Wayne State University Dissertations

1-1-2012

Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events to semiotically express

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Recommended Citation

QUEER ADOLESCENT GIRLS USE OF
OUT-OF SCHOOL LITERACY EVENTS TO SEMIOTICALLY EXPRESS
UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN ORDER TO
ENHANCE PERSONAL AGENCY IN THEIR LIVES

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2012

MAJOR: READING, LANGUAGE
& LITERATURE

Approved by:

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Advisor   Date

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to eight young African American women who honestly remind us all that the world speaks the words of homophobia, prejudices and HOPE.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is almost impossible to acknowledge all the people in my life for the past nine years that have supported my efforts in fulfilling this academic dream. I could fill a notebook with the all the comments I have heard including "aren't you done with that yet?" to "just sit down and write, it can't be that difficult." Well, to me the whole process of writing this dissertation was one of the most challenging tasks I have done in my entire life. Nothing about the process was natural to me so at times I felt I would never achieve the end goal of a completed dissertation.

Fortunately, I achieved the end goal because of the hand full of people that were with me every step of the way. First, the eight young women who committed to sharing their stories, which at times made them angry, sad, silent, or laugh out loud. I was determined to capture their stories despite my own struggle to find the right words.

I would also like to thank Dr. Phyllis Whitin one of my first mentors at Wayne State University, and committee member, to support my efforts to apply for the doctoral program. She spent a lot of time having breakfast with me convincing me that I could succeed in the program. I would like to thank Dr. Poonam Arya for always taking the time from prepping for her own classes, to talk to me about my progress. I would also like to thank Dr. Karen Feathers, a committee member, who believed in me as an educator, scholar and a person. She never failed to reach out with a kind word, suggestion or another perspective. Finally, to my major advisor, Dr. Gina DeBlase, who inspired me to keep writing because I had something important to share. She was forever patient with my ramblings, unfocused writing, and weekly stories about the girls.

I also extend gratitude to those people that stood at the sidelines for me. Lynne Morgan my friend, doctoral buddy, mentor, and commiserator. I will never forget the time spent laughing, talking and complaining about writing a dissertation. I would also like to thank, Kattie

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CHAPTER 1

Focus and Rationale

      Overview.

This qualitative study shows how the use of multiliteracies (reading, writing, viewing, visually representing, talking, and listening) by eight low-income African American LBT (lesbian, bisexual, transgender) adolescents contributes to the development of personal agency in ways that enable adolescents to create change in their lives. As will be discussed later in the study, it is the acquisition of personal agency that upsets the societal constructs of silencing, policing, devaluing and jeopardizing the identities and voices of these African American LBT adolescents. Hooks (1989), in *Talking Back* and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) in *Women's Ways of Knowing* elaborate on "coming of voice" as an act of self-transformation moving from a voiceless stance to speaking so one is heard. Identifying the features that contribute to the effectiveness of out-of-school literacies for LBT adolescents will assist educators and stakeholders in creating strategies and literacy space to support the identity development and growth of LBT adolescents in secondary school settings. It is my aim that such work will aid in extending the boundaries of educational spaces, such as schools, for the purposes of promoting democratic reform and social transformation to achieve societal balance.

This study took up a three-month weekly residency in a suburban rented office. I wanted to create a free space for the girls participating in this study, so they could collectively enter into new identities, create new alliances, and begin the work of self-transformation (Evans & Boyte, 1992). This space took the girls out of their familiar urban neighborhood into a suburban setting; some of the girls felt fear and hesitation. I vividly recall Bella as she stood in front of Taco Bell,

"I ain't goin' stand here long. The cops will be wondering why there is a group of Black people standing together."

However, this free space filled with art supplies, books, and large tables thrilled the eight girls as they walked through the door after lunch and immediately perused the setting. Ericka asked in a muffled voice "Is this for us?" Eventually, the girls would come to own the space by displaying their artwork and writing on the walls and hanging it from the ceilings. The free space provided all of us the opportunity to read, write, and create ourselves despite the outside societal 'voices' which silence, police, devalue, and jeopardize us as LBT (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) women.

As the research was ongoing, I performed (Butler, 1997) the identities of facilitator, educator, researcher, mentor, friend, and lesbian. I implemented a variety of methods for data analysis, asked an assortment of questions of the girls, and looked through multiple lenses to decipher the emerging themes of racism, homophobia, classism, whiteness, internalized racism, and internalized homophobia that wove through the speech, art, and writings of the African American LBT girls. I found myself connecting with the girls across these identities as a facilitator, educator, researcher, mentor, and lesbian, often enacting two more of these identities simultaneously. My willingness to connect with the girls in this way was important because I was asking them to be open with me about their multiple or polyphonic identities. The girls and I soon began to take every opportunity to understand and learn about one another. We drove from the city to the suburbs and vice-versa; we ate at neighborhood restaurants and shopped at the corner beauty store for hair weaves. We talked about societal issues (e.g. race, economics) that influenced us as literate individuals in sometimes vastly different and sometimes very similar

ways. In this way, this study expanded beyond the walls of the suburban rented office into the lived literacy experiences of eight low-income African American LBT girls.

I present the findings of this study in the six chapters that follow. Chapter one provides an overview of the study, the rationale, and the research questions. Chapter two examines three tenets of critical literacies that are the heart of the study construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. Methodology is presented in chapter three including stance as a researcher, recruitment of participants, data collection and data analysis procedures. The girls and their life stories are introduced in chapter four. In chapter five, major findings and themes are presented and explored. Chapter six includes a summary and implications of the research findings.

Introduction

On a cold winter afternoon, I drove for the first time to the GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning) youth center, which was the original site for this research. An overwhelming feeling of awareness of my "whiteness" slowly crept over me. I felt uncomfortable with the privileges afforded to me by society as a white, middle class woman. I drove through a community swallowed by inner city blight, where barred windows, chained steel doors, and crumbling cement walls hide signs of life. My time in this part of the city was only temporary because I could easily turn my car around and slip back into my suburban neighborhood. I was an outsider looking in. I soon learned that the girls who had agreed to be part of this study lived through winters with space heaters to keep them warm, did not have transportation for school or a job and spent many of their days hungry. I didn't know it at the time, but as I drove to the GLBTQ center passing the usual urban props of liquor stores, strip joints, and fast food restaurants, that I was on my way to discovering my own realizations.

One realization surfaced prior to the formal beginning of this study when I volunteered as a facilitator for a weekly *Real Talk* group for lesbian and bisexual girls at Pride House, the GLBTQ urban center. The informal setting of the *Real Talk* group provided me opportunities to hear the stories of the African American LBT adolescents–stories that were laden with mistrust, violence, drugs, and lack of agency. I treaded lightly as I listened to the collective stories told by the young women (pseudonyms used for all names). An excerpt from my researcher's journal:

> November 9, 2009: Many girls came to group tonight. It was great to see Kit and Nobby again. Ericka was high as she positioned herself haphazardly on the worn couch and Nobby made it known she had four quick shots of tequila, before she came to group. The girls' collective stories included such words as "smashed" to have sex, "freak" to mess with a girl, "niggers" are bad acting straight black men, and bad acting "studs," clowned" to make fun of, and "AG femmes" aggressive femmes.
> The group began with the girls conversing about labels specifically, the roles (femmes/studs) some Black lesbians perform in their relationships. Nobby explained to the group that two studs would not go out with each other. She defined herself as a stud as someone who dominates the relationship and makes her own decisions, like staying out with stud bros. She said it was gross and it would bother her if a stud made a pass at her. Nobby raised her voice to say "You're not a lesbian if you talk to niggers." The group as a whole had an issue with bisexual women. Da stated she did not like bisexuals because she does not trust them; they will break your heart. The stud don't want to be lied to." Da said she could forgive a femme if she slept with another woman but not with a man. Nobby added she didn't like studs, which means to date one is gross. It is like two men kissing. Liz, one of the group facilitators, asked the group if they replicate or duplicate heterosexual relationships. Bella quickly replied, "Sure, it is all we know."

I have chosen to begin this paper with this excerpt from the *Real Talk* group because it begins to foreground some of the major themes I address in this study including voice, negotiating discourses about gender and sexuality and resistance. Also for this study, I use the terms African American and Black synonymously because the participants interchangeably used the terms.

The work of Beach, Thein, and Park (2008) addresses how social worlds constitute adolescents' identities. This was evident in the interactions of the girls in this study. Each of the girls brought their own ideas about race, gender and social class to the group but it was the

public mixing of their ideas that led to the sharing of beliefs, for instance, the girls rethought their understanding and dislike of bisexual women. This fluid co-constructive process demonstrated the ways in which the girls are products of their social worlds.

When I began this study, I was nervous about gaining the trust of the girls in a way that would make them feel safe enough to share their lives' despite the dissimilarity in our age, education, economics and race. However, as the study progressed my thinking evolved from how the girls were unlike me, to understanding that we shared many of the same beliefs, values, and feelings. In effect, our identity kits (Gee, 1996) shared many similarities of how we organize our worlds and position ourselves according to the social and gender roles others in society will recognize. The girls and I shared the discourse of being gay women in a heteronormative society, a discourse related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society and we shared a set of values and viewpoints, which conflict with other discourses (Gee, 1996). These understandings occurred for me because of my need to figure out how to connect with this group of African American LBT adolescents. Although we shared common threads of oppressions and alienations, I was also cognizant of the ways that our oppressions and alienations differ because of age, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and social class (Lewis, 1993).

Rationale

I truly believe that if I did not have the experience of being a lesbian myself, this study would not have been possible because the rationale of the study deeply embeds my life story. As a young girl, I did not have the opportunity to use literacy as a medium to sort through conflicting feelings and issues about being gay in the 1960s. Today, despite dramatic movement with GLBTQ inclusive curriculum and supportive schools many GLBTQ youth are leaving

mainstream schools because of a history of fighting, drugs and/or family issues and are missing the opportunity to use literacy as self-exploration. I begin this rationale on how the contradictions in my life eventually led me to doing this study.

Reflecting on my life, I realize it has been a bowl full of contradictions:

- I attended a white, suburban Catholic school with a compulsory uniform code but on the weekends, I sported black straight-leg jeans and combat boots.

- I was an elementary and middle school teacher for fourteen years but participated in Gay Pride rallies, frequented gay bars and had female partners.

- I am a teacher educator who talks passionately about the importance of providing opportunities for children to have a voice in reading and writing but I furiously wrestled with how to "Come Out" during the Wayne State University Writing Project's Summer Writing Institute in 2006.

In the early seventies, I was an eighth grader attending an all white Catholic school in the Midwest. Both my mom and dad worked for Ford Motor Company and provided a good life for my sister and me. Despite the bombardment of heteronormative messages from my family such as Sadie Hawkins dances and blow-up crinolines for underneath my fancy dresses, I did not like boys as my friends did. Thinking about the upcoming 8th grade make-out parties or school co-ed dances was simply unnatural for me. In the sixties and seventies, gay and lesbian people were not screaming from their porches "We're here and we're queer, so just get use to it." As a young girl, I struggled for years to figure out "what I was" and "what I was called." Eventually, I got my hands on the book: *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by Judy Norsigian (1970) which not only provided me with the label "lesbian" but also photographs of "real" lesbians. I figured I could not go wrong, because now I had the how-to-be-a-lesbian book in my hands.

Fast forward to the year 2006, I was one of the lucky participants for Wayne State University's first Summer Writing Institute sponsored by the National Writing Project. The five-week process was jammed packed with teaching demonstrations, writing, and reading, and lots of fun. It didn't take me long to recognize every time I shared a kernel of my writing or a narrative, I felt as though I could not divulge the gender of my girlfriend so I used "partner," omitting "she" or remaining silent among my peers. Here is an example of my "secret" writing from the Writing Institute. I did not share this writing with anyone. I was trying to keep the secret alive for myself by using gender-neutral words.

> I roamed the darkness of unkempt emotions and feelings. I had a difficult time finding the right answers to my life. I met a person who was stronger than I was. A person who understood my anger and anxiety, I held deep inside. I kept trying to make it right. I kept trying to find the key. The person was caring and patient with me all the way. I thought many times, that the person would go away. But with a lot of effort and work the person decided to stay.

With this realization, I found myself censoring my ideas and feelings as I wrote the above short piece. It was an arduous task to try to keep my writing and voice "real." I did not think the act of censoring would have had such an impact on my writing or my thoughts. As Bahktin (1991) argues, identity does influence one's writing and response to text because of the transaction between the reader's lived experiences, understanding of the world, and the language of the text that shapes meaning or ways of knowing (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Slowly, the concept for this study began to materialize in my mind. As an adult, I struggled with sharing my authentic self with others through literacy, so how do young lesbian or bisexual girls do the same? My idea for this study was confirmed when Gina, my committee chair and the director of the writing project wrote my final evaluation for the summer writing institute. Some of her thoughts written on a legal pad were, "thinking ahead to your dissertation

this might be an important theme to keep in mind. A question that could potentially be explored is how Gee's theory about identity and discourse pertains to the lives of lesbian teens. Moreover, how can your research contribute to and expand our knowledge about GLBT youth and literacy?"

My childhood thoughts of silencing my voice and hiding my identity generated the rationale for this study. I struggled with the idea that identity is not wearing a blow-up crinoline or kissing a boy at a party, but exists as a complex social construct. So not only did this study benefit eight low-income urban African American LBT adolescents in learning about themselves, but it also provided me a safe space to write and share my "real" self with others without feeling pressured into contradicting myself. I thought by openly sharing my ideas, fears, and disappointments from life. I would help these girls to express the same, something I was not able to do when I was their age.

Something is missing in English language arts secondary classrooms…. The voice of the African American LBT adolescent.

Unfortunately, for the low-income African American LBT adolescents in this study, because their gendered and sexual identities are not in the curricula presented in the vast majority of schools, the discourse of the secondary school environment has left them disconnected and disenfranchised. A major issue for all GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning) youth in many secondary schools is the invisibility and condemnation of their values, aspirations, and choices throughout mandated literature and curriculum (Lipkin, 1999). Rosenblatt (1995) writes that literature can help one to crystallize one's attitudes and knowledge of the world. However, in the institution of secondary schools the liberating space she refers to does not exist

for adolescents who find themselves living outside the recognized "norms" of mainstream society.

The secondary English curriculum does not give adolescents, such as the girls in this study, the opportunity to extrapolate issues presented in text to their own lives. Instead, "sanctioned" or canonical classroom texts like *The Scarlet Letter, Pride and Prejudice* and *Romeo and Juliet* with no texts that offer alternative gender or sexual ways of being beyond heterosexuality become their role models for sexuality and relationships. Even the majority of contemporary, non-canonical texts as well as young adult literature taught in the English language arts classroom positions heterosexuality as the norm. This expurgation of non-heterosexual identities in classroom texts is one way in which school establishes and propagates GLBTQ adolescents' sense of disconnection from mandated curricula and encourages their lack of participation in classroom discussions around literature. As a result, adolescents do not have literary experiences in school that have the potential to make his/her own life more comprehensible to themselves as well as to others.

With few opportunities to see themselves represented in texts or classroom discussions, the African American LBT struggles with understanding her place in society because the framework presented to her reinforces only "fixed" or "traditional" sexual and gender norms, and does not represent her fluid or changing sense of self or lived experience outside of the classroom. It is important for the LBT adolescent to remain "true to her inner self and to avoid being co-opted by societal and peer expectations to take on a false identity" (Sprague & Keeling, 2007, p.18). In the presence of a curriculum which conforms to the ideologies of mainstream society, and although many teachers support the visibility of the lived experiences of the LBT

youth, many still find themselves entrenched in layers of societal pressures and expectations making it even more difficult for these young women to be themselves.

Mandating the authentic identity of African American LBT teen.

Educational policies such as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), with its high-stakes standardized testing and mandated curriculum, further undermine the opportunities for African American LBTQ youth to use the discourse of the classroom to develop agency in their lives or to construct their own identities. Curriculum should serve as a metaphor for the lives adolescents want to live and the people they want to be (Vasquez, 2001. However, the enactment of these policies results in the inability of LBTQ to use the literacy space of the classroom to make sexual and gender decisions through the exploration of the literature and making connections to their own lives. Because of the rigid demands of *No Child Left Behind* and other legislation stemming from NCLB, it is not uncommon for the 'vernacular literacies' (literacies associated with a person's community and everyday life outside the domain of power and influence) to be dismissed from curricular activities (Tusting & Barton, 2005). Restrictive policies such as these and the literacy practices that are often a consequence of these policies act like a complex filter, sorting out students according to their places on the socially structured hierarchy, making it difficult for LBT adolescents to live authentically in school (Apple, 1995). In order to succeed academically, LBT adolescents must assimilate into the practices most valued in the school.

Forced into an academic system that silences those who are different, all students must make personal and academic choices. Often, these choices are in conflict with one another and can contribute to an adolescents' sense of disconnect and identities that are thought of as inferior, deficient, and flawed. For example, some of the girls in this study took on the role of a *deviant* child, one who has failed to conform to the norms of schooling (Apple, 1995) while others

silenced their own voices and personal preferences in order to appear to agree with institutionalized norms. The negative consequences of such eradication on the lives of GLBTQ adolescents are visible in alarming statistics. According to the most recent School Climate Report conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (2007):

> 86.2%, of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 44.1% reported being physically harassed and 22.1% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation. 73.6% heard derogatory remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" frequently or often at More than half (60.8%) of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third (38.4%) felt unsafe because of their gender expression. 31.7% of LGBT students missed a class and 32.7% missed a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe, compared to only 5.5% and 4.5%, respectively, of a national sample of secondary school students.

LBTQ students are at risk in our schools as long as the educational system maintains as its primary goal, the reproduction of the kinds of knowledge and ways of being that are "required" by mainstream society to maintain hegemony or positions of power in society (Apple, 1995). This goal is evident in the curriculum set forth by high-stakes testing, which strives for "sameness" or some kind of "central difference" in students as a measure of worthiness against dominant social and gender norms (Barrett-Fox, 2008). This is the kind of thinking that encourages a heterosexual identity as natural and supports society's binary thinking of sexuality between a male and female as "normal" because it results in procreation. As recently as Proposition 8 (August, 2010) which claims that allowing only a man and a woman to wed promotes responsible sex and child rearing and ultimately ensures the future of humanity, we see the continued attempt to "normalize" heterosexuality and thereby label and claim other ways of being in the world as aberrant and dangerous. Even when it is not their explicit intent, most English language arts classrooms sanction gender and sexual identity roles approved by mainstream society by never questioning or interrogating the normalization of these roles. These

roles maintain both spoken and unspoken rules that govern how individuals learn to think, act, and speak according to social and gender positioning (Alvermann, 1994).

Unfortunately, for LBTQ youth these social and cultural roles of society challenge a more postmodern view of self and their ability to reenact gender and sexuality differently beyond traditional binary categories. The postmodern conceptions of identity acknowledge the complex and multifaceted character of the LBTQ teen (Bean & Moji, 2003). These teens often resist and react against the imposition of "healthy" normative ideas by the dominant society that silence their voice(s). Today, LBTQ youth are emerging with a new vision that sees narrow fixed identities as confining and unnecessary while embracing nonbinary genders (Wilchins, 1994)

African American LBT girls talking back in an out-of-school setting.

The out-of-school setting of this study provided the girls a means to "talk back" to those social and cultural structures and institutions that attempt to label and identify them. In this study, the girls challenged society's ideologies of the fixed entities of gender and sexuality with their own inner voices, which interpret gender and sexuality as fluid or changing. In the safe space of the LBT literacy club, the girls established a familiarity and sense of community, which allowed them to voice conflicting 'social viewpoints' with the equal right to speak. Mikhail Bahktin's concept of polyphony or multiple voices involves the use of language in which no language is privileged above others Orchestrated together, the differing voices of the girls helped to invent, reformulate, and elaborate on each other's stories without the fear of discourses that serve to silence, reprehend, and disavow them. The voices of the African American LBT adolescent inter-animated or co-constructed variations of all the girls' stories to help articulate their own self as in a polyphonic musical piece.

Another goal of this study was to not only resist but also to comment on the "power code literacy" (Delpit, 1991) environment of schools which perpetuate and reinforce the dominant ideology of mainstream standards and sanitize the differences of adolescents. As Delpit (1991) argues, marginalized students—those students whose lives differ from mainstream culture and who frequently lack agency for access to traditional venues of political, social, and economic power--must not only access the 'power code literacy,' which is the language and culture taught in schools, but must also have the skills to resist and critique those codes (p. 543). LBTQ adolescents stand at odds with classroom practices because their sexuality and gender-identification lies outside the power literacy codes and influence that represents the order of things as natural and universal. Delpit (1991) continues this rationale by stating that adolescents whose 'circle of intimates' (discourse community) consists of those that are the culture of power easily find their own way into literacy, which perpetuates this culture of power (p. 543). While for other adolescents, such as the LBT adolescent, their intimates are not part of the culture of power, and their personal path into literacy will not provide accessibility to power. On the contrary, just the opposite is usually the case. I argue it is essential for LBT adolescents to be equipped with the ability to "talk back" and critically read to uncover inequalities, mainstream hierarchies, and ideological premises portrayed in text.

The out-of-school literacy setting in this study is a response to the need for African American LBT adolescent to have a space outside the confines of school walls where they could disrupt societal labeling and curb some of the damaging effects of the normalization process. Shelton (2007) states, it is important for LBT adolescents to be provided the space to develop their own language and support their peers in the articulation of identities. Beach, Thien and Parks (2008) noted, "Adolescents construct their identities through their participation in social

worlds, including participation in worlds portrayed in literature" (p.7). LBT adolescents, given the opportunity to explore literacy outside of the class, have the opportunity to (re)construct their own gendered identities and beliefs as they engage in the critical reading and discussion of realistic young adult literature (Marsh & Stolle, 2006). In the context in which the literacy practices of this study occurred, it was important to attend to the socio-cultural discourses which were created by inter-animation or weaving of the literature with the polyphonic or multi-voiced identities of the LBT adolescent (Ball & Freedman, 2004). In the social environment of a LBT space that supported and recognized the girls' lived experiences and social identities, the adolescent had the opportunity to "talk back" to literature and their multi-voiced identities in a safe and supportive setting. The use of multiliteracies or modes of representation (writing, reading, talking, viewing, listening, and visual representation) offered the girls a medium to rework or question their understanding of gender and sexuality portrayed in literature and their lived experiences.

Summary

This study examines the relationship among African American LBT adolescents' use of literature to explore gender, sexuality, and femininity and their own social and cultural beliefs and identities as they relate to the characters and central themes of the literature they read. In addition, because there is very little research that examines this population in relation to literacy and literacy practices, it expands prior research into girls' worlds (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Cherland, 1994; and Finders, 1997)

Identifying the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of out-of-school literacies for LBT adolescents will assist educators and stakeholders in creating strategies and literacy space to support the identity development and growth LBT adolescents in a secondary school setting.

Educational research has not extensively investigated the process of how LBT adolescents use out-of- school literacies to negotiate the many dialogues of gender, sexuality, and femininity portrayed in literature to explore their own polyphonic or multi-voiced identities.

I assert out-of-school settings offer the most authentic approach for GLBTQ students to participant in literacy events that honor their lives, literature and culture without the fear of violence, bullying and harassment interrupting their lives. Despite the efforts by local and national organizations such as GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) that provides training for teachers and parents, there are many schools, which remain unsafe for the GLBTQ student. Their diligent effort cannot protect students when homophobia, violence and danger are the main staple of their neighborhoods; no particular curriculum, class discussion or training can protect the GLBTQ student once the school door is closed. Despite these realities secondary schools remain our best hope for enacting curricula, which maintains a social justice objective, and social and political values that will provide a unified society.

Research Questions

Primary Question.

1. To what extent does engagement with multiliteracies in a safe, LBT out-of-school space, contribute to the development of personal agency in the lives of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents in ways that enable them to enact change in their lives?

Sub Questions.

1. In what ways do lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents, in the context of a LBT supportive, out-of-school literacy space, draw upon multiple and competing social constructions of gender and sexuality to construct meaning from text?

2.   How can critical engagement with literature provide opportunities for lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents to "talk back" to stereotypical, mainstream, perspectives of gender and sexual identities inherent in much contemporary young adult literature?

3.   To what extent do lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents, in a LBT supportive literacy space, use multimodal literacy practices to reconcile variations of performance in their memberships in both the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender and heterosexual communities?

CHAPTER 2

The Theoretical Concepts For Understanding The Use of Multiliteracies

 Introduction.

 The three tenets of critical literacy: construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction (Jones, 2006) informed and helped to shape this study. The goals of this research are twofold: 1) To better under how eight low-income African American LBT adolescents use multiliteracies to enhance their understanding of the social practices and socially ascribed identities which construct them as African American homosexual females; 2) to critique and deconstruct this social construction and thereby contribute to their ability to reconstruct identities and beliefs that have the potential to lead to human agency. I will begin by defining the three theoretical concepts, which frame the literature review:

- *Construction:* social practices and identities are constructed by interactions with text, language, and others.

- *Deconstruction:* anything that is socially constructed like text and one's identity can be deconstructed or taken apart

- *Reconstruction:* as rewriting text and confirming one's identities. For example, reconstructing gendered, sexual and racial ways of being

 In this study, I view the theories of critical literacy, social constructivism, poststructuralism, queer theory, feminist theory, and multiliteracies through the concepts of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. The following chart outlines the theories associated with each of the key critical literacy concepts: construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. The reader should keep in mind that these theories and concepts intersect and overlap each other.

Theoretical Framework of Study	Concept Addressed with Each Theory
Critical literacy, social constructivism, poststructuralism	Construction
Critical literacy social constructivism queer theory, feminist theory	Deconstruction
Critical literacies, social constructivism, sociocultural, multiliteracies,	Reconstruction

Morrell (2008) "argues that no population requires critical literacy more than today's urban youth" (p.6) because their lives are constantly inundated with racist, sexist, classist language, and texts which threaten their well being as literate citizens. In part, to be a literate citizen in 21st century America requires the freedom to read, understand, and question the world in which she lives (Jones, 2006). For this reason, I have chosen Morrell's understanding of critical literacy and the theories listed above for this study on African American LBT adolescents. Morrell (2008) sees critical literacy as a tool to navigate hegemonic discourse, to redefine the self and to transform oppressive social structures and relations of production. He goes on to say that to "define ourselves on our own terms" (p. 5) we must understand the role of the political, social, ideological and cultural context of language and text in the construction of self and reality.

In this study I refer to literacies because, with this group of girls as with other kinds of social groups there is not one definition which can adequately capture the range of literacies, the multiplicity of demands, or the ways these girls engaged with literacy during the course of this study (Allington, 1994; Bloom 1987; Bloom & Egan-Robertson, 1993). The New London Group

(1996) is concerned with the connections between rapidly changing social environment and its impact on teaching and learning. They argue that increasing cultural and social diversity requires an understanding of literacy that moves beyond language. "Multiliteracies" as defined by the New London Group (1996) is a literacy pedagogy, which focuses on modes of representation, or meaning making that stretches beyond language into the visually representing, viewing, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Through multiliteracies pedagogy, students develop the critical engagement with literacy required for them to be (come) agents in their own lives.

Addressing the literacy needs of African American LBT adolescents.

As has been demonstrated in many recent studies (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997), literacy practices in English language arts secondary classrooms are social constructs based on dominant ideologies that fail to address the needs of the GLBT adolescent, let alone African American LBT youth. In-school literacy practices often privilege and reproduce the knowledge and cultural truths that serve only the interests of mainstream social groups while promulgating racial, social, and cultural inequalities. Wissman (2007) contends that literacy education is part of an already unjust educational system because it perpetuates the silencing and limiting of literacy access to non-mainstream communities of practice. This issue is further complicated when students such as the African American adolescent represented in this study, "take on" a gendered and/or sexual identity along the GLBTQ continuum, which furthers her chance of her voice not being heard in a secondary English language arts classroom.

The research on African American female adolescents' literacy experiences is scarce according to many studies. Boston and Baxley (2009), claim that the African American female adolescent continues to be at some risk because of inadequate and misguided literacy education (p. 568). DeBlase's critical ethnography (2003) argues there is "very little research that focuses

on the ways in which culturally or racially diverse groups of urban middle-school girls negotiate literary text in the classroom" (p.280). Recently Gibson (2010) states "very little research exists that addresses the African American females' reading proficiency by examining the reading interests or literacy practices of this community" (p. 566). Aside from the research on African American adolescents, there is a deficit of research on low-income African American LBT adolescents who are currently navigating these very issues of literacy in their in-school and out-of-school lives.

It is critical to understand the detrimental impact of dominant cultural models which work to "normalize" values, attitudes, and beliefs about the ways to act, read, and interact across social worlds that are based on middle-class, White, heterosexual subjectivities on a low-income urban African American LBT adolescent. The LBT African American adolescent is positioned not only as a young Black woman, but also as a homosexual and therefore expected to act in both roles, in ways that have been constructed for her. The tension for the African American LBT adolescent is created in her attempts to simultaneously manage and act out the cultural models (Gee, 1999, p.59) of both mainstream (white, middle class, and heterosexual) and non-mainstream (African American, low socio-economic status, and homosexual) communities if she wants to claim equitable access to literacy education in both communities. As this dissertation will demonstrate and as past research confirms the girls' attempt to straddle two competing and disparate worldviews creates "contradictory enactments" (Beach, et al, 2008, p.7). I begin the literature review with the theoretical concept of the construction of the social structures of dominant cultural models, gender, and classroom practices through literacy, which influences the socially constructed identities of LBT adolescents' identities.

Construction of cultural models through literacy

Social Constructivism.

Historically, views of normalization relegated 'ascribed identities' (Sutherland, 2005) to the African American female as inferior, objectified, and sexually promiscuous. Further, Foucault in his book *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings* (1977) claims that *"*normalization is one of the greatest instruments of disciplinary power and the power of normalization imposes homogeneity" (p. 184). Consequently, homogeneity positions or codifies certain behaviors, values, and perspectives as dominant and thereby instills them with a power or authority that allows for the devaluing and subjugating of certain other behaviors, values, and perspectives that fall out of the realm of "normal." Over time, the practice of ascribing identities based on ways of being works to limit the ability of disenfranchised groups, such as the girls in this study, to understand self beyond these ascribed identities or to "talk [back]" (Hooks, 1989) and resist identities ascribed to them by others. Postmodern theory posits these scripted identities or cultural models originate outside the self and bear the imprints and pressures of literacy practices, social institutions, and discourse.

The cultural models found in text including storylines, images and themes, inform the African American LBT girl how she should "be," thus indoctrinating her into the dominant ideologies of heterosexuality, femininity, and morality. Sutherland (2005) argues these models, which construct the ascribed identity of the African American adolescent, serve as "boundaries" which limit her ability to construct authentic ways of being. Brock's research (2010) reveals how the portrayal of the Black woman by ideological constructs becomes so natural that it seeps into her being and festers… (xviii).

Stephens & Phillips study (2010) examined the perpetuation of contemporary sexual scripts of the African American female such as "freaks", "gold diggers", "divas" and "dykes"

through text including magazines and novels. These scripts not only reinforce the beliefs of the White community about the Black community but also influence how African American adolescents see themselves (Phillips & Stephens, 2010). The African American adolescent is constructed by the discourses of her social worlds (e.g. school, media, and community) and situated into generic categories (e.g. dyke, freak or diva). Depictions of African American females found in current magazines including *Essence* and *Cosmo* and novels similar to *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah function to monitor and encode such gender roles including sexuality and femininity. Stephens & Phillips (2010) define the generic categories commonly found in African American magazines and literature:

Freak: sexually wild and aggressive, loves to have sex without emotional attachment.

Gold digger: trades sex for currency, believes sex is her commodity in life.

Divas: "having an attitude," wants to be adorned and worshipped by others.

Dykes: do not let men have a role in their sexual interactions. Ignores male advances (2010, pp. 15, 18, 20, 23).

Female adolescents use these ascribed scripts found in popular cultural media to produce sexual and gendered identities for creating peer relationships and sexual relations (Kehily, 2002). In a sense, these texts 'construct girlhood' by positioning African American adolescents in terms of age, social class and heterosexuality according to the standards established by others (p.104).

Together, these models of freaks, divas, dykes and gold diggers make up the overriding discourse, which creates a hierarchical value system that merits certain social practices over others and pressures African American LBT adolescents to adopt practices most valued in their social worlds of neighborhoods, churches, schools, and workplaces. The challenge for the African American LBT adolescent is not simply a "dance" as described by Gee (1999) between

her social worlds, but a recovery from the moralistic judgment and striping of her identity as a gendered and sexual being. In this way, cultural models found in text influence how the LBT adolescent identifies who she is and who she will become.

Construction of identity through literacy practices

I believe Adrienne Rich (1980) said it best when she wrote that too often adolescent girls look into the mirror of their school, lives, and community and do not see their image reflected in the curriculum, positively portrayed in media, or on the billboards of their neighborhoods. Lei (2003) describes identity construction as a "production" that occurs from the *inside out*, involving the comfort and acceptance from a community of practice but also a forced process from the *outside in*, which imposes on the African American LBT teen fixed categorizations and monolithic depictions (p.2). Lei's description of identity construction was the most appropriate for this study because a common theme in the talk and the writing of the study's participants was a constant tension between convincing their friends and families to approve of their LBT identity and resisting the dominant cultural model of what is "normal" and "natural" for a young Black woman. It is in normative performances where African American LBT adolescents create, reproduce and solidify "who they are," in multiple social worlds including school, community and family (see Appendix A). The African American LBT adolescent performs polyphonic (multiple) identities as she inter-animates between the different social worlds (e.g. heterosexual and homosexual). Her performances in each social world depend on the varying degree of "being out", voice and authenticity, she possesses in each social world.

Blackburn's study (2003) of the literacy performances and identity work of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth ages 12 to 23 who participated in a group called *Story Time* demonstrates the impact of literacy practices on the identity and agency of GLBTQ

youth. *Story Time* was a weekly literacy group that usually met for two hours in an urban GLBTQ community center. The purpose of the group was to provide the GLBTQ youth "free space" to share and discuss journal entries, poetry, and short stories they had written. Blackburn (2003) explains that, "*Story Time* was a particular kind of place where the youth and I explored the relationships among literacy practices and identity in ways that disrupted hetero-normative practices" (p.315). My study offers us a way of thinking about multiliteracies in relation to how African American adolescent girls name, construct, and negotiate polyphonic (multiple) identities in their social worlds of school, home, and community through interaction with literature.

One of the participants of *Story Time*, Justine, who self-identified as an African-American lesbian, shared with her peers' feelings of having to protect herself by dichotomizing her personal and academic writing because she experienced homophobia as a freshman, sophomore, and junior in high school (Blackburn, 2003). Justine was verbally abused and was called a dyke in school and in the street. She confessed that her "school journal had nothing in it" about the abuse or lesbian-themed writing (2003, p.316). Furthermore, Justine felt "the people at school would not respect, understand, or appreciate who she was as a person or what she was trying to say in [any of] her writing." She was unable to participate in her schools' literacy practices in meaningful or authentic ways because her gender and social identities did not conform to the social and gender norms of the high school community. Justine's identity in the context of school and in-school literacy events was interpreted as "unnatural" or "deviant." Students like Justine are watched, evaluated, and measured against the status quo. These "censors" (Jones, 2006) are constantly reinforced through the enactment of official discourse of secondary schools, as well as by silencing oneself as in the case of Justine. Thus, any attempts by

the African American LBT adolescent to "define herself in her own terms" are (Morrell, 2008) censored by traditional literacy practices and beliefs that ultimately distort the creation of self.

Construction of gender through literacy

For the purpose of this literature review, I consider gender as a social construct reproduced through literature and literacy practices (among others). With few opportunities to see themselves represented in texts or classroom discussions, African American LBT girls struggle with understanding their place in society because the framework presented to them reinforces only "fixed" or "traditional" gender norms, and does not represent their fluid sense of self or lived experience outside of the secondary school. This dominance of a fixed form of gender positions the African American LBT teen as the "Other" in a secondary school setting (Paechter, 1998) which leads to the "silencing of the voices of the oppressed and the legitimatization of oppressive social relations" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.8). The Sadler & Sadler (1994) study shows adolescent females experience loss of voice, self-confidence and positive self-esteem because of society's ascribed gender roles, which serve as a powerful message to girls. It is important to acknowledge for my study that race, culture, and class compounded the gender identity of the participants in this study. Each does not exist as its own entity but as an intricate weaving of social barriers for African American LBT girls. Butler (1990) argues that masculinity and femininity do not exist in any "body" but is an illusion because of socially agreed-upon beliefs about the world. These socially agreed-upon ideas help people to organize their lives and experiences in terms of socially constructed categories such as gender (Lorber, 1994).

It is the recurring "performance" (Butler 1999) of the binary structure (male/female) of gender in text, discourse and literacy practices of secondary schools that affect the ways students

think, so they find it impossible to imagine things in another way (Paechter, 1998). Many studies have discussed the processes in which girls are constructed as gendered beings in school contexts. Valerie Walkerdine (1990) argues girls are positioned as self-regulating subjects through the discourses of femininity, passivity, and irrationality while work by James Butler (1996) suggests the perpetuation of male domination in secondary schools makes apparent the invisibility of lesbians.

Bruce (2003) contends the conservative nature of secondary schools poses critical challenges for young women because women's voices and experiences are silenced in the official school curriculum. A female student states, "A lot of the books I've read, all the books I've read, only really talk about or show males" (Benjamin & Irwin-Devitis, 1998). In Hartman's (2006) study the 10th grade female participants could "hardly remember" any female characters in their high school literature thus far. Applebee (1989) found for 27 titles listed for required reading in high school there were only two, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* written by women while a 2010 reading list for a state high school with over 40 titles included only seven books written by women (http://www.regis-nyc.org). This issue is further complicated for marginalized groups because even less or no books are written by women of color or LBT women for a secondary reading list. This deliberate maintenance of socially sanctioned novels threatens the African American LBT adolescents' worldview and encourages them to preserve mainstream ideology (Morrell, 2008).

Coupled with a gendered curricula the discourse of a secondary English language arts classroom threatens an adolescent's sense of masculinity and femininity because literature, and especially the ways it is talked about in classrooms, has the power to influence how students perceive gender roles in school-sanctioned text such as *Hamlet*. Pace & Townsend's (1999) four-

month study focused on the talk between students and instructors in different first-year, college literature classes. One instructor in particular illustrates how gender role construction during class discussions affects how students might understand themselves and others. The instructor commanded the class discussions with his own opinions as if he knew Hamlet's perspective. Several times, he silenced the ideas of female students during the class discussions by asking the class, what else does it mean? As if to say to the girls, you are not giving me the "correct" answer. The instructor's long discussions were confined to stereotypical gender roles for both Gertrude and Hamlet. The instructor encouraged the students to perceive Gertrude as a "slut", weak, and sexual while portraying Hamlet as privileged, a scholar and a prince. Over time, the students began their own conversations demonizing Gertrude as "ruled by fickle allegiances and sexual appetites" while Hamlet was without further scrutiny by the students (1999, p.45). The stereotypical presentations of the characters were presented as natural and universal by the teacher's literacy practices which encouraged the students to "leave their own biases unexamined or to participate in their own degradation" (1999, p. 45). It is not about the text but the group discussions and interactions, especially between teacher and students that goes along with it, which brings about the co-construction of identity.

Construction of school-sanctioned practices through literacy

The larger framework of society including maleness, whiteness and middle class values are imposed on African American LBT adolescents while, at the same time, inexplicably expecting them to feel valued as an African American, female, and homosexual in a secondary English language arts classroom. The African American LBT adolescent is at the mercy of an institutional power that attempts to devalue her literacy and cultural practices by silencing her voice, exploiting her self-expression and negating her ways of knowing. Rochelle Brock (2010)

recognizes it happens early on in their lives as "Black children enter the educational system and begin to lose their concept of self from the very first day they sit in class ignored by curriculum, the teacher, and the system" (p.93).

"Literacy is a socially constructed phenomenon that is situationally defined and redefined within and across differing social groups" including classrooms, organizations, families, cultures, and professions (Casthanheira, Crawford, Dixon, Green, 2001 p. 354). Each social group identifies what counts as literacy, and its members are accountable for maintaining the value of the literate practices by their actions. A sociolinguistic perspective on literacy includes understanding literacy as a set of practices to understand the world and the value attributed to these practices in situated context. At times, the group may deny opportunities for others to access the literate skills necessary to participate in socially and appropriate ways, as the following study will demonstrate.

Sarah Michaels' study (1981) explores the interaction between a White teacher and Black children during "sharing time." This study conducted in an elementary school in Berkley, California. The majority of black children were bused to the school from the "flatlands" (segregated by class and ethnicity) neighborhoods. During sharing time, the children told stories about their experiences in the world to the class. Michaels (2006) found the sharing style of the black children to be a topic-associating discourse strategy; where the story is not told in a linear fashion, but recursive as the child's story is created by linking together a variety of topics.

According to the teacher, Mrs. Jones, the topic-associating style of the Black children did not constitute good sharing because it did not draw upon the linear Western story-form (2006). Thus, as the Black children told their stories, they were not effectively scaffolded or prompted by questions from Mrs. Jones to create a "legitimate" story. Instead, Mrs. Jones described the

children's stories as "ramblings" and evaluated them as unplanned, disorganized and not 'telling about only one thing" (2006, p.130). What counted as literacy in Mrs. Jones' classroom were the actions taken on by the children that either supported or rejected her ideology of what is good storytelling. Through the events of this particular classroom, the children learned that they were accountable for conforming to situated literate practices, which would identify them as readers, writers, students, and members of Mrs. Jones' classroom. The Black children were "interlopers" not really belonging as literacy members but merely as subjects to reinforce domination (Hooks, 1994). Yet the White children's literacy membership afforded them further educational opportunities that extended beyond the classroom such as writing stories for the school newsletter (Prentiss, 1995; Ivanic, 1994). Michael's study illustrates the implications of the social construction of school literacy by established norms and the value placed on contrasting discourse styles. The literacy event constructed by the interaction between the teacher and children was not simply a task of sharing a story but a complex web of situated, context-embedded practices intertwined with the workings of power and the social and cultural identity of the child.

As long as secondary school literacy practices reinforce the dominant culture's officially sanctioned ways of knowing, reading, writing and acting, the African American LBT adolescents' lived experiences remain obscured by homogenized curricula and teaching practices. An example comes from Schneider's study (2001), exploring the perspectives and beliefs of twelve elementary and middle school teachers about controversial writing topics including violence, racism, gay feelings, gay parents, religion, and sex broached by their student writers. The study demonstrates how institutional knowledge intersects with relations of power to "valorize" or "deauthorize" the specific interests associated with students' lived experiences

(Rasmussen, 2006, p. 169). The teachers utilized writing workshops and journals to inspire their students to write about their lives. The students wrote about safe topics such as family vacations, pets, friends, and sports within an assigned genre. Several of the teachers used writing prompts with their classes to avoid questions and turmoil concerning controversial subjects. For different reasons, many of the teachers asked their students "to avoid particular topics that made them feel uncomfortable" (Schneider, 2001, p. 418). Many of the teachers in the study redirected student writing if it promoted a particular thought or if the beliefs were different from their own.

One teacher, Nicole, revealed to the researcher that, according to her moral beliefs, homosexuality was inappropriate and she would not allow her students to write about gay parents or issues. She continued by saying if the parents were normal, she would not have to deal with such a moral dilemma in her writing class. However, she did not have an issue with the students writing about religion, "As long as it's [her] religion," she stated (2001, p. 422). In this case, Nicole allowed her personal religious convictions to dictate her instructional decisions by not accepting or accommodating certain beliefs or ways of being in her classroom, and not allowing the students to write about topics that were troubling even if they were of interest to them.

This "sanitizing" of lived experience sends a strong message to adolescents about "who gets to share their socially situated identities and who does not" in a secondary English language arts classroom (Gee, 2005, p. 311). Fordham (1993) argues to be "taken seriously" the African American woman must discard or at least minimize her identity. The consequences of an African American LBT adolescent of discarding her identity violates her sense of "Self" (1993) and becomes a deterrent to equitable access in the secondary English language arts classroom.

Taking up the views of Basil Bernstein (1996) in *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity* and Gamma Moss (2007) in *Literacy and Gender: Researching texts, contexts and*

readers in mind*,* I argue social reproduction through cultural models, discourse, text, and literacy practices are not determined by specific content alone, but rather by the reproduction of different subject positions and rules which serve as boundaries to accessing knowledge in different forms (2007, p. 37). In the case of an African American LBT adolescent, she is positioned within a "traditional dichotomous definition" of a woman or subject as good-bad, heterosexual-homosexual, freak-diva (Fordham, 1993, p.4). These fixed subject positions for the LBT adolescent affects what literacy resources are made available to her because of the lack of significance to her identities and community knowledge in both homosexual and heterosexual worlds. Post-structuralism and queer theory offers a set of theoretical tools to help deconstruct the boundaries, which keep power, privilege and access out of the hands of the African American LBT adolescent. The next section of the literature review from the perspective of feminist theory and queer theory and will address the deconstruction of social categories, language, and identity through literacy.

Deconstruction

Queer Theory and Feminist Theory.

Morrell (2008) claims "that in order to define ourselves in our own terms, we must understand the role of language and text in the construction of the self and the social" (p. 5). This "self–actualization" (Hooks, 1994) begins with the critical awareness of the cultural and societal forces pressing upon us–a precursor to deconstructing, talk backing, or resisting these constructions laden with hegemonic discourses. Deconstruction by nature is an understanding of language as vibrant, creative, and continually disseminating meaning (Leggo, 1998). An understanding of deconstruction is important to this study because African American LBT adolescents do not neatly fit in the regulatory framework of gender and sexuality. This kind of

thinking that encourages a student's heterosexual identity as natural, and supports society's binary thinking of sexuality between a male and female as "normal" because it results in procreation. Deconstruction seeks to show there is more than one way of looking at text, social categories, and literacy space.

