The Social Work of Poetry: Youth Writing, Empowerment, and Action

By

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Abstract

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This study explores the post-high school lives and literacies of a group of student poets who attended an alternative high school. Using mixed qualitative methods including participant observation, survey, focus groups, and case study interviews, this research followed this group of poets for up to six years after they took the poetry class in order to illustrate how they activated the writing tools gleaned in their in-school poetry class. With a strong reliance on participant voice, this study explores (a) participants’ memories of the poetry class that they reported as having a positive impact on their lives; (b) the evolution of these young-adults as writers and the functions of literacy in their post-high school lives; and (c) the lasting impact of memorable poems produced in the context of the poetry class. Findings illuminated how this group of students valued what they described as a family-like community in poetry class where they felt they could break through personal and institutional silence. Through this process, they grew as individual writers by pulling on the strength of the tight community of poets, internalizing the voices of the group, and refracting them through their own prismatic representations of themselves and their worlds. The social learning that unfolded in the poetry class through the discussion, critique, and development of each poet’s voice paved the way for the development of individual writers and for changing attitudes toward schooled learning. Regardless of the frequency of their writing post-high school practice they all understood writing as a critical tool for overcoming life challenges. Participants identified touchstone poems produced in the context of poetry class that resulted in moments of development and altered their life paths. My work argues that for students who have experienced failure or disengagement in schools, positive literacy-learning spaces that nurture trust, tolerance, and the breaking of silence along with the fostering of written communication and story-telling have the potential help students develop agentive identities and to be armed with literacy as a life skill or social tool.
I dedicate this dissertation to all the NBHS family and to the youth and educators who strive to make schools places of possibility for all youth.

I also dedicate this work to Paloma. May you be the protagonist of your own story.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Schools are not providing a meaningful education to all youth. Young people are dropping out in alarming numbers, especially youth of color in urban schools (Acosta & Martin, 2013). Given this crisis, what are the experiences from school that youth, even those who do not make it across the graduation stage, hold as meaningful and important as they transition into their adult lives? Critical pedagogues offer some insight and suggest ways to repurpose schools as places that foster change as opposed to maintaining the status quo (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2009; 2011; Kincheloe, 2007; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Freire, 1993). Some critical pedagogues have suggested that art, poetry, and hip hop can be important tools in this transformation (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007; 2008; Fisher, 2003; 2005a; 2007; Hill, 2009; Jocson, 2005; 2008; 2012). Research in this vein often follows students who have succeeded, graduated, and made it to the presumed goal of K-12 education — the university. Knowing that many students do not take this path, what can we learn from a group of young people whose struggles in and out of school have led them to various post-high school plans? Often under-represented in the literature, these youth who have dropped out of the traditional system have valuable perspectives on empowerment and what it looks like in and out of school.

For kids who have dropped out of the traditional system, what did they take from an alternative literacy-learning space that they identified as impactful? The purpose of this dissertation is to probe the experiences of students who opted out, or were pushed out, of traditional school environments in order to understand the possibilities of literacy-learning spaces that prioritize empowerment and self-expression over test-driven accountability. At the same time, this research seeks to problematize the notion of empowerment and to contribute to ongoing academic dialogue about what this term means and empirically looks like for youth, especially those who have experienced school failure and marginalization. Current research offers myriad portraits of urban students engaging in empowering ways in classrooms that make critical use of media arts, poetry, and hip hop (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007; 2008; Fisher, 2003; 2005a; 2007; Ginwright, 2004; Hill, 2009; Jocson, 2005; 2008; 2012). The questions driving this dissertation are based on what happens once students step out of these classroom spaces. Can these classrooms foster ways of being or habits of the heart and mind that translate to meaningful ways to engage in the world beyond school? While all of the research participants in this study attended an alternative high school, I selected case study participants to reflect a range of post-high school experiences including dropping out and not attaining a GED, completing a vocational certification program, attending some community college, and current enrollment in a four-year university. This diversity in post-high school experiences affords a deeper grasp of how the legacies of an education designed to empower students manifest in a variety of contexts, including but not limited to a college-going path.

While opinions differ about what youth empowerment looks like, many scholars agree that many students in traditional, urban schools and classrooms often feel disempowered by the literacies offered to them (Fine, 1991; Hill, 2009; Ginwright, 2010; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Mahiri, 2004; Yosso, 2006). This disempowerment encroaches upon young peoples’ sense of potential and often precludes
college-going options as they transition out of high school. Critical pedagogues (Boal, 1985; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009; Freire, 2002; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Kincheloe, 2007; McLaren, 2003; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Shor, 1992) beginning with Freire (2002) have searched for spaces, even within oppressive and authoritarian educational systems, to repurpose education for empowerment and ultimately liberation (see also Leonardo, 2004). Critical pedagogy pushes for the transformation of classrooms into spaces where young people can engage in critical dialogue and are empowered to be protagonists in their futures. Giroux (1983; 2001) critiques “happy” (read: non-critical) classroom spaces that claim empowerment without embodying a meaningful and transformative praxis whose impact ripples beyond the schoolhouse. His critique begs the question, how do we know when education is empowering? Other than students reporting enjoyment of a program, do literacy programs nurture tools that young people can use as they grow in the world and as they enter early adulthood? In what ways might in-school experiences manifest, or not, as youth make critical transitions after high school? As youth continue to develop after high school and become actors in the social world, do they hold on to anything from alternative literacy-learning spaces and practices as they author their adult lives?

The purpose of this research is to learn from a diverse group of young adults, whose persistently negative school experiences lead them to an alternative school, some of the many ways the seeds planted in an alternative poetry classroom have sprung or remained dormant as the students moved beyond high school and into universities, community colleges, vocational training programs, and the world of work and family. This research explores some of the extra-academic needs addressed through the pedagogy and rituals in poetry class that this particular group of students found meaningful to their development as young adults and that in many cases they believed enabled them to heal from and process traumatic experiences from their pasts. This intervention is aimed particularly at understanding the needs and spaces of possibilities for youth who have experienced the complex traumas associated with marginalization in schools and urban violence in their communities in hope that these students may employ certain literacies toward self- and community-transformation (Ginwright, 2010).

**Background and Context**

*Disempowering schools.* With only 54% of youth graduating from high school, Oakland’s school district has one of the highest dropout rates in the state of California.¹ With dropout rates consistently above 30%, urban schools are in crisis and are failing to meet the needs of all of California’s diverse students (Acosta & Martin, 2013; Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Boyd et al., 2006). Moreover, students of color drop out at disproportionately higher rates than white students (Deschenes, S., Cuban, L., & Tyack, D., 2001; Torkelson, 2011). Research cites that one of the largest reasons for dropping out, as reported by students across demographic differences, is that students feel classroom learning has no relevance or purpose in life outside of school (Bridgeland et al., 2010). Not only does irrelevance drive kids away from schools, but research also shows how schools

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¹ While the statewide graduation rate is 74% according to CALPADS, further research on the California Department of Education’s Data Quest site shows that Oakland’s graduation rate lags far behind the state average at 54%.
are one of many institutions that reproduce white hegemony and offer restrictive identities for youth of color (Fine, 1991; 2003; Lee, 1993; Leonardo & Grub, 2014; Leonardo, 2007; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Valenzuela, 2000). The cycle goes something like this: students of color from poor and working class families are over-represented in special education and lower track classes in schools; as students progress in these lower tracks, they are offered classes aimed at drilling for the test. They are offered fewer enrichment and elective opportunities and are required to take more traditional academic classes to prepare for testing. The schools offer more of the same thing that is not working to these underperforming students which in turn drives them from school altogether (Oakes, 2005).

Not only are students squeezed out of schools through systems of tracking, but also through institutional silence about the real lives and experiences of students of color in an educational context that operates from a stance of white normativity that denies systemic oppression. In her research on the experiences of students who have been pushed out of public schools, Fine argues that the silencing of youth of color in urban schools is “standard procedure” (2003, p. 14). She discusses “how muting students and their communities systematically undermines a project of educational empowerment” (p. 14). In traditional public schools serving low-income communities, silencing policies omit student lives and experiences, asking students to check their troubles at the door in order to access the upward mobility purportedly made available through success in schooling. Fine explains how,

In low-income schools, then, the process of inquiring into students’ lived experience is assumed, a priori, unsafe territory for teachers and administrators. Silencing permeates classroom life so primitively as to render irrelevant the lived experiences, passions, concerns, communities, and biographies of low-income, minority students. In the process, the very voices of these students and their communities, which public education claims to enrich, shut down (2003, p. 15).

This silencing functions as part of a system of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) whereby predominantly white teachers and administrators support a myth of meritocracy where students who work hard will achieve and climb the economic ladder while failing to acknowledge or account for institutional racism. This mythology fundamentally clashes with students’ local knowledge and the realities they experience in their own communities, and further de-legitimizes the institution of schooling for these youth. Instead of utilizing these social contradictions as fruitful spaces for learning and discussion, Fine found that most teachers gave into a “systematic fear of naming” (p. 18) that denied these paradoxes all together. This silencing leads to what Fine calls a “dichotomizing of student voice,” where “personal voices” are relegated to the offices of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists and dismissed from classroom discourse. Imagine what could happen if school offered alternative approaches to learning that would break the silence and draw students in to school in meaningful ways. Theories of culturally relevant pedagogy advocate for pedagogical approaches in which teachers show care for youth (Noddings, 1992, 2005), show respect for linguistic diversity (Lee, 2004), and to explicitly address and problematize the social constructions that reproduce failure for certain populations (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Given an opportunity to develop critical tools to understand and
analyze real social issues and social structures, students might find schooling more useful in making sense of their own experiences, obstacles, and opportunities given their socio-historical context.

The unfortunate reality for many students, especially poor and working class students of color in urban schools, is that schools are spaces of limitation as opposed to possibility. Fine (1991; 1995; 2003), Noguera (1995), and McCormick (2000) all describe the lack of physical safety specifically for students of color through school discipline, curricula, and surveillance policies. Proweller (2000) describes how the labeling of students, particularly “at risk students,” functions to push students out of mainstream schools instead of linking them to needed resources. Heller (1997), whose research focuses on adult writers, contrasts the type of functional or workplace literacy offered to people who have not had access to college-track education to the “meaningful, creative expression that affords writers the opportunity to make sense of their worlds” (1997, p. 7). She describes a “real education” (p. 14) as one that allows for the development of critical subjectivity through telling as opposed to the standardization pushed by the current educational agenda. Unlike culturally relevant education, what these theories push for is fostering spaces where students gain critical consciousness about socio-historical conditions through the naming of their own experiences.

Through his work with African American youth in the Leadership Excellence program, Ginwright (2010) found that forms of urban violence and oppression traumatize youth and that in order to be able to act as agents of social transformation, marginalized youth must first have access to spaces that enable them to heal from these wounds. He writes,

> The power to speak about painful experiences related to racism, sexism, and poverty facilitates healing because the act of testifying exposes the raw truth about suffering and releases the hidden pain that is a profound barrier to resistance. (Ginwright, 2010, p. 9)

Radical healing, according to Ginwright’s theory, is comprised of four aspects: caring, community, consciousness, culture (2010, p.10). Traditionally healing has not been a concern of schooling; yet Ginwright’s work compels one to consider the power and potential of healing spaces in schools that could address oppressive silences.

Ample research points to the myriad ways that schools are failing to meet the needs of America’s diverse youth. There is also plenty of research, especially in the area of critical pedagogy, that suggests ways to turn the tide and to repurpose schools from sites of oppression to sites of empowerment. While the research is rigorous, examines specific practices, and provides evidence for findings, the term “empowerment” remains slippery. We have a clear sense of what it looks like to be disempowered, but what are the markers of empowerment for youth that inhabit marginal spaces? In the following section, I examine how the term empowerment has been employed in the literatures, what I understand to be its limitations, and how I operationalize the concept in this dissertation.

**Empowerment: Uses and Limitations of the Term**

At its very core, critical pedagogy pushes the idea that through dialogic education and the disruption of traditional hierarchies of knowledge, both teachers and students,
oppressors and oppressed, can move from a state of oppression to a state of empowered action (Darder et al., 2009; Freire, 2002; Giroux, 1983; 2001; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Clearly success in this pursuit cannot be measured by bubble tests or the state’s annual yearly progress (AYP) reports. So what does it look like when students have access to educational tools that help them in their struggles to become free-thinking, agentic adults? Empowerment is a term that is central to critical pedagogy, but is used in various ways to mean different things. To define empowerment in this project, I turn to critical pedagogue, Shor, who follows in the traditions of Freire and Dewey. According to Shor (1992), empowering pedagogies begin with student participation and have as their ultimate goal student action for social change. Shor builds on notions of empowerment from Freire (2002) and Banks (1991), which put the joint negotiation of meaning between teachers and students at the center of transformative education. An empowering education, for Shor, can be characterized by truly participatory, democratic learning spaces where youth and adult teachers struggle for meaning together in ways that engage the world beyond the classroom. Shor argues that in order to embody these characteristics, educators need to re-imagine classrooms. They need to depart from traditional models that position the one-way flow of information from the authoritative text, teacher, or structure to the pupil. According to this definition, empowered learning is a personal, emotional, and intellectual engagement.

Building on notions of power discussed by the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and the work of critical pedagogy in education, Jocson argues that empowerment, or accessing one’s power, is central to the aim of schooling. In her book, Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools, she defines this contested term in the following way:

To empower means to bring to a state of cap/ability to act (to enable) or to bring one’s self forward to power (to be enabled). To empower then is to facilitate the process of constructing one’s cap/ability to act and releasing knowledge that is recognized by others. In this sense empowerment becomes the act and the process of en-abling, that which is the primary objective of education (2008, p. 31).

In order to foster empowerment, Jocson states, educational contexts must recognize what she calls voice, access, and dialogue. Without these dynamics, teachers and institutions impinge on student power by failing to connect to what students know and their modes of being in the world. While Jocson examines the notion of empowerment through various critical lenses, she ultimately argues for poetry as a tool for empowerment in schools, one that relies on these pillars of student voice, access, and dialogue. In her analysis of Poetry for the People (P4P), she finds that through the celebration of diverse voices and the explicit naming of experiences that typically remain in the shadows of discourse in schools,

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2 In Shor’s theory, empowerment begins with students feeling empowered in the context of schooling and (hopefully) leads to their actually working to forge real social change in their lives after school. While the former is easily assessed, the latter is difficult to determine and is often left out of qualitative research dealing with empowerment and in-school practices.
students access and contribute to dialogue that has the potential to disrupt the reproduction of disempowerment that has long characterized public education in America.

The term empowerment is commonplace in the literature, but embodies a contradiction that merits further attention. Coming from a Marxist tradition, the goal of critical pedagogy is material change in the social structure, yet the material gains of empowering pedagogies are not always clear. The following excerpt from Freire and Macedo (1987) captures the contradictory nature of the term.

Educators must understand fully the broader meaning of student’s “empowerment.” That is, empowerment should never be limited to what Aronowitz describes as “the process of appreciating and loving oneself.” In addition to this process, empowerment should also be a means that enables students “to interrogate and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather than merely serving the wider social order.”...educators should never allow the students’ voice to be silenced by a distorted legitimation of the standard language. The students’ voice should never be sacrificed, since it is the only means through which they make sense of their own experience in the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 152).

In this excerpt, one can infer the entangled relationship between self-empowerment and social transformation. While the two are related, there are limitations to individual empowerment that is not on the vector of historical change. Empowerment, according to this frame, is not just a good feeling. It has to do with real social conditions. Yet, how do we measure or identify the power in breaking silence? How do we account for self-empowerment through transformation and how does this relate to social transformation? What does it look like when a person defines and transforms the social order? Is this even possible? Just as feeling good is not a definitive mark of empowerment, nor is a diploma or a high paying job. Building on these uses of the term, I will define empowerment as a process of developing one’s voice for the purpose of describing, critiquing, and moving to change or transform one’s experience or reality as a socio-historically situated subject (see Leonardo, 2004). Empowerment has to do with a process of moving from an object position, to a subject position.

Given this definition, empowerment has its limitations. At best this empowerment manifests in a shift in the relationship between the individual and the material conditions, and at worst it is merely a change in the individual’s perception. I describe this as a limitation because it is a slippery slope from this relational understanding, to the idea of “loving and appreciating oneself” despite inadequate living conditions. The following theoretical frame and review of literature offer analytic tools and specific research that speaks to this definition of empowerment and what it looks like for youth in schools.

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3 The idea that individuals change the social order is itself a distortion. Marxist theory exposes such distortions, asserting that only the masses have the capacity to change the social order (see Althusser, 1971).
Theoretical Frame

The frame of social poetics uses the relationship between language and action, word and deed, as a basis to interpret how certain literacy practices can function as real-world tools for youth and young adults. By exploring the dialectical relationship between words and actions, this theoretical frame offers a literacy perspective to illuminate how positive experiences with literacy in schools can connect to students’ lives after high school. I will present Spoken Word poetry as one specific practice using the frame of social poetics in order to (1) show how spoken word jumps from the page as a possible guide for action and (2) justify why, from the perspective of a group of young people, it matters. It is from this frame that I approach this research in hopes of contributing to the dialogue in critical pedagogy on how to make schools more meaningful places for young people to engage and prepare to act in and upon the world.

Framing the Transformative Possibilities of Art in the Era of Accountability

In the testing frenzy of the No Child Left Behind era in American schooling, we see fewer art classes and more test prep and academic intervention in our public schools (Tamer, 2009). While art has played a critical role in human history, it is discarded from schools and framed as an unnecessary luxury unaffordable during economic downturns. Rose and Kincheloe (2004) lament the absence of art education in schools and claim that the ability to produce and critique art in the context of education is foundational to the flourishing of true participatory democracy. We need a method for understanding the importance of art in classrooms and beyond. Further, this method should address the role art plays in keeping youth in schools and in potentially promoting the development of an engaged citizenry. If classrooms are supposed to prepare young people for citizenship, then they need to offer space for diverse voices, not just the authoritative language of power. Dyson (2005) argues that to write, to engage in mimetic art, is not simply to copy the world but to re-create it. To do this in school means to allow students to transform the school space into a community space, to puncture the boundaries and to make them permeable to the world outside. Dyson finds that student creation of art promotes critical counter-stories that engage authoritative narratives in ways that have the potential to spark historical change.

Social poetics asks: What do people do with art, namely poetry, and what are its transformative capacities? As Greene questions in her work, what is the relationship between art and freedom; what is now and what can possibly be (Greene, 1988)? I appropriate and adapt the work of Vygotsky (1971; 1978), the Bakhtin circle\(^4\) (1993, 2006; Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1991; Vološinov, 1973), and Boal (1985) to build a framework for understanding and analyzing the social work of poetry in a high school context and beyond that takes into account the multiple ideological environments students inhabit and their potential to be actors in and on the social and academic world. Together, I hope to develop from their ideas a critical frame for understanding the ideolog-artistic creations of urban youth in permeable classroom spaces and how these reverberate in their lives after high

\(^{4}\) I refer to Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Vološinov as the Bakhtin circle.
school. With this frame of social poetics, I hope to understand what kinds of literacy experiences are relevant for young adults after high school.

Social poetics offers a lens through which to grasp the potentially transformative power of art in schools in a moment where its existence in school curricula is currently threatened. Social poetics takes into account the various forces — social, economic, developmental, emotional, and educational—that inform students’ artistic production, communication, and ways of being in school. It offers insight into agentive language practices that can blossom in classrooms and evolve through the actions of artist/actor/students as they travel beyond high school spaces, in the process shedding light on the notion of empowerment that is central to critical pedagogies. By creating spaces in school for youth to express themselves creatively, teachers can support students in creating bridges from, in, and out of school experience, nurturing permeable boundaries between school and life. In its ideal manifestation this permeability fuses in and out of school experiences and it creates a pathway from what is to what ought to be (Bakhtin, 1993; Greene, 1988).

**Spoken Words, Lived Realities**

Strictly speaking, Spoken Word poetry comes out of the tradition of Hip Hop Culture. It has been associated with coffeehouses and political movements, but has now found its way into schools and classrooms where it begs a rethinking of schooled literacies (Fisher, 2005a). The Spoken Word genre has exploded in popularity in the last decade. The spoken word classroom pushes the boundaries of official knowledge by allowing students, given the generic structures and poetics devices, to drive the content of their classroom space. Spoken Word poetry has roots in the activist poetry of the Black Arts Movement and the Nuyorican Poet’s Café and has since been nourished by Hip Hop Culture since the mid-1970s (Algarín, 1994; Fisher, 2005a; Jocson, 2008; Sutton, 2004). Spoken word offers another possible frame for addressing the issue of how to structure classrooms as safe spaces for students to grapple with the high stakes issues of real life, especially when we consider that many public school places are precisely experienced as unsafe for students of color (Leonardo and Porter, 2010).

While language arts students read canonical poetry, the ability to produce or communicate through poetry is neither tested nor seen as a core academic competence. So what is its role in school? What do students gain by creating art with language? While existing research explores the area of art education (Eisner & Ecker, 1966), it privileges visual forms and focuses mostly on the art class in schools. Spoken word, often found in language arts classrooms, does not fit neatly within the scope of art education. Because spoken word is itself a multi-modal genre, a synthesis of Vygotsky’s theory of art, Bakhtin and Medvedev’s work on poetics, and Boal’s work on participatory theater shed light on what students and teachers are doing with this hybrid production of writing/speaking/acting and how it may bear weight in the material world.

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5 Augusto Boal’s work builds on Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He appropriated Freirean theories of liberation through education and literacy and appropriated them for the theater. Boal explores theater as a social literacy capable of disrupting power relations.
A social poetics departs from art education in that it integrates art into multiple spaces. Art can be understood as a physical object, an artifact, that is converted into a sign and that this sign maintains a prismatic relationship with the world and "reflects and refracts another reality" (Vološinov, 1973, p. 10). The study of art from a Vygotskian perspective (1971) is not limited to the investigation of form or aesthetics, but explores the dynamic relationship between the representation and that which it represents, the artist and the audience, and the socio-historical moment. It is not the study of art alone, but how people can use art in everyday actions beyond designated art spaces. A social poetics aims to uncover the special function of art in society. Rather than conceiving of works of art as completed actions, social poetics examines the dialectic relationship between art and social interaction. Social poetics asks: What do people do with art, namely poetry, and what are its transformative capacities? To re-invoke Greene, what is the relationship between art and freedom; what is now and what can possibly be (Greene, 1988)? What is the value of art for both its progenitor and its audience?

Examined together, the work of Vygotsky, the Bakhtin circle, and Boal illuminate the politico-ideological role that artistic creation plays in society. Each of these theorists uses, builds upon, or subverts Aristotelian poetics to get at a social poetics, a statement of the power of art in the socio-cultural, or as Bakhtin would have it, ideological environment. Vygotsky (1971) invokes Aristotle’s law of catharsis to explain the healing potential of art. Bakhtin and Medvedev (1991), adapt a Marxist framework to study art, in particular writing, as a form of ideological expression that reflects and refracts the ideological environment in which it is produced. Their theory arises from a critique of the formalist school of literary analysis. Working as a revolutionary in Brazil and Peru, Boal (1985) interrogates historical interpretations of the Aristotelian paradigm and explores the emancipatory possibilities of performance. Together these poetics highlight the relationship between the creations of urban youth in a permeable classroom space and their possibilities for shaping agency in life after high school.

As a launch pad to this notion of a social poetic, I turn to the early work of the Marxist psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky’s early work on The Psychology of Art critiques the theories of its time and redefines art as a critical tool in the creative activities of humans. In this early work, one recognizes the seeds of Vygotsky’s later work on play and imagination (1978). Works of art, in his estimation, are artifacts that enable people to engage dialectically with their thoughts, feelings that inform action in a social reality. He argues for the necessity of art’s expansive capabilities in human emotional activity and the fulfillment of possibilities, and suggests the importance of art in education and the development of the imagination. Augusto Boal differentiates between what he calls the idealist poetics of Aristotle, Hegel, and others, and the Marxist poetics of Brecht, the Bakhtin circle, and others. Below I discuss these various poetics in the context of what they bring to bear on Spoken Word poetry and its social significance.

In "Aristotle’s Coercive System of Tragedy" (1985), Boal issues a call for a new poetics. He explains,

the Aristotelian system serves the [repressive] purpose better than any other; if, on the contrary, we want to stimulate the spectator to transform his
society, to engage in revolutionary action, in that case we will have to seek another poetics! (1985, p. 47).

This social poetics explores what makes this imaginative and playful writing markedly different from more traditional speech genres. It offers insight into agentive language practices that blossom in classrooms and evolve through the actions of artist/actor/students as they travel beyond school spaces. This new poetics accounts for the social work of youth poets who cross multiple ideological environments with their words and write the blueprints for personal and social action.

**Permeable Classroom Space: Breaking out of Encapsulated Learning**

The very presence of spoken word in the classroom breaks through the encapsulated learning environment by invoking realness and authentic experiences through the voice of the writer. Spoken word cannot be understood outside of embedded and intertwined contexts: the literary, ideological, and socio-political environments of a given moment. They are what Fisher (2005b) calls spaces of “Literocracy” that capture the interplay between democracy and literacy by challenging traditional boundaries. Understood through this paradigm, literacy learning and participatory citizenship function together in preparing children for life in and beyond schools by inviting the world and its ample contradictions into the learning activities. Fisher defines the term as “an intersection of literacy and democracy that blurs boundaries of oral/aural and written while emphasizing that language processes exist in partnership with action in order to guide young people to develop a passion for words and language” (2005b, p. 92). This concept builds on Freirean notions of direct democracy and the connection between education and community change. The literocracy also challenges the traditional binary of oral and written language by asserting a dialectic and interdependent relationship between the two facets of literacy. The spoken word reflects back on the written word and by including heterogeneous voices pushes the fixed character of the written word. These literocracies offer expansive literacies that urge critical understandings of language and its relation to the material world.

In-school literocracies allow youth to express themselves creatively, and to create bridges from in and out of school experience, nurturing permeable boundaries between school and life. This permeability fuses in and out of school experiences and it creates a pathway from what is to what ought to be (Bakhtin, 1993; Greene, 1988). By synthesizing real life experiences with the skills and grammars of poetic expression, the poetry classroom pushes relevance in the schoolhouse and has the potential to reach students who have been turned off with traditional approaches to literacy-learning in schools.

**Assuming the Role of Protagonist**

Through a social poetics, we look not only at what students produce, but what they are doing with their words. While speech act theorists (Austin, 2008; Searle, 1972) have exhausted this question, they do so on the micro-level analysis of utterances. They focus on performative utterances and commands. Social poetics looks at the performativity of art, not at the level of words exchanged between individuals, but at how art functions in a social dialectic. In “Toward a Philosophy of an Act,” Bakhtin discussed the inseparability of the content/sense and the act/deed (1993). By understanding the creation and communal
performance of spoken word as action, teachers can nurture the protagonists in their students, moving them from receptacles of schooled information (what Freire, 1993, called “banking education”) to those who are able to play with social signs in order to reflect their own experiences of reality. This form of expression marries art (the representations and refractions of the social world) with action as spoken word poets embody their words and speak to audiences, sharing their perceptions of what is and what can be. When explicitly connected to a legacy of activism as spoken word typically is, the poetry classroom can possibly become an exercise in world-shaping, where students are the architects and drive the dialogue. In preparation for this construction, students can explore and experiment with forms of language, grammars, genres, and styles that best suit the changes they see fit for their worlds because, as Vološinov writes, “expression organizes experience” (1973, p. 85). Complicating this relationship between meaning-making and world-making, Vološinov also insists one cannot understand language apart from the material organization of society (1973). While a social poetics explores what students do with their words, it must also answer back to the material basis of a social world wherein change is not forged by individuals but by the mass acting within the confines of history.

While Bakhtin did not concern himself with the poetry of his time, the role of poetry, especially of the Spoken Word genre, has changed in the current ideological environment. While Bakhtin criticized a poetry that stood for the centripetal pull of dominant nationalist voices (2006), spoken word, heavily influenced by hip hop music and various non-dominant counter-cultures (Fisher, 2007), exerts an opposite, centrifugal force. Given how spoken word functions in the world writ large, when transported to the classroom this artistic and performative space can function to transform youth from passive consumers of the authoritative discourse to provide the counter-voices that remix and manipulate it according to their experiences. Through art and community, the individual “frees himself from his condition of spectator and takes on that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject, is changed from the witness to the protagonist” (Boal, 1985, p. 126). This social poetics provides a framework for examining the conditions under which the artistic creation of youth in schools and communities can translate to empowered action. By moving beyond formal and stylistic analyses of student work, we are able to see how art in schools can germinate action as students have space to play with possibilities for their futures. It is through this lens that I will explore how classrooms can function as prisms,  

6 As a branch of a broader hip hop culture, spoken word centers the experiences of marginalized people (Rose, 1994). As historical context, Chang (2005) locates the birth of hip-hop in a time of disillusionment following the Civil Rights Movement with the assassinations of some if its great leaders and the unfulfilled promises of key legislation. Conflating these events with economic downturn and the loss of working class jobs in manufacturing, Chang explains, “if blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work” (2005, p.13). In the South Bronx, the birthplace of hip-hop, the seventies was a time of urban neglect where landlords found it more profitable to burn down buildings than to maintain them. Chang describes how this was a time that saw a rise in youth gang culture, but that out of these divisions rose leaders hip-hop leaders like Afrika Bambaataa, one of the fathers of hip-hop, who used music to critique the bleak social conditions in places like the South Bronx at the time. It was against this backdrop that youth began to trade in gang colors for DJ or dance crews and to remix the sounds of the black power movement into what would come to explode as hip-hop music and culture. Hip-hop would continue to grow and evolve as a voice of critique that centered experiences of urban youth of color. DJ Kool Herc remarked that before the commercialization of Hip-hop, it was about coming together, connecting, and that he said “it has given young people a way to understand their world” (Chang, 2005, p. xi).
where students can creatively manipulate, bend, and refract their experiences of the outside world and what the poetry alumni are doing with their words in the world.

These art spaces have the potential to break from the technical, decontextualized pedagogies and can be places where critical pedagogies and empowerment can thrive in school buildings. Critical pedagogues push for the appropriation of school spaces to nurture social change and to foster radical democracy; these classrooms that teach spoken word as a form of activist work are one possible means to this end. The dilemma inherent in this charge is that, short of a large-scale social transformation, these shifts in action and the material manifestations of empowerment can be difficult to perceive and measure. Viewed from a perspective of social poetics, language occupies an important space in the dilemma of empowerment. If “critical pedagogy is fundamentally committed to the development and enactment of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 9), a social poetics can help to answer the question of what empowerment through dialogic and creative classroom practices looks like and affords.

This theoretical frame offers a lens for understanding how literacy practices that challenge the status quo and allow youth to take control of their own stories may or may not impact students (self-empowerment) and their communities (social transformation) in the long term. Building on critical pedagogues’ profound sense of hope that schools can become catalysts for radical social transformation, I will explore the impact of a theoretically empowering school-based literacy practice. My goal is to better understand the nature of empowering pedagogies and how this empowerment exists within the classroom and whether it has an impact that ripples beyond the schoolhouse.

**Review of Literature**

Emancipatory literacy practices are one in-road to the transformation, championed by critical pedagogues (Giroux, 2001; 2011; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Shor, 1992), of school sites from sites where youth learn prescribed social roles, to seedbeds for revolutionary social change. Freire and Macedo (1987) present emancipatory literacy as always creative, involving risk, and breaking with the reproductive, technicist function that language often takes on in schools and other institutions of the state. Literacy cannot be understood simply as the mastery of technical skills as measured by performance on standardized tests, but rather the uptake of tool through which people examine and alter socially produced meaning. Freire and Macedo explain,

> For the notion of literacy to become meaningful it has to be situated within a theory of cultural production and viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform, and reproduce meaning. (1987, p. 142)

Emancipatory literacy practices look beyond standardization and examine the ways people move from passive consumption to active manipulation of meanings through their literacies.

Critical pedagogues in the U.S. have maintained a sense of hope and possibility that there is room in schooled learning for students to free literacy from its technocratic shackles and to structure spaces within school systems for students to liberate their words and voices from narrow, authoritative expectations. Inviting students to use non-dominant discourses to depict their realities is an important starting point for this transformative
literacy. Freire and Macedo’s appeal to the use of native tongues relates to the centrifugal force that Bakhtin explains is key to keeping language alive and counteracting the authoritarian unitary orientation toward language. Situated in the socio-historical context, the use of student languages and the centrality of student voice and experience is in fact an exertion of power against a social system designed to constrain.

The following review of literature explores findings from empirical studies in various classrooms that approach or embody this transformative capacity of emancipatory literacy and attempt to use poetry in service of student empowerment. These studies point to the transformative possibilities of using poetry in schools to foster democratic participation, to nurture respect across differences, to facilitate students in voicing their own experiences, and to shape social action. While the studies below offer findings in support of the empowering capacity of poetry, specifically for marginalized youth in urban schools, more research is necessary to understand the long-term impact of these classes as youth continue to develop into adulthood and outside of schooling.

**Spoken Word as Critical Pedagogy**

Emerging with the new millennium, a group of young and burgeoning scholars began to take real-world literacies back to the classroom (Fisher, 2005a; 2005b; Hill, 2009; Jocson, 2005; Kinloch, 2005b; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004) and study their effects. Other scholars had left the schoolhouse to study and make sense of more free and relevant literacies in and out of school settings (Fisher, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2001). Taken together the work of these scholars found the popular cultural arts of hip hop and spoken word to be possible avenues to forging critical change in urban schooling and for reaching students who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks. Some findings across these studies identify that some of the catalysts for this transformation common to hip hop and spoken word are the notions that these art forms invite student voice into the classroom in ways that challenge hierarchical views of language; that what we learn, do, and create in school has to do with who we are and might become outside; and that “official knowledge” (Apple, 2004) begs rethinking and expansion. This scholarship on the pedagogies of hip hop and spoken word offers examples of how language arts classrooms can offer youth transformative opportunities to understand the social word and world, to break silence, and to forge safe spaces. For the purpose of this review of literature, I will focus only on research about spoken word, since that is the focus of my study.

