When power has its sight set on a goal, it has no plans to go anywhere but forward. In New Mexico, when I realized I was like a gnat sitting on the monster’s tail, that the monster will eventually notice my pesky presence, I retreated and entered graduate school to digest my experience. A couple of years later, Dinah also withdrew and stepped off the cycle of bureaucracy. Speaking for myself, when I first engaged in the fight, I did so intuitively and passionately, because of the “inner voice that comes through loud and
clear to let you know when an assignment is yours.” (Bolen, 2005, p. 163). After thirty years, I would guess it was Dinah’s assignment as well. Yet even though we walked away, neither of us surrendered. Just as we are unfinished, so is the assignment. As Freire (2001) predicts, as long as I know I am unfinished, I have hope. Therefore, despite the chokehold the military industrial complex has on New Mexico and its reach, and despite the fatalism and fear that comes with growing chaos in the world, I comprehend the zest for life (King, 2014) and unfinishedness as sentient experiences that offers hope, an ineffable impulse that nudges us forward because, as Mary notes, we “cannot not do.”

And what are the desires and contributions of the women, my friends—both old and new, who so graciously contributed to this rich and messy body of data? While the Sister’s offer a vision, they also disrupt the rigid boundaries of old beliefs that no longer serve us. The women of the Georgia women’s circle illuminate the significance of women’s circles and women’s talk which enable an ethical power of women together as a force for change—and perhaps even peace. The horsewomen also demonstrate power, but through a constructive sentient fellowship that serves as an entryway into understanding and respecting the environment that supports and nurtures us all. The data and ensuing discussion underline the value of sentient knowledge as a form of relearning and understanding that the sacred is not a mysterious box contained within religion but a part of the experience of being alive. Sage reminds us that the heart is not merely a metaphor for sentiment but a core organ the size of a fist that represents perseverance, courage and passion. Dinah and Sage reveal the immenseness of dominant power that is the handmaiden of a divisive paradigm, while Belle portrays possibilities in accessing the
collective consciousness. As I consider the tipping point between hopelessness and hope, the stories from these women, and the thinkers that support them, I locate the impetus and momentum to move forward. Among my valued contributors, the momentum has been named the zest for life, the evolutionary impulse, the heat as a fist, the sacred, grace, and the sea of me. In each instance, the name represents unfinished, hope and possibility in an uncertain world and an uncertain future.

As I have worked and reworked critical literacy throughout this study, I have illustrated parallels and adaptations, but most striking is that critical literacy is as much of a malleable, adaptable and flexible narrative as it is a theory. The narrative can be reshaped to reflect and affect positive ethical change as demonstrated by its relationship and parallel to other examples of perspectives and theories such as Ursula King (2014), Teilhard (King, 2005), hooks (1994), Rendón (2009) and Brown (2012) whose work originates in theology, evolutionary science, feminism, sentient education and social work. Whether situated in the social context where it was first conceived, or the universal or the personal, critical literacy is, quite simply, an effective tool by which to examine change, consciousness, the future and hope. This discussion leads me to consider the practicality of these findings, specifically how this study might inform and shape future research and teaching practices, and guide women who wish to affect change in their lives and the world.

Implications

As I consider implications, I expound on Freire’s (2001) fundamental message of correct thinking that I touched on in Chapter 2. Correctly thinking is not about being
wrong or right; it is “a capacity for not being overly convinced of one’s own certitudes” (p. 34). Additionally, he advocates “the need for a rigorous ethical purity . . . that generates beauty” which he sets apart from self-righteous, Puritanical ethics and behavior. Furthermore, right thinking “is irreconcilable with self-conceited arrogance.” (p. 34). Therefore, using education as his foundation, Freire (2001) explains that the teacher who thinks correctly is grounded with students in the spirit learning infused with the ability to question one’s own certainties, to adhere to rigorous ethics stemming from being pure, authentic and devoid of pretense, arrogance and conceit. I return to this important facet of Freire’s position because throughout this discussion it has been an implicit undercurrent that remains unchanged. Therefore, as I proceed, I must stress that although Freire applies right thinking to educators and education, it is rooted in a practice that can benefit all people and all endeavors.

