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Abstract

This dissertation is an arts-based study that investigates the resilience, resistance, and images of relationships in the lives of three disadvantaged adolescent girls. The main theoretical interest in this study is the intersection of feminist thought and creative ways of knowing. Central to feminist scholarship is the focus on relationships in the development of women and girls. This dissertation examines the role autonomy plays in the development of resilience. A selection of poetry and paintings created by the researcher and three participants illustrate subjective knowledge as a legitimate source for understanding such phenomena.
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Sarah E. Hellmann
For:

Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony
Acknowledgments

I give thanks and praise –

To my God, whose presence is always known.

To my husband Brian, a kind, patient, and loving man – with whom I become more myself each day.

To my parents, who I love and honor very much. They have taught me how to love and be loved. There is no greater gift parents can give their children.

To my siblings and their spouses. They are hilarious people – who are also kind, loving, and humble. I am blessed to call them family.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE
Introduction
- On Becoming an Artist: The Color Blue 3
- On Becoming a Student: Red Shutters 4
- Problem Statement 7
- Research Questions 9
- Limitations 10
- About this Dissertation 11

## CHAPTER TWO
Literature Review
- Feminist Thought 13
- Black Feminist Thought 14
- Resilience 23
- Resistance 27
- Feminist Relational Approaches 34
- Arts-Based Educational Research 37

## CHAPTER THREE
Methods
- Recruitment 43
- Research Process: Phase One 44
- Research Process: Phase Two 47
- Data Analysis 50

## CHAPTER FOUR
Ciera 60
- Making Meaning: Hands Linked by Liberty 70

## CHAPTER FIVE
Lataya 72
- Making Meaning: Fish Swimming in a Pond 80

## CHAPTER SIX
Ebony 83
- Making Meaning: A Bird Above Her Cage 91

## CHAPTER SEVEN
Cross Examination
- Ways of Knowing 93
- Revisiting Resilience 95
- Revisiting Resistance 96
- Images of Relationships 98
- Making Meaning: A Flower Blossoms Before the Sun 101
CHAPTER EIGHT
Discussion

References
Chapter I

Introduction

Most of us have things we are proud of. It may be winning a spelling bee, scoring a winning goal, finding designer shoes half off, or being the first one to purchase a new Apple product. I’ve never accomplished any of these things. But I am proud of my time spent teaching art in urban schools.

As a Cincinnati Public School art teacher, I have learned many things. The first thing I learned is that the arts are not valued as they should be. There were times I was not taken seriously as a professional. My courses were called “specials.” Colleagues had no qualms sending students late or excusing them from my class altogether. There was no money for supplies. I would often walk the streets on garbage nights, salvaging materials for art projects. I have sat through “professional development” sessions that had little to do with me as a teacher, or the subject I taught.

I have learned that in rough, urban schools there are some of greatest teachers in the field. I consider it an honor and a privilege to have worked among them. They had a remarkable commitment to their students’ wellbeing and academic success. They were teachers who came to school early and stayed late. Teachers who brought extra lunches for hungry students. I have learned a great deal from their ethics.

I have met resilient children who beat the odds everyday. Many students came from the projects and managed several bus transfers in the early morning hour to make it to school on time. Most students had no one at home to care for them, yet many succeeded despite their unfortunate circumstances.

I’ve also seen the darker side of urban schooling. Levies failed year after year. Many
teachers were burnt out, and no longer cared about the profession or their students. Most students came to school tired, angry, and hungry, only to have to walk through metal detectors. Security guards and police officers patrolled every hallway. Restrooms were filled with the smoke from marijuana. Girls were pregnant at the age of 14.

On my first day of school, someone wrote “WHITE BITCH” on my classroom door. My car was broken into twice. My wallet and keys were stolen from my purse. When my students caused trouble, I would call guardians, who expressed no interest in what I said – they often told me it was my fault, because I did not know how to manage Black kids.

In time, things got easier. I built a rapport with the other teachers and administrators. I gained the trust of my students, and created a classroom management plan that worked. A student replaced “WHITE BITCH” with “ART TEACHER.” It was the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.

The truth is, I loved that job. Magic happened everyday in my classroom. Students – even the problem students – were engaged in the art-making process. They were committed to their work, they nurtured it, they cared about it. I often watched my students run to catch metro buses with unfinished artwork in their hands. It melted my heart each time. I was proud to be their teacher.

I would display student work on top of the graffiti in the hallways – no one messed with it. Colleagues would praise the students’ art and say to me “I didn’t know they had it in them.” It was then I realized that something was seriously wrong. Many of the teachers and administrators only saw the negative in the students. They did not know their students. They were not listening to the students. I mean really listening to them.

On the days when no one seemed to listen, and I felt little hope, I would go to my gym
and swim in the indoor pool. A man in the lane next to me said, “Isn’t it great to swim, like you can leave all your stress and worries in the water.” I loved this idea. I began my swim and concentrated on his words.

At first, I glided through the water floating on hope. I thought about the students I worked with and the challenges they face. A mile passed. I grew cold and fatigued. I was waiting for my stress to be washed away, but it never happened. My worries stayed close to me. Perhaps there was not enough chlorine in the water. Maybe I wasn’t swimming fast enough. I’m not really sure. I figured out in the pool that certain types of worry do not wash away.

Shortly after that swim, I decided to apply for the doctoral program at the University of Cincinnati. I wanted to know more. I wanted to implement change. However, I was an art teacher. I had very little influence on pedagogy or professional development.

I want to be heard. The powers that be do not listen to art teachers the way they listen to those who have earned a PhD. I had no choice. This was a difficult decision to make. Although, I love teaching, I loathe being a student. I was never good at it.

In the passages that follow, I provide readers with my experiences as a student, and my position as an artist and researcher. I included paintings, as I have done throughout this dissertation as a means for understanding.

**On Becoming an Artist: The Color Blue**

The arts mean a great deal to me. I escape with the art making process nearly everyday. I paint because I have to. It is a release, I can let my worries get soaked up in a paintbrush, and then be rinsed away in water. Each blank canvas brings me hope. As the canvas changes, so do I. I am never the same person as I was before I painted. Each painting brings me closer to myself.

When I was very young, my mom gave me a box of 64 brilliantly colored crayons. It was
my most prized possession. I hid the box under my bed in fear that my brothers or sister might dull the tips. When I was alone, I would dump out the box on the floor and arrange the colors in ways that made sense to me.

I remember being so impressed by the hues of blue, they seemed so honest and complicated. I believed it was an important color because of the numerous choices – aqua, sky, royal, cobalt, electric, Columbia, Egyptian, etc. I loved the language that blue offered. I understood the language and became fluent at an early age.

As I wrote this dissertation, I relied on the color blue. On difficult days, when I was stuck and felt unsure of myself as a researcher, I painted with shades of blue. Blue reminds me that I am capable of understanding.

**On Becoming a Student: Red Shutters**

On my first day of kindergarten, my mom took a picture of me. I am standing in front of our birch tree, wearing a green dress. I am holding an empty book bag that has smiley–faced pencils on it. My eyes are filled with expectation. It was as if I knew this thing called “school” would change me forever.

There are certain school experiences that I remember with clarity. For example, in kindergarten, I was assigned to the Blue Bird table. It didn’t take long for me to realize I was at a table of misfits. To my right, was a boy my classmates named “Dirty Dan.” To my left, was a girl who
never smiled. She wore thick glasses that made her eyes appear larger than life. Across from me, was a boy who spent half the day in the restroom. And there was me – a girl wondering why she was put at the Blue Bird table.

Miss Lee divided the classroom into stations. My favorite was the art station. There were two giant easels with sheets of big, glossy, paper and plastic jars of chalky tempera paint. Next to the art station was a doll house. The house was furnished with miniature tables, chairs, and couches. It even had a refrigerator with doors that opened. It reminded me of any house that I had visited. However, there was one thing about the house that didn’t make sense. It had white shutters. I’d never seen white shutters before. Something had to be done.

I carried my jar of red paint and my big clumsy brush and stood before the dollhouse. I began to paint the shutters one by one, feeling a sense of purpose. I was proud of myself for adding logic to our classroom. I thought for sure I would be awarded student of the week.

I was just about finished when Miss Lee saw me. She did not look happy. Immediately, I knew I was in trouble. I panicked. At my school, it was standard to be paddled for bad behavior or foul language. Miss Lee didn’t paddle me – she did something much worse. She forbade me to paint for the remainder of the year.

I remember thinking I didn’t know who I was supposed to be. I didn’t like playing house or tracing numbers. I didn’t want to read books next to the record player. I felt alone and misunderstood. It was at that point I stopped taking school seriously.

In first grade, I was back to making art in the classroom. Miss Molly gave us primary colors: red, blue, and yellow. I mixed red and blue and made a deep purple, almost black. I was not satisfied. I mixed yellow and red and made orange, it was okay. I asked Miss Molly how to make Egyptian blue. She had no idea. I remember thinking she wasn’t smart. What a terrible
thing to think at such a young age. Students love their teachers – they are heroes. I felt ashamed by this. I knew Miss Molly was a smart woman. She knew how to dance to the “hokey-pokey.” She showed us how to make applesauce. She taught us the importance of being kind. This was all valuable information. I owe much of what I know today to Miss Molly.

I moved on in my schooling. I was placed in the low track classes. It was not because of my aptitude as a learner or poor social skills. It had everything to do with how little I was concerned in finding the solution for \( X + 9 = 18 - 2x \), or why it mattered that adverb clauses are introduced by subordinate conjunctions. I couldn’t even pretend to be interested – because of this I was often assigned after school detention. I never understood why I was there. I didn’t cause any trouble like Troy who flushed three rosaries down the toilet, or Chad who used the F-word during recess. I was there because I couldn’t pretend.

I spent many years alone in the classroom until I high school. My art teacher, Mr. Price, knew what I meant when I referred to Egyptian blue. He taught me the elements and principles of art. I created a lot of art in his room through the years. He listened to me. I began to feel understood. He was a kind and introspective man. He ate yogurt and an apple everyday before lunch. Before he ate the apple, he would create a sketch or painting of it. He taught me how to enjoy the beauty of everyday gifts.

I majored in art education as an undergraduate student. Half of my courses took place in a studio, where I felt most at home. During my senior year of college I completed my student teaching assignments. My mentors were great women who taught me the basics of classroom management. They also taught me how to listen to students through art and other creative opportunities. I fell in love with the idea of teaching art to children. There was a place for me in school after all.
I taught art for two years overseas in Bahrain. I worked with kindergarten through high school students from more than 10 countries. I spent the summers in Turkey where I earned a master’s degree in international education. Unlike my classmates, I did not know a second language. It turned out to be okay because art is a universal language.

I entered my doctoral program in the fall of 2006. I knew there was a good chance I would not fit in. I was not familiar with theoretical frameworks or statistical approaches to analyzing “data.” I was an artist and teacher, not a traditional type of student. I felt like I was sitting at the Blue Bird table all over again. There were white shutters all around me. I did not know who I was supposed to be.

By the grace of God, I met professors who would later become members of my committee. They introduced me to action research and arts-based methodologies. They sat at the Blue Bird table with me. They gave me permission to paint shutters.

Problem Statement

There is perhaps no group as misunderstood and underserved as adolescent girls. Girls often carry with them problems that are more invisible or inner directed (LeCroy & Daley, 2001). The public underestimates their wisdom and skills. Teachers and parents aren’t sure how to relate to them. The ability to communicate is becoming increasingly critical for adolescent girls growing up in dysfunctional environments.

There is growing concern among parents, teachers, and researchers about the overall health of adolescents, in particular adolescent girls. The persuasive influence of Pop Culture and visual media causes many girls to abandon their true selves. This poses acute physical consequences for adolescent girls. Depression, eating disorders, poor body images, and a decline in self worth are experienced by many adolescent girls (Gilligan, Rogers & Tolman, 1991).
During this time of transition, “the hardiness, robustness, zest, and confidence of the prepubescent girl are often replaced by accommodating others, pretending not to know things and keeping large aspects of self out of relationships” (Forman-Brunell, 2001, p. 561). Adolescent girls’ self-esteem suffers when they are not able to accept and express their feelings and thoughts. As a result they become vulnerable and their confidence suffers.

Adolescents who are able to successfully transition into adulthood share common traits. One of these traits is resilience. Edward, Welch, and Chater (2009) believe resilience involves having the sense of self, looking after the self, feeling hopeful, having faith, and having insight into personal life situations.

Research on resilient high-risk populations, with a particular focus on adolescents has become increasingly popular in education. Positive alternatives to view at-risk students have been explored (Benard, 2004; Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Jordan, 2005; Lewis, 2006; Lambie, Leone, & Martin, 2007).

There is a shift in practice from a “deficit-focused model” to a “view that sees youth as a promise rather than at risk” (Lewis, 2006, p. 35). Garmezy (1991) argues that the study of success is just as important as the study of failure, and focusing solely on problems leads to inaccurate and often unnecessary data. Similarly, Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1997) believe that working from a model of deficit tends to diminish the value placed on adolescents’ experiences, strengths, and perspectives.

Robinson and Ward (1991) believe that many of the challenges and concerns of African American adolescent females have been ignored from traditional social science literature, partly due to the urban stressors of everyday life where research is a low priority. Disadvantaged children often grow up with chronic stressors of urban life such as violence, substance abuse,
teen pregnancy, and delinquency. Barbari (1993) writes “To the further detriment of these youth, rarely does one see the terms ‘competent,’ ‘resourceful,’ ‘aspiring,’ or ‘motivated’ used to describe them.” Many adolescent girls show remarkable resiliency and resistance toward adversity. More educational research on adolescent girls is necessary in order to acknowledge and celebrate their resilience.

I have met many girls in my life – happy girls, loud girls, angry girls, and girls who can’t be described with words. I have watched them paint, laugh, argue, and rise above terrible conditions. Some of the bravest and strongest people I have met were adolescent girls who managed to thrive in the face of adversity. I have witnessed remarkable resilience in adolescent girls. Their resilience is a wonder to me, and it is at the root of my research questions.

**Research Questions**

During the research process, my questions evolved. I went into the process looking for characteristics of resilience. As I understood my participants better, I recognized the characteristics of resilience are complicated and unique to each individual. There were two common themes that surfaced in my study. The three participants I chose to focus on were resistant toward adversity. In addition, each one had similar images or perceptions of relationships. My research questions developed into: (1) How can creative opportunities reveal the resistance, resilience, and images of relationships in the lives of disadvantaged adolescent girls? and (2) How can arts-based methodologies inform educational research practices?

My questions are colored by experiences as a student, artist, teacher, and researcher. The rationale for this study is both personal and professional. On the personal side, I am an artist who repeatedly relies on the art-making process to express my inner most thoughts. I want to provide adolescent girls with the same opportunities I have been afforded.
As a professional, I believe one possible solution to help increase the number of disadvantaged adolescents who fall into the resilient category is to provide opportunities for creative expression. Traditionally, the arts have been viewed as a decorative element to educational research rather than a legitimate source for understanding. I am confident that arts-based approaches are as rigorous and relevant as scientific modes of inquiry. I am committed to aesthetic practices, and I am certain there is a place for them in research. My research demonstrates that arts-based approaches are rigorous and relevant. Moreover, my work demonstrates that there is a clear need and place for aesthetic practices.

Limitations

Before my doctoral studies, I identified myself as an artist and a teacher. I never thought I belonged in a doctoral program. I am privileged to be among of a community of learners. I have learned different ways to read and write. I am now able to see the world through an informed and refined lens. However, I cannot compromise my role as an artist and a teacher by conceding to objective thinking and writing. I am proud of knowing my participants and myself. My work is shaped by my subjective and artistic ways of knowing. In some corners of academia, this is valued, and becoming increasingly respected. I am hopeful because of this.

Arts-based approaches are relatively new to educational research. There is only a small amount of literature that addresses the validity of arts-based work by scientific quantitative standards. Many scholars do not see the value or the power of the arts in conjunction with educational research. There is a chance that this dissertation could be considered as a decorative approach to understanding phenomena rather than as a legitimate source for understanding. Many people are not familiar or comfortable with the arts; therefore, this dissertation will only reach audiences that are willing to stretch beyond conventional thinking.
While the proposed study involves the stories of three girls, the context of this study can be conceptualized on multiple levels with insight into the lives of adolescent girls living with the stressors of urban life.

**About This Dissertation**

The primary goal for my dissertation is to understand the resilience, resistance, and images of relationships in the lives of disadvantaged adolescent girls. I have provided the girls with creative opportunities for self-expression. In this dissertation, you will see artwork and poetry created by my participants and myself. It is important for readers to take their time with this work, give the poetry and paintings time to sink in.

My literature review covers resistance and resilience and how they apply to disadvantaged adolescent girls. My theoretical framework centers on feminist thought and relational theory. I also discuss arts-based educational research and its place in this study. My methodological choices are based on my value system as an artist and researcher – found in the intersection of feminist-oriented understanding and creative expression.

I have used poetry and paintings as analytic tools – created from the in-between places in my experiences with the girls. They are pieces of wishes, unsaid words, and my vision of who the girls are. They have enlightened and informed my understanding of resistance, resilience, and images of relationships in the lives of disadvantaged adolescent girls.

My wish for this dissertation is that it is accessible for all audiences. It is my hope that this dissertation will raise critical consciousness and empathetic understanding for all those who read it. I have used a holistic approach to the research process, which emphasized the interconnectedness between theory and practice. My work deals with highly conceptual topics that represent fundamental aspects of the human experience. I used arts-based methods to
illuminate the resilience, resistance, and images of relationships in the lives of my participants. I strive to open new space with my own work and share my understanding with the educational research community.

This dissertation means a great deal to me – it is personal, vulnerable, and fragile.

I thank you in advance for your careful review.
Chapter II

Literature Review:

Feminist Thought as a Theoretical Framework

Feminist scholarship requires understanding of the contextual and relational experiences of all people, and strives for a better quality of life for all of humanity. Feminist scholarship places emphasis on gender difference and the needs of marginalized groups through social systems (Brown, 1994; Comstock et al., 2008; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan & Hartling, 2009). Feminist scholarship is relational, contextual, and open – a place for plurality of meanings.

One factor that led me to feminist scholarship is its opposition to the patriarchal nature of existing research design, and the value it places on interdisciplinary approaches. Spender (1985) states:

At the core of feminist scholarship is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge. Feminist scholarship is based on the premise that the experience of all human beings is valid and must not be excluded from our understanding…patriarchal knowledge must be challenged – and overruled (pp. 5-6).

Feminist scholarship shapes our understanding of the oppression in the lives of marginalized people. Reinhartz (1992) offers several defining characteristics of feminist scholarship. They include: (1) a struggle against sexism and other dominant forces; (2) a refusal to compromise the well being of women; (3) an aim to create social change; and (4) the capacity to represent human diversity.