*Why spoken word?* While Sablo Sutton’s study focuses on adult writers in the community, it offers groundwork for the possibilities of Spoken Word poetry in classrooms with younger students. In her study of Spoken Word poets in community settings in “Spoken Word: Performance in the Black Community” Sablo Sutton (2004), found that spoken word served to bolster a sense of community by activating and enhancing the literacy skills of both the poet and the audience. Emphasizing the oral aspect of this poetic genre, Sutton found that spoken word depends on a dialogue between the artist and the audience that kindles social movement, that is that the relationship between the poet and the audience is intended to ignite action in some way. For example, poets used techniques like call and response that then served as a starting point for a deeper conversation about an issue raised with the intention of calling the community to act or move around an issue.
These performances, according to Sutton, were conversations that laid a foundation for organized action. While the poems performed at the open mic event that Sutton describes began on paper, they came to life in the interchange between the audience and the poet. They were calls that begged response and that she found ultimately had the capacity to lead to community action in response to the issues they addressed.

In an issue of *English Education* dedicated specifically to art-based pedagogies, Dyson (2005) found that spoken word and other types of poetry invited appreciation for a diversity of voices in a heterogeneous school setting. Their work invokes Bakhtin in “Crafting ‘the Humble Prose of Living,’” to explain how opportunities for creative expression in schools not only acknowledge the many voices in the classroom, but the myriad voices that children bring from their homes, communities, churches, playgrounds, and even from the popular media. Through her research in an urban, first-grade classroom, Dyson found that against the backdrop of a test-driven system of accountability, the study and writing of poetry forged a “new basics” in language arts instruction. These new basics included, “an ear for the diversity of everyday voices, a playful manipulation of — a flexibility with—those voices, and an alertness to opportunities for performance” (p. 150). Dyson found that a spoken word pedagogy in an elementary classroom affirmed a diversity of voices and highlighted the many “Englishes” that are often over looked as they do not appear on high stakes tests. This pedagogy fostered respect for difference among students.

In their studies of conditions in large urban schools, Fine (1991) and McCormick (2000) found that inviting poetry into classrooms activated a potential for breaking through silence that often pervades schools (Fine, 1991) and for creating safe spaces of possibility, or what McCormick (2000) calls “aesthetic zones of safety.” In these safe spaces, youth were free to experiment with words and to produce counter-stories and counter-meanings to the ones they were handed by their families, schools, neighborhoods, and other institutions. For example, in McCormick’s study of a poetry class in a large New York City public high school, she found that students broke silence and moved from object to subject positions when they wrote about dehumanizing experiences, like study participant Nessa’s poem about the violence of the school surveillance and search systems students experienced everyday as they entered their building. While such poems did little to change the security practices, McCormick found that having a safe space to unpack these experiences and to discuss their feelings about them allowed students to cope with them and to maintain their sense of humanity.

Focusing specifically on teen mothers, Proweller (2000) found that in the context of an alternative school, poetry afforded students space and opportunity to rewrite their stories. Proweller found that, given a space to write counterstories/poems, teen mothers were able to shift from seeing their motherhood as disabling or as a predictor of failure (as statistics would have them believe) to being a motivating force for future successes. Through these reflective spaces, she found that teen mothers moved from students “at risk” to students “at promise.” While these teen mothers had previously given up on academic success, many began to take positive actions and move toward their goals once they had a chance to write about the futures they wanted for themselves and their children. Proweller found that inviting poetry into schools offered youth opportunities to resist crippling negative labels, however this resistance in the form of poetry did not necessarily translate into fundamental or lasting changes.
Co-construction and democratic literacies. Fisher's research examines literacy activities in African American community spaces and also explains how those typically extra-curricular literacies operate in classrooms (Fisher, 2003; 2005a; 2006; 2007). In “From the Coffee House to the School House” (2005a), Fisher conducted ethnographic research in two voluntary in-school writing programs in New York City that were led by elders who identified as poets. In examining these two poetry classrooms, Fisher found that some critical components for re-figuring the classroom as a space for student ownership were the centering of student experiences and the co-construction of knowledge between youth and elders. In both classrooms, Fisher found the teachers, Joe and Mama C, to play the part of “old heads” with whom the students identified and who took the time to get to know the contemporary youth culture. Both teachers taught students to “sing” or to “spit” poems, practices characterized by using one’s own authentic language (including voice and body) to share one’s story. Fisher found that these practices liberated youth who felt they were seen to have deficits in classrooms that demanded mastery of an authoritative or standard way of speaking and being.

Fisher's Writing in Rhythm (2007) is an ethnography of a poetry class in a high school in the Bronx. Joe’s Power Writers class, where Fisher conducted her research, was a literocracy where adult poets mentored youth writers, where students and adult poets explicitly confronted the politics of language, and where students wrote and shared their stories in their voices. Fisher also refers to such spaces as Participatory Literacy Communities (PLC). She found that the Power Writers forced open the discussion of voice and language and asserted institutional independence from the school in terms of the recognition and affirmation of non-dominant ways of speaking and writing. Fisher found that one of the fundamental mechanisms for engendering empowerment in the classroom was that students chose to occupy a self-defined space where ideologies of inclusion were clearly articulated and set the space apart from the school that housed it. An example of such a democratic participation structure was Joe’s Read and Feed, a process where peers and elders held equal voice in giving warm and constructive feedback to other poets. These participatory structures stood apart from traditional classroom systems that gravitate toward hierarchy. Because youth both wrote in their own language and participated in democratic structures, Fisher found that Joe’s classroom was one of possibility that could impact students’ ability to assume agency in other spaces. Fisher’s work explores the powerful relationship between writing and action in the class community and leaves one wondering what happens as these empowered youth transition into a broader social context.

Some research frames poetry in the classroom space as facilitative of democratic engagement. In Kinloch’s study (2005a) of two sixth grade classrooms in an urban, Texas school where she taught a poetry unit, she found that poetry played a constructive role in students’ respect for difference. Kinloch described how students, when first asked to write creatively about themselves, expressed trepidation about breaking out of the standard language they were expected to employ in traditional classrooms. Once these middle school students contributed their voices and thereby shaped the classroom culture, her findings led her to conclude that the classroom structures that hinged on the creating and sharing of poetry nurtured “humane spaces of interaction” (p. 99) where youth and adults learned about one another and their worlds. She also found that students found power in the ability
to write and rewrite their poems to reflect their own stories and visions in the language
that best represents them and moves the audience. Through the sharing and shaping of
these ever-evolving drafts, students engaged in dialogue about all the meaty topics the
poets brought to the table. The discussion of the poems, Kinloch found, were also
discussions about the worlds the students experienced and desired. Kinloch found this
practice to be reflective of a form of democratic engagement and world-making that
extends beyond the classroom.

While the notion of authorship in these studies is framed as a form of individual
empowerment, the findings also discuss the need for inter-subjectivity on the level of the
community in order to forge change beyond the individual. Each of these articles found
these practices to hold power when multiple voices were shared so that student-poets
practiced respect for different voices and expanded their world views collectively. While
the ideas of democratic engagement and collective action are hinted at in these articles, the
studies did not track how students engaged in community after participating in these
literacy communities.

Poetry and activism. The foundation of Jocson’s research is her extensive
involvement with June Jordan’s Poetry for the People (P4P) project (Jocson, 2005; 2006a;
2008). Jocson was both a participant in the Poetry course at University of California at
Berkeley and worked as a Student Teacher Poet (STP) through P4P’s partnership with a
local high school. Additionally, Jocson researched the project as part of her graduate school
and professional research. Continuing June Jordan’s legacy and her involvement in the
Black Arts Movement, Jocson presents spoken word pedagogy as a form of educational
activism (Jocson, 2008).

Jocson directly relates writing, particularly poetry, to the struggle for a more equal
and democratic society. She grounds this belief in the tradition of the Harlem Renaissance
and the Black Arts Movement to which poet and activist June Jordan was connected. While
spoken word is just one tributary to a larger history of activism through the arts, it has
particular relevance now as it has gained popularity with young people and has reignited
young peoples’ interest in poetry as a form of social expression and civic engagement. With
its multi-voiced nature, Jordan saw poetry as a democratizing force that could spark the
critical dialogues needed to fulfill the promise of democracy and the Civil Rights Movement.
As the pedagogical centerpiece, poetry, for Jocson serves as the process, the product, and
the practice of the classroom. She finds,

the centering of the small-group workshop on their poems and the
simultaneous de-centering of the space, a call to all members of the group to
participate, made this learning process less privileging and more democratic.
Their poems served as pretexts for extending conversations about relevant
issues and for creating collective domains for the co-construction of
knowledge in their respective groups (p. 162).

Like Kinloch’s concept of Democratic Engagement, this poetry as process and practice
requires that diverse student voices drive classroom work. While teacher poets introduce
forms and topics and invoke the voices of elder poets, students’ truths remain at the center.

Jocson found the P4P classes, which were offered in a comprehensive high school, to
be what she called hybrid and bidirectional learning spaces where students and teachers
moved fluidly between roles. Students were both apprentices and experts who learned from teacher poets and from one another in a structure that challenged the status quo of traditional, unidirectional instruction. Even the course reader gave equal weight to expert and novice poets (Jocson, 2005). These flexible identities in both the classroom structures and relationships and the practice of youth writing poetry functioned as an opportunity for reclaiming identities, particularly for youth who have been ascribed identities as academic failures in school systems.

Through case studies of student poets, Jocson found that the P4P structures and curricula invited students to write about topics that affected their lives. They wrote about misconceptions about youth, racial profiling, and media portrayals of young people of color. Through this writing, Jocson found, they moved from being objects of representation, to writing about the worlds they inhabited and the ways that they experienced them. Jocson found that poetry, in process and practice, afforded youth opportunities to be agents and to “rewrite (mis)perceptions of their social world” (p. 163). Students used poetry as a way to write the wrongs they witness and to make them the focus of critical dialogue.

Adapted from June Jordan's university poetry class, P4P offers a rigorous exploration of poetic forms while remaining outside of the canon. While the course does not incorporate the canonized names of high school poetry instruction, Jocson does not ignore its connections to traditional academic literacies. In her article “Bob Dylan and Hip Hop: Intersecting Literacy Practices in Youth Poetry Communities” (2006a) Jocson pays particular attention to the academic payoffs of the hybrid practice of poetry. By examining the multi-literacies of a 17-year-old focal student, Antonio, she found that the practice of poetry outside of school led to improved academic literacy overall and boosted Antonio's self-image as a student achiever. While her contrasting of Antonio's in and out of school writing verges on a bridging stance that instrumentalizes poetry to academic achievement, her research in the P4P classroom (2005; 2008) puts the poetry back in the center.

Jocson frames poetry as a form of activism in that the poems reify the youth's worldview and provide opportunities for them to own their experiences through their creations. Also built into these classrooms is space to share these products with others. This sharing space leads to her notion of poetry as practice in that the sharing of one's own unique worldview becomes a way of being that extends beyond the safe space of the classroom. P4P students

Engage[d] in the politics of democratic difference by reading and performing poems in various public spaces shaped the way students see themselves in relation to the sociocultural contexts they occupy (p. 168).

Jocson concludes her book with take-away lessons for classroom teachers seeking to transform their spaces. Based on her study of P4P, she offers poetry as a tool for empowering students to take authorship in their life narratives. Her concept of poetry as process provides a concrete example for teachers wanting to put students at the center and to radically change and keep changing ascribed classroom roles and identities.

**Bridging the Gap**

This generation of scholars has found art, specifically Spoken Word poetry, to function as a critical bridge between in and out of school literacies and in and out of school
actions and to be one possible avenue for realizing the aims of critical pedagogy. Through their research, these scholars choose to reimagine school spaces and the ends school has in mind for youth. They push the boundaries of literacy by privileging the use of hybrid literacy practices to foster personal relationships, to help students to articulate a sense of self in the world, and to encourage and stimulate love and respect for the heteroglot voices in classrooms and communities. They position empowerment not as an accessory to academic experience, but as foundational to the purpose of schooled learning. Some suggest poetry and hip hop as a bridge to academic literacies, some pose them as keys to affirming positive youth identities, some see these pedagogies as steps toward a more just school system. All push for a broader notion of literacy and inclusive classrooms that create structures and spaces for real talk and meaningful engagement with literacy.

Together, their findings highlight the special role that art, including hip hop and spoken word, can play in developing democratic citizenship. They also provide evidence for the benefits of acknowledging diverse voices and the grappling with real issues in classroom spaces. For the most part, these studies do not explore the contradictions in hop hop and take a celebratory stance toward the inclusion of spoken word and hip hop in classrooms. These studies do not, for example, address the commodification of hip hop and the ways that this impacts youth participation in hip hop as a form of expression that suffers from pernicious representations of youth in its mainstream iterations (Rose, 2008; Collins, 2006). To push these ideas further, scholars will need to research if and how these positive spaces impact students in the long term and to problematize them as critical pedagogy would encourage. While these studies provide useful examples of repurposed classrooms, we need to know how these alternative pedagogies impact students beyond the classroom. How do young adults carry these experiences forward? Together these studies scratch the surface of what empowerment can look like in the context of schooled or community literacy-learning, but there is a need for further research on the connections between these experiences and students uses of writing and voice in their lives after high school. In my research, then, I ask: What are some of the ways that students take their authorship from the page to their lived realities? What choices do students make and do they use writing as a tool beyond schooling? Several of the studies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007; 2008; Fisher, 2007; Jocson, 2006b, 2008; Kinloch, 2005a; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002) find that these classrooms that engage students in the production and analysis of art pique their interest in becoming change-makers, but the scope of the studies is limited to an experience with poetry at a moment in time. Jocson follows two of the P4P students into their first year of college, but focuses mainly on how their poet identities impact academic performance in college.

**Present Study**

Using the framework of social poetics to engage with the existing research on empowering pedagogies, I will investigate how students, who have been part of a poetry class much like the ones others have studied, are operating as community members, college students, and possibly writers in life after high school. I use qualitative methods to capture the post–high school perspectives of students who took a poetry course at an alternative high school over the five years that it was offered. In order to explore the connections between their shared experience of taking a positive poetry class within a nurturing
alternative high school and the post–high school lives of these young adults, I will address
the following research questions:

1. For a group of students who are between 2 and 6 years out of high school and report that
their high school poetry class had a positive impact on their lives, what do they remember
about their in-school literacy experiences related to their poetry class?
2. How do these youth use writing as a tool after high school?
   a. How has their use of writing evolved in their early adult lives?
   b. How does literacy function for them now?
3. What was the nature of the memorable writing that students produced in the class?

**Preview of Chapters**

In Chapter 2, I present the methods of the study, including the research design that
allowed me to track the early adult attitudes toward and uses of literacy of a group of youth
who took a poetry class at an alternative high school. Chapter 3, *Shifting Attitudes and
Lasting Impact*, addresses the first research questions and reports results on how alumni of
the poetry class remember and hold onto the experiences from their poetry class and the
ways that this class differed from other schooled literacy spaces. Chapter 4, *Writing a
Better Future*, answers the second set of research questions and explores the diverse ways
that study participants use writing in their early adult lives to fulfill academic, personal,
and social needs. Chapter 5, *Transformational Experiences and Touchstone Poems*, answers
the final research question and examines what I call touchstone poems that the students
produced in the poetry class. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with recommendations
and areas for further research.
Chapter 2: Methods

The portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in drawing the image. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 3)

Research Design Overview

This study uses qualitative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to construct a set of case studies (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997; Schram, 2006; Stake, 1995) of a diverse group of youth who shared a common experience in a high school poetry class between 2004 and 2009. I conducted a pilot study during the 2008-2009 school year during which I was a weekly participant observer in the poetry class. During this pilot study, students reflected on the impact the poetry class had in their lives, so I began to design this study of poetry alumni that explores what that impact looks like over time. I began by administering a survey, holding focus groups, and interviewing the alumni about their in and out of school writing as well as their evolving sense of selves and how they see writing as related to their own community involvement, pursuit of higher education, and life choices. While 92% of survey respondents reported that they felt their lives were changed to some degree by their involvement in the poetry class and community, I honed in on the experiences of students who reported that the class significantly impacted their lives (70%). In addition to the data sources already mentioned, the data set also includes all previously published poetry from the class, field notes from the pilot study, new writing samples from the focus group and case study participants, interviews with the poetry teacher, and memos and observational sketches written after my encounters with the case study participants. The focus of my analysis is on the students’ reports of their post–high school experiences and on their writing, not on the pedagogy or curriculum of the poetry course itself. The purpose of this study is to better understand how students who shared a common experience in a positive literacy-learning class in high school come to carry that experience as they move into the academic, family, and socio-political worlds beyond the schoolhouse. The following questions guided my research:

1. For a group of students who are between 2 and 6 years out of high school and report that their high school poetry class had a positive impact on their lives, what do they remember about their in-school literacy experiences related to their poetry class?
2. How do these youth use writing as a tool after high school?
   a. How has their use of writing evolved in their early adult lives?
   b. How does literacy function for them now?
3. What was the nature of the memorable writing that students produced in the class?

Background and Rationale

I chose to study a group of students with whom I have had close contact over the past seven years. While I never taught these students in their poetry class, I was a teacher
at their school and have had several of them in other classes. My intrinsic interest in these particular students arises from my own experience as a teacher of students who have experienced persistent school failure. I became interested in the poetry class after observing so many students who had been disenchanted with schooled learning blossom in that space and come to self-identify as poets. Because I saw so many students experience what the research identifies as “empowerment” (Shor, 1992; Jocson, 2008) while they participated in the class, I was driven to find out what happens to these students once they move beyond that nurturing classroom space. I was curious about how they would remember their experiences in poetry and how these memories could possibly continue to influence their development as they moved beyond school.

My methodology is informed by my desire to understand the nuanced experiences of youth who have not experienced widespread success in K-12 schooling and what empowerment might look like for these young people to whom society ascribes little agency. Often research on drop-outs and other disenfranchised students offers statistical analyses that isolate factors such as graduation rates, college matriculation, and retention, or employment statistics, and the long-term impact of dropping out on life chances. In contrast to these limiting portrayals, this study relies on qualitative methods to offer a detailed picture of the complex, and often conflicting ways, that youth carry memories of specific learning experiences forward and to bring to light the voices of these under-represented youth and the small and large victories in their stories. While there is a danger of sentimentalizing these youth through their stories, their perspectives offer much needed juxtaposition to these limiting statistical depictions.

I was attracted to Lawrence-Lightfoot’s method of portraiture since it relies on both artful description and scientific methods. With a focus on narrative, her methodology allowed me to conceive of a case that is not situated in a physical context or site, but in the stories held and shared by individuals who participated in a common experience. The methodology of portraiture, with an emphasis on what Lawrence-Lightfoot calls “goodness,” helped me to justify my stance as both a researcher and an advocate for these youth. This stance of “goodness” and advocacy required that I understand participants as having the capacity for agency. It also meant that I offered myself as a resource to participants if it was relevant in their current struggles. In constructing the cases, I was able through this methodology to assume an intrinsic interest and a drive to show what is working without romanticizing the struggles of these youth who face many social obstacles and limiting situations.

Lawrence-Lightfoot explains the focus on goodness as “an intentional generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (p. 9). This focus on goodness is crucial to my project because so often high school dropouts are described only as being deficient, as being unsuccessful, or not having made it in our society7. Much of the literature frames dropouts as the problem (see Fine, 1991) when in fact they may be some of our most valuable resources in thinking about how to restructure schools, they can

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7 This stance is also informed by Willis’ (1977) ethnography of working class students and their rebellion against mainstream school culture in that it frames these youth as making choices in their education, even if they had failing grades in school or ended up dropping out of high school.
speak to the ways that schools fail to connect with students in meaningful ways. Lawrence-Lightfoot’s value of goodness as a basis for social science research aligns with the maintenance of hope and possibility found in critical pedagogy. This is not a naive focus on goodness, but rather an exploration of the complications and contradictions inherent in it. It is a methodology that relies on storytelling, an appropriate approach for these young writers. Portraiture affords me the space to hold these community relationships and to counterbalance them with the data in order to construct holistic narratives for the case study participants. In a Gramscian sense (1971), this approach enables a move from society’s common sense (mis)understandings of youth who have been pushed out or dropped out of high school to good sense about their experiences.

My study design also relied on theories of memory (McAdams & Bowman, 2001; Pillemer, 1998) that frame memories as psychologically real events that have narrative truth and are indicative of how individuals make sense of experiences, particularly those of transitional moments (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). In contrast to general theories of memory, Pillemer (1998) emphasizes the importance of event memories in development. He explains that events can significantly alter one’s path and that these singular events “are represented in memory as profoundly life-affecting and even life-altering” (p.7). This frame allows me to examine how participants remembered the class as a turning point in their educational experiences that broke with the general patterns that they had experienced previously. These memories are understood as being true to the participant’s narrative construction of experience and therefore meaningful in terms of their understanding of self. In this light, specific event memories have impact on peoples’ actions in the world and can become active in “forming, redirecting, and sustaining the life course” (p. 24).

Pillemer’s description of anchoring events informed my reliance on interview in this study as a means of uncovering the long-term impact of the class that students claimed was impactful. Pillemer describes the impact of anchoring events on development as,

an anchoring event serves as a touchstone for a continuing set of beliefs about the world. The broad relevance of an anchoring event may become apparent only retrospectively, as subsequent events validate its intellectual or emotional thrust. The remembered episode does not set a course as much as provide a lasting reminder of the way things are. It can validate current beliefs and feelings, it can offer reassurance at times of trouble or difficulty, and it can refocus thoughts and behaviors in accordance with the underlying lesson represented by memory. (p. 74)

It is in this way that these memories are evidence of the impact left from participant experiences in the class. These are indicative of the ways that these episodes and experiences have continued to shape their beliefs and actions after the fact. Meaningful episodes can prompt a break with the existing scripts, for instance scripts about academic identities and expectations of schooling. These concepts of memory helped me to make sense of interview data that focused on memories of the class.

Cushman’s (1998) activist methodology informed the design of this research as well, and it informed how I framed my relationship to the study participants. Like goodness, Cushman’s methodology insists on research that listens to and hears the stories and
experiences of the participants and “how people can and do act instead of how they cannot and do not act” (p. 23). This frame is particularly important as some of the youth in my study did not graduate from high school. Whether we label these youth as dropouts, push-outs, or simply youth who did not graduate, we don’t even have language that doesn’t already cast a shadow of deficiency on them. While I don’t want this research to romanticize dropping-out, or to frame it as an autonomous act of unbridled resistance, I employ a methodology that allows me to understand the nuances of these young peoples’ experiences without discrediting them because they do not hold a high school diploma. This frame allows me to learn from the experiences of these youth without looking exclusively at that they have not achieved. While the study focuses on the lives of these young adults after high school, these labels shape, and often limit, roles, activities, and identities as youth move beyond formal schooling.

In order to explore this phenomenon, I designed a study with four layers (participant observation, survey, focus groups, and case study participant interviews), which borrows from several qualitative research traditions. Besides the methodology of critical portraiture, my research design was informed by a case study approach (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), and in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 2006) as well as surveys and focus groups. While Dyson and Genishi suggest that interview data should be supplemental to the construction of a case, they are central to this one because of my emphasis on portraiture. While I observed the poetry class during the 2008-2009 school year, the locus of this research is the young adults who shared the experience of a high school poetry class and the object of study is to document how they enacted those experiences, or not, in their adult lives. The classroom observation allowed me to experience and observe the class culture, rituals, and interactions between community members, including with the teacher, Mrs. Warran, so that I could gather background about the kind of classroom culture and what it might mean in their future lives. The survey allowed me to cast a wide net and to get information from a broad cross-section (n=80 out of a possible 116) of poetry alumni about the impact of the poetry class on their post-high school lives. The focus groups provided a space for alumni to co-construct snapshots of the class and their writing trajectories. The in-depth interviews with case study participants allowed me to highlight a diversity of experiences by exploring how six young adults have carried a common experience of having taken poetry into their early adult lives.

**Site Selection**

The students in my study all attended New Beginnings High School (NBHS), an alternative school that was designed for students who had dropped out of high school, but had decided to return. NBHS was a small public charter school that served as a second chance for students who had not experienced success in traditional schools. Over 95% of NBHS students qualified for free or reduced lunch and nearly all were students of color. Because of its mission to provide a safe, equitable, rigorous, and empowering school environment for under-served youth, NBHS had an overt social justice focus that the school prioritized as a condition for student success. All teachers were encouraged to connect classroom work to the broader sociocultural context and the issues of race, poverty, and immigration that impacted the school community. For example, the school participated in protests that were happening in the community around police brutality, especially after the
police killing of Oscar Grant, an unarmed African-American in 2009, and around the immigration raids that were happening in 2007-2008. Teachers were encouraged to probe these issues in the academic disciplines. Unlike many other alternative or continuation schools, NBHS offered a college preparatory program (University of California A-G approved) for all students. While few graduates matriculated at four-year universities, many are attending or have attended some community college.8

The staff at NBHS constantly grappled with what it meant to be an alternative school and what could make the school attractive and effective for students who had been turned off by traditional schools. NBHS was different because most classes were capped at twenty-two students (as compared to classes as large as 35 students in the comprehensive public schools in the local district), and there was a significant outdoor education program where students were able to learn outside of the city and even travelled to Venezuela. There was a service learning program where all students engaged in projects in the community beyond the school, an arts program that included a drama class where students wrote and performed their own play annually, a graffiti class, and the poetry class that published an anthology four out of the five years of NBHS’s existence. Also a core of dedicated teachers remained at the school and taught the same students year after year.

While NBHS made great strides in terms of student attendance and meaningful shifts in students’ attitudes toward schooled learning, the school struggled to make the progress required by the state and federal accountability systems. Due to a failure to meet annual yearly progress (AYP) standards, the school district’s office of charter schools denied NBHS’ charter renewal and the school’s doors were closed after the 2008-2009 school year, highlighting the challenges that schools face when trying to offer alternatives to traditional learning. When NBHS closed, the students dispersed to different schools; some chose to go to continuation schools or adult education programs, some went to other alternative schools, and many followed the math, poetry, and history teachers to Youth Reach Academy (YRA), another small charter school in a smaller city in the Bay Area. The poetry teacher, Mrs. Warran, continued to offer the Poetry for the People (P4P) class for one year at YRA until she became a co-director at the school and was unable to offer the course in the 2010-2011 school year. Mrs. Warran resumed teaching the class in the 2012-2013 school year at YRA, but will not offer it in the 2013-2014 school year.

Mrs. Warran’s Poetry Class.

Mrs. Warran’s poetry course was inspired by June Jordan’s Poetry 4 the People program at University of California at Berkeley and was a signature course at the school. Over the five years that the poetry class was offered, 116 students took poetry and published in any one of the four poetry anthologies the class created. Of all the classes at NBHS, the poetry class embodied an alternative to traditional schooling in both content and pedagogy. While this study does not focus on the pedagogy or curriculum of the poetry class itself, I offer a description as contextual information. I have come to know the P4P class well over the years as a colleague and school community member, as a participant

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8 Exact percentages are unknown for the entire pool of graduates because most records were lost after the school was denied re-charter and closed in 2009.
observer in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years, and as a teacher of the course for one semester while Mrs. Warran was unable to teach because of administrative duties.

In a school where students were trying to turn their past schooling experiences and behaviors around and to get engaged with learning in new ways, poetry was presented as a space with the potential for self-actualization. As a former student of June Jordan’s, Mrs. Warran created a participatory literacy community (PLC) (Fisher, 2007) where a teacher-as-poet collaborated with the youth poets to construct a safe space (McCormick, 2000) to share and reflect their writing and experiences. It conformed to the criteria for Fisher’s PLC, being a space where

- students’ voices and experiences were welcome and respected by design,
- rituals supported community building, and
- students chose in to the community.

The class was also a model of what Jocson (2008) describes as a hybrid and bidirectional learning space where, in the tradition of June Jordan, poetry was presented as activism.

With each new poetry cohort, Mrs. Warran spent the first weeks laying the foundation for what June Jordan referred to as a “Beloved Community.” Students collaborated to create community agreements and held the responsibility for their maintenance. Through the study of June Jordan’s work and her political philosophy, students learned about the important role poetry has played in various movements for social change and they were encouraged to expand the cannon by writing and publishing poetry that addresses the important social issues of the current moment.

Students explored what poetry meant to them and began a rigorous process of putting their selves on the page. While Mrs. Warran maintained a very open space for learning, key rituals grounded the class and offered a consistent and dependable structure for the youth poets. Poets also learned a vocabulary for discussing poetry and poetic devices and conventions, and they learned strategies for performing their work.

The basic structures and rituals of the class included the sharing of poems and giving and receiving of feedback. This provided an important context that was referenced frequently by case study participants. Mrs. Warran organized the class in units. While she sometimes changed the order or swapped different units depending on what students had already encountered, the foundational units that she taught were self-affirmation poems, Blues poems, profiling poems, haiku and t’ang, homeland poems, odes, and emulations. Each unit began with a study of poems written by a combination of widely known poets, peers, teachers, and Poetry 4 the People poets from Jordan’s class at UC Berkeley. Mrs. Warran often pulled examples from the preceding anthologies and always presented professional and amateur poets with the same respect and recognition side by side in her unit packets. Poetry students would read and discuss the poems provided and each student would choose one poem from the packet to perform in front of the class. This gave students an opportunity to practice performing and also to try on different voices and styles as they explored their own. Next, students wrote their own poems that fit in with the style or theme of the unit. Once each poet had a draft, the class would engage in what I have come to call poet-to-poet feedback or workshopping. The table below illustrates the contours of each poetry cycle. All activities were in the service of strengthening the community and also building up individual poets through the publishing process. Each
year, Mrs. Warran taught the class three times, once per trimester. Many students cycled through multiple times.

**Table 2.1: Mrs. Warran’s class cycle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building and strengthening the Beloved Community</th>
<th>Exploring peer and professional poems and poets</th>
<th>Poet-to-poet feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Knowing and being known</td>
<td>• Reading other NBHS poets alongside well-known published ones</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learning about the legacy of activist poets</td>
<td>• Practicing constructive criticism and exploring issues of style with outside authors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Workshopping</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Performing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Giving and receiving constructive feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Publishing</td>
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In my pilot study in 2009, poet-to-poet feedback stood out as the most important structure in the class in terms of holding space for student voice and empowerment. Mrs. Warran was strict about holding the space of poet-to-poet feedback. In the workshop activity, poets read new or revised work and received feedback from their peers, teacher, and visiting poets or community members. At least once a week the poets participated in a workshop where they shared what they had written. The students sat in a semi-circle with the poet standing in the middle to read. They then engaged in the following structured protocol for workshopping the pieces:

1. Mrs. Warran hands out a packet with the poems to be workshopped that day.
2. The poet reads the piece.
3. Responders write comments on the copy.
4. Responders give oral feedback on a voluntary basis. The poet is not allowed to respond.
5. After the responders discuss the poem, they hand the copies back to the poet who uses them in the revision process.

Mrs. Warran pushed the responders to give both positive and critical feedback and to respond in as much detail as possible.

Mrs. Warran urged students to be specific and modeled specificity by giving constructive feedback herself. After writing their feedback on the page, Mrs. Warran would open the floor for fellow poets to give verbal feedback, and other poets in the room would show agreement with the feedback by doing “spirit fingers” where they wiggle their fingers in the air. Students often echoed certain key terms from the early lessons on poetic conventions. One of the most frequent suggestions for poetic form was for peers to use “maximal impact and minimum words.” While these suggestions were often heard, most of the feedback from peers came in the form of validating the poet’s story. Many of these rituals were referenced in the data and will be discussed in the following chapters as they relate to this study’s findings.

Mrs. Warran’s poetry classroom and its nested relationship to NBHS as a small, community-focused school, offered a fruitful space to investigate the long-term impact of a
positive literacy-learning space. Students during their time at NBHS and after, for the most part, expressed positive feelings toward the school and especially toward the poetry class. Many students kept in touch with each other and with staff members through on and off-line networks after graduating or leaving the school, which facilitated the process of tracking down poetry alumni. As previously noted, of the survey respondents, 92% reported that they felt the poetry class changed their lives in some way and 70% reported that the class had a significant impact on their lives.

Participants

In 2011, two years after the closure of NBHS, I located as many of the poetry alumni as possible. All were potential subjects for my study. Because most of the school documents and databases had been lost after the closure, I relied on networking to find the youth. I had maintained communication with many of them and was able to contact others both using social networking and the off-line networks of the young people I was already in touch with.

Survey participants. In order to conduct the survey, I created an inventory of the poems published by the class from which I tried to locate all of the poets using both on- and off-line networks. Of the 116 students who had been enrolled in the poetry classes, I was able to locate 94 (81%). I sent surveys to all of them and 80 returned the surveys (85% return rate of those located and 69% of the total group). A return rate of 85% is extraordinarily high when compared to usual survey return rates, which hover around 50% on average (Archer, 2008), indicating the group’s sense of loyalty. Once I reached my target (n=70) for survey collection, I began to select for case study participants as described below.