Thus, this research informs possibilities rather than certainties. As I reflect on the implications in light of my findings, I feel I have come full circle with Freire’s (1991; 2001) theoretical stance. The three big ideas in my findings informed by the desires and contributions of the women of this study are the fruit of critical literacy and I believe a testimony to its relevance, applicability and practicability. As demonstrated by Chapter 4, those three ideas--that we look to new and relevant cultural narratives as humanity evolves; that humanity’s inborn sentience informs new knowledge; and that women collectively are capable of a power that potentially nourishes and heals--are not new. However, they are possibilities just the same, which begs the question, how do we take
these and other possibilities seriously—and seriously enough to affect change? How do we work towards an unimaginable future? I begin with educators.

**Implications for educators.** As I reexamine qualities of heart I discussed when embarking on this study, and reframe them within implications for educators, I consider the human capacity for heart in a world that often seems bereft of heart. If the denial of sentience corresponds to the heartlessness present in the world today, then could it be that developing the sentient human self could engage humanity in exploring the capacity for heart, for compassion and passion and for love and justice that many purport to be a beneficial possibility for humanity’s future—in education and in all aspects of life (Freire, 2000; Greene, 1995; Horton & Freire, 1990; King, 2014; Kohl, 1989; Noddings, 2013a).

Rendón’s (2009) *sentipensante* pedagogy has taken up the practice of including feeling with thinking in social justice in higher education. Rendón’s premise can be applied to other disciplines, and the practice of feeling and sensing can be extended to include inner knowing and sentient matters indicative of the sacred that are important, unexplainable and beyond one’s control (Smith, 2000). Applying this knowledge may prove to be problematic but not impossible. Moore and Yamamoto (1988) explain that the paradox of knowledge residing in the body is pervasive, but at the same time illusive. In addition, sensory functions occur in different parts of the brain simultaneously, suggesting a highly complex neural network. Although Moore and Yamamoto (1988) offer more evidence of the brain’s complexity beyond mere thinking, one point is particularly relevant to this discussion: The human capacity for awareness, which brings
me back to where Rendón begins. The awareness and acknowledgement of sensing and feeling in a milieu traditionally relegated to thought is an important beginning.

Others have explored the sentient terrain through learning. Within adult education, Lawrence (2012) discusses a working model she developed to address intuitive knowledge through modes of “holistic knowing or knowledge at the intersections of body, mind, heart, and spirit” (p. 5). Here, the author describes applications of her model through “embodied pedagogy” applied to body awareness and activity and conveying meaning through the body. Freiler (2008) describes “learning through the body” where the body is no longer considered an impediment to knowledge, but a way to experience the world. Francesconi and Tarozzi (2012) propose “embodied education” as a teaching practice that combines phenomenology and embodiment to create and education of consciousness. From the field of nursing, Swartz (2012) discusses her experience with illness and healing as it successfully informs her practice. The above represent a fraction of the educational practices emerging in sentient knowing. Whether it is called learning through the body, embodied learning, embodied pedagogy, somatic learning, sentient knowledge or any other term, this type of learning is developing. It is not new, nor is it unfounded. It simply has not been widely accepted because of the stigma of the sentient body as the antithesis to the intellect. The irony, of course, is that the intellect could not survive without the body.

In "thinking about how to do research and to teach [for that which] we cannot even imagine," I believe the only place to begin is, in fact, with the imagination (Moje, 2009, p. 359). Imagine how embodied learning might inform teaching, learning and
research in the future. The possibilities might include ongoing movement awareness segments built into a curriculum such as exploring spatial relationships; energy levels; direction; and movement as it relates to sight, sound, touch, and smell. Communication could include students’ addressing feelings and senses along with thoughts and ideas. Students could be taught to attend to their inner voice and to heighten their awareness and understanding of each other’s and their reaction to others. These are broad ideas, but how might they look in practice with real content?