It is important to note there are many branches of feminist thought that focus more specifically on race and class. There are important distinctions among the various feminist
theories. Joyappa and Martin (1996) recognize “there is no one woman’s experience, there is no one feminist research method or perspective” (p. 6).

The adolescent girls in my study are African American. It is critical for me, and my readers, to understand the oppression that affects the lives of marginalized groups. Black feminist thought is an appropriate framework for exploring the resilience, resistance, and images of relationships in the lives of my participants.

**Black Feminist Thought**

Not all women experience oppression equally. Black feminist thought recognizes that race, ethnicity, gender, and class compound the risk of oppression. Few (2007) identifies three tenets of Black feminist thought: (1) the belief that self-authorship represents a unique and diverse standpoint of and by Black women; (2) Black women’s experiences with multiple oppressions result in needs, expectations, ideologies, and problems that are different than those of Black men and White women; and (3), Black feminist consciousness is an ever-evolving process.

Black feminist thought facilitates a clearer understanding of the relationships between systems of oppression. Viewing the world through a conceptual lens of race, class, and gender leads to a humanist vision of the world, creating new possibilities for empowerment (Collins, 1990).

Black feminist thought highlights women’s emerging power of knowledge. Collins (1990) identifies Black women as self-defined individuals who confront race, gender, and class oppression uniquely from other women. Collins (1991) describes Black women as a unique group of women who live in the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. All these elements shape Black women’s individual and collective consciousness as well as their self-
Black feminists further assert that African American women have a shared historical reality and worldview of historical resistance to their own oppression and dehumanization (Collins, 2000; Stevens & Phillips, 2005). Human action and interpretations are considered historical by-products of collective experience (Comstock, 1982). The marginalization of African American women as members of a specific group characterized by their gender and race creates a shared experience (Stevens & Phillips, 2005).

African American women face a dual oppression of racism and sexism. Abram (2002) recognizes that this dual oppression impacts African American adolescent girls' development in critical ways. “These include shaping a unique ideal of womanhood, stripping away the protections that are generally afforded to White young women, and making the acquisition of self-esteem more challenging” (p. 55).

Ladson-Billings (1994) is a leading figure in multicultural education. In her book *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, she raises awareness about the location of the researcher. She believes that through reflection the researcher can use culturally relevant practices. There were times in the research process when I reflected on my experiences as a White, middle-class woman with the experiences of my participants. This was helpful because it allowed me to better understand our different social locations. It is critical to my study that I recognize the impact of race, class, and gender and how they shape my understanding of the girls I work with.

### A Feminist Relational Approach

A feminist relational approach recognizes that mutual empowerment and empathy are necessary factors for developing a healthy self and society. Individuals and their choices are
socially constructed and influenced by social contexts in relation to gender, race, and class (Giblen & Chan, 1995). Jaggar (1989) refers to a relational approach as an interaction between how we understand the world and who we are as people.

It shows how our emotional responses to the world change as we conceptualize it differently and how our changing emotional responses then stimulate us to new insights…[it demonstrates] how the reconstruction of knowledge is inseparable from the reconstruction of ourselves (p.132).

Relational approaches encompass both reflection and action as forms that promotes “a better, fairer, more humane world” (Miller, 1990, p. 13).

A feminist relational approach acknowledges human experience, respect, and relationships within a social context. The prevention of psychological problems, the enhancement of psychological development, and a comprehensive understanding of human development are central to a feminist relational approach (Covington & Surrey, 1997; Jordan & Hartling, 2009). Although the roots of a feminist relational approach are grounded in the development of girls and women, this perspective provides a framework for the assessment of all people’s psychological development and well-being.

**Major Influences: Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and Carol Gilligan**

I became specifically interested in Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), developed by Jean Baker Miller, because of the focus on culture and relationships in the lives of women and girls. Miller and her colleagues at the Wellesley Centers for Women have shaped my understanding of RCT. RCT identifies the contextual and socio-cultural challenges that impede and support an individual’s ability to create, sustain, and participate in growth-fostering relationships. RCT recognizes the experiences of those who are marginalized and the impact of culture and power
practices within a larger sociocultural context (Miller & Stiver, 1997). The aim of RCT is to promote social change and represent human diversity.

Our experience of the world passes through an autobiographical prism that includes facets of gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ability, and so forth (Halifax, 1997). I can illustrate RCT on a personal level from an experience I had as a young teacher in my inner city classroom. Most of my students took several bus transfers to make it on time for their 7:45 a.m. class. They arrived to school tired and hungry. I would allow my students to eat during class. None of us can work well on an empty stomach. A student named Diamond asked me to write her a note to the faculty lounge so she could heat up her pizza. I had just gotten in trouble for letting my students buy juice from the vending machine during “instructional time.” I was hesitant to grant her permission. I told her to eat her pizza the way it was. She yelled in front of the class, “Shit Ms. B., I’m not White! I don’t eat cold pizza!”

Of course RCT is much more complicated and sophisticated than cold pizza. But the idea is there. I believe Diamond’s frustration went beyond eating cold pizza. Although Diamond and I shared many things in common, our life experiences were shaped by our social locations. I was a White middle-class woman and Diamond was a Black teenager from a lower socioeconomic neighborhood. As a teacher, I held a position of power, Diamond needed my permission to heat up the pizza. I was limited by what I could do for her because of existing school rules. Our relationship was influenced by several layers of social constructs.

Brown (2001) affirms that a relational cultural approach is necessary to understand that participants’ words, relationships, and experiences cannot be separated from the cultural context in which they are embedded. It is critical to my study that I am sensitive to the sociocultural influences that shape the lives of adolescent girls. Key aspects of RCT such as relationships,
connection, and disconnection will be discussed throughout this dissertation.

**The Work of Carol Gilligan.**

Carol Gilligan is a leading figure in gender studies and a pioneer in the field of psychological and moral development of girls. Gilligan (1982) found that women’s sense of self shows profoundly in the experience of connection and indicates that women’s experiences of connection contribute to conceptions of self, morality, and images of relationships. Women’s ways of approaching relational conflicts and crises are carried through their connection with others.

Gilligan (1990) opposes male-centered psychology posited by Freud, Erickson, and Kohlberg. She suggests that in our current society there is a competitive, socially privileged, and dominant style where girls’ mutual relational approach is seen as deficient. Gilligan argues that women and girls are not inferior in their personal or moral development, but that they are different. They develop in a way that focuses not on separation and autonomy, but through connection with others (Lefton, 2000).

Gilligan’s theory holds implications for adolescent girls as they develop in a society where autonomy is the hallmark for adulthood. Raider-Roth (2005) asserts the “development of self is asserted not by autonomy and separation but rather by constructing, defining, and redefining relationships” (p. 20). The illusion of separation and autonomy as indicators of maturity contribute to the denial of the basic human desire to participate in growth fostering relationships. Separation can cause adolescent girls to minimize their experiences and sense of worth. In turn, they construct meanings that disparage and condemn themselves (Gilligan, 1990).
Relationship, Resilience, and Resistance

Over the past two decades, new conceptualizations of women’s psychological development have evolved with emphasis on the centrality of relationships in women’s lives (Brown, 2001; Jordan & Hartling, 2009; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Adolescents shape their identity through social interactions. Girls place a high value on relationships, and the consideration and needs of others guide their moral development (Gilligan, Lyons & Hamner, 1990; Letendre, 2007).

Central to feminist scholarship is the value placed on relationships. During the past 20 years, feminist qualitative research has offered a complex appreciation for the relational worlds of adolescent girls (Forman-Brunell, 2001; Rhodes & Roffman, 2003). Abrams explains that “women are acutely attuned to the intricate world of human relations” (p. 52). Women and girls gain self-esteem primarily by virtue of connection with others.

Adolescent girls organize their sense of meaning and feelings of worth in relationships (Forman-Brunell, 2001). Gilligan (1990) believes the desire to develop, maintain, and strengthen relationships is where women develop a sense of self and morality. Similarly, Raider-Roth (2005) states, “a common thread running through relational orientation is that the growth of human self is embedded in and inextricably linked with relationships with others” (p. 20).

Jean Baker Miller and colleagues (2010) refer to “five good things” that characterize a growth fostering relationship: (1) increased zest and vitality that comes from connecting with another person or persons; (2) increased ability to take action in the relationship as well as in other situations; (3) increased clarity – a clearer picture of one’s self, the other, and the relationship; (4) increased sense of worth; and (5) a desire for more connections beyond the particular one. These five good things describe the outcomes of growth-fostering relationships. It
is through this relational model that a person can feel safe enough to share her experiences and represent herself more completely to others.

Sharing in each other’s language, knowledge, and talents offers different ways to build relational competence. Raider-Roth (2005) researched the student-teacher relationship and found qualities that should be present for a trusting relationship between student and teacher. It is necessary to establish a safe environment where trust can prevail. A teacher’s connection to students and their experiences is critical, as well as a genuine interest in nurturing students’ ideas. A collaborative study between teacher and students contributes to building a trusting relationship. Relational competence is the ability to participate in growth fostering relationships. “It is being in touch with our own feelings, and with our own hearts, that we touch the hearts of others and both people grow” (White, 1959, p. 20). Relational competence occurs by empowering others through creating connection.

Growth fostering relationships occur when mutual respect and trust develop between an adult and an adolescent in an environment that values engagement, uncertainty, possibility, and choice (Candice, 2008). The levels of trust, consistency, and open communication play important roles in the success of relationships. When these things are established, we grow not toward separation, but toward greater mutuality and empathetic understanding (Jordon & Hartling, 2009).

Growth fostering relationships are critical for healthy development; however, many disadvantaged adolescent girls have been deprived of healthy relationships. As you will read, such relationships are often compromised by an individual’s tendency to disconnect from others.
**Disconnection and Connection.**

Relational theorists have worked to redefine the notion of self and development through connection with others (Jordan, 1995; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker 2002). One develops a sense of self as a person who attends to, and responds to, what is going on in relationships with others.

The Jean Baker Miller Training Institute (2010) acknowledges that chronic disconnection, whether on an interpersonal or societal scale, is the primary source of human suffering. The effects of chronic disconnections are costly and potentially devastating. Disconnection deprives people of a healthy development and a relational understanding of their world.

Many disadvantaged adolescent girls experience a lifetime of abandonment and they may alter their self-image by returning to painful relationship experiences. Miller and Stiver (1997) found that a relational context that includes repeated disconnections will lead people to create restricted and distorted images of relationships and themselves. Miller and Stiver (1997) claim that the most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is the psychological isolation involved in disconnection. It is critical to recognize the tremendous damage created from disconnections.

It is often the case that individuals who experience chronic disconnection develop defense strategies for emotional survival. Jordan (1995) refers to this as “defensive self-sufficiency” where we “become so afraid of engaging with others about our experiences that we keep important parts of ourselves out of connection; that is, we develop strategies for disconnection” (p. 2).

Walker (2002) argues that connection over the course of an individual’s life is made in
relational contexts. “Disconnections in relationship is in large measure a function of the multiple social identities operating in that particular relationship and in the relational surround at any given moment” (p. 2). Disconnections are a major source of psychological problems. Repairing disconnections with respectful, encouraging connections can increase the capacity for mutual growth and empowerment.

Jordan (1995) suggests, “there is a primary energy that flows toward others, toward joining with others in an expansive sense of interconnectedness” (p. 1). She continues to write, Anyone who has known the experience of “coming home” to connection, whether in the embrace of a loved one, in gazing into the sparkling and responsive eyes of a baby, or in the rapture of a breathtaking sunset knows there is something basic and beyond doubt about the sense of ‘being with,’ being in the flow of relational experience (p. 2).

A relational perspective recognizes that in order for growth to occur, there is a primary need for connectedness and emotional joining. There is safety in establishing connections with others. There is an intrinsic motivation to be in relationship and all people experience a need to feel understood, effective, and competent. We are all born with the possibility to engage in meaningful relationships, emotional connections, and mutual empowerment.

Jordan, Walker, and Hartling (2004) provide three main relational concepts of connection: (1) paradox, where there is a simultaneous yearning for connection yet the need to maintain strategies for disconnection in fear that others may not empathize with their feelings; (2) connection, experiencing each other’s presence in a full way, accommodating both the correspondence and contrast between them, and; (3) resonance, the ability for one person to respond to another and thereby recall or connect with their own issues. These ideas suggest that all growth occurs in connection, that all people yearn for connection, and that growth-fostering
relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. By enlarging our understanding of human connections, we can enhance the quality of life for everyone.

Resilience

Resilience is a fairly new concept in the relational research literature. It has only been during the last two decades that scholars in the fields of human development and social intervention began to explore the dynamics of resilience to promote favorable development in unfavorable conditions (Ahren, Ark & Byers, 2008; Gilligan, 2008; Ryan & Hoover, 2005).

The definition of resilience can vary substantially across social groups, classes, cultures, and genders (Arrington & Wilson, 2000). A variety of influences have been studied to clarify the concept of resilience in the lives of disadvantaged youth (Ahren, Ark & Byers, 2008; Edward, Welch & Chater, 2009; Osterling & Hines, 2006). Adolescents experience risks and feelings of vulnerability differently, depending on their developmental stage and sociocultural circumstances (Ahren, Ark & Byers, 2008). Despite the differences of life circumstances, scholars similarly agree that resilience involves looking after the self, feeling hopeful, and having faith.

Studies of resilience are often concerned with particular risks that permit youth to survive in spite of adversity. Resilient individuals show a bias toward positive emotions when faced with uncertain circumstances. The ability to endure adversity and sustain personal growth is a major characteristic of resilience.

Levesque (2002) claims in order for resilience to exist there must be a threat to the individual, such as living in a high-risk environment. A resilient profile encompasses two factors — adversity and adaptation. Adaptation has been defined as successful performance on age developmental tasks. Adversity is evaluated according to negative life circumstances (Schilling,
2007). Also, the individual must have adapted or developed in a competent manner despite adversity. Bernard (1995) similarly agrees that resilience is a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity.

Davey, Eaker and Walters (2003) explore characteristics within the individual that contribute to resiliency such as high self worth, coping skills, and particular personality traits. Devine (1984) believes personality and self-worth are salient intrapersonal characteristics that can significantly impact a child’s potential to be resilient and self-worth may be the most important indicator.

**Resilience and Relationships.**

Many scholars have questioned the link between relationships and resilience (e.g. Berlin and Davis, 1989; D’Abreu, Mullis, & Cook, 1999; Harvy & Delfabbro, 2004; Hurtes & Allen 2001; Werner, 1990). It would be fair to claim that one may find, or expect to find, strength in relationships. Access to resources, supportive relationships, and diverse experience tend to nurture and promote the potential for resilience among all populations (Ahren, Ark & Byers, 2008; Schilling, 2007). Healthy relationships contribute to an individual’s ability to endure adversity and chronic stressors.

Feminist scholars place great value on relationships and consider autonomous behavior unhealthy for development. Unfortunately, such relationships are absent in the lives of many disadvantaged youth. My experiences with disadvantaged adolescents have taught me that their sense of autonomy was critical for survival. Friedman (1993) argues that relational accounts of autonomy need to recognize the importance of female individuality. Friedman’s current work investigates the effects on women's autonomy from the experience of domestic abuse from intimate partners. She claims that women need to be able to exercise agency and understand
themselves as effective agents even when they are alone. Through autonomy women can resist the control of oppressive communities and relationships. Friedman believes that a sense of autonomy can be applied to women's circumstances in order to diminish their oppression and social subordination.

Conventional studies of resilience have been characterized as the ability to go it alone in the face of adversity. D’Abreu, Mullis, and Cook (1999) researched a group of Brazilian homeless youth. They found that the quantity and quality of social supports did not determine the success of young people to cope on the streets. Other researchers describe a resilient profile as one that demonstrates autonomy and a sense of purpose as well as insight, independence and initiative (Benard 1993; Hurtes & Allen 2001; Werner 1990). Similarly, Rutter (1991) found that resilience was largely determined by innate factors, and was therefore relatively unaffected by development, relationships, or interactions with the environment.

**Resilience as Protection.**

A resilient profile increases protection when life hazards multiply. Individual protective factors, or resiliency factors, is a recent topic of research (e.g. D’Imperio, Dubow, & Ippolito, 2000; Glantz & Johnson, 1999; Takviriyanun, 2008). In addition to having higher self-worth, resilient children have been described as those who learn to cope with stressors in more effective ways. Berlin and Davis (1989) found that the ability to separate oneself from a dysfunctional environment is a major characteristic of resilience in children growing up with chronic stressors.

It is important to note that protective factors differ from coping mechanisms. For example, individuals can cope with situations by avoiding them (Gruen, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1998). Whereas protective factors involve the ability to take control, be proactive, and make careful decisions and choices. Protective factors buffer against the impact of risk and can alter or
Resilient individuals usually exercise more than one resilience factor at a time. The greater number of resilient factors used by an individual, the greater the chances for positive outcomes (Takviriyanun, 2008). Protective resources such as self-worth and coping skills moderate the relationship between stressors and adjustment, distinguishing resilient individuals from their high stressed but maladapted peers (Masten, 2001).

D’Imperio, Dubow, and Ippolito (2000) determine that protective factors may enhance an individual’s management of chaotic environments, thus promoting resilience under conditions of high stress. Understanding the protective factors adolescents develop can give insight into what makes some individuals more resilient than others.

**Resilience in the Lives of Disadvantage Adolescents.**

Bernard (1993) identifies disadvantaged youth as those who face poverty, neglect, abuse, emotional and physical handicaps, war, mental illness, alchoholism, or crime. Unfortunately, it is still the case that “significant risk factors are very much here to stay, and that any significant changes in the social and economic structure of current society are highly unlikely in the foreseeable future” (Harvy & Delfabbro, 2004, p. 4). The study of young people living in impoverished conditions can also increase our understanding of broader socioeconomic inequities.

There exists a large amount of literature that focuses on why disadvantaged youth either fail or succeed academically (e.g. Cammarota, 2004; Conchas, 2001; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). However, studies on the dynamics of resiliency among economically disadvantaged and racially diverse adolescents are relatively absent in the research literature (Bell-Scott & Taylor 1989; Cammarota, 2004; McLoyd 1990). There is even less research that incorporates the voices of
youth into the discussion (Hall, 2007; Pollack, 2005). Longitudinal studies, several of which follow individuals over the course of a lifespan, have consistently documented that between half and two-thirds of disadvantaged children do overcome the odds (Arrington & Wilson, 2000; Bernard, 1993; Hurtes & Allen, 2001; Werner, 1990).

Bernard (1995) believes we are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, by which we are able to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Every child is capable of developing a resilient mindset, which can enable her to deal more effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to bounce back from disappointments, adversity, and trauma (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005, p. 4).