Focus groups. Of the 80 who completed the surveys, 38 agreed to participate in interviews or focus groups. All survey respondents who answered that they were willing to participate in further research and who were not selected as case study participants were invited to participate in a focus group meeting. I did not filter for other factors in these participants, although all except one participant in the focus groups did respond that poetry had a significant impact on their lives. To some degree, students who were interested in further participation in the study were more likely to have found the class to have been impactful because they were interested in unpacking the experience after the fact. Focus groups were held between April and June of 2012. They were roughly organized by cohort year, so that founding members of the poetry class were in one group, students from the middle years were in another, and students from the final year of NBHS were in another. Because of participant schedules, there was some heterogeneity in terms of cohort years.

Having participants who attended NBHS at the same time and knew each other raised the likelihood that they would share openly about their experiences. It also allowed for differences by cohort. For instance, the very first year of the school NBHS was in a different building. There was a certain bond shared by students who experienced the school at the original site. Having the students together who shared that experience allowed me to see some of the changes in the perceptions of the class between the different years.
I used Facebook and e-mail to contact participants and inform them about the focus group meetings which were held on Sundays at my home. Because many of the participants have children, I offered childcare during the group meetings. The first group meeting had four participants; the second had six. For the third meeting only one person came. I did the focus group activities with the sole participant and then I held a make-up meeting for that group to which two participants came. The total number of focus group participants was thirteen.

**Focus group one.** Present at the first focus group were three poetry alumni: Brooklyn, Grant, and Starla. Grant brought his four-year-old son with him to the meeting. Both Brooklyn and Grant were members of the founding class at NBHS and took poetry in the first year of the school. Starla came to NBHS in the second year of the school. All three of the participants in focus group one graduated from NBHS. While they knew each other and were friendly at NBHS, none had seen each other for some time. They were enthusiastic about recalling their days at NBHS and stuck around to catch up with one another for an hour after the meeting was officially adjourned.

**Focus group two.** The second focus group was the one that was most well-attended. Six students participated: Joe, Michael, Lauryn, Jalith, Evan, and Toya. In addition to these six, Estela (also a poetry alumni) and her mother, Mrs. Amador (who worked at NBHS as the parent coordinator and school lunch provider) came to watch the children (my toddler and Toya’s one-year-old son, Chaka). The students who participated in focus group two were mostly from the middle years of the program. When they came to NBHS, there was already a strong poetry culture and the poetry classes that preceded theirs had already published books. Michael, Evan, and Joe graduated in 2008. Jalith, Estela, and Toya graduated in 2009. Lauryn dropped out of school after NBHS closed, but eventually returned to earn a GED from a local adult school.

As this focus group was ending, another student, Tammi and her son came to the meeting to see everyone. She had heard that there was a gathering and wanted to reunite with her NBHS friends. Tammi never took poetry at NBHS, but she was thirsty to reconnect with the community. During the time that I held the focus groups, I received many calls and e-mails from students who had not participated in the poetry class, asking why they hadn’t been invited to the reunion. Students were generally interested in reconnecting with peers and staff from NBHS, especially since there was no longer a school site to return to or to participate in as alumni.

**Focus group three.** While four alumni replied and said they would attend the third focus group, only one student, Paris, showed up for the meeting. Paris was a junior when the school closed. She graduated the following year from a continuation high school. While I followed all the protocols with Paris, I was unable to get the dialogue and co-construction of memories that I was looking for with only one participant. I recorded and transcribed the data from this interaction; but I did not count it as an official focus group.

**Focus group four (make-up group).** When participants who were scheduled for a focus group did not show up, I attempted several times to reschedule, but had trouble finding times to match everyone’s busy family and work schedules. While several participants RSVP’d that they would come to this make-up group, only Bonita appeared. One of the poets from YRA (the school where Mrs. Warran taught after the closure of NBHS) was at the meeting to babysit. In order to get a dialogue going between the
participants, Kaya (the YRA student poet) joined the meeting; so the fourth focus group meeting ended up with two participants: Kaya and Bonita. Bonita attended NBHS the year it closed and was published in the final poetry anthology, *We Are What We’ve Been Waiting For* (2009). Bonita was a sophomore when the school closed. She relocated to a comprehensive high school from which she graduated in 2011. Kaya participated minimally and by chance in the study. Although not planning to include her, I did observe Kaya in Mrs. Warran’s class at YRA in the 2009-2010 school year when I collected pilot data and her experience was of interest in that it provided a point of contrast because she experienced the class in a different context than the NBHS students. Because I had observed in both schools, I knew that Kaya had participated in the same structures and used the same materials with Mrs. Warran, albeit in a context where poetry was less integral and consistent to the school culture than it was at NBHS. While Kaya and Bonita had not met before, they were able to engage with each other about their experiences in and memories of poetry class.

**Case study participants.** From the group of 38 survey respondents who agreed to participate further in the study, I used the survey to narrow down the pool of participants for the case study interviews. Because I wanted to explore how participants who saw poetry as an important experience made meaning of it after high school, I selected case study students from those who claimed that poetry was their most memorable class in high school, who also reported that poetry had a significant impact on their lives, and who took Mrs. Warran’s poetry class at least two trimesters at NBHS, which indicated they had chosen in to the community and also had more exposure to the class culture and opportunities to write and participate in the class structures than those who only participated for one year. There were 17 respondents who fit these descriptors. From this group of 17 respondents, I selected a set of 6 who showed maximal variation in post–high school experiences and also represented diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and cohort years at NBHS. Of the 6, 3 graduated from high school and 3 did not.

I offer a brief description of each of the case study participants:

**Lachelle.** As a disciplined writer and college student, Lachelle offers a portrait of how personal writing relates to academic success. Lachelle is a twenty-two-year-old African-American woman, currently studying psychology at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in the Midwestern United States. She self-identifies as a writer and has incorporated journaling into her daily life. Lachelle was one of only three survey respondents who was currently attending a four-year college during the survey collection. I selected her as a case study student because her experience as a fourth-year university student allowed me to explore if and how her identity as a writer served her in the academic setting. As a child growing up in the foster care system who graduated from NBHS and continued on to a four-year university, Lachelle’s story is one of empowerment through rejecting the social scripts offered to her on the basis of her up-bringing.

**Cesar.** Cesar’s case highlights the connections between personal writing and political action. Cesar is a twenty-four-year-old young man who was born in Mexico and brought to

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9 During data collection and analysis, Lachelle was enrolled in school. She has since graduated and will be beginning graduate work in social welfare in fall of 2013 at a large university in the Midwest.
the United States as an infant. Cesar did not graduate from high school, nor has he obtained a GED. I selected Cesar for several reasons. First, Cesar is an example of a young man who believes deeply in education, but has completely opted out of the system. Second, Cesar’s self-motivated learning has led him to become active in a revolutionary political organization where his main role is as a poet, performer, and writer. He is a political organizer who uses his writing to share social critique. In his survey, Cesar explained that he hated school, but that poetry was a life-changing experience for him. Cesar’s story is one of using writing to connect the personal and the political in service of social action.

Ruby. Ruby reveals how a young woman learned to build community through writing. Ruby is a twenty-one year old Mexican-American woman who graduated from high school and has taken some community college courses, but is not currently enrolled. I selected Ruby as a case study participant because she described poetry as a place that allowed her to take control of who she wanted to be in the world. I also selected her because after NBHS closed, she followed Mrs. Warran to her new school and continued to take poetry there. Ruby came to NBHS as her third high school. She expressed that she’d found a healthy home at NBHS that she had never had before. While she was a student at NBHS, she would come when school opened in the morning, and she would stay until the last staff member had to lock up the building. She struggled with living in an abusive home and was a survivor of sexual abuse. She expressed seeking refuge in the poetry community and in her writing. Her story is about connecting with others through words and culling personal strength and resilience through those bonds.

Monet. While Monet continues to struggle along her path in early adulthood, her case reveals the power of writing as a coping mechanism. Monet is twenty-three years old and was a member of the founding poetry cohort in the first year of NBHS. She is of mixed race. Monet was also one of the signature poets, whose work was included in the poetry readers and was respected in the new canon of Mrs. Warran’s class community. Living in very unstable conditions, Monet dropped out of high school after two years. She later returned to a technical college and earned her certificate in medical assisting. Writing continues to play an important role in her early adult life. I chose Monet because she offers the perspective of one of the original members of the class. Her story is one of using writing to get by.

Jaleeyah. While Jaleeyah never really committed to formal education and schooling, she felt that Mrs. Warran’s class was an important space for her. Jaleeyah is a twenty year old African-American woman. She is a transsexual, born male, who began to transform into her female identity in her high school years. When Jaleeyah came to NBHS she had already dropped out and had not been in school for three years. On her survey she reported that poetry was the most memorable experience from high school. Jaleeyah completed one year at NBHS in 2008-2009, but had to transfer after the school closed. She followed the poetry teacher, Mrs. Warran, to her new school but dropped out after one semester there. She has started and stopped several programs including adult education, GED prep, and community college, but has not graduated, attained a GED, or completed any college coursework. I chose Jaleeyah as a case study participant for several reasons. First, having attended and dropped out of a variety of schools, including comprehensive schools, alternative schools, adult and independent schools, she epitomizes the experience of a student who does not feel she fits in school. Second, Jaleeyah used writing as a way to confront trauma and to
come out to her family and community about her identity. Her story is one of using writing for therapeutic communication.

Ty. Ty took poetry with Mrs. Warran almost every year that he attended NBHS. He was a member of the founding poetry class and he explained how writing helped him understand and process his emotions. Ty is a twenty-three year-old African-American male. Since high school he has worked several jobs to support his wife. He is currently enrolled in community college, but has had to start and stop his schooling several times because of his work schedule. While Ty was very interested in committing as a case study participant in this study, it became too difficult to schedule interviews between his class schedule, two jobs, and family obligations. He completed only two of the three interviews. Ty’s story is one where he wrote his way through adolescence and into emotional maturity as a young man and a husband.

The chart below summarizes key variables for each of the case study participants.

**Table 2.2: Key variables for case study participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year published</th>
<th>Graduated high school?</th>
<th>Post-high school plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lachelle</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Lachelle is in the last semester of a four-year college. She will graduate in 2012 with a BA in Psychology. She plans to attend graduate school in Social Work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesar</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Cesar has not attended any college. He has a job organizing for the Revolutionary Communist Party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monet</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Monet earned a certificate in medical assisting from a technical college. She does in-home care and plans to open a crime-scene clean up business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Ruby completed one semester at community college and intends to return to get her AA but is not currently enrolled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaleeyah</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Jaleeyah has not attended any school since dropping out of high school and does not plan to enroll.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>He has his CNA certification and is currently enrolled in JC. Ty works in security and as a CNA.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Five of the six case study participants completed all three interviews; Ty only participated in two of the three interviews due to scheduling conflicts.

**Role of the Researcher**

It is important to acknowledge my pre-existing relationships with the youth involved in this study. Because I was a teacher for four years at NBHS I knew nearly all of the survey respondents with the exception of a handful who were there for the first year of the school only. I taught many of them in either English, Drama, or Service Learning, but I did not teach the Poetry class. Because this study has been evolving since I collected pilot data in 2008-2009, some of them also know me as a participant-observer in Poetry class.

I come to this research as a ten-year veteran high school teacher who believes in teaching beyond the tests. I see myself as an advocate for young people who have been pushed out of traditional schools. My work as a researcher and as an educator focuses on listening to stories and experiences of youth who have been silenced by the system through persistent failure, tracking practices, and the disproportionate disciplining of youth of color in schools. I am personally and professionally invested in exploring the potential impact of these empowering pedagogies on the young people we serve in schools. My stance as an educator of marginalized youth impacted the study design because it was based on a belief informed by my experiences as a teacher and researcher in alternative schools—that educators have much to learn from the students who struggle most in schools. Given this study design, the findings that follow in this dissertation offer positive lessons and possibilities to be learned from alternative literacy spaces in schools.

My relationships with the youth afforded me a deeper context as an interviewer. While many interviewers using the three-interview model have to establish rapport and build trust within those three interviews, I was able to begin with a certain trust and mutual respect established. While I view my pre-existing relationships with the study participants as mostly adding value and depth to the research, I am also aware that they complicate the research and have some potentially negative effects. The possible detriment of having pre-existing relationships is that the participants may not have been completely honest about their school experiences; that said, because I did not teach the class that we focused on, I believe that they were truthful to their experiences as there was nothing to gain from dishonesty. There were a few circumstances where the participants asked if they could be really honest about situations that happened at school. I assured them that I was not interacting with them as their teacher or representative of the school and I encouraged them to be completely honest. The fact that the school no longer exists and that the case study participants are not still in high school also created a comfortable distance from the teacher-student relationship that we had before. Another possible detriment could have been that participants would have shared too much, invoking the ethical responsibilities of a mandated reporter. While participants shared about their lives and circumstances, there were no instances where I felt I needed to act as a mandated reporter. In some instances I did advocate for youth or suggest resources, but not for immediate situations that involved abuse, neglect, or danger to persons.

The methodological approach of portraiture and its focus on “goodness” and the idea of activist research has offered a helpful lens in resolving the dilemmas of representation that come with having a personal investment in the lives of the participants...
in this study. My stance as a researcher is to co-create a portrait of these youth through their written and spoken words, my own observations, and my understanding of the social-historical context in which we have come to know each other. Given these data points, my responsibility is to focus on what they are doing in their early adult lives in a critical way. While I choose not to describe these young people from a deficit stance, I am not making a decision uncritically to celebrate them.

**Data Collection**

Before beginning formal data collection for this study, I had already spent time observing in Mrs. Warran’s class and had collected the four poetry anthologies that Mrs. Warran’s classes published between 2005-2009: *Bloomin’ Poets Breakin’ the Silence* (2005), *Fully Loaded Minds Breakin’ Free* (2007), *Breakin’ Down but Still We Stand* (2008), and *We Are What We’ve Been Waiting For* (2009). I had also collected sample poetry packets that Mrs. Warran used to introduce each poetry cycle. While these data were not part of the formal data collection specific to these research questions, they contributed to a contextual understanding of the class, its structures, and its outcomes. Below are descriptions of the data collection for the survey, focus groups, and interviews.

**Survey.** I designed an online survey to give me a general sense of what alumni of the poetry class are doing now, their most salient memories from high school generally and from poetry specifically, and their willingness to participate further in the research. See Appendix A for a full copy of the survey.

**Focus groups.** Unlike surveys and interviews, focus groups create opportunity for participants to co-construct meaning through conversation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I organized three focus groups by the years alumni published: one for the early years (2005-2007), one for the middle year (2008), and one for the last year (2009). I also held one make-up focus group. At each focus group meeting I collected audio recordings, took hand written memos, and also collected writing samples from the activities. Focus groups began with an individual writing exercise that asked participants to write about who they are now and then students launched into discussion of their memories of the class and the school (see Appendix B for the complete focus group protocol). The focus group meetings lasted one hour each, although Focus Group One went longer as the students were extremely engaged in reminiscing and reflecting on NBHS and the poetry class. The design was intended to begin by getting students to unearth individual memories and then to construct shared experiences through dialogue in the group.

**In-depth interviews.** For the case studies I used semi-structured interviews (Briggs, 1986; Weiss, 1994) to look at the nuanced development, uses of writing, and post-high school journeys of the six case study participants. After identifying the case study participants, I reached out to each one via telephone to ask if they were willing to participate in a series of three interviews. Each of the selected participants agreed. I explained the process to them and went over the consent forms over the phone and then scheduled interviews with each. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of each case study participant and at a place of their choosing. Because Lachelle attends college out of state, I interviewed her using Skype. I also interviewed Ty using Skype because his work schedule (he had two jobs and worked a graveyard shift) did not allow for us to meet in person. I conducted interviews with Jaleeyah in her home. I conducted interviews with
Cesar at his home. For Ruby, who lives in a very uncomfortable home situation, I would pick her up at her house and take her to local cafes or to my home to conduct the interviews. I also picked up Monet and interviewed her at a cafe because she lives with a drug-addicted mother. I audio-recorded all interviews.

Immediately after each interview, I wrote a contact summary sheet (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that included my initial reflections on the interview and any gaps or follow up needed and any new questions that arose from the contact. For some interviews I also wrote or recorded memos. I transcribed interview audio as soon as I could after each interview and uploaded the transcripts into Atlas TI, a qualitative data analysis program. I also transcribed all focus group audio and written materials and uploaded them into Atlas TI as well as all memos.

I based my interview design on Seidman’s (2006) model for the three-part in-depth interview. Seidman recommends conducting three interviews of 90 minutes, each spaced approximately one week between each meeting. His model is based on the idea that the interviewer-interviewee relationship requires the construction of context. The three interview structure allows for relationships to develop in the context of the research and also creates a way to examine the internal consistency of the interviewees' statements. In a study like this involving multiple case study participants, it also allowed me to check ideas, hunches, and experiences across participants.

Seidman proposes that the first interview should focus on the life history of the participant that is relevant to the research topic. The second, he suggests, centers the present, lived experiences of the interviewee (as they relate to the topic); and the third interview is meant to provide the interviewee’s reflections on the topic with the previous two interviews as important context and background. As an adaption of Seidman’s phenomenological model, my three interviews covered the following topics:

**Table 2.3: Interview topics and corresponding research questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Research questions addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>Exploring high school experiences with a special focus on Poetry</td>
<td>RQ1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>Focus on writing samples from the past and present</td>
<td>RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3</td>
<td>Reflections on the role of writing in life</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See Appendix C for complete protocols.

**Summary of Research Questions and Data Sources**

The table below summarizes the research question that drive each of the subsequent analytic chapters and the data sources that contributed to the analysis.

**Table 2.4: Research questions and data sources that answer them**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
For a group of students who are between 2 and 6 years out of high school, what do they remember about their in-school literacy experiences related to their poetry class?

| 3 | How do these youth use writing as a tool after high school?  
   | a. How has their use of writing evolved in their early adult lives?  
   | b. How does literacy function for them now? | Class observation field notes  
   | Survey  
   | Focus group data  
   | Case study interviews |

| 4 | What was the nature of the memorable writing produced in poetry class? | Case study interviews  
   | Published poetry anthologies  
   | Case study participant writing  
   | Focus group data |

Data Analysis

To manage data, I used Atlas TI, a qualitative data analysis software program. As soon as I transcribed audio from interviews and focus groups, I entered them into Atlas. I also uploaded transcripts of all written documents so that they could be coded. Survey data was handled separately because I was able to filter data and sort responses using the online platform, Survey Monkey, that hosted the survey. I analyzed survey data to find out the percentages of respondents who found the class to be impactful and to sort which classes NBHS students found to be most memorable. The sorting of the survey data primed the more in-depth analysis of the focus groups and case study interviews.

Once all interview and focus groups data were entered into Atlas, I attached descriptive codes to identify speaker and activity that allowed me to sort data in various ways. I then developed a deductive coding system. I began with an initial start list of codes grounded in my theoretical frame (Miles & Huberman, 1994) (see Appendix D for start list of codes). My initial codes were intended to highlight the connections between what students wrote about in poetry class and the actions and decisions they made in the world. I also wanted to understand if and how students held onto experiences from the class, or from being writers, in their early adult lives. Start codes that were grounded in my theoretical frame included talk about ideological environments, agency, empowerment, and individual and community identity (see Appendix D). I did an initial pass through the data using these codes. As I did the initial coding based on the start list of codes, I created a second list of interpretive, inductive codes based on emergent themes from the data (see Appendix D). I also created a third set of pattern codes that highlighted initial findings, such as “writing as a life skill” and “going deep” that allowed me to synthesize the data after having identified and explored the analytic categories that emerged from inductive coding. In the early stages of data analysis there was a certain amount of fluidity to the codes, but they remained grounded in the theoretical frame of this study.

As I processed and analyzed data, I revisited my code list, added and refined inductive codes, and fleshed out both the start codes and emergent codes. I went back
through the data for a second round of analyses using the expanded list of codes. After a second pass through the data, I finalized the codes to capture themes that had emerged across the data set. As I conducted these initial rounds of coding, I wrote memos about the themes that emerged both across the data set and for particular case study participants. After a third round of coding with the refined codes, I was able to begin analyzing the connections across codes. Through my analysis, I was able to highlight findings that answered my research questions. While not exhaustive, the table below offers examples of the deductive, inductive, and pattern codes and the research questions they helped to answer.

**Table 2.5: Examples of codes and corresponding research questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Deductive Codes</th>
<th>Inductive Codes</th>
<th>Pattern Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideological environment</td>
<td>Co-construction</td>
<td>Knowing and being known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memories</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Community as family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>Struggles</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Critical incidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>School motivation and engagement</td>
<td>Going deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Writing to cope</td>
<td>Writing as a life skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Writing to change the future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Writing as alternative to violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As findings emerged from my data analysis, I checked with case study participants and focus group participants to make sure that my analysis matched their understanding and to ensure that they agreed with the portraits the data analysis helped me to create. In some cases, the case study participants redirected me and clarified my thinking about what their cases revealed about my research questions. I triangulated data with Mrs. Warran and also with a group of colleagues at UC Berkeley who helped me to think through the story my data was telling as I finalized my findings and wrote analytic chapters.

**Chapter Summary**

While existing literature offers descriptions of classroom practices and pedagogies that youth understand as empowering while they are taking the classes, the goal of this study is to use a range of qualitative methods to capture the memories, experiences, and beliefs about the role of writing for a group of young adults years after they shared a positive literacy-learning experience in an alternative school environment. Through the methodology of portraiture, I use qualitative interview data, writing samples, focus group data, and participant observation to co-construct portraits of the youth, to honor their
voices, and to explore with them their take-aways from Mrs. Warran's poetry class. I used a coding system grounded in socio-cultural theories of language and literacy that highlight the connections between words and social actions. This coding scheme enabled me to find patterns in the data and to find answers to my research questions. To address limitations of the study, I triangulated findings with Mrs. Warran and with the case study participants. I also relied on colleagues for peer review of protocols, codes, and findings. In the following three chapters I present my analysis and findings.
Chapter 3: Shifting Attitudes and Lasting Impact

Healthy relationships are fundamental prerequisites for radical care between youth and adults. If care is given meaning through relationships between individuals, radical care is formed in community. (Ginwright, 2010, p.76)

Using data from the survey, focus groups, and case study interviews, this chapter answers the following research question: For a group of students who are between 2 and 6 years out of high school and who reported that their high school poetry class had a positive impact on their lives, what do they remember about their in-school literacy experiences related to the class? Given that study participants almost unanimously reported positive feelings about poetry class and given the fact that the student population generally was one that had been disaffected in school in the past and had experienced problems being part of any academic community,¹⁰ I wanted to know what aspects of Mrs. Warran’s poetry class, and of the school in general, stood out to students and why it held such importance to so many of them. To answer these questions, I examined three layers of data: participants’ memories of the class as reported in surveys, focus groups, and case study interviews; participant observation from the class; and the teacher’s description of the class.

Starting from analysis of the survey data that showed students held positive opinions of poetry class,¹¹ the following portraits from case study and focus group participants offer more nuanced explanations of exactly what students held onto from this class. By combining the stories from the focus groups and case study interviews, I was able to show the full range of themes that arose from the data. Together these data revealed three major answers to the research question of what students remember as impactful. First, the students remembered an (idealized) family-like atmosphere in the poetry class which gave them a space where they could feel attached to others and to the school writ large, catalyzing a shift in their attitudes toward school, but not necessarily translating into widespread academic buy-in or success. Second, the students remembered, given the family-like atmosphere of the class, that they could break through habits of silence about their own stories. The act of sharing these personal stories within this space, they recalled, helped them work through life issues that were difficult for them, transforming the poetry circle into a healing space (Ginwright, 2010) where relationships were at the center of the work. And third, analysis of their writing and observations from the class showed that as the students broke through the silence that had previously enshrouded their struggles, they engaged in a dialectical process of development. Through this process, they grew as individual writers by pulling on the strength of the tight community of poets, internalizing

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¹⁰ 94% of survey respondents had attended at least one other high school prior to attending NBHS which signals that they either opted out because they were dissatisfied, or they were pushed out of other schools.

¹¹ Of the participants, 73% reported on their surveys that they felt that poetry had a significant impact on their lives while another 20% responded that poetry had some impact. Only 5% reported that the class had no effect at all on their lives. While there were no strong patterns between respondents who reported no change, three out of the four took the class more than once. While they claimed that the class had no impact, they still chose to take it again, which indicates that they had some positive feelings about it as it was an elective class that students self-selected.
the voices of the group, and refracting them through their own prismatic representations of themselves and their worlds.

**Forming Attachments in an Idealized Family**

One of the aspects that students felt differentiated their experiences at New Beginnings High School (NBHS) was that they felt connected and attached to their school community, including teachers. Further, the poetry class was one of the spaces where those attachments were formed most effectively. The students described the school as having been a small community where everyone knew each other, where they had opportunities to work in the community, and where teachers cared about them. As a broad stroke, the survey revealed that students claimed to experience a shift in their attitudes toward school generally after attending NBHS and that one of the salient features of the NBHS community was that it felt like a family to many students. Survey responses showed a difference in remembered attitudes toward school when participants wrote about their attitude toward school generally versus when they wrote about NBHS in particular. Of the 58 people who responded to the survey question about their attitude about high school generally, 33 reported negative attitudes toward school generally and an additional 3 respondents expressed neutral attitudes but explained that they faced significant obstacles in their home lives that prevented them from engaging at school. When asked about their attitudes toward NBHS specifically, only 3 of 58 were negative as compared to the 33 who responded negatively when asked to characterize their attitudes about high school generally. Three responses were neutral and two were positive but offered some critique of the school. The three negative responses cited the lack of resources at the school, the inadequate and small physical site, and that there was “too much drama.” Of the 52 positive responses, 15 used the word “family” to describe what they liked about the school. There was no other attribution that showed up with such frequency.

Participants named the poetry class specifically, but also the school community, as a family that had impact on their understanding and expectations of community and family as they moved beyond high school. Brooklyn reported,

Like period. I remember the fact that we was a community school. Like that was my family. I don’t care what nobody says I still tell them to this day. That was my family and if one did something we all did it and we rocked as a family from — Ask Grant — from the beginning to the end we were a family in NBHS. When they said we was a community school, we was a community school we did everything as a community. Everything. (Brooklyn, Focus Group 1)

Case study and focus group participants recalled poetry class as what I am calling an *idealized family*, in that it epitomized what they believed a family *should* be and remembered the class as *being* that. In most cases this idealized family contrasted sharply

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12 There is no way to tell if the positive responses were about NBHS or other schools as the question on this topic didn’t specify which school the respondent felt positively about. Only two of the participants attended NBHS only and no other schools and they both reported positive attitudes toward school generally and NBHS specifically.
with students lived experiences with families that were often sites of struggle. This connection and sense of belonging to a supportive and positive family, students claimed, was one important factor that led them to shift from negative attitudes toward school to positive ones, at least toward NBHS.

*Nurturing Family-Like Relationships in the School and the Poetry Class*

Because NBHS catered to students who had not experienced success in mainstream schools, both students and teachers were committed to changing the paradigm within the NBHS community to one that supported achievement and where students could embrace positive identities. These same students often faced challenges at home, so the nurturing environment was not only a foil to previous schools, but sometimes to home situations as well. Mrs. Warran’s poetry class achieved a certain level of closeness and cohesion that was facilitated by this school environment that valued positive relationships. The school struggles of NBHS students often overlapped with their family and home-life challenges. Family and home were not uncontested spaces for these youth and the other study participants, but yet they described the poetry class and the school as family with positive connotations, even when those posed disconnect with their personal experiences with these concepts.

Many students at NBHS came from challenging home situations or high poverty neighborhoods\(^{13}\) plagued with violence where many experienced trauma. With 17.5% of the school population on probation, large numbers of youth who were involved in the foster care system, 80% of students living in poverty, and almost all students who had experienced school failure, students came to school with many needs beyond just academic ones. On any given day at the school, several students would be wearing RIP hoodies with pictures of family members or friends who were the victims of gun violence in Oakland (Field Notes, 2009). Of the case study participants, Cesar, Monet, Jaleeyah, and Ruby came from abusive homes; Monet and Jaleeyah faced homelessness; Ty held adult responsibilities while elders were incarcerated; and Monet and Lachelle lived in group homes or foster care. Of the focus group participants, two lived in economically stable homes with both parents, while of the other focus group participants, six lived with single mothers and had little to no contact with their fathers, one lived with his sister, and another lived with her grandmother because her mother had been murdered. Another focus group participant lived with both parents but as undocumented immigrants, they faced chronic uncertainty about employment\(^{14}\). The sharing of these experiences in an academic environment laid the foundation for the need for a supportive poetry family where youth and adults held one another’s stories in safe and nurturing ways. Starla contrasted students’ home families to the idealized family of poetry class. She explained,

...many students did not have safe environments at home where they felt comfortable to make mistakes and where they could receive nurturing.

\(^{13}\) Over 90% of the school population qualified for free and reduced price lunch, 80% lived in poverty, and 17.5% of students were on probation (Charter Renewal Petition, 2009).

\(^{14}\) During the time that these students attended NBHS, there were frequent Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in Oakland. Students at the school organized around these issues and there were several poems published from the class that discussed the hardships of undocumented students.
Poetry was a family where you could be an individual and it was appreciated, encouraged and built upon. (Starla, Interview)

She recalled that the poetry community offered a space to re-imagine and enact what family *could be*. In Starla’s words, it was a place where students were safe to make mistakes and to learn from them. These relationships between staff and students and between the students themselves fostered growth through safety and acceptance and led participants to hold the community as a model family. Whereas students reported feeling that their struggles were perceived as weaknesses in other school environments, the student-teacher relationships at NBHS generally, and the practices of poetry class specifically, gave students a space to transform these negative experiences into sources of strength and community. Not only was this evident in student memories of the class, but was also evident in my observations of the class in 2009 where I saw the students and teacher engaged in validating student voice and experience, giving praise to student voice, and sharing expertise in the classroom. Mrs. Warran also spoke to these issues in describing her class design as one where all voices were welcome and respected in what June Jordan described as a “beloved community,” which served as a supportive family.

Study participants in the focus groups and case studies described NBHS as a nurturing family whose members promoted their success and supported them through stumbling blocks. Participants’ descriptions of the school focused on the positive relationships they experienced there more than on the academics. None of the students in the focus group or case studies countered the claim that the school and the poetry class functioned like a family. Of the six case study participants, four used the word “family” to describe the class and the poetry community. Toya described the poetry community as “an unbroken family with many views that shared the same experiences with similar goals” and Evan explained how he was disappointed when he took poetry in community college because the class did not have the “family-feel” he had come to expect through the NBHS poetry community (Focus Group 2). In each of the three focus groups, the concept of family came up and all participants agreed that the class felt like a family, even when it didn’t function like their own families.

For those who described the class explicitly as family and those who expressed that they valued it as a place where they could safely (i.e., without fear of punishment) express themselves and work through personal struggles in order to experience success academically and otherwise, the school and the poetry class allowed students to open up to schooling and to build healthy relationships with peers and teachers. Brooklyn explained that one of the aspects that made NBHS feel like a family was how teachers stood with their students. In other schools, she felt “teachers were just there to collect a check,” but at NBHS the teachers walked with us. They held our hand through this process of becoming students so when I hear that they still teaching I be so happy because I thought we were the reason why they were going to stop. (Brooklyn, Focus Group 1)

Given that Brooklyn, like many other students, had been expelled from other schools, she had experienced a tacit message that students were disposable. NBHS felt more like a family because of the sense of loyalty and persistence in dealing with students, even when they made mistakes for which they may have been expelled in other environments. These
values, students remembered were ingrained in the structures of the school and the relationships between youth and adults there. Brooklyn described a mutual, personal investment that felt more familial than the hierarchical relationships encouraged between students and teachers in the traditional schools she had attended. She was pleasantly surprised that these teachers had remained in the profession because the precedent set in other schools was that teachers leave. Brooklyn also talked about how teachers would not turn their backs on students. Like a family should be, the staff never gave up on students, even when students sometimes gave up on themselves. She recalled how even after her own flagrant behavior, teachers stood up for her and made sure she graduated from NBHS. While Brooklyn described how the teachers advocated for her and championed her in graduating, she did not offer details about how they straddled the fine line between holding structure and discipline and also offering what she perceived as unconditional support.

The family feeling, as Brooklyn described, wasn’t all about feeling good or getting away with behaviors that were not tolerated elsewhere. It was also about holding high expectations for individuals and the community. In poetry class, Mrs. Warran leveraged these close, familial relationships to hold students to high expectations for their writing output, respectful participation, and ability to dig deep into personal struggles with their poetry. Brooklyn described how Mrs. Warran “rode [her] like [she] was the bull and she had her cleats and everything on and it was like come on. You wanna act like this, we can act like this” (Brooklyn, Focus Group 1). Brooklyn explained how she felt a sort of unconditional love from her teachers, especially Mrs. Warran, that previously she had only associated with family. Because of the trust, Brooklyn said she allowed Mrs. Warran and other teachers at NBHS to push her in ways that she would not have responded positively to in other school spaces. She credited her graduation partly to these trusting relationships and the high expectations that her teachers held.

**Transformation over Time**

Some students reported an immediate transformation given the school community and the nurturing space of the poetry class; for others, change took place over time. Brooklyn explained in the first focus group meeting that she remembered seeing her peers and teachers at NBHS as a family and continued to do so years after graduating, but that the impact of that positive family on her ways of communicating and being in the world evolved over time (Focus Group 1). As Brooklyn faced struggles in her life after high school, she described herself as transforming and beginning to act on the lessons she learned at NBHS. She told a story about how she ran into Grant at a mall and he did not recognize her. She described herself as carrying herself with positivity and pride. Although these reported changes happened after graduation, Brooklyn attributed them to the relationships she nurtured at NBHS. It was only after graduating, Brooklyn explained, that she began to see the NBHS community as a positive reflection of herself and vice versa and that to embody that meant changing some long-held beliefs and behaviors around what it meant to engage in family and community.

