

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE POETRY: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT GIRL POETS.

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In this phenomenological study, I explore the lived experience of African American adolescent girl poets in an organized poetry group in their school. My research question unfolds, “What is the lived experience of writing poetry to uncover the power for African American adolescent girls to name who they really are?” My exploration calls upon the works of such phenomenologists as Edward Casey, John O’Donohue, Michael D. Levin and Martin Heidegger. My study is further augmented by Black feminists scholars and writers such as Patricia Hill Collins, Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. Furthermore, Max van Manen provides a research guide pedagogically on this journey, alongside culturally responsive educators such as Gloria Ladson Billings and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine. The paths, thoughts, and

meanings of phenomenology and poetry danced through, between and alongside one another.

Poetic Eight is what the African American adolescent poets of my study have named themselves. The eight poets' names are brought forth by their external identities, lived experiences and cultural collective as African American adolescent girls. And while these identities and names offer some insight into who these girl poets are, the girls, themselves, reveal who they are through their writing and voices. Through the process of writing and weaving between concealing and revealing, individually and collectively, identities begin to unfold. As each participant begins to reveal her poetic identity (ies) and lived experiences, themes quickly emerge around grief, loss, naming as I Am, love and divinity.

Finally, I offer poetic and pedagogical insights into the lived experience of writing poetry for African American adolescent girl poets to uncover and maintain their power through naming. These insights and suggestions are concluded with my own poetic reflections. As an educator, igniting poetic voices for listeners and readers occurs through a process of unraveling and writing renderings with the intention of embodying the hope, joy, rage and love that the poets have spilled onto the pages, as they read in the group in earnestness and conviction.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE POETRY: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRL POETS

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Preface

Reality of Color

Understanding the reality
Of your color
Is a profound
Experience

It unearths beauty
Of self definition
And security
And without apology
Allows you to steep
In your culture
(Jones, 1996, p. 17)

Culturally responsive poetry is the unearthing of African American adolescents' self-definition through a process of naming (to call forth their own names and multiple identities). It involves poetry writing as both individual and collective efforts by and for African American adolescent girls, a bold and passionate declaration of self-identity. The process of creating culturally responsive poetry for African American adolescent girls becomes a deeply meaningful recognition and expression of multiple identities that include race, gender, age, class, and location. Moreover, embedded in the fabric of culturally responsive poetry is the voice of resistance. The voices of resistance and identity that are revealed in culturally responsive poetry are connected theoretically throughout Black feminism and multiracial feminism. The result is a form of writing that calls for the merger of scholarship with creative and poetic expression.

The journey of African American adolescent girl poets uncovering the power to name themselves as a phenomenon reflects the beauty and angst of self discovery,

identity, and self-definition. Phenomenology unfolds the poets' lived experiences, deepening the meaning of each writing experience, as the process reflects not only the essence and meaning of the poems but the essence of the poet. Phenomenology as a practice and methodology surrenders to lived experiences (the world as we immediately experience it rather than conceptualize it) through a process that is as reflexive and profound as the poetry writing itself. This dissertation, then, can be seen as a poetic rendering of the poetry writing experiences of African American adolescent girl poets in order to uncover their multiple identities.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to:

Tia, Mishaps, Blue, Divine Diva, KiRe, Camille, Lenash, Family, Queen of Hearts

and,

all of my students who by their fire, courage and voices allowed and inspired me to learn more than I taught.

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CHAPTER ONE: MUTED SOUNDS, SILENT BODIES, AND IGNITING POETIC VOICES

On September 20, 2006, I began a poetry group with eight special education and general education African American high school students. The group was inclusive of adolescent girls and boys who did not write poetry, along with emerging poets and experienced poets. The program was designed to meet once a week during lunch for approximately 45 minutes over a 3 month period. However, as time continued, while the number of consistent members began to decrease, the voices of the members who attended regularly began to heighten. As the group began to solidify and relationships were forged, by request, the once weekly meetings became twice a week, and 3 months grew to almost eight. Ultimately the undeniable voices and experiences of two special education African American adolescent girls, Tia and Shaniqua, began to emerge, igniting a collective recognition of the naming of African American adolescent girls. From here my journey into and call to culturally responsive poetry begins.

Uncovering Muted Voices

Tia is a high school junior whose voice and presence fills the space of the entire room with its volume and exuberance. And while she appears to speak freely and with ease, her authentic voice is often muted. Tia, like many adolescent girls, has a voice that has been muted by the spaces where her words wither into inaudible noises, fall upon “unlistening ears,” or are strangled into silence. Yet her voice, along with the emergence of her true identity, seems to be unearthed when she writes

poetry. Her poetry is shared in unedited form as she writes it, as is the poetry shared of other adolescent girls.

The Poetic Voice of Tia

You Don't Know Me

You don't know me, unless you know how hard I try not to cry! At the age 13 my step-mother had died, by the age of 14 nothing could go right. Got my virginity token by a boy who had no rights. By age 15 I thought it could be the end, when everything started falling again and again! I thought I would go crazy and love I never felt. Because I thought I was in love, looking at the cards I was dealt. I put my whole life around him and you wouldn't even know, because if he asked for it he'll get it his feelings didn't even show. But by the end of 10th grade I didn't care anymore the fighting the violence it all seemed to show. By the age 16 I seen the light. But soon as it shined it went out with the night. I lost 2 more cousins one after another. But see it just goes to show how one thing can lead to another. Yea I go through a lot and no I don't want it to show. Because I too cry at night and no, no one seem to even know! Because you don't know unless you know I too cry!

(Tia, 2006)

“You don't Know Me” was written by Tia in one of our poetry group sessions. At the time she was in a tumultuous relationship with a boy who off and on attended another high school in between brief stints in jail for the sale of narcotics. I first became aware of Tia's writing in our inclusion (special education and general education) ninth grade English class. While other students were writing flowery love poems or poems that resembled nursery rhymes, Tia was writing poems about teenage violence, infidelity, and sexual encounters with a nineteen-year-old boyfriend. Her experiences chronicled in her poetry exposed a tension between violence, sexual desire and dangerous exploitation. Although her poetic

“confessions” were unnerving at times, there was a vulnerability and truth that could only be uttered through the words on the page.

Tia’s poetry was forceful and unapologetic, yet there seemed to be questions left unanswered in her poetry as she struggled with her desire to be loved, as she writes, “Because I thought I was in love, looking at the cards I was dealt.” Tia was also in a struggle to determine her identity. As Tia’s exploration through poetry continued, she would chronicle her sexual experiences: the unfaithful nineteen-year-old boyfriend in ninth grade, the sexual assault by a classmate, the first unwanted pregnancy in tenth grade, and the second unwanted pregnancy in eleventh grade. Tia rarely spoke of the death of her step mother or her two cousins, and only referenced it once in her poetry. However, questions about love, identity, visibility, and sexuality were themes that surfaced throughout her writing. Uncovering her muted voice, thoughts, and experiences may emerge for Tia, and other poets, not only through their personal process of poetic expression, but through the voices of other writers. There is a pressing need to resist the call to fragment or silence their multiple identities.

Multiracial Feminism and Black Feminism through Phenomenology: Voicing the Experience

For African American adolescent girls, exploring the intersections of race and gender through writing and a collaborative process of sharing appears to be a critical component in acquiring knowledge and a sense of self. Furthermore, poetry writing as a cultural practice may be rendered through and by community, humanity, and pedagogical intention (Beech, 1999). Theoretical approaches to understanding, acknowledging, and revealing the lived experience of African American adolescent

girls have deeply influenced my writing through the lens of multiracial feminism and Black feminism. Multiracial feminism and Black feminism have provided the framework in this research to make narratives and counter-narratives more explicitly audible academically, intellectually, creatively, and socially. Multiracial feminism and Black feminism as theoretical frameworks also augment the research of Tolman (1994/1996) on urban girls, specifically as they unpack and challenge myths and stereotypes about African American women and girls, their experiences, sexuality, and poetic expression. As the process of creating a self-identity unfolds, how will creating counter-narratives steeped in the culture of multiracial feminism and Black feminism be experienced by African American adolescent girl poets? Will writing counter-narratives within this framework become a form of resistance?

Racial disparities are confronted and placed at the forefront in multiracial feminism, presenting counter-stories to misinterpretations of experiences. This dialogic exchange provides liberation from multiple hierarchies based on race, gender, class, and location, which is especially important in examining the poetry and writings of African American urban girls in this study. Because data and narratives on urban girls generally are interpreted by researchers outside of the cultural structure, they often present a fragmented portrayal of the girls' experiences. Multiracial feminist perspectives seek to make visible and audible the voices and experiences of the girls through their own stories and identity construction (Tolman, 1996; Zinn & Dill, 1996). When the individual process of naming through poetry writing is connected with multiracial feminism and Black feminism will it create a collective experience of naming for the poets? What new understandings might be

uncovered for African American adolescent girls if the lenses of Black feminism and multiracial feminism are used to interpret their narrative structures?

Black feminism, in this study, primarily is explored through the lens of Black feminist thought and the works of Patricia Hill Collins (2000). Black feminist thought is constructed in such a way as to lend action to Black feminist theory in academia (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought also provides the venue and necessary recognition, sense of self and collective sense of “knowing” to ignite the inaudible voice, heightening it into a high pitched scream demanding to be heard. And while many traditional theories are created, maintained, or discussed within the post secondary setting, Black feminist thought acknowledges a broad spectrum of locations and outlets, including poetry and journal writing, independently and through community organizations (Collins, 2000).

Moreover, Black feminist thought while empowering African American adolescent girls to seek and define their own identities, simultaneously emphasizes collaboration and cooperation for the benefit of a collective voice and experience (Collins, 2000). Defining an identity also includes the acknowledgement of self-defined sexuality and expression, as well as the relentless struggle to eradicate violence (domestic, societal, and institutional) and sexual abuse and exploitation. “To be able to express the range of one’s voice to express the totality of self...” while negotiating and reconciling “internally defined images of self as African American women without objectification as the Other” is primary (Collins, 2000, p. 99).

Primarily through the use of Black feminism, I seek to illuminate the experiences of the adolescent girl participants as they engage in a poetic rendering of

their experiences. Black women scholars, researchers, activists, and writers have paved a way for resistance, justice, community, self expression, and voice as they help provide a basis for counter- narratives. Furthermore, I have chosen to weave Black feminism throughout exploration of the phenomenon to provide a connection between the individual and collective spirit and voices of Black women and adolescent girls through their poetry and scholarship. And in an attempt to bring forth “internally defined images of African American women (and girls) without objectification as the Other” (Collins, 2000, p. 99), I instinctively turn toward phenomenology as I ponder what the lived experience of writing poetry for African American adolescent girls is like as they uncover the power to name who they really are.

Phenomenology allows this process to unfold through an in-depth, interpretative exploration and conversation of the meaning of human experience through encounters, deep readings, reflection, and revelation (Garran, 2004). Phenomenology is the place where analysis and philosophy surrender to poetic expression. Poetic connections and distinctions are revealed through lived experience which is immediate and naturally reflexive, creating the sensation of an unaware awareness. Dilthey, as cited in van Manen, suggests that “Lived experience is to the soul what breath is to the body” (2003, p. 36). Lived experience is also the critical beginning and ending point of my phenomenological study and research.

A phenomenological study of poetic renderings allows me to journey deeply enough into poetic imagination and truth(s) to expose the ways in which each adolescent girl, who resides between the borders of girlhood and womanhood, is

connected to each other, not only by race and gender but their being/essence and experience. Poetic expression allows each writer to open up first to herself and then to each other. Yet, their poetic renderings remain so distinctive from one another that they may be perceived as the “other,” even within the same poetry group. And although my role as a scholar and researcher requires that I provide some interpretation and “narration” of participants’ poetry writing and discussions, it is my goal to preserve the authenticity of the poets’ words, language, feelings, and discussions in their most raw, unedited, and unadulterated form as possible. I am called by the phenomenological question, **“What is the lived experience of writing poetry to uncover the power for African American adolescent girls to name who they really are?”** The following renderings of poetic writings begin the journey.

You Don’t Know Me

Tia’s essence is shared through her lived experience as the memories embedded in her soul leap out at the reader when she writes and reads her poetry. Yet, the conviction with which Tia writes and reads her poetry is conspicuously missing when she responds during our discussions to the content of her poems. During our discussions, Tia describes the events of her life revealed in “You Don’t Know Me,” as if she were rattling off items on a grocery list. Although Tia does not utter words of anguish in our discussion about the rape, her recent abortion, or her boyfriend cheating, the poem written by Ntozake Shange in *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* seems to seep the unspoken emotion that is missing when Tia discloses the events.

Abortion Cycle #1

tubes tables white washed windows
grime from age wiped over once
legs spread
anxious
eyes crawling up on me
eyes rollin in my thighs
metal horses gnawin my womb
dead mice fall from my mouth
i really didn't mean to
i really didn't think I cd
just one day off...
get offa me alla this blood
bones shattered like soft ice-cream cones

i cdnt have people
lookin at me
pregnant
i cdnt have my friends see this
dying danglin tween my legs
& I didn't say a thing
not a sigh
or a fast scream
to get
those eyes offa me
get the steel rods outta me
this hurts
this hurts me...
(Shange, 1975, p. 22)

When Tia speaks of just coming out of the hospital, showing the places on her arm where she received the IV, it is in a monotone voice. She speaks of her “operation.” And she shares that the would-be-father is back in jail. Tia also shares that she has taken the advice of her mother and me to get tested after learning that he cheated (like the boyfriend in ninth grade). She’s contracted something, but it’s not HIV, and it can be “fixed” like the “other situation” (the pregnancy). She understands what we discussed in our last poetry group meeting and she knows that he is at least the third boy to hurt her, “place her in harm’s way,” or cheat on her. She

softly declares that she will “leave him alone” eventually. Tia knows she deserves better, but he depends on her and recognizes that she is the best thing that has happened to him. *His mother* even agrees. The monotone voice in which Tia speaks is deafening. Her pain seeps through the empty spaces and pregnant pauses with the force of a poisonous gas leaking from a faulty stove in the quiet of the night. The final echo of Shange’s (1975) poem pierces the silence “this hurts me...” (p. 22).

Tia Revealed

Tia is a regular participant in the poetry group. She is bright, creative, passionate, and animated. Tia is college bound, hard working, determined and driven. She is viewed as an expert in writing and a leader in the poetry group. Yet Tia, without poetry, seems to have a barely audible voice in expressing her own identity. Tia is like many girls who reach adolescence and find their sexuality, identity and need for relationships is heightened, along with their feelings of vulnerability and disempowerment (Tolman, 1994).

Tia’s vulnerability and disempowerment are revealed as she shares her experiences after being raped. Her desperate attempts at being heard are met with accusations of being a “liar” and a “slut.” She is labeled not only by boys, but by girls, who previously claimed to be her friends. Tia struggles to reconcile her relationships and her identity, attempting to negotiate feelings of love, confusion, and pain. Yet questions linger about her identity, other people’s perceptions of her, society’s expectations, and what she will be named. Tia’s fears are illuminated in Shange’s poem “Latent Rapists” which exposes another violent silencing of the female spirit through the isolation and scrutiny she is forced to endure.

Latent Rapists'

Lady in blue
A friend is hard to press charges against

Lady in red
If you know him
You must have wanted it

Lady in purple
A misunderstanding

Lady in red
You know
These things happen

Lady in blue
Are you sure
You didn't suggest

Lady in purple
Had you been drinkin

Lady in red
A rapist is always to be a stranger
To be legitimate...
(Shange, 1975, p. 17)

Silent Bodies

If sexual experiences become saturated with fear, pain or false accusations of provoking victimization, can girls reclaim their voices and their bodies? Tolman (1994) reports that for many adolescent girls, their bodies, much like their voices, become silent. "Silent bodies" (Tolman, 1994, p. 327) are girls who disappear during sex, become confused, perform because it is expected. They experience being denigrated and controlled through physical or sexual abuse. And if abuse is absent in the relationship, desire and arousal still remain laced with fear, fear not only of physical danger but of tarnished reputations, reinforcement of stereotypes,

internalized oppressions, and the pressure to silence their own bodies from enjoyment. Their total beings (voices, minds, bodies) exist without sound. Fear, pain, and danger, are embedded in sexual experiences. What does it mean to live in silenced bodies? If girls are afraid of what their bodies are labeled, who do they become when draped in such shame?

For African American adolescent girls, the dichotomy and impact of externally controlled images seem to be even more apparent as African American girls report a more pronounced fear of being labeled and fear of sexual desire (Tolman, 1996). However for “the urban girl” even the “luxury” of a dichotomy is absent. The urban girl is portrayed as a stereotypical, one-dimensional, caricature of the adolescent girl and is believed to be amoral and out of control. She is the embodiment of female adolescent sexuality, representing all that is not only “bad” but “abnormal” (Tolman, 1996).

In addition to age and gender, the urban girl also forces us to confront disparity in race and class as she, in spite of statistics that reveal the pronounced sexual activity of white and suburban girls, is almost always depicted as Black (or Latina) and poor (Tolman, 1996). As a researcher, I am cognizant of the stereotypes, distortions, and caricatures of urban girls and I actively seek to eliminate and redefine pre-conceived notions and assumptions. However, it is of even greater importance in this phenomenological study that the girls (all of whom are African Americans, some originally from urban areas geographically, and from low-income, as well as middle-to upper- income, families) ultimately define, name, and identify themselves. The “urban girl” is forced to confront external images, negative stereotypes, and myths

about her identity as the embodiment of immorality and inappropriate sexuality, as well as the misinterpretation and distortion of her experiences. It appears even more critical that she be provided the opportunity to write her experiences, share her own voice, and tell her own truths to uncover the power to name herself (Tolman, 1996).

Writing and reading poetry allows a space for Tia (who has been labeled an urban girl by others) and other adolescent girl participants to reveal emotional pain and turmoil while writing for empowerment and strength. Reflecting on poems enriches this space to consider the impact of personal experiences, the magnitude of internal and external conflicts, and the ways in which to elicit support (Wiseman, 2004). Moreover, reading poems offers a way in which adolescent girls can find their voices outside of externally defined roles or identities. These possibilities are revealed as I continue with Tia's poetry.

Looking Past the Outer Shell

If you wanted to know about me you would have to look really deep. Deeper than my Brown eyes. Brown skin. Different color hair. The real me. Look past the tough. Mean outer shell that's hard to break. Look deeper than my height, my weight, the walk and the talk. Just look into my mind. Look into my heart. Thoughts that are created, a feeling that's truly felt. Understand the real me, understand that the looks I give you are not from hate, not from anger and not from love. I look at you to understand you, like you should do me. You may think you know me because of my past. Think because of my looks you can predict my future. I bet you can't look at my face and tell me my emotion. Tell me what you think.. go ahead I'll wait! Come up with it no because you have to look past deep down past my outer shell. Even past the next level & the one after that. Even passed it all until the core. The rhythm, the beat of me. You still don't know, me & won't until you look past the disguise that's shown to be me.
(Tia, 2006)

The raw places revealed in Tia's poems, echo the experiences shared in Tolman's study. Each girl and woman questions in their stories and their writing, "Who will hear their voices through the confusion, façade, and transformation from girl to woman?" Who will penetrate the "outer shell... that is shown to be me?" And for the "urban girl" and the Black woman, the poetry that has been shared dares the reader to know them and embrace them in such a way as to hold them so close to their own hearts that they become part of the reader's own heart beat.

Abbey Lincoln (2005) in her piece, "To Whom Will She Cry Rape," floods the pages with the experiences of the metaphorical rape of the Black woman's and girl's psyche. Words are written about the violation of the Black woman's innocence and her soul that hemorrhages with grief, but also the hope of redemption. Tia's call resembles that of Lincoln's call in her writing.

"To Whom Will She Cry Rape," however, is not a story centered upon a physical assault but an emotional one. This emotional assault so violently shatters the spirit of the African American adolescent girl that it leaves her emotionally desolate and subdued. Tia's poem, like Lincoln's piece, resides in those quiet spaces where she remains violated and maligned as long as she remains unheard (Lincoln, 2005). The poet, along with the listener who hears her cry through her writing, must confront each layer of stereotypes, caricatures, and exploitation, to validate the writer's indignation and rectify her humiliation in order to protect her identity as much as her innocence.

The poet, and the listener, must look past the layer of adolescence, the layer of femininity, the layer of the myths about race, the layer of labels, the layers of

definitions by others, the layer of conformity, the layer of un-truths to make visible what goes unseen. Listening to the writer's poetry enables us to not only hear her, but for her to hear herself. Conversely, when cries fall on deaf ears and the voices of those considered to be the "Other" are further pushed to the margins, by our own need to dominate, feel powerful or maintain the status quo, we do not only fail to ease human suffering, but our collective deafness actually becomes responsible for creating suffering (Levin, 1989).

The Voice of Shaniqua

Whats going on
Gatta leave I have homework and test to make up
why am I here
Why me?
Why pick on me out of everybody else.
Why me?
(Shaniqua, 2006)

After participating in the poetry group for almost a year, Shaniqua stops attending. Shortly after Shaniqua stops attending the poetry group, she stops attending classes. Shortly after she stops attending classes, Shaniqua withdraws from school. Shaniqua withdraws from school to move out of state after being cast out of her house by her mother. Her mother is tired, raising Shaniqua and her two young siblings alone and recently starting a new job. What's more, Shaniqua's mother expresses that Shaniqua doesn't need her any more. Shaniqua is the girl/woman into whom other adolescent girl students are beginning to emerge. She is now eighteen and in the eleventh grade, having been retained twice. Her mother wants her to set an

example for her younger siblings and to serve as a role model, but instead Shaniqua's mother defines her as disrespectful and defiant.

I think back to high school and my own desire to define myself and be thought of as a grown woman. Coming of age always seems to involve some sort of wrestling for "power" between mothers and daughters. I remember my mother in exasperation declaring one day, "There will only be one woman to a house and if you feel that you are that woman it is time to get your own house." Yet Shaniqua's mother's declaration was not an empty gesture or reminder of boundaries, or the reality of adolescent limitations versus authentic womanhood. Shaniqua's mother has defined her as a woman who should be self-sufficient and cast her out.

Shaniqua's mother and I talk for over an hour on the phone. Her mother is adamant that the school has falsely identified Shaniqua as having an emotional disturbance and defines Shaniqua's behavior simply as an "attitude problem." It, according to her mother, is time for Shaniqua to step up to the plate and become strong, resourceful, resilient, and independent. All of these things Shaniqua must learn and do on her own because she is now a woman. But what neither of us speak, question, or clarify, is the fact that she is expecting Shaniqua to do all of these things at the young age of eighteen because she is a Black woman, and what is more, a Black urban woman. However, there seems to be some recognition of the limitations of her request, and arrangements have been made for Shaniqua to live with her best friend and her family.

As the details of the conversation swirl around in my head, I become aware of the words, "best friend." Shaniqua has a best (female) friend? I am struck by the fact

that she has a best friend, as much as I am struck by the fact that she has been experiencing such turmoil in the relationship with her mother. Shaniqua has never written poems about her mother or their relationship or even referenced her, as the other girls have done in conversations in the poetry group. Shaniqua has never mentioned a best friend or any female friends. In English class, I rarely if ever, see her interact with anyone who is not a boy (and those interactions appear to be limited as well).

Upon further reflection, I realize Shaniqua has never written about anything but her boyfriend, and while she writes about him, she often is reluctant to have a conversation about her writing. I ponder what these unspoken or barely existent relationships with other girls and women will mean for Shaniqua whose lived experience seems to be unfolding like a Toni Morrison novel. I think about what it means for her to be put “outside” of her house by her mother. Images of Pecola from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* float into my consciousness. Pecola’s isolation is chronicled as her tale unfolds, by those who not only failed to protect her from the odium of the outside world, but also participated in its perpetuation. As a result, Pecola becomes the “little-girl-gone-to woman...” (Morrison, 1970, p. 31).

O, my clanswomen
Let us all cry together!
Come,
Let us mourn the death of our mother,
The death of a Queen
The ash that was produced
By a great fire!
O, this homestead is utterly dead
Close the gates
With lacari thorns,
For our mother
The creator of the Stool is lost!

And all the young women
Have perished in the wilderness!
(Walker's interpretation of Okot p'Bitek, 1994, pp. 517-518)

In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the characters live in constant fear of being cast “outdoors.” The “outdoors” is a metaphor for the isolation and vulnerability experienced by impoverished people in every day life. Furthermore, outdoors becomes symbolic of an inability to have basic physical needs met such as food, clothing, and shelter as well as emotional needs revolving around human connection, love, and acceptance. Shaniqua's fear of being cast out is now a reality having been abandoned by her mother. She is not only a mother-less child, but a child now without a childhood, who seems to be forced to search elsewhere for human connection, love, and acceptance or perish with the other young orphaned women in the wilderness.

How to Live?

Dream

Every night I dream of the first time
I saw your face
And the way you made me feel as you looked into my face.
It felt so real and yet so fake I never had someone make me feel this way.
Every night I dream of the way you
Hold me in your arms caressing me
Like I was your charm
Never wanting to let go.
Now you got me into you
The way you move and the things you do
AJ your constantly on my mind dat
I think about you all the time
You mean so much to me
That your in every dream
AJ don't you see that me and you were meant to be.
(Shaniqua, 2006)

As Tia's identity and naming process begin to unfold, Shaniqua's abruptly comes to an end, even before they seem to truly begin. Similarly to Tia, as expressed through her poetry, "I put my whole life around him" (Tia, 2006), Shaniqua describes her existence and thoughts in her poetry writing in relationship to her boyfriend. "You mean so much to me that your in every dream" (Shaniqua, 2006). Shaniqua, without hesitation, gives her boyfriend the power to name and define her as she asserts that he is her focus and the source of her self-identification and definition. And while she is the only girl in the poetry group to openly make the declaration that her boyfriend defines her, she certainly is not the only one to focus her poetry writing almost exclusively on the topic of relationships and boyfriends.

It is hard to know just how to live
How much I should take
And what should I give?
(Jones, 1996, p. 4)

As Tia and Shaniqua explore the process of naming through poetry, their struggle resembles that of Mona Lake Jones (1996) in determining how to live, what to take or accept from others, and what to give of themselves. During her participation in the poetry group, Shaniqua's naming has been based upon external forces. Shaniqua chose to have her boyfriend define her, and her mother chose to decide her options, but Shaniqua's own naming is a mystery.

Shaniqua does not seek solace in her poetry (unless unbeknownst to the group, she is writing in isolation as she did before the group), nor does she seem to seek a sense of belonging or human connection in the poetry group. Shaniqua stops attending the poetry group and eventually stops attending school. Last I heard, she

moved out of her best friend's house to move out of state to live with her grandmother. However, I never received a return phone call from her mother to confirm the information. "I wonder how she handles [her] pain" (Boylorn, 2006, p. 670).

There is a part of me,
In the heart of me,
That is all that's associated with being Black...
There is anger and frustration,
There is confusion and misunderstanding,
There is strength and independence,
There is spirituality and sexuality,
There is the ability to defend myself,
There is force behind closed fists,
There is power, and knowledge and ignorant bliss,
There is the stereotypical Black girl,
Not a white girl trapped beneath Black skin.
Her eyes
Carry
The weight of the conversation
About race and love and life
She is passionate
About
Relationships
She is in love
With a man who loves her maturity
She talks like a preacher
And I am not surprised to learn
That she is a minister
Faithful to her ambitions
Faithful to her emotions
Faithful to her God
I wonder how she handles [her] pain
(Boylorn, 2006, pp. 663-664, 670)

Igniting poetic voices comes from the power of living words and experiences joined together in purpose. By writing and speaking Boylorn's pain, the shame of secrecy is undraped to reclaim a voice not only as an individual but as a collective. Where being doused in labels evoked the sensation of choking and

gasping for air, the living words of poetry become the oxygen that ignites Boylorn's and other African American women's spirits.

Igniting Poetic Voices

Does the poet have a responsibility? If the poet feels an urgency to write to express her pain and to be heard, does she also feel compelled to express the pain of others who still have not found their own voices, or who have been so marginalized that they can no longer speak? Is part of the charge (duty) or responsibility of the poet to ignite other poetic voices? Can resistance or change be created by writing and sharing experiences or offering poems to others whose pain remains buried or unspoken?

Boylorn, like many other poets throughout this study, speaks and writes the lived experiences, elation, and pain of other women and girl poets. And for the poet who is finding her own voice, she may take solace in reading and hearing poetry written by others who share similar experiences. Connecting and joining her experiences with the experiences of published writers or poetry group members, can spark or even flame her own poetic voice. And when poetic voices are ignited, so is the possibility of igniting the spirit of resistance.

How She Handles Pain

One day grief will be gone, as even pain does not last, but often is found to be misplaced, forgotten, or if we are lucky, written away. Poems are about sharing the things that we do not want known and saying the things that are "unsayable" (McCarriston, in Moyer, 1995, p. 271). The meaning of "unsayable" is not only in

reference to the beautiful lyrics, rhymes, and flowery words that cannot be eloquently expressed without poetry, but the secrets and painful segments of life that, although we do not want to recognize, explode to the surface if unwritten by their sheer necessity to be heard. Even in speaking and writing what we do not want known, an undeniable urgency is expressed that can be the difference between a casual utterance and a purposeful declaration.

What the poet so often is looking for is the depth and meaning not only of her pain, but all pain that frees her yearning for permission to experience deep sorrow in order to simply feel (Morrison, 1973). This is how the poet handles her numbing pain – through consciousness. And with consciousness and purposeful declaration, I, too, am called upon to share and say the “unsayable” through my writing and poetry in this study, to resurrect change and justice with the truth, candor, and courage that I ask for and see continuously displayed by my students.

Wilderness: Alone

dragged out into the death of night
where the only sounds are the screams of fear
mixed with the laughter of another far enough away
that her voice cannot be reached
close enough to me that I know somewhere in the darkness
there is a presence of another
another who sees his hands grasping at me
wrapping themselves around my neck pulling me deeper
into the darkness

Sharpness of his voice
Slicing cutting digging at what is numb in my soul

Thrust out to be swallowed by the wilderness

abandoned
doors shut behind me
openings out of the darkness fastened

instead raw openings leak unsealed terror

howls of the wilderness
daring me to find my way home
(Bacon, 2008)

It is 1:00 a.m. and I am being dragged out of the car by my neck. We've been arguing most of the night. He's cheating, but looking over my shoulder, to see who is calling my cell phone at the restaurant. He's turning red in the face each time someone gazes at me. He's moving in to signal his territory when we walk to the next room together, tightening his grip on my body. He's barking at me, showing everyone who is boss. My friends/classmates in the doctoral program who are out with us that night are growing wary. One pulls me aside to say, "Who is this guy?" "None of us like him... we have a bad feeling." I know who he is. He's the one I've been seeing off and on for a couple of years now. He's the one who pinned me down beneath him threatening to rape me but "showed me mercy" and cast me outdoors crying instead. He's the one, unbeknownst to me, who continued to see his "ex" girlfriend who had left him because he was cheating on her.

He is also the one that I am bent on saving. "He had such a bad childhood," I hear myself saying to my friends. He was physically abused by his mother, watched his father abuse his mother (his father was sent to jail for raping her), his mother was an alcoholic, and he was molested by his babysitter. How could I not sacrifice some things to rescue him... perform my "missionary duty" on/for his broken spirit – his broken heart?

He is shaking me and screaming in the car once we are alone. I embarrassed him. My girlfriend and I thought we were so smart; I kept talking to my male friend

that he declared was “that fag.” I’m scared but angry and refusing to be a victim, and I’m screaming back, yelling for him to let go. I do not care that my 124 pounds cannot stand up to his 180 pounds of muscle. I’m threatening to call the police – knowing that I won’t. After all, he is the police.

A bruise will form on my arm beneath my winter coat that’s covering my stylish multi-colored blazer. The shouting and the car shaking will draw the attention of another couple. He’ll stop at least until they are gone. His eyes turn glassy when I tell him not to touch me again or I really will call the police. I’m being dragged out of the car by my neck now being called names that aren’t my own. I am being dragged outside to find my way home from this wilderness, or to be left to perish.

For two weeks following the incident he will call at different times during the night to let me know he “had no choice” and I “made him” do it. I can take a day or two off from work, but then I will go back with a smile plastered on my face that says I’m okay. I’ll have to stand in front of my students and be damn sure not to cry. How do you talk about feminism and eradicating abuse after being pulled out of a car by the man you’re seeing again after breaking up with him numerous times before? I feel nothing. I am numb. How will I eventually handle the pain? I know the pain of these young adolescent poets; my own lived experiences intersect with theirs. My words meet their words, and together we search for meaning in this lost place.

Black Women and Girls in the Wilderness

Wilderness: A Collective Poem

Dragged out into the death of night
Sounds of black women gasping for air
Choking back pain

Swallowing doses of hate
Digesting fear
Laughter from outsiders watching beneath closed eyelids
The parade of black women
 Limbs tangled between grasping hands wrapping themselves
Around their flesh | rapidly shredding dark skin
Brown gold orange hues *bleed red*
Fingers clawing at dignity
Scraping spirits
Fragmenting bodies from names
Fragmenting real from imagined sound from insane

Black women wandering like haints
Through the wilderness searching for dismembered body parts
Searching for forgotten memories

Black women spitting up venom
Ejecting hatred
Regurgitating fear

Black women reaching for each other to remember
Remember remember find your way home
(Bacon, 2008)

Ultimately, I did turn to the police that night. The officer would begrudgingly take my “complaint” and tell me he did not see anything on my neck. He would ask me in an accusatory tone if I was sure that I had been pulled out by my neck rather than my coat. After explaining for the third or fourth time, he would nod, tell me to find a taxi home, and drive away leaving me in the cold to once again find my way out of the wilderness.

Months later, a colleague’s friend was celebrating her graduation in almost the same exact location. Since it was unclear to her friend that night if she had wandered off with the person she was talking to or had been abducted, the police were called (officers arrived from the same precinct that I had spoken with the night I was dragged out of the car). The police officer’s first question following the explanation

was, “Did she graduate from Howard?” A picture of a young white woman was provided with the response that she did not graduate from Howard University. The officers would exhaust the rest of the morning searching for her.

“Understanding the reality of your color is a profound experience” (Jones, 1996, p. 17). Understanding the reality of your color allows Black women and girls to steep in their culture and unearth their beauty and strength in their own, self-defined, terms. However, do the terms of self-definition for Black women and girls need to be created in spite of the experiences with the dominant culture? Or do the terms of self-definition for Black girls and women need to be created because of experiences in society with the dominant culture? Do Black girls need to be pulled aside by Black women and warned of the consequences of race and gender in order to survive? Can we keep Black girls safe by sharing the stories of Black women who have disappeared into the wilderness? Should we, maybe, whisper into the ears of nine-year-old Black girls that if they choose to wander from the beaten path to find their own voices and follow their own dreams that others may not dare to look for them or even recognize that they are gone?

Looking for Lost Black Girls

The premise of poetry writing often is situated in the acknowledgment and expression of feelings of isolation, anguish, and a desire to return home. The poet acts as observer, even of her own thoughts, and as participant in the process (Lewis, 2006). And as a Black woman poet, turning from the isolation of writing and searching alone to pre-empt the disappearance of African American girls, I turn toward the creation of a poetry group for Black women. Together, we sojourn though

the wilderness writing into visibility the experiences of Black girls, threatened with disappearance, and Black women who have not yet made their way back home.

Shanna, a member of the poetry group, reveals this plight in her poem “My Girls.”

My Girls

Two more girls gone yesterday
With twin braids anchoring the sides of their cheeks,
Doe eyes gleaming for the camera-
And it's too bad they are blackgirls
Whose picture only circulated for a moment
Before gone, just like the two.

Why would they, at nine years old,
Slip away from the sidewalk
In the city space that knew them
To direct themselves lost
In their enthusiasm
To be away anywhere a local train took them,
Play grown and invent new selves for themselves
Just across the border?

Did they know no one would look-
Not for black girls in the news,
Not even at nine?
Did some mama tell them
We watch for white, and wonder
More for little whitegirls and women?
Or did the latest lyric only suggest
Black booties, brown thighs, and beige breasts
Are all that's looked for if blackgirls are offering them,
Not pre-pubescent bodies clothed correctly for school?

Two girls found today,
Who wandered away from home
While wandering into our preempted imaginations.
We did look for them, those who noticed
On emailed black underground news-networks.

We looked into our own mirrors
And recognized them gone...
(Shanna, 2007)

Recently, I received an email from a teacher-friend that Roger, my former student, had dragged a high school girl into the woods that morning and raped her. Although her body would remain mostly intact, her spirit had been left to perish. Shortly following the event, our Black Graduate Student Association on campus, would bring to our awareness, the story of Megan Williams in West Virginia. Megan Williams, who was a young African American woman with a learning disability, was kidnapped, gang raped, tortured, and brutalized by a White mob that while repeatedly burning her, ripping out her hair, and stabbing her for a period of weeks, also doused her in racial slurs.

Shortly after that, I heard reports of another brutal crime through the listserv involving a Haitian woman in Dunbar Village, a Florida housing project, who was held, tortured, gang raped and maimed along with her son by a mob of adolescent boys. Although her neighbors heard her scream for hours, no one would help her, report the incident, or even give her and her son a ride to the hospital as they staggered, in the dark, blinded by cleaning fluid. Shortly after, two nine-year-old sisters would vanish, yet their disappearance would not be recorded or recognized by the outside world. I began to wonder, was there an epidemic in which Black women and girls were disappearing, being cast out, or dragged into the wilderness, physically, emotionally, or psychically, and no one seemed to hear their cries? Did anyone realize they were gone? Did anyone know they ever existed?

at the cemetery,
walnut grove plantation, south carolina,
1989

among the rocks
your silence drumming

in my bones,
tell me your names.

nobody mentioned slaves
and yet the curios tools
shine with your fingerprints.
nobody mentioned slaves
but somebody did this work
who had no guide, no stone,
who moulders under rock.
tell me your names,
tell me your bashful names
and I will testify.

the inventory lists ten slaves
but only men were recognized.

among the rocks
at walnut grove
some of these honored dead
were dark
some of these dark
were slaves
some of these slaves
were women
some of them did honored work.
tell me your names
foremothers, brothers,
tell me your dishonored names.
here lies
here lies
here lies
here lies
hear

(Clifton, in Moyers, 1995, pp. 85-86)

Lucille Clifton (1995) writes her poem for each Black woman of bondage who existed in silence and invisibility without hearing their real names. African American men who existed on the South Carolina plantation she visited, had been so degraded and dehumanized that they were listed in the records as inventory. African American women who existed on the South Carolina plantation had been so marginalized and

dehumanized that they no longer even existed, not even in the records as inventory. I remember the names of Tia and Shaniqua. I remember the two missing nine-year-old girls without names in the press. I remember Megan Williams, and the Dunbar Village rape victims. I remember Lucille Clifton's poem and each Black woman and girl who has perished physically, spirituality, emotionally, and psychically before them by being made invisible, nameless, and silent. I remember my own name. "And I will testify" by writing and sharing the writings of my girls and others to continue to remember their names and my purpose.

The Power of Poetry

Emancipation from voiceless-ness and isolation comes from breaking the silence, sharing each truth, and being heard (Levin, 1989). Liberation is the moment that the poet's words are written and uttered in such a way that in that instant another person has the opportunity to "know" what it is like to be her. Poetry of Black womanhood and girlhood is such a place for the collective voices to pierce the ears of those who fail to hear as they demand and cry "for dignity and restitution and salvation" (Lincoln, 2005, p. 101).

Writing reflects the essence of the person and her life. It is a reflection of the soul. And writing in the voices and reverberations of the African American experience and culture allows the poet to pay tribute to something profoundly beautiful, complex and rich. The poetic voice unfolds multiple narratives and counter-narratives to the perversion and reinterpretation of the experiences, images, and lives of African American women and girls. In telling the narratives and counter-narratives, it, too, becomes as visible as the girls' and women's lives, that there is a

necessary obligation to tell not only the sorrow, and bitter-sweet pain, but the elation experienced from truth. And to tell the truth is as varied and numerous as the layers of her identity and her many names (Ansa, 1993).

Phenomenology's Call

In the early hours of the morning before the sun contemplates rising, I am remembering how I first chose this poetry path. My thoughts do not begin with the work that I have done as a special education teacher with secondary students and poetry, but instead my thoughts are of the Dementia/Alzheimer's Unit of the nursing home where I first volunteered at age fourteen and in need of community/volunteer experiences to begin building my college portfolio.

During my sophomore year, I took time off to "find myself" and was drawn again to that very same nursing home. This time, I became a recreation leader on a part-time basis. I developed a much deeper relationship with the residents and cultivated an affinity for working with residents on the Alzheimer and Dementia unit. There was a woman who was 101. She was blind and remained in a wheelchair outside of her door most of the time. Although she seemed mostly incoherent and would frequently call out, there were times of almost absolute clarity in which a central theme in her life surfaced. She would frequently recollect stories about her mother and her father. Stories from her childhood seemed most prominent, in which she would recount the indignities suffered from not being granted time to go outside, to moments of being chastised. I was always struck by the fact that at 101 these seemingly inconsequential occurrences from her childhood still mattered.

Other residents who stayed on the unit included a veteran (I do not recall from which war) suffering from chronic depression as a result of post traumatic stress disorder who was subject to fits of extreme anxiety and despair, at which times he would commence biting off the first segment of his fingers. Other residents spent their adolescent and adult years being hospitalized for bipolar illness or schizophrenia. Some had endured electric shock treatment and had a very painful time recalling the events of their lives, but they still housed “body memories.” I began to learn to listen to them with a “different ear.” Their stories and lived experiences were so intensely vivid and lucid at times that they resembled the process of writing poetry.

As I began creating formal poetry groups with the residents, I remember feeling awe struck by their abilities. Unforgotten stories floated to the surface; childhood memories breathed new life, and poems were woven magically and often effortlessly. Residents, who wrote poems or wrote in journals privately for years, experienced a new sense of community and voice. Commonalities were uncovered and differences (mostly) honored. As a result of these discoveries, after I graduated from college, I formally studied and trained in the use of poetry therapy (the use of reading and writing poetry individually or collectively with a trained facilitator for purposes of self-expression, reflection, catharsis, and ‘a therapeutic interaction between participant and facilitator’) for two years (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994, p. 10).

Although I did not see a connection at the time, the use of poetry with Alzheimer and Dementia residents prompted me to explore further how it could be

used with adolescents when I became a special education teacher. During my first two years or so of working with students with learning disabilities, I became acutely aware of my students' remarkable talents, profound intelligences, and creative strengths. And while many residents' and students' reactions and experiences with poetry influenced my decision to explore this poetic journey, none seemed to have as great an impact on both my academic and "emotional life" (van Manen, 1997, p. 36) than my work with Tia, Shaniqua, and African American adolescent girl and women poets.

Novelist Opal Palmer Adisa (2006) speaks of the ways in which each character in her writing becomes imprinted in her consciousness and her heart. Her connection to the characters becomes so meaningful that when she writes about the death of a character's father she weeps for her. Although she is the author, it is almost as if on some level the characters have created themselves, and by that power and virtue, have created her by bringing forth life in the way that lived experience brings forth meaning to the soul and breath to the body (van Manen, 1997). But Tia and Shaniqua and my other participants are not characters in a book; they are my students, some of whom I have worked with for years. And I wonder how I will "narrate" their stories, without internalizing their pain. How might I become absorbed in this plight, steeped in the issues of justice and feminism, but not let them become my every thought?

How do I express my "just ire" (righteous indignation) as Freire (2000) suggests, but not become consumed by it, so deeply hurt and exposed by the rage at these injustices? How do I heal my own raw places to separate my experiences from

those of my participants and contemporary survivors so the reader can hear the true voices of each participant, and I can maintain my own voice? Every time I sit to write or read their stories it makes me want to weep. Is bringing this forth worth the pain of the creation and delivery?

There is so much to uncover and I am drawn to the quest of discovering how the experiences of the students will shape the process of phenomenological research. How will my experiences and writing shape the process of phenomenological research? Because I am an educator and a researcher and not a therapist, I recognize that there must be a distinction between the work I have done in formally studying poetry therapy and my role as an educator, as well as my own lived experience as a poet. Through the process of phenomenology, I believe, questions will be answered or at least explored pertaining to how poetry is experienced by the writers as they uncover the power of naming.

What is the lived experience of writing poetry to uncover the power for African American adolescent girls to name who they really are? Phenomenology, as human science research, urges us to 1) turn to a phenomenon that calls to us and commits us to the world; 2) investigate experience as we live and feel it rather than as we conceptualize it; 3) reflect and draw on the themes that surface and characterize the phenomenon; 4) describe the phenomenon through the art or poetic experience of writing and rewriting; 5) maintain a strong pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; 6) balance the research context through considering parts and whole (van Manen, 1997). This methodological process is explicated further in chapter three.

In chapter one, phenomenological inquiry is driven by a commitment of turning to a concern, as I have shown in this chapter. Turning to the phenomenon of the lived experience of writing poetry to uncover the power for African American adolescent girls to name who they really are speaks to the urgency and depth with which I am compelled to use this methodology. Phenomenology charges its practitioners to commit to a process or concern that is deeply meaningful, thought-provoking, and expressive. Moreover, phenomenology recognizes the importance of wholeness, and as a methodology, also charges each researcher to maintain a sense of responsibility to the participants and to humanity. Wholeness, depth, and humanity are the only means and dimensions for the poetry process to be rendered, making phenomenology, for me, the only organic option for human science research and lived experience.

In chapter two, investigating experience or existential investigation requires a deepening and reflecting upon the turning process through a variety of sources. My investigation is sparked by the poetry of two students and further expanded upon by the recognition and exploration of the multiple layers of identity against the historical backdrop of culture, legacy, and loss. Investigating experience through phenomenological inquiry offers the power to reveal poetry as a process, while beckoning participants to engage creatively as individuals and collectively as co-authors. Moreover, in maintaining a strong connection and orientation to and with the research, phenomenology demands that I, too, remain engaged as an active participant in the poetry writing and rendering process, rather than assume the role of a dis-interested evaluator.

In chapter three, I provide a philosophical grounding that is used as a means of opening up the phenomenon of poetry writing and poetic renderings to reveal the path of unfolding students' voices. The philosophic voices of van Manen, Bachelard, Levinas, Casey and Levin ground this process, while Heidegger creates and exposes a tension and practice of "being" alongside oppression. The presence and voices of poets and authors create an on-going dialogue between philosophers and writers within an individual, collective, and metaphorical space.

In chapters four, five, six and seven, the words, stories, poetry, and voices of students are included through the process of creating and naming a self-identity and maintaining a space for the poets to be heard. I hermeneutically search for themes that lend themselves to deepening and revealing meaning in the living word. In responding to the poets' living words and lived experiences, chapter eight responds to the pedagogical implications this study has to offer for further praxis.

CHAPTER TWO: POETIC NAMING: AN EXISTENTIAL INVESTIGATION

What is the lived experience of writing poetry for African American adolescent girls to uncover the power to name who they really are? This chapter explores this phenomenon more deeply as I turn to a variety of sources for this uncovering. Naming has the power to define you. It can create who you are and define who you are not. As my students seek to uncover who they really are, I seek to unfold the process of who they are not. My students are not “**These Black Kids**” as defined by others.

These Black Kids

This poem is for *these* Black kids who laugh with their mouths open and uncovered

This poem is for *these* Black kids who speak not only with their mouths but also with their necks (wiggling), eyes (rolling), and hips (swiveling)

It’s for the Black kids whom the sub, in the regular teacher’s absence, calls “lazy, stupid, complainers”

This poem is for *these* Black kids who listen when we are not looking

Who Cherish every A and gold star they ever earned

Who call out without their hands raised – but always have the right answer

Who have been scribbling poems of poverty on toilet paper and having babies at 14 as we “teach” them the rhyme scheme of ABAB

This poem is for Rachel who sleeps drooling on the desk for 50 minutes...
after taking care of a crying baby sister all night because Mama didn’t come home –

again-

Rachel who tried to go to the store for milk
only to be chased away for the crime of looking like a kid who *may* have shop-
lifted yesterday.

“I don’t know they all look alike anyway.”

This poem is for *these* Black kids who spent the night being stalked by the police...

for standing **outside & together**- trying to explain *the projects have no AC* and the suffocating heat is too much for young souls to sleep

This poem is for Tyrone who spent the morning picking up bottles and vials after daddy's "party"-

For Tyrone with stained clothes, and stale breath, bread and butter smeared *homework*,
who crouched for hours in the under-sized closet *studying* by flashlight in the only place where there's a little bit of quiet and *daddy's hands don't roam*
after the "guests" are gone.

This poem is for *those* Black kids who didn't make it to the closet last night... And whose neighbors turned up the television to drown out their muffled screams and cries instead of calling the police

This poem is for Tyesha who limps in quietly after the bell rings and struggles to sit side-ways to protect the sliced flesh on her backside from one more beating – infraction unknown

This poem is for the tight-lipped, baby, warriors who defiantly hold the "private business" of "family affairs"

**CPS never comes:
Can't find/prove anything
Too scared.**

**Pupil Personnel Workers *explain* procedures instead of making home visits unless "absolutely necessary"
"Oh and teacher referrals aren't accepted – only administration can make that call."**

And prune-faced substitutes hiss hatefully, "why can't *these* Black kids behave?!"
(Bacon, 2005)

I was co-teaching in an inclusion (general education and special education) English class in a diverse suburban public secondary school at the time I wrote "*These Black Kids*." In spite of the school's racial and ethnic diversity, my special education students were predominately Black children from urban areas and/or were from low-income families. Although inclusion classes were designed to incorporate special education students in the general education setting, the majority of my ninth-

grade Black special education children seemed to be “tracked” into one English classroom.

I wrote the poem in response to actual events that had occurred throughout my teaching career, as well as a specific incident in which a substitute teacher referred to the Black children in my class as “lazy,” “stupid,” “animals.” On this particular day, the substitute teacher conducted the class along with the general education teacher and the general education teacher’s student-teacher. Our class was always lively, and the children often verbally expressive and animated. Many of our students, unbeknownst to the substitute, had endured traumatic experiences at some point in their lives such as abandonment by loved ones through death or temporary or permanent desertion; poverty, physical or sexual abuse by adults or boyfriends (some resulting in pregnancy); and/or previous discrimination based on their race, class, gender, and disability.

However, my students frequently expressed a zeal for life, enthusiasm for learning, debates, and discussions. And although the children called out frequently during class or some, like many children, may have experienced difficulty remaining in their seats, their answers were almost always correct, and they remained actively and verbally engaged in the lessons. However, rather than naming the students resilient, persistent, creative, or survivors, the substitute chose to “name” the Black children “loud,” “stupid,” and “lazy,” and further decided they “could not behave or learn.” Although both the general education teacher and the student-teacher reported the incident to me, and I took immediate action, neither of the other teachers voiced

their dissatisfaction, concerns or opinions to anyone else but me (not even to the substitute teacher).