Deconstruction of the social cultural constructions of an African American adolescent through literacy

Deconstruction, a tenet of critical literacy, implies that text, discourse, and one's identity can be deconstructed or taken apart to reveal the multiple layers of meaning saturated with worldview ideology (Powel, 2007) and then to critique those meanings and ideologies. An African American LBT adolescent sees and understands herself and the world by the discourse of her social worlds (peer, school, friends, and community). If this is the case, what does the LBT girl believe and value about herself when confronted with the following social messages of what is normal and natural for a Black LBT woman?

- A bumper sticker: Marriage = one man +one woman
- A song lyric by Luke Campbell (1991): I hate bulldaggin' hoes with a passion
  You motherfuckin'right a nigga gave bashin' You bitches need to get that gay shit off your mind…(Stephens & Phillips, 2003).
- A message from the church: "When you look at the way God designed the male and the female — 'Be fruitful and multiply' was the command," I'm sorry, but the homosexual cannot be fruitful and multiply" (National Public Radio, August 2010).

The above language which creates the social institution of marriage as only between a woman and a man, and constructs identities of hoes, bitches, and "niggas" constructs a reality which encourages African American LBT adolescents into a way of seeing and understanding the world that is in conflict with and denigrates the complex realities of their own lives. These social categories are recurring performances of a culture's values and beliefs, so much so they are considered as natural or normal. Consequently, anything else is unnatural, abnormal or even

immoral. The language of a culture, in part, invents these performances or recurring acting out of categories. In turn, this language can be deconstructed to create a reality or a counter narrative for African American LBT adolescents on their own terms.

To illustrate this point Sutherland's (2005) study of six 16-year-old Black girls reading *The Bluest Eye* validates the need for girls to talk back or deconstruct scripts that interrupt the status quo of institutional norms and for further human agency (Bruce, 2003). It is through the practice of reading that deconstruction aims to make meaning from a text focusing on how the text works, and how a text is connected to other texts as well as the historical, cultural, social, and political contexts, in which texts are written, read, published, rewarded, and distributed (Leggo, 1998, p. 187).

The study took place at Westport High School, which is located off an interstate expressway nestled between a city and the suburbs. The school was approximately 91% percent Black with about 15% of the student population received free or reduced lunches. The researcher observed an English honors class during a semester long "Identity" unit, which included studying the novel, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Sutherland found a Eurocentric standard of beauty and societal assumptions on how Black women should "behave" were recurring themes in the students' writing and class discussions. The two themes, which Sutherland refers to as "boundaries" of what the girls are able to do, are in the girls' stories. It was through group discussions, individual interviews and writing that the girls were able to talk back or negotiate what these two themes meant from the social positions that as Black women they occupy. The book bothered one girl in particular, Shawna because dark-skinned Pecola (a central character) was ugly against a Eurocentric standard of beauty. Shawna deeply identified with Pecola because she was also a victim of skin shade racism in her school and community. Through literacy

practices, Shawna was able to talk back using Pecola's experience to understand her feelings of anger and resentment because of how others perceived her dark skin color. Shawna explains, "It hurts me that um, being dark-skinned to most people is ugly, is ugliness, and really, and really, most of the dark-skinned people like myself would not looked to as being subservient if I weren't dark" (p. 382).

Shawna used the novel to make sense of her own life story and to reassert her sense of self-worth surrounding her own beauty. During an interview Shawna repeatedly said, "I love being dark. I love who I am" (2005, p. 384). The discussions about the text enable Shawna to renegotiate how she confronts skin shade racism in her own life. She explained during an interview, "I guess it really says that I really shouldn't look at myself the way they look at me because that's what happens sometimes. And like I said earlier, I'm not here for them, I'm here for myself" (2005, p. 384).

From a post-structuralist perspective "peeling back the layers" of a text enabled Shawna to negotiate the multiple meanings of skin color racism from a societal created reality in *The Bluest Eye* to a personal reality that made her more resilient to the thinking of others. This helped Shawna to not only make sense of her experiences but to try on or take up polyphonic or multiple identities (Bahktin, 1981). Sutherland (2005) asserts the continuous process of interacting with text provided the girls with the opportunity to shape their own reality by deconstructing the ideals of beauty and behaving which regulate them as young Black women in society. The African American LBT adolescent is constrained not only by the binary conception of beauty and behavior but also by the limited constructions of gender identity visible in society, school, and community (Nielsen, 2006). The cultural values about males and females in literacy practices reinforce gender and social binaries.

Brett Elizabeth Blake (1995) did an ethnographic study on African American and Latina urban low-income girls' construction of "cultural text" as a means to write and talk about their lives, silenced at home, in the community and in school. Blake argues writing provided the platform for the girls to name, define, describe, explore, and transform sexism, which wove naturally through their lives. As Freire (1987) argues, it is the ability for a literate individual to name one's experience that lets them understand the limits and possibilities of the larger world. Lorraine O'Grady (1992) extends this notion to Black women by stating "To name ourselves, rather than be named, we must see ourselves…"

Jenna, an African American girl wrote about personal issues ignored by the adults in her life and were filled with a sense of betrayal, resentment, and anger toward her father's attitude about boys. The father's lectures on "the birds and bees" were prefaced with the sexual motives of boys. Jenna wrote:

> My father was talking to me and he told me boys are only after one thing because he was a boy before. There was this boy and he wouldn't let me play with him my father tried to keep him away and if he did something bad to me my father would hang him up. My father says boys don't care what they do to you because if I get pregnant it's our problem. I would like that boys got pregnant too (1995, p. 175).

Beach, Thein and Parks (2008) write that a construct of third-space explains how Jenna's struggle with the cultural model of "what boys do" with the complex realities of her own life helped to create an alternative 'third-space world' where "boys got pregnant too." Jenna's third-space world was her way of talking back to the status quo and deconstructing cultural models that she found to be unfair. It was Jenna's way of resisting authority over her. From a queer theory perspective, it was not enough for Jenna to talk about her father's attitude about what boys do but to have the freedom to actively take-on or resist the discourse or roles expected of

her. Her third-space world disrupted the notion of fixed gender characteristics and made room for a reinvention (e.g. trying on different identities and ideologies) (Reece-Miller & Endo, 2010).

The LBT adolescent incorporates a variety of taken-for-granted-values, norms, and narratives as part of the practice of socialization into a community of practice. Gee (2000) defines 'community of practice' as shared knowledge, which is distributed across people, social practices, procedures, and tools of a community about gender, sexual, and social norms (p.186). The LBT adolescent in community practice gains knowledge through her immersion in the collaborative community practice defined in words, but is passed on through socialization. For this reason there needs to be intentional disruption of space in out-of school and in-school settings for the LBT adolescent to bring their own agendas, histories, and subject positions in order "to unravel the relationship between appearance and reality" (Appleman, 2000, p.100).

Deconstruction of space through literacy where no space 'naturally' existed

Both of the previous studies show that deconstruction requires the reader to acknowledge their agendas, histories, and subject positions when reading text while keeping in mind a space for multiple interpretations (Marshall, 1992, p. 188). Marshall continues to explain that multiple interpretations can open the space that "may become the space for dialogue" (p. 188). This next study illustrates Marshall's point about creating a space for the dialogue of young women, which acknowledges their agendas, histories and subject positions and claim to human agency.

In Weis & Carbonella-Medina's (2003) study of a voluntary urban school program called *My Bottom Line* for girls in Buffalo, New York the participants included ethnically and racially diverse girls from the 7th through 12th grades with varied backgrounds in the arts. The goal of the program was to "prevent or delay the onset of sexual activity, build self-esteem and increase self-sufficiency in young women" (p. 98). The "discourse of desire" (Fine, 2003), or what was

expected of them, such as not to be a virgin, to be sexually available to men, and to take on adult-like sexual responsibility, regulated these young women in a poor, working class community. Their community's discourse and cultural models constitute what is normal or natural for young women of color. The girls used the discourse or words of their communities to speak about their identities and performances (Cameron, 2001).

"Just about every girl, like on my street, had babies when they were about fourteen or fifteen," Danielle, one of the study's participants, states "The girls around my neighborhood, they all 'hos.'" "And they wear nasty outfits, and they go out with older guys," Gloria continues (Weis & Carbonella-Medina, 2003, pp. 150-151).

This discourse, which has the power to "systematically form objects of which it speaks" (Foucault, 1972, p.49), reduced the young women to sexual objects thus limiting the capital funds available to them. The community's positioning of these young women minimized the young women's resources for self-transformation. Feminist theory has made strong claims about the significance of women telling their own stories and the destructiveness of others speaking for them (Lugone & Spelman, 2005, p. 18). *My Bottom Line* offered a space for the young women through literacy to tell their own stories about renegotiated individual and collective identities that were unlike their neighborhood's cultural models of sexual promiscuity and male domination. Eventually, the adolescents validated their identities by "pulling away from others" that maintained the femininity norm of the community: "tight clothes, and being fast and wild" (Weis & Carbonella-Medina's, 2003, p.105). As expressed by Ayisha, one of the study's participants: "Well, they're not going to make it because they're doing so and so with their lives. And You know, I'll show them differently. And they's be looking at you like, I can't believe it. Well, believe it, because I'm going to do something with my life" (2003, p.158)."

An important aspect of Alyisha's identity work included "distancing" herself from those other girls in the community that were perceived as "not like" those who will not make it, ending up as the consequence of the community norms, pregnant, or abused by men (2003, p.147). *My Bottom Line* existed as a deconstructed space to accommodate young women's dialogue on resisting and challenging the gender and sexual scripts of their neighborhood's patriarchal structure. As Hull (2003) argues, it is "paramount" for secondary literacy education in these times to offer a space for students to communicate critically, lovingly and agentively (p.230) to define themselves and their view of the world. While Weis et al. (2003) adds, "[in] no other space does the official curriculum lend itself to these subjects and subsequent potential empowerment for young women" (p. 163).

In a sense, literacy is "fundamental to aggressively constructing one's voice" while creating a new relationship with the wider society (Freire &Macedo, 1987, p.7) as demonstrated in the next study. In Wissman's (2007) ten-month qualitative inquiry on sixteen young women of color, the majority African American deconstructed dominant school discourse and space to claim agency and credibility with their language. The young women felt their high school was a perpetuator of silence, surveillance, and invisibility, which curtailed their academic development. The "space of Sistahs" (2007, p.7) allowed the student "to write herself and put herself into text and by doing so; her future will no longer be determined by the past" as written by Helene Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (2005). The participants had a strong desire to write their agendas, histories and subject positions into text as evident in this excerpt from Jasmyn's poem:

> I seem to be quiet
> Leaving my voice muted and stored
> But really I'm like a tiger
> Roaring my roar
> Showing the world I am so much more
> More than just a gold-digging "b".… (2007, p. 2).

Her poem transcends dominant discourse of inferiority to reflect strength, pride, and resiliency.

Jasmyn resists the derogatory representations of Black women by proclaiming herself "more than

a gold-digging "b"…while showing the world I am so much more" (2007, p. 2).

During the study, the Sistahs became disenchanted over a decision made by the school's

administrators to halt a student protest against the war in Iraq. Their disenchantment led many of

the young women to write about their future that would no longer be determined by the past as

reflected in Maya's "just thoughts" about school faculty and administrators, as they debated the

student protest issue (2007, p. 5).

> How can you sit back and let us fall victim to a system that has been implemented and
> embodied in the dirt of a society you polluted, that you infected with your lies and
> propaganda? And it is the same society that we, the key holders of tomorrow's future,
> have to face (March 6, 2003).

Maya used oral and written language to position herself in a third-world space (Beach et

al., 2008), the space between the real world and the desired world where her ideas, experiences

and knowledge matters. The third-world space served as a site for Maya's "authoring" of her

reconstructed self and a desire to claim human agency (p.7). As Anne Hass Dyson (1995) notes,

the self can easily be lost within what has come to be known in the post-structuralist world as a

discourse grid, that is a grid of identities of who one can, and cannot be, and what one can and

cannot do, in particular. This being true Wissman (2007) argues for crafted spaces in-school or

out-of-school settings that provide "a context for explorations, dialogue, polyphonic voices, and

engagements with literacy and the arts" (p. 7). Wissman's (2007) study strongly demonstrates

the need I found to be true in this study for young African American LBT adolescents to have

crafted spaces outside or inside the confines of secondary English language arts classroom to

disrupt the practices of silence, surveillance, and invisibility which normalize them into

unwilling positions; a space that provides a sense of permeability to create, reproduce and solidify "who they are," in multiple social worlds including school, community and family.

Deconstruction of school-sanctioned text through literacy

Within the field of literacy, Deborah Brandt (2001) contends, "what individuals can do with their reading and writing contributes to their sense of identity, normality, and possibility" (p.11). It is through literacy that people confront and create different perceptions of their social worlds. People express, display, and make claims for who they are and who they would like to be in the stories they tell, read, and write. Reading is a socially constructed activity shaped by the demands and needs of the setting in which it occurs (Dillon, O'Brien and Volkmann, 2001). A response to what one reads or writes depends not only on the experiences of the reader or writer, but also on the "textual contract," on what the secondary English language arts classroom expects (2001, p.55).

Recently the secondary English classroom has not expected the growing popularity of urban fiction among African American adolescents. Urban fiction such as *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah (1999) and *London Reign* (2007) by A.C Britt are deconstructing the boundaries of school-sanctioned text with a genre, which includes explicit sexualized images and violent themes. Urban fiction authored by women are written in first person from the perspective of a young African American female protagonist between the ages of 16 and 23 who triumph over real life experiences including drugs, pregnancy, abortion, crime and abuse. Gibson (2010) states the popularity of urban fiction among girls is an example of disconnect between school-sanctioned text and the novels the African American girl reads in an out-of-school setting. Some educators view urban fiction as "trash" and do not acknowledge this type of novel as pedagogical devices for the secondary English language arts classroom (Mahiri, 2004; Schultz & Hall, 2001).

Sutherland (2005) and Carter (2007) contend, "this trend in the popularity of urban fiction is crucial to consider because historically Black girls have been left out of literature engagements in the English classroom on multiple levels" (Marshall, Staples and Gibson, 2009, p.1). The value of urban fiction as described is allowing adolescents to "talk in the third person about problems with which they are concerned" (Corbin, 2008) (Baltimore City Paper).

Two critical aspects from a socio-cultural perspective are how readers grapple with the dialogic tension presented by texts that differ from their experiences, and how well they are able to discern the complex network of ideas and beliefs that relate to larger themes that extend beyond the lives of the characters in the text (Beach et al., 2008). Through this lens, it is therefore not enough for the African American adolescent to experience text presented in-school and out-of-school settings without the freedom to actively take-on or resist the discourse or roles portrayed in them. The power to "take on" resides in the acknowledgement of adolescents' realities. The female adolescent may not relate to the characters portrayed in urban street fiction but are "challenged and provoked by the characterizations, situations, and the language of the books" (Corbin, 2009, p. 1).

Marshall, Staples and Gibson's (2009) study argues the constructions of Black femininity in urban fiction may serve as a site of resistance for African American adolescents to reclaim derogatory representation against them. Marshall, Staples and Gibson's study included the analysis of two popular urban fiction novels *Bitch* by Deja King and *Black and Ugly* by T. Styles as sites of resisting stereotypical representations of the African American female. In the novel, *Bitch*, Precious, the female protagonist portrayed by sexual prowess, emotional manipulation, and intellectual ruthlessness, defines her femininity. Precious' self-worth is initially dependent on her relationship with rich and powerful men. Life as a prostitute, murderer, and wife of

notorious drug dealers teaches Precious the purpose and power of her femininity. The story concludes with Precious as the "supreme bitch" and wife of a rich rap star controlling her own finances, social clout, and street status independent of any man (2009). The novel, *Bitch* provides the African American female reader the opportunity to deconstruct the representations of Black femininity to understand what institutional forces reflected in them shape her beliefs and identities and position her as an outsider (Beach et al., 2008). The female reader of urban fiction debunks stereotypical representations of Black adolescent femininity as unrealistic, insulting, or futile and reconstructs the representations as heroic, smart, and successful (Staples, 2005).

The second novel, *Black and Ugly* from the study is similar to *Bitch* in challenging representations of Black female femininity. The protagonist, Parade, is constantly berated by her mother about her blackness and ugliness. She says, "I knew I was ugly the moment my mother gave me a mirror" (Styles, 2006, p.1). Throughout the story, Parade negotiates the color of her skin and other physical features by deconstructing stereotypes about Blackness and beauty (Marshall, Staples and Gibson, 2009). At one point in the story Parade confides in the reader by saying, "In my entire life, no one has called me pretty; let alone beautiful" (Styles, 2006, p.100). As the heroine of the story, Parade transitions into womanhood with a strong sense of racial pride and a self-discovery of being Black and beautiful.

Both of the novels, *Bitch* and *Black and Ugly* serve as resources for African American female adolescents to make sense of their Black femininity and to try on multiple or conflicting identities. The African American female adolescent draws on "her experience with life and language as the raw materials" to illicit a deeper understanding between these texts and her histories (Rosenblatt, 1995). Urban fiction used in an out-of-school setting or in-school setting can reflect the experiences of an African American female adolescent by presenting alternative

ways to construct Black femininity representations and discourse, which the secondary English language arts classroom silences. In this way, texts like urban fiction bring a sense of liberation to the African American female adolescent by showing that her emotions and ideas are shared by people in other social worlds and by providing her with a plan to do Black femininity her way. This is an opportunity to "enlarge [her] response to literature" (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 53), to regain the emotional attachment the African American female adolescent has lost in other literacy settings by giving her permission to deconstruct stereotypic representations of Black women because her identity is not fixed but constantly under negotiation depending on the expectations of various social worlds. To define herself "on her own terms" is crucial for the African American adolescent's positioning as a "literate citizen" (Morrell, 2008, p.5).

For this study the African American LBT adolescent needs a safe space to "live through" what is being fostered during reading without fear of repercussions because her ideas do not conform to dominant ideas (Rosenblatt, 1985), and so she is not constrained by limited constructions of gender and sexual identities in school and society. The LBT adolescent is in need of texts that add meaning to both her in school and lived experiences because of the out-of-school contexts affecting her life (Tatum, 2009). Rosenblatt (1985) describes a literacy transaction as a reciprocal relationship between the text and the reader in which "the reader comes to a book from life" (p.34). African American LBT adolescents are no different, bringing their social and cultural histories to the reading experience. Rosenblatt continues, "If the images or ideas presented in literature do not have relevance to the experiences or emotional needs of the reader, only a vague or feeble response will occur" (1985, p.56). This emotional detachment to literature occurs for the African American LBT adolescent if the literature does not resonate with her identities. The detachment will continue until the adolescent learns to rework story lines or

themes to reflect her social worlds and to challenge the binary thinking represented in text. The only way to avoid this is if secondary schools let go of the ideals of fundamentalism, intellectual safety, and homogeneity that control what type of texts students read.

I argue it is necessary for the African American LBT adolescent to have the opportunity to participate in literacy practices that do not hold her to a textual contract or norms in terms of her sexual and gender identity. The African American LBT adolescent needs to see her experiences in the world represented in text and not the unquestionably dominate ideology as the universal truth of what counts as literature (Cherland, 1994, p.16). It is crucial for the African American LBT adolescent to understand how literacy functions as a means of participation in society, and how it constructs her life and identity as a literate citizen.

Reconstruction

Pedagogy of Multiliteracies.

Multiliteracies as discussed by The New London Group (1996) are relevant to the concept of reconstruction because the elasticity of multiliteracies accommodates the multiple/polyphonic identities of the African American LBT adolescent. For this reason, I feel it is imperative for the African American LBT adolescent to have the opportunity to explore his/her polyphonic identities through multiliteracies including language, writing, reading, speaking, viewing and visualizing to achieve various purposes. The narrow, monologic concept of literacy found in many secondary English language arts classrooms is not useful in addressing the social worlds of the African American LBT adolescent. Their social worlds exist as fluid spaces or in "gelatinous context" (Bean & Moji, 2003) infiltrated by racism, sexism, and heterosexism.

The New London Group (1996) created literacy pedagogy of "multiliteracies" which is comprised of tenets that accommodate the fluidity of the polyphonic identities of LBT

adolescent. One tenet in particular states: literacies are forms of meaning making that are imbued with social purpose and involve making decisions about the use of conventions, norms, and practices in culture, institutions and society (Ivanic, 1998). As such, individuals develop identities by participating in the literacies of their own socio-cultural group. This tenet has the ability to create spaces that disrupt the ideological boundaries of what constitutes text, discourse, and literacy practices in a secondary school setting. The disruption of space allows for the negotiation of a different sort of social order where differences are recognized and the African American LBT adolescent has a chance to access the power codes of literacy. The use of multiliteracies provides access for a LBT adolescent to different ways of making meaning without having to erase or leave behind her interests, intentions, or purposes. The New London Group (1996) states that the challenge is to make space available so different social worlds or community life can be reconstructed and can flourish.

Reconstruction of space beyond the borders of schools through literacy.

Fine, Weis and Powell (1997) contend that urban youth whose lives are interrupted by "frequent moves and the rapid unpredictabilities of life…rarely feel that they have a secure or safe place" (p.4) to empower and ensure safety and a sense of trust. In the case of the urban African American LBT adolescent, gender and visible sexual identity markers (e.g. dress, behavior, and language) put them at risk for harassment or violence and thwart this sense of security. Boyte and Evans (1992) conceptualized the idea of free space "where people are able to imagine life differently, join together to nurture hopes and dreams, and often produce real changes in their individual and collective lives" (1997, p.4). The free spaces outside the borders of secondary schools permit LBT adolescents to use their identity kits to try on new identities, eliminate a few or to simply experiment. It is not to the LBT adolescent's advantage for

secondary schools to build impervious walls around a classroom to keep cultural influences outside in order to create a protective space for learning (Schultz, 2002). Examining LBT adolescents while they participate in out-of-school literacies provides us with a window to understand the ways in which authentic transactions with literacy practices can enable LBT adolescents to engage in a "critical reading of the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29). The next two studies elaborate on the idea of "queercentric environments" as coined by Harriett Malinowitz in *Textual Orientations* as a space for the exploration of tensions, complexities, and contradictions of gender and sexual identity experienced by the GLBTQ adolescent. Queercentric environments are a way for educators to understand the possibilities of multiple literacy practices in out-of-school settings on GLBTQ adolescents' literate identities within school settings (Malinowitz, 1995 & Schultz, 2002).

Moody-Hickey, Rasmussen and Harwood (2008) discuss how an online community *The Pink Sofa* offers an out-of-school virtual space for LBT females "to play with, subscribe to, subvert, and refute normalized notions of sexual identity" (p. 124). *The Pink Sofa* exists as a reconstructed space in which females can imagine diverse ways of "doing LBT identity." In doing so, the site helps LBT females to deconstruct certain assumptions made by "straight" people about sexual identity and appearance. One post reads: "I don't have short hair my hair is all the way down my back and I fix it so its just right. I am very girly and people usually think I am lying [sic] when I say I am gay (2008, p.134)."

This post suggests that young women who have long hair are "girly" and therefore not gay. The statement reflects how LBT women are impacted by heterosexist assumptions about gender and sexual identity. Thus, *The Pink Sofa* exists as a political site for LBT females to reconstruct heterosexist assumptions of gender regulation and "sameness" dictated by the

dominant discourse. As concluded by the authors, the contributors to *The Pink Sofa* must "navigate their own way through these contradictory regulations" (2008, p.135). A reconstructed space like *The Pink Sofa* enables the "true self" of a LBT woman to emerge from her written text loosened from social, economic, and political footholds. As is the case in this study a search for "personal authenticity" encourages the LBT adolescent to value the multiple, often contradictory dimensions of self (Jacobs, 1996).

Another study looking outside the physical space of schools is Blackburn's study (2003) about The Loft, a youth-run center offering a variety of services for GLBTQ youth, as well as outreach programs. One of the programs, the Speaker's Bureau, provided the GLBTQ youth the opportunity to utilize literacy practices for social change to challenge heterosexism that oppresses them. Many of the youth members of the Speaker's Bureau struggled with issues in school and wanted to be part of making it a safer place. For instance, one member, Dara, confessed, "once she was out as a lesbian", she "found it nearly impossible to stay in school because she encountered heterosexism and homophobia" (Blackburn, 2003, p.476). The Speaker's Bureau empowered the GLBTQ youth to work for social change outside the walls of The Loft by providing community workshops and outreaches.

The literacy practices of the Bureau allowed the youth not only to exercise power but also to become the vehicles of power. Their purpose was to educate youth and youth service providers, including students and teachers, on the impact of heterosexism and homophobia not only on GLBTQ people, but also on all people (2003). The youth of the Speakers' Bureau, with the support of an adult, created HIV/AIDS workshops, brochures for safer sex workshops, and materials for schools, homes, churches, and temples. They hoped their work with administrators,

teachers, service providers, and their peers would make the community a better place for GLBTQ youth.

Out-of-school contexts that are meaningful to the African American LBT adolescent are then "integrated into their construction of the world" (Smith, 2006), not based on the concrete observations from others, but on their own reflective experiences achieved by writing. These out-of school practices as discussed permit the LBT adolescent to capitalize on literacy practices that extend across space and time such as online writing and writing for social change which are compatible with their school literacy practices (Skinner, 2007).

The out-of-school literacy club, or reconstructed space proposed in this study, allowed the African American LBT adolescents through reading, writing, language and a visual artifact to:

- Raise issues related to her social location or situated practice

- Interpret the different ways meaning is made through the six modes of communication (reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, visually representing)

- Reflect and interpret socio-cultural values and contexts and particular ways of making meaning

- Use what has been learned or discovered to reconstruct texts and knowledge in new ways and in different contexts (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, 1996).

The four tenets posit the idea of secondary educators accepting a broader view of students' learning that includes out-of-school literacy practices. Schultz (2002) illustrates in the next study how students' writing can bridge their often-incongruent experiences between school and out-of-school. The study further challenges the idea of the "pedagogization of literacy" (Street & Street,

1991) or the prioritizing of school-based literacy over community and social literacy shaped by larger social forces.

Schultz's (2002) multi-site study explored the relationships between the writing of a group of low-income multiracial high school juniors across school and out-of school contexts. The study illustrates what forms of writing and the meaning of this writing to a specific group of students as they transverse between different social worlds. During the first year of the study, the researcher spent between 3 to 5 days a week in selected high school classes, attending school activities, and building relationships with the students. The second year of the study, the researcher observed the same group of students in the field, including at home, on the job, and doing errands.

Three major themes emerged from the data on the of out-school writing of the participants including *private practice* writing separate from their school lives, writing when taking a *critical stance* and writing to *bridge* their home and school lives (2002). The majority of the students in the study were reluctant writers in school. More than, half of the students wrote at home, a practice the students rarely admitted to their peers. One case study featuring Denise, an African American female reflects the deconstruction of space separating writing at home and in-school writing. This re-imaging of space allowed Denise to connect to the school curriculum while taking on the identity of a writer (Schultz, 2002). Throughout the study, Denise resisted writing, refused to participate in group projects, and isolated herself from others in classes. It was noted that she was less resistant to writing in her social studies class. For over a month, her government class was studying the Bill of Rights and preparing for mock hearings on the freedom of speech. For one of the classes the teacher showed a segment from the *McNeil-Lehrer News Hour* featuring prominent African Americans opposing gangsta rap. The class defended

their own stance about gangsta rap. The following day Denise shared her own opinion about the topic. This in itself was surprising because she rarely participated in class discussions. Denise writes: "This specific show I don't agree with. Well I feel they could say whatever they want because I know who I am and that's all that Matters. About People rapping about Killing, I think they're just telling us about the society and what's happening in it today…(2002, p. 380)."

As the researcher eventually discovers, Denise's editorial became a play, *Gangsta Lean* that she was writing at home. *Gangsta Lean* was on actual events taking place in her own life when her cousin (Johnny) was shot during a drug-related event. With much encouragement from the researcher, Denise allows the Drama teacher to produce *Gangsta Lean* as a school play. After the production of the play Denise seemed to link her work as a poet and playwright to her identity as a writer at school (2002, p.380). Denise writes: "When writing a play popped into my mind, all I thought about was painful things that I see in the world today. So I started to write about one. Which was my cousin Johnny. So I started to write. And I couldn't stop, It felt like I was being trapped… (2002, p.381)."

From a social-constructivist perspective Schultz's study affirms the value of bridging in-school and out-of school writing for secondary students. Denise's writing described, transformed and escaped her lived experiences. Her in-school writing became meaningful because of its linkage to her thoughts, feelings and writing outside of the classroom. Denise began to understand writing as a meaningful activity rather than a process because it was a home practice used to construct meanings.

Schultz (2002) recommends secondary educators to find ways to re-image classroom practices that are permeable with out-of-school literacy practices, which can lead to transformative uses for students. The study suggests the value of the reconstruction of school-

sanctioned pedagogy, which liberates the literacy learning of secondary students by bringing their lived experiences to the forefront (2002).

Reconstruction of school-sanctioned pedagogy through literacy.

Educational research has not extensively investigated the process of how marginalized adolescents use out-of-school literacies help to negotiate their own polyphonic or multi-voiced identities not acknowledged by secondary schools. Moje (2000) challenges literacy theorists to extend the claim that literacy is a transformative tool for thought and experience to unsanctioned literacy practices of adolescents. She simply asks, "What do unsanctioned literacy practices do for adolescents?" (p.1). A sociolinguistic perspective on literacy and schooling states that neither context is sealed tight, but is interdependent of the communicative patterns of an individual's community. As documented by Heath (1983) a child socialized into their community's ways of words, must leave his/her unsanctioned literacy practices at the classroom door if effective learning is to take place. A critical approach to reconstructing literacy pedagogy enables us to transform the power of literacies by extending the boundaries of what constitutes literacy in our society.

Moje's (2000) three year study with five gang-connected youths argues the importance of acknowledging the power of unsanctioned literacy tools in the lives of marginalized youth and the reconstructing of literacy pedagogy to "re-vision" (Moje, 1999) new discourse. The symbolic interactionist theory (Bruner, 1969; Mead, 1934) informed the study by stating that individuals define situations and negotiate meanings in their lives with symbols including language, dress, and body movements while engaging with others (2000). Moje hypothesized that the gang-connected youth used visible markers (e.g. dress) to "explore possible worlds, claim space, and make their voices heard" (p.1).

The study consisted of three years of data collection including:

- Two English classrooms and student areas such as the lunchroom

- Out-of school settings including homes and restaurants

- Out-of school settings including more social and family practices (2000)

The literacy practices of marginalized adolescents are seen as resistant or deviant, not as tools or a meaning maker for expressing beliefs, values, and interests (2000). The physical characteristics and social affiliations of gang-connected youth naturally position them as not able to succeed in an academic setting. Thus, their lived stories are "invisible' when aligned with the dominant stories of a secondary English language arts classroom. Moje (2000) found the gang-connected youth used a variety of unsanctioned literacy practices including art, music, poetry, and tattoos as communicative and transformative tools in their lives. As Kheh, A 15-year-old, Laotian girl shares "I guess I just wanted to be part of the story" (2000, p.1) a part of the story to liberate Kheh's thoughts and social and school experiences for the world to hear. It is common for marginalized adolescents to use borderland discourse (Blackburn, 2005) in and out of school to "take hold of their lives,' and to write themselves into the dominant stories.

A borderland discourse is one that reflects the social identity and values of a marginalized community. It is intentionally exclusive to that community and not as accessible to "outsiders" so it creates a boundary. At times, marginalized adolescents have to use different social languages in different settings, performing a delicate balancing act between discourses. Rachel writes:

Now I lay me down to rest
A red rag across my chest
If I die before I wake
Shoot a crap [Crip] with my .38. (2010, p.8)

In Rachel's parody of a child's prayer, the "red rag" indicates she aligns herself with the gang Bloods and the term "crap" is derogatory comment to the Crips, a rival gang of the Bloods. The parody served several purposes for Rachael including her allegiance to the Bloods, a way to communicate to a rival gang and to make a vow to get revenge. The parody constructs Rachel's version of her reality.

The youth create their own borderland discourse to use when they are traversing the social, economic, and cultural boundaries of their social worlds. A significant implication that arises here is that the gang-connected youth use of language, codes, or discourses helps them to take on a particular social role in the gangs or other peer groups in which she/he wants to be or already is a member. The youth valued the use of unsanctioned literacy over school literacy because of its connection with family, culture, and community practices. It was not uncommon for youth from the study to attend weekly church services wearing their gang dress, such as baggy pants, oversized shirts, and gang colors and interacting with the people of the congregation.

The unsanctioned literacies used by the gang-connected youth worked by "distinguishing places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (Blackburn, 2005, p. 91). It is important for the youth to create borders so they can see themselves for who they are, without the effects of ethnicity, color, and social class. The unconstrained nature of out-of-school literacy makes the use of a borderland discourse by queer youth "count" as an appropriate style of communication (Gee, 2008). This acknowledgement is significant because the gang-connected youths' identity is linked to their use of literacies which otherwise are not "valued" in a secondary school setting.

Moje's (2000) study shares many common threads with this study in terms of unsanctioned literacies which are used and heard in GLBTQ community centers, friends' houses, and events when LBT adolescents come together for "off line" communication not under the school's control (Gee, 2008, p.192). Unsanctioned literacies reconstruct space where words such as gender queers, boy-girl wonders, and tranny fags are without the need for explanation or fear of judgment. Unsanctioned literacies not only speak the "truth" about the LBT adolescents' sexual and gender identity, but also are an act of liberation from the cultural and social production of school-sanctioned literacies.

The next study is based on Hilary Janks' (2010) claim from her book, *Literacy and Power.* She writes redesigning each other and ourselves is too risky and dangerous to attempt alone. Jank's thinking applies to the experiences of LBT adolescents, as they attempt to claim space in the "heterosexual master narrative" (Jacobs, 1996). Similar to the gang-connected youth from Moje's study, the African American LBT adolescent strives to be part of the dominant story. When given the freedom, African American LBT adolescents have the ability to create their own cultural practices and to alter the ways the institutions and people conceptualize them (Shelton, 2008). It is important that LBT adolescents are provided the means to develop a language of their own and a space in which they can co-construct their identities with other youth (2008) making the process less risky and dangerous.

Harriett Malinowitz's Textual Orientations argues for the need to reconstruct literacy pedagogy and to not only 'acknowledge' difference in the English secondary classroom but to explore the tensions and contradictions of the margins to revise taken-for granted ways of knowing and being (1995). The LBT adolescent writer existing on the social margins of a secondary English language arts classroom may or may not be aware of the unique ways of self-

defining, knowing, and acting the margins have offered her over the years. Malinowitz insists on capitalizing on this unique position for the LBT student because claiming public space changes the nature of space for everyone that inhabits it (1995). She argues it is better to "negotiate the tension crackling between the differences than to yearn for the illusion of solitude" by communities of knowledgeable peers (p.252).

Malinowitz's (1992) multi-site study consisted of eleven undergraduates each identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual with diverse backgrounds attending two New York City colleges. The context of the study included two composition courses offered as Writing about Lesbian and Gay Experiences. The purpose of the course was to give gay and lesbian students a chance to read, write, and think about their lives in a way that never occurred in school. Eventually, Malinowitz believed it was more feasible to select only four of the gay and lesbian students to participate in the "interpretive portraiture" (p.157), part biographical narrative and part literacy narrative.

One of the portraiture features, Mary, an eighteen-year-old bisexual young woman who never identified herself as bisexual in any of her writing until the opportunity to participate in Malinowitz's gay and lesbian writing class. Mary remarks, "to not talk gay, which is such a huge, huge thing, is just like to ignore the right half of my body" (p.229). The "queercentric" (p.26) setting of the writing course contributed to Mary making visible the invisible facets of her identity. Mary points out: "These were essays that we could put some of ourselves into, instead of like where, before, it was you never speak in first person, you never mention yourself, you don't ever say what you think" (p.233).

As Mary progressed in the writing course, her mode of self-presentation to others changed. For example, when she would meet someone new Mary would figure out when was the best time to come out to the person for fear of rejection or lost of a friendship. Mary states, "Ok,

when I first meet someone I'm not going to tell them I'm gay. I'll get to know them and then I'll tell them I'm gay later" (p.234). However, as Mary increasingly became aware of how her own positioning did not command credibility when conversing with others, she began to say, "Well, I am a gay person" (p.234). Mary admits the visible gay presence in the writing course contributed to her feeling more comfortable with her bisexual identity. Mary asserts to talk and write about critical issues in a gay and lesbian academic community "makes it more real in a way" (p.235). Malinowitz contends a queercentric setting offers the GLBT person the opportunity to question the tensions, complexities, and contradictions associated with his/her sexual or gender identity. Malinowitz suggests, "To even conceive of reconstituting writing classes as "safe" places for lesbian and gay students is not simple" (p.40). There is a certain discomfort for GLBT individuals when asked to talk and write about feelings, beliefs, and values, which have been heavily, policed by others and "ourselves" all our lives. It is not as simple as including GLBT literature, authors or issues in a secondary classroom but a reconstructing of literacy pedagogy which interprets "inclusion" as not adhering to the entrenched ways of knowing or being, but to disrupt the master narratives of our culture by naming and engaging the tensions and contradictions that exist on the margins.

Reconstruction of social cultural models though literacy.

Heteronormativity.

African American LBT adolescents are assuming an identity they were taught to avoid. From the time they are girls, women are encouraged to conform to the master narratives of femininity and heterosexuality. Adrienne Rich (1980) argues that heterosexuality for women may not be a "preference" at all, but something imposed, managed, and organized by force or power relations. The familiar models associated with heterosexuality (marriage, children, and tax

breaks) construct an image of social perfection that is performed and socialized throughout our culture. It is said that heterosexuality is an institution so embedded in our culture that it has become invisible. Bronwyn Davis (2003) states, "heterosexuality is generally understood as a natural fact of the real world rather than something that we have learned to see as natural" (p. 5). If heterosexuality is natural, other ways of identifying gender and sexuality are defined as deviant, abnormal, and trivialized as a "chosen life-style."

Social theories of learning define schools, in part, as an encompassing process of social practices that constructs an adolescent's identity to conform to the heteronormative ideology of white, heterosexual structured norms. Within the contexts of curriculum, classroom practices, and teacher decisions, adolescents are regulated and reinforced to adopt certain identities that support the status quo (Mcleod & Yates, 2006). For example in secondary schools, students are silenced from discussing controversial topics such as contraceptives, abortion, and homosexuality because these behaviors are not a gauge of a "good student" (Fine & Weis, 2003). This process produces and reproduces a stratified unchanging socio-political order organized by class, gender and race (Apple, 1995), which mirror the unequal power relations that exist in the larger framework of society. In other words, schools maintain sexual identity and gender privilege by defining what is appropriate by the identity and gender roles displayed by the groups in power and then teaching the norms, values, and dispositions that contribute to the ideological hegemony of those groups (1995).

Many secondary English language arts teachers understand that literacy is the most effective tool of liberation at their command to challenge the status quo (Ressler & Chase, 2009) and are reconstructing the boundaries of curriculum to contest heteronormativity in their own classrooms. Queer theory asserts to question heteronormativity as part of a larger vision to

challenge differences, inequality, and discrimination in our society. Jackson (2010) refers to this seamless integration of GLBT issues into the curriculum and classroom as "naturally queer moments" a way of thinking about GLBT issues that turns traditional notions on their head in productive and useful ways. Blazer's (2009) study presents an example of what is possible in secondary English language arts classrooms when student inquiry is used for the purpose of making meaning about issues that exist outside most students' knowledge base in becoming literate citizens. The study took place at Washington Heights High School in New York City, where most of the students were immigrants or children of immigrants from the Dominican Republic.

Many students shared their negative feelings about gay people including "I don't like gay people" and "it is really bad they kiss on the street" (2009, p.80). The teacher/researcher selected the play *Angels in America* to promote authentic conversations around universal themes such as identity, family, abandonment, and truth, while disrupting some of the students' presumptions that homophobia is normal. *Angels in America* is Tony Kushner's epic play about the AIDS epidemic and its impact on the gay community in the 1980's (2009, p.77). From a critical literacy perspective, the teacher wanted the students to assume an interrogative stance when interpreting how the characters' actions and dialogue serve as social agendas (Mosenthal, 1998). Throughout the study, the students participated in activities to establish a connectedness to gayness, sexuality and AIDS. The teacher accomplished this goal by using three approaches with the students:

- Focused on conversations between the characters that are universal including love and family
- Used "safe space" dialogue in the form of class discussions and journals

- Engaged with building relationships with the main characters by writing, drama and role-play (2009, p.78).

By taking a thematic approach to the unit, the teacher found that when the students asked not to share their personal opinion but to use their literacy skills, they were more willing to engage with difficult issues. The students also drew on their own experiences to draw conclusions about the characters' own development. For example, Ernesto connected with the character, Joe as a "man who [needs] to make the decision [about his identity] so he can be comfortable with himself" (Blazer, 2009, p.82).

Clark and Blackburn (2009) contend that how a teacher implements GLBTQ-themed literature in a curriculum influences the disruption of heteronormativity in the classroom and school. As illustrated by Blazer's study the teacher offered a space or "naturally queer moments" for the students to discover their own feeling and beliefs about GLBTQ issues instead of creating an agenda that did not consider the needs, interests, and histories of the students. Jamie (age 22) writes:

> **Teaching It Wrong**
> There's that other box that never seems to exist in any form
> Schools really aren't giving me an option to talk about it
> I wasn't learning the words
> I never learned about gay history or culture
> They just left me on my own to figure it out
> Missed opportunities (Wells, 2004, p. 11)

As the poem, *Teaching It Wrong* suggests GLBTQ youth are not in secondary school curricula, literature selections, or in spaces to authentically transact with text. This being said, to prosper in the heteronormative setting of secondary schools the GLBTQ youth reconstructs the intended meaning of text against the "mainstream, heterosexual grain" (Lipton, 2008, p. 168). This practice of "queer reading" (Britzman, 1995; Lee, 2004; Lipton, 2008) forces instability and

flux which challenges the stable categories of reader/text/author and permits the youth "to be part of the story," to claim space, and take a social position in their worlds (Moje, 2000).

It is not enough to assume that GLBTQ youth will feel comfortable and safe enough to discuss their gender and sexual identity in an English language arts classroom reading GLBTQ-themed literature. Therefore, GLBTQ youth seek out-of-school literacies such as popular culture, to reconstruct text in the way they believe the text should have been written in the first place. As Karen (age 20) from the next study puts it, "I think there's a lack of homosexual characters that are presented in a positive and uplifting, or not even positive and uplifting but just represented, on the screen or in text in general. I guess it's a desire to have a voice" (Lipton, 2008, pp.175-176). A voice, which disrupts the marginalization of LBT adolescents in a society, that creates the invisibility of their identity.

The following study discusses how a small group of queer students attending the Harvey Milk High School in New York City "use negotiated reading practice as a means of creating a positive queer identity" (Lipton, 2008, p. 175). Lipton's study (2008) found that GLBTQ youth approach reading in three ways in order to discern the complex network of heteronormative beliefs, which saturate the majority of text in their lives. Queer reading practices include:

- Altering the intended meaning of the text by finding homosocial/sexual content

- Fabricating an imagined text or a queer world

- Insisting that queer messages are directly embedded within the text by the author (2008, p.168).

In constructing texts as cultural worlds, GLBT youth learn to interpret character's actions within larger frameworks of worlds or activity systems impacted by cultural or ideological forces (Galda & Beach, 2001). Gabby (age 18) from the study states:

"If I pretend she's a dyke, then I can accept that this character might be a real person, instead of just accepting their heterosexuality and accepting that they're just a character. So I think it [my approach to reading] has added a sense of belief in what I'm ingesting. Sabrina (Charlie's Angels) as straight has less fun than when I believed she was a dyke" (2008, p.169).

Gabby realizes that her life is influenced by bigger social forces and not satisfied by simply accepting taken-for-granted cultural practices. Another girl from the study, Christine wearing a Brady Bunch T-shirt tells the researcher:

"The T-shirt that I am wearing is an example of what you're talking about….How many girls of my age didn't have a crush on Marsha or Jan when they were growing up? And not just thinking that she was in love with some guy in high school and just always inserting yourself in the role of the guy, imaging that it was you"

Christine reveals tension between what she believes society expects from females to acting on her "romantic" feelings for Marsha or Jan. The queer reading practices of the two girls reinforced a GLBT worldview, which supported the construction of their identity. Lipton found for many of the youth the negotiated readings helped with issues such as coming out, intensified insecurity and understanding their identity in normative terms. The practice of queer reading empowers GLBT youth to take control of conflicting interpretations of *who they are* and to create their own positive representations. This process alone is a political act against a homophobic society (2008). As Doty (1993) "adds queer reading practices help queer youth empower themselves with the necessary tools for constructive living" in becoming a "literate citizen" (p.104).

Gender identity.

Cosier's (2007) one-year ethnographic study explores the benefits of a young queer woman being able to perform gender in numerous ways and at the same time reconstructing public and private spaces. This study is important to my literature review because it demonstrates how LBT adolescents value the free space to "try on" polyphonic configurations of female/male

gender constructions not regulated by fixed categories. The researcher centered on a 17-year-old butch dyke, who identifies sometimes as Crystal and other times as a drag king named Charlie.

