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**Finding the Place Where Poets Go:
An Interpretive Inquiry of Aesthetic Experience Through Poetry**

by

Susan Quincie Hart



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Elementary Education

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 2000



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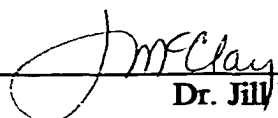
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Abstract

This study is an exploration of what it means to engage with the aesthetic. It draws from the researcher's experiences writing poetry and also from her experiences talking with a group of three adolescent girls who write poetry. In the context of the study, the focus on poetry provided an entry into exploring the nature of aesthetic experience. The research was conducted through a process of interpretive inquiry. It is reported as a series of five papers, each of which deals with distinct but related themes that emerged from the research. Discussion includes engaging the aesthetic imagination, the similarities between writing and the experience of research, poetry as a means of self-invention and the importance of response, teen angst poetry as a form of resistance, and an exploration of what it means to create the aesthetic spaces in which we dwell. An introduction provides the background and context for the research and describes the process of interpretive inquiry. A conclusion provides a look back at the research process and describes some of the theoretical tensions that are woven throughout the five papers. As well, the conclusion provides a brief description of future research projects suggested by the study.

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To my teachers:

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Linda Hart ~ who taught me the meaning of generosity and care; who helps me understand my history even as I embrace my future

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Introduction

...beginnings, middles and ends do not present themselves as such before the fact of poetic creation. Critics may perceive the parts of a plot once it has been constructed, but poets must discover them in the depths of their own experience. ~ E.F. Kaelin, 1989, p. 6

It is never a matter of simply starting from the beginning when describing a research project. There are so many stories that might frame the work, and so many roads not taken, to borrow the words of Robert Frost (1946, p. 117). Often, I feel like the speaker in Frost's poem: "And both that morning equally lay/In leaves no step had trodden black./Oh, I kept the first for another day!/Yet knowing how way leads on to way,/I doubted if I should ever come back".

In many ways, this introduction describes the road not taken. It begins with the story of an earlier research project, and documents the path I followed as I explored the questions and wonders that led to my doctoral research. It tells the story of how I followed a "felt sense", a term Perl described as "the soft underbelly of thought... a bodily awareness that ... encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time" (1986, p. 31). It was this felt sense that first led me to question the meaning of particular experiences in my life, experiences I later learned to equate with the aesthetic. Deeply embedded within this felt sense were the research questions that guide my study: What is the nature of aesthetic experience both for me and for the participants in my study? In what ways might aesthetic experiences help us create

meaning in our lives? What kinds of conditions would be necessary for us to experience the world in aesthetic ways?

Beginnings

In July 1996, I began working with Julia Ellis and Jan Small-McGinley on a project aimed at listening to students perspectives on schooling - students who, in this case, had been labeled as behaviorally challenging. The purpose of this research was to document students' perspectives of schooling in the hope of better understanding their classroom experiences and their views on teaching, learning and classroom life. As educators, we hoped that by listening carefully to what these students had to say, we might begin to find better ways to support children whose behaviour was perpetually challenging.

One of our goals was to produce a video¹ that would capture these students' voices on film. We hoped such a video would help those in education and related fields come to a richer understanding of the various ways students make sense of their classroom experiences. We also believed the students' words might provide a powerful backdrop for thinking about the existing dialogue around how to best live and work with students in classrooms.

As we worked on the video and began imagining possibilities for what it might become, I started to think about the powerful ways film can shape our perceptions and help us understand people or events in the world in new ways. This led me to think about

¹ The completed video is titled Listen Up! Kids Talk About Good Teaching (1997). It is available through Mighty Motion Pictures in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. (1-800-471-5628).

experiences with other art forms: poems, plays, novels, and songs. I started to pay attention to the powerful ways experiences with these creative forms shaped my sense of self as well as my sense of the world around me. I began thinking about those moments in my life when I was moved to understand in a different way after viewing a film, hearing a song, reading a novel, or writing a poem. For example, I thought about the Dar Williams song “When I Was A Boy” (1995) and how it helped me think about my struggle to define myself and be accepted as a feminist. I read and re-read Frank O’Hara’s poem “Why I Am Not A Painter” (1990), and eventually came to see it as a metaphor for research. I thought about how the Spike Lee film Get On The Bus (Borden,1996) helped me sift through my understanding of how race and gender relations are both personal and political struggles. I slowly realized I had an enormous collection of such experiences, ones I continually drew upon to help me understand my life and the lives of others in the world. It is a collection that frames both my own experiences and my understanding of the experiences of others in emotional and expressive ways.

As I began searching for a way to describe or explain these kinds of experiences, I slowly realized that no matter how hard I tried, I could never adequately describe them through everyday language. It was as though the knowing that came from engaging with a poem, song, film, or story existed in a separate realm. In the words of Gadamer: "The work of art that says something confronts us itself. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed...[it] is not something one knows in any other way" (1976, p. 101).

A Search for Language: “Defining” the Aesthetic

I began searching for language with which to articulate my newfound understandings. I read the work of Barone (1993, 1997); Eisner (1984, 1985, 1991, 1992, 1995); Greene (1971, 1989, 1995b, 1995a, 1997), and others in the academic community who write about the importance of experiences with the arts. I read books by Barbieri (1995), Gallas (1994), Heard (1989) and others who describe their work as teachers helping children engage with the very kinds of experiences I was wondering about.

In particular, the writing of Greene helped me find a language with which I could begin talking and writing about my experiences. In a book chapter titled “Texts and Margins”, Greene proposed that “art education be infused with efforts to do aesthetic education” (1995b, p. 114), and differentiated between the two:

By art education I mean, of course, the spectrum that includes dance education, music education, the teaching of painting and the other graphic arts, and (I would hope) the teaching of some kinds of writing. By aesthetic education I mean the deliberate efforts to foster increasingly informed and involved encounters with art works that often free people to be fully present ...To be fully present involves what there is to be noticed in the work at hand, releasing imagination to create orders in the field of what is perceived, allowing feeling to inform and illuminate what is there to be realized, to be achieved. (Greene, 1995b, p. 114)

Greene’s writing was my first encounter with the distinction between the

artistic and the aesthetic. Although I could not articulate the importance of this distinction at the time, I did seize upon Greene's use of the word "aesthetic" and began exploring how others conceived of it.

David Best has also made the distinction between artistic and aesthetic. In his view, these terms "are still almost universally and unquestioningly regarded as synonymous, or, at least, the artistic is regarded as a sort of species of the aesthetic genus" (1992, p. 165). While he acknowledges the two terms are sometimes related, he differentiates between them by asserting that:

...a central feature of an object of *artistic* as opposed to *aesthetic* interest is, roughly, that it [the artistic] can have a subject matter... by contrast with aesthetic feelings, one's artistic feelings in response to works of art... are frequently inseparably bound up with a wide variety of issues from *life generally*... it is the potential of the arts for deepening, extending, sensitizing our understanding and feelings about an immense variety of issues... the assumption that [the arts] are concerned primarily with *aesthetic* pleasure, e.g. with beauty, trivializes the arts. (1992, p. 166)²

Best's work helps me think about the differences between the artistic and the aesthetic. However, my sense of the aesthetic is more in line with Greene's

² For an extended discussion of the distinction between artistic and aesthetic, refer to Best, D. (1992). The Rationality of Feeling: Understanding the Arts in Education. London: Falmer Press.

notion of “releasing imagination” rather than Best’s assumption that the aesthetic is largely concerned with “beauty”. Although Best does not define aesthetic in the same way he defines artistic, one can assume – through examples like the one in the above quotation – that he equates aesthetic with common notions of “beauty”: for example, beauty defined as “an assemblage of graces or properties pleasing to the eye, the ear, the intellect, the aesthetic faculty, or the moral sense” (www.dictionary.com, retrieved 25 September 99).

Habermas would likely agree with Greene’s sense of the aesthetic. He suggested aesthetic experiences should not be judged according to “experts’ critical judgements of taste” (1993, p. 102) and instead referred to the interpretive nature of such experiences:

As soon as [an aesthetic experience] is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems, it enters into a language game which is no longer that of the aesthetic critic. The aesthetic experience then not only renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another. (1993, p. 102)

The word aesthetic has historically been associated with perception. The Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D.) defines aesthetic as “of or pertaining to things perceptible by the senses” and states that “recent extravagances in the adoption of a sentimental archaism as the ideal of beauty have still further removed *aesthetic* and its derivatives from their etymological and purely philosophical meaning” (1989, p. 206). The O.E.D. traces the etymology of the word aesthetic and documents how it came to be connected

with Baumgarten's notion of a "Philosophy of Taste", "theory of the Fine Arts" or "Science of the Beautiful" (1989, p. 206). The entry further suggests that the word *apolaustic* (defined as "devoted to enjoyment", www.dictionary.com, retrieved 25 September 99) might have been a more appropriate term to use in this context.

Abbs' definition of the aesthetic resembles that of the O.E.D. For Abbs, the aesthetic is "a particular mode of responding to and apprehending experience... a mode of intelligence working not through concepts but through percepts, the structural elements of sensory experience... [and] the arts are the symbolic forms for its disciplined elaboration and development" (1989, p. 76). This definition is firmly situated within the tradition of the aesthetic as related to perception rather than beauty. Abbs' description of the aesthetic as intelligence or knowledge working through percepts (something perceived; immediate knowledge derived from perceiving) raises the question of how we might define perception. Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary defines the verb *perceive* as "to become aware of (something) through the senses - see, hear, feel, taste, smell; to come to understand" (1980, p. 587). Again, this sense of perception is closely connected with the work of Greene. In her writing, Greene offers the following explanation for what it means to perceive or come to understand through the aesthetic:

An aesthetic object is not something that exists in the physical world as books exist and sheet music and stretched canvas and blocks of wood... It comes into existence only, as Frank Sibley says, when there is "an appropriate sort of noticing. (1971, pp. 23)

My use of the word aesthetic to describe particular experiences draws from the writing of Abbs and also from the original O.E.D. definition. As a result, my sense of the aesthetic rests more upon the aesthetic as it relates to perception, and less upon the aesthetic as it relates to ideals of beauty. In this sense, while I agree with Best that there is an important distinction between the artistic and the aesthetic, I reject his idea that, in contrast with the artistic, the aesthetic is not concerned with “the expression of a conception of life issues” (1992, p. 173). In fact, I believe the opposite to be true, that the aesthetic can lead to “a release of imagination, the capacity to look through the windows of the actual, to bring ‘as ifs’ into being in experience” (Greene, 1995b, p. 115). Like Greene, I equate the artistic with “formal” training in the various arts; the aesthetic as those experiences which allow us to achieve art works as meaningful in the context of our lives. Like Habermas, I think of the aesthetic as that experience that “renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world” (1993, p. 102).

As Greene wrote:

Aesthetic experiences require conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an ability to notice what is there to be noticed in the play, the poem, the quartet. Knowing “about”, even in the most formal academic manner, is entirely different from constituting a fictive world imaginatively and entering it perceptually, affectively, and cognitively. To introduce students to the manner of such engagement is to strike a delicate balance between helping learners to pay heed – to attend to shapes, patterns, sounds, rhythms, figures of speech, contours,

and lines – and helping liberate them to achieve particular works as meaningful.

(1995a, p. 125)

A Return to Research

As I thought about the aesthetic, and specifically, about the power of aesthetic experience, I realized many of my unarticulated hopes for our video were, in fact, informed by my newly discovered beliefs about the importance of coming to know the world in aesthetic ways. When I spoke with my co-researchers about my vision for the video, I expressed my hope that it be something that would allow viewers to engage aesthetically. I wanted the video to prompt conversation and dialogue, and provide multiple entry points into understanding the experiences of the students we were working with. I rejected the notion of a more traditional documentary, one that might include the “expert” voices of teachers, psychologists and educational researchers interspersed among the voices of the students. Instead, I hoped our video could show the power and passion of the students’ voices without the voices of adults to either validate or censure their words. In short, I hoped the video might help viewers respond aesthetically – as Abbs might say, to respond with perceptual rather than conceptual intelligence.

My role in making the video grew from co-researcher to writer to assistant editor. This meant I was involved in interviewing students during filming, sorting and sequencing video clips according to themes and topics, and working with the editor and producer/director during the editing process to create the final product. The resulting video was, for me, one that might help people engage with the voices of students in personal and emotional ways – to engage aesthetically.

As the video neared completion, I realized I wanted to pursue my questions and wonders about the nature of aesthetic experience in my doctoral research. I thought about how I might extend my work with the video to explore these questions and wonders. I struggled for a long time trying to imagine how I might use the video to study the nature of aesthetic experience.

Eventually, I came to the realization that my work with the video was not something I wanted to use in my ongoing inquiry into the nature of aesthetic experience. I came to understand that even though I tried to help create a video that might engage people in aesthetic ways, I could not predict whether this would indeed happen. When I imagined exploring the aesthetic experiences of others, I realized I needed to use a range of creative materials and contexts, rather than asking someone to watch the video and talk with me about whether they had experienced it in aesthetic ways. Further, I had come to understand that although I found film to be a powerful and engaging medium, it was not a form in which I was particularly literate, despite my experiences with the video project. Also, the more I thought about aesthetic experience, the more I realized I wanted to engage not only with the experience of perceiving an aesthetic object that has been created by someone else, but also the experience of creating an aesthetic object for oneself.

Changing Paths: Exploring the Aesthetic Through Poetry

As I continued thinking about how I would approach my research, I realized I could not predict whether someone would engage in aesthetic ways with any one particular prompt, whether it be a film, poem, song, novel, painting or performance.

Because of this, I endeavored to create a research context that was open-ended, one that might allow multiple opportunities for experiencing creative and aesthetic moments. After taking personal inventory of my own experiences with the arts, I realized I was most literate in the areas of music and poetry, with music being the area in which I had the most formal training. However, I rarely created musical works; most often I simply practiced and performed works by other composers. Unlike music, poetry was something I had been creating since childhood; it was a genre in which I could both “read” and “write”. Music, for me, was more closely connected with the artistic; poetry with the aesthetic.

With poetry as the form through which I would explore the aesthetic, I began thinking about others who used poetry as a way of engaging with the world in aesthetic ways. One such writer and teacher, Karen Gallas, described the arts as “a way of knowing”. In her book The Languages of Learning (1994), her students use poetry, among other things, to acquire knowledge about specific subject matter and to express their knowledge. One of her first grade students talked about how poetry can “teach you” in the following way: “A poem is a little short, and it tells you some things in a funny way. But a science book, it tells you things like on the news... But in a poem, it’s more... the poem teaches you but not just with words” (p. 136).

As I continued reading, I discovered other writers, teachers and researchers who seemed to share my belief that through aesthetic experience, and, more specifically, through poetry, we may come to see the world differently. In Sounds from the Heart -

Learning to Listen to Girls, for example, Barbieri described why she used poetry with her students:

I surround my students with poetry so that they will come to love language and so that they will look at their worlds in new ways... The content of what we read is important to me and to them, as we become aware that poems do shed light on the lives we are leading; the connections are strong. (1995, p. 126)

Georgia Heard described poetry in the classroom as a way to shatter the silence that surrounds “telling the truth and expressing emotion” (1989, p. xx). For her, poetry is an “opportunity for kids to learn the steady, constant expression of what’s true to them” (1989, p. xx). In a similar fashion, Leggo described his autobiographical poems as a way to “fend off forgetfulness, to stake a claim for significance by shaping a story that signifies” (1997, p.68). Lorde described poetry as a “vital necessity of existence” (1984, p. 37), one that “forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (1984, p. 37). Finally, van Manen wrote that “from a phenomenological point of view we may gain more interpretive understanding and more profound insights into human life from a great novel or a great poem than from some reputable behavioral social science text” (1984, p.51).

Through reading these words and the words of others, I have begun to understand not only how poetry provides us with other ways of seeing, but also

how it may provide us with a form through which we can re-interpret what we already know. As Greene states: "... one way of finding out what [we] are seeing, feeling, and imagining is to transmute it into some kind of content and to give that content form" (1995b, p. 113). As well, when we re-interpret ourselves and the world through poetry, we may "render conscious the process of making meaning, a process that has much to do with the shaping of identity, the development of a sense of agency, and a commitment to a certain mode of praxis (Greene, 1997, p. 394). We may also find openings that allow us to examine things that generally remain hidden from view; aspects of ourselves and the world that may be difficult to give expression to, either because we lack the language to talk about them or because there is no appropriate social space that will allow for their expression. As Barbieri wrote: "As we read [and write] poetry, we see that nothing is off limits; that the things poets notice, wonder about, believe in, cherish, fear, or dread can all be brought out onto the page and examined" (1995, p. 135).

Describing the Research

I first began thinking about how my research might unfold during the summer of 1997. I decided to talk with two young women who share my love of writing poetry. One of the women was a former student who used poetry in several of her course assignments; the other was the sister of a personal friend.

I met with each of these women on two separate occasions for an hour and a half. My goal in talking with them was to begin exploring others' experiences of reading and writing poetry; I wanted to understand, for example, whether these women shared my

sense of the powerful ways poetry sometimes shaped my sense of self and my sense of others in the world. Before meeting with each of them, I prepared a series of open-ended questions to serve as a guide (see appendix A), but tried to let each conversation unfold in its own way. I tape-recorded and transcribed these conversations in the hope of discovering a research approach that might help me understand how to best explore the aesthetic through poetry.

These initial conversations helped confirm my decision that poetry was a rich and fruitful way to explore the nature of aesthetic experience. However, as I reflected on my conversations with these women, and thought more about the direction I hoped my research would take, I realized I wanted to explore the writing and lives of adolescent girls.

As a poet³, I was most prolific during adolescence. During this time in my life, I recall using poetry as a way of expressing myself - as a way of expressing things that could not be said, things that needed to find a way out of my mind and my heart. I also recall writing out of the sheer pleasure of playing with language and finding a form for an image, moment or memory.

As I thought about my poetic history and its roots in my own adolescence, I realized I wanted to work with adolescent girls. I knew that girls of this age were often prolific writers, and that many wrote poetry as a way of expressing themselves. I decided

³ Throughout this dissertation, I use the word “poet” to describe myself as well as the adolescent girls in my study. My use of the word poet in this context corresponds with Merriam Webster’s first definition: “one who writes poetry: a maker of verses” rather than their second definition: “one (as a creative artist) of great imaginative and expressive capabilities and special sensitivity to the medium” (www.m-w.com, retrieved 28 September 99).

to form a writing group, where I would work with a small number of girls in a “writer-in-residence” type of role. I imagined coming together once a week to read and write poetry, to share our words and the words of other writers, and to talk about the process and the power of writing.

I began talking with colleagues at the university about the possibility of working with adolescent girls. During one of these conversations, a colleague provided me with the name and telephone number of a language arts teacher at a local high school. I telephoned this teacher and described my imagined writing group, then asked whether she knew any girls who might be interested in participating. She was very supportive of my request, and told me she knew three or four ninth grade girls who might want to participate. She volunteered to ask the girls if they would be interested in meeting me and hearing more about the writing group. In all, five girls said they were interested. Through their teacher, I arranged to come to their school to meet with them and tell them more about the research.

In January 1998, I first met the girls. We spent 45 minutes together after school in their language arts classroom. I introduced myself, talked about my vision for the writing group, and provided them with letters and permission forms (see appendix B for ethics information). After this initial meeting, all five of the girls said they would like to be involved in the study; however, for a variety of reasons, only three of the girls ended up participating.

I met with the girls on thirteen different occasions between February 1998 and October 1998, a time spanning the end of their ninth grade year and the beginning of their

tenth grade year. At each of these meetings, I tape-recorded and later transcribed our conversations (see appendix C for a chart listing dates, topics of conversations; appendix D for a sample transcript excerpt). The girls and I also met informally a number of times; conversations during these meetings were neither tape-recorded nor transcribed.

Most of our meetings were held in a small, private student lounge at the university. Each week, I picked the girls up after school, and drove them to the university. Our meetings lasted anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half. Occasionally, the girls met me at a coffee shop close to campus and we held our meetings there. During the summer following their ninth grade year, I met with each of the girls individually. These one-on-one conversations were tape-recorded and transcribed. Near the end of our time together, I invited the girls to carry my small hand-held tape recorder with them for one or two weeks and record any thoughts or ideas they had that related to poetry or “inspiration”. These monologues were transcribed along with the group and individual conversations. All transcripts and subsequent research papers were shared with the girls in order to give them a chance to respond.

During our first official meeting as a “writing group”, I expressed my desire that the girls and I structure our time according to a shared sense of what we might accomplish together. Because we did not know each other very well, and because the girls came to that first “official” meeting with an expectation that I would be the “adult” and direct the activities, we had a difficult time negotiating this shared space. Since they clearly wanted me to “be the adult”, I relented and began sharing some of my ideas regarding activities we might undertake during our time together. The girls responded

quickly to each suggestion, embracing some and rejecting others. By the end of that first meeting, we decided that our writing group would, in fact, be a conversation group; the girls told me they were not interested in writing together since they felt it would be impossible to be “inspired” at a prescribed time every week. Instead, they decided to bring poems they had already written; we would read these and talk about them together. We also decided to use the coil scribblers and pencils I provided as “free-writing” books; we would begin each meeting with a five or ten minute free writing session and then take the conversation from there.

Our conversations spanned many topics. Sometimes, one of the girls would bring a poem she had written and we would talk about it. Other times we talked about their school experiences, their friends or families. Sometimes I could not resist asking an explicit question; perhaps predictably, I learned less about inspiration, for example, when I asked the girls when they felt inspired than when I simply listened to them talk about their experiences.

During the research, I attempted to make use of a research journal. The journal was intended to be a place where I could record my thoughts and wonders about what was emerging in the research and also about my experiences as a researcher. I tried, unsuccessfully, to write in this journal on a regular basis. However, despite my failure to use the journal as an ongoing method of data collection, some excerpts still appear in the body of my dissertation.

Prior to, during, and after the data collection period with the girls, I read books and articles related to my study. As I read, I used scribblers to record quotations from

particular authors and wrote personal reflections on what I was reading. During the course of the research, I filled nine such scribbles; each of these is numbered and labeled with removable page markers according to author and/or subject.

Probably my most powerful source of inspiration and reflection during the research process was my weekly meeting with my advisor. These meetings were structured according to my needs: sometimes we spent the hour talking about ideas I had or themes I thought were emerging in my conversations with the girls, other times we discussed revisions to my writing, still other times we spoke more philosophically about the challenges of writing or research. For me, these meetings provided a space for reflection and careful thought that was unavailable through other means; it was a time when I could genuinely focus my attention on my research experiences and, at the same time, hear another person's thoughtful responses to my ideas.

Data analysis involved many steps. First, I read and re-read each of the transcripts, trying to get a sense of the themes that were emerging. Eventually, as I began to flesh out ideas for individual papers, I made copies of each transcript in order to cut out the sections that addressed specific themes or topics. I glued these cutouts onto large sheets of chart paper labeled with individual themes. These chart papers hung on the walls of my home office; I referred to them constantly as I wrote and re-wrote drafts of individual papers. During this writing process, I also continually referred back to my scribbles, most of which were coded according to theme and topic as well. However, this data analysis process was not as straightforward as simply identifying themes, cutting and pasting transcript excerpts together and augmenting these with pertinent quotations.

Often, I would begin with one idea for a paper, and then, through the process of writing, would change directions or focus my attention in a different way. During these times, the floor by my computer would be covered with highlighted articles, bits of transcripts, and numbered scribbles as I frantically searched for that dimly remembered quotation or transcript excerpt that supported the thesis of a particular paper. It was a messy and ambiguous process, one that was at the same time organized and rational, creative and unpredictable.

The Process of Interpretive Inquiry

Each of the papers⁴ that follow represents one loop in an ongoing process of inquiry. The research as a whole, then, might be represented as a series of loops, with each joined to the next, and each growing out of the one that came before. This metaphor is one that has been described by Ellis (1998); it is a metaphor that draws largely upon the writings of Gadamer (1976) and Packer and Addison (1989). According to Ellis (1998), “each loop may represent a separate activity that resembles data collection and interpretation” or, alternately, “each loop may represent consecutive efforts to reinterpret one constant text or set of data” (p. 19). In Ellis’ work, these loops are a way of describing the process of interpretive inquiry, a term that has been described by Packer and Addison (1989) as one that is “pedagogical rather than theoretical, moving us to action as it leads us to gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and others” (p. 9). Ellis’ description of interpretive inquiry as a spiral or series of loops suggests that each of the

⁴ This is a paper format dissertation. While each of the five papers is integrated within the larger format of the complete dissertation, each is also a stand-alone piece. For this reason, the papers contain necessary repetition in terms of clarifying the meaning of the aesthetic as well as describing the research context.

loops in any particular study can be seen as representing the forward and backward arcs of the hermeneutic circle.