It is my belief and experience that this was not the first or last time that Black students, particularly in special education, would be subjected to this type of discrimination in and out of the classroom and have their voices silenced. Therefore, I felt it was imperative to create opportunities for my students to express themselves, tell their stories, determine their own identities, and receive positive affirmation of their culture(s). Based on many of my students' interests, I determined that African American adolescents could create this opportunity through reading and writing poetry.

The Poetic Journey

The poetic journey began after I transferred from a suburban Virginia school to an urban/suburban school in Maryland. This journey was much different. The drive to the school building was long and tedious in the early morning. I would awaken in the dark and travel in its despair to my destination. Someone once commented that it must be beautiful to drive into the sunrise. It was not. The sun rose behind me most of the journey and never spread her arms across the length of the sky, and when the road would twist in her direction I was reminded of her fury. It was a blinding scorching turmoil that always made you want to shut your eyes tightly, knowing that if you looked at it directly it would cost you your sight.

A Joyless Place: Legacies Lost

Bachelard (1994) quotes Noel Arnaud in *The Poetics of Space*: “I am the space where I am” (p. 14). Where I am is dank and cold. The building does not hold warmth in the winter or cold in the summer. It does not hold sunshine, for there are no windows. It does not hold joy. The walls are sterile slabs of bricks that resemble a prison. The institution was designed with freedom in mind and, therefore, allows for open spaces, classrooms without walls. However, the open spaces allow the sound of unrest to sweep through, but the air does not. The air smells stale and used. Toxins are breathed out with nothing clean or new brought in. A lingering pain cloaks the rooms like a musty, wet blanket designed for putting out fires that still smolder undetected.

We are too close together. The dirty desks and broken chairs are crammed upon one another. Each student’s body, small as a sixth grader and large as an eighth grader, has been stuffed into those desks at one point in time. We cannot all fit into this closet, with soiled carpet, slanting bookshelves, and droppings of whatever has come to darken our door the night before. Occasionally, one who is cumbersome in size sits uncomfortably with their fat squishing from outside the chair. There is my sweet Tommy who has a glandular problem. His face is that of an angel; he keeps his smile plastered to his gentle brown cheeks, as the other children slide their desks away and hold their noses. His mother forgot his Depends diapers this morning, and the urine leaks quietly undetected until it hits the air. I get up unsteadily from my own squishy chair to rush to his aid. The back from the vomit-colored-orange-upholstery chair is missing. It should have been discarded at a 1970’s garage sale.

The substitute's obesity broke the chair's back. It is a metaphor for all of us too large to be caged in this stifling space. We are like Great Danes in the pound in cages made for Chihuahuas. Maybe they think we will be subdued, and maybe, some of us do shrink in stature to accommodate the low roofs, limits, and low-expectations of who and what we really are. Maybe we, indeed, are our space.

Bachelard (1994) describes a moment between Rilke and his two friends: "This image of solitude symbolized by a single light moves the poet's heart in so personal a way that it isolates him from his companions" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 36). The experience further reveals that the three are "hypnotized by solitude" (p. 36). My students and I are poets who are isolated from each other by grief, poverty, and the violence of oppression. I cannot protect them, once in the halls, from the crushing stampedes of upperclassmen's feet. I cannot protect them from the indifference of the administration who send their own children to private schools.

I cannot protect them from the mice and roaches that will lurk throughout the building once we leave, if we are lucky. I cannot protect them from the teachers who call them animals and say they cannot learn. I cannot protect them from viewing the girl raped in the neighborhood who ran naked into the street. I cannot protect them from being duck taped to the clothes dryer and beaten, until it is too late, and the damage is done. I cannot protect them from the knowledge that their fathers were killed in a drug deal gone wrong, or their mothers' belt that will not be spared when she gets home after working two jobs and going to night school.

I cannot protect them on the bus when the autistic child is forced to perform oral sex by two other young, misguided special education boys whom we had

repeatedly pushed to have placed in a program for emotionally disturbed children prior to the rape. And I cannot protect them in the bathroom when one child follows the other in and molests him. The administration says it is a case of standing too close together at the urinals, and the paperwork is “accidentally” discarded. And on many days, I feel I cannot protect them from each other, even in my classroom when desks begin to fly across the room in frustration and anger.

Race, class, age, ethnicity, and gender, among others, make up the major forms of oppression in the United States by creating an unjust situation, where over a long period of time, one group systematically denies another group access to resources in society (Collins, 2000). “...Without the power to influence the purpose and direction of our collective experience, without the power to influence our culture from within, we are increasingly immobilized” (Collins, 2000, p. 88). This systematic oppression seems to lead to further alienation from a truly self-defined identity and a connection to other students and cultural legacies.

What Do You Know about African People

I walk down the street and a woman senses my accent
She asks
Do Africans live in trees?
And I go home and turn on the TV
See naked African children
Begging for food
I walk to school and people make fun
Of my accent
They ask me
Why do you talk like you have something in your throat?
I go to an African-American neighborhood
Where I think I belong
Someone says
Why do you hate us?
And I say
The media makes you believe that we hate you

But we love you because we are the same people
We have the same blood
Even though we don't speak the same language
Then they ask
Why did you Africans sell us for money?
I tell them I can't speak for the past
They should ask the people who sold them
And the people who bought them
A little girl asks me if I speak Tarzan language
I go to the restaurant and someone asks me if we eat leaves
I go to the mall and someone asks me if we wear clothes
I go for a job interview and the boss asks me
If I left my home to labor for money in America
I fill out my application and someone asks
If I am from Nigeria or South Africa
Maybe they don't know I'm from Liberia
Well, do you know that oil and diamonds came from Africa?
Do you know that math was invented in Africa?
Do you know that education and writing began in Africa?
Do you know that beauty was started in Africa?
The kinky hair you can do everything with it
You can braid it
You can straighten it
You can leave it like curly curly
Our eyes look peaceful
Like a flowing river
The full lips
Big butt
People on TV want to look like this
Do you know that love, peace and forgiveness came from Africa?
Because after all the slavery
loss of our homes
our families
after lynching us for being black
after working in the cotton fields
after breastfeeding white families' children
after working for free after beatings
after we watched our mothers our sisters our children being raped
after losing our land our riches and our diamonds
after the bombing of our land
after taking our animals from Africa and putting them in the zoo
after destroying our self esteem after the media shows our bad side
I still forgive but I don't forget
And I know that love, peace, and forgiveness came from Africa

Tell me

What do you know about African?
(Weah Weah, in DeDonato, 2004, pp. 40-42)

My students do not know who they are. They cannot remember their proud histories – their legacies. They do not speak of Timbuktu in Mali. My students do not know Nat Turner. They do not know of the Harlem Renaissance and their intellectual and literary revolutions. They do not know of the Black Arts Movement and those who swung by broken necks from trees in their unformed names. We are very close to each other, but we are isolated. We are hypnotized, but we do not reside in the house of solitude.

Bachelard (1994) speaks of a “house of memories” (p. 14) that becomes intricately complex and psychological. Through poetry and literature we “write a room” or “read a room.” I do not know the psychological memories attached to this building or my broken classroom. I wonder if it is more of a personal psychological connection or if it reminds them, too, of America’s shameful history. It is the high-poverty school where students are ten times as likely to be taught by uncertified teachers as low-poverty schools (Irvine, 2003). It is the severe travesty of the history of education in which 1 cent is spent for African American students compared to the sixteen dollars spent on White students (Irvine, 2003).

This building is symbolic of hundreds of years of deprivation and injustices. It represents the crouching in cramped dusty corners by ancestors who defiantly huddle in specks of light, learning and teaching one another to read. It is like the holding and torturing caves for slaves’ bodies and spirits to be broken. It is the fingers dissected and bodies dismembered for reconnecting to African Knowledge.

Van Manen and Levering (1996) suggest that we do not really experience ourselves as a “self” in the ways in which we experience other qualities or objects in life. Therefore, they suggest that the concept of “self” is an illusion. The “self,” however, becomes an illusion when we find it determined, defined, and situated by others, particularly “others” who view the creation of race, culture, age, achievement, gender, and ability in terms of “other” than themselves.

Poetry: The Creation of Selves

Levin (1985) describes the process of identity creation as the phase of an “authentically individuated self” which begins with the “emergence of guardian awareness of Being” (p. 105). The construction of an “authentically individuated self” is constituted by the “existential understanding of our inherence of Being as a whole” (p. 105). This phase encompasses the journey from an unformed or unnamed identity of “everyone-and-anyone” to the discovery of one’s “true-self” through “poetizing motility” (Levin, pp. 105-106). And while poetic creations and independent pursuits may in some ways differ dramatically, “...everything individual is always engaged in the process of Bildung [culture, cultivation, cultivated].” And, “What constitutes the essence of Bildung is clearly not alienation... but rather the return to oneself...” (Safranski, 1998, p. 14).

Identity construction seems to be linked to culture inextricably. The term culture comes from the Latin word *Cultura* (Wikipedia.org). *Cultura* is defined as the ability to “tend, guard, cultivate, and till.” My students, through the formation of their “authentically individuated selves,” tend, guard, cultivate, and till their multiple identities individually and collectively as Black/African American, girls/women,

urban/suburban, special education/ general education poets. Yet, as they seek to define and cultivate their own “beings as a whole,” they often are faced with the need to guard the complexities and dimensions of their racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, ability, and age identification. They also must defy the construction of race and gender created by false perceptions, myths, and stereotypes by the dominant culture, peers, and adult society.

My students lead me through the cultivation process by tending and cultivating their cultural identities as experienced within their age group, location, and contemporary society. And as they reap and sow their identities, while negotiating external images and contemporary society, I tend to the cultural and racial framework by which students’ lived experiences unfold against the backdrop of a historical reality of disparity and injustice, alongside an ancestral heritage of scholarship and philosophy. Tension and anxiety surface through tilling multiple identities which seem to call for the ebb and flow of guarding or protecting past and present experiences, while exposing and creating multiple identities (Hultgren, 1995). Moreover, the process of Bildung beckons each poet to uncover her true self beneath the many names of her external identity.

My Real Name

Today my name is colorful.
Yesterday my name was dead souls.
Tomorrow my name will be lively spirits.
My friends think my name is fire.
The police think my name is burden.
My parents think my name is symphony.
Secretly I know my name is anything
I want it to be.
(Noel, in WritersCorps, 2003, p. 46)

What is real? Is real the poet without a name or without a form? Is real the identity that she keeps hidden beneath the surface to mask her most intimate feelings? Maybe real is truth? Or maybe real is uncovering the poet's name or discovering that in her true form she has no name, or that she embodies several names. Naming is a secret that responds to the hidden identity and uniqueness of the poet. Naming is also a process that invites the poet to confide, confess, and explore her secret identity (ies) by writing and re-writing her inner life and experiences (van Manen, 1996).

Naming allows the exploration of internal identities, experiences, and inner lives, while offering the space to explore external identities. Enveloped in the process of naming for African American poets are the elements of defining, resisting and imagining cultural and racial images in the abstract and the concrete. It is also at this juncture in exploring the process of naming that I begin to experience and observe the distinctions in language and meaning in the writings of/by my students, published poets, philosophers, and me that emerge through defining and naming race and culture. Naming(s), of poets, calls for defining Black, in conventional terms, as a race of people of the African Diaspora (African, African American, and Caribbean). Blackness also is revealed in terms of a collective experience with marginalization or oppression as shared in my previous poem "**These Black Kids**". Moreover, Blackness poignantly unfolds as a feeling, image, and description of race, color, beauty, empowerment, complexities, and passion as revealed in the poem "Paint Me."

Paint Me

Paint me Black. Paint me.
Me, Black, the most authentic thing you can see.
Paint me Black 'cause I don't want anything to change my shade.

Immerse my soul in its essence and show me what you've
Made.

Splash the most beautiful tones upon my skin.
Paint me Black. Paint me
For all that I am for my history.
Paint me and shine me up for the world to know.
Paint me Black 'cause I've got stories other colors haven't
Told.

Paint me Black and I'm sure you'll find
The other color fits me perfect, but doesn't control my mind.
(Spicer, in *WritersCorps*, 2003, p. 12)

As race and color emerge as vivid descriptors, images, and feelings, how does culture unfold for the poets? What does the naming of culture (which is conventionally defined as the customs of peoples with shared histories, practices, beliefs, and rituals) evoke for African American adolescent girl poets? Do race and culture, when merged with poetic expression, create and define naming (Irvine & Armento, 2001)?

For African American girls and women, poetic culture tenders definitions, identities, and naming(s). The poetic culture also offers an identity as individuals and as a collective to transcend labels and names. In transcending the conventional, poets may venture into the realm of imagination or the abstract to connect to their inner spirits or inner lives, their ancestors, or even the universe to call forth their names. Venturing into the realm of imagination and abstractions allows adolescent poets, such as Weatherspoon featured in *City of One*, to not only name her racial and cultural identity as "Black Mother Earth" (p. 102), but to become and embody her name. Naming, within the poetic culture, offers writers limit-less prospects of definitions and meanings of who they are and from where they come.

I Come From
I come from the sky.
I come from a window of fresh air.
I come from a place in my family.
I come from the center of the earth
 With God Jesus and love.
Where do you come from?
Do you know me?
Do I know you?
I come from a shoe, a book, do you?
I know me, do you?
I come from a world full of questions,
A world full of food.
I am the queen.
I am royalty.
You call me by my name.
I call you by yours.
You can call me Hope, Respect,
 Or Black Mother Earth.
But call me by my name.
(Weatherspoon, in DeDonato, 2004, p. 102)

Calling forth Identity

Calling forth identity through poetry is explored in a variety of studies.

Wiseman (2004) examines the impact of poetry writing on identity and community in her study with students of color from urban areas participating in poetry workshops with a community poet and educator. She notes that poetry provides students with an opportunity to explore their identity (ies) through creative metaphors. Through poetry writing, students not only explore their feelings and experiences, but they feel empowered to control and manipulate their perceptions and envision solutions and various outcomes.

Wiseman (2004) notes that students who participated in the poetry workshops, were often able to transform “negative” circumstances and feelings into strength and

power based on their ability to create poems from their experiences, or to “re-write” difficult situations. Some students in the program expanded their poetry writing to connect their experiences to their peers, which was reinforced by the collaborative nature of poetry writing. Through collaboration, students experience empowerment and establish a relationship with others through their expression of feelings and disclosure of emotional and social components of their lives. As students begin to forge and reinforce relationships, not only with their peers but with the larger society, many students begin to identify a connection with their experiences, current events, and even world issues (including poverty, violence, and war).

However, one of the most prominent and important topics and themes that surfaced in students’ writings in Wiseman’s study is centered upon racial and cultural identity. As a result, the poetry facilitator would encourage students to explore and discuss race and culture and others’ perceptions of them, based upon membership in a specific racial or cultural group. Many students reported experiences with discrimination that occurred at school as a result of negative perceptions, stereotypes, naming, and low expectations by teachers. “The stereotypes are running my life/Bringing much confusion and strife...” (Vanessa, in Wiseman, 2004, p. 163). Other students in Wiseman’s study expressed a tremendous sense of pride and strength in identifying their experiences in reference to race and culture: “I am a Black African American teenager living in the ghetto/And proud of it...” (Shanell, in Wiseman, 2004, p. 163). In Wiseman’s study, as well as other poetry studies of African American adolescent writers around this phenomenon, their poetry reflects

multiple identities of race, culture, as well as gender, and begins to emerge with a sense of their distinction and empowerment.

Poetry creates a space for students to explore issues and experiences around cultural, racial, and adolescent identity (ies). As a result, students are able to share their feelings, knowledge, and perspectives on their own terms in ways that are meaningful to them and others. Furthermore, poetry that is written collaboratively, allows students to establish and/or reinforce relationships, not only with the facilitator, but with their school, home, and “global” community (Wiseman, 2004).

In *Family Gumbo: Urban Students Respond to Contemporary Poets of Color* (Athanases, Christiano & Drexler, 1992), a poetry project created by Oakland public school teachers and the University of California at Berkeley, culturally responsive poetry was incorporated to inspire and empower students. The poetry unit was designed in such a way as to acknowledge, embrace, and honor the cultures, customs, and lineages of multi-ethnic adolescents. Students’ personal experiences and family histories were deepened by linking them to community and global experiences around issues of social justice and historical events (in the United States and abroad), while encouraging the students to nurture a collective awareness and consciousness. The exploration of social justice and historical events prompted participants to reflect upon struggles endured by their own family members (particularly in regard to poverty and racial discrimination) and the means of resurrecting resistance and change.

Students were encouraged to look at works from a variety of poets of color. One of the most powerful pieces explored was Alice Walker’s collection of family

portraits of the rural South. Using Alice Walker's writing as a model, students were invited to create poems to dedicate to their own family members, as well as to create a portrait of their family lives. For African American adolescent girls, family portraits of their mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and mother figures were especially prominent. Furthermore, the girls described the women in their lives as people who inspired dignity and courage which shaped their own experiences and feelings of identity. In addition, the girls chose to honor the legacy and strength of Black womanhood through a selection of poems by Black women writers such as June Jordan, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker, and Nikki Giovanni, along with the authors' works on womanhood including: *Mothers*, *For My Mother*, *For My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties*, *Women*, and *Lineage*. In addition to the selection of published poems, participants, such as Temeka Burnett, wrote their own poems to the women in their lives (Athanases, Christiano & Drexler, 1992).

Strong Black Woman

For my sister Andrea
One who always says
"I come from descendants of kings and queens
from the mother land"
Truly an African princess.

For my sister Andrea
one who is now furthering her education
to become one of the best damn black nurses
that ever stepped foot on Mother Earth.

For my sister Andrea
one who makes me truly proud to say
"I am African-American."

I recognize her as a strong Black woman
rising to the top of her rope.
Keep rising Black Woman

Keep rising.
(Burnett, in Athanases, Christiano & Drexler, 1992, p. 49)

While African American adolescent girls wrote poems acknowledging the strength and courage of the Black women in their lives, Burnett also recognized in her poem that even “The strongest person in the world needs encouragement” as she wrote about her sister.

Poetry is so powerful a venue that it allows African American adolescent girls the possibility of naming themselves. Poetry is also the venue that enables African American adolescents to be vulnerable, to express a range of emotions in exploration of their many names, forms, and identities unencumbered. But what do African American girl poets who do not have the opportunity to write about their identities, images, and experiences in the mainstream classroom setting do to feel unencumbered and empowered? How do they express and acknowledge their naming (s)? What do African American adolescent girl poets who feel voice-less do?

What African American Adolescent Girls Do

The students I work with in my poetry group are older now. They are no longer the middle school children of the first five years of my teaching career, experiencing the angst of transitioning from childhood to adolescence. Nor are they the ninth grade special education students, of my first year teaching high school, who were blatantly tracked into an environment devoid of their cultural identities and images – forced to call out to be heard, understood, and included.

They are now eleventh grade students, many in an environment with seemingly more resources and support. Rather than be subjected to the naming of

their worth and identity by discriminatory substitute teachers and the like, the majority of students who have been selected to participate in my poetry group are active members of my inclusion English class. The English class is taught by Omari Daniel, an African American male general education teacher who is a poet and writer and holds a Ph.D in Educational Policy and Leadership, and by me, an African American woman special education teacher who is also a poet and writer in the process of completing her Ph.D in Minority and Urban Education. The readings, writings, texts, and classroom dialogues are laced with the analysis and dissection of isms (including racism, sexism, classism, and anti-Semitism) along with examining homophobia and other practices of marginalization and discrimination. All students (African American, White, Middle Eastern, Latino, Asian, African, Caribbean) in our class are challenged to construct and deconstruct their (multiple) identities, which, include their racial and cultural identities in order to name their, “authentically individuated” selves (Levin, 1985, p. 105).

I contemplate if it is necessary to create a poetry group based on the lived experiences of African American adolescents when they appear to be receiving support and affirmation in the mainstream classroom. Yet, based on their writings and discussions, some African American students continue to express feelings of isolation in the mainstream classroom and to struggle with the process of naming or revealing their multiple identities and/or “authentically individuated” selves (Levin, 1985, p. 105). Delving a bit deeper, it appears to most frequently be the girls, who express reluctance to name themselves, at least in their own terms, rather than using definitions of others.

Into my consciousness surfaces the quote, “African American girls are expected to get in trouble in ways that damage their own life chances, rather than make trouble for others like the boys do” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 42). I am challenged by the notion that African American girls are expected to damage their own life chances. If making trouble for others is what boys do – what do girls do? I find that other research studies, writings, texts, and even poems, leave the question unspoken or unchallenged. The quote is one of the justifications for educators and researchers focusing their attention on boys. However, for me, it is a confirmation of the need to ensure that African American girls are provided a means to share their voices on their own terms to express the pain, fear, or joy they are experiencing even if they are not “making trouble for others” or “damaging their own life chances.” And while the educators and researchers in Ferguson’s study consider “damaging their own life chances” as limited educational or financial opportunities, silencing the girls’ voices, creating isolation, and making them invisible, seem to damage not only the girls’ life chances but the very essence of who they are.

I Am

How do the girls manage their pain or express their joy when they are expected to get in trouble in ways that damage their own life chances? By writing their feelings and experiences will the girls’ essence be uncovered and made visible? African American adolescent girl poets who write their stories, pain, identities, strength, and successes also write and create their own truths. Declarations and even questions of who they are reveal their inner voices and allow the adolescent girls to uncover their real names and make their identities more visible to themselves and

each other. Writing poetry allows the adolescent girls to share their lived experiences in such a way as to create and cultivate their essence and inner lives on their own terms without the confines, labels, definitions or superficial interpretations of others. Furthermore adolescent girls, such as Shaneka Brooks featured in *Growing Up Girl*, who engage in writing “I Am” poetry, expose their inner most feelings often hidden beneath a mask of false identities or forced smiles.

I Am

I am a poet writing my pain
I am a poet living a life of shame
I am a daughter hiding my depression
I am your sister making a good impression
I am your friend acting like I’m fine
I am a wisher wishing this life weren’t mine
I am a girl who thinks of suicide
I am a teenager pushing things aside
I am a student who doesn’t have a clue
I am the girl sitting right next to you
I am the one asking you to care
I am your best friend hoping you’ll be there
(Brooks, in Sewell, 2006, p. 50)

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) further reveals the process of adolescents and women uncovering the power to name “I Am” within the safety of an individual and collective voice and community space. “Beyond the mask... [in] the Black Woman’s community, in her family, and, more important, in her psyche, [there] is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions – sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy...” (p. 101). In this other world of “I Am,” which is created by individual and collective voices and visibility, Black adolescent girls and women find the strength, support, joy, and solitude of their naming. The process of writing poetry unveils the multiple dimensions and experiences of race, gender,

culture, and language to uncover each girl's/woman's essence. Furthermore, it is in the space of the collective that the poet allows herself the vulnerability to express her sorrow as "the one asking you to care." It is also in this space that poets express their genuine joy and acknowledge their heritage and legacy of "I Am" from Mother Africa to "the princess daughter of Safria."

I Am

I am the first spoken word of Swahili
that flowed like the river into Africa
I am the river that formed the mother and father of the world
I am the confidant of the king
the princess
daughter of Safria
I am the beauty of my land
I am the first fruit put into the basket on Kwanzaa
and there again the beautiful song of
the spoken language
I am Aunt Jemima binding the family
I am Harriet Tubman
Dr. Martin Luther King freeing my people
I am the Black Panther in the souls of the righteous leaders
I am the June in Juneteenth
the celebration of my soul
I am the wild in the animals of Africa
I am the first African to set foot
on the moon
I am the inventor of all inventors
I am the future of my culture
(Dunlap, in DeDonato, 2004, p. 115)

The voices of the girls appear to reflect an uncovering that is supported by the opportunity to write and read poetry that is actively heard. Furthermore, the girls in my poetry group, Wiseman's study, *Family Gumbo*, and the poetry anthologies, share meaningful lived experiences through their poetry that are sometimes not revealed outside of their writing. However, there are many African American adolescent girls whose voices are not yet as audible as those of the Black women writers who have

declared their naming and multiple identities. Therefore, to understand the lived experiences of African American adolescent girl poets uncovering the power to name themselves is to delve deeper to a place of knowing presented only by their voices and creations. The following poem by Tia continues to reveal the self-struggle of cultivating an identity in terms of self and in terms of others.

What I Feel

Do you really want to know how I feel?

Written on a sheet of paper without a seal.

Do you want me to express to you why I cry?

Let you in on my true feelings without telling a lie.

Let you really know why I hide the way I feel.

Hidden behind closed doors with my lips sealed.

To fill you in on why I feel this way. I think I'm in
love with playing the GAME!

The games we play brings us both pain,

And the things you say put my heart to shame.

I really didn't think you could be meant for me.

Not saying that I don't love you but were moving to fast.

In my life I still haven't move on from what has happened in the past

Now look at us so young and deep in love...

But why do I cry at night only to let the joy and pain come out...

I'm afraid of love and to admite it

I try my hardest to hide all my secreats...

(Tia, 2007)

Tia's poem mirrors the process revealed by Collins (2000) and, phenomenologist O'Donohue (1997), who suggest that beyond the mask of false identity, as named by others or an inauthentic self, the human journey is one of constant transformation. Transformation occurs through honest and meaningful connection that affords the possibility of illuminating secrecy, vulnerability, and anonymity. As a writer, the poet is constantly active in the process of revelation.

Living Words

African American writer, Sekou Sundiata, describes himself as a recording and performing poet. He attributes his style of poetry to the tradition of African “oralizing,” which includes the practice of call and response. Sundiata further connects his style of poetry to the “rhythms” of African American churches, from Harlem to the Deep South, and remembrances of the language/spoken word of the pulpit, combined with music to create a “living text” (Sundiata, in Moyer, 1995, p. 391). Words live and breathe their existence from your heart to your listeners. Living texts are full of passion, motion, response and rhythm to feelings, rather than words that remain dry and flat on a page. This creation of living words or living texts is one of the many cultural experiences and ways of knowing by the community/collective of African American poetic voices.

Quincy Troupe, African American poet and winner of the title “World Heavyweight Poetry Champion” has been greatly influenced by poetry as living words through jazz music. Troupe reads in places often devoid of poetry, from prisons to bars. Troupe expresses a need for poetry, similar to Sundiata’s, linking his poetic expression to music and rhythm which he names “the music of language” (Troupe, in Moyer, 1995, p. 413). Poetry, according to Troupe, finds its essence or meaning in music. Furthermore, Troupe, echoing Sundiata’s idiom, finds the essence of poetry to be rooted in the African oral tradition and declares that poetry cannot be dead, but must be a creation and expression of living words or living language.

Poetic discourse, in the African American community, often is saturated by rich language, story telling, metaphors, meaningful conversation, and political and

social commentaries. Poetry may be heard, shared, and spoken in a voice that reflects a cultural context and exchange of every day language. There is a particular power in poetic language and communication shared through the written word. Reading and sharing poetry is a necessity for many poets who have created a culture that embodies the “language of life” and “living words” (Sundiata & Troupe, in Moyer, 1995).

Poetry writing also is described as a means of discovering the writer’s and others’ humanness. Poetry writing is, as shared by poets, a source of illumination, providing the possibility of essential expression for thoughts and feelings. Poetry, as a language, can be used in such a way as to make the poetry itself a part of the writer’s every day cultural experience. It is so powerful a medium that it does not only represent an experience but it *is* experienced, allowing poems to become “living words” (Sundiata, in Moyer, 1995, p. 394).

Poetry as a “living word” situates the writing experience in a cultural space, as well as a space of discourse, relationships, and humanity (Sundiata, in Moyer, 1995). Students have found that by sharing these experiences and feelings through poetry, they are not alone (Wiseman, 2004). This is of particular importance, as it is not only silence that keeps poets subdued, but isolation, as well.

As I explore the writings and experiences of adolescent poets, I also turn to poetry books and anthologies such as *City of One* (DeDonato, 2004), *Growing Up Girl* (Sewell, 2006), and *Things I Have to Tell You* (Franco, 2001). The adolescents published in *City of One* by Writerscorps, a community organization created to improve literacy and provide a creative forum for marginalized youth, primarily from low-income neighborhoods, share their meanings and feelings regarding poetry. *City*

of One writers offer a plethora of descriptions about poetry ranging from music that is as soothing as a lullaby, as colorful as leaves on an autumn day, or as jumbled as a puzzle that has no wrong way of being put together. Poetry is described as a cultural dance or a bird flying free. Poetry is revealed to be the following: a collective people, prayer, question, answer, stories of the soul, an embodiment of sadness, and an intimate secret, knowing, breathing, and magnetically charged.

Writerscorps poets in *City of One* describe their engagement with words as being a revolution, a calling, joining together what is lost or broken that only the poets have tools to recreate, heal, or locate. The poets write of big city streets as well as distant war-torn lands. The poets write of the forgotten, the silenced, or scared, expressing the same urgency and need to write that permeates the pages from adolescent girl poets and women in chapter one. A nineteen-year-old poet, in Writerscorps, shares explicitly, through poetry, the need to write for those who have had their bodies and spirits tragically destroyed. They write for those who have perished – who never again are able to write or speak for themselves.

Are poets who lend their voices to others who are forgotten or invisible made visible themselves? Does the courage to speak for others ultimately allow the poet the courage to share her own vulnerability and voice? Throughout chapters one and two, Black women poets tender a responsibility for the paths and voices of adolescent girl poets. Is there also a responsibility young poets tender for each other and a connection to those who have written before them?

As adolescent poets search for their voices, feelings and memories that need to be told often float to the surface. Hence poetry writing becomes a process of

sharing and speaking to the listening ear. What happens to the poet whose writing experience is void of a listening ear? If the poet is to reveal her true name, identities, and feelings, must she be heard and understood?

Things I Have to Tell You

Poetry allows the writer to share her own vulnerable experiences such as bouts of depression or domestic violence which can be connected to the lived experiences of others. The anthology *Growing Up Girl* (Sewell, 2006) shares the writings of girls and women who have been marginalized. Shaneka Brooks, a seventeen-year-old poet who began writing when she was placed in the foster care system at fourteen, writes about isolation and despair in the previous poem *I Am. Things I Have to Tell You* (Franco, 2001), a collection of poems and prose written by adolescent girls, further illuminates the process of writing and searching to uncover a voice for adolescent girls through journal entries, poems, and letters. The poetic process allows for the possibility of uncovering the power for the girl poet to name herself in spite of an external, as well as sometimes internal, need to silence her voice and hide her identity (ies) or find an escape by helping others, frequently males, to find their power while denying her own.

Escape

I look inside me and I don't see it
I don't see the power
The confidence you say I have
You say I can do anything...
But I don't know
If it's all there
Waiting for the opportunity
To jump into you
And try to help you

Fix you
Ask you
Why? Because I don't know...
Who can I follow?...
Cuz then I won't have to continue the
Search
For my power
(Hossfeld, in Franco, 2001, p. 9)

In chapter one, rather than the girl and women poets escaping into wonder, many African American adolescent girls and women were dragged into the wilderness emotionally, psychically, and physically. Through the poetry shared, an over-powering awareness was revealed that Black girls and women individually and collectively are gone. They are vanishing into the wilderness to perish through voicelessness and isolation.

The silence and isolation of Black women and African American adolescent girl poets is deafening. As I reached out of my own wilderness, I grasped at the hands of other poets and writers clearing their way from the wilderness, like me, for themselves and for others by creating poetry. The poetry group I formed for adult women was born for all of us through our collective consciousness and connection. Our writing began to connect with each other's words and voices, as well as the voices and experiences around us. The voices of each member seemed touched and strengthened by charting a safe path within our group to wander and wonder, unlike the girls and women who had disappeared in our poems and in the world.

The experiences of group members will continue to unfold throughout the chapter; however, my thoughts drift to Shanna's poem, "My Girls," shared in chapter one. Shanna writes of the still unbroken spirits of two real life young African American girls who wander from the beaten path to follow their own hearts' calling.

The girls are yanked back to a harsh reality of the danger of following their dreams by those of us who find that to keep them safe is to keep them tucked away in invisibility and voice-less-ness. But what damage is inflicted by such over-protectiveness?

As I reflect on the journey of wonder, silence, and reclaiming voice for writers bridging African American girlhood to Black womanhood, I wonder at what point did/do we as Black women become silent and invisible. Did/do Black women have to become invisible or voice-less to survive? If African American adolescent girls write poetry, can they hold fast to the possibility of wondering, wandering, imagination, and voice? Can they continue to maintain their feminine power and their natural joy? Will the process of invisibility and alienation be preempted if girls write to reveal a self-defined identity?

Girlchild

I have experienced many difficulties and hardships in my life and yet despair is a state in which I rarely remain for long. This is largely because despair cannot share the same space as wonder, and it is wonder that I have had from childhood, and in abundance.
(Walker, 2006, p. 36)

Is it possible that if African American adolescent girls uncover the power to name and (re)define themselves, they might not grow into Black womanhood and discover themselves gone? I wish to navigate each pitfall and danger to keep each girl safe. I wish, like the Black women in “My Girls” (Shanna, 2007), to whisper into each girl’s ear not to wonder or wander from the beaten path and become lost while no one is looking or searching. But, instead, I echo the feelings expressed by local Black feminist poet and activist, Michelle Sewell in “Girlchild.” She writes the

words that need to be uttered to each girl to foster and protect her dreams, rather than silence her voice in order to keep her “safe.”

Girlchild

Baby girl, as you pack your bags
For your life travels – please don’t
Forget your heart song and your north star.
You’ll need them both.
There’s no need to live a life of quiet desperation.
Dream Big!
Take up as much room as you need.
Girl, take up as much room as you want.
If girlchild falters and can’t find her way,
She can search out... this message...
There will be ports in the storm.
Drop your anchor sometimes.
Sit long enough to let someone scratch
the worry out your head and bathe you in
some scented water.

And before I forget – drop the title
Of super woman. She’s like Santa Clause...
She doesn’t exist...
I guess it’s simply this:
Beautiful baby girl, you are not disposable.
Your life should not begin and end in the
same twenty-four day.
That everything humanly possible should be done
to preserve your life force.
That there is something amazingly unique about
a child born a girl.
And I promise
Yes, I promise
you will always find favor.
(Sewell, 2006, p. 272)

It is this yearning to be free that the Black mother/woman dares to instill in her girlchild, although it may take her from the beaten path. The Black mother who nourishes her girlchild’s dreams recognizes that while “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am [, t] he Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (Lorde, 1984, p. 38). Freedom is what the

Black mother (figuratively and literally) dreams of for her “girlchild,” even only if it is a place of solitude in her consciousness.

As she seeks to preserve the “girlchild’s” life and to keep her safe by protecting her body and spirit from vanishing and perishing in the wilderness, the Black mother/woman recognizes that she must not only allow the “girlchild” to wander, but she must encourage her to do so to fulfill her dreams. For it is not only the “girlchild’s” body that must remain in tact, prevented from becoming one of the physically missing, but her spirit and identity must also be protected from becoming nameless, formless, voice-less, and joy-less as a result of being subdued by the onslaught of definitions and expectations of others.

To stay free and follow her dreams, Black mothers/women must encourage the “girlchild,” who is on the brink of womanhood, to ward off the urge to become numb beneath oppression and domination. In order to define herself and feel the depth and breadth of her emotions and experiences from sorrow to elation, the “girlchild,” on the brink of womanhood, must continue to be free to speak her truths. Only the “girlchild’s” feelings will sustain her poetic spirit and essence. Feelings allow her to maintain her dreams and move her to demand action, change, and visibility (Lorde, 1984).

Black women and adolescent girls have been as highly visible as they have been represented, depicted, and defined by others to not be visible in their true form(s) or true name(s). If fear of shining truth on self-definitions is lifted – if raw emotions and identities are exposed, who will Black women and adolescent girls be for themselves and for each other? Black women must protect the “girlchild’s voice”

as much as her physical being, in order to ensure her passage from girlhood to womanhood. Therefore, the “girlchild,” like the Black woman, must have the means to speak her name(s), tell her truth(s), and reveal her identity (ies), not only for her survival, but for her own pleasure. Adolescent girls navigating the path to discovering their own north stars speak to the shared truths and paths between Black women and girls in their writing by sharing their struggles and their joys. Thomas’s work, featured in the anthology *Things I Have to Tell You* (Franco, 2001), seems to respond to the experience of a “girlchild” encouraged to wander and wonder as told through a letter to her Great-Grandmother.

A Letter to My Great-Grandmother

...I love you Mama for giving me a sense of character.
Thank you for being happy I am a girl and teaching me
pride in being a woman of color, helping to find where
my roots are, and always telling me I was intelligent and
just as good if not karmically cleaner than those who seemed
to get more chances than me...

Mama do you remember when I asked to be a Black Panther
for Halloween and you told me I was a Black Panther every day
in your house. Then you proceeded to tell me about the Cause,
and about everyone from Queen Sheba to Malcolm X.

I love you for that, Mama, and I always will... telling me when
I’m making you proud and loving me with no strings attached.
(Thomas, in Franco, 2001, p. 50)

In addition to African American adolescent girls writing their feelings in letters and poems, the girls express their feelings and experiences in their own voices through a series of interviews featured in writer and educator Rebecca Carroll’s (1997) book, *Sugar in the Raw: Voices of Young Black Girls in America*. The voices of the girls included in this chapter range from ages thirteen to seventeen and are from northern geographic locations such as Brooklyn, New York and Springfield,

Massachusetts, to southern regions such as Birmingham, Alabama. Some of the self-identified Black girls in the study are biracial, adopted into white families where they were intentionally denied their culture in order to assimilate, or were brought up in predominately Black neighborhoods and schools where they always felt included and that their cultures were honored. And while their voices are diverse and many of their experiences vastly different, common themes surfaced, as they did in my poetry group, Wiseman's study, *Family Gumbo*, and the poetry anthologies. These poetic renderings centered upon legacy, the collective, cultural awareness and pride, and strong ties to and with Black womanhood, often through relationships with other Black women (especially their mothers).

It is through their renderings which Webster defines as "To submit," "to give or make available," "to represent in art," that they are able to discover expression and identity (1978, p. 186). The girls and young women in Carroll's interviews render meaning of their identity (culture, Blackness, and girl/womanhood) as written or spoken truths. They have come to submit to their truths, give or make meaning of their cultural experiences for themselves and others, and represent truth, identity, and meaning poetically/artistically.

Yet, are the cultural renderings from a thirteen-year-old girl residing in Brooklyn, or a seventeen-year-old girl residing in Birmingham, universal truths that connect to the poetic renderings of the African American adolescent girls in my study? Can a sense of cultural identity be shared even when physically separated from one another? Is there a contemporary understanding or definition of Black

womanhood presented by adolescent girls that diverges from the path and meaning of Black women writers?

Lanika, age seventeen who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, asserted that one of the most distinctive things about being a Black woman is being a member of a culture that maintained its sense of resistance, along with integrity and spirit. Like the girls in the other studies, there was a profound acknowledgement that truth needed to be shared and that resilience, identity and strength were derived from relationships with their mothers and other Black women. Like many of the poets in chapters one and two, Nicole and the other girls interviewed describe the experience of being Black as a feeling or expression of “I Am.” There is a demand, by the girls, to be called by their names. “...You can call me whatever you please, but I’ll still be Nicole... you’re going to remember me as Nicole if you’ve taken the time to learn my name. And those who haven’t taken the time, I don’t care to be remembered by” (Nicole, in Carroll, 1997, p. 55). What evokes the passion and conviction for Nicole, and other African American adolescent girls, to demand being called by their names?

In the blood and legacy of these young women and girls we find a sense of pride, struggle, and fight that is passed down from one generation to the next, even when/if separated from their families. As fourteen-year-old Jo-Laine of Brooklyn, New York, declares: “The kind of girl I am has everything to do with the kind of woman I think I’ll be” (Jo-Laine, in Carroll, 1997, p. 43). Yet, what is quite distinctive among the voices of the adolescent girls as opposed to some of the voices of women is that there is not only a sense and recognition of struggle, resistance, and

legacy; there is also an unapologetic sense of freedom expressed through the use of wit, humor, and enthusiasm.

The African American adolescent girls in *Sugar in the Raw* (Carroll, 1997) rejoice in a freedom of expression and recognition of how girls from other cultures have expressed a longing for their style, confidence, and sense of humor. Many of the girls recount their experiences in middle and high school as being laced with feelings of comfort and contentment, along with the expressed notion, “It’s good to be Black” (Alaza, in Carroll, 1997, p. 102). For the girls who reside or participate in culturally responsive communities, families, and schools, there is an expression of empowerment, visibility, and voice.

Do the lived experiences of Alaza, Lanika, Nicole, or Jo-Laine, in *Sugar in the Raw*, connect to the poetic experiences of Shaniqua and Tia in my poetry group? Is culturally responsive poetry solely the expression of girls who feel invisible? What role will culturally responsive poetry play in uncovering the power to name for girls who already feel empowered, visible, and heard?

Black Women Writing

As my students embark on this journey, as a writer I experience the need to cultivate my own multiple identities as this phenomenological research unfolds. Phenomenology requires engagement in close observation and active participation. Close observation creates a dynamic where the researcher becomes as engrossed in the phenomenon as possible, while remaining alert in such a way as to step back frequently to reflect on the meaning of writings and interactions (van Manen, 1997).

This requires that I, as a Black woman poet, engage in this phenomenological process with an individual and collective consciousness.

In deepening my engagement and participation in the poetry process during this study, I draw upon my experiences in a Black Woman's Poetry Group. The group consists of self-identified Black women writers (four African American and one South African), primarily from the University of Maryland, pursuing doctorates in Minority and Urban Education, Women's Studies and the American Studies departments. Recognizing the significance of naming, individually each member chose to use her actual name for the study. Collectively we chose to allow the group to form a sense of identity, and for the poetry writing process to unveil before deciding upon a name for the group. With time, a group member offered a name that suggested simplicity and purpose that we all agreed upon, *Black Women Writing*.

Kellea, Barbara, Ebony, Shanna, and I began meeting once a month to share our poetry and experiences. *Black Women Writing* is now completing our first year. While Ebony and Kellea have since relocated for new jobs, the group continues to meet and accept new members. Kellea and Ebony are inclined to write and share their experiences through email.

While we have similar backgrounds in that we are all Black women who hold advanced degrees, come from education backgrounds and are considered middle class, there are distinctive differences as well as powerful similarities. One of the many threads that connect us to each other is the need to write. While the majority of us have been writing since childhood/or adolescence, and have received accolades or recognition in the past for our work, we turned away from our inner poetic voices as

we entered adulthood or academia. Yet, there came a point, like the women and adolescent girls in chapter one, where we could no longer silence our voices or write in isolation.

I returned to my poetic voice following a series of violent incidents against Black girls and women, including the rape of a high school girl who was dragged into the wilderness by a former male student of mine. Barbara writes to share her story of living beneath the reign of oppression in apartheid South Africa declaring, “Here I am. Look at me. I exist, I matter, my experiences matter. I lived through horrible things which no one should have to experience, and I survived. My survival on this planet matters” (Barbara, written reflection, 2008). Kellea also is drawn to issues of social justice asserting, “I think particularly Black poets should always have a voice in the community for social justice issues...” While Shanna experienced a return to her true poetic self after feeling stifled and isolated in academia, “It’s almost like letting a part of me die...” Each one of us seemed to reawaken our poetic voices, consciously or unconsciously, as we affirmed our lives and the lives and voices of each other.

There seems to be a call to bring forth our identities as writers, not just individually but collectively, which also includes a need and responsibility to call forth the names of other women who have been silenced physically, emotionally, spiritually, or otherwise. Deep from within there is a sense of knowing that poetry writing individually and collectively is a necessary path to being. This Being does not know artificial labels of class, job, education, expectations, race, or womanhood,

but knows the urgency of a voice that must be heard and a story that must be told as we write ourselves.

There is a need to replenish and refuel each poet's spirit through the collective voice. As we turn from isolation, and acknowledge shared or universal experiences as Black women, the poetry itself, not just we the poets, offers a voice of strength and connection. The members of *Black Women Writing* share a feeling of responsibility and connection to and for our world through our writing and connection to our lived experiences and each other. We write of Black women and girls lost, and we write of women who laugh, love, and live fully. But above all, together we provide a safe space to speak our stories through our truths and passions to one another in order to be heard. "As black women, I think the idea of making something really beautiful - for no other reason than wanting to create beauty - is quite a revolutionary idea" (Barbara). *Black Women Writing* collectively holds dear the importance of personal, community, and global issues of reform, justice and change as a charge of Black writers. Yet Barbara, offers a distinctive and varied voice of the naming of resistance for Black women.

Black Women's Global Voices

In our *Black Women Writing* group, we seek to break the silence surrounding women's issues and connect them with the larger community, which allows us to connect to each other on a personal level. Extending our experiences to a global context, I reflect on Barbara's experiences under the reign of apartheid. Although our lived experiences may vary, there is an expression of voice that binds poets and writers. I am reminded of this during my journey to Johannesburg, South

Africa during the summer (winter in South Africa) of 2006. Although I was there as a graduate student attending classes with students from South Africa and the States, the most powerful and meaningful experiences for me were not with other doctoral students, but rather listening to the poetic voices of the youth, mostly from Soweto.

Mother Mithi saw cousin Martha fall
first all of a sudden, and as Lily reached
for Martha to help, then BANG! a shot
rang out from the nearby police vehicle.
And Lily Mithi fell, never to rise again. A
police bullet mercilessly brought her down.
A police bullet sponsored by the apartheid
racist state ensured that Lily Mithi- a defenceless
and innocent young South African who had neither
threatened nor harmed anyone – would never see
the sun rise again; would never see her ninth birthday...
(Mutloatse, in Hlongwane, Ndlovu & Mutloatse, 2006, p. 11)

In June of 2006, South Africa celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the 1976 Soweto uprising (named Youth Day). Local and international poets and writers came together to commemorate the uprising of Soweto by offering their voices for the children, women, and men who had been slain, imprisoned, tortured, and rendered voice-less. Just as African American adolescent and women poets remember the names of their ancestors, grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and themselves, so do the South African poets. High school children, the ages of Tia and Shaniqua, sound the name of a movement and resistance connecting their lives to those before them. Like the poets in chapter one, those who have not perished in the wilderness find a clearing by joining voices and calling their foremothers and forefathers into visibility. And as they write of the fallen innocents (children, women, and men) who died

grasping for the arms of freedom, through their collective voices comes a transformation from despair into celebration and affirmation of life.

Azanian Love Song

Like a tall oak

I lift my arms to catch the wind
With bruised fingers,
And somewhere in the ghetto
A Child is born,
A mother's anxiety and pain
Hide in a forest of hope.

Like a straight pine

I point my finger at God
Counting a million scars
On my dreams
And somewhere in the ghetto
A child is weeping,
A woman writes her legacy
On leaves of despair.

Like a weeping willow

I drop my soul into a pool of fire
Somewhere in a dark sanctuary
I hear the sound of a Freedom Song:
The Child has risen
And walks defiantly
Towards the lion's liar

Undaunted, unafraid...

(Ommarrudin, in Hlongwane, Ndlovu & Mutloatse 2006, p. 36)

Speaking Truths

Black women who 'forge an identity larger than the one society would force upon them... are aware and conscious, and that very consciousness is potent.'

(Mary Helen Washington, as cited in Collins, 2000, pp. 113-114)

Also during the year of 2006 (in August), the fiftieth anniversary is commemorated of the mobilization and march of women protesting the dehumanizing laws enacted against them in South Africa. During Women's Day, women who

resisted further subjugation are celebrated. The South African women who refused to use identity books (which identified them, restricted their movement, permitted increased harassment, labeling, degradation and arrest if not carried) are commemorated and honored each year during the national holiday of Women's Day.

To commemorate Women's Day, stores close, re-enactments are organized, and poetry readings ignite the spirits and voices of younger and older generations. During a poetry reading in one of the few Black owned book stores, in the area not far from where we are staying, young women poets are making their way to the microphone to speak their contemporary truths and to pay tribute to the women who marched (literally and figuratively) before them. The room is filled to maximum capacity with tightly pressing bodies, straining together to see the poets take their places at the microphone. The poets' words lift over the crowd in passion, in pain, in anger, in elation.

An opening from the book store into a café next door holds the bodies attempting movement to and fro until their restlessness grows into stillness. The crowd becomes transfixed by the young women poets testifying for their mothers, grandmothers, community members and themselves. The young South African women are breaking their silence and sharing the stories of the past, as well as their lived experiences of the present, that would otherwise push them back into invisibility. They speak of the marches and the iron fist of apartheid. They speak of the rapes and beatings by the police. They speak of contemporary marginalization and oppression of racism, poverty and HIV as well as the oppression of women domestically through beatings and rapes by partners. And they speak of the love,

family, community, relationships, and sisterhood that keep them together. The struggles shared in their poetry do not seem to defeat them, but rather empower them and connect them to each other, their community's legacy, and voices of hope and courage. I am reminded of the poets in chapter one speaking the "unsayable." For the South African girls and women, as for the African American adolescent girls and women, poetry is the means of sharing the things we do not want to say but none-the-less need to speak (McCarriston, in Moyer, 1995).

Universal Call

It is the transformation from despair to joy and celebration that Alice Walker writes of in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: a Writer's Activism* (1997). She describes the struggle of resistance that fosters feelings of being fully alive, turning fear into courage, sorrow into joy, and despair into celebration. Walker reveals the physical and psychic wounding of suffering on the human spirit in her writing on activism. She writes in metaphors, translating her personal suffering and injury into the collective pain and suffering of others who have had their bodies and minds bruised. Like many writers, Walker lends her words to those fearful, reluctant, or too ashamed to speak of their pain. Unexpectedly, sharing her own words and stories with others to strengthen them and their voices, further strengthens her own. As a writer, I too, find that the places where I have lent or united my voice with the voices of adolescent and women poets, have unexpectedly brought me closer to returning to my poetic self.

During a gathering Walker attends on genital mutilation, the survivors tell their stories over and over again. Each time they speak, it is "with the same stunned

amazement” that they are being heard (Walker, 1997, p. 34). Walker remembers her journey to this place of devotion to speak on/of violence against women and girls beginning when she was thirteen-years-old. It was the year that she viewed the body of a dead woman whose face had been partially shot off by her husband. A determination to forever remember this face-less, voice-less woman overtook her and demanded that she learn how to tell this woman’s story. That demand was finally realized by writing (Walker, 1997).

I cannot begin to process or comprehend the suffering that the women who gather to share their stories in South Africa have experienced, nor translate the suffering of the women, primarily from West African countries, who have experienced genital mutilation in Walker’s stories. I do not know the horror of living under apartheid, watching loved ones and children brutally shot down in the streets. Yet, by merging Tia’s voice with the works of Ntozake Shange in chapter one, the South African girls’ and women’s voices with the experiences of West African women survivors in chapter two, to the histories of my students dwelling in decrepit buildings and overcrowded classrooms, “we [each] become a part of everyone we meet” (Wiseman, in Mullen, 1996, p. 195). Furthermore, through poetry and story telling, we can become a part of everyone whose stories and poems we read. Sharing experiences and stories of struggle connects communities, countries, and even continents. It is the stories of others that can uncover our remembrances, inspire us to share our own stories, to create, or recreate our voices, and support and nurture each other.