When Crystal identifies as Charlie, it gives her power she does not possess beyond the drag stage. Crystal states when she performs as Charlie, "she [is] more comfortable with herself" (2008, p.12). These performances are her way of doing gender that allows her to feel complete as a gendered being. Crystal feels her performance relieves some of the tension she feels navigating between the incongruent social worlds of school and family. In contrast, the social world of drag serves as a "space for authoring" in which Crystal positions or "authors" herself into a constructed world that accommodates her reconstructed self (Beach et al., 2008). The researcher's work with Crystal/Charlie confirms, "Young LBTs have an uncategorical understanding of gender," and do not want to be "pigeon-holed" by specific renditions or categories of identity; they are more likely to view identity as "multidimensional" (Cosier, 2007, pp.11-12). Thus, it is crucial for African American LBT young women to play with "who they are" through the literacy practices of reading and writing because it enables them to define herself "on her own terms" (Morell, 2008).

Crystal/Charlie's reconstructed self in the form of drag is what Beach, et al. (2008) refers to as "third-space worlds." During reading, adolescents create new, alternative worlds. For example, the African American LBT adolescent learns to create alternative third-space worlds to ease the tensions that exist between the cultural models of the normal, idealized heterosexual female and the second-space realities of her life as a LBT adolescent. Identifying second-space tensions through literacy practices cause the LBT girl to be aware of tensions that exist in her social worlds. She will no longer view herself "as a subject within an institution but an object constructed and limited by the status quo" (Beach et al., 2008, p. 95). In a sense, the LBT

adolescent's identity is no longer subject to others' interpretation of queer, woman, or femininity. This "self–actualization" by the African American LBT adolescent (Hooks, 1994) begins with the critical awareness of the cultural and societal forces pressing upon her; a precursor to deconstructing, talk backing, or resisting these constructions laden with hegemonic discourses.

In the previous studies, (Blazer, 2009; Cosier, 2007; Lipton, 2008) each group of young people used language, signs (t-shirts), drama, or discourses as tools to share responses in a community of practice which included a secondary English classroom, GLBT high school and a public setting. The young people affirmed their membership in each community of practice by using tools consistent with the beliefs, roles, and norms of their community. These tools were used for social shared thinking. This idea of social shared thinking applied to a broader view of literacy conflates traditional reading and writing practices into contemporary practices such as literature circles, writing clubs, and visual representation. Social shared thinking is created by the active coming together of the text, the reader's and writer's lived experiences and the context of the literacy event (Moller & Beth, 2000). I argue social shared thinking also includes the use of multiliteracies enabling young people to co-construct their understanding of their lived experiences and identity, which leads to further human agency.

Reconstruction with the use of multiliteracies.

The process which entails the LBT adolescent interpreting, and exploring their polyphonic identities through literature cannot be achieved without taking advantage of the recursive nature of the modes of communication (reading, writing, listening, talking, viewing, and visually representing) interacting with each other. Traditional reading, written and oral discourse in an English language arts secondary classroom makes it challenging for an LBT adolescent to acknowledge and engage a post-modern, fluid sense of self in ways that enhance

her developing awareness of personal agency. I suggest the use of multiliteracies within the context of an out-of-school LBT book club because the African American LBT adolescents positioned not only as authors and artists, but also as meaning-makers to represent their understanding of the world (Albers, 1997). Wertsch (1991) refers to the LBT adolescent having a "cultural tool kit" that consists of a variety of meditational tools for the process of recasting meaning or transmediation from language to another sign system.

Zoss, Smagorinsky, O'Donnell-Allen's (2007) study of the mask-making composition of three senior boys attending a high school in the Southwestern United States illustrates the use of compositional tools to explore and develop personal and socially situated identities. The mask-making project was a part of a unit on identity in a British literature classroom. The teacher's purpose for the mask-making projects was to have the students "see themselves as writers and to take risks and think for themselves" (2007, p.20). The mask-making process consisted of pre-composing activities including drawing thumbnail sketches, writing prompts, and cluster mapping. Each of the boys provided protocols during or following the creation of their masks. The protocols consisted of the researcher posing questions to the participants about their masks. One of the boys, Alan discusses how the lines on his mask reflect the way he interacts with others. He said,

> The reason why I put points on some of it because it kind of brings out the facial expressions…The way that a curve is real slight I might come into a conversation real slowly. Or I really disagree with it and the sharp points are when I get after it and say my mind-that will be it. So it is like points of anger or really confusion towards something.

Alan used lines on his mask to represent himself while conversing with others. While Peta's mask was elaborately designed with vines, geometric shapes, and swirl shapes, he said, "I just made the vine red because…it's like a life that was kind of entwined through it all" (p.23). The masks served as a "provisional space" for the three boys to play with visual qualities (e.g. color

and lines) to truly represent themselves (p. 24). As Alan explains, "A lot of people don't think that I see a lot, but I do. And I want to talk about it" (p. 24). While Jay's black and white design reflects his dual personality: "a really nice side that is fun to be with" and a side that wanted to be "alone…and [is] kind of angry" (p.26).

Each of the boys wrote a narrative piece to highlight the meanings, ideas, and feelings represented by their masks. The personal investment each boy put forth in creating his mask helped to generate powerful writing. Peta's design process was influenced by the hypocrisy he experienced in school and his community. Peta writes: "With all of your nice boys' and girls' faces of innocence smiling and blushing, with such a lie that is thought not to be perceived and I have lost my innocence and I will refuse to play the drama of joy and misery…"(p.29).

The visual symbols of his mask were in his poem: Peta explained that the yellow nose symbolized "the inner rage"; the jagged edges represented the emotions of "sorrow, envy and pain"; and the vines were used "for holding things back" (p.29). With the recasting of meaning from Peta's mask to another sign system, poetry enabled him to develop a richer understanding of his development as a person including his beliefs, experiences, and emotions.

I also draw from the theory of semiotics to explore the potential of LBT adolescents critically thinking through their ideas about gender and sexual identity through multiple sign systems (e.g. reading, writing, language, and visualization). Through transmediation or "recasting meaning from language to another sign system" (e.g. creating a poem from a visual artifact), the LBT adolescent will deepen her understanding of her polyphonic or multi-voiced identities (Cowan & Albers, 2006, p.2). The New London Group defines this interaction or intermeshing as a semiotic activity including language to produce or read texts (1996). This

semiotic activity of making meaning is a fluid and dynamic process and not something dictated by static rules.

The New London Group's Concept of 'Design'.

From a social cultural perspective, the semiotic activity is a matter of 'Design' (1996) consisting of three elements: Available Designs, Designing and the Redesigned. From a critical literacy perspective these three elements are construction, deconstruction and reconstruction as discussed in the previous sections of the literature review. For this section on multiliteracies I use the terms as defined by the New London Group as available designs, designing and the redesigned. The out-of-school literacy club proposed in this study will utilize a mixture of semiotic activity including whole group book discussions, writing in a writer's notebook and creating a visual artifact. As 'Designers' the LBT adolescents bring their experiences, life stories, and 'bits of the world' to the meaning-making process (see Appendix B). The adolescent girls will design or construct meaning using the Available Designs or available modes of meaning including discourse style, modes of representation, voice, and genres. As a result, a "semiotic text" (Cowan & Albers, 2006) will evolve as the meaning-makers (the girls) use signs such as words from a group discussion or a jotted image from a writer's notebook to create new text forms.

As stated by The New London Group (2006) "Every moment of meaning involves the transformation of these Available Designs of meaning" in producing new constructions and representations of reality (p.10). Through the co-engagement in Designing, the LBT adolescents will transform their relations to each other, and so transform themselves. These transformations will create tensions for the queer girls with the awareness that their polyphonic identities will never be semiotically constructed the same way again.

The outcome of the Designing is the Redesigned. This means the LBT adolescents as meaning-makers will "remake themselves" by reconstructing and renegotiating their polyphonic identities. The Redesigned will vary for each of the adolescent girls based on their literacy and personal experiences, backgrounds, and histories. The Redesigned or changes occurring in the African American LBT adolescents consist of becoming a critical reader, an increased sense of agency and/or proficiency in negotiating multiple discourses. The Redesigned is generative in the sense it extends the initial interpretation of the meaning-maker when exposed to the other adolescents in the book club. The meaning-making process of 'Design' is recursive in the sense that African American LBT adolescents will continually revisit the materials they brought along with them to the Designing process and the Available Designs that exist outside themselves to continue this life long transformation of "who they are" as a LBT individual in regards to knowledge, social relations, and identities. Although the LBT adolescents in the literacy group talk back to their peers, the meaning-makers (individual girls) have the responsibility to control their own transformation. This control by the LBT adolescents as they remake themselves will enhance their developing awareness of personal agency to enact change in their lives.

Multimodality, intertextuality and hybridity.

The New London Group Framework (1996) which uses the concepts of multimodality, intertextuality, and hybridity (Fairclough, 2003) assisted me in making sense of the themes inter-animating through the African American LBT adolescent's reading, writing, language, and multimodal visual artifact. As stated by the New London Group (1996), each of these processes require the adolescent girls as Designers to use Available Designs in complex ways. In addition, it is important to note that 'change' is the core of each of these concepts, which resists and challenges the static and passive practices of schools, dominant discourse, and cultural models.

Each of these listed practices in its own way has suppressed the human potential to represent meanings using multiple senses (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000).

Multimodality.

Multimodality is the inter-animating of various Designs such as visual, linguistic, and audio in one text (Chandler-Olcott & Haher, 2003). According to the New London Group's (1996) view of multimodality, all semiotic text created by the girls in this study is multimodal in nature and process. For example, an entry in a writer's notebook by an adolescent may accompany a drawing or a theme from a group discussion or dramatic movement. The fluidity of the multimodal process will extend, stretch and change to accommodate the polyphonic identities of the adolescents at every point of their transformation.

Intertexuality.

Intertexuality is the way in which words, phrases, or other textual features from one text link to another text, genre, or mode of meaning. Any Designed text by the LBT adolescent draws upon "one or more series (chains)" of past discourses, images, or text. This process of sifting through linked discourses or texts will provide the adolescents with a different understanding of their polyphonic identities. The use of intertexuality is evident in the collection of short stories and illustrations in *My Brain Hurt* by queer-identified indie cartoonist, Liz Baillie who portrays New York City teens in search of identity, meaning, and acceptance (Pepper, 2009). The cartoon

Figure 2. Intertextual cartoon by Liz Baillie

draws on familiar discourse heard by queers and the author's personal experience of coming out to explore ideas of gender and sexuality. Liz Baillie borrows various discourses (I don't need them calling me dyke), motifs (dress, hairstyle) and an image of a school honoring the work of Bayard Rustin (*1960's civil rights leader and gay rights activist*) to create an 'intertextual collage of voices'—a patchwork of text (Roache-Jameson & Sharyn, 2005). Similar to the work of Liz Baillie, the LBT adolescent in this study will transform established text forms into new ones.

Hybridity.

During the process of Design, the adolescent will combine and recombine the Available Designs of meaning to create a new form of meaning (hybridity). The queer girls will design hybrid text as they inter-animate various discourse and genres together to create a poem, a visual artifact, or a personal narrative. The hybrid text will allow the African American LBT adolescent to do identity work around issues of power, sexuality, and heteronormativity. For example, the graphic below illustrates the use of artwork to redesign old dominant ideology to create new empowering images for young women (see Figure 3).
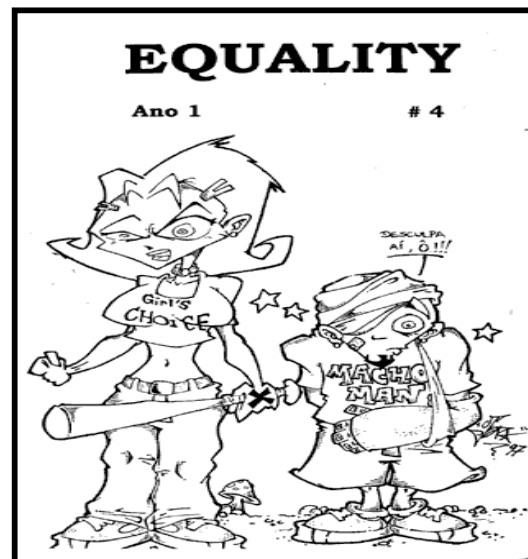
Figure 3. Graphic that Illustrate the Use of Artwork to Redesign Dominant Ideology

As The New London Group (1996) states, the members of different social worlds have identities that have multiple layers and relate to each other in complex ways. Utilizing the pedagogy of multiliteracies will assist me in understanding the multiple layers of the LBT adolescent's identities participating in a LBT book club while giving the girls the tools to help them to acknowledge and engage a postmodern, fluid sense of self in ways that enhance their developing awareness of personal agency and transformation. A multiliteracies approach has the ability to "crack open" a unique space for LBT adolescents to find their own voices in authentic ways.

Literature Review Conclusion

A limited amount of research has addressed the literacy approaches that support the GLBT adolescent's individual, cultural, and social identities (Blackburn, 2003; Pinar, 1998). Furthermore, very few researchers have analyzed the experiences of GLBT adolescents as they participate in out-of-school literacy practices, more specifically, participating in a book club in a GLBTQ-friendly setting. This research will address some of the gaps that exist in research. Therefore, the following questions will be applicable to this study on how African American LBT adolescents construct deconstruct, and reconstruct their polyphonic identities by participating in out-of-school literacy practices:

1. To what extent does engagement with multiliteracies in a safe, LBT out-of-school space, contribute to the development of personal agency in the lives of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents in ways that enable them to enact change in their lives?

2. In what ways do lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents, in the context of a LBT supportive, out-of-school literacy space, draw upon multiple and competing social constructions of gender and sexuality to construct meaning from text?

3.	How can critical engagement with literature provide opportunities for lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents to talk back to stereotypical, mainstream, perspectives of gender and sexual identities inherent in much contemporary young adult literature?

4. To what extent do lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents, in a LBT supportive literacy space, use multimodal literacy practices to reconcile variations of performance in their memberships in both the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender and heterosexual communities?

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

    The Research Design.

The purpose of this study is to understand the ways African American LBT (lesbian, bisexual, transgender) adolescents participation in an LBT-friendly out-of-school literacy club contribute to changes in the ways they describe and think about self, including their sense of self as agents of change in their own lives and in society. I employed constant comparison methods of analysis (Chamarz, 2006) to discern core and recurring themes and patterns in the data. The naturalistic data collected over a three-month period included written artifacts from each of the girls' writer's notebooks, researcher's field notes, two sets of semi-structured interviews, researcher's field notes of whole group book discussions, a visual audit trail, collages and identity masks created by the girls, researcher's memos written after each session, photographs and audio recording of the girls' oral presentations.

My goal, as the researcher, was to understand the girls' experiences in the book club from their point of view. It was my intent to represent the perspectives and interpretations of the African American LBT adolescents as accurately as possible. This was ensured by collecting data over the duration of the girls' participation in the out-of-school book club, making use of different data sources (e.g. writer's notebook and individual interviews), and confirming the credibility of my findings and interpretations with the girls and a peer debriefer (Creswell, 2007).

    Ethnographic Approach.

Ethnography is a process of gathering systematic observations based on the researcher becoming intimately involved with members of the community or participants in a natural setting (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Ethnography is more than simply describing a selected

community; it involves becoming immersed in the lives and activities of the community in order to understand the participants' roles and involvement within the community (1999). The tools of ethnography are the "researcher's eyes and ears" which lead to discovering what people are actually doing and the reasons they give for doing it before assigning a personal interpretation to the data (1999, p. 2). This ethnography is descriptive because the findings will create an accurate narrative or story of the ways the African American LBT adolescents construct and make meanings in the context of this setting. I let the voices of the participants carry the story through dialogue, writing and visually created artifacts including collage and mask making.

It was my major task to ensure that the voices and perspectives of all of the girls in the study were included in the narrative analysis. It was critical for the validation of the girls' voices and life experiences within the group and that confidentiality and anonymity were in place throughout the research process. To gain access to the lives and experiences of these girls, it was crucial for me to create a safe environment for the girls to feel comfortable about discussing and sharing experiences, beliefs, perspectives, and understandings that are deeply personal and significant in their lives.

Role of the Researcher.

Background.

One of the characteristics of ethnography is that the researcher functions as a primary tool for data collection and analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). This is dependent upon the researcher gaining the trust of the people involved in the research. However, as both the researcher of the study and the facilitator of the literacy events, I was not a neutral party. I brought my own ideas, thoughts and beliefs about my experiences as a self-identified lesbian to the study. I have also had extensive professional experience working with the GLBTQ

community in the capacity of AIDS/HIV educator; youth group facilitator, and helpline counselor. I have enriched my understanding of GLBT youth through local and national conferences, in-service training and staff development workshops on related topics. In addition, I have spent the last 26 years working as an educator on the elementary, middle school, and college level. My experience as an educator equipped me to be a valuable resource in conducting this research because I understand what it means to learn from the people studied and to realize their vision of the world (Spradley, 1980).

Participant observer.

My role in this literacy group was that of participant observer (Spradley, 1980). I engaged in the literacy activities of the group (e.g. reading the novels and writing in a writer's notebook) in order to immerse myself in the community of readers and writers. This self-immersion in the process was important to this study because as a queer person, I share many common experiences and ideas with the LBT girls. I understand what it means to try to "make sense" of society's ideology of gender and sexual roles versus what feels like "normal" behaviors and feelings. As Spradley (1980) states, "participating in a social situation takes on meaning and coherence from the fact that the participant observer is inside the situation, part of it" (p.56). In ethnographic research, it is common for the researcher to move from the role of insider to outsider and vice versa.

As a participant of the literacy events in this study, I read, discussed, and wrote my responses to the novels, as did the girls during the study. As a researcher, I collected the data of the study through observing the girls participation in the literacy club and individual interviews. While participating in the study, I was in the "midst of what is happening", providing me with a greater understanding of the collected data (Berg, 2004, p. 148).

Researcher bias.

My participation in the literacy club as well as my experience as a lesbian, former youth facilitator, and educator, provided me with a greater understanding of the LBT youth culture in which these girls are self-identified members and their experiences with school. As Berg (2004) states, "research is seldom undertaken for neutral reasons," for me, this means my research topic was selected because I have "deep familiarity" with it (p.155). In order to enhance the interpretation of this study, I attended to my own thoughts, values, and interests of the study by memoing in a researcher's journal and engaging in weekly conversations with my peer debriefer. As stated by Creswell (2003), "the researcher will filter the data through a personal lens. One cannot escape the personal interpretation brought to qualitative data analysis" (p.182). As asserted by Creswell (2003), a serious limitation to qualitative research is the humanizing process of bringing the researcher's experience to the study. In recognition of this limitation, it was important to employ qualitative techniques in which the data are collected to obtain relevant characteristics about the participants and locations (Fraenkel & Norman, 2006). This also controls researcher's bias and minimizes threats to validity. In addition, I maintain that my life experience contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the events because I was able to notice details other researchers may have missed. For example, the style of dress of an LBT adolescent identifies her in the GLBTQ community as either a "femme" or "stud." A researcher who is not a member of this community may not know that or ever learn it.

The Research Process

Description of the two original sites.

Crescent GLBT community center.

Originally, when proposing this project, I wanted participants in this study to be 17-21 years of age, self-identified as lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and attended one of two community-based organizations (CBO) in the Midwest. I selected a pseudonym for each center: Crescent GLBTQ community center is located in the suburbs and Pride House GLBTQ community center is located in the city. Both community centers are explicitly committed to serving lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender or questioning youth and to work against homophobia and heterosexism in the larger society. Crescent Community Center's youth service, based on the nationally acclaimed model High Scope, considers the social, cognitive, and emotional needs of the young people it serves. All youth programs and projects consist of quality of programming and for providing a safe, drug- and alcohol-free, adult-supervised space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and allied youth.

The Pride House GLBTQ community center's youth services work from a strength-based philosophy with the youth and families. It draws youth from the entire metropolitan area. The Drop-In Center provides opportunities to learn new skills and to receive survival services such as food, clothes, counseling and housing. Those attending the centers vary according to their coming out status. Some are "out" (e.g. admitting they are GLBTQ to themselves and/or others) while others have not disclosed their gender and sexual identity.

It was my original plan to select a diverse group of LBT adolescents attending either or both of the community-based organizations. Although I have done extensive work in the GLBTQ community for at least ten years, it has been several years since I was actively involved with

HIV/AIDS work and planning GLBTQ community events. As an educator and former youth facilitator at the Crescent GLBTQ center, I realized it was crucial for me to build a strong rapport and trust with the girls attending both centers before the start of the research study. Beginning in September 3, 2009 with permission from the directors of the centers, I began to "hang out" in the first GLBTQ center, which is located in the suburbs. My hanging out at the suburban center consisted of talking, playing games, and simply observing. Several years ago, Crescent GLBTQ community center received substantial funds from "the big three" car companies (Chrysler, GM, and Ford) to build a "state of the art" community center. The three-story glass center adorned with many flat screen TVs, Apple computers, hip, colorful furniture, an extensive GLBTQ library, coffee shop, youth space and is an ever-changing art gallery. For gay youth in this community and the surrounding area, this is the place to be.

Since being active in the GLBTQ community, I realized that the youth attending Crescent GLBT center had shifted from primarily White with equal ratios of males and female to a majority of African American males. The average number of females coming to the center on the weekends was about four. Of the four girls, three of them were African American and one was White. The boys' main motivation for attending the center was to practice voguing. Voguing means to "walk" or compete against one another in "balls" in which they are judged on <u>dance skills</u>, <u>costume</u>, general <u>appearance</u>, and <u>attitude</u>. I had an easier time connecting with the boys because I could actively watch and ask about "voguing." It did not take much time for me to become a familiar face at the center with the staff and youth. I volunteered for big events including the GLBT prom and Christmas dinner/party. I took every opportunity at the big events to distribute information flyers to all of the girls about the upcoming research study to see if I could pique some interest. An excerpt from the informational flyers (see Appendix O) read:

Do you want your voice heard as a young, lesbian or bisexual (15-21 years of age) living in _____ and surrounding areas? Here is your chance…I am doing a research study for Wayne State University on African American Lesbians and bisexuals and literacy. I need at least ten girls who are willing to participate in a 12-week research project.

It took more time to connect with the girls than the boys at the Crescent GLBTQ community center. I felt the girls were not interested in the purpose of my regular visits to the Crescent Center. One girl even told me, "No, we or I don't like you" when I asked, if I could play the game, *Apples to Apples* with the group. Despite the cool reception I was receiving from the five girls, I continued to come to the center at various times to see if more girls would show up. After about a month, I decided to advertise a mask-making workshop for the girls entitled: *Your Altered Self.* It was a crisp October night when I trudged all my boxes of art supplies to the GLBTQ center including, paints, feathers, beads, stickers, ribbon, and paper masks. It was an hour until the first girl showed up for the workshop. It was another half hour before three more girls came to the center. Slightly disappointed, I approached the three African American girls who were sitting at a table in the basement eating pizza. I asked the girls to come to the mask-making workshop. The Halloween candy, pop, and the mask I provided helped my cause. Although I was a familiar face to the girls, this was the first time we began to meaningfully converse with each other. I began the mask-making workshop with reading and discussing *Still I Rise,* by Maya Angelou, and several other poems. My hope was that the workshop would help the girls to think about their own identity in terms of appearance, attitude, feelings, and experiences. The girls and I spent five hours that evening talking, laughing, and creating our masks. It was during this time that I began to realize the importance of creating a safe space for LBT girls to "just be girls" to talk about sex, relationships, parents, and school. After the mask-making evening, I was feeling very confident about my ability to "recruit" more participants for the study. For several more weeks, I consistently came to the Crescent GLBTQ

center to interact with the same four African American girls that attended the mask-making workshop. I realized it was time to begin to volunteer at the Pride House GLBTQ center located in the city.

Pride House GLBTQ community center.

The approaching street was barren: no people, bright lights or attractive buildings to signal a vibrant setting. Pride House GLBTQ community center is urban, sits across from a Popeye's chicken street sign, and has a battered sign that hides its identity. As I drove down the dark and desolate street, I passed a barred up Coney Island; its windows coated with a thick layer of grease as if to hide the faces and the identities of the customers. I made a U-turn in front of the center and parked in front of the door. A simple brick building, it has two floors, a rather large floor plan one door leads to administration, and another red door leads to the youth center. The glass door of the administration office had a line of Pride Colors awkwardly marking the entrance. Anyone entering Pride House community center needs to push the buzzer to enter the front door. Therefore, I looked into the security camera and smiled. I had to climb 40 wooden steps to get to the entrance of the youth space. When I made it to the top step, Lori the youth manager was sitting at the sign-in table in a coat and snow boots. She was small and pretty, but guarded even though she was smiling. In the first room of the center were several couches and four bookshelves with many outdated books not likely to be attractive to young urban GLBTQs. At least, I thought, the center was making the effort to expose the teens to literacy. As I walked down the hall to the kitchen, there was one-gender-neutral bathroom on the left side of the hall and a staff bathroom on the right side of the hall. The hall eventually led into a big dining room with simple tables, chairs and new Apple computers. The young people eat home cooked meals provided by the center from 5:30 p.m.-6:30 p.m. and use the computers from 6:30 p.m.-7:30 p.m.

The activity room was a huge room with wooden floors, a large screen T.V, pool table, foosball and a large dance floor: a safe haven for the majority of African American boys labeled as tranny girls, boys, and traders to practice voguing for ball dances or competitions.

Real Talk group for lesbians and bisexual girls.

I felt a little more confident attending Pride House community center because I was given a specific purpose from the center's director. She wanted me to help facilitate the Real Talk group for lesbian and bisexual girls with two other facilitators. The purpose of the group, Real Talk was to provide lesbians and bisexual girls their own space for discussing relevant issues about their lives, ideas, and feelings. The scheduled group was on Wednesdays at 6:30 p.m. The first session began with the facilitators brainstorming with the girls about topic issues. The girls made a list of at least 20 issues including religion, sex, relationships, and domestic violence. The adult facilitators dominated the majority of the discussion during the first session because they could not hide their excitement of having enough girls for a successful group. It took four more weeks for a consistent group of girls to begin attending Real Talk. The girls told the facilitators during the first session that girls do not come up to Pride House because the boys bully them with comments about their clothes, hair, and preferences. The boys constantly ask the girls, "Why do you dress like a boy?" The girls also said they are tired of watching the boys "vogue."

After several weeks of attending both community centers, I was growing very fond of the Pride House community center in the city. The youth and the adult facilitators were very friendly and welcoming to me compared to Crescent community center. I decided because I did not have enough girls for my research study at either center that I would try to join the two small girls' groups to make one group. I first approached the four African American girls at the Crescent GLBTQ community center and asked if they were interesting in joining the Pride House for a

movie night happening the following week. The girls replied to me, as if in unison, "No, we don't hang out with girls from the Pride House center. We only do things with girls from the Crescent center." They continued by standing up from their chairs and slapping each other's hands. I have to admit, I was taken back with the girls' response. That night I left the center a bit stunned and worried how I would find enough girls to participate in the research study.

Fast forward to January 6, 2010, it was a successful night of the Real Talk girls' group at the second center. Six girls participated in the group: Ericka, Treasure, Lucky, Omar, Felia and Shauna (all pseudonyms) I did not know it then but Ericka, Treasure, Lucky, and Omar would eventually be the foundation for this research study. During the group session, the girls discussed domestic violence, relationships and their behavior in relationships. The other facilitator said it is common for girls their age to act "all crazy." I agree with all crazy but violence seemed to be a common thread running through their stories. Lucky and Treasure talked about an incident with an iron. Lucky explained that she called Treasure a bitch and in return, Treasure threw an iron at her. This was about the time during the session I passed out a handout with a relationship credo. I was surprised the girls wanted to read the credo aloud. The other facilitator and I discussed the meaning of several of the paragraphs. We both suggested to the girls a plan if an argument occurred; to give your partner space if a disagreement occurs, read the credo together, and do not resort to verbal or physical violence. Treasure said that there was a lot of violence in her past. Ericka took a more positive approach to the group that night. She was listening to the conversations and adding her own advice about not using violence in a relationship.

I was interested in what Felia and Shauna had to say about their own relationships because they were both very quiet. Shauna told the group that her relationship was 50/50 (good vs. bad), she argued a lot with her partner. I asked Shauna what was good about her relationship.

She said, "We both love each other and the sex." Sex was a prevalent theme in most of the girls' description of a "good relationship." Ericka gave me a "high five" when I was able to define the words "femme", "stem" and "stud", from last week's session. In addition, she gave me her Facebook name to include on my friend list. I thought both gestures from Ericka were very positive. I was beginning to feel accepted by the group; at least Ericka and Omar were happy that I was staying on with the group because the other two facilitators will no longer be volunteering at the center after tonight.

Information meeting with the girls.

I scheduled an information meeting on February 15, 2010 about the research study. A few weeks prior to the meeting, Treasure and Ericka posted the information about the study on their Facebook pages. The information meeting flyers (See Appendix O) read as follows:

Please come to an information meeting about the lesbian and bisexual young women and literacy research study on Monday, February 15, 2010 at 5:00 p.m. at the Pride House GLBTQ community center. Pizza and drinks will be provided. You do not have to commit to participating in the study.

I also gave Treasure and Ericka the information card to give to their friends and left a stack of the cards at both GLBTQ community centers. The extra effort of distributing the information cards and two more flyers at the centers did not help in finding more girls to participate in the study. I resorted to Facebook and my connection to Erika to find more participants for the study. Facebook eventually became my major communication tool to find two more girls and to communicate regularly with the participants of the study. The information meeting took place at the Pride House GLBT community center. The girls including Treasure, Ericka, Omar, Lucky, Tamika and Jordan were all eager to eat pizza, drink pop, and to hear about the research details. They were excited that the research study would "officially" begin in March. In-between

the bites of pizza and slurps of pop, I presented the following books to the girls in the form of

book talks:

Titles of young adult literature	Topics addressed
Parrotfish by Ellen Wittlinger	Transgender girl, acceptance, rejection, family, self-identity
London Reign by A.C. Britt	Urban setting, courage, real love, monogamy, alcoholic father
The House You Pass on the Way by Jacqueline Woodson	Southern setting, sexual feelings, interracial family
Once Dead, Twice Shy by Kim Harrison	Good and evil, free will and destiny, mysticism
Coffee Will Make You Black by April Sinclair	Urban setting in 1960s, race and sexual orientation
Ash by Malinda Lo	Fairy tale, romance, fantasy, love
Down to the Bone by Mayra Lazara Dole	Cuban-American culture, friendship, prejudice, love

Each of the girls picked up the majority of the books and carefully read the summaries on the

back covers. The books depicting African American women on the covers were of the most

interest to the girls. Lucky took a liking to *London Reign* and began reading the first few pages

aloud to the rest of the group. Although the girls unwillingly agreed with no objections with

Lucky that *London Reign* should be the book selected for the literacy club, the decision was

made; *London Reign* won the approval of the girls. *London Reign* is ghetto literature or urban

fiction. It is a frank and sexually raw novel about London, a stud from Boston that discovers who

she is as a daughter, friend, and romantic partner. The novel is very explicit with sex scenes,

swearing and violence. I was not surprised at Lucky's interest in the book because the main

character, London who identifies as a stud, as does Lucky, is on the front cover. As stated by

Ericka, "I want to read a book I could relate to." During the information meeting, I discussed the

details of the study and the supplies including a writer's notebook with a spiral (the girls made

me promise, I would also buy writer's notebooks for them with a spiral). Lucky was particularly interested in the idea of having a camera or a video camera to use during the study. Ericka said, "I don't want one of those cameras from CVS." I assumed she was referring to the inexpensive ones for less than ten dollars. When the three pizzas and pop were gone, I drove the girls back to Ericka's flat. When Treasure was exiting my car, she said, "she had a good time." During this week, the five girls were spending time together at Ericka's flat on the west side of the city. I knew the girls would change their home situation and romantic relationships several more times before the study started in March. The girls' transient natures made me nervous, for fear I would lose some of the girls as participants before the start of the study.

The girls' experience the work of a local writer and an artist.

Several weeks before the start of the research study, I ordered the first book for the book club (*London Reign* by A. C. Britt), supplies including writer's notebooks, an art kit containing paint, brushes, pencils, scissors, crayons, a disposable camera, and spiral notebooks for collage work. Because the girls had no financial resources, it was necessary for me to supply the girls with everything they needed to participate in the study. During this "wait" period, I invited Michelle Brown, a local African American writer, poet, children's author, and GLBT activist to the center to talk to the girls about writing and her work. The girls found Michelle engaging and informative, and intrigued by her description as a lesbian African American woman. Michelle read aloud her poem entitled "The Chino Project":

I am unique, one of a kind, that's right, unique, part of my bad self. Part of the same Chino, part black, brown, white. I'm as old as yesterday. And new as tomorrow. I am a two-spirited being. Sanquine, sister, brother, friend, LGBT, loving and very queer. But, human just like you. Magnificent, glorious and yes, sometimes, a real piece of art. I am you and You are me.

The girls revealed they had never had the opportunity to ask an older African American lesbian about relationships, race, and family and Michelle's story of how her father tried to kill her twice for being a lesbian because she was an embarrassment to him saddened them.

The following week I invited Todd Stanton, a local artist, to the center to share his passion for collage with the girls. Todd did a short presentation on collage, element of design, and color; and he showed a few of his collages. As the girls were listening to Todd, they flipped through collage and scrapbooking books, which I brought to the session. Todd and I talked about how to alter a page with paints, magazine pictures, markers, collage, and writing. We kept reiterating that there is no set way of doing collage, it is what you feel and what you are thinking in terms of the novel and group discussions. The girls were very concerned about "doing it wrong." Ericka said, "She was better at doing collage than writing." Jordan said, "I read and do a journal all the time," and asked "if she only had to only do one page a week." I reassured Jordan that I could always give her a second journal. Again, like Michelle, the girls found the information interesting about collages and element of design, but it was the personal details about Todd, including his African American boyfriend and his daughter, which was intriguing to the girls. The girls admitted they never had the opportunity to talk to a White gay man. The girls were anxious to go home and to get started.

The research study takes a sudden turn for the worse…I thought!

Up to this point, I was feeling confident with the study and myself. I was so pleased with the workshops given by Michelle and Todd and the excitement of the girls. It was not until later that evening when I got home from Todd's presentation that my world fell into my lap. The director of the Pride center informed me through Facebook "We can no longer accommodate your research needs on site." I kept reading the words repeatedly until my eyes began to blur

from tears. I thought to myself, I worked so hard the last four months planning for the research to begin in the next week and now I did not have a place to make it happen. At the same time, I began to panic about how the girls would feel about relocating the site. I kept asking myself, what was I going to do at such a short notice? Questions but no answers began to flood my thinking: Would the girls enjoy a new site just as much at being at the Pride House GLBTQ community center without other youth? (Did this make the girls feel special?), would I lose some of the girls as participants because of the site change? Moreover, how would I transport all the girls to a new site?

The following week I scrambled to find another site for the research group. I put a request on Facebook without any promising leads. The urban neighborhood of the Pride House GLBT center is void of coffee shops, libraries, and other community sites for meeting. With not many options, I decided to rent an office space in the suburbs for the next 12 weeks. The office was located in a large building located on a busy street and was surrounded by fast food restaurants and gas stations. The office was inviting with many windows, large working tables, and plenty of walls to hang up the girls' artifacts including their writing and art. I tried to make the space cozy for the girls by bringing a few things from home such as two accent lamps, a few art pieces, books, and candles. Although I suggested to the girls to bring some personal items to the literacy space to make it their own, they never did.

Entering the new research site (Literacy Club Space, LCS).

The girls were very excited to receive their digital cameras as they walked through the office door for our first research session. Most of the girls tore open the plastic packages even though I suggested first eating at Taco Bell, about a half a block down the street. Lucky was quick to put her and Treasure's camera away in a blue bag, hidden from the rest of the girls.

Treasure eventually took her camera from the blue bag and opened the packaging with scissors. During our short walk to Taco Bell, the girls were busy taking pictures of each other. A couple of the girls did not feel comfortable walking down the street. This was obvious with Bella's comment "I am moving before the cops come to find out what all these Black people are doing here." When we walked through the door at Taco Bell, Lucky "freaked out" and became "paralyzed" when she saw all the white people in the restaurant. Lucky proceeded to sit down at a square table with her hands over her face. It took some persuasive talk from the rest of the girls for Lucky to get in line to order her food. While the girls and I were standing in line Bella asked me if I was balling, and what I thought that meant. I said, "Either dancing or sex." Bella and Treasure said, "No, to have a lot of money to be able to pay for the lunch." I said, "No, I don't have a lot of money, but I am able to buy you lunch." She smiled.

After lunch with the girls, we settled back into our seats around a long table at the LCS (office space) decorated with a Kente cloth for the girls to begin completing all the necessary paperwork for the research study. First I distributed a Behavioral Research Informed Consent (see Appendix G) to each of the girls 18 years of age and older to sign to participate in the study and a Behavioral Documentation of Adolescent Assent (see Appendix F), a wavier of parental consent for the one 17-year old girl who cannot obtain the consent of a parent or guardian because being LBT or out may result in harm, violence or homelessness. I carefully read the forms aloud to the girls and provided time for them to ask any questions or voice a concern. Second, I gave all the girls a two-part questionnaire on reading and writing practices (see Appendix G: Participant's Questionnaire about Writing, and Appendix H: Participant's Questionnaire about Reading). Again, I read the questionnaires aloud to the girls and provided an

opportunity to ask any questions. The girls said after our first session that they liked the new site. Lucky admitted, "I feel I can share more here and it feels more comfortable."

Description of the girls.

The majority of time during the research study six of the eight African American girls stayed in the west part of the city at Ericka's second floor flat. Her mother occupies the first floor flat. The other two girls lived in the suburbs on the west side of the state. This area suffers from urban blight including low-income families, racial isolation, and high crime. It is approximately 93.1 % African American, compared to 81.6 % city wide, 4.0%, White, 0.6% Hispanic, and 0.2% Asian. According to City Data (http:www.city-data.com) this city's demographics information includes:

- Median household income ($18, 433) is below state average

- Median house value ($63, 784) is below state average

- Unemployed percentage (31.3 %) above state average

- Renting percentage above state average

- Percentage of population with a bachelor's degree or higher significantly (6.1%) below state average.

The girls ranged in age from 17 to 21 years old. Seven girls identified as African American, and one identified as bi-racial. While five of the girls identified as lesbian, one identified as bisexual and two identified as transgender. During week eight of the study, one of the girls moved to the west side of the state to attend a new community college and no longer was part of the study. This same girl convinced her girlfriend not to continue in the study by telling her that the only person that should hear the details of her life is her girlfriend. I made the

effort to continue the study with the girlfriend living in the city with her parents and a new baby sister.

Duration of girls' involvement.

I began the process of this research on September 3, 2009 by volunteering at both of the GLBTQ community centers. Crescent GLBTQ community center is located in the suburbs and the Pride House GLBTQ community center is located in the city. It took at least three months for the number of participants for the study to stay consistent. I had three more African American girls that participated on some level before the study began but eventually they did not commit to the twelve-week research process. The success of retaining eight girls was because Lucky and Ericka were cousins and there were four pairs of romantic partners. The personal relationships of the girls did put a strain on the study because of weekly break-ups and fights between partners, friends, and cousins. On the other hand, it also kept the girls coming back to the book club.

Schedule of sessions.

My assistant, J. Cooper, a doctoral student attending Wayne State University and I met with the girls from March 3, 2010 through June 23, 2010 for a total of twelve-weeks. Every Sunday the twelve sessions took place at 3:00 p.m. and ending around 7:30 pm. The more the girls became involved with their writing, collages and mask making, the more time they wanted at the book club space (fondly referred to as LCS). Beginning the fourth-week, J. Cooper and I began picking up the girls around 1:30 p.m. and ending around 7:30 p.m.

It was necessary for me to have an assistant for this study to transport the girls to and from the site, pick up food, and facilitate a second reading group. We were both responsible for transporting the eight girls from the city to the suburbs about 20 minutes one-way. J. Cooper

helped with transportation and managing the sessions but did not assume the role of co-investigator.

Overview of sessions.

I worked with the eight African American girls, ages 17-21, every Sunday beginning in March 3, 2010 in a LBT-friendly space. When more time was necessary for individual interviews, writing, or a collage piece and/or mask, the girl(s) and I would go to a restaurant, coffee shop or bookstore. I wove multiliteracies into the context of an out-of-school LBT book club because this positioned the girls as authors and artists; meaning-makers intent on representing their understanding of the world (Albers, 1997). Drawing from the theory of semiotics, I engaged the girls in critical thinking strategies so that they could begin to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their ideas about gender and sexual identity using multiple sign systems (e.g. reading, writing, language, and visualization). Through transmediation or "recasting meaning from language to another sign system" (e.g. creating a poem from a visual artifact), the girls deepened their understanding of their polyphonic or multi-voiced identities (Cowan & Albers, 2006, p.2).

The girls engaged in a variety of activities throughout the study, including book discussions, literature circles, writer's notebooks, poetry, and visual arts. The groups' discussions and writing extended beyond the parameters of the novels to topics including physical mutilation, racism, suicide, loss of family members, bein' white, and male growth hormones. Each of the twelve sessions had a semi-structured schedule to accommodate the needs, interests, and moods of the girls.

Weekly Agenda
Girls eat provided food usually chicken or pizza, pop, snacks
Individual sharing of writing or collage work
Critical literacy activity
Whole group book discussions or separate reading groups (weeks 7-12)
Individual writing or collage time

Book Selection for the literacy club space (LCS).

Over the course of the study, I used two young adult literature novels; one with a homosexual protagonist and the other with a heterosexual protagonist. The rationale behind the use of two novels each for six weeks was to examine in what ways the girls might construct different versions of self as they experienced literature one which was congruent and one not congruent with their social worlds and identities. I embedded critical literacy strategies (see Figure 4) within the context of the discussion groups so the girls would reflect consciously on the novels and their created texts, as well as the ideologies that support these texts and the process through which they make meaning (Cowan & Albers, 2006). I selected the initial set of novels for each six-week session and girls had the opportunity to decide as a book club which two novels they would read during the twelve-week book club. The novel with the homosexual protagonist was read the first through the sixth week, and the second novel with the heterosexual protagonist was read from the seventh through the twelfth week. I conducted a book talk for each of the novels and provided adequate time for the girls to peruse the novels. The girls selected the first novel before the start date of the research, so I had enough time to buy the novels. The girls made the final decision for selecting the reading order of the novels. As a group, the girls chose

to read the homosexual-themed novel the first six weeks. I used the following criteria from the book, *Discovering Their Voices: Engaging Adolescent Girls with Young Adult Literature* by Marsha M. Sprague and Kara K. Keeling (2007) to find novels that would foster productive dialogue among the girls during book discussions.

- All the books were for young adults' ages 17-21 years of age. Both novels selected by the girls were of the urban fiction genre, which addressed themes such as betrayal, loss of family, and relationships from the perspectives and experiences of urban African American adolescent girls.

- The books featured a young female protagonist as identified by "their ability to solve problems, overcome adversity, and persevere when circumstances within society present overwhelming obstacles" (Giorgis, Johnson, Colbert, King, & Kulesza, 2000, p.521).

- The books placed the female protagonist in a position where she was required to conform to certain ways of thinking and being, which resists social norms.

- The book illustrated forces, such as parents, school, societal expectations, or peer pressure that limited her choices regarding decisions and actions.

- The books portrayed girls in conflict with those forces.

- By the end of the books, the girls defined themselves in ways that reflected their choices and decisions.

Selection of novels with a female homosexual protagonist.

Initially, I intended to select eight GLBTQ young adult literature titles by using one or more GLBTQ young adult literature titles suggested by the National Council of Teachers of English Women in Literacy and Life Assembly (WILLA), the American Library Association's The Rainbow List (2008, 2009) which is an annotated list of GLBTQ books for teens, and

GLBTQ blogs which review young GLBTQ literature. However, it did not take long before I realized that the majority of young adult GLBT literature lacks minority protagonists and urban settings. Popular novels such as *Keeping You a Secret* by Julie Anne Peters, *Annie on my Mind* by Nancy Garden and *Kissing Kate* by Lauren Myracle are common selections for young LBT women, but contain language, characters and settings most familiar to non-minority young women. It was important to this study to locate enough books containing diverse characters and settings to meet the interests of the participants. The homosexual-themed book list grew slowly with such titles as *The House You Pass on the Way* by Jacqueline Woodson, *Once Dead, Twice Shy* by Kim Harrison, *London Reign*, by A.C. Britt, *Coffee Will Make You Black* by April Sinclair, Ash by Malinda Lo, *Down to the Bone* by Mayra Lazara Dole and *Parrotfish* by Ellen Wittlinger. It was not until after the girls selected *London Reign* that I stumbled across a few more novels with African American LBT characters in an urban setting. My new finds included *My Secret Your Lies* by N'Tyse, *She Slipped and Fell* by Shonda and *Consequences* by Skyy.

Selection of novels with female heterosexual protagonist.

I selected six novels with female heterosexual protagonist using one or a combination of the following resources: ALAN Assembly on Literature for Adolescents, National Council of Teachers of English) and American Library Association; African American teen's websites, which review young adult literature. I presented the following heterosexual-themed young literature books to the girls in the form of book talks.