Packer and Addison (1989) described the circular process of interpretive inquiry – the hermeneutic circle - as one that begins with our everyday practical understanding of the world. This practical understanding informs the forward arc of the circle. When we try to understand a particular phenomenon, we attempt to make sense of it according to our previous knowledge and experience. This previous knowledge and experience both creates and limits new possibilities for understanding (Smith, 1989).

The reverse arc of the circle involves responding to what has been discovered thus far through our inquiry. It is here where we often find things that surprise us; these unexpected dimensions of the study are called uncoverings (Ellis, 1998, p. 22). According to Ellis, these uncoverings are essential because they enable the researcher to “understand the problem or question differently and so to reframe it usefully for planning the next step in the inquiry” (p. 22). This circularity of understanding may be repeated many times over the course of the research; as each new understanding or insight is uncovered, it informs our ongoing inquiry and moves us again into the forward arc of the circle.

I find Ellis’ loop metaphor particularly helpful in thinking about this process, since the image of a series of loops suggests a continuous line of inquiry, rather than a circle that closes in on itself. In thinking about my own research, I have come to see each of my papers as well as my conclusion as loops in this ongoing process of inquiry.

“Finding the Place Where Poets Go: Engaging the Aesthetic Imagination” represents the first loop of my inquiry into the aesthetic. This paper sets a context for the remaining four papers and conclusion; it addresses many of my initial wonders about what it means to experience the world in aesthetic ways. In this piece, I explore what it means to engage the aesthetic imagination and what the role of inspiration is in this engagement. Finally, I share three stories that emerged in my conversations with the adolescent girls in my study and describe how these stories help me understand what it means to engage the aesthetic imagination and what the implications are for such engagement.

“Living Without Closure: Writing and the Experience of Research” represents a second loop in my inquiry. This paper articulates one of the uncoverings I discovered during the course of my research: that research and writing are intimately connected. It is a paper that has its origins in an independent study course I was completing during the early stages of my work with the girls. “Living Without Closure” documents my growing understanding as a researcher through describing how the writing process mirrors the research process. The paper draws from a wide range of literature on writing as well as on some of my experiences as a researcher. Writing this paper not only helped me articulate some of my beliefs about the nature of research, it also helped me develop confidence in a process that is not easily defined or articulated.

“Inventing Ourselves through Poetry: Truth, Imagination and Response” represents the third loop of my inquiry into the aesthetic. This paper focuses on poetry as a means of exploring aesthetic experience; it is a piece devoted to articulating the various

ways poetry might help us make sense of ourselves and our place in the world. In writing this paper, I was able to merge some of my own experiences with writing with the experiences of the adolescent girls in my study. I was also able to explore the meaning of response and revision, both in my own writing and in the writing of the girls. For me, this paper raises important questions around how poetry not only helps us experience the world in aesthetic ways, but also hints at how poetry can help us make connections with others.

“Dismissing Voices of Resistance: Teen Angst Poetry” represents a fourth loop in my inquiry. This is a paper that once again returns to the exploration of how poetry might help us define ourselves and our place in the world. However, rather than describing how the adolescent girls in my study use poetry to “compose their lives”, to borrow the words of Bateson (1989), this paper describes the girls’ understanding and dismissal of “teen angst” as a specific genre of poetry. Through exploring the girls’ experiences with this genre as well as my own experiences with writing that has been similarly cast, this paper raises issues around how certain discourse traditions and communities label our words and then use these labels to either accept or dismiss the writing of those who reside outside of that tradition or community.

The fifth loop of my inquiry is represented by the paper “Authoring Our Own Aesthetic: Stories of Resistance and Possibility”. This paper describes yet another uncovering, one that led me to question how aesthetic spaces are defined in the lives of children. In this paper, I tell two kinds of stories: stories of resistance and stories of possibility. The stories of resistance illustrate the subtle and not-so-subtle ways the

adolescent girls in my study sometimes resisted aesthetic spaces as defined by others. In contrast, the stories of possibility are ones that help me think about what it means to be able to author our own aesthetic in the service of composing our lives.

The final loop of my inquiry is the conclusion. In this section, I return to each of the research questions that guided my study: What is the nature of aesthetic experience both for me and for the participants in my study? In what ways might aesthetic experiences help us create meaning in our lives? What kinds of conditions would be necessary for us to experience the world in aesthetic ways? Within the framework of these three questions, I describe my understanding of the aesthetic and introduce some of the theoretical tensions that are woven throughout the five papers that make up this dissertation. From here, I look forward to possibilities for future research. Finally, I borrow the words of Smith (1991) and Greene (1995a) to describe the importance of “taking up the interpretive task for oneself” (Smith, 1991, p. 199) - a task that depends upon a “breaking free, a leap, and then a question” (Greene, 1995a, p. 6).

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Paper One

Finding the Place Where Poets Go: Engaging the Aesthetic Imagination

...the aesthetic refers to a particular form of sensuous understanding, a mode of apprehending through the senses the patterned import of human experience. The arts, in particular, work through this aesthetic mode and it is this which gives them their fundamental intellectual unity. Through exacting perceptual and imaginative engagement, through acts of heightened and sustained bodily attention, the arts are radically involved in the quest for understanding. ~ Abbs, 1989, p. xi

During my time as an undergraduate student in education, I took a course that introduced me to the writings and teachings of Plato. The course was structured largely around Socratic dialogue as a way of exploring issues and themes in education. One of the themes that kept recurring in class discussion was Plato's idea that music brought harmony to the soul. I was fascinated with this idea and I struggled for a long time, trying to make sense of it.

Several years later, I enrolled in a music harmony course. Although I had been playing piano for over ten years, this was the first time I had ever studied composition. I spent the first half of the course trying to master the rules of composition as my teacher set them out. Eventually, as the rules became part of an emerging literacy, I began to think about my simple compositions in terms of how they sounded and what they expressed, rather than simply if they followed the rules. I began doing my homework at

the piano, plunking out simple melodies which I later harmonized. It was during one of these homework assignments when I recall having a moment of recognition, a moment when I finally understood what Plato might have meant by the idea that music brings harmony to the soul. To compose music is to unite reason and emotion – two of the elements of the soul, according to Plato. It is an intensely rational activity that follows mathematical rules, yet, at the same time, is able to express profound emotion.

In that moment of recognition at the piano, I understood for the first time how intimately connected reason and emotion are in music. I understood how music can express elation or sorrow, for example, through complex combinations of rhythms and harmonies, yet rhythm and harmony alone are not what makes music music. Somewhere within those rhythms and harmonies lies emotion, whether communicated through the body of a performer or through the particular choices of the composer – specific chord progressions, dynamic levels, or tempos for example. Even in my own rudimentary understanding of composition, I was able to begin combining musical elements in ways that expressed something beyond the notes on the page. While I had always understood something of the union of reason and emotion in music, this understanding was so much clearer after I began studying composition. Previously, when I sat down to play a Chopin nocturne, I could appreciate the mental and physical skill required as well as feeling moved by the haunting chords of his “night music”. However, until I began composing simple melodies and harmonies for myself, I had a limited sense of what it meant to craft the materials of music into a form that could speak so powerfully to the emotions. For me, this illustrates the nature of aesthetic experience: it describes that moment of

recognition where one is able to hold seemingly disparate elements in the same hand, and to perceive, both through the intellect and the affect, the patterns and harmonies that connect those elements.

Researchers and philosophers such as Abbs (1989), Best (1992), Greene (1995, 1971) and Habermas (1993) have written about aesthetic experience. For example, Habermas wrote "...aesthetic experience... not only renews the interpretations of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another" (1993, p. 102). Like Habermas, I believe attending to the patterns and harmonies of aesthetic experience is a way of orienting oneself to the world in order to understand more fully. In searching for a way to express this idea, I was reminded of a poem I discovered several years ago in an anthology titled Til All the Stars Have Fallen: Canadian Poems for Children (1989, p. 32). The poem was written by Sandra Bogart, and is titled "Poems Can Give You"¹:

Poems can give you
 double vision.
 They make you see
 the colours you feel
 when you're sad,
 the sound of a red,
 red sunset,
 the smells of happiness,
 the flavours of the seasons,
 Double vision
 not blurred
 but crisp as last night's snow.

¹ Reprinted with permission from Til All the Stars Have Fallen: Canadian Poems for Children (1989). D. Booth (Ed.), Toronto, ON: Kids Can Press Ltd.

For me, Bogart's metaphor of double vision is intimately connected with what it means to experience the world in aesthetic ways. It suggests a particular way of seeing, a particular orientation to the world, one that depends as much on the sensory and the emotional as the intellectual. With double vision, we are, as Bogart wrote in her poem, more able to see the colours we feel, smell happiness and taste the flavours of the seasons. In my own exploration of the nature of aesthetic experience, I have come to understand such an orientation to the world as having a strong and vital connection to Bateson's idea that we understand the world by learning to invent it: "...all peoples – and all individuals – learn to understand the world by learning to invent it, and it is in the invented world that we must survive. Our best chance of survival lies in seeing and inventing that world as beautiful, inventing it with the precision of wonder" (1994, p. 226). I like Bateson's use of the phrase "inventing [the world] with the precision of wonder". It is a phrase that describes what Bogart does in her poem when she talks about the double vision that poetry makes possible. It is a phrase that reminds me of what it means to compose music: to work with an almost defiant precision, one that paradoxically seeks to constrain the notes within the necessary rules, while, at the same time, insists they leave the page behind in order to dwell in the hearts and minds of listeners. It is a phrase that captures the elusive quality of aesthetic experience, a phrase that reminds me of trying to grasp a warm handful of sand: the more tightly you hold it, the more it escapes you. With this in mind, I will try to describe my understanding of the nature of aesthetic experience - writing, I hope, with what Bateson might see as the precision of wonder.

Another Way of Seeing: Peripheral Vision

In her book Peripheral Visions, Bateson (1994) describes her work and life across several cultures and countries. She documents her emerging sense of possibility for understanding through using peripheral vision, that vision which is always at the edge of perception and consciousness. Bateson uses a metaphor of peripheral vision to describe how important learning is sometimes only visible to us out of the corner of the eye, in much the same way we are able to see a falling star more clearly when we are not looking directly at it. When I think about Bateson's notion of peripheral vision, I am reminded of Bogart's double vision; for me, these describe a similar orientation toward the world. While Bateson describes peripheral vision as a vision that allows us to see the familiar in new ways, Bogart describes how poems can make you see the colours you feel. In both prose and poem, these "visions" describe creative acts of understanding or invention, ones that require us to attend to that which is not immediately in focus. In many ways, this reminds me of my experience at the piano, when I was finally able to make sense of the idea that music brought harmony to the soul. Through the creative act of composing, I was able catch hold of an idea that had been dwelling on the very edges of perception and consciousness; I was able to see more clearly through attending to that which was in my peripheral vision.

For Bateson, attending to peripheral vision also means living with the ambiguity that is inevitably present when one accepts the diversity of visions that make up the world. Rather than avoiding that which is out of focus, Bateson argues we should embrace it - since it is this very ambiguity that makes creative acts possible:

Ambiguity is the warp of life, not something to be eliminated. Learning to savor the vertigo of doing without answers or making shift and making do with fragmentary ones opens up the pleasures of recognizing and playing with pattern, finding coherence within complexity, sharing within multiplicity... We are called to join in a dance whose steps must be learned along the way, so it is important to attend and respond. Even in uncertainty, we are responsible for our steps. (1994, p. 8)

In the above quotation, Bateson is asking us to acknowledge our responsibility to attend and respond to the ambiguity that makes up the “warp of life”. In so doing, we might learn to see ourselves and the world in new ways, and perhaps learn to compose our lives differently: “... to compose lives of grace we need to learn an artful and aesthetic pattern of attention to the environment of those lives” (1994, p. 109). In order to develop such an “artful and aesthetic pattern of attention”, we must be able to attend to those moments of recognition in our lives that come in and through creative acts of understanding. My experience at the piano is only one example of what it means to have such a moment of recognition; it was an experience that would not have been possible had I not been in a situation that somehow allowed me to see what was in my peripheral vision. I believe the ability to recognize such moments - to use an artful and aesthetic pattern of attention - is the work of the aesthetic imagination.

As I write, I try to pay careful attention to the words I use to name the aesthetic. Most often, I refer to “aesthetic experience”, sometimes to “aesthetic understanding”, and now, I note with some dismay I have used the phrase “aesthetic imagination”. I suppose

this may be one of the perils of writing with the “precision of wonder”. I do not know how the words “aesthetic imagination” managed to tack themselves onto the end of the preceding paragraph; all I know is they somehow belong there. The fit is a good one, since so much of aesthetic experience – experiencing the world in aesthetic ways – happens in and through the imagination. In many ways, this reminds me of a story from a book by Kenneth Koch called Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children To Write Poetry. In his book, Koch recounts the story of a third grade student who misspelled “swarm of bees” and ended up with “swan of bees”. In the story, Koch uses “swan of bees” to show his students an example of the “artistic benefits that can come from error and chance” (1970, p. 18). While the phrase “aesthetic imagination” did not present itself to me through a misspelled word, it did write itself onto the page quite unexpectedly. In writing with the precision of wonder, I encountered a swan of bees – the aesthetic imagination. This is an imagination that other writers and researchers have also encountered: for example, Greene (1995) describes an aesthetic education as one that might release imagination (p. 114). For me, the aesthetic imagination helps me understand how music can bring harmony to the soul and how poems can make you see the colours you feel.

Engaging the Aesthetic Imagination

Bateson (1994) said, “insight ... refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another” (p. 14). This is the very process I was engaged in when I finally made sense of the idea that music brought harmony to the soul;

it was a process that enabled me to set my experience of learning about Plato beside my experience of learning to compose music. In a similar way, I hoped to understand something about what it means to engage the aesthetic imagination through setting my understanding of the aesthetic beside the experiences of three adolescent girls who participated in my doctoral study.

My study began with a realization that, in my own life, I often used songs, poems, stories, novels and films to help make sense of my experience of self and others in the world. As I thought about the power of these experiences, I realized I had no language to adequately describe the knowing and learning that emerged when I was moved to thought or action after hearing a song or reading a poem, for example. Eventually, I came to see this kind of knowing as residing in the aesthetic, a word Abbs (1989) defined as “a mode of intelligence working not through concepts but through percepts, the structural elements of sensory experience” (p. 76). For me, this definition is particularly helpful since it combines the intellectual and the sensory, suggesting a union that might help explore questions around what it means to perceive patterns and harmonies through both the intellect and the affect – and, in so doing, to learn to engage the aesthetic imagination and hold the seemingly disparate elements of our experience together in the same hand.

The research questions that guided my study were deeply embedded in this sense of the aesthetic. In the early stages of my research, I followed what Perl described as a felt sense: “the soft underbelly of thought ... a bodily awareness that ... encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time” (1986, p. 31). Later, I was able to use language to articulate the questions that guided my study: What is the

nature of aesthetic experience both for me and for the participants in my study? In what ways might aesthetic experiences help us create meaning in our lives? What kinds of conditions would be necessary for us to experience the world in aesthetic ways?

In February 1998, I began working with three adolescent girls who wrote poetry. The girls attended a local junior/senior high school and were identified by their language arts teacher as girls who were interested in participating in a research group focused on poetry. When I began the research, my intent was to talk with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler² in order to learn about the aesthetic dimensions of their writing and their lives. I hoped we might write poetry together, and share our writing in order to learn about the aesthetic from each other. My focus on poetry emerged from my own experiences as a writer. I knew I wanted to focus on an art form as a way of accessing the meaning of aesthetic experience and poetry was something I had been writing since childhood. Unlike music, where I most often performed work created by others, poetry was a genre where I felt comfortable creating for myself. This was an important part of my exploration of the aesthetic, since I hoped to come to a better understanding not only of what it means to experience the world in aesthetic ways, but also what it means to create an aesthetic product that gives form to those experiences.

When I think about my research with the girls, I realize I was working with the “precision of wonder”, as I am now, writing this. While the girls and I met on a weekly

² The adolescent girls in the study chose their own pseudonyms. The unusual names reflect the creativity and uniqueness of each of the girls.

basis at a prescribed time and place, there was little else that governed our time together. I knew I wanted to learn something of their experience as poets, something about the aesthetic dimensions of their writing and their lives. However, my initial assumption that we would write poetry together proved wrong. Early on in the research process, the girls made it clear they would prefer not to use our time together for writing, since they believed it would be difficult to “be inspired” at a prescribed time once a week. As a result, even in the early stages of our time together, I was called upon, to revisit the words of Bateson, to “join in a dance whose steps must be learned along the way” (1994, p. 8). As the girls and I worked together, learning the steps to our dance, I learned to pay close attention, to carefully attend and respond, and to savor those moments of recognition where the patterns and harmonies of the girls’ lives and writing presented themselves to me.

Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler never spoke directly about the meaning of the aesthetic in their lives. They never mentioned the words “aesthetic experience”, “aesthetic understanding” or “aesthetic imagination”; they never described specific incidents or encounters with the aesthetic I might later refer to in the transcripts of our conversations. We did not share a common language for talking about the aesthetic, although I am convinced it lives in the stories they shared and the conversations we had about their writing and their lives. I sometimes wonder how the research would have unfolded differently had the girls and I shared more of a common language for talking about the aesthetic. I wonder what would have happened had I been able to introduce the phrases “aesthetic experience”, “aesthetic understanding” and “aesthetic imagination”

during our conversations. At the time, however, I was still trying to work through my own understanding of what it meant to engage in aesthetic ways, so all I could do was listen carefully to what the girls were saying and try to make sense of their words in the context of my own emerging understandings. As a result, this paper does not “point to” specific examples of the aesthetic in the girls’ lives, and then attempt to explain the meaning of such examples. Rather, this paper is an exploration of those moments during my time with the girls when I glimpsed something of the aesthetic as I have come to understand it; it is a paper filled with wanderings and wonderings about what it means to engage the aesthetic imagination.

Inspiration and the Aesthetic Imagination

When Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler first told me they did not want to use our time together for writing because they believed it would be difficult to “be inspired” at a prescribed time once a week, I did not question them. This way of thinking about inspiration rang true for me, particularly when I thought about my experiences as an adolescent poet.

When I wrote as an adolescent, most often I recall writing out of inspiration—that is, writing when I had a creative feeling or impulse. Rarely did I sit down to write as a matter of course, without first feeling inspired to do so. When I think about writing now, and read books by writers on writing, I understand more about the discipline required to work as a writer. For example, in a book of quotations compiled by Donald Murray, Rosellen Brown is quoted as saying: “... if you’re going to make writing succeed you have to approach it as a job. You don’t wait for inspiration. The muse does not do your

work for you” (Murray, 1990, p. 49). More and more, my own poetry writing involves such discipline; I have recognized that in order to successfully write on a regular basis, I cannot often rely on my muse to “do the work for me”. However, even though I value Brown’s words and understand her sense of the discipline of writing, I have to admit placing a different value on poetry that comes as a direct result of “feeling inspired” than on poetry I sit down and deliberately work at³. This is not to say “inspired poetry” is superior to poetry crafted in a more disciplined and deliberate way. It is simply a recognition that, for me, “inspired poetry” is a kind of gift, a small miracle of vision. Although I never experienced a similar “miracle of vision” with regard to writing music, I have studied composers who experienced such inspiration. For example, Franz Schubert was said to have composed many of his songs, of which there are over six hundred, in a “white heat, sometimes five, six, seven in a single morning” (Machlis, 1984, p. 71). In many ways, this kind of inspiration, whether in poetry or music, reminds me of what Dar Williams (1996) refers to as “the blessings” in a song by the same name:

And the blessings were like poets that we never find time to know,/ But when
time stopped I found the place where poets go./And they said, “Here have some
coffee, it’s straight, black and very old,”/ And they gave me sticks and rocks and
stars and all that I could hold .../... It’s not a release, it’s not a reward, it’s the
blessings,/ It’s the gift of what you notice more...

³ It may be more helpful to think about “discipline” and “inspiration” as two ends of a continuum rather than discrete approaches to writing; however, for the purposes of this paper, I find it helpful to differentiate between the two.

For me, this “gift of what you notice more” is something that happens as a result of engaging the aesthetic imagination. Greene (1971) wrote about this kind of noticing when she described the aesthetic object: “An aesthetic object is not something that exists in the physical world as books exist and sheet music and stretched canvas ... It comes into existence only, as Frank Sibley says, when there is ‘an appropriate sort of noticing’” (p. 24). When I think about what the girls have said about inspiration, I wonder whether they are indeed talking about this very thing—that is, a certain noticing that occurs when one engages the aesthetic imagination. For example, Jeremiah described the role inspiration plays in her writing by saying, “I don’t write poetry every single day, it’s not something that just like - okay now it’s time for a poem - you know, it just sort of happens ... like a moment that just happened to all perfectly fit in place” (transcript, August 11, 1998).

If I really think about what the girls have told me about what it means to be inspired, I can understand why they didn’t view our time together as a space for writing. For Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, and, for me, inspiration is not something to be summoned at will. Rather, it is a state of being that presents itself, a “moment that just happened to all perfectly fit in place”, one that pulls you toward expression. Ranma described this pull when she said, “Oh, I wanna write, just right now” (transcript, March 16, 1998). Skyler described something similar when she said, “Sometimes I think things are so beautiful, or not, the opposite, but I just want to get it down on paper” (transcript, April 6, 1998). The girls’ views on inspiration and their inability to see our time together as an inspirational space led to many questions: When did the girls feel inspired? What

kinds of conditions did they see as necessary for catching hold of those moments when everything “just happened to all perfectly fit in place”? When were they able to engage their aesthetic imaginations?

When I thought about these questions, I realized that the girls most often described moments of inspiration as occurring in situations characterized by a kind of openness or freedom, ones that allowed a certain “quality of attention that makes recognition possible” (Bateson, 1994, p. 233). In the pages that follow, I explore the girls’ experiences of what it means to attend in this way. As well, I explore how this idea connects with what it means to engage the aesthetic imagination, in order, as Williams sings, to find the place where poets go.

Finding the Place Where Poets Go: Moments of Recognition

Vancouver

During a one on one conversation, Ranma told me about a trip she had taken to Vancouver. She was fourteen at the time, and had just completed ninth grade. One of her favorite bands was performing in Vancouver and her parents gave her permission to attend the concert on her own. During our conversation, Ranma shared something of her experiences being alone in a strange city. She told me she started a piece of writing while she was there, and described how the writing was a response to being alone in a different city:

... I was in my hotel room, and it was a cool experience, because I was alone in a different city, and it felt really weird even though it was for two days and I knew I was going home, and I knew where I’d be the next day ... it was ... like when

you're alone, you feel like ... you don't take yourself for granted as much.

(transcript, August 13, 1998)

Ranma continued by describing how she thought people pay more attention to themselves when they are alone in unfamiliar situations. She described how this was a catalyst to her writing: "... you think about yourself more. Not in a selfish way, but ... you pay more attention to yourself, if that makes any sense. So I kind of wrote about that. Not about it, but off of it, you know?" (transcript, August 13, 1998). She compared being in Vancouver to being in Edmonton, where she always had an "underground feeling" of being at home. When I asked her what she meant by "underground feeling", she described how even though she knew she was at home, it was not something that was on the surface, rather, it was something she took for granted: "Like you're not walking around thinking okay, I've seen that car before, I've seen this person before, I've seen this building before, it's just you know you're at home" (transcript, August 13, 1998).

