

WHO'S THE 'WRITE' GIRL?
A POETIC INQUIRY

by

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Language and Literacy Education)

The University Of British Columbia
(Vancouver)

August 2017

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Abstract

This dissertation closely examines my own experiences as a creative writing facilitator, program coordinator, poet, feminist, and confidante at a creative writing non-profit organization in Vancouver, B.C. *Write It*¹. *Write It* was created specifically to support young women between the ages of 13 and 19 who have been labeled as 'at-risk.' I ground the dissertation in Foucauldian theory and situate this work within the field of Girls' Studies. I braid this critical feminist educational work with the generative area of poetic inquiry to explore the multiple and differing ways the young women who were enrolled in the program have been understood and how the labels of 'at-risk,' 'troubled,' and 'in-crisis' have shaped them.

I explore through poetic inquiry my interpretation of how each of the young women in differing ways shaped their own identities and experiences. The original poems were grounded in the detailed journal entries I kept while I was involved in the program. Through poetry I endeavor to represent the various experiences, impressions, understandings, and a witnessing of the young women at *Write It*. Inquiring poetically enables the exploration of the complexity, contradictions, and poignancy of the program, the young women, and the multiple roles I occupied. We need to get rid of the 'fixing' and 'reformation' discourses of youth. What needs to be done is to work to advance creativity and self-awareness. The poetic explorations

¹ I have created a pseudonym for the program to protect its anonymity

provide effective theoretical, practical, and pedagogical approaches for 'at-risk' young women and contributes to the expansive and the fields of Girls' Studies and poetic inquiry research.

Lay Summary

This doctoral dissertation engages with and reflects on, through poetry, the experiences I had as a creative writing facilitator at a Vancouver-based non-profit program *Write It*². It centres on the experiences I had with young women enrolled in the program who have been labeled as ‘at-risk,’ ‘troubled,’ and/or ‘in-crisis’ by authority figures such as educators, administrators, counsellors, youth workers, and social workers. My original poetry serves as the data for this project. I have created poetry from journals I kept while at *Write It* in order to inquire into the various ways each of the young women experienced and understood themselves and the program. In doing so the project interrupts, gestures towards, and speaks back to the problematic ‘at-risk’ label and sheds light on how poetry can be used to expand and work to expose and change stigmas, stereotypes, policy, and pedagogy.

² I have created a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the program.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Abby Wener. The four visuals are all photographs taken by Abby Wener of original collage art and personal property.

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Acknowledgements

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor and mentor Dr. Carl Leggo. Thank you for inspiring me with your generative scholarship, warm wisdom, and fostering my creative and critical abilities. Thank you to both of my committee members, Dr. Theresa Rogers and Dr. Shauna Butterwick for constructively encouraging and shaping my feminist educational scholarship and being positive and passionate about this dissertation.

I would also like to thank Dr. Victoria Purcell-Gates and Dr. Jennifer Vadeboncoeur for your dynamic instruction and inspiration in the early days of my doctoral studies. Thank you to Dr. Mona Gleason and Dr. Patricia Badir for your instruction over the years and warm encouragement for my doctoral studies.

Thank you to my colleagues Claire Ahn, Dr. Chelsey Hauge, Dr. Anar Rajabali, and Harini Rajagopal for the support, countless conversations, and being such innovative and supportive scholars. Thank you to my dear friend of over twenty years, Dr. Ahava Shira, for inspiring me with your innovative braiding of creative and academic work.

Thank you to the 12 young women who I facilitated at *Write It* for being such incredibly wise and thoughtful young women and writers; it was an honor to facilitate our workshops and be among you.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the four loves of my life, my parents Judi and Carl Wener, my incredible husband Lorne Herlin, and my sweet son David. You all make my heart sing.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This doctoral dissertation engages with and reflects on, through poetry, the experiences I had with young women who have been labeled as ‘at-risk,’ ‘troubled,’ or ‘in-crisis’ by authority figures such as educators, administrators, counsellors, youth workers, and social workers. I am dedicated to research about young women in order to challenge such reductive categorizations, which are fundamentally oppressive and deny young women agency. Building on Alcoff’s (2006) call for educators and researchers to “challenge, thwart, and rebuff [these labels] and to establish reflective consciousness and power” (p. 331) the research focus is twofold.

This dissertation closely examines *Write It*³, a creative writing non-profit organization that was operationalized in Vancouver, British Columbia for eight years. The non-profit was created specifically to support the reflective consciousness of young ‘at-risk’ women between the ages of 13 and 19. In my second chapter I examine the *Write It* program itself. In the third and fourth data chapters I gesture through my poetry the multiple and differing ways the young women who were enrolled in the program have been understood and how the labels of ‘at-risk,’ ‘troubled,’ and ‘in-crisis’ shaped them. I also explore how I perceived each of the young women in differing ways, shaped their own identities and experiences. These examinations stem from revisiting detailed journals I kept over the five years when I worked there from 2009-2014. I wrote prose in my journals, and I composed original

³ I have created a pseudonym for the program to protect its anonymity.

poems for this dissertation based on those prose journal entries. The data chapters that make up this dissertation consist of these poems. It is through this writing that the dissertation engages in poetic inquiry. The poems explore the complexity, contradictions, and poignancy of the program and the young women who were enrolled in the program. All the poetry in this dissertation is written by me and does not include writing by the young women I worked with. The poems also present and speak to and from my positionality and the roles I occupied as creative writing facilitator, program coordinator, confidante, poet, academic, feminist, Jewish, heterosexual, educated, middle class, and woman in my thirties. The poetic explorations suggest effective theoretical and practical pedagogical approaches for 'at-risk' young women and serve to critically and creatively expose and interrupt objectification. Additionally, I hope that this project contributes to the expansive and the fields of Girls' Studies and poetic inquiry research.

Inspiration for this project

This research directly builds on my Master of Arts thesis *Don't Tell Me Who I Am: Narratives of Young Women Who Are Mothers* (Wener, 2004). In that work, I utilized pastiche narrative inquiry. In the context of my research, I incorporated oral narratives in the form of interviews, visual narratives in the form of drawings, and written narratives in the form of poetry. Using this approach, I sought to enable the young women to narrate their experiences in a way that directly challenged

reductive and essentialized social ideas and disrupted the stereotypical understandings of the 'teen mother.'

I was inspired by the *Write It* program to carry out this research project, as I was a poetry facilitator and program coordinator for five years. While I was on maternity leave, *Write It* lost funding and unfortunately had to close. As a result, I shifted my dissertation's focus. In order to examine the program with a researcher's lens and represent the complexity and contradictions of this particular non-profit program, I used the extensive field notes and journal entries I kept over the five years that I worked at the program. I have been very motivated by the range of young women I have taught over the years. The following poem "Snapshots" was inspired by specific women who I have taught at *Write It*.

Snapshots

The room smells of bubble gum,

 hairspray,
 freshly cut grass.

The window to this room - open,
 stuck:

Jordan blows a bubble, becomes
a perfect circle
as if she was pumping air inside it like a pink balloon.

She holds it steady before it collapses onto her coral lips.

She begins chewing again, loud rhythm
staccato, while she writes,
the ink of her pen exploding purple
onto the unlined pages.

Lisa sits inside
her sweater, pulls
her knees under and holds—
sealed tight so nothing escapes.

Marty writes about her bedroom: yellow quilt,
the squares a mix of daffodils and daisies.
Her black notebook filled with line drawings, geometric and
unending
hard spine and dog-eared corners.

She creates a snapshot—
under her bed. There is
a tin box with sharp edges. Inside, a brass ring
was her mother's. Her mother had small fingers, she is
described as a swallow.

Next snapshot—
a letter from her grandmother, paper thinned by finger and
cheek, thinned by time and touch.

Belinda writes about antiseptic,
the pale mint colored walls, adolescent unit 2B.
How her words were used against her,
slapped her in the face, restrained her, caught.

*In blue ink she writes so it's hard to return to the page
here, blank, don't even know how to begin, to fill it.
She chews her fingernails, plays with the edges of her jeans.
For words were used as tools of her undoing,
loose ends, frayed.*

Photograph 1 Collage 1

Excerpt of a collage I made at the beginning of writing this dissertation.



Foucauldian theories of discourse and power provide a potent and rich lens that grounds and informs my research. I will explore these theories in this introductory chapter. Then, I will explore in detail the history and current research in the field of Girls' Studies as it relates to my project. Through a review of the literature, I will pay attention to the fictions and discourses that are operationalized within the field of Girls' Studies and that, in turn, dominate young women's lives. I will explain how my research carries along in the vein of researchers such as Fine (1992, 2001, 2004), Gonick (2001, 2003, 2004), Harris (2004, 2005), and Ward and Benjamin (2004) who are interested in how young women 'do' girlhood, and how young women 'speak in their own right' and disrupt reductive discourses such as 'at risk' by talking back (Weedon, 1996, p. 16). By using the phrase 'do girlhood,' I am interested in contributing to research that draws attention to young women's agency. This project has the potential to expand young women's beliefs of what is 'do-able.' Therefore, the goal is to bring the operation of power into view and, further, to think about young women's identities in this way.

This research serves to grapple with and challenge pervasive assumptions that are made both theoretically and practically about young women. I choose to focus on this by attempting to attend to the complex and multifarious nature of young women's identities. Young women are not fixed subjects. Nor are their experiences, opportunities, lack of opportunities, straightforward, uniform or equally available. The very category of young woman is slippery and problematic and is shaped by social norms and understandings of race, class, ability, sexuality,

ethnicity, age, educational, and familial backgrounds. Society recognizes and privileges white, middle class, able bodied, straight, educated young women. Society also privileges young women who come from a nuclear family and, pathologizes, oppresses, and criminalizes the majority who act outside of these privileged categories. Young women as a group are “categorized between the ages of thirteen and nineteen” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 12) which is the ages of the young women who are subjects of this project. This project engages with my experiences of working with 12 young women and myself a woman in my mid-thirties to represent multiple dimensions of young women’s power, cultures, and identities. Additionally, this project serves to expose the pervasive social constructions and narrow expectations of what is acceptable young womanhood today.

The very categories treat young women as a pathological ‘problem’ to be managed – “at risk” as defined by adults, social workers, youth workers, teachers, facilitators, and administrators who interact and are meant to assist youth. The label ‘at-risk’ is a value-laden term used to describe a range of behaviours. When used to describe young women in particular, behaviours associated with the label include anger, lack of self-esteem, lack of interest in school, sexual promiscuity, teen pregnancy, smoking, drinking, and drug use. The term ‘at-risk’ young women is synonymous with delinquency, addiction, and incarceration. In turn, the dominant discourse of ‘at-risk’ young women is that of ‘fixing’ and ‘reformation’. The work of this project is to creatively, through poetry, link each of the young women’s own

personal issues, experiences, personalities to broader issues vis-à-vis the social, political expressions and attempt to understand and begin to transform them.

I will then conclude this introductory chapter by exploring poetic inquiry, which provides opportunities to expand and open up possibilities in research with young women. Through my poems my aim is to interrupt, complicate, and challenge the 'at-risk' script by presenting specific, wide-ranging, varied, detailed, and vivid accounts that are derived from my many years of engaging, facilitating, speaking with and sharing space with the young women who were enrolled at *Write It*. These poems are the heart of the project and serve as the data for this dissertation. The poetry is integral to the project and braids with my academic voice.

I will close this section with three key quotes that speak and inspire the key themes of my dissertation.

Girls' Studies:

Girls are always accused of being too mature, too sexual, not rational enough, in other words too something and not enough of something else (Walkerdine, 1993, p. 15)

Young women as 'at-risk':

Is there alternative ways of speaking about youth that does not invoke spectacle? (Roman, 1996, p. 20)

Poetic Inquiry:

...because I can never tell a whole story, I seek fragments.
(Leggo, 2012a, p. 17)

Part one: Foucault

The work of theorists and researchers such as Bakhtin (1986), Bourdieu (1977), and Foucault (1975) draw attention to a particular use of language and semiotics as a site for the social construction of meaning. One of the key markers of the social construction of young women is the language that is used to objectify, refer to, and categorize them in many social contexts including school, family, home, peer group, religious institutions, medical establishments, and social services with mediating discourses. In turn, social constructions of meaning produce through language restrictive knowledges about what identities are possible for young women. I illustrate these ideas further in the following poem.

Used

*Language is used,
Something 'happens' to girls
used by language
hyper-visibility:
where they are only seen as:*

*unruly
hormone-crazed*

*awkward
out of Control
risk Takers
risk Seekers
risky.
To not be seen, but made invisible.
To be spoken for.
Placed, put away
to not be seen or heard at all.*

Sanctioned versions of labeling young women as 'at-risk,' as well as terms such as 'challenging' and/or 'troublesome' (Moje, 2002, p. 221), are often invoked from an adult authority figure such as an educator. "Class, race, and gender identities are formed in interactions with institutions" (Apple in Lesko, 2012, p. xv). These labels carry with them panic, fear, and the need to control. Foucault's theories in particular, provide a potent lens that both grounds and reverberates through my research. While I acknowledge that Foucault ignores specific subject categories such as gender, I am in agreement with Ramazanoglu (1993) that feminists cannot afford to ignore, or dismiss Foucault. I have considered many feminist theorists' critiques of Foucault such as Sawicki (1994), Hartsock (1997), Butler (1990), and Fraser (1989) for the need to have tangible tools to confront social domination and expose specifically how social norms function and effect women in society. However, for purposes of this project his understandings of the effects of power that are constituted by shifting social forces and discourses which create and shape multiple, dynamic, changeable social identities, rather than understanding the self as singular, true or stable is critical. For me, his work presents a robust account of subjectivity and resistance, which I feel has much to offer this feminist dissertation. I will now go into specific detail of how Foucault's work and writings inform this project.

Discourse, the central concept in Foucault's analytical framework, and his understanding of power are particularly useful in understanding how the young women have been defined by their social contexts. Specifically his theories are useful

when examining how the young women have been defined and positioned by the institutions of schooling and family as well as the non-profit program. According to Foucault, possibilities for meaning and definition are pre-empted through social and institutional positions that are held by those in power who use them. Meanings attached to labeling the young women 'at-risk,' 'troubled,' 'in-crisis,' 'wild,' 'difficult,' and/or 'out of control' do not only arise from language itself but also from institutional practices and productive power relations. It is important to note that just as meanings do not solely arise from language itself so too, the effects of the meanings such as 'at-risk' do not only exist in the abstract but also have real-life and embodied ramifications. Hence, in the context of this project, the creation of a 'subject,' and how a person becomes who and what they are, is generated by power and knowledge. Foucault explains networks of productive power and knowledge that (1975) result from "a single, inseparable configuration of ideas and practices" (p. 49) which in turn, constitute a discourse.

Therefore, discourses are constituted by exclusions and inclusions – what can and what cannot be said within particular contexts. Much of what the young women 'say,' the meanings they make, and their entire subjectivities have often been excluded, muted, and othered. They are routinely cast off into the realm of the unseen and unsaid. Or if seen, they are seen as 'abnormal' or 'other.' I will be guided by this quote from Foucault (1975):

a demanding, prudent, and experimental attitude is necessary at every moment, step by step. One must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, I have always been concerned with linking together as tightly as possible the historical and theoretical analysis of power relations, institutions, and knowledge, to the movements, critiques, and experiences that call into question reality (p. 374)

Through my poetry I will confront, interrogate, and prod my way through the various ways these particular young women have been dismissed, (mis)understood, and (mis)treated in schools, the home, in mental health communities, the medical community, social services sector, and with their peers. I will do this in order to see how this research can be a methodology to reframe how this particular non-profit operated in meeting and/or failing to meet the young women's needs.

Lesko (2008) informs my desire to examine how we as educators regard, talk about, interact with, and structure activities around and with young people is dialectically situated within the dominant, often disabling discourses surrounding this 'difficult stage.' Research based on theoretical 'truths' about young women is quite possibly constructed fictions. There is no way to access the "real behind the real adolescent" (Walkderine, 1990, p. 32).

Hall (1904), an influential educator and psychologist, defined adolescence in his encyclopedic publication *Adolescence* as a developmental stage marked by "storm and stress" (p. 15). This definition was based on discourses of individuality whereby adolescence was a turbulent and chaotic phase of life, and an archetypically feminine phenomenon. This discourse has a long tradition in Western societies and, thus, is able to tap into a resonating concern about the vulnerability of girls and

potential dangers they face growing up. Difficulties within adolescence have been naturalized and seen as 'real' rather than being recognized as experiences that are negotiated within particular social relations and contexts. The controlling and productive role adults and institutions play along the way, as well as the structural forces that influence opportunity and access are not questioned and are often rendered invisible.

Lesko (1988, 2012) challenges these notions through her examination of the pervasive discursive construction of young people as 'public problems,' meaning "young people as irresponsible, troubling, unstable, emotional...[young people as] a cause for worry and even for outrage" (1988, p. 15). She stresses that this understanding is complex, malleable, and needs to be examined for the broad effects it has on society. Her concept of the "history of the present" (2012, p. 2) is a useful tool in problematizing how we understand young women as 'public problems.' Her work assists me in looking at how these understandings of young women in and out of school needs to be denaturalized, de-normalized and disrupted in order to present young women as nuanced and complicated subjects that they are.

According to Foucault, discourse is the central concept in his analytical framework. Discourses are historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth in language. I argue that discourse is not merely a theoretical concept but exists in practical reality; that is discourse determines what is possible to speak of at a given moment. Discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak; they constitute objects" (Foucault, 1969, p. 49). The focus of

Foucault's work on discourse is described as "structured ways of knowing" (p. 52), which are powerful producers of culture.

In discourse, "something is formed according to clearly definable rules; alongside everything a society can produce there is formation and transformation of things said" (Foucault, 1975, p. 63). Discourse, then, is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but, instead, is always produced and propelled through power and institutional practices. Going slightly deeper into this aspect of discourse, Gordon (1980) who carried out detailed interviews with Foucault, explains that discourse "transmits and produces power; it is both the product of and producer of power relations" (p. 101). Therefore, I find it effective to understand discourse as language in action whereby thoughts and actions are influenced, regulated, and controlled by these different discourses.

Discourses organize knowledge and are always linked to powers that are "embedded in institutions and the social realm. In turn, they produce ways of understanding" (Gutting, 2005, p. 119). Power is constituted in discourses. "Discourses produce truths and it is in discourses where power lies. We cannot exercise power except through the production of truth in discourses" (Foucault, 1975, p. 93). For Foucault, it is not so much where discourses come from, or what topic or interests they speak to, but what "effects of power and knowledge they ensure" (p. 95). Also important for Foucault is what makes the use of the particular discourse necessary at that particular time and place within which it is occurring and operating.

The possibilities for meaning and for definition are pre-empted through the social and institutional positions held by those who use them. Through Foucault's writings (1966, 1969, 1975) we understand that meanings do not arise from language itself but from institutional practices and power relations. Discourse expresses the historical specificity of what is said as well as what remains unsaid or relegated to silence.

Discourses are based on what can be said and what can be thought. They are also based on who can speak, when they can speak, and with what authority they can speak. Therefore, discourses do not only embody meaning and social relationships, they also constitute subjectivity and power relations. There is no all-powerful subject through which discourses are manipulated. Rather, everyday individuals deploy discourses. It is through their deployment and circulation that particular understandings, misunderstandings, meanings, interpretations, misinterpretations, and truths are formed, made, reformed, in order to be made again.

At the heart of Foucault's understanding of power is an understanding that power does not only reside in institutions nor is it solely imposed or inflicted upon individuals. Rather power "circulates consistently through the social body" and into institutions and individuals (Foucault, 1976, p. 96). Therefore, power is propelled through "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1976, p. 96) and is embodied in social texts, which make specific discourses and their effects possible. Power constructs and distributes truths so that, "truth, knowledge, and power are entwined" (p. 111).

Foucault argues that power operating through discourse is productive. By productive, Foucault means power generates and creates social life and inspires knowledges. His understanding of power stresses that it does not repress 'authentic' human nature but, rather, gives shape to human subjects and their identities.

The young women I have taught became produced as 'at-risk' subjects through the generative and normalizing effects of power. The generative and normalizing effects of power operate and circulate in and through the discourses of 'girlhood,' the school, home, family, peers, and in discourses of race and class. More broadly, they are also generated through discourses of the education system, medical, judicial, and social services, and society at large. Foucault explains that power simultaneously enables as well as limits identities.

Power is not one directional, prohibitive, or restrictive. Rather it is a constant, dynamic, non-centralized network that "comes from everywhere" and is generated by and/or arises from specific historical circumstances (Foucault, 1976, p. 93). Therefore, recognizable, non-centralized forces and circumstances are not random or haphazard but instead assume particular historical forms and always produce new forms of knowledge and subjectivities.

Foucault's (1975) work on power in *Discipline and Punish* centers on the historical changes that took place in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, which led to the disciplining of subjects to ensure the best workers. As people were integrated into new systems of controls, such as the education and the prison system, power was exercised as discipline through a number of techniques. These

techniques “relegated the most intimate and minute elements of the constitution of space, time, speech, desire, and embodiment” (p. 138). Foucault bases his analysis of power on the study of techniques and tactics of domination. He calls this new type of power “disciplinary power” (p. 140). Disciplinary power operates through the hegemony of norms that take shape in institutions of society such as the prison and jail cells, schools, and classrooms.

Thus, power is administered within these institutions through the process of surveillance. Foucault’s concept of surveillance is an all-seeing and all-knowing observation. Surveillance is supervision under a disciplinary gaze. Disciplinary power also shapes individual subjects and bodies. However, Foucault does not see individuals as having essential or fixed identities but rather social and historically variable ones. He stresses, “individuals are produced and reproduced in discourses and disciplinary practices of power” (Foucault, 1975, p. 98). Prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity are maintained through physical restraint and coercion through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to social norms.