Wells (2007) determines that resilience is not an extraordinary quality, it is inherent, and therefore it can be developed and nurtured. It is critical to recognize the development of resilience because it can inform our understanding of all adolescents. “The study of children who overcome risk and adversity enhances the understanding of both normal development and maladjustment” (p. 425).

Bernard (2004) recognized that resilience arises from “the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities” (p. 10). I believe resilient individuals possess great courage. There exists a type of resilience that cannot be defined on paper. This type of resilience has quiet magic. You will recognize this later in the stories I share.

**Resistance**

As you will read, certain types of resistance are healthy and necessary in the development of adolescents. Contemporary researchers examine the development of protective factors of
healthy resistance, which are necessary to help build resilience (e.g., Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Wachtel, 2008). Hall (2007) recognizes that the capacity to positively transform and resist adversity can be viewed as an expression of individual power. It can also be seen as a personal act of agency that helps free individuals from the hardships of prejudice and sexism.

Rutter, Giller, and Hagnell (1998) define resistance in the construct of resilience, “the phenomena of people functioning well in spite of adverse experiences, of relative resistance to risk factors, or overcoming stressful experiences” (p. 170). Adverse experiences include sexual harassment, gender bias, negative body image, and dysfunctional relationships. These experiences illustrate the need for developing and defining healthy resistance. Camiller (2007) describes characteristics of resistance as “non-participation and verbalization, or actions that prevent connection, self-awareness and insight” (p. 96).

Wachtel (2008) studied Freud’s concept of resistance and found that it was not a patient’s expression of stubbornness or uncooperativeness but rather it was “an expression of anxiety that was the primary force in the patient’s difficulties in the first place” (p. 188). Some individuals avoid certain thoughts and feelings. They consider those thoughts and feelings dangerous- in that the individuals would become vulnerable to pain.

Scholars have identified several forms of resistance (e.g., Brown, 1998; Gilligan, 1990; Raider-Roth, 2010; Robinson & Ward, 1991; Wachtel, 2008). As seen in Raider-Roth (2010), Gilligan identifies two forms of resistance: political and psychological. Gilligan defines political resistance as a circumstance when an individual is aware of what she or he knows, and is willing to be honest and outspoken. Psychological resistance is a “reluctance to know what one knows and a fear that such knowledge, if spoken, will endanger relationships and threaten survival” (Gilligan, 1990, p. 256).
Robinson and Ward (1991) refer to two forms of resistance that African American female adolescents face from being members of an oppressed group. “Resistance for survival” often takes place in hostile and oppressive environments where youth seek temporary relief in the form of sex, drinking, and other potentially harmful behavior. “Resistance for liberation” is a time “in which Black girls and women are encouraged to acknowledge the problems of, and to demand change in, an environment that oppresses them” (p. 89). Establishing a positive racial and personal identity through the process of affirmation is an act of psychological resistance for liberation.

Gilligan, Robinson, and Ward acknowledge that oppression influences the level of resistance and individual experiences. Many adolescent girls develop survival tactics to protect themselves against adversity. It is critical to offer adolescents safe opportunities that lead to empowerment.

Gabarino (2005) determines that youth may appear resilient in social terms, but can be severely wounded in inner or emotional ways. As seen in Gilligan, (2008) Ungar argues that resilience may take the form of resistance as part of a struggle to assert a sense of agency, “in a context that otherwise may risk being crushed” (p. 38).

Adolescents who find themselves unable to successfully navigate the transition from childhood to adulthood are likely to be resistant. It has been my experience with students that resistance has occurred when they felt unable to express their emotions, or felt as if their experiences did not matter. I initially interpreted their resistance as defiance or having a lack of interest. I have come to know that resistance is a message saying “something is wrong — something hurts” an emotion that arises when all else has failed. I believe resistance is a product of the emotional losses many girls experience. In the chapters that follow I will further define
resistance in the stories I share.

**Marginalization as a Source of Resistance.**

Many scholars have written extensively on the struggles of adolescent development and their experiences of marginalization from growing up in a patriarchal society (e.g. Elium & Elium, 1996; Brown, 1998; Gilligan, 2008; Robinson & Ward, 1991). In American society, adult-centered concerns and traditions marginalize all adolescents regardless of their race or socioeconomic class. The developmental stage of adolescence is often characterized by rebellion and emerging independence (Smith et al., 2003). Resistance towards family, school, and other authoritative figures seems to be a natural condition for adolescents.

Pipher (1995) recognizes adolescence as a time when girls experience social pressure to put aside their authentic selves and resist showing others their strengths and gifts. Brown (1998) refers to adolescent girls as “actively struggling to sort out the meanings of their lives, contesting the pressures to align with a reality that devalues and dismisses them” (p.xii). Elium and Elium (1996) state that the conflict between the need to belong to a group and the need to be seen as a unique individual is the dominant struggle of adolescence.

Adolescents who are of racial minority status or from low socioeconomic homes face multiple forms of marginalization. Birrell and Freyd (2006) observe that cultural oppression, social exclusion, and other forms of social injustices underlie the tensions that individuals in marginalized and devalued groups routinely experience. Characteristics associated with being in a disadvantaged social position play significant roles in the development of resistance strategies.

Pastor, McCormick, and Fine (1996) found while listening to urban girls of color, that they have developed a critical consciousness of sexism, classism, and racism as opposed to their White counterparts. Curtis-Tweed (2003) recognized that “to form a sense of agency, people of
African descent must rely on self-perceptions, independent of the images reflected by the dominant culture or by those who shape the dominant culture” (p. 401).

During my research, I have found many scholars and organizations that advocate for adolescent girls. One is UNICEF, an international child advocacy organization with a mission to build a world where the rights of every child are realized. UNICEF recognizes that the situation of adolescent girls is particularly complex. There are deep-rooted traditions of patriarchy and the subordination of women and girls that make it difficult for adolescent girls to realize their rights. I am hopeful for the betterment of adolescent girls because of the new and growing awareness of the importance of adolescent health.

**Resistance and Relationships.**

Adolescence is a time when girls are in danger of losing their voices and their connection with others (Brown, 1998; Gilligan, 1990). At this stage in life, relationships can be risky. Rogers (1993) writes of the “ordinary courage” of women and girls. She identifies adolescence as a particularly vulnerable time in a woman’s development, where “the capacity ‘to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart’ is a loss many girls experience at the edge of adolescence” (p. 275).

Children who have been emotionally wounded or abandoned by others develop strategies for staying out of relationships. Miller and Stiver (1997) refer to a “disconnection” that can take various forms such as passive attitudes, preoccupation, withdrawal from social activities, substance abuse, and other dissociative behaviors.

Individuals who conform to others and their environment can also be considered resistant. Adolescent girls encounter relationships that demand conformity with standards that differ from their own. They are faced with decisions that cause them to dissociate
from what they know (Raider-Roth, 2005). For example, Miller and Stiver (1997) illustrate conformity in young children who adapt the role of a “good” student in order to win the teacher’s approval. Such strategies help individuals feel less vulnerable and exposed, but they also prevent the possibility of connection with others (Miller & Stiver, 1998). This type of resistance is subtle and often overlooked. It is important to recognize this type of resistance as unhealthy because it interferes with the development of an authentic self.

**Anger as Resistance.**

Anger is a complicated emotion and is often viewed as inappropriate or unacceptable. Anger makes people uncomfortable. Many girls receive messages that anger is offensive. Subsequently, girls struggle to honestly communicate with others. Brown (1998) discusses “voice training” (p.12) where girls learn what to say, how to speak, what to feel, and how to think if they want to be the right kind of girl. Society has instructed girls to resist anger and because of this girls have developed unhealthy patterns of communication.

Rogers (1993) states adolescents often experience an “unspeakable longing and rage” (p. 275). Similarly, Gilligan, Lyons, and Hammer (1990) note that the history of being misrepresented, misunderstood, and unheard leaves both knowledge and scars. In the absence of growth fostering relationships, adolescents are left alone to evaluate themselves and their situations. This often leads to feelings of anger.

Haste (1994) sees the frustration and anger in the lives of girls who are not able to fit into the dominant culture’s idea of womanhood. Their resistance in the form of anger creates anxiety because they are disturbing traditional sex-role socialization. The capacity to feel anger, know its source, and respond to it correctly was once seen as strength, but now it is often viewed as a
liability (Brown, 1998). The ability to express anger is an important aspect of healthy development.

Depending on social class and material status, anger is perceived differently. For example, Underwood, Coi, and Herbsman (1992) claim that anger is taught and valued in low income communities “because it prompt[s] children to act quickly and forcefully to protect themselves” (p. 377). In certain populations, anger is viewed as a call to action.

Brown (1998) suggests that reasoned anger is critical to the healthy development of girls, “here at the edge of adolescence...was the anger expressed, the resistant, knowing voices determined to be heard, the underground voices easily called forth by someone who would listen and take them seriously” (p. xi). If girls do not have the opportunity to feel anger, they develop unhealthy resistance, which undermines their capacity to be resilient. Caretakers of adolescent girls must recognize anger as a healthy expression and something to be considered seriously.

**Healthy Resistance.**

Brown (1998) claims that creative resistance to stereotypes and various forms of oppression become central to women and girls’ development. Psychologists often teach and practice creative strategies as a way for patients to reduce unhealthy resistance and overcome traumatic events. For example, Bratton (2010) worked with severely abused adolescents. She and her patients created a character that represented their abuser, naming him “the Destroyer.” “Personification in the metaphor of the Destroyer leads to lasting transformation, because the Destroyer can be disempowered and discarded, reducing the amount of a patient’s resistance” (p. 62). In my experiences with my participants and the art-making process, I have witnessed when “one voice speaks through another voice or voice type” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 59). When this happens, individuals are able to separate themselves from dysfunctional experiences and express
themselves in a creative voice.

Another example can be found in Lykes (1996) description of her experiences working with women in rural Guatemala, and the desire to work towards a better quality of life for the community. This includes strengthening the capacities for survival and healthy resistance through education and change-based practices. Lykes and her partners established “Creative Workshops for Children,” a safe place where child survivors of war could expose their painful experiences, share thoughts, fears, and anxiety. Theatre, bodily movement, visual arts, music, and creative writing played a major role in developing healthy resistance for recovery.

Externalizing negative messages and unhealthy resistance by offering creative strategies can detach the individual with dysfunctional life experiences. Creative opportunities fuel “rapid and lasting shifts in self-experience and interactions with the world” (Bratton, 2010, p. 62).

As adults trying to make sense of adolescent girls, we can make a mess of things. Perhaps their indirect expression of anger and resistance is unsettling. The path of least resistance may very well lead us in the wrong direction. Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995) state that it is critical to listen to and support girls at this developmental crossroads, to appreciate and learn from their “outspokenness” and resistance.

**Feminist Relational Approaches in My Dissertation**

I study from the vantage point of an artist and researcher and this perspective shapes who I am, what I see, and what I study. My life experiences have influenced my approach to understanding feminist scholarship and how it can be applied to my study.

It is necessary for me to understand the role relationships have in the lives of my participants. Miller and Stiver (1997) recognize the desire for connection and the fear of connection can be a paralyzing circumstance for many people. This is a critical component for
understanding my participants.

De Vault (1999) writes that “the dilemma for the feminist scholar, always, is to find ways of working within some disciplinary tradition while aiming at intellectual revolution that will transform tradition” (p. 59). Feminist thought and arts-based methodologies are two disciplines that act as a framework for this study. They both challenge the patriarchal nature that exists in traditional research formats.

Researchers and therapists are pushing traditional boundaries and taking risks in order to develop connections that can lead to deeper understanding (Rabinor, 2000). The boundaries of the researcher and the researched are woven together in hopes to make connections, demand engagement, and instill greater self-consciousness. Way (2001) writes about her experience working with feminist approaches:

The adolescents have the power of knowing their own experiences and deciding what to tell me and what not to tell me. Attuning myself to speaking and from what vantage point strengthens the rigor of my research because it encourages me to see and hear the unexpected (p. 114).

Through authentic engagement, adolescents and adults become persons to each other. Being in a relationship means sharing ideas, exposing emotions, and making oneself vulnerable. We are all born with the possibility of engaging with others and out of it flows mutual empowerment. These ideas have allowed me to better understand and communicate with the girls in my study.

**Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

Feminist scholars have learned the importance of entering a conscious and participatory relationship with a way of thinking, discovering how it can hinder, confuse, transform and
change both the participant and the researcher (Halifax, 1997). Participatory action research (PAR) is rooted in feminist thought which rejects the belief that one can separate the subjectivity from research. It also rejects the belief in universal laws or truths and seeks out ways to limit the power relations that exist in traditional research design (Rogers, 1993).

Brydon-Miller (2000) defines PAR as a framework that allows social change to take place through the process of research, education, and action. It is essential to form a solid knowledge base of the participants and their communities in order to develop a critical consciousness of the complex realities faced in their everyday lives. Brydon-Miller stresses the importance of a strong and healthy relationship between the researcher and members of the research community. The researcher must pay close attention to his or her role in the collaboration process. Power dynamics play a role in any type of research and complicate our understandings of participants and other phenomena.

Tolman and Brydon-Miller (2000) describe participatory action research as a democratized form of research. Ideally, both content and methodology should be decided by all those involved in the project. Each group has expertise to share and together they can form the design of the project. Maquire (1996) determines that participatory researchers, no matter what methods they use, affirm “that people's own knowledge is valuable...[researchers] regard people as agents rather than objects, capable of analyzing their own situations and designing their own solutions" (p.32). Similarly, Reid (2004), defines PAR as a social action process that works “with” rather than “for” the researched, breaking down the distinction between researchers and the researched.

McIntyre and Lykes (2001) recognize the struggles involved while conducting action research. The researcher takes on three roles: initiator, insider, and outsider. All three roles have
complex issues that require special attention. They highlight the importance of tolerance, acceptance, and humility in the development of reciprocal relationships. The construction of stories is made possible by the investment and commitment made by group members. Stringer (2008) writes about the four working principles of action research: relationships, communication, participation, and inclusion. These four principles guided my study and informed my practices.

When executed successfully, the art-making process can be integrated into a PAR model that brings the research group together in a non-authoritarian and non-hierarchical manner. Spaniol (2002) affirms that artistic activity is consistent with the tenets of PAR because it is by definition action-oriented, “it lends itself to collaborative activity because it is often used to identify issues and solutions” (p.108). The use of visual art as a collaborative and participatory activity can demonstrate how communication and understanding can be achieved when traditional hierarchies are dissolved.

**Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER)**

Arts-based education research (ABER) is influenced by conventional social science practices, but deviates from the traditional methods of conducting research. The artist/researcher is fully engaged in the creative process, and seeks to make meaning of his/her questions through artistic measures. Much of educational research has aesthetic qualities. However, the more pronounced they are, the more the research may be characterized as arts-based.

Elliot Eisner and Tom Barone are pioneers the field of ABER. They established a theoretical framework that consists of: the creation of a virtual reality, a degree of textual ambiguity, contextualized language, empathetic participation from the research participants, and an aesthetic form through which the unique signature of the researcher is communicated (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008).
Barone and Eisner (2006) claim that arts-based research is meant to enhance perspective, allowing the reader to view educational phenomena in a new way. ABER aims to explore questions that may otherwise be left unasked.

Arts-based educational research is rooted in art therapy, but is now used by those outside of the profession such as artists, art teachers, and researchers to study different ways of knowing. Arts-based research supports the notion that knowing is best achieved by doing, and creative experiences can provide us with knowledge of ourselves and others.

Much of my work is influenced by Shaun McNiff, an experienced arts therapist and arts-based researcher. McNiff (1998) defines art-based research as a “method of inquiry that uses the elements of the creative arts experience, including the making of art by the researcher, as ways of understanding the significance of what we do within our practice and teaching” (p. 13).

Jacobs (2008) published a book titled *The Authentic Dissertation: Alternative Ways of Knowing, Research, and Representation*. He offers several definitions of research and what it means to be an expert in one’s field. He cites scholars who define research as a truth-seeking activity that contributes to knowledge. Arts-based approaches require active participation from the researcher and participants. When executed successfully, such participation leads to discovery of subjective truths.

Arts-based approaches utilize the elements, processes, and strategies of artistic and creative practice investigation. Eisner and Barone (1988) describe ABER as possessing aesthetic qualities or design elements that “infuse the inquiry and its writing” (p. 73). Arts-based inquiry communicates the expression of multiple truths and the interaction of these truths to create new individual and collective meanings (Conrad, 2004).

Leitch (2006) reminds us that not all aspects of experience are readily available to
awareness. Many emotional, sensory, and embodied dimensions of experience lie below the threshold of consciousness and are thus impossible to articulate in words. The creative process itself carries unknown and unconscious dimensions. Arts-based experiences have the power to access our most inner thoughts and feelings. Creative experiences reveal, evoke, and provoke understandings that traditional research formats cannot provide.

McNiff (2004) reflects on his years of practice as an arts therapist expressing how the arts present themselves as imaginative healers, “I try to get people involved in the creative process in a way that opens to a deep personal dialogue with images and feelings that instinctively present the needs of the soul” (p. 5). When dealing with pain and loss, there are often no words to explain the extent of suffering – this is when the language of imagery becomes essential (Ganim & Fox, 1999). Arts-based research methodologies strive to make connections, demand engagement, and instill a greater self-consciousness.

The Different Branches of ABER.

There are several terms that arts-based researchers use to define their methodology. The two most popular are scholARTistry and a/r/tography. ScholARTistry is a field that combines tools used in the arts with the practices of social scientists to make meaning of the human condition. The three goals of scholARTistry are “to make academic writing an area where virtuosity and clarity are valued, to make educational research an area where the arts are a legitimate inquiry, and to infuse scholarship with the spirit of creative connection” (Nielson, 2005).

A/r/tography is a term encompassing artist-researcher-teacher. In a/r/tography, these three roles are integrated, creating an “in-between space.” A/r/tography merges “knowing, doing, making” (Pinar, 2004, p. 9). Research is viewed as a process of exchange that emerges through
an intertwining of mind, body, self, and other. The context and conditions of inquiry become open, and knowing “is rooted in embodiment as being in motion, relational, and singular” (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p. 108).

**Tensions within ABER.**

ABER faces many questions because of its short history and elusive language. There is much uncertainty looming over creative approaches to social science research. Issues of legitimacy and authenticity are central concerns for researchers who use creative practices.

There are tensions in the academic community concerning arts-based inquiry: what constitutes artful expression and how expert must one be in an art medium to render research through the arts (Pirto, 2002; Sinner et al., 2006). Many want to judge the quality of nontraditional work. Criteria for judging ABER will depend on the purpose of the work, the audience who is receiving the work, and the philosophical framework used by the researcher.