Ranma's experience in Vancouver helped her understand something about "the underground feeling of being at home". For Ranma, this realization was a moment of recognition, one she felt compelled to write about, or as she says, "write off of". Before her trip, this understanding was something that most likely lived on the edges of her perception; it was likely not something she could articulate, even though it was part of her awareness on some level. When I think about Ranma's experience in Vancouver, I wonder what enabled her to bring this understanding from her peripheral vision to a place of focus. Perhaps being alone in a different city, Ranma experienced a freedom she could never feel at home, one that enabled her to imagine "composing her life" in ways she

might otherwise not have thought of. Perhaps her youth enabled her to inhabit the role of traveler, both literally and figuratively, with a freedom that is not typically available to adults who may have a more rigid sense of self, and a larger collection of rules that govern their behaviour. Perhaps being alone in a different city enabled a slowing down of sorts, one that allowed a different kind of noticing, a different kind of vision, one that sees the world through the eyes of the aesthetic imagination.

Taking Photographs

Sometimes I asked the girls how they came to write the poems they shared at our weekly meetings. I was always surprised when, more often than not, Jeremiah said she did not know what prompted her to write a particular poem and she could not remember even the act of putting the words to the page. I had a difficult time making sense of this, since, in my own writing, I had a strong sense of what prompted me to write a particular poem and often could even remember the place I was sitting and the time of day the poem was written. I struggled for a long time trying to understand how my experiences of writing poetry could be so different from Jeremiah's.

Late last summer, Jeremiah and I had a conversation that helped me understand something of why her poems did not seem to hold the memories of their writing in the same way mine did. During our conversation, Jeremiah told me about "Topic 5", a poem she had written some months earlier, when she was studying for a science exam. She explained how she had been waiting all summer to talk with me about this poem, since it was one the few poems she had written where she could talk about how she came to write it. Part way through our conversation, Jeremiah turned the tables on me, became the

researcher, and started asking me why I wrote poetry. I tried to explain how in the last few years I had been writing more “consciously”-that is, I had been trying to be more measured and disciplined in my writing rather than waiting to be inspired or writing only when I felt a strong sense of need. As soon as I introduced the idea of writing more “consciously”, Jeremiah began to explain how my description of “conscious writing” helped her understand why the poem “Topic 5” was different from much of her other writing:

... that one there, “Topic 5”, it was more conscious than a lot of my other writing ... I really like that one because ... it’s not just like raw emotion on a piece of paper ... my thoughts are more organized, not just necessarily that, but it’s more consciously thinking about ... these are my emotions, but how can I put them on this page so that they really mean something, not only to myself but to other people -- whereas when I write just like if I’m really mad, or if I’m experiencing something that’s incredible, and I just write it, blah, blah, blah ... then I’m less happy with that work than I am with this [“Topic 5”], because sometimes I sit there and go, “What the hell was I thinking? Where was I? What was going on in my head? [But] with this, because I was consciously thinking about it, ... I know exactly where I was at and everything and it means a lot me, like it actually means something because I know where I was at and I can remember that very moment ... (transcript, August 11, 1998)

Jeremiah continued her explanation of “conscious” versus “non-conscious” writing by comparing her experiences with writing to her experiences with photography:

... some pictures have a purpose, some pictures are ... like you look at something, [and think], that's really beautiful. I'm going to take a picture of that. And you set up your camera and you organize your film and you organize your shot, and you take a picture of it. But then you take pictures that are un-purposeful, like, hey, I just snapped a picture, you know? ...let's say you've got a picture of a room full of all your friends, and you didn't set up the picture or anything, but your friends all happened to be sitting on the couch, and you snap the picture when none of them were even looking. And you look back, and you don't really remember what happened that day, you don't really remember what was going on ... but you know you took that picture for one reason or another... (transcript, August 11, 1998)

For Jeremiah, "Topic 5" was like the first photograph she described, one she consciously thought about and set up, choosing film, shutter speed, and composition, for example. However, much of her other writing was like the second photograph she described, that is, more of a snapshot of a moment she might not even remember later, even though she had a picture of it. Her explanation of these two different kinds of writing helped me better understand the role of poetry in her life, and the reason she was often unable to articulate what it was that led to the writing of any particular poem.

When I think about Jeremiah's words, I wonder whether the more conscious type of writing she describes is part of the process of "finding the place where poets go", while the other, "non-conscious" writing, is more about finding a way to express the immediacy of an emotion or moment. It seems that the more conscious kind of writing

begins with an inspiration or realization, one the writer works to craft into a form that relies as heavily on the intellect as the affect. For me, this is what it means to “find the place where poets go” - to engage the aesthetic imagination in order to hold an experience, memory or moment in such a way that others may also come to recognize it. However, this is not to say Jeremiah’s “non-conscious” writing was not aesthetic. While this writing might be more akin to journalling or diary keeping, it took a form that was distinctly poetic: it was a form that included line breaks and stanzas, metaphors and imagery. What was the difference, then, between Jeremiah’s “conscious” and “non-conscious” writing? Was the former more about “finding the place where poets go” - and engaging the aesthetic imagination – than the latter? For me, the difference lay in the ability of more “conscious” writing to help others re-discover, however vicariously, that moment of recognition that led to the writing of the poem.

Discovering the Sky

During one of our conversations last spring, Ranma and Skyler told me about their experiences over spring break. This was spring break of their ninth grade year, a week of holidays spent with a group of friends, a week of freedom unbound by the schedule of school and homework. Ranma described the week as “amazing” and said, “This spring break I felt taken by a sense of community and comfort” (transcript, April 6, 1998). Skyler said, “During spring break, I was with the people I love. I feel it cleansed me, prepared me, strengthened me” (transcript, April 6, 1998). I was intrigued by their description of spring break, and, although I could not articulate it at the time, wondered whether their experience of spring break had anything to do with “finding the place

where poets go” and engaging the aesthetic imagination. When I think about it now, I realize Ranma and Skyler’s experience of spring break represented much that was missing from the tight schedule of their days spent in school. It was a week filled with freedom and possibility, a week where they were free to do what they wanted when they wanted. They spent their days and nights with a large group of friends, “enjoying bonfires, sweating in sweat lodges, walking around aimlessly, checking out art shows, and lazing around listening to strange music” (transcript, April 6, 1998).

It was during this week of freedom that Skyler came to a realization about the sky. She described it in the following way:

I’ve been looking at the sky all of spring break, because it’s just, it’s like the most amazing thing ... I always knew it was there and I always knew I loved the sky, its unpredictability, the colours, and just everything, how it doesn’t end ... it was kind of just like a burst of inspiration. Because every night we were somewhere where you could see the sunset. You could see the moon rise and all the colours and everything ... like it screamed, “Skyler!” (transcript, April 6, 1998)

At the time of our conversation, Skyler had not written anything about her experience with the sky. She explained how writing might come from this experience, but that her first impulse was to express this moment of recognition through drawing or painting. She said, “I find it easier to work from [visual] art to poetry” and described how she might begin by first drawing a landscape with a sunset and then writing about it.

While I did not see evidence that Skyler used her inspiration from the sky to create a work of visual or literary art, I still believe the moment of recognition she

experienced over spring break - the moment when the sky “screamed” her name - is important to think about. Her words, “every night we were somewhere where we could see the sunset” made me reflect on the ways we structure our lives. The girls’ experience of spring break as a time of community and comfort, a time of cleansing, preparation and strength causes me to question how adults choose to structure their own lives as well as the lives of children. It also raises questions about how such structure shapes the development of the aesthetic imagination.

Joining the Dance

I believe, like many others, it is of vital importance we learn to engage our aesthetic imaginations in order to live together in our complex and contradictory world. For me, the three stories from the above section each point to ways in which we might begin to think about what it means to engage the aesthetic imagination. From Ranma’s story of Vancouver, we might learn how necessary a sense of freedom is. This sense of freedom is what allows us to imagine composing our lives differently; it is a freedom that demands we look carefully at how we have invented ourselves in order to entertain other possibilities for who we might become. From Jeremiah’s story of the photographs, we might learn how to be more conscious of our improvisations. In so doing, we might discover how to better merge perspectives and bring the intellect and the affect into a stronger union. From here, we might begin to help others discover and re-discover their own moments of recognition. Finally, from Skyley’s story of the sky, we might learn to pay more attention to the structure of our lives. Her story tells of the importance of slowing down to watch the sunset, of the miraculous moments of discovery that might

present themselves if only we have the time and space around us to attend with all of our being.

It is not enough to learn. We must also teach. I am left with questions of how we might begin to help others understand the necessity of engaging with the world in aesthetic ways. Bateson (1994) describes the importance of this teaching when she says, "The challenge for parents and educators is to create the readiness to respond, the quality of attention that makes recognition possible: pattern matched with pattern, vagrant awareness welcomed, empathy established" (p. 233). In other words, we must teach children not only to live with the ambiguity that is "the warp of life", we must also help them use what is in their peripheral vision to make sense of this ambiguity in creative ways.

The stories of Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler help me pay closer attention to those opportunities where children might learn to "find the place where poets go". Like Heard (1989), I believe poetry can help shatter the silence that "surrounds telling the truth and expressing emotion" (p. xx). Like Greene (1989) I believe the various arts can help us engage our aesthetic imaginations and reach toward alternative ways of thinking - to seek "possibilities of expansion and significance no one can ever entirely predefine" (p.214).

If we hope to help children discover "the place where poets go", perhaps we should begin by teaching them with a sense of freedom, one that allows them to imagine themselves into other ways of being. Perhaps we should learn to be more conscious of our own improvisations in order to bring both the intellect and the affect into a stronger union. Perhaps we should begin introducing the language of the aesthetic into classrooms

in order to begin talking about what it might mean to engage the aesthetic imagination and what the implications are for such an engagement. In so doing, we might be able to “find the place where poets go” and discover a path leading towards new improvisations and ways of living with others in the world.

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Paper Two

Living Without Closure: Writing and the Experience of Research

To see something as something else is really the way we see anything at all. ~ Anne Berthoff, 1988, p 177

Every time I sit down to write a research paper, I am reminded of the complexities of "doing research". I am never sure what "research" is exactly, and yet I try to "do" it. In my own academic setting, the methods and vocabularies of the educational research community are often questioned, but there seems to be a consensus we are all doing something and we should call it research.

For me, questions of how and why to do research are philosophical ones. Bruner (1986) described Rorty's characterization of mainstream philosophy as being "preoccupied with the epistemological question of how to know truth" in contrast with the "broader question of how we come to endow experience with meaning, which is the question that preoccupies the poet and the storyteller" (p. 12). My own view of research in education is that it should be more concerned with the second of these perspectives.

Several years ago, I began working on my doctoral research. Part of the preparation for this research involved completing a literature review on writing and the writing process. The more I read, the more I was reminded of my own lived experience, not as a writer, but as a researcher. Over and over, different authors using different words described the complex, recursive process called writing, and at each new phrase or paragraph, I could see my own life as a researcher unfolding.

One of the themes in the literature about writing is the idea that writing is not in any way a straightforward, linear task (Atwell, 1986; Berthoff, 1988; Clark, 1986; Daigon, 1986; Kirby and Liner, 1988; Murray, 1984, 1986b&b; Perl, 1986; Stafford, 1986). With each attempt to describe the writing process, comes an acknowledgement that it is not something easily explained or modeled. The same is true of my research experiences. As a result, this paper is not a description of writing as a research methodology, nor is it an attempt to fully explicate the various facets of either research or writing. Rather, in each of the sections that follow, I explore connections between the writing process and my own experiences with research and use others' descriptions of the writing process to make sense of my lived experiences as a researcher.

The Subjunctive Space

Funk & Wagnalls dictionary defines the subjunctive as "of or pertaining to that mood of the verb expressing possibility, desire, supposition, etc" (1980). In Actual Minds, Possible Worlds, Bruner (1986) referred to the subjunctive mode as "trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties" (p. 26). He described how literary discourse subjunctivizes reality and makes it possible for readers to "write their own texts":

Literature subjunctivizes, makes strange, renders the obvious less so, the unknowable less so as well, matters of value more open to reason and intuition. Literature, in this spirit, is an instrument of freedom, lightness, imagination, and yes, reason. It is our only hope against the long gray night. (1986, p. 159)

In my research, the creation of a subjunctive space has meant letting go of my pre-conceived idea that research is a relatively straightforward, linear process. Instead, I learned to embrace (albeit somewhat hesitantly at first) the uncertainty that came with allowing my research to unfold in its own way.

When I first began thinking about my doctoral research, I had little sense of direction or method. My research questions were still deeply embedded in what I later learned to refer to as a “felt sense”. I only knew I wanted to study something of the aesthetic¹, and that poetry would be the medium for my exploration.

I began my research by talking with Shauna and Trish,² two women who share my love of writing poetry. During our time together, I asked some specific questions about their writing, but for the most part tried to let the conversations take their own course. I met with each of these women on two separate occasions and talked with them for an hour and a half, trying to come to a better understanding of the aesthetic dimensions of their writing and their lives. For example, I learned about Shauna’s sense of writing as “need” and heard her story of how writing helped her deal with personal tragedy. I heard Trish’s description of writing as something beyond herself, a creative process that emanated from a web of relationships that connect the universe.

While my conversations with Shauna and Trish enlarged my understanding of their experience of writing poetry, I did not discover a clear, straightforward research

¹ My sense of the aesthetic does not rest upon the traditional notion of the aesthetic as beautiful. Rather, I prefer to think of the aesthetic more in terms of Abb’s definition: the aesthetic as “a particular mode of responding to and apprehending experience ... a mode of intelligence working not through concepts, but through percepts, the structural elements of sensory experience” (1989, p. 76).

² Participant names are either first names or pseudonyms, as requested by each individual.

approach as I secretly hoped. In the weeks and months that followed, I was forced to accept and eventually embrace this ambiguous space, this subjunctive space of possibility and desire.

Eventually, as I thought more about the aesthetic and about my own history as a writer of poetry, I realized I wanted to work with adolescent girls. I knew girls of this age were often prolific writers and that many used poetry as a means of self expression. With this in mind, I endeavored to find a small group of girls who might be interested in participating in my research.

I began meeting with Ranma, Jeremiah, and Skyler³ during the last few months of their ninth grade year. We participated on a weekly basis in what might best be described as a conversation group. Once a week, I met the girls at their school, and we traveled to the university. Our meetings lasted anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half, and we usually met in the same room, a small student lounge with couches, chairs and tables. When I first imagined working with a group of adolescent girls, I envisioned a writing group. My role would be to act as a "writer-in-residence" and write poetry along with the girls. We would write together, share our poetry, and talk about our experiences as poets. What I discovered, however, is that the girls did not see our group as a place for writing. To them, having to write at a prescribed time once a week was not "real writing" at all. In one of our conversations, Ranma described the difference between "real" and "forced" writing: "Personally, I sit down and really think about it when I have to, like for marks at

³ The adolescent girls in the study chose their own pseudonyms. The unusual names reflect the creativity and uniqueness of each of the girls.

school, but when, when it's actually real, it doesn't take pushing yourself to stay at a table and write . . . usually for me it comes from one line of an idea, or two." Later, she continued by saying, ". . . it's Mrs. _____ saying, 'Kay, kids, this is due in one month or two days,' it's, I don't know, it's forced out, but usually if it's just at home, and you go, 'Oh, I wanna write, just, right now,'-- it's just more real, 'cause that's what poetry is, it's expressing . . .'" (transcript, March 16, 1998). As a result, our writing group became a conversation group.

My weekly meetings with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler became the focus of my research. Despite the fact our conversations rarely focused specifically on the aesthetic, they continually nourished the sense of wonder that originally prompted me to begin my research. I persevered in this subjunctive space and gradually learned more about the role writing played in the lives of the girls. In time, I began connecting the aesthetic to their stories of writing and life; I began to see glimpses of the powerful ways the aesthetic helped them continually reinvent themselves.

My work with the Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler continued to evolve. We resumed our weekly meetings in the early part of their tenth grade year, and talked more about poetry, art and life. Not all of our conversations seemed relevant to the work I was doing; talk about poetry so often led us down other, more personal avenues. But I learned to accept that the research process, must, in the same way literary texts do, "traffic in human possibilities, rather than in settled certainties."

Feeling in Research

Murray (1990) described writing as an essential human need. In my own writing, this experience of need occurs primarily through my body. When I experience the need to write, it is powerful and immediate. I feel a restlessness, as though I am being physically drawn to the page. Sometimes I can ignore the urge to write, but other times, to borrow the words of Ranma: "if it's large enough, you're gonna write about it." However, this powerful need does not define all of my writing moments. There are other, more measured moments, when I set aside time and space to explore an idea that has been patiently waiting and quietly tugging, coaxing me toward expression.

The experience of need was also expressed in both my early conversations with Shauna and Trish and in my later work with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler. In a conversation with Shauna, she talked about the role writing played during a difficult time in her life. A close friend had just been killed in a car accident, and she, along with a group of friends, was trying to deal with the tragedy and make some sense of what had happened. She described how the group of them was inseparable in the days following the accident, but despite their closeness and support for one another, she needed something more to help her express her grief and make sense of her feelings:

...we all did everything together, and after a while, we would listen to pounding music, because it was probably the only thing that could drown out the way we felt ... but for me, I needed something more, so one day ...we picked up books [journals] and it was the only way to really express, for me to express the way I felt about her... this is sort of my memory book for _____. (transcript,

July 17, 1997)

For Shauna, this memory book was as much a collection of memories and artifacts as it was an original piece of writing. She described the power of creating the book, and the healing that resulted:

I guess it's a constructive way to express how we feel like when you're gluing and pasting and cutting and writing and thinking about how you want to put it together, it's more like a project, it's not so much I'm hurting but it's like I'm doing something good ... when it comes out, it ends up being almost beautiful, as a tribute, rather than just sort of a mess of emotion inside. (transcript, July 17, 1997)

For the girls in the conversation group, the experience of need - of having to write, feeling it in your body - was closely linked to the idea of "inspiration". Skyler described it this way:

... in some people, who get so inspired by something that they just have to do something with it...like whether it be visual art or writing, or dance, you just get an inspiration and have to do something with it, you can't just let it sit up there in your head in the attic getting dusty... sometimes I think things are so beautiful, or not, the opposite, but I just want to get it down on paper, I want other people to see what I see, I want other people to experience it. (transcript, April 6, 1998)

Perl (1986) has also expressed the idea that writing can be felt in the body. In "Understanding Composing", she described the feelings and non-verbalized perceptions of the writer using Gendlin's term "felt sense": "[felt sense is] the soft underbelly of

thought . . . a kind of bodily awareness that . . . can be used as a tool . . . a bodily awareness that . . . encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time . . . It is felt in the body, yet it has meanings" (p. 31). Perl's work described felt sense as a backward movement in writing, a movement that "can be observed if one pays close attention to what happens when writers pause and seem to listen or otherwise react to what is inside of them" (p. 31). In my own experience, the bodily knowing of Perl's "felt sense" and of Murray's "need" characterize not only my writing life but also my research life. And while I suspect this is true for many researchers, it is not often described as part of the research process.

My decision to focus on the aesthetic in my research was in no way easy or straightforward. In fact, I was well on my way to researching an entirely different topic for my dissertation when I first started paying attention to how I was responding to and experiencing various events in my life. At first, none of the events seemed related - the discovery of Frank O'Hara's poem "Why I Am Not A Painter" (1990), the power and pedagogy of the Spike Lee film Get on the Bus (Borden et.al.,1996), and the acoustic performance of "The Christians and the Pagans" by Dar Williams (1996) at the Folk Festival. But each of these moments stayed with me, and each moved me towards expression and understanding. The pull was physical. It was something I had been ignoring, pushing aside my wonders and questions so I could focus on my "work".

Eventually, I realized I had been trying to make sense of the power of each of these experiences. I had scraps of paper with hastily scribbled personal reflections about Spike Lee's film. I purchased Dar William's CD and discovered new lyrics I was able to

connect with. I read and re-read Frank O'Hara's poem and eventually came to see it as a metaphor for research. When I finally started paying attention to that bodily knowing, that felt sense, that need - I realized these experiences, and others like them, were integral to my research. Each of these experiences was a small tug at my subconscious, willing me to move in a direction that was fuelled by a passionate and authentic questioning that encompassed both body and mind.

I slowly learned to pay attention to my "felt sense", to trust it would lead in promising directions. Although it was not easy to abandon the notion that good research is a product of the mind and not the body, my experiences taught me otherwise.

Searching for Form

Meek said the secrets of writing can be found within narrative fiction (1991, p. 41). She quoted Culler as saying: "[narrative fiction] can hold together within a single space a variety of languages, levels of focus, points of view, which would be contradictory in other kinds of discourse organized towards a particular empirical end" (p. 41). Benton (1992) described this same idea using a musical metaphor: ". . . a [literary] text orchestrates a range of discourse into a common score such that their individual expressive voices can still be heard" (p. 48).

In my experience, Meek's "secrets of writing" may also be secrets of research, particularly in the context of my study. I think it is essential that research texts be crafted in such a way that they can hold "a variety of languages, levels of focus and points of view". In my work, I struggled to find a form that would hold multiple voices and perspectives, particularly when I was confined to using written text. In conference

presentations, I often used song and poetry to express the subtleties of my topic and to engage listeners in personal, emotional ways. However, this is often difficult in academic writing since the accepted standard for such texts consists almost exclusively of scholarly writing.

At a recent annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, 1998), Lynn Butler-Kisber presented a paper titled Representing Qualitative Data in Poetic Form. She, along with Elliot Eisner, Tom Barone and Hillary Austen-Johnson, presented her work in a session devoted to examining critical issues in arts-based research. She began her paper by describing some of the parameters of arts-based research as established by Eisner and Barone (1997):

... features [of arts-based research] include creation of a virtual reality, the existence of ambiguity, use of expressive, contextualized and vernacular language, the promotion of empathy, the personal signature of the writer and the presence of aesthetic form. (p. 2)

In her paper, Butler-Kisber described the process of coming to see poetry as a means of representing data. She described her willingness to experiment and risk with this form of representation because it "feels more natural and more appropriate for illuminating certain phenomena" (p. 3). In her research, Butler-Kisber crafted poetic forms, or "found poems", from the transcripts of her conversations with the women in her study. She wrote:

I decided to transform Ann's words, and only Ann's words, from the narrative chain to a "found" poetic form. To facilitate this process I returned to the

videotapes many times to get at the nuances of Ann's gestures and speech through rhythms, pauses, breath points, syntax and diction. I played with order and breaks to make Ann the speaker even though I was shaping the form. (p. 10)

While Butler-Kisber acknowledged that not all forms of data are suitable for poetic interpretation and that any such undertaking must be done with the utmost care and rigor, she also attested to the power of such representations: "I do believe that a poetic text potentially helps to bring the essences of lived experience to life by showing rather than telling, by situating the voice of the participants more centrally in the work and by engaging the reader more profoundly" (p. 13).

Throughout the research process, I continually questioned the form of my written account and particularly, the ways I chose to represent the experiences of the girls and women in my study. In many ways, it seemed inappropriate to explore the aesthetic through traditional research papers, since this is a form that relies almost exclusively on academic text. However, for the purposes of my doctoral work, the research paper turned out to be the most useful form through which to express my understandings. When I think about exploring alternative forms of research and representation in the future, the work of Butler-Kisber gives me hope; it is heartening to know others in the research community are exploring the use of alternative forms of representation in order to bring "the essences of lived experience to life".

Rational Does Not Equal Research

In a chapter titled "Write Before Writing", Murray (1986b) described the importance of paying attention to what happens between the moment a writer first gets an

idea and when they begin crafting that idea into written form: "We need to understand, as well as we can, the complicated and intertwining processes of perception and conception through language" (p. 37). What happens in the space between perception and conception? How does a writer interpret an idea or event and represent that interpretation through text?

Britton (1982) described interpretation as something more than a re-enactment of a particular event. For Britton, interpretation, at least in the literary arts, involves the sensory and the emotional as well as the rational:

An interpretation of experience. . . is a penetration of experience: it is not the mere purveying of a distilled essence, or a key formula, or a mathematical solution. There is something in it of a reconstruction of events – and yet an ordered reconstruction. The artist's interpretation of experience is concrete, sensuous, emotional: yet it is not a mere re-enactment either – it is a work of the creative imagination. (p. 21)

When I thought about my experiences as a researcher, I realized the interpretive space between perception and conception is one that also existed in research. Like the artist, the researcher's interpretation of experience is "concrete, sensuous and emotional... a work of the creative imagination". In this sense, qualitative research is much more an art than a science, and consequently, the interpretive space between perception and conception is highly personal and not easily articulated. How might a painter or poet describe the process of interpreting a particular image? Certainly they would have some sense of how they came to craft their words or brushstrokes, but it would be difficult to

articulate and impossible to replicate. The same is perhaps true of research. How does a researcher come to interpret the events of their study, the conversations, the physical spaces, the silences? And how might another researcher interpret the very same things?