Norms establish what is normal and what is delinquent. Therefore, social norms support social inequities as they are “based on the divisive practices which become affirmed in norms themselves” (Foucault, 1975, p. 36). As I am a feminist and engaged with Foucault, I believe surveillance in terms of women’s subjectivity and bodies is especially important to understand. Young womanhood is both individually and collectively realized through participating in the social, material, and discursive practices that define young femininity. (Gonick, 2001). Even in the

same historical period and social context, experience and meanings of girlhood will shift because gender and age always intersect with race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, family background, literacy, nationality, and ability. Therefore, the various meanings and experiences of girlhood are not created in isolation rather, they inform each other. For women especially, there are extremely rigid and pervasive social expectations, which are based on hegemonic social norms. These norms are at times subtle and at other times not so subtle. Foucault's work enables me to see that these norms operate to ensure that from a young age women speak, live, and act out from a dutiful, socially sanctioned, and desiring body.

Hierarchical surveillance is self-producing and perhaps one of the most powerful lessons of schooling. Through the internalization of systems of surveillance, self-regulated behavior 'contains' differences within people and diversity between people, homogenizing the social context. "Containment is an arrangement through which all forms of oppression express themselves" (Goldenberg, 1978, p. 36). Young women are differentiated through discourses of femininity and categories of social difference. Embodied containment increasingly restricts and narrows the scope of possibilities and differs depending on the particular positionalities of each of the young women.

Foucault explains that through disciplinary power, we are all subjected and under the authoritative gaze or "the eye of power" (Foucault, 1975, p. 35). The authoritative or disciplinary gaze serves to control individuals to the point where we as individuals subconsciously and at times consciously self-regulate ourselves. This

contributes to the process of turning ourselves into *particular* kinds of subjects, such as 'the good student' or 'the risk-taker.' This is carried out through processes of ostracization, stigmatization, isolation, pathologization, juvenile detention, and hospitalization. The production of *particular* as well as new forms of self, are produced through the production of new discourses and new forms of power. Foucault's own words can be used to sum up these multi-layered concepts as he succinctly states, "power, knowledges, institutions, practices, individuals, and discourse are all interrelated. Everything and everyone is embedded and generated through power" (Foucault, 1975, p. 138).

This perspective highlights the way the young women who have been labeled 'at-risk' can be seen as being under a constant disciplining gaze both within institutions as well as for just 'being,' voicing, and embodying their own selves. I seek to illustrate through poetic inquiry how this disciplinary gaze functions to limit young women's positionalities and how young women interrupt and resist vis-a-vis their writing, speaking back, participating in, contributing to, and taking up space in our workshop environment. Therefore, I draw on Foucault to argue that under the disciplinary gaze and surveillance, prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity are regulated through physical restraint and coercion. There are times I have seen, read, and heard the young women describing themselves as 'no good,' a 'bad egg,' or simply 'trouble.' These are harsh judgments signalling their perception that no teacher, parent, family member, doctor, social worker, counsellor, or even friend can understand them; they echo Foucault's understanding that individuals themselves

can monitor themselves through “self-surveillance and self-correction” to the pervasive norms and therefore, internalize the disciplinary gaze (Foucault, 1975, p. 54).

It is important to conclude by investigating Foucault’s complex understanding of the many facets of power by briefly exploring his understanding of resistance. Foucault understands bodies as social constructions. In early work (1966, 1969) he conceived individuals as objects of power whereby power held a firm grip on the body. In later work (1984), he writes of the ability of the body to resist this grip of power. He writes, “counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges in their multiplicity and their possibility for resistance” (1984, p. 16). Resistance is understood as being generated by the very power it opposes. Where there is power, he came to see, there is also resistance.

In his later writings Foucault understands all power as producing resistance. Resistance takes the form of counter discourses, which produce new knowledge, speak new truths, and in turn constitute new powers. My detailed journals and poems created out of them serve as products of resistance and new knowledges. I will explore the methodological aspects of poetic inquiry later in this chapter.

According to Foucault, power is in and of itself productive and generative rather than repressive and limiting. Identities are multiple and socially constructed; identities can develop and be expressed through local and specific sites of resistance in the politics of difference:

We are not trapped. We cannot jump *outside* the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it. So what I've said does not mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free – well, anyway, that there is always the possibility of changing ...[r]esistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that *resistance* is the main word, *the key word*, in this dynamic (1984, p. 55).

In closing, Foucault argues that power is not a thing that is held by anyone. It is mobile and contingent and works on and through every individual and every part of society. Power for Foucault is malleable, flowing, fractured, ever changing, and productive and I adopt this understanding of power in my understanding of both *Write It* and the young women who were enrolled in the non-profit program.

Part two: Girls' Studies

Photograph 2 Collage 2

Excerpt of an original collage I made at the beginning of writing this dissertation.



Shape of a girl

Outline in a coloring book--
follow the lines, and where they curve
up and through.
Told what colors to bring to the page,
erasing the hues.

Cookie cutter dictates,
sets the frame, sets the shape
of a girl.
Made uniform, stuck

trouble(d)
disturbed
at risk
wild.

Crawl out, extend a palm, a foot points left
tiptoeing past the frame.
Words shape her girlhood, she brings her shape to the page,
rip the words out of notebooks, scribbles on folded paper
bring words to what was discarded, made still.

Revisit the coloring books
ignore the lines, bend into curves
outside.

She is not uniform, or a steady color.
She is made up of many moments, shades.
Work way through words
unmaking remaking and
unmaking again,
shaping her girlhood
sound by sound
syllable by syllable
word by word.

Girls' Studies and the theorists who locate themselves within the field, work to legitimate female youth as a subject worthy of inquiry. Understanding 'girlhood' as a distinct form of subjectivity, and focusing on how young women are uniquely gendered, racialized, sexualized, classed, privileged, marginalized, and generally 'othered' assists in carrying this out. From this perspective, subject positions are not essential, fixed, or natural, but are socially created, changeable, and constructed. Social values, inequities, and privileges are attached to these positions. Therefore, girlhood is not a homogenous subjectivity that is experienced in a singular way. Rather, it is fraught with competing and complex narratives, meanings, experiences, and performances. An aim of this project is to disrupt the dominant focus on 'white,' 'middle class,' and 'heterosexual' young women and therefore I will not be merely contributing to the field of Girls' Studies but troubling and expanding the field.

The multifarious narratives, meanings, and experiences of young women's subjectivities are grounded in historical, material, and discursive contexts. Girls' Studies theorists concern themselves with the changing meanings of young womanhood and how these meanings are negotiated and lived by young women. I am inspired by deRas and Lunenberg's (1993) poignant question: "how and why are girls what they appear to be at a particular moment in a given society?" (p. 1). My research project is interested in reflecting on the everyday experiences of young women enrolled at *Write It* and the material conditions that shaped their lives. My aim is to analyze girlhood as something constituted socially, vis-à-vis their lived realities as particular raced, classed, sexualized young women.

Girls' Studies as a discipline arose in the early 1990s out of a frustration with the disregard for issues of gender within Youth Studies and issues of age within Women's Studies. The specificity and complexity of young women's experiences has been systematically overlooked in the aforementioned disciplines. Today, Girls' Studies is an interdisciplinary field in that it draws from the disciplines of Educational Studies, Literacy Studies, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Sociology, Psychology, Communications, and Human Geography. Broadly, the pivotal issues within Girls' Studies that inform this research and shape my understandings include girls' socialization and education, (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Eyre & Roman, 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001) practices of consumption (Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2004; Harris, 2005), negotiation of their bodies and sexual identities (Fine, 1992; Fine & MacPherson, 1992), young women as consumers and producers of popular culture and subcultures (Currie, 1999; Heywood & Drake, 1997; Inness, 1998; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2002; Mitchell, Rundle & Karaian, 2001; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009) and the relation between lived realities and discursive representation (McRobbie, 2005, 2009).

Contemporary Girls' Studies seeks to not only understand the gendered, sexual, raced, classed, age specificities of young women but also attempts to prioritize the constitution of 'young women' as a category. This is done through an examination of the dynamic and multiple experiences of young women in their social worlds. Girls' Studies stresses the importance of investigating the ranges of circumstances, opportunities, and challenges that confront and exist in young

women's lives today. I take on Gonick's (2001) call to action that as feminist researchers and educators, our task in working with and/or writing and theorizing about young women is to create a space in which young women might express their own experiential knowledge.

My inquiry stems from a feminist interest in social change with an agenda for multiplying, diversifying, and working with young women to open up possibilities for their lives. I am committed to representing the complex lives of young women as a method for contributing to and extending conversations with and about young women and youth culture. I choose to analyze girlhood as something constructed socially rather than as a stage of life fixed by biology and psychological development. Girlhood is a site of competing narratives and an experiential process grounded in historical and material contexts. Girlhood is both individually and collectively accomplished through participating in the social, material, and discursive practices defining young femininity.

From this perspective, experiences and meanings of girlhood shift over time; gender and age braid with race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, nationality, ability, literacy, family structure, education, and they all inform each other. I am dedicated to finding ways to reflect the richness of young women as thinking, speaking, and acting agents who experience the world through bodies marked by socially constructed meanings. I will now provide a detailed literature review of Girls' Studies including a historical overview of the field, popular texts that still

have pervasive effects today, how 'at-risk' identities are fixed and figure in the field, and the dynamic researchers and research where I situate my work.

Historicizing Girls' Studies

For the first glimpses of modern girlhood in Britain, Eliza Lynn Linton's notorious 1868 diatribe against the 'modern girl' entitled *The Girl in the Period* provides a crucial point of visibility for mid-nineteenth century debates about young womanhood. The influence of new commodity cultures, newly diverse practices of labor and consumption, and the interplay between them, resulted in different expectations for young women. Young women's new access to literacy and education forcefully impacted on their economic, political, and sexual life.

Linton's (1868) young woman is "a creative who dyes her hair, paints her face. As the first articles of her personal religion, whose sole idea of life is plenty of fun and luxury and whose dress is the object of such thought" (p. 339). Young women are emerging as 'the problem' of the present. To provide context, Linton's essay stems from the 1867 Reform Act in Britain, which broadened enfranchisement and escalated the campaign for women's suffrage, debates about labor, and public education.

The new schooling and leisure group possibilities for young women produced forms of guidance and observation but also new ways of being female. New prospects for young women's lives were possible, which in turn, produced

new identities. From the end of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, the publications of psychologists, cultural theorists, and educators all presented young women “as a site for concern” (Linton, 1868, p. 72).

Kelly Schrum (2006) outlines in *Some Wore Bobby Sox* that the post WWI period in the United States coalesced the cultural conditions necessary for the female teenager to take on iconic status. Schrum sees the emergence of the adolescent female as the new visibility of girl culture, which is comprised principally of fashion, beauty, music, dance, and movies. These leisure pleasures and adornments are tied to particular race, class, and sexual positions. The white, middle to upper class adolescent young woman became the standard reference point for the social and cultural discourses as well as policy on display in the public sphere (Sen, 2000) in the (North) American context.

The emergence of literacy and education for young women helped constitute the modern young woman. Feminist movements that emerged in the 1960s and grew in the 1970s pushed young women into prominence. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham became popular for its analyses of youth culture such as Stuart Hall’s (1975) *Resistance Through Rituals*, which focused on young men. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1978) critiqued the exclusion of young women from the field and conducted ethnographic research on British girls’ youth cultures. Empowered by the emphasis of cultural studies on every day and social problems, a range of studies began to focus on the domestic bedroom culture of girls, eating disorders, sexual discipline, and considerations of

femininity. McRobbie and Garber's (1978) ground-breaking work *Girls and Subcultures* explored the invisibility and marginality of pre-teen women in the area of youth subcultures. Within the British context, McRobbie and Garber questioned what young women's roles are when they are visible. They wondered whether young women organize their cultural life as a subculture, or whether they do so in a different way. McRobbie and Garber discussed the role of commercial and popular culture based around music, magazines, and television. Much of their work focused on how young women become a cause of parental concern, fear, and anxiety. Rather than being in public realms, young women's leisure time became relegated to their bedrooms.

Inspirational Girls' Studies texts

In the context of the United States, the work of Michelle Fine (1992) was among the first to account for the discursive possibilities for young women through research that actively involved and listened to the voices and experiences of young women themselves in the context of school, with peers, and in the home. She focused her work on young women's bodies, sexuality, and desires. In doing so, Fine enabled the self-expression and autonomy for young women to not only be imagined but also realized in research practice. Her famous essay on *The Missing Discourse of Desire* (1992) and her research on the importance of understanding intersectionality in young women's identities (2001) ushered in a new area of critical

investigation. The construction of young women's identities at the intersection of class, race, sexuality, and gender has remained an important conceptual frame for works such as Heidi Safia Mirza's (1992) *Young, Female and Black*, Walkerdine, Melody, and Lucey's (1992) *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*, cultural studies approaches such as Roman and Christian-Smith's (1988) *Becoming Feminine: The Politics of Popular Culture* and Driscoll's (2002) *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*.

The examination of schools as sites where femininities are constructed through hegemonic discourses of nation, gender, sexuality, and culture and resisted by young women themselves are the key elements of Educational Studies texts within Girls' Studies and extremely relevant to my study. Texts such as Hey's (1997) *In the Company She Keeps: An Ethnography of Girls' Friendship* and Gonick's (2003) *Between Femininities: Ambivalence, Identity, and the Education of Girls* detail the crucial role relationships between family members, peers, and educators hold in shaping both material conditions in young women's lives and their own gendered identities. Both of these texts powerfully and eloquently speak to the role society and institutions, primarily the school and media, hold in shaping both the experiences and the voices young women utilize to express themselves. These key texts within the field of Girls' Studies inspire me in my scholarship.

Popular and problematic Girls' Studies texts

In 1982, Carol Gilligan published *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Gilligan was one of the first researchers to listen to young women. In this influential and much quoted book, Gilligan makes the claim that young women undergo a "crisis in self-esteem" in adolescence from which they "never fully recover" (p. 28). Gilligan presents young women as a homogenous group who are the embodiment of 'crisis.' This is a dominant feature throughout her text, and is a common feature of popular North American discourses about girlhood. Gilligan's book sought to address this problem by accenting the positive value of young women's moral reasoning which, in the psychological traditions of Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg was rendered either problematic or non-existent. Gilligan argues for a need to expand concepts of identity and moral development to include the stereotypical feminine need for interconnection and an ethic of care. While this kind of inclusion has potential of being feminist in nature, I was put on pause by her summation of young women's lives.

Like others including Harris (2005) and Fine (1992), I critique Gilligan for using the experiences of privileged white young women to claim a 'different voice.' She positions all young women as living identical lives in essentialized, uniform ways. She asserts that all young women have the same interests, desires, and voices and can speak with the same 'female' voice. A common theme in this type of

popular Girls' Studies texts is that young women go from being invisible to being hyper-visible and extremely vulnerable.

Common representations of adolescent femininity depict young women as accepting a subordinate status. Gilligan, Lyons, and Hammer (1990) described adolescence as a "crossroads for girls at a time between childhood and adulthood, when young women enter into a period of danger and loss of self" (p. 45). While young women before the age of 11 or 12 are characterized as boisterous and self-confident, after this age they are typified as being withdrawn and negative about their future. This pervades commonplace understandings and institutional discourses that exist in schools which have real-lived, tangible effects on young women's lives. There is a plethora of problematic research on young women that has gained popularity inside and outside of the academy. These texts associate adolescence with young women's "loss of voice" (Brown, 1998, p. 50) a lowering of self-esteem as a consequence of a girl-hostile culture that "denies the expression of authentic selves" (Orenstein, 1994, p. 17) and a culture that 'poisons' young women (Brumberg, 1997; Lamb, 2002; Pipher, 1994; Simmons, 2003).

The view that young women 'lose' an authentic selfhood in order to become what our culture dictates was popularized by Mary Pipher's (1994) bestselling book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* which had a multi-month stint on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Pipher's book not only launched public awareness of the discourse, but its success also highlighted an intensification of cultural fascination with young women in western societies. Pipher adopts

Shakespeare's character Ophelia from *Hamlet*, as the symbol of what she claims is a new crisis of girlhood. According to Pipher, in the story of *Hamlet*, Ophelia is the obedient daughter who kills herself, drowning in grief and sorrow when she cannot meet the competing demands of Hamlet and her father. *Revising Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* is a book that makes sweepingly reductive statements about young women and in doing so, paints all young women with the same broad brush void of including and considering the broader social contexts in which young women live. "Adolescent girls are like saplings in a hurricane. They are young and vulnerable trees that the winds blow with gale strength" (Pipher, 1994, p. 22).

The individualistic and essentializing crux of Pipher's argument is that due to pressure from North American culture, young women are coerced into putting aside their authentic selves. Therefore, they split from what was in their pre-adolescent days a healthy and 'whole' girl and transition into false and troubled young women. According to Pipher, young women lose their resiliency and optimism and become inclined to take risks. Young women are treated as a fixed, stable, and unified group. Pipher asserts all young women lose their assertive, energetic personalities and become self-critical, depressed, and unhappy with themselves and their bodies. Pipher's book asks why so many young women are prey to depression, eating disorders, addictions, suicide attempts, and risky behaviors. She states that her goal is to "offer parents compassion, strength, and strategies with which to revive their daughters lost sense of self, weather storms of life, avoid depression, self-destruction, homelessness, and being in trouble" (p. 70).

Harris (2004) informs my main critique of Pipher's text, and that is her assertion that we live in a girl poisoning culture. Pipher states this without looking at the range of girlhood subjectivities and therefore, the different social positions that shape young women and their lives in particular ways. Young women are not mere victims of a mass culture that promotes their subordination solely based on gender; rather pervasive discourses and networks of power are at play. Her text erases the fact that young women are attempting to try on, act out, understand, perform, and struggle with a socially sanctioned femininity. Her text does not examine the pervasive and multiple social forces that shape young women. For Pipher, the most significant dimension is gender and age. Race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, family and educational background are not only analytically subordinate but, all together absent in her book.

In general these popular texts from Gilligan's to Pipher's all share the view that young women's self-esteem crisis is a consequence of a girl-hostile culture that denies them expression of their 'authentic' selves in adolescence. This explanation is overly simplistic in that it avoids focusing attention on the social issues, factors, and contexts which exist outside of young women themselves, and over which young women are presumed to have little control and few resources with which to fight or speak back. Also within these texts, the mythical construct of a stable 'authentic' self is dominant and the omission of an intersectional analysis is glaring (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). The suggestion seems to be that either young white women are vulnerable to cultural influences in a way that young working-class women of color

are not, or that the lives of young white middle-class women are assumed to be representative of all young women. Crenshaw (1989) and Hill-Collins (1990) inform my understanding of intersectionality. An intersectional analysis highlights how race, class, sexuality, able-bodiedness, intellectual ability, peer group, literacy, family dynamics, mean that both experiences of girlhood and available ways of 'doing' girlhood are always mediated by processes that position young women in sometimes complementary, sometimes competing identity discourses.

Through my point of view and in my poetic voice, I am presenting and articulating a series of snapshots that speak to both my embodied experience as facilitator and the lived experiences of the various young women who were enrolled at *Write It*. The poems stress the importance of lived experience and the intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, family, ability, ethnicity, and educational background in the lives of the young women and in myself.

There is an intersubjective ground in the space between researcher and researched. I conceive of this analytical, subjective, and creative dissertation as a written product that produces a mediated "partial truth" (Clifford, 1988, p. 20). My subjectivity shapes the poems I write and the stories I tell in this dissertation. As the author of this text I have the power to make interpretations and this power of authorship is situated and contextual. Language does not merely reflect reality but is constitutive of it. Therefore, this dissertation is a product of "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988). I take up this useful concept of "situated knowledge" to stress that this project is not objective. I do not claim to adopt a stable, passive, observational

role, voice, or subjectivity. Rather, I am seeking to actively carry out a subjective, direct, engaged project that is rooted in multiplicity, creativity, and the personal.

I am inspired by Walkerdine, (1997), who stresses that the position from which I write this dissertation is not a stable or fixed place. The ways I was brought up to see the world, and my very subjectivity, “shapes what is created, produced, and regulated” (p. 101). Further, identity shapes the texts we write in ways that are not necessarily transparent. It is important to me that I acknowledge that this dissertation also discursively constructs and produces the young women in particular ways through my own identity, understandings, experiences and lens. While I am challenging larger social understandings and the non-profit *Write It* which is an institutional by-product of society for their construction, understanding, treatment and re-construction of young women labelled as ‘at-risk’, I acknowledge that I too, make my own assumptions and understandings which also creates discursive subjects of young women in this dissertation.

Theme of ‘at-risk’ young women in Girls’ Studies literature

The poem that follows imaginatively explores an experience with being labelled ‘at-risk’.