I am awe struck by the themes surrounding voice, visibility, the process of speaking truth, releasing pain/grief, and being heard that surface within a global community of women (writers, story tellers, “truth sayers”) that uphold a universal call to speak out and be heard. The phenomenon of the lived experiences of African American adolescent girl poets reveals itself to be about truth, individuality, and the collective sorrow and joy which come from a connection to self and others, voice and visibility of Black and African American girls and women uncovering the power to name themselves.

Spiritual Infusion

We would like only, for once, to get to where we are already.
(Martin Heidegger, as cited in Casey, 1993, p. 273)

What does it mean for African American adolescent girl poets to return home to themselves? Can you return to a place that you do not remember? As we journey back to the same place through the wilderness to find our way home, we recognize that home is no longer the same. As nothing goes unchanged, this includes our memories. Casey (1993) reminds us that homecoming, in spite of the heart’s deep yearning, is often brought about through strenuous efforts and the crossing of daunting obstacles. The path leading back to our selves, through writing poetry, is not only about who we are but who we will become (Wiseman, in Mullen, 1996).

And while we may grasp hands as we travel and unite our voices, the journey of the writer toward homecoming is often a solitary and sacred experience that requires aloneness to unfold. Isolation is not the state or location of being alone. Isolation is not solitary or singular motions of creating words or transforming feelings

on the page. Rather, isolation for the poet is frequently the inability to connect the poetry to an almost universal energy or source. And to connect poetry to a universal source is to acknowledge and connect lived experiences and words to the experiences of members of the world: history, family, friends, community, legacy, cultural consciousness, humanness. The process of releasing pain and connecting with self and others through writing moves the writer from a place of sorrow to a realm of healing and of joy.

Conversations with God (Walsch, 1995), suggests that what gets you from hurt to healing is complete honesty – which requires being willing to acknowledge, assert, and declare exactly how you feel about a thing(s). Yet, while choosing to be God-like, we do not need to choose to be martyrs or victims. Attacks on dignity or spirit, wounding of the psyche or heart are not necessary obligations to endure, but the search and utterance of truth, for many writers, is an absolute necessity. Further, it is necessary to recognize hurt, damage, and loss as part of our experiences, and decide who we are in relation to those experiences. There is an acknowledgment that things others do, say, or think will hurt sometimes – until they (which I connect to the things that have been said or done) do not (hurt) anymore. The process of poetry writing often seems to be about that recognition and acknowledgement, bringing the poets closer to their inner spirits.

Say your truth – kindly, but fully and completely.
Live your truth, gently but totally and consistently.
Change your truth easily and quickly when your
experience brings new clarity.
(Walsch, p. 134)

In further recognition and acknowledgement, I turn to the phenomenological and philosophical clearing from the wilderness. In so doing, I connect with the approaches to exploring the lived experiences of African American adolescent girl poets and the uncovering of naming. I describe the relevance as well as resistance to particular philosophical perspectives. In the next chapter I share the methodology that I use to hear and experience the meaning of poetic voices.

CHAPTER THREE: THE POETICS OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

In this chapter, I attend to the ways in which hermeneutic phenomenology unfolds as the poets uncover the power to name themselves. As the poets journey through silence, isolation, and introspection to voice, sharing, and consciousness, phenomenology mirrors the philosophic transition of poetic expression in solitude, creation, and sharing of lived experiences. This phenomenological uncovering takes the poet and philosopher through the experience of silence, waiting, uncovering, and listening, within the realm of individual and collective consciousness of naming. Philosophers and phenomenologists which include Levin, Gadamer, van Manen, Casey, Bachelard, and Heidegger offer insight and inspiration, as well as expose and generate struggle and tension. Black feminist writers and poets, along with culturally responsive educators, offer further insight and inspiration as well as illuminate the process of discovery encompassed in struggle and resistance. Ultimately, a path is revealed that leads to the voices and lived experiences of African American adolescent girl and women poets.

Martin Heidegger is credited with transforming phenomenology, influencing great change in the texture of twentieth century philosophy, and playing a crucial role in reinvigorating ontology. The term “phenomenon” is derived from a Greek expression which indicates “to show itself” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 51).

Phenomenology, like the experience of poetry, is not a system but rather a practice. Phenomenological and poetic practice require a knowing or understanding that

resides within and offers liberation from prejudice, traditional theory, and externally imposed constructions thrust upon the phenomenon.

Heidegger's philosophical plight and path was devoted to the question of Being. Being is the entity which each of us individually possesses and that which is also known as *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1971). Being already exists as an entity within us; yet, like naming for the poets, it is discovered and encountered. Phenomenology and poetry dance fluidly within and around each other as living entities that reinvigorate and revive lifeless, cold spaces of theory and objectification, with humanness. Yet, even poetry and language require revealing and concealing that are often heard only through the passage of reflective silence that leads us in stillness to voice (Moran, 2000).

Silence as a Path to Voice and Truth: Being through Poetry

... poetry... grows out of being and reaches into its truth. (Heidegger, 1971, p. ix)

The growth of poetry, according to Heidegger, is derived from truth that begins with Being. The process of discovering and encountering requires that poets engage and develop awareness of their experiences of revealing and concealing. As African American adolescent girls encounter and share their truths through poetry in my study, Heidegger also intuitively turned to revealing and concealing through the workings of poetry and language (Moran, 2000).

As the emphasis throughout chapters one and two has been on finding a voice that is clearly defined by the girl and women poets, I now venture into the realm of silence, not as muted sounds and voices, but rather a purposeful and reflective

solitude that poets often experience through sacred moments, memories, and poetic secrets. Heidegger (1927/1996) writes of a call that is brought about by silence in order to hear one's own call and voice. This solitude and reflection is the place in the journey of a poet where she introduces and reveals her true self. Eventually revelations from her consciousness are unraveled onto the page. This consciousness often is laced with reflections and memories that hold a "secret privacy" that the poet cannot express any other way but through writing, for fear of losing the richness and depth of meaning by verbal expression, or "deafness" of the listener.

The word secret derived from the Latin word *secretus* is defined as "separated, set apart, hidden" (van Manen, 1996, p. 12). There are moments and experiences for the writer that are more profoundly felt in silence and secret. These moments are not spoken, because there simply is no need to utter them, as feelings that are verbalized are not always adequate for true poetic expression (van Manen, 2005). Silence offers the possibility of communicative secrecy as various thoughts, feelings, or experiences are held inside, as well as the possibility of existential secrets in which the whole person, not just a thought, of the poet remains a mystery.

Poetic Silence: The Pathway to Human Existence

I reflect on the experience of silence and the magnitude of reading Heidegger during a silent retreat at Holy Cross Abbey, a monastery for Trappist monks. It is during Heidegger's Catholic seminary days that he first encountered hermeneutics. The study of hermeneutics was introduced to him as a branch of theological interpretation. Some theologians considered it essential for scriptural interpretation. Yet for Heidegger, hermeneutics was the pathway to the interpretative nature of

human existence, an existence that is not so abstract to have a general meaning, but rather an entity of “mineness” that is specific to a person and her/his existence (Moran, 2000).

How is human existence revealed or concealed through poetry? Is there a “mineness” that is so personal as to exact individual knowing and lived experience, or is human existence revealed through poetry as a general knowing? Is encountering *Dasein* ontologically to know *Dasein* as an individual possession? Is the writing of poetry an individual possession of the poet? How can others hear what is spoken if it remains an entity of individual possession?

Encountering Poetic Silence

The discoveries and encounters of revelation and human existence do not remain static, forced or neutral through theoretical contemplation. Rather than be removed, hermeneutic phenomenology, like the process of writing poetry, does not allow the encountered to be neutral or dispassionate. The encountered must challenge herself instead to be present, involved and connected to the inquiry. How does the poet experience connection to the inquiry? Will what the poet encounters be heard and felt more authentically in silence?

During my weekend stay at the abbey, I am provided ample opportunity to encounter silence. During meals, the caregiver reads from a variety of works, from scriptural readings, to Mother Teresa to the reflections of Reverend Richard Bozzelli (a visiting priest at the monastery). Readings are shared at meals, as meals are a time when guests (as well as the monks who remain in separate quarters) come together physically in a small community and space. Meals are, therefore, a time when the

temptation to speak grows stronger, particularly because of the close proximity to one another.

Reverend Richard Bozzelli writes of silence and a necessary distinction that echoes the words of Heidegger and the call of African American adolescent girl and women poets. He writes, “There’s a big difference between keeping silent and being silent” (Bozzelli, 2004, p. 3). Being silent requires that we remain in solitude and yet attuned to the voices and sounds that surround us. It is in silence that we recognize the distinctive chirping of birds, the buzzing of insects in the otherwise stillness of the night. In silence we hear our own true voices resound within us with a clarity and “uncoveredness” we might fail to recognize during our verbal chatter. Silence allows the space for Being in its “uncoveredness” and truth (Krell, 1993, p. 113). It is also in silence that we hear with the sensitivity of the listening ear that connects not only to the words of the poets but to their essential feelings that are not expressed in words (Moran, 2000).

Van Manen reminds us that human scientists need to be mindful of the essential nature of silence which text and meaning are built within and against. There is a process of uncovering that encompasses experiencing silence, speech, and being silent, all of which rest in the arms of the poet as poetry offers truth and meaning that are beyond words. While the process may encompass literal silence, the absence of words or speech, there is also a need for epistemological silence. Epistemological silence is that deep sense of knowing that is often unspeakable (van Manen, 2003). It is also the feeling or sense that we know more than we can utter aloud. Yet, what we know and cannot speak may be shared by the voice of another –

such as the poet. Epistemological silence allows the poet to say what others do not always have the words to express. Van Manen further expands the meaning of silence for the poet and phenomenologist through ontological silence. Ontological, according to Heidegger, is “the phenomenology of being” (Heidegger, as cited in van Manen, 1997, p. 183). Ontological silence is one which provides the poet with a “fulfilling silence” as it resides in the presence of truth (van Manen, 1997, p. 114). This is a silence of Being and of Life that encourages the poet to return home to her true self.

It is further in the realm of silence and introspection that lived experience is manifested as a unit of consciousness that allows for life to become realized in experience and for the practice of phenomenological research to be as life or to be life. Introspection, reflection, silence, and revelation of self, create transformation and are offered as the phenomenology of spirit in which “something is undergone and through it one changes” (Risser, 1997, p. 85). This path or journey to truth requires the exploration of what is hidden, as disclosure of truth leads to consciousness and a higher level of insight. Knowing, according to Gadamer and Hegel (as cited in Risser, 1997), occurs through and by experience and is born of memory. Conversely, forgetting the path to truth becomes an absence of presence or an omission of truth that is necessary for the poet to bring forth her voice (Risser, 1997).

In order for the poet to tell her truths, she must delve into the memory of lived experience and consciousness. Memory, in old English, is spoken as *Thanc*. *Thanc* is the “heart’s core” or the “gathering of all that concerns us” (Risser, 1997, p. 99). For the poet, this gathering of concerns of the heart gives way to an experience of the

collective in which voices and experiences are united to lend shared passion, sorrow, or joy to areas in which there was once despair, absence of presence, or isolation. It is through the voice of collective despair, recognized in resistance and struggle, that a pathway is cleared through the wilderness to strength and insight. Gathering in the name of a collective and individual voice with purpose, intention, and presence evokes remembrances that are unrelenting (Risser, 1997).

Listening to Unspoken Words

In silence, we listen to our own hearts, needs, the memories and knowledge of our bodies, and the voices, hearts, memories and knowledge of others. Through philosophy, identity is connected poetically with the body and the memories of the individual. How, then, does identity (as poetic naming) change with consciousness? If the poet deepens her level of experiences (memories or body) to acknowledge the meaning of those experiences, will she uncover her truth and her many names? Does the identity of the poet change as she explores memories and lived experiences, or is she revealing her true identity? Van Manen (1996) further questions, “How do I experience my sense of self?” “And who am I when I speak to myself as self?” George Herbert Mead (as cited in van Manen, 1996) offers the recognition that identity is formed in recognition of (significant) others. What does that recognition mean for African American adolescent girl poets cloaked in the names and perceived identities of others?

Truth is derived from the experience of active listening. Within social spheres, that uphold seeking and telling truth, voices can be heard and words spoken without fear or shame. The practice of listening for truth offers a space that balances

between everything and nothingness in a dance of “harmony and discord, resonance and emptiness, voices and silence” (Levin, 1989, p. 136). The practice of listening to truth (internal and external) and speaking truth cannot be separated, as both require a sense of presence and responsibility.

The journey through silence and listening to internal voices calls for poets and philosophers alike first to travel through the wilderness of an inauthentic or unformed being toward an authentic self. It is in this silence in the wilderness that we may also hear the call of responsibility or conscience. Heidegger urges us to cease turning away from our true selves in order to avoid our fears or angst. Further, in silence, poets may cease turning away from inauthentic selves and others to turn toward voice and the power within to call forth their true names. It is the silent call that fosters the act of listening, ultimately, allowing for genuine connection with self and others beyond the mask of an inauthentic self and a “clearing away of concealments and obscurities” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 167).

Poetic Revelations: The Path of Truth

Heidegger’s thinking in the later years is best described in terms of the process of poetry or of language. Moreover, there is a particular emphasis on the art of disclosure for truth. As poetry and philosophy are interconnected in Heidegger’s thinking, revelations in philosophy are believed to be derived through conscious examination of poetry and art (Moran, 2000). Poetic dwelling is the place where poetry and philosophy intersect. There are shared entities between poetry and philosophy that are revealed through essential communication, uncovering and withdrawal. In addition to silence, it is the pursuit of truth, which is wrapped in

speech that cannot be false, that is a form of fulfillment that bears witness or testifies to not only personal truths but the truths and revelations of others (Risser, 1997). Revelation is, therefore, a necessary truth as truth; in phenomenological terms, this is referred to as “unconcealment” or “uncoveredness” (Krell, 1993, p. 113). The essence of poetry is revealed by Heidegger, and phenomenology itself, to be a naming which brings forth revelation in language. Truth also is deemed possible through human freedom. For Heidegger, human freedom requires “letting be” which allows for detachment or releasement (Moran, 2000, p. 213).

Poetry: Interpreting the Voices of the Gods

The lived experience of revealing and concealing through poetry and language is offered through hermeneutics or “the art of interpretation” (Moran, 2000, p. 197). Hermeneutics is described as “the awakening of life toward itself” (Risser, 1997, p. 34). Life offers the poet the means to offer her essence through reflection and voice. The voice of the poet is carried not only through her words but through the voices of others who understand and hear her works with an active awareness and listening ear. Just as Hermes translated language from the gods to mortals, it is said, in Greek philosophy, that the rhapsode is in communication with Homer and understands his thoughts.

The poet, in Greek philosophy, is often thought to interpret the thoughts of the gods. And when the poet speaks her truth, it is considered to be a “holy thing” (Risser, 1997, p. 193). The poet brings a message or announcement of the divine. Yet, it is the rhapsode who often translates the words of the poet. The rhapsode is to interpret the poet’s thoughts for those who seek to listen and understand the poet’s

words. Rather than create the poems or offer her own interpretation, the rhapsode lends her voice in the absence of the poet through recitation. Both the voice of the poet and the rhapsode are lent to others in order for others, as well as possibly themselves, to speak their truths and to be heard. Poems are thought to be en route toward what is open as well as approachable (things, feelings, people, imaginings). I wonder if poems for African American adolescent girl poets are en route toward the poet's memories or the core of her essence? Through *Hermeneuein*, or the act or kind of interpreting that is required of poets and rhapsodes, a reading into human existence and its meaning is offered (Moran, 2000, p. 235).

As meaning is sought, it becomes critical that the interpreter does not impose her own agenda or, even to the best of her ability, her version of understanding of the poem or poet. This, too, is the role of the phenomenologist. Moreover, this phenomenon is about the interpretation of meaning, truth, and human existence, as well as the divine for African American adolescent girl poets. And throughout this clearing from the wilderness, each participant from adolescent poet to Black woman writer to phenomenological researcher will voice their/our beings and truths as both poets and rhapsodes. However, phenomenologists and poets recognize that their/our own experiences might possibly be the experiences of others. In this ebb and flow or poetic dance, some interpretation or understanding of the adolescents' poetry is required; however, during those moments, I seek to engage with the poetry primarily as a rhapsode (offering a recitation rather than reinterpretation). The integrity of each poet's voice contains her truths and that which is sacred – her feelings.

Who's Naming?

And while I seek to engage with the poetry as a rhapsode, writer and phenomenological researcher, I also, as an educator, acknowledge the works of Erik Erikson (German born psychoanalytic scholar who also became certified in Montessori teaching) who begins to formally unfold the identity of adolescence and young adulthood by suggesting the guiding question for adolescence centers upon “Who am I?” (p. 342). Erikson turns to identity and development through the presence and creation of eight psychosocial crises that he believes extend throughout the lifespan (Erikson, as cited in Turner & Helms, 1991). And within this cycle, adolescence falls in his fifth stage which represents the psychosocial crisis based on identity vs. role confusion or the search for identity. It is during this phase, according to Erikson, that adolescents begin to develop an integrated sense of self that is personally acceptable and distinctive from others.

Furthermore, Erikson offers that a lack or failure to nurture an appropriate sense of personal identity can lead to feelings of isolation. During adolescence, attention is also paid to the difference in self-perception and the perceptions of others. How will these beliefs and perceptions unfold in the group for adolescent girl poets? Erikson’s belief surrounding identity seems to mirror some of the struggles and questions in the lived experiences of my African American adolescent girl poets; however, as the girls range from fourteen to eighteen (ninth- twelfth grades) and some of the girls confront issues of grief and loss and/or assume roles of caregiver and nurturer to younger siblings, or have experiences with feelings of abandonment and forced independence, they have begun to assume rapid transitions into the world,

roles, and identities of womanhood. But even greater than that are their experiences and expressions of a powerful sense of “knowing” that encompasses tremendous maturity, insight, compassion, humor, intelligence and creativity well beyond the experiences of their chronological years.

And as the girls in the poetry group unfold their identities from girlhood to womanhood individually and collectively, I begin to reflect on Erikson’s sixth stage that encompasses young adulthood and delves into intimacy vs. isolation. It is during this stage that young adults develop close and meaningful relationships with others. Erikson believes if young adults have achieved a sense of personal identity during adolescence, they are able to share themselves with others in friendships, romantic relationships and/or partnerships.

According to Erikson, peer groups and friendships are crucial in creating a sense of belonging. This is especially true of relationships that are trustworthy, steadfast and consistent which seemed to be developed and explored within the poetry group. However, it is believed that those who are unable or unwilling to share themselves with others are said to experience loneliness or isolation. Does existential silence also lead to loneliness and isolation? Is writing through grief a way for poets to not only express their true selves and deepest thoughts but a way to overcome grief and isolation? How does the experience of trust, belonging and intimacy unfold individually and collectively in the poetry group? Has the poetic process created a bridge from isolation to intimacy?

And while Erikson provides insight and a backdrop to the identity development of adolescents and young adults, it is the girls’ voices, discussions,

declarations, writings and even silences that provide the unfolding of answers, as well as more questions, alongside the framework of phenomenology and Black feminism. It is through phenomenology and Black feminism, that the path of unfolding poetic identities for African American adolescent girls is laid, expressed, declared for and by the girls and women themselves. Poetic identity is based upon what is experienced, felt, written and seen within the individual and collective rather than through theories or experiences that have been pre-formulated or imposed.

From Behind the Mask

A mirror image of anger
Betrayal, sadness, defeat
No longer can I hide behind the lies,
I thought I was so close to happiness
But some how I never left my seat
Sorrow has consumed my soul
That sadness that I used to hide with smiles

No longer can I control...
(KiRe, 2009)

Moving from behind a pre-formulated or imposed identity theory to poetic identity and naming for African American adolescent girls, Amina Mama (1995) Black feminist, scholar and researcher, writes of the experiences and places that exist for Black women in *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity*. Mama (1995) views identity as subjective, multiple and dynamic, as well as a process, in which she herself remains actively engaged as a group member while seeking to empower her research participants. As in poetry and the spaces Collins (2004) calls to “Behind the Mask,” Mama in *Beyond the Mask* (1995), experiences identities for Black women as shared, created, recreated and explored in a variety of spaces from community centers

to kitchens. The un-folding of identity and naming occurs through reflections as well as the acknowledgement of participants' and researcher/facilitator's personal histories. Naming occurs while maintaining an understanding and awareness of individual experiences and uniqueness through lived experiences of Black women in their own terms without being framed around, in contrast to or defined by the experiences or theories of the dominant culture (in race, gender or class).

Further, it is through African American adolescent girls' and Black women's own lived experiences that my poetic naming and identity "theory" is developed and honored. Unlike many traditional and narrowly defined identity theories, Black women's and girls' identities are shaped in and through a historical and social collective consciousness, personal knowledge, discourse, community, poetry and literature. In particular, "Creative expression of femininity" is illuminated through Black women's poetry (Mama, 1995, p. 148). The path of my phenomenological study is of the voices of the collective and individual through self-discovery, self-awareness and consciousness that leads to self inquiry, affirmation, and poetic identities for group members.

Creating the Cultural Poetic Self

The purpose of life is to know yourself, create yourself, experience yourself as Who You Really Are. There is no other reason to do anything.
(Walsch, 1997, p. 17)

Walsch (1997) writes in Book Two of *Conversations with God* that the only way to manifest truth is through feelings. Feelings are the only language of the soul. And it is the soul that does not only contain truth but is truth. As I travel through the wilderness of this poetic journey toward collective voices and human freedom that I

define as resistance, social justice, and freedom from oppression, Heidegger and I now venture into divergent realms of consciousness in phenomenological research under the conditions of ethics and human freedom. It is here that Heidegger's silence as a means of reflection and introspection moves into a political stance, as a member and affiliate of the Nazi party, to pronounced and intentional silence which is oppressive, violent and suffocating. It is here that Heidegger's being silent becomes keeping silent. How am I to follow the path of Heidegger's sense of ethics and human freedom? If I venture into this world of phenomenologists from Heidegger to Casey who do not speak the language and culture of the poetic plight of my African American girl students, am I participating in this silent oppression? At this crossroad, I must step from Behind the Mask of silence and existential secrecy to uncover my own voice.

Silence

I am silent

Words swirl in my head with the rapid conviction of the turning of the earth but I am silent

There is the feeling of a fist stuck in my airway I cannot swallow it down or throw it up

I am silent

Can they hear me? The gurgling noises coming from my throat?

Can they hear me? Words are forming in my mouth yet when I open to release them the voice of another comes out

Those outside of me are declaring my thoughts

I am silent I am shrinking I am invisible from others to see

I am silent

Is this the isolation Edward Casey claims to know?

He declares isolation "socially, culturally, linguistically" but does not speak my experience

I am silent

Joanne Braxton breathes life into this quiet, desolate space

Black Women "We have been as invisible to the dominant culture as rain; we have been knowers, but we have not been known"

I speak up
(Bacon 2006)

At this juncture, I begin to feel a sense of isolation from Heidegger, his path, works and the works of other phenomenologists, even Casey, as I join hearts, hands, and stories with other marginalized people in this wilderness. In reclaiming my voice, I evoke the spirits of my ancestors as well as call upon Black feminist writers, scholars, activists, and culturally responsive educators to bring forth ethics, passion, and resistance. I beckon them to enter into a space, that Heidegger once occupied, which I now find void of human compassion and responsibility under the guise of human freedom and being. I call, as well, upon my own voice and consciousness that are joined with the collective voice of truth sayers. Yet, as I turn away from Heidegger to hear the voices of human freedom, I continue to hear the echo of his philosophic voice through his profound contributions to phenomenology. This echo will cautiously invite me back into this space, eventually, to explore his redemption. And while I will return again to the voices of phenomenologists, I now look to language that authenticates and empowers me as a Black woman writer, educator and researcher and speaks to the lived experiences of many of my African American adolescent students.

As I return to the voices of African American adolescent girl poets, human freedom is a charge of and for collective voices, responsibility, accountability, and naming. Human freedom under these terms for African American adolescent girl poets and Black women is not passive or detached, but rather a conscious, engaged and passionate action. African American adolescent girls uncovering the power to

name themselves through writing poetry express their naming and power through “living language,” “living words,” and indeed a language of the soul.

Finding Each of You

You must speak the dreams your ancestors only dared whisper.
(Adisa, 2006, p. 93)

As I call upon ancient foremothers, I invite the writings of Alice Walker (1983) upon this journey. Walker travels to the core of ancestral African American women artists’/ writers’ despair as she describes how the deprivation of expression and voice drive the would- be- writer/poet to lunacy. Walker writes about the Black woman writer of yesteryear who is forced into a place of profound isolation and turmoil as her life belongs to that of another under the oppression of slavery, share cropping, or cheap and exploitative labor. Yet, the fate of the Black woman writer who is finally physically freed from her manacles is still not permitted a more gentle fate. The Black woman writer such as Zora Neale Hurston, Phillis Wheatley and others, Alice Walker calls forth, may have perished with their names imprinted in the consciousness of many (unlike the slaves in Lucille Clifton’s [1995] poetic testimony) yet still vanished vulnerable, desolate, and abandoned.

Is this the necessary fate of the Black woman writer/poet whether her artistic spirit is suppressed or expressed? Has she little option but to make the descent into lunacy, despair, or isolation or to travel toward visibility and creative expression only to meet with voice-less-ness at the end of her journey? Walker writes, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden* (1983), of a grief that Black women in bondage shared. She speaks of the women whose deep creative genius would be manifested in poetry or

art, but instead was forced into poverty, oppression, self neglect, and a life of self deprivation. Their visions and dreams were never allowed to breathe life back into broken spirits and burdened bodies. And while their bodies may have been shackled, inhibiting them from wandering from the plantation fields into the thick humid air to whisper poems aloud to the southern stars, the poems lived within them. And their legacies are not lost as contemporary African American adolescent girl poets speak the dreams of the Black women before them in their own voices through their lives and creative expression.

Paths taken toward power, naming, voice and visibility may require risking such ills to journey from self-denial and isolation, to writing her way out of the wilderness by way of solitude and aloneness to voice, visibility, and community. And with this, I am reminded of our plight to create our cultural poetic selves through the words of Walker: “I have fought and kicked and fasted and prayed and cursed and cried myself to the point of existing. It has been like being born again, literally” (Walker, 1983, p. 125). Resistance, struggle, and longing are the catalysts for exploration. Walker recognizes that she must leave the comfort of the known works of the teachings of European male poets and forefathers to follow the ancient African foremother to “where my duty as a black poet, writer, and teacher would take me...” (Walker, 1983, p. 132). And where it takes the African American adolescent girl poet and the Black woman writer is home.

For Each of You

Some of this journey must be done in solitude, listening to the voice of the poet’s inner thoughts, spirit, and memories. Some must be done in active silence

while observing surroundings and listening to the hearts, words, and voices of others. And some must be done with an individual voice, speaking her truths for herself, and lending her voice to the stories and lived experiences of others. Yet some of this journey must be done together, joining voice to voice, life to life, and heart to heart in collective resistance, rage, freedom, and uproarious boisterous laughter. Lorde (1997) reminds us of the journey of the poet's return to herself and her purpose in her poem, "For Each of You."

For Each of You

Be who you are and will be
Learn to cherish
That boisterous Black Angel that drives you
Up one day and down another
Protecting the place where your power rises
Running like hot blood
From the same source
As your pain.

When you are hungry
Learn to eat
whatever *sustains* you
until morning
but do not be misled by details
simply because you live them.

Do not let your head deny
Your hands
Any memory of what passes through them
Nor your eyes
Nor your heart
Everything can be used
Except what is wasteful...
Respect whatever pain you bring back
From your dreaming...
Each time you love
Love as deeply
As if it were forever
Only nothing is
Eternal.

Speak proudly to your children
Where ever you may find them
Tell them
You are the offspring of slaves
And your mother was
A princess
In darkness
(Lorde, 1997, pp. 59-60)

Audre Lorde, an African American feminist lesbian activist poet/writer, speaks of the process, power and necessity of poetry and voice in her book *Sister Outsider* (2007). In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde names a feminine force and resource that is as powerful, yet spiritual, as the creative expression of poetry writing.

Furthermore, she names the feminine force or power erotic – rewriting and defining the term as an expression of a woman’s feminine identity, being, and creativity in a form that is not only untainted but embracing of pleasure and joy. Erotic energy, according to Lorde, is a form of body knowledge and awareness experienced as feelings or emotions that are not relegated or regulated by a mind that seeks to judge or analyze thoughts or ideas, but rather seeks to experience them.

Furthermore, erotic power is not bred in the psyche of societal marginalization or a sense of male domination that seeks to harness a woman’s natural power or joy. Rather, erotic power is a feminine energy that embraces and affirms life, and even provides life through its exuberance expressed as creativity, love, and elation. Lorde’s naming of the erotic is as expressive and connected as poetry writing, as it offers a bridge from sensual to spiritual, physical to psychic and emotional, and superficial to meaningful.

What are the lived experiences of African American adolescent girl poets writing from their hearts rather than their analytical minds? How do adolescent girl poets embrace their feminine power rather than escape their power and feelings to conform to the expectations and paths of others? Is writing poetry to uncover the power to name who the girls/women really were/are an expression and affirmation of not just the poets' lives but life itself?

Erotic power bridges the connection from grief to joy by creating a pathway through fear (fear of self-definition, empowerment, creative expression, self-knowledge, isolation, feelings/emotions/sensations, body awareness) to the realization and recognition of individual and collective joy and expression. Erotic power acknowledges that to suppress our true expression, stories, experiences, knowledge, or even desires only flames our fears by giving our fears as well as others, who might seek to keep us voice-less and invisible, power over us. Giving our power over to our fears and to others cripples our spirits and paralyzes our emotional strength and resilience. Feminine/erotic power is the uncovering of muted voices to speak our poetic stories with truth, courage, and conviction. It is also the point where the girlchild on the brink of womanhood wanders and wonders through the wilderness to find her true self without fear or apology. And it is the point where she dares as a poet and as a woman to be free.

Wondering and wandering takes the poet through the "beginning-place" and "end-place" by visiting the "in-between" spaces that eventually lead us home (Casey, 1993, p. 275). According to Casey (1993), homecoming does not require a long stay in the same location but rather a return to that same place. Consequently, the return

to that place urges us to recognize distinctive differences or changes that ask us to revisit our memories and past selves (in comparison to who we are now).

Homecoming also invites us to reconnect with those who still reside where we once were and who once had meaning in our lives. Homecoming also allows us to yearn for those who have departed from that place (through death, abandonment, or homesteading).

However, according to Casey (1993), homesteading is the journey to a new place that is to become our future home(s). It is that place that is unknown to us even though it might be known to others who have made the journey before us.

Homesteading invites us to settle in for an extended period of time. And while homesteading offers the opportunity for us to put down physical roots – it does not need to be literal. Rather, what is essential to the homesteading process is our commitment to remain in a new place/space long enough to build a significant life in that space (Casey, 1993). To ultimately end at the beginning, African American poets and Black women writers must journey through the in-between stages of wondering, wandering and truth saying through a previously traveled ancestral land to return home to themselves and each other.

African Ancestral Truth Sayers

Woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is an ancient, and it is deep. (Lorde, 1984, p. 37)

As I journey into the wilderness to that place of power which is dark, ancient, and deep, I welcome the presence of ancient African poets, truth sayers, and story tellers. For this part of the journey home, I turn to griottes (female truth sayers/story

tellers) and griots (male truth sayers/story tellers). I invite ancestral griottes and griots, along with Alice Walker (1983) and Black feminist poets and writers, as I make my way toward culturally responsive poetry through those who continue to cultivate the history and legacy that African American adolescent girl poets and I stand on and build upon.

Griottes and griots enter to till, guard, and cultivate the pathway of knowing and being from the past to the present. They, like the adolescent poets, wear many names from “Jegna” in Ethiopia to “Jeli” in West Africa (Hilliard, 2002, p. 18). Griottes, Griots, Jegna, Jeli are the poets, story tellers, historians and maintainers of oral traditions. They offer their voices through political commentaries with a sense of knowing that inspires awe. Griottes and griots, in their many names and identities, are avowers of the protection of life, community and culture. But above all else, they are truth sayers. As in the mythical descriptions of poets who interpret the words of the gods, griots are said to be highly spiritual with so deep an awareness and connection to the higher spirit that they are believed to be as close to God as one can get/be.

I invite and welcome ancestral griottes and griots into this space, in the tradition and legacy of passion, resilience, courage and resistance as they are known to be extraordinarily fearless. And in this journey through the wilderness of truths, stories, and remembrances, each poet, as she reveals her power to name and calls forth her many identities, invites fearlessness in the face of vulnerability. Like the African American adolescent girl poets and writers, griottes (female truth sayers) are

known to gain their knowledge, teachings and experiences through other women, especially their mothers, sisters, and mother figures (Hale, 1998).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

As I continue my journey through the wilderness, I rest a moment to experience the lives and teachings of the philosophers, phenomenologists, poets and story tellers thus far. I venture toward the path leading to my own poetry group with knowledge of the capacity for wholeness, integration of the senses and lived experiences, which allows each poet to command fullness of creative expression. Knowledge of the capacity for wholeness is an affirmation of the poet's life, not as an escape from her awareness or an indulgent luxurious expression, but as a basic necessity for women and girls.

Yet, before I make my way to the clearing of culturally responsive poetry, I make my way through the trees in the wilderness to culturally responsive pedagogy. I begin this part of the journey with Jacqueline Jordan Irvine. I picture her steady and firm hand pressed against my back guiding me into the realm of methodological practices alongside Gloria Ladson-Billings, Michelle Russell and bell hooks.

Irvine begins her writings with the same captivating "voice" that she sounded during her talk at the University of Maryland that I attended in 2006. Her work reveals the real stories and lived experiences of students in the midst of policies, theories, and statistics. *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Seeing with a Cultural Eye* (2003) begins with the story of Darius, a nine-year-old African American boy living in an impoverished neighborhood. When asked about his dreams and visions for the

future, Darius responded, “Lady, I don’t see nothing and I don’t have no dreams” (p. 2).

Darius’s story does not end there for culturally responsive educators as Irvine charges us to act on the behalf of children who do not have dreams. She further charges us to recognize that students who do not feel like they have futures in fact do have futures that are “inextricably linked” to our futures as educators (p. 14). This is the charge issued by culturally responsive pedagogy and phenomenology. Irvine further urges us to recognize that we as a society cannot achieve our vision by ignoring children who seem to have none (futures, dreams, or visions) or by naming them as the “other”.

I am reminded of the voices of Shaniqua and Tia in my poetry group. Shaniqua did not seem to have any dreams or hopes for the future, while Tia had many dreams and expressed them with zeal and conviction. How do we help create dreams for those who do not have any and maintain the dreams of those who do? Can we hear both voices and recognize both needs? Can they hear their own voices and the voices of one another and link their own futures and visions? Whether the students have no dreams or dreams in abundance, live in urban communities or attend schools in the suburbs, will writing and reading poetry create a way for them both to be heard?

Irvine, upholds the call, of scholar and culturally responsive educator Gloria Ladson-Billings, for educators to be “Dreamkeepers” (1994). Irvine’s culturally responsive practices include: caring, other mothering, believing in children and their dreams, demanding and expecting the best, recognizing teaching as a calling, and

providing appropriate discipline and structure (Irvine, 2003). Ladson-Billings and Michelle Russell further expand upon these practices by recognizing the essential nature of connecting learning to meaningful lived experiences and making education a part of the students' culture rather than inserting culture into education (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Russell, in Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982).

Culturally Responsive Uncoveredness

Michelle Russell, author of *Black-Eyed Blues Connections: Teaching Black Women* (1982), connects daily living with history and social justice, resistance, and activism. However, Russell's lessons are uniquely based on the lived experiences of African American women from urban areas. Much like the spaces shared by Black women who exist "beyond the mask" (Collins, 2000), Russell's classroom is constructed in such a way as to create a place where African American women feel empowered to express their voices and the voices of the collective. Her classroom serves as a vessel for "uncoveredness," self-discovery and remembrances. Through meaningful experiences, a collective knowing and a collective memory are induced and truths shared. Russell uses the classroom as a safe space, created and nourished by Black women, for the purpose of resurrecting change in response to circumstances.

How do African American girl poets use this space? Has this space nurtured a spirit of resistance, or created a place of unbridled, uproarious laughter? Is there an individual or collective sense of knowing that the girls uncovered? What stories and remembrances do they share through their poetry?

The culturally responsive educator from Irvine to Ladson-Billings, similar to the phenomenologist and the poet, walks through the wilderness of feelings, concerns,

joys and struggles lead and guided by, alongside, and sometimes before her participants to a clearing. She also encourages each participant to be a story teller, individually and collectively, as a means of transferring knowledge, building a collective memory, speaking truths, connecting to each other, history, and the global community. Each woman, in essence, begins to create her own identity poetically as a griotte/truth sayer.

The culturally responsive educator acknowledges a social justice or resistance consciousness. She acknowledges daily living experiences, each participant's lives, survival mechanisms, creative expression, and the impact of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and dis/ability on individual and collective lived experiences. By honoring each woman's life and voice, the culturally responsive educator recognizes there is no aspect of a participant's life or naming that is too trivial to be heard. What is more, the educator acknowledges that seemingly individual lived experiences are often universal experiences (Russell, 1982).

Teaching as Learning

Ladson-Billings (1994) writes of her experiences with successful teachers of African American children. An open flow of ideas and exchanges between the teachers and students was created which allowed the relationship to be fluid, equitable, and connected. The writings of the culturally responsive teacher frequently mirrored practices and thoughts of the Black feminist teacher and the Black woman poet. Black women poets connected to feminine and spiritual energy and power as educators and mother figures stand guard and till the dreams of African American adolescent girl poets. As a Black feminist activist, scholar, educator and writer, bell

hooks (1994) speaks of the role of Black women as both teachers and writers. Hooks recalls the tradition within education in which Black teachers connected pedagogical practice to the antiracist struggle. Hooks views teaching as a means of resurrecting justice and revolution and rather than escaping from her role and responsibility as an activist or change agent, she boldly steps into it and claims it. The Black feminist teacher is attached to the outcome of human freedom and builds into the fabric of teaching/education a commitment to counter-hegemony. For hooks, teaching is a service and a means of giving back to one's community.

Yet, while teaching is often seen as a political and professional duty, the practice of writing poetry offers a personal freedom and the fulfillment of a serious yearning. Hooks uncovers the tension of Black women poets who are connected to revolution and justice as teachers while struggling to fulfill a personal yearning as poets. Their plight encompasses the struggle and commitment to maintain and protect the dreams of the "girlchild" as well as their own.

Hooks (1994) reveals that to achieve fulfillment, a necessary component of pedagogy, is pleasure in conjunction with resistance and freedom. As excitement, serious intellectual stimulation, and academic engagement are brought about by the development and cultivation of community. Through a genuine interest in one another, the ability to listen to one another's voices and the recognition of one another's presence, community is fostered in and out of the classroom. If we want to assist our children/students in fulfilling their dreams and finding their way to their north stars, it becomes apparent that we must support, inspire and encourage them. Yet, self struggle ensues as I explore my role and "requirements" as a researcher,

poet, and teacher. How much do I say? When do I lead and when do I follow? Do I release attachment or cultivate it to let my students learn and find their own voices and human freedom? As I reflect on the process of teaching and learning, I return to a place of poetic and phenomenological questioning.

Teaching is even more difficult than learning...
Teaching is more difficult than learning
because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn.
(Heidegger, as cited in Hultgren, 1995, p. 371)

My study required that I engage, closely observe, and actively participate in the phenomenological process while “letting” my students learn in their own way, their own time, and through their own experiences. Moreover, this process required that I “let” my students teach each other and teach me. Hultgren (1995) suggests that the process of “self struggle” is a necessary component of growth as both a human science researcher and a teacher. And as I entered into poetic exchange with my students whereby we explored the cultural past and present through poetry and the eyes of adolescents, I allowed new ways of seeing to occur. And as the process of self struggle through teaching and learning continues to unfold, I am reminded of Khalil Gibran’s (1951) poem from *The Prophet*. Just as he acknowledges that you not give them (children) your thoughts as they have their own thoughts, I acknowledge that the responsibility of the teacher, at some point, is to learn more than teach.

...Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of
Life’s longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet
they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts.

For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
Which you cannot visit,
not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make
Them like you...
(Gibran, p. 17)

Phenomenology requires that we, as researchers, submerge ourselves in the language of life. Human science research, like poetry, is a purposeful form of writing that can only be fulfilled by “actively doing it” (van Manen, 1997, p. 8). By writing, reading and listening with a purpose, we create and sustain discourse. Van den Berg, as cited in van Manen, suggests that the world is our home and language needs to be heard and spoken with meaning through the world of lived experience or “life worlds” (p. 112). Phenomenological writing allows for the possibility of lived language, living words, and “lifeworlds,” to be exposed to reveal deep and complex renderings.

Moving Between Worlds in the Wilderness: Homecoming and Homesteading

And to each other they remain unknown, so long as they stand, the neighboring trunks. (Hoderlin, as cited in Heidegger, 1971, p. 13)

The paths, thoughts, and meanings of phenomenology and poetry danced through, between and alongside one another. Yet as I deepened my methodological awareness and grounding in Black feminism and culturally responsive pedagogy and poetry, like Alice Walker, I was called to re-chart my direction in the wilderness to follow the paths of my ancient foremothers in order to return home to Tia, Shaniqua, and to create a clearing for the new voices of African American adolescent girl poets, Black women, and myself. Culturally responsive poetry, philosophy and

phenomenology are magically and tightly woven to one another through feeling, thought and practice. As I return to the wilderness, I attempt to conjoin the branches of the poetic, philosophic, and phenomenological not only as practices but as collective voices. Even though they dwell in the wilderness beside each other as trees with “neighboring trunks” as long as they are unknown to one another, they will remain isolated (p. 13).

In this wilderness, I now connect Heidegger to Casey to Walker to hooks to van Manen through knowing and Being. More importantly, I now connect the girl poets making a clearing through the wilderness to their naming(s) to their engagement in homecoming and homesteading. Where there once was tension, silence and disease, the flow between phenomenology and Black feminism, offers a merger of traditions that are connected, ancient, infused with the feminine and philosophically liberating. Further, there is a blending of words, practices, and poetic intuition that leads us out of the wilderness home. Van Manen’s (1990) framework for phenomenological research serves as a guide toward our homecoming and homesteading. In *Researching Lived Experience*, he identifies six primary research activities that ground the methodological structure of human science research:

- 1) **turning** to the phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- 2) **investigating** the experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- 3) **reflecting** on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- 4) describing the phenomenon through the art of **writing and rewriting**;

- 5) **maintaining** a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- 6) **balancing** the research context by considering the parts and whole (pp. 30-31).

The First Path: Turning To A Phenomenon Which Seriously Interest Us And Commits Us To The World

In chapter one, I describe the poets and the experiences of African American adolescent girls and Black women, alongside my own experiences and writings, who have been dragged into the wilderness physically, emotionally, or psychically. The exploration and experiences individually and collectively of African American girls and women in the wilderness, finding a way to a clearing through voice and visibility, would be paramount to my commitment to this work with poetry and calling forth names and identities.

Turning to the phenomenon of the lived experience of African American girl poets uncovering the power to name who they really are speaks to the necessity and depth with which I am compelled to use this methodology. Phenomenology charges human science researchers to commit to a process or concern that is deeply meaningful, thought- provoking, and expressive. Moreover, phenomenology recognizes the importance of wholeness, and as a methodology, also invites each researcher to maintain a sense of responsibility to the participants and to humanity. Wholeness, depth, and humanity are essential for the poetry process to be rendered, making phenomenology, for me, the only organic option for human science research and lived experience.

The Second Path: Investigating Experience As We Live It Rather Than As We Conceptualize It

As I reveal the voices of the girl poets as they uncover the power to name who they really are, I find and join their voices with my own poetic voice and lived experience. Our words are not spoken in isolation pushing into visibility the themes, voices, experiences, and stories of published poets to anonymous or name-less poets. Published African American and women writers, as well as unknown writers, accompany us along this journey through the wilderness by lending their poems, stories and lived experiences individually and collectively. I have drawn on the poetry, lived experiences, and voices of former students and poetry participants, primarily the voices of Tia and Shaniqua, along with other local and international writers who bring powerful truths to this phenomenon.

As Tia and Shaniqua have either graduated or withdrawn from high school, I draw upon their poems, prose, previously written reflections, individual and group discussions, my journal entries, and phenomenology class research papers that the students participated in, to recapture their lived experiences poetically. Knowing the voices of the former participants of my poetry group and English classes, and listening with an active ear to the poetic voices of adolescent participants in other studies and poetry books, I travel alongside Tia and Shaniqua and other adolescent poets, as a rhapsode, poet, researcher, and educator in chapters one and two.

However, Tia returns as a guest poet for her homecoming in this new poetic space, having bridged from an African American Adolescent poet to a Black woman writer. Briefly, she offers her voice and experiences as a griotte and poet to and for

the poetry group of my present study, who follow behind her to their own homecoming and homesteading. I also seek guidance from the writings and words of phenomenologists such as Heidegger, Casey and Bachelard and women activist poets such as Walker, Clifton, and Lorde. I continue with etymological word tracings to get beneath the surface of what words mean – going to their original root derivations. It is in making language speak that phenomenology resides.

This phenomenological pathway is paved by philosophers and human science researchers through the words of Bachelard, Rilke, Levin, Casey, O’Donohue, van Manen and Heidegger. Where questions linger on, the pages become filled with calls and responses of the girls in the group to one another and to me and by writings, experiences, voices, and poems of published African American adolescent girl and women poets. These poets seem to speak to the girls’ experiences and chart and navigate the wilderness of Black womanhood for girlchildren who wander and wonder. Words and feelings mingle, cross over, through and around each other – each reaching out to grab hold of another’s poetic voice and to lend its own voice.

I step into my role as poet, griotte and rhapsode where the spaces invite me to write to my students’ pain and silence. In previous chapters, I connect the pain in poems, such as Tia’s powerful writings on rape and abortion, to the pain revealed in Shange’s or other writers’ poems. These pages are filled with questions, reflections, affirmations and poetic truths from our voices, lives, memories, and multi-layered silences. It is the existential investigation and the blending of poetic voices from a variety of backgrounds that prepared and empowered me to invite and call forth the voices of a new group of poets in 2008-2009.

The Third Path: Reflecting On Essential Themes Which Characterize The Phenomenon

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(Eliot, as cited in Casey, 1993, p. 271)

Reflecting on essential themes such as naming, including what the poets are named by others such as “**These Black Kids**” (Bacon) and what the poets name themselves, unfolds many layers that offer a pathway for African American adolescent girl poets to journey home. For Casey (1993), homecoming is the return to the same place. It is for the poets a place of their authentic selves, a place of being in their truths, born of remembering and uttering what often is unspeakable. Moreover, this poetic space of homecoming is also offered as a place of homesteading for poets, as it provides the possibility of a new or future home. This place of homesteading invites the girl poets to uncover the power to name and write who they really are, share their voices or offer new voices to the listening ear. This is also a place that allows for naming to be fluid as the journey of discovery is one of being, feeling, and identity (ies). And it is a place of memories placed beside the creation of whom and what you are now.

The Fourth Path: Describing the Phenomenon Through The Art of Writing And Rewriting

The art of writing and rewriting asks that we thoughtfully bring something to speech. This often occurs through a writing activity, as van Manen (1997) beckons us to hold in our consciousness the meaning and purpose of what research and writing

serve. Writing phenomenologically is akin to writing poetry which allows for lived experiences, memory and reflection. The process allows for the unfolding of memories that surface in the writing and rewriting process as they are concealed, revealed and created.

Rilke (as cited in van Manen), describes memories through the writing and rewriting process, “One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the great patience to wait until they come again” (1997, p. 114). Human science research recognizes the experience of truth that is made possible through poetry and created or “imported” into phenomenological writing. However, uncovering the power to name yourself for African American adolescent girl poets allows the process of writing poetry and writing phenomenologically to be as one. Poetry and phenomenological writing require the art of writing and rewriting to be reflective and as deeply experienced as the disclosure and revelation process itself. The art of writing and rewriting is also one of writing and rewriting naming(s) and complex layers of truths.

The Fifth Path: Maintaining A Strong And Oriented Pedagogical Relation To The Phenomenon

The phenomenological methodology and theory of poetry (writing, reading, and listening) is the poetry itself. Poetry is felt, experienced, and known in the poet’s body, memories, dreams, and consciousness. Poetry is phenomenological research and embodies what is reflexive, what is lived and known as well as what is questioned, hidden and invisible. Poetry as phenomenology is as much the truths that

are shared as the words unspoken are imprinted instead in our memories and lives in our silence.

Heidegger turned to poetry to express Being. He did not find speech to be adequate enough without poetic language. Heidegger believed poetic language stretched language beyond its limits and allowed for greater creativity. With this in mind, he also wanted to free language from the confines of grammar to reveal the essence of language (Moran, 2000). This has been the writing process of my present study, as well as Tia, Shaniqua and other adolescent girl poets who have offered their voices without censorship or reinterpretation, inviting those in the poetry group to listen to the unadulterated voices that once experienced silence.

Phenomenology's aim is to allow something to show itself in its true form or as its self which allows for "self-manifestation" (Moran, 2000, p. 229). Poetry in its essence is understood in phenomenology as naming that "bring[s] something to revelation in language" (Moran, 2000, p. 218). To name phenomenologically is to bring forth, uncover and disclose the essence and multiple identities of the girl poets. In order to do this, according to Heidegger as cited in Moran, we as humans must recover that essence by returning to who and what we already are. This process allows African American adolescent girl poets to return home from the wilderness as a homecoming and a homesteading.

The Sixth Path: Balancing The Research Context by Considering The Parts And Whole

Phenomenology as a methodology and practice extracts wholeness (of thought, body, spirit and consciousness). This mirrors the path of Black feminist and

culturally responsive educators as they seek to resurrect justice by educating the entire child and providing a space for resistance and voice. As Tia and Shaniqua experienced invisibility and voicelessness in the mainstream classroom, they felt forced to fragment themselves based on others' definitions of them by race, gender, disability and "urban-ness." As the participants in my present study enter into this new space, their lived experiences and questioning follows the path laid before them as they struggle from "behind the mask" (Collins, 2004), with voicelessness not only in the classroom but initially in the poetry group.

Phenomenology considers not only the parts of the research as a whole, but calls and charges the human science researcher and her participants to resist fragmentation by acknowledging the wholeness of individuals, the collective and humanity. Further, Heidegger (1962) connects the experience and language of wholeness to being healthy, which speaks to not only adolescent girl poets uncovering the power to name themselves, but their power to embrace themselves fully in joy (Moran, 2000).