Titles of young adult literature	Topics and themes addressed
Dare by Abiloa Adam	Hip-hop culture, coming of age, finding love
Conception by Kalisha Buchanon	Chicago south side, teenage motherhood, abortion, love
Drama High: *The Fight* by L. Divine	Urban setting, race relations, relationships

If You Come Softly by Jacqueline Wilson	Interracial romance, family situations, love, race, racism
Until We Meet Again (Bluford High series) by Anne Schraff	Urban setting, lost, family relations, love, courage
Picture Me Rollin by Black Artemis	Incarceration, abuse, coming of age, hip-hop culture

Data Collection

When conducting participant observation, the ethnographer engages in the lives of the participants of the study while observing the details of social dynamics and patterns. As an active participant of the study, I used a combination of empirical evidence, including audio recordings, field notes, transcripts of semi-structured interviews with the girls, transcripts from whole group book discussion, visual artifacts including collages and identity masks as well as the girls' presentations of these artifacts to the whole group, entries of girls' writer's notebooks, and researcher's memos.

Before the data collection began, girls who were 18-21 years old at the time of the study signed the Behavioral Research Informed Consent (see Appendix F) in order to participate in the study. An Adolescent Assent form (see Appendix E) was signed by the one 17 year-old girl in the study because obtaining parental consent because "coming out" to her parents had the potential to result in harm, violence or homelessness. The girls participating in this study did not experience any harm or discomfort other than ordinarily encountered in daily life during the literacy club activities. Each girl selected a pseudonym for the length of the study to assure the protection and confidentiality and anonymity of the girls. Table 1 provides a brief history of the time frames for the research study.

Table 1

Timetable of the study

Time Frame	Tasks
September 3, 2009	Began volunteering at first community GLBT center
October 3, 2009	Began volunteering at second community GLBT center
October -February 2010	Active recruitment of participants for study
February 15, 2010	Information meeting about study including book selection
March 22, 2010	First literacy group session
April 12-19, 2010	Initial interviews with all participants
June 13, 2010	Final interviews with all participants
June	Final literacy club session/mask presentations

Below is a detailed description of the processes and techniques, which were utilized in each of these methods of data collection.

Observations.

I observed eight low-income African American LBT adolescent girls as they participated in a LBT book club for twelve weeks. The book club met once a week for a minimum of four hours to discuss and engage in literacy activities centered on the themes of two novels, as the girls identified these themes. The purpose of these observations, as well as the informal curriculum I designed, was to understand the ways in which their engagement with literacy events in a safe, out-of-school setting may contribute to the development and awareness of personal agency in their lives. I was concerned with helping them to access mechanisms and understandings needed to enact positive change in their lives, as they determined and defined these changes. It is through the work and enactment of critical literacy (Halverson, 2007;

Morrell, 2007) that individuals are empowered as citizens in democratic societies (McLaren, 1989).

Voluntary questionnaires.

These were a two-part questionnaire regarding the girls' reading and writing practices (see Appendix G: Participant's Questionnaire about Writing, and Appendix H: Participant's Questionnaire about Reading); and a Participant Questionnaire (see Appendix C**)** for further information (e.g. race and years of being out). Each questionnaire provided me with a brief overview of the girls before getting to know them personally.

Book discussions.

The participants met in a book club format once a week for a minimum of four hours each week for twelve weeks at an LBT-friendly space. The facilitated discussions consisted of open-ended questions (see Appendix Q) designed to help the girls deepen their understanding of their identity as LBT within the context of literature and group dialogue. I asked extemporaneous questions to shape the LBT adolescents' meaning-making process. For example, is there a particular character you identify with in the novel, if so, why or why not? Does your selected character possess expectations or roles that you can personally identify with, if so, why or why not?

In addition, the girls engaged in a variety of reading strategies. For example, *Post-It Note Coding* to identify important passages, jot responses, ask questions, or to make text-to-text, text-to-self or text-to-world connections as they read and discussed the novels using Post-It Notes while reading the novels. The girls used colored coded Post-It Notes to mark sections of the text that they found to be key concepts or information (V.I.P.); or information they were confused about or that did not make sense (**?**); or information they found interesting, hard to believe, or was unexpected.

Audiotapes of discussions, visual artifacts such as collages and identity masks produced by the girls during the book clubs were collected (Figure 4). I have outlined the literacy engagements and the data sources for the first six weeks of the literacy club in the following table.

Figure 4. Schedule for the first six weeks of the book club

Week	Literacy engagement	Data Source
1	Introduction to the literacy club Reading and writing questionnaire Discuss format of discussion group, writer's journal and interviewing Individual writing time with provided prompt (see Sprague & Keeling, 2006, p.84)	Questionnaire Writing artifacts from writing journal Transcriptions of audio recording of group discussion and visual audit activity
2	Participate in visual audit trail Critical literacy strategy for example: Relived experience activity through language and drama (Cowan & Albers, 2006) Whole group discussion with sharing of entries Individual writing time with provided prompt	Visual artifacts of visual trail Audio recording of group discussion and visual audit activity Writing artifacts from writing journals
3	Participate in visual audit trail Critical literacy strategy for example: **Alternative Perspectives** (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) Whole group discussion with sharing of entries Introduction to multimodal project with artist Individual writing time with provided prompt Conduct individual interviews	Visual artifacts of visual trail and multimodal project Writing artifacts from writing journals Transcriptions of audio recordings of group discussions, visual trail, working on multimodal project and individual interviews
4	Participate in visual audit trail Critical literacy strategy for example: Using Expression /Suppression Framework to discuss voice (Sprague & Keeling, 2006) Whole group discussion with sharing of entries Individual writing time with provided prompt including mind and alternative mind portraits	Visual artifacts of visual trail Writing artifacts from writing journals Transcriptions of audio recordings of group discussions and visual trail
5	Participate in visual audit trail Problem Posing activity/role playing to examine gender and identity issues Critical literacy strategy for example*:* (McLaughlin	Visual artifacts of visual trail Writing artifacts from writing journals Transcriptions of audio recordings of group discussions and visual trail

	& DeVoogd, 2004) Whole group discussion with sharing of entries Individual writing time with provided prompt	
6	Participate in visual audit trail Critical literacy strategy for example: Deconstruction of text based on textual structures, construction of characters, gap and silences, power and interest, whose view, multiple meanings Whole group discussion with sharing of entries Work on multimodal project with artist Individual writing time with provided prompt Conduct individual interviews	Visual artifacts of visual trail and evolving multimodal artifact Writing artifacts from writing journals Transcriptions of audio recording of group discussion, visual trail and interviews

For weeks, 7-12 when the girls began the novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* the critical literacy strategies listed on the above chart remained the same.

Semi-structured interviews.

I conducted three sets of semi-structured interviews with the participants during the weeks of the 3rd, 8th, and 12th sessions. The scheduling of the interviews varied according to the girls' schedules. The individual interviews took place when a girl was available during the week. I found it too difficult to conduct interviews before or after the book club because of the extra responsibility of transportation and picking up food for the group. The interviews followed a semi-structured format in which I asked questions based on my observations during whole-group discussions, their entries in a writer's notebook, the visual audit trail, and the multiliteracies artifacts they created. The purpose of the individual semi-structured interviews was to clarify and expand my existing understanding of individual girl's responses during group discussions or written entries in their notebooks and to help define recurring patterns within the data. The semi-structured interviews with the girls served as a "member check" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with the girls regarding the data that had already been collected.

To enhance internal validity, or commonly referred to as the impact of observer effects, I adhered to the following guidelines: ensure that the girls are comfortable in the interview setting; assure the girls that the researcher can be trusted and that they are identified by a pseudonym during the study and in the research paper; situate the interview in a private location to protect the confidentiality of the girls; and clarify any ambiguity in questions (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999, p.280)

To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the girls, all audio recordings and transcriptions are in a locked cabinet at my home and will be destroyed after three years according to the protocol of the Human Investigative Committee. I scheduled regular debriefing meetings with my dissertation chair to discuss themes emerging from initial analysis of interviews as well as group discussions, and artifacts produced by the girls.

Writer's notebooks.

The participants and I wrote weekly entries in our writer's notebooks and created collages for twelve weeks outside the book club to identify, illustrate, and describe what each of us thought were the significant themes in the novels as well as to express other ideas, ways of thinking, or personal responses to both the novels and our discussions. Although I read both selected novels before each six week set, I felt that I had a better understanding of social interaction of the group and was able to create stronger connections because I read and wrote along with the girls. The writer's notebook and collage workbook permitted the participants to speak from experience about ideas, feelings, understandings, etc., and therefore served to help triangulate the data.

My thinking was that the subjective nature of the writer's notebook and collage workbooks lends themselves to ways of thinking and insight about African American LBT

adolescents that was not captured during a group discussion or an interview. A writer's notebook and collage workbook captured the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of the girls as well as provided me with insights about the political, social, and cultural factors, which influenced the girls. The girls handwrote their entries, doodled ideas, or glued computer-generated entries into their writer's notebooks and/or collage workbooks. I asked the girls to write a minimum of two entries (two pages in length) per week in their writer's notebooks so that they would have the opportunity to expand on or give further details about their opinions, beliefs, views and feelings regarding the novels, discussions, and interactions. At times, I provided a writing invitation (prompt) to the group to help keep the girls' writing focused on a specific theme or idea that emerged from our group discussions. During group discussions, the girls had the opportunity to share their notebook entries with other participants, if they chose. I collected the writing entries of the girls during the 3rd, 6th, 9th and 12th sessions.

As the researcher, I wrote thick field notes during weekly book discussion groups and individual interviews. The rationale for taking descriptive field notes was to provide detailed descriptions of the setting, the participants, and behavior according to my observations (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The descriptive field notes included: portraits of the participants physical appearance, mannerisms, gestures, how they acted, talked; reconstruction of dialogue conversations between the participants and the participants and the researcher; description of the setting: room and seating arrangements; accounts of particular events who was involved, when where, and how; and depiction of activities detailed description of what happened, along with the order in which it happened (2006). Immediately following each discussion group session, I was able to review my notes and write my some initial thoughts about what I observed.

The whole group book discussions were audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the written field notes. Semi-structured interviews were also audio recorded. I transcribed the data on a weekly basis.

The culminating project: Identity masks.

One of the resulting products from the twelve-week literacy club was an identity mask created by each of the girls using a wooden box as the major structure with a paper mask placed inside of it. The girls began creating their masks week nine of the twelve-week process. Each mask differed according to materials, images, words, and colors. The purpose of the visual project was to provide the girls with another creative medium in which to express their sense of individual, sexual and gender identities. Some of the girls took the opportunity to work on their masks outside of the literacy group. In addition, I photographed each of the identity masks and a few of the girls in the process of creating them. Seven of the eight girls completed a mask.

Oral presentations.

The oral presentations beginning on week twelve consisted of each girl sharing her identity mask and discussing how the artifact reflected her thinking and ideas about identity and/or self after participating in a twelve-week literacy club. I wanted each of the girls to experience the response of all the participants to their masks because it was my intent that an interactive dialogue between the artist and the other girls creates the space to extend ideas and thoughts to a higher critical plane.

Visual audit trail.

On the sixth week of the study, the girls created one visual audit trail consisting of a long sheet of paper. I placed one piece of paper on the middle table in the room for the girls to write personal jottings, paste images, add quotes or drawings sparked by peer conversations, responses

to the novels, entries in a writer's notebook or reflective thinking during the past week. The girls initialed their entries, so I was able to triangulate the data from the visual trail with other collected data. The visual audit trail as a recursive tool helped to retrace the thinking, make connections, and to initiate critical conversations with the girls (Vasquez, 2003) as we co-constructed personal meaning with text themes.

Researcher's memos.

Charmaz (2006) shows memo writing allows the researcher to reflect upon the following: record what is happening in the data; use early memos to explore and fill out qualitative codes; chart observed and predicted relationships in the data and between emerging categories; trace and categorize data subsumed by the topic; identify beliefs and assumptions that support the categories. Following Charmaz's model, throughout this study, I wrote memos and created collages to depict my thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections I was making, and to articulate questions that were emerging.

The data collection for the study followed a detailed schedule as shown in the following table:

(Figure 5): Schedule for data collection

	Discussion Groups	Interviews with girls	Visual audit trail	Girls write weekly entries	Notebook collected	Researcher's Memo Writing	Multimodal Project	Oral Presentation
Week 1	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes		
Week 2	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes		
Week 3	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	
Week 4	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Week 5	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes		
Week 6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	

Week 7	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes		
Week 8	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Week 9	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	
Week 10	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes		
Week 11	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Week 12	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes

Data Analysis

The data analysis of this study was recursive and ongoing across the twelve weeks during which the eight girls participated in the book club. I coded all data collected for emerging themes including twelve group discussions, three semi-structured interviews with each of the eight girls, entries in a writer's notebook and collage workbook by the girls, researcher's memos, identity mask, oral presentation of the masks by the girls to the group and one audit trail. The book club began with the girls reading the novel with the homosexual protagonist because it was the preference of the group.

I used Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory coding guidelines for sorting and analyzing the data. I used a grounded theory of qualitative coding because it allowed for a recursive, back-and-forth process. It was crucial for the efficacy of this study to follow the leads of the fluidity of the data emerging from the girls' conversations, writings, and visual artifacts. The flowchart below illustrates my data analysis process beginning with a research question (Charmaz, 2006, p.11). I used this flowchart for each of my research questions and then was able to look across the charts as a means of constant comparison and analysis.

Figure 6: The data process beginning with the research question

Initial coding of data.

Initial coding consisted of two phases: 1) an initial phase naming each word, line, or segment of data followed by 2) a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize the data (2006, p. 46). Codes included perspectives held by the African American LBT girls and ways of thinking about identity, gender, and relationships. The coding shaped the analytic framework from which to build the analysis of how the girls used an out-of-school literacy space to acknowledge and engage a postmodern, fluid sense of self in ways that enhance their developing awareness of personal agency and to use that developing sense of self to enact change in their lives.

Data collection with focused coding of data.

After the initial coding of the data using line-by-line coding (Glaser, 1987), I decided what initial codes were most frequent, thus providing an indication of their significance. This focused coding of data allowed for the analysis of larger segments of data with more selective codes.

Initial memos raising codes to tentative categories.

Throughout the coding process, I wrote "memos" (Charmaz, 2006) or analytic notes based on the emerging data. I used the following prompts to initiate my writing and to focus on further data collection: What is going on in the book club meetings or within the interviews? What are the participants doing? What are the participants saying? What connections can I make or which ones do I need to check? (2006, p.80)

Using advanced memos to move focused codes to conceptual categories.

Charmaz (2006) states that advanced memo writing allows the researcher to "pierce the surface of data" by moving the data beyond description to analysis. Advanced memo writing helped me to clarify what codes best represent the data thus becoming categories to analyze. Charmaz (2006) suggests using the following prompts to observe and predict relationships in the data and between the categories: define the category, explain the properties of the category, describe how my category emerges and changes, and compare categories in the data with other categories (p.93).

Theoretical sampling collecting of specific new data.

Theoretical sampling is concerned with collecting more data to elaborate on categories that I may find not be fully "saturated" (Charmaz, 2006) I used theoretical sampling as a way to obtain additional data to help me further clarify emerging categories. I accomplished this by attending to the gaps or incomplete categories discovered through memo writing or by asking the girls different questions to expound on the core categories. Theoretical sampling helped me to follow up on my analytic leads.

Sorting, diagramming, and integrating of memos.

I began to visually sort and diagram the connections from my memos after I saturated the categories of the study. Charmaz (2006, p. 113) suggests asking the following questions to help assess if core categories are saturated: Which comparisons can be made between data within and between the categories? What sense can be made of these comparisons? Where do they lead? How do comparisons illuminate theoretical categories? In what other directions, if any, do they suggest? And what new conceptual relationships, if any, emerge?

Both sorting and diagramming memos helped me to create a concrete image of the logic and the flow of the analysis. Because of the sorting process, I saw the similarities and differences between the categories. As Glaser (1996) says, "the world doesn't occur in a vacuum," and as the researcher, I took into account the interconnectedness of the girls' actions, language, writing and visual artifact (as cited in Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2007).

Discourse Analysis.

In addition to using constant comparison method for the coding and categorization of emerging themes and patterns from the data, I used two elements as described by (Gee & Green, 1989): the *MASS framework* and *building tasks of language;* both combine discourse analysis with an ethnographic perspective. Both frameworks made it easier to identify the girls' "language in use" (Gee, 2006) by focusing on what the girls accomplish and what it means to the girls as they participated in an LBT book club. In addition, the frameworks addressed "situated meanings" and "Discourse models" (2006). Both of these were associated with the words the girls used as they interactively participated in the book club. It was important to understand the choices of words and actions they used to interact with each other within and across time (weekly literacy club), actions (taking on another perspective), and activity (writing in a writer's

notebook). The MASS framework and the building tasks of language tapped into the interpretive and polyphonic nature of the girls' actions and behaviors as they socially constructed situations/events including definitions of roles, relationships, rights, and cultural models within the literacy club (Gee & Green, 1989).

The MASS System of Discourse.

The MASS (material, activity, semiotic, and sociocultural) framework allowed me to analyze the fluidity encapsulated in the literacy events (e.g. book discussions) and the modes of representation (e.g. writing, reading) across time, actions and activity (Gee & Green, 1989) (see Appendix J). This was accomplished by moving back and forth across the four aspects that define a social situation: **m**aterial aspects (actors, place (space), time, and objects presented or referred to during interactions); **a**ctivity aspects (specific social activity or interconnected chains of events in which the girls are engaging); **s**emiotic aspects (situated meanings and cultural models connected to various "sign systems" such as language and images; and **s**ociocultural aspects (personal, social, and cultural knowledge, feelings, identities, around sign systems and the material world (1989, p. 134).

Interconnecting data across these four aspects created a "network" which allowed me to see the ways in which the data inter-animated, providing a more holistic picture of the girls' social worlds, actions, and changes in terms of social identities (different versions of self).

Building tasks of discourse.

The second element of the framework (Gee & Green, 1989) was building tasks of language. In his book, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method,* Gee (2006) describes building tasks as what we "construct" or "build" with language when we talk or write. These building tasks (e.g., world building, activity building, identity building, literature building,

and connection building) demonstrated what the girls, as writers and speakers, were doing socially through these tasks, which are part of a larger group of tasks including power, gender, literacy, and access (1989) (See Appendix J: Examples of a Gender Identity Building Task Using the MASS Framework).

(Figure 7): MASS discourse analysis using one building task

Building task	MASS aspect	Related questions
World building	Material aspect	What meanings and values seem to be attached to places, times, bodies, objects, artifacts, and institutions relevant in this situation/event?
Connection building	Semiotic aspect	What sorts of connections (intertextual ties) are proposed, recognized, acknowledged, and interactionally made to previous or future interactions?
Activity building	Activity aspect	On what is time being spent in this situation/event?
Identity building	Sociocultural aspect	What personal, social, and cultural knowledge and beliefs, feelings and identities seem to be relevant to the situation

Trustworthiness and Ethics

I established credibility of the data collected in the field by prolonged engagement in the setting, persistent observation, and constant comparison method. The purpose of persistent observation was to identify those characteristics in a situation that are most relevant to the issue perused by the researcher. The prolonged engagement of this study included twelve-weeks of data collection in the same setting and with the same eight girls. The persistent observation consisted of me studying the LBT adolescents within different contexts: whole group book discussion, three semi-structured interviews with the eight girls, writer's notebook, collage workbook, weekly visual audit trail, and an identity mask artifact accompanied by an oral

presentation about the artifact. I consistently met with a peer debriefer to enhance the credibility of the study. The purpose of peer debriefing, contend Lincoln and Guba (1985), is to facilitate the researcher's consideration of methodological activities and to provide feedback about the accuracy of the data collection analysis procedures.

The constant comparison of the data across a range of literacy events, meeting times, with different groups of girls and through a variety of methods insured credibility. (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2007). Member checking was a technique used to confirm the credibility of the collected data and the categories. An impartial colleague and the LBT adolescents fulfilled the following member checking responsibilities: provide the opportunity to check the intent of the respondent; allow for the correction of facts or interpretations; provides the respondent an opportunity to add more details to the notes; provide an opportunity to summarize as the data is being collected; and provide the respondent an opportunity to give assessment of overall accuracy (Spradley, 1980).

I established both dependability and confirmability by creating an audit trail consisting of the tools for data collections (e.g. writer's journal, audio recordings), the raw data (e.g. transcriptions of the group discussions), personal researcher's memos and outlined procedures as discussed in the proposal for analyzing the data.

Conclusion

The combination of constant comparative method and discourse analysis provided me with the theoretical and methodological foundation to identify the principles guiding the LBT adolescents' practices within and across the different literacy events as well as the types of social worlds, polyphonic identities, actions they construct and demonstrate through their actions and discourse. An ethnographic perspective on discourse analysis provides a conceptual approach for

analyzing discourse from an insider's perspective and for examining how discourse shapes the polyphonic identities of the LBT adolescents participating in a literacy club. Both constant comparative method and discourse analysis accommodated the study's various data sources, literacy events, and use of multiliteracies. The study's design permitted me to add different aspects to the MASS framework to address the emerging themes from the data. The aim of the combination of approaches was to make an interpretative description that illuminates the ways African American LBT adolescents' identity transitions are connected to literacy practices and enables them to become literate citizen.

CHAPTER 4

Findings of the Study

Understanding the lives of four African American LBT adolescents.

As compelling as the girls' construction of gender and sexual identity are, the amount of data is, in many ways, a complicating factor. While it is tempting to bring every aspect of the girls' experience to the forefront for interpretation and evaluation, to do so would be impractical. Therefore, the analysis of this study will address the data collected for four of the eight girls and the significant aspects of the research questions. I selected these particular girls (Lucky, Jordan, Meanz, and Thee) because I believe their stories best reflect the impact of multiliteracies to challenge and change discourses helping the girls to acquire alternative ways of being in the world (Janks, 2005).

The work of the four African American girls presented in this chapter explored their uses of multiliteracies (reading, writing, viewing, visually representing, talking and listening) and how these contributed to the development of personal agency. It was this developing sense of agency that provided them the potential to create change in their lives. My intent is to explore: 1) how they used multiliteracies to enhance their understanding of the social practices and socially ascribed identities which constructed them as African American homosexual females; 2) the ways in which they critiqued and deconstructed social constructions of identity and thereby contributed to their ability to reconstruct identities and beliefs that have the potential to lead to human agency. I begin with the girls providing self-descriptions and their selected pseudonyms.

Figure 8: Chart of pseudonyms

Lucky (19-years old)	"I am a 19 year-old Black, African American lesbian. I knew I was going to live the lifestyle of a lesbian when I was seven years old. It was nothing more than an elementary crush, but anyway I am a stud because I love feminine women. I am nicely built and athletic. I dress like "a preppy white boy.""
Meanz (20-years old)	"I am a 20-year-old African American bisexual. My image depends on the people around and what side they bring out of me. I consider myself as girly, boyish, calm, sexy, quiet, having a hard exterior, and attitude. One day I hope to become a chef."
Jordan (19-years old)	"I am a light-skinned, bi-racial with long dark hair, my tongue and belly is pierced, has many tattoos, and slanted eyes. I am very opinionated and does not make friends easily. I am a girly girl (femme) and wears whatever is cute and appealing to the eye. I think a lot about things and over analyze everything. I am a sophomore at a community college and would like to be a teacher one day."
Thee (19-years old)	"I am an 19 year-old Black, Jamaican transperson in the making. I am athletic, but not an athlete. I dress in men's clothes with a preppy style. I work in a pizzeria as a cashier, delivery boy, and pizza maker. I am a sophomore at a public university. People tell me that I am pretty or cute and has nice skin. I hope to manage a hotel or a restaurant."

Introduction.

I could not foresee the complex issues that would ultimately influence this research study. Assembling a group of eight African American LBT girls on a weekly basis to participate in the activities and literacy practices of the book club proved challenging. I tackled not only the literacy issues, which included motivation, reading, and writing skills, and experience with a book club that often influenced the ways the girls interacted with the texts, but I also observed the social issues that influenced the ways the girls positioned themselves within various social communities (urban setting vs. suburban setting). The African American girls in the study were

not only dealing with the ideologies of race, as would be the case of all African American girls, but that they were also confronted by social constructions of identity. The twelve-week research process was in itself exhilarating and at times very daunting because of the girls' transportation and food needs. Early on Lucky told me "the girls never thought you could pull this [the study] off." I thought to myself. I never did either.

The silence of several of the girls during the first few sessions of the book club was distressing for me. It was difficult for some of the girls to find their way into the reading, writing, and the discussion groups. Several of the girls silenced the others' participation by bullying, policing, and laughing uncontrollably during discussions. As I struggled with my own insecurities of "making" this book club work, I was reminded of the ideas that reading and writing are both discursive processes and making their own way into this "foreign" literacy setting would differ according to the girls' maturity, literacy abilities, comfort levels, and social positioning in the group. Lewis (1993) posits, "our moments of experience transform our ways of seeing not only what is to follow, but as well what has gone before" (p.15). In a very short period, I was asking the girls to reconsider their thinking about new ways of experiencing literacy.

The findings of this study support a view of critical literacy as the ability of African American LBT adolescents to identify issues of personal significance, to confront these issues, and to create alternative ways or perceptions of understanding them. To achieve this self-transformation, the girls' recursively moved through the three major tenets of critical literacy: construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. The girls used conversations about the characters and events from each novel to analyze how their own everyday experiences constructed their identities as African American LBT girls. The first novel *London Reign* read by

the girls was the perfect story to initiate the momentum of this discourse community because the characters reflected the feelings of vulnerability, exposure, and uncertainty among the girls. Below, I present major themes, which emerged from the findings for each of the girls. These themes triangulated across the discussion groups, writer's notebook, collage workbooks, and individual interviews. Multiliteracies acted as tools for each of the girls to critically revise and analyze new ideas and apply it to their own life. The girls understanding of the dimensionally of each of the tools enabled them to recast the meaning from their written language to another sign system such as a collage or an identity mask (Cowan & Albers, 2006).

I begin by describing Lucky's construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction as a stud as she moved through the literacy experiences of the book club. It was the moving through these phases that allowed Lucky's stud identity to transform as she participated in her social worlds and in the worlds portrayed in the novels *London Reign* and *The Coldest Winter Ever.*

Lucky.

Lucky's construction as a stud.

"That's the type of attitude I got, and like, it ain't a good thing to be that way."
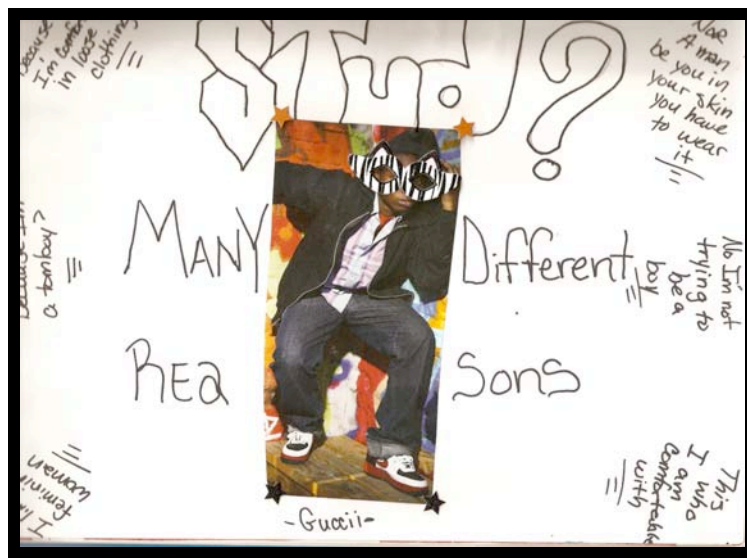
Figure 9: Lucky's collage

As I organized my materials and rechecked the recorders to begin the first book club (March 22, 2010) on a dreary cool day, I noticed each of the girls spent a significant amount of time sizing up the setting and each other. I could have easily compared the felt tension to an old western shoot out because each of the girls was waiting for the next to make the first move. Fortunately, my assistant made the first move," We have one question. In two weeks, it is Easter. What do you want to do for Easter?" A few minutes passed when Lucky, sitting at the upper-right side of the tables, mumbled gruffly, "We want an Easter Egg Hunt, decorate baskets." My assistant and I paused and looked at each other. We both were surprised that this response came from Lucky. To understand the irony, Lucky identified as a "stud" not an image usually associated with hunting for Easter eggs and decorating cute baskets. The cultural model of a stud as defined by Lucky is a female who wears masculine clothes such as men's baggy pants, oversized shirts, and acts emotionally detached, with a "hard" (tough) image. Lucky constructed her stud swagger (persona) dressed in oversized men's Roca wear jeans, Polo boots and a baseball hat. It was common for Lucky to adorn herself with a giant, silver "GG" neck chain, flashy oversized men's watches and a hat with either double "GG" (*Gucci*) or a Superman emblem on it.

During the first book club session (March 22, 2010), Lucky replicated the voice of authority she had with Shortie, Treasure, Omar, and Erika (friends that she considered as family or "fem" as she referred to them) in her personal life. Lucky positioned herself in the upper section of the tables, which was closest to the windows, door, and food. In this spot, she could easily see all the girls and was privy to the majority of the girls' talk. Lucky policed the girls with verbal interruptions such as "I do need cigarettes," laughing, and downtalking (criticisms). Lakoff's (1973) description of strategies of silencing in men's interaction with women were the

same strategies Lucky used to maintain her power within the book group including interruptions, control of discourse topics, being nonresponsive, and controlling discursive meaning. Lakoff explains these strategies often take place in a public setting to silence women and make them invisible in the social interaction.

Initially, Lucky used oppressive comments to position the girls in the book group. For example, if the girls were reluctant to share during group discussions, Lucky sharply prompted the girls with "You'll some bitches, I swear you bitches better share" or sarcastically remarked to the girls with, "You are sounding intelligent." A few times when a girl wanted to share her ideas to the group, Lucky would talk over her and silence the girl, as heard in this exchange between Lucky and Meanz discussing how many days are in a year for going to church.

> Lucky: One time out of 300 and some days-
> Meanz: "65"
> Lucky: So, you trying to be smart? Just because you just went to Craft College and I went to City Community College. So you want us to feel good by you going to Craft College (assumed a better college)...?
> (Laughter from group)
> Meanz: You know what? That's it, right there. That's it.

Lucky seemed to make the deepest connections between her life and London's life, the protagonist from the novel *London Reign*. Each conformed to the cultural models of what constituted a young stud in an urban, African American GLBT community. Similar to Lucky, London, wore white tank tops, oversized t-shirts, Timberland construction boots, a black flight jacket and a classic Red Sox baseball cap (2007). In some ways, Lucky began to live vicariously through London. This exchange with Meanz is one example of how Lucky positioned herself and performed as a stud during the book club. She quickly imagined and constructed an idealized stud image with the protagonist, London. Lucky said (session 2, April 4, 2010), "I thought of her as a best friend and waited to see how London would resolve the same issues I struggle with in

her own life because we are studs." In terms of romantic relationships both London and Lucky walked precariously between acting "hard" and opening up their hearts to someone. Lucky said, "I'm very much like London because we both describe are girlfriends as "bitches" and talk about sex a lot." Both Lucky and London had a reason for being a stud. Lucky explained her gendered practices of masculine assertiveness came from her grandfather:

> I think it all stems from my granddaddy, because my granddaddy, he was a very protective person, like over all his grandkids, over his kids. So with us, we got that same type of attitude, like 'what's mine is mine, and bitch you ain't going nowhere.' That's the type of attitude I got, and like, it ain't a good thing to be that way, but it's in my blood.

Similarly, London acknowledged her "negative shit" came from her father such as his temper and treating women as sex objects (2009, p.14). These cultural models of masculine assertiveness and discourse served Lucky for understanding her sexual and gendered identities.

Lucky said she disliked hearing certain remarks from others such as "just be a man because that's what you are anyway." She believed others made this remark because they think she is "dumb." This sense that others thought of her as dumb recurred later when she discussed her identity mask and how adults assume she is "dumb." Lucky shared her perspective with the book club (session 2, April 4, 2010) "I know that I'm a girl and I'm not trying to be a man, so what's the point of me putting on a show like I am a man? I mean it's bad enough that others think we are men." Lucky implied that being a stud was not acting like a man as she began to understand the reductive nature of a label such as stud.

Lucky spoke to societal pressures, which she felt limited, her voice because of her sexual and gender identity. Lucky explained, "You have to be a certain way and dress a certain way to get a job and looking like a stud ain't it. They ain't accepting you how you are" or "I feel like if you tell someone who you are and they still put you in the category that would piss me off." Lucky used her analysis of the characters to begin to think of extending the limitations of the

cultural model of a stud. For example, London's stud appearance created conflict with her father because he did not want his daughter to "act" like a "nigga [male]." It was important to her to understand the contradiction between masculine discourse and feminine discourse associated with her understanding of stud.

Throughout the book club, Lucky created significant text-to-self connections to the novels. I taught the girls how to use Stem Connections (Sprague, Keeling, 2007) (see Appendix N) or prompts such as *I felt like that character when*… and *If I were that character*, to help them to personally connect with the characters or an idea from the novels. The stem connection, *An experience I have had like that*...prompted Lucky to respond to several incidents in the first few chapters of the novel, *London Reign* which fostered rich group discussions among the girls including feeling different and the mistrust of romantic partners.

Session 2 began with Lucky explaining to the group in a somewhat matter of the fact way "a lot of things happened (in the novel), and some that I can relate to, And just after Monday, there was a lot of pain that happened…" (with Lucky and London, the character). Lucky used the stem connection, *An experience I have had like that*...to make a text-to-self connection between her mom throwing her our of the house this past week and a verbal and physical confrontation between London and her drunken father. London's father constantly abuses her and her mother because London "talks, acts, dresses, and looks like some nigga off the streets" (2007, p. 43). This argument results in London's mother telling her to leave the house. London confronts her mother "What? You kicking me out? You picking that nigga over your own flesh and blood? Your first born, ma? You just kicking me out like that? I begin to cry" (p.45). Lucky explained to the group she related to London's family argument because her mom threw her out of the house after arguments because, as a stud, she said, "I feel I have to protect my mother when my brother

is disrespecting her. And when (my mother) is hurt, I feel like it's time to kill–it's time to hunt–because that's the protective person in me" (group discussion, April 1, 2010). Lucky explained further "eventually my brother and I would start arguing and my mom would side with him and throw me out of the house." She often found herself "in the middle of arguments all the time." As did London, Lucky felt betrayed by her mother. She wrote, "I would end up feeling stupid in the end because it made me feel like she was jumping to my brother's defense, when I was the one who was defending her" (writer's notebook, April 5, 2010). In addition, Lucky decorated a page in her collage workbook with a blue crayon and gold sparked glue and wrote the following piece to explain how it feels "to feel out of place" (April 9, 2010).

> **"*To feel out of place is an empty feeling*"**
> To feel out of place is an empty feeling. You feel alone like your in one room with no one to converse with, like a young child. Whose in school only to come home and have no one to play with. Like an elderly, couple who loses their mate. Also like an lesbian with no to come out to or whose unaccepted. Maybe this is how London feels, out of place, no one to understand her, being unlike by her own father, or having to feel likes she's in a competition with her younger sibling. After being molded into a tomboy then singled out by her own flesh and blood, also being put out by her mother and the choice was for her to leave over her drunken abusive father. Out of place is never a nice place to be.

Lucky's idea of "feeling out of place" was a powerful text-to-self connection comparing herself to London because they both felt unaccepted by family members because as studs their behavior and appearance do not conform to the social norm of femininity and at times demonstrate masculine behaviors such as fighting and verbal confrontations. London understood she was not truly accepted by her family because she does not "act" according to the expectation of her father, London said, "But mainly the fact that *shit* 'round' the house *aing*t how my father wants it to be, and how I don't "act" the way he wants me to "act" (2007, p. 28).

Lucky's image (see Figure 10) accompanying the writing piece "To feel out of place is an empty feeling" reflected the dichotomy of a strong clenched fist around a soft petal rose. Lucky

explained during a group discussion (session 6, May 9, 2010) the visible conflict between the two images (soft rose and the bloody thorns) represented the harm and pain she has felt in family and romantic relationships. She said, "Every rose has its thorns." And it just means that everything that's beautiful can be hurt. You know what I'm saying? A rose is vey beautiful but if you touch it with its thorns, it can really hurt you."

Figure 10: Lucky's image *Rose can be healed*

The image and Lucky's explanation reflected a gradual shift in her thinking of the dichotomy of a hard persona (stud/masculine) coupled with a soft persona (femme/femininity). She began to articulate the "ascribed boundaries" (expectations of a stud, family) in her life, which have limited the development of her authentic sense of self or voice (Sutherland, 2005).

There were many group discussions among the girls about lacking a voice with family, friends, and partners because each of the female protagonists in the novels struggled to find their voice as young women. Each of the protagonists from the novels, London and Winter were voiceless in family situations, personal relationships and with their own identity. This topic often created tension and discomfort among the girls, so I incorporated the idea of "having a voice" in many different activities including writing. I presented the following writing invitation to the

group during session two. Discuss one situation when you felt you had a voice and one situation when you felt you did not have a voice. Lucky wrote (March 26, 2010) and shared her feelings about not having a voice with her mother, her brother, and society.

"I feel like sometime being a teenager period I don't have a voice. I feel like with my mom I don't have a voice, because no matter what I'm going to say, she's going to think she's right because she's the mom". Lucky not only expressed her vulnerability with her family but also with romantic love; more than once Lucky compared "her heart" to London's heart because both were vulnerable to love and intimacy. London tells the reader how she feels about Lexi (London's girlfriend), "I do kinda want to see where this will go if I let it. But, the idea of loving someone, scares me" (2007, p. 38). Lucky's text-to-self connections with London led her to create and share this image with the group about the vulnerability of love.

Should I let thy Heart Love?

Figure 11: Lucky's *Image I let thy heart love*

Candice: Lucky, do you want to share your page (from collage workbook)
Lucky: Yeah, it's called should "I let my heart love?"
Candice: What do you mean by that?
Lucky: Should I let myself get hurt? Should I let my heart be open to somebody? Should I put trust in somebody?

Lucky elaborated further by connecting her feelings to the character's feelings, "My girlfriend feels like Lexi, (one of London's girlfriends) and I feel like London." My partner wants me to express myself more and like that but sometimes I just don't know how to do that because of past experiences." Lucky felt her past relationships caused "her heart to have a shield around it." She expressed her vulnerability of sharing her feelings in several images in her collage workbook.

Figure 12: Lucky's Images

"People use x-ray vision to see my heart"   "People always trying to see thorough my heart"

As a stud, Lucky shared with the group (session 2, April 4, 2010) that she often "caught hell" by others in the LBT community if she was demonstrative with her feelings. This outward disapproval by the LBT community caused her "to be scared to show her feelings because others would put her down." Lucky explained studs in the community have to "be hard" and pretend "not to give a fuck" to protect their emotions and themselves from being hurt by others.

Lucky's deconstruction as a stud.

"This is what people expect of me."

At the halfway mark of the study, four of the girls began reading the novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever.* It was the decision of the majority of the girls to divide the group into two groups. One group would read several short books from the *Bulford High* series and the other group of girls would read *The Coldest Winter Ever*. It is a coming-of-age story about Winter Santiaga, the oldest daughter of a successful drug dealer. However, when the father moves his family from the projects to a mansion on Long Island, Winter's life begins to come apart. Her beautiful mother is shot, her father goes to prison, and the government seizes the family's possessions.

I reintroduced the critical literacy strategy using the expressions and suppression framework **(**see Figure 13) used in session 4 with the new novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*. The purpose of the framework is to analyze a novel's character based on physical/emotional changes, societal expectations and influence of adults etc. The strategy helped the girls to identify with the characters in *The Coldest Winter Ever* because a less direct level of congruency (Beach et al., 2008) existed between the girls and Winter, including sexual orientation, social economic status, and family dynamics. Although the girls initially believed, they had nothing in common with Winter because she was rich and the daughter of a drug dealer, this critical literacy strategy helped the girls understand that Winter had similar influences in her life, such as issues with her parents, friends, and romantic partners. As described below, after the activity, the girls were apt not to categorize Winter as simply a "rich bitch", "a hoe", or "a fake" (as described by the girls).

Figure 13: Expressions and suppression framework
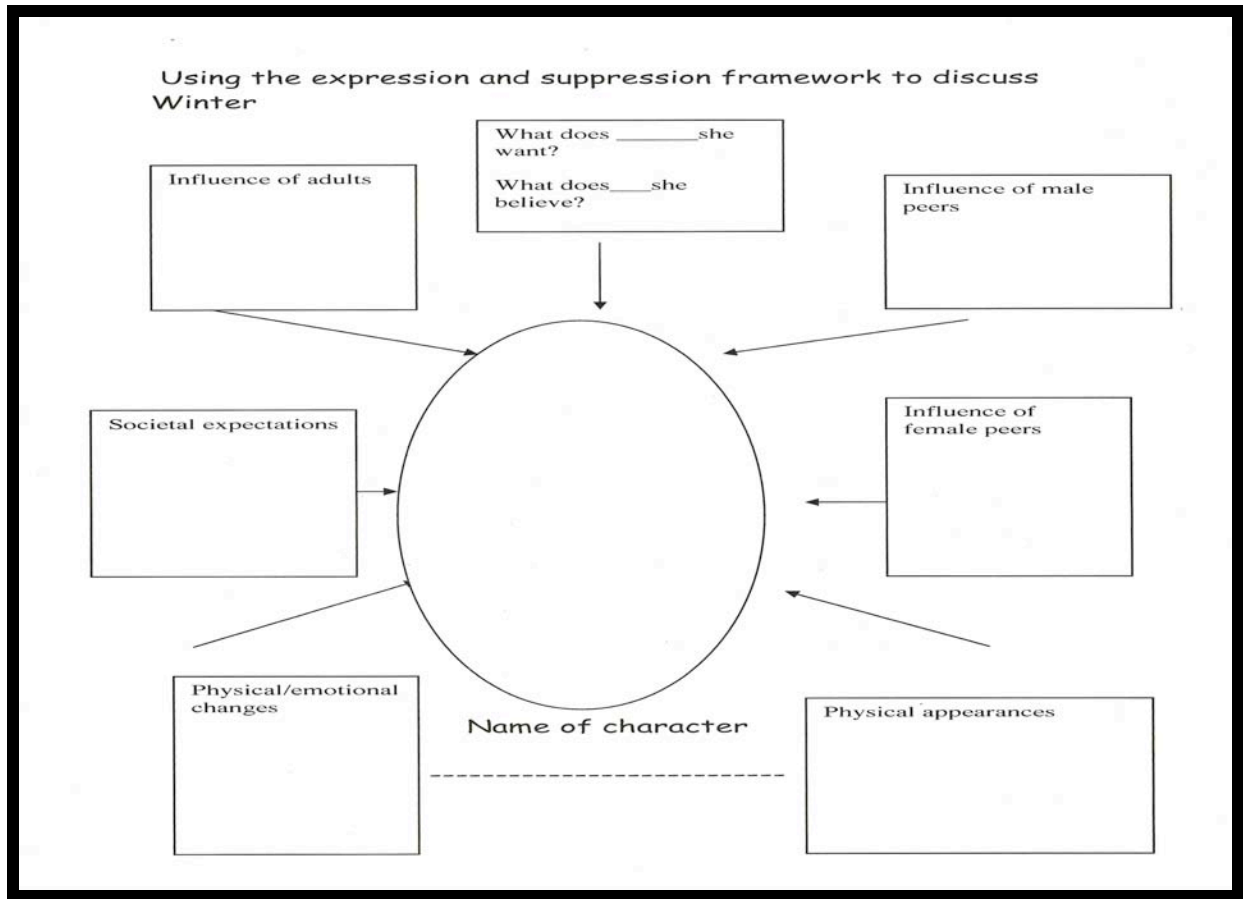
The girls' compared and contrasted London and Winter's voices using the above critical literacy strategy **(**see Figure 13). For example, Lucky explained the emotional changes between the characters with this analogy. "Because she [Winter] was born with a silver spoon in her mouth and felt like everything was suppose to be handed to her" while "London basically had a plastic spoon in her mouth and moved onto a silver spoon." The group discussion helped the girls to create an altered self-image illustrating a situation when they felt they either had a voice or did not have a voice. By using different magazine pictures, the girls created an altered self-image. Lucky stood in front of the book group with a smirk on her face holding her collage workbook in one hand and holding up her saggy, black jeans with the other. Lucky proudly presented this altered image of herself.

Figure 14: Lucky's altered mage

"The swirls are a woman's body. This is what my mom and other people think a woman is. This is what people expect of me, to be actually this. Besides this, because this is what I'm not and this is the more masculine figure, the Transformer. I like he has a wrench in his hand and stuff like that. I wouldn't mind working with cars myself. You see all the muscles and stuff are ripped. But you see there's muscle and the muscle man. The guy in the corner is because I dress like that sometime. Also he's standing like this, like I stand alone. Meaning he's different. Look how he dress. He be different if he wanted to. And he wouldn't care. And the long legs, I already go this way."

The themes from *London Reign* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* (discussed in the next paragraphs) and a visit to the city museum, pushed Lucky's thinking outside the categories) of what constituted a stud. For session eight, the girls visited a museum to see authentic Asian, African, and Latin masks before creating their own identity mask. Before the visit to the museum, the group perused a wide selection of books featuring masks from all over the world. As a group, we discussed the elements of design of some of the masks in terms of color and shape to express emotions and purpose.

As I mentioned above, because one group wanted to read a shorter book instead of *The Coldest Winter Ever* (over 300 pages), I created two reading groups to accommodate the reading needs and interests of the girls. As one reading group was milling around the museum's halls of African, Asian, Latin, and primitive art, Lucky took the role of the "director," facilitating her reading group in an empty hallway of the museum so, that they had their own space away from the Friday night crowd.