For Brooklyn, who espoused the motto “family first,” which was a popular phrase and could be seen tattooed on the arms of several students, seeing her school as family meant that she felt a sense of loyalty to that community and also meant that there was a blurring of the boundaries between the personal and academic (or to mimic a feminist line,
“the personal is academic”). Like any family, NBHS was not without its conflicts. While Brooklyn was committed to graduating and meeting her academic requirements at NBHS, she also described being held back by her “ugly attitude.” During her senior year she got into trouble for bullying some of the new students. She then had a serious altercation with a staff member that led to her being suspended for the entire spring semester of her senior year. While Brooklyn did manage to graduate from NBHS, she felt a tremendous loss at being forced to separate herself from the community in her final semester there.

In unpacking this story, Brooklyn’s descriptions illustrated a collision within her definition of family. While Brooklyn remembered feeling that NBHS was a family when she was in school, she held a certain vision of what that meant and of how families functioned. Brooklyn described how she would do anything to protect her classmates and her school, even if it meant fighting. When asked about her bullying of the students that ultimately led to her long-term suspension, she explained how at the time she felt like she was protecting the culture of the school. Brooklyn grew up in public housing in one of the most notorious neighborhoods in Oakland. With no father around, her oldest brother in prison, and a mother who was on dialysis because her diabetes led to kidney-failure, Brooklyn learned from a young age to stand up for herself. She explained that she grew up fighting and to her that was a form of loyalty and a source of pride, so that was how she showed her loyalty to her NBHS family while she was there.

Through her leadership at NBHS and her involvement in poetry class, Brooklyn learned other ways to express herself using her words. While she did not always choose to use these at the time, her experiences in poetry armed her with new communication skills. Brooklyn explained how before taking poetry she did not know how to express herself. She said,

...before Mrs. Warran we didn’t have no way to express ourselves period. Just being able to see somebody take that time and that effort out showed us — even though we didn’t let them know that we appreciated it at the time, we just put it through our work and through our minds. (Brooklyn, Focus Group 1)

While Brooklyn was learning to express herself and demonstrated this by writing about her personal challenges with family-issues and racial profiling in the 2005 poetry anthology (see Appendix E: Tell Me What You See), she didn’t become aware or was not able to articulate what that meant to her until later into her adulthood. It wasn’t until later that she realized the importance of the nurturing relationships and the opportunity to express her feelings safely through writing.

After Brooklyn had graduated and moved on to other chapters in her life she realized how beloved her NBHS family was to her. She recognized that her time there began a redefining of family that ultimately transformed her ways of being and engaging in community over time. Brooklyn spoke somewhat remorsefully about how she acted as a teenager. She also talked about how she now wants others to see her in a positive light, whereas she didn’t care about how others received her when she was young. She said,

Yeah we was a mess. I’m just so glad that it’s a growing process and you find yourself because when I sit back and look at all that I be like I was hella ignorant. You know it was time for me to grow up and why didn’t nobody really enforce that? And then I’m thinking no, I can’t say nobody didn’t try to
enforce it because everybody did. I just didn’t pay attention to it and that’s why you reflect later and say ok. (Brooklyn, Focus Group 1)

While this reflection indirectly addresses the school community, Brooklyn was able to explain how her thinking had changed over time. During her senior year, especially during her long-term suspension, Brooklyn was angry at being excluded, but she reflected back on how people in NBHS held high expectations for her and for the community. She wanted to be able to blame others for her actions, but over time was able to acknowledge that the adults at NBHS were trying to teach her to be successful, but she was not ready to learn to make some changes in the way she interacted in the community. It took time and space for Brooklyn to appreciate and take up the lessons she learned from her NBHS family. While she didn’t always hear it or like it at the time, that positive, supportive family impacted her engagement with others down the road.

Years after graduating, Brooklyn looked up the teacher she had had the altercation with and she sent a sincere letter of apology in which she took responsibility for her actions and explained the lessons she had taken away from NBHS. Primary among those lessons was that maintaining a supportive community is an essential ingredient to success in her life. While Brooklyn explained that she didn’t always have the maturity to articulate what she learned at NBHS, she has carried the value of community and positive relationships with her into her adult life. While Brooklyn consistently saw NBHS as a family, it was her understanding of family that changed over time and eventually led her to repair the relationships that she had breached while she was in school.

In the first focus group, participants expressed that because of the small size of the school, they felt ownership over the school culture. While there were very few fights between NBHS students at the school, Starla recalled the NBHS students protecting each other. She reported remembering

...people coming up to fight people and like the whole school would come out like NO you aren’t going to fight. We had each other’s back and we did do everything together. (Starla, Focus Group 1)

Like Brooklyn’s story, Starla describes her experience of family at the time that she attended NBHS as one that centered around issues of violence, who she would protect or even fight for. Grant added that new students had to be enculturated into the NBHS community. They had to learn to leave drama outside of the schoolhouse, to work in community, and to interact differently with teachers than they might have at their previous schools.

Agreeing with Brooklyn’s reflections, Grant discussed how new students would sometimes disrespect teachers at NBHS, and the more veteran students would explain to them that at NBHS “the teachers are our partners” (Focus Group 1). He also discussed the value of relationships with regards to NBHS’ restorative justice approach to discipline. Grant described how teachers and administrators

...actually gave a fuck. So like when somebody did something wrong it wasn’t just ok you get disciplined and that’s it. It was we disciplined you but then also like why did you do it. You talked it out like, so what can we do to help you fix that so we don’t got a problem again. (Grant, Focus Group 1)
Rather than serving a simply punitive function, Grant felt that discipline at the school was handled by improving relationships and talking through conflicts. Students remembered NBHS as a place where adults and students maintained proactive, authentic relationships and cared for one another in ways that extended beyond traditional student-teacher relationships, and that often exceeded the students’ expectations of familial relationships too. While teachers began the process by taking an alternative approach to discipline, students took this up by socializing new students into the culture. As evidenced by Brooklyn’s story, sometimes students thought they were socializing others into the culture, but they had not yet developed the tools, or even completely understood, what the school’s values looked like. What manifested as negativity or beef between veteran students and new ones sometimes emanated from the desire to pass on the school culture or family. Like Brooklyn, Grant tried to teach what he knew was important to him to his peers, but he didn’t quite have the maturity to do it in welcoming or safe ways at the time. For some, a shift in values related to family and community lagged behind their moving on from NBHS and transformed the way they saw themselves in subsequent relationships.

A Place to Question

Jaleeyah, who described herself as resistant to forging close relationships in general, did not describe the poetry community as a family, but did remember it as a different school space that drew her in and caught her interest whereas she had not remembered connecting positively with other schooling experiences. Having been out of school completely for two years prior to attending NBHS, Jaleeyah explained how she was skeptical about schools and she disliked the hierarchical relationships they tended to enforce. While Jaleeyah admitted that she mostly came to NBHS because it was a reason to get dressed up, she also discussed the important relationships and sense of responsibility she felt to the community that she had not felt elsewhere. Jaleeyah remembered how she opened up to the poetry class about her struggle to understand what family ought to be through her poem, “What is Family?”, a poem about the abuses she endured as a child and how her mother failed to protect her. Jaleeyah shared several iterations of this poem with her class through the feedback ritual while I was observing in 2009. While Jaleeyah did not claim the poetry class or the school in general as family, she did remember it as a safe space in which to grapple with her own questions about what family means and what it should be. In interviews Jaleeyah explained that while not legally emancipated, she had been living on her own off and on for a few years before coming to NBHS (Jaleeyah, Interview 1). While Jaleeyah kept in touch with her brother and her grandmother during that time that she was living independently, they were not what she felt a family should be. During my observations, Jaleeyah was very open in both sharing her poems with the class and in discussing and even problem-solving some of her personal struggles around family with the class.

Jaleeyah was mostly without support during a crucial time in her adolescence and she struggled with homelessness and issues of alcohol abuse. During that time, Jaleeyah, as a transgendered person, had the additional identity struggle of coming out as a woman. Once she started attending NBHS, she noted that she started coming to school every day (Field Notes, March 2009) because she felt that the relationships she forged there and the activities she was doing, especially in poetry class, were meaningful and allowed her to
work through her questions and struggles in a productive way (Jaleeyah, Interview 2). Jaleeyah’s poem, “What is Family?” was a touchstone poem for her in the 2008-2009 school year as she brought it to the class several times for revisions, published it in the anthology, and performed it publicly. While she may not have found the answer in her poetry community, the class allowed her an in-school space to open up her questions, to explore her experiences, and to begin healing. She looked back at her relationships and her literacy practice in poetry class as personally beneficial and this resulted in her attending school regularly at NBHS. After the school closed, Jaleeyah followed Mrs. Warran to Youth Reach Academy (YRA), but she did not feel that YRA engendered the same sense of a nested community that supported the work she valued in poetry class, so she dropped out again.

Whether students saw the poetry class and school community as an idealized family, or a place to question the meaning of family, observational data and participant memories revealed that the relationships nurtured through the work of poetry drew students into school and allowed them to transform previous patterns of truancy and apathy toward school. For some, the family relationships provided a reason to come to school, but did not necessarily impact academic performance. Starla explained the NBHS family, “at the time, honestly it encouraged me to come to school, but academically it was somewhat of a distraction because I wanted to come to school just to hang out” (Starla, Focus Group 1). She continued to recall that for her, her “poetry family” made her want to come to school, but she still struggled to achieve academically in other classes. Some participants recollected valuing the space of poetry as a supportive family, or as a space to question that relationship. In either case, poetry class motivated them to come to school and fulfilled some of their non-academic needs. For others, they experienced poetry as building important literacies that transferred into other spaces.

**Relationships at the Center: Stepping out of Silence in the Feedback Circle**

While focus group and case study participants characterized NBHS as an idealized family where their need for safety and recognition were met through caring and close relationships and non-hierarchical roles, they also remembered the poetry community as distinct from the larger school community and other classes. Other classes, focus group students recalled, were focused on academic content; so although teachers and students had positive relationships and knew each other, teachers didn’t necessarily use those connections to enhance instruction or learning. While Mrs. Warran’s class was in some ways a successfully concentrated embodiment of the school’s core values, it stood out to students as markedly different from the other classes in the same school. In poetry, Mrs. Warran explained, the relationships were at the center of the work and the dual-foci of writing and community-building functioned inseparably and symbiotically. Starla explained that “even though we were like a family [at NBHS], [poetry class] was like a safer place to kinda get to know each other — it’s bonding more like” (Starla, Focus Group 1). Both the pedagogy and the content of the course prioritized relational learning that leveraged personal relationships toward academic and personal growth and stood in for some of the dysfunctional spaces many youth came from. Through participation in the group rituals and class structures, poets remembered working through struggles while also building literacy and making space to reconstruct attitudes toward school and learning. These supportive interactions took place in a complex interactional circle facilitated by
Mrs. Warran, who laid a foundation for a physically and emotionally safe space and participated in flexible role modeling by participating as a poet in the circle and encouraging the student-poets to hold responsibility for the maintenance of the class rituals. Mrs. Warran described her design as one in which the supports and tools engendered in the poetry class relied on trusting relationships that could be strengthened through the work of poetry, but that also offered concrete literacy skills such as poetry analysis and writing conventions. It was this combination of academic and affective skill-building, the fostering of supportive relationships, and the rigorous processes of writing and revising that positively differentiated poetry from the other classes at NBHS in students’ memories.

When asked which class was most memorable at NBHS, half of the respondents identified poetry, and the other half were divided between 10 other classes that were offered at the school. Poetry was by far the most concentrated response selected by 50% and the next was English, selected by 15% of respondents. In describing poetry class, participant memories were almost all positive regardless of whether or not the respondent chose poetry as the most memorable class. All but two respondents described the class as a positive space and responses highlighted the meaningful relationships between the students and the teacher and between the students themselves, the publishing and performing processes, the benefits of learning to express oneself, and the appreciation for having a space to open up and write honestly about personal struggles. Of the two negative responses, one expressed that the participant felt forced to share when he did not want to and the other remembered that, while students were free to write about anything they wanted, disrespect to women was off limits. This student described how he wrote a poem about “a man who’s lady was sleeping around and gave him a disease the poem was what he would say to that woman. I never got to say that poem for my fear of being expelled” (Survey). This was the only response citing fear of sharing something with the group. On the contrary, half of all the responses describing the poetry class discussed the openness and safety of the class where students felt free to write about the life struggles they faced. The other half of the responses focused on publishing, performing, the workshopping process, and learning to be better writers.

**Breaking the Silence**

Because NBHS specifically recruited students who were not successful in other schools, most students came to school with negative experiences that they needed to process or work through in order to reconnect with schooling. While the mission of the school stated that all classroom curricula would have real-world relevance and connect to the lives of the youth, poetry was a unique space where student stories took center stage. Instead of reading texts selected exclusively by the teacher that may or may not have resonated with their experiences, students created the texts in poetry and created opportunities to talk and write about the experiences they needed to work through. By breaking through the silence about their own struggles, poetry students contributed to and benefitted from a healing space that allowed them to shift their own attitudes toward schooling in some cases, and gave them skills to face their life struggles in others.

One of the ways that the poetry class shattered silence was by inviting student expression into the spotlight. This was evident in both the teacher’s description of her goals
for the course and in student memories. Mrs. Warran wanted students to share their stories with one another and also with a broader audience. She described her objective to,

...break down the boundaries the ivory tower and like who gets to be published and wanting the students to be part of like the conversation and the work that's out there. I guess really what I wanted was for their voices to be heard for them to hear each other’s voices was like foremost in my mind. That their stories and what they've been through and their words are powerful so I wanted them to feel that. And I wanted them to then have like some discipline about like how they write so that other people could easily access and understand. (Mrs. Warran, Interview)

Mrs. Warran wanted the class to focus on student voices and to serve as a space where they could try on ways of telling their stories in order to contribute to a wider public conversation. A conversation from which, Mrs. Warran believed, these students’ experiences were often absent. While Mrs. Warran framed this breaking of silence as a broader social issue, some participants remembered this centering of student voice as a foil to other classes in school where they felt their voices were missing.

Jaleeyah explained that in her other classes they always had to read authors that they didn't know, but in poetry class students created the content by sharing and learning each other’s personal stories through the academic medium of poetry. The making of good poetry

\[15\] required them to release what they needed to share or discuss about their lives, their own poetry then becoming the content of the class. During a focus group in the 2009 school year, while Jaleeyah was enrolled in poetry, she compared it to “regular” classes where she felt bored by required reading assignments.

Oh, I think the difference is that when you are up in poetry class you can like speak what’s on your mind and stuff like that, write down, if you don't want to say what you want to say, you can write it down in a poem, tell people how you feel in a poem and in just that poem you can express your feelings and express, like, what's going on in your life and stuff like that. (Jaleeyah, Focus Group 2009)

Jaleeyah sought in-school spaces to work through the obstacles she faced. Poetry class was a space for her to write through her struggles, and the medium also gave her some distance that allowed her to discuss hard topics with others and to get feedback in a less direct way because the conversation centered around the poem not the person. Like many students, she saw poetry class as a space to work through these challenges.

In case study interviews, Lachelle remembered poetry as a community that “promoted growth” by encouraging collaborative relationships that chipped away at the silence and shame that enshrouded her in schools and other social institutions. Lachelle contrasted this value of togetherness with her experiences growing up in a community where she witnessed a lot of violence and destructive behaviors. Growing up with a single mother who was addicted to crack-cocaine and heroin and who spent time in and out of

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\[15\] Mrs. Warran defined “good poetry” as being true to one’s experience, being specific, and creating maximal impact with minimal words.
jail, much of Lachelle's childhood was spent in the foster care system, in and out of group homes. Lachelle never knew her father because he was murdered in drug-related violence, leaving her teenage mother to fend for her two daughters in whatever ways she could, including prostitution and petty crime. While Lachelle's sister chose to drop out and pursue illegal activities that landed her in jail for a time, Lachelle wanted to find success in school. Lachelle explained that the big, comprehensive school she attended prior to NBHS did not address her need to heal and grow as an adolescent coming from a difficult home situation. While the other schools attempted to provide Lachelle with academic tools, she reflected that these tools were not useful until she had some skills to process and learn to grow from her past experiences. As a result, Lachelle rarely attended while enrolled in these other schools. Whereas at other schools, Lachelle felt she had to hide her experiences, the poetry community taught her that she could voice her story and be accepted and encouraged by others as opposed to shamed or ostracized. In this supportive space, Lachelle learned to see herself as a survivor of, rather than a hostage to, her upbringing.

Lachelle described the positive feeling she had when she first shared a personal poem with the poetry class. She had explained how, growing up in and out of the system, she had learned not to share a lot of information about what was going on at home. It took time for Lachelle to trust others with her story, but here she explains how she felt comforted when she shared her experiences and learned that others had similar struggles. Through sharing, she felt closer to her NBHS family.

I didn’t know what to expect [from sharing my poetry] and what I got was more than I ever could have expected. Everyone comforted me. They felt where I was coming from. After that I learned that most of the kids I was going to school with was having the same problems. There were probably a few kids who had their mothers and fathers at home who were married you know and even those kids they were going through things. It allowed me to know that, yeah, we all may look a little different or do a little different but at, you know, at our core we all had a lot in common. I really had no reason to be secretive after that. I do feel that that built our bond better. I remember my classmates and I being very close. Like I always say, NBHS was a family. I remember us just growing from there. We all was open. Another young man I was in class with you know he was having issues at home with abuse and it was it was really extreme but together you know once we all discovered that we all was going through things we had each other. And we needed that you know and I think that’s why a lot of kids who probably wasn’t going to school every day at a bigger school came to school at NBHS. Yeah they probably didn’t make, you know, A’s and B’s but they were there. They came to class. You know they probably couldn’t read or write as well but they tried. They put more effort in cuz it was not just getting an education — we were giving each other love, attention, respect, motivation and I think that that brought us closer. (Lachelle, Case Study Interview 2)

For Lachelle, the poetry class was fulfilling more than an academic need. When Lachelle first started taking poetry, she lived in a group home because her mother was in jail. This class literally stood in for the family she was separated from. Through the sharing that took
place in poetry, Lachelle realized that she was not alone in her struggles. This realization that others knew and understood those things that she felt she needed to hide in other school environments helped her to break through the secrecy and silence about her own story. Through this class she learned to tell her story — a skill that ultimately helped to open doors to further her education. She wrote her personal statement for a private boarding school program, to which she earned admission and a full scholarship, and also for her college admissions application. For students who reported having felt silenced, alone, and anonymous at other schools, this feeling that their own struggles had value and could become the basis of both safe, trusting relationships and moving art were key factors in their buy-in and learning in Mrs. Warran’s class. With the “love, attention, respect, [and] motivation” that Lachelle identified, students in Mrs. Warran’s class could re-invest in education and in themselves. This safe and positive community provided opportunities for students to try on a different range of identities than they were offered in some of the negative environments they inhabited previously, whether these were toxic classrooms, abusive homes, or violent neighborhoods.

**Strengthening Poems and Poets in the Feedback Circle**

While students drove the content of class through their poetry, they did so within a set of classroom rituals and structures designed by Mrs. Warran and inspired by June Jordan’s P4P program. Study participants reported that the ability to express themselves freely within a safe class contributed to their growth in and beyond the classroom. Based on my observations and on the teacher’s description of the class design, one of the central activity structures in Mrs. Warran’s class was the feedback ritual that she and the student-poets called *workshopping*. The teacher explained that the workshopping activity led to the re-writes and revisions that would ultimately be published in the annual poetry anthology and was a core of relationship-building. In the workshop activities that I observed in 2009, poets read new or revised work and received feedback from their peers, teacher, and any visiting poets or community members. At least once a week the poets participated in a workshop where they shared what they had written, offering feedback to one another. During the feedback ritual, the students and Mrs. Warran sat in a semi-circle and the poet would stand in the center to read his or her poem. Everyone in the circle received printed copies of the poems being workshopped that day so that they could give oral and written feedback to the participating poets (Field Notes, 2009). They followed the following protocol:

1. Mrs. Warran handed out a packet with the poems to be workshopped that day.
2. The poet read his or her poem.
3. Responders wrote comments on their paper copies.
4. Responders gave oral feedback on a voluntary basis. The poet was not allowed to respond.
5. After the responders discussed the poem, they handed the copies back to the poet who used them in the revision process.

The workshopping process epitomized the combination of academic and relational rigor that drove Mrs. Warran’s class culture. On one hand this process facilitated refinement in the writing process that led to publication; and on the other hand it was one of the ways that students came to deeply know one another through sharing their personal writings.
When Mrs. Warran described the feedback process, she first explained it in terms of the poetry publishing cycle (Mrs. Warran, Interview). The purpose, she explained, was to get feedback in order to revise and rewrite the poems until they were publishable. When probed further, Mrs. Warran explained that the other goal of the feedback circle was to push students to practice what she called a “deep active listening,” a skill she believed was lacking in peoples’ interactions in the world. She explained feeling that “people don’t just go deep by sharing, they also go deep by listening and taking in others’ stories.” This deep listening impacted the way that poets remembered one another through their stories and the way it broke silence about the life stories and struggles the students carried.

Mrs. Warran pushed the responders to give both positive and critical feedback and to respond in as much detail as possible. On several occasions I witnessed both Mrs. Warran and the student-poets push back when someone responded by saying “I like that poem” or “that was nice.” Mrs. Warran and the student poets would push back by saying “what was nice?” or “what did you like about the poem?” (Field Notes, April 2009). Just as Mrs. Warran encouraged students to use “maximal impact, minimal words” in their poems, she also urged them to be detailed and constructive in their feedback to one another. Aligned with the parallel goals of Mrs. Warran’s class, the practice of workshopping not only served as a process for refining writing, but also modeled how people undergo change and improvement through dialogue with a supportive community.

Participants remembered the feedback circle as lending authority to every person in the room, as opposed to a traditional classroom where the teacher tends to have the final word. Starla understood the feedback circle and the student-driven content as democratic practices that centered around student voice and expertise. Through this design, Starla felt that Mrs. Warran gave power and authority to her students.

She let us run the class. So that’s what made it different. We ran the class. Since we ran the class we had control we felt more comfortable cuz it was like ok we’re in control and we got to learn from each other so when we are getting constructive criticism it’s like you’re just happy that everybody in the classroom is taking the time to really sit down and hear you. It’s all about you and you get respect. Yeah so anything anybody said of course it was coming from love but it was like these people really sat down and went line by line through my poem stanza by stanza or whatever and analyzed it and you know reflected on how they felt or what they would like to see so you always took the criticism. (Starla, Focus Group 1)

Given some power, students became as invested in the process as they were in each other’s stories. Students held the feedback circle because it mattered to them. It was a space where they felt heard and respected, and where they benefitted from the careful attention of their peers.

Brooklyn described Mrs. Warran as highly invested in the integrity of the feedback process. Because everyone in the class was taking the time to listen deeply and give thoughtful feedback on the writings, she expected the poems presented to be worthwhile. Brooklyn describes Mrs. Warran as “keeping it real.” She held high expectations of the poets in the class and pushed each individual to put in maximum effort in crafting words. When Brooklyn turned in rushed or half-baked poems, she explained that Mrs. Warran
would “check her” or call her out, as would her classmates. The class maintained rigor in the process of telling their stories through poetry. Brooklyn, Starla, and Grant all recalled the high expectations Mrs. Warran held in the poetry circle.

**Brooklyn:** I’ve had people say, ‘Ok well I think that’s some B.S. that you put on that piece of paper I think you just wrote that just to write it. I don’t think that’s real.’

**Starla:** Yeah I don’t think you put the time. I done had to go back to the drawing board numbers of times because people could when they just know you they know you they be like ‘Psst so um...’

**Starla:** Yeah what’s this? [Grant laughs]

**Brooklyn:** Whatchu’ need a couple mo’ days? Why you just didn’t say that?

**Starla:** Oh yeah I had Mrs. Warran say that to me too

**Brooklyn:** She was real. She was real about the situation. Real. (Focus Group 1)

The group dynamic that Starla, Brooklyn, and Grant described offers a complicated sense of group accountability and investment in one’s self and in the community. The community expected the best from each poet and held a high standard for the work the poets brought to the feedback circle. Consequently, the poets did not want to let down the group or be inauthentic. The group was there to listen and to help the poet to deliver, in the most precise, moving, and effective way possible, his or her experience to the world. This efficacy as a poet included writing in the poet’s own voice or signature style, as peers came to know each author through signature poems. The community became invested, through these practices, in each poet’s development of a unique and powerful voice and simultaneously in their coming to terms with or working through the life struggles they wrote about.

Ruby explained that she was very resistant to giving and receiving feedback when she first joined the poetry community. She didn’t see the value of it and she felt as though it was a personal attack when someone critiqued her words. Eventually, as Ruby gained trust for the process she learned to listen to the critiques because she felt they made her stronger. When Ruby discussed her writing, she blurred the boundaries between her words and herself. She didn’t just frame her growth in terms of becoming a better writer, but she explained that she, as a person “gain[ed] more strength” through giving and receiving feedback.

I’ve held onto um... accepting criticism. I don’t like it. Especially when it comes to my poetry. Mrs. Warran has taught me to let ME accept it. It’s ok to accept it because I gain more strength. Me and my brother got together and he was like can you read my poem and he let me read it and he was trying to talk and I’m like Nope, you can’t talk. You have to let me finish you know. And he didn’t like it either. That’s the thing about us. We don’t like it but we have to accept it in order for us to learn from it. That’s one thing I held onto. And the other thing is be free in what you want to write. (Ruby, Interview 2)
Not only did Ruby take away the capacity to grow from constructive feedback, but she replicated Mrs. Warran’s feedback protocol while sharing writing with her family and friends. Even though Ruby’s brother did not attend NBHS, Ruby extended the community to him through these shared rituals. Through this extension of the poetry practices, he became part of the “we” of the poetry community. She saw herself as an extension of the poetry community and she included others in her out of school communities by sharing Mrs. Warran’s practices as a means for achieving personal growth.

When these students gave constructive feedback to one another about the quality of expression in their poems, feedback often involved personal affirmations that attached to bits and pieces of the stories that had been revealed through the writing. Students frequently gave feedback about how they could relate to what the poet was going through, about the “realness” of the poems, and often ended by acknowledging one another’s strength (Field Note, March 27, 2009). The feedback was constructive in multiple ways: it addressed the conventions of the poetry and it built up each poet’s strength and confidence in sharing pieces of themselves. Brooklyn explained how she didn’t think you could critique someone else’s experience, but you could help them to maximize their capacity for communicating that experience to others who may or may not identify with the subject.

It’s hard to give anybody criticism about what goes on in their world. So at that point you are not criticizing them for what’s going on you are criticizing them for how they present it. And that’s where something I would always say like if it was something more that you need to add I feel like period regardless of who you think gonna hear regardless of how you think they gonna look at you add it cuz that’s what’s gonna make it better. (Brooklyn, Focus Group 1)

Brooklyn saw the feedback circle as an opportunity to learn to be a better communicator, a skill she says has taken her far in life after high school. Her remarks illustrate how students in Mrs. Warran’s class not only learned to write better poetry, but through the class rituals, also learned to communicate with one another in positive and compassionate ways. They learned to listen to and acknowledge each person’s experiences and then to hone in and give feedback that they believed would help each person grow as a poet and communicator. They learned to take those difficult experiences and to transform them into beautiful poetry that could teach others.

With the goal of publication, students heard evolving versions of each other’s poems over the course of a poetry trimester. During my participant observation in poetry, the class workshoped Jaleeyah’s poem, “What is Family?” (see Appendix F: What is Family?) several times as she continued to improve it based on peer and teacher feedback. Jaleeyah’s poem dealt with her questioning of the meaning of family after her mother chose to protect a man who had sexually molested her. By sharing, Jaleeyah received validation as a poet, but also as a person. The following are two responses, from Paris and Mrs. Warran, after Jaleeyah shared this emotional poem in the feedback circle.

**Paris:** Well, I said it was very short but very deep. I feel like I was there. This makes me sad in a way because I hate children getting abused. This poem was so real and so vivid. You are a real good writer so you should never stop writing.
Um yeah, I just feel like it was real strong emotions and it was real full of like titles like, “I got slapped around” “beat to the ground”, “you know how this must sound”. You know how like people want sympathy but it’s like the true life reality, you know, what people go through in life. Good poem.

**Mrs. Warran:** Jaleeyah, I am really proud of you. I think this is a really brave poem. I think you’re kind of the first one to put yourself out there like, hey, this is me, this is something that’s deep, and I respect you for that. Um and I just encourage everyone else to go there also with their own stuff. I think you can add some line breaks like in this stanza (she points to the photocopy):

but I wonder why line break she let him kiss me. (Transcript, March 2009 Observation)

During this interaction, both Paris and Mrs. Warran validated Jaleeyah for taking a risk and sharing a very personal poem. Paris showed Jaleeyah that she was actively listening by reflecting back some of Jaleeyah’s own words and phrases from the poem. She also connected to the subject matter and empathized with the poet. Mrs. Warran gave some specific feedback by questioning Jaleeyah’s decisions about line and stanza breaks, but she also highlighted Jaleeyah’s generosity and courage in sharing this poem and used it as a teachable moment to encourage other poets to open up. The feedback in the circle always focused on one poet at a time, but was a learning and modeling opportunity for everyone in the group.

**Issues of Safety**

While acting as a participant observer in poetry class during the 2008-2009 school year, I found that the student-poets in Mrs. Warran’s class wrote about the most raw experiences of adolescence and they shared these poems in a circle with diverse participants. The content of the poems often focused on the very personal issues of abuse, sex and sexuality, community violence, race and racism, and other social injustices. In the 2005 anthology, *Bloomin’ Poets Breakin’ the Silence* (2005), for example, one finds poems like “My Home Life,” a poem about how the poet’s addict mother asked her to score drugs, “My Everyday Life,” about life as a Sureño gang-member, and on the opposite page, “My Gangsta Life,” a poem written from a student in an opposing gang about Norteño pride. In Mrs. Warran’s classes there were gay and straight youth, black and brown youth, youth from warring turfs and gang affiliations. With such charged, personal information being shared, one might wonder how Mrs. Warran and the student-poets maintained a sense of physical and emotional safety. In the focus group meeting, Starla remembered this as “an organic process.” She explained that Mrs. Warran

...never had to like guide us or kinda instruct us on how to respect each other. Um she explained what constructive criticism is vs. just criticism — just being a jerk. But it really had to do with the fact that we were kinda

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16 The Norteños and Sureños are two rival gangs that have strong membership in the Bay Area and all over California. While there are many street gangs, these two have the most intense rivalry.
baying our souls. We just felt comfortable doing that because of the environment of the school. (Starla, Focus Group 1)

The student-poets took risks in "baring [their] souls," that allowed them to interact in unmasked interactions with one another. As Leonardo and Porter (2010) this kind of interaction leads to mutual recognition that shifts notions of self and other and, as Starla contends, can refigure classroom interactions. Grant added that he “treated class a little bit more serious because people actually like opened they hearts and put they feelings out there.” Even Grant, who admitted to being a clown in many of his classes, reported that he treated the poetry circle with the utmost respect. It wasn’t something that he needed to be taught, he explained. He recalled feeling that it was natural to hold respect in a space where students and the teacher were interacting in deeply human ways. Given this responsibility of safely holding space for the feelings of others, students tried on new ways of being in class that they did not adopt in traditional, hierarchical classrooms. Safety in this context actually resided in the act of community risk-taking, where all poets disrupted hegemonic silence by sharing their deeply personal experiences through writing.

Starla described poetry as a space where people’s “walls came down” and they got to know each other in ways that didn’t happen in other classrooms, or even in social times like lunch or afterschool. Whereas they might have been more selective of the information they shared and the topics they explored in other settings, students took advantage of Mrs. Warran’s class as an open space to get to know one another with the safe presence of a trustworthy adult facilitating. It was a space of trust where talk of confidentiality was not just lip service. Trusting that their secrets would be held, students shared the unsharable. Other than breaching this trust or not being real, there were no taboo subjects in poetry.

Also your walls come down in poetry because you’re like ok these are people that I’m in class with all day long and I’m kicking it with I’m having lunch with but right now they are telling me a little bit — they’re kind of showing me a little bit more than I’ve ever seen. You pull down your wall so that people feel comfortable. (Starla, Focus Group 1)

The structures of poetry facilitated a deep listening and getting to know each other that wasn’t happening for these students anywhere else (see Leonardo and Porter, 2010). Starla described how Mrs. Warran set in motion a culture of respect and listening, but that ultimately students held the safe container of the class through their buy-in, participation, respect, and openness.

The stories shared in Mrs. Warran’s class tied together the participants and fostered bonds that transcended the differences that divide people in schools and in society. Mrs. Warran held the expectation that everyone would share, including herself. Through the rituals of the class, students had ample opportunities to practice hearing a diverse collection of poets and practiced discussing their work. Students got to know one another by sharing their own stories and Mrs. Warran held a tight protocol for giving feedback so all poets felt respected in the process. This respect for one another’s writing led students to respect and even grow to like others who they had not engaged with before. Kaya explained how she grew to like and accept peers who she had previously written off after relating to the stories they revealed in poetry. She said,
...like if we didn’t get along but I heard a poem about something that they were going through that I’d been through before and I’d been there and I’d kinda be like maybe they’re not so bad. She’s a human so you know we’re all going through the same things and she knows how I feel. (Kaya, Focus Group 3)

These bonds also transcended the relationships that students formed a priori in other spaces at NBHS. Study participants explained how they would sometimes think they knew their peers, and then in poetry they would learn something completely new or unexpected. This did not happen serendipitously, but rather was a critical component of Mrs. Warran’s class design that centered relationship-building and knowing one another through the work of poetry (Mrs. Warran, Interview). In a space where they felt visible and validated, students put forth greater effort to produce quality writing and to engage in the publishing process.