Gaze

*High school twisted
and turned
against me.*

*A mess of shadows, tangled
in minimum light.*

*Became a story,
narrated me a nightmare
narrated me as trouble.*

*My collarbone protruding,
rose tattoo on my left shoulder,
faded blue hair,
photo of my dead mother in a locket
around my neck,
doodled through Math, History,
hid in bathrooms and under trees
in the far side of the soccer field.*

*Trying to exit the story,
split from myself
create another narrative
but couldn't find the words
amidst their loud stare
and sharp grip
chained under their gaze.*

Young women's identities are shaped as they try out different ways of being young women in various social settings. In my research, I understand young women as being active in this process; they are 'doing' girlhood. As Ward and Benjamin (2004) note, feminist researchers tend to trace the genesis of women's problems backward toward girlhood. As a result, feminist 'truths' about 'girlhood' were often informed by adult reflections on the "traumas of growing up as a girl during the 1950s and 1960s" (p. 14). It is important to acknowledge projects by Lesko and Talburt (2012) and Kearney (2011) that retrace and reconstruct their own young womanhoods. This retracing has the potential to benefit women. In addition, this retracing and reconstructing could potentially give rise to challenging the tired trope of young womanhood as a 'time of crisis' which has been widely accepted among academic and non-academic audiences alike and which is the focus of my research project.

Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2004) argue that the image of the middle-class white mean girl has consequences for young women of color and lower classes. Delinquency is a social construct that is an exercise of power based on race, class, and gender (Sangster, 2002, p. 52). This is also an important piece of Griffin's (2007) text whereby the focus on concern, surveillance, criminalization, and acting out behaviors are steeped in race and class stereotypes. Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) discuss how 'certain' young women become positioned and stigmatized for loud, demonstrative, sexual behaviors witnessed at school or in peer groups.

Therefore, there is a high visibility of a 'particular' kind of young woman and young womanhood.

Spacks (1981) speaks to the pressure young women endure to present a 'proper' femininity. A 'proper' femininity is defined as white, chaste, composed, obedient, and middle class. A binary is constructed whereby rebellion and defiance are associated with young women's bodies of color and of lower class backgrounds. Rebellion, defiance, sexual expression, and vocality become the focus of public concern, panic, stigma, and ridicule. The 'at-risk' female subject is produced as a problematic failure that transgresses the normative socially sanctioned femininity. These 'particular' kinds of young women were enrolled in *Write It*. Included here is a short poem to illustrate this point further.

*At risk: pathologize her
she makes poor choices
is unhealthy, lazy, has a
bad attitude, is a bad
seed.*

*She is rude, a slut
trickle down, down, down
to silence.*

Roman (1996), Sangster (2002) and Ward and Benjamin (2004) discuss the many meanings of 'at-risk' and discuss how that label, shapes the identities and experiences of the young women who have the label affixed to them. Young women's ways of making sense of each other and themselves is mediated through talk and interaction with institutions, peer groups, media, school, family, religious institutions, medical establishment, social services, and the court system. Academic success is often perceived as a "key to safeguarding [young women's] future by securing an appropriate lifestyle against criminality, disenfranchisement, and dissatisfaction" (Sangster, 2002, p. 27). This understanding ignores the role the school as institution has in perceiving, shaping, and pushing 'at-risk' identities onto young women.

Young women's identities are continually mediated by inequalities of gender, race, class, ethnicity, intellectual ability, and sexuality. Young women who diverge from the norm by virtue of their race, class, sexuality, body type, and ability are largely invisible with the exception that 'troubled,' 'wild,' and/or 'at-risk' young women are coded as working class and racialized and turned into hyper-visible "spectacles" (Roman, 1996, p. 2). For example, Sangster (2002) notes there is some presence of queer young women in discourses about young women's rebellion, which is heterosexist and othering but not enough has been written about this, and therefore, my poems will address and challenge this correlation as well as exclusion.

At the end of this section on Girls' Studies I feel it is important to include a snapshot of my own girlhood and of my own self in order to situate myself and claim my presence and subjectivity in this project. As I have stressed this dissertation is constructed and created by me. I must stress that like the young women who I represent in this dissertation, this poetic snapshot of myself is not a complete one, nor would that even be possible. Rather I have chosen to write a slice of my girlhood in a short poem to insert as much of myself as possible.

Abby: Girlhood

My roots are tangled, grandmother hid
pregnant with my mother while,
grandfather labored
Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz
camps
hard bread saved in pant pockets
whole body, hardened heart,
crumbs.

This is carried,
this is carried inside and through:
work hard, be proud to be Jewish,
to be here.

As a girl I was curled inside
myself with my words
like the bread in my grandfather's pocket
kept inside of me. Thinking I would be protected,
crumbling.

Only child.

Bullied for the arc of my nose,
running away from thrown snowballs and soccer balls,
from being hit,
and the taunts of *Weiner*.
Cheeks flushed, eyes down.

Escaping in a novel by Atwood, a poem by Sexton,
and my own small poems that I would read in crowded coffee
shops
where the busses would rattle the windows and older guys
would approach me afterwards.
I in black, wearing black
tight, red lips, fingernails.
Buying me a cappuccino and teasing out the words I held
under my tongue.
I escaped by getting A's and making art through
poems. I escaped by achieving in school
and running brightly into the future

Outside of high school, straight to cobblestones, and trains
wandering until September, until

university, proudly letting my words
lift off.

Part three: Poetic inquiry

Photograph 3 Collage 3

Excerpt of a collage I made at the beginning of writing this dissertation.



"The writing of poetry as inquiry itself" (Galvin and Prendergast, 2016, p. xiii).

Write It

*Standing outside the red doors
of the neighbourhood house,
summer rain angled, fine.*

*Her body tense,
shoulders to ears
echoes of past tellings
sweep like wind into her chest:
told she was a problem, always
in the way,
told she was trouble.
Alone walking down narrow sidewalks,
the high school closing in on her,
definitions made.
She is defined as underserved, a static risk.*

*Sign on the door:
never underestimate the power
of a girl and her pen.*

*Come on the write path reads a sign in the hallway,
pale yellow paint, uneven arrows in permanent marker,
serve as a guide
leading up the stairs
to a room
with a circle of chairs,
a desk, fifteen blue notebooks.
An arc of randomly coloured pens
some with chewed lids, some missing.
She wonders about their histories
what was written with them before, and
who wrote with them.*

*Misunderstandings, violence at home,
cutting, fading away, confusion,
disturbances—*

*learn to let the stories come through,
be relived, relieved (says the brochure)
in this space.
This space tells her to voice—
interrupt silence, the static,*

the hold, the constant grip of the label
risk.
Notebooks to be filled with layers of words.

But these layers are bordered, framed
mediated with phrases:
learn how to make healthy choices in life
be positive, let go of the past,
allow self to be empowered through writing.
But her experiences
and the writing of them
may not feel liberating
may not be empowering, or relieving

the slap of her cheek
cut on her thigh
ache in her chest
push of her body slammed due to class or colour
or for who she desires
or the simple slant of her gaze in school,
or the pitch of her voice,
the cleavage her tank top presents
her painted pink lips,
the mascara thick on her lashes
or the walls of her house caving in,
the doors of her home slammed,
locked
she has been pushed out of places
and relegated
to certain spaces.

She may echo
sting
her words may just need to be told,
written,
witnessed.

There may not be a release
epiphany or
change.

(She should not have to change.)

It is in this place
lived and relived in story, words, poems
I entered tangled.

Complicated spiral of researcher, academic, poet,
woman, facilitator
and begin to re-tangle, untangle, tangle again
in the exploration and challenge
of what **can** be said, written
how words can be scribbled, and uttered
inside the red doors
of the neighbourhood house.

So I ask, challenge:
who is the 'write' girl?

I have been writing poetry since I was a child. I was drawn to the genre from the age of nine to make sense of the world around me, the plethora of feelings I was having, and to reflect on both personal and political situations I was confused by or found myself in. For me, poetry went hand in hand with creating my own 'voice' and feminist consciousness. Through the practice and act of writing poetry, I gained self-understanding. I also gained a deep connection and access to a wide range of emotions. Through poetry, I was able to make sense of complicated and contradictory experiences I had gone through. Poetry enabled me understand the world I inhabited.

When the non-profit *Write It* lost funding I immediately felt not only lost but a tremendous loss. I felt loss for the young women who were enrolled in the program, and I felt loss that after eight years of operation, the program would not have the opportunity to work with more writers and young women. I felt a sense of loss that another not-for-profit was closing due to lack of funding and that the program would not be given the opportunity to improve and grow. I felt loss for myself, who had been working at the non-profit for five years and would sadly no longer be working with the amazing young women nor would I be able to use the organization as my research site for my dissertation. It is important to note that I did try and reach out to many of the young women who were in my workshops. I found that while they were receptive to speak with me, their lives had gone in various

directions and it was proving difficult to make any concrete arrangements to meet and be interviewed or even reflect on their *Write It* experience.

I had to mourn the loss that I would no longer be able to engage directly with the young women who were enrolled at *Write It* to carry out my research. With my heart in my throat and a heavy chest, I took to the page and returned to my journal where I had regularly reflected on my workshop facilitations, reflections on the program itself, joys with the program, frustrations with the organization, with myself, reflections on my interactions with the young women, reflections on the young women and their writing, and on the writing we had created in the space. I looked back and read reflections about myself in the space and how it changed over the years, on the complex and contradictory discourses that shape young women and shape programs such as *Write It*. After I wrote and wrote and wrote, the sadness that the program had closed was still there but I was propelled to switch gears regarding my dissertation. I decided to use my journals as the data for my dissertation and engage in poetic inquiry.

Poetic inquiry in education research

Poetic inquiry is a type of qualitative research that incorporates poetry as a key component of research. Prendergast (2009) discusses how “researcher voiced poems are written from field notes, journal entries, or reflective creative writing as a data source” (p. xxii). A light bulb turned on and I realized that the free writes,

scribbles, reflections, field notes, and insights that I wrote in my journal over the span of five years could be used as a springboard for this dissertation. What I reread in my journal was concrete, wide-ranging, vivid, salient, and poignant writing that expressed my lived experience of being involved in a non-profit.

By engaging in poetic inquiry, this dissertation tells poetic stories about myself, the program and, the young women who were enrolled in the program. It is my hope that this project will inform curricula for non-profits that aim to meet the needs of young women, productively challenge sinister, prevailing understandings of young women labeled as 'at risk,' and critically contribute to Girls' Studies and the methodology of poetic inquiry as a vital and emergent contribution to educational research.

My research stresses the importance of the use of poetry in qualitative research in education. Poetry "appeals to the senses, and opens up different ways of seeing and knowing" (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 231). By making poetry central to the project, this dissertation contributes to poetic inquiry Butler-Kisber (2002), Finley (2000), Glesne (1997), Leggo (2009), Prendergast (2006), Richardson (1992a), Sullivan (2004), Thomas (2008). The theorists that I include here guide my inquiry and inspire me to forge my path for this project. The young women who were enrolled at *Write It* engaged in and created their own poetry in our workshops, however all the poetry in this dissertation is written by me.

My use of poetic inquiry in this research provides a rich lens that focuses on both the young women's and my own identity construction. Additionally, poetic

inquiry is a dynamic methodological tool that enables reflective insights, experiences, and meaning making. Poems open up a space to present data in ways that “are attentive to multiple meanings, identity work, and accessing subjugated perspectives” (Leavy, 2009, p.178). Poetry can cut through and be direct. “Poetry’s work is the clarification and magnification of being” (Lincoln, 1995, p. 278). Poetry allows for concreteness. Sullivan (2009) eloquently states, “poetry accesses emotions as well as grounds works in a complex, complicated, and unresolved form” (p. 15). This is a perspective that fits this project. At the same time, poetry allows for ambiguity by attending to complex experiences that are often interpretive and open-ended.

The poems serve as my data chapters. The poems are framed in the research context of the *Write It* program. They are centred on my reflections of both the place itself and the young women participants. The poems are a product of my experiences, impressions, observations, and interactions as an employee, facilitator, and researcher. I include prose reflections in some of these data chapters (Chapters 2 and 4) in order to explain the poetic process behind the poems that I have written. Leavy (2009) explores how it is through the very act of writing poetry, that poetry holds multiple spaces of complex, conflicting realities and emotions. Poetic writing serves as a mode of perception, meaning making, and knowing. As Soutar-Hynes writes (2012), poetry enables the probing of issues of race, class, sexuality, and power arising out of and lived through experiences. This is especially important for my project. I see poetry as a way to ruminate (Leggo 2002, 2004a, 2005a) and

speculate (Leggo 2004b). Poetry enables the braiding of various strands: the heart and the personal, with the mind, the political, and the embodied. “Poetry is a vehicle to process experiences, reflect on notions of epistemological concepts, and learn to consider with confidence what the heart shows” (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 465).

Poetry is a powerful tool that has been adopted by scholars to open up research possibilities and challenge the traditional mask of academic objectivity (Prendergast, 2009). Researchers in poetic inquiry do this by cutting through the jargon that weighs down academic research and reveals poetically the multi-dimensional, complicated, messy, conflicting, heterogeneous, subjective and dynamic elements that are distilled at the heart of the work. For the purposes of this project, inquiring poetically enables the movement of meaning to be expansive and therefore allows findings to be open ended and multiple. This is because poetry is open to interpretation and does not produce a singular or fixed interpretation or understanding. Therefore, “poetry seems to open spaces rather than closing them down” (Parini, 2008, p. xii). In this project poems open up spaces to represent data in ways that are attentive to multiple meanings, identity work, and subjugated perspectives.

Galvin and Prendergast (2016) state that poetry reveals the “unexpected, ambiguities that accesses one’s vulnerability by inspiring courageous truth-telling. In addition poetry is playful and poignant, all the while forging critical insight” (p. xv). This project explores how poetic inquiry can enable greater accessibility, richness, and complexity in research projects. In my educational research and

practice, I engage with poetic inquiry in order to provide new depths of understanding. I see poems as having the ability to connect and transfer learning to a multidimensional, fresh, original, emotional, and accessible place. This is what I aim to do with my poems and my contribution to doctoral research in education.

I will not offer one single definition of poetic inquiry because the methodology is emergent, expansive, and fluid. Butler-Kisber and Stewart (2009) understands the adoption of poetic inquiry in qualitative educational social science research as an “analytical or reflexive approach as well as a representational form” (p. 3). Inquiring poetically in research allows for new and unexpected insights to be brought into the world of everyday experience. Ricci (2003) sees poetry and qualitative research as having compatible goals – they both aim to provide meaning, density, aestheticism, and reflexivity while being evocative.

Poetic inquiry is both a medium for representing data and for attending to lived experiences. It grapples with the complexity of representation in a holistic way of knowing and being in the world. Cole and Stewart (2012) discuss how using poetry in research can enable personal and social transformation by attending to, engaging with, and inquiring about people, places, events, and social contexts. Sullivan (2004) further explores how when a researcher inquires poetically, this inquiry is an exploratory and embodied act.

Poetic inquiry, therefore, informs an approach to exploration because poetic language facilitates embodied knowing and calls up embodied “faculties, utterances, actions, gut reactions, hearing, and seeing. These are always in process, collecting,

discarding bits and pieces of living” (Hurren, 2012, p. 229). Throughout this embodied process one gains further understandings of the context they are writing in as well as insights about themselves. This is because poetry is concrete and it allows one to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and feel their way through the poem and beyond. They are able to feel their way through the poem and inside the telling of a “concrete and embodied story” (Sullivan, 2004, p. 112-113). Through the embodied practice of poetry what often occurs is that poetry enables one to “say what might not otherwise be said” (Cahmann-Taylor, 2003, p. 14). Poetic inquiry requires that the researcher/writer pays attention to absences, silences, awkwardness, ambiguities, and fragments in order to dismantle and then recreate multiple truths, perspectives, and insights. For example, I will ‘read between the lines’ of my journal entries to create poems that attend to the smallest of details which helped shape how *Write It* operated for example or how the young women enrolled were treated, perceived, and/or responded in order to poetically represent an attentive, engaged, multifaceted, complicated portrait of the program and its participants.

Early academic contributions to poetic inquiry include anthropologist Flores (1982), who explored the use of self-therapy and reflexivity and adopted the use of poetry in qualitative research. She was experiencing feelings of doubt when researching and living with another culture and wanted to explore both her feelings alongside her contributions. Gee (1985) explored the use of poetic transcription whereby he divided qualitative interview data into quatrain stanzas, which provided a useful early contribution to what would later become integrated into the

field of poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009). Since then, poetic inquiry has been adopted in disciplines ranging from nursing, medicine, anthropology, social work, and education.

Sociologist Richardson's (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994, 1997) work offers early models of poetry inquiry and writing techniques. Richardson (1992) used 'found poetry' whereby words were extracted from sociological interviews and crafted into poetic form to recreate lived experience and evoke emotional responses. She was a feminist who grappled with ethical issues of voice and representation and sought to counteract the hegemony inherent in traditional sociological texts. She aimed to bring the reader closer to the work and to permit silenced voices to be heard. Poetic inquiry methodology has been used in educational contexts in wide-ranging and moving ways, by Glesne (1997), Finley (2000), Butler-Kisber (2002), Piirto (2002), Cahnmann-Taylor (2003), Neilsen (2004), Sullivan (2004), Prendergast (2006), Leggo (2008), and Thomas (2008). Each of these scholars has inspired this project through their use of poetry in educational research practice. I have been inspired by not only the creation and their sharing of poems, but also by the development of their poetic voices within their scholarly voices in order to discover and communicate their findings in vibrant and multi-dimensional ways. Poetry is "a way of reframing an either/or perspective into one of both/and, of moving from dichotomous thinking to more divergent thought" (Glesne, 1997, p. 205).

An increased academic interest in arts-based research can be attributed to Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) call to a turn in qualitative research in order to avoid

the “crisis of representation” in which voices of participants become appropriated, overpowered, fragmented, rendered over-simplified, and, in extreme cases, even silenced. Through poetic inquiry, claims of authority are challenged and reflexivity is centralized. In turn, poetic inquiry brings complexity and new ways of understanding issues of representation in research. Prendergast (as cited in Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009) states that poetic inquiry is “used by scholars to express various kinds of representations of experiences such as being a girl, a student” and is interested in the “multiplicity of experiences” (p. xxxvii).

Two anthologies of poetic inquiry research that I found particularly innovative and useful are *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences* (Prendergast, Leggo, Sameshima, 2009) and *Poetic Inquiry II – Seeing, Caring and Understanding Using Poetry as and for Inquiry* (Galvin and Prendergast, 2016). These anthologies showcase the range of research that is carried out using poetic inquiry. The anthologies represent the possibilities that come with using poetry in research by “thinking with the heart” (Leggo, 2016, p. 53) and by attending to Neilsen-Glenn’s (2016) statement that

poetry is inquiry, prayer; it is learning to pay attention, to listen, to be awake. Poetry cuts deep to the bone, makes vivid the flesh and sounds of the world and yes of the mind and heart. Poetry asks me to ask bigger questions (p. 99).

The journal *Creative Approaches to Research* published a special issue on poetic inquiry in 2012, and *LEARNing Landscapes* published an issue in 2010 titled *Poetry and Education: Possibilities and Practices*. These two special thematic issues explored

poetry in social science educational research. They focused on the resonating power of words when weaving poetry into qualitative social science investigations. These journal issues focused on how poetry has a powerful ability to access deep emotion: “Through poetry the personal is remembered, generalizations are replaced with awareness, and we enter into spaces of communal knowing. Poetry takes us to moments of memory” (Luce-Kapler, 2011, p. 54). Both of these issues demonstrate how poetry can express what is often considered inexpressible and can lead research to arrive at more complex, expansive, wide-ranging, nuanced, and thoughtful understandings.

As discussed earlier, Foucault’s (1982) understandings of networks of productive power and knowledge enable the configuration of ideas and practices and in turn, constitute discourse. I choose to bring poetic inquiry alongside these Foucauldian understandings of analysis as poetry enables what I see as a rupture. This is a rupture from normative and reinforced constraints, social constructions, and pervasive assumptions that are made about subjects. This rupture occurs through poetry’s qualities of being non-linear, embracing of emotions, ambiguities, and multiple contradictory meanings.

Open

We were telling stories, trying
to tell them, narrate them, read them, trying to unstick
from silence,
unstick from the labels that were
stuck upon us
as if they were gum at the bottom of a running shoe
stuck like stigmas: *lazy, rude, angry, problem, trouble, slut,*
out of control, out, out, out

Hi. My name is 'at-risk'

We worked with words, the stories of poems to scrape,
shed,
unpeel,
loosen,
challenge,
crumple,
toss,
throw,
the imposing labels within
the walls of the neighbourhood house
day upon day
as leaves layered upon each other,
the smudging of seasons,
from sweaters, to cut offs, to umbrellas twisting in the
wind and rain.

Until the doors got locked behind us
without warning.

I am left with echoes, their poems,
stories curving, bits of words
found and lost, fragments arching
pulsing in my journal, lifting through

my notes bear witness
the scribbles I scratched catch their breath, awaiting to
become poems
to make sense

in the need to bring out the poetry,
to find in the rubble, the shards of policy and funding cuts
and discourse
build on and prod and poke

with sticks and sound
stones
syllables like tools to carve and sound out
places and stories
Identities and truths where there is no
singular "write" girl
where telling stories allows for the
"magnified encounters with life as lived, up close, and
personal" (Brady, 2009,xi)
to see, say, know,
breathe
break open,
up,
into
words, as I inquire
inside and through.

Writing poetry has always been an intuitive process for me. I become overwhelmed by inspiration either from an image that comes to me or an actual line or series of lines that come into my mind and I am compelled to bring pen to paper. During adolescence when I felt alone, misunderstood, isolated I would fill page after page of poems in journal after journal. Engaging in poetry and poetic inquiry for this dissertation, I took the additional and vital step of reading the extensive journals I kept over the five years that I worked at *Write It*. I would use a line or lines from my journal as a springboard, and inspiration would hit. A poem would almost write itself intuitively. I found that after the initial reading and review of my prose journals the poems would take shape. I tried to let the words flow and only edit the poem once I felt like I had finished composing it.