As Lucky joined the group on the cold tile floor she exhibited excitement over an African piece entitled, *Death is but a Mere Transition,* she explained to the girls that upon death a spirit leaves a person's body. The image of the African mask and Lucky's connections to the character, Winter, became the topic of conversation beginning with her mask ideas. Lucky confronted the cultural model of a stud as being emotionally detached ("without spirit"), mean, cold, and inaccessible to others. Lucky highlighted some ideas for her identity mask. As she explained,

> So with my mask this side is going to be a woman, and this side is basically going to be a man's face. And like in African or Egyptian writing, I'm going to have my name going across her. I'm going to have the nose spread a little wider, wired, to say there's a thin line between both parts. And I'm going to call it "Without Spirit." The eyes are going to be all like totally black. You can't see through them. And I said basically I was going to put some wire on his lips, or on this side, the stud side of the lips, and nothing on this side of the lips but lipstick because I feel like the woman side of me is more outspoken than actually the stud side. With the eyes being black out, I said I was just going to put a real, real, real dark piece of paper under them so it can represent that the body is without a spirit. And also it would block the people trying to see the difference on each side of me. Yes, I feel sometime, that I emotionally I am "without spirit. Some of the characters in the books are without spirit. I have two sides like Winter had two sides. Winter is fake to me. Behind my eyes, I would have my eyes, very, very low. Or I think I would probably drew or had a picture of my face over it with these on, so nobody could see through them just like people could not see the real Winter. I am mean and cold like Winter.

Later in the session, Lucky shared one of her longest written narratives. The narrative reflected her willingness to begin to answer her own questions about her identity. She wrote this entry the night before the group.

> **Lucky tells all**
>
> Why are you so selfish sometimes
> I ask why are you so mean,
> How come you can't give anyone your all
> Why do you hardly show emotions
> Why don't you let anyone care for you
> Well all these questions
> Im not the only person who ask me these questions,
> Shit
> I get em from the love of my life
> And the people Im around

but I search and search for my answer
Is it because I lost a big part of me in 06's
Is that when the personality and attitude change,
or
Is it when my uncle tried his best to tell me,
To be such a young girl
Im developed like a woman and that he wanted to show me what woman get
Was it the day my father walked out
And I realized
He wasn't there,
I don't know what turned my heart so cold
But sometimes I wished I had the warmth back
Maybe then I wouldn't be such a hard ass
Maybe everything wouldn't be the majority of me, myself, and I
Maybe peoples attitudes, mouth, funny actions wouldn't bother me as much
(writer's notebook, May 14, 2010)

Lucky's reconstruction as a stud.

"There are situations when it is time to stand up for your identity."

Lucky constructed her stud identity through a discourse of toughness, lack of emotions, and being opinionated. She used this discourse to relate to her peers, family, and partners. She struggled with balancing her masculine stud image with the girly version (as described by Lucky) because it caused discord in her relationships with others as well as herself. These feelings of tension led her to use both novels, *London Reign* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* to dismantle the ascribed attributes, which positioned her as a stud and a woman. Her final artifact of the study, the identity mask, highlighted her personal transformation and her sense of agency.

Figure 15: Lucky's identity mask

The final interview (June 17, 2010) with Lucky took place in a bookstore connected to the city's university. There were not any adult chairs in the quiet area, so Lucky and I squeezed into wooden children's chairs situated around a table. Lucky took the framed mask in her hands and said, "the mask is a keepsake symbol for imaging myself in different roles and seeing other possibilities in life." The mask is also a reminder to her that other people's opinions count. That people can agree to disagree about issues.

Lucky said the idea for the wired mouth came from the proverb, "Silence is Golden."

> I wired the mouth shut because it is better to stay quiet sometimes than to speak. There are situations when it is time to stand up for your identity or stand up for something that you believe in. I believe you should say what you feel at any time, but there are also times that you cannot be in control of the situation. For example, if I had a job and a boss, I would have to listen to the boss because I am not in control of the situation. The broken glass symbolizes the breaking of silence. The mask is gold to represent royalty and it is worth a lot of money like me.
>
> The mask sits on the bottom of the box and turns whichever way it turns because "my head is not on straight at times." My eyes wired shut cannot see the endangerment of children, failure and homeless people giving up on life. I do not want to see pain; I do not want to see none of that. I just want to see happiness and success. My brain has many layers of colors because it symbolizes the different ideas I have for the future. I swirled the paint to mean I could accomplish anything if I put my mind to it. My heart follows my mind, and other times my mind is rude. My heart can stop me, like what if this business is not good. My mind is rude because it pushes my heart out of the way. The dark colors of the crown represent my masculine side, and the gold is more feminine, showing my feminine side.
>
> Lucky concluded, "This is my baby, basically I feel in love with my box."

Meanz.

Construction as a princess (a symbol of an ideal woman and beauty).

"You see, you can't be that, because you just got tattoos everywhere."

Meanz was not one of the original five girls that I met while co-facilitating the *Real Talk* girls' group at The Pride House. Therefore, I was surprised when I was waiting to take the girls to the research site and Omar poked her head in the window of my Mini Cooper, and asked if her friend, Meanz, could join the study. I said, "Sure, if we can fit her into the car." I did not know it then but Meanz, the quiet girl squished into the car, would turn out to be one of the most complex participants of the study.

I began the first literacy group by inviting the girls to address the following prompts in their writers' notebooks.

Private journal writing
(Session one, March 22, 2010)

> This is your time to self-reflect about what you believe and value but also how you express your beliefs and values to others.
>
> **Need help getting started? Try these writing prompts.**
> Who am I?
> What do I believe?
> What do I value?
> Do I express my beliefs and values to other people? If so, how?
> Can you recall a situation when other people stifled your beliefs and values? If so, how?
>
> On the top of your page: Write your pseudonym and session one.

The purpose of the writing invitation was to set the stage for the girls to think about writing as a social act to communicate their experiences (Bruce, 2003). After I explained the directions for the journal entry, six of the girls stood up and bolted out of the office room to sit in the car of one of the girls to complete the task. Omar and Meanz stayed in the room with my assistant and me. Omar sat at the big table while Meanz situated herself in the "art space" area.

Twenty minutes later, all three of us noticed that Meanz was crying, as she was writing in her journal. I paused a few minutes before I asked Meanz if there was a problem. After several attempts to speak without crying, she said, "I do not know who I am." The three of us sat dumbfounded until Omar got up from her chair and gave Meanz a big hug. She told us she did not feel comfortable in either the heterosexual or the homosexual communities because she was a bisexual. Meanz struggled to make sense of the disparate voices of being a "princess" (a symbol of an ideal woman, which included not having tattoos and her attraction to females. Meanz's struggle to understand herself was apparent during the first group discussion (March 22, 2010), which occurred when Meanz compared herself to London because she [London] hid her female identity from others by dressing in masculine clothes and performing as a male. Her written response to the stated prompts stated in the above paragraph incited her oral response.

> Meanz: But I'm not going to act that way towards Ericka (another participant) because she doesn't know me, that side of me. Because my identity changes with different people
> Jordan: Why don't you just combine them all and just be you?
> Meanz: Because –I don't know. Because I don't know who I am

This conversation between Meanz and Jordan explicitly revealed her personal conflict of understanding the connection and interaction of her polyphonic/multiple identities. I often thought of Meanz as a chameleon adapting her identity, appearance, and attitude based on what others expected her to be. It was common for Meanz to fluctuate between a feminine appearance with short skirts and heels to a masculine appearance of baggy pants and oversized hoodies. In the next excerpt, Meanz used her image poster to explain the purpose behind her different social performances (session 3, April 6, 2010). Each of the girls' visually represented who they are using words, pictures from magazines, and art material such as ribbon and cardboard letters. Meanz explains,

> Well, for instance, when I go to school, I have a "I don't give a crap attitude, so I dress in all baggy clothes so nobody want to talk to me, and I put a hair on with my hair back. I wear black to hide my emotions and to protect my body. But then I go around Omar (her girlfriend) and I be like, oh my God, I want to be girlie and I want to do this and that.

Her explanation of her image poster to the group supported my chameleon analogy

Meanz drew an oval with her name in the middle and wrote these self-identifiers around the

shape of the oval:

> Everyone around me influence my image: family, friends, mates
> My sexy side I go to my sexy image when I'm covering up sensitive side
> Some people bring out the bitch in me
> Some people bring out the hard side in me
> In front of the camera, my image is an "I'am a star"
> My image depends on the people around and what side they bring out of me
> I have two sides
> Image is just for the eye. I wear what people think I should wear
> My image changes everyday.
> My image is like I walk to my own beat, so I dress with my emotions
> Attitude
> Sexy
> Lesbian
> Straight
> Boyish (comfortable)
> Some people bring out the girly side in me
> Some people bring out the sexual side of me

The purpose of the poster was to initiate a group discussion on the girls' self-identities

and outside influences such as peers, community, and society. Meanz's poster reflected her

construction of separate identities but at the same time contradicted her thinking, "I don't know

who I am" as heard in her conversation with Jordan. However, as I learned, she did not have a

difficult time listing characteristics of her image, but struggled with what Bahktin (1981) defines

as "double-voicing." That is, not taking on the authoritative voice of institutional discourses and

cultural models. This discourse does not exist in isolation but is always part of a greater whole.

Meanz struggled to construct a self outside the authoritative discourses of her family,

community, and society. She said, "I want to be different from what others thought of her but

that side of her has not come out, and she did not have the courage to take that step." Meanz explained (interview, April 12, 2010), how some her contradictions resulted from the social performances of beauty and femininity seen in the media. She shared a recent conversation she had with her mom: "Me and my mother was watching TV and I guess it was these Barbie dolls or whatever the fuck you want to call them, on the TV. [laughs] They had no tattoos. And she (her mother) was like, "You see, you can't be that, because you just got tattoos everywhere." Meanz's mother's comments privileged her own interpretation of beauty, an interpretation that is supported by a cultural discourse of what constitutes beauty. This made Meanz "feel like I don't have a voice because I have tattoos. So my mother is trying to tell me I can't be beautiful because I have tattoos." The privileging of conventional beauty Meanz heard from her mom was also an important theme in the novel *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Winter's mom often told her "You got everything a girl could want, pretty hair, beautiful eyes, clothing, jewels" (1999, p, 39). She teaches Winter that as long as a woman is looking, dressing, and smiling the best, she is the best (p. 515). Both Winter and Meanz felt they could not live up to their respective mothers' expectations of beauty and femininity. Meanz extended this text-to-self connection to a two-page collage. The symbols used in the collage represented idealized beauty and womanhood.

Both Winter and Meanz felt they could not live up to their respective mothers' expectations of beauty and femininity. Meanz extended this text-to-self connection to a two-page collage. The symbols used in the collage represented what she thought was idealized beauty and womanhood.

Figure 16: Meanz' princess collage

She began with "When I was three years, I told my momma I wanted to be a princess (*jeweled crown*) but then I got tattoos and I started having sex with (*girls)*, So I feel as if that my dream *(bird stand)* is gone, because I can't be a princess if I'm gay. The **(***mic)* is me voicing that I want to be a princess. It's me announcing that I want to be a princess without people judging me. You can't be a princess because you got this and this and this and this.

"I guess a princess to me is a person who has lots of things and who feels special, who wears pretty **(***dresses)* all the time. Who cooks. Almost like a housewife type of thing." Meanz's associated being a princess with being heterosexual and conforming to cultural norms of female beauty.

> I think that what it means if I feel like I get married to a female, that it would not be what my parents want. It would not be the dream wedding everyone would have envisioned. A wedding with a female, I just feel like everything would be dead. All the (*flowers)* would be dead and nobody walking me down the aisle. And we'll be wearing all black and it would just be depressing.

This awareness on the part of Meanz that she may not meet these idealized expectations did not come without consequences. She admitted, "[she] felt yucky. Like I know I'm gay, but I still feel like am I dating a female for real? That's how I feel. Like I'm judging myself a lot." Meanz said, "I indulge in cigarettes, tattoos, drinking, and eating to avoid cutting." She understood these self-harming behaviors did nothing to uphold a princess image. Rich & Evans (2010) explain these behaviors as not an erasure of self on the part of Meanz but a re-voicing of

her subjectivities and experiences. She is noticed. Meanz visually represented her pain and hurt in several collages. She explained each of her artifacts in detail during her second interview with me. I asked Meanz to tell me about each artifact.

Figure 17: Meanz' collage *Fist Full of Tears*
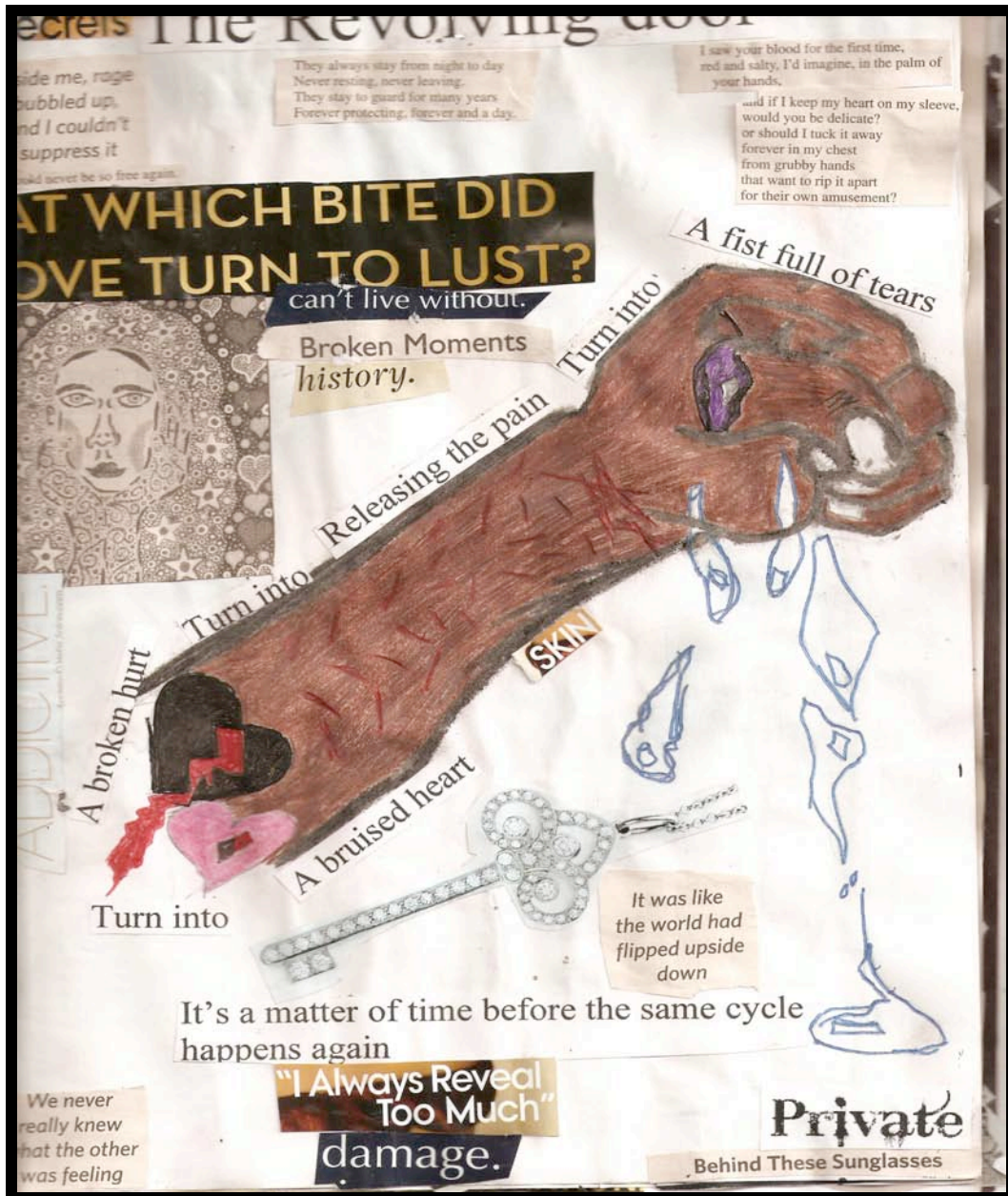
Figure 18: Meanz' collage *Every Rose has its Thorn*
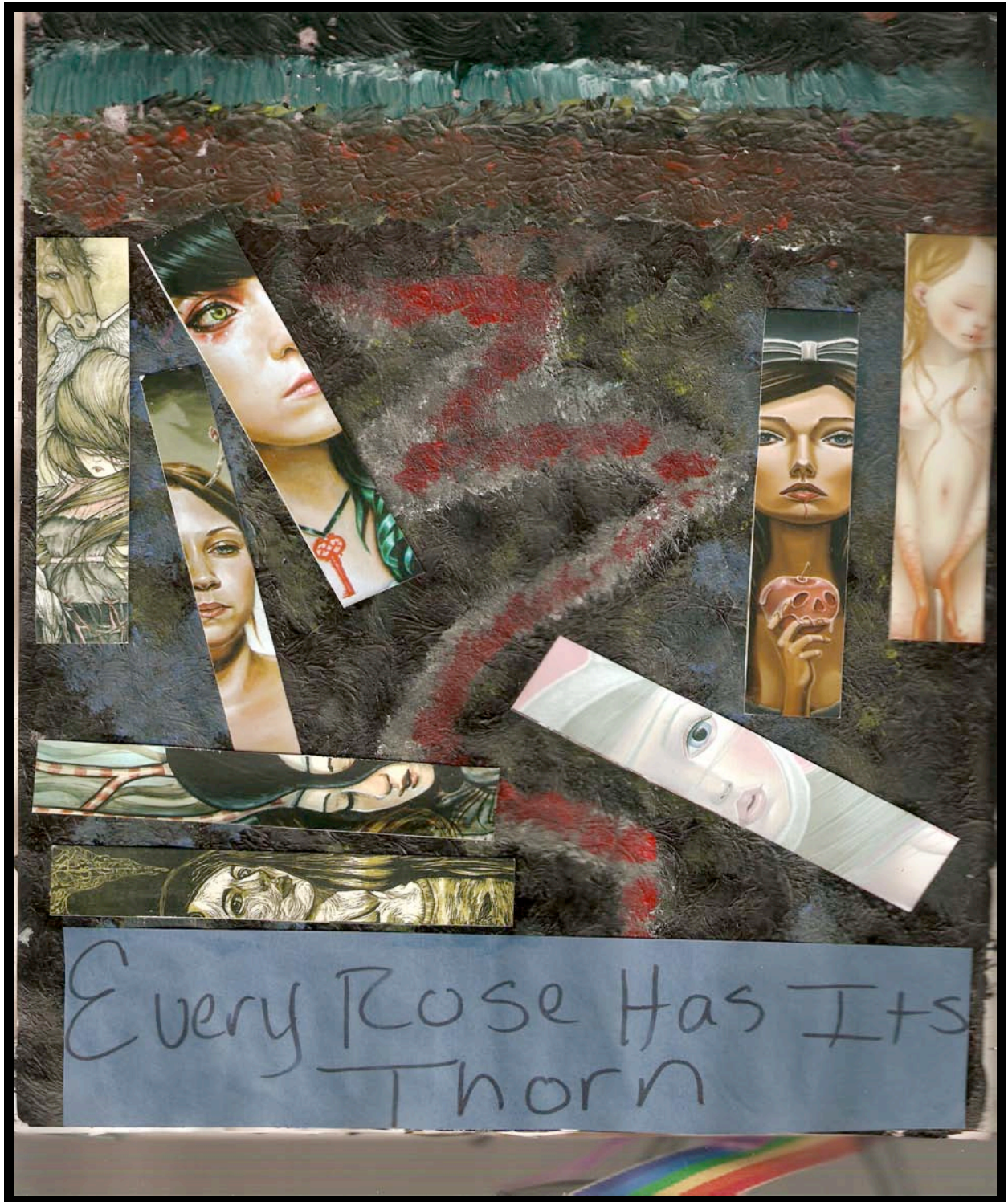
Figure 19: Meanz' collage *Mask Collage*
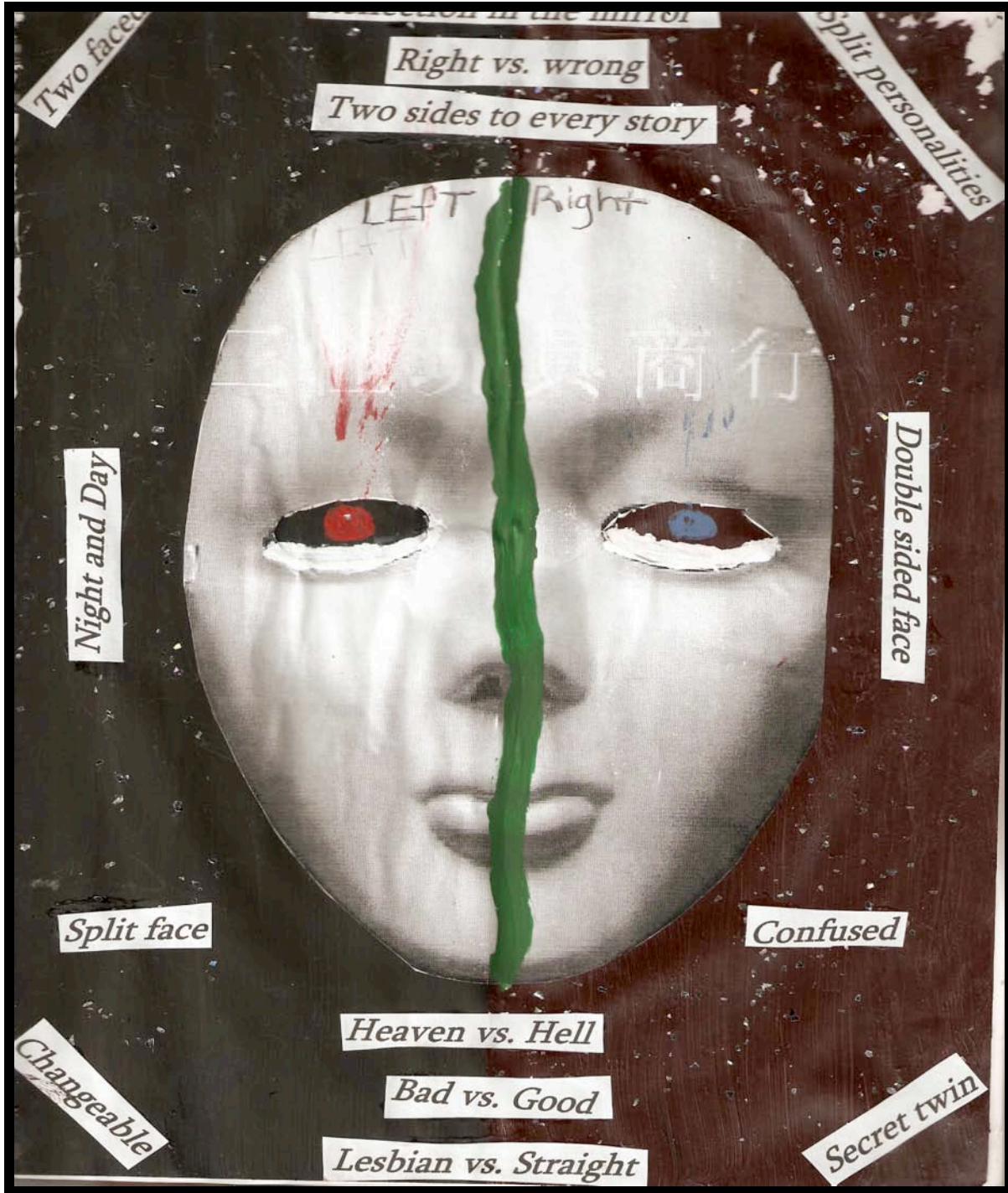
Figure 17: "I heard a song that's called 'A Fool is Full of Tears.' And it just inspired this page.

This is just the process I saw myself going through when I cut myself. I cried first and it turned

into me cutting myself, then it turned into a broken heart, then it turned into a bruised heart"

Figure 18: "Every rose has its thorns. It has three different females that are going through different types of emotions and the background is dark and deep and the emotion is chaotic. They live in the world. That's why their so full of pain. If you're not living in the world, you're not going through much pain."

Figure 19: "The meaning of the red eye and the green line separating the mask into two parts. The line is the separator between the green and the red. It's how all the cutters stand out on the page. If I could tell the cutter something, I would tell her to suck it up because I do it because I love her. That's what I would say. Meaning that I cut you and abuse you because I love you."

Deconstruction of the princess.

"I wanna to fit in but something in me doesn't want to fit in."

> I had a major setback. It was two years since I did this and I feel like a failure. I was so proud of myself that I got through this horrible problem but I guess I didn't. I cut myself. Yes, it felt good when I was doing it. No, it didn't feel good after the damage was done. ~Deep Breath~ Sometimes I wonder do I cut myself for attention but I don't think so because I feel like pain and sadness build up in my heart and make me block out issues and go back to my original solutions to all my problems.

Meanz wrote this entry in her writer's notebook (April 30, 2010). The inner conflict which appeared in Meanz's writing and the above collages (Figures 14-16) illuminated her struggle to find a space for herself in the world and to explore the implications of her choices. She stated, "I have learned to talk around my feelings to make it harder for people to hurt me. Meanz further explained this inner conflict during an interview (April 12, 2010). I asked her to explain the images of her face on the glass ball (according to her the glass ball was a mirror).

> Ok, right now, I don't feel the way I'm thinking I look. I don't know. I just can't explain it. If I'm looking in the mirror, I see someone I don't see when I'm not looking in the mirror. I see a totally different person. I wanna to fit in but something in me doesn't want to fit in. So I'm trying to find myself in the mirror. I look in the mirror 24/7 to see the princess others see.

Meanz drew on this inner conflict to understand the cultural models and discourses, which have shaped her identity. She deconstructed the ideal of a princess using the character Winter, who was perceived as a princess by her father, mother, and other men. Meanz explained that Winter was not mature enough to know that others depicted her as nasty, a bitch, and spoiled. She said Winter was a "fake" that hid behind expensive clothes, jewelry, and sex. This connection was powerful to Meanz because she described herself in a similar way during her first interview, "When you don't know the true me, my nice side is my fake side. Yeah. When I'm real nice to you–'Hi, how are you?'–you don't see that attitude. I'm just being fake to you." After realizing this connection, Meanz said she was like Winter because both could look into a mirror and never see their true selves.

The metaphor of a mirror inspired Meanz to create this altered image using contrasting body parts such as a skinny arm vs. a muscular arm (session 5, April 18, 2010). She highlighted a few of the symbols in her collage:

Figure 20: Meanz' Image

> I used the contrasting images of arms, boots, and pants because I felt like an oddball. Everybody was just lesbians in the book club, and they talked about all of

> this, and I was just like… And I don't feel like a lesbian. Even though I said that, I don't feel like a lesbian. I can't sit here and say I'm a lesbian. Because I know if me and Omar (girlfriend) break up today, there's 9 times out of 10, I would be with a boy or a girl. That's what I said in my book. I said I feel like I'm playing both fields. One day I feel straight and another day I feel like a lesbian. With her. One day I feel like I'm dating a nigga (a man).
>
> The woman with her hand over her mouth is silenced and scared because I feel like I lost my childhood. I don't think I really remember having a childhood. Because I think I was trying to grow up a little too fast. I was trying to loose my virginity a little too fast.
>
> I used white girl images because I have always felt that way. That's why I said on my Facebook status I'm a white girl with an imperfect tan. I just don't consider myself a black person trying to show off. Or I don't want to be a stereotype black person.

Meanz's altered image demonstrated her self-questioning and a way to balance her individuality in a polyphonic way rather than give up one for the other. Over time, she had moved away from single word self-identifiers such as femme and straight to what she now considered an "incomplete whole."

As discussed earlier Meanz's ideal of a princess included a perfect wedding with a man. However, in her social world she had romantic feelings for a stud. She explained that her new relationship made her feel "like the gay world is kind of new to me. Even though I've been out for four years, it's very new. It's almost like I just walked in." Meanz's admitted, "being with a stud is something I will have to get use to because we will get the looks."

Meanz used the novel *London Reig*n to navigate the newness of her gay world. She shared with the group (session 2, April 4, 2010), "When I first opened the book and read London, it was in the beginning of my relationship, and London was like, I just have sex with females; I ain't really trying to settle down. I really thought that's how all studs thought. Exactly. And I was like, why do every stud think like this?" Meanz said she had preconceived ideas of a stud treating women as "sexual toys and eye candy," but the novel helped her "to understand the mentality of a stud almost." Meanz disclosed, "In the beginning I thought the relationship with

Omar was just going to be like the sexual relationship between the characters, London and Lexi. I thought I was going to be a quick thing and it was over with. And then Omar started catching feelings." Omar's feelings prompted Meanz to begin to make sense of the image of a stud as it pertained to her new relationship.

Meanz and I talked further about gender roles during her first interview because it was a prominent theme in the novel *London Reign* and she was concerned about her girlfriend's image as a stud.

> Candice: What do you think about the distinct roles in GLBT community?
> Meanz: It can be a bad thing to stick out too hard. Because when you stick out too hard, people start to analyze you and pick on you and try to change you to someone that you're not. But when you're too quiet, it makes you feel as if you're trying to hid yourself and you're ashamed of yourself. I think there's a middle ground. I think you should not be too flashy and try to get everybody. Just be neutral and be who you are and not try to go too far. I think it's unnecessary.
> Candice: Why?
> Meanz: Because when people say "I'm a stud," I think they're trying to put on the image of, "I don't want to be touched. I don't want to be a female." That's how I feel about it. And me and Omar (her girlfriend) was talking about it. We was talking about Thee (another participant in the study) I like the way Thee is, it's like she's kind of soft. I'm like, we're females, we're supposed to be soft. And I think having a hard exterior and "I'm a stud," and I'm supposed to be this way is unnecessary. You're making your image take over who you really are.
> Candice: Okay, what do you mean?
> Meanz: I don't really like that. And I like how Thee is. She reminds me of a female. She dresses the part of a male, but she's a female. Yeah. I'm like, she is a female. This is two females together. That's cool. I don't want to be with a stud so hard it reminds me…
> Candice: Of?
> Meanz: Yeah. Because I could be with a boy.

It was evident from conversation that Meanz had begun to understand the relationship between the performance of an image (stud or princess) and losing one's identity. Meanz's two comments, "I'm supposed to be this way is unnecessary" and "You're making your image take over who you really are" reflected her talking back to the expectations others had of her in different social worlds. She was extremely concerned with maintaining a sense of femaleness in

her relationship with a stud. Meanz attributed this concern to not being fake, "I want people to know that I am with a female."

Reconstruction of the princess.

"Like I never really knew the definition of myself."

Meanz described reading the novel *London Reign* to an assignment in school. "You're very interested in it because you don't know nothing about it. I don't know nothing about gayness. So I felt like, wow, do they really do that? Like it's a dream." She described the experience as being a dream on one hand "but explained that talking about the book with a group of lesbians confused everything for her. Because it's like I was going into real life." Up to this point, Meanz admitted, "I am not part of the gay world (interview, April 21, 2010).

After twelve weeks of participating in the book club (interview, June, 18, 2010) Meanz said that she got to know herself more because she read the books and talked about the issues that were important to her. She "learned that I didn't really know myself. Like I never really knew the definition of myself. I thought I knew myself, but I really didn't." Meanz felt she had the strongest voice in her collage workbook because she felt she could say anything. Meanz said, "[she] is more accepting of who [she] is despite what others think of her" She never knew how much a person could change in three months. Specifically, she "looks at life situations in a different light and has had people enter and exit her life that made her feel like a new person." She did not realize things about herself until she shared her thoughts with the group. For instance, Meanz explained, "I wear colors that affect my shyness. Meaning that I wear black because I don't want to be seen, and I didn't know that at first. But then I heard my voice and I was like, whoa, is that true?" She felt creating the identity poster told her a lot about herself. She said, "I really felt like, wow, this is who I am." She admitted, "I never thought I had it in me to

understand myself as a lesbian". In the same vain Meanz learned, she made herself inaccessible to others by wearing dark clothes and covering her face with a hoodie and used sex, alcohol, and cutting as leverage to gain access to people.

Meanz explained (interview, interview, June, 18, 2010) looking in the mirror was very different now, "I used to look in the mirror to figure out who I am but now I look in the mirror to say sometimes I want to be thinner, soft, smooth, sexier, prettier and less heavy. You know it's always easier to find flaws than the positive stuff. But w/every negative comment I give myself I try to give myself a positive comment." Meanz realized her "rainbow side "was missing before she met Omar. She honesty feels a part of the "rainbow world" now that "I'm with her (girlfriend) because she brings out a side of me I been hiding for a long time…She treats me like I always want to be treated A PRINCESS." "For once in my life I can appreciate my gay side outside of the sex." However, with this realization Meanz understood, "how cruel the world could be to the rainbow world. We live in a world where being gay is the next fashion, so everyone seems cool about it. But, in reality it's not easy for anyone to be apart of the rainbow community." Meanz admitted she did not feel she had a voice as a lesbian in school, at work, or with her parents. She only felt she had a voice with her girlfriend. Although Meanz learned more about her lesbian identity, the new relationship still frightened her because she had never dated a stud. She said,

> Oh yes, I still feel like a virgin. I feel yucky. I am not like Lexi who was okay being with London who looked and acted like a nigga, I am still struggling with dating a female that looks like a guy. Honestly, I can say I am still confused about my sexual orientation because I am currently with a female.
> Meanz laughed, "My girlfriend makes me feel like a lez one moment and a straight girl the next. Basically, I feel like I am dating a boy and a girl in one body. I wonder…is it a curse or a blessing?"

Despite the fact that Meanz did understand the consequences of "taking on" an image (stud, princess), she believed she had to have a certain "girly" image with her girlfriend. She explained, "When I act like her (girlfriend) she says I have my swag (persona). We act alike and that frightens her. When I'm more comfortable around her, I don't stay like a girl. I just put it back in and try to be girly. Like I have to have a specific image around her. She's the stud, and I am the fem."

Figure 21: Meanz' Identity Mask

Meanz's identity mask (June 18, 2010) reflected many of her uncertainties and the work she still had to do to become comfortable with her gender and sexual identity. For her final interview, she was dressed in black and a hoodie was partially blocking her eyes, Meanz explained the meaning and symbolism of her mask. I prompted her with the question, "What does your identity mask say about you?"

Well, I'm like a closeted lesbian. I'm scared to be a lesbian. The box is so colorful, so it's showing some side of my personality. As soon as you go into the box, it's very dark. Even the rainbow colors are dark. The whole mask underneath is black. I think of the eyes are hollow because there's nothing behind them. They have no emotion. I'm just a scared lesbian that's afraid to express herself. I am afraid to express myself because I don't think I'm a lesbian and sometimes I know I'm a lesbian. I'm struggling with that. Sometimes I don't think I like boys either. I don't know what it is. It's hard to explain. I do want to sleep with men. I just don't want to have a relationship with them. And I don't want to have sex with females. Not unless their strapping or eating me out besides that I don't see the point of it. I do sometimes but I really have to be into it. Sex doesn't come naturally. I have to convince myself to do it. When I cut myself, that's sex to me. Yeah, it brings relief. I get mad when I have sex, so I cut myself or do something else. I brought a deeper color into the rainbow for an effect. Having a bright rainbow means you accept being gay. I accept it. I don't accept it like that I wouldn't tell someone I'm gay and would be ashamed of it because I don't understand what it is like to be a lesbian, what it is to be female. I will never be a happy lesbian. The purple squiggling line on the mask is more of my personality coming out. Purple is more let's have some fun. It is the nice side. The loose glass in the box means freedom. Freedom from life and being free and flying. The string of beads lying on the back of the box remind me of rocks in the water. The box is confusing to the person looking at it. That's why I say, "You'll Never Understand." The words cover up some of my mask because I only let people see what I want them to see.

On the front glass of her box she wrote in white lettering, "I only let people see what I want them to see" is a powerful representation of not only her resistance but also a self-silencing. As Brown and Gilligan (1992) argue, girls take their knowledge of selves underground to remain accepted by others. As Meanz stated, "She wanted to be different from what others thought of her but that side of her has not come out, and she did not have the courage to take that step" so parts of her will remain underground until the time is right.

Thee.

Construction as a boy.

"I always felt like a boy."

As I stood waiting to pick up Jordan at the pizzeria for the first book club, a low-riding white car drove up along side of me, and Jordan stepped out of the car. "Hi," she said, "This is

my girlfriend, Thee. "She wants to be part of the study too. But she has to work tonight delivering pizza." Overshadowed by her baseball cap and the car's steering wheel, Thee looked up at me, nodded, and said, "I have to be a delivery boy tonight." Her comment foreshadowed what I witnessed later to be Thee's inner conflict of wanting to physically transition into a boy.

During the first several weeks of the study, Thee was guarded with what she shared with the other girls through discussions, writing, and collaging. She was one of the only participants that did not read and write on a regular basis for the book club. Thee admitted she did not like to read or write for relaxation or for school. She explained, "If I need to know something I would just look it up on the Internet." Thee initially had difficulties connecting with the novel *London Reign.* However, as described below, as she engaged with the novel, she began to identify with the experiences of London and immersed herself in the story. Thee found that the character London, much like herself, physically and socially performed as young men. Each wore men's clothes and haircuts, and worked male-defined jobs. Thee worked as a delivery boy, while London was a car mechanic. Both London and Thee struggled with the negotiation between societal expectations, where they would embody themselves according to traditional feminine identifiers and roles and maintaining their individuality, which moved beyond the boundaries of gender roles. In Thee's life conflicting cultural story lines of fixed gender appearances created tension for her; tension that would emerge in her literacy acts, which challenged the boundaries and limitations of gender and sexuality through writing, discussions, and collage work. Thee spoke and wrote herself into an existence as a boy in terms of dress, attitude, and behavior.

During session three (April 7, 2009) Thee explained to the group what she meant by the phrase, "It's a boy" on her identity poster. I asked her why did she write, "It's a boy"? Thee answered, "Just because I'm not…This is a long story." Thee dressed like a boy and her physical

embodiment was portrayed to match her inner sense of feeling like a boy. Although she appeared as a boy, she struggled with the distinction between her appearance and her physical body, she said to the discussion group, "People always thought I was a boy, but that doesn't make sense in real life because I have a vagina." She explained she dressed like a boy until she attended an elementary Christian high school and was required to conform to a gender specific dress code. Thee shared "When I was in elementary school, I screamed every morning because I knew I had to put on a skirt for school. Sometimes I would pee in my underwear during school because I knew the office staff would give me a pair of pants to wear for the rest of the day." Thee felt she fit in with the boys when she wore pants but this tactic quickly changed when she began to attend high school.

During high school, Thee said, "she suppressed her lesbian identity." Appearing and feeling like a boy led Thee to realize that she was attracted to and would prefer to date females. Once again, she found herself condemned, as she did not follow societal expectations. The Christian school limited the ways she could perform her gender and sexual identity. Thee explained to the group (April 7, 2010) "a girl can only be a tomboy in a Christian school to a certain extent, and once you cross the line, you will be kicked out." She backs up this argument with the statement "I was one of the dudes in high school playing basketball and having eating contests-stuff like that and to the school everything about me was wrong and I was going to hell no matter what." Thee concluded, "I can't explain it. I don't think girlie." The cultural story lines Thee heard during high school conflicted with her own "identity kit" of being a girl who wanted to be a boy. Thee's identity kit, including dress and behaviors as a boy created her sense of who she was and at the same time disrupted cultural story lines, which permeated her life growing up and attending a Christian school.

Thee's construction as a boy was not only complicated by attending a Christian school, but by her family's non-acceptance of her sexual and gender identity. At the end of her senior year, Thee came out to her family and friends as a lesbian and dressed like a boy. In her writer's notebook (session one, March 22, 2009) she wrote her answers to the prompts: Do I express my beliefs and values to other people? If so, how? Can you recall a situation when other people stifled your beliefs and values? If so, how? Thee wrote, "By the end of my senior year I just said, "Fuck it," everyone knew I was gay anyway. But coming out to my family was hard. I don't believe no one should be judged by men b/c we all sin."

Thee's family handled her coming out with denial and betrayal. She explained, "My grandma the person I lived with my whole life, she was like what you are gay? She found me kissing people that weren't boys and everything. How did she not know I was gay?" Her father did not approve of the idea that his daughter dressed like a boy. Therefore, he took back the car he promised her. Her father defended his reason to keep the car for financial reasons. Thee furthered explained, "I barely see or talk to him now."

"And that's how I feel. I think like the baby."

Thee's struggle with the abandonment of her father was evident in her writing and during group discussions. Her mother's murder when she was a young girl exacerbated the situation. She was her father's only daughter for several years. I realized by reading her writing and listening to her during the discussion groups that Thee had a difficult time untangling the complex and contradictory emotions regarding the issues around her family. She found solace with the protagonist, London, because they both shared some of the same issues, including abandonment. Thee sympathized with London when she had to leave her home because London's family did not accept her, especially her father. Thee wrote in her writer's notebook

(session 2, March 29, 2010). "Some things that happen to me happen to London. There are many instances just like London, I lost a lot of support from my family when I came out, and they were virtually against my decision or made it out to be a phase. I've contemplated about leaving home when I lived there) so as not to cause my family pain. They don't accept my life style."
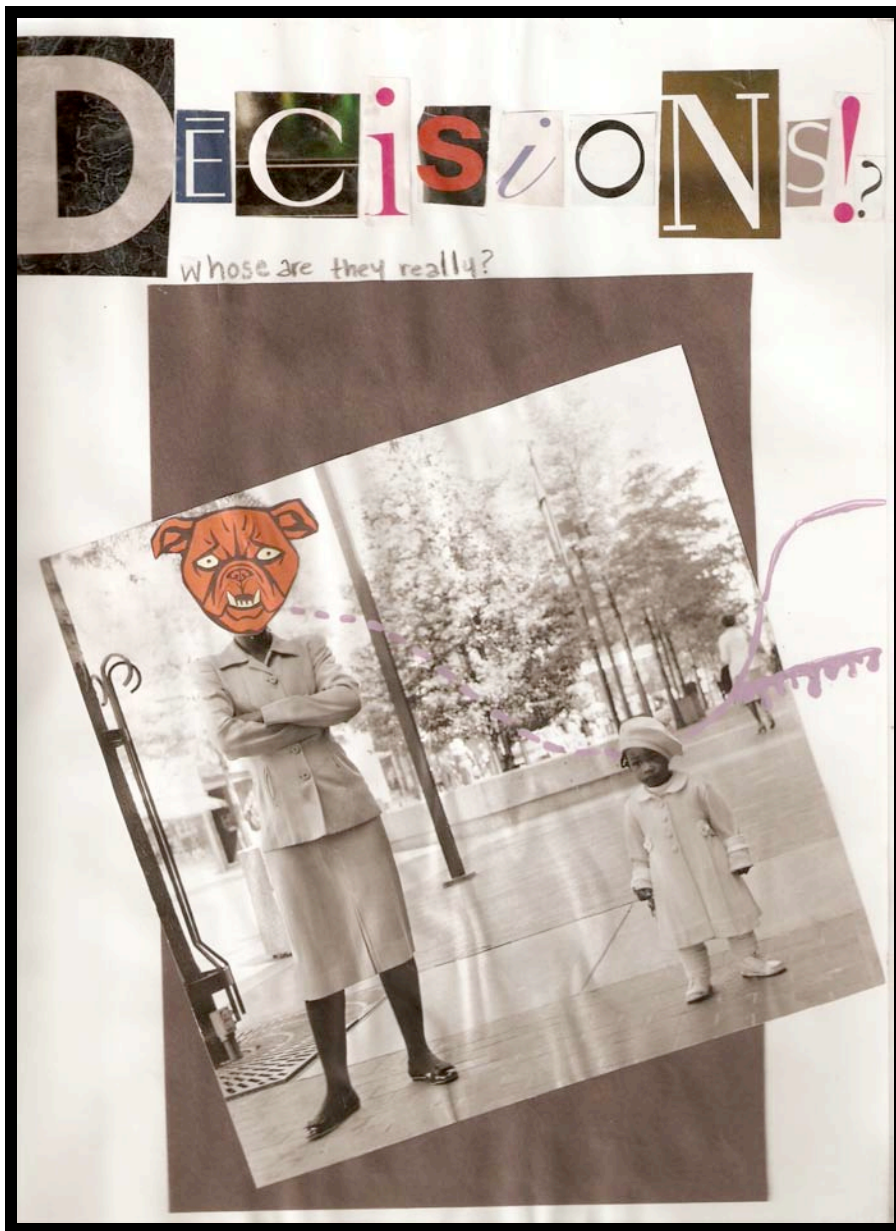
Figure 22: Thee's altered image

Thee's altered image, *Decisions,* spoke further about her lack of control over decisions others make for her. She frequently discussed that others like her father tell her she should act

and dress more like a girl or her grandmother tells her that she can't be gay! As Thee worked on her altered image during a book club session (session 5, April 18, 2010), she explained to me what she was thinking at the time: "I'm going to put my head right here. And then I'm going to have this. This is going to be in bubbles. Because sometimes I feel like I'm a little person and everybody else is big like her. The woman has the authority in the picture. She looks like she's got a smirk on her face and the baby is clueless. And that's how I feel. I think like the baby, but I'd rather think like her…Because she's in control."