In my own research, I continually struggled with this interpretive space. I was never quite sure how to describe my newfound understandings, since I was always aware that my interpretation was only one of many. I resisted the urge to search for Britton's "distilled essence" or "key formula", and instead attempted to present the richness and fullness of my encounters with the girls and women in my study. And I thought about Kirby and Liner's (1988) description of good writing as honest writing, writing that risks feelings:

. . . good writing is honest writing. The writer risks feelings with us, and we respond to the words because they touch our feelings through shared human experience. The subtleties of form, the intricacies of vocabulary, the erudition of allusion may contribute to the experience and to our pleasure in the work, but without that risk taking and sharing of feeling, they are an empty shell. (p. 74)

I believe the same to be true of research, although it is not always easy to take risks with words in an academic setting. The history of objectivity in the research community has placed an emphasis on reason over emotion and left little room for the "sharing of feeling". More and more, my understanding of the space between conception and perception in my own research is one that includes the sensory and the emotional as well as the intellectual. While it is not always easy to honour this balance, I believe it is crucial in order to tell an authentic story of my research.

Coming to Know Through Language

In reading the literature on writing, I continually came across two connected themes. The first of these is that through writing, we discover what we know. For example, Stafford (1986) said, "a writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he hadn't started to say them" (p. 25). Perl stated, "when [our writing is] successful . . . we end up with a product that teaches us something, that clarifies what we know (or what we knew at one point only implicitly), and that lifts out or explicates or enlarges our experience" (p. 34). And Richardson (1994) described writing as "a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic" (p. 516).

The second theme relates to the first and refers to the relationship between thought and language. As Berthoff said, "writing is a matter of learning how to use the forms of language to discover the forms of thought, and vice versa" (1988, p. 21). Benton described this same phenomenon in terms of a paradox: "meanings and experiences, and our thoughts and feelings about them, are both produced by and expressed in language" (p. 71). Finally, Meek described it simply by saying, "as we collect words for thinking from the books we read, so we understand our own thinking better" (p. 47).

Shauna, one of the two women I originally talked with, alluded to this discovery process when she talked about her memory book. In our conversation, she described how the process of creating the book helped give form to the "mess of emotions" she was

feeling:

I think that when people are feeling something it's not always clear, it's not always 'I feel bad or good, or ...' it's not always black and white but sometimes the way you feel inside, you don't, you can't explain it, you can't do anything with it, like I don't know if you've ever felt such intense hurt ... I can't explain how I felt, I couldn't express it, in a way that you would understand with words verbally, but when I show it in more of a collage of pictures and letters and writings... it's more clear, rather than being such a mess of, I guess it makes it more structured, it makes your emotions more structured. (transcript, July 17, 1997)

Skyler, one of the three adolescent girls, also described the process of coming to understand something through writing. In one of our conversations, she talked about the happiness that came from being able to make sense of her emotions through poetry:

No matter what I was feeling, it made me happy, because I was able to express those feelings clearly, and it came out clearer than anything else that I -- even if my brain is in a jumble of knots, and I don't know what I'm doing, it can come out clear on paper, which really makes me feel happy... I think that's one of the reasons I like to write. (transcript, August 15, 1998)

In my experience as a researcher, I have come to understand that the process of doing research may be at least as important as the product. In the same way Shauna and Skyler discovered what they knew through putting words to the page, I have discovered what I know through engaging in the process of research. This has not been as simple as

using research to find out about something or other in the world, but rather, a discovery that the process of doing research may teach as much as the analysis of data or the writing of a final research text. Early on in this process, as I was writing my research proposal, I realized I had no straightforward research questions to guide my study. I thought for a long time about how to formulate such questions, how to give language and form to the wonderings that were pushing me to study the aesthetic in the lives and writing of adolescent girls. But I moved forward with only a “felt sense”⁴, and trusted that the process of meeting with the girls, thinking about our conversations and doing writing of my own would lead me in promising directions. It took courage and faith, but I slowly came to understand that the process of reading, writing, talking, thinking and reflecting could teach me all I needed to know. In many ways, this reminds me of writing, both in terms of “finding a process that will bring about new things I would not have thought of if I hadn’t started to say them” and in terms of my understandings being both “produced by and expressed in” the research process.

Living Without Closure

We women have lived too much with closure . . . there always seems to loom the possibility of something being over, settled, sweeping clear the way for contentment. This is the delusion of a passive life. ~ Carolyn Heilbrun, 1988, p. 130

⁴ Eventually, I was able to move beyond this felt sense and articulate the following questions that guided my research: What is the nature of aesthetic experience, both for me and for the participants in my study? In what ways might aesthetic experiences help us create meaning in our lives? What kinds of conditions would be necessary for us to experience the world in aesthetic ways?

In many ways, the first line of the above quotation could be changed to "We researchers have lived too much with closure..." I don't imagine Heilbrun ever intended for these words to be used as a metaphor for research, but I find them helpful as I think about what it means to live and work as a researcher. When I first began "doing" research, I imagined a neat and tidy process, one that began at a specific point in time, and ended with a sense of closure and contentment. I have learned this is not the case. I now wonder whether my research began the first time I opened a book of poetry, the first time I tried to express my feelings and emotions in poetic form-and I wonder too if everything since then has also been part of my research. For me, the process has been an integral part of my life, and now I am able to make some of those implicit wonderings, learnings and understandings explicit. Perhaps this might be a definition for what it means to do research: making the implicit explicit in our own lives and in the lives of others. This reminds me of a quotation by Murray (1984)-and again, the word "write" might be replaced by the word "research":

Writing begins with all that we have known since we were born, and perhaps with a lot of knowledge that was born in us. We write, first of all, to discover what we know and then what we need to know. (p. 3)

And so I have come full circle, back to the subjunctive space of possibility and desire. In this research space, there is no closure, only an openness to understanding the world in multiple and diverse ways - to seeing my own research experiences embedded in the writing process as described by others. Here too, is another return, to the opening quotation of this paper: "To see something as something else is really the way we see

anything at all."

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Paper Three

Inventing Ourselves Through Poetry: Truth, Imagination and Response

When I was eleven or twelve, I realized for the first time my mother was pregnant with me before she and my father married. This is something my family never talked about - not like the story about the local preacher stealing Grandad's hay bales, or when my aunt's boyfriend died in a car crash on the way to dinner at the farmhouse. I don't know how other people make sense of their untold stories, if they ever bring them to the surface, open them up, and look inside. Certainly, I've never really asked my parents about the circumstances surrounding their wedding, but I remember my mother telling me all it takes is one mistake.

I suppose I have always assumed that given the choice, my parents would not have married and had their first child so young. It has been difficult to reconcile this belief against the reality of my own life, as though I were somehow responsible for what happened in theirs.

A few years ago, I stumbled upon a photograph of my parents. It was a picture I had seen before, and I had a faint memory of being told it was taken the day before their wedding. I studied the picture over and over again, writing words that came to mind, trying to compose a poem, trying to find a form that would hold image, memory and feeling together in a way that would reveal something of the truth of my experience. The photograph sat for weeks on the side table by my writing chair, and every so often, I

would take it out and look at it again. I could not leave it alone. I was compelled to write about it.

One afternoon, I looked at the picture, and for the first time, realized my parents were smiling. In that moment, I knew I had discovered an image that would hold my poem together.

1975

late again
no phone call
cold supper
beer on his breath
voices raised
she sobbing
me sobbing

1981

sitting on the bathroom floor
counting backwards
February January
December November
October September
August ... when were you married?
oh
two months shy of legitimate
that explains everything

1997

a photograph
the day before their wedding
his arm
tossed casually
across her bare shoulders
I can't see
a slight roundness
signaling my presence
it doesn't matter
I've noticed
they're smiling

This poem was a way for me to reinvent the past, to make sense of my feelings and experiences in the context of my parents' story. In writing it, I understood for the first time how regret and hope might co-exist in the story of their marriage and my birth. This understanding came as a result of finding a way to hold these contradictory ideas together in a single form. In studying the photograph, in struggling for words that could express my feelings, and in creating a coherent aesthetic form, I was able to discover something about my life that I had not known before.

This poem is one of many I have written that helped me compose my life, to borrow a metaphor from Mary Catherine Bateson. In her book Composing a Life, Bateson (1989) describes how each of us is “engaged in a day-by-day process of self-invention – not discovery, for what we search for does not exist until we find it” (p. 28). She describes life as an “improvisatory art”, one that follows an “underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic” (p. 3). For me, this improvisation is most visible when I am writing poetry. In creating an aesthetic form - the poem - I am better able to see, understand, and feel the events of my own life and the lives of others.

Carter Mullen described this act of creation as “truth”: “The truth of art-and the art of truth-is the revelation of the world to the human being through her power to perceive, to question and respond, that is, to create” (1998, p. 60). In this context, the meaning of the word truth is not truth as corresponding to some external reality-the way things “really are”-but rather, truth as an authentic examination of ourselves and our lives. In a similar fashion, Heard (1989) has described her poetry as “an unyielding curiosity, a solitary need to look for the truth” (p. xvii). For Heard, this search for truth,

at least in poetry, involves peeling away the protective layers we build around ourselves, and writing from a place of honesty and authenticity. She quotes Albert Camus as saying, “A [wo]man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence [her]his heart first opened” (p. xix).

In a similar fashion, Zinsser (1987) wrote about truth as an imaginative act. He described how Toni Morrison searches for truth in her works of fiction:

Toni Morrison, another searcher for truth in the buried past, also knows that it can only be quarried by an act of imagination. She takes as her literary heritage the slave narratives written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to persuade white Americans that blacks were “worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery”. But because those writers wanted to elevate the argument and not anger their masters, they “dropped a veil” over the terrible details of their daily existence; no trace of their thoughts and emotions can be found. Toni Morrison wants access to that interior life – it contains the truth about her past that she needs for her work. She can only get it by imagining it: by an act of writing ... Toni Morrison uses fiction to conjure up what was real. [She has] skipped over research and landed on the truth. (p 25)

What does it mean to search for the truth of our experience, and to uncover that truth through an act of imagination? I spent the last year trying to understand something about this paradox of poetry as truth and imagination through working with a group of three adolescent girls, talking with them about their poetry and their lives. I began

meeting with Ranma, Jeremiah, and Skyler¹ during the last few months of their ninth grade year and continued meeting with them during the early part of their tenth grade year. Our conversation group met after school once a week, in a small student lounge at the university. During our meetings, we talked about poetry and the writing process, shared poems we had written, attended occasional poetry readings, and told stories of our lives. This work was part of my dissertation research, something that for me, is as improvisatory as any art (Hart, 1999). I also wrote my own poetry, and talked with the small group of writers who came each week to the writing workshop I was enrolled in. While each of these contexts offered different perspectives on poetry, both contributed to the richness and depth of my emerging understandings.

Conversations on Writing: Invention and Improvisation

...writing is taking a memory and putting it in a suitcase and keeping it there and traveling with it. ~ transcript, April 6, 1998

These words were spoken by Ranma, one of the adolescent girls in my conversation group. She has often conceived of poetry as a place to capture and preserve memory and feeling. For her, “poetry is like a diary”, it is a place to collect your innermost thoughts and feelings, a place to write about significant experiences. The idea that poetry can hold significant experiences is one that is shared by each of the girls in the group.

For Ranma, Skyler and Jeremiah, poetry most often comes as a result of “big” experiences. The word “big” here is misleading, because all three girls agree that “even

¹The adolescent girls in the study chose their own pseudonyms. The unusual names reflect the creativity and uniqueness of each of the girls.

though the experience might be as big as my fingernail, it's still large, and if it's large enough you're gonna write about it" (Ranma, transcript, April 6, 1998). For the girls, "large experiences" are those accompanied by strong feelings, whether positive or negative. Jeremiah described it as "an explosion ... this little mental thing that just zips through your head: I have to write this down, I just have to get this out" (transcript, August 11, 1998). Skyler described it as a "big blast of inspiration" and said, "sometimes I think things are so beautiful, or not, the opposite, but I just want to get it down on paper" (transcript, April 6, 1998).

I believe these "large experiences" and the poems that accompany them are part of what Bateson called a "process of self-invention" (1989, p. 28). They allow the girls to engage in a form of improvisation in order to find out about themselves and the world, through trying to make sense of a significant experience or feeling. As Kaelin said, "[poetry is] the taking – better, the making – of a measure. It opens a universe in which [wo]man may live" (as cited in Carter Mullen, 1998, p. 60). This "improvisation" has been described by the girls in different ways and was perhaps most clearly illustrated in our conversations around two of their poems: Stinger and Topic #5.

Stinger

Is there a difference
 Between you and I ...
 The emotion
 pricks like a thorn
 Dagger
 Has struck me now,
 I feel its claws
 Creeping,
 deceiving its way into my
 Jagged soul.

Do you see
pools in my eyes,
That hold the story of a thousand
Tattered men
Who are no longer.
Can you even begin to
Open your mind
Wide enough to let me in?
The emotion is
Hatred
The hatred of too many.
I am no longer.

Skyler wrote the poem “Stinger” after watching the first part of Schindler’s List. She described how she was unable to watch the entire movie because she found the images too disturbing. When I asked her whether the poem was a response to the movie or a way of expressing her feelings, she had this to say:

I think it was just to make myself realize how strongly I felt about all that I had learned in the past about war and ... how I used to be proud that my grandpa had fought in the war, but now, I’m not, not that I’m not proud of him, but, I mean I know he had to go, but I used to be like, “Cool, my grandpa used to fight in the war,” and now I’m kind of ashamed even. (transcript, March 16, 1998)

In this instance, Skyler’s poem “made her realize how strongly she felt about war”. Writing the poem became a process of self-invention, one that helped her articulate the contradictions of moving from a young child who thought it was “cool” for her grandfather to fight in a war, to an adolescent who was forced to acknowledge that war is also about horror and devastation. In writing “Stinger”, Skyler could begin to make sense

of the depth and complexity of her feelings about war in the context of her current life and family history.

Jeremiah's poem "Topic #5" was written as she was studying for an exam about the environment, topic five in her science textbook:

Topic #5

What is happening to this world?
What is worth saving?
What is worth trying to help?

It is slowly sinking into this industrial chimney
A soot filled hole
Deadfish
destroyed by the finger

What a beautiful blue little box
Oh! My what an impeccable basket

It's all shit, there's holes and dirt,
and human crap.
Plastic limbs, and lost teeth floating aimlessly to nowhere, in our water.

ya know our back yard's the earth's garbage can

And our people cry,
Our babies yell,
And mothers die

We're all hungry

When I stand,
We salvage nothing and all;
even our youth.
Bloody, bruised, hurt and torn.

Lost, all a wondering aimlessly
With all direction lost to the endless little star.
The small, stupid dream an incoherent ... that,
well, that it'll be ok!

It's all a hole, a shit hole,
and we're all wasting away in it,
just like the fish!

Jeremiah wrote this poem as a result of realizing something was missing in the textbook descriptions of the damage that was being done to the earth:

I was reading all this stuff and I was writing scientific notes and preparing for a test, and you know, I was learning it as fact. But ... particularly the subject of the environment has a very social issue to it, as well as a scientific explanation to everything ... I figured ... there's something missing. So I just wrote it down, the social aspect that I felt. (transcript, August 11, 1998)

For Jeremiah, "Topic #5" provided an opportunity to understand environmental issues in a more personal, aesthetic way. Her poem offers a perspective and commentary that was unavailable in the factual writing in the textbook – and it allowed her to express her disgust and cynicism with society's treatment of the environment without risking public scrutiny. As she said later in the transcript, "[writing is] a little sanctuary to me. It's just like, nobody has to see it if I don't want them to, and I just have the opportunity to get down what's in my head on a piece of paper, and if anything, I can kind of make some sense out of it, you know?" (transcript, August 11, 1998).

Like Skyler, Jeremiah was able to make sense of the contradictory nature of her experience through writing and, in so doing, engage in a process of self-invention. In this case, the contradiction lay in her sense of the importance of caring for the environment juxtaposed against the textbook treatment of environmental issues. This juxtaposition is perhaps most evident in the title Jeremiah chose for her poem. The scientific accuracy of

the words “Topic #5” is a sharp and effective contrast to the sentiments expressed in the poem, particularly the opening questions: *What is happening to this world? What is worth saving? What is worth trying to help?*

In many ways, the poems of Skyler and Jeremiah remind me of my struggle to write “1975”. In the same way “Stinger” helped Skyler make sense of her feelings about her grandfather’s role in the war, “1975” helped me better understand my feelings about my parents’ marriage and my birth. In the same way “Topic #5” helped Jeremiah articulate the contradictions in her understanding of environmental issues, “1975” helped me come to terms with the complex feelings of regret and hope that surrounded my early family history.

Our poems are improvisations. In the same way a jazz musician improvises within set chord structures and rhythms, or a virtuoso pianist improvises a cadenza that follows the themes and motives of a piece of classical music, the girls and I improvise word and sound within the developing form of our lives and our prior experiences. These compositions are not arbitrary, rather, they emerge out of the complexities and contradictions of every day life. Like musical improvisation changes the nature of a piece of music, each poetic improvisation changes our view of the world and ourselves in it. At the same time, each poetic improvisation also creates new forms with which to make sense of the events of our lives.

Writing For My Own Eye? Audience and Response

During a train trip across the prairie, I spent hours looking at the landscape, letting images of wheat fields and prairie grasses wash over me. I remember being almost

melancholy as I looked out the window and pondered the paradoxical nature of my feelings. I was awed by the immensity of the land, overwhelmed by the never-ending horizon, and at the same time experienced a simple yet profound feeling of kinship and intimacy.

As I often do when confronted with strong feelings, I began to write. Slowly, a poem emerged, and the landscape became a metaphor for how I viewed my life:

and if the plains described her life

prairie grass caress
sharp and cool
or a deeper
more fertile impulse
to burrow into hot black soil
and disappear

I was very happy with this poem. For me, it captured something of the intangible and contradictory nature of my feelings. However, after seeking response from a variety of people, I discovered the poem didn't really "work" for them on the same level it "worked" for me. For them, the poem was too short, and the images weren't strong enough to sustain the contradictions and complexities I envisioned. After much resistance, I changed the poem, and added another section. Now it reads like this:

badlands

prairie grass caress
sharp and cool
or a deeper
more fertile impulse
to burrow into hot black soil
and disappear

sadness leaves an imprint

fossil on rock this archaeology
better to leave
unearthed
than to lift with fumbling hands
brush soil from stone
meticulously scrape away and lay bare
memory of a memory
held in aching callused hands

My poetry professor commented on the new version of the poem:

...the title is really fine, contrasting ironically with the feeling of the opening section. The new second part is really good – there wasn't enough poem before. Now there's a shift in tone and a good contrast between the fertile impulse (the hot black soil) and the feeling of sadness (the fossil on rock). I like 'memory of a memory'. This is now one of your best. (final evaluation, poetry portfolio, December 1998)

I am not particularly mollified my professor now considers this poem "one of my best". In fact, I am still disappointed there could be such a gap between how I viewed the original poem and how others viewed it. If I am really honest, I can admit to secretly hoping the original poem has been misunderstood-that one day I'll be a famous writer and it will be lauded as one of my finest, most subtle works.

My experience with this poem made me think again about the role of audience and response in writing, both for myself and for the girls in the conversation group. Although I claim to write "for my own eye" when I sit down to compose a poem, there is nearly always a phantom audience in the back of my mind. I read and re-read the words in my head and out loud, trying to hear the music of the poetry as someone else might

hear it, trying to get beyond myself in order to see the poem from a fresh perspective. I want others to feel and understand at least some of what I intended through my words, and when this doesn't happen, it is difficult for me to think of the poem as a success. For me, this imagined audience provides the first response to my poem. Through this process, I try to imagine how other readers might understand or interpret my words.

The girls in the conversation group think of audience in a much different way. Skyler described how she didn't think she wrote with an audience in mind, and said, "I don't think I have an audience ... if it's anybody, it's people like me, because I wrote it" (transcript, June 1, 1998). Ranma also said she never imagined an audience, but said if she were to write a poem with someone specific in mind, she imagined the poem would be more "flowing", because it would most likely come as a result of very strong feelings. Of the three girls, only Jeremiah imagined any sort of audience. However, her imagined audience is more about writing from a particular point of view rather than a way of seeking response to her poetry. She described how she often imagined she was in a movie when she wrote: "It's sort of like, I'm the narrator ... if I'm writing about somebody else, or something else, I'm the narrator and there will be this scene, I'll have this scene in my mind, like in my mind's eye of what's going on ... sometimes even just normal life, I feel like someone's video camera, ...following my life around" (transcript, June 1, 1998).

In thinking about my experience writing and revising "Badlands", I have come to better understand the role of audience and response in my own writing. I have also come

to understand that my views of audience and response are not necessarily shared by the girls in the conversation group.

Conversations on Writing: Truth and (re)Vision

In a recent conversation, Ranma shared a poem she wrote over the summer and described how she struggled to find a form that would hold her experience:

It was hard because it was such a big feeling and I didn't know how to put it into a visual thing ...my intent was to make it very visual ... and I wanted to remember exactly what I was thinking, the way it looked, because when I went five years ago, I don't remember anything, and I wanted to this time. (transcript, October 9, 1998)

She also described her attempts at revising the poem, when she discovered she didn't want to change it: "... actually, I came home and tried to change it, but I decided to leave it exactly how it was when I was there, because that's the most important part ... it's the reason I wrote it, my gut reaction" (transcript, October 9, 1998).

the world ends
at the coast of a blue pacific starred up night
the moon, disguising itself
as a pale green banana
leads you around the opening of the sky
merging with ocean clouds
traveling towards the horizon
sloping cliffs of liquid salt
spit you back to shore
in the ageless sand
glowing natural lemon
surrounding selfless dewy exposures
washing over
displaced neverending foam
still charging the vivid tracings
of your faintest wishes

sinking into the surface
of the harsh baked sandy forever
fading into the rolling moonlight
haunting immensity hums
a delicate unwelcome
in your direction
so back through the erect, two by four
driftwood forest
to the unspoken brother of the water;
the long road
parallel path of miles upon miles of telephone poles
into forever toothpick distances
looking back to geography lessons from the thumb
hitch yourself a ride

Skyler shared a similar “gut reaction” when she described writing the poem “Else”. For Skyler, writing is a way to express “the purest of her thoughts”. She described the immediacy of writing “Else”, and recounted how she was able to “reorganize how she was feeling” about a former relationship after reading the words that came uncensored and unedited to the page: “...that was the purest of my thoughts at the time ... that was like raw and, because it made so much sense ... it became clear to me how I was feeling” (transcript, August 15, 1998).

ELSE

Two lay upon the ground
Upon the ground
The ground so sound
To hurt myself
My small, seedy self
Is to do now
What has been done many a time
By someone else
Is that all
All that’s here
To part with
Or to part without

The choice is his
 His, hers, yours, mine
 His choice to love
 His to hate
 His to destroy
 His to create
 His to unfold
 His to expose
 His to open
 His to close

To creep upon the shards of grass
 Left behind his forgotten past
 When I cry
 I leap into the sky
 To be swallowed by
 Faithful
 Reliable
 Nothingness.

For the girls in the conversation group, revision is something that can interfere with the truth of a poem. Poetry enables them to capture a feeling, thought, or emotion and make sense of it in a way they hadn't before. Once this has been accomplished, the need for revision is secondary. In a conversation last summer, Skyler talked about why she is reluctant to revise her poetry: "I almost never revise poetry. Because I think that if it came out like that, that's how it's supposed to be. It's like straight from your head and that's exactly what you're thinking" (transcript, August 15, 1998).

The girls' emphasis on poetry as "gut reaction" coming "straight from your head" suggests a particular concern for truth in their writing. For these girls, truth is a search for that elusive authenticity that will capture the moment, the feeling or the experience. This search is not fundamentally different from Heard's description of poetry as "a solitary need to look for the truth" or Zinsser's description of truth as being found in a

work of imaginative fiction. However, the fact that the girls see revision as interfering with this search for truth or authenticity raises important questions about the role of response in writing, particularly in a classroom context. If we accept the idea that poetry helps us better understand ourselves and others through an ongoing process of self-invention, then perhaps we need to redefine the role of response in the classroom.