Eisner (2008) identifies five tensions that arts-based researchers face while conducting their work. One dilemma researchers face is the desire to work imaginably but risk the chance their work will not communicate. The second tension is located between the particular and the general. The focus on a particular educational setting may explain distinct functions, yet at the same time it should extend beyond the particular. Third is the temptation to allow aesthetic considerations to trump literal truth. A fourth tension, common among all forms of research, is when the product results in newer, more interesting questions. Lastly, recognizing the tension of subjectivity verses objectivity. Objectivity is always beyond reach and meanings are made as part of life histories.

Eisner (2008) warns us of the dangers of metaphoric novelty versus literal utility. He recognizes,
Novelty is a part of creativity and creativity is important to have but when it trumps the instrumental utility...namely that it contributes to the enrichment of the student’s educational experience, it loses its utility as a form of educational research...arts-based research needs to pursue novelty without sacrificing utility (p.24).

McNiff (1998) believes artistic inquiry can offer a new vision of research based on the principles of artistic knowing. He does not find it necessary to legitimize the field of arts-based research according to outside groups’ criteria. He writes about the valuable tension between philosophy and art, “I believe this gap is the most basic of the creative spirit, and I see no reason to resolve or bring closure to the tension...I recognize the value of science and its research methods; but they can never encapsulate the totality of what I do” (p. 31).

Latta (2008) describes educational reforms in the last two decades to have focused on objectifying specific learning outcomes resulting in much more superficial rather than substantial learning. Latta claims that little attention has been paid to assimilation, internalization, or integrated thought.

Arts-based approaches are slowly becoming more accepted in the field of educational research. However, grants and ethics committees still follow the criteria used by standard research projects and fail to take into account the context of working with humans in complex social structures. Because of this, many researchers shy away from nontraditional work. This undermines the innovative nature that research should entail.

Although parts of this dissertation follow a traditional framework, much of it does not. A substantial understanding of the resilience, resistance, and images of relationships in the lives of three African American adolescent girls requires a holistic approach to my research. In the chapter that follows, I provide readers with my positionality as a researcher and I offer my
reasons for using nontraditional approaches.
Chapter III

Methods

Recruitment

It was a chilly spring day. My friend and I sat at the curb in front of campus to meet the school bus filled with public high school students for a tour of our university. My friend was working with students from the Cincinnati Arts and Technology Center (CATC). The center provides Cincinnati Public School students with the option to earn their fine arts credit after school. I was thrilled to be invited – it would be a great opportunity for me to recruit participants for my study.

The bus arrived and I eagerly jumped on. The director had arranged for me to speak to the students while they were still on the bus. The voices on the bus were loud and jovial. These students were familiar to me. They came from rough schools, much like the ones where I have taught. The type of schools that housed overcrowded classrooms, broken windows, metal detectors, security guards, and greasy lunches. I welcomed them to the university, introduced myself and told them about my study. I explained that I wanted to work with adolescent girls and art. The boys jokingly said it wasn’t fair that they were not invited. I said something back that made them laugh. I passed out 20 sketchbooks to the girls who expressed interest.

The bus emptied and we went to our first presentation at the admission office. The students quickly filed into the auditorium and fought over seats. A young woman from the university spoke to the students about different programs and degrees offered. Some students listened eagerly. Some students snuck text messages and ignored her altogether.

We proceeded on our tour of the university, passing classroom buildings, libraries, and the football stadium. The boys struck Heisman poses and spouted off names of their favorite
athletes. The girls made fun of them. It was nice to see the students happy.

Our tour ended at the African American student center. We listened to an enthusiastic senior speak about the Black fraternity and sorority. The girls thought he was cute and whispered things between their hands and mouths. Pizza was served, and I invited the girls with sketchbooks to join me. I made casual conversation, asking how they liked the tour, did they know anyone who attended the university, and so on. I told them that we could meet every Tuesday and Thursday at the CATC center. I walked them back to the bus and watched the girls closely, wondering whose stories I might learn.

**Research Process: Phase One**

As planned, I arrived at the center on Tuesday with fast food and art supplies. Although I passed out 20 sketchbooks I guessed maybe half would show. I was given a small room with 15 chairs. We were going to cover Picasso and his abstract portraits. I heard the buses arrive and the girls started to trickle in and within 10 minutes, 18 girls gathered around me. There was not enough room, food, or supplies. I panicked.

Since I only brought enough supplies for 10 girls, I improvised. Instead of Picasso portraits, I asked the girls to write a haiku poem that they would later illustrate. Some of them groaned; some jumped in, stating they just learned about haikus in English class. The first poem I read was written by a girl named Lataya (pseudonym),

_I’m just sitting here_

_What do you want me to say?_

_I do not know you_

I wasn’t sure on how to instruct her to illustrate her words to images. I was hoping for a poem about flowers, puppies, or something comfortable and familiar. It was then when I began
to understand. These girls were resistant. They were guarded. They were not going to let me in easy. These girls did not know me as their teacher. I did not have the luxury of seeing them one school bell a day. We had no history. There was an interpersonal tension – a tension that would not go away for some time. It was going to take slow and difficult time for the girls to trust me.

I thought back to my years teaching in predominately Black schools and the expression from my students’ faces that read “What do you know about my life, White lady?” I would start off the year by nervously reciting the same speech to each class, “Listen please. I don’t know you. You don’t know me either. You may like art – you may find no reason for it. I will meet you where you are. I will respect you. For now let’s trust each other.” The speech usually was well received. I recited the same speech to the girls. It was difficult for me to see their expressions because of the poor lighting. I hoped some of them believed my words. I am sure a few rolled their eyes. We cleaned up and I collected their poems and artwork. The girls hurried to their bus. I walked out of the building feeling alone and fatigued. I was afflicted with doubt and confusion.

On my drive home, I was sad and wondered why life had to be this way. I wondered how many times these girls have been let down. I thought about Lataya and her resistance toward me. I imagined a long road ahead. I thought of a quote I once read from Alois Podhajsky, a horseback riding instructor who worked with the fundamentals of classical riding, “I must not forget to thank the difficult horses, who made my life miserable, but who were better teachers than the well-behaved school horses who raised no problems.” He believed in the art of riding in harmony with, rather than against, the horse. The natural ability of the horse influences the type of instruction it receive, recognizing that every horse, regardless of breed is unique in its own way.

Much like good classical riding, action research only occurs when the researcher has a
good seat, a correct, well balanced body position, and moves with the participants’ motion. I was not going to work against the girls’ resistance. Instead, I would search for art projects that could capture their thoughts, emotions, and deep-seated suspicions. I had no choice but try to gain balance and allow the girls’ unique personalities to influence my methodologies.

I was better prepared for our next session – or at least I thought so at the time. In our second session we examined Picasso and the Cubist movement as I initially planned. I asked the girls to make abstract self portraits using oil pastels. I used this lesson many times as an art teacher. It was my experience that students enjoyed this project because it allowed them to be someone else.

This was not the case with the girls. They complained about the pastels getting under their fingernails. They didn’t understand why they had to make “ugly” pictures of themselves. I once again had to improvise; I had to ride with the girls. We decided then to create realistic portraits. I took their photographs, and taught them how to use a grid method for their composition. We spent the next few weeks composing their portraits.

The portraits turned out beautifully and the girls were proud of their work. After the self-portrait project we created collages, painted landscapes, and studied the work of Van Gogh.

After weeks passed, attendance became inconsistent. Some days, eight girls would show, on other days five or three. As time passed, girls had to leave the group due to jobs and responsibilities at home. Three girls remained and they asked if we could continue after the school year was over. These are the girls you will read about in this study. Lataya and Ebony are pseudonyms, but Ciera asked that I use her real name.
Research Process: Phase 2

Most of our sessions take place at the downtown library on hot summer days when the air is thick and cruel. The script rarely changes. I drive in my un-air-conditioned truck, to the library, with the gas needle hovering near empty. I always park in the same lot. It was expensive, but I know I will not have to leave our session to pay the meter. I hoist my suitcase filled with art supplies, fruit, and cold drinks from the back of my truck. I grab the bag of cheeseburgers from the front seat and clumsily lock the door. I walk to the library, passing city blocks filled with vendors, business people, and small children clutching their mothers’ hands.

In front of the library, wedged between corporate buildings and hotels, groups of older men huddle together under the shade of a lone tree smoking sweet cigars and laughing at one another. Next to them are teenagers in headphones who eat chips and speak in slang. On lucky days, there is a man in front of the library beating his drums and singing off key. Most people seem to pay him little attention, but I am grateful for the melodies he plays over the honking horns and squeaking buses. I usually give him a crumpled dollar bill from my shorts pocket. He smiles at me and says, “Thanks, darling.” I smile back and enter the building.

When I walk through the door the cool air welcomes me. I pass through the metal detectors and offer a smile to the security guard, hoping I will not have to open my jam-packed suitcase. I take the elevator to the second floor. I pass through a giant room lined with massive windows where people quietly play chess. Outside that room is a magnetic board where people can string random words together to make poetry. My favorite sentence so far is “I dream of a mother garden where every tree is a window.”

The room where we meet is located in the teen center. I ask the librarian for the key to open the room and sign a paper claiming I am responsible for any damages. The walls of the
room are made out of crystal clear glass. At times, I feel like the girls and I are on display. I unload my suitcase, place the food and drinks on a separate table and arrange the rest of the tables into one large one. I scatter markers, paint, construction paper, glue, and scissors on the big table. Once everything is set up, I sit down and sigh. I close my eyes and quietly pray that I am who the girls need me to be that day.

Once the girls arrive, I give them a chance to eat and drink giant gulps of cold blue Gatorade. I take plastic cups to the restroom and fill them with water for our work. When I return they are usually arguing about boys, who farted, or why their bus ride was the longest. I settle the girls as best I can and pass out their works in progress. We critique each other’s pieces using only positive comments. I listen to the girls plan the next steps of their compositions. We select our supplies and begin to work.

We talk as we work. I listen to the girls speak about their jobs, friends, boys, TV, and so on. At times, they are frustrated that their work does not turn out as planned. They often curse the materials that spill or splatter on their clothes. They are loud and animated. I am accustomed to the foul language, the ridicule, and the loudness. It doesn’t bother me.

It is the times of quiet that catch me off guard. Rarely is it the peaceful type of quiet that one might imagine when engaged in the art-making process. This quiet is heavy and sober. It is the remembrance of a grandmother dying of cancer, an eviction notice, or worse. It is the sound of difficult times.

Using the Arts in Quiet Times.

When dealing with matters of the heart, such as pain, loss, or abandonment there are often no words to explain the extent of suffering. McNiff (2004) reflects on his years of practice as an art therapist, expressing how art presents itself as an imaginative healer. “I try to get people
involved in the creative process in a way that opens to a deep personal dialogue with images and feelings that instinctively present the needs of the soul.” (p. 5).

Ganim (1999) credits the arts “as a way to heal the emotional wounds created by our internal fragmentation as well as by our sense of separation from others” (p. 1). The creative process carries unknown and unconscious dimensions. Not all aspects of experience are readily available to awareness; many emotional, sensory, and embodied dimensions of experience lie below the threshold of consciousness and are unattainable by words alone (Leitch, 2006).

If words and people fail to understand, creative opportunities provide an escape, a chance to be someone, or somewhere else for a moment,

Creativity implies us to re-do things in a new manner, so the future is not dictated by the past, but can intrude upon it, and can welcome the strange and dangerous rather than getting fixed on the familiar and safe (Moran & Honan, 2008, p. 92).

Creativity demands engagement and instills a greater sense of self-consciousness. Arts-based experiences have the power to access our innermost thoughts and feelings. Creative experiences reveal, evoke, and provoke understanding of ourselves and others.

My background as an art teacher and my experiences as an artist lead me to believe that everyone has an intrinsic desire to create. I believe that art is a universal language, an intimate voice of expression; a language we all can speak and understand. It is a language we need in order to be fluent human beings. It has been an honor to listen my participants’ voices. I know them as young women and artists. Their voices reside in my heart and mind. They inform my practices and methodological choices.

In the true sense of arts-based research, I have allowed my methodologies to emerge from the art-making experience and my relationship with the girls. I used studio practices in order to
accommodate improvisation. My experiences as an art teacher have afforded me with an instinct for creating lessons as we went along. Berlin (1996) shares similar sentiments,

There is an element of improvisation, of playing by ear, of being able to size up the situation, of knowing when to leap and when to remain still, for which no formulae, no nostrums, no general recipes, no skill of identifying specific situations as instances of general laws can substitute (p. 33).

There were times when I had to sit still, and times when I had to move quickly. I have learned to honor the process. I had to let go and that is where I found understanding.

**Data Analysis**

*The alchemy that separates the head from the heart finds no gold.* – (Pelias, 2004, p.9).

I have searched long and far to find an approach to data analysis that captured the authenticity of my participants’ voice. The journey has been an exhausting yet rewarding. It has forced me to look within, to look out, to feel, to love, and to understand. The emotional response and commitment from my readers is critical. My analysis includes both poetry and visual artwork, created by my participants, as well as myself. The data analysis methods I have used are an attempt to move from objectivity to conscious subjectivity, from fragmentation to wholeness. My poetry and artwork can stand on its own, but it is intended to be viewed and understood as a related whole.

It may be possible to find a way to objectively analyze my data; however, I am not interested in doing so. Moran and Honan (2008) determine that objectivity can only make sense of some parts of the academic community, an aspect that is fairly predictable, regular, explainable, and controllable. This form of knowing creates a false sense of safety and security. What matters most to me as an artist and researcher is the interpretive process and product that
allows me and my readers to better understand the lives of my participants. Patton (2002) suggests that these types of findings are where “truth” is understood, where the emotional dimension is just as important as the cognitive one.

Arts-based researchers have established, and continue to establish, data analysis methods that consist of a creation of a virtual reality, a degree of textual ambiguity, contextualized language, and empathetic participation from the research participants (Barone, 2008, Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Leavy, 2009).

McNiff (2004) writes about the fragile nature of analyzing the creative works of others. “The words I use are impressions of impressions that hopefully generate further impressions and expressions of others” (p. 3). Artistic data representation evokes meaning, illuminates impressions, and is a tool that has helped me work through complicated issues.

**Portraiture: Embracing Aesthetics with Empiricism**

Portraiture is a relatively new concept that first surfaced in the works of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot while documenting the culture of schools, life stories of individuals, and the relationships among families, schools, and communities. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) published “The Art and Science of Portraiture”, a seminal piece that illuminates the origins, purposes, and features of portraiture.

Portraiture is a style of writing that offers a thick description of characters, events, and environment. It is unique in that it “blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). Portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitists and the subject, each participating in the drawing of the image. In this sense, portraiture can be seen as a method that increases the richness, reflexivity, and authority of experiences.
Portraiture exists within the larger discourse of social science inquiry. Portraiture is complex in nature and has many elements. I will focus on context, voice, and relationship as they are three integral aspects of this dissertation.

**Context.**

Context is the framework that places people and action in time and space and a resource for understanding what participants say or do. Context is a necessary and crucial factor in understanding the human experience. Researchers who work within the realm of context are forced to confront the distance and dissonance between theory, practice, and participants’ experiences.

Utilizing context as a resource for interpreting behavior and thoughts contradicts traditional positivist research documentation, where research investigates humans in isolation. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Mishler (1979) criticizes the practice of “context stripping” and claims that in order to understand human experience we must see it in its natural setting. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) believe that human experience has meaning in context where relationships are real and behavior is natural.

One way that I have documented context is through field notes. Writing based on field notes offers readers the context of participants in their environment. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2001) refer to “evocative field notes” that can “provide particularly rich accounts of the processual nature and full complexities of experience” (p. 361). Fluid, descriptive and insightful means of writing can be more compelling than standard prose.

**Voice.**

In portraiture, my voice as a researcher is everywhere – in the in the questions I ask, and in the assumptions and perspective I bring to the study. I introduced my dissertation in an
autobiographical fashion. There was an explicit recognition of the use of self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting my perspective. Later in this dissertation, I use an autobiographical voice as a means to communicate the experiences of my participants.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argue “the portraitist’s reference to her own life story does not reduce the reader’s trust, it enhances it. It does not distort the responsibility of the researcher and the authenticity of the work, it gives them clarity” (p. 96). Voice is the research instrument that echoes the self of the portraitist – her eyes, her ears, her insights, styles, and aesthetic understanding (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). However, the voice of the portraitist must be cognizant and controlled so it does not overshadow the voice and experiences of the participants.

Listening for other voices allows the portraitist to seek out and to capture “its texture and cadence, exploring its meaning and transporting its sounds and message into the text through carefully selected quotations” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 99). Such poetic documentation can make situations more vivid to the reader.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) present voice in six different contexts: (1) the use of voice as witness; (2) voice as interpretation; (3) voice as preoccupation; (4) voice as autobiography; (5) active listening for voice; and (6) voice in conversation (p. 87). The sequence and purposes of voice is intentional, starting from the restrained voice of a witness or stranger, progressing to a voice in dialogue.

Throughout this dissertation you will hear my voice as a witness and interpreter. You will also hear the voices of my participants. I have intentionally selected quotes from the girls that I believe best communicate their perspectives, insights, and individual experiences. Together, our voices tell a larger story.
**Relationship.**

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) determine that portraits are constructed, formed, and drawn through the development of relationships. Relationships are never static, they are negotiated and renegotiated, week by week, day by day, even minute by minute as the portraitist and the actors navigate lines of intimacy, trust, reciprocity, and boundary setting, and as they work to develop a level of comfort, balance, honesty, and authenticity in their communications with one another (p. 135).

Hill (2005) explores portraiture in her work with African-American teachers and urges fellow researchers to view participants as human, “woman beings,” each with her own experiences, perspective, and practices. She writes, “creating poetic portraits allowed me to convey the spirit of their beings, in a way that other, more traditional, forms of data documentation would not enable...creating ‘living’ portraits allows the reader to see, hear, and feel” (p. 104). Such work enhances the voice of the researcher and the participant and our ability to understand the experiences, perspectives, and identities of our participants.

The methods and practices used in portraiture have taught me how to look through a refined lens. Portraiture has influenced how I wrote field notes and my perspective as a researcher. I was able to see the intricate and subtle details of my participants and record them within a specific context. Through such descriptive writing I was able to add depth, detail, and life to my participants and their stories.

**Poetry as Analysis**

The use of poetry in the production of social scientific knowledge has increased greatly in recent decades (Leavy, 2009; Pelias, 2004). Bochner (2001) recognized the “narrative turn” in
qualitative research as a way of honoring people’s stories and allowing the data to speak for itself. Leavy (2009) states that poetry as a research strategy challenges the fact-fiction dichotomy and offers a form of evocative presentation of data,

Poems, surrounded by space and weighted by silence, break through the noise to present an essence. Sensory scenes created with skillfully placed words and purposeful pauses, poems push feelings to the forefront capturing heightened moments of social reality as if under a magnifying glass (p. 63).