In the chapters that follow I inquire poetically into the rich data that I derived from the worn pages of my journals. I will first present the *Write It* program in poetry. The poems represent the program coloured through my lens as a middle-class white heterosexual female, academic, former employee, facilitator, and feminist. The poetic chapters that follow explore how young women were positioned and positioned themselves in the non-profit that sought to meet their needs.

I adopt the emergent and evolving methodology of poetic inquiry to attend to the complexities and layers of my own identity as well as witness these young women's varied and tangled experiences at *Write It* through my role of being a facilitator. As a poet, I aim like Leggo (2012b) "to grasp the tenuous, tentative,

tangled, tensile threads of questions, unraveling with tantalizing possibilities” (p. 153). I did not model my dissertation or the use of poetic inquiry on one project or scholar. My project is unique to my subjectivities, my poetic style, and the *Write It* context where I facilitated poetry workshops with 12 young women. Rather, I conceive of the researchers who I have cited in this section, who have engaged in poetic inquiry before me to be cushions from which I lean on in order to draw support and inspiration. I actively constructed my project to emerge and take shape. Poetic inquiry enabled me to have multiple openings and be present to the possibilities for attending to contradictory, discursive, and messy findings on subjectivities, issues of representation, autobiographical analysis, and the larger social context of *Write It*. The multiple openings afforded to this project by poetic inquiry fuse the creative with the critical. It is my hope that in doing so, spaces expand and bring forth possibilities for creative feminist educational scholarship.

Alcoff (1995) argues that all representations are fictions that have real material effects and are always mediated in complex ways by discourse, power, and location. Further, Alcoff stresses that there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one’s words do not prescriptively effect or mediate the experience of others. Rather, in this dissertation it is my hope to create a dialogue where the poems serve to enact and practice “speaking with” others. In doing so, the purpose of this dissertation is to bear witness to young women’s experiences with being labeled ‘at-risk.’ I use poetic inquiry to explore the complexities of the young women’s experiences within the context of *Write It*. This is done in order to attend,

in my poetry, to how each of the young women in differing ways understand, mediate, and challenge this label. Further, it is my aim through the poetry to represent my witnessing of how each of the young women objected to the treatment they faced due to their particular histories and identities. Further, the aim of this project is to make recommendations for how similar adult education programs, creative writing programs, rehabilitation programs, non-profit organizations can work with young women to do the important work of collaborating alongside and with young women rather than imposing, speaking for, and ultimately further othering them.

Chapter 2: *Write It*

This chapter puts the emergent methodology of poetic inquiry into practice. “The process [of poetic inquiry] is reflexive...creating poems has been an extremely successful activity for many qualitative researchers” (Ely, Vinz & Anzul, 1997, p. 136). This chapter focuses on the *Write It*⁴ program itself. Through poetry I examine how the program operated. Further, the poems in this chapter explore, how the program, in complex and various ways, understood, positioned and, at times othered and stigmatized the ‘at-risk’ young women it aimed to meet the needs of and even ‘empower.’ Through poetic inquiry, I communicate my findings through poetry that I wrote based on journals I kept while working at *Write It* over a five-year period from 2009-2014 in “multi-dimensional, penetrating, and accessible ways” (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2003, p. 29). Poetry is an evocative form of data representation and a “practical and powerful means for reconstitution of worlds” (Richardson, 1993, p. 705). Poetry “increases attention to complexity, feeling, and new ways of seeing” (Eisner, 1997, p. 23).

In order to contextualize the program I will provide a background and then a description of the poetry workshops I facilitated. *Write It* workshops took place from 4pm-7pm on Thursday afternoons for 18 weeks. The program provided workshops for various creative writing genres such as stage play, short fiction, non-fiction, and

⁴ A pseudonym has been created for the program

poetry. I was hired as the poetry facilitator and coordinator and worked at the program for five years from 2009 until my maternity leave in 2014. During my leave the program closed due to loss of private donor funding. School counsellors, social workers, psychiatrists, youth workers, psychologists, and/or other non-profits and other programs would refer young women into the *Write It* program. The young women were able to choose the writing workshop in the genre they wanted to participate in. The young women who enrolled at *Write It* already wrote or expressed interest in writing. For my workshops, each of the young women was interested in writing poetry, enjoyed writing poetry, or identified as poets. I was the facilitator and coordinator for the poetry workshops.

The poetry workshop accommodated 12 participants for each session. As the facilitator, as long as I worked within the mandate and adhered to the rules, I was able to design and create the activities and exercises for each workshop. The activities and exercises were then, approved by the administrators and I prepared the workshop outlines and submitted them without issue. I arranged the desks to be in a circle so that the young women could see each other and that we could connect within the large room. I began each workshop with 20 minutes of free writing where I encouraged the young women to keep pen to paper and just write in a stream of consciousness style. I encouraged them not to stop to edit or censor what they were writing but instead to allow themselves to let their ideas flow. These free writes were centred on themes such as: describe your morning, strong childhood memory, recall a dream you had recently. Typically it took about three weeks before the

young women wanted to read and share their writing aloud. I would always ask if they wanted to share their free writes. I found that once one person volunteered others would follow.

After the free writing and sharing, I would often put music on ranging from classical to jazz and the young women would do a timed-writing for another 20 minutes. Having these two in-workshop exercises each week generated writing and allowed them to settle into their writing and out of the busy days they had before coming into the *Write It* space. I used the white board in the classroom to outline what we were going to do each workshop. I brought in guest poets such as Evelyn Lau, Jen Lam, T.L. Cowan, and Miranda Pearson to share their poetry. It was wonderful to have various styles of poetry from literary to spoken word shared by dynamic feminist women. On those days I would give the participants a line prompt from one of the guest poets poems, which would then inspire a poem of their own. On days we did not have guest poet speakers, I divided the remainder of the workshop into writing time. If the participants were blocked or stumped to write I would provide inspirational prompts such as a colour, a day of the week, a shape. The last hour would then be reserved for constructively critiquing each other's poems either in pairs or in the larger group.

At the onset of each workshop we would set out ground rules for constructive critique of each other's writing. These ground rules worked out very well. These included providing concrete examples and then suggestions for changes in the poems they were critiquing; sticking with the text and not getting into

personal details or matters that the poems address. Therefore, I stressed the importance of critiquing the writing as writing and not to pry into or assume the origin or autobiographical nature of the writer writing the poem. Depending on the content of the poems sometimes the young women preferred that I be the one to critique or provide comments of their writing and opted not to share their writing. This process was not linear; sharing would occur regularly and then would suddenly stop. The consistency of sharing was different for each of the young women.

By week 10 of the workshop we would begin discussing the end of session chapbook and what poems the young women wanted to include. We discussed who wanted to do the artwork for the covers, the colours of paper, how it would be bound. We also discussed formal submission of poems to the administrators who would use the writing to attract and obtain future donors. Most of the time, the young women wanted the administrators to have a copy of the chapbook and did not want to submit additional poems. Depending on each of the young women's attendance, their experience in the program, and future interest or demand for the program, young women would often enrol for another 18-week session. In my five years at the program, I had eight young women enrol in back-to-back sessions and hone their poetic craft.

The poems that follow in this chapter are snapshots of *Write It* and come from my lens as a poetry facilitator at the program. Strands of my identity inform my poetry and what is included and excluded in the writing here. I will offer reflections

on the poetry throughout this chapter and in Chapter 4. I am a white, middle-class, married, mother, heterosexual, educated, able-bodied, Jewish woman. I am an outspoken feminist, writing teacher, published poet, and academic researcher. My poetry is a direct expression of the lens through which I see and understand the world around me. These perceptions and understandings are shaped by my positionality. Therefore, because of this my poetry also has limitations and blind spots.

I will address these blind spots in the reflection pieces, as “a poetic approach to inquiry requires the careful study of our own written logic, technique, and aesthetic” (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009, p. 19). Through these poems about the non-profit adult education program *Write It*, my desire is that the poems will reveal and re-represent the program in such a way that will provide new depths of understanding and will explain how the program operated. Through these poems and through engaging in poetic inquiry, I hope that my findings will be articulated in multi-dimensional, accessible, and evocative ways.

Rule(d)

The *Write It* manual whispers
to me, I skim
the rules, the words
not really reading
not taking them in.

It is September, the leaves
are still green, brighter
at the ends.
I have just finished my Master's in Educational Studies—I am
eager
to teach,
to write,
eager to write *with*,
alongside the young women.

The manual, right, the manual
I am told to: *familiarize yourself with the rules*
so I sit on a bench at the small park
with the red slide and blue swings
on Arbutus and 7th,
the park I will take my son David almost six years later, his
laughter will fill the park amidst giggles of others, amidst
cries, wails,
staccato shouts.

I sit in the shade-
it is hot for September, and I am
grateful it is, still.

I read the manual, rules,
instructions for instruction
Write It
Write It
Write

There are rules,
so many
to be ruled right
wrong
in out
a binary of either/or
no middle, no in between, no both,

has to be one or the other, all or nothing.

There are rules,
so many rules
to be ruled

appropriate language⁵
decorum
dress code
no gum
no smoking or visible cigarettes
no cell phones
no ear buds
all forms must be filled, completed,
must complete the sign in sheets,
must stress the importance of sign out sheets,
stress accountability,
stress participation
they should be positive,
in the program to write
they are in the program, they are lucky,
they make the most of the opportunity,
they must be open, be present,
they must attend,
be be be, take all this into account

I already want to edit,
be an editor
Sweat on my upper lip, as I close the manual
rules, ruled.

⁵ Italics in poems are 'found texts' from different sources, including the *Write It* manual.

Rule(d) zooms in on my initial visceral feelings of reading the *Write It* rulebook manual. This poem turns the experience into one that is a “magnified encounter with life as lived, up close and personal” (Brady, 2009, p. xi). As with all the poems in this dissertation, I wrote this poem after rereading the journal entries I kept. This particular poem is derived from my first journal entry that explored the various emotions and impressions I experienced as I read the rulebook in the park. I incorporate “found poetry,” which is featured in an italic font to use the “words extracted” from the rulebook itself to contextualize and ground the piece (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). The original poetry is used in my adoption of poetic inquiry in order to emphasize the complex, multi-dimensional, and layered nature of the program, the young women enrolled, and myself as poetic inquirer. Brady (2009) informs my work by stressing that “there is more than one-way to see things, to say things, and therefore, to know things, each inviting different points of entry” into the poems (p. xiii).

Referred

Young women, ages 13-19, are referred
become enrolled into *Write It*
because *they have engaged in*
risky behaviors

Many are in transition:
out of the home,
homeless
pushed out of school
drop out, dropped
isolated
without support
fragile
trouble
troubled
in trouble

at risk
at risk

abuse,
abused,
addicts,
addictions,
acting out,
attention seekers,
risky behaviors

Misunderstood,
distrust (taught to)

Social workers,
youth workers,
counselors,
therapists,
parents,
caregiver,
guardian,
teacher
the referred individual
be in touch with them,
report back,
engage in a continuous dialogue.

*Needs,
they have shown writing ability,
they like to write
encourage.*

*Your job as facilitator is to get them to write, get them out
of themselves
give them a voice*

The poem *Referred* builds on the poem *Rule(d)*, to bring the reader into the project and into the context of the *Write It* program. This poem once again utilizes found poetry with its use of actual language found in the manual to mediate understanding and generate insights into how the program is designed and for whom it is designed for. This chapter focuses on the theme of *Write It* as a program in operation, and therefore, the poems that make up this chapter can be seen as a “cluster around a theme which provides a powerful way of expression, a range of subtle nuances about a topic while simultaneously producing a more general overview” (Butler-Kisber, 2005, p. 68).

While I will discuss in the next chapter in much more detail how the young women are positioned and position themselves at *Write It*, it is important to note that the found poem element of this piece extracts word for word descriptors of the young women that *Write It* understands as being their target participant. In particular, I’d like to make mention of the manual’s inclusion of the goal of *Write It* to give young women “a voice.” This tired trope is often found in non-profit mandates (Fine, 1994, p. 67; Fine and MacPherson, 1992, p. 102; Weiss & Fine, 1993, p. 76) and in research for/about/with young women (Driscoll, 2002, p. 5; Harris, 2002, p. 105; Pomerantz, 2008, p. 50); and in both popular and academic Girls’ Studies literature (Allen, 2000, p. 198; Brumberg, 1997, p. 60; Harris, 2005, p. 38; Nussbaum, 1998, p. 93). The trope of voice troubles me because the statement of “giving young women a voice” assumes that young women are without their own

insights, agency, or ability to speak for themselves until someone or some program comes around and enlightens, empowers, and/or encourages them. This problematic notion assumes that someone else can hand over or 'give' someone else a voice. In doing so, it further misplaces the young women of agency. Through the focus of poetry as a method of discovery in educational research, we can see how offering a space and time for self-reflection can "offer a means to what otherwise might not be said and/or expressed" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009, p. 14). Through the poems I gain deeper, richer, more layered, and complex insight into these sorts of stumbling blocks, which then I can present, critique, and challenge through the poems.

Patch

facilitate,
my job is to guide,
create and set the tone of the space;
the writing classroom, the weekly workshop

"it will be different for every young woman," I say at the
first staff meeting
it will be different for each individual person
not everyone will feel the same (nor should they)
not everyone will act the same (nor should they)
there will be push and pull
pull and push
frayed edges
silence,
tearing, letting it be,
playing with the torn parts,
sitting still.

*It is crucial you make the space safe, safe to speak aloud to
share writing, so they get the most out of each session, so
you know where the young women are coming from*

I will do my best, I say, but that is ever changing, it might
take time, or shift depending on the day, the writing, the
others, the past, experiences shape what happens, distrust,
mistrust, anxiety, fear, personal, private thoughts

Safe space, creating
I begin first workshop with my own words, my voice
a poem about being bullied "Weiner"
I start simple, I start slow
I start with wide-eyed stares, and eyes that are avoiding my
gaze

Weiner-
they mispronounced me.
On purpose they renamed me.
Adding that simple letter,
that 'i'-
that 'i' which wasn't theirs to add.
I snapped under their speech of it,
knees buckling
weakened

under the weight of the mispronunciation.⁶

I start with sounds of pens frenzied on paper, and pens
doodling flowers, and pens resting on the table, gazing out
the window

Admin demands me, expects, anticipates, pages and pages of
writing, for the classroom to be filled with sharing of
writing and voices, of hot tears streaming down faces, makeup
smudging,
of constant production,
attentiveness
Instead it is a little bit of everything
and nothing, all...

Some are ready to write and read aloud,
Sue⁷ writes about the cat she had as a kid, the one
who lives at her parent's house
that she never sees
cannot see
but dreams about,
dreams of snuggling with her mother, her worn blue slippers
tapping to the rhythm of *Them there eyes*
while they snuggled, sat together in the oversized grey chair,
with her cat
black with white paws and a
white patch over
his left eye

⁶ I italicize this text as I am including the short poem "Weiner" that I recited at Write It.

⁷ Pseudonym created to protect anonymity

Patch and the poems that follow, in particular *Labels* and *Open*, focus on the importance of not painting all the young women enrolled at *Write It* with the same brush and the same broad strokes. In particular, *Patch* expresses the tension I experienced with the program's point of view of the young women and the expectation that they would all come to the program ready to write, ready to produce writing, be engaged, uniformly be open and content, as well as all feel safe even at the first workshop. This poem foregrounds the multiplicity, the range of the young women enrolled, and helps "make sense of contradiction" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009, p. 22) that exists even with the same young women. I use a mix of remembered comments that I jotted down in my journal that I have now creatively transfused in poetic inquiry. These quotations are from me, the administration, as well as participant Joe. I include direct quotations to make the poem clear, immediate, fresh, more accessible and "render the richness and complexity of the observed world" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009, p. 24). The poems in this thesis support a key goal of poetic inquiry-to be "concrete" (Sullivan, 2009, p. 112). Concreteness brings with it "grittiness, embodiment, sensuality, and a close approximation of lived experience" (p. 112). This is demonstrated in the final five poems that round out this chapter *Labels*, *Open*, *Paper*, *Scratch*, and *Bound*.

Labels

*A risk
risky
at risk*

*Tired, stuck in stereotypes
These young women are pushing through,
colouring their own lives, trying to draw
their own lines
risk takers.*

But they are not seen like this.

They are see as
a risk
risky
at risk
of not controlling their lives
bodies
minds,
but they are in control
they just are refusing to be controlled,
and small, and stuck inside the narrow confines
the intricate folds of sanctioned girlhood.

Still they are made small
small by labels
minimized
reduced, a shadow
labeled.

The labels even echo
through the manual, through
the space-through *Write It*
I do not want them to echo
through our room, our workshop.

I know *Write it*
is "for" "at risk young women"
but I am uneasy

I am glad the program exists

I am glad that I am hired

to be here, but I want
to shed and shake
it up—acknowledge
labels, stigmas, positions
all the range of identities and experiences that comes with it
and brings the young women
here

I find the young women are torn AND whole
scarred loud
and quiet
yellow brown white pale
burned bruised cut
middle working poor
muted
colourful
in school, out
in home, out, between
unseen and hypervisible

read wrong,
again and again,
reread right,
or closer to whatever 'right' is.

These young women have been spoken
for, chastised
for speaking up and out, chastised
for being quiet anxious alone depressed unsure out out out
closeted, scared
scarred.

I don't want to participate
be a part of that
do not want to do this here
do not want *Write It* to do this

pushed out of lines
of black white
of boundaries
of square
of being round, oval
for being wrong
queer,
for being right
for doing what was right for her
but told wrong,

for being confused.

I see some of the same lines
the rigid bounds
and rules here
at *Write It*

as they sit in the semicircle
of the neighbourhood house room, where
I am not allowed to open
the windows, where breaks
must be only taken at a certain
time and must be taken
all together

*no gum, no cigarettes, no phones, no personal breaks, no open
windows,*
just a rickety fan.

Open

I open the window, close
it as soon as the three hours of workshop are up
I need air, suffocated
by the assumptions, the boxing
in, the manual, with its
times new roman font.

I want to unbox this program-
try in my workshops not to contain
the young women, let them stretch
out where they want to go,
who they want to be
voice the many parts of themselves.

I can see the fidgets from
discomfort,
fear of labels, past, anxiety,
the cigarette cravings
needing a fix for this fixing
discourse.

I want to encourage writing, encourage
them, open open, access
their words

Do not want to contain them, why this pressure to contain,
define,
make the same.

That is not how one learns, that is not how one will feel
safe.

In a staff meeting I gently voice my wish
not to contain
to not treat each of the young women, as at risk, as in
danger,
as if they are unsafe living in their own skins, living their
own lives.

As in that containing
it not only retains but reifies the labels-
that *Write It* should offer an escape from that,
from what has brought them here.

From the risky, at risk,
a risk, from being seen as wrong.

The mandate says
*the program will fix through giving voice, through writing
productivity, through rigid fixing*

I just want a space
for openings
to unpack
to lighten the burden
of the loads they each have been carrying

and when they are ready to go
through, sort through,
throw words out, wash
words, dry them, fold
them
bullshit, Erin⁸ says
when the administrator Diana⁹ in the hall
says she cannot
have her phone to call her boyfriend

later after the workshop, Diana comes up to me
to say that I may
have *trouble* with Erin

I try to talk about
not wanting to contain,
but am told *there are rules,
an order to things,
for the program to go smoothly, for the participants to get
the most out of the program.*
*They need to have rules,
these young women need structure.*
Many have never had stability,
Abby,
they need it, require it.

I fold in.

Oh and Abby close the window please.

⁸ Pseudonym has been created

⁹ Pseudonym has been created

After the workshop I rush
to my journal
think of my own rules,
but instead I write this poem.

Paper

Stacks of paper, rustle, gets
tangled up
by the rickety fan
makes the blinds clap, the dust dance
why can't we just
open
the window (*my colleague
says to me quietly*)

Pens with mismatched lids,
some chewed
spiral notebooks, only six
so not enough for the girls
So we tear paper out
of each of them, make smaller notebooks.
We are given
construction paper, a stapler,
to make new notebooks.
They can draw/decorate their own notebooks

[Later when I present the notebooks most of the young women
roll their eyes at the books,
roll their eyes about this craft]

In-take forms
many
questions left
blank,
the young women are left
out
by the questions
themselves:
 *parent/guardian, name phone number
 home address
 school name
 grade completed
 prior incidents
 hobbies*

The administrator tells me
it is *my job*
*to get these filled
or to get in touch*

*with each of the young women's
social worker
youth worker
counselor
therapist
parent
guardian*

*get as much information
as you can on*

Joe Erin May Sky Lisa Jessie Mabel Jane DJ Frankie Marty and
Sarah ¹⁰

The questions exclude

I scan the names
wondering what words
they will attach
to their stories,
poems, what part
of their worlds they will
be wanting to share

Wondering what words
will be sanctioned here
at *Write It* and what words
about themselves will
be written spoken shared.

¹⁰ Pseudonyms have been created

Scratch

Take a breath, two young women
are already sitting in the semi-circle

One, with faded blue
curls
tapping
her feet to Modest Mouse
or is it the Stars
on her iPod Shuffle,
I can hear it through her ear buds
Admin walks by,
loudly whispers for me to tell her
that I need to keep the shuffle and the ear buds at the front
until the workshop is over

The other young woman ties
her frayed shoelace, eyes the shuffle.

Another woman comes in, with a half finished cigarette between
her short purple-painted fingernails
Shit I think to myself, I have to take the cigarette away or
repeat the rules, or tell her to hide it,
Great. How are they going to feel safe,
comfortable?
I have to police them, take it all away.