**Flexible Roles and Modeling**

Without being a free-for-all, the structures of poetry class offered students a set of tools and an empathetic audience with which and for whom to write through their struggles and day-to-day experiences. The student-poets seemed to be using the writing as a way to make sense of the complex and often painful experiences they faced. While there were distinct rituals in the class for journaling, writing, and giving feedback that were held by the teacher, there was also a sense of student buy-in and ownership of the space. For example, some days the class would begin by a student bringing a concern to the class to work through. On one of my visits, Paris brought to the class’s attention the fact that she was upset that Jaleeyah was planning to drop out of school (Field Notes, May 8, 2009). Jaleeyah stated her reasons, which had to do with her being homeless at the time. Because the students had already disclosed so much and trusted one another with their personal stories, they could have conversations that might not find their way into traditional classrooms. On this day, Mrs. Warran allowed for a break in the structures and rituals to have what students called “an intervention” in which they helped Jaleeyah talk through her predicament, identify some resources, and ultimately postpone her decision to drop out. Mrs. Warran seemed to take cues from the class to inform her decision about when to break with the class structures.

While Mrs. Warran set the structures of the class in motion and ultimately held responsibility for the maintenance of a safe space, one of the ways she handed responsibility to her students was by participating as a poet in the circle. Mrs. Warran would occasionally workshop her poems in the circle just as the students did. When she did this, it was up to the students to hold the rigor and the integrity of the feedback ritual. It also paved the way for openness as Mrs. Warran soothfastly shared bits of her own story and her deep emotions attached to it. On one of my observations, Mrs. Warran shared a very personal poem in the workshop. The poem dealt with a mixture of love and resentment she had felt while caring for her husband while he was recovering from back surgery. Mrs. Warran’s words and images invited students into her personal world. She laid bare some raw feelings that adults, especially teachers, often mask. As the students gave feedback, Demetrious was using a cell phone. Mrs. Warran made a personal plea to him, explaining that she had just shared something personal and that she felt he wasn’t giving
her his attention (Transcript, May 20, 2009). As Mrs. Warran was in a vulnerable space, Jaleeyah stepped in and told Demetrious to put the phone away. She seamlessly slipped into the role of the teacher in this exchange. Later, one of the other students was giving feedback to Mrs. Warran and she responded, breaking with the protocol. Jaleeyah, taking ownership of the ritual, reminded her that she could not reply. The interaction revealed the blurring of roles in the classroom.

Understanding Voices: Being Part of and Apart from the Group

Through the safe, trusting relationships they developed in Mrs. Warran’s classroom, students developed a sense of accountability to the poetry group that allowed them to shatter institutional silence and paved the way for them to embrace their own voices. Given the tight-knit community fostered in poetry class, there was a dialectic relationship between the individual and the group whereby fortified individual voices emerged through a process of group reflection and feedback. Through the workshopping process, poets became familiar with the voices and experiences of the other student-poets. Poets became known for certain poems or styles that their peers remembered even years down the road. Certain student poems, like Monet’s “Ghetto Bird” or Ty’s “My Ode to Oakland,” were canonized in Mrs. Warran’s course readers and became part of the shared knowledge of the NBHS poets. Each trimester, student-poets looked up to these poet-elders as they searched for their own voices and poetic styles. During a focus group with current poetry students in 2009, Demetrious explained how each poet developed a unique voice or trademark style in their writing.

Everyone writes outside of school…. What I noticed is everyone has their own like style of poetry. Mine is lovie dovie, sad emotional. Hers is more (gestures with his hand to Jaleeyah) you know, judgmental and like profiling like we just did today. Then Paris is very much more everyday street life. You know, what you go through outside of school is what makes you. Like Paris could be walking home like she said in her little gray dress that she wore to school and I’m pretty sure when she left school she probably wrote another poem but I mean when I get mad or sad, or I have a conversation with my significant other, I just start flowing out poems. (Transcript, May 1, 2009)

Poets in Mrs. Warran’s class got to know the work of their peers, and thereby their peers’ stories. Even in this statement, Demetrious referred to one of Paris’ poems, “Little Gray Dress.” They frequently cited one another and quoted lines from their peers’ poems. In these interactions, poets fashioned positive images of themselves as students and community members that countered some of the stigma they carried from past negative experiences in schools. Further discussion with the poets and poetry alumni revealed that they didn’t enter Mrs. Warran’s class with a sense of a unique voice. In fact, several poets reflected on moments of crisis through which their own voices emerged from the group. These critical incidents were catalyzed by the feedback ritual in Mrs. Warran’s class.

One of the important milestones for poets in Mrs. Warran’s class was the critical ability to reconcile one’s own voice with the perspectives of the group and to decide when to adopt and incorporate others’ ideas and when to trust one’s own voice. Several of the poetry alumni described moments of crisis when they lost their own voices in the crowd of
feedback and opinions, and each one also described learning from those experiences what really mattered in their own words. They described an earlier stage in their writing where they felt a strong allegiance to the group identity and where they felt they owed it to their peers to revise their poems to satisfy each person’s feedback. In each instance participants reported feeling they had lost their poems in this process. Learning how to incorporate the diverse feedback from the group while still maintaining one’s voice was a struggle that Starla described as a critical incident in her development as a writer.

Oh yeah um I remember we used to sit in a circle and do the critique the constructive criticism and I had a poem and I read it and they would write their criticism and they’d give it back to you. Mrs. Warran print one out for everyone so you’d get a stack of a million of your own poem (Brooklyn: uh hum) and I took everybody’s criticism and reworked my poem and when I gave it back to her she was like ok basically she couldn’t follow it because it didn’t make sense anymore and um yeah I just I kind of took from that that like if it’s--I lost my poem and Mrs. Warran was basically saying that you don’t need to take everybody’s um criticism because you’re going to lose the essence of your poem. You don’t need it. It is constructive but you still have to kind of like follow your instincts or whatever and I remember that I don’t know why I remember THAT but I remember it. (Starla, Focus Group 1)

This memorable incident marked a shift in Starla’s thinking from external to internal, from the group to herself as an individual. In Mrs. Warran’s class, development as a poet hinged upon a shared social process, one that each poet ultimately had to own and internalize. As Starla explained, this was not a simple or direct process, but one wrought with choices as the poet turns inward to carefully craft poems that could speak for them to a public audience. Several participants discussed the ability to respond to feedback as a sort of rite of passage in which their unique voices grew to maturity.

Like Starla, Kaya and Bonita reflected on the process of learning to take and respond to the feedback from their peers in poetry class (Focus Group 3). As Kaya and Bonita discussed their processes for deciding which feedback to incorporate, both described a process of trying on other’s suggestions and seeing how the outside suggestions fit in with their voices and their intentions for their poems. This process, as explained by Kaya and Bonita, not only led the poets to understand and listen to one another, but to define their own voices. Whereas Starla described how she lost her voice in attempting to appease all of her classmates’ critiques, Bonita’s description illustrates how she developed her own voice in her reactions to feedback.

I would try something different like you know the way that they would give us feedback is everybody would have a copy of our poem and they would make their little you know — they would edit, cross things out or write how they feel about it on the bottom of the poem or whatever. So I would look through it and if somebody like crossed a word out or whatever I’d look and I’d say the poem how they would want me to say it and I’m like I kinda like that so I’ll put it in this pile or like no that criticism makes no sense you ain’t got no business trying to give me no piece of criticism, I don’t even know why you say nothing. (Bonita, Focus Group 3)
Bonita learned, through a process of ventriloquizing, which feedback worked and enhanced her own voice and message, and which needed to be discarded because it clashed with her own intentions. This process involved critical skills and also depended on the student-poets having some confidence in their own voices. Through the community building and rituals in the class, student-poets were able to build each other up, to offer warm feedback, and ultimately to help one another build the confidence to be able to choose what critical feedback to follow and what to ignore.

Kaya articulated that some feedback was good, but didn’t make sense with what she wanted to achieve with her poem. She explained, “sometimes the feedback was probably good feedback but it was like that’s not where I want the poem to go then I would like ignore it like even though it’s really great feedback like that’s not how I want my poem to sound” (Kaya, Focus Group 3). Bonita agreed with Kaya and further articulated how some of the feedback she received pushed her to think about, and even embrace, the choices she had made as a writer and gave her more confidence. The interplay between the group and Bonita’s own inner-thoughts deepened her own conviction about her voice and style. The questions and critiques posed by her community of poets made her think about her stylistic choices explicitly and to stand behind them.

Some poets, like Kaya and Ruby, said that they were able to internalize the feedback process and were able to invoke the voices of the poetry community when writing in life after high school. Kaya explained how her internalization of the feedback process that she learned in poetry has helped her to become a stronger academic writer.

It’s helped me so much because I found like when people like you know when you get the feedback from people you kinda get used to kind of like the feedback people give so I found myself already doing that when I was writing poems. Like I’d write my draft and I’d look over it and like oh someone might say that word doesn’t fit or I don’t need that word and then and I’d do that when I was writing essays like well I don’t really need to use that word or whatever. (Kaya, Focus Group 3)

Kaya was able to transfer the skills she acquired through group feedback to other academic venues, such as essay-writing. This confidence-boosting was especially important for this group of students who had been marginalized or written-off in schools. In this way, the social learning that unfolded in the poetry class through the discussion, critique, and development of each poet’s voice paved the way for the development of individual writers and for changing attitudes toward schooled learning.

Ruby attributed many of her successes in junior college to her identity as a poet and to the skills she honed in Mrs. Warran’s class. Ruby explained how she transferred her poetry skills to writing essays in college. She believed that writing poetry taught her to be precise with her language, to use detail, and to put her own twist on the subject matter she was writing about. During her first semester at her community college, Ruby submitted a personal essay to a writing contest sponsored by the Latinos Unidos organization and won a $200 scholarship. Without her experiences with poetry, Ruby explained, she would not have had the confidence to share her story or to put herself out there in the ways that she did. Perhaps more than any academic skill for Ruby, poetry was a vehicle to connect with others and to find strength in her voice.
In the beginning people just write whatever you know and oh it’s a poem we have to write a poem let’s just write whatever. As days went on each person started opening up you know, when each person started opening up it gave another person a chance to open up and not be afraid of what he or she said you know. Write about whatever you want. You know, don’t be afraid. You’re not wrong you know and it’s ok to express yourself and I think that’s like ... as days went on we just all just started writing you know writing and writing and at the end our poetry became powerful. It came to be something that we all — well I thought we couldn’t even do. I remember in the beginning I didn’t like my poetry. I used to always like talk shit about my poetry like I don’t like it and Mrs. Warran was like this is good. People saw my poetry being good when I didn’t even see it you know. They helped me gain like to not put myself down you know because other people see it good and I didn’t see it until the end you know. I went back and I was like damn this is good. (Ruby, Interview 1)

For Ruby, the internalization of the group process in poetry was both academic and focused on personal affirmation. Ruby described herself as a student who had very low self-esteem prior to taking poetry. Through the internalization of the positive voices in her poetry circle, Ruby granted herself permission to express herself and to own her words. It was through the structures and rituals in Mrs. Warran’s class that Ruby was able to recognize the good in herself and her ability to connect with others through poetry.

Once students had broken through the silence by bringing their stories to the poetry circle, they forged trusting relationships that supported individual poets in exercising their own voices to tell their stories. These interactions fostered confidence in poets that impacted their self-perceptions and allowed them to see themselves as successful in a classroom space, albeit a non-traditional one. For some these successes were limited to the poetry classroom, but for many it transferred into other spaces including but not limited to higher education experiences.

Discussion

Study participants held positive memories of their experiences that they expressed had lasting impact on how they imagined family, how they understood their own struggles, and how they saw themselves as students and community members. Given their previous negative experiences in schooling, NBHS students’ memories revealed that they needed to feel invited into a caring school environment where they did not feel stigmatized because of past failures. Just as Ginwright (2010) discusses the need for youth to heal before they can engage in social activism, the youth in Mrs. Warran’s class needed to heal before they could see themselves differently as students. Once in this different kind of school, poetry students appreciated having a space where they could build closer relationships that allowed them to heal by unpacking their experiences, recognizing strength in common struggles, and boosting confidence through writing. For some this nurtured subsequent academic successes and for others it yielded social development.

In poetry, students built each other up through their structured interactions in support of positive identity formation as a group and as individuals. For some, these
changes began while they were in Mrs. Warran's class, and for some the impact of the class did not become apparent until long after they moved beyond high school. For most, NBHS was nothing like the homes and the families in which they grew up, but rather, it was a space that helped them to re-imagine what family and community could look like. While some students described NBHS as a family and close community, a deeper look at their talk about this topic revealed that NBHS actually led them to alter or change their conceptions of what family actually meant.

Given a classroom that was at once highly structured and also student-driven, students (through the rigorous work of writing, revising, and publishing poetry) were able to learn ways of compassionately listening to others, communicating in ways that promoted growth, and building bonds that empowered students to speak through the silence that surrounded their life struggles. The poetry circle, as a space of open and respectful communication where youth and adults shared responsibility for maintaining trust and safety, offered a space for student-poets to play with roles, try on different voices, and develop a sense of group and individual identity and to transform their struggles into strength. This confidence in their own voices ultimately impacted the way students felt about school and opened the possibility for positive attitudes toward school. Some, like Ruby, Kaya, and Lachelle, felt that this confidence served them in higher education. Not only did they find themselves to be more competent technical writers, but they learned to imagine themselves as successful students and developed the confidence to claim their own stories and to reach higher than they could have conceived before. In subsequent chapters, I will analyze the ways that this uptake of family and the rituals of writing poetry impacted some participants and the ways they chose to engage in family, community, and the authoring of self after leaving the school.
Chapter 4: Writing a Better Future

From their post-high school perspectives, each of the six case study participants expressed their belief that writing is an important tool that has benefited them to varying degrees in adulthood and has lead each of them to a better future. In this chapter, I offer portraits of five of the six case study participants\(^1\) in order to answer this question: How do case study participants use writing as a tool after high school and how have they evolved as writers? Given that all of the case study participants reported that the poetry class impacted their lives, the three-part interviews were designed to reveal more detailed portraits of the post-high school reverberations of writing practices rooted in Mrs. Warran’s poetry class and to explore the relationship between word and deed for these young adults.

In keeping with the frame of social poetics, it is important to understand these practices within the life circumstances of the participants. All of these focal participants described their adolescent years as riddled with struggle; they dealt with a range of issues from LGBTQ identity, homelessness, breaking out of cycles of poverty and incarceration, abuse at home, and drug use. They shared a common belief that their lives were better with access to writing than if they did not have this tool at their disposal. Some participants maintained that writing had meant the difference between life and death for them. The ways that they described how writing served each of them were different, and they certainly adapted their practices depending on their personal needs and related to their ongoing life struggles and ambitions. For most of the interviewees, writing contributed to their coping strategies on a personal level. They used it to deal with the obstacles they faced, as a guide for actions, or a funnel for feelings in the moment. A few thought writing served as a bridge from what was to what they believed ought to be. Jaleeyah and Monet said they used writing as a personal coping skill. Ruby said she attempted to use writing to forge positive relationships with herself and others. Lachelle said she used writing to reject and rewrite the script that she felt had been handed to her. Cesar said he used writing to share his vision of a more just society in hopes of inspiring his audiences to social action. The following portraits illustrate the variety of ways that these young adults report having used writing as a tool in early adulthood and how each focal participant has evolved as a writer since taking Mrs. Warran’s poetry class in high school.

**Laying Claim to her Identity: Jaleeyah**

While adolescence is a time of transition for all people, Jaleeyah’s adolescent transformation also involved her metamorphosis from Damon, whom she described as a loud, trouble-making boy who didn’t have much regard for others — especially authority figures. Damon became Jaleeyah, a young woman who took great pride in her appearance and her sense of self. Jaleeyah described how, growing up, she always felt like a girl, but it wasn’t until she started attending NBHS that she made the transition to living her life

\(^1\) I did not include Ty in these portraits as he participated in only two of the three case study interviews. As the third interview was the one that discussed participants’ uses of writing in early adulthood, the data on his case was incomplete and could not provide answers to the questions addressed in this chapter.
publicly as a woman. Jaleeyah had been out of school for at least two years prior to attending NBHS, and she detailed how this time in her life was the first time she had rode the bus as a woman and attended school with her peers as a woman. While she was at NBHS, she told teachers that she did not care if they called her Damon or Jaleeyah, but since then she has emerged, with the help of writing, fully into her identity as Jaleeyah. At the time of the study, Jaleeyah was taking female hormones and planned to get breast implants, but was unsure of whether or not she would pursue further sex reassignment surgery. She explained that it had taken her family a long time to accept that her becoming a woman was not just a phase or a hobby, but a self-declaration and staking out of her own identity.

Writing, especially in Mrs. Warran’s poetry class, gave Jaleeyah a platform from which to share herself with the world from the inside out. Below is Jaleeyah’s description of her transition into womanhood, in which she also talks about her feeling that people judged her for her outward appearance and manifestations of her femininity.

I started living as a girl when I turned fifteen or sixteen like right before I came to NBHS. I started dressing like a girl so it was like I used to always like dress like a boy for my family and then when I started dressing like a girl and I was identifying as a girl like ok this is not a hobby this is not a phase that I’m going through and all that it’s like this is it. This is who I am going to be so I guess I was trying to get people to understand that like yeah I wear high heels and I be having make-up on and all that but I’m not stuck up. I’m not bougie. I’m not none of that and a lot of people think that about me and I’m not like that it’s like, get to know me. Don’t just judge me by what you see. (Jaleeyah, Interview 2)

From feeling one way and appearing another, to role playing to appease her family expectations, to then dealing with the gender stereotypes that women face based on how they dress, Jaleeyah constantly coped with complex issues of identity. She had to make difficult choices about her identity and how she wanted to present herself to the world. While she took great pride in her hair, make-up, and dress, Jaleeyah also felt people mistook this process for shallow vanity. Writing poetry gave her a space to share what she was feeling on the inside and to add depth to her emergent identity.

Jaleeyah explained that she was a writer prior to attending NBHS. In fact, she recalled writing stories about her home life as early as age eight. She explained that back then she used to write about her life as though it was someone else’s.

Before I met Mrs. Warran I was a drop out. I had been out of school for like three years but I used to write like I’ve always written like I’ve written since I was like in first grade I just liked English and writing and all that kind of stuff and I’d just write stuff like I used to write a lot of life stories I guess you could say. They wasn’t that long because I was only like eight but I used to write like stuff like that about my life and I used to really talk about my mom a lot. Like it was hatred and just stuff that. I don’t think people should think about their — I don’t think a person that age should be thinking but yeah I used to write like stuff like that about what my mom did to me and what different people did and how I used to feel. I used to write as if I was telling someone else’s story yeah so I think one time my granny found my notebook and was
Even as early as age eight, Jaleeyah alluded to writing as a way to cope with her feelings and to come to terms with family issues and childhood trauma. Her use of the third person to tell her stories showed identity play and experimentation with ways of sharing her story. Writing about her experiences in the third person acted as a primer for exposing the abuses she endured without naming them outright. Jaleeyah’s grandmother was able to read into these third person stories to inquire about what was happening in Jaleeyah’s mother’s home. Ultimately this resulted in Jaleeyah living with her grandmother.

Jaleeyah characterized her evolution as a writer as having grown to possess a refined ability to craft her words, to be specific, and to edit and revise her work in her post-high school writing; this growth she attributed to learnings from Mrs. Warran’s poetry class. Jaleeyah described writing as a therapeutic practice that helped her to share her story and to assert her identity as she has transitioned into adulthood and womanhood. She understood writing as a both a private and public practice. She also used writing as a form of communication off-line with family and with a limited public audience on-line through social networking. Jaleeyah described herself as someone who does not talk to people and keeps to herself. She held tense relationships with family members and did not maintain a consistent group of friends. The person she talked to most in the years prior to this study was her younger brother, Tre, who was shot and killed during the course of data collection for this study. Jaleeyah explained that she had two main tools for dealing with depression and anger: her two Chihuahuas and her writing craft.

At the time of the study, Jaleeyah did most of her writing on her cell phone. She used Instagram and Facebook to post sayings and commentary publicly. She also wrote letters and what she called “freelance writing” in her phone when the words and ideas came to her. In an interview she explained, “I still do write. It’s just I haven’t written a poem. I use writing as like what is it um therapeutic” (Jaleeyah, Interview 2). While she said she was not writing poetry anymore, the letters and short writings that she shared with me all had a poetic timbre to them. Jaleeyah did not write every day or with any regular discipline, but she expressed that she knew writing was always available as a tool when she needed it. She turned to writing when she was frustrated or overwhelmed by occurrences in her daily life, or when she wanted to share something with others without having to stick around to see what they would say back.

Jaleeyah’s writing practice was somewhat reactive. She was not employing writing as a preventative measure, but as a way of responding to challenging circumstances or crises. For example, when someone upset her, she chose to react in writing. She explained doing this [writing] will keep me from cussing somebody out so I can say that I have more self-control with that because at first I would just go off, but now that I can write it’s like I will just explain myself in a writing and nobody gotta read it. (Jaleeyah, Interview 2)

She understood this as an alternative to “cussing somebody out” or acting out of rage and anger. Jaleeyah also learned to use her writing as a way to less explosively confront the issues from her past that continued to haunt her into her early adulthood. Jaleeyah recounted several instances where she felt agitated and turned to writing to release her
frustration instead of engaging directly with the people or situations that upset her. This tool suited her emergent identity, whereas Damon, whom she described as loud and rude, might have chosen a less controlled response. Over and over Jaleeyah highlighted the fact that she did not like to talk to others, yet she would sometimes leave a poem or post to Facebook or Instagram to explain herself in lieu of engaging in conversation. This medium did not invite response from the individual about whom she was venting, but did offer space for others in her community to chime in. This practice, using social networking, served as a refraction of the feedback process in Mrs. Warran’s class in that it allowed space for audience response but did not require the writer to respond on the spot. She explained that people mostly responded to her postings with praise on these sites.

Jaleeyah’s responses were always imbued with paradox. On one hand she claimed she did not want to share her own hurt or hear others, and on the other hand she did share her hurt quite generously with her poetry classmates.

> I’m just a very very closed person like I keep everything in and I’ve always been like that like I just I don’t think I should share my hurt with you and then you share your hurt with me or I don’t want to feel pity. So it’s like I mean I could write a poem and words the certain type of ways and sometimes you might not even get it might take a while for you to get that poem and by the time you get it I’ll be gone. (Jaleeyah, Interview 2)

When I observed Jaleeyah in Mrs. Warran’s class, she was highly engaged in the feedback process. She workshopped her poems repeatedly, making changes based on the suggestions and criticism of her peers, and she was so receptive to peer feedback that she even changed the whole message of one of her poems. She described how, in the poem “Other than my Shoes,” she started out trying to write a poem about her ego, but through the workshopping process, she ended up with a poem that exposed some of her vulnerabilities. She explained that in expressing her vulnerabilities in Mrs. Warran’s class she sometimes received undesired pity from her listeners, but she also talked about feeling recognized and realizing through peoples’ responses that they cared for her. While Jaleeyah could take criticism from her classmates, when it came to family situations, it seemed Jaleeyah was less likely to stick around for or invite a response. This stood in contrast to her interactions with her peers in NBHS where she bought into a culture of reciprocity. When it came to her family, Jaleeyah used her poetry and her other writings as a one-way mode of communication, a way to share her truth without criticism.

Jaleeyah used her poetry and short “freelance writings” to explore her complex layers of identity. In her poem, “Tell me what do you see,” Jaleeyah captured what she explained as the outer world’s failure to see beyond her exterior presentation and into the person she knew herself to be.

> Tell Me What Do You See
> Other than my heels,
> What do you see

> I’m pretty sure it isn’t me
> You probably see a faggot
> Tryin’ to be a bitch
But that’s not me

Other than my hair
What do you see

I’m pretty sure it isn’t me
You probably just see a nigga
With extensions
Not intentions

Other than my lips
What do you see
Can you see beyond this lip liner

Naw
I’m sure you don’t see me

Other than my dress
What do you see
Can you see me being
The best I can be

Nope

I’m pretty sure you don’t see me (Jaleeyah, 2009)

She wanted to be seen and recognized as a woman, but not in a superficial or objectified way. Jaleeyah’s treatment of her identity was complex and sometimes contradictory. She felt both misunderstood and tokenized, and also aloof and unwilling to let people in through interpersonal relationships. She explained herself through her writing, but then also claimed that she did not care how others perceived her. She shed light on this in the second interview, saying

Because I did have a poem called “Tell Me What Do You See” or other than my heels or whatever that was basically saying like just because you see me like this don’t mean that I’m really like all that but I guess, I wrote it to try to get people to understand who I am but I never really care. Like I don’t know I think I’m really blunt, so I don’t really care what people think [laughs].
(Jaleeyah, Interview 2)

She began to unpack how she used her writing to explain herself to others, but then her talk took a turn and she seemed to backtrack and claim that she did not concern herself with the opinions of others. Jaleeyah used her writing as a way to define herself in a medium that she perceived as non-dialectic. In other words, she did not feel that her writing was mutually transformative or that her audience’s reception of her work changed her in any way. Rather, she used writing as a way of unloading. She did not write to facilitate dialogue
with the world around her, but to assert a positive identity where she felt otherwise misunderstood.

Through writing, Jaleeyah felt she gained a sense of control over her life. She explained how she would not allow people to get too close to her. While she did not like to share her stories with others in an unscripted way, she would drop a poem or written story on someone to reveal information in a controlled way. She explained how sometimes she would not stick around long enough to experience her audience’s response.

I think I’m more so of a person that lives day to day so I’m always moving I’m never with the same group of people like I’m here now hopefully I’m here for a while but who knows because I’m always moving like I never stay in one place so nobody ever really gets to know me I never let it get that far. I have that type of control where I let people know what I want them to know (Jaleeyah, Interview 2).

Jaleeyah confronted one of her childhood abusers in this way by delivering a poem to him. She used the poem to set boundaries for others, including those people who violated her boundaries as a child. She explained that she did not care what this person, or anyone for that matter, had to say about it. She found it necessary for her own sense of self to reveal her truth and to move on from it.

Writing stood in for what could have become frustrating or conflict-laden conversations. There was something conclusive about this practice. It was a way of saying, “This is who I am. Take it or leave it.” Jaleeyah’s use of writing as a one-way form of communication was both cathartic and isolating as she was able to get things off her chest but did not use it to nurture supportive relationships or to deepen her connection to others. She used her writing to heal and to grow as an individual, but not in connection with community. While some might find fault with Jaleeyah’s non-dialogic use of writing, she understood this as necessary in forging an identity that was contested. Through writing, Jaleeyah paved her way to a brighter future by authoritatively and positively asserting her identity as positive and by using her words to confront her abusers. In this way she was using writing as a bridge from who she was and the traumas she experienced as a child to the woman she was becoming in spite of these experiences. Writing provided a space for Jaleeyah to take control over the events that have shaped her and to use them to continue to shape her identity.

For Jaleeyah, writing in her early adult life has been a definitive practice. It was the tool with which she rewrote her identity as a woman beneath the surface identifiers of make-up, high heels, and long hair extensions. It was a means to unapologetically confront her abusers without inviting their responses or interpretations. And, during the course of this study, it was also a way for Jaleeyah to take authorship of her younger brother’s life after he was murdered. Jaleeyah explained that she had taken responsibility for writing her brother’s obituary because she felt that she knew him best and could write the most honest representation of who she believed he was. Whereas some of Jaleeyah’s family members wanted to lie and represent her brother as a church-going young man who was “saved,” Jaleeyah felt that she should write about his life as she saw it. Whether writing to give birth to a new identity, or to memorialize one in death, Jaleeyah used writing as a way to define people and experiences as she saw them and to bridge past and present identities.
**Writing to Keep from Fighting: Monet**

Monet described her own life as one of constant struggle. While Monet felt proud of some of her post-high school accomplishments, such as graduating from a certificate program in medical assisting despite the fact that she never graduated from high school, she also felt as though she had not evolved since high school because she still faced many of the same struggles she dealt with then. She waffled between expressions of pride and defeat when she discussed her early adult growth. She described the importance of writing in facing her struggles, yet at the time of the interviews she admitted to feeling frozen and unable to write about her life circumstances. Even though Monet graduated from a certificate program in medical assisting, she was hard on herself because she had never attained a GED or gone to college. She said that she felt stuck, still struggling with some of the same issues from her early adolescence. At the time of data collection, Monet was still living with her mother who continued to abuse drugs. Monet discussed her dreams of opening her own business doing crime scene clean-up, but she had not yet been able to identify or gather the resources to become certified. While she expressed regret about these circumstances, she also spoke proudly about the fact that she was alive and not in jail. Monet attributed this accomplishment in part to her writing practice. When asked where she thought she’d be without writing, Monet answered the following.

> In jail. Definitely in jail. Um I went to juvenile hall when I was younger but as an adult, no. No jail because I probably wouldn’t get out. I have anger issues so bad and that’s why poetry is such a great tool for me cuz it’s where I get to vent. I vent and then it makes me feel like I have a lot more room for more bullshit in my life to stock back up and then when I write poetry I vent and then I have more room so if it wasn’t for writing or music, I would be in jail. It releases that that valve. (Monet, Interview 2)

While Monet did not feel that her present conditions were particularly positive, she did believe that without writing she would have been much worse off. Monet had a difficult time imagining a bright future for herself, so she employed writing as a tool to confront struggle in the moment and to release her anger. This tool created space for a more positive future because it allowed Monet the space to reflect on her actions and prevented her from committing violence, which could alter her path in negative ways. Unfortunately, Monet explained that the space she opened up for herself was typically filled back up with negativity as she was unable to make changes in her life circumstances. Monet used writing off and on to cope with challenges, but wasn’t able to use her practice to imagine a better life for herself.

Monet described her on-going struggles with depression and what she described as “an anger problem.” Writing had been Monet’s primary tool for dealing with these issues throughout her youth and young adult life, but she was not writing when we spoke. When asked why she wrote, Monet explained that writing was her therapy. She leaned on her writing craft when she faced periods of what she identified as extreme depression. She described her writing during these periods as “sessions,” just as one might refer to time with a counselor or psychologist. Monet explained that at the end of these sessions, she would feel as if her troubles were alleviated—at least for some time.
...some times I get so mad and then it’s like Monet you just need to write. Just write and it’s like no you know I don’t want to do that I’m pissed off I just get mad and then I calm down a little bit and then I write and I feel a whole lot better and even before I think that it’s like I know that after I write I’m going to feel better but I’m so mad that I don’t want to write. [laughs] It’s weird. But um I feel a lot better after I write because like I get to say whatever I want to say to the paper and it listens so yeah it controls my temper to an extent. Yeah well I think I’ve been doing a lot better cuz I haven’t punched no holes in the walls. I haven’t broken anything. Haven’t fought in a while. So I think I’ve been doing good. (Monet, Interview 3)

For Monet, writing offered the same type of relief as she would get from physically destroying something, which she explained she was prone to doing when struggling with anger. She held writing to be a much more productive practice than the violent actions she felt inclined to commit in the absence of other tools and outlets. While Monet did not see herself as someone who had accomplished greatness in her own life, she did express pride in surviving the circumstances in which she had grown up.

Monet remembered discovering writing as an alternative to violence while attending NBHS. She recalled an incident from NBHS when another student stole her cell phone. Monet was extremely angry. She felt disrespected and devastated. As a homeless youth with very few possessions, Monet explained that she held tightly to her belongings. Monet investigated and found out who had taken her phone. She explained that the next day she came to school with a can of corn in a tube sock. She intended to attack the thief. She described walking down the street toward the corner store where this young woman was standing. At some point during her walk, Monet thought about what she was about to do, identified an alternative, and turned around and went back to school. She realized that instead of committing this act of violence for which she would probably have been expelled from the school, she could release her anger by writing poetry and raps in the school’s music studio. Monet believed that this was a turning point after which she began to use words to guide her actions. Without writing, Monet said,

I think I would’ve got into a lot more fights... a lot more altercations and a lot more bad things And that’s kind of what I did when I was young. I acted on impulse and now it’s more so like I take a second...think about what I’m doing and you know if I get too upset I just write. (Monet, Interview 3)

While writing has not led Monet to feel empowered or successful in her adult life, it has served as a positive tool because it has allowed her to mitigate her negative actions. It has helped her to release anger without committing acts of physical violence against herself and others. While Monet reported that she didn’t feel she had evolved much as a writer since high school, or that her materials circumstances were drastically improved, she did feel that writing was a tool that could serve her in managing her life stresses. While one could critique this use of writing to manage stress as a privatizing of anger that precluded public protest, Monet felt that it kept her out of jail and allowed her to transform her negative feelings into something positive.
Writing to Connect through Struggle: Ruby

For Ruby, writing provided a safe place to escape from abusive family situations and to play with her self-image and ways of sharing her story with the world. Sheltered from the negative voices of her physical home, writing freed Ruby to cope with painful experiences and offered a healthy alternative to self-harm. From this space of reimagining herself, Ruby was able to forge healthy relations with the poetry community that fundamentally departed from the relationships she described in her home. Ruby explained that through writing, especially in the community of Mrs. Warran’s poetry class, she was able to recognize her own strengths whereas before she mostly held negative thoughts about herself. She said the class wasn’t just a class it was “like a family and it helped each student recognize their talents that they have” (Ruby, Interview 1). While the recognition of talents might sound insignificant compared to more substantial material gains, it was not at all trivial to Ruby who struggled with issues of self-image and abuse in her home life. Ruby was a survivor of rape who never received any formal counseling. While she had no relationship to her father as an adolescent she remembered how as a very young child, her father would tell her she was ugly and compare her to cousins whom he described as “fresas,” a term to used to describe pretty, fair-skinned girls. She also described how her older sister was physically abusive and frequently beat her in the home. Ruby described her mother as powerless in these situations and she felt her mother’s inability to defend Ruby reinforced her negative self-image (Ruby, Interview 2). Through writing, Ruby explained, she connected with other youth through struggle and learned to feel good about herself. For a young woman who had a habit of cutting herself and who had attempted suicide on more than one occasion, writing provided a positive tool for the emotional management that allowed Ruby to work toward a better future and to seek out sustaining relationships.