The lack of control in her life represented in Thee's altered image was also an issue for both the main characters, London and Winter, in the two novels. Each had lost control in certain aspects of their lives because their parents, friends, or partners narrowly defined them. For example, Winter's father raised her to be a hustler. To be a woman who would say anything, do anything, and hurt anybody who stood in her way. As a hustler, Winter no longer controlled her own life but was a fragile puppet manipulated by her father. Others, who knew her, dismissed Winter as an emotional, mental, and intellectual midget because she did could not make decisions without her father telling her what to do (Souljah, 1999)

A few weeks later, Thee wrote this entry in her writer's notebook (April 12, 2010) about her altered image (see Figure 20):

> My altered page is about decisions. My page shows how the world [dog] influences my thoughts and any choice I make. The world has a big impact on me. Sometimes, my heart tells me one thing and my mind tells me another. It's hard for me to find me in the mix of everything. The dog's face represents how cruel the world can be. They'll tell you one thing and then turn its back on you with no support.

Again, Thee made a strong text-to-self connection to the stories and the plight of the female protagonists. Both London and Winter confronted the sadness and anger of losing the support of a loved one. Thee said, "she empathized with London when she was kicked out her

house because it is something I, too, had experienced." She angrily insisted, "It was so wrong when London's mother stood by her husband's decision to kick London out of the house because she was a stud. A mom got to stand by her daughter." The majority of the girls in the book club were angry that London's mom kicked London out of the house and sided with her husband. Shorty added to the heated discussion "you know, from the get-go, fathers are the protectors. They provide, they protect, they do all the up-and-above stuff. They're the one who are supposed to keep you…protect you and not throw you out of the house."

Thee felt a sense of abandonment when she thought about how her family would treat her if she became a boy and she heavily weighed the options. More than once, Thee discussed and visually represented the ideas of conformity and power in regards to identity and gender such as her altered image (see Figure 22). Thee said gender or sexual conformity on her part might "guarantee her a seat at the family dinner table" (session 3, April 7, 2010). At the time, the girls were discussing the themes found in chapter three of the novel, *London Reign*. Thee shared the theme, "hard life." She referenced London's quote" This shit is too hard. I can't do her like this" (2007)

"If someone thinks I am a dude, I rather not talk. If they think I'm a boy, I just let them think that I'm a boy, but if I say something and they're like, oh no, you got me; you're a girl, it's just embarrassing. I rather conform to what people believe that I am than go ahead and explain, like, oh yeah, well, I'm a girl who likes girls and I dress like this because I want to. So I'd rather just do. If they think I'm a boy, let them think I'm a boy."

During this group discussion, Thee further justified her decision to be a boy with a strong connection to family acceptance. She explained,

> It be a lot easier. Because I like girls. I like girls, so either way, if I'm a boy or a girl I'm gonna like girls. So it'd be easier for a lot of people, like my family would accept me.

Well, they don't accept me now, but if I was born a boy, they would accept me more and they would accept my girlfriend more.

Thee took up different subject positions to explore the different implications and experiences of being accepted by others because of her gender and sexual identity. She understood her identification as a lesbian or a boy afforded her different forms of power in her social worlds Thee often spoke of Winter's power based on her role as a drug lord's daughter, a best friend, and a beautiful woman. These textual connections helped Thee to understand her positioning in society and with her family.

Deconstruction as a boy.

"They should not make me be the Thee that they want me to be."

When Thee presented her identity poster (see Figure 23) to the group, she shared many personal feelings about her identity and gender. For example, the black sheep image represented her positioning in her family. Thee explained "I have a cousin who is a Muslim and the family makes accommodations for her, but like, for me it's no…no. It's either our way (the family) or leave. That's how it is."

Figure 23: Three images of Thee's identity poster
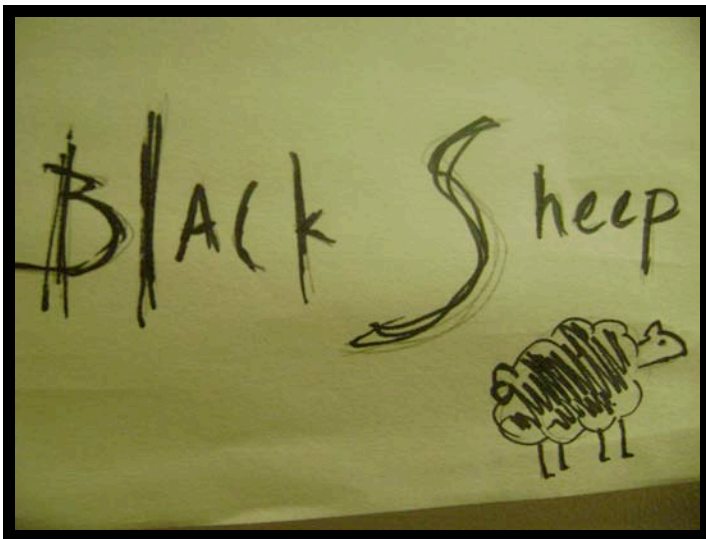
Thee authored herself as the black sheep of the family. This is the position that was also taken up by the novels' protagonists, London and Winter. Each character existed on the outside margins of their families because they defined gender and identity on their own terms. For example, London's performance as a "nigga" resulted in physical fights with her family while Winter's "bad girl" attitude impacted her relationship with her mom and younger siblings. In each case, the female adolescent in these novels is confronted with "double identities" (twice removed from mainstream ideology of what constitutes femininity and womanhood) by the social constructions of gender and sexual discourse models found in social discourse (Sutherland, 2005). From a post-structuralist's perspective "peeling back the layers" of a text enabled Thee to negotiate the multiple meanings of gender and sexuality. Interestingly, this, in turn, made her more resilient to the thinking of others. An example of Thee's resounding voice was obvious during her second interview (June 17, 2010). During the interview, I asked Thee "if she still believed in what she said earlier in session one and two that she changes for people just because she doesn't want the hassle. And does what people want her to do." Thee replied with confidence in her voice,

> I think that used to be the old me. Like before I stood up to my Granny, before all that, I used to be like, well, she's going to yell at me if I wear this, so I might as well not wear this and not get yelled at. But then I was just like, I don't give a fuck no more and it's

really tiring trying to do what everyone wants. So I'm going to be me. If you like it, you like it. If you don't you don't.

In addition, Thee's resilient voice is visually represented in two of her two images *Thee, you have to wear a dress, No! and It's a boy* (see Figure 23) each image suggests a stronger voice about her own decisions and identity. Thee's images resist, and "talk back" (Hooks, 1989) to identities ascribed for her by others. As noted in her writer notebook (March 3, 2010) this entry was a text-to-self connection with the character, London. Both Thee and London experienced disapproval from others because of their gender roles. Thee wrote, I kinda think of her as myself. What I think if they (world, family) don't accept who I TRULY am then they should accept me as I come. They should not make me be the Thee that they want me to be. They should just love the Thee that I am.

However, with Thee's stronger voice there were many contradictions in her life such as her father's emotional abandonment and the desire to live as a boy. Thee's development of voice, understanding of self, was not a seamless process. In part because as she and the other girls worked to negotiate their identities, there is always, present the hegemony of powerful social and cultural constructs, which interrupt and confuse this process of knowing. This becomes evident to Thee during a group sharing of open-minded portraits (session 4, April 11, 2010) based on the thoughts of the characters from the novel, *London Reign*. Omar shared London's quote "Pops needs to accept me for who I am, because I ain't changing for one" (2007, p.16). My assistant asked Thee "if she has ever heard those words in her own life and what do you think when somebody says that or does to you"?

> Thee: That it hurts
> Assistant: That it hurts? Who's said that to you?
> Thee: A lot of people.
> Assistant: Give me one example. How do you respond to them? Or how does it make you feel?

Thee: I tune them out.
Assistant: Ok. Does it ever make you reconsider who you are?
Thee: No
Candice: So why don't you change? Why haven't you changed because people say the same thing over and over?
Thee: It's not you.
Shorty: Right, it's not you. Why be something you ain't?
Thee: Right. If you change for somebody, just to please them, that's not…
Candice: But I believe you said, a couple of weeks ago…
Thee: You're right, "I am contradicting myself. But if somebody asks me something, then I tell the truth. It's not like I'm just rejecting myself to be who somebody wants me to be. I'm not changing anything about myself. I don't know. This confuses me.

Fortunately, Thee continued her thinking and made a connection to her own happiness. "It hurts when someone does not accept who you are because I am not going to change anyway. I do not think it is fair that we have to change ourselves. It's not you, if you change because what people say about you. How are you going to be happy in life if you just try to please everybody?"

Thee said she worried if she insisted others to accept the gender and sexual identities that she believed represented the "true" Thee, she would emotionally hurt herself or others such as her family. Brown and Gilligan (1992) explain that young women gloss over and dissociate from feelings in order to preserve relationships with others. Thee explained that she silenced herself to preserve her relationships with her family. She had a reason to disassociate from her authentic voice, as she explored in her drawing, *Sea of Lies (*see Figure 24)

Figure 24: Thee's drawing
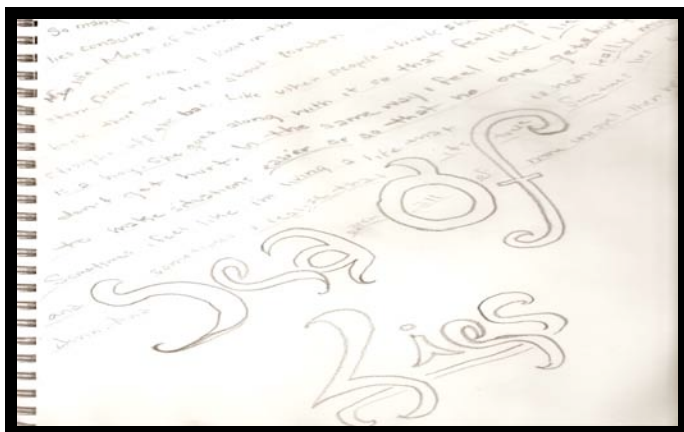
Thee wrote about *Sea of Lies* (March 8 2010),

> So many lies consume my life. Most of them stem from me. I know in the book there are lies about London straight off the bat. Like when people think she is a boy. She goes along with it so that feelings don't get hurt. In the same way, I feel like I lie to make situations easier so that no one gets hurt. Sometimes, I feel like I'm living a life that is not really mine and sometimes I realize that it's not really mine. Sometimes lies break down. When all of my lies unravel, then you'll meet me.

Through the process of interacting with the novels and the group discussions Thee began to think deeply about changes she wanted to make in her own life such as her relationships with others. She began to envision possibilities for life and identity that she may never have imagined for herself before. Thee began to understand that her "lies," as she called them, kept her from authentically performing a masculine gender and sexual identity. Her sexuality and her identity as a boy were both vulnerable to the influences of her family and the sense of needing to conform to make others happy.

Reconstruction as a boy.

"When all of my lies unravel, then you'll meet me."

Thee's reconstruction as a boy allowed her to imagine actions for the future. As Freire (1987) argues, it is the ability for a literate individual to name one's experience that lets them understand the limits and possibilities of the larger world. The following conversation conveyed Thee's understanding of her identity as a lesbian and a boy, and that the two did not necessarily contradict one another. She began to accept "boy" as one of the many different aspects of her identity. During the conversation presented below, she acknowledged the impact of societal and family expectations on her gender identity and began to reconcile the conflicts that kept her from embodying and accepting all the complex issues of gender and sexuality that made her unique. During session 6 (April 25, 2010), Thee told the group that she had begun to reconcile her relationship with her family. She was able to make positive steps with her family because they

had some time to mentally process Thee's coming out as a lesbian and identifying as a boy. I was

curious to find out how Thee's feelings as a LBT person was influenced by her family's more

accepting attitude. I began a conversation during a group discussion with the question: "When

you read the novel *London Reign,* what did you learn about being a LBT person?"

> Thee: It's tough. It's tough. It's not something you would want to do.
> Ericka: It hard to be something that you're not. Basically, London tried to be a boy and she's not one, so it was hard for her.
> Thee: If I was like a straight person just reading this book, I might think being gay is a choice, but you read the book and you figure out like it's not. Why would somebody choose to be like this if it's so tough? You know?
> Candice: Do you find being a LBT person tough?

Figure 25: Thee's drawing

> Ericka: For me? No.
> Thee: At times it's tough. Not right now it's not. I'm cool with it now like at first my family was like, "What the fuck? Go somewhere." But now they're cool. They're real cool.

Thee felt like she had made steps toward gaining support from her family and felt

empowered to display her future goal with the image, *Getting Ready for the New Me* (see Figure

25). This image provided Thee the space to assert and control her emergent identity (Bettis & Adams, 2005). In the image, Thee wrote in block letters VOID across her name XXXXX and wrote her new name Sean L. XXX. She was able to separate how others saw her because she had begun to come to terms with her own sense of her gender identity. Thee's writing allowed her to stop hiding behind her "sea of lies" and to push her thinking past her current perception of self, which enabled her to enact change in her own life She explained her gender acceptance further during an interview (April 8, 2010). "Listen, listen, listen. So they're telling me, you have to be girly, you have to be girly. But I don't like dresses. Don't put me in a dress. So if the only way they're going to say you can look like a boy is if you're a boy, then that's what I have to do. Do you get it?"

As was demonstrated, Thee continually constructed and reconstructed her understanding of gender and sexual identity as she interacted in literate actions in an environment where she felt safe and accepted. The book club provided her the opportunity to speak, write, and read without the fear of dominant discourses about womanhood and femininity talking over her. Thee discussed the collective power of the group within the context of her identity mask, *The Birds of a Feather* (see Figure 26).

> I met different people. I met people who embraced me and made me feel empowered – like I said, birds of a feather. Even though I might not make decisions based on what the whole group was doing. It was good to know that they support what I do. You know?
>
> So then when I have – like if I have more people's support, it helps me to do what I have to do. Like when I was living with Granny and she was giving me, 'You can't go out no more once you move back in. You can't do all this,' and blah, blah, blah, blah.
>
> And I'm like, no, that's not going to happen. That's not going to happen. And I told you no a couple of times and I have the force to back it up now. I'm going to. Like everybody in the group helped me, just with little stuff they would say. I really pick up on stuff they would say, like little things. Like I walked past somebody's house yesterday when I was canvassing – 'Where there is life there is

love.' Or 'Where there is love there is life.' One of the two. But I wrote it down. I still remember it.

Because what people say, what people do, has an impact on me, and it helps me grow as a person. It helps me to feel whether I want to be like them or, yes, I do want to be like them or something like that.

Figure 26:
Thee's identity
mask

From a critical literacy perspective, it was not enough for Thee to talk about the fixed concept of what constituted femininity and womanhood but to have the freedom to actively take-on or resist the discourse or roles expected of her through literacy. In this way, Thee was able to understand how the scripts of others (e.g. family) were defining her identity for her and limiting her choices to being who she is.

Jordan.

Construction as a lesbian.

"No matter how many identities I take on, I don't understand myself."

My relationship with Jordan did not begin with the Real Talk girls' group at the Pride House but through a Facebook friend connection. I was particularly interested in the ways Jordan visually-represented her identities on Facebook. Her images highlighted many contrasting identities, from resistance to sassy to adventurous.

As I learned later from Jordan during interview one (April 14, 2010) her images reflected her search for her own authentic voice. Metaphorically, each image as discussed in this section represented a window into Jordan's life, which exposed the pain and non-acceptance she felt as a lesbian and performed through her art and words (see Figure 27).

Figure 27: Jordan's image
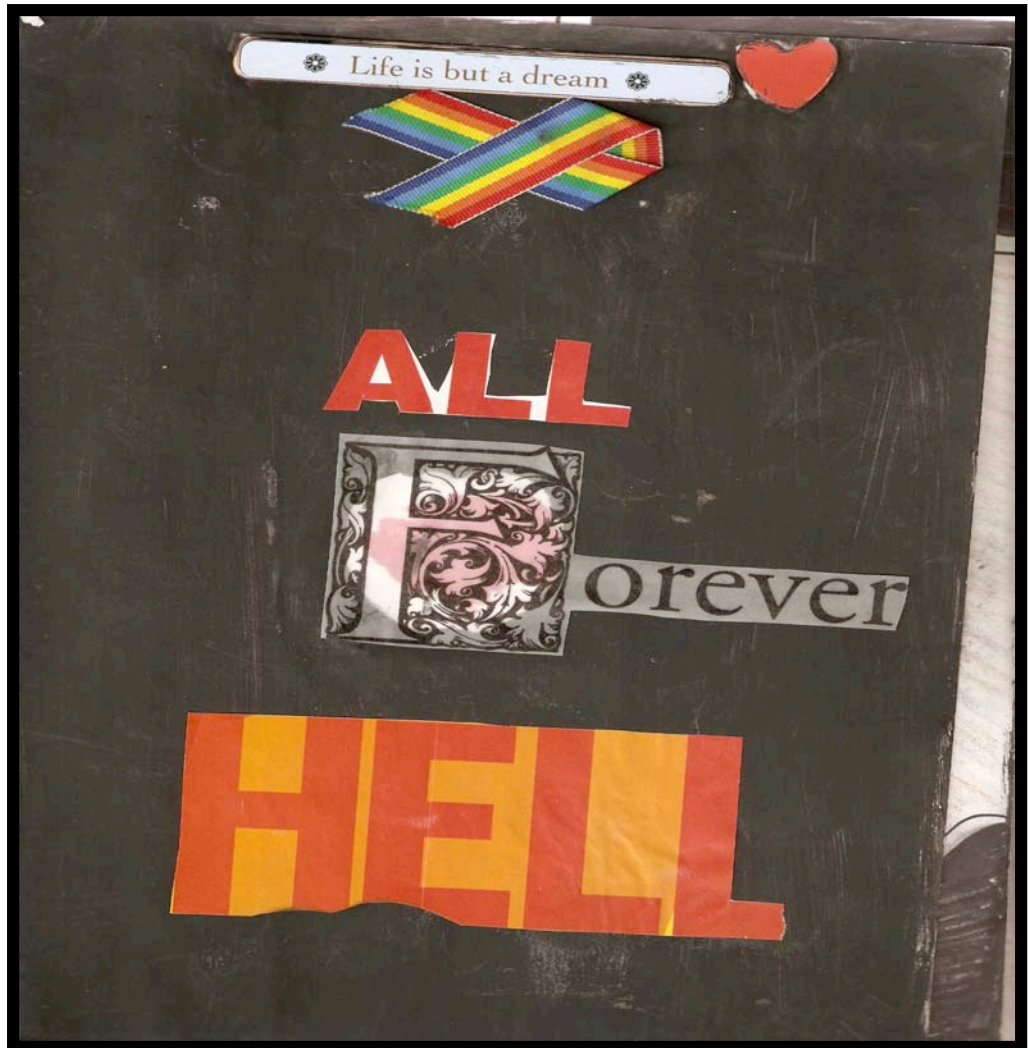
During the first book club, each of the girls created and discussed an image, which they created after reading the first thirty pages of *London Reign*. In the story, London is at odds with the majority of people in her life including her parents. Her father gets drunk and beats up London's mother and London. He is furious because London "acts and thinks like a man (2007). Eventually, London leaves the house because her father tells her she is an embarrassment to the family.

Jordan's artifact (see Figure 27) was unlike the artifacts of the rest of the girls because of its powerful tone created by the black background and the bolded HELL The majority of the girls' images reflected a positive tone with bright colors and images of rainbows and love. Jordan shyly presented her image, *Life is but a Dream* to the group. Surprised by the darker image some of the girls shared their thoughts with Jordan. Lucky admitted, "I would be afraid to go to sleep with you." Another girl interrupted and asked Jordan, "Why are you gay?" Jordan repositioned her chair to share the meaning of her image, "On the top it says, life is but a dream and love, and then gay love is always gonna to be hell. No, matter how much I try to get accepted by people or something--its always gonna remain in hell like people is never gonna to be accepting of it."

As I listened to Jordan's explanation, I felt her artifact reflected a sense of hopelessness with her lesbian identity and life. She revealed, "My goals in life were just dreams because society and others did not accept my sexual identity. Yeah like your family, your friends, the people who like you, the one person who accepts, and people who like you, the one person who accepts, and I am okay with it now, but then they're not like that, like your mom, like London's mom."

Figure 28: Jordan's image

In the same breath, Jordan explained, (session one, March 22, 2010) "I should have a feel for who I am and not just walking around in life trying to find myself." She compared her life to a puzzle (See Figure 28). The three puzzle pieces are broken. She explained the image's meaning" It is not a full puzzle because I don't know who I am totally yet, and I feel incomplete as a person. I don't know my place in life. All I know is my fucking sexual orientation"

Jordan understood that her sexual identity was only one piece of the puzzle and at times a fragile piece because of other conflicts in her life. She often blamed herself for these conflicts, explaining, "I just fuck up everything! I can't do shit. I deserve to die." To Jordan the puzzle metaphor applied to the novels' protagonists because London and Winter struggled to fit the mismatched pieces of their life puzzle. The novels provided a platform for Jordan to analyze the ways in which social norms about gender and sexuality affected the characters and the internal and external conflicts the norms placed upon them. She said her sexuality threatened and destroyed her relationship with her mom.

> The whole London leaving her mom, I related to that. Because I'm like, oh my god, I've got to get out of here. When my mom found out, I was a lesbian, every other day she was coming to my room debunking the demons. When I was younger, we had a good relationship. I used to talk to my mom about everything. But then like when she started she basically shut down. I can't talk to you about something if you always want to get on my back about being a lesbian. I just want to call her and just cry out to her and tell her what is happening in my life. My mama don't like the fact that I'm gay or whatever.

The barrage of non-acceptance extended into Jordan's other social worlds with feelings of inferiority, fear, and shame that she was a lesbian evident in her artifacts (see Figures 26-28). Jordan struggled to find a culturally approved self that would not separate her from the heterosexual community.

> I really want to be accepted by my mom, society, Thee (her girlfriend), and fam (family). I mean I think it's very unfair that heterosexuals are able to go out without being looked at wrongly cause the person is the opposite sex. I want to be accepted by heterosexuals. Why can't they accept me or the community to be right?

Jordan discovers her sexuality was one of the many pieces of the puzzle that left her struggling to understand herself and her relationships. However, with the opportunity to talk about her own personal experiences in relation to the novel's characters, Jordan began take her voice from a private to a more public sphere (Blair, 1998).

Deconstruction as a lesbian.

"I often cry but the tears aren't there."

Figure 29: Jordan's collage page titled *Skeptical*
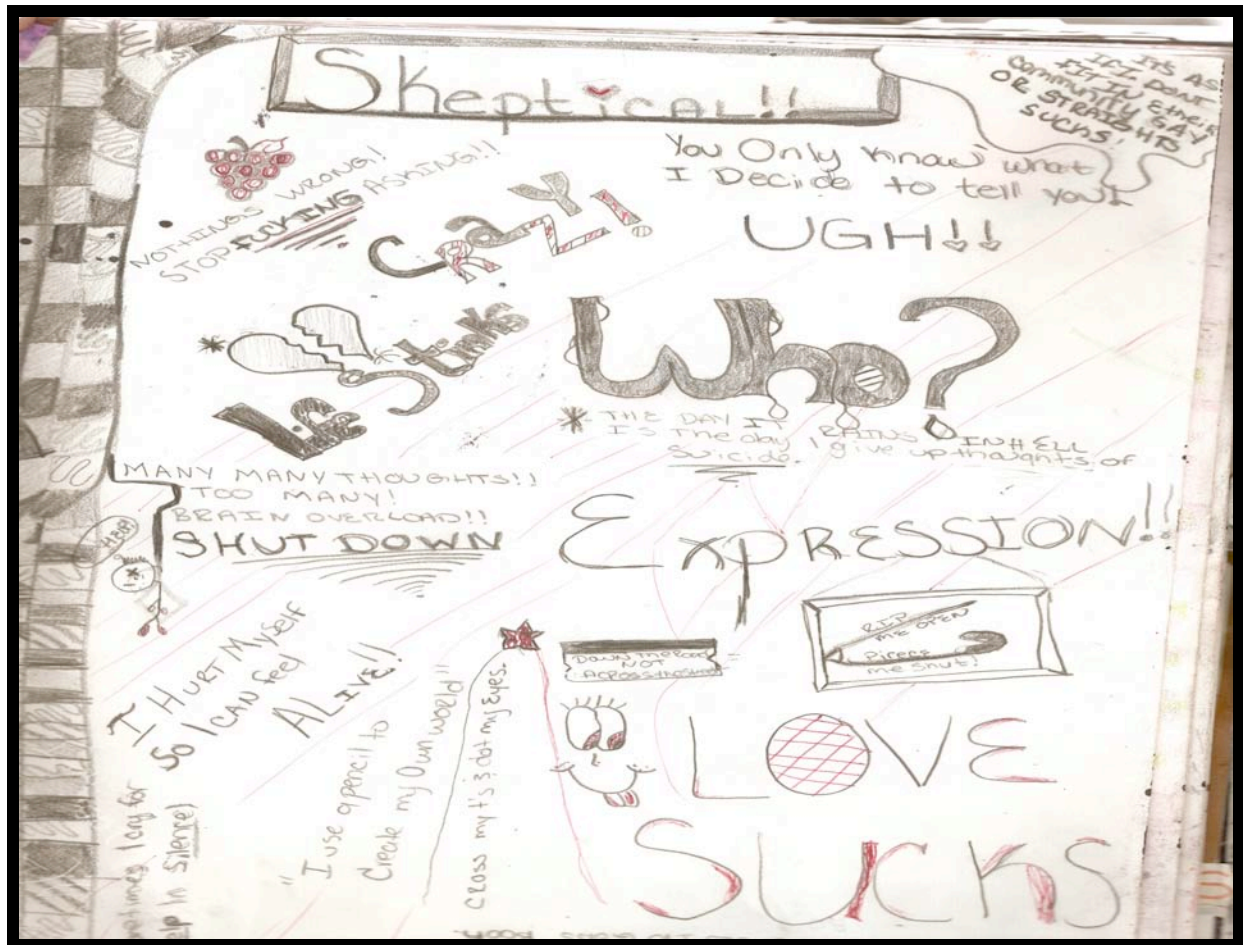
I begin with Jordan's collage page entitled *Skeptical* (session 2, April 4, 2010) because it was the first image she created which publically voiced she engaged in cutting or self-injury. It was one time Jordan expressed herself without resorting to "I don't know" to avoid sharing with the group. It was surprising that Jordan revealed that she engaged in cutting but silenced herself on so many issues discussed in-group. Her words written in pencil, "I hurt myself so I can feel alive, Rip me open, pierce me shut, and The day it rains in hell is the day I give up thoughts of suicide"

As I studied Jordan's writing, her art, and her comments during discussion groups, I began to wonder if perhaps Jordan believed the issue was too risky and dangerous to attempt to

remedy on her own. Jordan created a text (see Figure 29) as a way to voice her pain. In this way, her text is an invitation to enter her world with her permission. Jordan explained during her interview (April 9, 2010) she started cutting in the 10th grade, the same time her relationship with her mom became unbearable because she came out as a lesbian. I was quite surprised she shared such a personal detail because she had known me for only a short time.

> I didn't have anybody to talk to except my sister but she's a year older than me, so we've both been it's like, you've only been living a year longer than me, what could you possibly do? I missed my mom so much. I just be getting upset, and sometimes I just can't write, because it be too much on my mind, just be too jumbled up to write. It just be too much to write. So I just be like, OK, whatever then. Cut. I used to be like slice and dice. I used to say slice and dice and put it in my status or something on Facebook.

She continued with discussing the feeling of liberation, which accompanied the act of cutting. Jordan compared it to an out-of-body experience. The act of coming out to her family and friends did not create a positive outcome or validate a sense of self-truth but the acting of cutting validated her pain and existence (Boyd, Ryan, and Levitt, 2010). Drawing on a metaphor, Jordan explained, "physical cutting served as a way to cut herself off from the world because I don't know how to deal with it. She added, "I often want to cry but the tears aren't there. I don't understand where they've gone. I have run out of tears.

Throughout the study, Jordan questioned her relationship with her partner because of the sadness she felt when she was with her girlfriend. During her interview (April 8, 2010) she told me she shared her feelings of sadness with her partner, "I told her this is not how my life should be right now. I should be enjoying my life instead of wondering who I am, is this right?" Without any answers to her question, Jordan created another image. The drawing depicted her girlfriend with masculine and feminine traits. All the questions, which Jordan said gnawed at her, outlined the image. The questions represented Jordan's self-talk, which could be identified as belonging to her (Hooks, 1989). Some of her questions included: "Why was I born this way? Am I a

mistake? Are you able to see the real me? Did God mean to do this to me? Am I really a disease?

God why? Am I wrong, have I sinned?"

Figure 30: Jordan's collage pad

Hooks (1989) compares "the exposure of one's writing to newly hung clean laundry, out in the air for everyone to see" (p.7). I imagined Jordan's image in the same way, that her rethinking of self included exposure and vulnerability at the expense of others judging her.

Figure 31: Jordan's collage pad titled *"I can't stand it?"*
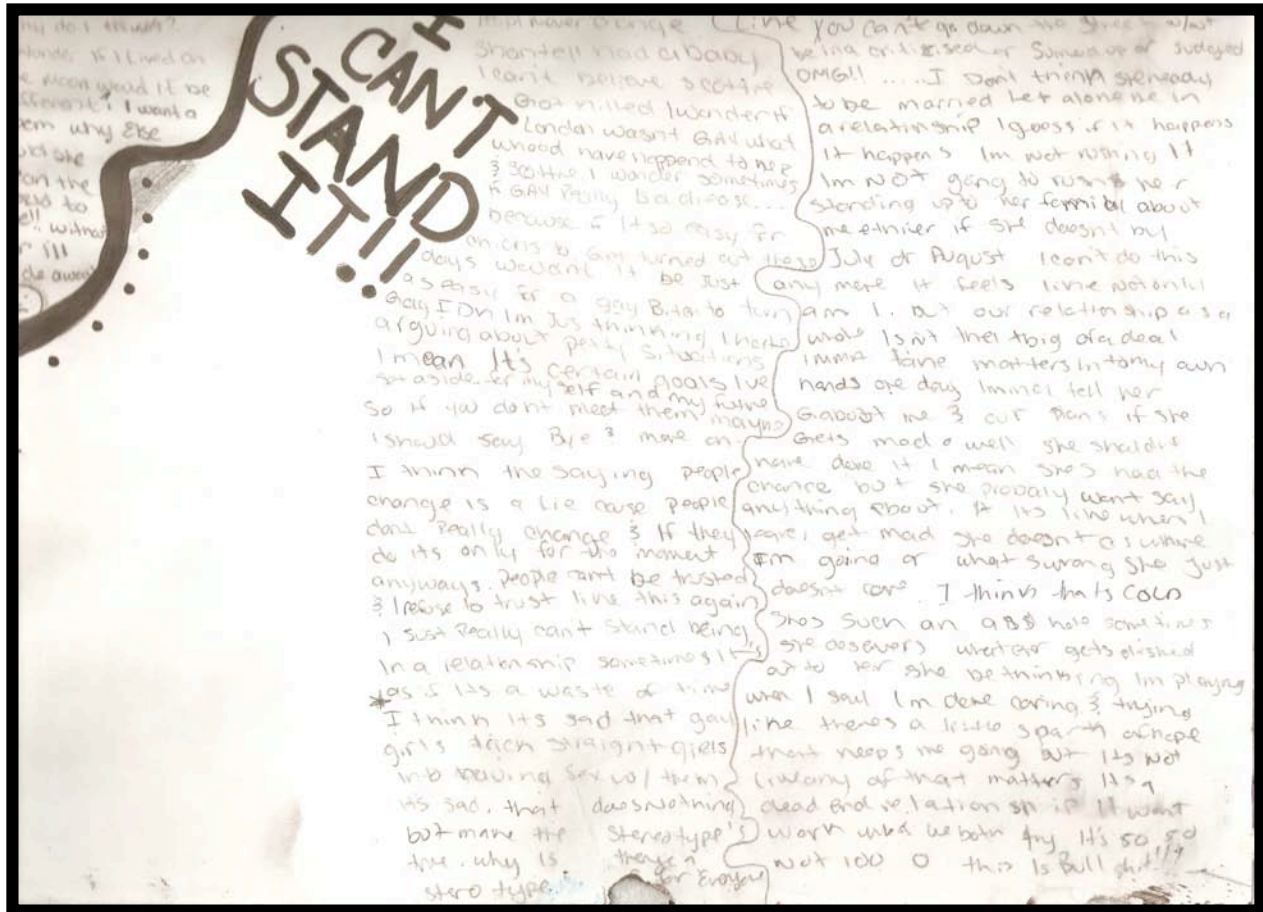
Jordan's talking back or questioning inspired her to create another image; entitled *"I can't stand it!"* Jordan wrote in her notebook people never change. "I wonder sometimes if GAY really is a disease because it is so easy for chicks to get turned out these day. I think the saying people change is a lie cause people don't change and if they do its only for the moment. People can't be trusted and I refuse to trust like this again."

Jordan as did all the girls in the book club worked through their relationship issues seen not only in the novels but also in their own lives. During the group discussion (session 3, April 7, 2010) the girls were discussing the consequences of London getting kicked out of the house by her family and her relationship with her partner, Lexi. Jordan shared "I felt bad for Lexi because "her and London just being a couple, and it's like they weren't even together for that long before London got kicked out," She continued, "sometimes I feel like I can relate to Lexi in a way because of her relationship with London". Both Jordan and the character, Lexi had similar feelings about their unpredictable romantic relationships. For example, Jordan wrote (April 10, 2010).

> I don't think she (her girlfriend) is ready to be married let alone be in a relationship. I guess if it happened, it happens I'm not rushing it. I can't do this any more it feel like not only am I but our relationship as a whole isn't that big of a deal. Shes such an a$$hole sometimes she (her partner) and deserves whatever she gets.

Jordan's feelings are heard in Lexi's conversation with Shantell (London's sister) about her relationship to London She said, "I don't know what I'm going to do. It's like things were finally starting to look up between us. Do you think I expected too much? Do you think I created this whole fantasy, but all along, me and London was never meant to me. I'm in love with your sister, and I was finally getting London to realize that she should be in love with me. She ain't here though" (2008, p. 60).

Her transaction with the text was particularly poignant because it demonstrated how Jordan used the text to cope with emotions and to talk back to people who may be obstacles in her life. In addition, her writing reflected the kinds of relationships the girls in the study have with their girlfriends. At times, the girls' relationships were volatile, co-dependent, and emotionally unattainable. Jordan continued to interrogate her romantic relationship later with another writer's notebook entry (April 18, 2010), "Me and Thee [unbearable duet] were broken.

Because of me. I just want to cut myself. Or maybe I can jus become a worn out freak DAWG. I always said she deserved better n. torn up not, worth it, self. Imma just be by myself maybe im not stable enough to be in any type of RELATIONSHIP HELL!"

Further in the entry, I heard Jordan's voice of introspection,

> I'm going to be twenty soon. I need to start acting it. I need to stop what I'm doing. I need not to start cutting. I need a new outlet because I'm always so scrambled in my head. Everything happens for a reason so what's the reason what's the reason for this happening? Until Glorious Day comes Ill jus keep writing my soul's heart out. "The person I want to be is unreal"

Figure 32: Jordan's collage
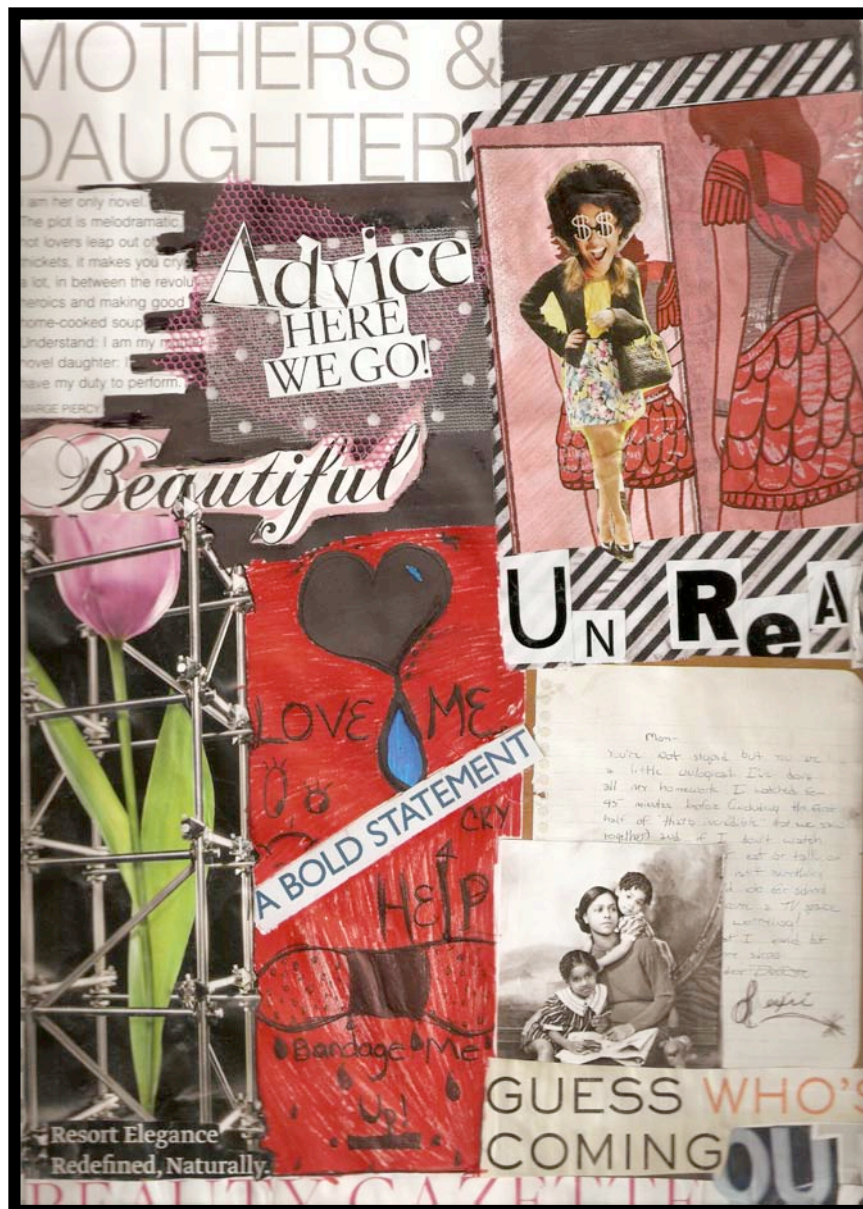
Jordan represented some of the issues she had with her "momma" with this college (see Figure 32). She knew at this time that her momma made her sad and unhappy because she did not accept Jordan as a lesbian. Jordan said, "Her momma could not be trusted with what she had to say to her, so she felt the altered image was the safest way to express her experiences." During the discussion group (session 4, April 11, 2010) Jordan shyly took out her collage workbook from her shoulder bag and leaned slightly into the room's wall for support. She began "my altered image has five different things to it." Jordan pointed to each image (a mother with two children), "This one is me and my relationship. I used to always go to her for advice. I don't know what this is, but it is a poem"…She read it aloud: *I am her only novel. The plot is melodramatic….Understand I am my mother's novel daughter. I have my duty to perform*. Jordan hesitated a bit and explained the line "my mother's novel daughter" meant to her,

> I guess being a daughter that your momma wanted. You know how when you're little and you picture your little girl that you want to be your daughter? Like that. I guess being her. I don't know. You know when you have a baby, you be like, "Oh, she's going to be like this." I guess when your momma gets that, she feel like that's a novel daughter, I've got to be the daughter my mom wanted.

She continued with explaining the meaning of each image.

> The girl looking in the mirror is the person she wants to be. But the person she wants to be is unreal. She sees herself as someone she wants to be. The heart with the blue tear is like love me, blah, blah, blah. Help-like a cry for help. Like bandage me up because you're hurt. Because people hurt. The beautiful rose is trapped. I just need to rework myself, so I can be a beautiful rose without the drama. Beauty gazette is something pretty to look at. I want to be beautiful inside and out, not just on the outside. I want to feel beautiful to myself. The letter is what I am trying to say to my mom. I am not going to write a letter to her because I don't want a response. I just want to give her the letter.

Jordan's altered image represented Adrienne Rich's (1986a) notion of "only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experiences enables women to create a collective world" (p.16). Jordan's collective world not only included the girls in the book club, but the female protagonists from the books, because these young women legitimatized Jordan's

issues. Because all of these girls dealt with their tumultuous relationships with their mothers, fathers, partners, and themselves. A "collective world" which provided Jordan the opportunity to speak, write, and read without being limited by dominant discourses.

Reconstruction as a lesbian.

"I just be like"F you all," I will make myself happy."

It was my last interview (June, 17, 2010) with Jordan, and we were both sitting on the couch in the living room of her apartment. This setting guaranteed Jordan a safe space to address her issues with me knowing I have been supporting her for the past twelve weeks. Jordan used her puzzle image, "*Got to Find the Pieces of Me"*(see Figure 26) as a starting point to discuss her reconstruction as a lesbian.

Jordan explained "that although she is still figuring out her life, there are more puzzle pieces together. The blank page is full of more pieces." She said, "now I know that I have anger problems and I need to work on it. Also I know that I need to stop being so aggressive at times. I'm really starting to see my temper. I don't know, maybe I'm just really starting to see it, instead of like, 'No, I don't!' Now I see it. And I'm working on it."

Jordan discussed how she uses, what she called "book-to-me" connections with each of the books to try to figure out how to make her relationship better with her mom. She said, London was more of a role model because she fixed her strained relationship with her mom while Winter did not want a relationship with her mom after she was disfigured by a gunshot. Winter admitted she was embarrassed by her mom's ugliness. Jordan said, "So if I see what the characters do and it worked out from them, I thought maybe I would try it. I began to see my relationship with my mom a different way." She elaborated on a recent incident with her mother.

Yeah, we went over to my grandma's house on Memorial Day, at my grandma's house. We was just sitting on the porch and my momma pulled up and she was coming in the house. It was me, Thee (girlfriend), my cousin Aisha and the two babies and the dog. And my momma had gave me a hug, Aisha a hug, and she gave Thee a hug. What a shocker! My momma never even looked at Thee before this. Jordan explained her feelings about the incident, If my momma can accept me then. Maybe other people can accept me. But then to me it kind of felt like, personally I was happy. Like yay. I don't see my self as an outcast with my family or mom anymore. Because Thee isn't an outcast and I'm not an outcast, because we can just chill over there (Momma's house) now.

She continued by reflecting on her beliefs about why her mother has taken up a new attitude, "I think my momma was just like, Well, I don't think this is a phase. Or at least if it is I can just deal, be there for her afterward,' or whatever. She's just there for me now. I think she like this is serious, I need to love my daughter for who she is."

Besides amending her relationship with her mom, Jordan decided she was now ready to make a five-year plan for her life. "I want to make a plan sheet. I want to do it! Yeah. I want to do more stuff. I want to meet some more people." Her words spoke of a future, which did not include cutting, "I used to cut on a regular basis but I am not cutting anymore. That's changed." Jordan discovered many things about her personal relationships, sexuality, and goals for the future, and she began to understand the disconnection between her feelings and body (Gilligan, 2002). Jordan authored herself into a more reflective world, so she could know her feelings as a young lesbian woman without resorting to destructive behaviors such as cutting.

Jordan's identity mask (see Figure 32) reflected a new sense of pride as a lesbian. "It's a collage of my [her] personalities." She entitled the box "Bold Statement" which spoke to her voice as a lesbian. Jordan situated her box on the coffee table and began by saying:

Figure 33:
Jordan's
identity mask

I'm going to talk about the jeweled triangle on my forehead. It represents gay pride. I see it around. I see it means equality everywhere. And then it can be matched up with the bold statement, because I want equality to be accepted. And it's like me speaking up.The jeweled green eye. It 's supposed to be like an all-seeing eye. Like I want to see everything. I want to do a lot. I want to get more active in the whole equality and pride gayness. And then the rainbow is supposed to represent-you know how rainbows are like, oh, friendly, nice day!

And then the mouth wired shut matches in with the bold statement too. First it was taped closed. And then you can remove tape. But when it's wired closed, it's wired closed. I can't speak up. Like whether it's in the lesbian community or the black and white communities. Because I just feel I'm gay, I don't really need to speak up except for stuff like gay marriage, then I'll speak up about it. I get told that I act black in the white community. It's weird. I go to a white place, I get called black. I go to a black place, I get called white. What? I'm acting mixed. I'm just acting like me, I don't know what they mean.

The dark eyes, I just I don' t know, black eyes represent something dark, like I'm dark on the inside because I can't see nothing. But it's not like how I feel, but it's just something that I thought would be cute and go with the mask. I don't feel that way.

I painted it silver, I wanted it to be I wanted it to stick out. I think silver is really bright. I think my personality is bright. And you would say it could match that I'm mixed. It could be a mixture of my culture inside, and this is my culture inside, and this is my personality outside.

The white broken piece of glass on top of the box is like my personalities collided. Like both sides of me the temper and the nice side. That sometimes I have an edge.

Conclusion

As chapter four has demonstrated, the out-of-school literacy space provided the four girls the opportunity to define themselves on their own terms with an understanding of the role of the political, social, ideological and cultural context of language and text in the construction of self and reality (Morrell, 2008). The challenge for the adolescent girl was not simply a "dance" as described by Gee (1999) between her social worlds, but a recovery from the moralistic judgment and stripping of her identity as a gendered and sexual being. The cultural models found in text and social worlds influenced how the LBT adolescent girl identified who she is and who she will become. Her performances in each social world depended on the varying degree of "being out", voice and authenticity, which she possessed in each social world.

This engagement became a site for significant tension among the adolescent girls positioned within a "traditional dichotomous definition" of a woman or subject as good-bad, heterosexual-homosexual, freak-diva (Fordham, 1993, p.4). These fixed subject positions for the LBT adolescent affected what the literacy resources made available to her because of the lack of significance to her identities and community knowledge in both homosexual and heterosexual worlds. Theories of post-structuralism and critical literacies offer a set of tools to help deconstruct the boundaries, which keep power, privilege and access out of the hands of the LBT adolescent girl.