She has a shy smile, a green notebook of her own with a worn
spine

I am embarrassed by the notebooks
I will handout
check that the pens are still beside me
I scratch my neck,
feel it reddening--
I try to clear my mind.

Turn to poetry, poems, poems, poems, poems

I introduce myself as Abby,
recite my poem *Cut and Paste*, about being a teen, being
bullied, my last name Wener altered unrelentingly as Weiner
all the judgments, not fitting in,
sharing of the poems,

meeting the gaze of many of the twelve young women.

It is so hot in the room,
cannot open the window, the fan is so loud,
and doesn't cool off the upstairs room of the neighbourhood
house.

Finally I just open it.

I try to talk about the rules,
using the three hours to write and share,
be together with each other and our writing.

At first they roll their eyes but eventually
they make their journals their own
by doodling on the construction paper,
or writing their names in bubble letters,
some just wait
and stare out
the window,
clear their throats,
whisper to themselves
or each other.

I talk about the rules, reading from the manual:
no gum,
no private breaks,
bathroom is fine,
no smoking,
no cell phones,
no other devices like the shuffle,
no swear words even for emphasis,
we will work on spelling and grammar, form and composition.

We all breathe together in the semi-circle
Someone, I think it was DJ¹¹ asks *if we have to sit in this
shape,* and then we all laugh together.

¹¹ Pseudonym has been created

Bound

Not for profit,
dependent on
donors—
we are dependent.

Pressure: we have to reach our markers,
We have to prove
our right to exist
as a program.

A program, one that is bound by rules,
operations
rule book, manual
bound
by expectations.

Each group, together for eighteen-weeks—
once a week for three hours.

*If young women are referred to again, if they act
appropriately, if they attend, if they write, they can come
back.*

*You must keep copies of the writing, donors need
to see what is produced,
the positive effect it has,
like a domino, everything changes, by week 10.
Half way.*

What can be written, told,
Shared, cut off, cut up,
cut open, cut through

What topics can and cannot be shared
Bound by admin, by rules, by donors
Watch the language they use—
Power play as I do not want to censor
limit the young women,
discourage or guide how they want to voice themselves and
their experiences—
but bound.
Clean language, clean composition,
sparkle.

The writing already sparkles, it is rough
and full of edges, raw, and deep.

I push myself up
against the expectation
the belief that the young women
are mere stencils--
that they need to simply
fill in their images
to a set narrative arc
of the *at risk* young woman
voicing who she really is
and untangling from the label

but these boundaries bring up so many more tangles

the young women, all in different ways,
with different words and uses of language
braid themselves into
and then cut or hang themselves from those very bounded words

I set this workshop space up, the workshop I facilitate,
the rules surrounding,
reverberating all around and through us
but
they are not mere stencils,
but dynamic young women who are constructing
within despite the rules,
despite the fences of
Write It
They are creating, constructing, composing syllable by
syllable
word by word.

“Poetry is a mode of being, knowing and telling” (Prendergast, 2009, p. 10). These poems and the ones that follow in subsequent chapters hold “multiple spaces for complex, even conflicting realities and emotions” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 63). The poems provide a critical analysis and representation of the non-profit adult education program *Write It* that focused on providing creative writing workshops for young women labeled as ‘at-risk.’ “Poetry is a bridge that creates ongoing connections with oneself and communities of people” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 64). Poetry enables a connection that braids inspiration and tangible action together. The next chapter’s poetry centres on the 12 participants,¹² Joe, Erin, May, Sky, Lisa, Jessie, Mabel, Jane, DJ, Frankie, Marty, and Sarah, in order to attend to the wide-ranging, dynamic, complex identities of these young women and the “fissures, fragments and fringes” (Leggo, 2009, p. 149) that make up the experiences, lives, and identities of the young women who were enrolled at *Write It*.

¹² Pseudonyms have been created to protect anonymity.

Chapter 3: Writing the write girls

This chapter serves as an introduction, through poetry, of 12 young women who participated in the *Write It* program. Poetry allows for the representation of more fluid, complex, and complicated understandings of young women. I must reiterate that this dissertation is interpretive; it is completely shaped by my particular positionality and role as writer, academic, researcher, and facilitator. My subject positions shape the writing; both the poetry and the prose that is presented on these pages are filtered through my embodied lens. How the young women were 'read' by me, their writing, and how they functioned in the *Write It* space are all products of larger social contexts, discourses and experiences. As Stake (1995) stresses, the different and multiple roles that I occupy as "teacher, observer, advocate, writer, and reader" each work to generate deep, rich, even contradictory views of what is happening" at a particular place and time (p. 12). Therefore, I see my multiple roles and long and active history at *Write It* as an asset. The connection I have to the program, as well as my having worked directly as a facilitator with the young women, fuels this project. My hope is that the poems that make up this project work towards more nuanced understandings and tangible changes in both perception and practice of female identity construction and adult education non-profit programs for young women.

I see poetry as a useful, evocative, and powerful tool to delve into complex identity work. Poetry is a useful tool for the broader goals of this research project.

These goals are to carry out research that is oriented to social justice, is feminist in nature and scope, and as a whole works towards social change. At the same time, however, it is important that this research is critical and grounded in actual lived experience and does not romanticize the power of poetry, which I addressed in Chapter 1. For this important reason, I have chosen to situate this project alongside particular scholars of poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Leggo, 2008; Richardson, 1992; Sullivan, 2004). My overarching goal is to pull strands together and braid critical and creative forms of poetic inquiry and exploration in order to produce critical and creative academic scholarship.

In Chapter 2, through poetry I aimed to scrutinize the *Write It* program and how it was designed to assist, advance, and ‘fix’ troubled young women. In this chapter, poetry allows me to probe deep into the various ways young women presented themselves, negotiated their past and present experiences, as well as their own subjectivities while they were enrolled in *Write It*.

What follows now in this chapter are 12 poems whose titles derive from pseudonyms I have created for the 12 young women who I taught at *Write It*. I strive through poetry, to create vivid and expansive snapshots that attempt to reveal the young women in multi-dimensional ways. I have actively chosen to do this to represent them as complex, contradictory, and dynamic subjects and not static, one-dimensional, oppressive ‘at-risk’ caricatures. The poems are my effort to offer, a sense of how each of the young women does ‘girlhood’ in unique and differing

ways. I have chosen to let the poems stand on their own without following them with interpretive prose commentary as I want the poems themselves to stand alone.

Joe

She is here and not.
She is waves,
coming and going, in
out.

Looking for keys, glasses, another pen, rummaging,
counting up and down, counting the minutes
passing
second hand ticking on her turquoise watch
looking up and looking down.

*I just want to tear this paper up
rip it up,
cross it out,
forget all these words.
But also keep it somewhere
like on a high shelf or a locked drawer, ya know?*

Her poems tell stories of how Grandma raised her, while
Mom was there on Sundays.

Poems of cauliflower and corn soup,
of hair being combed out, 100 strokes, counting each of the
brushings.
Her poems are about braided hair, how slow it took,
to brush it out, how she savored that time.
If she closed her eyes she could feel it.
She can call up the feeling of
her hair being pulled at the end and tied with a rubber
elastic
as scrunchies and ribbons were too expensive.

Poems about that pull, the worst
part when the hair was pinched into the elastic band in two
loops.
Poems about leaving, how she knew once her hair was put into
the elastic
Mom would leave soon thereafter.

Poems about warm milk on the stove, honey and cinnamon,
sipping warm.

I remember telling Joe her poems were evocative, the richness
of images pulled from vivid memory.

Nah

she responded with a dismissive smile.

Waves, they crash
and crash.

I hear them when I go near her to offer
more paper, when I urge
her not to cross words out, rip out pages, to just let words
fall
as they will.

Let words fall

fall, falling,

*I have to stop them, Joe says, I do not know what to do if
more comes out.*

Erin

*I don't like how long it takes to get here
We're on the top floor, too, it's so hot up here*

*No one ever understands me
JJ made me come here, but I do like to write.*

What do you know about me?

Those words echo

What is on file, in print about me?

*Very little, I remember saying quickly,
which is the unfortunate truth.
I look forward to getting to know you.*

Really, you do?

The files vary, depends on who one is referred by, whether it is a guidance counselor, youth worker, social worker, teacher, therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist, parent.

Erin tells me she really liked school,
*was told to leave in grade 9
pushed out.*

Her poems are about high school drama, rumors.
It was worse
than a Shakespearean play.
I was smart,
statement made into the past tense,
by the push out,
I actually liked Shakespeare.

I was folded inside myself, a shy girl
*Called a slut too many times, so I lost it
clocked this girl Candace in my grade
was tired of being bullied all the time,
stole some shit from her so she would get the message.
I hit the pretty girl, that was the last straw.*

Her poems are about revenge if through words she could cast

spells on all, right the wrongs.

*No one thought I was smart, cuz I showed off my boobs,
cuz I am not white or thin.*

I remember her saying
now all I have is words, and a tangled anger.

When JJ her youth worker told her about *Write It*
she was drawn to it as she wanted to *write herself out to get
somewhere else.*

She has to get somewhere else
I won't let anyone tell me who I am anymore.

Often she retreats

But I hate getting here, it's so hot in here too.

The shadows are bright,
the voices are loud,
she retreats.

Retreat with words
away from what they want her to be, away from
what they understand her to be.

May

She carries a stone in her left palm, a worry
stone
her fingers clench, keeps her rooted.

No eye contact, her forest-green eyes, fixed on the page.

Abby, I am going to empty myself of everything

Poems of the bus ride
she'd take
the bus between
her Mom and Dad's.

Cherry blossoms raining
down, still a chill in the air—the last ride
she took, the last one, was
so crowded, that ride from her Dad's when she told him she was
pregnant

*His disappointment made me lose the baby, I am
convinced.*

She hasn't spoken to him in three years.

Part of her left her body when she lost the baby,
baby lost at 6 months in utero
her heart beating so loudly, the empty metronome
just wanting to run, run, run.

Poems of the running, of the sudden turn,

the highs
first to forget,
then to keep high
so high
she couldn't even see the ground below.

Everything a broken blur,
a far drop.

Sky

I am stupid, Sky says before the class starts.

*It's the second class.
She missed the first one.*

*She comes in chewing gum, my heart sinks
already I have to police, tell her what not to do.*

*How to respond?
Of course you are not stupid...
Sorry you feel that way about yourself...
Ugh...*

*Why are you introducing yourself that way, I ask.
She freezes, her hazel eyes full moons.*

*That's why I am here, right? Fuck up like the others.
You are going to fix me? Right?
This program is going to change my life, right?
She said with a wicked twinkle.*

*You're here to write and we'll
get to know each other in a supportive way.
Hope in time we can share our writing and experiences
together. We all come from different experiences and places.*

(Ugh, I sound like such a teacher.)

*You are actually going to let me write what I want to write
about?*

*I hope you write what you want to write, of course, and if I
can assist you that is why
I am here.*

*She was always told she was stupid, a slow
learner, worthless,
she became disengaged, droopy
like an unwatered plant.
She became silent, twirling
her hair, doodling through math class,
fulfilling the prophecy, expelled for skipping too many
classes,*

no where to go.

Lisa

She doesn't like sitting in the chairs,
can I sit on the floor, can I lay on the floor?

*It's hard to be creative in a classroom,
can I just...
please?*

Can we listen to music?

As she says this John Coltrane plays
while we do a free write
and the saxophone fades and fills.

We have songs without words,
so our words can form.

Lisa is a push pull

pulling.

I try to listen to her,
to stay steady
to not blink against
her constant stare.

*I haven't taken my meds
I am not crazy*

*I hope you are safe, able to take care of yourself
is my mantra, my
response to her.*

Running in circles without getting dizzy
'round and around
around and around and around.

*Can I show you my journals?
I filled an entire notebook since last week.
Can you read everything I wrote?
I need you, I need you to listen
to what I wrote,
I need you to hear me.*

*I crave grilled cheese, sunshine, can I have a cigarette?
A different song?*

`Round and around
around and around and around.

Jessie

Reapplying red,
smacks lips
clears her throat.

*Classes like these
do not work for me,
why did I agree to this?*

Quietly, after
the third class ends
Jessie hands me six poems, printed.

In her ears,
she can still hear the smack
of her father's hand on her cheek,
can still feel the sting
heat
of palm.

*Worthless
bitch*

Dragging days like a heavy bag of dirty laundry
behind her.

Hopeless.

The air is humid, bees circle
these are the details in the poems
she recalls the first walk,
that first walk home from school

whistles and the gaze, male
wanted to be wanted, be taken
away

Left a grip for another and another and another.

Mabel

Flush faced, smile full
into the seat beside me at the table.

Her hand outstretched to shake,
I'm Mabel, I love to write.

It's the first class and for the first free write
I ask the class to write about how they spent their morning.

She details, CBC morning show on the radio, fading in and out
on the am
Earl Grey tea, a small bowl of cheerios,
how the light shone through the window.

She tucks in the detail,
her gratitude to finally be adopted after five years in the
foster system

a ping pong ball rolling rolling
this way and that.

Her writing is as clear as ice-
exact images stirred with heart:

letting go of foster parent after foster parent hands,
manners, routines,
favorite dishes from stir fried vegetables with tangy peanut
sauce,
to freshly baked sourdough bread, to the smile lines around
her favourite foster-father's eyes,
to having a home, a three bedroom house painted red, with a
Siamese cat named Sam.

Nothing is lost, it is always there, everything
lives on in waiting, lives on
to be wanted.

Jane

She is always late, comes in to class when there is already a
found rhythm,
a flow.

I want her to catch the beat, be with us, but always behind,
I try to catch her, to pull her in.

You won't tell admin on me, will ya?

I ask why she is always late,
*I need to make money, support myself and help my Dad out too
so I clean a house until 4:30.*

Black hair frames her pale face, there is a
tattoo of an anchor on her inner left wrist,
her blue jeans are baggy even with a belt.

Strain of keeping up,
up keep.
Her hands like swallows,
brushing hair from her face
and holding her pen just so.

Exhaling into the room of words
holding
not wanting to make a sound, not
even her breath.

DJ

I have been so inspired to write

DJ shares with me during the break, we have had five classes together.

Her poems are like a shoebox filled with treasures,
some tarnished and some glistening.

A poem that equates her childhood to the circus—
each stanza a clear frame as if part of a film reel.

She comes out to me, the group in a poem.

She is steady fighting the rejection of the past
from friends family school

she was brought outside, made to stand in the cold outed
the poem brings her back in.

Writing these poems brings the conscious fight forward
holding on and up.

Just me, I'm gay.

I like girls.

Saying that out loud.

Saying it inside a poem.

I am coming into myself,

my words

and I am learning

to like myself,

here, now.

Frankie

*Everyone disappoints me
I disappoint everyone*

These lines end the poem Frankie hands to me
after the first class.

She was the first young woman to introduce herself, speak
to the group.

Sixteen, from Montreal, moved to Vancouver with her aunt five
years ago.

Published in a school newspaper, a few poems, a short story.

She comes to the program, I can hear in the space between us
the clank of glasses beer or wine.

Can I smell grapes or is it hops?

Do not yet know the history, the current narrative,
I do know *Write It's* rules and hope
it is a one off.
That I won't have to report, remove,
push, let go, let
down.

She is dirty blond, forest green army jacket, buttons of
free Ai Wai Wai, pins for bands I have never heard of on her
jacket and backpack.

She taps her feet while she writes,
stretches into place, and starts to scribble.

Marty

She rips pages out of her notebook, even after only writing a few lines.

Making a mess of my memories

Just let your words sit on the page, I say gently.

Knee jerk, to get rid of, to judge.
Difference between a thing, a thought
done.

I don't want to share.

I don't want people to know me here.

I don't want to know people.

I want to encourage but not press.
Reach but not over
reach.

She looks above my head when I talk to the class, when I share
a poem
of mine or a poem I like by Bukowski, Connelly, Pearson, Lam.

*I don't want to write
I worry about what will be revealed*

She hides inside and passes time with bits of words.

I protect her against the admin, say she is writing, just not
ready to share
or submit.

Questions, so many questions,
and I don't even know what is happening.

When I look at her I
wonder what is.

Sarah

Her poems command listening.

She describes cherries freshly washed in a colander, the corner apartment she grew up in Victoria, taking a ferry every month to visit her Dad, a pilot.

She always recites her poems, always raises her hand when I ask who wants to share aloud.

Blue dress above the knee, ankle boots, leather jacket, short nails, black chipped nail polish.

I am not good with sentences, writing sentences, just so you know.

Learning disabled, labeled.

I think differently.

Think in a different way.

I wish everything was expressed in poetry.

Bits,
bites of me.

Slices to gather
in the air,
in the spaces between us, here.

In this chapter, I include poems about 12 young women who I taught while they were enrolled at *Write It*. This chapter introduces the young women to the reader. I chose these particular 12 young women because I had the most detailed journal entries about them to draw my poetic data from. The purpose of these poems is to represent complex, messy, situated, wide-ranging, and dynamic snapshots of each of the young women (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Stake, 1995; Stake, 2006). This chapter aims to reveal common, overlapping, as well as particular or unique themes that stem from young women's experiences with being labeled as 'at-risk.' This is in keeping with the central argument of this dissertation which is to interrogate the multiple and differing ways young women enrolled in the *Write It* program have been understood and objectified and how, through poetry, we can understand young women beyond or at least outside of the reductive and restrictive labels of 'at-risk,' 'troubled,' and 'in-crisis.' I stress that this dissertation is also about my positions as both writing facilitator at *Write It*, and writer of this dissertation that discursively positions the young women, the program, and myself within this text.

I will explore my complex positioning in the next chapter. I situate myself and the multiple roles I occupied in order to explore my positionality and entanglements at *Write It*. Like Leggo (2012a) "I engage...witness, in presenting poetry and prose that linger with a language educator's delight in the revelry of words" (p. 142). By using poetic inquiry, I am able to focus and linger in the multiple, tangled, and dynamic spaces between my self, the young women's selves,

and the *Write It* program. Additionally, the next chapter explores, through poetry, my perspective of the various effects *Write It* had on young women. The poems explore how I understood and witnessed each of the young women navigating the program in different ways.

Chapter 4: Creating spaces within the *Write It* space

This chapter explores poetically how each of the young women ‘do’ or engage with *Write It*. This includes how, from my perspective as I reviewed my journals, each of the young women in differing ways navigate and negotiate for themselves the classroom space, curriculum, rules of *Write It*, and the program as a whole. How each of the young women engage with *Write It* also includes the young women’s relationships with *Write It* administrators, their youth or social workers, counsellors, psychiatrists, psychologists, their fellow peers who are enrolled in the program with them, and with myself as their workshop facilitator. Through poetry, I will explore my encounter with the wide-ranging experiences each of the young women had in the program. I will do this in order to emphasize the heterogeneous nature of these young women’s subjectivities. The purpose of this is to write against the sweeping and overarching claims that are made about young women that I explored in Chapter 1.

I now see my role, through writing this dissertation, at the *Write It* program as being a witness to the various experiences each of the young women had while enrolled in the program. I stress that my role as witness is not a neutral gaze, but rather my seeing and understandings are mediated by my own subjectivities that I have made explicit throughout this dissertation. As the poetry facilitator at *Write It*, I was a mediator between the young women and the larger program. Through my

role as witness the poetry that I have created are representations of my witnessing. Ropers-Huilman (1999) and Oliver (2004) inform my understanding of the concept of witnessing with their focus aimed at social justice research. When we act as witnesses we are both 'telling' and 'listening'. Therefore, Ropers-Huilman stresses the importance of taking responsibility for exploring the multiple meanings of "equity and care while acting to promote our situational understanding" (p. 30).

I aim to linger in these complicated representations. An example of this is the poem *Jessie* that explores objectification and how she was actively responding and resisting the objectification. They are derived from my journals and are carefully reconstructed impressions of what I saw and heard about the young women's experiences and what I experienced personally under my own gaze. The poems serve not to replicate but to speak to the witnessing and gazing that I did. In the witnessing, it is my aim to represent and then interrupt and disrupt the objectification of young women who have been labeled as 'at-risk' experience in various ways at *Write It*. I must stress that it is my understanding that the very term 'at risk' and the other synonyms associated with that label is in and of itself objectification. The general aim of this chapter is to critically and creatively expose and interrupt objectification.

Foucault is useful here as his work explores "the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (1982, p. 208). Foucault's genealogies present histories of these different modes that are "made subjects who are designed to lead to a diminution in the value of the rational self-constituting subject" (p. 279).

Foucault suggests that one should resist processes of normalization and pursue alternative modes of subjectivity. In this project, alternative modes are explored through inquiring poetically and therefore, this project resists replicating problematic representations of fixed, stable subjects who are 'at-risk'.

I begin this chapter with a poem that situates and explores my positionality and experiences at *Write It* as a Jewish, academic, poet, feminist, poetry workshop facilitator, and creative writing coordinator. This poem *To the root* further expands on elements I included in poems in Chapters 2 and 3, about my complex role at *Write It* facilitating the poetry writing workshops and my interactions with the young women. It is important for me to begin this chapter with a poem about me. I reflect poetically on my multilayered, complicated, frustrating, rewarding, terrifying, contradictory, engaged, and constantly changing experiences teaching, writing, speaking, breathing, listening, navigating, and being alongside the young women within the walls of our own classroom space as well as the larger and metaphoric walls and halls of the *Write It* program. Following *To the root* are a series of poems that focus on my perception of the multiple and differing ways each of the 12 young women enrolled in my poetry workshop navigated, negotiated, and experienced the *Write It* program. The poems also explore how *Write It* understood and interacted with the young women.