Writing provided Ruby with a record of her personal growth and changes over time. She compared writing to the roots of a tree, the sustaining force that allowed her to continue to grow from and make sense of her struggles.

Even though I look back on my poems and see that you know I’ve grown, I go back to the old poems and I take a piece of that and I expand it into what I’m going through now so people can feel the root of it. The whole beginning — like the whole past present and future of it. I like to do that so people can know that I still didn't forget what my first poem was or the pain I was going through because you can’t always forget the pain. The pain helps you grow more and makes you become the person that you are now. (Ruby, Interview 1)

Ruby’s poetry became a sort of growth chart through which she gained an evolving sense of self. While she did not forget or let go of her struggles, she renegotiated her relationship with them constantly through her written reflections. She enjoyed the dynamic perspective-shifting that happened when she reread her own work and connected her past and present narratives. Because Ruby was able to see her own growth through writing, she held to hope for a brighter future, one in which she envisioned continuing to work through her struggles and reinvest in her own narrative. Despite this hopeful outlook, Ruby
continued to struggle with depression as she had no other supportive interventions to help her deal with her trauma.

In her one semester in junior college Ruby forged strong relationships with her professors and even won awards for her writing. Ruby explained that she activated her poetic sensibilities even in her academic writing. Ruby held a fundamental belief that writing was a tool to connect with others.

It’s changed me in expressing myself even in college, you know. I’ve touched teachers’ hearts when I didn’t even think my poetry would touch you know. (Ruby, Interview 1)

Ruby expressed that her poetry practice helped her in two ways in college: it made her a better academic writer, and it helped her to forge meaningful relationships. She related her poetic sensibilities and ability to use language precisely and descriptively to her ability to write convincing essays in college classes. She also leveraged her poetry to build relationships and alliances with professors.

Ruby’s poetry provided her with a platform from which to express herself and to explain her story, including some of the obstacles she had overcome. Ruby felt that personal connections were critical to her ability to learn with and from others.

I remember one time in college we had to write something like bring an object or a song that described us and I just read one of my poems that was about you know being suicidal even though that was my past and I’m a new person now I want them to know, hey this is what happened in my life but this is who I am now. Like it grew it grew on to me. It grew and each time I write a poem I’m not the person who I was back in the day. It’s like the words that I have in my poetry the feeling the taste the sound and everything it’s gotten more powerful and more open and I tend to grasp peoples feeling and teachings and I write that in my poetry and that helps me a lot and even in essays half of my essays are like poetry written and my teacher noticed that and I didn’t think she’d notice and I got awards for that for good writing, so it’s like what the heck, People saw my poetry being good when I didn’t even see it you know. They helped me gain like to not put myself down you know because other people see it good and I didn’t see it until later. (Ruby, Interview 2)

Poetry allowed Ruby to grow stronger from the outside in, to feel connected and to “touch hearts.” Unlike Jaleeyah, Ruby conceptualized writing as a community activity through which she shared her story and picked up pieces of other’s stories that she heard. She saw writing as an expansive enterprise that bolstered her sense of self and could serve as a foundation for sustaining relationships that would have the power to improve day-to-day life.

When I first began interviewing Ruby for this study, she was in a negative space personally and expressed feeling like a failure. She felt frustrated and disappointed in herself because she had dropped out of community college and she had not been writing. Her writing voice, the one that recognized her own talents and gifts, was drowned out by the voices of family members who constantly told her that she would and could not achieve
or be somebody positive in the world. Because she felt that writing had become such an important part of her identity, not writing made Ruby feel as though she “was dying little by little” (Ruby, Interview 1). She explained that she missed the support of Mrs. Warran’s poetry class.

> Now I feel slightly alone I’m not going to lie and say I don’t. I know I’ve changed from being very naive and very innocent to a whole different person but I feel alone and I feel I need that person or whoever you know back and I mean, I let go of writing. Why? I don’t know why. I write here and there in my head and I write in my head and I never jot it down like I used to and I think I’m losing myself little by little even though I’m still trying to hold strength and still trying to hold myself in reality I feel like I’m dying little by little. Again. (Ruby, Interview 1)

Ruby not only lost touch with her writing practice, but the community of support it provided her. Writing, for Ruby, was a tenuous pillar of her self-esteem. She understood the two as connected and felt better about herself when she engaged with herself and others through writing, but she lacked a consistent structure through which to maintain the discipline of writing. As she moved away from her practice and lost touch with communities of writers, Ruby felt she might again succumb to her suicidal feelings. She appeared to be reaching out and asking for help during this first interview.18

When asked why she was not writing, Ruby explained that it is not just writing on her own that supported her, but having a safe space to connect with other writers. She held dearly to other people’s stories and described them as constitutive of her own sense of self. Ruby explained,

> I love to listen to what people have to say because it makes me grow. It makes me want to be like ok they wrote about this let me write about this. And it helps me and I don’t have that around me right now so to me its like, why write? (Ruby, Interview 1)

For Ruby, the poetry class functioned like group therapy. She remembered it as a space where she and her classmates grew from sharing and working through struggle together. In our first interview, Ruby fluctuated between expressing nostalgia for her high school poetry class and exuding a melancholic longing to find such a place in her adult life. In each of the subsequent interviews Ruby described her efforts to find a beloved community and to share with other writers. Unfortunately, none of her efforts were matched by people around her. She remained in search of a beloved community of writers and in need of help in tackling her life challenges.

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18 In my first interviews with both Cesar and Ruby, the talk seemed to unearth difficult feelings. In both instances after asking the formal questions, I turned off the audio recorder and continued to talk to the participants. Because I had pre-existing relationships with these youth, I was able to leverage our relationships to talk with them and follow up with them after hard feelings surfaced. Ruby, who was desperate for connection, expressed that she wanted to meet with the other poets and form a writing circle. We worked together to plan a writing night, but in the end after planning it, Ruby did not show up. I continued to follow up with her after the interviews were over.
While Ruby did not write consistently in her post-high school life, she still identified as a poet and sought places to meet other writers and exchange poems. In the one semester that she attended community college, Ruby won a monetary award for a poem she had entered into a writing contest. She expressed that she wanted to find a poetry group when she returned to college. She tried to connect with others through poetry. She sometimes shared her poetry with friends and her brother, who was the one family member with whom she had a decent, albeit distant relationship. She attempted to connect with her brother, but he would frequently disappear for extended periods and she would not be in contact with him. She attempted to connect with other writers in on-line chat rooms, but discovered that this was not a safe container for sharing her deeply personal poetry. Because of the anonymity of these chat rooms, Ruby said that “sometimes people would say rude things” and there was no one holding participants to respectful communication. Finally Ruby met a young man at work who also identified as a writer. They agreed to exchange a journal in which they would take turns writing poems and giving feedback. While Ruby enthusiastically wrote in the journal, the partnership fizzled out as her partner failed to reciprocate. While Ruby maintained hope that she could still use writing as a valuable tool, she also expressed deep frustration at not having found a supportive community in which to write.

**Writing to Change her Circumstances: Lachelle**

Writing, for Lachelle, allowed her to open up and release bottled-up feelings. Once externalized through writing, she could transform her thoughts and reflections into actions. She also understood writing as a way to share her story with others and to leave a more permanent record of her life. At the time of data collection for this study, Lachelle was finishing her BA in Psychology at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in the Midwestern United States. She was applying for graduate programs in social work. As a young woman who grew up in the foster care system, these accomplishments were no small feat. Lachelle self-identified as a writer and described how she had incorporated journaling into her daily life and also consistently returned to her earlier writing to assess her own growth and determine areas of focus for self-improvement. She kept a public blog of her poetry that she hoped would inspire others. Without writing, Lachelle asserted that she could not have imagined herself as a successful college student who was applying for graduate school. While Lachelle lamented the fact that she had entered college underprepared for the kinds of academic writing that was required, she felt that poetry served her affective needs and taught her the importance of believing in herself and building a community of support to persist and get the help she needed to thrive in the university setting.

Lachelle explained that she was “focused on achieving goals and those goals are centered around helping others and improving the lives of others and myself” (Lachelle, Interview 2). Lachelle felt that, through her writing practice, she had learned to confront her own issues and that by passing on her story she could help others to do the same. When asked what parts of her story she felt were most important for others to hear, she explained the following.
I would definitely want it to include the incidence of me being raped and molested because I believe that’s like part of my foundation of who I am. I think I view life a certain way because of that. I would want it to include that fact that I did grow up in a single parent with a parent with substance abuse I think that’s very critical because that also you know it made a great impact on who I am my personality and the decisions I make today. I would want it to include how I did very well in high school and college to show a balance that you can be going through things but if you channel it positively it can have a good outcome. I would want it to include basically things that another individual can learn from ‘cuz that’s pretty much all we are worth in the end. You turn out to be a story, so why not be a story that can help someone or can you know inspire someone or motivate?

(Lachelle, Interview 2)

In the previous chapter I described how, in poetry class, Lachelle learned to break through the silence around her own story. Once she was able to begin confronting her own experiences, they became a source of pride and motivation. As Lachelle continued to overcome obstacles, she wanted to communicate through her writing that others could too — regardless of where they come from or what has happened in their lives. She wanted to let others know that they could also become the heroes of their own stories and that writing could help them to transform their dreams into reality.

Lachelle described writing as “exciting” because she felt it gave her an opportunity to influence the way other people faced their own life challenges. She felt that her own experiences had value for other youth facing challenges, who might otherwise perceive their life circumstances as limitations. Prior to our second interview, Lachelle wrote a poem entitled “United We Strive” that she posted on her poetry blog.

Everyday is a struggle
it seems to never get easier
I push myself to keep striving
with god and my support team it must be possible
to achieve my dreams
Telling myself every day it’s worth the pain and suffering
when I feel I have hit rock bottom
I phone a friend knowing that someone
some where would be there for me
receiving help used to be hard for me
As I have gotten older I have realized help is a need
when you’re down and out
lost and confused
beaten and burned out
the clouds will open
and the sun will shine through
no one can make it in this world alone
not even you
for that reason let’s come together
and overcome these obstacles
let’s turn our words into action
and rise above
keep the fight of life
it’s not time to die
live live live
united we will strive

In discussing the motivation for this poem, she discussed how a poem might motivate someone who might not have other sources of inspiration or any other therapeutic interventions. She explained

I have dedicated my life to help others in a positive way. Any way possible. For people that’s into poetry, this would be another way of being able to do that. so if you’re not into going to counseling and so forth I’m going to publish — well I have already published and I’m going to continue to publish my poems and hopefully make a difference in someone’s life. Like with this poem the whole goal was just to get a person to feel motivated. Don’t give up. So this this is what I hope people get from this poem um they feel that they are not alone and I’ma put somewhere in here if you can’t contact nobody you can contact me. Really, because I know how important that is. (Lachelle, Interview 2)

While Lachelle’s writing process evolved in her life after high school into more of a personal journaling practice, she held onto a belief that writing should be public and should facilitate action. While she used writing as a personal tool, she also made her writings available to a broad audience through her blog (which she said had just over 300 views) and she wanted to make herself available for further conversation with anyone who read her poem and needed further support. She hoped to unite with others through her words and to send a strong message that she had learned to overcome obstacles and anyone else could too.

Poetry specifically, and writing in general, were outlets for the stresses that could have prevented Lachelle from making positive choices for herself. She described a sort of verbal alchemy through which she could transmute something negative into something beautiful.

Poetry has changed my life because it gave me the power to be open. Um when I was younger I used to hold a lot in of what you know what was going in my life things that I was witnessing. Things that was going on around me. I would you know I would bottle them up inside um I had I would say some aggression and I believe that poetry changed my life in that aspect because when I’m going through something now I can write about it. I can turn something bad or sad into something positive beautiful that promotes growth and you know could possibly help another person or help me also ‘cuz til this day I go back to my old poetry book from high school and you know read over it reflect on it and just look back like how far have I came and still how far will I go. (Lachelle, Interview 1)
Like other case study participants, she saw writing as a way to release anger that might otherwise have been unleashed in destructive ways. She believed that writing was life-changing tool that freed her from holding in negative feelings and experiences. Lachelle directly connected writing to her actions in the world and her ability to overcome obstacles. Later in the first interview, she described her poetry book as her version of a “growth chart.” Not only did Lachelle learn from her writings, but she felt they held value in inspiring others as well.

Lachelle believed that writing allowed her to create a clear vision of who she wanted to be and helped her to actualize her life goals and dreams. She felt that writing enabled this by allowing her to externalize her thoughts and then to be accountable to what she had committed to paper. She explained the difference between talking about something versus writing about it.

When you talk to a friend or anyone, if you notice, it’s easier for you to see their whole picture and offer advice because you are not involved in it. But when you are in your own situation it’s hard for you to see the big picture because you are involved in the picture. So in a way, by writing out your experiences or whatever you’re going through, you are actually stepping out of your situation and then it’s there for you to view as if you are not in it, you know? It allows you to see it as a whole and to change or alter or keep the same — whatever you would like to do to ultimately lead you to the person you are trying to become (Lachelle, Interview 1)

Writing allowed Lachelle to experience a perspective-shift that helped her to see herself in a different light. She could look at her situation as if she wasn’t in the middle of it in order to figure out what to do. It was a form of self-objectification through which Lachelle could begin to advise herself in the same way she would counsel a friend. She believed this practice helped her on the path to becoming the person she wanted to be. As an aspiring therapist, she used writing as a way to become her own counselor.

In addition to continuing to write poetry after high school, Lachelle developed a reflective writing practice through which she documented her growth, tracked her progress toward goals, and identified behaviors she wanted to shift as she continued to grow. Here she discussed her emergent theory.

Writing is a very powerful tool. Actually last semester I was taking class — a theories of counseling class — what I started to do last semester was actually develop my own theory and it’s actually based off writing and with a self-reflection method. The theory is not one hundred percent done but my reflection therapy — that’s not the permanent name for it yet but that’s where I’m going in that area — it will be based off writing. So you would write your goals whatever you are going through any emotions um and what you would do is you keep track. keep track of everyday you will jot something down and you go back and you you view it and you reflect on it and you look for things that you can change or that you would like to stay the same. And you basically map out your life. (Lachelle, Interview 3)
Writing. Lachelle maintained, had real material consequences; it was a pathway to success and a tool for problem-solving. She felt that others could benefit from using writing in the same way that she did and hoped to contribute this idea to the field of counseling.

Central to Lachelle’s identity, writing wasn’t just something she does, but it is crucial to who she is.

Writing. I don’t think I will ever stop writing like that’s a part of me now that I that is definitely a part of me. If I am confused I don’t know what’s going on in my life I will write it and a week later go back read it and analyze it and then write on that same thing on how I view it today. And that is very very helpful. It shows me how my thinking has improved. How I have matured. It also allows me to monitor my moods, um my emotions, my activities, and hopefully one day it’ll be a piece of history. I can leave it to my grandkids or kids one day. I’ve been actually considering publishing my journals. The only thing that’s holding me back on that is I have to go back and type all those freaking things and I have so many from the years. So many journals.

(Lachelle, Interview 3)

Not only was writing integral to the person Lachelle has become as an adult, but she recognized that her writings would remain as documentation of her life for generations to come. Lachelle felt that her story held value for herself and for other youth who felt overwhelmed by life-challenges or limited by their circumstances.

**Personal and Political: Cesar**

... With my poetry I try to hit particular things that I think need to be talked about and give light to it.

The shift from writing for personal ends to writing to move a crowd and appeal to a public sense of justice characterizes Cesar’s writerly evolution from high school into his early adult life. At the time of data collection for this study, Cesar was a twenty-four year-old young man who was extremely active in a local revolutionary Marxist political movement. He used his writing to share social critique with the explicit goal of moving his audiences to action. When I began collecting data for this study, Cesar was teaching at a middle school through the AmeriCorps VISTA program and working as a political activist. By the third interview, while he was invested in teaching and education, he was unable to finish the school year with his students because of issues with the organization that was paying for his work in the school. While Cesar lamented this change, he was excited at the opportunity, once relieved of his daily teaching responsibilities, to write, organize full-time, and travel with the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). Cesar used the word “writing” to describe both writing poetry and composing lyrics; he saw the two activities as intertwined. The combination of poetry and lyrics reflected his valuing of the orality of poetry. He conceived of his audience as listeners rather than readers. Some of his writings were personal and private, and some were public and intended to move people to political action. While Cesar initially discovered writing as a tool with which he sorted out personal struggles, over time he favored his more public and political work. While Cesar emphasized his political voice, at the time of data collection for this study, he continued to produce
personal writing as a way of getting to the social messages he shared through his activist writings. He framed personal writing as a necessary step in understanding his role as an individual within a larger social system.

Cesar characterized his development as a writer and as an activist as entangled. Writing, he explained, had served as a way to help him make sense of struggles since he had first taken Mrs. Warran’s class at NBHS. When he began writing, Cesar had been out of school for two years. He explained that he had been using drugs frequently and a lot of his early writing was about his drug use. He described how Hunter S. Thompson and his signature style of psychedelic “Gonzo Journalism” was the greatest influence on his early writing. As Cesar explored his own feelings through writing, he reflected on his life habits. As his writing grew more reflective, he explained that he stopped using drugs as much as before. As he continued to write about his ideas about the world, he also realized he needed to change the way he was living to reflect the values he expressed in his writing.

In the early stages of Cesar’s political awakening he saw his identities as conflicting. On one hand he hung out with “the boys on the block,” folks from his neighborhood with whom he rapped and smoked marijuana. At first he felt that he had to hide his emergent political or revolutionary identity and that the two manifestations of his self were incompatible. He described that he “kept that to [himself].” As Cesar developed, he sought to bridge what he previously perceived to be two separate worlds: his political and street identities.

In facing the tensions and complexities of his own identity, Cesar’s writing led the way. As he wrote he expanded his repertoire and wrote raps about his ideologies whereas previously he had written mostly about drugs and life on the block. For Cesar, the challenge was not to eliminate or resolve those perceived tensions, but to be aware of them and how they played out in the social sphere and in his work in the world. In discussing his writing process, Cesar shared that he would sift through the personal writing to discover the universal themes that he believed would touch and inspire his audiences. As a young, working class man of color coming of age in an inner-city neighborhood, Cesar developed a public voice to which he hoped other youth could relate and also begin to understand their own struggles as political. In his political writing, he aimed to make explicit the relationship between his struggles and the social structures that produce and reproduce oppression. He wanted people to understand the systematic nature of the struggles that each individual faces. Cesar recited the following poem from memory for me in our second interview. While he called it one of his “personal poems,” it situated his own struggles within the systems of structural oppression in a way that had the capacity to reach other youth, especially when performed with the accompaniment of music/beats.

What’s inside this noggin?
Lyrical misconduct
Chemical imbalances
from snorting hella product
from smoking hella doja
	til my mind was stuck
yacking up blood
when my ass was drunk
I didn't mean to do it
I was influenced by a system
That's why I broke that chain
I fuck with Communism now
And it's not a struggle going back and forth
I was just fourteen 1st time in court
Hanging with the homeboys
stealing cars like sport
Taking ounces of dope and separating the bags
the 1st time I sold dope I stole from my Dad
I was just a little kid but goddamn I was bad
But can you blame me?
when every day they beat my ass
I used to tell the racist teacher
Fuck you-kiss my ass.
You ain’t teaching me shit.
What the fuck you gotta say?
When you step into my hood
you hear bullets not child’s play

While Cesar continued to produce writing about his individual struggles, he framed this as part of a social dialogue in which personal experiences lead him to certain social commentaries and those poetic critiques allowed him to see his own struggles as intrinsically linked to those of other oppressed people and communities. This poem captures a gendered experience of oppression and the specifically masculine responses to these structures with references to “misconduct,” opposition, and violence. While Cesar deals with the personal in this poem, it is entangled with public performances of masculinity.

Whereas Cesar started as a writer using his craft to explore himself and his personal struggles in the world, in his adulthood he has turned that craft inside out and uses it to connect with others’ issues as they affect him and his community. Cesar described feeling tension between writing for self and writing for the greater good of the public. His individual struggles served as a starting point in his writing, but from those individual struggles, he would select the material that he believed could speak to the pressing social issues and appeal to a broader audience. He explained,

19 Marijuana
20 Vomiting
A lot of the stuff I write is individualist starting from myself but I’m trying to sift through that and seeing how I can connect that with the overall picture of what shapes people so that in a way people get a better connection to it than just me me this is what I’m going through because then they are like I can relate to HIM as opposed to I can relate to humanity and that’s more what I’ve been trying to do with my music. (Cesar, Interview 2)

He wanted people to understand that the issues they face are bigger than themselves and that they have historical momentum that requires strategic intervention. Cesar’s awareness of his evolved task and audience has caused him to think critically about his own writing and how it affects those who hear it, and in turn how it affects him as the writer and messenger.

Cesar reported grappling with how to move the crowd with his poetry and music while maintaining a motivational stance, but also remaining faithful to his critical view of life in America. In his role as a sort of motivator opening political rallies, his purpose was to “bring light” to social issues, to entertain, and to incite people to revolutionary action. Cesar believed, “You do need a serious revolutionary culture but there has to be some liveliness to that there’s gotta be some joy to it” (Cesar, Interview 1). Cesar described the challenges of writing his critique in a way that was real, but not all doom and gloom. He searched for a balance between inspiration and reality, seriousness and joy in his writing. Of this struggle he said,

A lot of my music is very dark. And I’m not one who believes that if you send out positive vibes the world will become positive. Because you can think positive all you want. There’s still a fucked up world out there. So sometimes my music is very dark. Very heavy. And that’s the part I’m just trying to figure out. How to connect with people. ‘Cause in the beginning I was just writing for me. Just so I could relax I could relieve anger, so I could relieve anxiety, it was just me me me. And all of the stuff that I was writing reflected that. Me and anger. Me and my depression. Me and my frustration. Me and my family issues. Where now it’s more like there’s a society. There’s a world. There’s a system. Let’s try to look at that. (Cesar, Interview 3)

Cesar was clear that he did not believe that by simply writing positive words or thinking positive thoughts, that he could transform social dynamics. He did, however, hold a belief that writing through perceived social contradictions and problematics and then illuminating them for a public audience did have the capacity to catalyze change. He understood his words as having the power to bind people in social movement, but he was also conscious of his need to be both realistic and hopeful in his delivery.

Mind is matter. Writing not only fulfilled individual, affective needs for Cesar, it was also a way to turn the inside out, a means to connect to others for the purpose of social change. Writing allowed Cesar to get out of his own head and to materialize his thoughts in the world. He hoped that by doing this, he would influence others to come together in sharing both their struggles and their visions for social change. According to Cesar,

...you have all this understanding, now you have to turn that into action. You gotta make that into a material force. Take it outta the books and outta the
mind and start moving into the world and getting others to move too. (Cesar, Interview 3)

Cesar understood this materialization of inner thoughts as a social action that tended to ripple into further actions for himself and his audience. Writing, in Cesar’s estimation, propelled thoughts into deeds and was a necessary step in world-making. He shed light on the fact that “millions of people have an intent or a hope for a different world. But if they’re not doing something about that if they’re not doing something within their own life to change something then... all of it just stays in your head” (Cesar, Interview 3). Getting the ideas out and sharing them was the first step in Cesar’s plan for pushing material change in the social world.

Cesar revealed what he believed to be an intimate relationship between artist and audience in illuminating the motivation behind his newer public writings. He quoted rapper Tech 9 to illustrate his dialectical theory of writing.

I write for different reasons. Sometimes its anxiety — and I just have to get it out. I just have to write about it. Sometimes it’s ‘cause I wanna understand something. Like I’ll be confused in my head and I’ll feel like if I write it and then re-read it, I’ll have a better understanding. I mean, I also write for other people too. ‘Cause I want them to hear the words. But that’s been something new to be honest. At first the writing was just for me. I mean still, like I was saying, a lot of the writing I have is still for me. My personal stuff that I’m trying to learn how to get out in a different way because — it always makes me think about this one Tech 9 song, where he says "I put my life in this music, Nina is inside out/I shed my heart out for people/ They know what the inside’s bout/ Will they keep feeling Nina forever/This I doubt/Can never cry for help so if you’re listening this my shout/." And I’ve always liked that line because that first part like, I’m not just making bullshit music to make you party — I’m giving you a piece of myself. And what you do with that affects me. (Cesar, Interview 3)

The point Cesar made was that if people turned their personal struggles inside out, if they connected with others and also shared their hopes and visions for a better world, that they would see that things don’t have to be the way that they are, that no one is alone, and that another future is possible. Once he turned the inside out, he opened himself to criticism and scrutiny and to being part of something larger than himself; but he understood this as an important aspect of working toward change. For Cesar, writing was central to this communication or this turning the inside out, and then back in again as a shared sense of struggle and purpose united artist and audience. Once Cesar had shared his writings, they became part of a movement in which both he and his audience shared ownership and responsibility.

Since the beginning of his political awakening at NBHS, Cesar became increasingly dedicated to revolutionary political action. In describing himself, Cesar explained

I’m a revolutionary and a communist and I think that no good can come about until the system is completely done away with and that right now it’s a
political struggle in this country to get people to realize the need for revolution. (Cesar, Interview 1)

For Cesar this belief was not just talk. It guided his actions in the world. Cesar had been on the frontlines of various protest movements over the four years between leaving high school and the time of data collection for this study. He organized May Day walkouts and actions against youth incarceration, toured with revolutionary groups to speak out against police brutality, and engaged in the Occupy Movement. He explained how the killing of Oscar Grant on New Year’s Day 2009 launched him deeper into activism and increased the urgency he felt around the need for revolutionary change. Cesar’s involvement in the Oscar Grant protests, which the media called riots, deepened his awareness of the media and their power to represent social and historical events and moments. Because he believed that the media misunderstood and misrepresented the rage that youth expressed in the wake of Oscar Grant’s killing, he invested more deeply in his own words and his power to represent himself and to speak to others about what he understood as happening.

Cesar lived in an Occupy encampment for the duration of the Occupy Movement Protests in 2011. He also traveled with the RCP to share his writing about the killing of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida in 2012, and other victims of police and state violence. Cesar’s ideology and his action converged in his writing, which he shared at rallies and protests. He performed his writings to music in an effort to move the crowd both to the music and to the streets to take up action. For Cesar, his writing was more than just words on a page, but a call for revolutionary change. He explained that his intention was to unite people through his words. He wanted “to unite with people who want to change the world” and incite thoughtful action, meaning he wanted people to think through their visions of revolutionary change.

I think the world does need to be changed and people need to be introduced with not just like the idea of the revolution in some kind of religious way but like alright you want a revolution, let’s talk about what it’s going to take. Let’s talk about not just what it’s gonna take but what society we need to put into being afterward. (Cesar, Interview 3)

He used his poetry and music to start a conversation about the kind of world he wanted to inhabit. He did not just want people to hop on a revolutionary bandwagon to tear down the current system, but Cesar wanted to catalyze thinking about what would best replace what he believed to be a dysfunctional system that is currently in place. In order to inspire this kind of thinking and action, Cesar had to tease out the personal and political in his writing and to understand the complex relationship between the two.

In his early adult life Cesar evolved into a public writer who held his craft as fuel for his political beliefs and subsequent actions. He believed writing, as a form of making thoughts tangible to others, to be central to the Marxist project of dismantling the false permanence of the existing capitalist order. When asked what role writing has in dismantling the social order, Cesar quoted Marx and the concept that people hold on to an idea of an order that is false. Cesar believes that creativity and imagination are crucial to helping people see beyond this illusion that things just are the way they are. In order to lead the revolution, Cesar explained,
You do have to maintain that poetic side. That ambition. That wonder of the world and really, you know. You need to keep that side. Otherwise it’s very easy for you to become a rigid dogmatic, "It’s all about the science. It’s all about the science". So I’ve been really trying to figure that out. And some of the writing has been helping. A lot of time in society you hear people saying, ‘here come the communists. Party’s over. Turn on the lights.’” (Cesar, Interview 3)

Cesar’s belief in maintaining creativity and joy in his work revealed how he had matured as a writer and learned to reconcile the parts of himself that he had previously conceived to be contradictory. He has learned how to weave together his love of music, creativity, and his deep conviction in revolutionary Marxism in a way that has allowed him to fuse the personal and political and to turn mind into matter. For Cesar, poetry is a material practice. Cesar revealed that of the various forms of writing in which he engaged, poetry held a special place because of its ability to straddle art and science, to bring joy and life to the movement, and to move the crowd.

**Discussion**

This chapter highlighted the ways that case study participants evolved as writers after high school and how they adapted their writing practices to fulfill individual and social needs. While they chose different life paths and still struggled to varying degrees, the case study participants saw writing as an invaluable, life-affirming, and sometimes life-saving tool. When asked where they would be without writing as a tool in their lives, Cesar and Monet both said that without writing as a tool, they felt they would be dead or in jail. Ruby felt that she would have succumbed to her suicidal thoughts and tendencies if she had not had writing to work her way through those feelings. Jaleeyah believed she would be in a psychiatric facility if it weren’t for the coping mechanism of writing in her life. Lachelle discussed how she would not have been able to achieve her goals of attending a four-year college and pursuing a career in counseling and psychology if she did not write regularly. They all continued to write after high school, albeit some more consistently than others; and regardless of the frequency of their writing post-high school practice they all understood writing as a critical tool for overcoming life challenges.

While the frame of social poetics examines how writing can facilitate a transition from *what is to what ought to be*, these cases reveal that only some participants were able to use writing to imagine new possibilities for themselves and their world while for others writing was more of a tool for coping with immediate threats and challenges. Monet and Ruby used writing as an alternative to violence, whether that was violence toward others or manifested as self-harm. And while Ruby attempted to use writing as a way of connecting with others, she often found herself dissatisfied with the results of her efforts or unable to sustain them. Without the therapeutic writing community, Ruby continued to be at-risk of falling back into her self-destructive tendencies. Jaleeyah, Lachelle, and Cesar’s cases offer examples of youth who were using writing to challenge ascribed identities on individual levels and also as community members (in Lachelle and Cesar’s cases). These portraits also reveal how writing is a tool for future-planning, and for envisioning lives beyond the prescribed ones that many low-income youth of color are handed.
These cases highlight some of the non-academic applications of writing that matter to young adults as they transition into the adult world. These practices overlap with academic identities as illustrated by Lachelle and Ruby, but serve a wider purpose that encompasses positive lifestyle choices and healthy tools for managing stress and making decisions, and even forging social change. While some came to NBHS as writers already, and others first honed their writing skills in Mrs. Warran’s class, all agreed that in the space of their poetry class they nurtured skills, habits, and relationships that have positively impacted their futures. In the next chapter I delve deeper into the ways the students engaged with Mrs. Warran’s pedagogy and how these interactions resulted in touchstone poems that maintained importance for them in their lives after high school.
Chapter 5: Transformational Experiences and Touchstone Poems

Poetry Should Fly
An emulation of a poem by Ruth Forman
By Lachelle

Poetry should fly high in da sky
For all to see
right next to the airplanes
Sky divers and jets

Poetry should swim
In the school pools
in the sea with the fish
Poetry swims within me

Poetry should live in the hood
Call out what block she from
Go dummy and get stupid

Poetry should be a gun
Bullets fly
Kill or save
With one hit

Poetry should be a cover
Keepin' me warm at night
Holdin' me and Bookey tight

Poetry should be a rainbow
Show red when feelin' anger
Yellow keepin it real
Add black for just a bit of questioning

Poetry should be a girl
Have an army of friends
Go to school/ PMS/ Talk on da phone

Poetry should fly (NBHS Anthology, 2007)

Through analysis of participant memories, field notes from observation in the poetry class, and Mrs. Warran’s talk, I established in previous chapters that Mrs. Warran’s pedagogy prioritized relationship building and the nurturing of a classroom space where students were known and knew others in an idealized family-like atmosphere. I also
explored the ways that case study participants adapted their writing practices to meet their needs in their post-high school lives. In this chapter, I explore the nature of the memorable writing that participants produced in Mrs. Warran’s class. I found that case study participants felt that they produced this memorable writing because Mrs. Warran pushed them to dig deeply within their own experiences and emotions. Many of the focal participants said that this digging deep involved being pushed by Mrs. Warran to delve far below the surface of their feelings to unearth the complex range of emotions that they harbored. Many participants described Mrs. Warran as a teacher who relentlessly pushed them further and deeper than they thought they could go. They described her as “pushing” and “forcing [them] to write about emotions.” While these descriptions conjured feelings of coercion, the participants expounded to describe how it was that Mrs. Warran was able to elicit these deeply emotive poems. Their descriptions of her tactics partially contradicted the descriptions of force that they used initially and offered memories of a teacher-mentor who coaxed, rather than forced, her students out of their shells as the relationships in the poetry circle strengthened. It was through these relational techniques that case study participants explained Mrs. Warran elicited what I call touchstone poems that transformed the way they understood themselves or their circumstances.