Yet, Heidegger as he made his later transition after 1929, often did not refer to himself as a phenomenologist, but he remained fully a phenomenologist (Moran, 2000). With this in my consciousness, I recall Shaniqua's poetic process. Shaniqua, although she possessed notebooks full of her poems that she had been secretly and silently writing for years, did not name herself as a poet. She did not offer a reason or meaning to the denial of the name "poet." Yet, as I connect the branches in the wilderness to each other, I cannot help but begin to connect the two similarities. Were some of the restrictions Heidegger experienced in language and the naming of

himself as a phenomenologist at all similar to some of the restrictions Shaniqua experienced in language and naming herself as a poet? In answer to this question there will remain a silence that I cannot fill epistemologically or ontologically.

Inviting New Poetic Voices on the Path: Method for Engagement

In order to allow the engagement of the study to unfold, formal approval and screening was been provided by the Internal Review Board at the University of Maryland to work with “human subjects” prior to beginning the program. I also received consent from the office of the superintendent of schools for the county and Read High School’s (pseudonym) principal. Furthermore, each participant selected for the group was required to sign an assent form (for minors), and each parent/guardian was required to sign a consent form in order to participate in the study (see Appendix E and Appendix F).

The process of selecting a location involved deciding upon a county and a high school. I chose one with a significant number of African American students. Both the county and the school maintain a status of African American students as the majority. This differs vastly from the location, background, and experiences of my previous poetry group and former teaching experiences. Choosing a school where the majority of students were African American eliminated some concerns that I held about not being able to find enough participants in the school where I was employed. It also eliminated some concerns that I had about possibly excluding other interested students when promoting the poetry group.

And while race allows for a homogenous group of participants, Read High School itself offers a great deal of diversity in ethnicity, background, ability, socio-

economic status, and location, but more importantly it offers a diversity of voices and lived experiences. Geographically and economically, students represent a rather large range of areas in the county, with some students receiving transportation to attend the high school, which is located in the suburbs of the county, from geographically urban and working class neighborhoods. Within the immediate school community, students reside in single and two-parent family households and live in condominiums, town homes, and affluent single family homes.

Read High School also offers a wide range of classes and electives. Students may be placed (and participate) in advanced placement classes, honors, on-level, and inclusion (general education and special education) to self-contained special education classes. Furthermore, the high school is said to have a strong performing arts program with a high concentration of talented, creative, and actively engaged students.

To invite potential students to participate in my study, a flyer was used to advertise the poetry group and information was included in Read High School's newsletter (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Moreover, guidelines, requirements and expectations were outlined in a letter distributed to students and parents (see Appendix C and Appendix D). Students were expected to attend poetry sessions twice weekly for an hour and a half each session. They were also expected to meet with me, as the facilitator, for 15-20 minutes bi-weekly for individual discussion (during student facilitated groups). During individual meetings, students discussed their poetry, experiences and feelings surrounding their writing, emerging themes, conversations that occurred in the group, and their experiences working and writing

in a poetry group for African American adolescent girls. A safe space for poetic renderings to occur is critical, and each member was asked, as indicated in their written guidelines, to respect the work and voices of other members by offering constructive and supportive feedback, and by not laughing or making fun of other participants' writings, readings or expressed feelings.

A meeting and discussion, with recommended and interested girls to determine final participation and commitment to the poetry group, ensued following the English and performance art teachers' distribution of flyers, newsletters, guidelines and the collection of poetry samples. In addition, I made visits to a general education English class and a special education English class to discuss the program. I also had discussions with other English teachers, and announcements of the group were made by the principal.

To allow for each participant's voice to be heard and each poet to be visible on her own terms, I shared in writing and during the interest meeting, that the number would not exceed twelve in the group. Furthermore, I shared verbally and in writing that each poet would be given the opportunity to reflect and expand upon her poetry experience, individually and collectively, through reading and writing poetry and writing journal reflections (to include her experiences and feelings in participating in a poetry group for self-identified African American adolescent girls) and engaging in discussions with me and other group members. I too, as an engaged phenomenology researcher, educator and Black woman writer/poet, wrote reflections, participated in discussions, workshops and shared poetry in and outside of the group to remain

actively engaged in the phenomenon and to enhance my lived experiences and connection to the writing process.

The Dawn of Poetic Awakenings

Once the consent of participants and parents/guardians was received, I engaged with eight participants in poetic renderings over the course of approximately five and a half months to uncover the girls' experiences with poetry reading and writing to name who they really are. Our meetings, writings and discussions occurred twice weekly for an hour and a half (although they frequently were extended to two hours, and during the last week we met three times instead of two). The group met in person, before winter break, in the middle of December of 2008 until the middle of May in 2009 with one follow-up meeting in June. In addition, email correspondence occurred from December 2008 through August 2009. The focus was on collective voices and the poetic group experience; however, individual discussions occurred both formally and informally on a rotational schedule or as needed, depending on the writing of the participants. These occurred during student facilitated sessions or before or after meetings, in addition to weekly email correspondence with the group.

The program was originally designed to begin with poetry readings by African American adolescent girl poets, primarily from such books as, *Paint Me Like I Am* (2003), *City of One* (2004), *Things I Have to Tell You* (2001) and *Growing Up Girl* (2006) and end with their own poetry writing. The participants readily and eagerly shared their own poetry from the outset, allowing the poetry books to be offered as supplemental material or used for occasional writing prompts or poetry samples/models. Furthermore, opportunities for individual and collective discussions

and readings of self-selected poems occurred during each meeting. In addition, three published poets were invited to facilitate poetry workshops, and more importantly, actively listen to the self-selected poetry readings of the girls.

Participants were given the opportunity to respond orally and in writing to each other's poems, as well as generate their own works (see chapters four, five, six and seven). We further explored connections between their own works elucidating individual and collective experiences within the group. We looked at and drew from expressions of self-identity and empowerment and naming as "I was," "I am" and "I will be" through their experiences and voices as African American adolescent poets (see Appendix G).

Personal and poetic reflections and responses were written in a journal and a notebook in reference to the poems created and read to uncover the power for participants to name themselves. During the first three weeks, students created their own poems by reflecting on topics and themes that resonated with them from the poetry readings. I facilitated the first six sessions and selected icebreakers, poetry and discussions around friendship to begin building relationships and community within the group based on collective discussions that transpired during "check-in." Students were then invited to select topics and themes that were of importance to them to facilitate and write about for and with the group. The topics selected included: grief, sorrow and loss, love, spirituality and God, confidence, goals, and self (esteem), and spring (renewal and growth).

Techniques, topics, and poetic structures were "borrowed" or "imitated" on occasion to provide support or serve as a model; however, the ultimate goal and

purpose was to generate poems based upon the thoughts, ideas, lived experiences, and poetic identities and naming(s) of the student. In reference to identity and naming, guiding questions included: “How do you feel you are defined by others”? “How do you define (or seek to define) yourself”? “What names/characteristics describe you?” A written reflection was also completed during the first and last session. The reflection was based upon students’ feelings, beliefs, concerns, and experiences surrounding naming as it pertains to lived experiences, feelings, intrapersonal, interpersonal relationships, culture (race, gender, age), etc.

Today My Name Is

While it is the girls’ voices and writings that lead us to themes and naming(s), their uncovering(s) were further prompted by such questions as, “Who Am I?” “What do I name myself?” “Is what I name myself what others name me?” as well as affirmations of “I Am,” “Paint Me,” “Black is,” and “My Real Name” revealed below.

My Real Name

Today my name is colorful.
Yesterday my name was dead souls.
Tomorrow my name will be lively spirits.
My friends think my name is fire.
The police think my name is burden.
My parents think my name is symphony.
Secretly I know my name is anything.
I want it to be.
(Noel, in Writerscorps, 2003, p. 46)

As a group we read “My Real Name.” I asked that we each read a line from the poem in the circle. After each member read a line, enabling her to have her voice heard, I asked the group to say the line that resonated with them personally. The first

line “Today my name is colorful” was deleted from the poem so that they could write a new line for the poem with their own name for today. As they created their names for today, I invited them to reflect on feelings of I was, I am and I will be. From the original poem, I placed the words “burden,” “lively spirits,” “dead souls,” “fire” and “colorful” on individual index cards for each member to select as part of her naming and writing experience. Each group member was invited to make the original poem her own by adding her self selected names to her poetic identification of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

How Will I Name?

Woven into the fabric of questions, naming(s) and affirmations are the works and voices of adolescents’ calls and responses to each other and to the voices of published poets. And as we explored the process of “I Am” and naming(s), students began by delving into the process of naming by literally selecting their names (that they would like to be called) for the study and closed with finding “My Real Name.” Throughout the study, answers to questions unfolded while other questions surfaced such as, what was the meaning of the selected name? How will “I was” “Who Am I?” “I Am!” and “I will be” reveal and conceal identities?

By not only reading but by writing poetry, African American adolescent girls and young women have been encouraged and empowered to explore various concepts, and experiences in order to interact critically and poetically with ideas that pertain to their own lives and naming. Participants explored relevant topics and cultural, collective, and individual experiences to develop a deeper awareness of self and others with the goal of strengthening or cultivating a voice that may lead to

(greater) feelings of empowerment, visibility and expression. Moreover by honoring the students' multiple identities and names (in reference to cultural, ethnic, racial, ability, gender, class, religious, age, sexual orientation, etc), a safe space was created that allowed the adolescent girls the opportunity to explore, challenge, and construct individual and collective experiences that may or may not be consistent with external perceptions of students' identities, experiences and naming(s). To further augment participants' voices, visibility, and co-authorship, within the second month, students facilitated sessions of the poetry group based on a topic of interest to them.

Honoring the Process and Path of Poetry

There were questions verbally that I was unable to formulate in advance, given the nature of hermeneutic phenomenology. For the process of further questioning and naming to unfold, I was required to patiently wait and actively participate in the path of "uncoveredness." We searched for truth and recovered remembrances through poetic words and verbal expression, written poems, journal entries and reflections. Select audio-taped discussions and readings also served as a formal tool of retrieval to help extrapolate meaning. Moreover, in recognition of the significance of voice and visibility, each participant wrote a final reflection about her experiences with writing poetry in the group.

In honoring and sharing the poetic voice of the girls and me, an opportunity was provided to read their poetry on the radio. I was invited to share my experiences in teaching and creating poetry groups for the empowerment of adolescents and women, as well as read poems on such radio programs as the Cedric Muhammad Show and *Dialogue* on WPFW. This allowed me the opportunity to make

arrangements to bring my students on another radio program to share their own voices and read their poems. In addition, they were invited to submit their poetry to GirlChild Press for review following a poetry workshop, with editor and writer Michelle Sewell, and they were given the opportunity to submit poems to the school newspaper. Moreover, the girls wrote and shared self-selected poems for the creation of an-end-of-the-year group poetry journal.

Through the voices and writings of the girls, a path was revealed from the wilderness to wholeness by and through their naming(s). The girls' lived experiences of writing poetry, not only to name but to share who they really are, offer the possibility of creating and hearing culturally responsive pedagogy and poetry as a voice to and for creativity, humor, healing, expression, discovery, resistance, justice and visibility. As rhapsodes, poets, and griottes we embarked on this journey, individually and collectively, anticipating what might be revealed through our poetry writing and sharing. The next chapter reveals the themes that emerged from our experiences in the poetry group.

CHAPTER FOUR: EMERGENCE OF THE “I AMS”

We must talk
until there are no more words
We must explain
until everything is understood
We must be honest
until nothing is hidden
We must listen
until everything has been said
We must question
so that we must know why
We must be fair
so that everyone's basic needs are met
If there is no communication
there will be no bond
there will be no friendship
(Schutz, 2001, p. 4)

The collective poetic journey begins by writing and talking “until there are no more words.” We journey through this process of emerging voices as poets, rhapsodes, griottes and anam cara of the poet’s heart as we explore the lived experiences of writing poetry to uncover the power for African American adolescent girls to name who they really are. This chapter offers up a beginning introduction of the participants as their voices begin to emerge.

Becoming the Poetic Eight

Poetic Eight is what the African American adolescent poets of my study have named themselves. Like students who came through this poetic experience before them, their names are brought into or through the world by their external identities, lived experiences and cultural collective as African Americans, adolescents, and girls on the brink of womanhood. Their identities, outside of the group, also encompass the various names of honor students, general education students or special education

student. It further includes identities as majority, self-identified straight or heterosexual, self-identified bisexual or questioning (exploring or explored) sexual identity.

The eight official members of Poetic Eight are daughters of Christian ministers, Muslim parents, non-practitioners, middle class parents, working class parents and single fathers. They wear size zeros and fours and eights and sixteen. They wear short hair, medium-length hair, natural hair, straightened hair, twists and braids. They also wear the names of girlhood as “good girls,” “tough girls,” “strong girls,” “lost girls,” “found girls,” “accomplished and ambitious girls,” “outsiders,” “insiders,” “struggling,” and “scholars.” As daughters and girl children, they have been given identities and names of “beloved” adopted daughter, foster care daughter, biological daughter, step-daughter, big sister, half-sister, grand daughter, surrogate mother, niece, their mothers’ daughters (living, deceased, never known, by birth or adoption/choice) and a daughter of God (the universe).

And while these identities and names may offer some insight into who these girl poets are or what they have experienced, they do not define them or their uncovering poetically. The girls, themselves, reveal who they are through their writing and their own naming – by, through, in spite of, in support of and because of their external identities and many names. They unfold who they are in the poetry that follows. Each of the eight joined the group for different and varied reasons. **Blue** and **Mishaps** became members of the group to write through the deaths of their mothers and share their stories. They have shared their poetry with others, not only to write through their own grief, but to help others find their words and voices through

their stories and poems. **Divine Diva** participated to not only write her poetic story (ancestral, family, cultural, struggle, loss) but to have it heard and understood. **Family** joined the group to write through the loss of her biological family and overcome her stage fright and stuttering, while **Camille** joined to find and share more of her voice through her writing. **Lenash** came because she loved poetry and wanted to share her talent. **Queen of Hearts** became a member to explore her interest in creative writing to prepare for college, and **KiRe** who initially joined for community learning/service hours, developed a deep desire to be a published poet and performer. As each embarked on fulfilling her own individual mission, she found not only what she was looking for, but a new level of voice and empowerment which encompassed the collective experience of hearing and supporting each other's missions and poetic journeys. As I reflect on the lived experiences of the members of *Poetic Eight*, who were called to enter into this space by and through the name poet, I wonder if their naming unfolded differently than the girls before them because they named themselves poets. Did their naming change as they revealed "I was" to "I am" and "I will be?"

Building the themes around my students' lived and poetic renderings continued to unfold against the backdrop of phenomenological and Black feminists' voices. However, the return home (homecoming and homesteading) in my study remained the pathway to a clearing in the wilderness. As the next three chapters of my study unfold, I am led by the voices of my poetry students and my own poetic journey with them to their naming(s). Their poetic voices, writings, and even silences, helped guide a way through fragmentation to wholeness. I begin this

journey with the lived experiences of grief and loss in poems, such as Mishaps in *Suffocation* written about the death of her mother. I connect her writing to the grief of Zora Neale Hurston, as a motherless-daughter, along with Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and other writers and poets.

Haunting Suffocation

In March, I re-turn to Holy Cross Abbey. It is my third visit, second stay in the retreat house, and first time inviting a guest into such solitude to accompany me along this portion of my journey at the abbey. Shanna, who is a dear friend and member of *Black Women Writing* and whose voice and poetry (“My Girls”) enter through chapter two, houses a similar identity and spirit to my own as a protector of the stories, visions, and memories of Black women writers. She is also an African American woman writer/poet, doctoral student and educator. On this journey, we are both accompanied by our journals, texts, poems, messages, novels, and numerous stories, but most of all we bring with us the haunting spirits of the Black women who we carry in our own knowing and in our own hearts.

The abbey is sprawling, and in this space we share ideas and feelings that can only reside in the openness and vastness of the acres of land and freshness of air and space that extend as far as you allow your sight to see. Few people or even trees fill up the acres, but the spirits of these Black women who we bring with us (or maybe who were already here) fill the land. Some of the women are from fables, characters in books; yet, others are leaping from the pages of slave narratives and of the voices of revolutionaries, activists, Black Panthers, teachers, mothers, and poets. They are courageous; they are afraid; they are fearless; they are proud; they are fragile; and

they are connected, free, and knowing. They are unyielding, not only with fortitude, but as fortitude. They simply are as they are and want to be in the space of I Am. And they are us in our many names and forms seeking life and expression through our voices, knowing, and written words. And they are of the voices and lived experiences of the African American adolescent girls of my study, as they named themselves *Poetic Eight*.

At night fall, Toni Morrison enters the walls of the abbey through *Beloved* (1987). Morrison's book concludes with the collective strength of Black voices that send the haunting spirit back home to rest for good. Through this fictional account I enter into the "haunting" of our own poetic space by the memories and remembrances of my students beginning with "Mishaps" and "Blue." I wonder if Mishaps' and Blue's stories, memories, poetry, and strength of collective voices, will forever honor the presence of their deceased mothers and loved ones. By writing these Black women home, are they (not only their mothers but the girls themselves) able to find reprieve from the grief and sorrow that suffocate them and re-turn to joy and life?

In the morning, as our footprints rest on the monastery trail which is sacred and serene, the voices and spirits of those still living as well as departed come alive. And as I make my path, I step into the footprints of Zora Neale Hurston who has left *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942). I ponder the ways in which Mishaps and Blue might carve out a path in Hurston's footsteps or, instead, follow a trail not yet traveled to a clearing for themselves and other girls who are grieving and searching for their mothers. They write their way to meaning through memory and body as "mommy hunger" and "suffocation" become markers to find their way home.

Shanna and I step cautiously alongside a bubbling body of water next to our trail. The water flows beneath a bridge and spans the length of a cleared wooded area of our path until we turn a-way from it to re-turn to the abbey. As I look closer into the tranquility of the water, I notice circles forming and churning. The circles move slowly and methodically until they begin to embrace greater force and vigor. There seems to be a beckoning to face the growing turmoil of the water rather than re-turn to the safety of the abbey walls. Beside the bank, Shanna and I begin to fade as I, instead, imagine the creations of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) emerging from the water's turmoil. Sula stands beside the river with her best friend Nel watching helplessly for the little neighborhood boy playfully tossed into the mouth of the water, never again to re-emerge.

Stepping back into the poetic waters of a journey toward homecoming and homesteading is a trying one at times. I remember the voices, writings and lived experiences of the Black women who have walked this path before me. And I remember my former students, like Tia, whose teachings, "learnings" and writings have spanned the nine years before those of *Poetic Eight*. I remember the lived experiences of my own poetic journey and reflect on the work of the journey ahead (both the tremendous joys and the sorrows of the unfolding of the individual and the collective lived experience through the wilderness). And I am now drawn to Mishaps' writings, "I hate that the world is round because history repeats itself and so does my hurt..." Will the girls uncover their power through their writings if history is to repeat itself in their experiences of grief? In what way do they unfold their

remembrances and the experiences of Black women writers who have gone before them?

As I remember the names of the real and of the dead alongside stories, fables and metaphors of creators (such as Morrison), I begin to recognize that I am not helpless in this writing process, nor fear-stricken like Sula and Nel by the bank, waiting for the drowning boy to re-emerge. Rather, I enter into this space as rhapsode and writer/poet alongside the voices, stories, memories and lived experiences of Mishaps, Blue, and other members of *Poetic Eight*. And while their memories (and mine) may suffocate them (and me) at times, they will not drown them (us). Instead the girls (and I) will keep rising to the top of the water as they right/write and re-write their lives and their loved ones and experience re-emergence, homecoming and homesteading as poets and griottes (truth sayers). But first, we must make the journey through feelings of suffocation as a motherless daughter led by Mishaps.

Suffocation

My lungs give out on me
In the dark my eyes deceive me
and breathing became (ten thousand five hundred seventy-two percent)
less easy
I morn when I'm happy
I weep more when I'm sad I try to stay above sea level
but I tend to get mad
It hurts to be glad but it hurts to be sad
This suffocation is excruciating
My mom is gone now all I have is my dad
My tears are getting dry
My heart is getting cold
I don't want to live like this "you know"
Without my mom until I'm old
I can't explain the pain cuz it cuts at me deeply
This suffocation is playing games by peeking
I haven't cryed like I need to
Didn't even cry like I want

look to the sky and still don't understand whats going on
I'm so young my sister's even younger
How can I stop this mommy hunger
Its suffocating, but it just wont die
I believe this suffocation will remain for the rest of my life
(Mishaps, 2008)

Motherless Daughters

Like the poetic spirits that rise through Morrison and Hurston, Mishaps' poem haunts this space. Her grief, confusion, and despair over the recent death of her mother does not line the air with a faint and distant haze, but rather engulfs the space in such a way as to consume enough oxygen to leave Mishaps' listeners gasping for air as well. "Suffocation" is not an invitation for discussion and un-concealing, but a directive. "Suffocation" moves us to dig in the soil past delicacy and polite prescriptive conversations to what lies beneath. Uncovering the underbelly of death where piercing grief and loss reside, keeps one digging with such tenacity that the hands that re-emerge are so raw they can no longer feel. It is through this digging that Mishaps' unconcealing begins. Yet, she sheds no tears as she reads "Suffocation." And as she shares the death of her mother with the members of the poetry group, it is with eyes directed not *toward* ours but *through* them. Her gaze does not move or waiver any more than her voice does. And it is with her reading and unearthing that "... death stirred from his platform in his secret place in our yard, and came inside the house" (Hurston, 1942, p. 63).

Zora Neale Hurston in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), unfolds her grief and emptiness following the death of her mother as she breathes these words into the numbing silence, that which is echoed in the lived experiences of

Mishaps and Blue. “That moment was the end of a phase in my life. I was old before my time with grief of loss, of failure, and of remorse” (Hurstun, 1942, p. 64).

Braxton further chronicles Hurston’s experiences as a motherless daughter in her book *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (1989). She shares Hurston’s reflections of being different from other people because of her loss that she did not want others to uncover. Hurston’s pain and isolation created a weight and longing to be like everyone else and to escape her feelings of “cosmic loneliness” (p. 149).

Nevertheless, death is a visitor that once seeking your presence and attention knows always how and where to find you.

All Tapped Out

I’m all tapped out no words to
Explain how I feel
I cry no longer cuz I’ve stored
Away all my tears. For what?
I don’t know.
And oh how I just wanna
Scream cuz (I get sick of saying this but)
It feels like a dream
My mental is insane my hurt is
So much pain
And how I just can’t stand
People cuz they love you, you love them
They leave you
So hate is my best friend cuz its like
My fuel
But in the end when I’m all tapped
Out Don’t worry I don’t just hate
You you and you. I hate me too.
(Mishaps, 2008)

Mishaps’ feelings of suffocation cause her to become emotionally tapped out. The pain, she describes, in “Suffocation” is all that remains to remind her she is still

living. Fear and hatred have become her secret companions; they travel beside her as the presence of death.

O'Donohue (1997) offers death as the presence that surrounds us but remains a secret companion as we are blind to her presence. The expression and presence of death is said to greet us when we are frail, hurting, vulnerable or negative. My experience of reading and writing grief reveals, however, that death meets us during the times of clarity and bravery when we dare to look closely into her face and feel her pulse connecting to the rhythm of our own lives or another's. Death requires a surrender and acceptance of not only its process and nature but of the process and nature of oneself.

In surrendering and accepting our process and nature, Rilke (2005) charges that it is death that forces us to increase our strengths and brings us more deeply into the rhythm of life. As this process of grief and surrender begins for Mishaps and the other adolescent girls, I wonder what they might create and achieve, not in spite of their pain, but because of their "grief of loss, of failure, and of remorse" (Hurston, 1942, p. 64). What is it that their pain needs? More importantly, what in them needs their pain?

A Mother-less Daughter's Poetic Bleeding

Mishaps carries a tragic burden, which does not belong to her and is well beyond her years. She carries the feeling, upon finding her deceased mother, that she could have saved her from death's grip. And she carries with her the belief and burden that she had the power to save her mother from a life of domestic violence, pain and poverty. It is this pain that compelled her in past years to turn to physically

bleeding it from her body that she now spills with words, instead, onto the pages of her poetry. “When I’m writing it helps me to relieve what’s there for that moment...writing became my knife [to bleed out the pain], my sword, my protection. I just use it to the best of my ability. I just use it as much as I can.”

Writing, for Mishaps and many of the other girls, is the return and uncovering of the power they have been robbed of, through life circumstances and experiences. Once a mother-less daughter begins this journey of discovery and rebirth through writing, there is often no turning back. For daughters whose worlds have been built within that of their mothers, there is no place, but within, to go home to. With this sorrow and determination, Rilke (2005) beckons the writer to take her “affliction and bliss” (p. 108) of life and relationships into her work. Writing is the expression of deep pain and profound joy. Yet, in other areas of her life, outside of her writing, the poet must refuse to accept being made to suffer. Writing, for Mishaps and many of the other girls, is a “face-off” with death in order to overcome pain, fear and other negative experiences in order to return to the living without guilt or remorse. Writing is also their release of sorrow, by choice, of the secrets that would otherwise consume them. It is also the hatred and pain they feel over being left among the living.

Mishaps further shares her deep feeling of fear, in “To Be Me.”

To Be Me

To be me is to be hated
Loved and then traded
To be me is to have friends over-rated
Enemies that can’t take it...
To be me is to cry over fears which
Are none

And as the wind slows my tears run

Faster than my feet can even faster
Than my mouth
Tears for lost ones...

To be me you have to see the good qualities of another's life

To be me you have to face the consequences of wrong and right

To be me is hard so I wouldn't
Dare to be you

To be me you must definitely
Must positively have to always be blue
(Mishaps, 2008)

Writing is the path for Mishaps *to be* the voice for her mother and for her own pain. Writing is also the path for Mishaps to recreate herself and her life story. As Mishaps and I talk about how she can "re-write" her life story, she quickly responds she would write her mother "back to life." "And I would just let my life play out. There are a lot of things that go on that I can't stop. I want to but I can't." Mishaps unravels her story and confusion around her grief and remorse onto the page for others to hear and understand her. She writes through her "Suffocation" and self destruct[ion], ending her poem "Self Destruct" with "To die is to kill."

"Self Destruct" is written to voice the feelings that surged within her, after her mother's death a year ago, causing her to contemplate taking her own life to end her grief and suffering by joining her mother. As she safely unravels her feelings of wanting to end her father's life for the pain he caused her mother to endure by battering her, she comes to understand and share in our discussion, "... killing someone else is both to kill another person and killing yourself. It's not what I would want to do... And I couldn't do something like that. To take another life [mine or someone else's]. I don't want to set myself up because what is done in the dark will

be revealed [to God]. So I can't kill myself [and I can't kill another]. To die is to kill." But as her rage subsides, numbness seeps in. The numbness is buried so deeply in her body she once wanted to dig into it to feel again. She is the Black women in the wilderness "ejecting fear" and "regurgitating hate" (Bacon).

Mishaps' writings, reflections and discussions around "Self Destruct," "Suffocation" and "To Be Me" resemble the public voice described by Braxton (1989) in diaries written as autobiographical reflections of African American women writers. Rather than maintain a private account, the diaries of the African American women writers, in Braxton's book, unfold a tradition of writing with a public voice. Their writings reflect a struggle that honors their intelligence, sensibility, knowing, resistance and truth. Through public voice and un-coveredness, "black and female poetic identity" of "restoration and self-healing" is created and expressed (p. 85).

Poetic Calls to Death

Death and violence cling to Mishaps and suffocate her spirit. How will she send these haunting spirits home? The story of *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987) requires sending ghosts and demons home. However for Mishaps, her lived experience requires sending the presence and images of even goddesses, saints or martyrs home to be free and find her own path.

Until now, Mishaps is alone in this poetic process, but through the group, she is offered a sense of knowing in response to her "Suffocation." This sense of "knowing" begins to sooth the gaping wounds, quiets the violent, turbulent, sounds, and gives another voice to what is not spoken. Through my invitation to enter into this space alongside Mishaps, Camille, Lenash and Blue offer their poetic responses

to Mishaps' "Suffocation." After poetic snaps, nods and sighs, epistemological silence reenters the space. It is then that I invite the poem to be read again, but this time as a collective voice.

We begin with the reading of Mishaps, and go around the room, each one of us reading only one line from her poem. After the poem is finished, I ask each member of the group to call into the once silent space a line or lines (even if the lines have been called out before) that resonate with her (connecting with a memory or a feeling or simply speaks to her in any way). As we close the call and response, I offer the opportunity for each girl to write a poem to Mishaps by beginning with one line from "Suffocation," followed by her own words. By using the first line of Mishaps' poem, each girl creates her own poetic voice. This poetic response begins with Camille.

Breathing became (ten thousand five hundred seventy-two percent)
less easy
The harder and harder I thought
The less I was able to breathe
Being drowned by my feelings
As if I was
Being held by the neck
By my past
it wanting me
needing me to remember
the painful thoughts
the thoughts that had me to the point I wanted to cry
but never did
no one knew the pain of my suffocation thoughts
breathing became (ten thousand six hundred ninety two percent) less
easy
the harder and harder I thought
the less I was able to breathe.
(Camille, 2008)

As Camille continues to write, she uncovers not only her voice but her own feelings of loneliness.

Feeling lonely
When everyone is around
Why am I so sad?
Thinking
“Why doesn’t anybody know why I act the way that I do?”
People think I act as if I hate the world
When truly I don’t
I just give off certain impressions that
Seem like it
Looking in the mirror
Feeling upset at what I see
Wanting to know why I put myself down the way I do
Wanting to feel angry
When people won’t leave me alone
Feeling as if I hate someone
When this feeling is nearly
What is the last line?
(Camille, 2008)

Lenash’s voice joins with Mishaps and Camille by offering her response as a rhapsode.

It hurts to be glad but it hurts to be sad
This part of my heart is what makes me so mad.
Trying and trying to make it through the day
But the feelings from your love just won’t go away.
Being happy is what I’m concentrated on
Yet still being sad is what pulls me along
It still hurts to feel sad, but even worse when I’m glad.
When I feel good is when I feel so bad.
This suffocation is the thing that stops my heart,
Yet, you have the cables to jumpstart
My love, I’m still waiting for you.
That’s only because I keep forgetting we’re through.
(Lenash, 2008)

Mishaps’ mouth begins to expand into a smile that takes over her face and casts light from her eyes as she shares her experience of being heard. “It is like someone finally walking in my shoes. It is as if they understand me. It feels good.”

Mishaps writes in her reflection following the conversation, “It made me feel like if I hurt so do others and they need my help as much as I need others help...”

Camille offers her voice as a griotte and Lenash as a rhapsode, but it is Blue who enters into this space as an *anam cara* (soul friend), which is unfolded in the following chapters. As an *anam cara*, Blue lends her lived experience and her heart to Mishaps’ sorrow. The tears Mishaps does not shed as she reads “Suffocation” are shed instead by Blue. It is Blue’s sorrow, as a mother-less daughter, that allows her to offer her pain, compassion, and tears when numbness prevents Mishaps from expressing her own sorrow (O’Donohue, 1997).

Poetic Numbness

We often deem “Humanness” as the negative side of ourselves. Our humanness houses frailty, hurt, vulnerability, imperfection and pain. However, it is often those traits, that we name negative, that become our greatest tool for creativity, renewal and rebirth. O’Donohue (1997) urges us to welcome home our “negative” qualities, rather than banishing them or repenting for their existence. Acknowledging and feeling our pain bring harmony and unity into our lives. Feeling our pain, also, allows us to accept our poetic identities and many names. As we explore our humanness, we bring into awareness that, “at the deepest level of the human heart there is no simple, singular self. Deep within there is a gallery of different selves” (O’ Donohue, p. 113).

I hated myself for crying, so I stopped, comforted by knowing I would not have to cry – or see anyone else cry – again.
(Walker, 1983, p. 246)

Walker (1983) reminds us that our emotional lives and growth can be stunted by negative experiences and fear. These lived experiences can take us from our loved ones (in body and spirit) and from love itself. Negative experiences that cause numbness can also push us into isolation, gnaw at our truth and diminish our feelings of self worth and belonging. Furthermore, fear and sorrow can take us away from life, even before our physical demise as, “All fear is rooted in the fear of death” (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 204).

Turning toward our “different selves” frees us from the fear of death that casts a shadow on our true existence and our lives. Embracing our “different selves” is to realize who we really are in our many names and poetic identities. Truth and self awareness cannot exist in the same space as denial and fear. Truth is un-concealment that begins by digging beneath the soil and uncovering the roots of the trees in the wilderness, whose existence evaded us because of our own isolation. Poet M. Eliza Hamilton (1994) writes that to end the journey of fear, one must uproot oneself (and one’s emotions) to root oneself again. While the process of uprooting oneself may feel like a death, as it requires letting go of the past, it is actually a re-birth that comes from being renewed.

Poetic Re-Emergence from a Partial Death

The path for Mishaps and other members of *Poetic Eight*, as motherless daughters, exposes a deep sense of self struggle. Yet, the experiences with “different selves” move Poetic Eight toward intimacy, knowing and self acceptance. This is also “a pathway to meeting with a life-long friend from the deepest side of your own nature” which allows one to be fully alive (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 201). However, the

need to repent for “imperfections” or “negative” qualities, still often, drives this journey through both the wilderness and the desert. During those moments of being driven by the need to repent, *Poetic Eight* must use their imaginations, like poet Oliver’s (1986) “Wild Geese” to find their way home. Loneliness and isolation are softened by the poetic process of telling despair, and hearing the despair of another, for self forgiveness, acceptance and belonging.

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.
(Oliver, 1986, p. 14)

In the beginning of this journey, Mishaps walks on her knees repenting for something that she has not done and an act that she cannot undo. The journey is arduous, and as Mishaps begins to tell her despair, and hear the despair of the other girls in the group, she writes her way from an emotional death to revelation. Moreover, to arrive at self acceptance and belonging Mishaps, along with *Poetic Eight*, collectively gaze into the face of despair.

Revelation and un-covered-ness are often experienced as a partial death for the writer as it is so personal, passionate, and laborious of a process that it can rob the spirit while transforming it. Many writers, who write poetry or autobiographies, experience a sense of self-awareness or self- healing through creative transformation, revelation or change. Writing during this process is sparked or ignited by an (inner) crisis, incident, or event. During the event or crisis that brings about a change or acknowledgement in identity, writing can serve as a refuge for the poet who explores how she will live (Braxton, 1989).

How Will I Live

How will I live knowing Death is
right around the corner
it makes me so angry to know I'm
a goner...
barely sleep cuz I hate to close my eyes...
How will I live when I'm not doing well
(Mishaps, 2008)

With each work writers create from their hearts reflecting their lives, truths, memories and souls, the “living word” is ignited and restored. Moving from destruction to re-emergence requires a re-birth through creativity.

Destruction and Creation

I have been to the edge of the abyss
And I have looked into the depths.
There I looked at death
And have returned to the living.
There I looked at madness
And have returned to the sane.
There I looked at destruction
And have returned to create.
[I] Can answer destruction and madness
and death.
(Pizer, 1992, p. 38)

Through this restoration and re-emergence process, Blue is able to write to the presence of death.

Look to the sky and still don't understand what's going on...
Like a repeating song
Singing Momm, Mommy, come and find me
But I haven't found me dealing with insecurities
Pain gushes like blood from a wound
Feeling like a balloon thoughts
And pain
I want to go insane still I look to the sky
Feeling high on this drug of pain
And still don't understand what's going on in my veins a blood boil
From blood pressure
Not having my mother is
Why I wonder why am I here
Hearing rolling thunder
Wonder wonder
But still don't understand

Whats going on
(Blue, 2009)

Blue now enters into a dialogue with her mother, symbolically, as well as with the group. Through her reflection, she shares her experiences with her own partial death after the loss of her mother.

I'm tired just the other day we went past the cemetery. We even drove down the road the same road we took after the funeral. I couldn't breathe. I felt the pain in my heart. My sense of thought froze my body turned cold. Mom I can't even look at your picture any more... I'm tired I'm ready to be with you. I miss you with a passion. Mom sleeping on your pillow is not enough. I'm tired of trying to be looking to be okay with this life decision. I'm bless with the house I'm in now (living with her father, step mother, and step brother after her mother's death) because if I wasn't in here now I wouldn't be here in school maybe even living. I miss you mom!!
(Reflection, Blue, 2009)

At one time or another, each poet experiences "desolate solitude." It is often a state that is necessary to spark the transition or call to voice and freedom from

silenced emotions. Delving into the emptiness and places that are numb can beckon us to write our emotions. And through the process of writing and weaving between concealing and revealing, individually and collectively, “disguised women... whose identity [ies] remain partly obscure” begin to unfold (Braxton, 1989, p. 24). For Blue, will delving into her emptiness begin to sooth her desolate solitude? How can her dialogues with death and grief allow her to breathe again and begin to heal her heart?

Invisible Poetic Tears

In response to Blue’s revelation, each girl enters the dialogue by connecting stories of funerals, wakes, partial deaths, numbness and emotion. And with the revealing of emotion, anger and pain, tears seem to be missing again. Blue’s tears are at the surface of her eyes, but this time she looks away. What does it mean for Blue when she writes of her mother and as the tears well up in her eyes, she forces them back down? Will her poems write her back to the place she remembers, not only in her mother’s heart, but her own? What happens to Motherless daughters once she is gone? “...Mama dies at sundown and changed the world. That is, the world that had been built out of her body and heart” (Hurstons, as cited in Braxton, 1989, pp. 147-148).

Mishaps’ writings join Hurston’s words and Blue’s now silenced emotions, “The perfect mother... if you were here you’d be as perfect now as you were then...I wish I could have been the perfect child. If you were here you’d tell me I was... I was as perfectly unperfect as you...” Blue is the color of poetic emotion laced with tears of fright, sadness, loss, frustration, disappointment and loneliness. Shared by

many members of Poetic Eight, are feelings of loss for mothers who have died or were taken by other means (including foster care or abandonment). As Blue, Mishaps, Family and Divine Diva grieve for their losses, they do so by shedding invisible tears.

We All Cry the Same Tears

tears of fright
tears of sadness
tears of loss
tears of frustration
tears of disappointment
tears of loneliness
lands are flooded with our tears
we need one another's
kindness, cooperation, trust and respect
to survive
(Schutz, 2001, p. 3)

Family, who has named herself for the family that she lost, now enters this space as a motherless daughter. She was permanently taken from her parents, to be placed alongside her siblings, in foster care. During the poetic process, she grapples with her grief and feelings of abandonment. Her questions, unlike her tears, surface in her poem "Why Did You."

Why Did You

Why did you have to take me away
From my mom and dad
Why did you make my heart feel sorrow
And dead
Why couldn't you have taken my life away
Instead
Why couldn't you just take me where
I belong
It's like one of those sad and sorrow[ful] songs
(Family, 2009)

Camille enters this space alongside Family. Camille has re-named herself her birth name (which was changed after her adoption). She was adopted by a loving family and has seemingly erased her memories as a motherless daughter. What does or will this connection to grief through and by the other girls mean for her?

In the presence of Camille's and Family's silence, Divine Diva shares her grief, in her poem "Burden." Divine Diva, has named herself a Divine Diva to the world, yet a burden to her parents. She writes through her sorrow, as a motherless daughter, having spent her young years being shuttled between her parents, grandmother, uncle and other relatives. "I felt hurt all my life and I just wanted it to stop."

Burden

A burden of those who didn't expect me
Forever wondering am I loved by my family
Today my name is heart
Yesterday my name was dead souls
But was I ever thought of as
A person who could love u the most
My friends think my name is fun
My enemies call me the unwanted one
Secretly I know my name is anything
I want it to be
I want my name to be loved-
(Divine Diva, 2009, inspired by "My Real Name")

As the adolescent girls reveal their pain and suffocation, Nietzsche's (2006) reflections serve as a reminder that the problem for women is that they are rarely allowed to be authentic in the expression of their pain. Rather, women live out their lives as if actors on a stage. Often, Women sacrifice who they really are to play an object or role for others (for parents, children, lover/partner) and their needs, wants and desires. Learning to play an inauthentic self, rather than their true selves, is often

the process of transitioning from girlhood to womanhood (Babich, 2006). Queen of Hearts writes of the experience of girls and women who are choked into silence by their feminine roles in her poem, "I Was a Little Girl."

I was the little girl,
Who's scared of saying a word,
Scared someone's shadow,
Would cover me,
And I wouldn't be heard
But I was afraid.
I was the mute button,
On the remote,
That decided to open up,
All of a sudden
I choked...
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

However, the girls in my poetry group express the voice of a new generation of women as African American adolescent girls on the brink of womanhood. Their lived experiences and stories are shared from behind the mask and rarely conform to hegemonic images and ideas of womanhood. Throughout their declaration and affirmations of strength, independence, resilience, and even pain and fear, there is a refusal to see themselves or be seen by others through the lens of victimization. The adolescent girls, in my study, seem to live, almost virtually, free of multiple oppressions and silence, except when they cry. How has the expectation of strength and independence of African American adolescents, on the brink of Black womanhood, created its own stage of silence and deafness?

Strong Black Women Don't Cry

I haven't cried like I needed to
I don't know what to cry about
I tend to get sad but nothing ever happens
Mainly people may have noticed that when

I cry there is something really wrong with me.
I never cry over little things
Or someone trying to hurt my feelings.
But I know one day it will all come out.
You will see what my life is really about.
(Blue, 2008)

The girls in my poetry group, in spite of their awareness of disparity, express a tremendous and outspoken confidence, sense of self worth and freedom. What is more, they seem to have maintained a sense of wonder and wander of the “girlchild” in spite of their transition into womanhood. Yet, when grief strikes them, why are they, as strong Black women, often reluctant or afraid to cry in front of each other?

And while marginalization cuts across color, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, Black women and girls, especially from urban areas, have been stigmatized based on race and gender and, thereby, forced to endure societal hostility, stereotypes, distortions and victim blaming. Societal marginalization and hegemony have created images that have controlled, constrained and suffocated choices and options for survival. Societal marginalization has also created a climate of silence by those who must share their stories and deafness by those who must hear them (Richie, 1996). KiRe and Blue unfold their feelings as strong Black women who do not cry in their poems “Didn’t Even Cry Like I Want” and “You Missed Out.”

Didn’t Even Cry Like I Want

Didn’t even cry like I want
I can’t even stunt
Can’t attempt to front
Don’t mean to be blunt
But its just what the truth is
Or what its not
Remorse is a feeling that I forgot
A battle I haven’t even fought
Help that I haven’t sought

Why?
Because no matter how hard I try
How many nights awake I lie
How much time goes by
I can't cry
(KiRe, 2009)

You Missed Out

You Missed out on my cries
You left confusion inside
Being a problem child

Hiding from the lies
I didn't care if you wasn't there
All I need was my mother

That's why I never stop to wonder
Where you was or
What a life without you would
have been
But now I see what could have been
Now I am wishing
For that life again
But all I have is ...
Hurt and lies from U
To me and me to U
I just never thought I would
See it through
(Blue, 2008)

Unlocking the Tear Gates

I re-turn to my bookshelf to take down a poetry book on comfort and healing that I frequently used with residents in the nursing home. Pizer (1992) opens her poetry on grief and death by writing of the difficulty of men and boys in expressing their sorrow and grief. She writes of men who have not cried since they were small boys, taught instead to tough it out and act like men, while women were permitted gentleness, sadness and tears (Pizer, 1992). And I wonder aloud, when did girls stop

crying openly? When did girls also begin to view tears as a sign of weakness and unacceptable vulnerability? While boys were being trained to be men, were African American girls simultaneously being conditioned to be Strong Black women? Did the tears run dry as they/we transitioned from girlhood to Black womanhood? Did the tears run dry at the same time African American girls gave up wondering and wandering the beaten path into Black womanhood? Is the end of wondering and wandering the point when we become cloaked in the names of Strong Black women and superwomen?

Lenash, a sophomore, shares that she is okay with tears as long as they are not her own, and follows with “it seems weak.” Each group member echoes the sentiment that they do not want to seem or to be vulnerable. I assure them that tears are not a sign of weakness and vulnerability. Vulnerability comes from the Latin word, *vulnerabilis*, meaning “wounding.” Included in this is *vulnerare* which means “to wound” (Barnhart, 1995, p. 866). What is it that vulnerability calls forth as African American adolescent girls or Black women? Is the “wounding” akin to leaving a fragile new life with skin peeled off and exposed nerves to the harsh elements of nature as it often feels? Or, perhaps, it is not the stripping off of skin but rather the casting off of unnecessary layers that are, in fact, too heavy to carry or bear any longer? This unburdening connects to suffering. The Latin word suffer or sufferer includes to “undergo” or “put under” (Barnhart, 1995, p. 775). Through suffering and grief, a transformation will be undergone. The transformation is driven by the necessity to dig up feelings as much as the necessity to “put under” burdens as described by Blue.

Yelling, screaming, unsure
I miss u with the love in me
I'm crazy without your hugs...
You in my life is what I lack-
You make me mad
Yelling, screaming, unsure
You make me mad
(Blue, 2009)

As Blue digs up her feelings surrounding her grief and loss, she uncovers the means to bury her burdens. Writing her suffering allows Blue to be vulnerable. Through her poetry, Blue yells out for her mother's love and her hugs. And as she reveals the pain of what her life now lacks, she begins to "put under" her sorrow. It is the vulnerability and suffering of one that becomes the pathway to connection for many. With the casting off of layers and burdens, we uncover universal lived experiences from the particular.

Universal from the Particular

... I think poetry, or any writing, is but a reflection of the moment. The universal comes from the particular.
(Giovanni, cited in Collins, 2000, pp. 268-269)

Lived experience is highly valued for women in the African American community providing credibility, knowledge and connection, rather than distant statistics and irrelevant applications of the voices of others. As a result, many Black women scholars include their lived experiences and the experiences of other Black women to open up their methodologies. Black feminist epistemology recognizes standards used to assess knowledge or truth. This epistemology offers collective experiences along with accompanying world views against an historical backdrop

(Collins, 2000). In my study, shared and collective wisdom has provided a bridge for African American girls into Black womanhood.

Strong Black Women Crying

During Women's History month, I was asked to be a panel member for a local public school that designed a program for girls by honoring community "sheroes." And while the opportunity was provided to allow us to share our success stories, particularly, in the way of academic achievement and career accomplishments, something unexpected unfolded which took a powerful turn. I experienced strong Black women and girls, collectively, without pretense or apology, crying in front of each other.

The girls who participated in the program that day unraveled their stories alongside ours. Our stories began to delve deeper than degrees and career choices into relationships and lived experiences. From behind the mask, we began to embrace our authentic selves and the authentic selves of one another as we shed our tears. By the end of each story shared, in a room of 40-50 participants, there was not a dry eye.

Strong Black women can and do, in safe and sacred spaces, cry. That one day workshop and panel discussion was so transformative, because not only did each and every member feel permission to shed tears, but she also felt permission to embrace the others' pain. To stand for each other collectively offered a power that surpassed any individual emotional or physical strength. Truth leaked from tears that cleansed all stains of shame and secrecy, that not only excused but upheld, vulnerability as a sacred expression. Each panelist, each staff member, each girl student who stood to

“testify,” did so with rawness and presence. That presence dissolved titles, false names, appearances, images and lies that had been told about us and our existence as Black women and girls.

Turning to Face Home

The journey
of Fear
and Denial
ends here
at the center
Of the Self
I have uprooted
 to root again
in this space
guttled and razed
 fists will never be forgotten
 but
once more
there is rain
and air
for roots
to take hold
of me
Me
being born
every minute
every moment
roots delving
deeper
in my Self
this journey
of Fear
and Denial
end here.

(Hamilton, cited in White, 2003, p. 89)

Hamilton’s poem is featured in Evelyn White’s book, *Chain Chain Change: For Black Women in Abusive Relationships* (2003). Hamilton invites the reader to face every pain, word and deed that has ever hurt her even when it brings about tears. She reminds Black women who have been hurt that the world will not fall apart

because their tears are shed. Each Black woman is unique, beautiful and deeply deserving of love and respect from her self, her partner and society (White, 2003).

As I turn back to Strong Black Women who do cry, I am reminded of this affirmation with each story that was shared by the African American adolescent girls and Black women who spoke the day of the panel discussion. From behind the mask, adolescent girls spoke of being raped by boyfriends, working several jobs while still attending high school, holding lifeless mothers who had over dosed on heroine, battling depression, and keeping the secrets of suicidal parents. Each girl and woman, who shared stories of success and triumph to basic survival, was a “shero” by virtue of her *Being*.

And while Poetic Eight was not present that day, many of their voices and own poetry writing reverberated with those who did speak that day. It is these powerful revelations that return me to chapter one and the charge/duty of the poet. Does the poet have a responsibility? If she feels an urgency to write to express her pain and to be heard, does she also feel compelled to express the pain of others who still have not found their own voices, or have been so marginalized that they cannot speak? The collective voice has answered in response, yes; she does.

How does an adolescent girl who has never experienced motherhood, domestic violence or rape write poems for those who have? Writing with a sense of awareness, compassion, community and sisterhood, permits Divine Diva, who has never been a “Troubled Mother” or Blue who has not endured rape, to write for those who have. Divine Diva and Blue are led by their poetic spirits and listening ears to this place of compassion and creativity. It is the poetic spirit that connects to the path

of griotte (truth sayer) and rhapsode for universal truths and stories that are unwritten.

This poetic spirit and consciousness is also the path to social justice and resistance that continue to be unfolded in chapters five and six. And through this collective consciousness, the concept of an isolated “me” once again becomes a collective “we” for the unity and solidarity that each poem and story offers. Divine Diva connects voices and stories in her poetic creation of the experiences of a “troubled mother” in “Keep Me from Insanity.”

Keep Me from Insanity: Story of a Troubled Mother

The voices in my head
They never stop
I try to cry them out
But they just won't stop
Forget about the children
Save urself
He'll never stop hitting u
No one will never help
He knows everyone
He's the town hero
He can kill me in a second
And no one will ever know
Why does he hit the babies too
They never did anything
All they say is “daddy I love u”
But he keeps hitting them over and over again
From the bruises they have
They might be better dead
A few months have past
And nothing has changed
I need to save my babies
They're pain needs to be erased
The bath tub is the safest way for them to go
They love playing in the water
They feel safe there
A place away from their father

I did it

All I have to do is wait until he comes home
Then I'll get rid of myself
Then he'll know how it feels to be all alone
We fought over the gun for only a few minutes
But I was able to get it
I pointed it
And killed him
I'm free now no more hurting
But the voices haven't gone
They won't leave me alone
I need to finish it off
All I need is one more bullet
But the gun is empty
The voices finally stopped
I ended it with the sharp knife...
(Divine Diva, 2009)

Divine Diva enters into the depths of her imagination to write of the terror of a troubled mother who knows no other way to escape from abuse and madness but to end her life and the lives of her family. Through her writing she cloaks herself in the despair of a woman enslaved by oppression and pain. Through her poetry, Divine Diva imagines the life of a troubled mother who feels she has no other options. As Divine Diva becomes her poem, she slips into what a troubled mother might fantasize about to be free. The troubled mother's desperation resembles the declaration of those in bondage who call out, "... before I'll be a slave I'll be dancing on my grave and go home to my soul and be free" (Walker, 1997, n. p.). Divine Diva offers such escape through poetic imagination for women enslaved by their circumstances, who, rather than go to their graves in body and spirit, write their way home to their souls to be free.