“Well, It Depends on the Teacher ...”: Response in the Classroom

In For the Good of the Earth and Sun, Georgia Heard (1989) describes her own very traditional experiences in the writing classroom :

In traditional writing classrooms – the classrooms I grew up in – the topic was assigned, the writing accomplished, and the product handed in for evaluation.

There was seldom any listening or indeed any interaction at all among teacher, student, and writing. (p. 39)

Heard continues by describing the shift that took place in her teaching as she slowly abandoned the model she had been taught with and began to listen more carefully to what her students were trying to say in their poems. She also began to heed the advice of Lucy Calkins, and “started to teach the writer of the poems, not the poems themselves” (p. 39). And she described her own experience seeking response from her teacher and mentor, Stanley Kunitz:

What has encouraged me is not questions about this line or this word or vague, generalized praise, it’s the big things Stanley has noticed, the sense of being listened to and understood. This is the crucial element in responding to anyone’s poetry. (p. 38)

This sense of being listened to and understood is one that has sometimes been missing from the classrooms of the girls involved in my research. For Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, response in writing, at least in school, has often been manifested in one of two ways. Either they have sought out the responses of their peers, whose comments are often viewed as empty praise, or they are being evaluated by their teachers for marks. The girls expressed what they considered to be the futility of their teachers trying to evaluate any kind of art, whether written or visual. Ranma described it as “immeasurable, the way there’s no one who can tell you: this is art, this is not, this is good, this is bad” (transcript, April 6, 1998).

Skyler often expressed frustration at being asked to add imagery to her poems. She described her writing as “coming from the heart” and said, “it’s mostly feeling, not really taking a plant and writing about how it curves, how the leaves grow, or something” (transcript, March 16, 1998). She described how, on one occasion, this “from the heart” writing was deemed unacceptable by her teacher:

... my first copy was all emotions, there was no imagery, and she told me I had to completely change it, because any poem without imagery is wrong. That was her theory, and I was kind of mad because how can you say what a poem is, what is good poetry? (transcript, March 16, 1998)

When I asked the girls whether they ever changed their poems to please the teacher, Skyler said she sometimes changed hers, adding, “‘cause I’m like that, everybody knows” (transcript, March 24, 1998), but Jeremiah and Ranma said they

wouldn't change theirs because "it's poetry, that's the point. That would be like, contradicting its meaning to do that" (transcript, March 24, 1998).

For these girls, it would seem that response in school has rarely been focused on meaning. When response ignores meaning and instead takes the form of evaluation, when students' loves, hates, fears and desires are not acknowledged and celebrated, and when the focus in classrooms is on the poem rather than the poet, poetry very quickly becomes an artifact rather than a means of self-invention². When the girls are asked to revise their poetry, they are naturally resistant. They are being asked to change a representation of themselves, or perhaps, a representation of how they view the world. For these girls, the process of writing poetry leads to self-invention; it is a process that helps them compose their lives. In bringing words to the page, they are able to capture something of the intangible quality of their feelings or experiences. Revision in this context makes no sense. It would be like asking them to revise their conversational speech or personal journal entries.

When I think about poetry as self-invention, and particularly about the ways in which these girls have used poetry to understand something about themselves and their lives, I realize the importance of looking beyond the immediacy of any particular poem. If we can begin to conceive of the writing of poetry as an important process that helps us compose our lives, rather than only a means of gaining access to an art form that might be

² It is important to note I am not advocating all poetry instruction focus on the poet rather than the poem. There are important distinctions between teaching the forms and traditions of poetry and teaching creative writing. If student writing is meant to help students master a specific form – for example, the sonnet – then focusing on the poem is obviously paramount. However, if student writing is meant to help students learn another language for self expression, then the focus, at least initially, should rest on the poet.

“mastered”, then our view of response changes dramatically. Perhaps response and revision should be equally concerned with attending to the ongoing stream of words, thoughts, images and feelings that find their way into our poetry, rather than only on crafting and perfecting any one particular poem.

Being Loved in Return

During my doctoral research, I attended creative writing classes in the English department at my university. The classes were conducted as workshops where each student handed in poems on a weekly basis. The poems were handed in several days in advance, so students had a chance to read and formulate responses prior to the class meeting.

During class, students took turns reading each of their poems out loud, and then responded to comments, questions, and criticism from their peers. Most often, feedback was directed toward the mechanics and form of the poem. Occasionally, students responded with something about how the poem made them feel, or perhaps with a question about the events that led to the writing of the poem. However, despite the fact the majority of students had been together for over a year, these more personal responses were rare.

Several months into the course, Jason³, one of the students in the class, expressed frustration with the kinds of responses he was receiving. He was concerned the majority of responses to his poems were about word choice and punctuation, rather than any kind of reaction to the meaning he was trying to convey through his words. Some class

³ This is a pseudonym chosen by the author.

members were offended by his comments, arguing they were trying to help him improve his writing, and that improvement could only come through paying close attention to the minute details of each poem.

While I understood the reaction of my classmates, I did not agree with it. I, too, was sometimes frustrated with responses that seemed to ignore meaning and focus exclusively on form or mechanics. I was hungry for personal response: *How did this poem make you feel? Did it move you? Surprise you?*

In Voice Lessons, Mairs (1994) describes this need for response as something that lies at the core of her life as a writer (p. 146). She echoes the questions asked by Woolf in A Writer's Diary: “Do I ever write ... for my own eye? If not, for whose eye?” (p. 146). She describes her writing as an act of love: “Without readers – whether fans or reviewers or judges – I do not feel myself to exist. My writing arises out of erotic impulse toward an other: it is an act of love. And I want terribly to be loved in return, as a sign that I have loved well enough” (p. 146).

I suspect this was the very thing Jason and I were reacting to, this need to “be loved in return”. We desperately wanted our readers to respond to the truth of our writing in order that we might be brought into existence through our words. This is poetry as self-invention, writing that brings the self into view through the personal response of an other, a “being loved in return”. It is an idea that is hinted at in the following excerpt from Denise Levertov’s poem, “The Secret” (1964):

Two girls discover/the secret of life/in a sudden line of /poetry./I who don't know
the /secret wrote/the line.../...I love them/for finding what/ I can't find,/and for
loving me/for the line I wrote ...

For those of us who participated in the creative writing workshops, giving and receiving responses was a formalized part of the writing process, a course requirement. If the responses were personal and if they focused on meaning rather than on line breaks, word choice or punctuation, they became an integral part of whether we felt a poem was successful, a mirror that reflected our gaze back at us, one that sometimes held surprising and distorted images. Perhaps ironically, it was this focus on meaning rather than mechanics that would prompt us to return to the page - to rearrange the words, change the punctuation and the line breaks - all in the hope that this new version might reveal “the secret of life in a sudden line of poetry”, and cast our gaze back to us with sharp clarity.

In writing about my experiences with poetry and about the experiences of the girls in the conversation group, I have come to better understand the powerful role poetry can play in helping us make sense of ourselves and others as we “compose our lives”. I have learned that truth and imagination, rather than being a dichotomy, are, in fact, intimately connected to each other and to our lives as writers, poets and storytellers. And perhaps most importantly, I have learned that response, no matter what the context, is most helpful when it involves being listened to and understood. Ultimately, the responses of others are a powerful factor in how we view ourselves. I believe that in poetry, and in life, we are all searching for the same thing: to be loved in return.

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Paper Four

Dismissing Voices of Resistance? Teen Angst Poetry

...Reality doesn't seem like an option for me anymore(reaLiTY? wHAT THE HELL IS IT?), and then I realize that I'm a pathetic dreaMer; I'm an insignificant speck, desperately seeking a drop of (!)meaning(!) and identity in a world where triviality has taken over anything that I could ever have WANTED... Maybe when I get older I won't feel so strongly that I 'm simply taking up room... I wish I wasn't an angsty, disgruntled teenager. Give me something more. ~ Boivie, 1999¹

... adolescence is a critical time in girls' lives – a time when girls are in danger of losing their voices and thus losing connection with others, and also a time when girls, gaining voice and knowledge, are in danger of knowing the unseen and speaking the unspoken and thus losing connection with what is commonly taken to be “reality”. ~ Gilligan, 1990, p. 24

* * *

Webster's Dictionary defines angst as “a feeling of anxiety, apprehension or insecurity” (www.m-w.com, retrieved 17/05/99*). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines angst as “anxiety, anguish, neurotic fear; guilt, remorse” (OED Online,

¹ (excerpt from The Rantings of a Disgruntled Teenager, <http://www.infidels.org/~rmartin/poetry/teen.html>, retrieved 12/04/99).

<http://shelley.library.ualberta.ca>, retrieved 17/05/99). I first started thinking about the meaning of angst during my doctoral research. This research was focused around trying to understand the aesthetic dimensions of the writing and lives of Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler², three adolescent girls who participated in my study. My interest in the aesthetic emerged from a realization that, in my own life, I often used songs, poems, novels, films, etc. to help make sense of my experience of self and others in the world. As I thought about the power of these experiences, I realized I had no language to adequately describe the knowing and learning that so often emerged when I wrote a poem or read a novel, for example. As I thought more and more about these experiences, I came to see this kind of knowing as residing in the aesthetic. As a result, my understanding of the aesthetic does not rest upon traditional notions of beauty, nor on the immense body of philosophical literature that attempts to define or explain what the aesthetic is and how it works. Rather, I prefer to think of the aesthetic as describing “a particular form of sensuous understanding, a mode of apprehending through the senses the patterned import of human experience” (Abbs, 1989, p. xi).

I met with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler once a week for several months during the latter part of their ninth grade year, and into the early part of their tenth grade year. Most often, we met in a student lounge at the university, a small room with couches, tables and chairs. Our meetings were, for the most part, unstructured, with the exception of a brief writing activity. For the first ten or fifteen minutes of our time together we

² The adolescent girls in the study chose their own pseudonyms. The unusual names reflect the creativity and uniqueness of each of the girls.

collected our thoughts and wrote them down. This writing helped us leave the day behind and focus on the next hour and a half we would spend together. Sometimes our writing told stories of our experiences from the week before – for the girls, these might be school stories, for me, stories of research or writing. Other times there were poems or opinions or wonderings. We always shared this writing by reading it out loud; it became a ritual that helped us enter into conversation with each other.

Our time together focused on poetry: we talked about writing, attended occasional poetry readings, shared poems we had written, and, inevitably, told stories of our lives. The research was not intended to be a study of teaching writing, nor was it intended to be a study of poetry per se. Rather, I hoped the focus on poetry and poetry writing would provide an opening for talking and thinking about significant experiences and, in so doing, help me better understand what it means to engage with the world in aesthetic ways.

Teen Angst Poetry: Perceptions of Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler

The word angst first surfaced in our conversation in connection with a poem Jeremiah shared during one of our meetings, a poem she had written several months earlier:

Bargain

It's been a week and a
day and the sun still rolls around.

It's been a month and a
year and I still shine.

Patently passing through a day.

Blindly wandering through a
crooked life.

Tastefully wasted on a 15
dollar high. Grimly smiling at a
15 year old hand.

I blend nothing of habit
and all of colour.

It's a typical gray day, a
typical stone, brick, gray building
that I love.

Not too strong, and not
too silent. Pathetic and cynical
all in one day.

I control the speed.

I control this photo I've
arranged to save.

It's been an hour and
a minute, and the night still runs.

Jeremiah's first words after reading this poem were, "I don't like that." When I asked her why, she said it was "just stereotypical teen angst" writing. When I questioned further what she meant by teen angst, she described teen angst poetry as writing that focused on how bad life is, and then recited, "my life is ending, my world is crashing down on me" in a high pitched, dramatic voice (transcript, May 4, 1998). Angst was not mentioned again during that conversation, but Jeremiah had piqued my interest, so I asked about it during our next meeting.

This time, Skyler, Jeremiah and Ranma offered further explanation. Skyler said teen angst is "cliché, I hate life, my life sucks, I want to kill myself ... I went to hell and

back (feigning sobs) ... just everything that has to do with being a teen". Jeremiah described it as "the stereotypical, cheesy, I-wear-all-black-things teenager, my life is horrible, my parents are mean, my curfew is midnight" (spoken sarcastically in a sing-song voice). Ranma continued by saying, "I wear black lipstick, I light black candles..." as a way of describing the stereotypical teen who writes teen angst poetry (transcript, May 25, 1998).

In trying to ascribe meaning to the word "angst", it is perhaps helpful to return to the dictionary definitions that open this paper. Both Webster's Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary define angst primarily in terms of anxiety, perhaps due to the etymology of these words. In fact, both "angst" and "anxiety" derive from the same Latin root: "angustia" (Bamber, 1979, p. 7). It is interesting to note that, according to Bamber, it was this shared etymology that caused Freud's early translators to adopt the word "anxiety" for the German "angst" (1979, p. 7). As a result, much of our understanding of "anxiety", and, by extension, of "angst", is tied to Freud's work in psychoanalysis.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe Freud's work in detail, it is perhaps helpful to note that for Freud, anxiety is seen as a reaction to not being able to acknowledge "repressed wishes that have become powerful" (1962, p. 64). Since all people are faced with this same struggle, Freud felt that anxiety was a central part of the development of the social self. As Shaw wrote,

... in Freudian terms, social life was a form of tension between individual pleasure-seeking drives or libido, and the knowledge that they could not be given

into, but had to be repressed for the sake of society... in this way, repressed libidinal energy and its consequence, anxiety, are placed at the very heart, not only of symptoms and neuroses, but of most social formations. (1995, p. 35)

However, while the connections between “angst” and “anxiety” are helpful, particularly as they relate to psychoanalysis and the development of the self, they don’t seem to hold the girls’ sense of “stereotypical teen angst”. Instead, the girls’ sense of angst seems more connected with Heidegger’s notion of “dread”, and the “fear of metaphysical insecurity” (OED). In Being and Time, Heidegger (1962) suggested the feeling of dread or Angst brings the individual to a confrontation with death and the ultimate meaninglessness of life. For me, this sense of the word angst, that is, angst as a reaction to having to confront “death and the meaninglessness of life” is more in line with the girls’ descriptions of how angst has surfaced in their poetry and in the poetry of their peers. If we return to the excerpt from Linda Boivie’s The Rantings of a Disgruntled Teenager at the beginning of this paper, this sense of angst becomes exceedingly clear: “I’m an insignificant speck, desperately seeking a drop of meaning and identity in a world where triviality has taken over anything that I could ever have wanted”.

The girls told me they first heard the term “teen angst poetry” from a language arts teacher, who shared examples from the Internet. According to Ranma, Jeremiah, and Skyler, these Internet poems were viewed as examples of how not to write because they were full of cliches and stereotypes about how bad teenage life can be. The girls described teen angst poetry as depressing writing full of unoriginal references to death, for example – using words like black, darkness and mourning. Jeremiah said, “You

should go to the teen angst thing on the Internet and you'd see what we're talking about. It basically sums it up to see it. I remember one of the poems was like, 'My life is shattering/all the black raindrops fall on my face/like dirty ...'" (transcript, May 25, 1998). When I searched the Internet for examples of such poetry, I found dozens of websites devoted to adolescent writing. The following is an excerpt from a poem I found published on the Internet:

3 A.M.

I touched myself and I felt pain
 I whispered in my ear and I heard lies
 I looked into my eyes and I saw fear
 I put my feelings on a shelf and they fell and shattered
 I tasted my mouth and was overcome with bitterness...
 ...I dreamed a dream and awoke to a nightmare
 I couldn't sleep late one night and I got up and wrote this poem.

(Angel's Place Web Page, <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/3727/>, retrieved 26/04/99)

While this poem is a strong and moving description of an adolescent life, that in itself does not make it remarkable. What is remarkable is that this is only one of perhaps thousands of poems written by adolescent girls that are published on the Internet.

For Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, this poem, and others like it, would likely fall under the category of teen angst, and might therefore be dismissed as unimportant, trivial, or boring. In our conversations, they described how they thought teen angst poetry was a stage everybody went through, one some writers never moved beyond. Jeremiah said, "... I think everybody kind of goes through the period of time when it's like teen angst, [and] everybody really understands it ... everybody has sort of been in the same boat, so

it's easier to describe [through poetry]" (transcript, May 25, 1998). The girls also described how they thought teen angst poetry was easier to write than other kinds of poetry, because "it's way easier to think of bad words, like, 'drowning in a sea of rage', and so it sounds better" (Ranma, transcript, May 25, 1998).

One of the more disturbing ideas the girls shared with me was the notion that some adolescents fabricate problems or cultivate depression in order to write teen angst poetry. They described how they thought some girls wrote this kind of poetry as a way of seeking attention or as a way of fitting into teen culture - as Skyler said, "making things cool by making them depressing" (transcript, May 25, 1998). In fact, the girls suggested most teen angst poetry is an attempt at "fitting in", rather than an authentic expression of feeling. As Jeremiah said, "... it's so easy to conform to, like it's such an easy thing to go from grade seven, grade eight and then all of a sudden you hit high school and it's easy to go into this whole 'I hate the world, everything's bad, everything's bitter' ... it's just like a pattern that they're all following ... like they're in a cookie cutter" (transcript, October 9, 1998).

Perhaps the most disturbing element of this conversation came when Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler described how they thought poetry about suicide was very often a way for adolescent girls to seek attention. In the following transcript excerpt (May 25, 1998), the girls discuss this idea with me:

Skyler: [I've heard] that more girls commit suicide between the ages of 13 and 17 or something, than boys do . . . because a lot of girls want attention, and

that's it, a lot of cases, that's not all, there's a lot of reasons that contribute to it, but a lot of it is attention, and that comes out of angst too, it's attention, and teen angst poetry will come from that too. Wanting attention. . .

Susan: But isn't most of that poetry private?

Skyler: Yeah, keeping it a secret except showing certain people will give you attention, right? And then there's some people who think that they're keeping it private, and show like twenty people, so that they're all like, "Ooohhh are you okay? Don't kill yourself, everything is wonderful, we'll buy you stuff. You're wonderful, life is wonderful..."

Susan: So do you really think that's a social phenomenon, that girls fabricate suicidal thoughts?

Ranma: Yeah

Skyler: Not in all cases it's fake either, it could be just being blind, you don't know you're doing it for attention, but you are in reality, you are . . .

Susan: What about the whole privacy issue?

Jeremiah: A lot of times, the cheesy teen angst stuff isn't really private at all, do you know what I mean? Like they don't really keep it private. I used to know this girl, her name was _____, and she was like two years older than me, so I was 11 and she was 13. And she used to write all this teen angst poetry and I remember I went over to her thirteenth birthday, and she rips out her poetry book, and all of us are like, "Ohh, it's okay, life isn't that

bad . . .” She just got a whole bunch of attention from everybody. . . if it was really something that was like . . .

Skyler: If it was real and serious, you wouldn't want everybody to know.

Jeremiah: Exactly

Skyler: Like if it was true, because otherwise, even if it was true letting everybody know would be for attention – obviously...

This excerpt is particularly disturbing in light of recent statistical data. In Canada, suicide is the tenth leading cause of death, with one death approximately every ten hours (Statistics Canada, Causes of Death in 1992). According to the American Psychological Association, suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people aged 15 – 24, with young women attempting suicide four times more frequently than young men (http://www.psych.org/public_info/TEENAG~1.HTM, retrieved 26/04/99).

The girls' attitude toward suicidal topics in the poetry of their peers might be seen as an extreme example of their dismissal of “teen angst” poetry. Unfortunately, this dismissal seems to me to be closely connected to their school experiences. As Ranma said, “. . . if I didn't have an L.A. class that talked about teen angst, I would have [kept writing] teen angst poetry”. When teachers use “angstful” poetry as an example of how not to write, or when they begin a poetry unit by saying, “Grade eight students tend to write about death” (transcript, May 25, 1998), it sends a clear signal to students about which topics are appropriate to write about and which are not. Rather than labeling student writing as “teen angst”, or focusing on “good” or “bad” poetry, I wonder what

might happen if teachers valued the expressive nature of student writing rather than focusing primarily on form and quality.

As I continued to talk with Ranma, Jeremiah, and Skyler, I couldn't help but wonder about the implications of labeling so much of the writing of adolescent girls as "teen angst". If the girls were correct in saying that "teen angst" characterized the writing of many, if not most, adolescent girls, was it not something we should be paying attention to? Was it not something we should be valuing for its own sake and on its own terms?

The Struggle to Speak and Be Heard

Researchers in the areas of education and psychology have discussed the importance of creating spaces for adolescents to express themselves through poetry (Barbieri, 1995; Bates, 1993; Bowman, 1992; Clark-Alexander and Larkin, 1994; Gardner, 1993; Hart, 1999). For example, Barbieri (1995) described how poetry in the classroom might serve as a means of "breaking the silences that can suffocate adolescent girls" (p.135):

Certainly, as girls enter adolescence, the adult world signals the priority of thought over emotion. At what price do girls suppress all they know through their senses, their imaginations, and their intuition? Could it be that more poetry would help them stay in closer touch with these parts of themselves, even as they progress through an educational system that clearly values other ways of knowing? This is my hope for them. (p.126)

Clark-Alexander and Larkin (1994) described how poetry writing can be a safe and private way for adolescents to express their feelings. They suggest this kind of writing may offer teachers a window into their students' conflicts and anxieties. While they acknowledge that teachers must seek assistance from trained professionals in the case of students who appear to need counseling or intervention, they also emphasize the importance of teachers letting students know they have been heard as a primary means of preventing more serious problems:

Because writing provides a safe way for students to communicate important issues of the heart, teachers need to give careful consideration to how they will respond to such writing. When students expose their innermost feelings through writing, the effects of being ignored are devastating. (p. 40)

It is important to note not all researchers subscribe to the notion that classrooms can be safe havens for students. For example, Finders (1997) argues that creating safe spaces in classrooms is both "impossible and undesirable" due to the often-invisible culture of power exhibited by some students over others (p. 118). While I understand Finder's concerns, I would argue that before we dismiss the possibility of creating safe spaces in classrooms altogether, we must think carefully about how we conceive of a safe space. While Finders may be correct in assuming that the *public* space of the classroom, that is, the space of group discussion and student collaboration, may never be safe for some students, it is possible that safe spaces might still exist in the interactions between a teacher and an individual student or between small groups of students. Perhaps if students are not expected to publicly share their writing, and if they are able to choose

with whom and at what time others may read their work, it might, in fact, be possible for students to experience some aspect of the classroom as a safe haven.

Unfortunately for Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, the sense of being heard has been missing from many of their writing experiences in school (Hart, 1999). Sometime between seventh grade and tenth grade they have been taught their words will be ignored at best and dismissed at worst when their writing takes the form of “teen angst poetry” and deals with the difficulties and turmoil associated with adolescence.

What happens when society fails to value the writing of adolescent girls, labels their poetry as “teen angst”, and dismisses the powerful feelings that lead to this kind of writing? How do girls come to see themselves as authors of their own feelings, thoughts, and indeed lives, when the outside world tells them there is no merit in self-expression unless it is able to transcend the label of teen angst?

Gilligan has written extensively on the struggle adolescent girls face in trying to speak and be heard (Brown and Gilligan, 1991; Gilligan, 1993, 1990, 1982). According to Gilligan, adolescence is a particularly troubling time for girls, since it is a time when they are forced to reconcile the female need for connection and relationship with the adolescent need for separation and independence. Unfortunately, since human development has been understood historically almost solely in terms of male experience, the former of these two struggles - that is, the need for connection and relationship - has largely been ignored. As Gilligan wrote:

As we have listened for centuries to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to

notice not only the silence of women, but the difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak. Yet in the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility... (1982, p. 173)

Brown and Gilligan (1991) have written about their own struggle to give voice to what they call the “canonical no-voice voice”, that is, the “objective, dispassionate, and disembodied” voice that is “generally not construed as a voice but rather as the truth” (p. 43). For Brown and Gilligan, this struggle involves a shift away from “a practice of truth” and toward a “practice of relationship”. They write about their work with Tanya, a girl in one of their studies, and point to the difficulty adolescent girls face in trying to hold onto their own experiences and speak in their own voices when faced with this “practice of truth” that is still so pervasive in our patriarchal society:

... we have to ask why, as Tanya moves from age twelve to age thirteen, does speaking about what she feels and thinks in her relationships, once so simple and genuine for her, become so fraught with difficulty and danger? As we saw, Tanya struggles to hold on to her experience – to know what she knows and to speak in her own voice, to bring her knowledge into the world in which she lives – in the face of authorities and conventions that would otherwise muffle her voice or bury her knowledge. (p. 56)

Gilligan (1993) has also written about how girls are “at once inside and outside of the world they are entering as young women” (p. 148). She believes that their resultant ability to see and speak in two ways might enable girls to resist taking on the male perspective as their own. Unfortunately, however, the taking on of a male

perspective is a lesson girls learn as they enter adolescence, and if this lesson is learned well enough, it becomes part of the invisible cultural framework that assumes the “male conversation” is, in actuality, the “human conversation” (p. 148). In the words of Gilligan: “On a daily basis, girls receive lessons on what they can let out and what they must keep in, if they do not want to be spoken about by others as mad or bad, or simply told they are wrong” (p. 149).