To the root

I stand,
I clear my throat, the sounds
reverberate
against the walls, thin with peeling paint.

It is cold
(I do not know yet that this will be the only time the room is
not too hot)

outside
the trees are bare.

I button my maroon sweater
clasp, then rub
my hands together.

This first day, first workshop
poetry.

I am 45 minutes early,
I am always early.
I like to be early.

Rob and Janet,¹³
two of the administrators tease me loudly,
Rob elbows me in the side
in the hall
keener, he says
with a tinge of bitter.

I laugh nervously, uneasy.

I am unmade, like a
delicate dish at the edge of a shelf.
And I hate that feeling.

I ask myself why I let him make me feel like that.
I like to be early,
be in the space,
to hold the space in order to get a sense
of it, of me in it.

¹³ Pseudonyms have been created.

I want time in the room.

For months, I have been preparing:
I was interviewed four times, practiced
workshops,
then was given the manual,
then read the manual, over and over:
writing the wrongs.

Read all the background information provided
the labels, notes, minimum details
on the twelve young women who will soon be in the room:

Joe
Erin
May
Sky
Lisa
Jessie
Mabel
Jane
DJ
Frankie
Marty
Sarah

read in between the lines,
in the spaces of what
the information did not say.

The information, reports
on each of these women
made by their high school teachers or principals
or their youth worker or social worker
or their counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist,
parent, biological, adopted,
fostered or found
referring them as *troubled*
troublemakers
risk takers
at risk
problematic backgrounds, problematic behaviours
that need reformation,
they need to be controlled.

These labels shadow the light.
Distort,
shadow

scribble into the skin and bones
of memory
her stories, her experiences, her lines, her selves.

I am told to expect disruptions, resistance,
prepare for disrespectful behavior, non-compliance.
I am told
too much.

As I stand in the room, in the chill
I think about what
I want to tell them
about me.
I want to try and put them at ease, being here
(is that even possible?)

How is that possible,
when I too feel judged
when I too feel pressured by the rules, confined
by the manual,
when I too feel put upon by the judgment.

How do I engage in the labor it takes to work to build
and hold safer spaces
and create a space for all our words?
For all ourselves.

Is that even possible?

There is no place that is ever safe.
My unease is telling.
We will all experience the same space
differently.

How do I create a space
within this program to rise,
to unlearn
ways of past classrooms
institutions
society has closed in
on them like piercing light
fragmenting and pushing young women
to the margins of the page.

Write It wants to bring the young women to the centre
of the page, but I quickly see
it follows a tired pervasive script:

Identities broken and bad
beaten down
need to repair, reform them, put them in line.

I want their poems to mean
what each of the young women want
their words to say.
To not prescribe any expectations, limits
or place new storylines upon their shoulders,
or on their pages.

Start talking inside my words, begin, conversations
of experiences live each and everyday.

How do I be me? I ask myself, heart pounding staccato
How do I be me, what does that even mean?
I am not one thing, one self, stable.
For I shift who I am, who am I
is there a way
to get to the root of me
as I stand,
teach
speak here?
With, alongside, in poetry?

4:15 pm hits
when green eyes are on me or
shadowed in pink,
blue eyes are on their pant legs,
and hazel eyes are fixed on a bird in flight out the window,
and other
eyes are fixed on each other, I begin:

I found poetry as a quiet girl
shy sad contemplative bullied
misunderstood socially, in
high school I clung to words I could
make and scribble,
clung to doing well in school
wearing pages out of books, dog-eared, torn
finishing assignments in my closed room with Tori Amos softly
playing.

I play with the loose bottom button of my sweater

I catch the gaze of Joe and Sky
I look away and walk the room as my voice fills it.

Mabel smiles at me steady.

*I want to create our own space here
within the Write It space
where you write what you need to
use your time the way you need to.*

There are rules to follow.

*I will encourage you, I provide as much feedback as I can,
as you want, I hope
you will share and speak to each other.
There are rules outside this specific class-
rules of this program that are here
that I am bounded to follow.
We can make the most of our time,
our words, this space here
and you can come to me with ideas, concerns,
hopes for our workshop and time together.*

Some eyes are smiling at me, others are blank,
some roll or divert their gaze, come back
and fix
on mine.

My heart is in my chest, still staccato and loud.
I read a few lines from a poem by Angelou:

*The caged bird sings with
a fearful trill of things unknown
but longed for still and his
tune is heard on the distant hill¹⁴*

Can we use Angelou's poem as a prompt for
one of our own? Lisa asks
and I settle in, *yes that sounds great.*
Many pens scrape paper, some just sit still not writing,
some play with the pens, others rest on the desks
but we have begun, are beginning.

¹⁴ Angelou, M. (1969) *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. New York, Random House.

Joe

*I have to stop them,
my words, Joe says,
I do not know what to do if more comes out.*

*Afraid, fear is thick
it covers me like a blanket.
It provides no comfort,
no warmth.*

*Abby, Joe asks loudly,
while everyone else is writing,
Do you know who said fear is your only god?
It was someone famous.*

*Before I answer, Jessie says *Rage against the Machine*,
that band.*

*Joe, lets words fall, crosses them out, rewrites them again
she looks up at me for permission, encouragement. By the sixth
class she laughs when her eyes meet mine, knowing I will tell
her not to censor, to let words fall as they will, to continue
writing.*

*She wants to write, she wants her words
to speak her stories that she
carries close and deep.*

*She doesn't want her psychiatrist to see them.
I don't want my words to be used against me, turned on me.
I do not want
to be told things.
I know who I am, what I am, I don't need to be told.
I understand me.*

*Your poems are for you, I say.
I have to write a report of you like I do for all the women in
the workshop,
and a report on the writing you do here in our workshop.
I will show you the report.
I do not have to include your poetry if you don't approve
that.
No one has to read or hear your writing
except for me and if you are ready in time, you can share*

with your peers.

Her poems are sensual, memories of home
of grandmother, of an absent and (re)appearing Mom.
Absent language, unknowns, could have beens.
Of soup, and bannock
flavours, fragrances,
and their absence.

Absence of taste, scent, words.
What is gone and what remains.

Joe sighs loudly, asks if I have another pen,
this pen I was using suddenly
feels weird in my hand.

Ten classes in, Joe says
I'm less afraid, this writing I am doing
I now understand myself better and see that I am a good
writer.
Even if this place doesn't get me or my psych, I am getting
me.

Erin

What do you know about me?

Those words echo.

What is on file, in print about me?

*Very little, I remember saying quickly,
I look forward to getting to know you.*

Really, you do?

Erin's file is thin,
like her figure slight, angular.
Drop out, is written in thick black marker.

She was told to leave in grade 9.
Pushed out, behavioural issues.

Bullied, was the bully

different stories depending on who did the telling.
(Always)

Violent tendencies,
(Janet tells me to *be careful*
to not put myself in a position where she could get
physical with me,
do not make her mad), she says in a loud whisper.

*It's a different context and we don't have the whole story of
what happened at her school, I say.*
She is trouble, bad news, Janet says, fixed.

I notice that every time Erin sees her she looks at Janet
with wide animated eyes, then laughs a little too loudly.
I witness this and Erin is performing,
the role that is on file.

She is treated like a loose canon, her actions defining her.

But, she is quiet in the class, but opens up
on the page
her words: lyrical, rhythmic, clear.

We are all transfixed by her voice,
untangling the experiences of being judged, slut shamed,
wanting to learn, but being pushed out.

I tell Janet of her strong poetry and articulation of her
experiences, of her naming them

I am glad she is healing, reforming.

I seethe quietly, she was never seen before,
never understood,

listened to,

seething because the judgment continues
frames us here, reforming.

I try to work within this frame, I am
encouraging work within this frame?

(Does this make me complicit?

 If I leave what good does that do?)

Is it enough to focus on our interactions,
our classroom?

Is it enough to focus on the poetry
and our writing?

On the telling,
rewriting, and retelling?

Where else is there to go?

May

No eye contact,
her forest-green eyes fix
on the page.

*Try to get her to open
up to you, try to get her to voice
with the others, Janet says,
when we go over each of the young women in my poetry workshop.*

*I think that is where she is at, she needs to just attend,
write, and share with me her writing, I say.
My words press, have a bit of punch.*

*She doesn't need to be here then, Janet says. I will have to
talk to her.
It is not enough to just come to the workshops.
I can talk to her, I say in a tone layered with hope,
protection, defense, weight.*

The pressure of not being enough, of being wrong
still,
and I feel pressed. Want to support May,
ask what she needs,
be in that place,
want to meet the requirements of my job: update, progress,
assess.

It is progress.

She is able to write her experiences out,
that have been stuck
still, on the page,
an unraveling the tangles of rejection, pregnancy,
baby loss, loss

the broken blurs, into a
clearing, shift into another,
clearing
breaking
into smaller shards.
Shards she sees
 strands of herself reflected in.

No one else needs to see them,
I worry if they do.
I know if they do it will stop
the slow clearing
that reflects,
where parts of herself are healing
and coming through
to be quietly visible seen.

Janet talks to her before the workshop
on a chilly, clear spring afternoon.
I can hear May shuffling her feet, through the open door
fidgeting as Janet talks.

*I am writing for myself, May says,
I am all that I have.
I will not be pressured by anybody.*
Janet talks fast, how *Write It* needs to see writing
otherwise she might as well work in a café or in her bedroom
the space she takes up in the workshop, could
easily go to another young woman who is ready to meet
the program's requirements.

May does not write at all that workshop.
Tells me about her meeting with Janice after the workshop is
over.

*I cannot handle the pressure.
I cannot handle her not understanding me.
I cannot handle the judgment and being seen only as a
disappointment, as not good enough,
as failing even here. I am not, it's not fair.
What should I do, Abby?*

I tell her to do as she has been doing,
I know she is untangling,
doors are open and I would hate for her
to listen to the pressure and run from or shut herself back
in.
I encourage her to write about that meeting if she needs to
and to come next week with it or with what she needs to write,
where she needs to be.

Sky

She comes in chewing gum,
my heart sinks already
I have to police, tell her what not to do.

Already I have to come from a place of policing and directing
what is allowed and what is not allowed:
binaries, constructions of:
yes and no
right and wrong
facilitating
the creation of poetry is floating around all the rest of it,
but I still try to make central the creating,
different ways to approach writing
different types of poetry.

I try to cushion her self-deprecation. She is vocal and I try
to hear her crashing syllables
her ripe descriptors.

*I am a fuck up
We are all fuck ups, right?
I'm not some pretty white princess.*

I do not see you or any of you like that, I say.

*This program is going to change my life, right?
That's what Janet and Rob always say.
That's what Donna, my social worker tells me.
She says with a wicked twinkle
and a fake laugh.
Ugh, she says loudly.*

*For me, I say, I believe that is not possible, if you want to
change things in your life,
that is up to you.
We are here to give you space
time to write about yourself, your experiences,
focus on writing,
share with me, workshop with me, the others. Carve out time to
write.*

Sky sees through the discourses that come through the room,
like afternoon sunlight.

The discourses that inform the rules,
pressures and forces that serve to rule
the supposedly unruly.
That create lines to colour in.

She is blunt,
direct,
 knowing.

I want to keep the colours out strong,
Let them smudge
run
combine as they will.

Sky herself refuses to mute,
confine or
dilute her colours.

Her poems are sparks, strong and punchy
she speaks against being called a *stupid girl*
speaks to why she just got *tired of being called stupid*
undisciplined.
Troubles it by naming aloud.

Learning more outside of school
outside of the rejection
of the discourse of reformation.

Lisa

*Let us know if you need assistance
need Lisa out of your classroom, Abby,
Rob tells me on the third class.*

*She has a history of lying, of erratic behaviour.
She does not take her meds, you know. She is
unhinged, ill, crazy but
we had to admit her.*

*Do I hold my tongue?
How can I hold my tongue?
I cannot be silent and just listen
to him talk like this.*

*She is a wonderful part of the workshop.
She is taking care of herself. I do not like
describing anyone as crazy.
She is in control of her mental illness.
We should not disparage her for it.
We need to support her.*

*(I do not wait for him to respond or
my memory doesn't recall his response).*

*Lisa asserts against the label, in her poem, bravely
I am not crazy.
But I am crazed.
Crazed for white sand, peppermint chocolate chip ice cream, an
unexpected
kiss.*

*She writes and writes this, speaks
this out loud both casually and formally.*

*Cross-legged on the floor, she writes. Rejecting
the chairs,
suggesting music to serve as the background for free-writes.
I explain instrumental is best.
I bring in my own old black tinny stereo, get it from my
parents' house,
that is still in the room that was my bedroom
ghetto blaster, Lisa teases me, it works, she says with a
pleased smile.*

Her poems speak against pathology
but I still feel it, like a ping pong ball in the room
she can be frenzied, trying on the space,
on us.

(But I know we are trying on her too).

I try to stay calm,
the other young women tend to disengage
block her out,
aside from talking about her poems, the writing.
With Rob and Janet, I focus on her writing, the
power and strength of her poetry.
Reports, reporting
on her for her psychiatrist
and parents:
her talent, the push
pull
twirl, twist of her words,
and Lisa
thunder
 lightning

a flicker,
a loud spark

refusing to submit
silently.

Jessie

Reapplying red, she
smacks her lips and
clears her throat.

Looks out the window, reties her shoelace.

Rob enters our classroom, fixing the thermostat. Stays
to scan the room, to assess us:
scanning checking catching.

Put pen to paper Jessie
Rob says, Rob
the male administrator
navy suit jacket, khaki pants.

His eyes to her body.

I catch his gaze at it follows,
traces, objectifies
until it catches mine, then he looks down, away.

Jessie, comes up to me when Rob leaves the room
I can't write, now.
Can I go to the bathroom?
I need a break.

After class, Jessie says to me *that was bullshit.*
I don't want that here too. He's such a creep.

Sick to my stomach,
Jessie goes to Janet. There are no open doors so
I do not hear the conversation.

Janet later says to me, *you know Rob and myself we are here,*
our roles are to oversee things. We have to report to others
you know.
We both need to see first-hand what the young women are doing,
not doing, acting
what and how much they are writing, how they are behaving.
You're not in charge.
Just because you coordinate the poetry workshops,
because you facilitate the poetry workshops.

Yes, I know

I barely can get the words out of my mouth.

We are constrained, but we resist
do not condone.

Continue carving spaces within *Write It*
spaces within this space
words upon words
and the words are not always loud
not always soft
or even spoken
audible
not always written down
but the words are in between us,
words between words
the words are heard,
they are stated
and we still hear them in our own way,
in our own process.

Mabel

First class, her hand outstretched to shake,
I'm Mabel, I love to write.

Keen, sparkle, intent on writing,
connecting. Most of the other women
do not engage just yet, do not meet her gaze.
She is steady, undeterred.

*I have a lot to say,
I know they want me to share it all here, at this program.
I am lucky to get a spot.
I smile, not wanting to dilute her enthusiasm.*

*Did you see in Mabel's file, Janet asks me,
rough history of being in the foster care system.
She is a perfect participant for our program,
probably has so much to draw from.*

I cringe inside myself, by her excitement of her tough
background
as fodder for poetry,
as if there is an ideal subject.
She is romanticizing her otherness.
I understand quickly, what is permeating the walls and
wandering the halls
that,
Mabel is
the 'Write' Girl
at Write It.

Mabel tells me she really wanted to come here
to create, write
a poetry manuscript:
*a poetic novel of being a motherless fatherless girl,
an unlovable girl
who needs to come into herself somehow and someday
Perhaps by being here?* She asks then continues.

*They look at me like I am broken.
That's okay, it got me here,
she says.*

Twisting, subverting

while *giving them what they want.*

Jane

*You won't tell admin on me, will ya? Jane asks.
She is always late,
comes in to class when there is already a found
rhythm,
a flow.*

*She comes to the classroom 45 minutes late
as she cleans a house until 4:30.
Trying to make money,
I scrub other people's shit. I don't have a choice.
She exhales into the room of words
holding her own, releasing
them to the page brightly
like a few scattered stars in a darkened sky.*

*Where is Jane, never see her at the start of class, Janet
asks,
She has a long bus ride here, I say, so she always needs to go
to the bathroom,
refresh.*

*She is writing a lot of incredible poems
and feeling more comfortable to share in class,
I say quickly.*

*I am glad that Jane comes at all,
that she has this place despite...
That she has this time
despite...*

DJ

She comes out to me, to the group, in a poem.
*I can control how it's done
in my own words
with my own words.
In high school I was outed against my will.
I was so alone, they broke me.
Wanted me to just go away, I guess.*

The reading of this poem, undoes the others
there is silent nods, our group embraces without holding.
We are holding each other in this space.

When Janet and Rob ask me at 7pm how class was that day,
I take a minute. I am still processing, very moved by the
class and the holding of the space.

So, Rob says pressing me. Perhaps he is uncomfortable by the
silence or the time I am taking to collect my thoughts.
*It was a very emotional workshop today.
There was sharing and supportive listening and understanding.
Oh that's good,* Rob says quickly and leaves the room.
(I am grateful that he does not ask for details.)

I stand with my back against the door frame,
DJ's words still fill my ears.
*I am outing myself
on my own terms
only I can define myself
and I defy a single definition.*

Janet says, *don't get too attached, things could switch next
week
these young women are unpredictable.
Also we have to be careful with donors,
that we don't get too political, on the fringe.*

I tune out, DJ's own words steady inside of me,
attaching and propelling.

In the classroom I focus on what is turning,
turning in, out, and through our workshop.
It is a splattering, a centering, a turning
in, on, out, and through

connecting
processing
defining each of our selves.

Frankie

She comes to the workshop, I can hear in the space between us
the clank of glasses beer or wine.

I know *Write It's* rules and hope
it is a one off.
That I won't have to report, remove,
reject her so I
push, let go.

She does not appear inebriated.
She is focused and typing,
the only young woman with a laptop.
Jane comments that her computer is *shiny*.
How'd you afford that? Do you have a sugar daddy?
Frankie says her aunt bought it for her,
lucky you, Jane murmurs coldly under her breath.

Frankie sits alone at the crooked table by the window.
I wish at least another person would round out the space,
accompany her.
Outwardly she doesn't seem bothered,
seems content alone.
Worry it's the alcohol she came here with,
keeping her company.

I observe, and keep the observation close.
I talk to her about Montreal, her hometown,
my husband's as well. She used to skate on Beaver Lake,
loved to write little poems in French when she was ten
says her French is rusty, weak these days.

She doodles intricate circles, in between tap tapping the
keys.
Jane eyes the circles, from a distance.
Rolls her eyes at the drawings.

A few weeks later, before the workshop Rob sent
me an email.
Frankie's youth worker called,
*she has been missing, not going to work at the coffee shop
where she worked on Fraser and Broadway,
that she has been drinking again, and went to her cousin in
Sechelt.*

*Broke her probation
twice.*

Not sure when she will be back.

So I wanted to inform you of this.

Rob writes, not sure we will allow her back.

Please readmit her, Rob, if she asks to be, I write.

She needs this outlet, this group.

If she is sober and there is proof that she is sober, maybe,

Rob writes back,

I will let you know. We have to follow policy.

We do not need disruptive people in here

Marty

I try
to protect Marty against the admin.
When they ask
about her, I say she is writing,
just not ready to share or submit her poems just yet.

She rips page after page out of her notebook,
after stringing two or three words together
she stops,
rips, tries to rid herself of the words.

I don't want to share.

I don't want people to know me here.

I don't want to know people.

I don't want you to know me, no offence okay Abby?

I am told by Janet repetitively and by her file that she has a
long history of abuse, distrust, risky behaviours.

I get the difficulty of sitting and being inside the pain,
the difficulty of writing it out.

She isn't there now. I try
to encourage her to leave the paper in the notebook,
just turn the page when she wants to stop, or change
direction,
when it gets to be too much.

To not rip it away.

She asks for poets to read. Reads *The Small Words in my Body*
by Karen Connelly and asks if she can take it home.

I say, yes, she quickly puts my copy of it in her well-worn
green backpack.

*It's both inspiring and intimidating to read poetry this good.
To listen to the other girls in here write such amazing stuff.
I start to say don't compare yourself, try to just be inspired
by it and she says,*

*I know. Hard to stop the comparisons when I don't even give
myself a chance.*

You will when you are ready, I say. That's okay.

Janet tells me
Marty is broken.
My memory slips here,
I remember saying *she has been through so much.*
I think she is doing really really well.

We don't see it the same, Janet says, as if surprised,
that our opinions differ
why is she surprised, we always collide.

Sarah

Learning disabled, labeled.
I think differently.
Think in a different way.
I wish everything was expressed in poetry.

Janet talks to me after the first class, she warns me
asking me to note Sarah's ability to read and write.
She tells me that *the class and expectations*
of our program may be too hard for her.

I tell Janet that already, the small excerpt
Sarah shared about her morning
commanded listening.
That she was comfortable sharing it aloud
and read it wonderfully with nuance.

Janet raises her eyebrows at me in disbelief.

How limiting it would be,
how dark it would be if I just took the file at face value.
Sarah is so much beyond what is written here.

I quickly learn that all of the women are.
All are misread, misunderstood or
not understood at all.
The files are mere outlines,
without flesh bones,
without details or complexity,
without room for pause, or commas,
dashes, or contradictions
or this and that.
Without being both,
without being. Existing
only in absolutes.

So we write them in, the 'this' and the 'that,'
the 'both'
We write them in and complicate
in the spaces we make within the *Write It* space.

Clouds.

So we insert chances of sunlight, chances of rain.

Quickly we see how the hovering clouds,
oppress,
speak for, inform, cover each of our skies.