A part of humanity that may elude the social scientist reveals itself in poetry, allowing the audience to connect from deep within (Richardson, 1997). Poetry can enhance the written text and can make situations vivid to the reader, “it provides us with a window into the feelings of characters, and it encapsulates the essence of events that many of us have lived at one time or another” (Hill, 2005, p. 96).

Kusserow (2008), a cultural anthropologist, used poetry created from her field notes and conversation with men from the Lost Boys of Sudan. Poetry presented what she wanted to explore anthropologically where, “chaos and confusion, their fluidity and subtlety, their unpredictability and color, were suddenly three-dimensional again, through images, smells, looks and metaphors” (p.74). Kusserow’s use of poetry served as a type of mediation, which illuminated the experiences of her participants.

Barone (2008) describes four design elements within literary-style arts-based research texts: (1) the use of “everyday” forms of language; (2) the use of metaphor in order to re-create experiences; (3) the use of the text to entice the reader, evoking an alternative reality; and (4) the presence of heightened degree of ambiguity (p. 25). Representation of data in poetic form can assist the researcher in evoking different meanings from the data, working through a different set
of issues, and helping the audience receive the data differently (Leavy, 2009).

With this in mind, I wrote this poem taken from my field notes,

*It’s a hot summer day*

*they come to me sticky*

*seeking refuge in the*

*air conditioned library*

*I bring them food*

*they used to eat quickly*

*before*

*I told them they could take it home*

*now*

*they eat little*

*save it*

*for dinner*

*or*

*sisters and brothers*

*I get sad*

*I have never had to do that*

Bochner (2001) describes this type of work as “poetic social science” through which readers contemplate the truthfulness of the emotions expressed by the poet-researcher. There are experiences and circumstances that cannot be expressed through conventional language. If I were to succumb to traditional forms of writing, my heart would be buried in the text. I would be doing a great injustice to the girls, my readers, and myself.
In my analysis, I use both narrative and lyric poetry. Richardson (1997) distinguishes between narrative poetry and lyric poetry. In Richardson’s framework, narrative poetry is similar to storytelling. Data gathered from interviews are transformed into a poem that tells the participant’s story.

Lyric poetry emphasizes moments of emotion. This method of writing encourages the researcher to capture the rhythm, tonality, and patterns that compromise speech in addition to participants’ words themselves. Poetry extends our understanding of “giving voice” to our research participants (Leavy, 2009).

Poetic portraits of people and places rely on the framework of voice and context. Hill (2005) uses poetic portraits in her work through listening to the voice of others. Through observation and interviews, she was able to express the outsider’s stance, taking advantage of the position of a stranger. She considers internal and historical context as well as the values that shaped her perspective. The spirit of the participants was made vivid in a way that other, more traditional forms of data representation would not allow.

Leavy (2009) provides a set of questions for evaluating poetry: (1) what does your internal monitor say?; (2) what is your emotional gut-level response?; how does the poem promote issues of social justice or understanding across difference?; and (3) does the poem call forth something from your experience or help shed light on an experience that is unfamiliar to you? (p. 82). Artistically oriented qualitative researchers provoke and stimulate readers by connecting on several levels – centering on aesthetics, interpretive vitality, and expressive voice.

I have written poetry throughout the research process. I have done this because it has given me a space to think, feel, and understand. I was able to give a voice to my concerns, joy, and bewilderment in a holistic way. I chose to share my poetry with my readers because it
communicates my understanding of the girls, their experiences, and our relationship. I believe every aspect of experience, hope, and the unknown can be captured in poetry. My poems are my intimate voice of expression.

**Painting as Analysis**

Leonardo da Vinci said, “The noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding.” I chose painting as an analysis tool because it allows me to understand. When it came time to make meaning of the girls and their experiences on paper, I froze. I had to paint to keep on moving. As you will see, I have concluded each participant chapter with a painting that synthesizes my understanding. Without the opportunity to paint, this dissertation would not have been completed.

My work deals with disadvantage in the lives of adolescent girls. Their testimonies are real. Many of their stories were communicated to me with a heavy heart. I did my best to listen and be present. It was not easy. When it all came to be too much, I sat on the floor in my studio and painted. My favorite time to paint is at dusk when the day washes into night. For a moment, my concerns and suspicions have a chance to be stolen by the settling sun. I rely on painting because each canvas brings me hope.

I choose poetry and painting as analysis tools because they remind me that I am a human. The art-making processes, as well as my poetic documentation, are grounded in a close relationship with my transcripts, field notes, and relationships with the girls. They reveal the complexities and struggles I have encountered during the research process. My poems and artwork are reflections that honor the centrality of my researcher voice, my experience, creativity, and authority. I believe my creative works will illustrate the richness of my experience and the truth in my heart.
My methodological choices are based on my value system as an artist and researcher, found in the intersection of feminist oriented understanding and artistic/creative expression. My dissertation is my attempt to understand the resilience, resistance, and images of relationships in the lives of disadvantaged adolescents. In the chapters that follow, I introduce my participants. I provide examples of their artwork, poetry, and conversation. I analyze their words and images with my poetry and paintings. In our works, you see testimonies of the loud and quiet times we have spent together.
Chapter IV

Ciera

I am used to seeing Ciera in her work uniform, with braids tucked into her hat. She wears her visor low and when she speaks she tilts her head up and smiles as she talks. Her name is tattooed in cursive on her wrist. She carries a worn-out book bag, and her pink cell phone is always in her hand.

When I first met Ciera, she appeared happy and rested, as if she never knew pain. Initially, her easy-going nature put me at ease. Now that I have come to know her well, I know Ciera was in and out of group homes, and currently sleeps on a friend’s couch. She works 50 hours a week. She doesn’t think kiwis should be eaten because they are covered with fur. She has never met her father and doesn’t know her mother’s address. She won’t eat chicken on the bone. She hates math. Her boyfriend’s name is Troy. She dreams of going to New York and never looking back.

Ciera is usually the first to arrive to our group sessions. She hurries in, plops down next to me, and says, “Miss Sarah, my boyfriend be so crazy.” Their arguments are typical. He spends too much money on shoes, he wrote to a girl on Facebook, or he doesn’t show appreciation toward her. I smile at her and sing, “Love is a battlefield” by Pat Benatar. We laugh.

I go to the bathroom and filled up cups of water for our work. When I return we continue our conversation. I ask her if relationships are worth the battle. I share with her that some of my relationships have made me stronger. Ciera nods her head and speaks to me about her perception of strength in relationships.

You can get stronger being in a relationship – it can get you stronger. I’ll give you an example, like you a lady, and you go with a man that starts beating you and you get
stronger. Or say like your momma get on your nerves it helps you get stronger too. Like my momma makes me so mad, I could like yell back at her or just move on. I move on and that makes me stronger...like I was sayin’, like if you were with a man and he beat you then you have to be strong because if you weren’t there wouldn’t be anything left of you.

Her words catch me off guard. I cannot offer her my smile as I normally do. I was not prepared. As stated in previous chapters, it would be reasonable to assume that relationships offer strength. Ciera’s perception of strength in relationships is colored by her life experiences. There was no literature that described the type of strength Ciera refers to. I feel sad and confused.

I know Ciera as a happy-go-lucky adolescent girl. I realize at that point I do not know her as well as I thought. I have no idea of the things she has witnessed. There are many covert messages in this statement, such as ending a relationship can make one stronger, but there is also strength in staying in a relationship.

After listening to Ciera speak about strength in relationships, I feel a sense of panic. I want so desperately to hear Ciera speak about healthy images of relationship. I ask her about the relationship she has with her mother. She said,

My momma be drinking and she passed out and I thought that something was real wrong so I called the ambulance. Well, child services took me away because of child neglect or something. I wish they never sent me back to her. She kept telling them that I was crazy – put me in 20/20 [detention center] because she said I hit her. My mom said it was my fault she got divorced. But he was cheating on her. When I leave I ain’t never coming back. I won’t invite her to my graduation and when I have kids I will tell them they have
no grandma. She will regret everything she did. She better not come to my funeral.

Ciera’s rejection of her relationship with her mother in order to establish a more autonomous self has paved the way for her survival. Ciera continued to talk about her relationships with her mother, peers, and teachers.

Me and my momma kept always getting into it. I kept running away. I was mad I thought I wasn’t being heard. I thought I could go outside and get away with it. If I was gone, it would keep us from arguing. I think by me running away and going to 20/20 and seeing a therapist, I grew up. I think I was misunderstood by my momma, my teachers, and my peers. Everyone thought that I was something I wasn’t. My peers thought I liked to fight, my momma thought I was a troublemaker, my teachers thought I was bad. I don’t know why they thought that.

It surprised me to hear Ciera speak about the perceptions others had of her. I knew a much different girl. Despite being misunderstood and let down by other people in her life, she was eager and open in developing a relationship with me.

Ciera’s relationship experiences are tragic. The repeated disconnection Ciera has faced pushes her into isolation. She feels misunderstood and expresses anger toward the people in her life – “I was mad I thought I wasn’t being heard.” Ciera mentions seeing a therapist and how she “grew up.” I asked her if she could see any need for relationships. She replied,

I was just going to say like you need people…like people need people no matter what you think. You’re going to need like friends, someone to talk to – you ain’t like always going to be perfect. You need someone to talk to...somebody to love you. You’re going to need something...you need food so you go to the grocery store. Your life could just be perfect if you got somebody in the house to talk to. You always need someone to talk to. That’s
what me and my boyfriend do.

The idea Ciera expressed about her life just being perfect if she had someone in the house to talk to to illustrates her understanding of how relationships can impact the quality of her life. It is obvious through my conversations with her that she desires growth-fostering relationships, such as the one she has with her boyfriend. She sees the value of relationships because it is something missing from her life. At the same time, relationships are dangerous because the ones she has experienced have been violent or neglectful. Remarkably, despite her chronic disconnection and emotional abandonment, she recognizes the need to love, receive love, and to be understood.

Resistance

Ciera’s disconnection from others is a motive for her to find a better life. She has quietly endured suffering. She has been able to successfully resist adversity and hold on to hope. I asked her one day how she kept from drowning. She replied,

Some things that made me stronger is my father not being there for me my whole life, my mother’s drinking problem, me being in a group home, foster care, seeing my mother getting beat on when I was little. These things showed me how to not live my life and not to depend on people. I also met wonderful people and not so wonderful people. I have learned a lot from these people and from my resources [group homes and detention center].

Ciera’s negative life experiences contribute to her resistance toward relationships. Ciera tries to stay positive, saying she has learned a lot from people and available resources. I ask Ciera to describe her learning.

Like don’t take something so little and short term and do something that the impact be
long term. Like don’t run away and throw stuff and fight because you can be in jail a long
time for assault...that it’s going to get better...uhm...I am going to try to change what is
going on and then everything gets up. I can’t run away from my problems because
they’re mine. I got older and thought about my future and I’m not going anywhere like
that except maybe jail. I told myself this isn’t what I wanted.

Ciera shows she has taken ownership of her life by recognizing she can’t run away from
her problems. She understands she has a choice – she can fight, or face her problems and move
forward. Ciera has been able to successfully adapt, despite her experiences of disconnection and
abandonment.

Ciera arrives to one of our sessions upset because a man on the bus made racist remarks
in front of her. When she started to explain the incident, her anger and sadness welled up and left
her speechless. When I asked her if she was willing to use her emotions in a creative work she
chose to write a poem,

    It is not the language that you speak
    Or the comfort that you seek
    That determines who you are as a person
    It is not the clothes that you wear
    Or the pain that you bear
    That makes people want to be around you
    So don’t tell me it is the color of my skin
    Or where my book began
    That make those think less of me
    It is the choices that I choose
And the direction I move

That determines my destiny

Ciera’s poem is powerful, it illustrates her perspective of the world around her. She writes about individual power and challenges outside pressures by her choices. She shows this in her depiction of “the direction I move” and how it determines her destiny.

The lines “it is not the language that you speak/or the comfort that you seek/that determines who you are as a person” illustrate how Ciera’s connection with others has been tainted by prejudice and misunderstanding. Her creative resistance in the form of poetry is her badge of courage. Ciera’s ability to maintain a sense of self and morality is a true testimony of her resilience.

Ciera initially resisted her feelings because they were locked up by conventional conversation. Through her poetry she finds her voice and there is power in that. She is in control. Her poetry provided clarity in a language all her own. I asked Ciera how she felt after writing.

Like writing, it helps me, it’s like a coping skill for me. Like poems and stuff like that. I used to write like when I was like that [angry] but now that everything is going fine now I can express it calmly by talking to people. When stuff do happen and I get real sad I just write about it. I write poems that is why my poems seem sad – because I write and stuff when I get sad. I don’t write about happy poems unless I am sad and try to get happy.

Ciera’s creative work is an extension of what she already knows is true. Again, she makes a choice. She chose to act out creatively instead of violently. Her ability to communicate her anger and sadness illustrates the resilient nature she possesses.

In the section that follows, you will see two compositions Ciera made. I offer my impressions of her work through painting and poetry.
Resilience: New York City

From our very first meeting, Ciera tells me that one day, she wants to move to New York. I encourage her to use New York as a theme for her artwork. She eagerly agrees. I instruct her to ask the librarian for books so she would have visuals from which to work. She and the librarian return to our room with stacks of books. Ciera leafs through pages and finds a photograph of a New York skyline. Her face lights up, and she exclaims, “OMG! I love the Empire State Building! I’m going to go there first when I get there. I’m gonna wear fake eyelashes, skinny jeans, and flip-flops. I am going to wear long braids in my hair, and people are going to think I’m rich.”

Next, Ciera finds a photo of the Statue of Liberty. She is familiar with the statue and she smiled as she looked at it. She decides to create a composition using it. I ask her why she chose the statue. She replies,

What the Statue of Liberty states is a message for people, including immigrants. It’s telling people ‘We don’t care what your religion is, political views – we don’t care. If you are in lower class, upper class, or in poverty – we welcome you.

Ciera’s explained that the statue is a symbol of belonging. All economic classes, religions, and political views are welcome. Her words remind me of the earlier poem she wrote after her encounter with the racist man on the bus. “It is not the language you speak… It is not the clothes that you wear… that determines my destiny.” She writes about the underdog. She writes about herself.

Ciera decides to create two mixed-media compositions. She had no qualms working with messy materials. It was refreshing to me because the other girls often complained about the
supplies getting under their nails and onto their clothes.

Below are two works Ciera created, one of the skyline of New York, and the other of the Statue of Liberty.

Skyline of New York City.

Ciera started her skyline of New York with a pencil sketch. She painted the buildings neutral shades with watercolor. She blended blue oil pastels for the sky. She drew bricks and windows with markers. When all of the white space was covered, she looked at her work and was dissatisfied. She felt it wasn’t finished and did not know what step to take next.

I encouraged her to add more detail by using scraps of paper for the walls and steeples of the buildings. She cut brown paper for the bricks and green paper for the rooftops. She adorned the clock with gold-leaf paper.

Ciera determined that her composition was finished. I asked her if she could expand on her feelings of the Empire State building. She replied,

The Empire State building represents freedom and a sense of direction. To me, I see success in New York, happiness, and a way to meet new and all different people, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. I think of business people everywhere with something to do.

Ciera expresses her desire for connection with the new and different people she can meet in New York. Her work is optimistic. The buildings are filled with windows. The Empire State building stands in confidence. Certain windows mirror the blue sky with reflections of her wide-
open dreams. I imagine her behind a window “with something to do.”

**The Statue of Liberty.**

Ciera was intimidated to start her drawing of the statue. We looked at the photos together. I instructed her to identify the shapes she recognized. In pencil she drew a rectangle for the body, a circle for the head, and triangles for the crown. She then refined the shapes by carefully examining the photograph.

Once the statue was drawn, Ciera painted it with green watercolor. Next she painted the sky with mysterious shades of blue and purple. She waved and blew the paper with urgency, in hope that it would dry quickly. When the painting was dry, she added detail to the statue with green marker. In the sky, she used purple marker to write Emma Lazarus’ famous words of the statue’s inscription:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Ciera was not pleased. The words did not stand out as she wished they did. I suggested she type the words on the computer, and cut and paste them to the sky. She agreed and left the room to find a computer and printer. When Ciera returned, she cut and arranged the words and scattered them across the sky. She then used chalk pastels to blend the sharp edges left by the printed words. Finally, she adorned the night sky with stars.
Once Ciera was finished, she handed me her work. I smiled and told her it was beautiful. There was an airiness about her artwork. Her work was hopeful. Her work reminded me of all that she was.

I left our session with her art in my hand, and walked to my truck. On my drive home, her work sat on the passenger’s seat. I sang to the music on the radio. When I sat at traffic lights I looked at Ciera’s art. I imagined Ciera reaching New York City – sitting next to the Statue of Liberty, under the night sky, being healed, and feeling appreciated in a place where she belongs.

Before I went to bed that night I wrote a poem for Ciera. It is my quiet wish for her.

_Sweet girl,

I will take you on a magic boat

and catch the stars

you paint in the sky.

We will glide

over the Hudson –

you could cry.

I would collect your tears

at the shore,

give them back to you

and pray for more._

In my poem, I give Ciera a safe place to cry. She told me once, “If people think you sad then they take advantage of you. I don’t want people to feel sorry for me.” The only time I have ever seen Ciera cry is when I told her I was proud of her. Ciera’s tears
matter to me. I conclude my poem, “and pray for more.” I do not wish her additional suffering, but for cleansing tears that offer relief from all she has endured.

**Making Meaning: Hands Linked by Liberty**

When it came time to make meaning of Ciera’s experiences, I sat with her composition of the Statue of Liberty. I admired the blues and purples in the sky. I ran my fingers over the paper stars. I reread the famous words from the statue. I noticed certain phrases were emphasized in all capital letters – GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR…SEND THEM TO ME…REFUSE…I LIFT MY LAMP. I imagined Ciera’s relationship with the statue.

There are two arms in my painting. One is the Statue of Liberty’s and the other is Ciera’s. Together they lift the torch. A flame sheds light. There are fireworks celebrating in the sky. The arms are linked together by chains. They are chains that can not be broken by an absent father, a neglectful mother, or the injustice that surrounds her.

The artwork and poetry Ciera and I created are testimonies to her resistance, resilience, and images of relationship. Ciera is a hero to me. She tells me the truth in her life, and I am honored. She speaks openly and honestly about her life experiences and her relationships with others. Her life is filled with chronic disconnection, yet she is able to positively transform and resist adversity. Ciera looks after herself, she feels hopeful, and has faith in a brighter future.