These poems were central to their memories of the class (as discussed in Chapter 3) and often informed their uses of writing after high school (as discussed in Chapter 4). Each of the six case study participants shared touchstone poems in their interviews; some were published, some were performed, one was neither published nor performed but continually rewritten, and one was destroyed by the poet. These poems were described in connection with anchor experiences (Pillemer, 1998) that continued to hold meaning for participants in their adulthood. These touchstone poems remained as artifacts of the work from the poetry class and were poems against which the students assessed their subsequent experiences. For many of the case study participants these poems served as conductors that connected words and actions in impactful ways in early adulthood. In this chapter I analyze the touchstone poems, what led up to them, and how these moments resulted in development.

Understanding Emotion: Ty

Below are two of Ty’s poems that were published in the 2007 anthology. The first, “My Ode to Oakland” was one of his early poems and the second, “My Ode to Anger” is his touchstone poem. “My Ode to Oakland” typifies the kind of writing he described producing prior to breaking out with his “Ode to My Emotions.” Interestingly, both used the genre of the ode, but the earlier one is an example of what Ty calls his “one note” poetry that focuses on the iconography of Oakland youth culture and is devoid of emotion, while the second personifies an inner world that reveals the complex interactions between the author’s feelings. The fact that Ty chose to publish both of these poems in the same anthology shows that the new poem, in which he explored an unchartered part of himself, did not eclipse or negate the older poem, but rather illustrated his range of expressive capability. After the passing of time (our interviews were 5 years after the publication of these poems), his break-out poem took on more importance in his memory and as an expression of the emotional growth and maturity that he described as taking place since high school. Below I

The fact that Ty chose to publish both of these poems in the same anthology shows that the new poem, in which he explored an unchartered part of himself, did not eclipse or negate the older poem, but rather illustrated his range of expressive capability. After the passing of time (our interviews were 5 years after the publication of these poems), his break-out poem took on more importance in his memory and as an expression of the emotional growth and maturity that he described as taking place since high school. Below I
begin by analyzing Ty's earlier poem, “My Ode to Oakland” and next I analyze his touchstone poem, “Ode to My Emotions.”

Ty recalled enrolling in Mrs. Warran’s class because he was interested in writing raps and making beats. He was involved in the hip hop class at the school and he saw the poetry class as a place where he could write rhymes to record in the studio over the beats he and his peers made there. Ty was heavily influenced by the Hyphy Movement in the Bay Area. When he first took Mrs. Warran’s class he remembered writing about smoking weed, cars, and street life. Ty described these topics as his “recreational activities” (Ty, case study interview 1). Ty described how all of his early poems were “one note” and focused on the subversive youth culture of the Hyphy Movement (Ty, Interview 2).

My Ode to Oakland

During the years that students attended NBHS (2004-2009) there was a popular youth movement in Oakland called the Hyphy Movement. Many NBHS students identified as part of this youth culture phenomenon that was characterized by the music of local Bay Area rappers Mac Dre, Keak da Sneak, and E-40. Their poetry frequently referenced the iconography of this movement including references to smoking weed, attending sideshows (illegal car shows), and hyphy dancing (turbing, crunk, and shaking dreads). Students at NBHS had painted a mural of Mac Dre, who was killed in 2004, in the music studio in the school.
Land of the Grapes
Home of the White tees
Nikes
Stunna shades
Three hair styles
Dreads/Braids/fades
Full of dime women
Wit breasts, thighs, and cakes
Only thing niggas dream about
Is money to be made
It's all about the cars
And the paper
Most days we high speed hyphy
Or scrapin in ya scraper
Mostly real niggas
We get rid of all the fakers
The town is so HARD
Ani’t no soft niggas gonna break her
Oakland is full of choppers
Killers and raiders
If Oakland was in Iraq
It would be a piece of cake bruh
The whole war
Would be ova in one day
We got army and NSA weapons
We shut down anything nigga
With no discretion
On this side of the US
Oakland people are the best of the worst
We put inside and outsiders
In da curse of the hearse
Garunteed only way you leaving for good
Is in the epidermis of
Mother earth
100 to 200 dead a year
is barely enough to quench her thirst
to some of us
it’s all about the purple stuff
drop 5/ drop 10/ drop dub
Roll yo swishers up
Drink heem

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22 A purple variety of marijuana
23 A modified car with large rims
24 A cigar used for rolling marijuana.
Sip gin
Pour absolut
In a paper cup
Pop some pills
Gone and thizz\textsuperscript{26} it up
Feelin ourselves
Man we really don’t give a fuck
Not caring if our day ends
Wit our wrists or fists in cuffs
We thinking about
Putting bricks in trunks
Rips and blunts
Gold and platinum fronts
Thinking about females
And the radius of her lumps
Chevys/ Buicks
We leavin you
Gassin/ Breakin/ Dippin through
Lock it up and swinging dude\textsuperscript{27}
So don’t ask
We show what it do
And what it is
From the North/East/ West
And all the way through
Oakland nigga
It’s nothing new

\textsuperscript{25} Hennessey
\textsuperscript{26} Ecstasy
\textsuperscript{27} This refers to “side shows,” illegal car shows.
Here Ty expresses love for his city through iconography of the Hyphy Movement that prides itself on rebellious behavior and even sometimes the perpetration of violence. As an ode, Ty is presumably singing the praises of his city and its unique sub-culture. By using the pronouns “we” (lines 14, 16, 26, 27, 31, 49, 52, 59, and 63) and “us” (line 38), Ty shows allegiance to a subversive youth culture defined by scraper-cars, drugs and alcohol, and the sexual objectification of women. Ty's poem captures an essence of stereotypical expectations of patriarchal masculinity and what hooks describes as “gangsta culture” (hooks, 2004) in its bravado and conflation of money and power.

There are references to cars and side shows (lines 12, 14-15, 20, 58, 60-61), to drugs and alcohol (lines 2, 39-47, 53-54), to fashion trends like gold teeth and long dreads (lines 3-7, 55). The poem contains two sections that describe women in sexually objectifying ways (lines 8-9 and 56-57). Ty makes references to making money by any means (lines 10-11, 13) like selling drugs (line 53) and not fearing consequences like getting arrested (lines 49-51).

Like the Hyphy Movement itself, the poem lacks any expression of emotional depth. Woven throughout the poem is the notion of realness (lines 16-17, 62-64), power (lines 18-19), and “not giving a fuck” (line 49). There are references to violent acts that are treated in an uncritical remorseless manner. Ty compares Oakland to a warzone (lines 22-26) where weakness is exploited (lines 16-17 and 31-32) and the city is thirsty for blood. There is an almost celebratory undertone to description of the high murder rates in the city (lines 36-37). There is an insistence that power and violence are necessarily linked (lines 17, 21, 31-32, 33-35, and 36-37) and that being hard (read uncaring) is key to survival (line 18).

While this lack of feeling was typical of the lyrics of Hyphy music, it also demonstrated what Ty described as his own inability to explore his feelings in writing as a novice poet.

Below I analyze Ty's “Ode to My Emotions,” which he described as a touchstone poem because it was his first attempt to write about his feelings.

**Ode to My Emotions**

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28 In 2006, well-known rapper, E-40 debuted a music video called “Tell Me When to Go.” The video was filmed in Oakland and showcased side show culture and a dance known to youth as “going dumb.” Oakland was making a name for itself in national media and hip hop culture for its innovative style of music and car shows.
You know ANGER is one letter short of Danger
When my man ANGER wakes up
He's like kill everyone in sight
So I write him down on paper
To suppress the pit bull Mohammad Ali
Put a nigga to sleep tendencies in me
Cuz it's amazing how fast pistols come out
When this niggas around
No smiles just frowns and mean mugs
It's my nigga don't call me thug
ANGER convinced me not to give a fuck

And this beautiful lady LOVE
She is so sweet to me
If she was a fruit I guarantee she would be a peach
Fuzzy/ Soft skin
It's so easy to sink your teeth in
Her flesh tastes the best
Yeah we close friends
But right when our essence
begin to intertwine
Hear comes my man

ANGER
DA FUCK
I can't get rid of him
We stuck like tight jeans on big butts
Crazy thangs on my brain/ Like this stuff
Blood/ Guts/ Knives/ Thumps/ Ride/Die/ Cry
WHAT
And don't get me started on JEALOUSY
This lil wimpy guy sighs and whines
Every time my ex walks by
WHY/ He makes me sick
NONCHALANT sits there and watch
While JEALOUSY cries

I think JEALOUSYS whipped
ANGER comes back with a fully loaded clip
ANGER'S upset he says
He's going to kill that bitch

LOVE'S (sweet sexy ass) says
Don't kill my ex chick
I'm going crazy
Not knowing what to think
Lil’ vulnerable SADNESS
Is makin’ ANGER the maddest
Anger points a gun at me
Cuz I’m isolating SADNESS
Away from ANGER’S killing passion
Big ego GLADNESS says I should be happy
Cuz my ex can no longer have this
Mackin’ ass HORNY says
I should fuck every cute chick
I’m stuck like my nig STUNNED
Tryin’ to figure out what’s happenin’
Cry baby GRIEF makes me feel the saddest
SLY/ANGER/ and PAIN
Get together to do damage
They had me convinced
For a minute to feel madness

But LOVE gets tough
Grabs me by the shirt
She says be man
Don’t do something stupid cuz you hurt
She gives me a smirk
Lets go of my shirt
And says think
I calm down
Put my emotions back inside of me
And go to sleep

In “Ode to My Emotions,” Ty invites his readers into his rainbow of feelings and the interactions between them that ultimately guide his choice of actions. Ty highlights his feelings of anger, love, jealousy, sadness, “non-chalant,” gladness, sexual desire, shock, and grief. Of these, anger and love seem to hold the most power as Anger repeatedly returns in the poem trying to overcome the other feelings. Ty’s “Ode to My Emotions” is more active than his “My Ode to Oakland.” Whereas “My Ode to Oakland” was chock-full of nouns, this ode has a verb in most lines. Anger “wakes up” (line 2) and attempt to “kill” (line 3), pistols “come out” (line 7) and he tries to convince the author to act. The author “writes” (line 4) and suppresses (line 5) the aggravated emotion. Love appears (line 13), but then Anger appears (line 22). The author “can’t get rid of him” (line 26). Jealousy (line 36) is there crying and Non-chalant sits idly by (line 35). Anger returns with a loaded gun (39); he wants to kill the author’s ex-girlfriend. Love stands up to stop the violence (lines 43-44). Other emotions conspire, like Gladness and Horny (lines 52-55). Sly, Anger, and Pain almost get the best of the narrator (lines 59-62). “Beautiful Lady Love” offers a contrast to the images of women offered in “My Ode to Oakland.” While she is still sexualized, she is also described through friendship and powerful communication. In the end, Love triumphs (lines 64-68), suppresses Anger, and teaches an important lesson—not to act out of hurt. The emotions interact and attempt to win influence over the author as the scene unfolds.
The verbs in the poem lend movement to the dramatic scene he describes and give a sense of the transitory nature of these feelings he personifies.

While the poem is about his emotions, writing finds its way into the poem as a tool for quelling anger. Writing, as Ty explains in the opening of the poem, quieted the overwhelming anger that he felt. The sublimation of anger, through writing, paves the way for Ty to see his other feelings. In the end, Ty is able to calm down, listen to love, “put [his] emotions back inside” and rest. The writing of this drama allowed Ty to externalize his feelings in order to understand them and to think before he acted. The emphasis on verbs and dramatic action in the poem also conveyed the diverse choices of action.

“Ode to My Emotions” was the first poem Ty wrote about his own feelings and he reflected back on this poem as a pivotal moment in his adolescence. In this way it speaks back to conceptions of patriarchal masculinity (Ginwright, 2010; hooks, 2004) by externalizing the complex feelings that men harbor. In another way it embodies gendered notions of emotions with Love personified as a woman who uses the power of seduction to impact the actions of the narrator. This poem was the result of what he remembered as Mrs. Warran’s constant urging of him to dig deeper. He recalled how Mrs. Warran let him write about whatever he wanted, but over time, as people in the class opened up, she began to encourage him to diversify the subjects of his poetry. Ty described how, without forcing him, Mrs. Warran “nudged” him, asking him if there were other things he felt or thought about besides street life. He explained,

I had problems dealing with my emotions back then and um like Mrs. Warran kinda’ like forced me to write about my emotions. I used to write a lot about my recreational activities which kinda’ got old after a while of me writing about the same thing so you know she never told me like oh you can’t write about that but she just kind of pushed me to write about other things-- like she would read one of my poems and she would be like ‘oh you’re writing about this again’ and you know I’d kind of giggle it off but she’d be like ‘what else do you have feelings about? You know do you feel ways about things?’ I’d be like, of course I feel ways about things [laughs]. She was trying to get me to stay off that one topic or that one speed. She would kinda’ coach me, push me, you know a little simple nudge (Ty, Case Study Interview 2).

Ty’s response speaks to the effects of oppression on young men and how it manifested in a resistance to exploring his feelings. Mrs. Warran seemed to pick up on this and encourage Ty to dig deep without naming it as a gendered act. Without giving directives, Mrs. Warran leveraged her relationship with Ty to encourage him to explore his feelings and commit them to the page. While Ty described Mrs. Warran as “forcing” him, he culminated this description by characterizing it as a “little simple nudge.” Rather than penalizing Ty by lowering his grades for the monotony of his subject matter, Ty remembered Mrs. Warran as remaining persistent in using curiosity to encourage Ty to use writing to explore different aspects of himself. Eventually, he did.

In his interviews, Ty described the poem, “Ode to My Emotions” as a critical moment for him in his transition to adulthood. While Ty was one of the most published poets in the class, with a total of six poems in the first poetry anthology, when asked if any poems stood out to him, he unwaveringly identified “Ode to My Emotions” as his “breaking out poem”
(Ty, Case Study Interview 2). The writing and sharing of this poem stood out in Ty’s memory because it was the first time he remembered digging beneath the surface and played with the spectrum of his emotions in his writing. The result was a dramatic poem in which he personified his feelings and put them in conversation with one another, allowing others to witness the drama of his conflicting feelings that he had previously tried to suppress.

That was like my breaking out poem and it really showed me that I should branch out. I had learned that I’m able to control my emotions and not even able to control them but to understand them and write it down to where people can understand it you know (Ty, Case Study Interview 2).

As a touchstone poem, Ty’s “Ode to My Emotions” altered the way he understood his own capacity to cope with his emotions. He also remembered learning, through composing this poem, that he could successfully explain his feelings to others as well. After this breakthrough, Ty began to branch out and to write directly about the things he felt and experienced under the surface.

The lasting impact of this exploration of feelings was that it launched a journey for Ty, that led to deeper self-understanding. This poem held importance in Ty’s memories as what McAdams and Bowman (2001) describe as a redemptive narrative that signals movement in a positive direction for an individual. As Ty continued the exploration of his emotions that began with this ode, he began to feel more in control of his actions in the world, especially in relationships (Ty, Case Study Interview 2). Ty explained that from that first poem about his feelings, he started to use writing as a way to calm anger and quell impulses, just like he described in the first line of his poem. In the interview he described how this kind of writing allows him to

get it down and better understand like what I’m feeling and you know when I sometimes when I read when I uh think about how I feel and I’m able to you know to choose how I project it like if I’m going to act upon my emotions or if I’m gonna you know tell myself that it’s not the right thing to do. It gives me extra little thinking time about how I feel and about what action I’m going to take based upon how I feel (Ty, Case Study Interview 2).

Ty conceptualized his actions in the world as projections of his inner feelings, so in order to act with intention he needed to get in touch with his emotions. He explained how writing about what he feels has helped him to understand the spectrum of emotions, to listen to them, and to take control of which ones guide his decisions. Ty attributed this ability to sort through his feelings and to give himself space to write through his feelings to this critical incident in Mrs. Warran’s class.

Just as Mrs. Warran exhibited patience and persistence in urging Ty to break through to his feelings, Ty has learned to hold space and listen to the feelings he harbors. He articulated how important this skill is to him as he builds a strong foundation for the future of his family. Ty talked about wanting to rewrite history both through his poetry, and through his decisions. He wants to teach future generations about the power of writing through and about feelings in order to deal with them in a productive way.
Continuing to Question: Jaleeyah

Jaleeyah described her poem “What is Family?” as a touchstone poem that came out of poetry class and then continued to speak for her after she had left NBHS. Prior to taking Mrs. Warran’s class, Jaleeyah had used writing as a tool for self-expression, but she described writing in the third person, as if her story belonged to someone else (Jaleeyah, Interview 2). This poem captured a questioning of family that remained with her as she moved into adulthood.

What is Family?

Two brothers/ Two sisters
All in pain/ is what I’ve gained

My father wasn’t there
I realized/ I don’t care

My mother truly doesn’t care
If she did maybe I wouldn’t feel this grudge
This pain
And sometimes insane

Insane because
I got slapped around
Beat to the ground

I feel scared
As she dares
To hit me
But wonder why she let him kiss me
Touch me in a way
I knew nothing of

He touches me/ Rubs my thigh
As I take a deep sigh
He grabs my arm
Holds me on the bed

I wish I was DEAD

Part of me is dead...
It died when she let him stay
And I couldn’t do nothing but pray

So I ask
Is this family?
Jaleeyah’s poem begins and ends with questions. She answers the first question, “what is family” by describing the abuse she endured under the purview of her own mother. She does not question the abuse as much as she questions her mother’s allowance of it. In plain and simple language, Jaleeyah describes the layers of pain and betrayal she felt after her mother protected the man who sexually abused her. She writes in short lines that are mostly between 3-5 words and has a scattered rhyme scheme where some stanzas end in rhyming couplets and some do not. The longer lines call the readers’ attention to the questions that seem to drive the poem: “if she did maybe I wouldn’t feel this grudge” (line 8) and “but wonder why she let him kiss me” (line 19). There is a matter-of-factness to the writing and yet at the center of it are the feelings of pain (line 9) and sometimes insanity (line 10) that linger as a result of what is presented as a mother’s decision not to protect her child from sexual abuse (lines 16-21). The poem has a stark tone and uses a metaphor of death to describe the lasting impact of the abuse (lines 29-31). There is a noticeable lack of metaphoric imagery until the very end of the poem. Instead Jaleeyah brings her reader in to the scenes of abuse by describing how her abuser forced her into sexual acts (lines 23-26). In the end of the poem Jaleeyah leaves the reader with an image of a forsaken child in prayer with no one to protect her (lines 29-31). While the poem describes the death of some part of the poet, perhaps her innocence or the bond between mother and child, its tone is less elegiac and more questioning. This touchstone poem ends with a second question, “is this family?”, one that Jaleeyah actively sought answers to after having authored the poem. Unlike Ty’s emotive poem that paints a picture of a dramatic scene that over which he retains power, Jaleeyah’s poem exhibits a sense of vulnerability that is more typical of a young woman’s narrative (Luttrell, 1997).

In interviews Jaleeyah not only referred to this poem several times, but she also discussed the theme of continuing to understand what family is. After having been homeless, having had her apartment burn down, and having lived in various temporary situations, at the time of our second and third interviews, Jaleeyah had moved in with people who were “like family” to her and with whom she hoped to stay for a while (Jaleeyah, Case Study Interview 2). When asked how she would describe her life, Jaleeyah pointed me to this touchstone poem, saying

the first poem I wrote which was, ‘What is Family’ that was my ‘about me.’ I think that explains everything about me. (Jaleeyah, Case Study Interview 2)

Jaleeyah’s first poem, which went through various drafts and iterations before being published in the 2009 anthology, spoke for her to her family and to her former abuser and allowed her to continue to measure the meaning of family in her adult life.

When Jaleeyah first shared this poem in poetry class, Mrs. Warran recognized her for being one of the first students that trimester to go deep and take a risk in sharing something personal. As I included in Chapter 3 in describing the feedback ritual from my observations in the poetry class, Mrs. Warran responded to Jaleeyah by saying
I am really proud of you. I think this is a really brave poem. I think you’re kind of the first one to put yourself out there like, hey, this is me, this is something that’s deep, and I respect you for that. Um and I just encourage everyone else to go there also with their own stuff.

(Transcript, March 2009)

Mrs. Warran acknowledged Jaleeyah for her courage and used it as an opportunity to continue to urge students to write about their own truths. It was the process of digging deep that invited Jaleeyah to write this poem about the somewhat taboo topic of molestation and sexual abuse. Incidentally, it was an experience that was shared by many of the poets who came out through their poetry as survivors of rape and sexual abuse (Lachelle, Interview 3; Ruby, Interview 2; Monet, Interview 2; Mrs. Warran, Interview). Jaleeyah discussed how Mrs. Warran’s approach and class structures offered her positive reinforcement that she had never experienced in school situations before as she had dropped out at such a young age. Jaleeyah was somewhat resistant to forging long-lasting relationships, yet she was able to open up to her peers and teachers in poetry class.

From my observations in 2009, Jaleeyah stood out as one of the most influential leaders in the poetry class, despite her characterizing herself as a shy person. Jaleeyah described Mrs. Warran’s digging to elicit meaningful poetry.

We would really really get deep into you know a poem. I thought that was good that um Ms. Warran used to really like dig and reach down and get good poems from us that normally we wouldn’t say and we had like built a little community or whatever that I was-- I’m more so the shy type of person. It’s probably hard to believe that. I’m shy though. I didn’t really like reading in front of the class but.. it helped me I guess you could say because I would have never done nothing like perform in front of a bunch of people that I didn’t know. So that was not like me at all like I was very very scared and I just I thought I was like gonna pass out like I didn’t want to look at the audience but I mean I got through it. It was cool I guess. That was a new experience.

(Jaleeyah, Interview 1)

While Jaleeyah down-played the incident, she also related Mrs. Warran’s pushing and digging for poems to her pushing herself to do something she would never have done before: performing her poetry for a public audience. While her sense of accomplishment was understated, she emphasized how she “got through it” and remembers it in a positive light. Jaleeyah added that she felt like her classmates were depending on her, so she knew she couldn’t back out of the performance even though it meant stepping out of her comfort zone. This sense of allegiance stood out because Jaleeyah typically described herself as someone who didn’t care what others thought and didn’t allow people to get close to her.

While she was in the poetry community Jaleeyah was highly engaged as I witnessed in my visits to the class; however, after leaving that specific community, Jaleeyah did not take with her the habit of forming supportive communities. She simply moved on to the next thing. After leaving NBHS, Jaleeyah followed Mrs.
Warran to YRA thinking that continuing to take poetry would maintain her interest in going to school. Jaleeyah described YRA as a chapter of her life that “just didn’t work out” (Jaleeyah, Case Study Interview 2). She lasted a few months with very spotty attendance at YRA before dropping out. After that she did a brief stint in an adult school and she attempted to register at community college, but didn’t make it past the line at registration. Jaleeyah describes her life in sketches or moments. The only real continuity between these chapters is that she continues to approach life “one day at a time.”

My life is like in chapters. That NBHS chapter happened it was cool and then the next chapter was what YRA or something that didn’t work like I don’t know I think I’m more so of a person that lives day to day so I’m always moving I’m never with the same group of people like I’m here now hopefully I’m here for a while but who knows because I’m always moving. (Jaleeyah, Interview 2)

Jaleeyah’s sense of community investment did not stick with her and she did not relate her NBHS chapter to what came after it. While Jaleeyah continued to write in a sporadic way, mostly to vent anger or frustration, she did not hold on to a sense of community from poetry class.

As she did in her poem, “What is Family,” Jaleeyah continued to use her writing practice to think through family relationships. She shared the following unfinished poem that she had composed on her cell-phone prior to our second interview. This writing was composed after her brother, who she had been rekindling a positive relationship with, had been gunned down in front of their grandmother’s house.

```
Trying to be accepted by family
is the worst way to degrade yourself
you shouldn’t have to try
It should come naturally
Thinking of home fills your eyes with tears
so many emotions drag along with it
it hurts to be there
I will never find a new sense of security
the security that I should have isn’t there
a security blanket
it protects me from my home
the home that’s supposed to be filled with love
and with laughter
is filled with pain and shattered dreams
```

As evidenced in this short piece of “free-lance” writing (that Jaleeyah resisted calling a poem), Jaleeyah’s struggles to understand family continued after writing her touchstone poem. In this later writing, Jaleeyah describes the pursuit of family acceptance as degrading (line 2) and something that no one should have to try to do (lines 3-4). Jaleeyah describes a missing sense of security that she will never find (lines 8-9). This gnomon harkens back to the part of her that she described as
having died in “What is Family?” Rather than being a place of safety, she describes home as something from which she needs to be protected (lines 10-12). There is a sense of intense longing in this poem, a longing for an idealized home “filled with love and laughter” (lines 12-13) as opposed to the “pain and shattered dreams” (line 14) that have characterized home for her in reality.

Transformative Performance: Ruby

For Ruby, the performance of a poem was more of an anchoring event than the writing of the poem itself. Ruby remembered the risk she took in performing a personal poem about the abuses she endured at home during a school-wide poetry open-mic. It wasn’t just the writing of this poem that made it a touchstone for Ruby, but it was the event of sharing it in front of her community. The poem itself, Ruby admitted, wasn’t her strongest writing and she chose not to publish it in the yearly anthology. Ruby described being so overwhelmed by tears during her reading that she ran out of the auditorium before she could finish performing the poem. While Ruby’s performance was not necessarily successful because she was unable to get through her piece, the moment stuck with her because it taught her about taking risks, identifying trusting relationships, and building community. Ruby even reflected in an interview that Mrs. Warran had discouraged her from reading that particular poem at the event because she worried it was too long to hold the audience’s attention. Ruby read it anyway and did not regret the experiences because it ended up being formative.

The event became a touchstone for Ruby because it enabled her to make a self-declaration in front of her community and to come out of the shadows of her abuse. Ruby felt this event, this personal sharing, gave her license to feel pride in her identity, to discuss her feelings, and to bring to light the painful experiences she was having at home. Below she described how the performance of this touchstone poem transformed her experience of herself in that community.

The performance made people understand like who I was and why I act the way I do. I know I was what nineteen at that time and I acted like a little girl it’s because I never could act like a person a normal person at the house. I was always told no. I was always just neglected. That’s not a good feeling. It messes up people’s mind and it messed up my mind. I didn’t know who was a good friend. I didn’t know who was a bad friend a boyfriend or you know this and that. I was lost. and that poem it made people understand you know the things that people think I am to the things that I know what I am you know and I don’t know it felt weird and I didn’t expect myself to cry and I was trying not to because I didn’t want to feel embarrassed or I didn’t want people to be like oh she’s crying oh my god another poem you know. But it was because that was something that really changed my life because those people that I didn’t talk to at school or the teachers didn’t know what was going on and for me to really open up and show my pain. It was weird. After I felt good because there was three people that came up to me. My friends that ran after me and I have friends
that were there and it showed who was my friends at that time and who weren’t friends and I guess it felt good. I guess it helped me more like gaining more strength like I know I say that a lot about strength but strength is like the number one thing each person needs. (Ruby, Case Study Interview 2)

Ruby’s exposure of her feelings and vulnerability served as a sort of test of the trusting relationships she built at NBHS and in this way served as a touchstone poem. Ruby was afraid that people would laugh at her, but no one did. Ruby remembered feeling nervous the next day at school, but everyone continued to accept her just as they did before she read her poem and melted down in front of the school. This acceptance helped Ruby to build her confidence and to chip away at the shame she had learned to feel from her family.

While Ruby did not publish the poem that she described as an anchoring event, she did publish her “Ode to My Scars” that year. Her “Ode to My Scars” is a testament to the crystalline transformation that enabled Ruby to express love toward herself. Ruby’s anchor memory was about building trust and relationships and enabled her to see the beauty in her own struggles. She needed to have others believe in her before she could have confidence in herself. She was afraid that people would ridicule her and they did not. This allowed her to feel accepted and consequently to accept herself.

Ode to My Scars

1 I see you
2 everyday
3 minute
4 second
5 hour
6
7 Try to avoid you
8 but you always
9 seem to hang on
10
11 Stare at you
12 in the mirror
13 you stare
14 back
15
16 We
17 battle with
18 Each other
19 over
20 Make up
21 You
22 always seem
23 to win
24
I cry
wish you would
disappear

Everyday you
make me
mad

You were with me
since a little
girl
you grew up
with me
as you stretch
you become
more attached
to me

I want
to rip you
off my face

Just be
faceless

At times
I like
you

History unfolds
when I talk about
the struggles
we’ve been through

You are me
and I wouldn’t
dare replace you

I love you
scars

you make me
who I am

In “Ode to My Scars” there is a transformation within the poem that reflects Ruby’s own growth. Ruby’s “Ode to My Scars” opens with an expression of constant
struggle (lines 3-6) with her own scars. She frames her scars as something that she cannot escape or avoid (lines 8-10) and that she must learn to face. Her scars are an externalization of her struggles. The poem takes several turns after the opening. Ruby describes being in battle with her scars (lines 23-24) and in this description she falls into a victim narrative where she expresses feeling constantly defeated in her struggle. Later in the poem (lines 34-42) her tone turns to one of nostalgia. She describes “growing up” with her scars and the history they share. In another turn she writes that she wants to rip the scars off of her face (lines 44-46) and “just be faceless” (lines 48-49). This powerful image equates the scars with her own face as she would be faceless without them. With this, the poem turns again to an acceptance of the scars (lines 51-53). In the end Ruby expresses love for her scars, for the stories they hold, and for the struggles she continues to overcome. The poem that began with a condemnation or the poet’s scars ends with a statement of appreciation of the scars and what they stand for. This turn mirrors Ruby’s development of self-love through her engagement with poetry and the poetry community.

**Work in Progress: Monet**

Monet’s touchstone poem did not represent a transitional moment as much as it captured a life-long struggle, one that continued for her at the time of our interviews. Monet explained how she continuously revisited and revised her poem, “As I Smile,” since she first wrote it in Mrs. Warran’s class. It addressed the struggles of living with an addict, a reality that had not changed for Monet at the time of data collection for this study. While Monet originally wrote the poem at age 16 it still struck an emotional chord and she had to fight back her tears as she read it for me (Monet, Interview 2). Because she had rewritten the poem so many times, she no longer had the original version that she wrote in the class and she did not choose to publish it. Below is the most recent iteration of Monet’s touchstone poem that she shared in the second interview.

```
As I Smile
1 As I smile I feel it’s fate
2 leaving me to be awake one more day
3 open my eyes to pain and poverty headed my way
4 As I smile I have illusions of succeeding
5 and moral righteousness
6 for a life I do not live
7
8 I’ve cried screaming and praying
9 that this life is not all there is
10 Today is a life of it's own
11 Following my mother
12 picking her up to put her back together
13 I had no one to carry me
14 when I could not stand
15 I would fall and pick myself back up again
```
16  I was the rock that hit bottom
17  a past that can’t be forgotten
18  screaming out for a mother
19  that was dozed off from
20  from the heat flowing
21  through her blood veins
22  the rush through her body
23  contamination of the brain
24  the poke of needle says
25  everything is ok
26
27  a concrete bench was my bedframe
28  I was ashamed
29  I took the blame
30  As I smile
31  one tear drop leaks
32  from the corner of my eye
33  She’s foaming at the mouth
34  I’m pleading and I cry
35  She starts to see black
36  She’s fading out
37  but I can’t lose her she's all I have
38  That night god was holding her
39  Jesus took my hand
40  Saved both our lives that night
41  as I smiled

Monet’s poem addresses her struggles living with a drug-addicted mother and focuses in on a formative event of watching her mother overdose, but captures a sense of a life-long struggle. Like the ironic title of the poem, Monet’s poem captures a paradoxical mixture of feelings: those of gratitude for being alive, “fate leaving [her] awake to see another day” (lines 1-2) and at the same time a sense of being forsworn or precluded from a life of success (line 4). Temporally, the poem seems to tell the story of one single day when Monet wakes up to face her struggles and then witnesses her mother overdosing from heroin, but it also seems to speak to a cycle in which Monet feels trapped. She says she has cried (lines 8-9) in a way that suggests that this is a continued struggle. There is a sense of a haunting and ever-present past (line 8-9 and 13-15) so that the poem that tells the story of a single event actually reveals a continual struggle. Monet internalizes her mother’s addiction, expressing that she felt responsible or blame-worthy (lines 28-29). She alludes to their homelessness, saying “a concrete bench was my bedframe” (line 27). The poem comes to a climax in the moment when Monet faces her mother who is on death’s threshold “foaming at the mouth” and “fading out”(lines 30-36) and realizes that her mother is all she has in the world (line 37). The poem ends with the title words, “as I smile” (line 41) and while this repetition of the phrase seems to betray a real smile it is still imbued with sadness.
After she shared the poem with me in the interview, Monet expressed that she tried to hold everything together because she knew that her mother couldn’t take care of either of them. She said, “I smiled through all of it, but this was what was underneath it” (Monet, Interview 2). Monet tended to minimize her successes (like graduating from a technical college) in her talk and she focused more on her struggles and the ways in which her life had not evolved in the ways she had hoped it would have since high school. While she described herself as a survivor, who had lived through severe abuse, homelessness, and continued to live with an addict, she felt unable to move beyond the feelings expressed in “As I Smile.”

**Owning her Story: Lachelle**

When Lachelle first began writing one year prior to attending NBHS, she used her writing as a way of trying to understand the world through other peoples’ perspectives. The very first poem that Lachelle wrote was inspired by the story of a young transsexual person who was slain in Oakland. After hearing the mother of the deceased speak about her experiences, Lachelle was compelled by the power of storytelling, yet she described how she was not yet ready to come out with her own personal narrative. Her very first poem was written from the perspective of this young transsexual woman who was brutally murdered. While she wrote her first poem at her previous school, it was in Mrs. Warran’s class where she recalled developing her writerly discipline, where she began to incorporate writing into her life as a daily practice.