And with this declaration and imagination, instead of remaining in pain, women speak of laughing when they wanted to break down from their worlds being torn upside down...

Happiness sadness
Smile frown
Can't count how many times
My world was torn upside down
(Divine Diva, 2009)

They exude a sense of comfort in finding a source of love and strength in a circle of women friends. They share the pain of being brutalized by a partner but being told they could and would make it out of their relationships by a stranger who cared. Women that day unfold stories of attaining a college degree at fifty, or defeating alcohol addiction when no one else believed that they could. They thank their mothers who always believed in them. They honor the mother figures and mentors who succeeded before them and were role models. These Black women celebrate putting themselves through college, buying their own homes, and breaking down society's barriers to earn doctorates.

That day serves as another reminder of our collective strength and our work ahead as poets and writers. As stories unfold and the history of marginalization and voice-less-ness are revealed, tears are offered for ourselves, our mothers and our ancestors. And although some of us never saw these young women before, and others worked with them each day, but had never heard or shared these stories, each one of us extend our arms to embrace and hold up the young women and girls coming behind us. There is the collective knowledge and understanding, that strong Black women sound their cries to those who are willing to listen. And those cries have a powerful purpose. With this sounding, tears of loneliness, abandonment and betrayal become tears of hope and healing as shared in "Black Women Cry Purple Tears."

Black women cry purple tears
After years, and years of loneliness,
abandonment, and betrayal.

They croon blues songs
in tune with false promises
Of lost lovers who watched them
cry themselves into lakes.

Deep violet tears they cry.

Tears that clog city drains
With desperate calls for freedom...

I see the blues on black women's faces
under the foundation of their eyelids.
I can sense the pain, the frustration...
I can hear the moans, the growls, the screams.

I don't have enough tissue for these tears.
I don't know if one box is enough.
Or, if I should even
bother.

Because, I have learned that crying
Is a form of release. Crying helps to heal.
But, what about those tears
that don't seem to stop?

That speak out loud?
The tears that ask for help?...

Black Women cry purple tears

In a non-peaceful world
Where people make nasty comments
about her upbringing, her hair, her body,
her children, and her house.

I have only two shoulders,
two ears,
And not much time to listen.

Those tears burn. Burn. Burn.
(Sims, 2007)

According to Collins (2000), the hegemonic domain of power is firmly situated in its ability to distort and shape consciousness through the manipulation of images, ideologies and ideas. Black feminist thought reclaims consciousness through an emphasis on the power of self-definition leading to freedom and empowerment. Furthermore, consciousness is not believed, in Black feminist thought, to be fixed but rather continually evolving.

Behind the mask, a sisterhood exists that uplifts, upholds, and nurtures the experiences of girlhood and womanhood. Understanding and embracing this path and transition to Black womanhood offers the girlchild a guide, not only for wandering and wondering, but for vulnerability as a means of strength and self expression. And as I return to my work with Poetic Eight, I recognize that they must also unfold individually, as well as collectively, what they must do for themselves when grief strikes again and they begin to feel overwhelmed. I begin this segment by posing the question, “Where will you go when you feel overwhelmed?”

Where Will You Go When Overwhelmed by Suffocating Emotion?

Where do you go once the tears have fallen and isolation comes back to your door? Where do you go, as an African American adolescent girl poet, on the brink of Strong Black womanhood when you feel overwhelmed? Pizer (1992), who writes of healing and comfort, opens up the question of where you go when you are overwhelmed through her poem “Overwhelmed.” As each girl has who has carried the lived experience of grief, from death, abandonment, loss or pain continues this process, she must imagine her way home to herSelf.

Overwhelmed

When I feel overwhelmed by destruction,
Let me go down to the sea.
Let me sit by the immeasurable ocean
And watch the surf
Beating in and running out all day and
All night.
Let me sit by the sea
And have the bitter sea winds
Slap my cheeks with their cold, damp hands
Until I am sensible again.
Let me look at the sky at night
And let the stars tell me
Of limitless horizons and unknown universes
Until I am grown calm and strong once more.
(Pizer, 1992, p. 39)

After reading “Overwhelmed” to Poetic Eight, I ask them to write where they will go (metaphorically, metaphysically or literally) for comfort and healing when they are feeling overwhelmed by their emotions or losses.

Walker (1997) writes about what she has gained in her life from her experiences, the people that have been placed along her path, her family and her poetic journey. She ponders what she can give back to humanity as a mentor, big sister and mother to all of the daughters born of her heart. And what Walker comes to recognize is that her greatest gift is her poetry. She writes her wisdom, advice and compassion in her poem dedicated to loneliness, to courage, to sorrow, to strength, to despair.

In the poems below, Poetic Eight offers their writing to being overwhelmed. The offerings of their poetry are their gifts to their sense of Being. Camille writes a poem for her thoughts as she enters into this activity. Her poem is a revelation of the

power of her analytical mind and thoughtful silence to free herself from being overwhelmed when she is hurt and to stay calm.

Camille writes this poem to that place in her mind:

Not knowing what to do
Or where to go
Getting lost in my thoughts
Causing serious headaches
Thinking when will all this end
Hoping each thing will fall off piece by piece
When knowing it may get larger
I go to a place in my mind
Filled with thoughts
Doesn't matter what they are
As long as they keep me from this insanity
Let me stay here
Let me stay in this place that keeps me calm.

Mishaps writes her poem to vulnerability. She offers an opening to a place inside her where she does not feel she has to hide her feelings or even her tears. And while she declares that she will not cry in front of others, her tears are where she runs when she is overwhelmed to feel free.

Mishaps writes to that place in her emotions where her tears safely hide:

When I'm feeling overwhelmed I run straight
To my tears or look through pictures, and
Reminisce on past years
I go to a place that you can't see and a place that you can't be
I run directly inside of me and there
Is where I hide, various emotions that
I keep inside
How deep does my place go past the earth's core
it goes to all the other side and more
And more and more...

While Camille goes within her mind to feel free, Blue ventures outside of her thoughts to escape feeling overwhelmed. Blue travels to nature to release her thoughts and feelings when overwhelmed. Like Pizer (1992), Blue retreats to the

water to be cleansed by the waves that are powerful enough to wash away her sorrows and lose herself in what she loves.

Blue writes to that place outside of her mind:

When I feel overwhelmed I go outside of my mind to a beach with lots of overflowing water beyond [what] the eye can see... I would stop what I am doing and do something I love to do. For hours and hours until I don't feel overwhelmed any more.

KiRe enters into the warmth of the kitchen when she is overwhelmed. Her reflection reveals her draw to creating community as her cooking "...brings people together" when she is feeling overwhelmed. KiRe retreats to the place where everything comes out exactly as she intends and creates it to be in a shared space with her family.

KiRe writes to her happiness:

I find sanity in the kitchen. Cooking makes me happy. For me, I sometimes [wish] my life were like a dish, because it seems whenever I cook, it comes out how I want it to, even when life doesn't do that. I also like cooking because it brings people together. No matter what the issues in my family are, it is forgotten once the food is smelled as soon as feet hit the kitchen floor.

As Poetic Eight begins to build bridges to their inner thoughts, writing and feelings, they also build bridges to the feelings and experiences of one another. As the group unfolds through their writing, where they will go and what they will do when they feel overwhelmed, the path of an adolescent poet is illuminated. As this path is made clear, Tia re-enters this space. Tia returns to offer her story as an African American adolescent girl poet turned strong Black woman writer. Tia shares that she does cry, with a purpose, and is not afraid to be vulnerable in her truth and in her writing.

The Re-Turn of The Poetic Daughter

For this portion of the journey, I leave my space as poet and educator to remember my previous journey as rhapsode and “other mother” when Tia re-enters the poetic circle. Since the poetry group, Tia has graduated from high school. Her senior year proves to be a productive one and I receive reports, from her teachers, of her success. She is focused and ambitious, and has become a role model for other students and her younger sister as she said that she would. I first contact her by email then by letter to congratulate her on her graduation and invite her to speak to my new poetry group. We speak by phone, and it is immediately apparent, as she details her recent experiences with her writing, school and job, that she is no longer an African American adolescent girl but a strong Black woman. Tia is now a Black woman writer and a teacher (through lived experience and example) who has maintained her sense of wonder and wander.

Tia’s poetry remains powerful and her voice certain. As I connect her previous lived experiences, in her loss and pain, to that of the members of Poetic Eight, I know that my reading her poetry to the group will not do her work justice. Rather her story must be unfolded, in her way, to the poetry group directly through her voice. I invite Tia as a former adolescent girl poet who once sat in the space where members of Poetic Eight now inhabit. As Tia assumes her new role, she begins to help chart the waters through her words and writings for Poetic Eight to travel behind her and to make their way to the shore.

Poetic Arrival

As I pull into the metro station, I finally notice her. Her physical body looks slight; I had not remembered that she was so short in stature. She appears thinner than the last time that I saw her, making her look almost fragile. But she is not. There is a depth in her eyes and a power in her voice that far exceeds her size and now matches her lived experiences.

When we finally arrive at the classroom, where she will speak with the new poets, her mere presence calls for a response. She creates hushed tones, followed by absolute silence, when she walks into the room. Her presence will remain even after today when she will again move on. I will see her once more when I make other arrangements for her to join the group, for a poetry program, but I will not know the next time that she will re-surface or where her homesteading path will lead her. Her homecoming path has led her back to this space to imprint her poetic footsteps and experiences as dust tracks on this road. She walks through this wilderness for the next group of poet warriors and griottes to follow her.

Tia is as animated and humorous as she was in high school, and she carries the same sense of ownership (much like Mishaps and Blue) and command of her presence. She is also a natural leader in the room and is seemingly fear-less in speaking her truths and sharing her voice. She follows my lead by sitting atop a desk to face the girls as she readies herself to read her poems and share her stories. Since graduating from high school she has received an associate's degree and is now returning to college for a bachelor's degree. She has a job she enjoys and a boyfriend she feels is supportive and treats her with respect, love and dignity. She reminds the

girls that they, too, can be anything, and overcome anything and that she is a living testament to those very words.

Through Tia's poetry there evolves a "co-responsive" truth born from the experience of listening for the girls, and of being heard for Tia. Tia, who has never before seen or met this group, boldly steps from behind the mask to utter her truth in this sacred space without apology or indecision. She speaks with conviction; she reads with authority, and she offers her strength to the girls in my program through her poetry and her lived experience. And as the room falls silent, she reads her poem of the rape.

It's not the type of thing a girl should go through.
This guy took my body and tore it in two.
He took my childhood and laughs away.
When he first grabbed... me...
You can hear me breathing heavily windows shut.
He must have hated me very much...
Confusion on my face as I started to cry.
Crossing my legs I wanted to die...
He told me it was my fault and if I knew better I wouldn't let it happen again.
(Tia, 2009)

Tia then leaves them with a message which can be merged with many experiences surrounding violence, oppression, silence and shame for girls and women. "I don't want any one [girls and women] to be scared. Speak up. It's not your fault."

The girls are overcome by "truth as an experience with listening" (Levin, 1989, p. 136). Their eyes remain on hers; they speak words of agreement, sigh and nod with an understanding that is not carried through words. As Tia unfolds her poetry and truth, Poetic Eight enters first into a space of epistemological silence. And through this truth and listening, there is an acknowledgement that we are responsible

to each other and to humanity by what we hear. It is an experience that moves what is now an ontological silence (fulfilling silence) to voice and numbness to resonance.

The truths of poetry often reside in listening with an open heart and an active ear; the truths of poetry also reside in the writing and speaking of remembrances that move us from what is numb or not expressed to what is alive and felt. Our listening, poetry writing and truth saying are interwoven and intertwined with each other's. Yet, we must first offer our silence in order to hear our own hearts and each other's. These weavings are filled with responsiveness, receptiveness and care. Listening is also born of the wisdom and intuition of the feminine spirit that invites us all to return home to our selves, our "I Ams."

Tia's message of justice, voice and self acceptance will be further unconcealed by Poetic Eight in the following chapters. Moreover, in the next chapter, I continue to unfold the process of writing, listening and creating. Chapter five begins with "My Real Name," as poetic identities and naming are uncovered and explored. Naming is the opening and interpreting of voice for the poets that deepens love, friendship and justice. In subsequent chapters, justice and divinity will occur in a space of fire and joy. As the chapters unfold, Poetic Eight's remembrances and connections allow them to enter into homecoming and homesteading with themselves and each other.

CHAPTER FIVE: MY REAL NAME

“My Real Name” is about uncovering the power to name who you really are through writing. As the process of naming unfolds, it nudges me to remember that phenomenology invites you into a space sometimes as shyly and quietly as the voices of Camille and Family who ask you, through the subtleties of their expression as well as their poetic silence, to listen actively, intuitively, with care, openness, a higher consciousness and patience. However, there is deep enthusiasm by participants and me to bridge gaps, connect spaces and jump head first into the deep end of the phenomenological waters to discover and explore the bottom of the ocean floor and all that is living and growing in that space. Yet, this process gently reminds us all that some of what surfaces is not explored or dug up from beneath the ocean floor, but sometimes floats to the surface, carried instead by a facial expression, a whisper, or a gentle drifting that leads you to a deeper poetic understanding of yourself and one another.

This drifting is a reminder of the process of true poetic renderings. While this journey is about creation, re-creation, and movement, it is also about surrendering. Painfully, there are times when the self struggle of the participant writer is so great, and the process so labored, that I must consciously fight the urge to thwart the writer’s process by jumping into the water to drag her out. There are times when I have entered, waist deep or totally submerged in these phenomenological waters, as I have been led or called to do by their voices or their specific life circumstances. And there have been times that I have pushed against the current with my own restless movements that have pushed back and dragged me into even stronger tides. I

permitted the poetic renderings to wash over and around me until, like Pizer (1992), I was not overwhelmed or anxious any more. When calm and stillness came, following being overwhelmed, so did the where-with-all to continue to observe and experience the breath of this poetic study and the rhythm of its unfolding.

This uncovering and naming had its very own life which offered the lived experience for members to be reborn again and again with each un-concealing, healing, story telling and writing. Self struggle, re-creation and poetic rebirth come through and by the grief and loss process in each member's own way. In our poetry group it has come through laughing uproariously, crying sometimes inconsolably, writing, drawing, journaling, talking, checking in, embracing, being alone and being together. It also comes through writing poetic calls and responses to each other, poetry discussions and writing workshops, but mostly it comes through the courage to write and to share individual and collective stories and the courage to hear what is and is not spoken. In this chapter to respect the courageous naming of the poets, I choose to stay with their original work rather than rely on outside sources.

Uncovering the Naming

There are many collective lived and poetic experiences in the group; yet, uncovering the power to name who you are through poetry writing is a distinctively individual and unique experience. Mishaps' piece, "I Don't Know What I Need," resonates with KiRe because of its individual nature. Moreover, the poem sets forth a charge for/to the listener to see behind the mask to the experiences of the writer as she unfolds her own personal journey, feelings and questions of I Am. Following Mishaps' poem, KiRe offers her voice to this space as a rhapsode in response to

Mishaps' un-concealing and exploration of her real name. As Mishaps begins her journey, finding the anam cara in her self and receiving it by others creates self struggle.

I don't need
What I need

I don't need Nobody- I think!
I hope! I won't be happy until
I'm all alone then how will I cope
I don't need friendz or fam menz or
Manz, goonz with empathy and
I damn sure don't need your sympathy
I have plenty of my own.
I don't want help I don't want
Hope I want a miracle but
That's
Not so
I don't want tears, fears and cares
I just want "you" for years, years
And years
But how do I explain this to the men who
Took you away
I can't scream at him cuz he hears
But never has anything to say
I don't even wanna know why any more
Nor how
I don't need a buddy or pal cuz
I think I'll be o.k.
I don't need to be alive but I'm
Here any way wow he kept me
The very first day. And still I proceed
Maybe I don't know what I need.
(Mishaps, 2009)

The following is KiRe's poetic response to Mishaps' poem "I Don't Know What I Need."

I hate when people say "I know how you feel"
Because they don't
Nobody knows, I DON'T EVEN KNOW
Fantasies clash with reality
Memories collide with tomorrow
I don't even know what's real anymore

I don't want to know what's real anymore
I like living what feels to be a lie
Because the truth hurts so bad it has killed my soul, over and over
Numb with the embalming fluid of sadness, suffocated, with what my
life
Could really be insanity
I can't take it anymore, the way I feel
This simple complexity is peeling the layers of my stability, but
nobody understands don't tell me you know how I feel
I HATE THAT!! Or maybe I hate that someone could understand
me...

When I don't even understand myself
(KiRe, 2009)

Mishaps' story has been one of a strong Black woman, much like the women in chapter four, who have exclusively offered support, leadership and consolation to others. In the past, Mishaps has not allowed herself to receive support from others or to be in reciprocal relationships. As she unravels her feelings and declarations of what she does not need, she begins to uncover another layer of her poetic identity. Beneath the surface is a layer of vulnerability and questioning expressed through the exclamation, "I don't need Nobody- I think!"

Mishaps' initial denial of her needs and of her vulnerability, followed by her self-inquiry, allow her to journey to the in-between spaces of strong Black womanhood to arrive at the end-place of homesteading in acceptance and belonging. As Mishaps states, "I don't need friendz or fam menz or manz..." she reveals a place within herself that is still raw and fragile. Mishaps' lived experiences, as a daughter of domestic violence, a mother-less daughter and a surrogate mother for her younger siblings, have taught her that in order to survive she must not ask or depend on anyone outside of herself (Williams, 2008).

Yet, as Mishaps begins to dig up her concealed emotions in her poetry, her needs to connect and to belong begin to surface. How can she reconcile the need to conceal her feelings to survive her pain and the need to connect and be fully alive? How do you live and breathe when your needs are at odds with each other?

Through Mishaps' poetry she confronts her pain and her loss as she confronts her father and God: "But how do I explain this to the men who... Took you away... I can't scream at him cuz he hears... But never has anything to say..." In her poetry, Mishaps can scream at her father who does not hear her when she speaks, and even scream at God who did not answer her prayers and spare her mother's life. As Mishaps' declarations, questions and screams are written, she enters into a new poetic consciousness revealing "Maybe I don't know what I need."

Poetic Eight connects with Mishaps through their compassion and understanding. However, KiRe connects to Mishaps' poem by first acknowledging that no one else can fully understand your grief but you. Even though many members of the group have struggled with feelings of grief and loss, each girl's lived experience and journey to healing and acceptance is her own. Therefore, KiRe's poetic interpretation and response to Mishaps' poem is brought forth not through a shared lived experience but through her exclamation, "I hate when people say I know how you feel Because they don't..."

And while KiRe's writing affirms the uniqueness of individual voices and lived experiences, she, too, uncovers another layer of truth brought forth by vulnerability. KiRe's poetry writing acknowledges, "Or maybe I hate that someone could understand me..." Her poetic questioning leads me to ponder, in our

humanness, are we more afraid of connecting with and being understood by others than being rejected by them? To bury their pain and shed false images, Poetic Eight now calls upon their secret naming.

Secretly What Do You Want Your Name to Be?

My Real Name

Today my name is colorful.
Yesterday my name was dead souls.
Tomorrow my name will be lively spirits.
My friends think my name is fire.
The police think my name is burden.
My parents think my name is symphony.
Secretly I know my name is anything.

I want it to be.
(Noel, in Writerscorps, 2003, p. 46)

Understanding yourself and each other begins with the process of uncovering *My Real Name* (s). As a group we read the poem “My Real Name.” This naming activity begins with each participant going around the circle to read a line. The reading opens with Mishaps calling out with conviction, “Yesterday my name was dead souls.” As we move around the room, each poet seems to fall exactly in place with the line that she *needs* to read in that moment (even before they are asked to call out the line that has meaning for them). Blue follows with “Tomorrow my name will be lively spirits.” Queen of Hearts roars, “My friends think my name is fire.” Divine Diva whispers “My parents think my name is symphony.” Lenash closes by reading, “Secretly I know my name is anything I want it to be.” After we complete the reading, I ask each poet to call out another line of her choosing. Mishaps and

Lenash select the same opening and closing lines of the poem that they read at the beginning of the activity.

Lively Spirits: Urgent Naming

As we move into the next activity, each adolescent girl receives a copy of the poem with the first line “Today my name is colorful” removed. I ask them to complete the first line for themselves beginning with, “Today my name is...” Following today, they are invited to create a name for yesterday and tomorrow. I share that their names can be anything that they choose or want them to be from a color to a feeling, sound, season, thought or idea.

There seems to be a feeling of restlessness in the room as they reflect, engage, discuss, or appear to avoid discussing their naming (turning to look out of the window, glancing at a cell phone, chatting to their neighbors or to me). Levin (1989) reminds us that there are many different ways for us to be with, relate to or be in situations and experiences of our lives. Moreover, we perceive through a variety of channels (tactile, auditory, emotional, intellectual), orientations (curiosity, analytical, passive), perspectives (glancing sideways, looking straight ahead) and degrees of intensity (focused, staring, touching lightly, listening excitedly) as well as self-awareness.

Almost ten minutes have now passed since we started (although to me, and maybe to some of the others, it feels like thirty). I repeat the last line of the poem out loud, “Secretly I know my name is anything that I want my name to be.” I ask the participants to write “I want my name to be...” followed by a word that names them as well as the poem. They begin to speak out names that they could have been given

at birth, or playfully ask and tease, “Do I look like a ___?” while laughing. “Push yourselves to be abstract” I encourage as they continue to mull over and compare the literal names they might use or are familiar with. “Today my name is,” I repeat. I then inquire, “What do you want it to be?” and the activity begins to unfold. But as I probe, I begin to feel a sense of urgency.

Why aren't they mounting this hurdle? I am expecting them to dive in with reckless abandon, but instead feel confronted by their naming of the obvious or expected. How is this uncovering the power of writing that has guided my study of *being* and naming? I begin slowly calling out words from the poem: “fire, secretly, lively spirits.” Creating connections in this naming to their flow and reflections of I was, I am, I will be... Chatter and laughter begin until, I firmly redirect them to the page; my sense of urgency is growing in intensity. This is not as I had imagined the process to unfold as I was carefully creating, planning and organizing each activity. The realization comes to me; I am frustrated. Digging a little deeper, I realize it is more than frustration; there is concern as I question: if they cannot answer how they would name themselves or what their real names are, have I failed them? What is more, if they cannot name themselves, how do I know the truth in my names and identities (educator, poet/writer, phenomenologist researcher, arts activist)?

In spite of my phenomenological desire for gentle unfolding, I am attached to the outcome of this activity. Moreover, in not wanting others (including me) to impose names on my co-participants, I am ironically tempted to demand that they (in order to claim their emancipation) label themselves, and label themselves in a certain way. I once again hear the voice of Heidegger, “Teaching is more difficult than

learning... because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn” (Heidegger, as cited in Hultgren, 1995, p. 371).

There are times when we are engaged with acute or heightened awareness and participation, and other times when we are distant, detached or simply absent-minded. Levin (1989) shares a reflection of a psychotherapist who recognizes that he does not always follow his own process in order to be able to “be there for the other person” (p. 18). I am reminded again, through this experience of naming, of the need to listen actively to the different voices (spoken, unspoken, emotional, intellectual, and bodily) to be able to follow as well as lead. Moreover, the process of speaking, reflecting silently, fidgeting, drifting, glancing, engaging, wandering, laughing, smiling, imagining and questioning are the un-foldings of their, and my, many names.

Symphony

With these revelations, my shoulders become more relaxed. I begin to shift my posture to shrug off the burden of outcomes and expectations. And with the opening of the next activity, we wonder and wander as led by our own processes and imaginations.

Across the table, I have scattered the names “colorful,” “dead souls,” “lively spirits,” “fire,” “burden,” “symphony” and “secretly” from the poem. As I take a step back, they are invited to step to the front to pick up a brightly colored index card with the name from the poem that “belongs” to them. As they come to the table, they look excitedly at the names. Some of the girls again become pensive and quiet, while others talk, giggle and compare ideas.

Each poet takes the card that she considers to be a symbol of her naming, and a part of her identity, soul or her gift. Divine Diva claims the name of Burden traced back to her feelings of being unwanted and unexpected, as unfolded previously in chapter four. Camille steps into the name of Secretly, connecting with her silence. Mishaps declares her name to be Dead Souls, acknowledging her numbness from the death of her mother. Blue embraces the name Fire and her voice of passion. Queen of Hearts names herself Colorful as she embraces her personality and feeling that her color is gold which she sees as good luck. Lenash names herself Symphony as she declares her lived experiences playing in harmony with most of those around her in her life. And KiRe announces her animation and enthusiasm by selecting the name Lively Spirits. Once she has selected one of her many names, I invite each girl to explore creating her own “My Real Name” poem. Through the declaration, a shift begins to occur.

Everything

As we continue with naming, we follow “My Real Name” to return to Poetic Eight’s initial individual naming through their chosen pen names. Following the first activity, reflections seem to deepen as each member shares her feelings surrounding the meaning of her name. As the unfolding(s) occur, the adolescent girls’ writings lead them to everything from where they come from to who they were, are and will be.

Today my name is everything
Yesterday my name was nothing
but now, that solemn silence
Is now blasting boisterously

overflowing the bowl of my soul
all over the table destiny sat me at
but I won't clean it up...I CAN'T CLEAN IT UP
Anxiously awaiting life's next entree'
yet, still savoring the last bite
And I know that tomorrow
my name will be history
because I didn't clean it up...
(KiRe, 2009)

KiRe is often thought of as the light hearted one in the group because she keeps people smiling and laughing. She reveals there were times when she felt she could not tell people if she wasn't "feeling good," or that it was her job to make people happy (even at her own expense). Yet, what she learns about herself through her writing and naming is that "I am truly a lot happier than even I thought I was." The happiness she declares and affirms is emerging from a deeper self that is not based on others' perceptions or feelings about her (although she shares one thing that continues to make her happy and feel good, is helping others, like many of the other girls in the group). At this point in her naming, she realizes that when she works on making herself happy her happiness is genuine. She now declares with conviction as a "Lively Spirit" if "you're mad be mad. It is okay to express it and to cry and if you're happy be happy but not for others you don't have to pretend to be or feel something that you don't." In embracing all of her emotions, she declares her name today is "Everything."

My Real Name

Today my name is Blue Jay
Tomorrow my name will be Fire
My friends think my name is Thunder
The police think my name is sweet
My parents think my name is lovely
Secretly I know my name is black power

Or anything I want it to be.
(Blue, 2009)

Blue originally selected her pen name to describe her emotions after the loss of her mother. Yet, toward the end of the program, Blue offers a different interpretation of her name. “[It is] something to describe me but not necessarily saying that I’m blue...but it’s saying... blue is a normal color...I don’t feel the same way as I felt before I came in here because the poetry group helped me with my feelings and emotions.” And with the new meaning of her naming she declares she will keep her pen name. Blue further unfolds her own identity through her writings on her life and her goals that unfold in spite of the pain she has endured. Blue, like the “Blue Jay” of her name for today in “My Real Name,” can still fly. Blue is also drawn to unfolding her naming and poetic identity through her desire and ability to help others as shares in her poetic reflection, “My Life Starts with a Word.”

My Life Starts with a Word

A word of justice
That I have always wanted to practice
My life cries law
My duty is to help, good and bad...

My life, my life, my goal
(Blue, 2008)

Queen of Hearts names herself “Colorful” (for her animated presentation and personality and excitement for life). In addition, to the other girls such as Blue, KiRe and Mishaps, she offers part of her naming through the lens of others and her ability to help people, listen and “make” them feel better about themselves. I wonder, as they unfold their naming through their ability to help and take care of others, at what point could “helping you hurt me” as unfolded by many of the strong Black women in

chapter four? She further unfolds her naming in her poem “Colorful,” followed by her reflection and discussion.

Colorful

Sometimes when people look at me,
My personality strikes them as colorful,
A star shining through others eyes of he or she,
But then there was yesterday,
The pain & heartache of being left on the street,
The fear that I will be jumped or beat,
The secrets that are afraid to tell you the real me,
But no one thought this was me,
So tomorrow when I look in their eyes,
I open up and speak with dignity,
And show the personality,
And what really people think of me,
Hoping I am, I will be, that pile of gold,
That can be any color,
As of colorful...
But that wish of luck left me,
With these colorful beings.
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

“My pen name was Queen of Hearts. I’ve come up with that because you know when people are upset. Like I’m always there to help them out. I’m always there to help them with their hearts. To fix it. So I call myself the Queen of Hearts. [It’s] something that I want to do. I want to help people. Maybe become a psychologist.” However, when I ask her how she mends her own heart she responds:

Sometimes I try not to make as many mistakes as I can. I try not to rush many things. Try to keep everything real. I don’t want all that emotion stuff but when it comes down to it if I have to cry I will cry. I have a book for my thoughts, a book for poetry (referring to the notebooks I gave to each student during the first poetry group meeting). When I’m writing my poems it’s from a different experience. Not the troubles I would write in my thoughts. I think I want to write more about how we have evolved ever since this program has started. When I read my poems to y’all it’s like, ‘Oh snap I really like this!’ I want to minor in creative writing. I name myself as a poet and as a writer.

Through her naming and own poetic revealing she invites the listener to take a deeper glance past the surface into her heart.

Burden

A burden of those who didn't expect me
Forever wondering am I loved by my family
Today my name is heart
Yesterday my name was dead souls
But was I ever thought of as
A person who could love u the most
My friends think my name is fun
My enemies call me the unwanted one
Secretly I know my name is anything
I want it to be

I want my name to be loved-
(Divine Diva, 2009)

Uncovering the power to name allows a clearing from “Burden” for Divine Diva. Divine Diva, whose “My Real Name” poem was also featured in chapter four, moves from her selection of the name “Burden” to unfolding the creation of her pen name. “I just thought of it because I went to my aunt’s church... They had this conference Divine Divas... for young women. My grandma also calls me that. It’s my alter ego. Divine means that I’m God’s child and Diva that I can do what I set my mind to.”

Today my name is pain on top of fire
I was once a different soul.
Yesterday my name was boulder.
I am now filled with confusion.
Tomorrow my name will be a reflection of the future...
(Mishaps, 2009)

For Mishaps, it is her process of *sufferer* that allows her to “put under” her first naming of “Dead Souls” to create a living name of pain, fire and reflection

(Barnhart, 1995, p. 775). "I picked the name Mishaps because of all the bad things that happened: Drama, tragedy, a world of pain, a world of Mishaps." Mishaps returns to her naming, through her pen name while reflecting on its creation.

I mean I feel better when I'm here. I feel good. I feel relieved. I feel stress-less. I feel real good. I mean I probably would think about changing the name. But then I also have to think about that after I leave this room, it's always going to be the same out there and that's what my name represents. So I wouldn't change it. I think I'm going to find things that are always going to make me feel that way because there are always too many goodbyes and not enough hellos. People come in your life but more of them leave than stay. I think that's the hardest part for me.

Mishaps makes the distinction between safety, belonging and acceptance in this sacred poetic space versus the outside world. The poetry group provides a place for Mishaps and the other girls to step from behind the mask to begin to reveal their true poetic identities which encompass their vulnerability, creativity, empowerment and voice(s) (Collins, 2000). In our discussion, Mishaps acknowledges that our time together is now limited. The poetry group will soon be ending and Mishaps, Queen of Hearts and KiRe will be graduating high school.

While Mishaps expresses great enthusiasm over her graduation, the close of the poetry group and her senior year require that she once again say good bye to people she has come to deeply care for and who care deeply for her. In order to say good bye, will Mishaps need to detach herself again from her feelings and her loss? Without Mishaps' vulnerability, her heart would not have been made accessible to the group or, most importantly, to her. Mishaps declares that the outside world, for her, will always be filled with unfortunate circumstances and mishaps. Yet, she has

uncovered the power to name herself and maintains her power through her choice to continue to use her original pen name.

Unfolding Who I Am

In looking at Poetic Eight's power to uncover who they really are through their writing, they also call forth their names from where they are from and share the importance of their cultures and heritage. They embrace who they were, who there are and who they will be. As they continue to uncover the power to name themselves, we venture through the wilderness by returning to their homecoming (where they are from). Homecoming requires a return to a place, even if the stay there is temporary. Homecoming allows a connection to be made with those who still reside there, those who have departed, with our memories, current and past selves (Casey, 1993).

Revisiting this space (physically or poetically) can bring about closure and peace with the past and beckon us to journey to a new space through homesteading that will be our future home-place. However, connecting to our cultural legacies and heritage through writing, also provides the opening for co-habitancy between homecoming and homesteading by means of a culturally responsive poetic co-existence between contemporaries and ancestors, or those who still remain and those who have departed (Casey, 1993).

Divine Diva's story is set against the backdrop of her family's lived experiences in the Deep South. Her family's cultural and historical truths inspired her to write pieces about slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, psychological and physical brutality and other atrocities inflicted on African Americans throughout history. Today, as the keeper of culture and legacy, she begins with her homecoming through

sharing her contemporary culturally responsive poetry about growing up in the District of Columbia in “2 Words D.C.”

2 Words D.C.

The Cap, the home of Go-Go
Chocolate City
Where am I from?
2 words D.C.
Northeast Southwest
Northwest Southwest
Takin the metro bus & train
A sign everywhere u went
Chillin at Ben’s Chilli Bowl with my uncle
But gunshots would flare
When up came the darkness
The hot days in the summer
Everyone on their stoop
Walkin to school
Forever trying to read my books
A mural Mandela, Bob Marley, Malcolm X, Dr. King
Grew up in Brookland DC...
One of my favorite places in the world
I want my friends to come & see
Yall can come and visit me
I’ll be in
2 words D.C.
(Divine Diva, 2009)

Freire (1994), in *Pedagogy of Hope*, declares that his work was “Written in rage and love, without which there is no hope” (p. 4). Divine Diva and Lenash offer their writings and voices in rage and love from which hope and connection are brought forth in their poems “2 Words D.C.,” “Nigerian Woman,” “This is My Hair,” and “U Say.” In “2 Words D.C.,” Divine Diva shares her cultural experiences growing up in the District of Columbia. She remembers the historic sites of Washington, D.C. through “Chillin at Ben’s Chilli Bowl” to the influences of such powerful national leaders as Dr. Martin Luther King and Minister Malcolm X.

Through cultural murals in Washington, D.C., Divine Diva also is connected to the global legacies and works of Nelson Mandela and Bob Marley. While Divine Diva's poem is a celebration of culture and homecoming, she further unfolds the struggles of violence and oppression that are faced within the community. "But gunshots would flare When up came the darkness..." And through writing with truth, love, hope and cultural pride, Divine Diva embraces and integrates the ancient with the contemporary as a place of homecoming and homesteading. "[D.C.] One of my favorite places in the world...I want my friends to come & see..."

Lenash's culturally responsive poetry begins with her homecoming to Nigeria to unfold her lived experiences and those of her family living within the shackles and confines of poverty, oppression and domination. She further writes of Nigeria and the intersections of Nigerian and American culture, hence deepening her poetic naming. As she writes of her homecoming, she creates a clearing to her homesteading by proudly acknowledging, declaring and claiming her heritage and passage into womanhood in her poem "Nigerian Woman."

Nigerian Woman (inspired by Maya Angelou's Phenomenal Woman)

It's my heritage
And so... it is me
A brown skin woman
With Nigerian hair
And no other sign that I care
Of my background...
You look at me and see
A black woman...
You don't see the shackles on my feet
Or the goat with rice dinners that I eat
A basket of clothes on my head
With me in African dashiki lookin dead
Go in the house, put my kids folded clothes on the bed...
But that's my heritage...

I am, a Nigerian, woman!
No need to doubt because of the way I talk
Or if I don't wiggle my hips while I walk.
Just because I don't know my Nigerian speech
Doesn't mean that my head is too high to reach.
Trust, I am what you do not perceive...
Worth more than my African siblings who are poorer
Over and over my people are being oppressed...
The white man putting them down and saying it's for the best...
But who are they...
Nigerian women.
Just because on the out[side] I'm not in my African clothes
And the only way you see I'm Nigerian is through my nose...
Don't doubt that I am, a Nigerian, woman.
(Lenash, 2009)

Lenash in her poem "Nigerian Woman" exists in a place of co-habitancy wrapped in Nigerian and American naming(s), identities, lived experiences, perceptions and expectations. Her American homesteading is a place that is void of the speech, dialect or languages of her Nigerian culture. It is also void of the dress and the gender roles of her Nigerian foremothers. And while she does not adorn a dyseki or maintain the tradition of toiling for a husband or children, preparing goat and rice diners or washing and folding clothes by hand, she cautions others not to re-name her identity as she is still a Nigerian woman. Americans and Nigerians often do not "perceive" Lenash's identity as African, although she writes her Nigerian heritage can be seen in her natural hair (texture): "With Nigerian hair... And no other sign that I care." While the women who are more assimilated or Americanized chose to straighten their hair, the women who embrace their full Nigerian identity often braid their hair. Through Lenash's poetry, it is unfolded that her hair style (neither straightened nor braided) represents a lack of caring about her culture and her

appearance according to others. This perception is further expanded upon by Lenash in her poem “This is My Hair.”

There is tension co-existing in the space of homecoming and homesteading, as Lenash proudly claims the Nigerian American heritage that is shared between contemporary and ancient practices and life circumstances. In this tension, Lenash also offers the voice of resistance to colonization and domination through her writing. “The white man putting them down and saying it’s for the best...” she writes in reference to the rapping of land, resources, homes and cultures of African people during colonization and post-colonization (Hilliard, 1998; Walker, in Graham, 1997). Lenash offers a counter narrative to oppression (Collins, 2000) in her poem by challenging a class system that places greater value on her existence than her family’s because she is deemed to be “Worth more than African siblings who are poorer.” To this affront she responds with defiance and a voice of solidarity, “Trust, I am what you do not perceive... Don’t doubt that I am, a Nigerian, woman.”

Unlike Lenash’s homecoming, the meaning of Camille’s homecoming is deciphered through what is not written in her poem. Camille takes us through her homecoming to Southern California, where memories reside of friendships of the soul (anam cara) and the joy of her early years. Her homecoming is brought forth through memories of the first six years of her life, wrapped safely beneath the warmth of the California sun. As she first reads of her homecoming, her voice is a distant and faint whisper. She is invited to return home again with another reading in order to allow her voice to become more audible. With the next sounding, her voice is heightened and carries throughout the room, allowing her to be fully heard and to remember.

On the other side of the country
On the border of the Atlantic ocean
Just below Oregon
To the left of Arizona
That's where I'm from
Southern California
Raised six years of my life
Home of the Hollywood celebrities
Sunny bright yellow weather
Comfort of the warm sun
This is where I'm from
Where I met my first best friends
Where I had a fun life
A place where I felt happy
Southern California
The place that, I miss
That's where I'm from.
(Camille, 2009)

Camille's homecoming offers the joy of life that is care-free, warm and fulfilling. In group discussions she frequently references her childhood best friends and her longing for them. With her childhood best friends, Camille shares, she has a voice. Throughout the poetry program, Camille struggles with being shy, reading her poetry and writing from beneath the surface. Perhaps, this unfolding in her poem of the first six years of life, represents the simplicity of I Am. Does Camille's poem represent a place and a time that requires no explanation or meaning? And as Camille shares the joy of playing with her best friends in a place where she "had a fun life," she offers no voice to what she misses outside of "the place." Camille, who was adopted after her sixth year and moved to the East Coast, offers no indication or recollection of her feelings or memories after age six in her writing. Could it be for Camille, that the only memories she needs to transition from homecoming to homesteading are what she offers on the surface of her writing? What poetic wisdom resides there?

Poetic Wisdom

The majority of the girls in my study created and claimed their identities and names in their works and writing comfortably and naturally as African American adolescent girl poets who saw themselves as powerful in their words and in their space(s) (the poetry group, school and society). For some members, writing is not as much of a way of uncovering power as it is a way of declaring, expressing and affirming it for themselves and others. They are young African American women who have not had their wandering and wondering preempted by the dominant culture that forced naming of race, gender, class, ability or age upon them (Carroll, 1997; Sewell, 2006). However, many come into this space of power and voice, with their understandings and lived experiences as daughters of Black women who have endured multiple oppressions, from which they perished or were otherwise left voiceless, physically or emotionally.

The Voice of Resistance

The power that they sought, as African American adolescent girls, and daughters of Black women, declaring “I Come From,” “I Am” and “My Real Name,” was granted through re-writing their lives, telling their stories and the stories of their mothers and loved ones (Writerscorps, 2003). Uncovering the power to name who they really are through their writing is the journey from homecoming to (a self-created) homesteading. Lenash returns to this space with a voice of resistance in her declaration. She further unfolds the poetic intersections of culture and heritage, Nigerian and American legacies and lived experiences in her poem “This... is My Hair.”

This... is My Hair

You see it's slicked back in a style as if I care,
But in the summer when the tops down it flies all n the air... only,
Bcuz... this is my hair.
The African roots that my women tried to braid
But because it was so nappy it seemed to take all day
To get it combed, and brushed and done to perfection
That's why my aggressive sisters have made this their profession
Thinking that [they're] better, because they do hair
But little do they know that I, don't care...
Bcuz this... is My hair.
It's not yours, but mine
My roots are fine
My African sisters, are wasting time
By hating hair that's divine
Bcuz this... is My hair.
Although it may be coarse
I would never trade it.
Although I need it to grow
I wouldn't braid it.
Even if my hairstyle always stays the same
This... is my hair, it ain't no game,
So bcuz this is my hair
I am aware
That I don't care
And in case you stare

Hello... this, is my hair.
(Lenash, 2009)

Members of Poetic Eight offer their voices by writing poetry, which resembles many of the descriptions and feelings of adolescent poets in *City of One* (2004) and *Paint Me Like I Am* (2003). They define poetry for themselves as, “the best way to express yourself, your thoughts, emotions and how you feel,” as they further reveal their own naming and power. With this uncovering, Divine Diva, as the historical story teller and griotte of the group, declares that “Poetry is saying how you feel [and] speaking and telling stories for people that can't tell stories or [are] afraid to tell stories.” Each poet offers her voice to African and African American poetic culture

and family through her writing, story telling, homecoming and homesteading. KiRe also pays tribute to the wisdom and “knowing” offered and embodied in the “elders” through her poem “Wisdom.”

Wisdom

One million feelings captured in one word
Wisdom
So often spoken, but never heard
It's because of you that I am here today
Hopefully you are pleased with what I display
Although you are gone, in my heart I know
No matter what happens, I'll always show
Them that they made an impact in my life
My life is much easier because of their struggles and strife
Enduring so much, my elders remained strong
There will always be a place in my heart they belong
My gratitude, my thanks weighs more than a ton
I could never forget where I came from
I'll always remember what you told me
All those late nights you'd hold me
Telling me all I could grow up to be
For you I want to make those goals, reality
I live to make you proud of me
Grandmothers, grandfathers, and those before them
I love them so much, I could never ignore them
Let's adore them, and listen to their every word
Wisdom
So often spoken, but never heard
(KiRe, 2009)

Driven by “the love of wisdom” and assertion of Aristotle that “All men by nature desire to know” (Babich, 2006, p. 3), my thoughts return to the knowing that African American and Black women and girl poets personify and express through their creations. Rather than experience a desire, as stated by Aristotle, as all men “desire to know,” the African American adolescent girls and Black women in my study, honor their knowing and their lived experiences on their terms and in their own language through their writings. “For language is the most delicate and thus the most

susceptible vibration...” (Heidegger, 1969, p. 38). The delicate vibration created by language is linked to emancipation (Freire, 1994). This form of emancipation comes, for many Black women and girls, through knowing, understanding and acknowledging historical, societal, collective and personal pasts.

By understanding suffering, struggle and the history of oppression, these young poets’ words are also laced with feelings of hope. There is a need to dream and imagine something greater, something different and something better than what society has defined. Without hope, we cannot see our way through struggle and instead become fatigued, overwhelmed or immobilized. When we dare to fight through our poetic expressions and voices, and truly believe in the possibility of change we are seeking to resurrect, there is power in the truth that we are speaking (Freire, 1994).

Courage, resilience and strength are derived from our legacies, roots, and heritage as we acknowledge the degradation of the oppressive experiences of the past and present alongside the dignity, wisdom and grace of ancestors, elders, mothers, mother figures and ourselves. Divine Diva un-conceals her voice of resistance and connection to legacy in “U Say.”

U Say

U say I’m not gonna amount to nothin’
All I can say is u must be on something
I can do what ever I want to do
What I set my mind to
When u look at me u don’t see a
Business woman, an entrepreneur, or a lawyer
All u see is a person trying to annoy you
I try to live my life & live it to the fullest
But if I’m not wearing something new
U might think I’m homeless

The person I'm trying to grow into is not there yet
But with the best respect she'll have her moment
She might be a lawyer, a doctor or president of the United States

But u'll think by the way she looks
America made a mistake
Oh she's a descendant from mammy all she knows
To do is bake and sew
But in my southern voice
I can do so much mo'
The make [up] that I have is not from Mary Kay or Mac
The make-up that I have is what u lack
I come from kings & queens who were royalty
Tell me how far back can u go [in] ur family tree
(Divine Diva, 2009)

Margaret Walker's essays from 1932-1992 echo a voice of ancient foremothers as Divine Diva declares her freedom and resistance, and affirms Black womanhood through writing. She asserts that, if no where else, in her thoughts and in her mind she is completely free. And that freedom, she declares, for many African Americans must be expressed in her writing. "As a woman, I have come through the fires of hell because I am a black woman, because I am poor, because I live here in America, and because I am determined to be both a creative artist and maintain my inner integrity and my instinctive need to be free" (Walker, in Graham, 1997, p. 5).

Queen of Heart's journey concludes this segment as she embarks on her homecoming by un-concealing her poetic identity from beyond the mask to growing freedom. Queen of Heart's journey within, offers the discovery of her true self. As she opens "new doors to new beginnings," her homesteading begins.

Where I'm From?! (Inspired by I Come From)

I am from a chapter of new beginnings...
Working hard day by day
Getting stronger by the time
No more masks to tame your emotions...

Can open new doors
To new beginnings
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

Queen of Hearts shares in her previous discussions and reflections that she wants to write about the progress she has made since the poetry group began. Her writings in “Where I’m From?!” offer insight into the hard work that she has put forth to develop, not only as a writer, but as a young woman who is free from others’ perceptions and expectations. While Queen of Hearts once wrote that her purpose was to help others with their emotions, she now writes that there will be “No more masks to tame your emotions...” Like KiRe, Queen of Hearts is often the most animated and enthusiastic member of the group. She frequently makes others laugh or smile and has shared that her aim is to make others feel better. Yet, as the group continues, she seems to have uncovered the power to express her own emotions as she moves to this new beginning of homesteading with strength and certainty.

New Beginnings and Renewal

As the Poetic Eight members embrace where they have come from and where they are going, they begin to explore new beginnings and renewal. The idea of new beginnings and renewal is connected to our entering into the season of spring. An activity was originally scheduled to be designed and facilitated by Family around spring (her chosen topic). However, she was unable to create or attend the group meeting at that time, so I designed and facilitated an activity that would still allow her topic to be honored (while connecting it to previous themes such as grief, loss and naming).

As I begin the facilitation process, I ask each member to begin by thinking of the season fall (as it relates to the past). With this imagining, they are asked to think of what they would like to fall away (a thing, quality, circumstance /situation, characteristic) and what they would like to spring into (a new beginning) or what they would like to invite, grow, bud or blossom (a quality, dream, goal, situation, circumstance, characteristic). As we connect the seasons, not just of the year but of life and feelings, each member is asked to connect again to her naming and her past, present and future by writing who she was when she first came to the program (as I was), who she is now (as she declares or questions I Am) and who she desires to become (as I will). The power to uncover and claim their poetic selves and identities opens up with reflections, truths and declarations before they take on the life of the poems that further share their stories and lived experiences. Mishaps, as she has through chapter four on grief, leads the way to what is to fall away in order to bury her suffocation and invite her renewal and rebirth.

To fall away: My grief, pain and confusion

To invite: Affection, happiness, change, music and knowledge

I was a bitter person. I was upset all the time. Crying all the time. I don't like to let people know it or show it a lot. Cause I don't know I think people use that as a weakness. Most people I know. I was angry... I was hurt...

I am I still am but not as much. And then coming in here I became more open. I always wanted to talk coming in here... I was happy to talk. Willing to talk. That changed my talking a lot. I used to talk a lot when my mother was here but then I stopped. Coming in here it's like it filled a piece of my heart in. Now I can use that piece.

I will be powerful. I will be a better me.

As Mishaps unfolds her feelings into a poem she offers:

I was angry hopeless and drained of energy
I was mean and cruel
I was my own enemy

I am happy I am whole
I am happy I am whole
I am smarter I am bold
I am new but getting old
I am god's gift
I am known
I will be patient
I will be kind
I will broaden my horizon
I will forever use my mind
I will be a doctor I might even
be a nurse
but of all things
I will be me for better and for worse
(Mishaps, 2009)

Through Mishaps' reflections and poetry, she further reveals the process of "I Am" with unflinching honesty. In Mishaps' poetry she unfolds the stages of her grief and loss, beginning with her feelings of anger and hopelessness to arrive at feeling, "I am happy I am whole." As she enters into the phase of what she will be, she writes her dreams and goals. "I will broaden my horizon" and "I will be a doctor, I might even be a nurse." As Mishaps shares her feelings and desires, she comes to a place in homesteading that begins to reveal an integrated acceptance of herself, as she writes, "I will be me for better and for worse" (Turner & Helms, 1991).

Camille quietly comes into this space to offer her reflections and declaration, followed by her poem "I Am."

What I want to fall away is my lack of confidence. I shouldn't care what people may say I should just forget about it. I mainly want my shyness to fall away because it keeps [me] from things often.

I want to invite a new Camille one that will throw away the old one and never let it come back because she enjoys it (the life of the new Camille).

I was nervous I am a little shy I will be more outgoing
I am a shy person Keeping to myself Many hours of the day
Holding my head down So won't think people are staring
Keeping my voice low To certain people I've been like this for a while
now
Don't know why Always meeting new people Or reuniting with those
that
Knew me when I was younger I break out of it with close friends
But never with anyone else I am a shy person But will be more
outgoing
(Camille, reflection, 2009)

I Am

I am a preachers daughter
The descendent of a slave man slaughter
I am a person with very little to say
Letting my life come as it may
I am Queen of the Nile
enlightening my people with a humble smile
I am my brothers keeper
I am my mothers weeper
Being the one to see them cry
I am the one who lets life pass me by
I am the Olympic winner
I am lifes beginner
Starting over and over when new things come around
I am the one who hopes to be glory bound
I am a person who thinks you'll love me for me
If you don't that's the way its gotta be
(Camille, 2009)

Camille unfolds her "I Am" through her reflections of what she wants to fall away and what she wants to invite. She offers her "I Am" through her cultural legacy as "Queen of the Nile" and the survivor of the slaughter of slaves. Camille's identities unfold as the daughter of a minister, "I am a preachers daughter," to the confidante of her mother, "I am my mothers weeper." She reveals through her many

identities an emerging voice of an adolescent girl who was once “with very little to say” and “lets life pass me by.” As she uncovers her voice, new beginnings of hope and a new level of glory emerge: “I am the one who hopes to be glory bound.” Through her declarations, reflections and poetry, Camille claims her “I Am” as, “a person who thinks you’ll love me for me.”