During our last session, I ask what is next for her. She told me she has enrolled at the University of Toledo for a chance to better her life. Ciera plans to major in pre-social work so
she can help children who are growing up disadvantaged. She wants to attend graduate school in New York City to pursue a Master’s in Social Work.

Ciera is a complex and multi-faceted young woman. Ciera communicates the power of resilience through her words, poetry, and artwork. Ciera’s resilience has taken her far. She is currently enrolled as a college freshman, and I am certain that one day soon she will live in New York.
Chapter V

Lataya

Lataya is 17 years old. Her nails look as if she chews them on a daily basis. She thinks pickles are gross because they smell like feet. Her hair is always pulled back in a tight, smooth ponytail. She doesn’t wear jewelry. She wears large, oversized t-shirts and baggy jeans. She looks after four siblings. Her grandma is dying of cancer and she is the only mother Lataya knows. She wants to work on cars one day.

At first, Lataya’s presence intimidated me. Her posture is stiff. Her face is stern. She doesn’t smile because “she is her own person.” Some of her first words spoken to me were, “I take things seriously so I don’t look soft. I ain’t never scared.” Developing a relationship with Lataya was not easy. I wish I could say that it was an effortless, magical experience for us. It was slow, awkward, and uncomfortable to get to know her. She spoke very little and rarely looked me in the eye. In time, I understood this is how it would be. Her resistance became an important element of our routine.

Unlike the other two participants, Layata did not enjoy making art or writing poetry. She lacked confidence in her art making abilities, and expressed little interest in our projects. I often wonder why she returned week after week. She showed up on time for every session and was the last one to leave.

I had to meet Lataya where she was. Throughout our time together, we developed a system. After the others had settled and started on their projects, I sat next to Lataya and asked about her day. Usually she had nothing to say. Next, I introduced the project. She would complain and say it was stupid. I would offer her my smile and begin the work for her. I would convince her to continue. She begrudgingly did so. She would pick up
from where I left off and work until the end of our session.

Toward the end our time together, I asked the girls to consider a theme for a series of drawings, paintings, or mixed-media work. I did this because, at that point, the girls had a solid understanding of the elements and principles of design. A series would reflect their learning.

Lataya was not interested. I gave her examples of several series that I have painted – still no sign of interest. I showed her examples of abstract art thinking it might take the pressure off of her to create something that looks “real.” She said they were ugly.

I sighed and walked around the room hoping an idea might fall from the ceiling. I listened to the other girls talk, laugh, and make fun of one another. I watched their hands holding scissors and paintbrushes. I noticed a tattoo on one of the girls’ wrist. I asked Lataya, “If you had a tattoo what would it be?” She immediately said, “A rose.” I asked her why. She replied,

Roses are beautiful. They have thorns, if you wanted to pick one you have to pull it from the roots. They are like strong. I have to look after my brothers and sister.

My grandma is real sick and I have to help her— I have to be the thorn.

After three months together this is the most I have heard Lataya speak. Her rose tattoo made sense and I began to understand.

I was caught off guard by her honest and heavy words. I was not prepared to respond in a caring or nurturing way. I awkwardly said, “I would get one of a butterfly because they remind me of hope.” She gave me a funny look, “Miss Sarah – I know I wouldn’t be a butterfly. Butterflies are weak to me. If you hold them close enough you can kill them.” Now I had something to work with. I asked her which type of animal she
would be. She looked at me in the eye and said, “If I were an animal I would be a lion. It’s hard to kill a lion.” It was the first time she looked at me in the eye – I took it as a sign of interest. During our conversation, she decided to create a series on animals.

On my drive home, I thought about Lataya – her words heavy on my heart. “I have to look after my brothers and sister. My grandma is real sick and I have to help her –I have to be the thorn” she said. I tried to picture her rose tattoo. When I think of a rose, I imagine the sweet fragrance of a rose, its silky petals, and green waxy leaves. This is not Lataya’s rose. Her rose is much different. Her rose has thorns and must be pulled from the roots. I thought of how unfair her life was. She was 17 and had to look after her siblings and sick grandmother. She probably never had the opportunity be alone with a rose. I thought about how tired she must be.

**Lataya’s Kingdom**

Lataya chose three animals – a snake, a lizard, and a tiger. Staying true to form, I started her work by sketching each animal on separate pieces of paper. I passed them to her and she began working without the need of encouragement.

I knew from experience that Lataya’s favorite medium was markers. I bought her a new glossy box. The tips of the markers were fresh and pointy. The caps snapped loudly as she worked. I was happy watching her. She seemed to be at peace, far away from her siblings or sick grandmother. I prayed that things could be easier for her. In the passages that follow I provide visuals of Lataya’s work. I share her words, both written and spoken. I offer my impressions of Lataya in my poetry and painting.

**A Snake That Spits Venom.**

The first animal Lataya created was a snake. She outlined my pencil sketch in black, waterproof marker. She quickly printed words around the snake. She drew designs on the snake’s
skin and colored them in with markers. She painted with red watercolor to frame the spiraling snake.

Lataya finished her composition by adorning the snake with specks of green glitter. She blew the extra glitter from the page and handed it to me. The words around the snake read,

If I were a reptile, I would be a snake because snakes are dangerous. They are sneaky. Snakes are fast. Snakes have venom. If I were a snake I would be the meanest one. I would have to be the ringleader… I would be untouchable. I would be the longest. If I had venom and people made me mad I would just snap and spit my venom on them. I would call all the shots.

I read her words several times and recognized she was writing about herself. Her snake enlarges my vision of her. Lataya outwardly possesses certain attributes of her description of a snake, such as being untouchable and calling the shots. Lataya distanced herself from me and the other girls. To a degree, she is untouchable. The snake has control over her environment – she is the ringleader. Lataya’s stern demeanor is reflected in her words, “I would be the meanest one.” She can control her smile if nothing else. She wants to be on top, telling people what to do.

I asked her if she had anything else to say about the snake. I did not expect her to expand. She continued to work, looking at the paper and said,

My grandma never learned how to express her anger, that is probably where I get it from. I guess she tries her best. It’s not like I am saying I hate her or nothing like that – she know I love her. I would fight for my grandma. I was thinking this isn’t the way it’s
supposed to be.

I was surprised Lataya was so generous with her feelings. I was not used to that. The aggressive nature of her snake is personal as she talked about her relationship with her grandmother. She would fight for her grandma. She would protect her. She would be a snake and spit venom.

This passage also illustrates Lataya’s ability to reflect on her life circumstances—“I was thinking this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be.” I asked Lataya how it was supposed to be. She shrugged her shoulders and continued to work. We never spoke of it again.

I thought to myself about how unfair Lataya’s life was. Lataya speaks about the void in her life. Her sick grandmother, two generations removed from her, is the only care provider she knows. Lataya looks after her four siblings. She is right—it shouldn’t be this way. Lataya is alone with no one to fight for her. She has to be the snake. I don’t see her as a predator any more. I see Lataya’s snake as a guardian—a defender of her sick grandmother, siblings, and herself.

A Lizard That Blends In.

Lataya began her lizard drawing more relaxed than the one before. Her system was the same. She outlined the lizard and wrote her explanation around it. She colored her lizard with bright blues, purples, yellow, green, and orange. I watched her as she picked up a paintbrush and dipped it in water. Every now and then, she would stop and look admiringly at her work. She worked intuitively and purposefully. She appeared to be entranced with the art-
making process. She began to paint the background in reds and blues, making mysterious shades of purple.

I read Lataya’s description of the lizard while she was working.

I like lizards because they can blend in. Lizards are colorful. They can climb trees. Lizards are pretty. They can get away from enemies. Lizards are neat creatures because they can move about with worries. For real, they seem like they can never be caught. Lizards to me symbolize freedom. Lizards can be pets. If I were a lizard I would be very colorful and I would blend in with anything. I would not be scared.

I was confused. I wonder how she could be a colorful lizard that blends in and a snake that snaps and spits venom all at the same time. I wanted to ask her but I did not want to interrupt her work. She must have seen the puzzlement on my face – she spoke to me in a quiet voice,

When I was younger a couple of things happened to me and my sister. When I was growing up it was good to hide my anger, you know, to suppress it – because then it made it go away.

My heart broke as I thought of a younger version of Lataya. She was able to disassociate her true feelings in order to survive. When she was younger, she believed it was good to hide her anger, much like a lizard can camouflage its existence, “I would blend in with anything. I would not be scared.” Lataya would be safe if she could blend in.

I can see the lizard in Lataya. She hides her femininity with her oversized clothes, drawing little attention to herself. Ironically, Lataya’s lizard was vibrant and exotic. Her art work has given her a chance to be someone else.

Next, I examined Lataya’s description of a lizard. I sat there completely puzzled.
Although lizards and snakes are reptiles, according to Lataya they have very little in common. Her snake is predator, powerful, and mean – a creature to be feared. Her lizard is elusive and free, one that can hide from predators.

Lataya begins her statement with description, then makes a dramatic shift by identifying herself as a lizard, “they seem like they can never be caught. Lizards to me symbolize freedom. Lizards can be pets. If I were a lizard I would be very colorful and I would blend in with anything. I would not be scared.” Below, I provide my impressions of her sentiments in a poem I wrote following our session.

_My pet lizard is pretty_

_I will never try to catch her_

_She is_

_free_

to climb trees
to blend in,
_She is_

_not worried_
or
_scaredd
_of
_enemies_
_She is free_

In writing this poem I began to see that Lataya’s lizard was much like her snake. They both are able to defend themselves, a snake with venom, and a lizard that can hide from enemies.
A Tiger That Stands Her Ground.

Lataya completed her series with a drawing of a tiger. Her composition was more sophisticated than the other two. Her color pallet was selective. She outlined the tiger and then drew a border with black, purple, and green. She used oil pastels for the tiger’s fur. She placed her words within the border,

I would wanna be a tiger because they are colorful and untouchable. They can be fierce, dangerous, aggressive. At times I am aggressive. They are pretty creatures, they stand out. They are respectable because they stand their ground.

Again, I was confused. Tigers are a fierce species. How can she be a dangerous tiger and a quiet lizard? She admits that at times she is aggressive. Her aggression hides her vulnerability.

She is only 17 and has great responsibility. Her tiger reminds me of her snake, the are both hypervigilant. She wants to be in authority. She assumes that authority equates respect. She feels if people are afraid of her, they will respect her.

It was time to leave. I wanted to hear Lataya speak about her tiger but she had a bus to catch. I packed up the supplies and said goodbye to the girls. On my drive home I was in traffic and thought of Lataya’a tiger. I wrote a poem on a napkin,

*She is a tiger—*

*colorful*

*untouchable*
In writing this poem, I realized how much I respected Lataya. We have spent months together, sharing very few words. I knew Lataya better than I thought. This poem illustrates my understanding of her.

**Revisiting a Butterfly**

During our last session, Lataya sat down next to me and ate her cheeseburger with no pickles. She had an expression on her face that I haven’t seen before. She looked as if she wanted to say something. She looked me in the eye and it was as if I could see all her stories. She spoke with clarity and ease,

Maybe you were right about butterflies. I never thought of that – but really, like they are strong because they are breakable. They are like so breakable but they still have to survive when it rains or it is windy.

I felt so inadequate, like an outsider who had no idea what it was like to be her. That moment was all so honest, so true. Lataya is strong but fragile, her pain has made her stronger. She recognized that vulnerability could make something strong. I felt so lucky to hear that from her.

**Making Meaning: Fish Swimming in a Pond**

It was difficult for Lataya to share her thoughts, feelings, and emotions with me. Her artwork provided me with insight into her inner world. I am honored by her trust, and I will
cherish our conversations always. The art-making process opened new spaces for Lataya. She was able to transform her aggression and resistance into images. Her resistance, resilience, and images of relationship are revealed through her art. I once believed it would have been easier to know Lataya if she were less resistant. Now I understand it was her resistance that allowed me to understand her.

Lataya’s work required careful handling. I have spent a lot of time in my studio with her animals scattered on my drafting table. I read over and over again her transcripts. I sat for long periods of time admiring her work, feeling sad, and recognizing the fragility of it all. I searched for connections between the snake, lizard, and tiger. There were so many contradictions in her work. Lataya’s art expressed the things she wishes she could do – call the shots, blend in, and stand out. Her animals are a reflection of who she would be if only she had the chance.

When Lataya’s words became too heavy and my heart grew fatigued, I sat in front of a blank canvas. I wished for so many things for her. If Lataya could rewrite the script of her life, things would be different now. I wanted her script to change. I wanted to paint a new one for her.

On my canvas, she is not a snake, lizard, or tiger. She is a fish. I want her to live in a pond, where things might be easier. There are no predators in this pond. The fish breathe freely and swim in harmony.

I started painting with shades of blue in overlapping ripples. I added laced paper on top of the blue, hoping she might find pleasure in intricate waters. I painted the fish one by one, adding decorative paper to make sure each fish was unique. Lataya could pick which fish she wants to be.

I cut roses with delicate tissue paper and laid spiral shapes with complicated patterns in the center of the flowers because she is delicate and her life is complicated. Soft green paper
made the leaves and stems, and the roses are arranged as if they were floating on the water’s surface.

    I wished that Lataya could swim in clear waters, among roses that have no thorns.

    I haven’t heard from Lataya since our last session together. I wish I could have done more for her. I am not able to offer a happy ending to this chapter, perhaps that is why I end it with a dream on canvas. I have transcripts and copies of her artwork. In time, my image of her could slowly fade away. Lataya’s rose, animals, and butterfly will remain clear – and my wish for her will reside in my heart forever.
Chapter VI

Ebony

Ebony is 17 years old. She reminds me of a hip-hop performer. She wears expensive jeans and t-shirts with brand named logos. Her hair is styled in long braids. Most days she wears big, hoop earrings, and a cross around her neck. Ebony has an unapologetic swagger when she enters a room. She walks with confidence and poise. She wants to be a veterinarian one day. I imagine her dancing with a grizzly bear and enjoying it.

Ebony spoke to me openly and honestly from the beginning. I am not sure how I earned her trust so quickly. I felt so honored. She had a difficult past. She spent months feeling alone and misunderstood in a psychiatric hospital.

Ebony carries a spiral notebook – either in her hand, or in a fancy purse. The cover is shiny, pink, and worn. The notebook is thick from the bloated pages. I admired Ebony’s notebook during our first session together. I asked her what was in the book. She said, “They’re poems I wrote. I express myself and like being different in my poems. It works for me now – like a security blanket. It’s going to work for me forever. It works until something big happens and all the feelings come out.” Ebony loves to write. She would often text me her poems, which I would type and give them to her at our sessions. Usually she explains them to me, although there are certain ones she won’t talk about.

While the other girls worked on artwork, Ebony drew or painted in the margins of her notebook. She appeared to be at peace so I never pushed for her to create other compositions. Because of this, there is only one piece of her art in this chapter.

Early in our group sessions, the girls created self-portraits. Ebony was proud of hers. She asked if I would make a small colored copy of it so she could glue it in her notebook. I printed a
5 by 7 copy and gave it to her. She was thrilled and she knew exactly where it should go. She thumbed through her notebook and pasted the picture next to this stanza of her poem,

*Watching pictures in hazy visions*

*with blind insanity*

*will only hurt you*

*Imprisoned within oneself*

*Conditions deep*

*Sanity reached its peak*

*Captive with a mentality so broken*

Ebony’s self-portrait captured the complexity of her poem. In her portrait, she did not draw her entire face. It is as if she only wanted the viewer to see a part of her. Her poem and painting is a framework for understanding Ebony. It foreshadows what will follow. There are patterns in her poems. They are colored by her intrapersonal struggles and the agency she so desperately desires. During our first session together Ebony described some of her experiences.

When I was younger, I think I use to express myself in a bad way so I was like in a hospital for a long time because I had coping skills that weren’t healthy. I use to do stuff like – hurting other people. First I use to write, write, write, write, and didn’t do nothing bad to myself. When I stopped writing, it was like I started doing bad stuff to myself and other people versus just writing stuff down. Like I got 16 journals and they all full. When I stopped writing that is when like mass bad stuff start happening.
Ebony recognizes her writing as a healthy coping mechanism. She has spent months in a psychiatric hospital where she learned that writing was a chance to escape the danger of being misunderstood. In her earlier statement, she said that it works until something big happens then all her feelings come out. Her poetry provides a safe shelter, but there are thoughts and feelings that can not be contained in her notebook.

I asked Ebony if she shared her poems with her friends or family. “Yeah, like I used to show my mom my poems and she be like ‘You sad? You crying? What’s wrong with you?’ So I just stopped showing her them.” I asked her if any of her friends have read her poetry. “Not really, I don’t show them that side because really it is not their business. Sometimes when you express yourself they take it as weakness. I could express myself to them and they be like ‘I could make her cry’.”

Ebony does not share her writing with others because she does not want to appear weak. She does not feel safe to cry in front of her mother or peers. Ebony’s emotional isolation, as well as her sense of separation from others places her in hiding. She shows only one side of herself to the public because the other side “is not their business.”

I told Ebony that I admired her for using her creative gifts as a way to deal with difficult life circumstances. She shrugged and said,

I just keep expressing myself …like things that are inside me and people don’t see. I wrote this one poem about how when people look at me they see me smiling like a happy person. But people don’t know that really, inside, I might be dealing with stuff.

Ebony hides herself in her poetry. Her feelings are safe there. She offers a happy façade so others do not see her true feelings. She continued to speak about the perception of others.

It’s messed up because people think if you mad all the time then you have problems. If
you sad all the time people will take advantage of you. I guess I was, like always in trouble. Like I was always mad. Well, that is why I was always in trouble – because I was always mad. Like I was frustrated so I came to school always mad. Like if, say something bad happened to somebody, and I was like real sad because someone passed away or something I be real mad versus sad.

I shook my head as if I understood. Ebony’s sentiments were familiar to me. I have taught hundreds of adolescent girls in urban schools. I can count on one hand the girls I have seen cry. I can count on dozens of hands how many fights I have witnessed between angry girls.

There is a hidden culture among girls such as Ebony. I asked her why she thought it was better to appear mad instead of sad. She replied, “Like if people think you weak then they take advantage of you.” Ebony equates sadness to weakness. I asked her if she ever cried in school, she shook her head no.

I don’t cry in front of people because it isn’t their business. But now I am not like that any more. When I am sad, I just try to ignore it…but sometimes I be thinking – like that is just where I put myself. Like, I get sad because I am mad – that is just my favorite resort. Like do I get mad just because I can’t express myself so I just do it through anger?

I did not feel qualified to answer her question. I looked at her, tilting my head to one side, thinking of the right words to say. I know that suppressing true feelings is painful and only leads to more sadness. In Ebony’s case – a sadness without tears. That type of sadness can be dangerous. I asked her if she wanted to explore further her thoughts in another poem. She nodded and left the room with her notebook in hand. As she walked away, I wondered if I should have told her that she was correct, her anger was getting in the way of her expressing herself.