I cannot help but wonder if Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler have learned these lessons. Are they becoming experts on what they can let out and what they must keep in? Have they learned that in order for their poetry to be valued in a school setting, it must avoid others’ sense of cliché and stereotype and not dwell in the dark shadows of painful personal experience? Have they learned to accept and even embrace the idea that “teen angst” poetry is a valid label for such writing? Finally, have they learned that others can and do label the things we say and the ways we choose to speak, and that these labels carry an immense amount of power?

Labeling Personal Experience: Teen Angst and Confessional Poetry

When I think about the school experiences of Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, I can’t help but reflect on my own struggle to find a form in which I might begin to write in an authentic voice. Several years ago, I enrolled in a writing course at the university. The course was structured as a workshop, where each student brought poems to our weekly meetings and shared them with the group. My experience with this group was very positive, for the most part. However, there were times when our conversation turned to the writing of people who were trying to “find themselves”, to use the words of one of the

girls in the course, and this kind of writing was clearly not valued or respected. The following personal journal entry documents one such conversation:

... Erica³ talked about how she hates it when people write poetry about "finding themselves" and how it's usually forty or fifty year old women who she hears at poetry readings who write this kind of stuff. My professor responded by saying that he's heard plenty of younger people write "finding myself" kind of poetry... but he agreed with her that it's typically not good writing. I didn't say anything, but I was thinking about how I think that many (most?) women come to poetry writing, at least in the beginning, as a way to express themselves and find out what they know about themselves and the world. At least, that's how I experienced writing. (personal journal entry, October 29, 1997)

I found this conversation troubling for several reasons. First, I was inclined to think of poetry if not as a way of "finding myself", at least as a way of "finding out about myself". Most of my writing was very personal; for me, poetry was a way to capture a moment, or make sense of an experience or feeling. Second, I was meeting with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler while I was enrolled in the writing course, and this conversation seemed to echo the girls' dismissal of "teen angst" writing. Hearing the words of Erica and my professor, it seemed that the "finding myself" poetry of forty or fifty year old women was being judged in the same way the girls (and their teachers) judged "teen angst" poetry. Finally, I was frustrated by my own silence; I no longer felt like the writing course was a safe place to talk about my own very personal experiences with

³This name is a pseudonym chosen by the author.

writing. I was afraid that if I shared my belief that poetry was intimately connected to self-knowledge, my writing would no longer be respected or valued.

Historically, when women have written poetry based on their own experiences - poetry that moved beyond safe topics and ventured into the realm of madness, mothering and menstruation, for example - their work was labeled as confessional. According to Middlebrook (1993), confessional poetry referred to “content, not technique” (p. 633). It was writing that was “technically proficient”, but with “subject matter [that] made critics publicly recoil” (p.636). In contrast, Lerner (1987) has written that confessional poetry “deals with experience that is deeply painful to bring into public, not because it is disgusting, nor because it is sinful, but because it is intensely private” (p. 64). However, he argues for the use of fiction in poetry, as a way of “detaching oneself from one’s own experience” (p. 55).

I would argue that Lerner’s emphasis on the importance of “detaching oneself from one’s own experience” is, by and large, a male construct. It is interesting to note that, despite the fact “confessional poetry” has historically been associated with male poets such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman and W.D. Snodgrass (Gilbert, 1984; Lerner, 1987; Middlebrook, 1993), Gilbert (1984) described this genre as a “distinctively female poetic mode” (p. 99). Gilbert distinguished between the male confessional poets and the female confessional poets by pointing out that although the male confessional poet “romantically explores his own psyche” through his poetry, he is able to “move beyond the self-deprecations and self-assertions of confessional writing to larger, more objectively formulated appraisals of God, humanity, society” (p. 99). Gilbert suggests

this is the case because male confessional poets are able to see themselves as representative of the species - as “Everyman” - while female confessional poets have no such history or social context. As Gilbert wrote, “...even at her most objective she feels eccentric, not representative; peripheral, not central” (p. 100). The female confessional poet “cannot easily classify either herself or her problem. To define her suffering would be to define her identity, and such self-definition is her goal, rather than her starting point” (Gilbert, p. 100).

Lerner (1987) disagrees with the notion that self-definition can be the goal of poetry. For him, in order for confessional poetry to be poetry, and not simply confession, “...it would have to have a reason – an aesthetic reason – for being written and read, and making form out of the poet’s own inner chaos would be a by-product. If that were your primary aim, you would go to the confessional” (p. 66). In contrast with Lerner, my sense is that there is an intimate connection between self-definition and the “aesthetic reason” for a particular poem; for me, these are not mutually exclusive ideas.

I am often torn between my own personal experiences with writing and what the canon tells me is valued and valid. For me, Lerner’s words represent the “canonical no-voice voice” that presumes objectivity and hides the identity and stance of the writer behind a “practice of truth”. In contrast, my own writing seeks not objectivity, but complicity. I want to embed my voice within the text, and share my experiences with the reader, not simply as the “speaker of the poem”, but as the author of the work. When I read Lerner’s essay on confessional poetry, I wanted to know if he is a poet. I wanted to know how he experiences writing in his own life. It is not enough for me to read the

words published in an academic journal without knowing something of his experience, without hearing something of an authentic voice in his writing. And yet, behind these brave words, lies a somber truth: I cannot help but be influenced by a literary tradition that seeks to label my writing as confessional, one that seems to put more value on words the further removed they are from personal experience. I can't help but ask the question, "Is it good enough?" and all too often, I forget to add, "Good enough for whom?"

I believe there are strong parallels between "teen angst poetry" and "confessional poetry". Both are written primarily by women, about women's experiences, in a voice that makes it abundantly clear the writer is intimately connected to the speaker of the poem. Both have been labeled by a literary tradition that has been shaped, at least historically, almost exclusively by men. Both focus on topics that are intensely private and often based on painful or difficult life experiences. Both are relegated to the margins of what is considered acceptable or praiseworthy. And, in the context of my work with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, both have played a part in silencing the voices of girls and women. It is one thing to feel silenced myself by a writing group of peers and a literary community that I am in some small way a part of. It is another thing entirely for Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler to be silenced by their teachers and other adults who, with all good intentions, slowly smother the voices of adolescent girls in the name of "good poetry".

In Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer, Mairs (1994) writes about the challenges women face in trying to write about personal experience. She argues that this kind of writing is risky because "public utterance" is "culturally impermissible for women (p. 128). She describes her own experiences in a poetry workshop where she was

the only woman, a workshop where the men “knew what writing was because they were doing it” (p. 22). She also described how her writing was often dismissed, not only in this particular workshop, but also by editors and reviewers who, while never suggesting she stop writing, all but insisted she write something else.

Despite her struggle to be heard, Mairs managed to cultivate her own voice and continue writing about her own experiences. As a result, her writing has sometimes focused on painful or tragic events. For Mairs, this kind of writing is important not only because it preserves and honors the voice of the writer, but because it has the potential to help others come to terms with their own personal struggles. To use her words: “What of the woman who wrote to me after her lover had shot herself to death? She didn’t need a description of depression (she was a psychiatrist) but a means of fathoming suicidal despair. She needed to enter and endure it with me” (p. 129).

For Mairs, such writing is neither “confession” nor “angst”, it is simply an authentic examination and expression of one woman’s life, one that deserves to be heard on its own terms:

Let the masters of the written word cling to their bodiless principles. Let them pronounce what is interesting and what is not, what is a poem and what is not, what merits their grudging praise and what does not. For myself, I want another model. I want to hear this poem by this person on this muggy August morning under the pear trees. I want to know what it is doing in the life of her work, and in my life as well. I want to give her the courage to say the next hard thing, without fear of ridicule or expulsion if she strays across the borders of good taste,

good sense, or good judgement demarcated by a tradition she has had no part in forming. I want her to do the same for me. (p. 24)

How do we begin to give adolescent girls the courage to say the “next hard thing”, when their poetry and, by extension, their very experience, has been labeled as “teen angst”? How do we help girls hold onto the strong, authentic voices they develop in childhood, and not cast them aside in favor of the “canonical no-voice voice” that presumes to represent all of “human conversation”?

Conclusion

For me, the questions and issues raised in the preceding pages suggest a return to Gilligan's quotation from the beginning of this paper:

... adolescence is a critical time in girls' lives – a time when girls are in danger of losing their voices and thus losing connection with others, and also a time when girls, gaining voice and knowledge, are in danger of knowing the unseen and speaking the unspoken and thus losing connection with what is commonly taken to be “reality”. (Gilligan, 1990, p. 24)

Perhaps the poetry of adolescent girls is their window into “knowing the unseen” and “speaking the unspoken”. Perhaps “teen angst” poetry is a way for adolescent girls to articulate the loss of self and relationship in a society that continues to worship a male model of personal autonomy and increasingly demands we relate to one another in terms of power and control. If this is indeed the case, if “teen angst” poetry can serve as a way for adolescent girls to speak in their own authentic voices and resist taking on a male

perspective of the world, what does it mean when they are taught, as Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler have been, to discredit the very form that makes their resistance possible?

Lorde (1984) has written about this problem. In an essay titled “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”, she described how our current society has been defined by “profit, linear power, and institutional dehumanization” (p. 39). She argued that within these structures, our feelings were not meant to survive; rather, they were expected to give way to rational thought: “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (p. 38). Finally, Lorde described the absolute necessity of poetry in the lives of women:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (p. 37)

There are no easy answers here. Part of the solution no doubt lies in continuing to question the patriarchal structures that have for too long labeled the things we say and the ways we choose to speak as women. For me, this signals a move away from a teaching tradition that seeks to teach the poem, rather than the poet (Heard, 1989). Perhaps Barbieri (1995) was right when she said poetry can help adolescent girls stay in touch with the “deepest, most candid parts of themselves” while helping them make connections with others (p. 142). Barbieri’s hope for her students is the same hope I have for Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, and indeed, for all adolescent girls who are struggling to

hold onto their own voices and their own knowledge: the hope that I will see them in years to come, “still dancing, still shouting, still themselves” (p. 144).

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Paper Five

Authoring Our Own Aesthetic: Stories of Resistance and Possibility

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) have described the power of stories in helping us understand our experience: "experience ... is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones" (p. 415). Likewise, Kerby (1991) has written:

... narratives [or stories] are a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately, of ourselves. Narrative emplotment appears to yield a form of understanding of human experience, both individual and collective, that is not directly amenable to other forms of exposition and analysis. (p. 3)

In this paper, I share some of the stories that emerged from my conversations with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler¹, three adolescent girls who participated in my doctoral research. These girls were identified by their language arts teacher as girls who were interested in participating in a research group that focused on poetry. When I first met the girls, I imagined we would meet once a week to write poetry together and talk about our experiences with writing. However, I soon discovered the girls did not want to use our time together for writing, since they believed it would be difficult to be "inspired" at a

¹ Each of the adolescent girls in the study chose their own pseudonyms. The unusual names reflect the creativity and uniqueness of each of the girls.

prescribed time once a week. As a result, the writing group I imagined became a conversation group.

Florio-Ruane (1986) has written about role of conversation in research. In a study involving teachers and researchers, she found that conversational talk offers a way to transcend status differences and admit more and different sources of information (p. 7). Similarly, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) described conversation as a method that allows participants to share equally in establishing the form and topics of the research. As well, they believe conversation should occur “in a situation of mutual trust, listening, and caring for the experience described by the other” (p. 422). During my time with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, I worked hard to establish our group as a place of equal participation where all topics were honoured. As a result, our weekly conversations proved to be a rich and fruitful approach to learning about the lives and experiences of the girls.

My research began with an interest in the aesthetic. Abbs (1989) has defined the aesthetic as "a particular mode of responding to and apprehending experience ... a mode of intelligence working not through concepts, but through percepts, the structural elements of sensory experience" (p. 76). Like Abbs, my sense of the aesthetic is closely connected to sensory experience. For me, the aesthetic refers not to traditional notions of beauty, nor to the immense body of philosophical literature that attempts to define or explain what the aesthetic is and

how it works. Rather, my understanding of the aesthetic comes directly from personal experience; often the experience of being profoundly moved by a poem, film, song or story helped me uncover knowledge about myself or the world that was unavailable through other means. In many ways, this reminds me of Gadamer's idea that works of art can sometimes be experienced as a discovery or disclosure. To use his words: "The work of art that says something confronts us itself. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed ... [it] is not something one knows in any other way" (1976, p. 101).

My work with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler was an attempt to expand my understanding of the aesthetic through exploring the nature of aesthetic experience for them. Through talking about our experiences with poetry, I hoped to come to a better understanding of how they experienced the aesthetic; I hoped to discover, for example, whether they shared Gadamer's sense of discovery and disclosure. I was also interested in how the girls' aesthetic experiences might contribute to their understanding of self and world.

The stories that follow suggest the importance of paying attention to how children conceive of and create aesthetic spaces in their lives. They are stories that remind me of the work of Heilbrun (1988), who suggests that women, in particular, "have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples,

by which they might assume power over – take control of – their own lives” (p. 17). Through sharing these stories of Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler², I hope to make visible some of the spaces in our lives and in our research together - spaces that hint at the narratives, texts, plots and examples Heilbrun speaks of.

These stories are not sequenced in any linear or chronological way; rather, they make up a collection that, when taken together, might further our understanding of the complexities inherent in finding and creating the aesthetic spaces that might help us compose our lives. As Coles (1989) reminds us:

The whole point of stories is not ‘solutions’ or ‘resolutions’ but a broadening and even a heightening of our struggles – with new protagonists and antagonists introduced, with new sources of concern or apprehension or hope, as one’s mental life accommodates itself to a series of arrivals: guests who have a way of staying, but not necessarily staying put. (p. 129)

Stories of Resistance: Whose Aesthetic?

Bateson (1989) described life as an “improvisatory art”, one that follows an “underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic” (p.3). I find her words

² The stories in this paper are either my own version of recollected events or tellings, or are fashioned from transcripts of conversations or monologues. In the latter case, the stories use only words taken directly from the transcripts; however, in some cases, I chose to modify or combine parts of conversations for clarity or completeness.

helpful for thinking about the stories the girls shared of their lives and about my own stories of the time we spent together. However, when I think about my work with the girls, and about some of the “ongoing improvisations” that make up our lives, I cannot help but wonder: Whose grammar and whose aesthetic are at play in the spaces we create and inhabit together?

Creating a Welcoming Space with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyer

Most often, we met in a small student lounge at the university, a room with two worn, orange sofas, a metal cabinet, an old wooden coffee table, and various games, books and toys left behind by the children who used the room for a lunchroom and playroom. There were bulletin boards along one wall, and my first instinct was to cover them with paper to try and make the room a more inviting space. But the girls didn't want to decorate anything – they liked the room: the dim light, the dusty blinds, and the brown cork bulletin boards. They said it was so bad it was good. And maybe for them, that room needed to stay that way, to be left as we found it, because it said something about the university maybe, or our group. If we changed it, it might have changed us somehow.

(transcript, February 23, 1998)

When I think about this story, I realize my desire to decorate that room came out of my experience as a teacher. In the culture of teaching, the ideal classroom is one with brightly coloured bulletin boards covered with samples of student work and motivational posters. In the absence of a model for an “ideal

research space”, I fell back to my story of teaching. This story is one that was at odds with the rhetoric I had been sharing with the girls in the research group. All through the introduction and explanation of the research project, I constantly expressed my desire to have Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler genuinely involved in decisions around how our group would proceed. Then, during our very first “official” meeting, I began offering them a “school story” of decorating our room together. Their reluctance to do so may very well have been a signal that this space was to be something very different from a school space. At the time, none of us knew what that was. However, we continued to negotiate the space together, and, as uncomfortable as it was to resist the impulse to “be the teacher”, I am grateful I followed their lead and allowed the space to remain undefined, and open to possibility.

For me, this story has profound implications for how we live and work with students in schools. Is it desirable or even possible to create these kinds of undefined spaces in schools, spaces that remain open to possibility? How often do we, as teachers, impose our sense of the aesthetic onto students, assuming that our definition of a welcoming space is the same as theirs, for example? Finally, how do we even begin rethinking the kinds of spaces we inhabit with students when we are forced to work in an educational context that clearly values defining and limiting student activity in the name of assessment or evaluation?

Finding the Purpose of Jeremiah's Play

We did a play in drama, and we got royally yelled at for it. We had this really cool set in the back: there was a door, two big black screens, a plant, another plant, a box, a bus stop, and a chalkboard behind it. In front of the chalkboard we had a white screen where we projected a painting that we did on an overhead transparency. Our play was really strange, basically _____ came out in the front of the stage and pretended to be an old fat man, with a cigar... and I don't even know what my character was, I just came out, I was eating an apple. I was this big quiet person that wasn't exactly all there. In the middle of it we had three phone rings, and then we had an interlude, and then this really odd jazz music, where we all stayed in tableau - we stayed still - and then it went on and we continued our play. But, apparently there wasn't any point to our play. That's why we didn't get full marks. It was just an odd play in comparison to the other ones - they were straightforward, they had all the right scenes, they had all the right characters, they built up this structure the way it was supposed to be according to the assignment, they had all the actors and everything, perfect, and we didn't have that, we just sort of created this thing from our imaginations. I guess it was a flop as far as the educational purpose of it goes, but it was the most fun to do, it was the best! It wasn't the normal, everyday, student, 14 or 15 year old play that everybody would do. It was weird. There really wasn't a whole solid, substantial, evident purpose to the play, or any deeper meaning or anything

like that. I got in a confrontation with my teacher about it, and I told her I thought the whole thing she was trying to do - to find the purpose of the play in front of the whole class - I told her it was BS, because why do you have to find this deeper meaning, why are you always expecting to see something so deep, why can't you just take it for what it is? It was an exploration of an imagination, but we weren't purposely trying to not have a point ... you just take the point for what it is, that was our whole purpose of the play. (transcript, April 20, 1998)

Jeremiah's story makes me think about the ways in which well-meaning adults define or limit creative, aesthetic spaces for children. In Jeremiah's story, the drama assignment was clearly laid out, with expectations for setting, plot and character - elements that arguably make up the culturally acceptable aesthetic for drama. When Jeremiah and her partner chose to work outside of those boundaries, they were met with resistance and a poor evaluation. As a teacher, I understand the importance of setting boundaries for student work; indeed, some students would be hard pressed to achieve success if left to create such boundaries for themselves. As a researcher, however, I have become painfully aware of how my actions and expectations have a significant impact on the kinds of things the girls are willing to share with me, and upon the authenticity of their responses. When we provide opportunities for students to explore the world in creative ways, we might begin by asking ourselves what it is that we hope to accomplish and how we might best respond to their interpretations (Hart, 1999). Is our intent to

have them master a specific form? Is it to help them explore the sensory and the emotional? Is it to provide them with another language for self-expression?

Resisting Ranma's Dreamworld

Sometimes I think my dreams are so cool, they are just so neat, because you don't normally think these things, but they're in your mind somewhere, and that's the scary part. I think they come from somewhere, something I did the day before, that day, or the week before, or whatever. This one came from a real experience: My friends were all in this sweat lodge and I didn't go in. I stayed outside. I was wearing a Pearl Jam shirt that says on the back " Nine out of ten kids prefer crayons to guns". And I saw these kids run by. They had these little BB guns and they were playing games and running around, and I thought, well that's kind of interesting, me wearing this shirt and seeing those kids. So that's what actually happened. I think that night, or a day later, I had this dream: I was at a band recital at my school. I don't do band, but I was there. I was with some friends and these friends were people I don't know in real-life. We went outside after it was over and it was really raining, and then these kids, those same kids that I saw the day before with BB guns, they were running around with real guns, shooting them. Then we went around the corner of this building, and there were two old people lying there dead and gory and shot and they were holding a rose together. (transcript, May 4, 1998)

In my work with the girls, the subject of dreams was a recurring theme. I wish I could say I encouraged the girls to talk about their dreams, or that I recognized the importance of this topic for them and worked hard to understand the meaning of dreams in their lives. Most of the time, however, I resisted. Whenever the girls began talking about their dreams, I felt uncomfortable. I felt like the discussion of dreams did not have any connection to our “real lives”. Instead, it felt like we were journeying into the supernatural, entering the realm of extra-sensory perception and out-of-body experience. This is not to say I consider dreams unimportant or frivolous; on some level, I suspect our dreams hold very important clues into our subconscious. However, the discussion of dreams simply did not fit with my preconceived ideas about the kinds of topics that would emerge in our conversation group. Despite my best efforts to create a research space that was “undefined” and “open to possibility”, I resisted the girls’ efforts to talk about their dreams; I failed to explore the aesthetic space of their dream worlds, because it was not a space I saw fit to dwell in.

This experience makes me think about the importance of paying attention to these kinds of spaces in the lives of children. It makes me question whether we value these kinds of openings, and consider how children might begin to make sense of their lives if given the opportunity to dwell in aesthetic spaces they create for themselves.

Stories of Possibility: Authoring Our Own Aesthetic

The following stories are ones where Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler talk about what it means to create their own aesthetic spaces. These stories help me understand something of what it means to dwell in aesthetic spaces of our own creation; for me, these stories point to ways we might begin thinking about what it means to help children author their own aesthetic as they improvise their lives.

Ranma: Less is More

Part of the way I have always taught myself to draw is to thrive on limitations. Meaning that, if I paint, I'm not going to want a box full of colors like light aqua green to mauve, flesh, fuchsia to brick red and banana yellow and golden sunshine yellow.... I believe that in order to learn something you have to limit yourself because that way you are using yourself more than your materials. In the school I go to, it's hard to get away from this in art class. But, I have never been one to have that big tin box of 16 different pencils from 6B to 4H. One pencil is good enough for me, or one stick of black charcoal. I think that makes it more interesting. If you buy a kid of big box of paints, or you buy a kid a pencil - she is probably going to learn a lot more from the pencil. Then, when you get her the box of paints, she will appreciate them a lot more and she'll be better with using them.

It's like rich man, poor man... Who's gonna learn more? I'd like to think that the poor man would because he's learning from himself and what he really

has, not from his material means. I kind of almost pity the rich in that way ... I realize that sounds kind of self-righteous, but I hope you know what I mean.
(transcript, January 1999)

Near the end of our time together, I invited each of the girls to carry a small hand-held tape recorder around for two weeks to record any thoughts or inspirations they had about writing, poetry, or life in general. The above excerpt was taken from Ranma's tape. What intrigues me most about Ranma's words is how they contradict so much of the prevailing attitude about how to best provide for children's creative learning. More and more it seems as though we are buying into the "bigger is better" mentality, intent on providing as many materials and resources as possible.

Ranma's words, "In the school I go to, it's hard to get away from" suggest the difficulty in getting beyond this way of thinking. Despite this difficulty, she developed the philosophy that, "... in order to learn something you have to limit yourself because that way you are using yourself more than your materials". Perhaps we could learn something from Ranma when we think about how to present opportunities for children to engage with materials in creative ways. Ranma's words make me wonder whether we should give children more time and fewer materials for creative activities, rather than the other way around.

For Ranma, authoring her own aesthetic means having the freedom to limit her medium, to choose a single pencil and sketchpad over "a box full of

colours". This is not to say all children would make the same choice. However, Ranma's words point to the importance of allowing individual children to make their own choices about how to engage with creative materials, rather than assuming, as adults seem to, that "more is better".