Sarah's poetry is fresh, fragrant like a wildflower bouquet
not weeds not perfectly arranged sweet sour hers.

Workshop poem

We arranged the desks in an imperfect
circle.
Each week was different almost round,
connecting, attempts
for everyone to see hear each other.

At first, the twelve embodied young women, were holding
themselves
their limbs, their pages close
did not want to be seen heard
wanted to stay inside their own selves and words.

Those first workshops the only sound
were scribbles of pens to paper,
of the sound of paper ripping out of notebooks, crumbling in
palms
to be thrown out
during free writes: write about a memory
a childhood memory.

Abby Journal Excerpt: May 5, 2012

*After the free write, I asked my usual: who would like to
share what they wrote?
Eleven women raised their hands; eleven out of twelve! I will
never forget how large
my smile was; I couldn't help it. Joe laughed at me first,
then the other women
joined in.*

We listened attentively, wide-eyed
as each morning was recited.
Mornings were for lingering in beds,
keeping beds unmade
remembering a foster mother saying *be good and
wanting none*
of it,
applying pink blush in make-up mirrors,
cracking eggs in a chipped blush-coloured bowl,
cold water splashing on a scar,
leaving a shelter early before seeing anyone,
leaving a shelter early not wanting to see
anyone.

Mornings were turning over,
as one turns over a page.

From that sharing, sharing became commonplace.
From the free writing, the workshop discussed what it meant
"to be good,"
Sky said that phrase *made her itchy like a sweater*
and she wrote a poem of her own based on that workshop
discussion.

Then feedback came, conversations:
liking the images used
asking for metaphors to be carried throughout the poem
staying with each poem, trying to get inside the meanings,
make them clear.

As the workshop opened up, some closed in again
was never a full circle, was never fully round.

Abby Journal Excerpt: June 16, 2012

There are a range of responses when we are workshopping each other's poetry. After a fairly steady period of sharing all of a sudden, perhaps as the writing is going deeper and a lot more writing is being produced. The young women are saying things like: I don't want to be evaluated by these girls. In the same vein, I don't want to be told what I am saying in this poem by her, these are my words. I'd rather you, Abby, because you are our teacher, be the only one who comments on my writing. I don't want the administrators to read these. Others are enjoying the workshop process continually with comments that they like different perspectives and they find it interesting that the same poem can be understood differently depending on who the reader is.

In response I stressed that we, while the writers, are not the writing. It is important to separate ourselves from our writing. It is important to critique the writing constructively and not pry into the writer's autobiography unless they make it clear that they are open to sharing personally the inspiration or some context behind writing their poem.

Eighteen weeks of workshops,
breathing out and in, holding still

around an almost circle,
telling various stories in poems
of how each of us are opening,
shattering, revealing different shades
and shards
breaking in and through the light.

Write It reflects the values of larger society and understandings of social hierarchy. The program did not reflect an intersectional understanding that young women's lives and identities are shaped by not just gender and age but race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, family background, educational background, religion, literacy, and ability. The poems in this chapter serve to present how each of the young women and each of their experiences were understood by me and came to the fore at *Write It*. The poems also discuss how young women's agency is constrained in the program. Each of the young women in differing ways, work, challenge, or speak against the stigmas, labels, and narratives that dominate their lives. Their agency is constrained by matrices of race, age, gender, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, religion, class, education, and familial background. Due to each of the young women's unique and differing subject positions, they each experienced the structure and rules of *Write It* in differing ways.

A potent thread that runs across the 12 poems in this chapter is the differing ways in which feelings of unease arose in the young women and myself while in the program. This feeling often stemmed from the general rules of the program, as well as from the presence of and interactions with the administrators. I must stress that the *Write It* program, the mandate, rules, and the administrators are all products of larger society. Therefore, it is important to put this program into context of structural inequalities that shape the program with dominant discourses and determine its operations. *Write It* fully embraced a deficit perspective whereby

young women were seen solely as problems and burdens. The dominant discourses around 'at-risk' young women are pervasive in the mandate, in the understandings of the staff and donors that support the program, and are palpable as they circulate loudly in the space. This is all despite this non-profit program being designed to meet the needs of young women who have been labeled as 'at-risk.'

The poems in this chapter generally address the unease that stemmed from a tangible feeling that rules and judgments were being imposed upon the young women as well as myself. For me, the unspoken understanding was that in my role as poetry workshop facilitator I had to keep the young women in line and on task. I was a mediator between the young women and the program. I had to balance the young women's needs with the expectations and mandates of the program. Through my interactions and attempting to negotiate the needs of the young women with the expectations of *Write It*, I quickly came to learn that the administrators really were not tasked with the ability to 'know' about each of the young women but rather, based their understandings of them on their past histories such as expulsion from school, being in foster care, suffering with mental illness. The administrators in following the mandate and carrying out their roles, understood each of the young women as defined by their own extremely limited histories that are included in each of the young women's files and therefore, by the same labels of 'troubled,' 'at-risk,' 'problems,' 'crazy' that the program's mandate states it aims to dispel. For example, Jane needed to hide class inequities that shaped her need to work and therefore caused her to come to the workshops late each week. Jane and I decided it was best

to keep her lateness from the administrators because they would not understand her not being punctual. The administrators were not tasked with understanding that Sky, being pushed out of school was shaped by intersections of age, race, class, and gender – not by the fact that she was simply a ‘bad’ or ‘troubled’ young woman. I must stress that I am not blaming the administrators but rather was witness to them carrying out their very fixed and limited roles and what was demanded of them. I saw quickly, that for this program to really meet the needs of the young women there would need to be a complete overhaul through deconstructing and dispelling the larger social discourses that shape the label and understandings of ‘at-risk’ young women. What would be needed is careful consideration and taking up of the very inequalities that shape our lives and institutions. As well as doing the difficult work of acknowledging and addressing the various ways young women are understood, oppressed, stigmatized, and treated within larger patriarchal, racist, classist, ableist, ageist, heterosexist society.

Young women enrolled at *Write It* were constructed through policy and program discourse as static subjects who *were trouble* and needed the program for reformation. The program as a product of society neglected to understand that young women’s identities and experiences are shaped by larger social discourses and forces of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, ageism that were being reproduced at *Write It*. Lazreg’s (1988) “essentializing otherness” (p. 93) is what took place in the program. Young women were perceived as bearers of categories, with no existence or individuality outside of the category or label. This was also done albeit in a

different way with Mabel, who was essentialized for her very difficult girlhood. Due to her positive attitude she became the poster young woman or what I call the *'write/right girl'* for the program. Her overcoming of the hardships of being a foster child and her eagerness to write about her experiences caused her to be a romanticized and praised, poster-child. The program neglected to see that her *'whiteness'* and being fostered in an upper middle-class family of faith also shaped her identity and experiences. It is useful to return to Foucault (1982) here in terms of his understanding of how society constitutes and constructs subjects. In particular, in relation to what was at play at *Write It*, Foucault understands identity as a form of subjugation and a way of "exercising power over people and preventing them from moving outside fixed boundaries" (p. 793).

The poems in this chapter seek to uncover how each of the young women was reduced to the stigma, label, or experience that brought them to the program. Everything the young women can be is attributed to and seen as determined by their past. I have attempted in these poems to present, and in the presentation to subtly challenge and stress the need for understanding young women as having fluid, historicized identities that are shaped by pervasive social discourses and forces.

The poems in this chapter speak to my experiences of how, despite the constrained agency of the young women and the pervasive nature of discourses and social forces, they do not automatically accept or take on the stigmas, labels, or understandings that the program and larger society has attributed to them. Young women's subjectivities are constituted by these discourses and their resistance to

being 'known' is also reflected in this exercise of power. Young women are not passive, static victims that accept the discourses and rules of the program. Rather, through the poems written for this chapter, I seek to offer a counter narrative and present the young women as complex, unique, and multi-faceted subjects. The poems are focused on how the reproduction of identities via discursive frameworks and institutional forces push and pull at subjects including myself.

Categories of identity and structures of inequality are not automatic, but are constantly reproduced and resisted in practice. Therefore, there are moments of possibility for social change, which I attempted to capture, in the poem about DJ. The reproduction of structure is not automatic nor is it complete, but it is contingent on its repetition and iteration. The attempt of my workshop classroom to be a 'space within the space' was an attempt albeit a constrained one to assert ourselves, our writing, and voice and act towards change. This project, attends to ways discourses enter into our lives invading them in a Foucauldian sense and "being implicitly or explicitly challenged by them in the course of practices that goes beyond discursive constraints" (Ortner, 1998, p. 14).

I explicitly place myself in not only *To the Root* but also in other poems in this chapter. The poetic snapshots that I have taken are mediated by me and also are in relation to me. My agency was also constrained at *Write It* and this is a running theme in the poems in this chapter. I had my own understandings of young womanhood as well as my own understandings and relationships with each of the young women. I also had to work within the frame and rules of *Write It* and interact

and report to the administrators with whom I was often in disagreement. I quickly sought refuge by creating a space within the *Write It* program space. This was done in order to facilitate the workshop, and more importantly, to do the work I could tell needed to be done in differing ways with each of the young women. It was my attempt to interrupt objectifying understandings of the young women as 'at-risk' by creating a workshop space separate from the larger program environment where each of the young women could have the opportunity in their own time to self-express, speak back and to the labels they had experienced for themselves. Further, at the end of the poem *Sarah*, I write about how by creating a space within the *Write It* environment, we inserted, troubled, and complicated rigid, reductive, and problematic social discourses about young women that pervaded *Write It* and continued to be ascribed to them.

I must note that my position as a feminist poet and educator is not a fixed position. My subjectivity is created, produced, constrained, and regulated in both the *Write It* program and here on the page. My identity shapes this text in ways that are not necessarily transparent to me. I acknowledge like all subjects, that I have been historically produced as a racialized, classed, sexualized, gendered, and political subject. I recognize this here and stress that this project is therefore, inevitably shaped by my identities and relationships. The poems in this chapter offer a kind of understanding that is "distinct as well as useful, by creating a language adequate to the experience of their subjects. Poetry can waken us to the realities that fall" (Parini, 2008, p. xiii). I use poetic inquiry to allow the poems I have written to

serves as the central insights of this project. I aim to write clearly, steadily, and in detail of my role as witness of the young women in the program and choose to let the poems radiate outwards to the complicated, complex, and contradictory corners of the issues this project addresses.

Here we are
 second floor, the door is
partially open until the workshop starts.
A space within the larger space
to speak each of our words
to stay silent inside
to scribble them in a rush
to scribble in a slow rhythm
to recite softly
to stop midway
to embrace without holding
to embrace holding keeping
our space breathing,
to keep
opening spaces.
To remain open.

Chapter 5: Untangling *Write It*

Photograph 4 Fieldnote journals

Image of my fieldnote journals.



Through poetry I seek to go “past the layers of lies to the truths of systemic exploitation and oppression, as well as possibilities for resistance” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 1).

Poetry, as an untangling
an untangling of the tight knots,
the stigmas that take a hold on us,
catch, keep
us stuck.
The stereotype-laden stories
that make us mythical.

Poetry enables
a loosening.

A social repositioning,
despite the strong hold,
despite the firm grip of stigmas.
Despite the push to the margins,
the hyper-visibility of being made into a
'problem.'
Of being both seen, and not seen
due to gender, race, class, ethnicity,
age, sexuality, family, education,
(dis)ability, religion, literacy.

In my workshop space
within *Write It*,
this untangling,
this loosening took place
in different ways and speeds
depending on position,
depending on who was tangled,
who was being held.
Depending on how knotted,
depending on how tight a grip.

Poems enabled a repositioning,
in and against dominant, regulatory discourses.
Those that served to fix,
that worked to keep the young women
tangled, stuck, silent.
Each of the young women's poems

enabled movement, fluidity
within the *Write It* space.

In the repositioning,
untangling,
loosening from
the firm grip, the pervasive myths
try to regain hold,
attempt to re-inscribe meanings.

Still, each of the young women
tell bits and pieces
slices of stories in poems,
interrupt the fixed myths,
contradict and complicate their narratives.
In their own words, in our workshop
I see their writing as interrupting
the fixed myths
that the program tries to continuously narrate
for them.

Here, on these pages I return
to the stories I told myself about their poems.
I return to our time together, shared.
I tell of my experience through writing,
I tell of my experience in relationship with
them,
at *Write It*, in our workshop space
where we
loosened, retold, repositioned ourselves.

Attempts to unstick,
to reveal how each of the young women themselves
were figuring out what they needed,
looking in on themselves like a microscope
focusing in on what they needed
to say, do, write.

They had "the capacity and agency to analyze
their social context, challenge, and resist
forces
that were working to impede their possibilities" ¹⁵

¹⁵ Mazarella, S. & Pecora, N. (2002). *Growing up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity*. New York: Peter Lang.

This concluding chapter begins and ends with poetry because poetry propels this project. The young women enrolled at *Write It* all wrote poetry in our workshops. They used poetry to critically, creatively, and expressively represent themselves and their experiences. The data for this dissertation are all original poems that I have written inspired by my field note journals." A poetic approach to inquiry requires the careful study of our own written logic, technique, and aesthetic" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009, p. 19). It is important that this dissertation is both critical and creative. It is grounded in my unique positions as a feminist academic, educator, and poet. Engaging in poetic inquiry enabled me to delve deep into the complexity that was my experience at *Write It*. By engaging in poetic inquiry I was able to "achieve a concise ability to give language to the unsayable" (Gioia, 1999, p. 31), "helped me understand contradiction" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2001, p. 46), and generated a fresh and accessible project that was able to capture the "richness and complexity of the observed" (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 81) at the non-profit *Write It*. Poetic inquiry can be evaluated based on presenting a challenge to claims of authority, being reflexive and open to interpretation, and whether it taps into deep emotion.

By carrying out poetic inquiry in this project claims of authority are challenged and reflexivity is centralized. This dissertation challenges claims of authority by troubling reductive understandings of 'at-risk' young women and normative discourses that pervade society and programs like *Write It*. This project is

reflective and open to interpretation due to its foregrounding of my original poetry. This project taps into deep emotion through poems that are image-based and explore multiple and detailed narratives that attempt to capture complex identities, understandings, and experiences of the young women, myself, and the *Write It* program.

By contributing to the craft, practice, and possibility of poetry in educational research and practice, it is my hope to further open up possibilities in order to work towards understanding and supporting young people. This can be done by encouraging and being inclusive of a wide range of voices, subjectivities, and engaging with discourses of difference. “This project works towards social justice, equity, and continues to work with multi-faceted young women” (Butler-Kisber, 2010a, p. 98). In doing so, this research works towards a more just society and social change. As I highlighted earlier in the dissertation, poetic inquiry is an effective way to utilize Foucault’s ideas of the creation of the situated, multi-faceted subject. Poetic inquiry provides an expansive and powerful way to emote, evoke, provoke, and represent experience; language is always an approximation of experience. Therefore, poetry can be seen as a potent mode of being, knowing, telling, and meaning making. Poetry can articulate and say what is often unsayable or unarticulated. Poetry in this project articulates, and at times challenges how I perceived the young women as resisting and speaking back to being “compliant passive subjects” (Foucault, 1975, p. 780).

Butler-Kisber (2005) describes a writing process similar to mine where “pivotal memories are reimagined by revisiting journals and brainstorming a series of words, phrases, and metaphors which form the kernels of each poem” (p. 105). Hussey (1999) also explains a process very similar to my own where she chose “nuggets from journals” that are concrete, vivid, salient, and poignant. She then carried out “free-writing sprints” using those nuggets, as inspirational springboards that brought her, like it did me, into the poems. Those nuggets “serve[d] as a scaffold to help find the material that is filed away in memory, or find material through observation...in order [to discover] what is being generated by the writer” (p. 35).

“Poetic inquiry was used reflectively and reflexively” in this project (Butler-Kisber, 2010b, p. 83). I generated original poetry by “using [my] own words to describe situations and experiences discussed in research” (Furman, Langer, Davis, Galfrado, & Kulkarni, 2007) and wrote autobiographically about these personal experiences (Stein, 2003) because writing poetry enabled the work to openly “speak to many” (Furman, 2004, p. 164).

For me, what remains hard to describe in carrying out poetic inquiry, is that it is a creative endeavour that will “always remain impervious to an articulation that is largely intuitive and individualistic” (Butler-Kisber, 2010a, p. 95). However, it is important to share how revisiting my well-kept and detailed journals enabled poetic inquiry to be carried out for this project. Behn and Twichell (1992) capture my experience and my feelings of using poetic inquiry:

The complexities of form and its relation to the subject, the feel of the line, the image, the play of sound that makes it possible to respond in a voice with subtlety and range when she hears the music in the inner ear, or she sees the world. That image, that's the sparkle of a poem. (p. xi)

Inspiration arose after reading and finding key words or phrases in the journals, and that situated and grounded the poem and enabled it to take form and sparkle.

Rereading the journals put me back in the workshop room at *Write It*, and the details within the journals quickly inspired me to focus on various themes or images that would shape each of the poems. Engaging in poetic inquiry enabled me to “push to the edges of methodological inquiry by taking risks and expanding on educational research” (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009, p. 14).

Lincoln (1995) articulated and defined a new paradigm for goals in feminist educational qualitative research. She saw this new direction in research as one that embraced and was committed to engendering change by being oriented to social justice and equity. This project is in keeping with the commitments Lincoln outlines by demonstrating my positionality and reflexivity in the work. This project also follows Lincoln's research commitments as it is interested in and focused on young women's experiences. These young women have had direct yet differing experiences with being marginalized, and silenced. The young women also had direct yet differing experiences with resistance and pushing back. They troubled and

interrupted objectification. In this project, I actively worked against reproducing representations of young women in tired and reductive ways.

Identity construction is a process that involves the negotiation and organization of the self around discourses and practices (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Gender is constituted through interactions and institutions; “it is situated [and is] carried out in the presence of others” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Gendered, racialized, sexualized identities, social discourses, and practices have the power to position young women around specific practices and dominant cultural ideologies (Williams, 2007). This project is based on the understanding that gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, (dis)ability, nationality, religion, family background, and educational background are all socially constructed identities that are intersectional. Further, Hill-Collins (1990) articulates that “intersectional identities mutually construct each other” (p. 16).

Identity is a complex composite of multiple, mediated, and interdependent modes of being. As Mazarella and Pecora (2002) observe, “mainstream culture instructs girls on how to become women – the ways in which the culture approves of growing up girls, and the ways girls negotiate those messages” (p. 3). This project focused on the differing ways in which each of the 12 young women enrolled in my poetry workshop at *Write It*, understood, negotiated, made sense of, or resisted the meanings of the labels and stereotypes that have been attached to their identities and lives. In Foucauldian terms, attempting to produce compliant, passive subjects who are consistently subject to processes of “relentless control, assessment, and

observation” (1975, p. 25) resonates here. The project is grounded in inquiry with an agenda for multiplying, diversifying, and opening up possibilities in young women’s lives.

The poetry that is central to this project focuses on my perspective of how young women ‘do’ their girlhoods. The poems stress how young women “speak in their own right” and disrupt reductive labels such as ‘at-risk’ by confronting and talking back to these labels (Weedon, 1996, p. 16). My aim is that this project is reflexive and critical by “attending to people, places, events, and contexts.”

Additionally, it was my experience in the *Write It* program that the young women actively deconstructed and resisted the pervasive discourses that train them to be “quiet, nice, and invisible” (Bentley, 2002, p. 214). What is necessary is a “deft use of a range of discursive resources to render powerful cultural critiques as a form of participation and citizenship” (Bentley, 2002, p. 216). Foucault’s (1984) ideas about resistance as understood by being generated by the very power it opposes, is important to revisit in this context. “Discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but it also undermines and exposes it” (p. 70).

This feminist educational research project is situated in and contributes to the dynamic field of Girl’s Studies. My contribution to Girl’s Studies is to generate research that centres on “multiplying, diversifying, and transforming the possibilities” for young women’s lives (Gonick, 2003, p. 48). Braiding Girl’s Studies research with poetic inquiry has allowed me to produce creative writing that accommodates and is conducive to multiplicity, complexities, and diversity.

I have endeavoured, through poetry, to articulate a range of experiences and understandings about myself and each of the young women enrolled at *Write It*. The project sought to demonstrate our collective ability within our workshop to create generative, expansive, productive, and supportive spaces within the larger *Write It* space. In our workshops, the young women and myself found that poetry provided meanings into the multiplicity of our lives, experiences, and the *Write It* program. I hope that the poetry I have written for this dissertation provides insight into my dynamic with the young women, and explores our differing subjectivities, stories, and experiences. Additionally, I hope the poetry that I have written for this dissertation provides insights into the perceptions I had about each of the young women and how they each in differing ways responded to the objectifying experiences and labels that were attached to them. By engaging with poetic inquiry I was able throughout the writing process to continuously scrutinize, explore, witness, rethink, insert, and represent not only my own subjectivity and positionality, but also that of the young women, and the *Write It* program.

The young women I worked with at *Write It* had tremendous self-awareness and critical insight. For example, both Frankie and Mabel in different ways understood how *Write It* both oppressed and privileged them. Jessie immediately could identify her experience with misogyny, sexualization, sexual harassment, and sexism. It is my understanding based on my interactions with each of the young women that they could each identify as well as feel the cultural messages and discourses that were at play. These messages and discourses informed the mandate,

rules, and permeated the *Write It* program viscerally and tangibly. Examples of this included the reformation discourses that permeated the *Write It* rulebook with regards to dress code – the expectation was that young women dress in appropriate or modest attire. Another example is having the administrators regularly and randomly checked in on workshops to see how the young women presented and conducted themselves. In my poetry, I argue that each of the young women in differing ways could identify, critique, and challenge these discourses and messages as well as respond to them. Examples of this include Erin’s awareness of being labeled a ‘violent drop-out’ and being pushed out of school, as well as May asserting that her writing is for herself and is not the product of pressures to produce writing at *Write It*.