Ebony returned within five minutes. She smiled at me, ripped out a page from her
notebook, and handed it to me. Her poem read,

Am I really messed up or is it just a mindset?

Anger loves to befriend me or is that just my favorite resort?

Likewise, I am smiling or is that just a distort?

Do I have more songs to sing like a bird whose nature is to chirp?

Will I live from the past or rise from a new birth?

While everyone is claiming to be,

My mind will just keep moving.

Then one day I might chirp again –

A beautiful song so soothing

I carefully read her poem as she watched me. It is a beautiful, introspective piece. Ebony reflects on her current mindset. She identified anger as her favorite resort. She believes her smile distorts the image she gives others.

Ebony recognizes her potential with more songs to sing. She writes of a new birth, a symbol of promise of her future. Her poem shows commitment to herself, while everyone else claiming to “be” she will keep moving forward.

I particularly loved her last two stanzas. They offered such hope. I asked Ebony what type of song her bird would sing. She replied in quiet voice, “It would sing because its feelings are hurt. How people mistake my anger for something other than how I really feel. It would just sing how it really felt.” Ebony identifies herself in the bird’s song. She would sing an honest, vulnerable song.

**Ebony and Relationship**

Ebony does not trust people with her true feelings, which hinders her ability to participate
in relationships. Her façade distances her from others. This is illustrated in Ebony’s words below, 

I don’t know. I’ve always been the real tough person because I grew up just…okay because my momma…I was the oldest and my momma would work. I would be taking care of my younger sisters so I always had to be the person who was strong for them. So I’ve always been the type of person who is strong like even if I wasn’t strong. I don’t like asking for help or being dependent upon someone. I feel like the only way you can get forward is through yourself and God.

I assume Ebony had to grow up fast. She cares for her younger sisters while her mom is at work. She had to appear strong for them despite her true feelings. Ebony feels like there is no one on her side except God. She doesn’t like asking for help or depending on people. I wonder how many times she has been let down. Her words remind me of a poem she wrote titled “Time to Find Yourself Through Another”.

*Rushing to reach the other side*

*before emotions get too deep*

*a chance to do better*

*or*

*a chance to relapse and need another hand*

*departure easily obtained*

*which world is to blame?*

This is a complicated poem. It has a cautious type of optimism. Ebony writes of two worlds: one that finds connection through others, and the other one that looks at relationships as a chance for relapse. She is stuck between two worlds. Ebony concludes her poem with blame. I am not sure how to make sense of this. Blame suggests a victim’s perception. In a way, she is a
victim of her own mentality. Either world departure is easy to obtain. I asked her if she could expand. She replied,

I use to think that relationships were like horrible, like you let someone in and they take advantage of opening yourself up. When someone gets comfortable with you and they have taken as much as they could from you – they just leave and take a piece of you with them…like I always fall back into the darkness I was in before. I hated that feeling but now I am in a relationship where it is give and take. I love this person. Everything is equal so we are on the same level. Like you know – I trust them to a point when I can let it go.

Ebony’s words were so vivid to me – it was as if she was speaking through images. When I got home that day, I immediately went upstairs to my studio and created this painting.

This painting could be interpreted in several ways. At first glance this piece looks hopeful; two hands joining one another. However, after reflecting on Ebony’s words, the hands take on a different meaning. The hands are slipping away from one another. Ebony expresses that when she feels she is getting ahead something pulls her back, “like I always fall back into the darkness I was in before.” The negative space is black, representing the darkness and her state of being alone.

Ebony stated that when people get close they leave and take a piece of here with
them. The glitter that sparkles on one of the hands could represent the pieces that “they” take from her.

The painting can also be seen in a positive light. Ebony said, “now I am in a relationship where it is give and take. I love this person – everything is equal so we are on the same level.” Ebony explains different levels of trust “trust them to a point when I can let it go.” The hands now symbolize letting go, the glitter symbolizes the magic of “letting go” in order to feel the warmth of a trusting relationship.

At our next session, I brought my painting in for Ebony to see. I explained the symbolic aspects in my work. She looked at it and said, “Yeah! Like that’s exactly what I am talking about. Especially like the darkness.” I asked her to explain the darkness. She replied,

It seems that whenever I am doing better and I am reaching ahead, something pulls me back down. Something always pulls me back down. Something makes it hard for me to keep going forward. I always fall back into the darkness I was in before and this seems to happen to me so much. It is like everyone is out to get me and nothing goes right.

Ebony is aware of her darkness and does not feel in control. I asked her if there was anything she thinks about when she feels pulled into the darkness.

There are always times I guess when I feel like nothing goes right and I feel like giving up, but I always just kept pushing even against the odds. There are so many obstacles in my way but I succeed anyways or at least I try my hardest.

Someone in my life who I think is strong is me.

Although Ebony has known disappointment, she feels hope and pushes forward despite the odds. She depends on herself if nothing else goes right.
Making Meaning: A Bird in a Tree

Months after my time with Ebony I chose to revisit her transcripts. I believed some distance would allow me a fresh perspective.

On a cold, rainy, autumn night I sat on the porch with Ebony’s transcripts. I listened to the rain dropping on the leaves that fell on the grass. The street was shiny from the rain, and I could see the reflection of lampposts on the pavement.

I examined Ebony’s poetry. I reread her poem about a bird’s nature to chirp,

While everyone is claiming to be
My mind will just keep moving
Then one day I might chirp again
A beautiful song so soothing

I paused from my reading and I saw my breath for the first time of the season. I imagined the glow on the pavement to be from the moon. I pictured Ebony’s bird, sitting on a branch, above her cage, singing an honest song. It is a song of liberation.

First, I painted the moon in shades of pale yellow. Blues and purples from the night sky embraced the moon. I painted a tree with branches that sprawl out into the sky. I painted a silhouette of a cage on a sturdy branch. The cage represents her past, all she can leave behind – her fear of expressing her true emotions and the false perceptions of others.
I cut tissue paper thinking of the delicate pages from her notebook, in her notebook she is honest and safe to feel. I place the paper in the sky and on the moon so all can see the truth. Lastly, I painted a bird sitting on the longest, skinniest branch, where the risk of falling is the highest. She has the choice to return to the cage, or to fly to freedom.

There are many layers to Ebony. On the outside, she wears a heavy armor that protects her sadness. She feels if people see her sad they would take advantage of her and make her cry. She believes sadness equates to weakness. She does not want others to see her as weak so she shows anger. She allows people to see her smiling or angry, but not much in between.

On the inside, she is fragile and tangled up in sadness. Ebony feels alone. She speaks about being imprisoned within herself. Ebony writes she is “captive with a mentality so broken.” She does not express her true emotions, which prohibits her ability to maintain and create relationships. Although she is honest with herself, she is not honest with others.

I am honored that Ebony has shared with me the truth in her life.

Ebony is currently enrolled in a community college. She texts me now and then about the grades she receives on tests or professors who are “lame.” She hasn’t sent me poetry in a while. I would like to think this is because she is singing honest songs to others.
Chapter VII

Cross-Case Examination

Ways of Knowing

I have used arts-based approaches as an interpretive framework to understand the girls and their experiences. Listening to adolescent girls through creative opportunities is a rigorous task. Researchers must be willing and open to hear the unexpected and listen closely to the subtleties of the human voice and experience. The creative works produced by the hands, hearts, and minds of my participants have provided me with insight into the inner world of disadvantaged adolescent girls.

In order to understand the experiences of adolescent girls, parents, teachers, and researchers must have a perspective and sensitivity that calls attention to what is censored or unseen (Bernardez, 1991). Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1997) found that by listening carefully to adolescents, they heard “their concerns, their experiences, their insights…[they] heard evidence of a range of competencies that are at odds with prevailing characterizations of deficit” (p. 22). Listening to others through creative expression is one way to hear what is not overtly spoken.

Brown (1998) recognized in her work “the resistant, knowing voices determined to be heard, the underground voices easily called forth by someone who would listen and take them seriously” (p. xi). The girls in my study willingly shared their stories because I believe they knew I took them seriously. They were brave in expressing themselves. Rogers (1993) recognizes the “ordinary courage” of women and girls. She identifies adolescence as a particularly vulnerable time in a woman’s development, where “the capacity ‘to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart’ is a loss many girls experience at the edge of adolescence” (p. 275).
It was not always easy for the girls to open up. Creative expression can be frightening because it exposes our emotions and how much we are willing to risk by sharing ourselves. I am honored the girls felt safe to share parts of themselves with me.

As an artist, I believe one can come to understand almost anything in life through the art-making process and relationships with others. Creative experiences reveal, evoke, and provoke understandings that conventional writing cannot provide. Opportunities for creative expression can separate an individual from dysfunctional life experiences. Creative opportunity “fuels rapid and lasting shifts in self-experience and interactions with the world” (Bratton, 2010, p. 62). Emotions, reason, and truth meet in creative works, and during this process an individual can gain control of thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

I believe this is particularly true when dealing with issues of the heart such as pain, isolation, and disconnection. Ganim (1999) notes that doctors, clinicians, and educators “have rediscovered art as a way to heal the emotional wounds created by our internal fragmentation as well as by our sense of separation from others” (p. 1). I have witnessed such healing during my time with the girls and the art-making process. The girls’ creative work became a living testimony of their experiences, concerns, and insight.

The art-making process involves a dialogue between self and others in meaningful and constructive ways. Creative expressions expose vulnerability, reveal strengths, and offer relief. When this process is shared we gain trust, and become better human beings. I have learned a great deal from the girls, and I am a better person because of them.

In this chapter I write my collective understanding of the girls’ resistance, resilience, and images of relationships. I revisit their artwork, poetry, and conversation as well as the literature I have studied.
Revisiting Resilience

Someone in my life who I think is strong is me. – Ebony

Researchers describe a resilient profile as one that demonstrates a sense of purpose as well as insight, independence, and initiative to take control over chaotic environments (Benard, 2004; Briere & Scott, 2006; Curtis-Tweed, 2003; Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Pollack, 2005). Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony all show evidence of resilience in their conversation and creative works.

Ciera takes ownership of her life. She tells me she can’t run away from her problems. She recognizes the consequences that can happen if she makes poor choices. She said, “I’m not going anywhere like that except maybe jail. I told myself this isn’t what I wanted.” She communicates initiative and the ability to take control of her life.

In Ciera’s paintings of New York City, she was able to envision and portray a better life. Ciera dreams of moving to New York City in pursuit of a brighter future. Her vision is so clear that she knows what she will wear when she makes it there. She feels a sense of purpose in New York. She imagines living alongside of business people everywhere “with something to do.” Her skyline of New York represents freedom and a sense of direction. The Statue of Liberty represents a place of belonging, which she knew existed somewhere despite not having found it yet.

Lataya was more guarded and expressed her resilience in subtle ways. Her lizard painting represents adaptability during difficult times. “I like lizards because they can blend in...they can get away from enemies...they seem like they can never be caught.” She shows recognition of sometimes needing to accept a difficult situation before leaving it.

Upon reflection, Lataya showed insight by recognizing the vulnerability and strength of a
butterfly. She said, “They are strong because they are breakable. They still have to survive when it rains or it is windy.” Lataya is strong but fragile, she has survived the rain and wind.

Ebony spent time in a psychiatric hospital because of her unhealthy ways of coping with difficulty. Her poetry illustrates her self-awareness. She recognizes she is held captive by her inability to share her feelings. She wrote, “watching pictures/ in hazy visions/will only hurt you.” Ebony is aware of her private and public self. Her poetry shows initiative to take control of the interpersonal tensions she faces.

Ebony recognizes her potential. Ebony’s words “there are so many obstacles in my way but I succeed anyways or at least I try my hardest ” illustrate her independence. She writes about rising from a new birth and rejoicing in a new freedom. Her poems convey a commitment to herself. She also offers a commitment to others while rejoicing in a new freedom – she will be free to share herself with others.

Ciera, Ebony, and Lataya endure adversity on a daily basis. Despite their obstacles they are able to successfully adapt to their environments. They recognize the consequences of poor choices. The girls look after themselves, they feel hopeful, and have faith in a brighter future.

Revisiting Resistance

_When I was growing up it was good to hide my anger, you know, to suppress it – because then it made it go away._ – Lataya

Contemporary researchers examine the development of protective factors of resistance, which are necessary to help build resilience (e.g. Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Robinson & Ward, 1991; Wachtel, 2008). Ungar (2004) argues that resilience may take the form of resistance as part of a struggle to assert a sense of agency – “in a context that otherwise may risk being crushed” (p. 38). The girls sense of agency was kept alive because of the protective factors they relied on such as their separation from negative relationships and circumstances.
Certain types of resistance are healthy and necessary in the development of disadvantaged adolescents. Hall (2007) recognizes that the capacity to positively transform and resist adversity can be viewed as an expression of individual power. It can also be seen as a personal act of agency that helps free individuals from the hardships.

Ciera shows resistance toward false perceptions of others in the poem she wrote after an encounter with a racist man on the bus. “So don’t tell me it is the color of my skin/That make those think less of me/It is the choices that I choose/And the direction I move/That determines my destiny.” Robinson and Ward (1991) refer to a “resistance for liberation” that African American female adolescents have from being members of an oppressed group. It is a time “in which Black girls and women are encouraged to acknowledge the problems of, and to demand change in, an environment that oppresses them” (p. 89). Ciera acknowledged the oppressive attitudes toward her and was able to eloquently write about it.

Lataya shows resistance toward vulnerability. She admits she has never learned how to express her anger. This is evident in our conversations and her artwork. Lataya’s rose is not easily accessible. It has thorns and must be pulled from the roots. She displays an understanding that even innately vulnerable things can be resistant and defensive.

When Lataya was young, she and her sister endured difficult experiences. As children, they were not able to defend themselves. She believed it was good to resist her anger and hurt “because then it made it go away.” The paintings she eventually created show that the snake and tiger are aggressive, in control, and able to defend themselves. In a sense, the animals are able to resist and chase away danger. Lataya wishes all these things for herself.

Ebony’s poetry provided a platform where she can express her feelings while maintaining distance from others. She recognizes that her resistance toward her feelings can’t last forever.
“[writing] works for me now, like a security blanket...it works until something big happens, then all the feelings come out.” As cited in Raider-Roth (2005), Gilligan (1990) refers to a psychological resistance where “reluctance to know what one knows and a fear that such knowledge, if spoken, will endanger relationships and threaten survival” (p. 256). Ebony’s psychological resistance exists outside the pages of her notebook. She is honest with herself; however, she is reluctant to show others her true self in fear that they will not accept her.

Garbarino (2005) observed that youth appear strong but are severely wounded in inner or emotional ways. Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony conceal their emotional wounds through a façade worn for others. The girls resist their pain with the need to appear strong. Ciera and Ebony believe if people thought they were sad they would take advantage of them. Lataya wants to be viewed as powerful as seen in the venomous nature of her snake. All three girls resist their vulnerability because they believed it equated to weakness.

Feminist scholars place great value on relationships and consider autonomous behavior unhealthy for development (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Lyons & Hammer, 1990; Jordan, 2005; Jordan & Hartling 2009; Miller & Stiver 1997). My experiences with the girls have taught me that their sense of autonomy was critical for their emotional survival. Despite their success with autonomous behavior, I agree with feminist scholars, growth-fostering relationships can help adolescents cope with risk factors, increasing their sense of resilience. There is a great urgency on our part to reduce the risks many adolescents feel relationships involve, so they may grow into a richer, more authentic, and resilient selves.

Images of Relationships

*Your life would just be perfect if you had someone in the house to talk to.* – Ciera

As seen in chapter two, feminist scholarship emphasizes the importance of relationships
for a healthy development. Research suggests that the presence of supportive and caring relationships increase the number of youth who succeed despite adversity and hardships (Garmezy, 1993). In an ideal world, everyone would have growth fostering relationships with caring peers, family, and adult figures. We don’t live in an ideal world. Many disadvantaged adolescents are deprived of the warmth of a loving relationship.

Children who are emotionally wounded or abandoned by others develop strategies for staying out of relationships (Miller and Stiver, 1997). Jordan (1995) recognizes that adolescents “often develop hyper vigilance in order to protect themselves. They look for danger, become super sensitive to rejection, and often defensively distance themselves from the other person in order to feel safe or worthy” (p. 4). Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony communicate resistance toward relationships to protect themselves against additional suffering.

Ciera’s perception of strength in relationships is colored by danger – “Like if you a lady, and you go with a man that beat you, then you have to be strong because if you weren’t there wouldn’t be anything left of you.” She sees strength in enduring hazardous relationships.

Ciera does not have a relationship with her father. She has a poor relationship with her mother whom she has witnessed being abused. Ciera’s autonomous attitude toward her mother, peers, and teachers highlights her belief that no relationship is better than a bad one. However, Ciera still understands the value in healthy relationships “Your life would just be perfect if you had someone in the house to talk to.” Despite Ciera’s experiences with relationships, she recognizes of the importance of loving relationships.

Lataya’s experiences with relationships were also unfortunate. The sole caregiver in her life, her grandmother, was sick and unable to look after her. Lataya is responsible for her
brothers and sister. Feminist thought teaches us that adolescent girls make meaning of themselves through relationships (Gilligan, 1990; Jordan, 1995; Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1997). Lataya has developed her identity through the role of responsibility she takes in caring for others. For example, she has to be the meanest snake and fight for her grandmother.

Lataya’s rose symbolizes her position in relationships – “I have to be the thorn.” Lataya’s thorns distance herself from others as a means for protection. Gilligan, Lyons, and Hammer (1990) write, “to open oneself to another person creates great vulnerability, and thus the strength of girls’ desire for relationship also engenders the need for protection” (p. 21). It is difficult for Lataya to open up to others because she has spent a lifetime protecting her vulnerability. I hope that one day she can to be the soft petals of the rose.

Lataya recognizes the dysfunction in her life and in her relationships, she said to me once, “I was just thinking this isn’t the way it is supposed to be.” Even though she hasn’t experienced many relationships she still has an intrinsic idea of what one should look like.

Ebony has created an image of herself in isolation. She shows only one side of herself to others. This choice has consequences. Most people are not aware of the sensitive side of Ebony. Because of this, no one will truly understand her. If she continues to keep large aspects of herself out of relationships, she will not grow as an individual.

Ebony doesn’t trust others or like being dependent on someone else. She told me once, “I feel the only way you can get forward is through yourself and God.” Ebony believes dependence on others is a weakness. In her poem she writes “a chance to do better/or/ a chance to relapse and need another hand.” She believes her chance to do better is to make it on her own. Ebony sees relationships as a relapse because she feels when someone gets close to her they leave and take a piece of her with them.
Growth-fostering relationships can increase clarity in one’s life. Although Ebony possesses initiative, purpose, and insight, she does not have the benefit of knowing herself through others.