In my own work as an English teacher of undergraduate second language learners, I create a seminar structure with accompanying readings for each student to lead discussions that cover topics of cultural differences and global consciousness. International students find these discussions to be intellectually and emotionally challenging, and more often than not, a means to open themselves to their honest feelings, to speak, be heard by and listen to others and to create compassion and bonds with other students from around the globe.

To read the world not just the word, as Freire advocates, implies a heightened sensory experience with the world in addition to a means to read our own conditioning as set by dominant power structures. For the young, this might mean a nascent understanding of the natural world, the commonplace sensory signs and symbols around us and understanding one’s own feelings and those of others. Older students could be encouraged to be aware of biases, judgements and perceptions of their inner and outer environment, and learn reflexivity, sensitivity and compassion. Ironically although emotional states such as gratitude, forgiveness, insight and revelation are often relegated
to religious practice, they are secular emotions that can be explored and learned—and can be beneficial to social development. These ideas offer a point to begin and can be creatively and successfully incorporated into a curriculum with imagination and innovation as long as we as teachers and researchers keep in mind that we exploring curricula for unlimited possibilities.

Educators sometimes find it necessary to create, innovate and adapt ideas to suit their students and learning needs. The above offers a sample of practices in education and sentience to illustrate that it can and is being done, as well as a springboard for fresh ideas. The nonverbal, sentient connections forged between the horsewomen and their horses model possibilities for engaging in embodied, sentient connections with the world, thus affording students insight as a result of their experiences. The women’s circle illustrates sentient relationships that elicit connection, community and collaborative learning. Understanding one’s own capacity for love and one’s anger toward injustice, as Freire (2001) advocates, is type of sentient engagement exhibited in the stories of the anti-nuclear and radical feminist activists’ in New Mexico. Although bringing new narratives to teaching milieux is also possible, I have reserved the implications for rupturing prior belief systems and cultural narratives to research into the future as I discuss below.

**Implications for researchers.** The discussion of my participants’ narratives opened avenues to reshaping theory and challenging epistemological boundaries. The Sisters are the first to come to mind as the repurposed their religious tenets to make them more meaningful and relevant. This is not unusual, but actually expected when viewed
though Wilber’s (1979) map of consciousness he calls the *spectrum of consciousness*, which is a linear progression of levels of awareness. The map illustrates the progressive disappearance of boundaries or divisions. The division, when dissolved, leads to an increasingly holistic state. Wilber (1979) identifies the states of consciousness from most fundamental division between the person and awareness through a series of levels ultimately leading to a unified consciousness. Unity consciousness represents the end of the consciousness journey, a state that Teilhard’s writings seemed to reflect as he comprehended himself as one with the universe.

The accuracy of Wilber’s (1979) map is less important than its usefulness in providing a means to envision possibility human progress. In addition, it draws from theories and philosophies from antiquity such as Taoism and Hinduism to twentieth century theories of Jungian psychology and Gestalt therapy. In other words, Wilber examined history and prior knowledge in contrast to discarding the old in favor of the new, a practice that seems common among Wilber’s contemporaries. I introduce Wilber into the conversation because of the usefulness in understanding currents that have been present throughout this discussion.

One is connections rather than divisions, a concept informed by the women’s circle, the horsewomen and in fact every group of women who came together for a focus group conversation. In addition, the discussion of the divisiveness of the patriarchal power at once informed these divisions and illuminated my own foible in the discussion as well. After re-reading my analysis, I realized than while I was immersing myself in a discussion of the destructive force of patriarchal power, I too was participating in the
divisiveness but separating the male and female. Although the analogy served its purpose in describing dominant power, which is represented by white heterosexual maleness, I was still participating in the divisiveness I sought to condemn.

Another lesser current but no less significant has been the idea of returning to history—of rehistoricizing culture—in order to remind humanity, ourselves, of prior mistakes so that we can truly learn from them. History repeats itself, so we are told, but perhaps not if we choose to remember and learn.