I witnessed each of the young women’s identification, critique, and challenge of pervasive discourses happening both vocally in our workshop room and written in the pages of their notebooks. I detailed the content of the young women’s poetry in the journal entries that I based this project on. While this project does not contain the young women’s first-hand accounts, or their own poetry, I am relying on my journals as well as my recollection of my many experiences I had interacting with them. It is important that this project and the poetry include the layers of self-awareness and critical insight that they each demonstrated. It was my experience that the young women were able to address the cultural messages that inundated them by measuring these messages against their particular lived experiences and their understandings about themselves. Examples of this include Sky’s assertion that

she is “not a pretty white princess” or “a stupid undisciplined girl” who needs *Write It* to change her life. Lisa also demonstrates this as she writes against the reductive label “crazy.” It is my hope that this project demonstrates how my subjectivity and the young women subjectivities “subconsciously owned positionalities, values, and predispositions all in an effort to not be guided unwittingly and exclusively by predisposition and pull of biography” (Fine, 1994, p. 76).

The poetry workshops provided young women with a tool or 'way in' to themselves. Poetry was a tool to sift through the cacophony of social images, messages, and discourses. This was demonstrated by Joe, who was initially fearful of writing and of her words being used against her. Frankie also illustrated this by speaking of writing against the 'broken' label that had been imposed on her. Sarah also demonstrated this by speaking and writing against the 'slow' stigma or learning disabled label. Poetry enabled the layering of understandings or enabled complex meanings to be made in conscious and purposeful ways. For example, Mabel used the 'broken' label to her advantage by subverting and reclaiming it in poetry. DJ chose to come out as a lesbian in one of her poems and recited it to the group.

There was an active process in our poetry workshop where each of the young women in their own unique ways would take on common social images, messages, and discourses and confront them. The workshops allowed each of the young women to do what they needed to do. As the poetry in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explores, some young women sat with a blank page, some tore pages out, some wrote in every workshop, some wrote regularly and then stopped for a while, some never shared with their peers, some shared intermittently with their peers, some recited their poetry aloud, some performed their poems, and some just read poems quietly to me. Overall, the poetry the young women wrote, sometimes shared, and recited was based on memories of their experiences as 'at-risk' young women or reflections on their current life experiences and positions.

While at *Write It* the young women and I experienced constrained agency. The type and level of constraint depended and was shaped by identity, past experiences, and history. Each of the young women helped carve out spaces for themselves and their words in our workshops through their presence, engagement, negotiation, critique, and craft. They were able to create spaces within our workshop space by suggesting to me directions they would like particular workshops to take. For example, often the young women would suggest subjects for writing prompts, music that we had in the space, and when, how, and for how long we should share our poetry. Additionally, the young women decided in each workshop whether they would share their writing that day in pairs or in the larger group. They determined the timing of breaks, and how to structure feedback in the workshops.

It was my hope that the spaces that were created in our workshops within the larger *Write It* program shifted the understanding of the young women from 'broken,' 'trouble,' 'at-risk,' 'problems' who were seen as stable and fixed subjects, to situated, multifarious, complex, contradictory, and dynamic subjects. Our workshops created writing that addressed the topic of labels/stigmas they experienced as well as created opportunities for each of the young women to assert themselves. It is my hope that both the writing workshop space allowed each of the young women in differing ways to present their own subjectivities. I had to negotiate and navigate my own understanding of the multiple roles I occupied as poet, workshop facilitator, researcher, academic, middle class, heterosexual, white, Jewish, feminist, and confidante. I had to continuously negotiate my positionality

with a critical lens, even though I had to follow the rules and mandate of *Write It*. This was especially the case as I got to know each of the young women. As I explain and explore in the poems in Chapter 4, Janet warned me about Lisa's erratic behaviour and low literacy levels and May's underperformance in the program. I had to continuously negotiate my positionality especially as I was both attempting to understand and see where each of the young women were in their lives and in the program on one hand, and then reconcile that with the needs and expectations of the administration and the program itself, on the other hand as I was an employee at the program.

Poetry can be a particular resource as a poignant tool into engaging and speaking. However, I do not want to give the impression that our poetry workshops were perfect or to romanticize the power of poetry. There was still at times "self-censoring, silencing, and monitoring" (Bentley, 2002, p. 218). However, I was committed while working within the prescriptive mandate and within the constricting *Write It* space, "rather than insisting they conform to the cultural stereotype of the girl with the troubled past" (Bentley, 2002, p. 219). I hoped that our workshops created an engaged space and I tried to be mindful of the different needs of each of the 12 young women and allow them to be where they needed to be at each workshop. Tensions often arose due to the rules and mandate of the *Write It* program, which both the young women and myself had to navigate and negotiate. Examples of this range from not allowing gum and cell phones to pressures to produce writing, be punctual, and perform a "proper, polite, and polished

femininity” (Gonick, 2003, p. 27). I often felt torn and was constantly juggling my own opinions against those of the program’s and the administration while keeping as I noted in my journal *the ears of my ears open, the eyes of my eyes fixed, the heart of my heart present*.

When the young women were ready in our workshop, they each in differing ways used their voices for each of their own unique purposes. They took risks in challenging the silences and fixed understandings of being understood as particular kinds of young women. In their own differing ways they each insisted on taking up space and finding ways to express themselves on the page, in the space, and amongst their peers in the program. The young women refused to “fall mute from a diminished sense of self, [they] refused to be hypervisible, [and they] refused to be locked up from acting out, or disappearing” into silent submission (Bentley, 2002, p. 220). All the original poems I have written in this dissertation speak to my understandings of how each of the young women powerfully expressed refusals to the labeling and imposed understandings of who they are.

Together, we worked on speaking up and out, letting our words and subjectivities press against and stretch through to the edges and confines of *Write It*. I relate our experience of constrained agency to this powerful quote by Lorde (1984):

tell them about how you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there is always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder, and one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside (p. 8).

This dissertation presents my account of the young women who I facilitated in the poetry workshop at *Write It*. In our poetry workshops I had 18 weeks to interact and witness their self-reflective, critical, and nuanced understandings of their lives, experiences, the program, and larger society. Poetic inquiry enabled me to carry out a research project in critical, creative, and purposeful ways that directly punched at the stereotypes, labels, stigmas, and judgments that weigh, strangle, and shadow young women's selves and lives.

Ultimately, the outcome of this project is the bridging of critical feminist, Girls' Studies, educational scholarship, with creative poetic inquiry. In a general sense, this project enabled through the telling of poetic stories, a generative awareness of what I as facilitator, researcher, writer, poet, and witness, as well as a diverse group of young women experienced at this particular non-profit.

Additionally, this project speaks to the range of assertions, meanings, and disruptions that can be created through poetry and poetic inquiry.

This project is also in keeping with Finley's (2003) description of "research that has vitality in the community. It should show a caring and ethical relationship with the participants, create an open space for subsequent dialogue, induce questions, rather than answers, and demonstrate passion, and move others to action" (p. 294). Through poetic inquiry, my aim for this project is to contribute to feminist educational research that has "the utility and social consciousness and ethics of care" (Bentley, 2002, p. 216). I have attempted to do all these things in this dissertation.

Sullivan's (2009) discussion of the occasion for poetry (p. 111) whereby elements of concreteness and emotion are brought to the fore, resonate with me as I conclude this dissertation and discuss the value of poetry and poetic inquiry. Concreteness brings images to life and provides the reader with sensory and embodied experiences. Emotions in poetry are brought about by rich descriptors and clarity of images that spark memories and experiences. Therefore, emotions contribute not only to the aesthetic quality of the poem but the power of the words, which, speaks to the craft of the poem. Another quality of poetry, which I feel is especially important in this project with the young women, is the presence of ambiguity. Poems in this dissertation are examples of ambiguity. My intention was to have the poems be open-ended, have an unresolved complexity, and hold multiple and conflicting truths. This speaks to the dynamic, complex, wide-ranging, and different subjectivities of the young women I worked with at *Write It*, as well as, my own complex subjectivity as the writer of these poems.

I have endeavoured to use poetry with complexity of emotion, contradictions, and richness of experiences. The poems in this project are intended to pause, interrupt, and disrupt dominant, pervasive social understandings about young women. "How we are subject to discourse not simply as subjects through discourse but with the ability to turn around, contemplate, and rework our subjectivity at will" (Hall, 2004, p. 127). Poetry opens up spaces to linger, listen and process. Poetry does not force or foreclose on conclusive findings or understandings. Rather poems invite a stroll whereby, "I walk into a poem and walk out someone else" (Waheed,

2013, p. 16). As Leggo (2012b) states, poetry enables us to have “curiosity, openness, and refuse binary oppositions, simple judgments, and epigrammatic solutions” (p. 142). Barton (2008) asserts that while fixed in language, the poem itself is unstable, and mutable, open to multiplying and perhaps contradictory interpretations” (p. 8). Poetry should be judged for “honoring the fragmentary” (Leggo, 2012b, p. 153). Therefore, poetic inquiry should be appreciated for its ability to linger in the spaces between words and poems and “compose and decentre [while] understanding the identities of the self” (Leggo, 2012, p. 153).

The implications of this project present a pressing need that educators, academics, facilitators, writers, and researchers who focus on work with young women need to carry out. We as feminist educational researchers need to centre our work on young women in order to cultivate specific strategies that offer alternatives to the pervasive and common discourses that exist. We need to work together to continue to expose, challenge, and reform the prescriptive, policing, and punishing discourses that work to “create a certain kind of girl” (Gonick, 2003, p. 5). Additionally, we need to get rid of the ‘fixing’ or ‘reformation’ discourses of youth that are all too prevalent in texts, research, schools, adult education programs, mandates, community groups, and non-profit programs like *Write It*. These discourses speak to Foucauldian understandings as they serve to regulate, surveille, and project social anxieties onto young women (Hoogland, 1993; Roman, 1998; Walkerdine, 1990, 1993). These pervasive understandings serve to keep young women subservient and stuck inside a stable, reductive identity.

Rather what needs to be done is to work to *advance creativity and self-awareness* – a phrase included in the mandate for *Write It*. ‘Fixing’ discourses restrict, limit, and generally do a disservice to the young women these programs are aiming to assist. These discourses are based on damaging and narrow conceptions that there is a learned position or a perfect, acceptable, proper, and ‘normal,’ young female subject. This subject is constructed as hetero-normative, white, Christian, middle-class, educated, driven, and from a nuclear family. Evidence of this was in the handbook the young women were given when they started at *Write It*. I made notes in my journals of some suggestions that were found in this handbook such as: *return to your faith, go to church, write a letter to your Mom and Dad, respect yourself it’s time to focus on yourself and your writing so do not get distracted by young men at this time, and it’s never too late to return to school or at least get your G.E.D.* I then wrote the following words in my journal: prescriptive, directive, and reductive.

This project works to complicate these understandings by representing 12 dynamic young women from various sexualities, races, faiths, classes, educational levels, family makeups, and backgrounds. It is imperative “to be engaged in a social practice of relentless deliberation and to work with difference” (Fine, 1994, p. 65). I am interested in this in order to complicate, expand, and contribute to the range of stories that are available to complex young women

Building on this project, in the future, I would like to create a curriculum for adult education, community programs, or non-profits for young women. This new curriculum would not only challenge the tired discourses that were actively present

at *Write It* but, present alternative nuanced understandings and strategies of how to work with, listen deeply to, and assist young women in useful and supportive ways. Returning to the concept of witnessing, I take up Ropers-Huilman (1999) notion that by being active listeners and seers we in turn, become critical witnesses. We can “heighten the possibilities for renewal within the discourses in which witnessing operates” (p. 32). Creating a new curriculum would allow me to carry through on the lessons, insights, and time I spent at *Write It* with groups of diverse and multi-faceted young women. The five years I spent there were full of complexities, contradictions, and were vividly colourful. It was not merely a seamless space of oppressive meanings. Rather it was a space where the young women and I took up room for “disruptions and inconsistencies and spaces for negotiation” (McRobbie, 1994, p. 163).

Carrying out this project using poetic inquiry was a process where I could utilize my voice and tap into deep reflexivity. The main understandings that emerged when I read through the field note journals I kept and created poetry from them was the various, multiple at times subtle ways young women challenged understandings of themselves and the program, the differing ways they subtly interrupted and troubled objectification, and the desire to have support and assistance from myself and others but on their own terms. Poetry enabled me to inquire into my own subjectivity by tapping into unexpected moments of insight with regards to my own adolescence, feminist politics, the precarious push and pull

of navigating and negotiating the needs of the young women and the responsibilities of the program.

A future project would be designed alongside young women participants. The young women would be co-creators, in a participatory action research project. I would see this as a step towards creating new spaces for them to claim and inhabit. This future project would fuse critical and auto-ethnography whereby the focus would be a critical reflection on the young women and myself creating a workshop curriculum. The data would consist of insights from the young women and I as to how to structure the program. The young women and myself would both write poetry about the process, which would also be central to the inquiry. It would also be carried out with a critical feminist lens in order to deconstruct the cultural myths that exist and order young women's lives. This must be done in order to enable young women to create their own messages, and understandings about themselves, their experiences, and the world they live in. I see young women as both produced through and producing their own bodies and sense of self as a non-linear, ambiguous, fluid, shifting, multiple, complex, and forever becoming category. In future work, I will continue to braid the critical with the creative. I am interested in delving further into critical feminist educational research and poetic inquiry. By doing so, it is my hope that I will continue to create academic scholarship that is reflective "in the making" (Ellsworth, 2005, p.60) and is immediate, unfolding, and moving.

Bettie (2003) inspires me to build from this project by continuing to engage in a “radical reflexivity that acknowledges that there is an always a place from which we speak” (p. 27). To use the language of poet Piercy (1982) it is important as academics, researchers, facilitators, and coordinators of adult education, community programs, and non-profits such as *Write It* to be mindful and continuously ask how we can be of use.

In closing, I wish to stress the importance of being mindful of local realities as a related product of global happenings. *Write It* is a direct product shaped by discourses of difference and tangible social inequities namely, sexism, racism, and classism. An important take away of this emergent and generative project is that it takes up the everyday and often small, lived experiences I had as a facilitator at *Write It*. I focus on reflecting on the many interactions, dynamics, and time spent with 12 diverse young women who were enrolled in the program in order to tell the stories in poetry of what I witnessed. Oliver (2004) explores how witnessing is “seeing with one’s eyes and bearing witness with one’s entire being and body” (p. 81). Witnessing for me was a fluid, dynamic, tangible, and embodied experience that occurred between subjects and environments. Witnessing was an active process for me that occurred when I worked at *Write It* as well as when I was writing the poems for this dissertation. It occurred ear-to-ear, word-to-word, eye-to -eye, word to mouth, mouth to word, journal to poem, and back again. Witnessing occurred when something was spoken as well as unspoken and when something was in the process of being written or was already written.

I utilized poetic inquiry to speak back and against fixed, reductive, and damaging understandings. As I am nearing the end of the conclusion of this dissertation I am still in the process of critically and creatively untangling from my memories and revisiting my layered experiences at *Write It*. I returned and lingered in the pages of my journals to inquire poetically and express poetic stories of witnessing interruptions and finding space within the larger *Write It* space. I choose to untangle further by ending this conclusion with poetry. "Poetic processes can be used as tools of discovery" (Brady, 2009, p. xiii). I will end this dissertation with three long poems that inquire and reflect poetically on what was said, experienced, written, created, and mediated by and through my subjectivity and positionalities.

Poetic conclusion part one

Even if I had to hold
my tongue...

Even if I had to withhold
dilute
what I really thought felt
needed to do...

In the thinking
in the feeling
in the quiet, in the inside
in our workshop space,
in the poems made
 lost
 thought
 and made here
 made now, in this dissertation.

In the writing, in the poems
there was action.

A move
 through.

*What doesn't bend, breaks*¹⁷.

In the bending,
it was compromise
to do what needed to be done
alongside the young women in our workshop with them.

It was not submission to the labels
or the sanctioned understandings
of the young women that *Write It*
adapted from larger social understandings,
constructions holding firm.

Nor were we able to shatter,
shatter the stereotypes or the stigmas all together.
Rather,

¹⁷ Difranco, A. (1994). *Buildings and Bridges, On Out of Range*. New York:
Righteous Babe Records.

we watched them smash,
into a slight splinter.

Rather it was a bending,
that we navigated
we figured out
how to do the bending, and from
where in our bodies where we needed to bend,
from where in our bodies we were able to bend.

It was a not so delicate
or graceful movement,
this bending to balance ourselves as
dynamic,
complex,
contradictory,
differing subjects.

We made use of the space
to create all different kinds
of words and narratives and actions
to reflect ourselves
back
to ourselves.

To speak up
 out
 through.

Words were expressed in a loud whisper,
a writing frenzy
that was expressed
amongst ourselves
and for ourselves.

All that matters
is that we uttered them,
wrote them,
wrote.

And rewrote them,
and spoke them again.

Read them from the pages
of notebooks with crossed out words
and words reformed,

pages torn,
tearing out pages,
stapling pages together upon second thought,
words scribbled
in the margins, pages with
smudged ink, stains,
doodles, words.

We spoke them amongst ourselves
and put them on the page and put them out,
put them forward,
looking beyond this place,
beyond utterances, speaking forward
up
out words
through
words.

Poetic conclusion part two

Seasons flip
like pages from a notebook,
the scribbles of eighteen
weeks spent together
in a room, on the top floor
of the neighbourhood house.

It is really loud in our room,
on the day of the last
workshop.

We all seemed to want to hear
our own voices
 make sounds
 make words
 have sounds ricochet, echo into memories.

Have them ricochet against the walls,
in conversation with each other.

I worry there will be a noise complaint.
That our energy will be misconstrued.

I have put together chapbooks
that we will read from in the last workshop.
(I had to convince the admin to give me money
in the budget,
that the books could be used as a tool for
donors, referees).

I was also given twenty dollars from the budget
to buy snacks for the last workshop.
I asked the young women what they wanted me to buy:
sparkling apple juice
barbeque chips with ripples
green grapes
a fancy cheese
those ginger cookies you made and brought to group that time,
DJ added.

Collectively the young women
chose purple
as the colour for the card stock.
Chose purple

for the cover,
with inside pages in white.

Sarah did a drawing for the front cover,
Jane did a drawing for the back.

Sarah and Jane volunteered their drawings,
the group supported the drawings we used for the book.

Sarah's is the outline of a body,
drawn in thin black marker.
It is a form, female
with words the group of young women and I
wrote collectively together
 all around the outline:

*words take shape,
words shape the figure*

*listen
listen to me
listen to us
speaking up
can you hear me
stop reading me
listen
listen to me
listen to us
we all have things to say
we all speak differently
we all have different things to say
listen
listen to me
listen to us
Write It
poetry workshop
2014.*

The back cover is a drawing of a mouth.
Jane says it can be seen as
*puckering up for a kiss
or about to speak,
or as if the lips are about to
make a sound, they
have things to say.*

The lips are drawn thick

with black ink,
the image pops against
the purple.

I hand-stitched fourteen chapbooks
with neon yellow thread.

Pop,
punch.

Each young woman in the workshop got one,
I also sent one to Frankie,
mailed one to her,
the group wanted her to have one.
Frankie, who was in the group but stayed in Victoria
and never returned to our group, who was trying
to get clean, to have support.

One for me, and one for the administrators
to share with referees and donors
hope to impress them with it.

The sharing of our chapbook with the administrators
was discussed and decided
as a group.

The group asked me to write the foreword
that frames the poems.

But I asked if we could write a collective statement.

*The poems that are included in this chapbook are poems that
were written by the twelve young women participants enrolled
in the poetry workshop of the Write It program.
We are a distinct group of young women from different parts of
Vancouver, B.C. We come from different racial and ethnic
backgrounds; different family backgrounds, different
educational backgrounds, different sexualities but each of us
are passionate writers, poets, and activists.*

*We draw strength from our often difficult experiences at
home, at school, and in society at large. We turned inward and
outward to write, workshop, and rewrite the pieces that make
up this chapbook.*

*Listen, listen to her,
listen to us,
we have so much to say,*

we have so much that needs to be said.

We have so much more to say and it cannot be contained in words, let alone here on this page.

*Read us, our poems,
in our own ways and in our words.*

Poetic conclusion part three: Reflection

“Words are creating a world not describing a pre-existing one” (Orr, 2002, 144).

With these poems

I attempt to grasp.
These poems are a
reaching in.

I am seeking
the ability to confront name complicate explore
 change.

But as I reflect
here in a poem, I see the reaching serves
as a pause
an interruption
allowing me to see the progress of othering
the sting
echo
of stigma
as it reverberates
a dull clang, lingers
it cannot be contained
but it can be explored
confronted.

Pauses are important,
I linger inside these poems
just as I have witnessed the young women lingering
inside their poems
to shape larger spaces,
make room
for all their utterances and meanings.

I am still grasping
both through recollection and now
upon further reflection.

I will always be reaching.

I will take words with me, as seeker,
trust pen to page
braid critical with creative
breathe in that space, stay

linking utterances with
the steady walk of poetry.

As I inquire into
poetry
I am fuller
a smudge of sounds and shout of colour
beating,
working a way through
to see ways further still
pushing through,
reaching
reaching
reaching.

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