The contextual and sociocultural challenges the girls live with effects their ability to create, sustain, and participate in growth-fostering relationships. Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony live in high-risk environments. They have little connection to parental role models, and only a small amount of people who they can depend on. Despite the girls’ vulnerability and experiences with chronic disconnection, they can still visualize a healthy relationship. Their resilience baffles me. I wonder where or from whom they learned what healthy relationships look like because they had no or very few models. They recognize the need for honest, growth fostering relationships. Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony display an innate desire to participate in healthy relationships. They have known pain – yet they live to know love.

**Making Meaning: A Flower Blossoms Before the Sun**

When it came time to write a conclusion for this dissertation I was overcome with anxiety and a sense of responsibility. How can I possibly do justice to Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony’s voices? I decided to return to the canvas. I bought a large canvas, not knowing exactly what I would do with it. I sat in front of it for days – hoping that an image would come as easy as it did when I painted my individual understanding of the girls. For the first time in my life, I feared the canvas. How is it possible to communicate my collective understanding of the resistance, resilience, and images of relationships in the lives of these three girls? I was at a loss.

I found myself resisting what I knew. There were drafts of edited chapters in piles on my floor and tables. I had to chase away my doubts. I collected the drafts and put them outside the door. There was no longer a need to leaf through them. I knew what the pages said.
I thought about the creative works the girls and I have made. I know for certain that the truth we knew in our hearts would not have been released had it not been for the opportunities of creative expressions. I had to trust what I knew. I had to trust the art-making process just as I have throughout writing this dissertation.

I taped the girls’ self-portraits on the wall of my studio. I sat still and looked carefully at their pictures. I asked them, “What makes you so resilient? Are you tired of resisting? How have you held on to the hope of healthy relationships?” I wished so badly their portraits would talk back to me.

The sun shined through my window and onto their self-portraits. It made me happy. Despite all the times they have been let down, the sun still shines upon them. Immediately after realizing this, an image came to my mind.

I was able to use the language of imagery to communicate my understanding. I began by painting a large sun. Several shades of blue hang in the sky. I painted the earth under the sun and placed large rocks from textured paper on it. I cut the stem and leaves from thick, green, soft paper. A white flower grows in front of the sun.

After I painted, my anxiety slowly washed away. I was fully engaged in the creative process, and was able to make meaning of my questions through artistic measures. There is enchantment in creative expression. It communicates the expression of multiple truths, and the interaction of these truths create new individual and collective meanings (Conrad, 2004). Arts-based researchers have determined that
knowing is best achieved by doing, and creative experiences can provide us with knowledge of others and ourselves. Once I remembered this, I realized I did have a solid understanding of the girls and their experiences. My understanding was on the canvas.

It is difficult for a seed to grow in barren land. The only relationship the seed has known is with the rocks. Most of the rocks are dark and weather worn. The rocks closest to the flower are gold. They represent the precious relationships the girls do have. Ciera has a relationship with her boyfriend. Ebony has a friend with whom she can let go. Lataya’s relationship with her grandma, although perhaps not perfect, it is consistent and is a relationship worth defending.

The flower is determined to grow, and the sun provides the necessary encouragement. As Brown (1998) wrote, “the resistant, knowing voices determined to be heard by someone who would listen and take them seriously” (p. xi). In my painting, the flower represents the underground voices of the girls. The sun listens to the flower’s needs and takes its growth seriously.

As stated earlier, Rutter (1991) found that resilience was largely determined by innate factors, and was therefore relatively unaffected by relationships or interactions with the environment. It takes courage for a flower to grow in an oppressive environment. It has a lot of obstacles in its way, but it still flourishes. Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony are innately resilient. Despite their environment and disconnection to the majority of people in their lives, they continue to grow.

Adolescents who are characterized as resilient demonstrate autonomy and a sense of purpose as well as insight, independence, and initiative. The flower lives independently from the rocks. Curtis-Tweed (2003) recognizes that in order to form a sense of agency, African American girls must “rely on self-perceptions, independent of the images reflected by the dominant culture,
or by those who shape the dominant culture” (p. 401). The flower has initiative and purpose, it relies on its own strength.

The blossom represents liberation because it began from a seed and now the petals are open to the world – showing successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity. The petals are delicate and fragile like the girls are in the inside. In spots you can see through the petals and into the sun, just as I could see through the girls’ resistance through our loving relationship.

Conventional studies of resilience have been characterized as the ability to make it alone in the face of adversity. While the paint was drying, I wondered what the flower would look like if it grew in rich soil. I wondered who the girls would be today if they had a better foundation.

The girls embody resilience, they have the ability to endure adversity and sustain personal growth. They are beautiful flowers that grow and bloom no matter what their surroundings look like. They possess great courage. This type of courage has quiet magic.

The creative works that the girls and I made express the subtlety of human experience. They express hope, commitment, and survival. Every aspect of experience and the unknown can be captured in creative works. Certain ways of knowing exist below the threshold of consciousness, and are impossible to articulate in conventional writing. I conclude this chapter with a poem I wrote. It captures my deep understanding of the resistance, resilience, and image of relationships in the lives of the girls –

Beneath the rocks – big and small
was a seed that grew
into
A Flower,
called forth by
the promise of the sun.
Discussion

Autonomy and Separation as Self Protection

Ciera, Lataya, and Ebony have endured chronic disconnection in their lives. The girls have many roles to play and responsibilities to take on. Such as looking after siblings and supporting themselves. They are able to successfully adapt and overcome the adversity in their lives despite not having anyone to depend upon. Although at times they showed signs of vulnerability, they have a high sense of self-worth and personal agency.

The girls’ experiences with negative relationships did not get in the way of developing their authentic selves. The girls expressed autonomous behaviors and attitudes toward the people in their lives. Their sense of autonomy was a source of individual power and freedom. Autonomy in this sense is necessary for their emotional survival.

Despite the absence of relationships and growing up in oppressive environment, the girls were able to remain hopeful and hold on to healthy images of relationships. This suggests there is an intrinsic desire to participate in growth-fostering relationships. Like a flower that grows among oppressive rocks, their resilience has helped them not only survive, but thrive.

A Place for Arts-Based Learning in Educational Research

Art is a language of expression that has always been and will always remain a fundamental aspect of the human condition (Goldberg, 1997, p. 8).

My study is an example of using artistic ways of knowing to enhance understanding of disadvantaged adolescent girls. Arts-based methods go beyond the limits of language to capture the meaning of lived experience in holistic ways. Participants are given the tools to communicate when words alone cannot. Arts-based research techniques can lead to deeper understanding. Eisner (2005) notes,
The concepts and processes that we have used in arts-based research are much more likely to work at the edge of possibility and address questions of meaning and experience that are not likely to be as salient in traditional research (p. 20).

Similarly, Congram (2008) suggests that “the arts can offer compelling ways to frame current understanding much more than straight reasoning can achieve” (p. 175).

There are many ways in which the arts can help us understand others. The arts provide opportunities for transformation. They are a way of reflecting on experiences. Ideas are stimulated, and unconscious realizations are released during the process of creative expression. Creative expression begins its communicative task where language leaves off (Ortega & Gasset, 1975, p. 199).

Exploring ideas through the language of the arts enriches research and deepens learning because it accesses subjective areas of thought and feelings (Hughes, 2009). Arts-based approaches strive to make connections, demand engagement, and instill greater self-consciousness.

Jacobs (2002) writes, “until scholars are allowed to give credibility to their dreams and visions, the academy will continue to stifle possible solutions to the many problems that face our world” (p 15). Granting scholars permission to use creative alternatives for exploring people and phenomena will lead to a more promising future in educational research. Creative strategies present great possibility. They reshape our understanding and challenge the notion of scholarship.

The Place for Creative Expression in the Lives of Adolescents

Adolescence is a critical time in development. Outside of the normal teenage developmental process, the girls have many other challenges. Providing opportunities for
creative expression can help youth feel understood and offer relief in times of uncertainty. Creative expression can release deep-rooted emotions and help form a stronger sense of identity.

Opportunities for creative expression provide adolescents the opportunity to understand themselves and their experiences. Cajete (1994) suggests, “Such practices help students to establish a connection with their real selves and learn how to bring their inner resources to bear in their lives” (p. 225). The ability to creatively express oneself is an act of agency.

The great thing about making art is the tangible evidence left behind. The girls were the authors of their work. They knew their story better than anyone else. They held the knowledge, and could decide what to share.

Why Creative Expression Matters To Researchers

So please dear boy, not so many notations in your essay on the thoughts of men long dead. Profundity is seldom achieved by misquoting the opinions of those who cannot return to defend themselves...dare to walk the wildest unknown path. In this way we can look forward to some intellectual progress (Courtenay, 1992, p. 304).

Eisner (2003) states that we place greater value on prediction than discovery. “We tend to do things we know how to predict and control” (p. 378). To fully understand others we need to reach beyond the “the safe boundaries of the familiar to hear and see the experiences of others” (Kazemak, 1992, p. 150). To understand the perspective of adolescents, we must look beyond what we think we know in order to see what can only be communicated through creative expression.

Educational researchers must consider the methodologies or mediums that will best communicate the voices of our participants. We need to make use of the resources that best communicate their stories and experiences. Creative expression is a natural resource – tapping into it can help us discover the inner world of adolescent girls.

The most important quality that we possess as researchers who work with young people
is our belief in our capacity to understand them. We can honor adolescents’ perceptions, fears, and strengths in a much more fundamental way than has been done before by using more holistic approaches to research.

Validating Alternative Methods of Inquiry

Arts-based research is successful when measured by the level of creativity, aesthetic quality, and interpretive vitality (Patton, 2002). I recall a conversation I had with a member of my cohort during my first few months as a doctoral student. I explained to her that I wanted to study adolescent girls through creative methods. “That is not research,” she said sharply. I could have reacted in a number of ways but I stayed quiet and remained calm. I knew that wouldn’t be the last time I would have to defend the validity of my work.

I am grateful to the arts-based researchers who have gone before me. Their work has given me confidence and the courage to move forward. In The authentic dissertation: Alternative ways of knowing, research, and representation Jacobs (2008) offers several definitions of research and what it means to be an “expert” in the field. He cites scholars who define research as a truth-seeking activity that contributes to knowledge. The arts-based approaches used in this dissertation offer creative ways for conducting research. Visual art and poetry offer alternative avenues to represent data.

In arts-based research, Richardson (2000) claims that unconventional work should be held to “high and difficult standards; mere novelty does not suffice” (p. 937). She offers five criteria for judging the merit of arts-based research that demand rigorous academic and aesthetic scholarship. This is a framework I use to validate my dissertation and creative works.

1. Substantive contribution, does the author demonstrate a grounded social scientific perspective and does the work contribute to our understanding of social life?
The substantive contribution this study makes to social science is two-fold. The first contribution is methodological. I offered the girls opportunities to create poetry and art. I also created art as a means for understanding their creative expression and the stories they have shared. Through these methods, I was provided with a deeper understanding of who the girls were as individuals. By developing this process I have expanded upon arts-based educational research.

The second contribution is my understanding of the social realities of disadvantaged adolescent girls by using a feminist framework. I have focused on the girls’ strengths as a means of understanding their resilience. My recognition of the girls’ autonomy as a source of resilience contributes to a larger understanding of the social life of disadvantaged girls.

2. *Aesthetic merit,* is the piece aesthetically successful? Does the use of creative expression open up the text and invite interpretative responses?

There are many ways to judge a work of art to determine if it is aesthetically successful. I do not feel it is appropriate or necessary to apply a formal critique to the artwork in this study. I believe a piece is successful if a viewer can identify with it in some way.

The aesthetic merit of this work is that it provokes emotions, creates a new set of meanings, and leaves the viewer with more questions to ask. The work is holistic. Along with the written component of this dissertation, it incorporates the girls’ and my expressive works. Throughout this process, a body of work has emerged consisting of creative artifacts made by my participants and myself. Our work communicates highly conceptual aspects of the human condition such as hope, adversity, and resilience.

I have written expressively as a way of inviting readers into my experiences with the girls. The expressive works provides a space for readers to form their own interpretation. Each
artwork can stand on its own, but together they tell a larger story.

3. Reflexivity, how has the author’s subjectivity influenced the text? Is there adequate self-awareness for the reader to make judgments about the perspective of the writer?

My reflexivity is evident throughout this dissertation. In the introduction, I offer readers my perspective as an artist, student, and researcher. My methodological choices reflect my value system as an artist and researcher. In the participant chapters I wrote about the girls from my subjective place of knowing. I walked readers through the process of how I made meaning of the girls’ stories and experiences.

I have allowed my experiences as an urban art teacher to inform my practice and influence my relationships with the girls. I am aware of my positionality as a White, middle-class woman how it effects my assumptions and the things I see things.

Although I can relate to the girls on some levels, our lives are very different. I do not know what it is like to be them. There were nights when I laid in bed wondering what it would be like to be one of the girls in my study. I wondered if I would be as resilient as they are. There are many things I still do not know about the girls. But I do know what it means to care and want what is best for them. I hope this is evident in my writing.

As a whole, the nature of this dissertation is reflexive. The girls were able to reflect on who they were as individuals and communicate themselves in their creative work. My artwork was a reflection of their stories and creative works they shared with me. My dissertation tells a personal tale of what went on in my heart and in my head during the research process. I share with the readers the things I found amusing, distressing, and extraordinary.

4. Impact, is there an emotional or intellectual affect on the author or the reader? Does it encourage action or new research questions?
The emotional and intellectual affect of this work is my capacity to understand the girls in my study. I feel it important to note that there are stories I have left out because they would be too difficult to write about. Putting them on paper would make them even more real for the girls, for me, and for the readers. It is possible that these stories would have greatly affected the readers; however, I do not feel it is my place to share them with a public audience because of the intimate nature of the stories.

This work has had an intellectual affect on me. Early in this study, I recognized there was a big difference from what I was reading in the literature and what I was witnessing in my work with the girls. I went into this project with a feminist understanding of the roles relationships play in development of girls and women. Literature consistently states that people develop a sense of identity through their connection with others (Brown, 1994; Comstock et al., 2008; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan & Hartling, 2009; Miller & Stiver, 1997). As my study progressed, I learned that autonomy plays a large role in developing an authentic self.

My work has reinforced what I already knew about the power and importance of creative expression. I hope that care providers of adolescents are affected by this dissertation and will be inspired to use arts-based approaches in their relationships with their youth. I hope this dissertation has impacted researchers, so that they too may provide participants with opportunities for creative expression.

This work has inspired me to think about new research questions such as: Is one born resilient or is it a quality that is developed? Does gender shape one’s image of relationship? The answers to these questions can benefit our understanding and practice.

5. Expression of reality, is the text credible and truthful? Is it an honest account of the cultural, social, and individual context?
The girls spoke openly and honestly to me. I have listened with sincerity and have recorded our time together, their experiences, and my perspective. I have told the truth about the girls’ lives – from the clothes they wear to what makes them cry.

This work emerged from a context from who I was at the time. If I were to write this again perhaps I would see things differently. There will be other interpretations of this text because subjective reality is unique to an individual.

Why I Had to Create Art

Artistic expression is all around us…it is a birthright to which we all can lay legitimate claim (Wyman, 2004, p. 14).

I have relied on the art-making process to enlighten and inform my understanding of the resistance, resilience, and images of relationship in the lives of my participants by make meaning of the girls’ experiences in a language of my own.

It was often difficult to listen to the girls’ stories. There was so much disconnection in their lives. There was evidence of neglect and abandonment. I did my best to be present for them. After our sessions were over, I would go to my office and transcribe. It was more difficult to listen to the girls a second time. I heard the subtleties in their voices. I heard tones of anger, sadness, and confusion. Their stories were too much for me to hold onto alone. In moments like this I turned to painting. My artwork shows my connection and understanding of the girls and the stories they have shared.

Painting is a form of meditation for me. I work intuitively. I begin my work with an image in mind. I start by painting an acrylic wash of soft blues to cover the white of the canvas because blue reminds me that I am capable of understanding. I then apply an opaque layer on top of the subject matter. I paint in layers because it gives me more opportunities to think and feel. While the paint is drying, I select papers to embellish my thoughts. I glue the scraps of paper on
the canvas.

Once the canvas is covered, I sit for a long period of time and reflect on what I know. I am at peace. The room is still and my understanding settles in. I know that I am finished with a work when I am filled with relief – relief in knowing that I have an understanding of what the girls were communicating to me.

**A Place in Research for Love**

*As for love, I refer to what happens when we become truly involved with what consciousness presents to us. We worry about it, care about it, give ourselves to it. To love is to regard things, situations, persons, or creatures in the world, as “mattering,” and allowing oneself to be bound to their fate; this rouses us to exceed the self, to rise above it, as nothing else can (Moran & Honan, 2008, p. 92).*

I conclude this dissertation with the relationship of love to my research. I believe love, art, and research should be integrated so together they can inform our practice. This can be accomplished through developing trusting relationships, reflecting on life experiences, and engaging in creative activities. Charles Dickens wrote, “A loving heart is the truest wisdom.” If one wants to understand the human condition, it must be learned through love and expressed through art.

Sorokin wrote in 1954 that he believed at that the present stage of human history, an increase in our knowledge of the grace of love had become the paramount need of humanity. I believe that it is still a need more than 50 years later. I created expressive works as a way to honor the girls and their stories. My poetry and artwork are reflections of the understanding made possible by the investment, commitment, and the trust shared between the girls and myself. My interpretations have given me a chance to show love and admiration toward the girls.

My creative interpretations are a product of action and an act of love. Sinner et al., (2006) consider such work as aesthetic relations that are both ‘object’ and ‘action’ at the same time. I
was far from neutral when listening to the girls. I was human. I felt their frustration, anger, sadness, and joy. I experienced their emotions. I was involved in their interpretation of their experience. As a researcher there is no greater honor.

I am no longer an outsider to the girls. The success I have in knowing them had very little to do with my formal education or training as an artist. It had everything to do with gaining the trust of my participants and listening carefully to their stories.

Listening to others – getting beyond merely expressing ourselves – is the distinguishing feature of art in the empathic mode. When we attend to other people’s plight, enter into their emotions, and make their conditions our own, identification occurs. Then we cannot remain neutral or detached observers (Gablik, 1991, p. 112).

I was able to listen to the girls through their artwork, poetry, and spoken words. The girls gave me vulnerable pieces of themselves. Their pieces matter to me. They are evidence of our connection to each other.

An empathetic understanding of the girls allowed me to see a clearer picture of who they are as individuals. My understanding of their resistance, resilience, and images of relationships was made possible by a loving relationship. I believe good research is a moral endeavor. We must understand the visions of others and how they affect us as individuals. Good research discovers truth. Good research involves love.
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