The latter insights illuminate the limitations of framing research through the lenses of our conditioned, familiar perspectives, worldviews and cultural narratives that are fashioned through boundaries, divisions and narrow historical lenses. These implications are illustrated by the Sisters’ repurposing of a narrative that has been inextricably engrained in cultures throughout the world; by the horsewomen who know relationships that connect them deeply to creatures and nature; and by the women’s’ circle from the Georgia compound who know the healing effects of a symmetrical, supportive and safe community. For researchers, these and other stories from this inquiry demonstrate possibility in the development of critical consciousness, in delving into knowledge outsider familiar epistemologies and in expanding historical contexts in order to understand where we, as humanity, have been and where we are heading.

**Limitations**

The following identifies issues that limited the scope of this inquiry. The limitations include the homogeneity of my sample of women; the number of focus group
meetings; group scheduling and size; and concerns regarding validation and triangulation, political bias of my participants, and my theoretical limitations.

**Race, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomics.** My sample was an obvious limit in this study. The women I recruited were white lower middle to middle class women. I did attempt to organize an international group of former students, a multiracial group of professors and students, and a multiracial group of female friends from an anonymous Al-Anon group. However, with first two, scheduling was problematic, and ultimately became unrealistic due to the international women returning to their home countries and three of students in the second group graduated and found employment in different parts of the country. The third group, who I believe would have provided highly valuable narrative contributions, presented a problem due to a shift in membership and the issue of trust and anonymity with highly confidential and sensitive information and with women I did not know. That my participants were all women, of course, was intentional, but that they were all white became a reality based on multiple variables such as time constraints, personal contact, and matters of logistics. I ultimately rationalized my final group demographics from the point of view that my study would serve as a comparison for future studies among women of diverse demographics.

Another rationale, which I admit is also a rationalization to assuage my nagging sense of negligence to ethnic and racial diversity, rested in the idea that I homed in on women’s knowledge (Tannen, 1990) in a patriarchal paradigm that represents divisiveness and domination. Thus I was examining the innate qualities rather than levels of social marginalization and inequity due to issues of race and ethnicity. Not taking into
account social marginalization and inequity, though, is not in keeping with critical literacy. The fact remains that with the exception of two examples of gender difference among my participants, the women of my study were demographically homogeneous, a problem I was unable to remedy or reconcile. Consequently the study examined narratives of white women in a structure of white male power. Demographically speaking, while I envisioned the study to be a springboard for future inquiries, the homogeneity is a limitation, particularly in the face of looming problems of racial and ethnic difference in the United States and the world.

**Focus groups: Number of meetings, participation, and scheduling.** After completing each focus group interview, many of the women expressed a desire to continue meeting periodically, not necessarily as research, but simply to meet. Clearly meeting more than one time was something many of the women felt was important to them. However, I failed to ask why. I assumed they simply enjoyed meeting, which was a missed opportunity to understand the role the focus group played for them.

Group size and scheduling represent variables that affected the focus groups. Absences due to illness, changes in plans, and unexpected obligations were factors for reduced participation in some cases. In two cases only two people made up a focus group, and although I do not think that the interviews suffered as a result of the size, I cannot be certain. Among my participants, those who opted out of the focus group were also those who I knew the least. For the future, I would suggest planning for larger groups, make attendance more desirable, or find existing groups to interview with regular attendance. However, implementing the latter possibilities may trade one limitation for another, for
example, all participants attending a larger group may result in too large of a focus group; offering compensation may place the researcher in the role of authority rather than a facilitator and observer; and attending an existing group may alter relationships or disturb the equilibrium of a group because of my role as a researcher.

The tightness of individual schedules limited the duration of three of the focus groups. In one case, the group was interrupted and ended abruptly because the woman hosting the group was called away. In each of two other groups, participants had a prior engagement immediately after the group. When one focus group member left, the group focus dispersed. Unless I had any remaining, pressing questions, the groups ended. In these two situations we had about two hours, which was a sufficient amount of time to collect data. However, if there was more data to collect, my opportunity had ended.