Each of the four girls in this chapter realized that it was not enough to talk about how others have named them, but the real social changes occur when they actively took-on or resisted the discourse or roles expected of them. The book club provided the girls a safe space to move through the activities of identification of issues, inquiry, critique, raising possibilities, acting on possibilities, and culminating in self-transformation (Dellinger, 1998). The book club as a third-space world disrupted the notion of fixed gender characteristics and made room for trying on different identities. The girls wrote/rewrote their lives through "counterpublic narratives" (Fraser, 1990) which brought to the surface a mixture of hope, fear, power, and desire and enabled the girls to image themselves in different roles and settings.

For this reason, the chapter reiterated the need for intentional disruption of space in out-of-school and in-school settings for the LBT adolescent to bring their own agendas, histories, and subject positions in order to claim human agency. The book club offered a space for the adolescent girls through literacy to tell their own stories about renegotiated individual and collective identities that were unlike any other secondary school literacy experience. As one girl said, "No one has ever asked me to tell my story."

Each of the four girls drew on "their experience with life and language as the raw materials" to elicit a deeper understanding between the literature and their histories (Rosenblatt, 1995). The girls needed a safe space to "live through" what is being fostered during reading without fear of repercussions because their ideas do not conform to dominant ideas (1995), and so they are not constrained by limited constructions of gender and sexual identities in school and society. It is crucial for the LBT adolescent to understand how literacy functions as a means of participation in society, and how it constructs her life and identity.

CHAPTER 5

Analysis

The analysis of findings begins with a brief discussion on what constitutes agency followed by how the girls through context, writing, visual representation, and talk began to enact change in their lives. The four research questions which guided this study, were:

1. To what extent does engagement with multiliteracies in a safe, LBT out-of-school space, contribute to the development of personal agency in the lives of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents in ways that enable them to enact change in their lives?

2. In what ways do lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents in the context of a LBT supportive, out-of-school literacy space, draw upon multiple and competing social constructions of gender and sexuality to construct meaning from text?

3. How can critical engagement with literature provide opportunities for lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents to "talk back" to stereotypical, mainstream, perspectives of gender and sexual identities inherent in much contemporary young adult literature?

4. To what extent do lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents, in a LBT supportive literacy space, use multimodal literacy practices to reconcile variations of performance in their memberships in both the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender and heterosexual communities?

Introduction.

Ongoing throughout the girls' participation in the book club, I used discourse analysis as a method to identify the girls' "language in use" (Gee, 2006) in order to better understand the significance of the writing, visual representation, and talk and the ways in which the girls were

engaging in these literacy events. As discussed in chapter one the acquisition of personal agency can disrupt the societal constructs that work to silence, police, devalue, and jeopardize these girls' identities and voice; as well as those of all other marginalized populations. Moore & Cunningham (2006) interpret agency as a human dimension, which emphasizes freedom. In this study, Jordan's, Lucky's, Meanz's, and Thee's personal engagements with multiliteracies cultivated a 'free space' (Weis & Fine, 2000, p.80) in which to share thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and self-determination; all of which attributed to an increased sense of agency.

This sense of agency emerged gradually and in a recursive manner as they talked, wrote, responded and internalized strategies from these interactions; then used these strategies to regulate their own thinking and actions (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). The girls began to "talk back" (Hook, 1989) as a means to sort through and critique gender and/or sexual identity issues. As Moore and Cunningham explain, it is the "internal dialogue of the human mind that permits the presence of agency" (2006, p.135). As the following analysis demonstrates, the girls' agency resulted from the use of multiliteracies to connect their past, present, and future selves and the caring relationships among the girls and the facilitators, which promoted their agency (Moore & Cunningham, 2006**).**

As suggested by Gee (2011) the girls' language created the context of the book club by "how they spoke, what they said, and how they said it." Gee refers to this as "reflective" property of context (2011, p.85). Simply put, what an individual says reflects the context (physical setting) while, at the same time, the context (physical setting) reflects back what the individual says. Gee provides the example, if he stands in front of the classroom as a professor and gives a lecture, his way of speaking and acting create the context (physical setting) of the classroom. However, if the classroom did not exist as an institutional context, he could not speak or act as a

lecturing professor (p. 85). The following examples from the study will build on the "reflective" property of context for discourse analysis based on the work of Gee. I used Gee's #13 context reflective tool to understand how the girls' talk and actions created the physical setting (context) of the book club. Specifically, I answered the following questions as outlined by Gee (2011).

1. How does what an individual girl says and how and when she says it help to create, recreate, shape, or reshape what listeners receive as the physical setting of the book club?

2. How does what an individual girl says and how and when she says it help to (reproduce) physical setting that is helping them to continue to exist in time?

3. In what ways and in what instances are individual girls unaware that they are reproducing physical setting of meaning that if they were aware, they would not choose to reproduce?

4. To what extent does what an individual girl says and how she says it replicate physical setting, transform, or change them?

The shaping of identity through the physical setting (context) of the weekly book club.

The physical environment of the suburban office, the site of the weekly book club consisted of a large open space, several windows, and areas for art, writing, talking, and eating. Over time, the girls took ownership of the office by decorating the walls with their writing and drawing pieces. They enjoyed the ambience created by dim lighting, burning candles, and comfortable chairs. From the beginning, it was evident that each of the girls brought their own "literate currency" to the book club; literacy acquired from school, personal, social, and family experiences (Obidah & Marsh, 2006). The girls' literate currencies were those socially accepted ways of using language, thinking, and acting associated with being a member of their respective social communities. From the start of the book club sessions, it was evident that the physical

setting of the book club was conducive to the girls as readers, writers, and artists. However, what was particularly interesting was how the girls eventually engaged the space and one another in a recursive process of construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction. It was through this process, which at times could be acrimonious and somewhat chaotic, the girls ultimately consciously worked to provide a safe, respectful, and caring setting for all the girls.

As described earlier, to prepare for the book club, I bought art supplies and collected objects such as lamps and posters, in order to convert the office space into a welcoming book club setting. I understood my central role as a facilitator using the format of a literature focus unit and was prepared with activities and materials. Unfortunately, initially as explained in more detail later in this chapter, I failed to recognize the girls' needs to struggle, contest, and transform the physical and emotional context of the book club because it was like no other literacy setting they had experienced in a secondary school setting.

"Okay, does anyone want to start"? "Start what"? "Talking".

The following analysis describes how each of the four girls contributed and created the physical setting (context) of the book club by "how they spoke, what they said, and how they said it" (Gee, 2011. p.85). The book club's structure and social positioning of the girls shaped one another and shaped the processes and practices of what eventually counted as valuable literacy capital to the group (Beach, Thein, Parks, 2008).

As mentioned in chapter four, for the first month of the study, the physical setting of the book club and the girls' interaction was constrained by Lucky's behavior and community discourse, including aggressive behavior, policing behaviors, and using strong language such as "hoes" and "bitches' directed at the other girls. Lucky imposed on the other girls her cultural models and beliefs about ways of being and acting. These models served for Lucky as scripts,

which strongly influenced the way she acted, talked, and behaved as a stud (Gee, 1999; Strauss & Quinn, 1997) in the book club. The cultural models of a stud taught her to be "hard" which meant not showing emotions or listening to others' opinions. The girls did not challenge Lucky's "in your face" behaviors, so their individual voices drifted to the margins of the book club at least at the beginning.

Although the book club was in the format of a literature focus unit, I did not want to pollute the genuineness and authenticity of the book club with set rules and a rigid structure imposed by me. However, the flexibility of the format and passivity of the other girls allowed Lucky to move into a position of control and dominance. She recognized that her behavior and language effectively functioned for her in her own Discourse community, so she replicated it in the book club. The exchange between the girls and Lucky often became insulting, aggressive, and abusive and did not contribute to the production of positive book club.

The girls allowed Lucky to take center stage by allowing her to be the first to share her writing or to take the first piece of pizza. The majority of girls did not see their position in the book club as relevant because their focus was to keep Lucky off their backs. For instance, Meanz avoided all confrontation with Lucky by not challenging her authority. She did not have allegiance to Lucky as a friend, so Meanz did not permit Lucky to escalate their differences into a shouting match. Meanz understood the relevancy of the book club to her own needs. She loved to read and write and to share her thoughts with the group. Meanz did see herself as a relevant part of the book club but needed to devise strategies (agreeing with Lucky) as a way to maintain some level of relevancy, voice, and a place in the book club. Meanz like the other girls were not yet ready to confront or challenge Lucky's self-imposed authority.

Lucky successfully replicated a setting that valued her opinions and ideas above all the other girls. She sought to create a context, which satisfied her need for an audience as a reader and writer. This was not surprising because she never experienced a literacy setting with an audience of LBT women with the freedom to share personal feelings and issues about gender and sexuality. Lucky claimed, (interview, April 7, 2010) "the girls wanted me to take charge of the book club because they allow me to make decisions outside of the book club." As explained by Moore & Cunningham (2006) having the girls participate as one voice during the group discussions might improve the group dynamics but will do little for the girls' sense of agency. The book club had become a place of conformity, rather than one of appreciation for diversity of experience and ideas and acceptance of all the girls' stories (Laidlaw, 1998). Although Lucky exerted agency to claim a leadership role in the book club, this was a toxic form of agency. Her behavior and language impeded the girls in subtle ways. Many of the girls resisted the idea of sharing their writing and collage work because they felt their voice would not be acknowledged in the book club. Jordan commented on Lucky's behavior during her first interview (April 8, 2010) because I asked her why she suddenly became so quiet during group discussions, "Oh because I was like, "What-the-fuck-ever, I don't even care anymore." I was like, if nobody's going to listen to my opinion, and then I'm not going to say shit. Oh, well. So I was like, fuck it."

Sharkey (2004) makes the point that the silencing can be a type of "counterlanguage" or a "strategic suspension" which recognizes silences not as a deficit of language but as a political action (p. 495) For example, Jordan was cautious with sharing her opinions because she did not want to disrupt the "harmony" of the group. She made comments such as, "I ain't gonna say nothing else because this is just bad cause I would end up getting angry and people would be getting mad at me" during many group discussions. Jordan policed her own comments for fear of

failing or destabilizing the group. She was very much aware of how others could hurt her with their words or reactions. Jordan often spoke about how "people's emotions get hurt and feelings get hurt.

Thee silenced her voice as explained by Fine &Weis to "hide and control" inquires into her lived experience (2003, p.16). She was not willing to take the risk to expose her dangerous memories in writing or talking because it brought her to a place from which she could only speak very quietly" (Lewis, 1993). Initially, Thee existed on the margins of the book club not willing to share the memories of the murder of her mother and the emotional abandonment by her father because her identity as a stud was to be emotionally detached, with a "hard" (tough) image. It took Thee many weeks to find her voice and place in the book club. Her altered image, *Decisions* (see Figure 20) was her first attempt to voice personal feelings. Thee explained as she worked on her collage "She (the woman) looks like she's got a smirk on her face and the baby is clueless. And that's how I feel. I think like the baby, but I'd rather think like her (the woman)…Because she's in control."

The role of literacy events in creating the physical setting (context) of the book club.

My purpose in introducing the critical literacies strategies as discussed in chapter three was to provoke, challenge, and illuminate productive activities and accompanying discussion which would assist the girls to become a community of writers and readers rather than settle for a book club constituted by arguing, bullying, and self-censorship (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). The girls' educational and community experiences taught them that public sharing of lived experiences is unsafe territory, as one of the girls explained, "So if I'm in a classroom full of people, I'm not going to talk because they don't care. If it's just me and somebody else, I might." I understood how the physical setting of the book club could affect the stories, created and

shared by the girls. I did not want to pollute the authenticity of the group by lecturing the girls on how to "behave" in a book club and believed the proposed critical literacies strategies (see Figure 4) would disrupt the girls' perceptions of their passive roles and social positioning in the book club. The girls' interactions with the strategies helped them to develop self-consciousness by comparing and contrasting their polyphonic identities with not only themselves but with the group. The first few strategies engaged the girls in types of reader response activities in order to provide them the opportunity to make self-to-text connections using the novel, *London Reign.* I used Stem Connections prompts (Sprague, Keeling, 2007) with the group to (see Appendix N) foster reflective thinking. Stem Connections are open-ended prompts such as "That reminds me of"… "If I were that character, I would"… The girls stated that the stem connection template was useful for guiding their thinking because the prompts provided a structure for their answers.

In another critical literacy activity, the girls drew an open-mind portrait of a character. An open-mind portrait was a way for the girls to examine a character and reflect on story events from the character's viewpoint. These portraits have two parts: the face of the character is on one side, and the mind of the character is on the second page (Tompkins, 1991). For example, Jordan chose to critique Lexi's (London's sister) decision to leave her home after London's father and mother kicked London out. Jordan's critical response to the character's decision was "No, I think it was dumb. I think Lexi was just going off what she felt at the moment. And I feel like the way she dealt with it was just really overreacting." Jordan disagrees with Lexi's decision because her beliefs and practices conflict with the character's beliefs and contributed to the meaning she makes from the text.

The girls' work with the critical literacy strategies was instrumental in redistributing the group's power relations because the girls' roles shifted based on the social and cultural resources

available in the book club such as the right to share and heard. Their shared dialogue brought self-consciousness to the girls about the commonality of their lived experiences. As Meanz said, "I never knew others thought like I did." In addition, the girls experienced the contradictory nature of the "voice" (Blake, 1997) of the characters and each other. Lucky noticed by saying, "I didn't think Shortie (participant) had an opinion on anything."

Emergence and reconstruction of the book club as a site for "speaking a language of possibilities".

Gradually, the book club became a "homeplace" as described by bell hooks (1990). A safe haven for the girls to contribute experiences and memories that they initially thought were too dangerous to share with others. They no longer feared judgment, anger, or rejection by the other girls in the group. The girls 'spoke a language of possibilities,' which was not a reproduction of a reality they had experienced before this time (Carney, 2000, p.129) but one which extended the girls beyond a static categorization in which society, community, and family had positioned them. The book club transformed into a space, which allowed the girls to safely work out differences and to critique their identity outside "the gaze" of those that dominated their lives (Weis & Fine, 2000, p.92).

Meanz was one of the first to 'speak a language of possibilities" when she openly identified as bisexual a daring feat with a group of lesbians because many in the lesbian community believe bisexuals are not to be trusted. As confirmed by Ericka, "I don't want my girlfriend around no bisexuals." Meanz explored the meaning of her bisexuality through the words and images displayed on her identity poster (see Figure 20). "Okay, what it is, I'm not no labels at all. I just like females and males. If I date a female and we go forever until I'm dead, I'm still not a lesbian, I just liked that female. I'm not going to be looking for a man-none of

that-but if a man comes along and I'm in love with that man and we go all the way then until we're dead."

She spoke of the fluidity of her sexual identity without naming categories such as stud, lesbian, or femme. Meanz's openness legitimatized for herself and the girls the right to share opinions without the fear of being discounted or silenced. Meanz's enjoyment of reading and writing enabled her to take the risk to be open with the girls. It was as if Meanz had been waiting for an opportunity like the book club to make her private voice public. She said, "That the book club was important because I am not heard by others in my life." Her willingness to discuss tough issues became a social practice within this Discourse community. Both in the girls' interactions with one another as well as how they used their work (writing, art, and sharing) to critique their past understanding of self and others and to also critique and resist society's (family, friends, and community) attempts to assign roles and ways of being to them. Even Lucky realized "I think I am gonna feel comfortable sharing here."

Shifting the power from literature focus to literature circles.

The steps the girls and I were taking to create a community of readers and writers led us to a more natural, more productive peer-led literature circle format. I modeled and provided practice with critical and reflective literacy tools (see Figure 4) to help the girls' transition from a literature focus to a literature circle format. These critical literary tools provided the girls with a safety net of support, which prepared them for their independent roles in the literature circle.

Because the literature focus unit did not require the use of participant roles, the girls were excited about taking on the various roles of the literature circle. Jordan explained, "I'm gonna like the roles because the discussion won't be all over the place because everyone got a role. I will be more prepared." I facilitated a discussion on the purpose and the roles of the literature

circle. The whole group discussion was helpful because the girls had never experienced a literature circle in a secondary school setting. After the group discussion, the girls decided on the following roles that I provided for them on a handout: Discussion Director: Writes discussion questions or prompts; Line lighter: Finds five lines or short passages that are important to story; Summarizer: Provides a summary of the events that happened; Journaler: Sketches key scenes in the passage and explain why the sketches are important to the story.

The girls chose the roles according to the role's task. For example, Jordan, as the summarizer appreciated the structure of writing a summary, Thee as the line lighter was thrilled to select only five important lines from the novel, Lucky retained her leadership role as the discussion director and Meanz loved to get personal as the journaler. The girls decided to keep the same roles. Jordan commented, "The roles were like an assignment in school. I feel like it was easier."

As the book club evolved into a more natural, peer-led literature circle, so did the girls' roles and sense of agency as readers and writers. The literature circle format created and revealed a qualitatively different kind of social relation and engagement among the girls, which was not evident during the first six weeks of the book club. After experiencing the first literature circle Jordan told the group why she liked this style of discussion (session 7, May 2, 2010), "It was a closer discussion and you got to hear the voices of more people's opinions. I felt like I had a voice."

The most obvious change was a sense of considerateness (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998) as the girls interacted with one another. For instance, in the following example, considerateness as heard between Meanz and Jordan during a group activity became a common social practice and positively contributed to the context (physical setting) of the book club.

Meanz: Oh, I'm sorry. I wanted you to finish it.
Jordan: I'm sorry. I'm done with my area, my area is filled.
Meanz: You can have some of my area, go ahead

In addition, the girls affirmed each other's comments as heard between Lucky and Meanz

discussing how love changes a person's way of living.

Meanz: I don't need someone to be here with me, but I do feel that once I have someone, it's hard not to imagine them here. My mate is my everything, so they do make me feel good, and make me have a reason to live.
Lucky: Now that was good. That just cleared it up for me even more because I was really confused when I was writing. But that just cleared my mind.

As the girls engaged in mutual and empathic dialogue the relationships within the group

took on new meanings (Leadbeater & Way, 2007). The girls openly shared their ideas and

experiences without the threat of others silencing them. They began to trust each other and rely

on each other for suggestions and support. For instance, Lucky shared what she liked about a

girl's identity mask. "Three things I like is, it says lesbian on one side and normal on the other.

The blacked-out eyes. And then the hair on one side of the face and smooth on the other. That

what I like." Opportunities such as these created a book club context characterized by respect,

reciprocity, and caring among the girls.

Thee acknowledged the support she received from the other girls, "I met different people.

I met people who embraced and empowered me. Even though I might not make decisions based

on what the whole group was doing. It was good to know that the other girls supported what I do.

Like everyone in the group helped me, just with the little stuff they would say." She explained

further "because what the group say, what group do, has an impact on me, and

it helps me grow as a person. It helps me to feel whether I want to be like them or not."

The reconstructed context (setting) of book club allowed the girls to carry themselves or to

be carried across as described by (Fine & Weis, 2000) as the "social borders of differences" (p.

159). The reconstructed book club allowed space for the dialogue of young women, which acknowledged their agendas, histories and subject positions and claim to human agency. While helping the girls to crystallize their attitude and knowledge of how they view their world without the confines of other's beliefs or values (Rosenblatt, 1995). The harm lies with school-based literature circles that disenfranchise and effectively silence the voices of these particular girls who find themselves living outside the recognized "norms" of mainstream society.

The girls fashioned their identities through their writing.

As explained by Blair (1998) "a writer's voice has many meanings. It is a print of the writer on the piece. It reflects what she knows, who she is, what she values, fears, and considers. The recognition of one's voice, the experimentation with representing one's life in written text, and the confidence to move from a private sphere to a more public sphere all contributing to the strengthening of voice" (p.15).

I begin this section with Blair's interpretation of a writer's voice because one of the successes of this study was the transformation of each girl as she found her positive concept of self while juggling her openness in each of her social worlds (Wissman, 2007). For example, Jordan wrote (session 1, March 22, 2010) in response to her image (see Figure 27) that being a lesbian is like living in hell because "I had a friend, and she was actually my close friend-she was like, you're gay? And I was like, I like females, yeah and she backed away from me and our friendship" To achieve self-transformation the girls' recursively moved through the three major tenets of critical literacy: construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction as demonstrated by their use of multiliteracies. The non-linear movement of the girls through the three processes marked by transitions reflected the changes in the girls' writing. Throughout, the girls drew upon the varied discourse relevant to their life experiences and identity construction (e.g. race, gender,

sexuality, social class) to engage in the work of the book club. Through the various writings and projects they completed, the girls used combinations of texts (e.g. drawings, identity masks, writing, etc.) to begin to pose questions, negotiate meaning with one another, and pose possible "answers" or new understandings. Although there are other stances from which to understand critical literacy (e.g. for the purposes of this study), I am focusing on a perspective of critical literacy that is concerned with both the social and cultural construction of meaning in transactions with text as well as constructions of meaning within the larger social and cultural settings within which they lived their lives.

I recall as I handed each girl a writer's notebook at the study's introductory session the metaphoric nature of the spiral bound notebook as a tool to capture her sincere and innocent memories for the world and me to read. To understand the interconnectedness of literacy and the girls' identity, I used Gee's # 16: *The identities building tool* (2011). The identities building tool helped to identify the girls' socially recognizable identity or identities they were taking on or were getting others to recognize in their writing, visual artifacts, and talk. As I engaged in the ongoing analysis of their work, I posed the following questions (2011)

1. What sort of identity is the girl building for herself?
2. What sort of identity is she building for others?
3. What role does the identity the girl is building for _____ play in the girl's own identity building?
4. What tensions or contradictions (if any) in how the girl attempts to build her own identity both through talk about herself and through juxtaposing her identity to the one she attributes _____ to?
5. How is the girl positioning others, what identity is the speaker inviting them to take up?
6. The girl used themes to build her identities from somewhere. Where did the girl get some of her themes?

For the remainder of this chapter, I begin by retracing the girls' writing, visual artifacts, and talk individually instead of weaving their stories together. As I wrote, it became apparent to

me that the most cohesive and best way to do justice to the girls' stories of transformation was to address each girl individually across the writing, visual artifacts, and texts. Additionally, after each of these sections I include a discussion addressing this study's research questions and how the questions pertain to each section. The discussions include addressing the major themes, which were consistent in the girls' writing, visual artifacts, and talks. Although I discuss each of the themes separately, this does not imply that the themes existed isolated from each other. The themes were dependent on each other, making up the girls' polyphonic identities. As the girls moved through the process of using multiliteracies, their understanding as articulated through the discussion of the themes, did not remain the same.

The girls' write, create, and talk despite outside societal "voices".

As described by Foucault (1999), a child does not first discover their homosexuality, and then interpret what it means; he or she finds it, already interpreted by the ways society describes it. The girls used categories (femme, stud, transperson) in their writing to describe their sexual and gender identities and behaviors based on the discourse of their social worlds that included but was not limited to the heteronormative messages of what constituted a lesbian, an African American, female, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and gender. As Butler (2004) claims, *ourselves* have not one single author, this notion was obvious as the girls chose snippets to include in their writing and collage pieces from group discussions, the selected novels; past and present experiences to further understand their sexual and gender identity. For the most part, the girls' writing was meaningful to them because of its linkage to their thoughts, feelings and writing such as romantic relationships, family issues, and friends.

The girls fashioned their identities through their visual artifacts.

Although the majority of the girls struggled with writing on a weekly basis, I could not say the same about their desire and/or need to fill their collage workbooks with sketches, snippets of love poems, photographs, doodles, magazine pictures and other's art. The recasting of meaning from writing to another sign system, [collage] enabled the girls to develop a richer understanding of their identity as a person including their beliefs, experiences, and emotions. As Designers (The New London Group, 2006) the girls brought their experiences, life stories, and bits of the world to the pages of their collage workbooks. Jordan explained, (interview, June 17, 2010), "The drawing was like-with the drawing, you can basically say what I have said in the writing for the drawing. Just looking at the picture, you could say, "Oh, hey, this is what she said on this one, "and it would say the same in my writing."

Using several different types of "how to do books" for journaling I introduced the girls to a variety of strategies for creating journal pages such as page altering, collage, and image transfers. Although the girls did try the strategies during the book club sessions, their collage workbooks never reflected further evidence of experimentation. On several occasions, Thee reminded me "Black people don't do arts and crafts." With that said, I presented the work of well-known African American collage artists such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence to the girls. To no avail Thee reminded me again "Black people don't do arts and crafts." When I asked Thee why she thought this, she simply said, "Because they don't."

Lucky's visual artifacts.

Please note I have discussed the girl's images in detail in the previous chapters. Lucky got some of her themes from the different discourses of her social worlds some of which were marked with fear, judgment, and nonacceptance. She acknowledged the ease of conformity but

understood the importance of resisting the imposition of the normative ideals of gender and sexuality. Lucky understood the limitations of her voice with her family and in other social worlds but used her art to rewrite dominant gender and sexual scripts. The pages of her collage workbook allowed Lucky to share her feelings about her identity, love, relationships, and fears. She confidently talked back to others by saying "this is normal for me."

Lucky took pride in identifying as a lesbian stud and as a member of a collective community, which included her peers and family. She felt there was "power in numbers" when taking social action against the dominant sector. Lucky explained (interview, April 7, 2010) "If you think about it, we have so many people who hate gays or so many people that think that this is their world and we're actually living in our own, it's a powerful thing, we just got to know how to stand by it." She acknowledged the tensions between how she identified in her social words and how the world constructed her as a lesbian stud. Lucky resisted the imposition of normative ideas by visually representing the complexities of her identity. She was often "outraged" about the cultural and societal forces, which oppressed her as a stud. Lucky outwardly resisted imposed identity categorization by repeating, "I do not want to be a man" and "I don't want to have a sex change (session 3, April 7, 2010).

Her visual artifacts reflected, "talking back" (Hooks, 1989) to societal expectations while creating a counter narrative of what constitute gender and sexual identity. She confidently voiced her reasons for performing as a lesbian stud and recognized her personal significance despite conflicting societal norms. Lucky's visual artifacts solidified her desire to take a hold of her own life and to envision future possibilities. For example, the artifact of a bloody hand holding a rose (see Figure 9) represented her strength to overcome her past pain and to heal.

Fear and pain were underlying themes of many of her artifacts. Lucky feared the violence and hatred, which accompanied her identity as a stud. She used the words "yuck," and "no gays allowed" and an image of a gun to represent the constraint placed upon her identity. Lucky strategically selected these words encoded with her historical and personal memories (Wissman, 2009) of being a lesbian. These messages heard through multiple discourses were marked with judgments and expectations of what is gender and sexuality (2009). She juxtapositioned these messages with phrases with a biblical reference such as "forgive me father I have sinned," and "lesbians are welcomed in heaven." Lucky's visual artifacts reflected resistance to multiple social discourses. She challenged the authoritative voices of others that have constructed her voice, beliefs, and thinking (Moje & O'Brian, 2001).

Through images, Lucky articulated her personal thoughts about love, relationships, and the vulnerability of it all. Her artifacts professed the confidence of a young woman not willing to be confined to the ascribed boundaries (Wissman, 2009) of the homosexual and heterosexual communities, for example, as she explained to the discussion group, "I can't share my feelings because I am a stud" (session 1, March 22, 2010). Lucky wanted to freely participate in her social worlds as a stud but felt constrained by the normative ideals of gender and sexuality. She felt vulnerable to the societal forces, which could cause harm. This feeling of vulnerability made Lucky have a sense of being "out of place" with her father, mother and others that did not understand her. She knew it was "important to feel comfortable in one's own skin because you have to wear it" but at times, felt threatened by the authoritative voices of others as seen in the artifact (see Figure 12) with the all-knowing eyes.

Lucky thought it was unfair that homosexuals do not have the same societal privileges as heterosexuals (session 6, April 25, 2010). Lucky acknowledged the tension between the two

communities and at times felt, she had to convince the heterosexual community that "she was good" this was evident with her previously stated biblical references. Lucky's vulnerability was showing her feminine side in the homosexual and heterosexual communities but she felt protected by her stud appearance and behavior as evident by the use of Transformer-like image used in her altered image (see Figure 14).

She acknowledged the hurt that others have caused her as represented by a bloody rose. Lucky felt that it was important to have a voice but at times, it resulted in pain. For example, the artifact of Lucky crying when she found out her father was HIV infected the past ten years represented her need to question him on keeping this secret from her. She could not find the words or courage to tell her father how she felt about the situation. Lucky was hurt that her father further distanced himself from her and the family by not sharing his status (interview, June 18, 2010).

The tension, which Lucky had, was the effort needed to balance her stud identity with a feminine identity, which others expected from her. Her altered image (see Figure 14) represented her feminine side positioned between two upright masculine images. The masculine images are protecting the horizontally positioned feminine image. In a sense, the feminine image suggested calmness, stability and tranquility while the vertical masculine images gave a feeling of balance, formality and alertness (Bang, 2000).

Lucky did not reject her identity as a stud but had a difficult time convincing others to accept her. In many of her artifacts, she "talked back" (Hook, 1989) to others by asking questions such as "why not" and "there's nothing wrong with…" Many of her artifacts addressed love and relationship (See Figure 11). She contradicted her fun and playful images of romance and her present relationship with images of the vulnerability of love. She expressed her fear of

intimacy and letting others "see her heart." Many of Lucky's images portrayed future possibilities, including a job, education, and travel. Her later artifacts are affirmative images of who she wants to become (Wissman, 2009) instead of positioning herself as a "victim" of her gender and sexual identity, which was evident when she said, "I can't get a job because of how I dress." (interview, June 18, 1989). Her visual artifacts reflected a future, which could not be determined by the past or the language of others.

Meanz's visual artifacts.

It was interesting that Meanz's collages (see Figures 16-18) visually represented the exploration of her polyphonic images unlike her writing, which focused mainly on her new relationship with Omar. She created an identity of "being in control" of her life choices. This was first evident when she presented her identity poster to the group (session 2, April 4, 2010). Her images reflected a sense of agency represented by a clenched fist positioned in an upward position, rainbow flag positioned upward, and her image of a woman of a thousand faces (with Meanz's face) positioned high on the page) (see Figure 17). Meanz showed resistance to the voices of others by addressing the tension of conflicting ideologies such as femininity, masculinity, beauty, and perfection. At times, she had a silenced voice but shared stories of pain to the viewer. Meanz said (interview, April 12, 2010) the act of cutting released the pain and hurt she has felt in her life and was one of her most liberating actions. Her collages also reflected a distortion of self-created by cutting, not fitting societal images of beauty, and policing herself.

The identity she created for others represented idealized beauty, femininity, and sensuality. She highlighted women in lingerie, swimsuits, underwear, and eveningwear. Meanz emphasized beauty by framing her images with words such as "sex, free", "spotlight", "sleep with me", "wild", and "wet". It is interesting that Meanz removed the heads of many of her

images of women. She also created an image of women existing below the spotlight in a troubled world reflective of pain, hurt, and abuse (see Figure 18). Meanz realized others; especially women cannot be perfect because each woman (every rose) has its thorn. Meanz believed her outer appearance in the form of dress and tattoos was a barrier to letting others know her authentic self. In one of her collages, she represented her "hard" unattainable side with a brick wall and wrote that the brick wall would slowly come down when trust, loyalty, true love, support, honesty, and faithfulness became present. Only then would another person have the opportunity to see her "true self."

Meanz wanted to achieve a certain level of perfection in her life but her "failure" to meet those expectations troubled her. She compared herself to others in terms of beauty, femininity and financial worth. Meanz wanted to live in the "perfect" world but was anxious because of her sexual identity, cutting, beauty, and gender expression. At times, her "perfect" world was only words pasted on her collages, "They treat us with respect," "They hug us with their smiles," and "They believe in us." Meanz understood that acceptance is difficult because of the color of her skin, the size of her body (when she was overweight), and the choice of partners; she created a perfect world to hide her pain and hurt.

Meanz denoted a feeling of perfection in her collages by frequently using the words "paradise" and "wonderland" with images of butterflies, royal crowns, and beautiful homes and gardens. She juxtapositioned her image of "perfection" with words of imperfection "nothing lasts long," "every rose has its thorns" and "I'm a prisoner of my own thoughts." This dichotomy as described by (Arthur, 1993) was normal for Meanz to feel free and enchained, capable of making life choices but burdened by personal constraints.

Meanz positioned others to listen to her thoughts about being a lesbian. It is interesting that in one of her early collages she wrote a series of questions that said, "Always seems to over flow in my brain." Some of her questions included "what makes you gay, bi, drag, or queen?" "Why are gay people considered to be nasty to some cuz it's not in the Bible?" and "Why do some people try to convince you that you are not really gay or lez?" In a later college, entitled, *Randomness* (see Figure 20). Meanz addressed some her questions with her own explanation about love, more importantly lesbian love. She wrote, (writer's notebook ,n.d.)

> Love is Love, no matter where you find it. Although some may try to deny it still exists. Whether it is between a man and a woman or between two women. Love is what it is and it doesn't change. Love is love, still even, if it's the lesbian kind. It still remains beautiful. It is still, Divine.

Meanz respected the opinions of others but made it clear that everyone has an opinion and one opinion is not any better than the next. She wrote (collage workbook, n.d)

So don't use your opinion as if its gold cuz thousands of people got an opinion like yours. Yours ain't no different." She felt the opinions of people should not defer someone from appreciating what is inside a person; she wrote, The only thing that is important about anyone is what is inside.

Meanz got some of her themes from the cultural models in her life such as her mom and the media. She had an idealized perspective of what constitutes a woman's beauty, sexuality, and body. In addition, her experiences with men, women, and friends have created feelings of mistrust. Meanz said, "She had to act "hard" to protect herself from the hurt by others."

Jordan's visual artifacts

Jordan saw her identity as a lesbian as a burden because she said, "her life and career will suffer because of her sexual identity. She said life is simply "a dream," which is not within her grasp (session 2, April 4, 2010). She associated being a lesbian as existing in hell and everything

above her is a dream (see Figure 27). Jordan was confused about who she was and did not know how to fix the pieces of her life together because she felt disconnected in many different ways (see Figure 28). She did not feel comfortable in her contrasting social worlds such as the gay /straight community and the black /white community. Jordan was skeptical about life, love, and relationships and decided how much she would reveal, "You will know what I decide to tell you." It is interesting she referred to herself as being "ripped open and pierced shut" in one of her artifacts (see Figure 32). Her vivid description reflected her difficulty of opening herself up to others; she symbolized these feelings with a drawing of an open safety pin and a razor blade (see Figure 29).

Jordan's collage work reflected a young woman who "cries in silence for help" and "hurts herself to feel alive" (see Figure 29). She doubted her ability to work through the personal obstacles, which created pain and misunderstanding. Jordan questioned her self-worth as a person, in relationships, and as a daughter. She wrote about the religious messages in her collage workbook which caused her to doubt herself such as "did God really mean to do this to me," "Am I really a disease," and "Is what I am doing a sin" (see Figure 30). In her collages, Jordan was asking others for help to stop the feelings of doubt, rejection, and unworthiness, so she can feel good again. She questioned if others are able to see who she really is because she is afraid of sharing herself with others.

Jordan wrote in her writer's notebook "that people do not change" and "if they do change it is only for a moment (April 21, 2010). She doubted her mom would ever change because of her religious beliefs and her dad has been absent from her life since she was a child. She also grounded some of her thinking on the gender and sexual behavior of gay people. Jordan wrote about this confusion in her writer's notebook (March 25, 2010) "why some gay boys act

feminine' while "some gay girls act like dudes." She did not like the idea that "gay girls trick straight girls to have sex with them." Jordan wrote that this type of behavior "do nothing more than make the stereotypes about gay people true." She said, "Others judged and criticized her because of the stereotypes straight people have about gay people."

Jordan thought of her mom as "untouchable" because of her religious beliefs but wanted her mom's acceptance. She cries and cuts her body to get her mom's attention. Jordan wants her mom to "bandage her up." (see Figure 32) Jordan hoped for a picture perfect relationship with her mom. She wanted to write a letter to her mom but felt her mom would not retain the privacy of the letter. In one of her collages she referred to herself as" the novel daughter: "I have my duty to perform." (see Figure 32). Jordan struggled with her sexual identity while trying to live up to her mother's expectations of what a daughter is.

Her collage images reflected the inferiority depicted by being bound, disconnected, and in hell. The uncertainty of the thinking and behavior of others caused Jordan to doubt her decision-making. She could not be a whole person without the approval of her parents, society, and partners, as she wrote, "I can't stand it not knowing the answers to all my questions" (April 16, 2010). Jordan used the colors of red, black, and gray in creating many of her images. The colors contrasted each other just as Jordan's thinking contrasted with others in her social worlds. She portrayed herself as beautiful, gorgeous, and perfect but did not feel others viewed her in this way. Jordan created an image of her "unreal world" of a girl looking in a mirror and seeing the person she wants to be (see Figure 32). Again, the mirror denotes a reality, which is not within her reach. It is interesting that she wrote on this artifact," I use a pencil to create my own world." She felt another world existed because she created images of escape represented by luggage, names of places (e.g. Paris, Britain) and the open road (see Figure 32). In many of her

collages, she drew tears among the images and other words, which represented an overall sadness. The blackness of many of her collages represented her hopelessness and sadness. The blackness spoke to the disconnect she felt from her family, partners, and society.

Jordan's choice of words and images reflected tension and contradictions in her collages such as an image of a pink, beautiful tulip bounded by twisted silver wire and her words (see Figure 32). Jordan said she purposefully selected words and images, which brought her private feelings of pain and sadness to a public audience. The medium of the collage did not require perfection with grammar or choice of word but allowed her to experiment without any boundaries or valuing as right and wrong. A few collages were a display of randomness, which was interesting because Jordan wrote, "writing slows me down and gives me a chance to see the randomness of my life" (April 4, 2010). For one collage, Jordan wrote the statement "so many questions" in a circular pattern and with another collage using a pencil she created a random list of words including "crazy", "who", and "expression", each word having its own style and feel to it (see Figure 29).

Jordan invited others to help heal her through love and acceptance. She told others that she has many unresolved questions and needed help in this matter. Jordan admitted she was skeptical of many things in her life but did not feel confident or strong enough to do it on her own. Jordan's collages showed a small glimpse of her happiness represented by escaping and existing in the "unreal world" seen in the mirror (see Figure 32).

Her themes included pain, emotions, and disconnection, asking for help, escape, not belonging, being unreal, love, and fear. Some themes came from unresolved issues with her partners and family. She wrote, (April 19, 2010) she did not meet the expectations of others, so in return she thought she was not worthy for love, relationships, or happiness.

Thee's visual artifacts.

Figure 34: Thee's collage

Thee built an identity where she began to see future possibilities for herself. Her first several collages explored the possibilities of "striving for the very highest knowing" and "being the best of your tomorrows;" Thee visually complimented her mottos with an image of an endless road and far reaching mountain peaks. Her use of pastel colors such as yellow, green, and blue suggested calmness, wealth, and warmth. The images of the endless road and mountain peaks depicted motion and distance for discovery in the future.

In several of her images, Thee depicted a sense of confusion first about "no gays allowed" (see Figure 25) which ties into her thinking of not being able to marry who she wants to marry and not being accepted by her family. This image was void of color and drawn with a

pencil. The image entitled, *Riddle Me This* (see Figure 34) is much more dramatic because of the use of color, photos, and design. This collage is a tribute to all the people that have passed such as her mom and uncle. The collage is so striking because of the direct gaze of the people in the photos and the circular shape of her writing around her mom and siblings. The collage focused on the question "What happens when everyone you love only exists in pictures?" Thee contemplated her purpose in life because she does not understand why she has been left to exist alone in the world.

In several of her collages, Thee depicted others as something which is feared and not willing to hear her voice. The collage, entitled *Decisions* (see Figure 22) reflected how Thee felt constrained by her social worlds. She visually represented society as a woman with crossed arms and a bulldog face while representing herself as a little girl with a subtle distance between her and the woman (society). The lamppost in the image boldly separates the woman from the child. Thee explained while working on her image that others make decisions for her, so she feels very child-like in making her decisions. The artifacts reflected "a seamless and complete solution while hiding turmoil" (Luce-Kapler, 1999, p.274). As a little girl in the image, Thee is shown as disempowered, lacking a voice and distance from the woman (society). The image reflected a critical consciousness of how Thee positioned herself to others and a sense of agency by asking herself the question "who am I." She did not want to think of herself as inferior to others but was still trying to understand how to make sense of her identities and positioning in her social worlds.

With her artifact, entitled, *A Sea of Lies* (see Figure 24) Thee asks herself the question, "who am I" but this time with an answer for her question. This artifact revealed Thee's dialogue with the discourses of her social surroundings (Hicks, 1998) and a sense of disappointment with herself for taking on a false identity to spare the feelings of others.

The role Thee built for others influenced her need to police herself. Her early visual artifacts reflected new possibilities for her life with a child-like tone, which reiterated her lack of confidence with decision-making. It was as though Thee wanted to maintain the status quo of gender identity while erasing her differences (Sharkey, 2004). The progression of Thee's visual artifacts revealed a shift in her way of interpreting her life. A more definitive tone occurred for example in the image, "No to wearing dresses" (see Figure 24). Thee took a stance about her gender identification while protesting the heteronormative ideal of femininity. Her artifacts begin to reveal more possibilities with a sense of risk to peel back the layers of her life as evident in the image, *Sea of Lies*, Thee wrote "Sometimes I feel like I'm living a life that is not really mine." She was not only negotiating the context of the book club but the sociopolitical context of society (2004) based on her lived experiences with gender identity.

I found it interesting that Thee used pastel colors in her first few artifacts giving the reader the sense of playfulness, tidiness, and seamlessness. However, as Thee's inner dialogue became louder her images became void of color and sketched only with a pencil. She began to go deeper with her interpretations and connections to her own beliefs and the beliefs of others (Sharkey, 2004). Thee's artifacts became bold statements such as "no wearing a dress", "no gays allowed" to introspective questions such as "What is my happily ever after?" and "Decisions! Whose are they really?"

Thee's visual artifacts revealed strong tensions and contradictions between herself and the constraints of her social worlds. She understood she has taken on "false identities" to conform to the discourses of her social surroundings. Her collage work opened the space for future possibilities in life and gender identification. In several of her visual artifacts Thee referred to herself using masculine nouns such as "I should be treated like a king" and "get ready

for the new me, Sean L. Thompson". At the end of the study, Thee's artifacts began to reflect her reconciliation of her own voice with the ideals that society expects and often demands from sexual and gender identity (Benjamin & Irwin-DeVitis, 1998). Thee's use of symbols in her visual artifacts such as a large question mark, an endless road, and unclosed hearts signified her ability to articulate her vision of possibilities while her attempts at resistance were concerned with gender and sexual conformity.

In addition, Thee got some of the themes from the novels read in the book club. She was able to relate her own lived experiences to the life of the characters. As young black women, each endured rejection, pain, unconnectedness, unworthiness, parental rejection, harmful behaviors (drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity), escape, denial, and silencing. Thee made self-to-text connections to each of the books; she often put herself in the shoes of the character.

Discussion on the girls' visual artifacts.

The girls' visual artifacts were generative because they extended the initial meaning of the girls as Designers (The New London Group, 2006). This generativity was demonstrated when the girls' presented their artifacts to the book club. The girls animated their bodies and voice when presenting their visual artifact to the group. The room filled with excitement and tension as the girls asked questions or commented on how each other's themes were similar. Their collage workbooks provided the girls the space to extend, stretch and change to accommodate their polyphonic identities without the worry of grammatical structure, spelling, or length. The girls' stories lifted off the pages and the imagery of their feelings, thoughts, and ideas surrounded the room.

The girls' designed texts (The New London Group, 2006) or visual artifacts reflected their experiences, past discourses, the novels, their writing, and images. For example, in creating

her altered image (see Figure 14) Lucky drew upon variety of discourses "what it means to be a woman," her mom's voice "this is what I what you to be" and a familiar media image denoting masculinity to create a visual artifact of resistance. The idea seed for her artifact began with her writing entry. In this chapter, London endures a lot of pain and heartache because she is a stud. She also gets chance to be out on her own basically finding her independence" (session 2, April 4, 2010). Lucky connected her interpretation of the story–the theme of nonacceptance and independence–to form a new meaning (hybridity) (New London Group, 2006).

Three major themes of the girls' visual artifacts.

One theme of the girls' visual artifacts as discussed in the previous paragraph was resistance. The girls' writing surfaced the issues they found unfair such as heterosexual privilege vs. homosexual privilege, feminine appearance vs. masculine appearance and being "wrongly looked upon"— while their images reflected an act of resistance. The girls co-constructed their stories of resistance as each shared the meaning behind their art. By manipulating different signs within the social context of the book club, the girls were able to "talk back" to societal, community, or family discourses. As demonstrated by Meanz (see Figure 16), "It's me announcing that I want to be a princess without people judging me. You can't be a princess because you got this and this and this and this" (referring to her tattoos).

A second theme of the girls' visual artifacts was gender and sexual identity. The majority of the girls' artifacts were "talking back" (Hooks, 1989) to their social worlds, which have positioned them as inferior because of their identity. Their challenge was to negotiate a multiplicity of discourses about gender and sexuality. Recurring tensions present in the girls' collages were between how the girls felt as lesbians, bisexuals or transgender and how 'others' have constructed who they should be. From a post-structuralist's perspective, this tension was a

result of a mixture of conflicting factors, which influenced the girls' behavior concerning gender and sexuality.