Although Family did not attend that day, when she returned to the group she offered her voice, insight and reflections followed by her poem “Me:”

“I was shy when I first came here. I did not share my inner me like everybody else.”

Now I am still working on speaking in front of a big crowd because I get [stage fright] right but I am getting over it now (Family’s “stage fright” is one of the reasons she was not able to facilitate).

I will be one day an outspoke[n] person who will present her stuff in front of a big crowd and not [stutter].

Me

When I think about me
That is all I really see
When I think about me
I am all I want to be
When I think about me
(Family, 2009)

Family offers her voice of self-acceptance through a poem of “I Am” that reveals that in spite of what she may seek to change (speaking in front of large crowds), she remains “...all that I want to be.” Joy unfolds for Family, when she enters into self- reflection and affirmation. “I have within me... honesty, hope, dreams, to reach to a high standard [and] peace.” Although she continues to long for the love and connection to her family of origin, she still manages to begin to re-write

her grief and uncover her power. “When I am down in the dumps I always know a way to bring myself up.”

Each member of Poetic Eight through her poetry and declarations affirms her sense of self love and worth through the poetic mirror as she embraces her vulnerability with truth and new insight. Queen of Hearts offers her voice and declaration through her poem “I Was, I Am, I Will Be”

I Was, I Am, I Will Be

Now that I grew,
I know I am true
I keep myself going,
And makes sure my spotlight is showing...
Explaining the deepening,
Of my heart, mind and soul
I am pizza,
Each piece having a different taste or topping,
It's either no bite or one whole,
I will be the next freedom writers
Or Black Panthers,...
I will stop paying for other people's time,
Cashing money in for their crime,
Not knowing, I would live or die,
I will be the next Malcolm X or MLK
I will be Oprah Winfrey or Bill Gates,
I will be getting through my life day by day!
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

Queen of Hearts continues to unfold her poetic names as she reveals her hopes for the future, goals and identities that are as diverse and different as each pizza topping. She claims her many names from “freedom writer... Or Black Panther” to “Oprah Winfrey or Bill Gates.” As she unfolds her “I Am,” she further reveals that no matter what the outcome will be of her goals and choices, she will “keep myself going” when she once unfolded her purpose was to live for others.

Divine Diva unfolds her voice and sense of self acceptance as “I Am” through her written reflections and declarations.

What I want to fall away is the drama I deal with all the time. I want to get rid of the thoughts that everything’s my fault

What I want to grow is my determination to be known in the world.

I was...

I was the girl who had a lot to say

But was afraid of what others said about me.

Was my hair right? Will they talk about my clothes or shoes? It mattered to me if I had a boyfriend or not. Because I look like the only girl w/o a boyfriend. I didn’t feel comfortable with most of my friends because, I’m not all skinny like them. I was disgusted at the way my body was.

I am...

Now confident in myself & ready to try to be a teenager. I’m proud that I have curves and that I don’t look like everyone else... I’m a girl who isn’t afraid to speak her mind.

I will be ...

Whatever I choose to be... I want to be a singer, dancer, actress, director, producer, activist, mentor, & own my own businesses.
(Divine Diva, 2009)

Divine Diva shares through her poetry, reflections and discussions her struggles with self acceptance, image and belonging. She writes about feeling like a burden to her family and the need to be a “good girl.” Through her writing she shares her fears, “I was the girl who had a lot to say. But was afraid of what others said about me.” Divine Diva also questions her physical appearance in her writing, “Was my hair right?” “Will they talk about my clothes or shoes?”

I once wondered will Divine Diva *give herself* the permission to break free from the oppressive language, labels and images that silence her voice. And as Divine Diva uncovers the power to name who she really is, she answers in the

affirmative. As Divine Diva enters into the phase of “I Am,” she writes from “I was disgusted at the way my body was” to “I’m proud that I have curves and that I don’t look like everyone else...” Moreover, as Divine Diva uncovers that she is “a girl who isn’t afraid to speak her mind” she boldly declares, “I will be whatever I choose to be...”

KiRe declares who she is and what she will be through her writing and questioning of who am I and who am I supposed to be.

Who am I?
What do you want me to be?
Who am I supposed to be?
Standing in the mirror mentally stripped... of all that everyone else may see... my mind is clear... no one to please...my reflection looks at me... stares at me deep penetrating my soul.
Words are caught in my throat.
Who am I?
I know who I am but sometimes unsure of what it’s supposed to be.
What is my destiny my purpose?
I will be someone’s wife someone’s mother someone’s boss because I will not settle for less.
I will be cool, confident and damn right conceited because I will have all that I deserve.
Worked so hard for the blood, sweat and tears now mixed with what I think I was when I was who I will be

I think about confidence. I was thinking of this being a turning point I’m about to go from being a kid to being an adult. Just because I know who I am is that who I want to be? Everybody in my family has their certain standards of what I should be because I’m the one with straight As and everyone is like you should do this or you should do that or I hope you do this and I’m like what if that’s not what I’m supposed to be. I remember when I was younger I used to thrive off of making other people happy but I wasn’t happy because [it was only for others] but now the things I do it’s because it’s what I want to do. Even if it’s the wrong thing to do it’s something I can learn from. Guess what I’m here and there’s nothing you can say or do to... my purpose my destiny is mine to fulfill or let slip away. It’s up to me what I do...
Every choice [even] every lie I [ever] told..

yeah that's me too.
(KiRe, 2009)

KiRe who is the daughter of ministers talks about a turning point in her life toward personal truth. Like Blue, Mishaps and many of the other girls in the group, she feels that she has learned the most from her mother. She has learned "I Am" as a declaration rather than question from echoes of her mother's voice unfolding, "Do what you think you need to do. Know why you did it. Always know why. And at the end of the day don't regret it." The journey from "I was to I Am" for KiRe is about finding her own truth. She has turned toward the acceptance of each reflection of herself in the poetic mirror (unfolded in chapter six) from the young woman who gets straight As to the one who has not always lived authentically, as she writes, "every lie... yeah that's me too."

As the members of Poetic Eight bring forth their naming and declarations of who they were, who they are and who they will be, we continue to explore new beginnings and re-birth through the awakening of love. When we enter into chapter six, love unfolds first through self-affirmation. Self-affirmation allows the adolescent girls to confront the obstacles and challenges they, and others, face with a voice of resistance. Through the awakening of love, the members of Poetic Eight further reveal and declare what they want and what they need as they continue to uncover and maintain their voices and claim their own names and poetic identities.

CHAPTER SIX: POETIC LOVE

For love alone can awaken what is divine within you.
(O'Donohue, 1997, p. 7)

O'Donohue (1997) declares that when love awakens in your life it is a new beginning or re-birth. And as such, love is the awakening of life. It is as necessary for growth and nourishment of the soul as food is for the body. Love is the pathway to the divine and the way to one's homecoming and opening of the self toward fulfillment. It is also the process of "self forgetting" to embrace the lives of others. While love is often sought outside of oneself, "It is at the edge of your soul" (p. 8). As KiRe facilitates the poetry group session on love, she begins by describing what love is to her.

Love is everything it's not supposed to be but is...

Love is...

Love

Love is...

Love is everything that isn't supposed to be, but is
The imaginary memories, fantasized recollections
Of us

Love

Love is...

Love is everything you thought it was, but wasn't
The simple complexities, mad sanities
Of us

Love

Love is...

Love is invincible, unyielding, indestructible
Yet vulnerable, delicate, fragile

Love IS us

(KiRe, 2009)

In response to KiRe's poem each member begins to write what she thinks and feels about love. As the members of Poetic Eight begin to write their thoughts and

expressions of love, the room breaks into uproarious laughter and spirited exchanges. With each thought and feeling shared, they begin to build consensus in creating a collective experience of love that encompasses self-love and worth, love for family, friends and the bitter sweet angst surrounding their feelings about crushes and falling in love.

Love is caring for someone beyond all means
It's a desire for another
Love is family sisters and brothers
Love is the closest thing we have to magic
Love is like food 3 times you gotta have it.
Love is what made us.
(Mishaps, 2009)

Love is heart-felt, true, sincere, honest
(Camille, 2009)

Love means commitment, trust, honesty, friendship, and feeling.
(Blue, 2009)

As a dialogue ensues, there are giggles, sighs, nods, poetic snaps and affirmation. The experience allows for more community building and unity that leads to deepen the journey as *anam caras* in this shared space. Voices heighten with awareness (metaphorically and literally) as each member begins to read a line that she has written until their voices blend together as one poetic sound. As the discussion continues, KiRe turns to self-love and affirmation with her inquiry, "Why is it important to love yourself before you love someone else?" I follow KiRe's lead, and after the completion of the discussion and activity, invite each member to share ways that they affirm self love and worth, as I am reminded of the words of O'Donohue (1997): "Sometimes it is easy to be generous outward, to give and give and give yet remain ungenerous to yourself. You lose the balance of your soul if you are a

generous giver but a mean receiver. You need to be generous to yourself in order to receive the love that surrounds you” (p. 8).

Looking into the Poetic Mirror

Looking into the poetic mirror begins for Poetic Eight by looking into the physical mirror. The writing activity is followed by an exercise in which the adolescent girls are asked to write a list of five qualities and characteristics that they love about themselves. Some of the poets, such as Mishaps and KiRe, ask if they can include more than five characteristics which have been added. The lists that are included below provide the opportunity to find the girls’ reflections in the poetic mirror.

My eyes
My lips
My personality
My thoughts/understanding
My teeth
My legs
(Lenash, 2009)

My eyes (left and right)
My stomach
My attitude
My smile
My feet
My heart
My personality
My ability to write
My honesty
My self
My difference (from others)
My lips
My singing
My sarcasm
My intellect
(Mishaps, 2009)

My eyes
Smile
Shyness
Photogenic(ness)
Smartness”
Maturity
(Camille, 2009)

My height
My personality
My talents
My likeability
My honesty
My singing
My maturity
Sense of humor
My energy
(KiRe, 2009)

The members of Poetic Eight once again exude confidence and a positive sense of self as they rattle off the many traits and features about themselves that they love and hold dear. From size zero to size sixteen, they embrace their beauty and personalities from sarcasm to maturity and reservation. And while I am thrilled to see adolescent girls cherish their external beauty and outward personalities, I wonder what they will find in their poetic mirrors? What can they reveal about themselves, since they have been writing in the group that resides below the surface?

The poetic mirror requires looking into the “eye” of their consciousness, internal naming and often hidden identities. It requires once again gazing into vulnerable places (as we did in writing about death). These are the places that are not as readily revealed or accepted by others, but worth embracing to experience wholeness and self acceptance. They are the reflections of Camille’s shyness that she shares in later activities which she would like to have “fall away” to allow her to have a more audible voice; but she still holds them dear in the poetic mirror.

Blue suggests when you are experiencing self doubt, you should look in a physical mirror and declare out loud, “I love you.” To look not only at your face or body, but deeply into your heart requires sight that occurs through the poetic mirror of “I Am.” The space of “I Am” offers fullness and fulfillment, not based on society’s image of beauty or peers’ acceptance of who you are (Turner & Helms, 1991), but acknowledgement of your whole Being.

Seeing Self Love

Praying the Heart by Father George A. Maloney (1981) offers that in Eastern practice there is a total integration of an individual as she meets and surrenders to the God dwelling within. This integration is said to bring about healing and fullness in order to become the “glory of God” (Maloney, 1981, p. 15). Gazing into the poetic mirror allows for this possibility by looking past physical forms to ideas and imagination. The poetic mirror opens up and reflects powerful feelings and expressions of self-love. As we enter into writing activities and discussions surrounding self-love, each girl, offers her insight and poetic expression.

Mishaps writes:

Because if you don't love yourself you can't love any one else.
People carry traits that you carry and if you don't love your traits then
how will you love theirs?
I picked eight because my emotion is a big part of me and its not
always were it should be.
You can affirm yourself when you, “ Look n the mirror and say I love
you.”

KiRe writes:

It is important to love yourself before anyone else because it is
impossible to have healthy, positive relationships in the future. It is

also important because it isn't possible to appreciate love from someone else.

How can you get to that stage of self love?

Love is taught, and if it's not taught, you have to work up to it. You have to break the cycle of un-love. It is really a gift from God, to love yourself.

God Loves You.

Camille writes:

It is important to love yourself because it would be easier to take it from another person.

Blue writes:

Love ur self is important because if you don't know how to love yourself then you're not going to know how to love any one else. If you don't know how to love yourself then you're not going to love anything about some one else you're going to be too busy envying them.

You can affirm yourself by thinking of 5 things that you love about yourself. Parents (affirm in you), traits people love in you and represent you. You can get to self love when your mom and father show the importance of how much they love you and things that you do.

Collectively, the members of Poetic Eight create a poem on the meaning and feeling of love based on a fusion of their individual ideas, voices and experiences.

Love is a fragile pain
Love is emotional art
Of magic...Gotta have it!!!
It is everything that its not supposed to be
Love is like friendship and feelings
It is hate, self explosion and loyalty
Love is a heartfelt truth
Invisible desire
Spontaneous ride of vulnerability
Honestly caring for someone beyond all means
Love is sincere family
Love is trust
Love is joy

But it SuckZ!!!
(Poetic Eight, 2009)

The girls break out into “belly laughter” and give each other high fives. “Why does it suck?” I exclaim? “You know, because it has a good side but also a bad side—the pain. The reason why people cry over it.” Their response is followed by more giggles and long sighs. As we move through this chapter, the joys and excitement of love as well as the sorrows of relationships are unfolded. This chapter allows for the girls to find and raise their voices in solidarity and resistance as they write to boys about what they want, will not tolerate and need to know. However, this journey begins by turning first to the voices of transition from girlhood to womanhood.

Poetry Unburdened

The lived experiences of African American slave women held a strong connection to struggle and freedom. The experiences of motherhood that were literally forced upon their weary bodies through brutality and rape evoked the construction in literature and writing of the outraged mother archetype. This outrage stemmed from the violent intimacy of their oppression, yet they were capable still, in spite of attempts to break, subdue and de-humanize them, of a mother’s love, passion and dream of protecting her children from that agony. Rather than their agony defeating them, their heroism and resistance were ignited by the very abuse they, their children, and their people endured (Walker, in Graham, 1997).

The girlchild’s wondering and wandering are born of the desires of Black women to resist oppression, protect their girlchild and remain free. While

homecoming occurs for the Black woman writer by returning to her younger self to share her story with those to follow, homesteading opportunities can be brought about for African American adolescent girl poets simultaneously (Casey, 1993). The destination of African American adolescent girl poets, while unknown to them, except in their imaginations, has previously been visited and built out of the voices and experiences of the Black woman writer. With this realization, we explore wondering and wandering as a girlchild through the poetic voice of Michelle Sewell, who in turn, provides a listening ear for the voices and experiences of Poetic Eight.

Girlchild

Baby girl, as you pack your bags
For your life travels – please don't
Forget your heart song and your north star.
You'll need them both.
There's no need to live a life of quiet desperation.
Dream Big!
Take up as much room as you need.
Girl, take up as much room as you want.
If girlchild falters and can't find her way,
She can search out... this message...
There will be ports in the storm.
Drop your anchor sometimes.
Sit long enough to let someone scratch
the worry out your head and bathe you in
some scented water.
And before I forget – drop the title
Of super woman. She's like Santa Clause...
She doesn't exist...
I guess it's simply this:
Beautiful baby girl, you are not disposable.
Your life should not begin and end in the
same twenty-four day.
That everything humanly possible should be done
to preserve your life force.
That there is something amazingly unique about
a child born a girl.
And I promise
Yes, I promise

you will always find favor.
(Sewell, 2006, p. 272)

In chapter two I ask, “Is it possible that if African American adolescent girls uncover the power to name and (re)define themselves, they might not grow into Black womanhood and discover themselves gone?” I use Michelle Sewell’s poem “Girlchild,” in chapter two, to unfold the process of discovery and self-definition of African American girls transitioning into Black women. However, Sewell’s participation in this process allows the girls of Poetic Eight to experience and share their feelings with her as the “girlchild.” During these interactions between Poetic Eight, Sewell and the poetry of *Growing Up Girl* and *Just Like a Girl*, lived experiences meet with the living word to uncover the power to name. This space is one of transition and remembrance that offers space to wonder, wander and discover.

From Girlchild to Woman

Dear Girl

Legs balance your weight
Come forty you will be glad
Make sure you stretch them
Travel, the world, see the sights
 Don’t let others constrain
 Leap over fence
Dear Girl, hold your head up high.
 Don’t be afraid of the wind
 Or to travel against it!
(Ayers, in Sewell, 2008, p. 1)

As the girls of Poetic Eight transition into womanhood, they uncover the power to name who they really are with the courage and wisdom of the Black women writers who have gone before them. They unflinchingly walk through their grief, question and declare “I Am” and embrace self love and each other. Through this

process they not only uncover their power, but their wisdom and sense of knowing. As they imagine what “I Will Be” it is with their heads held high and their eyes wide open as strong Black women.

Writer and editor of *Growing Up Girl: An Anthology from Marginalized Spaces* (2006) and *Just Like a Girl* (2008), Michelle Sewell, now enters this space to share her writing and lived experiences with girlhood and strong Black womanhood through her poem “Girlchild” (2006) from chapter two. Her call is similar Trish Ayers, who writes “Dear Girl,” in *Just Like a Girl* (2008).

Sewell is embraced in this space of transition from African American adolescent girl poet to Black woman writer and editor. Much like the other Black women writers who have entered this space, either in presence or through their books and published writing, she helps to navigate the wilderness from girlhood to womanhood. Sewell’s experience as a poet is that many writers write because of something that they need to record. The urgency to record those experiences led Sewell to create anthologies for women and girls, and drew me to offer her anthology, *Growing Up Girl* (2006), to my poets. Today, Sewell sounds her voice to and for the *Girlchild* of Poetic Eight who sound back in their own voices and writing.

Like Trish Ayers, in Sewell’s anthology, Camille offers her own wisdom in a “Dear Girl” letter to the “GirlChild.” Camille’s writing and voice are followed by Divine Diva, Blue and Queen of Heart’s words and poetic dreams.

As a girl growing into a woman i'd say that its very stressful, unless you
dont let it get to you. It seems tiring at some points and
you feel like you
want to give up but you keep being persistent in it. Then
many times you'll

succeed in certain things. Being a female writer/poet you seem to express your opinion and feelings in a lot of your writing. From your perspective of certain ideas and/ or experiences you'd more likely be able to write about it.
(Camille, 2009)

Camille reveals in this letter, what often is unsaid in her poetry. What is the stress that she speaks of as she transitions into womanhood? Camille, for the first time writes from behind the mask. She declares, “As a girl growing into a woman i’d say that its stressful...” Camille offers her message to the “Girlchild” as Sewell has done before her. Camille writes, “It seems tiring at some points and you feel like you want to give up but you keep being persistent in it.” Is it Camille’s perseverance as a “Girlchild” that will lead her to uncover truth, love and joy?

As Camille shares her feelings around truth, love, and joy, I am reminded again of O’Donohue’s poem “Friendship Blessing” on the process of finding and becoming an anam cara. Her deepest feelings seem to be based, as revealed by Erikson’s theory of adolescence, on belonging (Turner & Helms, 1991). Camille offers her greatest truth as her ability to “make my parents happy.” Her greatest joy, she reveals, is her family and friends. However, when asked of her greatest love, she writes, “When people make me happy” and “Talking to my best friend.” She is the first adolescent girl participant in my study to openly reveal that her greatest love involves receiving (happiness) from others. I wonder how these feelings connect with other adolescent girls behind and beyond the mask. After our work in the poetry group, will these writings and feelings be deepened? Or, will they possibly be

changed by life circumstances and expectations of womanhood? Her un-concealing eventually leads us to her poem “IF I Were a Boy.”

Divine Diva reveals, “I write poems that come from what I’ve experienced and what I’ve seen and what I go through in the process. I write poems about things and topics I think about. I might write a poem or a song or a short story. I write heavy poems, sad poems...” Blue makes public, “I like to write poetry and I’d like to write a book.” Queen of Hearts follows, “My poetry is based more on my experiences of my friends than of me. And the way I interact with them is the way I write my poetry.”

Sewell shares that as a writer you are given permission to listen to other people’s lives as part of the writing, reading or active listening process (as revealed in the poetry written for Strong Black Women in chapter four and Queen of Hearts’ poetry). The process resembles the experience of not only listening to other people’s stories in the group, but being included in each other’s lives and experiences as griottes and rhapsodes. This process leads us into the voices and stories of the “Strong and Sassy.”

Voices of Strong and Sassy

We don’t talk about stuff we have a problem with until we have another problem then we bring it up. So basically everything stays the same.
(Mishaps, 2009)

As this chapter on love unfolds, the members of Poetic Eight connect to themselves and to each other through self-love and sisterly love. These experiences and connections have been forged and created within the group over a period of time. Through their writings and responses, it continues to be revealed that friendships,

romantic love and relationships cannot endure in a space of self denial, violence or suffocation.

The members of Poetic Eight also speak of another kind of suffocation that they have endured as African American adolescent girls. They speak, discuss and write about suffocation due to pressure or jealousy from peers and conflict/tension and inner struggle. They also discuss and write with passion about challenges and issues in relationships, especially with adolescent boys and men. While violence is not a personal experience that has been inflicted upon members of the group, some of the adolescent girls have mothers, other female family members or friends who endured being battered or otherwise abused. Both the members whose mothers or family members had been subjected to abuse, as well as those who had not, find themselves wanting to protect other girls and women, as well as guard their own hearts and bodies against these experiences.

As we un-conceal self-love and resistance, the issue of adolescent girls being battered becomes a discussion and writing exercise following the physical assault on Rihanna (a well known twenty-year-old pop singer) by her boyfriend Chris Brown (a well known nineteen-year-old hip hop artist and actor). Before the “incident” was published in the school newspaper, students were asked to take a survey about their feelings about the “incident” in preparation for the article. Tragically, thirty-three percent of the high school students surveyed at Read High School report that “she deserved it.” Why? How could adolescents (both boys and girls) report that a woman deserved to be battered? Did lived experiences, victim blaming or shame keep some of the high school girls from expressing that battering was wrong? Did

jealousy, pain or denial cause other girls to say that she deserved it? I began to recall a story shared by KiRe. She and her best friend were “jumped” by girls from another school (the fight seemed to be initiated by the other girls over feelings of jealousy and territory). At that point, she began to develop feelings of distrust and animosity toward other girls (a feeling shared, initially, by some of the other girls in the group).

Levin (1989) reminds us that the patriarchal structure that has been created and enforced is brutal to women and the cause of undo suffering and repression. This hostile environment has stifled self-affirmation, and instead, created pain and self-destruction. Reclaiming the feminine self and spirit, in this segment, begins, then, with self-affirmation for adolescent girls prior to addressing and deconstructing a violent patriarchal structure to reclaim, acknowledge and voice the adolescent girls’ strengths and embrace self-love.

I unfold the experience of pain inflicted on adolescent girls by other girls and the experience of overcoming obstacles through the lyrics of Rhythm and Blues singer, Mary J. Blige. Blige sings to girls and young women about rising above other people’s covetousness to embrace one’s own full potential. Like Poetic Eight, Blige also unfolds the necessity of speaking truths to heal and help others heal. She offers her lyrics of self love and healing to other girls and women below in *Work That*.

Work your thing out...
Cause so many you girls I hear you been running
From the beautiful queen that you can be becommin...
Read the book of my life and see of overcomming
Just because the length of your hair ain't long
And they often criticize you for your skin tone
Wanna hold your head high cause you a pretty woman
Get your front way stride home and keep it going
Girl, live your life

I just wanna be myself
Don't sweat girl be yourself...

Let em get mad
They're gonna hate anyway
Don't you get that
Doesn't matter if you go along with their plan
They'll never be happy
Cause they're not happy with themselves

(I am. work what you got...)
I'm talking about things that I know
(I am. work what you got...)
It's okay show yourself some love
(I am. work what you got...)
Don't worry about who's saying what
(It's gonna be fine work what you got)
Work what you got

Feeling great because the light's on me
Celebrating the things that everyone told me
Would never happen but
God has put his hands on me
And ain't a man alive could ever take it from me
Workin with what I got I gotta
Keep on taking care of myself
I wanna live long
Ain't never ashamed what life did to me
Wasn't afraid to change
Cause it was good for me...
(Blige, 2008)

Blige's lyrics in *Work That* connect with her writing in the preface of Terrie William's book *Black Pain* (2008). In *Black Pain* (2008), Mary J. Blige writes how deeply moved she is by the painful stories of other African American women and men. She shares, that in the faces and stories of African American women especially, she sees herself and remembers the suffering that occurred in her own life. Her lyrics in *Work That*, also reveal experiences with isolation and jealousy from others who seek to keep her oppressed and ensure her failure rather than their own happiness and

success. Blige is also a survivor of domestic violence. Blige's lived experiences intersect with other women who have been battered and have experienced shame surrounding the abuse (Blige, in Williams, 2008). Lastly, she writes that healing occurred for her through affirming herself completely and embracing self love and the love of God (as unfolded in chapter seven).

Lorde reminds us that, "The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us." Furthermore, she reminds us that, "We sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves..." (Lorde, 1984, p. 123). How can the members of Poetic Eight express their public voice and feelings about an oppressive situation? In what ways can their public voices and poetic expression further illuminate the path to eradicating the oppressor deep within each of us? Can their voices in struggle deepen their self-definition and naming?

Celebrating Strong and Sassy

Strong and Sassy

I remember the time when she was strong and sassy...
Born that way they say...
Headstrong, determined, DEFIANT
"Why she switch so much?!" They'd say sucking their teeth
as she'd walk by
Nobody could tell that girl nothin'. Men would holler 'em legs pretty
and long
That wouldn't stop her, oh no she'd just keep her head up and walk on
by
"Can't speak to nobody – you ain't all that!"
Them girls on the corner would laugh. They loved it when a man try
and disrespect her, them girls act like they hate her - but they just
jealous.

In private I even hear 'em murmur approval.
“She ain't scared of nothin' – child if I looked like that, you'd see me
switchin' my thang too.”

Could'uv done better. Why she let that man trap her, I'll never know.
Beat the life out her – that's what he did.

The only thing she done stroll through here now, is that there
baby carriage.

She keep that cute figure all covered up nowadays – an
that determination in her eye is gone. She speaks, that is when her
head

tilt up

“Serve her right... thinkin' she better than us.” They happy to see her
spirit broke.

Thought she had one foot out the ghetto door... she one of us now.

But I remember the time she was Strong and Sassy...

(Bacon, in David, DuBois & King, 1997, p. 80)

I wrote the poem “Strong and Sassy” when I was eighteen or nineteen years old. It was first published in *Returning Woman* (a literary magazine for women published by Hunter College) and then again in 1997 in *Phati'tude* (a literary magazine for writers of color). As the years have gone by, the meaning has changed for me and has come to represent the strength and fire that many of the girls I work with embody and possess. From the time it was first conceived until now (in 2009), “Strong and Sassy” is my poem that has received the most affirmation, identification, connection and response by girls and women.

As I have passed it on to the members of Poetic Eight, not only has it taken on a new meaning for me with this generation (I realize now that I have not written a poem like it, in style, content or language, since), they have made it their own through their responses and re-creations. I was prompted to read it to my poetry group following a discussion on learning and embracing self-love and self-worth. Many of the adolescent girls in the group had never had close (or for some any) female friends

(an experience which was vastly different from my own growing up). Because some of the adolescent girls had been mistreated by other girls or women (this was not an experience or theme for all of the girls in the group but it pertains to approximately half of the members of Poetic Eight), they (before participating in the poetry group) upheld only stereotypes of girls and women as “back stabbers” and “haters.”

Based on their lived experiences, as well as the incident(s) surrounding adolescent violence and abuse, I wanted to write, read, discuss and explore what keeps some women and girls focused on hurting each other and rejoicing in the hurt of others. What keeps some girls and women from their own true potential, success and joy? What keeps some girls and women from reaching out to others or befriending each other? The adolescent girls in my poetry group who had previously had negative experiences with other girls and women were awe struck by their ability to bond so tightly in our poetry group. More importantly, I wanted to provide an opportunity for the members of Poetic Eight to share, explore, uplift and accept themselves in their entirety and offer support to one another. I, therefore, invited them to enter this space to claim their Strong and Sassy selves (regardless of what others might name them). By writing a response to my poem, I encouraged them to have ownership of the words by creating their own.

Poetic Eight’s Call and Responses to Strong and Sassy

Yea, I remember, with her head held high
One time a man got real close to her thigh
But she smacked it away
Turned back and said “Hey!”
With smirk on her face, she went right along
I remember saying to myself, “It won’t be too long!”

I was a hater, I admit it. I wanted her to fall!
A dude was after her all the time, every day she got a call.
She was strong and so confident, I wasn't and lonely,
But now... she not the only!
(Lenash, 2009)

I was strong n sassy back in the days
So mature & articulate I could speak for dayz
Young, beautiful with so much prize men
Had to change and put away their pride

I was strong and sassy cute and cuddly
Fun and cool stayed in school
I taught the teacher cuz there was nothing she could teach
me cuz I was no fool

I was strong n sassy back in the days
Come to think about it I have yet to
Change my ways Still strong n sassy
You'd be amazed
(Mishaps, 2009)

I remember the days
When I was a little girl
Having hundreds of friends
Never being alone
Always wanting to be them
Talk with them
I even had thought I wanted to live with em
I seemed so happy go lucky
Smiling all the time
Showing my toothless mouth
Every time the church folk saw me
I was with my friends
But now,
The older I got I started to become distant with friends
You ask me why
Probably because I've lost so many
From moving
Across the country, around the state
My face went blank barely an expression
Wishing I can go back to those strong and sassy days
(Camille, 2009)

Why your boyfriend like me?
Is it cuz how I dress?

Is it cuz I'm just so sassy?
Maybe it's my intellect
Why your boyfriend like me?
Is it cuz of how I smile?
Cuz of how I carry myself
Mature woman, not a child?
Why your boyfriend like me?
Maybe you should be askin dude
Oops I forgot that

He's with me and not you
(KiRe, 2009)

“Strong and Sassy” and other poems, discussions and writings gave the girls a chance to discuss jealousy, isolation, friendship and competition through writing, serious discussion and humor. KiRe started reading her version of the poem with a disclaimer, “Don’t take this the wrong way. It’s not really me y’all.” Creating a response also provides the opportunity to explore another perspective and create an alter ego. Her exploration in her writing and the group seemed to develop each meeting as she got to know other people, outside of the girls she already knew, which led to more discussions and a new perspective. KiRe shares that she started to feel that “it was cool and the place where she belonged.”

For Camille, recreating the poem allowed her to reflect on her feelings. Rather than reflect on romantic relationships or pain experienced in female relationships, she remembers her previous experiences in friendships with girls and boys that had been really positive as a young child. Writing her response, also allows her to write about the subsequent loss of her friendships and her own feelings of isolation, experienced not from an abusive relationship, but from being moved to several new locations and homes.

Lenash and Mishaps recreate “Strong and Sassy” to reflect their poetic voices as both the embodiment of strong women and an adversary of them. Lenash’s writings lead us through the ways in which women participate in maintaining violence: “I was a hater, I admit it. I wanted her to fall!” are acknowledgements of their own pain and unhealed emotions or shame (Richie, 1996; Williams, 2008). Through the girls’ poetic calls and responses, we begin “Walking Gingerly in and around Violence.”

Walking Gingerly in and around Violence

In my poem, “They Walk Gingerly,” I write about women breaking the silence of domestic violence only to have their voices muted by judgment of other women who act as gate keepers, through their explicit and implicit messages, reflecting a patriarchal structure of domination and victimization.

They Walk Gingerly

They walk gingerly around the body of the bruised.
Then poking and prodding it with a stick, an anxiety ridden finger, a shove

*How did you get like this?
What did you do?
Neighbors inquire*

They want to know what brought on the onslaught of his words, the pounding of your body underneath his.
Flattened into the wall under his supposed “restraints”
On the bed lying lifeless
Muffled screams closed off by his hands

*Had you dropped something?
Forgotten something?
Said something to make him angry?
Did you not perform your wifely duties (cooking, cleaning, sex...)?
Were you with another man?*

No! No!
Your mind races and finally recalls an incident.
You asked for something—something he did not want to give
you or
want you to have.
You asked for a cat.
Something whose warmth would keep you comforted at night.
Whose purring would lull you to sleep.
Whose body curled up by your feet at the bottom of the bed would
make
you feel less fearful of him.

But you didn't see it coming
Him foaming at the mouth in response
Shaking shrieking calling you names

You looked at the window and willed yourself to jump
But your feet remained planted on the ground
Your arms did not remain stationery
Flailing- they threw things in his direction
Not at him Not hitting him but as if towards him

He is on top of you now
Stuffing you like a pillow too full for its case on top of the mattress

The women hear your story
You shouldn't have thrown something it made him more angry
Yes, and demanding that cat, that would have given me pause too

Pause? There was no pause, mute, or rewind button, just a fast
forward of your mind whizzing past this violent scene

Relief escapes from the listeners
Analysis over
Judgment drawn

They rest comfy in their own lives
Knowing safety does not evade them

For they, unlike you, do not provoke their husbands
(Bacon, 2008)

How do strong Black women recover when helping someone else not only
hurts them but batters and maims their spirits? In contrast, to “Strong and Sassy” and

self-affirmation, I open up this segment by unfolding the perils of silencing young Black women's "Strong and Sassy" selves and the shame and suffocation that follows. I draw on scholar and activist, Beth E. Richie's study, *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women* (1996). Richie's study offers a bridge from silenced voices to the dismantling of shame for African American adolescent girls writing poetry to name themselves (who are on the brink of strong Black womanhood). Her study is based upon the experiences of primarily urban Black women who have been battered, silenced and forced into a life of crime as a result of their societal and domestic oppression, intimate partner violence, marginalization, isolation and encounters with a hegemonic "justice" system that further victimizes them.

During this unfolding, I walk with caution and awareness. While some of the members of Poetic Eight have some similarities in their childhood backgrounds and experiences, this is in no way intended to be an indication, suggestion or implication about their futures. However, this connection is intended to illuminate the need and process for maintaining a voice, as well as active listening ears, for African American adolescent girls writing to uncover and maintain their power, as well as create a form of resistance through that writing.

From Poetic Self-Affirmation to Shame and Silence

Unlike many perceptions and stereotypes of battered Black women, Richie (1996) offers that the majority of battered Black women in her study were not abused as children (however, they did hold traditional ideas of marriage, gender roles, identity based on their domestic ability and the patriarchal structure). Conversely,

they held privileged positions within their families (often as well in school and their immediate communities) and were generally the favorite child (which sometimes led to isolation). They were rewarded for their energetic personalities, intelligence, sensitivity, charm or beauty. They also reported having high self esteem and feeling powerful as children (which created greater shame over being victimized as adults).

As children, they were seen, by their families and others, as positive role models and examples for other children and believed to have special gifts and talents in which other people (even outside of the family) took an interest. However, with their gifts, talents, and “exceptional status,” came additional obligations and burdens, which included caring for other siblings, being the care giver and confidante for parents, being an over achiever in school, pleasing others, offering unwavering loyalty and attachment to their families and feeling that they must be perfect.

Family members and others depended on them and often had unreasonable expectations of the girls’ abilities and duties which the girls began to hold for themselves. These expectations and behaviors were recreated in their adult lives, which frequently led them to abusive relationships in which they continued believing they were responsible for/to the abuser, for the abuse, or could change the outcome. Because of their childhood positions, they believed they could win the abuser over if they worked harder (as they did in childhood), or remain loyal. They were unable to break the silence due to shame, secrecy and further marginalization in a hegemonic culture. Once leaving their families and communities, they were bombarded by racial disparity, inequities, exploitation and marginalization in society and the work force.

I can't remember when I first learned that my family expected me to work, to be able to take care of myself... It had been drilled into me that the best and only sure support was self support.
(Walker, cited in Collins, 2000, p. 183)

The battered Black women in Richie's study, as girls, idealized and revered their mothers. Their mothers were respected and admired as strong women and possessed attributes such as discipline and perseverance that they sought to embody. Their relationships with their fathers were centered upon less reverence, more affection, and sympathy or pity for what they believed or perceived to be greater hardships, oppression and limiting life circumstances that their fathers endured as Black men. They didn't see girls and mothers enduring such limitations as Black women.

As adults, they often assumed the roles of their mothers as traditional, strong Black women (as unfolded in chapter four) who were "super women," endured abuse and suffered silently in self-judgment. "How could strong, smart, pretty me get myself into this mess?" (Richie, 1996, p. 48). In some cases, the women had been told explicitly that they were to remain loyal to the abuser or feel sorry for him (a message they often received when they were children by mothers who were abused). In other cases, the message was implicit. Shame, silence, and responsibility often kept many of the battered Black women, who were once girls with high self esteem and feelings of empowerment, trapped and voice-less when they got older.

The Power of Poetic Voices against Violence

In Greek mythology, there is a story of two sisters, Philomela and Procne. Procne, the oldest sister, is married to Tereus who is a wretched man. As the story

unfolds, Tereus is to retrieve Philomela for a visit. Upon seeing her, he “falls in love.” Much like the batterers revealed in this chapter, Tereus’ feelings are described as love; however, his emotions are actually centered upon lust and his actions violent and deceptive.

Tereus tells Philomela that her sister has died and forces her into a relationship with him (the implication is that he rapes her). Once she learns that her sister is still living, she threatens to tell her and expose him to the community. Tereus fears her speaking the truth and in a rage cuts out her tongue and locks her away. However, Philomela manages to get a message to her sister who comes to free her.

Procne out of revenge and punishment, for what Tereus has done to her sister, murders their son. As the sisters flee from Tereus, who is on the verge of killing them, the gods turn them into birds so they can escape. Philomela becomes a swallow. Swallows can twitter but cannot sing, much like Philomela because her tongue has been cut out. The gods turn Procne into a nightingale because of her deep sadness over murdering her son. The nightingale’s song is the sweetest because it is brought forth through sorrow (Hamilton, 1969).

As I recall this story, what stands out most to me is the power of women’s voices. So feared were their voices, that Tereus cut out Philomela’s tongue rather than allow her to speak the truth. And while Philomela is never able to speak again, her connection to her sister and her sister’s voice permits her to once again be free.

In this chapter, the members of Poetic Eight express their voices on behalf of themselves and their “sisters.” Through their poetry writing, they speak directly to oppression to be heard by one another and to be free. As Blue’s voice is sounded in

her letter “Dear Scrub” in solidarity with girls that are battered, I hear the echoes of Levin’s revelation. “I can hear myself when I listen to the other.”

I can hear myself when I listen to the other: I
can hear myself *in* the other, or in the position
of the other... I can hear the other when I listen to myself;

I can hear the other, or the position of the other, *in* myself.
(Levin, 1989, p. 182)

Levin (1989) describes the experience of listening, hearing, connecting with our selves, voices and positions of others which allow our role identifications to become blended, changed or even reversed. With this expression and exploration, a sense of resistance and voice of social justice are created. As we un-conceal violence against adolescent girls and women, in our poetry group, the members of Poetic Eight share their voices and denounce the suffocating experiences of shame and degradation of violence. Blue brings out her voice of justice and direction as she writes a letter to men who hit women in the following letter:

Dear Scrub,
2 the boy that hit my sistah understand this does not make you more of a man. Matter of fact you’re not a man at all. And if you think you are then you have been miseducated...
I know your mother taught you better than that. Think about how your mother would feel being beat... How can we trust you boys? Think about the younger ones you are influencing with this bad behavior. Also think about the generation of unborn baby boy[s] who would later be in your shoes. Be a man for others who can’t and don’t try to be a man. Please Listen [about] not being a man who beats his wife, girlfriend, or friend...
So when you ever start to think about hitting or laying a hand on a girl or woman. Think about my sistahz and your sistahz too.
(Blue, 2009)

Blue’s letter responds to her later request that boys sit down with girls to listen with openness to what girls and women have to say. She seeks to share the point of

view of and for girls and women who have been in abusive relationships, or have been witness to such relationships. These writings, discussions and reflections are followed by the poems of the other girls, such as KiRe, who discloses what she personally is seeking in a relationship.

During another poetry group “check-in,” Queen of Hearts shares that in class, a boy was pulled off of a girl that he was attempting to batter. Mishaps follows the conversation with her own story of being grabbed by a boy, who was sitting at a desk behind her, attempting to fondle her. After a lengthy discussion, we decide to create poetry and writings around the incidents, that occurred that day and other similar incidents and events that had occurred in their lives, the lives of their loved ones and in society.

I ask each member to think of what they would like to write to the boys and men in each of the incidents or to boys and men in general who batter, humiliate or otherwise had attempted to degrade them (physically, sexually, emotionally, verbally, and psychically) or other women and girls in any way. In response, Queen of Hearts declares, “I would like to read a Letter to those who harm women. I would like to read that to them. Because once they hear it [it could be like] damn I never looked at it that way. I would love for them to catch on to that. Furthermore, after writing the poem (shared below), I actually let my anger go. Writing [helps me] lose my anger.”

You hit me,
I swing back,
If you hit her,
She cries.
Feeling as though
She doesn't want to live much longer,
You have physically and mentally bruised her,
You gain an ego thinking you are more superior,

But then again,
You're just another ignorant man in this world,
You walk around,
Afraid to let her go,
As a friend, family member, wife
I never knew love was an agreement of screaming and beating,
Her spirits are broken,
She thought you were the one, her love,
And you hit her,
She thought you were her protection,
And you hit her,
You thought it was okay,...
You urged her to believe you were everything,
And you hit her,
She's confused,
Filling up with hatred,
The lies, punishments, pain,
You have weakened her,
Cutting through self-esteem and encouragement,
You make her think little of herself,
You're tearing her apart bit by bit,
Leaving her with nothing...
I cry for her
Because she's weak and harmless,
She's catered to you in every way,
She doesn't deserve this,
But you hit her,
Thinking you're superior,
Thinking you have her stay,
But you leave her,
Helpless, crying, hopeless,
When she thought you were the one
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

Queen of Hearts writes in solidarity with women and girls who have been battered. However, she seems to make a distinction between girls who are battered and are victims and those who are not. Is the difference for Queen of Hearts based on who cries and who defends herself in naming them battered and in need of protection and voice? As we have unfolded self love and naming of strong Black women, is it possible to recognize that a strong Black woman, who is not "weak or harmless," can

be battered? Queen of Hearts' unfolding also seems to chronicle the voices and responses to "Strong and Sassy" as she writes of a woman whose spirit becomes broken in an abusive relationship. Queen of Hearts, much like Blue and the sisters in the tale of Philomela, writes of the power of women offering their voices for one another to be free.

Mishaps shares,

Basically it's like you can't escape. As a female, we walk around and have guys calling us out of our names. You can't escape that. A guy is not going to change over night and we have to suffer for it as females. And if he's raised around people who teach him how to do that, we have to suffer for it. Older men teach young people. I think that older men need to take control. Fathers teach younger men. Stop saying certain things to teach their kids how to disrespect females.

"And I think," Blue interjects, "they [the boys] should also sit down with us and listen to what we have to say and how we feel about them doing certain stuff that we disapprove of and they will get our point of view." How do we create a space where girls can feel safe and share their fears? How, as Blue states, do we sit young men down to have them *listen* to the once silenced voices of African American adolescent girls and women? As this chapter continues, this dialogue begins by inviting the voices of male allies to walk gingerly in this space.

What I Want to Say

KiRe enters the discussion through her writing, and unfolds her feelings and point of view through her poem, "What I Want," to adolescent boys. KiRe does not ask questions but rather states with conviction her needs and wants in a relationship. She unfolds for herself what a relationship built on "proper communication" entails to allow her to "finally" step from behind the mask.

What I Want

I want you to tell me
Exactly how you feel
I don't want a sugar coated fairy tale
I want you to be real
I want you to show me
That you're different from the rest
Prove the saying wrong
Show me that you're the best
I want you to tell me
Exactly what you need
Without proper communication
A relationship cannot succeed
I want you to show me
The person you really are
Don't put on a fake or front for me
Honesty will take us far
I want you to tell me
Exactly what you expect
I'm not the type of girl who will tolerate
A bunch of drama and mess
Lets talk about sex
I don't plan on it anytime soon
So if that's a priority to you
I think you should be on the move
I want you to show me
That you are someone I can trust
Don't bring others into what we have
Privacy is a must
I want you to tell me
Exactly what we could
Become, because without clear motives
Things may get misunderstood
Now I want you to show me
That on the inside you aren't ugly
I want you to tell me that you genuinely care

And will forever love me
(KiRe, 2009)

In KiRe's unfolding, she further invites her potential boyfriend to step from behind the mask with her, "... to show me the person you really are." She expresses through her writing that she is not looking for a fairy tale, "I want you to be real."

The members of Poetic Eight, unfold self love and affirmation as the means to a healthy relationship with themselves and with others; KiRe's poem reveals the need for the same level of introspection from boys, "I want you to tell me exactly what you need."

The Poetic Eight girls share their voices and feelings on justice and love as they tell boys and men how they really feel, what they don't like, and what hurts them with power, fire and truth. As they discuss and write their lived experiences and the previous experiences of others, they do not have to wait for another problem or hurt to occur before they can "bring it up" to "finally" get to the point of healing, love of and by another. As they share their strengths and truths, the members of Poetic Eight allow their needs and vulnerability (once again undergoing change and releasing burdens) to be known as well. Queen of Hearts, through her poem, "I Need You to Say" further reveals her needs and fears in a relationship, followed by KiRe's poem on "finally" experiencing love. By speaking truth with intention and openness "... you learn to love and to let your self be loved... [to] come home to the hearth of your own spirit" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 7).

I Need You to Say

Why don't you say it,
Once you open your mouth and speak,
I want to feel your heat,
I run out of time thinking about you,
I get cut short,
I don't want to lose you,
But you're one of a kind in some sort...
The changes I know of you,
The promises I know you'll keep,
The dedication that keeps me smiling,
I want to hear you say,
It's really me,

You want to be with,
And believe you but it's scary,
I don't know what to do,
I don't... I'm confused,
I need your smile,
I feel I really need you.
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

KiRe follows Queen of Hearts with her poem "Finally."

Finally

Finally I can smile again
I feel free to love once more
You took the key to happiness
To unlock my heart's bolted door
I vowed that I would never
Love any other guys
But you took those vows, tore them up
And proved otherwise
Finally I can smile again
You are the source of my laughter
I feel like Cinderella
Our love happily ever after
I never wanted this to happen
Between the two of us you see
You weren't supposed to make me love you
You weren't supposed to love me!!!
After suffocating from heartache deep within...

Now I can smile again!
(KiRe, 2009)

KiRe, through her poem "Finally" unfolds the joy of a relationship behind and beyond the mask (Collins, 2000; Mama, 1995). The emancipatory voice of Freire (2000) connected to the writings of Poetic Eight through their expressions of rage and love that lead them to hope. KiRe offers "Finally" as a place of hope and homesteading that is free from oppression and violence, as she writes, "I feel free to love once more." This space even allows for imagination and fantasy in her words, "I feel like Cinderella."

Yet, as this segment comes to a close, questions begin to arise for me. If Poetic Eight were a group of boys, would their needs and writings be perceived the same way? Would they feel an urgency to explain and justify their feelings and writings? What are the expectations of adolescent girl and women writers in contrast to those of adolescent boys and men? Writer Mary Williams, featured in Sewell's *Just Like a Girl* (2008) anthology, describes the expectations of female writers in "A Manual for Female Writers." The members of Poetic Eight unfold their experiences as female writers, followed by questions and responses to "If I Were a Boy?"

If I Were a Boy?

A Manual for Female Writers

If you are a girl, don't try to be funny...
The Bible says that the truth shall set you free.
But if the truth is funny, do not write about it.

Laughing should be enough, and if you are desperate to inspire mirth,
be stupid...

Girls, write something heart-felt... unless your heart is feeling anger or
frustration, unless your heart is brimming with controversial opinions.
If this is the case, you are probably PMS-ing and should take Midol
and shut up.

Stop blaming men for sexism. Blame their mothers...
If you want to rant, I say do it! Rant, rant, rant! Should you submit it to
be published? If you are a female writer, and ranting about politics or
society or economics or theology – you are whining...

You can write poetry but you can't understand real poetry. Don't be
insulted, because if you are, you are overly sensitive. Every kind of
human suffering, everything that crushes your soul and every injustice
that makes you want to run the world is due to estrogen...
Oh, and going through puberty automatically makes you a whore.

See how I'm going on tangents and jumping around?

I can never think in a straight, solid line. You should edit your work, again and again, squeeze the imperfection out. In doing this, you will get rid of the urgency, the sincerity, yourself...
(Williams, in Sewell, 2008, pp. 19-20)

I have been asked by some men (in and out of education, writing and the realm of academia) if it is necessary to harp on “these things,” or if this is really about male bashing? I also have seen men squirm with discomfort when hegemony, violence, abuse or pain are discussed by women, especially young women and adolescent girls. The adolescent girl poets in my study have been asked by males themselves, “Don’t you write anything happy?” “There seems to be a theme here.” They have responded, “We write reality” (ours or others), or “It’s easier to write the happy poems once you can write out the challenges or the pain,” and “a lot of people like to shy away from the hard stuff.” However, the girls of Poetic Eight along with Tia and many of the other adolescent girls and young women I have taught, worked with, and learned from do not shy away from the “hard stuff;” rather, they have chosen to call it out and write their way through it instead.

Poetic Change: Gendered Complexities

Once discussions deepen with candid conversation, honesty, real emotion and sensitivity, what often follows for male educators, poets/writers and/or fathers (who previously felt or expressed discomfort or even outright denial) is the question of what they can possibly do to support the process (of empowerment, expression and identity naming) for African American adolescent girls. They also question, do men begin to uphold Black feminism? To this, I often have responded by sharing the ways in which men can enter into dialogue and discussion with girls and women, and even

enter into the space themselves as Black feminists. The process of entering this space begins with the acknowledgement that a problem does exist in the current structure, followed by actively listening to the stories and voices of the girls and women who unfold their experiences. Entering into this space for the purpose of authentic discussion is crucial for Being to occur behind the mask. Men must come into this space with an understanding of the need sometimes for silence and with questions, rather than expectations, assumptions and ready made answers to experiences that they have not yet heard or encountered. As I explore this space of gendered complexities, I unfold questions, expectations and assumptions of girlhood and boyhood.

As I reflect on my study, and its grounding in Black feminism, I am drawn to the lyrics of Rhythm and Blues artist, Beyonce. Beyonce's lyrics are about the experiences of many adolescent girls and women, in contrast to expectations of and by adolescent boys and men. I invite the members Poetic Eight to further explore and reveal their lived experiences as African American adolescent girl poets, through their writings, connections and questions surrounding being heard and understood. This segment begins with the question, "If I Were a Boy..."