**Participant bias.** As I have emphasized, I frame this research in the theoretical bias of critical literacy which supports the position that education is never neutral. As I discussed in Chapter 3, like education, research cannot be neutral either. The proof rests in our nascent subjectivity, a condition which in turn implies that objectivity is an illusion (Bateson, 1979). In my research question I identify my participants as being on the path of critical consciousness, which indicates that I understand them as directing their lives toward equity, human decency and a growing awareness of their cultural conditioning. Knowing these qualities in my participants was a given from the onset. As a result, this inquiry takes on a decidedly liberal or even radical bias that does not include a range of opinions or perspectives.
**Tools.** One roadblock in my data collection and analysis was the effectiveness of the tools I used, specifically my video equipment. Since I had planned to complete both a written and video analysis, the inconsistent video recording prevented the latter. Even though I brought two cameras with me for each interview and tested them before used them, I discovered that one would stop for no apparent reason, while the other produced poor quality sound and visual data. Unlike the digital audio recorder I used that was designed to be unmonitored and pick up a range of sound, my cameras had a limited audiovisual range and needed monitoring, even on tripods. Unfortunately, I found it difficult to interview and monitor video cameras at the same time.

**Participants as friends.** Although I had known most of these women for years, during the focus groups I realized that, in the words of my friend Penny “we all are our own kind of amazing.” Her words still resonate with me. Yet even Penny’s words do not express the depth and breadth of my experience during this research. As I reviewed my data, I re-entered the stories and narratives in an immersion that was unfamiliar. I had entered unknown territory, perhaps not for other researchers, but at least for me. Although I had tried to remove my connection to the participants from the stories, the separation was nearly impossible. My experience was like shaping a character in fiction or making a piece of art. However, this time I was with my friends, real people who I knew and for whom I cared. As I deepened my focus, I listened to and read my friends’ stories with new eyes, a new mind and a new connection that seemed to dissolve any boundaries of selfness between us. I was immersed in subjectivity because as I learned from Bateson (1979), that there was no objectivity to be had even if I tried. The analysis
process opened up channels of empathy, comprehension and compassion that linked me to various aspects of my analysis such as Bolen’s (2005) concept of the women’s circle and Smith’s three marks of the sacred, both of which fit seamlessly into my analysis.

**Recommendations**

I continue by responding to the above with recommendations that might ameliorate limitations to this study. Among them, homogeneity was indeed a troublesome issue with my sample and there was no way around it except to move forward with diversity in mind. One way would be to repeat the study among samples of women from multiple ethnicities, races, sexual orientations and gender identities to the focus group conversations in groups alone or in heterogeneous groups.

More than one interview with a single focus group would allow individuals time between groups to think about the concepts we discussed and for them to warm up to new friends and the idea of sharing personal stories. Repeated groups would also provide more data. When videotaping for a final analysis, additional meetings would allow more opportunities for recordings in the event of equipment failures or technical problems. In addition, after I had begun my inquiry and casually mentioned my research with women outside the study, I began to hear about women’s groups of various ages and interests who gathered for support and friendship.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I also understood that the themes I found to be dominant and significant, may be altogether different for someone else analyzing my data. This in itself would be an interesting topic for further investigation. However, it raised my concerns about validity and triangulation. Was it effective? Did I do enough?
That questions and doubts emerged led me to believe that my best recourse in this circumstance is to continue researching, as Lieberman (n.d.) indicates “to ask and keep asking” (p. 56).

**Directions for Future Research**

Several decades ago, philosopher and artist Piotrowski (1986), wrote, “Art is no longer an aesthetic question; the question is human survival.” His statement continues to be relevant and also pertinent to all endeavors. As the evolutionary impulse nudges us all forward, I wish to uncover the means through which to further human progress that contributes to peace, justice, wholeness and healing in the world and among the people in it. I trust that any reader who has journeyed with me this far possesses their own capacity for creative vision, therefore, in the spirit of collaboration, rather than recommend my thoughts, I offer them for discussion and possible directions for the future. Because my work is grounded in education, I will continue my inquiry into stories and narratives, a way that engages a wider audience through video documentary. As for focus, the findings of this inquiry have brought to light a number of issues that I believe merit further exploration, including action research in service of women’s circles and the women’s peace movement; educational projects in sentient education; perspectives and stories that explore the sentient, secular quality of the sacred; and inquiring into a range of effective grass roots movements, both contemporary and throughout history.
References


Appendix A

Research Protocol

Interview Questions and Prompts

The following questions and prompts are for you to consider and respond to. Your personal answers and responses are most important to this study. In other words, there are no right answers or wrong answers. You may bring to the interview, or create for the interview, documents, artifacts, photographs or items you deem relevant.