Skylar's Choreography

I didn't bring any of my own writing today, but I did bring part of a poem Laban used in one of his dances - he's a choreographer of modern dance - and it's really short, every line has two words in it, and near the end there's just one:

*we mirror/ in play/not only/the past/we show/ as play/not only/
today.../...solemnly striding/together/in chorus/ever stronger/binds
mutual/love kin/town country/ and mankind.*

Laban choreographed a dance for a festival, and he asked the writer of this poem to read it as the dancers danced. In modern dance you can dance to anything, but there has to be some kind of audio stimulus. That's the way Laban thought. For a presentation in school, we had to chose a choreographer and create a dance based on his choreography. We chose to choreograph a love story in the style of Laban. We found a classical piece of music by Mozart, and in one section my partner and I run up to each other and mirror each other, but we can't touch each other ... it was really coincidental because when I was looking for ideas for our presentation, I found the poem Laban used in the dance he choreographed for the festival and the first line was "we mirror in play".

I have a lot of trouble putting into words what my partner and I portray through our choreography. It is really hard to say in words because everybody sees it differently. We both choreographed it, we both put our ideas into it, and we both have different ideas about how the dance should be . . .but because we're partners, we put them together to compromise. But everyone sees it differently. In the beginning, we start back to back with our hands touching, then we pull away and turn, like there are problems in love. Then we come back together, but we can't touch, then we turn away, and we dance with really jagged movements. Finally, at the end, the last step, we're down on the floor and we're still not touching. Some people might see it as we're in love and we can't do anything, we can't reach out to each other - and other people might see it as mother and daughter, or something else entirely. I see it the way I see it, and my partner sees it the way he sees it. (transcript, March 16, 1998)

For me, Skyler's story is not only a story of what it might mean to find a space in which to author our own aesthetic, it is also a story that reminds me we are not alone in trying to find ways to create the aesthetic spaces in which we dwell. Skyler's story helps me think about what it means to honour multiple interpretations and to accept that no two people see things in the same way. At the same time, her story helps me understand what it means to work with another person to find ways to create together, all the while accepting that your interpretation might be very different from theirs.

Skyler's experience with choreography seemed infused with a sense of freedom and possibility. Together with her partner, she could choose how to live out the parameters of her assignment and interpret something of the world through dance. Her words make me hopeful about the possibilities for children to create and inhabit all kinds of aesthetic spaces, both inside and outside of school.

A Place of Freedom and Inspiration for Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler

Being with them makes you what you are. It brings up and makes what you are glow...there is a sense of freedom in their backyard, in their whole way of life, in their homes ... there is a sort of nonchalance, a way of looking at life, that I think makes it freedom. Gives it the essence of freedom. And I think that's why it's kind of inspirational. Because when I go there, I leave the house at 12 o'clock in the afternoon, and I don't come home until 12 that night, and my mom knows where I'm going so I have the ability to just forget about having to call my mom, or having all these other responsibilities that I have to take care of. I can sort of let go. I think the reason why it's so inspiring first of all, is because it's almost in the sticks, their backyard is big, and it's open, it's like a village, there's lots of trees, and there are train tracks in the back ...it's perfect. There are four houses we spend time at, all in an area of a square mile or block. It's a co-op, an actual co-op, so there's sort of this relative feeling. The most inspiring place when I'm there - I can't put it into thoughts, I can't put it into words, I can't put it on paper - I always go up on the tracks. Always. There's this place that I'll find, so I can

hear the hum of the people talking, I can hear the hum of the avenue and I can hear nothing at the same time. And it's so cool, it's just the coolest feeling, it's like my whole life put into one sound. (transcript, April 27, 1998)

The girls often talked about this place. It was a place where they spent time with friends, had bonfires and sweat lodges, where they didn't have to talk if they didn't want to. It was a special place at the time, perhaps sacred, to them. They would gather together and talk about life and art and each other – find metaphors for who they were and maybe who they could be. Who was the ocean and who was the sky? It was a safe place for them then, a place where they felt a kind of freedom. I always asked about it ... what was it about that place, those people? And they would tell me, wiser than I was, that they could not say it exactly, they could only talk around it, and hope I could understand.

The girls talked about this place as a source of freedom and inspiration, something they rarely felt in their day-to-day dealings with teachers or parents. This was an aesthetic space, one they could define for themselves, rather than having it defined for them. In that backyard, or up on the tracks, they could begin to establish their own grammar and their own aesthetic for interpreting themselves and the world.

Conclusion

My work with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler helped me better understand what it means for young persons to begin authoring their own aesthetic. Through

their stories of resistance, I learned to question whether the spaces we make available for students to explore and create might be more limiting than we ever imagined. Through their stories of possibility, I can begin to imagine new spaces for helping young people become authors, not only of their own aesthetic, but also of their own lives.

In a book chapter titled “Texts and Margins”, Greene (1995) writes about the importance of “making spaces for ourselves, experiencing ourselves in our connectedness and taking initiatives to move through those spaces” (p. 111). She describes an aesthetic education as one that might “enable people to uncover for the sake of an intensified life and cognition” and as an opportunity to engage in “other ways of seeing, other ways of speaking” (p. 125). These words speak strongly to the need for creating the kinds of aesthetic openings described in the stories of Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler; for Greene, these kinds of spaces, or “clearings”, as she refers to them, can only be realized when we engage students in interpreting works of art for themselves; when we allow them to find “their own openings into the realm of the arts” (p. 126). In many ways, this parallels Bateson’s notion of life as an improvisatory art, one that demands we author our own improvisations. It also parallels Heilbrun’s insistence upon the importance of creating our own “narratives, texts, plots and examples” by which we might take control over our own lives. Whether through refusing to decorate our meeting room according to some pre-conceived notion of what it means to create a

welcoming space, using drama class as an opportunity to push the boundaries of a particular genre, or continuing to discuss their dream worlds in the face of little or no response, the girls managed to resist having their spaces for learning, thinking and growing defined solely by others. Whether through learning to thrive on the limitations of a particular medium, acknowledging the importance of multiple interpretations through a choreography assignment, or feeling inspired by a particular place and group of friends, the girls taught me what it can look like to author our own improvisations.

If we are to follow the girls' lead in the hope of helping young persons author more "stories of possibility" and fewer "stories of resistance", perhaps what we need is some version or other of Greene's ideal:

...we ought to open larger and larger meeting places in schools. We ought to reach out to establish ateliers, studios, places where music can be composed and rehearsed, where poems and stories can be read. There might be new collaborations among questioners, as teachers and students both engage in perceptual journeys, grasp works and words as events in contexts of meaning, undertake common searches for their place and significance in a history to which they too belong and that they invent and interpret as they live. (1995, p. 126)

The importance of this vision lies in the emphasis on helping students "invent and interpret as they live". We cannot hope to accomplish this through

developing more precise curricular goals and objectives or through increased emphasis on assessment and evaluation. Rather than trying to further define and shape the educational experiences of our students, we might consider whether the experiences we offer have any room for the students' own sense of possibility. In so doing, we might begin to help our students author their own grammar and their own aesthetic for understanding themselves and the world.

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Conclusion

Shared ways of seeing are socially constructed and currently, fashionably, criticized and deconstructed, but when you are able to attend to something new or to see the familiar in a new way, this is a creative act. I would call it a godlike act, except that the word evokes, for too many, a sense of distance and dominance, while seeing anew is a kind of intimacy; I would call it childlike, if it were not important to avoid blocking learning with the remainders of all that was onerous in childhood. In the ordinary creativity of moving through the world we are both gods and children. ~ Bateson, p. 10, 1994

there is a party in my living room
 the poems arrived some time ago
 mine sit shyly on the sofa eyes averted
 while the canons drink beer and laugh a little too loud
 I keep myself busy pouring drinks serving appetizers
 wondering when the muses will arrive
 doorbell
 rings fashionably late
 I extricate myself from an e.e. cummings conversation
 { (parentheses) and awkward li
 ne breaks (do not)
 l
 e
 n
 d them (selves
) to
 ea
 sytalk} open the door
 muses sweep in brooding ethereal women draped in black organza
 (those of the men may be naked underneath
 lithe bodies of pleasurepoetry
 while those of the women smell of earth fertility (d)anger)
 now there is music muses sit boldly on the laps of canons
 coax my poetry to dance a little
 the party is in full swing

at four a.m. the muses disappear
 poems stumble around looking for lost words letters
 searching amongst half eaten pieces of pizza beer caps prone bodies
 I reattach phrases according to my own drunken logic
 send the cummings to bed with a dickinson
 (there will be a scandal
 but for now they are getting along nicely)
 heady with power pair plath with poe (who could resist?)
 I know I may no longer be amused in the clear light of sobriety but for now
 I will be both god and child in this creation

* * *

I would argue both research and poetry are creative acts, ones that enable us to
 “attend to something new or see the familiar in a new way” – as Bateson might say, they
 are acts in which we are both gods and children. In my own research, I began with a
 series of research questions about the aesthetic: What is the nature of aesthetic experience
 both for me and for the participants in my study? In what ways might aesthetic
 experiences help us create meaning in our lives? What kinds of conditions would be
 necessary for us to experience the world in aesthetic ways? While I do not claim to have
 hard and fast answers to these questions, I have enlarged my understanding of the nature
 of aesthetic experience, both for me and for the adolescent girls who participated in my
 study. I have discovered something about what it means to use the aesthetic to create
 meaning, and I have come to understand something of the complexity involved in trying
 to create conditions that might facilitate our experiencing the world in aesthetic ways.

The Nature of Aesthetic Experience

In the introduction to this dissertation, I used the writings of Greene (1971, 1989,
 1995a&b, 1997) and Best (1992) to describe differences between the artistic and the

aesthetic. I will continue here by revisiting this distinction as I have come to understand it. For me, the artistic is roughly equated with formal learning in the various arts; it is about learning to “read” the various elements that make up a particular work in the same way a critic might. The aesthetic, on the other hand, relies not on formal training, but instead rests upon our ability to “achieve particular works as meaningful” (Greene, 1995a, p. 125). While some might argue artistic vision is essential to aesthetic understanding, I would suggest this is not necessarily so. While artistic vision may help an individual understand a particular work in a particular way, I do not believe it guarantees the release of imagination that Greene described as being vitally connected to what it means to experience the world in aesthetic ways. In fact, I would argue that in some cases, the cultivation of artistic vision may, in fact, be a disservice to the aesthetic, rather than the other way around.

My musical studies are a case in point. I studied the piano for over ten years and consider myself a fairly accomplished musician. I am adept at reading the musical symbols that make up a piece of music and I can play compositions from a variety of composers in a variety of styles¹. When I hear a piece of classical² music, I can identify themes and motives; I may even be able to identify the composer or period. However,

¹ Absurdly, my musical literacy includes reading but not writing. Despite completing an introductory harmony course, I am not a fluent writer of music. Further, for individuals who have studied classical music using traditional teaching methods, this is not at all unusual. It is interesting to consider whether a more complete musical literacy - that is, one that includes both reading and writing - might contribute to aesthetic experience. I would suggest that while this more complete literacy would help, it still would not guarantee an aesthetic experience.

² The use of the word “classical” in this context is meant to suggest a whole range of eras including baroque, classical, romantic and contemporary periods. It is being used here in a “generic” sense, rather than denoting the “classical period” as it existed from approximately 1775 – 1825 (Machlis, 1984, p.228).

this knowledge does not mean I will experience a particular piece of music in aesthetic ways.

Recently, I had an opportunity to hear an Aboriginal man sing a traditional song from his culture. The song was a conclusion to a presentation on Aboriginal teachings in a course I was instructing. For me, the song lacked a familiar structure and sound; it did not use intervals or syllables I was accustomed to hearing. My “musical” ear was off balance as I listened. I could not make sense of the music in any rational, artistic way. However, the song moved me deeply. In the context of the course, the song represented a reaching out by the Aboriginal students to the non-Aboriginal students. The man who sang the song did so without reservation or fear; his voice was strong and sure. In my culture, only “trained professionals”, whether they be musicians or teachers, readily sing solo in front of a group of relative strangers. However, the man who sang to us was a visual artist, not a singer. When he sang, I could feel a bridge being built between the Aboriginal students and the non-Aboriginal students in the room. His song taught me something of his strength and the strength that resides in the various Aboriginal communities; it helped me see this man as a whole person rather than only as a member of a marginalized group. This was an aesthetic experience, one that enabled me to achieve this song as meaningful in the context of my life, not because of my formal musical training, but because I approached the experience of hearing the song with an openness that allowed a release of imagination.

My experience hearing this song was not simply an emotional reaction to a particular event. Certainly, my emotions played a large part in how I was able to

experience the singing of the song, but it would be inappropriate to assume aesthetic experience as being synonymous with emotional response. For me, the aesthetic brings together reason *and* emotion; it does not rely on one or the other. I believe, like Greene, that the aesthetic demands a “certain kind of noticing” (1971, p. 23), a wholeness that cannot be reduced either to rational thought or to emotional response.

In The Republic, Plato suggested reason should rule emotion. I believe it is this legacy that has led to the dominance of “artistic” approaches in the teaching of the various arts – that is, approaches that focus largely on the rational learning of colour theory, music history, or dance positions, for example, without paying heed to how we experience through the aesthetic. Like Greene, I believe “art education should be infused with efforts to do aesthetic education” (1995b, p.114), and that in this endeavor, we may be better served by emotion leading reason rather than the other way around. In so doing, we might learn what it means to release the imagination and “create orders in the field of what is perceived, allowing feeling to inform and illuminate what there is to be realized, to be achieved” (Greene, 1995b, p.114).

The tension between the artistic and the aesthetic and between reason and emotion permeated my work with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler. When I thought about how I understood the nature of aesthetic experience from their point of view, I realized they too felt these tensions, even though none of us could articulate it at the time. When the girls talked with me about inspiration, and declined to use our time together for writing, this tension came to the fore. The words they used were “real” versus “forced” writing-not aesthetic versus artistic-but clearly, they were trying to tell me something about the

difference between feeling “inspired” to write a love poem about a relationship breaking up and having a teacher announce you have thirty minutes to write a poem about love. In both instances, the girls drew upon their knowledge of language and poetry, yet they described the former of the two experiences as more authentic – more “real” – than the latter. I would suggest this is the case because when the girls felt “inspired” to write “real” poetry - rather than “instructed” to write “forced” poetry - emotion led reason, rather than the other way around.

There may be no way to fully reconcile these tensions. Certainly, the dichotomy of artistic/aesthetic and reason/emotion has limited usefulness. However, these distinctions help me think about the nature of aesthetic experience and what it means to describe such experience. If the aesthetic can be seen as a synthesis of reason and emotion, with emotion leading reason, perhaps the aesthetic should lead the artistic rather than the opposite. In schools and in society, this is seldom the case. Personal expression in the various arts is reserved for “artists”; their interpretations reserved for critics. Teaching the various arts in schools seems often to be focused on form and technique rather than on expression and meaning. In school and in society, we learn to identify who is a “good artist” – they are those individuals who have the best command of the media – but we rarely ask the question “What is art for?” I would agree with Abbs that “the arts are radically involved in the quest for understanding” (1989, p. xi), but I wonder whether this view is widely held. If the arts truly are involved in the quest for understanding, then it is important to find ways to allow all of us to “achieve particular works as meaningful” rather than assuming meaning rests in the bodies of artists and the minds of critics.

Creating Meaning Through the Aesthetic

My research began with a felt sense about the connection between aesthetic experience and the various ways we create meaning in our lives. In my own life, this connection is most apparent when I am able to experience a novel, film, song, or play, for example, in a way that enlarges my understanding of self or world. The connection between aesthetic experience and the creation of meaning is not easily articulated. In searching for a way to describe it, I turn briefly to the writing of Louise Rosenblatt.

In The Reader, the Text, the Poem, Rosenblatt (1978) developed a theory of literary response that focuses on the transaction between the reader and the literary text. According to Rosenblatt, critics and literary theorists have historically ignored the reader and focused almost exclusively on the text as the “place” where the literary work of art exists. In Rosenblatt’s view, neither the reader nor the text should be looked at in isolation since both are essential to evoke the “poem”. Rosenblatt uses the word “poem” not to refer to the physical manifestation of some piece of literature, but rather, to describe the lived-through work of art as it is created in the interaction between a reader and a text, whether that text is a poem, novel, short story or play. For Rosenblatt, the literary work of art can only be evoked if the reader adopts an aesthetic stance - that is, when the reader is primarily paying attention to the “attitudes, feelings, images, [and] associations that can be synthesized within the context of the total lived-through experience” (1978, p. 94). In so doing, the reader may be able to “crystallize out from the stuff of memory, thought and feeling a new order, a new experience ... [one that]

becomes part of the ongoing stream of life experience, to be reflected on from any angle” (1978, p. 12).

When I think about Rosenblatt’s words, I wonder whether it might be appropriate to apply her theory to a wider range of experiences. When we focus on the interaction between a reader and text, for example, I wonder whether it might be helpful to define “reader” more broadly - perhaps as one who interacts not only with written texts, but also with the visual and performing arts. Likewise, I wonder whether we might define “text” as spanning a whole range of expressive media, including literary texts, sculpture, dance, drama, painting, music and others. In expanding upon Rosenblatt’s definition of both “reader” and “text”, I have come to understand her notion of “evoking the poem” as intimately connected to what it means to engage the aesthetic imagination. Both the evocation of the “poem” and the engagement of the aesthetic imagination rely on what Rosenblatt has called an aesthetic stance:

The aesthetic stance ... means that the reader is primarily paying attention, not to logical connections, but to what the juxtaposition of these terms is calling forth within him[her]. [S]he is selecting out ... attitudes, feelings, images, associations, that can be synthesized within the context of the total lived-through experience. (1978, p. 94)

While Rosenblatt’s work helps me better understand the role of aesthetic experience in the creation of meaning, a tension remains. It is a tension that causes me to return to Rosenblatt’s distinction between the “reader” and the “text”; in my work with

the adolescent girls in my study, it is a tension that was first introduced by Jeremiah's distinction between "conscious" and "non-conscious writing".

Jeremiah described "non-conscious" writing as writing that resembled the taking of a candid photograph, a "snapshot" of a particular moment in time, one she might not even remember later. For Jeremiah, "non-conscious" poems were written quickly, to capture a moment or a feeling. They were rarely, if ever, revised. In contrast, she described "conscious" writing as writing that resembled a carefully planned photograph, one that was well thought out and taken very deliberately. These poems were crafted with an eye to expressing to others what she thought or felt; they were poems she could later return to and remember why and perhaps how they were written. When I first had the opportunity to reflect on Jeremiah's distinction between conscious and non-conscious writing, I wondered whether the former had more to do with having an aesthetic experience than the latter. However, I have since concluded this may not be the case.

When I first started thinking about Jeremiah's poetry, I thought that perhaps her "conscious" writing was more connected with aesthetic experience because it was writing that was more likely help others "re-discover" something of the writer's intent in crafting the poem. For me, this relates to the idea that when we deliberately craft a poem with a view to other readers, we may be more inclined to draw from images, metaphors and forms that reside within the boundaries of a shared cultural context. Conversely, when we engage in "non-conscious" writing – writing more akin to journalling or diary-keeping, for example – our focus is on personal meaning rather than public audience.

For me, this distinction raises the question of whether there is a difference between a public aesthetic and a private aesthetic and if one of these is more valuable or desirable than the other. Certainly, a public aesthetic is more “lasting” and more easily “measured”, for lack of a better term. One can return over and over again to a poem, a painting or an opera and experience the work in aesthetic ways. We can talk about these art forms and compare how we experience them using a shared artistic language. The creation and experience of this kind of public aesthetic is very different, however, from the more private aesthetic Jeremiah described as characterizing many of her poems. Many of Jeremiah’s poems resembled more of a “stream of consciousness” kind of writing rather than a deliberately crafted form; perhaps this writing represents a more momentary, private aesthetic experience, but an aesthetic experience nonetheless.

Must a poem be a shared utterance? Must we be able to return to the work and understand what compelled us to write it? Are we uncomfortable with the idea of a poem representing a private, fleeting aesthetic experience because a more “conscious” poem allows us to build some sort of consensus about what the “meaning” might be? For me, this tension suggests that despite the work of Rosenblatt and others, we still have not fully reconciled the question of where meaning resides: in the text, the reader, or, as Rosenblatt wrote, in the lived-through interaction between the two. A focus on a purely public aesthetic, an aesthetic that can in some way be shared, suggests meaning resides in the “text”. A focus on a purely private aesthetic, perhaps a momentary aesthetic, suggests meaning resides in the “reader”. Perhaps it is best to recognize the public and

the private aesthetic as residing on a continuum, where “non-conscious” writing might be conceived of as thought personified, and “conscious” writing as thought abstracted.

When I think about how aesthetic experiences help us create meaning in our lives, I have more questions than answers. I struggle with the notion of a public versus private aesthetic and I wonder whether we can or should learn to value both.

Conditions of Aesthetic Experience

In my research with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, I learned that aesthetic experiences most often occur in situations characterized by a certain openness or freedom. When I reflect on this learning, I realize I am troubled by the differences I perceive between formal and informal learning contexts, where formal contexts lack this openness and freedom and informal contexts welcome it. I would define formal learning contexts as those characterized by a more rigid definition of what counts as learning; they are contexts in which student activity is closely controlled and monitored. Informal learning contexts, on the other hand, are those contexts in which students are freer to define their own learning and engage in activities which are more open-ended and less focused on specific outcomes.

Many of the girls’ informal learning contexts were out-of-school places. These included, for example, Ranma’s experience of Vancouver and the girls’ experiences over spring break. Within the school setting, the girls experienced both formal and informal contexts in learning the various arts. While the girls did not tell an abundance of “school stories”, it was clear from the stories they did tell that informal learning contexts were

ones in which they could engage aesthetically while more formal contexts most often led to frustration and cynicism.

Jeremiah's story of creating a play presented a learning context that was not characterized by a sense of openness and freedom. When Jeremiah and her group members pushed the boundaries of the drama assignment, they were met with resistance and a poor evaluation. From Jeremiah's perspective, the activity was too rigid and did not allow the students to engage aesthetically and create their own meaning. In contrast, Skyler's story of choreographing a creative dance was a more informal learning context. Here, the students had guidelines, but were free to interpret the assignment according to their own understanding and experience. In so doing, they could engage aesthetically with their medium and create their own meaning.

The learning context was not the only factor that encouraged or discouraged an aesthetic stance. The girls' experience of response and evaluation also played a role in how they were able to create meaning through the various arts. For example, the girls were often cynical when they described their teachers' evaluations of their artworks. They questioned the grounds on which a teacher declared a particular work as good or bad. They maintained that no one could tell you "this is art, this is not" and they had a sense that many of their teachers awarded marks according to personal taste or preference. They knew something of the tension in society around the question "What counts as art?" and they felt that in many ways, the value of a particular work was more dependent on marketing, popular sentiment and elitism than on any "objective" measure of its value.

This cynicism creates an interesting backdrop for a story Ranma told me. In a conversation last summer, I learned that Ranma felt comfortable calling herself a visual artist, but was not comfortable calling herself a poet, despite the fact she seemed equally versed in both media. When I pressed her for a reason, she told me she did not consider herself a poet because she was not as confident about her poetry – and no one had ever told her it was good. In contrast, she was able to think of herself as a visual artist, in part because she had been earning praise from her teachers and peers since elementary school.

Again, this tension leads to many questions. In school settings, how might we create learning contexts that free students for aesthetic sensitivity? What does it mean to teach and evaluate the various arts? How can we help students create their own meaning from works of art when all too often, the teacher is expected to define “what counts as art”?

Future Directions

My study of aesthetic experience has left me with more questions than answers. From an interpretive perspective, this is important, since “a self-consciously interpretive approach ... does not seek to come to an end at some final resting place, but works instead to keep discussion open and alive, to keep inquiry underway” (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 35). It is fitting, then, that I end my dissertation with a discussion of future possibilities.

Although the study of aesthetic experience could conceivably occur in any number of contexts, for me, it is primarily an educational enterprise. This is partly

because of my work as a teacher and teacher educator and partly because I believe education should include spaces where students can engage their aesthetic imaginations.

In my current educational context at the University of Winnipeg, I endeavor to create spaces in which my education students might be able to engage their aesthetic imaginations. One of the optional course assignments is an invitation to the students to express their views on a social studies topic or issue through visual art. For the purposes of the assignment, visual art can include a number of media, including drawing, painting, collage, photography, sculpture, quilting, and film. To date, a few of my students have handed in projects; I am fascinated with the ways in which these students have represented their understanding through visual means. Over the next several months, I hope to talk with these students about their experience creating a visual work of art to express their learning and how or whether this differs from writing an academic paper, for example. I hope to discover through these conversations whether the creative, open-ended nature of this project allows students to engage with the aesthetic and how such engagement contributes to their learning.