If I were a boy even just for a day
I'd roll out of bed in the morning
And throw on what I wanted
And go drink beer with the guys

And chase after girls
I'd kick it with who I wanted
And I'd never get confronted for it
'Cause they stick up for me

If I were a boy
I think I could understand

How it feels to love a girl
I swear I'd be a better man

I'd listen to her
'Cause I know how it hurts
When you lose the one you wanted
'Cause he's taking you for granted
And everything you had got destroyed

If I were a boy
I would turn off my phone
Tell everyone it's broken
So they'd think that I was sleeping alone

I'd put myself first
And make the rules as I go
'Cause I know that she'd be faithful
Waiting for me to come home, to come home

If I were a boy
I think I could understand
How it feels to love a girl
I swear I'd be a better man

I'd listen to her
'Cause I know how it hurts
When you lose the one you wanted
'Cause he's taking you for granted
And everything you had got destroyed

It's a little too late for you to come back
Say it's just a mistake
Think I'd forgive you like that
If you thought I would wait for you
You thought wrong

But you're just a boy
You don't understand
And you don't understand, oh
How it feels to love a girl
Someday you wish you were a better man

You don't listen to her
You don't care how it hurts
Until you lose the one you wanted
'Cause you're taking her for granted

And everything you had got destroyed
But you're just a boy
(Beyonce, 2008)

As I reflect on “If I Were a Boy,” I am reminded of my own girlhood. I had a diverse group of playmates consisting of: Nigerian, Swedish, African American, Italian American, Jamaican, Irish American, Jewish, Protestant and Catholic boys and girls. Many of my playmates were from traditional families and I considered my family to be more progressive than theirs. My parents did not practice or enforce traditionally defined gender roles in our household. And unlike many of the other mothers, my mother worked outside of the home and had a career.

My two close friends, “Natalie” and “Janine,” were from traditional Italian American households. We would play together after school, along with our sisters or the neighborhood boys “Maurice,” “Mike” and “Cheidu” or “Harry.” When we played with the boys we would have water fights, dodge ball games or snow ball fights, basically anything that required a moving target. Mostly, we were the target for the boys. We would shriek, squeal and run for cover.

Yet balls and snow were not the favorite weapon of choice. Rather, the favorite weapon was picked from Maurice’s parents Dogwood tree. Each one of us would take turns climbing the tall tree, past the delicate pink flowers to the bright, hard, red berries. Once we climbed back down, the berries would be hurled with impressive force at the faces of the opposite sex. The boys always took this game rather seriously and would throw the berries with much more fervor, causing greater damage to our bodies. They also seemed to derive pleasure from causing pain and making us cry – especially if that crying sent us running home.

Many a day Natalie, Janine and I would run shrieking home covered in hives or with swollen eyes from repeatedly being hit in the face by the berries. In the midst of an attack, we would retreat. Sometimes we would retreat crying, and other times muttering furiously, but we always returned to the “game.” We relied on our verbal prowess and sage’s tongue to issue a stern lecture, temporarily persuasive argument on the dangers of violence, or enlightened counsel and ministry to the “lost souls” also known as boys.

These “sessions” often involved hands on un-formed hips and fingers wagging in the air. On gentler days, they involved soothing tones, compassion for the boys’ stories of having their intentions misunderstood, motherly advice and forgiveness. We believed that our pearls of wisdom and sincerity would inspire them to rise to higher emotional ground, or at the very least, stop smashing our little faces with hard berries. But in reality, it never did.

And while we were all “nice” and “good” kids playing a relatively innocent game that was not designed to inflict any real pain or injury, it still seems to unfold a deeper meaning and indication of traditional gender roles, expectations and interactions (Binger, 1994). The day that stands out most in my mind is the one when I ran into the kitchen to grab ice for the eye that was quickly beginning to close shut. Fighting back anger and tears, I was going to nurse my wounds and quickly run back outside to my neighbor’s house again. Before I could leave, my mother stopped me to ask me what happened. I rapidly rattled off a list of occurrences without so much as taking a breath. My mother looking shocked then asked, either “Why are you going back there?” or “Why do you keep going back there?” And while the

reasoning of a nine or ten-year-old is undoubtedly much less complicated than that of a grown woman, sometimes the concept or thought process can be similar. It never occurred to me not to go back. Frankly, I did not know there was an alternative. It simply seemed to be what girls did – endure pain or suffering and what boys did – inflict pain or suffering. And while these experiences are painful, sharing them for the purpose of emancipation is *The Truth That Never Hurts* (Smith, 1998).

I unfold this story and the ethnic and racial diversity of my playmates for two primary reasons. The first is to elucidate that sexism affects African American girls and women. Black feminist writer, Barbara Smith, unfolds this simple statement is “rhetoric to the contrary” (Smith, 1998, p. 41). Therefore, I seek to acknowledge gender oppression of African American women and girls in my story and in my study. The second is to acknowledge that the aggressive behavior from boys (which society generally associates with African American boys) is displayed by European American boys in my play group as well (Kunjufu, n.d.). However, my study is focused on the lived experience of African American adolescent girls.

I recognize that there are many gender stereotypes that are displayed in my story. Furthermore, I acknowledge that there are many girls and boys who do not have such stereotypical experiences. I am also mindful of making broad and sweeping generalizations about gender and sex based on a specific recollection.

Yet, as an educator who has worked with students from pre- kindergarten to college, I see a similar dynamic year after year. As in my own childhood experience, I see girls and young women of all ethnicities, religions, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic statuses and “races,” nurturing, counseling, yelling, condoning, excusing,

lecturing, blaming themselves, blaming other girls and women, cajoling, explaining, crying and begging boys and young men to stop hurting them or to change their patterns of behavior. In these situations, the boys' behaviors they are seeking to change range from pulling hair to throwing berries in the earlier years, to drinking, cheating, lying, ignoring, or taking their girlfriends for granted as outlined in Beyonce's lyrics "If I Were a Boy." However, they also include increasingly dangerous practices and behaviors such as emotional and physical abuse and other forms of violence.

I've also noticed a shift in the behavior of some girls who now attempt to imitate the boys' expressions and even batter them back (as unfolded in Queen of Hearts' poem). But often what I still do not see is girls and young women being given or giving themselves the permission to acknowledge that they do not have to endure, nor do they deserve being pelted by berries (as a metaphor for suffering or violence). I also do not often see boys being given or giving themselves permission to opt out of stereotypical male roles and behavior, even if it means being the male outsider on the playground.

As I explore the needs of African American adolescent girls based on their poetry and reflections, I connect with the work of Gary Lemons (2008). Lemons explores his position as an outsider on the metaphorical male playground in his book *Black Male Outsider*. Furthermore, I invite male ally, poet, feminist and educator, Omari Daniel, through his work and writings on "I Am Not a Man" to enter this space with Poetic Eight and as a guest speaker and active listener.

Black Male Outsider

Gary Lemons (2008) writes in *Black Male Outsider* the ways in which he, as a professor, has used the study and teaching of Black feminism through Black feminists' writings and autobiography. He shares that they not only transformed his professional and personal life, but saved them both by allowing him to fuel his passion, connect more deeply with his students, embrace social activism, dismantle racism and sexism, redefine himself and others, and move his students toward self-empowerment and inner healing. In addition to my own dialogues and discussions around these topics, I have chosen to invite former English co-teacher, friend, and writer, Omari Daniel, into this poetic space. He enters as an African American male, high school teacher, poet, academic, ally, feminist and father. Daniel shares his lived experiences, writings and reflections on manhood which have provided him with deeper understanding and communication with African American adolescent girl students. He offers his story, writings and reflections with the members of Poetic Eight, but more importantly he offers his "listening ears" as a poetic male ally to hear their stories and their voices.

Gender identity, is described as the knowledge that human beings are either female or male. However, gender or sex roles are based upon the interpretation of femininity and masculinity and are shaped by parents and other caregivers, culture, society and socialization experiences (Bigner, 1994). A fundamental goal of male feminism or male feminists is for men to "unlearn" traditional patriarchal systems that support and encourage oppression and marginalization (in terms gender, race,

ethnicity, class and sexual orientation). Essentially, men “unlearn” manhood as it has been created as a “performance,” caricature and mask (Lemon, 2008, p. xviii).

Furthermore, in Black feminism it is acknowledged that one form of marginalization, such as racism, cannot be dismantled while maintaining or upholding another form of oppression and marginalization such as sexism (or vice versa).

Barbara Smith (1998) writes about the dismantling of race and gender oppression in *The Truth That Never Hurts*. She exposes the necessity of eradicating such contradictions for the emancipation of women and men. Smith further shares the poetry of Pat Parker to unfold the silencing of Black women’s voices beneath the patriarchal structure of domestic violence.

Brother
I don’t want to hear
about
how *my* real enemy
is the system.
i’m no genius,
but I do know the system
you hit me with
is called
a fist.
(Parker, as cited in, Smith, 1998, pp. 42-43)

These same truths spill over onto the pages throughout the chapter on love as the members of Poetic Eight offer their poetry to men who batter women as they redefine what they have experienced, observed or previously described as “love.” As I continue to unfold these writings, guest speaker/poet Daniel is now invited to walk gingerly with us. But first, he must acknowledge a problem in the structure does exist and offer his naming, not only as an ally, but as “Not a Man.” Daniel offers his naming as “Not a Man” by acknowledging the names, qualities and characteristics the

adolescent girls through their experiences, or the experiences of their loved ones, have come to know as men.

I Am Not a Man

I am six foot three, can bench press 435 lbs, fathered two children, look better than Taye Diggs, but apparently, I am not a man. This fact has been delivered to me by waves of female students washing into my classroom during planning periods or lunch. Their words have washed up onto my conscious and eroded my definition of who I thought I was. I thought I was a man. In fact, I thought I was “the man”. However, I was wrong, wrong, wrong and I have never been prouder to be wrong in my life. I am glad I am not a man.

“Dr. Daniel. I need to talk to you.” This phrase has become part of my daily life as a teacher. Unless I am in class, I know I need to focus my attention on the brave eyes now trying to fight back inevitable tears. Another fragile young woman has made a choice to seek me out. I am humbled by this choice every single time. They did not choose their fathers, grandfathers, uncles, best friends, boy friends, brothers, counselors, or psychiatrists. They choose me. I was honored to be viewed as “the choice” but I could not help but wonder why? Why did a girl whose man told her to abort her baby because she was not his idea of a real woman tell me “When he said that, most girls would have cried oh Daddy, or oh best friend or oh So and So, but I cried oh Mr. Daniel.” Why did she want me? What kind of person am I?

I know I am not quite as *sane* as other teachers. I know I like to play around *some* and teach simultaneously. I also know that students know I will tell them the truth no matter how painful it is to hear. I am pretty sure my students trust me and know I am not here to judge them. They also know I am all about them improving their lives and developing their own identities, voices, confidence, and love of self so that they can conquer our cruel world. But a lot of teachers are like that right? This did not explain why so many girls were telling me things that only their diaries knew. Was I a living diary?

The issues that they have brought to me are overwhelmingly sensitive. I don't even know how to begin to express them. I guess I will try the band-aid method and just rip them right off. Maybe then I can get through the list without crying with and for my girls again. Rapes, molestations, loss of virginity, asking me if they should lose their virginity, believing they were ugly, that their bodies were ugly, believing a boy who said I love you, believing they are not important, wondering how to survive being labeled a ho, how to survive a father believing you are a female dog, believing you should not be alive any longer, believing..... I can't make it. There are just too many wounds.

There simply is no pill to dull this pain. It would essentially be taking aspirin for a bullet to the heart. I never learned the lesson that men can't cry or feel.

Why were they telling me these things? That question has haunted me these last few years, until I was blessed with an answer last week. A young lady told me "I hate boys. I hate men. I do not trust them. I ignore them all at home and in school. I would never tell a man anything about myself. They are all dogs and disgusting." Then she proceeded to tell me something devastating. I asked her "If you hate men so much, then why are you telling me? You do realize I am a man?" Her answer struck my soul like lightning. No, you are not. You are not a man, you are different."

I saw the light. For an infinite number of girls today, the term man has come to represent darkness, fear manipulation, hatred, depression, or pain. For an infinite number of girls today, a man has turned into a sexual predator, a liar, an abusive mate, a thief, a pervert, a foe, a taker, a user, a dragon breathing pure evil itself.

I was not doing anything special; I was simply not doing anything terrible. I was no monster-I mean man. I was different because I had no ulterior motives when I talked to them. I was strange because I wanted what was best for them. I was weird because I told them I loved them and meant it. I was an odd creature because I helped them to understand they had the power to heal themselves, and to love themselves despite the "perceived flaws" and unfortunate circumstances. I was not a man because men don't do those things for women. A man can't just be an honest, open caring friend to a woman, therefore in their books, I was not a man. I was safe. Not being a man is a gift and a curse. The gift is that I get to be there for a girl when they feel no one else is there. It is the ultimate gift, simple, yet eloquent; it is the chance to help. By not being a man, I get to matter.

The curse is not being depressed or burdened by so much sadness. I will listen to them all day if I have to because they need help slaying the beasts in their lives. The curse is having to prove myself to every girl I teach, year after year, that I am not a man. The curse is because of my genetics, many girls in need will not think to talk to me in fear that I am just a man. I am cursed because I have to go home to talk to my two sons. At the innocent ages of three and five. I wish I could just have the talk about them growing up to be anything they want in life. Instead, because of you (and honestly the man I was in college) I must tell them they can grow up to be anything but men. Thanks man. (Daniel, 2006)

After Daniel's reading Blue inquires, "What do you mean when you say you're happy not being called a man?" In response, Daniel offers his feelings

candidly about the pressure to prove your manhood and “act hard” and not show your soft side. “You realize at some point that you are not allowed to be a human being any more. You are not allowed to be vulnerable. So trying to play up to that [acting hard] or buy in to it... becomes a sad existence for you as a man. [It’s] a dead end.” It is through Daniel’s process as a writer and pro-feminist, living behind the mask, that he is able to reach his inner self and enter this space to be heard and received by its members.

As this chapter unfolds self love and writing as a tool for justice and resistance, I connect with Daniel’s words as he shares with Poetic Eight. “When I first started writing I was making up stuff and it was terrible. Eventually I started writing about my life.” He tells the girls with his voice unwavering, “Your first weapon is your pen. You’ve got a tool to beat this world.” What tool or weapon will they use as Dr. Daniel facilitates the group today? Will they write from their hearts, as they do with me, or “put up a front?”

I remember the words of KiRe from a previous one on one discussion with me: “Guys just bring a different vibe. And a lot of girls put up a front when guys are around. Maybe it’s just woman’s nature. To be the best one. The attitude would have been different and the outcome of the club would have been different [if boys participated].”

Camille’s poem deepens the meaning and voice of this experience in, “If I were a boy.” Through her poetry, she questions the way in which she is treated as a girl, along with the stereotypes and assumptions about appropriate female behavior.

How would that change if she were a boy she questions? How would she be treated by others if she were a boy instead of a girl who names herself a tomboy?

If I were a boy
Would you still treat me the same
Dap me up like you do now
Talk to me like im one of us...
Call me yo man's
And stuff like that.
You see me physically
as a girl
but may realize
I sometime act kind of
guyish
slouchin in my seat
legs all open
pretty much as what society calls not lady like.
And Im sayin how would you think of me then?
I mean like I don't really talk like a girl
I gotta deep voice
I sometime don't dress like a girl
Baggy pants and a huge sweater
Wearing that hood 24/7
And I say the same exact thing to myself
How would people treat me if I were a boy?
(Camille, 2009)

Yet, as Daniel un-conceals himself and listens actively to Poetic Eight's voices, their questions, reflections and lived experiences begin to flow from behind the mask.

Camille writes, during our next meeting, how she felt about Dr. Daniel revealing "I Am Not a Man."

"I really liked this poem because it's something I would want a man to be. Someone I could talk to about anything and get good feedback on it. In this poem this is a person you could tell secrets to. Thoughts, feelings anything you want and accepted the conversation with no rejection. Women can talk to him as if he were another woman when physically you saw he was a man. He was a person who helped you understand completely yourself and the situation."
(Camille, 2009)

“I felt the weight come off my chest because the words that was brought to my head what a man is was said in the poem. The poem made me speech less because that is how I feel about boys/men I would tell you what a man is and can easily tell you what I think a man is. But I won’t know what a real man is or a boy until I come in contact with a real man. The poem also made me understand from a man perspective what a real man is or should be.”
(Blue, 2009)

Camille and Blue uncover the power to name, “What a man is” based on their discoveries of what a man is not. As they travel through their questions of “If I Were a Boy?” to their experiences with “I Am Not a Man” they arrive at a place of homesteading by remembering their own names.

Remembering Your Name

Blue’s voice follows, “[There are] a lot of things that go on in a girl’s life especially inside which can create conflict outside which is a reflection of what’s going on in the inside. Being hurt by a peer, a loved one or just a friend. Losing self esteem.” As I reflect on Camille’s poem “If I Were a Boy,” it seems to ask the listener if you will still accept her in spite of “wearing that hood 24/7,” acting “guyish” or “slouching in her seat.” Yet behind the questions, writings and reflections, an unspoken question appears to emerge through the poetic voices of Camille, Blue and Lenash. Will you still love me if I tell you my real name? If not, do I forget my own name to remember yours?

Blue and Lenash further explore the experiences of girls and women who lose the power to speak their own names in their poems “Positive” and “Virgin.” In “Positive,” Blue writes about a woman who contracts HIV as she struggles to find love through sex and “That feeling of sexual healing.” Blue’s poem takes us through

the disconnection between emotions and bodily sensations that drive the woman in her poem to forget her identity/naming to get “lost in his name” (White, 1994).

Positive

She says his name, forgetting her own
Bodies clingin, a lustful woman singin
The words in her heart
And ooww, while this woman sings
She gets lost in his name
While forgetting that his aint the same as yesterday’s
Today it’s Pete, the one that massages her feet
While yesterday was Sam, who made her body go “Damn!”

And while she whispers “Pete...Pete”
She is still remembering Sam... but only because he made her
body go “Damn!” and Pete aint doin all the things he could
or that she wish he would so that she can get that feeling.
That feeling of sexual healing...

And though Pete aint all that good, she know he would do it [if] he
Could, but he can’t, so she goes back to Sam...
See Sam knows her body real well, so his name is what she yells.
Taking her body around and around, while deeper and deeper
He goes down.
She thinks to herself “Oh, hell yes!” This man Sam is definitely
the best!”

Now while he doesn’t “like” to use condoms
She just thinks “Well, what the hell!”
Forgetting 1,051,875 people die a year from those words.
And as she’s yelling his name, she forgets it won’t be the same
Because afterwards, she senses it to be all wrong.
Still the hormones are pulling her along to her grave.

She takes a pregnancy test to see if her body can progress, but
It’s positive... but so is she in the case of HIV AIDS, now
Aint that some bullshit!

She should have said that when he said “They take away the fun,
baby.” Little did she know, they could have saved her life, but
Now she gotta try to fight, her fears, her fam, her friends, and disease.
But she aint have to be here, standing all alone, just

Because while saying his name, she forgot her own.
(Blue, 2009)

What does it mean to forget your name to say an-other name? How do adolescent girls remember their own names not to be left “standing all alone” and forgotten? As the chapter has unfolded on self love, love of another, the voice of resistance and allies, I reconnect the writings of Poetic Eight with the words of Daniel behind the mask.

Think about the number of people in your life who know exactly who you are. Who know the inner you. When that person says they love you. How do you know they are saying the truth? Good bad, sad. And they are not going any where. Fast forward to the men you know. To love you means they have to know you. So how can someone say that they love you without knowing the inner you.
(Daniel, 2009)

As I reflect on the meaning of adolescent girls and women losing *and* remembering their names, I now offer my poem, “He Carries in His Heart” to these writings on self love and naming. “Do not throw your pearls to pigs...” is shared in the Bible (Mathew, 7:6). “My pearls” in my poem represent not only wisdom or knowing, but a sense of self worth, self esteem and identity that are expressed through naming. In my poem, it is the truth and path of personal identity and fulfillment of dreams that lead to emancipation. “He Carries in His Heart” is written about remembering the name that was forgotten to remember his – your own.

He carries in his heart my tears
imprinted like footprints
walking through the consciousness of his mind.
He holds images of me closer and closer still
thinking if he shuts his eyes and squinches his face
i cannot break free
from the grasp that binds us as forcefully as his remembrances
He does not see that i have vanished many years before
as I have grown older and gone to cast my pearls

at the feet of my own dreams.
he carries the pictures of the past with the breath of “remember
when?”
I do remember... which is why I leave him
(Bacon, 2008)

As I follow the path of this journey from girlhood to womanhood, I return to
the voice of Lenash. Lenash continues this unfolding through her poem “Virgin.” In
her poem, she writes about the loss of her name (identity) as the loss of virginity.
Through an emotional rape, “It was rape of my mind,” her “soul and heart” are taken.

Virgin

It started with a kiss
But ultimately ended with a diss...
From you.
Why doesn't it hurt, I thought it was true?
But it's hard to think that I almost gave him a part of me
That part was intimate, it was my virginity.
Not the sex, or making love, but my soul and heart
But really, my virginity is all you wanted from the start.
The thought that I was inexperienced, not knowing certain
things
But little did I know, I would never get a ring.
See, I was in it for you, willing for you to teach me
But no, taking advantage of me is all you seized.
It was rape of my mind
You stole my time.
My life is now scarred
And things are getting hard...
Not because of you
It's cause I have no clue.
But really? Why doesn't it hurt?
Blood was shed, and now all I imagine is you lifting my skirt
Of fear, rapping my inner thoughts.
You telling me about how you're so distraught!
But I'm the virgin here,
I thought that this was clear.
Naïve and so dumb
All I did was run.
I'm done running, a runner is not who I'm meant to be,
But whenever I run, you always follow me.
You stalker! Leave me alone!

I'm trying to get back home!

But, "but" is in the way,
And my virginity has gone away.
So what am I?
A virgin to your lie?
Because my virginity was taken
And I was forced to grow-up makin
Others grow-up fast too,
But I really have no clue.
And still, you have raped me,
And still without you, who would I be?
No longer am I a virgin, really
But now, I'm feeling silly!
I finally figured out why it doesn't really hurt,
It's because I wasn't a virgin, and you wasn't my first!
(Lenash, 2009)

Lenash shares, in our group discussion that follows, that her poem "Virgin" is not a piece about the physical loss of her virginity, "Not the sex, or making love, but my soul and heart," but rather the loss of emotional innocence. She exclaims in her writing, "See, I was in it for you, willing for you to teach me But no, taking advantage of me is all you seized." In reclaiming her voice and power to name herself again she recognizes, "I finally figured out why it doesn't really hurt." Since she has endured heart break and deception before, it does not hurt because she has come to a sense of "knowing" or awareness. Through that awareness, she re-claims her power, "It's because I wasn't a virgin, and you wasn't my first!"

I am reminded of poetry writing in *Catch the Fire: A Cross-Generational Anthology of Contemporary African-American Poetry* (1998). Poet Asha Bandele writes as a survivor of depression, domestic violence, self abuse and racism to a woman who has taken her life to end her similar suffering. Bandele offers her living words and name to the woman in her poem, "The Subtle Art of Breathing." In the

poems that I have shared in this segment, Blue has written “Positive,” I have unfolded “He Carries in His Heart” and Lenash has written “Virgin” for other adolescent girls and women who have also forgotten their names.

Bandele writes, “I’m gonna be even more than a survivor I’ll be a celebrant inside myself a party girl in my own soul I’ll take myself out to fancy restaurants bring me roses then make love to myself & in the heat of passion call out my own name...” (in Gilbert, 1998, p. 35). She invites the woman, in her imagination, to join her in remembering her own name by becoming “your own sensual dance partner in high-heeled shoes fine as hell girl & so so so fulla life” (Bandele, in Gilbert, 1998, p. 35).

Whether the adolescent poets received unconditional support and love, or relationships were healed or reconciled with boys, men, peers, parents or other loved ones in their lives, members of Poetic Eight eventually made the decision to take the chance to be heard and be “so fulla life.” They also risked being vulnerable by sharing and writing their stories and the stories of others. Revelation, truth and passion, carry us into the next chapter on divinity. Spirituality and divinity are themes that the members of Poetic Eight often reveal through their discussions and writings, both of which give them the strength to move toward Being and love. According to Metaphysician, Warch, “If you need love, you draw it from absolute love, God” (1977, p. 4). Divinity, in chapter seven, is expressed through Poetic Eight’s and my relationship and writings surrounding God, religion or spirituality, finding the anam cara within, and without, and a final path to homesteading.

CHAPTER SEVEN: HONORING THE DIVINE

Hermes, in Greek mythology, was not only a messenger between gods and mortals, but a messenger between the living and the dead (Steiner, 1989). Embracing our divinity offers us the space to be as Hermes in such a communion. For Blue and Mishaps their messages have been delivered from their thoughts and remembrances to their deceased mothers. And as pain is transformed and joy is revealed a relationship with the anam cara is forged. Throughout this poetic unfolding, the girls in Poetic Eight connect to each other through their shared experiences of suffering, of friendship and of joy which lead them to the path of anam cara. It is through the relationship with an anam cara that recognition and belonging are uncovered and the “hidden intimacies” of the writer’s life are revealed (O’Donohue, 1997, p. xviii). The friendships that are born in this sacred space of one’s heart and remembrances of the past open the way for friendships of the soul.

In this individual and collective journey, we are each called upon to honor and protect our memories and lived experiences, as well as those of each other as we are upheld “Safe in the Heart of Another” (Hollingsworth, as cited in White-Hood, 1989, p. iv). And with this safety, homecoming and homesteading are blessed with the unfolding of true friendship. This journey with the anam cara further leads us to God “as the divine anam cara” (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 132).

A Friendship Blessing

May you be blessed with good friends.
May you learn to be a good friend to yourself.
May you be able to journey to that place in your soul where
there is great love, warmth, feeling, and forgiveness.
May this change you.

May it transfigure that which is negative, distant, or cold
in you.
May you be brought in to real passion, kinship, and
affinity of belonging.
May you treasure your friends.
May you be good to them and may you be there for them;
may they bring you all the blessings, challenges, truth,
and light you need for your journey.
May you never be isolated.
May you always be in the gentle nest of belonging with your
anam cara.
(O'Donohue, 1997, p. 36)

Poetic Faith

Walsch (1995), in *Conversations with God*, shares that our lives are an expression of creation rather than discovery. Creation must include a sense of knowing that represents absolute faith. Faith is often known Biblically as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews, 11:1). Moving into an active sense of knowing and believing often requires intuition, trust and higher consciousness to connect and experience a “belief in what you cannot see or prove or touch” (Gilbert, 2006, p. 175). It is faith, knowing and creation that reveal clarity. It is also faith and self-love that, eventually, allow the members of Poetic Eight to experience “I Was,” “I Am” and “I Will Be” holistically. According to Heidegger, in metaphysics, there is thought and a presence of wholeness that allow for the recognition of difference and variation, while integrating diverse parts into a whole (Heidegger, 1969).

Individuality is the I Am...
(Warch, 1977, p. 23)

In integrating diverse poetic parts into a whole, phenomenologist and writer, George Steiner (1989) shares that God's presence is possible through experiences,

exploration and meaning of artistic creation. Through meaningfulness a path is created to the formation of living words. According to Steiner, words do not create God; rather, God creates life through words.

Although phenomenology and poetry are grounded in metaphysics and the divine, I do not introduce God or spirituality into the classroom, even as a poet or phenomenological researcher. Also, I do not initiate discussions around these topics, as my research is primarily guided by the lived experiences of my participants. Therefore, I find myself awe-struck by the fact that when the adolescent girl poets are asked to pick any topic or theme that they want to write about or facilitate, many of their selections center around God and the principles of divinity.

Poetic Principles

In my study, the opening of this poetic space follows the acknowledgement of sorrow and grief that once kept members of Poetic Eight isolated. Uncovering truth, joy and love led us to the final journey of homesteading. In this space of homesteading, I ask each poet to name her greatest truth, joy and love. Furthermore, I re-enter this space as a co-participant to realize my own truth and joy.

Mishaps writes that her greatest truth is that “love conquers all” and “every one has a sensitive side.” Having been exposed to violence and pain, her revelation and acceptance of sensitivity seem to create another passage from the wilderness to homesteading, which is a place that allows for vulnerability and self acceptance. When Mishaps speaks and writes of her greatest joy, she first scribbles on the page that her greatest joy is “my sisters” and “when they are happy.” She then scratches through her writings, and instead changes to “When I’m doing right by God.”

I wonder what the shift means for her. What is the power in her naming of her joy as an older sister who is also their surrogate mother? Does scribbling through her sisters' joy to her own quest of "doing right by God" reveal an even greater connection to the universal (as explored in this chapter)? Mishaps has just begun to discover feelings (or a possible desire) to be protected rather than always assuming the role of the protector. Where will this feeling lead her, now that our poetic work together is almost complete?

I am drawn to remembering the discussions and reflections of Mishaps, Divine Diva and Blue, who recall the lived experiences of their journeys as their mothers' children and their own experiences with relationships. I am drawn, in particular, to Mishaps' experience in her witnessing of "love" that is abusive and destructive. I also journey in the darkness to recollect my own writings and experiences of such relationships and the rewriting of those experiences to offer support and guidance for other young women.

Praise Poetry

Blue originally introduces the topic of God and spirituality to the poetry group. However, when she selects the topic for facilitation she changes the topic and discussion to God and religion, which become prominent themes in and for the group. "My mom was so religious, and when I make poetry about God it touches me... I feel God is my strength, my higher purpose, my higher thought. When I touch on something religious, it [her feelings and her poetry] comes pouring out..." And with her unfolding, she seems to develop a new style of poetry – praise poetry.

Why I Praise

I pray to you for wisdom
I pray to you for strength
His eye is on the sparrow

My love will never narrow
For God is my hero, more
Then that but a creation for

Which I walk upon
Blessing me with charm of life
With heaven of holy light

That shines through the sun light
Love the feeling of praising you
Calling upon God when my nights are blue

My soul belongs to you
If only they can see
What we hold underneath

Is a master piece
Of his work, so don't give up
God knows time is rough

And when you had enough
But like it says he won't give
You more than you can bare

God expresses his love for you
In difference and hardships...So I

Sing because I'm free
God installs all my hopes and dreams
Look at me giving praise for every little thing

Read between the lines God
Is my only prize, my rhyme
G.O.D. is the song I sing inside
So when I say I'm blessed

Nothing can compare to this blessing
(Blue, 2009)

Praise poetry allows Blue to offer gratitude or praise for her life and the love she believes God expresses, even during her hardships and grief. After her mother's death, she finds a connection to her mother spiritually and the ways in which she feels that she is "blessed" in life even in the little things. "Look at me giving praise for every little thing." Much like Freire (2000) and Walker (1997), Blue embraces freedom from her pain through her mind, inner thoughts and beliefs, while working to change her life circumstances. Embracing divine love and freedom allows Blue to create and maintain her hopes and dreams.

I join Queen of Hearts' poetry with the previous segment on gendered complexities and this chapter on divinity. Queen of Hearts shares her poem "Forsaken" written to her father on forgiveness and reconciliation. Queen of Hearts' father now actively seeks to be apart of her life and make up for his absence. Through Queen of Hearts' poem, it becomes apparent that she has found another listening ear in her father. As he reconciled with Queen of Hearts, he un-learns traditional manhood to become "Not a Man" for his daughter. This writing and reconciliation process, for Queen of Hearts, allows her to move forward with an open and healed heart (Lemon, 2008; Levin, 1898).

Forsaken

And the Bible says "Father why have thee forsaken me?,"
My mind wonders with questions unanswered,
I try to search for every answer known,
Where were you for the past 3 years,
When did you decide to leave me,
Why did you go.
Trying to understand this missing-in-action parent,
And everything we've been through,
But that was before,
You have come back in action,

Living, loving & listening for me,
Even can buy the closeness I need,
All hard feelings are put to side when it comes to you,
I'm more open & express love the best way I can,
Thank you for making efforts to be here when needed...
Dad, I'm glad we went through everything,
You make life & loving easier,
I thank you for keeping me in your thoughts,
And all you have forsaken me for.
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

Blue connects with her deceased mother through religion and faith, while Queen of Hearts connects with her feelings of being forsaken by her father through her faith. Queen of Hearts, in her writing, experiences her abandonment by her father as being forsaken by God. However, as her father re-connects with her, the meaning of being forsaken is transformed. Through the re-connection with her father, she expresses gratitude for what he has forsaken. "I thank you for keeping me in your thoughts, and all you have forsaken me for."

Finding Meaning in the Divine

While praise, worship, spirituality, faith and even the idea of sin differ within the group, spirituality still appears to be one of the greatest pulls and strengths (along with writing, shedding tears and music) for overcoming grief and embracing joy for all members of the group. Queen of Hearts expresses her feelings of overcoming grief through her connection to the divine in her poem, "You Found Me!"

You Found Me!

You found me,
Lost and insecure,
Hoping Someone comes
Pulls me out of
This dark place
I dug for myself,

Grabbing onto my insecurities
Taking them for a ride
On a roller coaster
I can't live much longer
Becoming heartless...
Cry out for help,
Doubts of being heard,
But you found me,
With your faith lingering over me,
Giving me hope
To keep going
As you pull me up
From the dark place...
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

As Blue creates activities involving spirituality and religion, a discussion ensues surrounding the meaning of God (Walsh, 1995). Based on the discussion, I explore, in these writings, what God, spirituality or the divine mean to members of Poetic Eight. While the names differ, are the meanings the same? In addition to praise poetry, how is God named and expressed poetically? There is an active exchange and engagement as members share their feelings around their writings about spirituality and the use of many names and ideas that the members in Poetic Eight call forth in their practices. They begin to unfold their naming(s), and the naming(s) of others, as God, the Lord, Father and Jesus.

I Think

I think about God each night and day...
I think of what I am getting ready to say...
I think of God as my heavenly father
(Family, 2009)

Family enters into this space through her poem "I Think." She unfolds the meaning of God for her as her "heavenly father." She shares that God always remains in her thoughts. As the dialogue continues, the girls discuss their beliefs,

allowing room for questions, interpretations, contradictions and conviction (even if their beliefs differ from each other, family members or society) with respect for distinction and with humor. The members of Poetic Eight further unfold the meaning of God for themselves through their discussion on Jesus. “We’re talking to Jesus but we’re calling him God.” “They said that Jesus was put on earth for him to talk to his father for us.” “I think God and Jesus are the same person with a different name like Boo or sweetie.” KiRe smiles and the group laughs. As religions outside of Christianity are discussed, Mishaps exclaims, “They pray to who they pray to and we pray to who we pray to. It might be the same person. It is the same person. It’s love in the air.” We discuss gender and God being referred to by them only as Father, he or him. KiRe expresses that God does not have a gender or sex but is more like a spirit (Walsch, 1998).

After the discussion, Blue begins her activity by sharing index cards. Each index contains one word such as praise, prayer, love, power, saved, holy and unite for each member to select, reflect on and write about. Divine Diva chooses power. “His power is strength in us, but he gives us strength back so we can persevere.” Camille, who is the daughter of a minister, chooses saved. “I think saved means to be in the church, not just attending, but a part of the family. When you are baptized you become saved, meaning your sins have been washed away. I chose this word because I am a Christian; I have been saved for at least 5 years or so. So I felt this word applied to me.” KiRe’s voice enters as she shares her writing about the poetic meaning of being “saved” for those who are suffering.

...it’s bone chilling growl,
And fists of anger jab her.

This little girl remains,
Beaten battered and worn,
Always herself she blames,
And wishes she was never born.
But one day she just got tired,
Of dealing with the sorrow,
Was fed up with the fire, and,
The pains of tomorrow.
So she did something she never did before,
And got down on her knees,
To call out to the Lord,
For deliverance from her disease.
What disease you say?
Terrible fate and horrible pain,
The games of threats & thorns she played,
Like flesh eating rain.
But once she cried out to Jesus,
Her heart and soul were renewed,
If the Lord could save this little girl,
He can surely save you!!!
(KiRe, 2008)

Blue follows by choosing prayer. Mishaps chooses the word love, which she relates to religion because God is passion and emotional connection. Each adolescent girl selects a word that seems to represent a homecoming through peace, belonging and acceptance, as well as a respite from the grief that they have unfolded throughout the previous chapters. I invite them, based on the discussion and Blue's activity, to work together to create a poem with all of their words and expressions.

He saved me with his love
And so I praise him
Through the power of prayer
I keep the faith
With love and grace
And his holy embrace
Keeps me alive
I'm filled with pride
I unite my soul with his power...

That is divine
(Poetic Eight, 2009)

Poetic Eight uncover their power to name themselves and heal their relationships through their faith, love, and God's "holy embrace." While Poetic Eight's lived experiences vary, they feel united in the power of the divine that "Keeps me alive." As I unfold this chapter, I must acknowledge that there are many practices, beliefs, and faiths that have not been included. In this chapter, as in this phenomenological study, I have been led by the voices and expressions of my participants.

Honoring the Divine Everywhere

As I return to hermeneutics and metaphysics, I note that Heidegger describes metaphysics as "a statement about God, because the deity enters into philosophy" (Heidegger, 1969, p. 55). Heidegger further acknowledges as he speaks of philosophy that the deity enters everywhere and brings us toward Being as "always and everywhere" (p. 61). Heidegger defines metaphysics as the "Interpretation of beings and the forgetfulness of Being..." (1993, p. 91). Metaphysics is revealed in these poetic unfoldings as we embrace *Dasein*. Heidegger reveals *Dasein* as states of emotion such as joy, excitement or anxiety. Heidegger travels through anxiety, much as Poetic Eight, to realize that it is this state that forces one to face life, death and Being (1993).

Life, death and Being have been represented through the poetry of Poetic Eight. Poets have been described as people or groups who intuitively offer deep understanding of the human experience with an accuracy that is delicate and a perception that is empathetic. In terms of divinity, poets have been said to raise

consciousness and act as visionaries (Woodward, 1987). How do poets act as visionaries but not get entangled or attached to their visions? As I open the final chapter and contemplate the meaning of the pedagogy of poetry, I begin by honoring the visions of poets.

I end chapter seven on divinity and open chapter eight on the pedagogy of poetry with the invitation for phenomenologists, “other mothers and fathers,” culturally responsive educators, spiritualists, activists, community members, writers/poets, human scientists, humanitarians and human beings (along with our other many names we call ourselves in this field and beyond) to learn and teach from the heart (Rothstein, 1993). I charge poets and educators to embrace the love of learning and inquiry, open our hearts and minds to creativity and honor the inner beauty of each student-poet. If we guard the thoughts and imaginings of every student as if she were a budding poet, as well as guard our own dreams, power may not only be uncovered, but it may be maintained.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE PEDAGOGY OF POETRY

According to the Farlex Dictionary, home is a place where someone lives. It is also a dwelling place, like the poetry space, together with, as family, or a social unit. Home is an environment that offers security and happiness or a place of refuge. Home can also be where something was originated, or someone was born, or has lived for a long period (which in the poetry space can be a physical place, emotion, or heart of another, like the heart of a mother). And home, as it is in this unfolding, is a place where something is discovered, founded, and/or developed. It is the beginning, center, and destination of poetic re-emergence, re-turn, and resting. This poetic home allows the space for nesting and rebuilding. Bachelard (1994) connects the idea of nests to a hole or envelopment that can be used as armor or allow for many corners or “hiding places” (p. 91). It is a way of multiplying images or identities within a nesting refuge.

While poets may seek the collective comfort of a nesting refuge, Rilke (1962) reminds us in *Letters to a Young Poet*, that “Nobody can counsel and help you... there is only one single way. Go into yourself” (p. 16). Rilke further directs a young poet to seek to express her every day life; speak her sorrows as well as her desires; hold a belief in (some sort of) beauty; write and speak with love and sincerity; express her feelings, dreams and her memories.

The adolescent poets in Poetic Eight, like all poets, are called to bear both the burden and the greatness of the expression of their feelings. And as the poet’s inner feelings and life grow, they lead to new insights, clarity and truths. The lived experience cannot be forced or hurried, but must unfold naturally like the

phenomenological research process itself. The lived experiences and phenomenological research process charge us all to walk through sorrow, joy and remembrances to come home to ourselves and venture into our homesteading. The members of Poetic Eight have, individually and collectively, walked through their remembrances and homecoming. As they arrive at their homesteading, they re-enter the space of the living and are charged by life as well as their memories.

I bequeath to you, the living,
All joy and all sorrow
Have courage always,
And sometimes, sometimes,
Remember me
(Pizer, 1992, p.vi)

As the work of this dissertation has been to explore the meaning of the lived experience of African American adolescent girls writing to uncover the power to name who they really are, this chapter addresses the pedagogical insights brought forward from these understandings. The pedagogy of poetry, then, is brought to light in the process.

Poetic Work

A Blessing

May the light of your soul guide you.
May the light of your soul bless the work you do with the
secret love and warmth of your heart.
May you see in what you do the beauty of your own soul.
May the sacredness of your work bring healing, light,
and renewal to those who work with you and those who see
and receive your work.
May your work never weary you.
May it release in you wellsprings of refreshment,
inspiration, and excitement.
May you be present in what you do.
May you never become lost in bland absences.
May the day never burden.

May dawn find you awake and alert, approaching your
new day with dreams, possibilities, and promises.
May evening find you gracious and fulfilled.
May you go into the night blessed, sheltered, and protected.
May your soul calm, console, and renew you.
(O'Donohue, 1997, pp. 160-161)

As I reflect on the pedagogical insight of this work – I seek to illustrate the “showing” of what it means to teach in a culturally responsive manner. **So rather than identify technical instructional strategies to help others teach in this way, I am offering significant examples through pedagogical statements for possible practice.** As a culturally responsive educator and poet, I envisioned a poetry program that would create the space for all of the voices of the African American adolescent girl participants to be uncovered and heard. Some of the poetic unfolding that occurred throughout the creation and facilitation of this poetry program required an intense level of engagement from me as an educator, writer, researcher, designer, facilitator, and co-participant. Writing and reading poetry and literature during or through the process of grief and loss can require an especially intense level of support and presence as a poetry facilitator (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994). Therefore, at various times, I touched base with or informally consulted other professionals or mentors (academic/educational, spiritual, artistic, and counseling professionals). I also consulted a variety of texts, poetry books, readings, journals, formal classes, trainings and workshops I have taken or I have taught, along with my own writings (poetry and journal entries), inner guide and lived experiences.

Poetic Ethics

I caution educators against creating a culturally responsive poetry group without first exploring and examining their own professional and personal

backgrounds, lived experiences and comfort with writing, reading and actively listening to culturally responsive poetry. Pedagogically, educators bring their own strengths, academic backgrounds, narratives, lived experiences and beliefs to the forefront in creating a culturally responsive poetry group. I brought and utilized my lived experience, Bachelor of Arts in human development, training in therapeutic poetry, Master of Education in Special Education, doctoral work in Minority and Urban Education and experience as a poet and writer.

In my study and work, I made a very important distinction between creating a poetry therapy group and creating a culturally responsive poetry group. **My study is by no means designed to provide a model for a therapy group. My study is designed solely to provide an educational model for a culturally responsive poetry group.** In creating such a group, it is critical to make the distinction between a poetry therapy group and a poetry writing group. While poetry can be experienced as cathartic, healing or even “therapeutic,” the purpose of this study was to provide African American adolescent girls with the opportunity to explore their naming through writing poetry.

Participants in my study wrote from their imaginations, sense of activism and social justice, past personal experiences and vicarious experiences of family members, friends or society. None of my participants unfolded their writings from either personal or present circumstances of violence, self-injurious behavior or violent or injurious behavior from or toward others. **It is absolutely critical to note, that if students/participants report/disclose being abused, the abuse must be reported**

as mandated by law. For example, when Tia disclosed that she was raped by a classmate, school personnel immediately reported the incident to the authorities.

In my poetry groups, over the years, students who displayed behavior that I believed to be inappropriate, inconsistent, unmanageable, escalating or unsafe, for themselves, poetry group members or me, were either not selected to participate in an educational poetry group or were not allowed to continue to participate in the poetry group.

As a special education teacher and case manager, the school environments that were most conducive to a culturally responsive poetry group were the ones in which I was able to work with a team of professionals. Team members, in these settings, consisted of an administrator, general education teacher, school psychologist or social worker, pupil personnel worker, school counselor and parent/guardian. **However, in order to maintain trust within the poetry group, it is critical that the student/participant be consulted or provide her consent if the teacher/facilitator intends to share her writing with others unless the student is in danger or is a danger to others.** I not only highly recommend collaborating with other professionals, I deem it essential (particularly when working with students who are struggling or have special needs).

Creating Clearings in the Wilderness

I actively pursued, carved out and created the support and connections that, in a holistic educational system, should be in place and readily available to educators, but often are not. Generally, in the field of education, we are called upon to wear numerous hats, yet in many schools, the ability and support to collaborate with other

professionals and experts in the field (especially creatively), even before a student goes into crisis, are not available or considered valuable (Dance, 2002; Kauffmann, 1999). Educators who enter into this space of human connection and poetic engagement, risk criticism from some administrators, testing stakeholders, and colleagues, as well as risk fatigue, burn out or eventual numbness from the demands that this practice of engagement requires (particularly if unsupported and working in isolation) (Dean, Salend & Taylor, 1993). Therefore, having a support system is critical as isolation easily seeps into work that should generate connection.

As teachers, we often lament about the fact that while we seek to educate and connect with our students holistically, the current system inhibits such opportunities. We are programmed to teach to the test, teach without feeling, and to work without genuine support and in isolation. Human connections do not translate, for schools, into making adequate yearly progress (AYP) or passing the HSA (high school state assessments), Regent's exams or standards of learning (SOL) (Garran, 2004).

In my experience, poetry programs, or student-generated learning, often do not fit into the curriculum or even the ninety minute block class schedule. Some programs are run by outside organizations or community poets for a limited amount of time because teachers are unable to allot additional time, have limited resources or are already over-stretched. The work day is long, the paperwork often all consuming, and the tasks, expectations and obligations of teachers seem never ending (Dance, 2002; Dean, Salend & Taylor, 1993).

My poetry programs have occurred either at lunch or after school, because that was the only time when we were able to meet regularly without "interrupting

instruction.” Students, who experience grief, have diverse needs or want to address issues of empowerment, rarely have creative outlets built into the fabric of traditional schools (Dance, 2002; Kauffmann, 1999). I have spoken with other devoted teachers and educators who have shared, practically with tears in their eyes, that they wish they could run this type of program. It is not their lack of compassion, concern or devotion that keeps them from doing so, but rather the lack of support, demands from the county, administration and high stakes assessments.

Safe Keeping: Protecting the Heart

“Much of the pedagogical and political work of forming self and communities, by youth, takes place well outside the borders of schooling” (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. xi). The interest meeting for my study serves as such a confirmation of youth attempting to connect outside of classroom borders. During the “interest meeting” for my poetry group, students arrived after school individually and in twos and threes, in clusters and in droves. They arrived after the door was closed of the warmly insulated, brightly lit, English classroom until the room contained twenty-three interested self-identified African American adolescent girl poets. And once the interest meeting was over, a few more girls arrived the following day, when I was not present, to drop off poetry samples and inquire if they could still join.

While I was overjoyed at the response to my poetry group and the powerful ways in which the invitation spoke to the need for African American adolescent girls to express themselves through poetic voice, I recognized the responsibility for us as educators, community members, curriculum designers, stake holders, administrators and the like to create a system that supports and staffs such programs regularly. How

can we create the space where all of our students who want and need an outlet are able to find one safely within the school setting? The task feels somewhat daunting, but we must undergo it (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges & Jennings, In press).

I am reminded of culturally responsive scholars, such as Lisa Delpit and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy's writings in *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom* (2002). The authors unfold the development of self esteem by African American students who have their linguistic expression and culture honored in the classroom. Delpit further offers the lived experience of her daughter, Maya, who felt like an outcast in her predominately White school. However, when Maya transferred to a predominately African American school, which supported her culture and voice, her self esteem soared along with her verbal expression. Delpit and Kilgour Dowdy's work surrounding linguistic expression and cultural vernacular connects to the lived experiences of Poetic Eight uncovering and maintaining their power to name who they are. Poetic Eight uncovers and maintains their sense of empowerment through their unadulterated poetic writings and creative expression. Joshua Fishman, as cited in Delpit and Kilgour Dowdy (2002), questions:

What does the country lose when it loses
individuals who are comfortable with themselves,
cultures that are authentic to themselves, the
capacity to pursue sensitivity and some kind
of recognition that one has a purpose in life?
What is lost to a country that encourages people
To lose their direction in life? (n. p.)

What we lose as a society when we silence students' authentic selves and cultures, are their truths, their stories, their power, their voices – we lose them. What we also lose when we silence students' authentic selves is us. We are linked to our

students, our community and our society by our humanness; we cannot realize our visions and voices without a collective consciousness (Dean, et al., 1993; Freire, 1994; Freire, 2000; Irvine, 2003; O'Donohue, 1997).

In traditional classrooms, eighth grade poetry participants in Wiseman's (2004) study shared that they did not have the same (positive) relationship with their teachers once they entered high school. Participants in my study expressed a similar feeling of disconnection from their high school teachers. Therefore, it was imperative for me, during my study, to establish a relationship with each group member to offset their negative high school experiences, build trust and a sense of community. Positive relationships were paramount to the success of my poetry program.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Pathway to the Poet's Heart

In creating a culturally responsive poetry group, three crucial topics are brought forth through the unfolding of my study: culturally responsive pedagogy, literacy, and phenomenology grounded in Black feminism.

In maintaining the tradition of culturally responsive pedagogy, Black feminism and phenomenology, I invite teachers to allow room and space for students' self-generated works and topics in poetry. What calls to your students? What do they seek to read, discuss and experience? What stories would be un-written if they did not write them?

I modeled my expectation of positive and supportive interactions between group members through my interactions with my participants. I actively listened to participants and included "check-ins" and discussions during every meeting. I displayed respect for participants' ideas, feelings and thoughts through verbal

affirmation and validation. I also encouraged each student to have a voice in my poetry group. During each poetry group session, I provided time for participants to read several poems. If a participant did not have an opportunity to read her work, I frequently remained for an additional half hour (as allowed by the after school program) to hear her readings and engage in discussions.

Like many culturally responsive educators, I often viewed myself and was viewed by the girls as an “other mother” (Irvine, 2003). My role as an “other mother” helped to solidify my accountability to group members and to encourage each of them to establish a certain level of accountability to their “poetry sisters.” In addition to creating and facilitating poetry sessions, I checked on the girls’ grades, listened to their stories, provided feedback, touched base with their families as needed, celebrated birthdays and graduations, contacted them between meetings via email or phone, and provided them with my contact information to call or email me. I also encouraged the girls to check-in with each other in between meetings.