Poetry was still new to me. [Mrs. Warran's] class is actually what got me--I really just started writing. That class had actually got me to do that. I believe it was the previous year that’s the first time poetry was actually introduced to me. I probably had you know heard of poetry. But at NBHS was my first time taking a course or writing poetry. (Lachelle, Interview 2)

For Lachelle, Mrs. Warran’s class introduced her to writing as an affective tool that allowed her to try on different perspectives in order to understand herself and her life circumstances. Below is a poem that Lachelle wrote in response to a mural that she saw that depicted a brown-skinned woman giving birth to a river. Like many of Lachelle’s early poems, it is written through someone else’s perspective.

**Move Mountains**

```plaintext
1  I have the power to move mountains
2  I said I have the power to move mountains
3
4  I work 16 hours a day
5  In the sun with no breaks
6  At night the pale face man comes in my room and say he wants to play
7  I lay down and do what masta say
8
9  I have the power to move mountains
10 I said I have the power to move mountains
```
Masta told me today you too big I must hide you away
I thought to myself
you didn’t say that when climbed on top of me
you made this life inside of me
you’re the boss I’m just carrying your belongings
that’s what I have been telling myself everyday
trying to deal with the pain at the same time ashamed
the being I gave a heart too will be taken away

I have the power to move mountains
I said I have the power to move mountains

My water broke early today masta told me to go down by the lake
I began to push masta belongings out
I cry but not from the pain
But from the non-emotions I have for the heart I made
The face-less man took it away

I have the power to move mountains
I said I have the power to move mountains

I moved a mountain today
I left masta and ran away

The theme of Lachelle’s “Move Mountains” is about recognizing one’s own power, even in the most hideous conditions, and then moving from recognition to empowered action. In this poem, Lachelle writes in the first person perspective, but in the second stanza she reveals that the identity of the narrator is that of a slave. The narrator explains that she works 16 hours in the sun (lines 4-5) and that a white master forces himself upon her in the night. Woven throughout the poem is a refrain that uses repetition, “I have the power to move mountains/ I said I have the power to move mountains” (lines 1-2, 9-10, 21-22, and 30-31). This admission of power offers a juxtaposition to the narrative of a slave woman who gives birth to her master’s “belongings” (lines 16 and 25) and is forced to hand the baby to a “faceless man” (line 28). While others might view the slave woman as powerless, she knows that she is not. The narrative ends with the narrator’s fulfillment of the power she acknowledges throughout the poem. In the end, she moves a mountain, and escapes (lines 33 and 34). While this poem was about someone else’s experience, it connected to Lachelle’s own struggles and her recognition of her own capacity to act. While Lachelle was only 16 at the time she wrote this poem, she was determined to move her own personal mountain and beat the odds as a child of the foster care system.

It was through writing in other people’s voices and through the work in Mars. Warran’s class that Lachelle gained the courage to tell her own story. Lachelle recalled Mrs. Warran as a teacher who believed that each student had a powerful voice and who helped to draw out their stories.
What I remember most was the power that she had on each kid each student. She never gave up on a student she just kept pushing them harder harder um I know there were times that I felt uncomfortable about a certain topic and I felt ashamed, cuz I'm not used to you know writing about certain things and she just was really open and so I'm like If she could do it then I could do it. And when I did it people were like dang that was good. And it helped me, you know it helped me. That class-- it was just fun at times too. There-- I don't know-- that class we were more like a family, like when everyone was like if there was a person feeling down we would take the time to talk to that person and make them feel you know comfortable again we had a chance to help each other out in poetry like we could relate to certain things with each other and even Mrs. Warran she used to tell us about her life and it just made that class more open and confidential within each other.. and I think it helped us grow, and how she made us get in front of the school and read poetry I think that is like a more open view like we aren't just a poetry class we are like a family and it helped each student recognize their talents that they have. (Lachelle, Interview 1)

Like Ty and Cesar, Lachelle described Mrs. Warran as “pushing” and even making them perform. While these are forceful descriptors, it was clear from the tone of Lachelle's description that she interpreted Mrs. Warran's actions as coming from a place of love. Lachelle believed that she and her classmates grew from their interactions with Mrs. Warran and each other. She valued Mrs. Warran's openness and understood it as facilitating her own ability to share about her personal experiences.

Eventually after writing in the perspective of other people and hearing other students open up and write about their own personal traumas in poetry class, Lachelle wrote her touchstone poem called “Who Will Cry for the Little Girl,” which was inspired by the poetry of Antwone Fisher, who like Lachelle grew up in the foster care system. The poem dealt with the abuses Lachelle had endured as a child and her feeling of loneliness that resulted from her growing up in and out of group homes. Like Ruby and Monet, Lachelle did not publish this touchstone poem, but she discussed how it impacted her. Lachelle described what happened when she shared the poem with her class.

I broke down and I cried in front of everybody. I would definitely say that was a turning point for me. That was the first time I had ever wrote my story and felt the emotion while saying it and I know that's when because I'll never forget it. You know some stuff just stick with you. It either made a difference. It was traumatizing or something. I'll never forget that. I'll never forget. (Lachelle, Interview 2)

Lachelle never forgot this experience because it was a coming out experience. Given the tight circle of the class, she was able to become vulnerable and to speak her own story in her own voice. This became an anchoring event that Lachelle saw as
influencing her life path, especially her decision to become a therapist and to help others to unpack their stories. Lachelle had recognized her own struggles and strengths through other peoples’ stories and then grew to share and act on her own.

**Letting it Out and Moving Forward: Cesar**

The story that I told about Cesar in the previous chapter was about his political awakening and the relationship between his personal and political writings. In this chapter I focus in on his experience of digging deeply, with Mrs. Warran’s pushing, into his personal struggles related to his father and to produce a touchstone poem that he ultimately chose to destroy but that indelibly impacted his life choices and behaviors. Cesar didn’t always have the tool of writing at his disposal. He became a writer at NBHS with Mrs. Warran and another teacher, Ms. Violet’s, encouragement. While Cesar didn’t follow through with his formal schooling, he took from NBHS a commitment to his own education, albeit in a non-institutionalized way. In the caring environment of NBHS where he had trusting relationships with his teachers, he discovered writing as, if not an alternative, an additional coping mechanism to his drug-use. A frequent drug-user during high school, Cesar described himself as “self-medicating” throughout his adolescence. He knew he struggled with depression and with the lasting impact of some childhood trauma, but the only coping tool he had prior to discovering his love of writing, was drugs.

It was through writing in Mrs. Warran’s class that Cesar became aware of how his drug-use was a way of dealing with deeper issues for which he lacked resources and processing skills. As she did with Ty, Mrs. Warran allowed Cesar to write about whatever he wanted, but she encouraged him to reach deeper and to get more personal in his writing. One of the anchoring moments that Cesar described was when he wrote a poem about his father. In his adolescence, Cesar had little to no contact with his father who had been a cocaine-addict and an alcoholic. Cesar recalled the fear he felt as a child toward his abusive father as a child and the helplessness he felt when his father hit his mother. This was not something he discussed with people and it was not a topic he wrote about regularly. He wrote one poem that dealt with his father in Mrs. Warran’s class. He performed it in a play that year in front of a large audience. After what he described as a cathartic performance, Cesar explained that he never looked back at the poem (Cesar, Interview 2). During one of our interviews Cesar showed me a drawer full of poems and other writings from the past six years. When I asked if the collection included the poem about his father, he explained that he had crumpled it up and thrown it away. While Cesar destroyed the physical poem, he discussed how the process of writing it was impactful as Mrs. Warran kept pushing him to “go deep” in his exploration of his feelings about his father and the traumas he experienced. It was a touchstone poem for Cesar in that it helped him to confront one of his struggles and opened his mind to developing alternative coping mechanisms.

Before writing about his father, Cesar wrote mostly psychedelic poems that discussed his experiences with drugs, or poems about his city and the music and car shows there. Similarly to Ty, Mrs. Warran would ask him questions and try to
encourage him to use his poetry practice to explore other issues. Finally he decided to write about his father. Cesar explained how Mrs. Warran would not let him off the hook once he opened up and started to write about his father. Mrs. Warran’s pushing led Cesar to a break through in his awareness about how his feelings about his father influenced his behaviors, especially with regards to drug use. He explained,

That was one of the only times of my life I ever tried to deal with the dad situation. Every other time like I didn't realize how much I was avoiding it when I would talk about it, it would sort of be in this joking way ‘my dad’s a alcoholic drunk, abusive.’ At best that’s what I would describe him as and then writing that was just like fuck and then every time like I would think like alright maybe if I break down and cry this time when I read it she won’t make me go deeper naw she still made me go deeper but it wasn’t forcing it. It was because I didn’t want to and I would resist but she would notice that this resisting was like I don’t know--like she--it wasn’t like she was pushing like ‘I wanna know more about your dad. Tell me about your dad. Tell me how fucked up your dad was. I want you to cry.’ But it was like her trying to get me to accept emotion and it was something that I did not do and that’s why I was always on drugs. I was my own fucking chemist for so god damn long just numbing every feeling I had. (Cesar, Case Study Interview 2)

Cesar described how Mrs. Warran did not force him to write about this topic and was not interested in his story in some voyeuristic way, but that she recognized his difficulty in processing his feelings and so she urged him to lean into that discomfort in order to work through it. Cesar latched on to Mrs. Warran’s presentation of writing, particularly poetry, as a tool for tapping into difficult emotions and making sense of them.

Once Cesar had broken through his feelings about his dad and realized that he could accept his emotions, he started to write through other struggles that he faced. As he began to use writing in this way, the content of his writing changed. For example, Cesar described how when he began to write poetry in Mrs. Warran’s class he would romanticize drugs in his writing, but as he explored his feelings and looked deeper inside himself, his poetry took a more critical stance toward his own behaviors and ultimately the conditions that nurtured them.

And through writing about the drugs like I—you saw a transition like you saw a transition from writing about drugs in this glorious hallucinogenic wonderful Alice in Wonderland type way to getting very deep into why I’m actually doing this and it was through that poetry class it was like getting deeper into understanding this. (Cesar, Case Study Interview 2)

Through his uptake of writing as a tool for processing his feelings, Cesar began to reflect upon the reasons why he was using drugs. While he did not stop using altogether, he was able to have the additional tool of writing in his arsenal and he
used it to understand his own personal conditions. Becoming a better poet and honing his writing craft in Mrs. Warran’s class required that Cesar know himself deeply and as he began to expand the scope of his writing beyond his own personal experiences, he needed to understand his community deeply as well. Poetry created an opening for Cesar to forge new relationships with his own history and the world in which he was developing.

**Discussion**

The texts that youth produced in Mrs. Warran’s poetry class were evidence of digging-deep and facing struggles. These impactful touchstone poems remained as artifacts or anchor experiences that they carried with them into adulthood. For many, these poems helped them to overcome challenges or to better understand their circumstances and behaviors. The poems were connected to anchoring memories that marked important transformations for most of the case study participants, except for Jaleeyah and Monet, whose poems marked what they perceived as a continual struggle. All of the touchstone poems identified by case study participants illustrated an externalizing of inner feelings and memories. Ty’s “Ode to My Emotions” was the only one that did not focus on a specific event memory, but rather on the interplay between his feelings, his own struggle to control anger, and his discovery of writing to quell aggression. The other five participants focused on poems that addressed different forms of abuse and neglect. Student discussion of these touchstone poems revealed how they functioned to reorganize experiences and memories for the case study participants which enabled them to feel increased agency in relation to their struggles.

While the participants held these poems as transformative, the personal and sensitive nature of them raises important pedagogical dilemmas. The writing seemed to stand in for therapy for many of these young people, and yet, Mrs. Warran was not a therapist nor was she working in concert with one. This is a difficult line for teachers, as it was for Mrs. Warran, but she had a classroom that where students felt open to share their experiences. Mrs. Warran believed that for this population of students in this specific school context, this type of sharing would help them in overcoming difficult experiences from their pasts.

The class collectively took risks in revealing their own struggles, especially in a community where so many youth were survivors or rape and sexual abuse. Mrs. Warran ran the risk of unearthing student experiences that neither she nor the school had the capacity to intervene in or manage. And yet, the case study students in this study remembered this pedagogy as transformational and sometimes life changing. They expressed a deep appreciation for Mrs. Warran’s persistence and her high expectations. There was a sense that for these students who were perpetually labeled as *at-risk*, poetry class served as a space where they could collectively engage in positive risk-taking that had lasting impact on their lives and resulted in development.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations: Writing is a Life Skill

This critical paradigm of empowering education, then, calls for inventing a zone of transformation where the cultures of students and teachers meet. Teachers are responsible for taking the lead in discovering this zone. Once discovered, it is filled with a specific subject matter and learning process — a theme (generative, topical, or academic) and problem-posing (critical dialogue). Empowering education thus takes place in a symbolic frontier, a developmental borderland between the teacher’s and student’s existing cultures. (Shor, 1992, p.203-204)

The purpose of this study was to explore the post–high school literacies and experiences of a group of young adults who attended an alternative high school and shared a common experience in a poetry class that they identified as impactful. Additionally, this research sought to problematize the notion of empowering pedagogies by taking a longitudinal perspective and uncovering the memories and experiences that students held onto years after taking an impactful course. The conclusions follow from the research questions and address three areas: (a) participants’ memories of the poetry class that they reported as having a positive impact on their lives; (b) the evolution of these young adults as writers and the functions of literacy in their post–high school lives; and (c) the lasting outcomes from student engagement with the pedagogy of poetry class. My work argues that for students who have experienced failure or disengagement in schools, positive literacy-learning spaces that rely on relational learning have the potential to help students heal, to develop positive identities, and to be armed with literacy as a life skill or social tool. Given impactful structures and practices, such as the pairing of practices that honor student voice with the fostering of written communication and story-telling skills, participants had a space to begin to see themselves as protagonists in their own stories and gained concrete skills for dealing with some of the life challenges they faced. In the following sections I will discuss the major findings of this study and the conclusions they warrant. Next I articulate contributions to theory and research. Finally, I make recommendations for researchers and teachers based on these conclusions and I offer a final reflection on the study.

**Embodying Positive Identities and Possible Selves**

In response to the first research question for this study that asked, for a group of students who are between 2 and 6 years out of high school and report that their high school poetry class had a positive impact on their lives, what do they remember about their in-school literacy experiences related to their poetry class, I found that students remembered experiencing the poetry class as an idealized family through which they connected to the teacher, their classmates, and the school writ large. These relationships catalyzed shifting attitudes toward school, but did
not necessarily translate into academic success or school buy-in. Students reflected that the family-like atmosphere of the poetry class enabled them to come out with their personal stories and experiences and to break through the oppressive silences that Fine characterized in many urban classrooms (Fine, 2004). They felt that the relational work in the poetry circle helped participants to work through life challenges and to engage in the kind of healing necessary for positive transformation of self and community (Ginwright, 2010). They reported that the poetry circle provided a space of open and respectful communication where youth and adults shared responsibility for maintaining trust and safety, and that it also offered a space for student-poets to play with roles and try on different voices. The poetry circle functioned as what McCormick describes as an *aesthetic zone of safety* (2000) where students felt empowered to produce counter-stories to the narratives of failure that constrained them in other school spaces. Through this dialogic process of writing and relationship-building, participants bolstered a positive group identity that they internalized and drew from to develop individual voices. From these findings, I conclude that this group of students who had been marginalized in previous school experiences, needed to establish a space of positive relationships with both peers and teachers in order to begin to see school positively. The space of the poetry class stood in for previous experiences and stood out as a distinctly different space in which family-like relationships served as a foundation for healing that addressed both the past negative school experiences and the traumas that some youth carried from their personal lives. These experiences had prevented them from thriving in classrooms. In this way, participants remembered that the work of building a positive community was equally as important as the writing itself. Once engaged in positive, nurturing relationships at school, these adolescents reported that they could see themselves refracted in their classmates’ strength and began to recognize new possibilities for themselves. In other words, they recalled that seeing the courage and love expressed by their peers and teacher enabled these youth to see themselves as positive actors in school and community. These memories stood out as anchoring experiences that held meaning long after high school (Pillemer, 1998). The poetry shared between them stood as experience transformed into a sign which then shed prismatic light on their experiences of themselves, the school, and the broader social context that included family (Volosinov, 1973).

**Activating the Tool**

In response to my second research question, how do these youth use writing as a tool after high school, I found that the case study participants adapted writing practices (that were often rooted in the activity structures of Mrs. Warran’s class) in order to meet their individual and community needs in life after high school. They also understood writing to be a critical tool in negotiating life challenges in early adulthood. For these youth, writing served immediate needs in terms of impulse control, coping with trauma, and as an alternative to violence (both violence against self and others). For a few it also fulfilled a longer term need for envisioning their own futures and imagining a better world for the community and for future generations.
From this finding, I conclude that participants valued their writing practices and saw them as life-changing. While some participants did use these writing tools in service of academic successes in higher education, all participants spoke of their writing as either a life skill, a social skill, or both. This conclusion is significant because, even those who wrote prior to attending NBHS reported that the tools they acquired and the practices they developed in Mrs. Warran’s class had a lasting, positive impact on their lives. In this way their experienced what critical pedagogues characterize as a repurposing of classroom learning (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2009; 2011; Kincheloe, 2007; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Freire, 1993) toward a goal of self-empowerment that opens the possibility of broader social transformation. Their continued application of writing speaks to the widespread relevance of the poetry practices honed in Mrs. Warran’s class for graduates and drop-outs, college and non-college bound youth alike. Participants felt that the tool of writing empowered them to face challenges from their past and the challenges they continued to surmount in early adulthood. Those participants who were able to pair their writing practices with community-building were most able to write beyond the moment and to create spaces to imagine new possibilities. These participants described themselves as empowered and illustrated the ways that their words and visions manifested in their actions in and on the world (Jocson, 206b, 2008).

**Touchstones**

My third research question investigated the nature of the memorable poetry produced in the context of Mrs. Warran’s class. The relationships at the center of these practices allowed both the teacher and the students to take risks and to hold rigor in the writing process. I found that participants remembered the class as a safe space where they were encouraged to dig deeply into the stories that held shaped their own life narratives and identities (Mc Adams & Bowman, 2001). This deep self-exploration resulted in the authoring of touchstone poems that marked critical moments in participants’ development. Participants continued to engage these touchstone poems in their early adulthood. Based on this finding, I conclude that participants buy-in to a safe and open classroom space enabled them to write and share about deeply personal experiences and feelings and that they remembered these writings as being transformational. Through these poems, participants faced challenges and struggles, and most felt that the result was positive growth. This type of risk-taking was empowering for some of the participants. As Greene (1988) writes,

> To be something other than an object, a cipher, a thing, such a person must reach out to create an opening; he/she must engage directly with what stands against him/her, no matter what the risk (1988, p. 11).

Students in Mrs. Warran’s class opened up and worked hard to produce quality poetry that would have lasting impact on the poets themselves and become part of history in the form of the published anthologies. The participants’ touchstone
poems helped them to see themselves as survivors and helped them in facing personal struggles.

**Contributions to Theory and Research**

This study contributes to extant theory and research on literacy and empowerment by employing the lens of social poetics in order to draw connections between the words that youth write and the actions they take in and on the world. Social poetics enabled me to understand the ways that student writing played a role in guiding actions and life choices in the pivotal moment of adolescence for these participants. Combined with theories of event memory (McAdams & Bowman, 2001; Pillemer, 1998), social poetics contributes to an understanding of how the authoring of written works can alter the life paths of writers.

This study also fills a gap in the research by providing a snapshot of the impact that writing, in the context of an in-school poetry class, had on these students’ lives in early adulthood. In unpacking the long-term empowerment of these participants, memory became a critical indicator. The study’s reliance on participant memory allowed me to understand what experiences and writings held importance for the participants as they moved beyond school. The application of theories of memory and a frame of social poetics to a longitudinal study of in-school writing experiences has potential consequences for those theorizing and researching empowering pedagogies.

**Recommendations for Pedagogy**

These conclusions depict how classrooms can be spaces of possibility that students remember and attribute as transformative years later. In those spaces students remembered that together students and teachers broke away from traditional educational hierarchies. In such co-created spaces, youth felt they were empowered to try on different voices and to play with their sense of authorship and ownership of their own stories. They could leave school armed with writing as a life skill for coping with immediate crises and for imagining brighter futures. In consideration of the pedagogy and practices that this group felt worked for them and that continued to be relevant and useful in their adult lives across a diversity of post–high school paths, I propose the following recommendations for secondary educators. Although these recommendations are grounded in findings from an alternative school setting, where the school-wide values allowed the teachers greater freedom than most traditional schools, they also pertain to mainstream schools. Many students can have opportunities to share their experiences in every classroom. All schools serve (but may not meet the needs of) adolescents who struggle to connect academically and who need tools to cope with their experiences in order to thrive and develop. The findings from this study illuminate the kinds of experiences that these youth identified as invaluable in their lives and often characterized as essential to their survival. I make these recommendations in hopes of increasing the capacity of literacy-learning spaces to reach all students and to inspire teachers to consider writing as a social skill as well as an academic one.
Not all teachers have the freedom that Mrs. Warran had in her poetry classroom. Not all teachers teach in schools that promote or even sanction the kinds of relationships that NBHS encouraged. Not all teachers are interested in or willing to take the kinds of risks that Mrs. Warran did, nor does this work advocate for teachers to do so. Not all students carry the heavy stories and trauma that this particular group of youth did. What other teachers can take away from these portraits is the value of writing as a tool to extend far beyond academic purposes. These cases highlight the potentialities of using writing as the basis of relational learning and the creation of classroom space that allows students to see the good in their peers, teacher, and in turn in themselves.

It was in the shared courage of this teacher and her students that they forged new territory and in breaking this new ground they created lasting memories that had a positive impact for the students who did not have affirming experiences in schools prior to attending NBHS. Forging co-created classroom spaces and relationships encourages students to look beyond what is or what has been in their school experiences, which in turn allows for a breaking with ascribed identities and the narratives of failure that accompany these for so many youth.

Youth in this study came to school because of their poetry class. They saw it as a reason to attend and a space that served their needs. They wanted to be in Mrs. Warran's class because it was a space where they felt visible, capable, and nurtured. It is crucial to note that this did not happen in a classroom space that was loose, easy, or unstructured. On the contrary, this dual emphasis on relationships and writing required teacher persistence, high expectations, rituals and structures, and active maintenance of class culture. It was within this container that students were turned on to writing and able to develop their voices in ways that they saw as important in their lives beyond school. Some of the participation structures that both the youth and the teacher identified as creating opportunities and nurturing possibility were the non-hierarchical relationships and flexible roles in the classroom, the student-driven content, and the explicit presentation of writing as a life skill. Ultimately, my recommendation for teachers is to reconceive of writing practice as relational work that has the capacity to impact students’ perceptions of self and community and that can have real consequences in the world. To treat writing in this way means to break in-school writing out of an ascribed identity itself.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study of the post–high school experiences of a group of young adults who shared an impactful in-school literacy experience calls attention to the need for more longitudinal perspectives on the impact of pedagogies over time. By focusing on participant memory, I was able to uncover the types of experiences that stuck with the poetry students as they moved into other activity systems beyond the class and school. This vantage point afforded me new understandings of the term “empowerment” and how it manifests, or not, for youth as they act in and on the social world. Other studies of the long-term impact of empowering pedagogies would prove useful to the profession as teachers and researchers rarely have
opportunities to see how students remember and enact in-school learnings down the road.

Another methodological lesson gleaned from this work arose from some of the contradictions inherent on the lens of portraiture and goodness employed in depicting the memories and experiences of this particular group of young adults. The stance of goodness allowed me to examine what these young people were doing with their words and how they were using their writing to improve their lives. For most, they used this tool as a way to make sense of some painful experiences in their home lives. These were real struggles for these participants, real traumas that they had experienced and needed to work through. Because these were the urgent needs to which they applied a therapeutic writing process, they did not always reflect on the positive elements of their lives. In retrospect, this emphasis on goodness with regards to the research participants did not yield a similar stance toward their families. This posed a challenge when dealing with young people who have been victims of sexual abuse and other forms of neglect in the home.

Similarly, in this analysis I focused on how students rejected ascribed identities as failing students through the writing and sharing of their personal poetry, but I did not thoroughly explore the gendered expressions of self in these works. In future research I would add more intersectional analysis that would uncover the complex ways that these poets rejected certain socially-ascribed scripts, but embodied others. This would add depth to meaning of empowerment in these portraits.

The import of this study is that is captures the voices and experiences of students who were pushed out of traditional schools and captures their insights about what has mattered to them in their post-high school lives. The theoretical frame of social poetics enabled me to make connections between the words they wrote in poetry class, the memories they held, and their actions in early adulthood. The mixed methods design of this study allowed me to analyze what happened in the class, the students’ memories, the writing, and the teacher’s beliefs and intentions. Through these data I was able to uncover key factors in the of context of reception of the class and in the long-term impact of empowerment, that led me to conclude that students who share experiences in empowering classrooms are differently empowered in life after high school depending on the ways they activate the tools they gained in these spaces. In future research I would like to explore how authorship and empowerment manifest through in school writing practices in more traditional classroom spaces. Using similar mixed methods, I’d like to address the question of where are spaces of possibility, relational writing, and authorship in standard academic classes. Such a study might offer possibilities for reaching youth who are struggling with trauma before they drop out or are pushed out.

**Coda: Significance and Reflections**

**Personal Reflections on the Study**

Throughout my work in alternative school setting as both a teacher and researcher, I have continually been struck by the resilience of youth and their undying desire to learn, grow, and heal, even when these desires have not translated
into classroom successes. Knowing these youth, their stories and their struggles, I knew that there was more depth to their experiences than statistical data on dropouts reveal. This study is significant because these youth typically slip through the cracks in traditional schools and their feedback and values go unheard because they drop out of the schools that fail them. In many ways I consider these young people to be our most valuable resources in understanding the challenges and opportunities of schooling. It was my goal in this research to value and honor the voices of these youth as experts in their own educational narratives as a means for rethinking classroom practices for all educators. I hope that these portraits convey the urgency of relevant literacies in classrooms and the importance of nurturing intentional communities of support in schools as these may not only be levers for keeping students in school, but they are also critical to empowerment in early adulthood.

While I sought to better understand empowering pedagogies through this study, I have come to realize through this longitudinal lens, that pedagogies in and of themselves cannot be empowering, but rather it is the uptake of these practices and the dialogic relationships that they foster that are empowering. In these cases, there seemed to be the most potential for empowerment when youth felt that they honed the concrete skill of the writing paired with the vision of a beloved community that they could strive for and where they could imagine ways of engaging agentively in community and in the world. My experience of Mrs. Warran and her poetry students was that together they worked toward what Greene describes as human freedom in their “capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise” (1988, p. 3). Those who were able to continue this practice of imagining different possibilities and to share that vision with community through writing continued to feel and act as protagonists in their stories as they grew into adulthood.
References


Appendix A: Survey

What year did you take Poetry?
Did you take the course more than once?
Which high schools did you attend?
Did you graduate? What year did you graduate? If you did not graduate, did
you attend Job Corps or earn a GED?
Are you currently enrolled in community college?
Have you taken any college classes? Are you enrolled in a four-year college?
Since taking Poetry in high school how have you used writing? (circle ALL
that apply) job applications college writing poetry music journal-writing letter-
writing social networks (Facebook, MySpace, etc.) e-mail stories articles scripts legal
other:___________________
   Remembering back, what was your attitude toward high school in general?
   What was your attitude toward poetry class? In a few sentences, describe the
   poetry class as you remember it.
   What kinds of topics did you write about?
   On the scale below, rate how much your involvement in poetry impacted you
12345
   no impact some impact poetry changed me impact in important ways at all
On the scale below, rate how empowered you felt in poetry class
12345
   not empowered somewhat empowered very empowered
   If you circled a 3 or higher, please give an example of how poetry impacted
you or empowered you.
## Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I am” (15 minutes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Take a moment to write down your most memorable moment from poetry class. Share around.

What do you remember sharing, or hearing your classmates share in poetry?

How did the poetry community compare to other communities you belonged to, like the broader school community, or communities outside of school?

What did you learn about yourself in poetry? About the world?
| What role does writing play for you now? |
| "We are..." |
| Spirit read |
## Appendix C: Case Study Interview Protocols

Interview 1 (The purpose of this interview is to reacquaint with the student and to get a sense of what’s been happening since they left high school)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of question</th>
<th>Possible prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ice breaker</td>
<td>How have you been? What’s going on in your world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell me what you’ve been up to since I saw/spoke to you last?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Last time I saw you, you were in high school, what has life been like for you since then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unearthing memories from high school</td>
<td>Now that you are out of high school, what do you remember most about Oasis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking about Poetry</td>
<td>Tell me what you remember about Poetry class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How did the teacher and students interact in Poetry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You took the class more than once. Was it any different the second time around?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What kinds of things do you remember taking about in Poetry class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you remember thinking about? Writing about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On your survey, you said that poetry “changed your life in important ways”, can you tell me a little about that? Give me an example.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What did you think was one of the goals of the class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What did you think the teacher’s goals were?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What did you take away?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting ready for next interview</td>
<td>What kinds of things are on your mind now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(for students who write) What are you writing about now?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(for students who aren’t writing) If you were to write now, what do you think you’d write about?

Assignment for next interview: Either write a new poem or bring something that you have written in the last year.

Interview 2 (The purpose of the second interview is to talk about “then and now” and to see what, if any connections they make)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of question</th>
<th>Possible prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ice breaker</td>
<td>If you had to write an author bio right now, what would you say about yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have student share and reflect on a new poem</td>
<td>Let’s hear the poem that you brought.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ok, so, tell me about your voice in the poem. Who are you in this poem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who is the speaker in the poem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When did you write this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What motivated you to write about this topic? In this style?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where were you when you wrote this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you shared it with anyone besides me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who did you share it with?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Will you share it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why did you write this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What does it mean to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does it say anything about you or who you are?</td>
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<tr>
<td>To reflect on an old piece of writing</td>
<td>I brought a poem that you published in the anthology. Before we read it, what do you remember about it?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have them read the poem.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask parallel</td>
<td>Have them choose</td>
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<tr>
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<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ok, so, tell me about your voice in the poem. Who are you in this poem?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is the speaker in the poem?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did you write this?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What motivated you to write about this topic? In this style?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Where were you when you wrote this?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you shared it with anyone besides me?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who did you share it with?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will you share it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why did you write this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does it mean to you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it say anything about you or who you are?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does it feel to reread this poem now?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it bring up anything for you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you reflect on what you were feeling when you wrote it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was it like to share this poem with others?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were writing this poem today, would there be anything that you would do differently?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it make you think about</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connecting then and now</th>
<th>What connections can you make between when you wrote the earlier piece and now?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What things are different for you and what</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
things are the same?

What kinds of things have you held onto?

What have you let go of?

## Interview 3 (More about writing)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of question</th>
<th>Possible prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ice breaker</td>
<td>If your life was a poetry anthology, what would the different sections be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of writing</td>
<td>Why do you write?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Has your use of writing changed over time? In what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find out more about the role of writing in their lives</td>
<td>On the survey you said you use writing for __, __, and ____ (fill in from survey). Talk to me about these different kinds of writing. What is the purpose of each one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which kind of writing is the most important to you? Why?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which kind of writing is the most personal?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The most useful?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What can you do/achieve through writing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to Poetry</td>
<td>Did you write Poetry before taking Sheila’s class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where would you be if you did not write?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you see writing in your future?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix D: Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Corresponding research question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideological Environment/Context</strong></td>
<td>RQ1. Looking at poets who are between 1 and 6 years out of the poetry class, what do they remember about their experiences and what if any relationship do they think the class has to who they are and what they are doing now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>community</td>
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<tr>
<td>college</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>work</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Memories</strong></td>
<td>RQ1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classroom</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>events</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Struggles</strong></td>
<td>RQ2. What struggles and growth over time does their past and on-going writing reveal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>educational</td>
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<tr>
<td>community</td>
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<td>family</td>
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<tr>
<td>global</td>
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<tr>
<td>disempowerment</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td>RQ3. How do youth who have participated in a community of poets and been published use writing as a tool after high school and to what end? What roles does writing play for college attending and non-college bound youth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self in society</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>authorial self</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>community roles</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>family roles</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>construction of self</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Empowerment</strong></td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal agency</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>community agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>ability to</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>in school</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
• out of school
• change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>RQ2, RQ3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• writing to cope</td>
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<td>• writing as agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>• rewriting the world</td>
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<tr>
<td>• writing as recognition</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Appendix E: Tell Me What You See

Tell me what you see
When you look at me
Walkin’ down the street
White people be looking funny at me
Like I got shit on my face
Staring at me and glaring knowin’ damn well
They like what
They see
Thinking this bitch is black
So she gotta be a thief
So tell me what you see

Walking into the store
Thinking like Tupac
ALL EYES ON ME
Listening to the sweet sounds of
Hurry up and buy
While being stared at funny by police
Only thinking to myself
Don’t make the wrong move
Or you’ll be cuffed
By that racist police crook saying
You bitch
As I stop and smile turn around and look
Sayin’
I know I am
Beautiful
Intelligent
Talented
Cute
Honest
So now tell me what you see
When you look
At me
Appendix F: What is Family?

What is Family?
Two brothers/ Two sisters
All in pain/ is what I've gained

My father wasn't there
I realized/ I don't care

My mother truly doesn't care
If she did maybe I wouldn't feel this grudge
This pain
And sometimes insane

Insane because
I got slapped around
Beat to the ground

I feel scared
As she dares
To hit me
But wonder why she let him kiss me
Touch me in a way
I knew nothing of

He touches me/ Rubs my thigh
As I take a deep sigh
He grabs my arm
Holds me on the bed

I wish I was DEAD

Part of me is dead...
It died when she let him stay
And I couldn't do nothing but pray

So I ask
Is this family?