Other imagined research in the area of the aesthetic involves studying how school-age children experience the aesthetic in a classroom context. Such a project might involve working with a classroom teacher to try and create openings and spaces for children to engage with the aesthetic; it might also document the inevitable constraints around creating such openings, particularly given the current emphasis on learning objectives, standards and evaluation in our schools. This imagined research could also

extend to the question of whether it is even possible to “teach” people to engage their aesthetic imaginations and what such teaching might look like.

Finally, I believe research into the aesthetic must extend to the products of research. More work needs to be done, for example, on what it means to engage in arts-based approaches to research and how such research might be judged. Typically, educational research is refereed in some fashion by educational researchers who are highly literate in text based academic forms of representation. What then are the implications for educational research that is presented in poetic form or through the visual or performing arts, for example?

* * *

As I think about how to end this dissertation, I realize this conclusion is yet another beginning. My work here will move me again into the forward arc of the hermeneutic circle and give me another lens through which to explore and interpret future questions and wonders. As Smith reminds me, “[a] requirement for hermeneutical explorations of the human life-world is a deepening of one’s sense of the basic *interpretability* of life itself. This is a matter of taking up the interpretive task for oneself rather than simply receiving the delivered goods as bearing the final word” (1989, p. 199). It is my hope that this research might, in some small way, also help others engage the aesthetic imagination in the service of taking up this interpretive task. As Greene wrote, “All depends upon a breaking free, a leap, and then a question. I would like to claim that this is how learning happens ...” (1995a, p. 6).

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Appendix A

Guiding Questions for Conversations with Shauna & Trish

1. How long have you been writing?
2. Do you have any favorite poems/poets?
3. What do you like about a particular poem/poet?
4. Do you have any favorite poems you've written?
5. Tell me about a specific poem and how you came to write it.
6. Do you revise your poetry?
7. Would you say you're "inspired" to write?
8. What meaning does the word "inspiration" have for you?
9. Is your poetry something you feel comfortable sharing in any public kind of way, or is it strictly private?
10. What do you think the role of poetry is/should be in society? In schools?
11. Why do you write poetry?
12. What purpose does poetry play in your life?
13. Have you written poetry for other people?
14. Do you ever share your poetry with others?
15. In general, how would you characterize your poetry? (rhyme or not, length, subject, etc.)
16. Were you ever encouraged to write/read poetry? By who and under what circumstances?

Appendix B

Ethics Information

Summary of Proposed Research Project

Purposes

The main purpose of the proposed research is to investigate aesthetic experience through poetry. Peter Abbs has said "the aesthetic is most adequately conceived as a particular mode of responding to and apprehending experience" (1989, p. 76). I believe that the aesthetic yields understandings that are not readily available through other forms of discourse. In my research, I hope to better understand the nature of the aesthetic through the reading and writing of poetry. As well, I hope to better understand how our understandings of ourselves and the world may be enlarged or transformed through engaging with the aesthetic.

Methodology

My research involves several different strands: first, I will engage in conversation with two women who write poetry in the hope of coming to a better understanding of the role that poetry plays in their lives and how they come to know differently by using a poetic voice; second, I will spend two months working as a writer-in-residence with a small group of adolescent girls to observe and talk with them about how they experience the aesthetic; and third, I will interrogate my own journey with poetry. For the purposes of this ethics review, I will discuss only the second strand of my research: my work with adolescent girls.

My work as a writer-in-residence will involve meeting with four junior high girls once a week for 1 1/2 to 2 hours. Our meetings will take place during January and February of 1998 in a classroom at the University. During our time together, we will write poetry, share our writing and read the poetry of others. I will observe the girls as we write and share our writing, read any writing the girls are willing to share with me, and talk with them about how they are experiencing the reading and writing of poetry. All of our conversations will be tape recorded and transcribed. I will collect any writing the girls are willing to share with me and photograph any artwork the girls create in conjunction with their poetry. As well, I will be keeping a research journal where I record any thoughts, questions or observations that arise out of our writing group.

How Data Will Be Used

Data collected will be used as a pilot study for my doctoral work. Some of the data may also be used in the writing of my doctoral dissertation. As well, I hope to share some of my preliminary understandings around poetry and aesthetics at the 5th Annual International Conference on Teacher Research in April 1998.

Ethical Considerations

Guideline 1: A minimal degree of risk to participants is posed. Participants will be informed of the public nature of the research document prior to beginning the study. They will also be informed of the researcher's legal obligation to divulge any incidences of abuse or neglect should such issues arise during the research process. Anonymity of all participants will be ensured.

All transcripts will be shared with the participants. No part of any transcript will be used in the research document without the participants' permission. As well, participants will have the final say regarding which pieces of writing they are willing to share in the public research document.

Guideline 2: Participants will sign consent forms indicating their willingness to participate in the study. Because they are under 18 years of age, their parents will also be asked to sign consent forms indicating that they give permission for their daughters to participate. Parents will be informed that any poems being used in the research document will ultimately be decided on by the participants. It is of vital importance to the study that the participants feel that they own their words and that they have the final say as to what may be included in the public research document. Participants will be informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Any participant who chooses to withdraw from the study may continue as part of the writing group if they wish. In this scenario the researcher will refrain from using any data, including writing or transcribed conversations, from that particular participant.

Guideline 3: The researcher will meet with the participants prior to beginning the study. At this time, the nature of the study will be explained and participant consent forms will be handed out. The researcher will follow up this initial meeting with a phone call to the participant's parents. At this time, arrangements will be made to meet with the parents of each participant in

order to further explain the study and to provide the parents with consent forms. All research documents will be confidential and read only by the researcher and her supervisor (with the exception of the final research document). The researcher will obtain permission from the participants before sharing any part of the unfinished research in other forums (e.g. International Conference on Teacher Research). Only pseudonyms or first names of participants will be used in order to ensure anonymity.

Guideline 4: The researcher involved in this study is familiar with University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The researcher will make every effort to avoid discrimination and biases in research practices and in the interpretation of findings. When in doubt, the researcher will consult with her advisor or other informed colleagues.

Guideline 5: The researcher has been, and will continue meeting with her advisor on a weekly basis to discuss the ongoing research as well as any ethical issues that arise over the course of the study.

Permission Letter – Parent or Guardian

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a graduate student from the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta and I am interested in studying how adolescent girls experience the reading and writing of poetry. I am writing to ask permission for your daughter to participate in a research project I am undertaking beginning in January of 1998.

Before returning to pursue graduate work at the University of Alberta, I taught elementary school to grades one through six. Here at the university, my work has involved supervising student teachers and teaching a music methods course to undergraduate students.

My research project involves organizing a poetry writing group for interested girls. The group will be a semi-structured environment where the girls can work on their own poetry, share and get feedback on their writing, and read the writing of other poets. We will meet once a week for 1 1/2 to 2 hours, for the months of January and February. Our meetings will take place in a classroom at the University of Alberta and we will meet outside of the girls' regular school hours.

My role during our meetings will be to act as a "writer-in-residence". That is, I will write my own poetry along with the girls, and be available to read their work and provide feedback when they invite me to do so. I am hoping that over the course of the research, the girls will begin to share their work with each other and provide feedback amongst themselves. In addition to my "writer-in-residence" role, I plan on introducing

the girls to different ideas and approaches to poetry writing. As well, I hope to read poetry with the girls and encourage them to share poetry that has meaning or interest for them.

From my past teaching experience, I know that many adolescent girls are drawn to poetry as a form of expression. I also know that school settings often don't have the time or resources to help adolescents express themselves through poetry or to give feedback to those who write on their own. The girls who participate in the writing group will be those who already write or who are interested in writing poetry. I am not interested in evaluating their work in any way; rather, I simply want to provide a place for them to get support, encouragement and creative ideas for their writing.

In my work with the girls, I am interested in exploring how they use their poetry to make sense of themselves and the world. I want to better understand how they experience the aesthetic through poetry, and what some of their thoughts and ideas are about what makes a particular poem "speak" to them. I want to talk with them about why they write poetry, whether they write for any audience, and what meaning or significance poetry has in their lives.

In order to explore these topics with the girls, I will observe them as we write and share our writing, collect any writing they are willing to share with me, and talk with them about our writing and the writing of others. Our conversations will be tape recorded and transcribed for later analysis. I will keep copies of any writing the girls are willing to share with me and photograph any work that has a visual or artistic component to it. In any written publications resulting from this research, only pseudonyms or first names will

be used. Your child will be free to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.

In any written documents or presentations that arise from the research, I will only use writing or transcripts with the girls' permission. I believe very strongly that the girls in the writing group be allowed every opportunity to make their own decisions regarding which pieces of their writing they feel comfortable sharing in a public forum. For this reason, I ask that in giving permission for your daughter to participate, that you agree to let these decisions rest with her. I want our writing group to be a place where the girls can feel safe sharing their work and confident in the knowledge that they have control over how their poetry is used.

Thank you very much for considering my request. I will follow up this letter with a phone call in the next two or three days to arrange a meeting with you. At this time, I will answer any questions you may have and provide a consent form for you to sign. I am very excited about beginning our writing group. I welcome the opportunity to share my enthusiasm for poetry and I look forward to learning from the girls as we write together. If you have any questions, or would like to talk further, please call me at 433 2576 (home) or 492 4273 ext. 268 (office). Please note that a complete research proposal is available should you wish to read it. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Susan Hart
Doctoral Student
University of Alberta

Consent Form – Parent/Guardian

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

I give permission for my daughter _____ to participate in Susan Hart's research on how adolescent girls experience the reading and writing of poetry. I understand that my daughter will have the final say regarding which pieces of her writing are used in any research documents or presentations.

Signature _____

Date _____

Permission Letter – Participant

Dear Participant:

I am a graduate student from the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta and I am interested in studying how adolescent girls experience the reading and writing of poetry. I am writing to ask whether you are interested in participating in a research project I am undertaking beginning in January of 1998.

Before returning to pursue graduate work at the University of Alberta, I taught elementary school to grades one through six. Here at the university, my work has involved supervising student teachers and teaching a music methods course to undergraduate students.

My research project involves organizing a writing group for interested poets. The group will be a semi-structured environment where you can work on your own poetry, share and get feedback on your writing, and read the writing of other poets. We will meet once a week for 1 1/2 to 2 hours, for January and February. Our writing group will take place in a classroom at the University of Alberta and we will meet outside of your regular school hours.

My role during our meetings will be to act as a "writer-in-residence". That is, I will write my own poetry along with you, and be available to read your work and provide feedback if you so desire. Hopefully you will feel comfortable enough to begin to share your work with other people in the group and get feedback from them as well. In addition to my "writer-in-residence" role, I plan on introducing different ideas and approaches to

poetry writing. As well, I hope to read the writing of other poets and I would encourage you to share poetry that has meaning or interest for you.

The girls who participate in the writing group will be those who already write or who are interested in writing poetry. I am not interested in evaluating your work in any way; rather, I simply want to provide a place for you to get support, encouragement and creative ideas for your writing.

In my research, I am interested in exploring how you use poetry to make sense of yourself and the world. I want to better understand how you experience the aesthetic through poetry, and what some of your thoughts and ideas are about what makes a particular poem "speak" to you . I want to talk with you about why you write poetry, whether you write for any audience, and what meaning or significance poetry has in your life.

In order to explore these topics, I will observe as we write and share our writing, collect any writing you are willing to share with me, and talk with you about your writing and the writing of others. Our conversations will be tape recorded and transcribed for later analysis. I will keep copies of any writing you are willing to share with me and photograph any work that has a visual or artistic component to it. In any written publications resulting from this research, only pseudonyms or first names will be used. You will be free to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.

In any written documents or presentations that arise from the research, I will only use writing or transcripts that you have consented to. I believe very strongly that you be allowed every opportunity to make your own decisions regarding which pieces of writing

you feel comfortable sharing in a public forum. I want our writing group to be a place where you can feel safe sharing your work and confident in the knowledge that you have control over how your poetry is used.

Thank you very much for considering my request. Please complete the attached consent form to indicate whether you agree to participate in the research. Once you have indicated your interest in the project, I will give you a letter to share with your parents and then call them to discuss the research and to get their permission for you to participate. I am very excited about beginning our writing group. I welcome the opportunity to share my enthusiasm for poetry and I look forward to learning from you as we write together. If you have any questions, or would like to talk further, please call me at 433 2576 (home) or 492 4273 ext. 268 (office). Thank you!

Sincerely,

Susan Hart
Doctoral Student
University of Alberta

Consent Form – Participant

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

I, _____ agree to participate in Susan Hart's research on
how adolescent girls experience the reading and writing of poetry.

Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix C

Date & Topic Chart¹

Date	Topics
17 July 97 Conversation with Shauna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing as need, a way to deal with powerful emotions • Evolution of a poem • “purpose” of poetry • meaning from poetry ... learning to “pay attention” • pain as a route to understanding the world ... expressing this through writing • being encouraged to write • poetry as “collage” • private versus public writing • writing as a way to bring form to inner chaos ... structure to emotion • momentary versus long term expression ... both as “release” • the role of structure in helping others understand the poem
12 Sep 97 Conversation with Trish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writing as a “part of who you are” • poetry as an expression of the “psyche” • the origins of creativity ... a web that connects all people ... creativity as connection • pain as a source of creativity • “school” writing • childhood as a separate reality • art as a way to “figure out what you’re doing” • dreams as a window to “knowledge of possibilities” • creativity as the opposite of conformity • origin of poems • poetry as coming from outside of yourself ... beyond yourself • connections between poetry and spirituality • beauty as connected to the “aesthetic, technical and spiritual” • art as a reflection of who you are
23 Feb 98 First Meeting with Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • purpose of our writing scribbles • how to structure our time together • time lines for the research • evolution of a poem • “planning” for poetry • publishing poetry • poetry as “coming from emotions” • imagery discussion poetry as connected to life experience • structure of poetry • “school” writing • questioning evaluation • deciding not to write during our meetings ... problematizing inspiration

¹ The topics listed in this chart represent a rough coding system. These topics went through a variety of incarnations as the research progressed and individual papers took shape; in many cases, they were expanded upon, added to or combined. These kinds changes raise questions about how we determine topics or categories in the initial stages of research.

...23 Feb 98	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> decorating our meeting room
9 Mar 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> poetry reading: Ross Lecke
16 Mar 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> inspiration poetry as connected to life experience ... relationships composing a poem evolution of a poem inspiration from other poets "real" versus "forced" writing "school" writing evaluating poetry ... problematic "purpose" of poetry choreography poetry as "realization" poetry and visual art poetry and dance poetry as an expression of need response to poetry
24 Mar 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> diary writing as poetic poetry and "moods" ... writing differently if things are going well or not poetic versus description ... are these the same? The role of "freedom" in poetry writing ... contrasted with "school" writing "forced" poetry poetry revision ... connections to "school" writing the "relativity" of evaluating poetry in school evaluation as "depending on the teacher" ... as "teacher preference" the "impossibility" of teaching poetry school revision as contradictory ... going against "what poetry IS" teacher "style" as influencing evaluation discomfort with reading original poetry out loud poetry as an expression of feeling ... not liking the poem when you no longer feel the way you did when you wrote it liking an original poem more the further "away" you are from it (temporal) poetry as capturing "a second in time" the privacy of poetry art as reflecting life experience poetry as realization poetry as coming from "passionate feelings" discomfort with "not being able to do justice" to "big ideas" in poems ... e.g. war
6 Apr 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> spring break research time line "unfinished" writing crafting a poem the sky as inspiration the place where the friends meet out-of-body experience

<p>... 6 Apr 98</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inspiration as leading to visual art first, poetry second • people who “get inspired” as being “lucky” • “having” to write ... to use inspiration as it presents itself • poetry writing as “diary keeping” ... storing memories or moments • “large” experiences • “large” feelings as being “almost-experiences” • poetry as “coming naturally out of your hand” • wanting other people to know an experience through reading a poem • poetry as a way of remembering • “building” inspiration versus being “born with it” • inspiration as coming from realization • the importance of teacher response in believing you are a “good” poet • poetry as “every-feeling” • art as “immeasurable” ... the role of “opinion” • poetry as a form of expression that “feels good” • the “culture” of the friends-place ... “poetic people” ... connected spiritually • passion in writing as being connected to relationships • poetry as “your spirit talking, writing” ... “your soul talking” • poetry as the expression of “who you are at a moment in time” • friendship
<p>20 Apr 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • origin of a poem • connection between visual art and poetry • poetry as something that just “happens” • perceptions of what a poem “is” • “real” versus “forced” writing • discussion of pseudonyms • metaphors for describing who we are • metaphors for ourselves as described by others • the group of friends as “weird” or “different” from other teenagers ... trying to define themselves outside of the “usual categories” • finding the purpose of the play • music as influencing identity
<p>27 Apr 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • music as influencing poetry ... writing in the style of another poet • perception ... discussion of how different people see colour • seeing artistically a matter of interpretation • exploring difference and connection ... within the group of friends • the group of friends as being connected to a sense of freedom • the group of friends as “bringing up what you are and making it glow” • inspiration and its connection to the group of friends • connections between freedom and inspiration • the significance of the friend-place ... the physical spaces connecting to inspiration, freedom and comfort
<p>4 May 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teen angst • evaluating our own writing • dreams • dreams as inspiration for poems • dreams as premonitions • early writing experiences • influence of music on writing

<p>... 4 May 98</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • musicians as storytellers • “serious music” • evaluating music • music as connected to identity
<p>25 May 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • visual art and poetry • music as inspiring poetry • teen angst poetry • teen angst poetry as inauthentic • teen angst as “defined” by school • teen angst on the internet • fabricating suicidal thoughts • teen angst poems connected to teen angst music • poetry as connected to life experience
<p>1 Jun 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speculation on how our meetings would have been different if we met in a different setting • discussion of time lines • teen angst • rhyming poetry • definitions of poetry • teacher definitions of poetry • angst as angry • being proud of poems (even angst-ful ones) • form in poetry • the evolution of a poem • editing poems • feedback from peers as being inauthentic • the process of writing • revision as interfering with the way a poem is “supposed to be” • revision as a “school” thing • poetry and music • audience in poetry
<p>11 Aug 98 Conversation with Jeremiah</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evolution of a poem • revision • crafting a poem • inspiration • “scattered” poetry as “a perfect second” • poetry as realization • realization as happening during the writing • “school” writing • poetry as “easy to write” ... feeling fluent in this form • writing as a “thought photograph” • poetry as being inspired by the “not everyday” • poetry as “telling yourself something amazing” • “conscious” versus “non-conscious” writing • revision as “organization” • photograph metaphor for describing “conscious” and “non-conscious” poetry • the privacy of poetry as a sanctuary • naming ourselves as poets or not

<p>13 Aug 98 Conversation with Ranma</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vancouver story ... being alone in a strange place as inspiration • The “underground feeling” of being at home • Inspiration coming from “a different state of being” and caring enough about to write about it • Poetry as diary ... a way to remember • Confidence in poetry versus visual art • The role of teacher or peer praise • Writing as being more “work” than visual art • Dreams • The tape recorder as “scary” ... recording things you might later change your mind about • Poetry as “easy to write” ... feeling fluent in this form • Inspiration ... feelings that are worth writing about ... anything strong • Music as inspiration for poetry ... writing “off of” music • Writing (in life) as having no beginning and no end ...
<p>15 Aug 98 Conversation with Skyler</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing poetry from life experience • Crafting a poem • Inspiration as words that “catch me”, “lift me” • Writing poetry “feels good” • Poetry as giving form to emotion ... satisfying ... other art does this as well • Revision as never changing the “thoughts” of a poem • Response to poetry • Poetry as helping you understand something • Writing poetry as finding a “fresh perspective”
<p>9 Oct 98 Ranma, Jeremiah & Skyler</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teen angst poetry • Teen angst poetry connected with being a stereotypical teen • Teen angst as a stage everybody goes through • Responding to poetry • Poetry as preserving a memory • Revision as interfering with the “gut reaction” that led to the writing of the poem

Appendix D

Transcript Excerpt - 1 Jun 99, pp. 15-17

“audience”

Susan: I just have one other question. I don't know if I asked you this before ... but have any of you ever written poetry for someone else? Like who do you write for? Just yourselves? Have you ever written anything for anyone else?

(Girls shake their heads no)

Ranma: Like to give to them or about them?

Susan: Well, either, like is there an audience when you write?

Skyler: Yeah.

Susan: Or is it just you, are you the audience?

Ranma: No ...

Skyler: I think the audience . . . like, when I know I'm writing for _____ I don't write for her audience just because she's the one reading it, if that's what you mean. I don't ...

Susan: No ...

Skyler: Like the poem about war that I gave you called Stinger? I didn't write it for like all the old people who went to war, I wrote it for anybody who's interested in war or anybody who reads my poetry and likes it.

Susan: Did you imagine that those people would read the poem when you wrote it?

Skyler: No. I don't think I have an audience... if it's anybody, it's people like me, because I wrote it.

Susan: Do you imagine an audience, Ranma, or have you ever written with someone specific in mind, or something like that?

Ranma: No. I haven't. But . . . I imagine it would be more flowing, it's kind of weird...

- Susan: Why do you say that? More flowing ...
- Ranma: Because ... if you're confident enough and strong enough to write to someone, you obviously, whether it's bad or good, have strong feelings about it, so ... like I imagine wanting to write a poem to someone is . . . a build up, so, it's all in your head then it just goes onto the paper really quick, I think
- Susan: Why a build up?
- Ranma: Because if you want to write a poem for someone I imagine it's really strong. Yeah, a really strong feeling or a bunch of feelings...
- Skyler: It couldn't be just, wow, I had a good day, I'll write a poem for Ranma. There has to be feeling there, like if I was to write a poem for _____ or about _____, or he would be my audience, there would have to be something there, there would have had to be feelings there when I wrote it.
- Susan: But you've never done that before? And neither have you Ranma?
- Ranma: For someone, no.
- Susan: How about you Jeremiah? Have you ever written for another person?
- Jeremiah: Mmm mm
- Susan: Do you imagine an audience when you write?
- Jeremiah: Mmmm... I imagine I'm in a movie.
- Susan: Really? What do you mean?
- Jeremiah: Um, I always think, whenever I like, ... even... sometimes in real life, like just sitting here, or something like that, I always pretend it's a documentary. And then when I, no seriously, and then when I write poetry, or like I'm writing in a diary entry or something like that, that's the time in the documentary when the person is talking out loud ...
- Susan: So you do imagine an audience then ...
- Jeremiah: Well, sort of yeah, sort of, but it's still sort of the same thing like ...you don't actually know who your audience is, do you know what I mean?
- Susan: But there's someone "listening" or "reading" what you're writing...

- Jeremiah: Yeah.
- Susan: And is it always that way? Or most always?
- Jeremiah: Always. Always.
- Susan: That's very interesting, that you imagine an audience and Ranma doesn't...
- Jeremiah: No, I just imagine I'm like in a movie or like a documentary or sometimes, have you ever just looked around...
- Ranma: What does being in a documentary have to do with writing poetry?
- Skyler: When you're writing poetry, you know like in a movie, when there's like talking, dubbed in front of what's happening . . . ?
- Jeremiah: Yeah ...
- Skyler: That's the documentary.
- Ranma: Ohhhh ...
- Skyler: What she's writing comes in front, and then the thoughts of the person come out saying ...
- Ranma: So if you wrote a poem about _____ you'd be like _____? Dancing in the field ...
- Skyler: No, if it was _____ she'd be like: I was running around in the field, suddenly I stopped . . .
- Jeremiah: Like for example... like you know when you watch Wonder Years...
- Ranma: Oh, okay, okay.
- Jeremiah: It's sort of like that in a way, it's sort of like, I'm the narrator, if I'm writing about somebody else, or something else, I'm the narrator, and there will be like this scene, I'll have this scene in my mind, like in my mind's eye of what's going on ... so say I'm picturing like _____ running around in a field and then I'll be the narrator narrating this poem of what she's doing in the field. . . but sometimes like even just normal life, I feel like someone's video camera, like following my life around ...