In my study, relationships and communication were the foundation for creating and maintaining trust. Prior to the first day, I began to establish trust through modeling personal engagement and self disclosure. I also provided a brief biography for my participants and shared some of my own poetry writing such as “Strong and Sassy.” I began on the first day with an introduction of the program. I reviewed student letters, guidelines and expectations (See Appendix C). Following my guidelines and expectations for the group, I inquired about their expectations. I encouraged communication and openly inquired about their definitions of trust. I

asked the girls what trust meant to them. I asked for their ideas about the ways in which trust could be established in the group and conflicts could be resolved.

Poetic Eight and I came to a consensus that trust would be evaluated in terms of open and honest communication, the showing of kindness and respecting privacy. We also agreed that trust could not flourish with teasing or “putting down” the ideas, writing or feelings of group members or the facilitator. We also agreed that talking about each other in a negative way to other members of the group or outside of the group would constitute a violation of trust. Because communication and trust is essential, I created a lesson plan for the first day with the goal of building these components (See Appendix H).

Since positive relationships were deemed to be imperative, during the second meeting, I created a lesson plan to begin cultivating relationships within the group. I began by continuing the discussion on trust and followed up with a candid conversation about friendship and sisterhood. I asked, “What makes a good friend?” I also asked, “What does friendship look like?” and “What is sisterhood?” In addition to working as a group, students worked in pairs to establish more individual communication (See Appendix I). Relationships, communication and trust created a clearing to emerging “I Ams” in chapter four.

Teaching Applications for the Poetic Heart

I firmly believe that even teachers who are “non-poets” are capable of successfully creating and facilitating a culturally responsive poetry group. However, teachers must be willing to take the risks that they ask of their students. Teachers/facilitators must lead from the heart, engage and participate in

poetry writing, readings and discussions with openness. **Although teachers might need to adjust my study design and format to accommodate their work environments, schedules or comfort level, the elements of positive communication, trust and accountability must remain consistent for success.** In adapting my design for a poetry group during class time, it is important to recognize that some secondary schools operate on a ninety minute “block” schedule (where classes meet less frequently for longer periods of time) while others might operate daily on a fifty or sixty minute schedule. Therefore, teachers might need to shorten or expand a lesson.

In my poetry study I included ice breakers, writing activities and discussions that built upon and fostered exploration and imagination. Into the fabric of this study I built time during each meeting for students to share topics they wanted to discuss, bringing forth what was on their minds and in their hearts (Gorman, 1999; Rothstein, 1993). I also had them lead and facilitate poetry segments, activities and discussions.

In order for students to uncover their power to name who they really are through writing, they must be allowed to write what is of interest or relevant to them. Furthermore, in my study, the empowerment process unfolded in four stages: writing, reading/speaking (their poems, stories and truths), being heard (having their voices received by listening ears) and hearing others (creating the collective and reciprocal experience through active listening) (Levin, 1989). In this process, even if the lived experiences are not one’s own, there is an element of recognition. Recognition offers engagement for the listener as she connects with her own

experiences, observations, reflections, desires or concerns (such as activism or social justice), or sense of what is felt or known “in their bodies” (Levin, 1989, p. 102).

Recognition provides the space to develop or reflect on emerging themes within the group, individual experience or writing patterns (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994).

Following recognition, exploration of the meaning and feelings of the writer and listeners is critical. This process is supported and nurtured by the facilitator and upheld by the group (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994). In my group, the adolescent girls offered tremendous insight, guidance and encouragement to members as peers, co-facilitators and *anam caras*. My unfolding process and program design was brought forth and provided mainly by the lived experiences of my participants. Although their experiences are unique; they represent collective and universal voices of African American adolescent girl poets. Therefore, as an educator, I seek to provide other educators and researchers with the tools and insight for creating their own poetry groups with the recognition that the groups will be as varied and distinctive as the participants themselves. I also provide a facilitation model and lesson plans to assist in the formation of a culturally responsive poetry group (See Appendices G-K).

Ideally poetry groups should remain small. I suggest 8-12 participants. My first poetry group (discussed in chapter two) and my recent poetry group consisted of eight members. Small groups allow participants more time to write, read and discuss their poetry. Smaller groups also seem to provide the space for students to become better acquainted with each other and the facilitator. However, poetry groups can be constructed for large classes. Even in a class of thirty, students can assume leadership roles. Large groups can also be divided into groups of 3 or 4 (allowing the participant

number of 8-12 to be maintained). Students are also able to serve as facilitators. Facilitators and participants may be rotated to allow students to build relationships.

As a special education teacher, I often used the co-teaching model for my poetry groups during class. In my inclusion classes (consisting of special education and general education students), the general education teacher and I facilitated groups simultaneously. In my self-contained classes (consisting of all special education students), I facilitated poetry groups with the para-educator (teacher's assistant).

Lastly, my poetry groups are designed to uncover and maintain participants' power. **Students are also able to be empowered by being supported in creating their own poetry groups.** Teachers may remain connected with students by serving as sponsors or consultants for student-facilitated poetry groups and programs instead of assuming the role of facilitator. **During my last meeting with Poetic Eight, we divided up tasks and each participant selected a role such as facilitating, sending out meeting notices or bringing snacks. Student leadership roles in poetry groups provide additional opportunities for students to uncover and maintain their voices.** Participants' power to name in my study, allowed them to explore and use their voices of resistance for the purpose of emancipation.

Freire (1994, 2000) charges society to develop literacy practices as a means of creating resistance and empowerment. Resistance and empowerment through literacy are especially important to African American adolescent girls in my study as members of underrepresented groups (African Americans, girls and young women, individuals with special needs or urban students). My study provided a deep poetic rendering of the experiences of my participants. My poetry program was student

centered and offered high interest material that allowed students to make connections to literacy and their lived experiences while constructing meaning.

The Poetic Art of Fusion: Phenomenology and Black Feminism

My study brings the voices, presence and lived experiences of African American adolescent girls and women into visibility. *Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets* increases the diversity of materials researched and written about and by African American adolescent girls and women. This study is designed to provide diversity and multiculturalism within the practice of phenomenology by fusing a Black feminist perspective with phenomenology.

Poetic Eight has repeated Audre Lorde's (2007) call that writing, for Black women and adolescent girls, is a necessity and not a luxury. Writing based on urgency and necessity is created whether it is invited or requested because it is the path that leads from suffering to wholeness. It is also the path that opens up the poet's heart and allows her to exist fully from behind the mask to beyond it.

In chapter four, I discovered that writing, for some members of Poetic Eight, is literally the substitute for bleeding out tears. These are the tears that did not run from their tear ducts, but rather ran from their veins. Writing thaws the numbness to bring feeling back to the damaged hands that clasped the pen when they could grasp nothing else (Hurstons, 1942; Walker, 1997; Walker, 1997).

My research has revealed with urgency the need for a holistic design in education that includes the lived experiences, writings and voices of African American girls and women in the curriculum rather than exclusively in after school

programs. It is a place where these experiences are not provided a quick glance during Black History Month or Women's History Month. The curriculum design is fused with culturally responsive pedagogy that does not further marginalize the lives of African American girls and women as a footnote (Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982; Sheftall, 1995). It is necessary to have a curriculum design that is centered upon lived experiences, co-authorship and humanity. In order to resurrect change and make audible the voices of silenced African American girls and Black women, writing poetry must be viewed as a necessity and not a luxury.

These urgent voices still call to me. They prompt me to stay in the in-between spaces to re-visit homecoming and voice-less-ness and homesteading in joy once more. I seek to stay in this space to allow questions to surface as a researcher and as an educator. How will my future research allow me to bring the voices of my participants into the space of the curriculum? How can the educational curriculum be "broken" to be rebuilt? My research calls me to continue to uncover more voices of once invisible and silenced African American adolescent girls and Black women to be led to a resting place in homesteading that resides within and without the borders of schools and education.

Educators, school reformers, and editors of *City Kids City Teachers* (1996), William Ayers and Patricia Ford write:

An urban pedagogy must be built on the strengths of the city, the hope and the promise of city kids and families, on the capacities of city teachers... The classroom cannot be a place where teachers bite their lips... and endure. Rather, urban classrooms must be places where teachers can pursue their ideas, explore their interests, follow their passions – and be engaged with students in living lives of purpose. (Ayers & Ford, 1996, p. 214)

I spent over eight years in the classroom as a special education teacher and case manager. I spent an additional year outside of the classroom as a special education department chairperson. I worked very closely with students in crisis who did not have outlets in the traditional school setting. However, this poetry program took place after school once I was no longer an employee of the public school system. Rather, I was a full-time doctoral candidate and a university supervisor. Working with high school students after school and working with student-teachers during the day helped me to remain connected to the pulse of the school system.

Having one foot in both worlds reminded me of the necessity to ensure that student-teachers had the awareness, knowledge and skills to become culturally responsive educators. I reminded my student-teachers to hear the voices of their students. I sought to make them aware of the invisibility and silences created by marginalization. I also encouraged my student-teachers to know their students well enough to hear what their students did not say. I echo the voices of Black feminists' scholars and writers Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (1982) and seek to be guided by my research in creating a curriculum design, teacher preparation class, writing project and publication that represents the voices of African American adolescent girl poets.

Engaging in my poetry study with high school students allowed me to remain connected to the process. I was reminded of the needs, thoughts and challenges of young people. I was also reminded of the demands of teaching. Yet, no longer being employed by the public school system provided me with the freedom and autonomy I did not have as a classroom teacher. Not being employed by the county, I was

liberated from bureaucracy, mandated state assessments, policymakers and central office. I was free to do what I loved the most and found to be the most beneficial – work with the children.

However, I was not freed from financial responsibility. I was required to fund the program and provide resources, and to do so as a volunteer. Many poetry and art programs are not funded at all by the school system, as in my program, or given limited funding or phased out (Wiseman, 2004, Garran, 2004). Editors Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, 1982) offer that visions of Black feminists writers, researchers and culturally responsive educators must be funded and supported. The editors emphasize providing funds for individual research projects of Black women scholars, as well as funding teacher preparation programs and curricular materials. Lastly, the editors reveal the need for funding Black women's studies courses which I suggest would be enhanced by the inclusion of writings by student-participants.

As I rest in the imagination of homesteading within the borders of schools and education, I see a flicker of light for future researchers. In creating a culturally responsive poetry model, culturally responsive pedagogy and literacy must be intertwined. Culturally responsive literacy practices may increase students' voices and sense of empowerment while enhancing their oral communication skills, written expression and reading fluency (accuracy and speed). My study, however is a phenomenological study guided by the lived experiences of writing poetry for African American adolescent girls to uncover the power to name who they really are.

Therefore, my research was not designed to increase such literacy practices as reading fluency or writing mechanics. However, my study opens a space for future researchers in the area of culturally responsive poetry for the purpose of enhancing literacy skills. As I re-turn to phenomenology, I move to a place of homesteading.

Poetic Homesteading

Homesteading provides a future home-place as well as an ending place (Casey, 1993). Homesteading brings some members of Poetic Eight from the confusion, despair and grief over death and abandonment to the remembrance of love. Love rests in the heart of the divine, themselves, each other, memories of their mothers and mother figures. Poetic Eight's stories are intertwined with the branches of philosophers, Black feminist writers, poets, story tellers and educators. As writers, they overlap and move between each other's poetic consciousness and voices as they uncover themselves, carve out new identities and names, and shed old ones that no longer serve them. False identities are shed that keep them grief stricken or keep them from being strong Black women who cry, feel and speak their truths.

The poetry group offers a space for writing in community and connection rather than in isolation. It is a place to be heard and understood. This poetic space serves not only as a means to express the necessity of writing for African American adolescent girls, but a place to write stories that may not have otherwise existed. Stories and experiences, once written, are powerful enough to leap from the pages as "living words" that breathe life back into the body and heart of the writer. Living words allow the listener also to experience this journey as rhapsode and griotte, but more importantly, as a part of a culture of humanity.

Uncovering the power to name who you really are is as much about what the young women and adolescent girls name themselves through their pen names, as it is about stepping into those names as poets. By stepping into themselves and their many names, they also embody their power with wit and wisdom. Each member of Poetic Eight, in her own unique way, creates her own voice and power. Sometimes, that voice is heard, primarily, through her silence.

Emerging Responsibility of the Poets to One Another

It is interesting to cut yourself into pieces once in a while, and wait to see if the fragments will sprout. (Eliot, in Vendler, 1998, p. viii)

T.S. Eliot was a Harvard graduate finishing his PhD in philosophy, having written poetry since his senior year in college, when he left Harvard to spend a year at Oxford University in England, never to return. While he finished his dissertation, he turned more seriously to poetry and eventually won the Nobel Prize for literature. As Heidegger is credited for transforming phenomenology, Eliot is credited for transforming modern literature (Vendler, 1998).

Eliot wrote, as many writers do, to use his imagination and interpretation of the world for others. This interpretation and imagination have also been said to be a mark of the greatest writers who “impose” their imagination on others (Vendler, 1998, p. ix). However, there is often a fine line between offering, inviting, imagining, inventing, interpreting and imposing as writers, which in my study, I seek to distinguish. There are times when my role and the roles of my co-participants as interpreters, truth sayers and writers blend or become blurred. These are the spaces

that also open up to the possibilities of many truths, meanings and names that are fluid and transformative for the writer and the listener.

Interpretation is another profound power uncovered in poetry, in which we as writers and listeners connect the poems to our lived experiences, or the stories of those we are familiar with and have yet to be told. As we are called upon to fulfill our responsibilities as poets and writers to speak for ourselves, as well as for others who cannot speak, it is with recognition that such speaking may also be an imposition by the writer on those we have written about or on their behalf. However, to shrink from this challenge is not an option, nor is silence or timidity in this space of poetic expression and interpretation. So, it is with conviction and fire that Poetic Eight and I offer our voices and our truths.

The story of Eliot reveals the path of a writer who in public concealed his inner sorrow from the world, but through his poetry, concealed nothing. This is the path of writers shown from Tia's declaration of "You Don't Know Me" in chapter one to Mishaps' "Suffocation" in chapter four. I acknowledge the places in which Mishaps, Blue, Divine Diva, KiRe, Queen of Hearts, and Lenash "concealed nothing" in their poetry. I also acknowledge the places where Family and Camille maintained a public concealing of their feelings.

In my own pedagogical homesteading, I seek to balance remembrances with repeating the process and practice unfolded throughout this study. However, I do not seek to be redundant to the reader. Instead, as I look toward voice, silence and future clearings, I make space for the voices and feelings that remained muted or inaudible in my participants' stories and writings. I listen for the silences. I seek to hear the

spaces where ontological (fulfilling) silences and epistemological (knowing) silences become voice-less silences.

Voice through Silence

While this study is guided by uncovering and maintaining the power for adolescent girls to name who they really are, and to find their way home to themselves and their voices, one of the most powerful tools for voice is silence. The silences of Family and Camille, who have the courage to reveal their shyness to the group, continue to prompt them, in their own way, to remain engaged and present. Their stories are often told beneath, “There’s nothing new” or “I have nothing interesting to say.” O’Donohue (1997) reminds us that it is beneath a smile that the hidden world of experiences is brought forth. Moreover, in our facial expressions, maybe sometimes more than in our words, possibilities and pathways to our hearts are created and illuminated. As with the listening ear, “If we knew how to read the faces of others, we would be able to decipher the mysteries of their life stories” (O’Donohue, p. 39).

Phenomenology allows us to illuminate the mysteries and intricacies of the human condition. Silence is often more active and responsive than voice. Active silence calls for the ability to be present, offers reverence in a sacred poetic space, and ignites imagination (Steiner, 1989). As an interpreter or rhapsode in this study, I have been called to decipher and communicate meaning for many of the poems of my co-participants. Gadamer (2004) reminds us that interpretation, in a certain sense, is re-creation. Re-creation is not an interpretation of the “creative act but of the created

work” (p. 119). Moreover, re-creation allows the interpreter to find meaning in the creative work.

According to Steiner (1989), an interpreter acts as a translator not only between languages but between cultures. Through this study I seek to interpret, when it is necessary, the voices and poetic culture of African American adolescent girls with authenticity and integrity. Through these experiences, it is not only the work of the girls that is felt and encountered but the human voice of another. Steiner (1989) uses the term “answerability” to mean the following: “The authentic experience of understanding, when we are spoken to by another human being or by a poem, is one of responding responsibility” (p. 8). He writes about the creation of the ideal society as being one in which there are imagination and meaningful exchanges. In this utopian society, deep creative intellect is valued. Discourse and interpretation are not valued and offered by outsiders who seek to merely criticize poetry, art and music without being producers of such creative expression. Rather, interpretation, discussion and even critique are offered through the insight of a fellow creator as an insider. This creation and exchange occur only when critics, judges and reviewers are not the impositional voice in this space.

Gadamer (2004) reminds us that achievements in the human sciences are never outdated. Rather, the subject matter remains significant when it is properly portrayed by the researcher. Thus, studies acquire life from the way they are presented and experienced. As an insider in this study and sacred poetic space, I embrace this phenomenological ideal and hermeneutic exploration as a Black woman writer. I have many shared lived experiences and stories with my co-participants, as

well as many unique ones. As a writer, my ability to ignite their poetic voices occurred by creating a safe space for poets to speak and write their feelings and experiences with truth(s). As an interpreter, my “responding responsibility” is unraveling and writing renderings with the intention of embodying the hope, joy, rage and love that the poets have spilled onto the pages and read in the group in earnestness and conviction.

Future Clearings to Silences Still Muted

At this point in the journey we see that while we carry the voices, legacies and stories of our mothers, mother figures, and ancestors, we also acknowledge that some of their unfinished business or untold stories will not be ours to complete. For each member of Poetic Eight to find her own voice, fulfill her own dreams and reveal her own truths, she must also step from behind the shadows. Following the path of others has covered and enveloped these young African American poets, and at times, even stifled or suffocated them. Yet, they have grown into themselves and embarked on a journey of living and writing their own stories.

As I reflect on the growth of members of Poetic Eight and their transition into womanhood, I am reminded of Alice Walker’s (1983) naming of Black feminists as “womanists.” She offers the name from the “black folk expression” of mothers to girls whose behaviors are deemed to be “womanish” or beyond their years, behavior often seen as outrageous, willful or courageous (p. xi).

The members of Poetic Eight, throughout my study, offer their voices and naming(s) as adolescent girls who acknowledge the struggles of transitioning from girlhood to womanhood. Moreover, they offer their poetry, lived experiences, stories,

imagination and voices of resistance with “womanish” willfulness and courage beyond their years. And as Poetic Eight embraces their homesteading and growing voices, they move into Walker’s further naming of a “womanist.” Walker (1983) offers the next naming of a “womanist” as a woman who either appreciates or prefers women’s culture, emotional flexibility (from tears to laughter) and strength. A “womanist” is committed to wholeness (in women and men) and humanity. Lastly, a “womanist” loves “the Spirit,” struggle, life and most of all – her full self (p. xi).

As the members of Poetic Eight acknowledge their spirit, struggle, lives and full selves, I acknowledge the group closure process in this transition. I invite discussions around the group concluding and ask each member to make a list of resources, adults or peers, who she could talk with, confide in or share her writing. Group closure also consists of celebrating and affirming the young women’s transition into adulthood and/or college.

During our final meeting, I organized a graduation party for Mishaps, KiRe and Queen of Hearts. This acknowledgement of closure and transition was expanded to include all of the young women by going around the room and sharing positive and distinctive qualities about each member. Closure was also extended to family members of Poetic Eight, who provided food for the graduation party in honor of the senior women’s accomplishments. After the celebration, I met with the remaining members of Poetic Eight. I invited them to continue their writing and work with each other by supporting the establishment of a student-run poetry group. I also offered to continue to serve as a consultant.

The process of group closure is further illuminated by Poetic Eight's growing voices. I conclude my study with the acknowledgment of my participants' transition from girlhood to womanhood through their final reflections and poetry writing. Through their reflections, they continue to reveal their transformation from African American adolescent girl poets to Black women writers.

Growing Voices

I'm doing this stuff for me. I got to the point where I realized that I got to this stuff because I was putting my effort into it.
(Blue, 2009)

Sometimes you have to satisfy yourself. First quarter I had a 3.6 next quarter I had a 3.2 But I was satisfied. I still made the honor roll and that satisfies.
(Queen of Hearts, 2009)

This study is a story of being fully alive. The poetic expressions on these pages have been about revealing sorrow and grief, bringing forth joy, truth, and ridiculous shrieking ("why are they laughing so loud in public??!" kind of heart-felt laughter). Truth is revealed in the belief that there is a dawn after the despair. And the light of dawn is so beautiful and clear that *you can look* directly into it. Looking into the light of dawn did *not* take our sight, as I unfolded in chapter two, but provided us with it.

As I unfolded in the preface of my study, culturally responsive poetry is the unearthing of African American adolescents' self-definition through a process of naming (to call forth their own names and multiple identities). It involves poetry writing as both individual and collective efforts by and for African American adolescent girls, a bold and passionate declaration of self-identity.

Individually Camille has unearthed many names throughout my study. Through her writings and discussions she has called forth her names and identity (ies) as: Camille, Preacher's Daughter, Queen of the Nile, My Brother's Keeper, Secrecy and A Person with Very Little to Say. Mishaps has uncovered her power beginning with her suffocation and closing with her emerging happiness. She has unearthed such names throughout these chapters as: Mishaps, A Bitter Person ("but not as much"), Bold, Whole, New, God's Gift, Known, Dead Souls and Happy.

Divine Diva has uncovered her power to name herself beginning with her declaration as a Divine Diva. She further defines herself as A Child of God, Always the Good Girl, Someone Who Can Do Anything She Sets Her Mind To and a Burden. Queen of Hearts begins her naming journey with writing as a Queen of Hearts and Mender of Other People's Problems and Hearts. As she continues along her journey her voice of resistance also emerges through her declaration as: True, Next Freedom Writer and Black Panther.

Blue's naming began with her delving into her emotions. Uncovering her power to name led her to defining Blue as a Normal Color. Blue also offered her internally defined names as Blue Jay, Fire and Black Power. Lenash's naming called out with the power to claim herself as: A Nigerian Woman, Symphony and Lenash. KiRe asserted her naming as: I Know Who I Am, KiRe, Lively Spirits, Everything and Sometimes Unsure. Lastly Family recognizes her naming in this poetic unfolding as Me. While she has not claimed her names as Hope and Honesty, she writes that she has them within her. My participants name themselves Poetic Eight. In their

collective naming, the girls recognize their identities as poets and as members of a united group.

The journey of the African American adolescent girl poets of my study reflects the beauty and angst of self discovery, identity, and self-definition. Phenomenology unfolds the poets' lived experiences, deepening the meaning of each writing experience, as the process reflects not only the essence and meaning of the poems but the essence of the poet.

This work in phenomenology allows us, as participants and as researchers, to explore and uncover. In phenomenology, we often ask more questions than assert answers; we change and constantly evolve. The process of inquiry, change and poetic revelation, is often where joy enters, not only in this methodology but in our individual and collective hearts. Walker, Lorde, Freire and Steiner, write of literacy, language and voice as tools for change, resistance, power, freedom and wholeness. Consciousness and empowerment are not measured in high stakes assessments or revealed through rote memorization. Rather, they are unfolded in my phenomenological study through the writing, listening and truth saying that are connected to our lives. The final reflections of Poetic Eight provide such insight as they declare, "All of us have grown whether the outside sees it or not."

I've enjoyed having people understand me. Even though I'm still working on my life, I've had so much fun getting to know new people. I learned you can write what you feel it doesn't have to be about the topic. You can write what your heart tells you to write. I love being in the poetry club because I can let out all my emotions and not worry about people judging me.
(Divine Diva, 2009)

It was fun and a good experience... overwhelmed with good. The experience made me realize the [potential] everyone has in new things. (Blue, 2009)

[I'm] not trying to slice you but seeing someone like you, [a] successful Black woman professional, talented, with her head on straight, etc who can deal with estrogen means it's possible. I know there were some days in the beginning that we came in here there were attitudes. But you dealt with it. And still came in to our school twice a week not just emails and you talked, and you actually asked, and cared. I think everybody should do this...

We accomplished a lot. Everybody, all of us have grown whether the outside sees it or not. Wow, I have friends (now) that are girls and are cool. That are actually decent people. I wish I could have gotten to something like this earlier (as this was her last year in high school).

How I feel about leaving:

Waaaaah... Exhale

Waaaahhhhh...Inhale

Wahhhhhhh..Inhale

Waahhh... inhale...Exhale

Waaaahhhhhh!!!

Okay, I'm finished 09!

(KiRe, 2009)

I'm speechless I completely don't know what to say. I wish It could be a little longer... Naw maybe, it was one of the best experiences I've ever had and it helped me to grow. It took out hate and put in happiness it took away [doubt] and replaced it with hope. "I will miss everyone

I love poetry...

I am every page in ever word. I am every tear in every joy...

(Mishaps, 2009, Graduate of 09)

Each girl offers an emerging voice from her homesteading experience in her reflection. Divine Diva brings together the reflections of Poetic Eight through her poem which she reads during our last meeting. Her poem serves as a reminder that the lived experience of writing poetry to uncover the power to name who you really are is, "Not Over." Rather, the power that the girls have uncovered through their naming in this journey is, "Just the Beginning."

Not Over Just the Beginning

We always wonder when the end is coming
But we sometimes forget the present
Don't see the continuous longing
The end might be near
But it's only just the beginning
Real talk, I'm starting to feel fear
Of the message I might be sending
But I've gotten such amazing advice from those who
Understand me
When we have our check-ins
I feel like I'm apart of a brand new family
I've met amazing folks who don't judge me
And keep it real
Not afraid to say what's on their mind
I'll always think of their advice
When a boy is acting like I'm all that and a bag of
Chips
But I know I am
My confidence has increased
Because of this group
My heart has stopped being a nonpaying lease
I can't be seized by the false version of I luv u
But know now that the actions he makes in the
Words of [Mishaps] "can spell it out for you"
This group has been my home away from home
It's so sad to leave
... we all know good things come to an end
It's not never it's just the beginning
(Divine Diva, 2009)

Final Poetic Reflections

During this process, as a researcher, there were times when traveling this road that I could not escape the occasional glimpse of a bumper sticker reminding me that, "All who wander are not lost." And it is with this recognition that I acknowledge that it is the path of wandering and wondering, with a purpose, that allowed me to reach out to others and to also bring myself home. This dissertation came through me like a birth. It initially caused suffering and great anguish before the catharsis (cleansing)

and process of letting go. It has been a dream fulfilled, a divine thought, an inspiration answered, a questioning, a path of many blended into one, a truth, a searching and a finding.

I began by looking outwardly, starting with the experiences of others from the nursing home, to “These Black Kids” to Tia to Mishaps and the Poetic Eight, only to find, at the end of the journey, I had uncovered my own power through writing. This project ranged through places of my being an activities coordinator, a poetry therapy student, a special educator, a survivor, an African American woman, an educator and a writer to be uncovered. I wanted from time to time to stop writing. But when the labor pains of creation hit, I came to understand that it must be born. And when it was ready, there was nothing that I could or would do to halt its entry into the world.

In the writings of each participant, I have supported getting this work “done” in ways that empowered the adolescent girls and provided the space for them to tell their stories or re-create them (and themselves) if they so chose. In some ways, this study and research process has been a partial death for me in order to be reborn. I, too, have uncovered the power to name myself as a Black woman writer.

As I reflect on this journey, I acknowledge the fact that education and writing are among my greatest joys. Education and writing have also been my outlet for my highest truth and an expression of purest love. As this study comes to an end, I recognize that this experience has encompassed my greatest truth, joy and love.

Speaking to My Heart

As I sit in this space I hear the echoes of my heart. There are whispers all around from the voices of the girl I once was, the adolescent I was becoming and the woman I am now. I look out into the faces of these young women coming behind me and I wonder how it is possible that

students, I only met a short time ago, can speak the echoes of my heart?

How is it that they have bonded as they have and at such an early age speak the truths that even as adults we often do not have the courage to utter? Why is it that their voices mirror so many dimensions of my life as their present and my past memories? They speak and answer questions that are not only of their experiences but of the women who wrote before them and the girls who will write after them.

I imagine, on some level, this must be the face of motherhood. To look into your past and to hope for all that is good for your daughters'/children's futures. And while they speak my heart there is a comfort in knowing that they speak the echoes of their own hearts with their own voices. And they will now carry with them the memories of each other and visions of their tomorrows.

(Bacon, reflection, 2009)

Appendices

Appendix A: Sample of Poetry Group Flyer

**An Exciting New After School Program for Girl Poets
2008**

Culturally Responsive Poetry for African American Girls

Mondays and Wednesdays, 4:00pm-5:30pm

English Classroom to be announced

December 17th - May 29th

Facilitator: Ms. Jennifer Bacon

This program is designed to explore and reflect on issues and experiences that are relevant to your lives as self-identified African American teenage girls through writing and reading poetry. The group is designed to encourage students to explore and expand their writing, to get to know each other and themselves, and to foster a sense of creativity and community voices. You will be given the opportunity during each meeting to write poetry and to read poetry by and about (primarily) African American teenage girls and to run poetry group sessions. Topics that may be discussed include (but are not limited to) self-identity, race, girlhood, school, culture, relationships, and goals. In addition to writing and reading poetry, students may share music, drawings, journal entries, etc.

Maximum number of participants is twelve

For more information, please contact Ms. Jennifer Bacon at
j.bacon@netzero.net

Please note the following: Parental consent is required and you must provide your own transportation.

Appendix B: Sample of Poetry Group Newsletter

Poetry Club for African American Girls

Attention poetry fans

We are looking for Wise girls interested in writing poetry, learning and exploring new techniques and looking to have fun with the written word!

This poetry club will explore and reflect on issues and experiences that are relevant to your lives as African American teenage girls through writing and reading poetry. You will be given the opportunity during each meeting to write poetry and to read poetry, by and about (primarily) African American teenage girls, and to run poetry group discussions based on your interests. **Please bring a sample poem on Wednesday, December 17th at 4:00 pm to room A205.**

Facilitator's Bio

Jennifer Bacon is the 2008 recipient of the Pursue the Dream: Chris Mazza Award for Poetry Therapy. She is the founder of the poetry and prose writing and social justice group *Black Women Writing*, and is also a published poet with works in literary magazines such as *Phati'tude* and *Returning Woman*. Bacon is a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland in the department of Curriculum and Instruction in the program of Minority and Urban Education. Recently Bacon appeared on Cedric Muhammad's Black Coffee Channel where she read her poem *Strong and Sassy*.

Appendix C: Sample of Student Letter

Poetry Group Student Letter

Facilitator: Ms. Bacon

Location: Classroom to be announced

Days and times: Monday and Wednesday 4:00- 5:30

Poetry Group for African American Girls

Purpose: The purpose of this program is to explore and reflect on issues and experiences that are relevant to your lives as self-identified African American teenage girls through writing and reading poetry. The group is designed to encourage students to get to explore their writing, get to know each other and themselves, and foster a sense of community. You will be given the opportunity during each meeting to write poetry and to read poetry by and about (primarily) African American teenage girls. Topics that may be discussed include (but are not limited to) self-identity, race, girlhood, school, culture, relationships, and goals. In addition to writing and reading poetry, students may share music, drawings, journal entries, etc.

Provided materials: We will use several poems from poetry books featuring African American teenagers such as, Paint Me Like I Am, City of One (by the Writerscorps), Things I have to tell you (by teenage girls), and Growing Up Girl. *Most importantly, your poetry will be used for group discussions and reflections!*

**In addition to providing poems, spirals will be provided for each student.*

Materials for students to bring: A poem to share, notebook paper, and a pen or pencil.

Guidelines: Everyone's feelings and writings are extremely valuable. Students and facilitator will listen while each person is sharing their work without judging, laughing, or teasing the writer or her poetry and feelings. Each participant will attend weekly and on time. You are encouraged to have fun and try something new! All ideas are important! There are no bad poems or writing in this group ☺

Final Projects: At the end of the four months, the group will participate in a school poetry reading! In addition, we will create and publish a self- selected poetry journal!

Dissertation Research/Publication:

***Please note: I am a doctoral candidate in Minority and Urban Education at the University of Maryland. With your parents/guardians and your consent, experiences, interviews, and select poems will be featured in my dissertation research. Your name will not be used or your identity shared; however, you and your parent/guardian must provide signed consent to participate. You may also choose not to have specific information or poetry shared. You may also contact me with questions or possible concerns at any time.**

Thank you for the opportunity to work with you!

Appendix D: Sample of Parent Letter

Poetry Group Parent Letter
Facilitator: Ms. Bacon
Location: Classroom to be announced
Days: Monday and Wednesday
Time: 4:00 -5:30 pm

Topic: Culturally Responsive Poetry Group

Purpose: The purpose of this program is to explore and reflect on issues and experiences that are relevant to your children's lives as self-identified African American teenage girls through writing and reading poetry. The group is designed to encourage students to get to know each other and themselves, and foster a sense of community. Each student will be given the opportunity during each meeting to write poetry and to read poetry by and about (primarily) African American teenage girls. Topics that may be discussed include (but are not limited to) self-identity, race, girlhood, school, culture, relationships, and goals. In addition to writing and reading poetry, students may share music, drawings, journal entries, etc.

Provided materials: We will use several poetry books featuring African American teenagers such as, Paint Me Like I Am, City of One (by the Writerscorps), Things I have to tell you (by teenage girls), and Growing Up Girl. *Most importantly, your poetry will be used for group discussions and reflections.*

Materials for students to bring: A poem to share, notebook paper, and a pen or pencil.

Guidelines: Everyone's feelings and writings are extremely valuable. Students and facilitator will listen while each person is sharing their work without judging, laughing, or teasing the writer or her poetry and feelings. Each participant will attend weekly and on time. You are encouraged to have fun and try something new! All ideas are important! There are no bad poems or writing in this group ☺

Final Projects: At the end of the four months, the group will participate in a school poetry reading! In addition, we will create and publish a self- selected poetry journal!

Dissertation Research/Publication:

***Please note: I am a doctoral candidate in Minority and Urban Education at the University of Maryland. With your parents/guardians and your consent, experiences, interviews, and select poems will be featured in my dissertation research. Your name will not be used or your identity shared; however, you and your parent/guardian must provide signed consent to participate. You may also choose not to have specific information or poetry shared. You may also contact me with questions or possible concerns at any time.**

Thank you for the opportunity to work with you!

Appendix E: Student Informed Assent Form

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Initials ____ Date ____

Student Assent Form

Project Title	<i>Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets</i>
Why is this research being done?	<p><i>This is a research project being conducted by Ms. Jennifer N. Bacon (Student Investigator) under the guidance of Dr. Donna Wiseman and Dr. Francine Hultgren (principal investigators) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are a self-identified African American teenage girl who writes or is interested in poetry and is participating in an intensive or co-taught English class.</i></p> <p><i>The purpose of this research project is to explore the experience of writing and reading poetry for African American teenage girls.</i></p>
What will I be asked to do?	<p><i>As a participant in this study, you will be asked to meet twice weekly at school after school for approximately an hour and a half each session for a semester.</i></p> <p><i>You will be asked to participate in poetry readings and discussions of the poetry you have written with the facilitator and the poetry group. You will be asked to meet with the facilitator individually for approximately 15-20 minutes to discuss your poetry, experiences with writing, themes, discussed in your poetry and the group, and your experiences working and writing in a poetry group for African American teenage girls.</i></p> <p><i>You will be asked to write and read poetry for and with the group and discuss topics and themes (such as race, gender, age, and ethnicity) in the poetry and of interest to the group.</i></p> <p><i>You will be asked to keep a journal and write about your experiences and feelings in participating in a poetry group for self-identified African American teenage girls.</i></p> <p><i>You will be asked to write a final reflection about your experiences with writing poetry in the group.</i></p> <p><i>You will be asked to perform a school poetry reading at the end of the semester. You will also be asked to publish a self-selected poem(s) in a school literary journal. You may choose to publish their poems in a school literary journal anonymously or under an assumed name.</i></p>

<p>Project Title</p>	<p><i>Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets</i></p>
<p>What about confidentiality?</p>	<p><i>We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, The confidentiality of the participants' identities will be accomplished through several means. (1) Names of participants will not be included on collected data. You will be asked to offer a single fictional name which will be used in all documents; (2) All collected material and information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet; (3) electronic files will be secured on a private computer using password-protected computer files; (4) consent forms will be separated from material by participants. Only the researcher and principal investigator will have access to the material collected. Collected data such as transcriptions, audiotapes and videotapes will be kept for ten years then destroyed. Written data will be shredded, computer data will be deleted, and audiotapes and videotapes will be erased.</i></p> <p>___ <i>I agree to be [videotaped/audiotaped/photographed] during my participation in this study.</i></p> <p>___ <i>I do not agree to be [videotaped/audiotaped/photographed] during my participation in this study.</i></p> <p><i>If we write a report or article about this research project or give a presentation, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, we will disclose to the appropriate individuals and/or authorities information that comes to our attention concerning child abuse or neglect or potential harm to you or others.</i></p>
<p>What are the risks of this research?</p>	<p>Risks and Benefits:</p> <p><i>There are possible risks in this study. You may disclose personal information (i.e. 'stories' or personal anecdotes) related your experiences in the course of this study. You will be asked to face and discuss some sensitive issues of race, gender, age, and ethnicity. You may experience feelings of discomfort as a result of reading poems in public, or being audio-taped or videotaped during poetry readings. Allowing participants to review audio-taped and video-taped poetry readings, discussions, and conversations to make additions, corrections and/or deletions at any time should do much to reduce the risk of discomfort. Audio-tapings and video-tapings may reviewed by participants after completion. In addition, participation in the poetry group may result in a loss of time you have designated for other activities after school during study or personal time.</i></p>

Project Title	Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets
What are the benefits of this research?	<p><i>The poetry group will provide you with knowledge of culturally responsive poetry that may enhance classroom learning and competence.</i></p> <p><i>Participation in the poetry group will provide greater exposure to and practice with reading, writing, critical thinking, and oral communication.</i></p> <p><i>Participation in the poetry group will provide an opportunity to write about topics that are relevant and of interest to you. Participation in the poetry group may increase community and friendship building with your peers.</i></p> <p><i>We hope that in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the writing and thoughts of African American teenage girl poets.</i></p>
Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>Your willingness and participation in this research will not affect your grade in English class or other classes.</i></p> <p><i>If at any time your behavior or conduct (such as fighting or threatening students or staff) within the poetry group or at school presents potential harm to yourself or others, your participation may be terminated without regard to your consent.</i></p>
What if I have questions?	<p><i>Ms. Jennifer N. Bacon is conducting this research under the guidance of Dr. Donna Wiseman and Dr. Francine Hultgren at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Dr. Donna Wiseman at 3119 Benjamin Building, Office of the Dean, University of Maryland, College Park 20742 (email) dlwise@umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0866 or Dr. Francine Hultgren at 3119 Benjamin Building, EDPL, University of Maryland, College Park 20742 (email) fh@umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-4562 .</i></p> <p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678</i></p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>

Project Title	<i>Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets</i>	
Signature and Date	NAME OF SUBJECT	
	SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT	
	DATE	

Appendix F: Parent Informed Consent Form

Page 1 of 4

Initials Date

CONSENT FORM

Project Title	<i>Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets</i>
Why is this research being done?	<p><i>This is a research project being conducted by, Ms. Jennifer N. Bacon (Student Investigator) under the guidance of Dr. Donna Wiseman and Dr. Francine Hultgren (principal investigators) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting your child to participate in this research project because she is a self-identified African American adolescent girl who writes or is interested in poetry and is participating in an intensive or co-taught English class.</i></p> <p><i>The purpose of this research project is to explore the experience of writing and reading poetry for African American teenage girls.</i></p>
What will I be asked to do?	<p><i>As a participant in this study, your daughter will be asked to meet twice weekly at school after school for approximately an hour and a half each session for a semester (approximately three months).</i></p> <p><i>Your daughter will be asked to participate in poetry readings and discussions of the poetry she has written with the facilitator and the poetry group.</i></p> <p><i>Your daughter will be asked to meet with the facilitator individually for approximately 15-20 minutes to discuss her poetry, experiences with writing, themes, discussed in her poetry and the group, and her experiences working and writing in a poetry group for African American teenage girls.</i></p> <p><i>Your daughter will be asked to write and read poetry for and with the group and discuss topics and themes (such as race, gender, age, and ethnicity) in the poetry and of interest to the group.</i></p> <p><i>Your daughter will be asked to keep a journal and write about her experiences and feelings in participating in a poetry group for self-identified African American teenage girls.</i></p> <p><i>Your daughter will be asked to write a final reflection about her experiences with writing poetry in the group.</i></p> <p><i>She will be asked to perform a school poetry reading at the end of the semester.</i></p> <p><i>She will also be asked to publish a self-selected poem(s) in a school literary journal. Your daughter may choose to publish their poems in a school literary journal anonymously or under an assumed name.</i></p>

<p>Project Title</p>	<p><i>Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets</i></p>
<p>What about confidentiality?</p>	<p><i>We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your daughter’s confidentiality, The confidentiality of your daughter’s identity will be accomplished through several means. (1) Names of participants will not be included on collected data. You will be asked to offer a single fictional name which will be used in all documents; (2) All collected material and information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet; (3) electronic files will be secured on a private computer using password-protected computer files; (4) consent forms will be separated from material by participants. Only the researcher and principal investigator will have access to the material collected. Collected data such as transcriptions, audiotapes and videotapes will be kept for ten years then destroyed. Written data will be shredded, computer data will be deleted, and audiotapes and videotapes will be erased.</i></p> <p>___ <i>I agree to be [videotaped/audiotaped/photographed] during my participation in this study.</i></p> <p>___ <i>I do not agree to be [videotaped/audiotaped/photographed] during my participation in this study.</i></p> <p><i>If we write a report or article about this research project or give a presentation, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your daughter’s information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if your daughter or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i></p> <p><i>In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, we will disclose to the appropriate individuals and/or authorities information that comes to our attention concerning child abuse or neglect or potential harm to your daughter or others.</i></p>
<p>What are the risks of this research?</p>	<p>Risks and Benefits:</p> <p><i>There are possible risks in this study. Your daughter may disclose personal information (i.e. ‘stories’ or personal anecdotes) related her experiences in the course of this study. Your daughter will be asked to face and discuss some sensitive issues of race, gender, age, and ethnicity. She may experience feelings of discomfort as a result of reading poems in public, or being audio-taped or videotaped during poetry readings. Allowing participants to review audio-taped and video-taped poetry readings, discussions, and conversations to make additions, corrections and/or deletions at any time should do much to reduce the risk of discomfort. Audio-tapings and video-tapings may reviewed by participants after completion.</i></p> <p><i>In addition, participation in the poetry group may result in a loss of time her have designated for other activities after school during study or personal time.</i></p>

Project Title	Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets
What are the benefits of this research?	<p><i>The poetry group will provide your daughter with knowledge of culturally responsive poetry that may enhance classroom learning and competence. Participation in the poetry group will provide greater exposure to and practice with reading, writing, critical thinking, and oral communication.</i></p> <p><i>Participation in the poetry group will provide an opportunity to write about topics that are relevant and of interest to your daughter. Participation in the poetry group may increase community and friendship building with her peers. We hope that in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the writing and thoughts of African American adolescent girl poets.</i></p>
Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?	<p><i>Your daughter's participation in this research is completely voluntary. You and she may choose not to have her take part at all. If you and your daughter decide that she will participate in this research, she may stop participating at any time. If you and your daughter decide not to have her participate in this study or if she stops participating at any time, she will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which she otherwise qualify. Your daughter's willingness and participation in this research will not affect her grade in English class or other classes. If at any time her behavior or conduct (such as fighting or threatening students or staff) within the poetry group or at school presents potential harm to her or others, her participation may be terminated without regard to her consent.</i></p>
What if I have questions?	<p><i>Ms. Jennifer N. Bacon is conducting this research under the guidance of Dr. Donna Wiseman and Dr. Francine Hultgren at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Dr. Donna Wiseman at 3119 Benjamin Building, Office of the Dean, University of Maryland, College Park 20742 (email) dlwise@umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0866 or Dr. Francine Hultgren at 3119 Benjamin Building, EDPL, University of Maryland, College Park 20742 (email) fh@umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-4562.</i></p> <p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678</i></p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>

Project Title	<i>Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets</i>	
Statement of Age of Subject and Consent	<i>Your signature indicates that: the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose for your child to participate in this research project.</i>	
Signature and Date	NAME OF PARENT/GUARDIAN	
	SIGNATURE OF PARENT/GUARDIAN	
	DATE	

Appendix G: Sample of Poetry Group Facilitation Model

Poetry Group Facilitation Model

Purpose: The purpose of today's group is to write about and discuss race through the groups' individual and collective experiences.

Topic: The experience of race

Prompt: What does it mean to be Black to you?

Poem: Paint Me Black

Format

1. Check-in and house keeping
 - 5 minutes
 - Ask..."Share two surprising experiences from your day".
 2. Poetry reading
 - 2-4 minutes
 3. Discussion of the poem -including sharing experiences and stories, reflections, etc
 - 20 minutes
 4. Activity -of the facilitator's choice
 - 5-7 minutes
 5. Poetry writing in response to the poem
 - 5-7 minutes
 6. Sharing- poetry writing
 - 6-8 minutes
- Closing discussion and reflection -including suggested topic for next meeting
- 10 minutes
- Closing readings-sharing poems of any topic and interest
- 3-5 minutes

Paint Me

Paint me Black. Paint me.

Me, Black, the most authentic thing you can see.

Paint me Black 'cause I don't want anything to change my shade.

Immerse my soul in its essence and show me what you've
Made.

Splash the most beautiful tones upon my skin.

Paint me Black. Paint me

For all that I am for my history.

Paint me and shine me up for the world to know.

Paint me Black 'cause I've got stories other colors haven't
Told.

Paint me Black and I'm sure you'll find

The other color fits me perfect, but doesn't control my mind.

(Spicer, in WritersCorps, 2003, p. 12)

Appendix H: Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets' Lesson Plan 1

1. Introduction

- 15 minutes
- Review student and parent/guardian letters
- Review guidelines of the group
- Review and distribute consent and assent forms

2. Discuss trust

- 15 minutes
- Ask
 - “What is trust?”
 - “How can we establish trust in the group?”
 - “How should conflicts be handled?”

3. Distribute index cards

- 5 minutes
- List contact information (phone numbers and email addresses)
- Emergency information

4. Have students list what they would like to write about in a poetry group

- 5 minutes

5. Ice breaker

- 15 minutes
- Select a partner
- Share 3 things with your partner about who you are (such as age or grade, where you are from, hobbies or if you have siblings)
- Share 3 things that describe you (personality traits or characteristics such as serious, studious, etc)

6. Share with the group

- 10 minutes
- 2 things that you learned about your partner

7. Begin writing activity

- 5 minutes
- Writing prompt
- What is poetry?

8. Sharing

- 15 minutes
- Read a poem of your choice

9. Closing Discussion

- 10 minutes
- Thoughts about the group
- Questions

10. Review of homework assignments

- 5 minutes
- Think of a poetry topic you would like to write about and facilitate for the group
- Bring a poem to share

Appendix I: Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets' Lesson Plan 2

1. Housekeeping
 - 5 minutes
 - Collect consent and assent forms
2. Follow-up discussion
 - 5 minutes
 - What is trust?
 - Review of guidelines for the group
3. Question
 - 10 minutes
 - Ask
 - “What makes a good friend?”
 - “What does friendship look like?”
 - “What is sisterhood?”
4. Sharing poems
 - 15 minutes
 - Students read brought in for homework
5. Sign-up sheet
 - 5 minutes
 - Self-selected topics for writing and facilitating a poetry meeting
 - Sign-up for dates to facilitate
6. Writing activity
 - 10 minutes
 - Prompt
 - Ask “What’s in a name (naming and labels)?”
7. Discussion
 - 20 minutes
 - Ask
 - “What is the significance of names and naming?”
 - “What names do you call people?”
 - “Why?”
 - “What are you called?”
 - “Why?”
 - “What are you called or named as a group or based on your age, race, gender, ability, sexual orientation?”
 -

8. Activity

- 10 minutes
- Select a partner
- Answer
- “If you judge me...”
- Ask
- “How have people judged you?”
- “What won’t people understand or miss or know if they judge you?”

9. Sharing

- 10 minutes
- Ask
- “What did you learn about each other?”

10. Review of homework assignment

- 5minutes
- Bring a poem to share
- Think about activities from today

What’s in a Name Responses from Poetic Eight

- Your identity
- Self worth
- Opinions (as far as others)
- Success
- Power
- Heritage
- Your personality

Appendix J: Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets' Lesson Plan 3

1. Follow-up
 - 10 minutes
 - Reflections
 - Ask
 - “Thoughts about judgment or naming?”
2. Check-in
 - 5-7 minutes
 - Questions about the poetry group?
 - Ideas or interests?
3. Sharing
 - 10 minutes
 - Students read their poems
6. Discussion of poems
 - 5- 7 minutes
7. Activity
 - 5-7 minutes
 - Select a pen name
8. Writing prompt
 - 15 minutes
 - Ask
 - “What’s your poetic name?”
 - “ Why did you select your poetic name?”
 - Sharing and discussion
9. Reflections and discussion
 - 10 minutes
10. Free writing
 - 7 minutes
11. Sharing
 - 5- 7 minutes
 - Volunteers to share free writing
12. Review of homework assignments

- 5 minutes
- Begin to think about I Am
- Bring your poem to share

Appendix K: Culturally Responsive Poetry: The Lived Experience of African American Adolescent Girl Poets' Lesson Plan 4

1. Check-in
 - 10 minutes
 - Discuss topics of interest
 - Create facilitation schedule
2. Writing prompt
 - 15 minutes
 - I Was
 - I Am
3. Sharing
 - 15 minutes
 - Read writing activity
 - Discuss
4. Read poem (below)
 - 5 minutes
 - I Am
 - Source
 - *Growing Up Girl*
5. Discuss poem
 - 10 minutes
 - Reflections or questions about writing prompts, topics and activities.
6. Sharing
 - 15 minutes
 - Select a partner and exchange poems
 - Have partner read your poem (to hear your writing in another voice)
 - Write reflections about poems that were read (feelings, connections, etc)
7. Writing Activity
 - 10 minutes
 - Write a poem in response to your partner's poem.
8. Discussion
 - 5-7 minutes
 - Share experience and topics
9. Review homework assignments
 - 5 minutes

- Think about emerging themes in the group from your poetry writing:
- Racism
- “Being me,”
- Fake relationships and fake friends
- Male/female relationships-
- “When are you going to love me?”
- Pick one of these themes and write a poem or reflection for the next meeting

I Am

I am a poet writing my pain
I am a poet living a life of shame
I am a daughter hiding my depression
I am your sister making a good impression
I am your friend acting like I'm fine
I am a wisher wishing this life weren't mine
I am a girl who thinks of suicide
I am a teenager pushing things aside
I am a student who doesn't have a clue
I am the girl sitting right next to you
I am the one asking you to care
I am your best friend hoping you'll be there.
(Brooks, in Sewell, 2006, p. 50)

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