About Being Unfinishedness

1. Please reflect on your personal history as a human being and a woman. Take some time to consider your personal life journey.

2. Trace your path of personal experience from any perspective you wish. What is (or are) the major event(s) that has (or have) shaped your life?

3. What have been your most compelling hopes and dreams?

4. How do you understand that you may not yet be done or finished as a person?

5. How has your involvement in your life and your future changed over time?

6. How have you reinvented yourself?

7. Explain how special texts (books, music, art, photos, and words) have impacted you.
About Heart

1. What does the word “heart” convey to you?
2. How does heart affect your life?
3. What makes your heart ache or break?
4. What makes your heart soar?
5. What are your deepest hopes for your life? For those in your life? For strangers and the world?
6. What, if anything, do you long for most?
7. How do you perceive the relationship between your heart and mind?

About Critical Consciousness

In this section, I ask you to be concerned with how your life has been shaped by those close to you, people in general, the environment, society, culture and the world.

1. What does freedom mean to you in your everyday life?
2. How does the idea of freedom in your daily life compare to the idea of freedom as a citizen?
3. Explain the most significant sociocultural issue(s) facing humanity. How have you been affected by the issue(s)?
4. How have you responded to an issue (or issues) and your ability affect change?
5. If you had the ability to change the problem(s) or issue(s), what would you do?
6. How do you think you are conditioned to perceive the world around you
7. Imagine and explain the ideal world.
Appendix B

Elementary

Oh if I could
   but walk with hooves
      with four big toes
         and a ballet of moves

Oh if I could but have
   a dexterous muzzle
         carefully to parse the healthy greens
         from ones of trouble

Oh if I could but flare
   my delicate nostrils wide
         inhale the knowledge that on wind
            ripples like the tide

Oh if I could but gaze
   from fluid deep dark eyes
         large and alert
            in some faraway they reside

Oh if I could but swivel
   my finely chiseled ears
         and absorb subtle sounds
            the environment rears

Oh if I could but swish
   my lovely tail that touches ground
         and carry it aloft
            when I dance and swirl and bound

Oh if I could but shake
   my lithe elastic neck
for my mane to sway and ripple
and a bur sometimes to catch

Oh if I could but spring
from my strong and supple haunch
and leap and buck and twirl
and delight in every launch

Oh if I could but roll as you
in grass and mud and sand
and know just what a fine, fine feeling
I have truly had

Then perhaps when you and I
amble trails both old and new
I would better understand
what our sojourns are to you

I would know how terrain can make
for you some kind of dent
in your timing and your footing
and your experience

I would know how feels the movement
of saddle upon your back
the girdle of the girth and on your bit
a hand giving slack

I would know how I sound
when I talk at random just to you
when you lend me your ear yet
your attention is elsewhere too

I would know, as you know,
that I really do not know
your vocabulary of silence
even when you nicker low

I would know how you see the shadows
from your wide-set eyes
and the light when it spooks you
as somehow I ride your shies

I would know when the sounds
that elude my perception
tell you what’s ahead
what requires more inspection

So much more I would know
if only I could be
with hooves and mane and tail
and your sensitivity

But for what reason
do I ponder these odd things?
because I seek to unravel
a persistent questioning

Why are you horse
and I human being?
Why am I not horse
and as a human you are seeking?

Then you could query on
about the whys, wherefores, of life
and I could live my wisdom
without such deep-seated strife

Oh dear little horse,
may my seat be ever deep
such that as we wander trails
you are not saddened should I weep

Why would I weep
whilst in the joy our travels bring?
Oh if I could but answer that
I would not muse upon these things

Instead I’d live the answer
borne beyond a reason
that joy and sorrow like your coat
are one throughout each season