The girls illustrated their struggles in a variety of ways including a flower bounded by wire, beautiful headless women, and a Terminator-like image overpowering a woman's body. The girls' use of symbols and icons linked to a heteronormative interpretation of gender and sexuality, were a significant part of their art. Although the girls acknowledged the conflict between their thinking and the rest of the world, their art had remnants of heteronormative discourse despite their redesigned images of their sexual and gender identity as a stud (see Figure 9), a sexy woman, or a male. As the girls remade themselves, they reconstructed and renegotiated their identities (Cazden, et al, 1996) by taking up different forms of femininity.

A third theme of the girls' visual artifacts was hope. At the time of the study, the girls were unsatisfied about transportation, money, or living situation. Despite the obstacles in the girls' lives some more serious than others, the girls' collage workbooks overflowed with hope. Many of their symbols or icons representing hope were rainbow flags, same-sex couples, money, a baby, traveling, gay rights, and peace to name a few. These symbols carried the beliefs of the LBT culture. In essence, the girls' agency developed as they helped each other find symbols, discussed their meanings, and communicated with each other about matters that concern them.

The girls fashioned their identities through their writing.

Lucky's writing.

In her writing Lucky confidently constructed herself as a lesbian and stud for example she wrote in her writer's notebook (session 1, March 22, 2010) a response to the prompt, "*Who am I"* and goes on to explain "an individual has their own reasons for who they are and what they think or do. That gender and sexual identity was a choice made by an individual." Further,

in the writing she "asked others to accept her as a lesbian, especially a stud. I do gender differently than what society expects of me but I do not want to be a man or have a sex change."

In the same writer's entry Lucky wrote, "loyalty is very important for successful relationships with partners, God, kids, and life." She knew she was abrasive when sharing her ideas or feelings but she believed "if you don't speak up for yourself no ones going to do it for you." She felt voice was crucial to her well-being but often experienced negative repercussions from sharing her ideas or feelings about a situation in the form of arguments with her mom and brother, her mom kicking her out of the house, or decisions ignored by her family like attending a school of her choice (interview, April 7, 2010).

She valued personal freedom and independence but felt that she had many things holding her back in life such as lacking a GED and being a stay-at home "mom" for her younger sister while her mom worked. She wrote, "I live my life not just for myself but also for my little sister and others." Lucky was protective of her family and friends. She wrote in response to the caring and protective nature of the character, London toward her sister, Shantell (writer's notebook, April 14, 2010) it was my responsibility to make sure others like her younger cousin, Ericka would succeed in life. "For Ericka to be very successful in life is a dream that I want to come true she is like my Shantell." She thought highly of friends and people she considered "a good individual." It was difficult when she lost her best friend to suicide a few years ago because Lucky wrote, "she was dear to the earth and could have done some good in the world" (writer's notebook, April 14, 2010).

Lucky positioned herself as invincible to others by "have the ability to get over whatever" someone sends her way like "downtalking (criticisms) fighting, or arguing. She invited others to challenge her opinions and attitude. Lucky explained that being a stud creates problems with

males such as " if a nigga (guy) talks to my girl of course I going to say something so that's when the fights start and god forbid if the nigga loses to a girl (the stud) with other boys around." She believed "people get what they deserve and if you are looking for shit you'll find it (session 1, March 22, 2010).

Lucky's experiences and cultural models helped to create her sexual and gender identity. The cultural model of an African American lesbian Discourse community affected her identity as a stud. Her experiences taught her that the African American lesbian community would make fun of her if she did not perform as a stud being "hard" and emotionless.

The characteristics Lucky took on, as a stud was normal or typical within her Discourse community. In addition she thought her identity was influenced by one or all of these life events including her father leaving the home, grandmother's death, her best friend's death, or her brother in prison. As explained by Marsh & Stolle (2006) Lucky used "distancing" to explore the expression of gender and sexuality through others. In an entry, which was difficult for Lucky to share with the group she wrote, "Sometimes I ask myself. Why are you so selfish? Why are you so mean? How come you can't give anyone your all? and Why do you hardly show any emotions?" (writer's notebook, April, 14, 2010). Lucky used the command form of *you* to share her cultural model about what constituted a stud but does not whole-heartedly accept these characteristics.

There were several examples of contradictions or tensions reflected in Lucky's writing. Her identity as a stud positioned her as having a voice of authority with her partners and friends. Nevertheless, Lucky's mom silenced her voice during family arguments because she took her brother's side. She wrote, "I often felt stupid because I was only protecting my mom from my

brother's hurtful actions and/or behavior during an argument" (writer's notebook, March 26, 2010).

Meanz's writing.

Meanz was the only girl in the group not willing to assign her gender and sexual identity to one category such as a lesbian, straight, or bisexual. She interpreted her sexual identity as fluid. She wrote (March 21, 2010), "I am thankful to God for giving me the ability and strength to be attracted to both sexes equally. It was not until her final interview (June 18, 2010) that she shared what she wrote about her sexual identity,

> I wouldn't say officially I'm a lesbian cuz I'm still attracted to males but at this exact moment I feel more like a lesbian than a bisexual. I feel a part of the rainbow community because of my current relationship with a stud brought that part of me out. I do not want to hide my sexuality any longer. I have been missing my other half (the rainbow side) for some time and now I feel complete as a person. I feel empowered by my romantic relationship because it makes me feel like I am worth something. And she (her partner) makes me feel like I always wanted to be treated…A Princess. But I still do not know myself but this is to be expected because I am only twenty years old.

Meanz writing was a way for her to share her understanding of the characters' relationships in both novels and her relationship with her partner. She wrote (April 11, 2010), "Her partner gave her a chance to prove to herself that she was ready for love. Gay people have to fight for their relationships because everyone in the world doesn't accept the rainbow world. I sometimes forget how cruel the world can be to the rainbow world."

At times, she said she felt vulnerable to others like her partner. She stated "that she was afraid her partner would take advantage of her because she (her partner) knows that I will do anything for her." However, she said, "I am willing to take a chance because I am deeply in love." She wrote, "I have had relationships with men that have been void of attention and affection, so I needed to learn how to become intimate with a female partner. Her writing response was stimulated by the group discussion (session1, April 1, 2010) on intimacy and sex.

In the book , both characters, London and Winter struggled with finding a balance between intimacy and sex in their relationships. In this way the girls' conversations about relationships helped the girls to understand their own position in their current relationships.

Meanz understood the effort needed to have strong relationships with others and acknowledged that trust was very important in creating healthy and positive relationships. On the other hand; she positioned others to keep their distance with her. She was afraid of being hurt and being taking advantage by others. She wrote (June 2, 2010), "I can only trust my partner, my momz and popz. I can tell them anything and not feel like I'm being judged I do not open up to others because I do not want to get hurt. I don't open my heart to people until they touch my soul by mistake."

The girls in the book club discussed trust on several occasions because the lack of trust among the novels' characters emotionally affected their lives. Meanz said, "I will not be in relationships when trust has been compromised between the people." She explained, "I have lost a few good friends because I lost trust in them. I'm sad about it but who needs friends." Meanz added, "All I need in this life of sin is me and my girlfriend with my family on the side. She used her current relationship with Omar as her major writing theme, which reflected her vulnerability of sharing real feelings and secrets while mirroring the relationship issues between the characters London and her girlfriend, Lexi including trust, love, and intimacy. In this way, Meanz came to her own conclusions about the characters and at the same time understood her own values about choosing a partner.

Meanz's writing about her new relationship was overshadowed with other feelings and self-perceptions. For example, Meanz wrote (March 21, 2010), "I identify with being a white girl with an imperfect tan. I don't feel bad about being a white girl or black girl with an attitude, I

know I feel comfortable." However, this statement was juxtaposed with, "sometimes I want to lose myself in drama and endure in some painful fun (sex, drugs, and liquor)". Meanz connected her reasons for "painful fun" to the character, London. In one of her written response, she wrote (March 3, 2010), "I understand why London indulged in heavy drinking and smoking. She was trying to erase the pain she was experiencing in life like the death of her best friend, Scottie. I am way too familiar with that. Its almost scary to see it happen to someone else."

Throughout all of her writing Meanz portrayed herself as a positive young woman despite her struggle with drinking, cutting, and body image. Meanz wrote (April 29, 2010),

> I'm never happy with myself even when I have someone who cherish me. I 'm still not totally happy with who I see or some of the characteristics I have. I look in the mirror a lot because I' am trying to figure out who I am by how I look. I want to be lighter, thinner, softer, smoother, sexier and less hairy.

Meanz thought of London as a role model of change. In her writer's notebook, she wrote (April 11, 2010) "I am impressed with London's ability to turn her life around and become a different person…maybe because she was finally happy and let go of some of her baggage. I believe I am changing for the better not the worse."

Meanz got some of her themes from the cultural models in her life such as her mom. She constructed a self, which was carefree and empowered. However, this was in stark contrast to the cutting, alcohol, drugs, and sex. She did not know what identity she should expose in her writing because she "did not want to be hurt by exposing too much." Meanz admitted sometimes, "I feel scared, alone, and like I had to always protect, defend, and act hard to hide the true feelings I have." In addition, she got some of the themes from the novels read in the book club. She was able to relate her own lived experiences to the life of the characters London and Winter. As young black women, each endured rejection, pain, unconnectedness, unworthiness, parental rejection, harmful behaviors (drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity), escape, denial, and silencing.

Meanz made self-to-text connections to each of the books; she often put herself in the shoes of the character by writing.

- So I know that London feels probably the exact same way that I do when I am scared and alone and that's way London has a masculine approach.

- Shantell being pregnant wasn't a surprise. At this moment in the book, I'm happy for her but I feel like happiness in my life has always had a flip side.

- So, I feel like London when she said, "I always have to protect my sister and I will die for my sister," I (Meanz) knew I loved my sister but I actually didn't know how much until some nigga gave her herpes."

Jordan's writing.

Jordan's writer's notebook spoke of her journey to figure out who she was: a young woman, lesbian, daughter, and partner. The accounts of her journey began with the writing prompts from session 1 (March 22, 2010):

> Who am I?
> What do I believe?
> What do I value?

She wrote, "I'm still on a journey to finding out who I am and no matter how many identities I can take on I don't fully understand myself. I wish I could jot down a list in number order pointing out things that I find are unique in me." Her writing reflected an identity, which was vulnerable to the world and others because she consistently wrote, "I do not fully understand myself". She struggled with having an "identity crisis" and could not understand why she could not have only one identity. Jordan feared judgment by others so she did want to label her identity. She felt others have the power to control her life with hurtful words and behaviors.

Jordan visually represented her feelings of control and hurt in a collage (see Figure 32). In the collage, she used barbwire to bind a pink tulip and a hand drawn red bandage with tears on it to stop the pain. Jordan's experiences with pain, rejection, and abandonment caused her to feel like she failed others and deserved to die. For instances, when her partner broke up with her she blamed herself for not being "good or worthy enough" to be with her. She wrote (April 19, 2010) "my partner deserves better than a worn out freak DAWG." Jordan also sympathized with the hurt she saw in the characters, London and Winter as each struggled to define themselves despite the harmful words and actions from people in their lives. She wrote as if to reflect the thought of the characters (March 24, 2010), "there is so many things I want to try and do and accomplish but I can't because I have too many judgmental people in my life like friends and families."

As the literature circles progressed, the girls made more text-to-text connections between the two novels, *London Reign* and *The Coldest Winter*. During session 8 (May 9. 2010) the girls made a series of connections between how London was "more real" because her life was realistic while Winter's life was "fake" because it was all about money, expensive clothes, weekly lovers, and fancy cars. To the girls Winter's "luxuries" kept her from really knowing herself and the people in her life. Lucky said, "I believe she [Winter] loves her money and she could care less about her family." This group conversation leads Jordan to write (May 12, 2010), "that my authentic self has to exist in a made up world because that's all I know about being real." Her made up world helped her not to feel pain, rejection, and abandonment by her parents and friends. The language that Jordan used in her writing denoted uncertainty because of her frequent uses of negatives, "I don't know, "I don't understand, "My tears aren't there", and "I'm so difficult." She was not confident in choices she has made in life because of the verbal judgment she has heard from her mom "like it is just a phase" and others "I am the most dirtiest thing or

something like that." These frequent verbal reprimands were obstacles in her own decision-making and acceptance of herself. The voices of others replayed in her head, which stopped her from acting on or doing the things in life she wanted to accomplish as a young woman.

Jordan extensively wrote about being stuck in life and feeling a lot of pain because she felt she could not accomplish her life goals. This of course revealed that she cut herself to feel good. She wrote, "I want to be an ice cube so I can numb my feelings. I need an outlet because I'm always so scrambled in my head." (April 21, 2010). When Jordan wrote about cutting her language denoted a sense of doom and hopelessness. For instance she wrote, "I fucked up now, I deserve to die, and I barely love my damn self" (writer's notebook, April 21, 2010). Jordan may not have control on how others and society judge her but she could decide when and how to cut her body. Her self-blame was evident in many of her notebook entries. For example, she wrote (April 18, 2010), "I'm such a fucking fool stupid yes It's time to change I'm going to be twenty soon and still doing the same kind of behavior (cutting). I need to stop what I'm doing." Jordan did not feel stable enough to be in any type of "relationship hell" with family, friends, and partners.

Jordan's writing revealed contradictions of ideas and feelings as she attempted to construct her identity. The conflict in her writing was between what she thought of herself and how others saw her. For example, Jordan wrote (writer's notebook, March 22, 2010), "A lot of people say too much sour and not enough sweet but honestly I think I'm pretty fine and I am so difficult I am told but it's the only way I know how to be." In relationships, she saw herself as the villain and not the victim. However, she contradicted herself when she wrote (writer's notebook, April 24, 2010), "I want others to have the power because I am not neither confident nor strong enough to make my own decisions in life." Jordan found her multiple or polyphonic

identities disconcerting because she was trying to find a single positive self in a sea of contradictions (Ivanic, 1998). This feeling translated into an artifact, entitled, I just gotta find all the pieces (see Figure 28) and a writing entry, "I am immature because a person should know what direction they are headed when they are 20 years old. I just want everything to be set and well planned out" (writer's notebook, March 25, 2011). Jordan shared her concerns with the book club, "Yeah, but I want it to be to the point –I don't know, not like being on the outside. Like I know, I am going to school and I am going to have a good job and gonna have a good life."

Jordan got her themes from how others constructed her based on their own beliefs. She wrote, "because it really bothers me that my family thinks that, 'being gay is a disease,' and she (her aunt's daughter) will catch the 'Gay' if she hangs out with me." Another theme in her writing was a sense of abandonment she feels from her parents, partners, and friends. Jordan wanted her feelings numbed like "an ice cube" because she did not want to be vulnerable to hurt or disappointment, this was evident when she wrote, "Don't open me just leave me alone and I'm just be by myself" and "I have nothing."

Thee's writing.

Thee carefully negotiated an identity for herself despite many obstacles in life including the death of her mom, abandonment by her father, and issues with her (guardian) grandmother. She had a difficult time achieving acceptance by her family and others in her social worlds. She wrote and shared with the group that "others thought I am gay because my mother was murdered when I was young" (session 1, March 22, 2010). Thee explained, "I do not understand the connection between the two issues." This writing entry reflected the personal quandary she had about being gay. Thee often told me that she did not know if her mom would have accepted her

as a lesbian. Despite never knowing her mother's thoughts about her sexuality and gender, Thee refused to be victimized by her mother's death and allow others to define what kind of person she was becoming.

Thee wanted to transition to a male one day. She wrote (March 31, 2010), "I can easily pass for a dude because I am cocky, a show off, and hot tempered. I do take on the role of a dude but many people think that I am girly and very feminine." She thought that gender identification was her own personal decision. Thee had an internal resistance to stand up for what defined her the best (Leadbeater & Way, 2007). Although her family did not validate her self-creation of gender, Thee had a sense of persistence and resilience to define herself on her own terms (2007). She wrote (March 31, 2010), "Although they (her family) don't accept who I TRULY am then they should accept me as I come."

Thee wrote (March 29, 2010) she had many disappointments in her life; so she tried not to hurt others' feelings. She used lying as a strategy to avoid hurting others. For example, she wrote, "I did not come out to my family until her senior year in high school so as not to cause my family pain." She struggled to be honest with her beliefs and values to other people. But with time Thee wrote, "I'll tell the truth point blank."

Thee said "I am suspicious of what others think about me." She wrote how "cruel the world can be, "they" tell you to do something and then turn their back on you without any support." She based her written response on a heated group discussion (session 2, April 1, 2010) on the responsibilities of parents, especially a father to their daughters. The actions of London's father telling London to leave the house because of her stud identity prompted a lively dialogue. Shorty explained, "Yeah, and that's like…Okay I understand what she's saying with both parents, but that's also a father. You know, from the get-go, fathers are the protectors but instead

London's father put her out that should make him feel low, as a man." Lucky added, "You know, I'm not saying that she was a baby, but she still a girl, and she's your daughter." Thee looked beyond just her family and included a more global influence. She wrote, "The world influences my thoughts and any choice I have made. The world has a big impact me." Again, she does not want to disappoint others so she tried to be what others wanted her to be such as "acting like a girl." In addition, Thee was suspicious that more people in her life would leave her like her mom and dad. She wrote she connected with London when her mom picked her husband over her own child. Thee made a connection to her own life. Her response was, "My mom would choose to see a nigga over ME! I don't understand how someone do that to their child whom they BIRTHED!" (writer's notebook, April 11, 2010)

Thee "gave voice" (Blake, 1997) to others in her social worlds while neglecting her needs. The voices and languages of others overshadowed her complex voice. She frequently isolated herself from the adults in her life such as her father and grandmother because they have failed to hear her voice. She wrote, "I have to live my life and she/they/EVERYONE needs to back off" (June 13, 2010). Thee was searching for a voice to help her to explore her gender and sexual identification. She wrote innocently "about conquering the world with love and laughter and that is all we need, no wars, no, fighting, and no hating. Everyone needs to agree that we are all going to disagree." Thee's passivity was her way to work out her struggles with societal norms. In addition, it was her strategy for feeling as if she belonged to a community.

Thee's writing indicated her hesitation to write about "dangerous memories" (Friere, 1972) for a public audience. It was difficult for her to trust the process of sharing details of her life on paper and to the other girls. As explained by Kamler (2001), asking for students to confess information about their lives… can be not only voyeuristic but a form of surveillance to

see if students produce the right voice. To make the process of sharing more comfortable Thee took up a relationship with the character, London and identified with her issues. She wrote (March 31, 2010), "When I read *London Reign* I kinda think of her as myself. Some things that happen to me have happen to London." She was able reveal information about her life using the character, London as a tool to analyze her experiences (Sutherland, 2005). She felt others would comment on London's decisions over her own. The fictional character helped Thee to interpret her own personal stories and to move her to a point of writing, "I have good plan for my life. So I'm going to show everyone and make a name for myself' (interview, June 17, 2010).

As in Luce-Kepler's study (1999) Thee's writing was not a coherent story that fit neatly into the overall stories of her life, but instead fragmented containing "at the moment" snippets, verses of songs, or isolated sketches. As described by Luce-Kepler her "collection of writing resembled an abstract painting rather than a realistic scene- a complex picture of varied lives filled with pleasure and difficulty" (p. 275). Thee had a sense of unconnectedness in her writing; each page spoke of the moment with very few breaks in her about her thoughts and emotions which were tied to the loss of her mother, abandonment of father, and her grandmother's resistance. Thee was fearful to let her voice be heard on the pages of writer's notebook. She would rationalize her lack of weekly writing to "I don't like to write" and "I don't have nothing to write about" Thee struggled to construct written text which helped to reveal what was significant in her life (Blake, 1995) enough to share with others.

Discussion on the girls' writing.

As the data indicates, the girls had multiple purposes for writing ranging from describing to escaping their daily lives. During her final interview, Meanz characterized her writer's notebook as, "a life line to her life, I would die without it." The girls, with the exception of

Meanz struggled with consistently writing for the book club. As Thee exclaimed, "I have never written this much in school." To the girls writing was just another "thing" to complete for school. The girls never experienced writing in a LBT safe setting as a way to broaden their experiences and blend them with others. Ensciso (1998) refers to this kind of literacy experiences as "transpersonal." At times, I felt like I was "pulling teeth" to get the girls to write. Jordan explained the difficulty of writing, "I just be getting upset, and sometimes I just can't write, because it be too much on my mind, just be too jumbled up to write. It just be too much to write. Like you don't even know where to start, because it's so much." Each of the girls struggled for their own reasons, but each enjoyed sharing their weekly pieces even a few sentences to the audience of girls. They loved the discussions often sparked by their written words, which included but was not limited to sex, hairstyles, biblical passages, weekend activities, heterosexuals, or problems at home. I could always count on Lucky to shout out "ooh, ooh, ooh, I want to read my writing first!"

The girls' engagement with reading and writing provided them the opportunity to (re)construct their own gendered identities and beliefs (Marsh & Stolle, 2006). The process of 'inter-animation' or weaving of the literature with their polyphonic or multi-voiced identities was evident in the girls' writing (Ball & Freedman, 2004). Leggo (1998) describes this as deconstruction because the girls read the novels and wrote more text about the novels. This interweaving of the girls words with the words of the novel was the transformation into another text (e.g. writer's notebook entry, poem). This process was recursive in nature as the girls continually revisited their writing as they were "recasting meaning from language to another sign system" (Cowan & Albers, 2006, p.2).

Three major themes of the girls' writing.

One of the themes in the girls' writing was acceptance by society, family, and the heterosexual community. This nonacceptance in their social words created a feeling of inferiority for the girls. The girls shared the discourse of being a LBT young woman in a heteronormative society. As written by Jordan, "It's very unfair that heterosexuals are able to go out without being looked at wrongly." After I read her entry, I thought of Adrienne Rich's "male gaze" (1979, 1980) through objectification when the girls referred to being "looked at wrongly" by not only society but also family members. The girls' resistance entangled with the language of others, which complicated their sense of agency (DeBlase, 2003). The girls "talked back" (Hooks, 1989) to this sociocultural discourse by re-imaging a third space (Beach et al., 2008), the space between the real world and the desired world where her ideas, experiences and knowledge matters. As Meanz shared, "I have been hiding my rainbow side for a long time."

The second theme in the girls' writing was protection. To protect themselves against being emotionally hurt the girls took up different identities. To use a Bahktinian term the girls authored different positions when they said, "I'm mean," I'm hard, and I'm sour" (Enciso, 1998) The girls wrote stories of rejection, abandonment, and loss and each struggled to find a resolution so the pain would disappear. Unfortunately, most of the girls' storylines were rooted to their gender and sexual identity and over time the girls occupied the protective position of "hard" or "mean." These unauthentic positions caused the girls to lose their sense of self. Repeatedly, the girls wrote, "I don't know who I am," and "I don't have a specific name for myself." With time, the girls allowed the "self back into the process of knowing" (Greco, 1999) by finding their voice amidst others. Thee wrote, "What I think if they (world, family) don't accept who I TRULY am then they should accept me as I come. They should not make me be the

Thee that they want me to be." At some level, each of the girls' writing reflected the kinds of person she wanted to be.

The third theme in the girls' writing was relationships. The girls wrote about relationships with friends, brothers, and parents but their relationship with their current partners dominated the pages of their writer's notebook. In addition, it was the theme, which caused the girls to protect their emotions. Jordan wrote, "Me and Thee are broken. Because of me! I just want to cut myself. While Meanz wrote in length, how difficult it was for her to share her feelings with her new girlfriend, she wrote, "I learn how to talk around my feelings and it make it harder for people to hurt me."

The theme of relationships made it easy for the girls to use the reading strategy of intertexuality to make links between the novels and their lives. The girls strongly identified with the relationship decisions of the character, London. On the pages of their notebooks, the girls not only problem-solved their own issues but also provided the characters some advice. Meanz wrote, "At first I thought London as an asshole and I started comparing my own situation with the way London thinks. I thought… If she thinks this way than every stud does. I don't think that no more. But I feel like London should've at least called the people who cared about her." Their writer's notebooks were a site for the "authoring" of the girls' reconstructed self and a desire to claim human agency. Their writing, "enlarged [their] response to the literature" (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 53) by helping them to regain their emotional attachment of who they are and who they were becoming.

The girls fashioned their identities through their talk.

The girls' masks represented the linkage between their past, present, and future selves (Moore& Cunningham, 2006). Metaphorically, the mask represented the girls' execution of

power in their lives (Blackburn, 2005; DeBlase, 2003). Albers & Cowen (2006) explain that semiotics positions individuals to demonstrate their power, or lack of it in their social worlds. While some of the girls' comments included "I would like to be that kind of person. I have a game plan," and "I think it is bright because of my personality now" others said, "I will never be a happy lesbian. It could be 20 years from now and I won't be a happy lesbian" and "my mouth is closed. I can't speak up. Each of the girls' masks indicated a changed perception of themselves, a new awareness or a reiteration of unresolved feelings. The girls' masks represented the complexities of their identities as they used the sign systems (multiliteracies) as tools for thinking (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000).

Lucky's identity mask.

Lucky's identity mask (see Figure 15) transcended dominant discourse gender and sexuality to reflect strength, pride, and independence. She described herself as royalty represented by the two purple crowns on top of her box. Lucky explained, "I painted the box gold to represent that it is worth a lot of money just like me." The mask bolstered her self worth. She purposely did a few different things with her box to distant herself from the other girls such as not gluing down her mask in the box. She explained "I'm different from everybody else." Lucky valued her positioning among the other girls as their leader, mentor, and at times a parent. She was proud that her "fam" the other participants of the book club used part of her last name, "Rich" in their signatures, which they wrote on the glass of their boxes. For example, Ericka wrote Ericka Richie Rich. This was a practice established before the book club and solidified the bond among the girls (Lucky's fam).

Although Lucky went through a lot of trouble to portray herself as "hard" during the literacy club, her mask reflected a changing identity and taking up a different form of femininity

which included respecting the opinions of others, not dominating situations, and letting her heart speak louder than her mind. She wanted to put her "heart and soul into trying to sustain her transformation" (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007, p.560) instead of others' expectations for her. As she explained, "there are situations when it's time to stand up for your identity or stand up for something that you believe in. I believe that you should say what you feel at any time when needed." Lucky imposed her beliefs about "speaking up" on others by using *you* and the indirect (*you*) in the command form (Marsh & Stolle, 2006).

Lucky juxtapositioned this statement with acknowledging her need to be silent in certain situations. She represented her silencing by wiring her mouth shut. Lucky said, "There's times when you can't be in control of a situation for example so if you had a job and you had a boss, you would have to listen, because you can't be in control of that situation. Because you have a job to do. I feel the same with my relationships."

Lucky began to value an identity, which would afford her more 'respect' in her social worlds by listening to the opinions to others. She adopted an attitude that she had to take care of herself by getting a GED and a job; she saw herself "as the primary locus of control" for her future (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007, p. 562). She explained the variety of colors used to represent her brain were "the different ideas that I have for the world, or different ideas that I have for my life, period…Like anything I want, I feel like I could put my mind to it to do it." Lucky's use of I-statements such as *I feel* and *I want* made it apparent how she wanted to define herself and others to see her (Marsh & Stolle, 2006).

Lucky renegotiated her thinking, which earlier positioned her as failure because she believed she could not get a job because she was a stud. She began to envision a future with possibilities. Lucky wrote in her journal, "That's why I can't wait. I want to own a corporation

one day. I just like to be a head of thing, control this, do this, do this. Bam. I would like to be that kind of person. I have a game plan. I just want to see myself happy in five years, instead of in the same position I'm in now."

Lucky's mask encased by broken glass signified the breaking of silence. She interpreted the breaking of silence to "speaking up" for one's identity and maintaining self-control in certain situations. Lucky had many tumultuous experiences, which caused her to silent her voice such as being kicked out of her house after family arguments and her father leaving the household. She felt constrained by the powerful structural inequalities in her life including society, the heterosexual community, her family, and the inability to complete a GED and get a job.

The tensions or contradictions reflected in her mask were her eyes wired shut because she does "not want to see things like failure or people giving up" to only wanting "to see happiness and success." Lucky made the conscious choice to look beyond her own pain to a simplistic way of life. In addition, Lucky recognized her powerlessness to "fix" societal issues in her journal, "I don't want to see things like endangerment of children. Or somebody failing. Like when you see homeless people, I hate to see that, because I feel like they've have given up on their life." By using the pronoun *they* she distanced herself from this state of being which was interesting because Lucky at the beginning of the study felt like she had given up on her own life by not completing school, not securing a job, or getting her car repaired for transportation.

Meanz's identity mask.

When I asked Meanz, how does your mask (see Figure 20) represent you? She replied, "I'm like a closeted lesbian. I am scared to be a lesbian." It was the first time during the study that Meanz used the word lesbian instead of bisexual. She explained, "I don't think I'm a lesbian and sometimes, I know I'm a lesbian. I'm struggling with that." The dark colors on the mask

represented the different sides of her personality such as being nice and mean. Meanz noted, as "you look into the box the colors even the rainbow colors are dark and the whole underside of the mask is black." The dark colors represented that she was a scared lesbian afraid to express herself. Meanz used "darker colors for the rainbow because in effect having a bright rainbow meant that you accept being gay." Her black, hollow eyes symbolized "nothingness with no emotion" because she did not know how to define herself on her own terms. Although Meanz always talked about her confusion with her sexual identity, it was the first time during the study in which she spoke of hopelessness. She said, "I will never be a happy lesbian. It could be 20 years from now and I won't be a happy lesbian."

Her mask represented a "narrative of rethinking" or a turning point in her understanding (Knoeller, 2004, p.149). It was as if Meanz went back to square one to rethink her feelings despite the excitement of a new relationship, being in love, and dating a stud. Knoeller (2004) explains "narrative as rethinking" as Meanz's reconciliation of her multiple perspectives about gender and sexual identity, which she internalized from participating in the book club. She found writing, reading, and collage work provided the opportunities for rethinking. Meanz compared this to working in a kitchen, "Everyone was writing and just expressing themselves. It was like all the chefs running around they came up with a great recipe that would knock everybody's socks off. It was like that to me. Like we just coming together and everybody's thoughts were just on track, on the same train. I really like that."

The collection of girls' voices meshed with the novels' characters' voices provided Meanz the opportunity to speak out about her feelings and experiences and to consider new views. Ironically, her mask told another story about her comfort sharing intimate details. On the glass frame Meanz wrote using glue mixed with gold glitter, "You'll never understand." Her use

of the pronoun *you* in the command form helped to separate her from others. Meanz said, "I allow people to see what I want them to see because I do not want people to use anything against me and hurt me." She struggled to find her voice denied by authoritative discourses and she did not want others to "fill" her silence (Greco, 1999). The dark colors of her mask signified Meanz's voice often at odds with other aspects of her life.

Jordan's identity mask.

The title of Jordan's identity box (see Figure 33) was *Bold Statement*, which she interpreted as "equality and speaking up as a gay person." Jordan visually represented gay pride on the mask with the rainbow colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet) painted on the side of the mask and a triangle created with rainbow-colored fake gems placed on the forehead. She explained she wanted "equality to be accepted by everyone like it is during Pride month (June). In addition, Jordan said, the rainbow signified "happiness oh, friendly, nice day." Jordan wondered why "can't *we* all be friendly, like all happiness." Her use of the inclusive pronoun of *we* revealed her thinking of acceptance in all her social worlds such as with her family, white /black and heterosexual/homosexual. As with many of the girls, her mask represented her silenced voice, Jordan pointed out that her mouth on her mask was not only marked with black electrical tape but also wired shut because "my mouth is closed. I can't speak up. Like whether it's in the lesbian community or any other community, I can't speak up." As explained by Bruce (2003) females in adolescence voice over their feelings to a point of losing touch with their own self. I felt Jordan chose silence because she said, "I am not taken seriously life." She explained,

> I get told I act black in the white community. It's weird. I go to a white place I get called black. I go to a black place. I get called white. I don't understand when people say that stuff, like, "You acting black or you acting white." I just, "What?" I 'm acting mixed. I'm just acting like me.

Jordan wanted to feel "normal" in her social worlds. She explained, "If you're gay, just be gay, just be gay. If your life is just normal like everybody's saying it is, then just let it be normal." What is interesting is Jordan's interpretation of normal is other's language not her own. Although her mask was for a celebration of Jordan's gay pride, she was not totally convinced being a lesbian was "normal." The dark eyes of her mask symbolized this conflict. Jordan offered this insight, "The dark eyes represented something dark, like I'm dark on the inside because I can't…You know what I'm saying" Like I can't see nothing, and I don't like the way things are.

Although Jordan did not like the way things were in her social worlds she began to envision future possibilities. She painted her mask silver because she wanted "it to stick out and to be something bright. I think it is bright because of my personality now. The silver could be the mixture of my culture inside and my personality on the outside." The color silver metaphorically signaled a new role for her. Jordan explained," Over the past three months or whatever, I've wanted to work out. I've wanted to start doing stuff like London in the book, like she tried. I want to try—like I don't want to do just stuff my partner wants to do. I want to make a plan sheet."

Not only did Jordan think of future goals but also had a new desire to have close-knit friends. Jordan referred to the character, Winter by saying, "Like she [Winter] had Natalie. No matter what she had Simone. And it was always like that since growing up together or whatever." This self- revelation was surprising because earlier in the study Jordan rejected the idea of having friends by saying "I don't really need friends to make me whole. You get what I'm saying? I don't really need friends. I can just do everything by myself if I really need to. Friends come and go; I've always got me." Jordan's choice to have friends was a powerful sense

of agency because she realized her closeness to family and friends was central to her self-esteem (AAUW, 1992) rather than rejection. The colors she used on her mask silver, blue, and yellow, and purple suggested a renewal as opposed to her earlier use of dark, oppressive colors on her visual artifacts. As Jordan explained, "I 'm really starting to see it (issues she would like to resolve). I don't know, maybe I'm just really starting to see it, instead of like, "No, I don't !" Now I see it. And I'm working on it."

Thee's identity mask.

Thee's identity box (see Figure 26) was entitled *Birds of a Feather*, which she interpreted, as "you become whom you're around." She only believed this to a certain extent she said, "It's a good statement and you do flock to people who are like you, but you don't always become who they are" (interview, June 17, 2010). This theme was evident in many of her earlier comments. She did not compare herself to her mom because many of her family members said, "[She] would follow [her] mom's example of a "wrong" kind of life (using drugs)." In addition, her grandmother warned Thee "being a lesbian would have a bad influence on her sisters and they would become lesbians too." She constantly felt the contradictory ideas from her family that "stuff would just rub off on me." This is one of the reasons Thee explained, "I act like others want me to be" because resistance to her family's norms was difficult to maintain as she was trying to understand her gender and sexual identity. She understood the impact of others' words on her own vulnerability and self-confidence.

Interestingly, Thee painted a white dove symbolizing peace on her mask and to complement the theme "Birds of a Feather." She also thought of the dove as making peace with herself and having her voice heard by others. Thee admitted,

> I'm not really hiding anything anymore. Like before I stood up to my granny, before all
> that, I used to be, well, she's going to yell at me if I wear this, so I might as well wear this

and not get yelled at. But then I was just like, I don't really give a fuck no more and it's really tiring trying to do what everybody want. So I'm just going to be me. If you like it, you like it. If you don't' you don't.

She proudly expressed her gender and sexual identity with the flow of rainbow colors across her entire mask. As with many of the girls' masks with darkened, hollowed, or wired shut eyes, one of Thee's eyes was blackened to signify compliance while the other eye was bright and wide open to legitimize the expression of her voice. The loose feathers outlining the back of the mask symbolized a new beginning or a shedding of "that used to be the old me." Thee put this idea into the context of planning a future she said, "And then for a long time it's just that I had some stuff, but I stood up, and it's like I just don't   want to do it. I'll do what I want to do and I'll become a successful. Like I'm this type of person."   Thee's use of I-statements such as *I stood up*, *I'll do*, and *I'll become* demonstrated how she wished to define herself (Marsh & Stolle, 2006) which is very different from some of her earlier writings using *they* such as, *they should accept me*, *they should not.* This shift in discourse created a wedge for her to narrate her own life on her own terms.

Three major themes of the girls' identity masks.

The first theme of the girls' masks was renewal. Each girl in her own way had accomplished the following: an awareness of maintaining identity and social positions, a resistance and challenge of dominate ideology, a sense of agency, and the creation new meanings. The girls' desire for change was inspired by the characters, London and Winter but for different reasons. The girls emulated London because she made positive changes in her life including resolving the issues with her mom, solidifying her relationship with her first love, and becoming an active member of her sister's family. Meanwhile Winter made the wrong choices and ended up in jail. Lucky explained, "Winter had the biggest effect on me, because I would

read the book again, if I ever lost sight of what's important." It's like Winter, she came from something and became nothing. She gave up. And London, she came from nothing and became something." Therefore, as character, London "showed" the girls that everyone has the ability to change even in small ways. The girls intertexualized their own emotional experiences with those of the novel's characters so they were able to understand themselves in a different way (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000).

The second theme of the girls' masks was voice. As Lucky explained, "Adults do not have high expectations of my thoughts and ideas that is why I wired my mouth shut." The girls' understood their voices were not valued equally in all their social worlds but it was crucial for them to express their voice in multimodal ways. The girls spoke without the loud constraining voices of their social worlds. They spoke using I-statements such as *"I'll become," "I know now," and I'm working on it."* Their masks layered with colors, shapes, and textures were representative of the girls' various meanings, intentions, nuances, and misrepresentations.

The third and culminating theme of the girls' masks was a sense of agency. Moore & Cunningham (2006) interpret agency as a human dimension, which emphasizes freedom. Each mask adorned with a symbol or icon-representing freedom included a white dove, rainbow colors, and broken glass. The girl left themselves open to new possibilities, as Meanz said "I m finding something new and exciting about myself everyday". "I am willing to meet the challenges and joys of life."

The girls' masks were the culminating task, which helped to create a discourse about their sexual identity, intimate feelings, and relationships that countered the cultural models in her life (Fine & Weis, 2000). Their masks became a symbol of the girls' reexamination of their identities and raised their self-consciousness about the contradictions and complexities of their

identities. It was the layering of the different modalities that contributed to the girls' new understanding. This kind of work requires collaboration and community in building the girls' understanding and establishing a space where this kind of work could take place. I believe Meanz said it best, "It's changing though. I'll say this because I'm on the edge of becoming someone new" (interview, June 18, 2010).

Conclusion

In chapter five, I discussed the analysis of the study's findings with a brief discussion on what constitutes agency followed by how the girls fashioned themselves through social environment, writing, visual artifacts, and talk helping them to create change in their lives. As Blackburn and McCready state, "If the goal is to work for social change, then the work is never done" (2009, p.227), I believe this is also true for this study, because the girls' understanding of their sexual and gender identities will never be complete as LBT young women. This study was one opportunity for their "ways of knowing transformed into new ways of knowing" (Cunningham & Moore, 2006, p.136). The girls were willing to share their dangerous memories (Lewis, 1993) because multiliteracies as a fluid platform did not ask for perfection or conformity. With a blank slate the girls cut, pasted, moved, ripped, and destroyed which led to the transformation of self. Much of the girls' early writing and visual artifacts portrayed a whimsical look at love, relationships, and themselves with colored hearts and pink and purple designs trying to make sense of what I was asking. The designs were freely scattered on the white pages, which hinted of confusion and disconnection of what the girls wanted to say about themselves. As the sessions, slipped through our hands the girls' writing and visual artifacts took on a voice of their own without the clamor of what others said they should be. It was through the girls' language that their "new social realities were created, constituted and constructed" (Cherland, 2009, p.2).

In conclusion, the girls still have many challenges in their lives and the book club does not alleviate the struggles and challenges they face. Rather, the work did help to provide them with the literacy tools that enable them to enact agency and voice in their lives. It does so by enhancing their thinking and understanding of themselves as well as the world around them and thereby instilling an appreciation for diversity of opinion and experiences.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While the findings of this study have demonstrated how the girls fashioned their selves through context, writing, visual artifacts, and talk to help them to create change in their lives, there are two limitations of this study. First, this study included only the voices of eight girls, and I used only data on four of the girls for the purpose of this dissertation because I believe their stories best reflect the impact of multiliteracies to challenge and change discourses helping the girls to acquire alternative ways of being in the world. That being said, this ethnography was descriptive because the findings created an accurate narrative or story of the ways the African American LBT adolescents constructed and made meanings in the context of the book club. Future research may include a larger sample size so that the findings are generalized to a larger population of students.

The second limitation of this study was the girls were similar in race, family structure, social economic status, and neighborhoods. The girls were not challenged by alternative viewpoints based on experiences and identities that were significantly different from their own. Therefore, the use of multiple grouping configurations would have broadened the girls' conversations around the novels, characters, and life experiences.

CHAPTER 6

Implications for Practice

In chapter six, I will discuss the three major implications of this study for the teaching of English language arts to secondary students. As discussed earlier each of the girls brought their dangerous memories (Lewis, 1993) of abuse, death, rejection, and drugs to the book club. In secondary English language arts classrooms students are missing the opportunity to use literacy as a medium to sort through conflicting feelings and issues because in a sense their stories are a violation to a structure, which promotes conformity and the sanitization of differences. As the study has demonstrated each girl's voice changed because the opportunity was without the fear of discourses that serve to silence, reprehend, and disavow her. As a result, the girls' experiences in the book club using multiliteracies made their lives more comprehensible to themselves as well as to others.

The first implication for this study proposes a secondary English language arts curriculum inclusive of providing students with literacy experiences with a semiotic perspective (Cowan & Albers, 2006) because as this study has shown the girls' understanding of their identities and lives deepened as they immersed themselves with materials they could manipulate, reject, or change. The colors, textures, and shapes of the art materials had the ability to respond to the girls' feelings and ideas without restrictions. Luck explained, "You could see the words in my art without the words." The girls could easily hide a "dangerous memory" among a mirage of pictures from a magazine. As Designers, the girls freely chose what to share with a public audience. This natural choice gave the girls a voice and the ability to define themselves on their

own terms. As Jordan shared, "Since I did the mask and I look at the mask, it's like I'm basically reflecting my face and who I am"

The use of multiliteracies in a secondary English language arts classroom challenges our idea of what is "normal" because students' writing and visual artifact differ in tone, voice, and power. This is ability to challenge what is "normal" is crucial for urban GLBT adolescents because their lives are constantly inundated with racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist language" (Morrell, 2008). Multiliteracies as a tool in the secondary English language arts classroom is never fixed but always-in flux to accommodate the students straddling between competing and disparate social worlds as the girls in this study.

The second implication is for secondary English language arts classrooms to open spaces (free) and nourish conversations because providing students the opportunity to speak out and hear from others in a free space enables them to speak out again in the future (Weis & Carbonell-Medina, 2000). As shared by Thee, "And then for a long time it's just that I had some stuff, but I stood up, and it's like I just don't want to do it. I'll do what I want to do." As an environment in which the healthy identities of students can flourish, the secondary English language arts classroom exists as an open space for all students to have a choice to share their socially situated identities. This is especially crucial for the LBT African American student because as Fordham (1993) argues to be "taken seriously" the African American adolescent must discard or at least minimize her identity. The consequences of an African American LBT adolescent of discarding her identity violates her sense of self (1993) and becomes a deterrent to equitable access in the secondary English language arts classroom. As Meanz shared, "I don't tell my teachers nothing because they don't want to know about stuff outside of school." As Broughton & Fairbanks

argues, "really listen when girls talk (2003, p.6). It is through an open and nourishing literacy setting in which girls find the greatest connection between their lives and other social worlds.

The third implication is re-imaging secondary English language arts classroom practices, which are permeable with the lives of students outside of the classroom. This is the most difficult implication to put into practice because if classroom settings are open and safe for nourishing conversations the students will expose parts of their lives that may be uncomfortable, dangerous, and insignificant to the other students and teacher. As I discussed in chapter one how do we protect the student outside of the classroom if he/she reveals something that may put them in harms way in their neighborhood. I do not have a perfect solution to this educational challenge but I do propose stronger relationships between schools and out-of-school settings such as GLBT community centers or transitional youth housing facilities to incorporate effective literacy programs with a semiotic perspective. I advocate for this implication because half of the girls participating in this study no longer attended school due to childhood drug use, violence, or family commitments. These girls existed on the margins of their schools, community, and the workforce without the opportunity to engage with multimodal literacy activities and literature. As Sutherland (2005) asserts the continuous process of interacting with text provides African American female adolescents with the chance to shape their own reality by deconstructing the ideals gender, sexuality and "behaving" which regulate them as young Black women in society. Beach, Thien and Parks (2008) noted, "Adolescents construct their identities through their participation in social worlds, including participation in worlds portrayed in literature" (p.7). Therefore, without continuous social interaction with literature, the girl accepts silence, powerlessness, and compliance to the dominant discourse. Despite these realities secondary

schools remain our best hope for enacting curricula, which maintains a social justice objective, and social and political values that will provide a unified society.

Conclusion

The use of multiliteracies coupled with critical reading enabled the girls in this study to critique and deconstruct the social construction of their gender and sexual identity, which contributed to their ability to reconstruct identities and beliefs that led to human agency. The safe parameters of a LBT book club, allowed each of the girls to discover her own way of transacting with the literature and using multiliteracies. The girls' thoughts about the process included "Blacks don't do arts and crafts to "You could see the words in my art without the words." I was asking the girls to transform their thinking in a very short period of time ways of experiencing literacy that would be authentic to their lives. The majority of the girls lacked the academic experience of "seeing" the discursive process of reading, writing, and visual representation and how to take on a critical stance in these areas. Despite this reality, it did not take a significant amount of time for the majority of girls to begin to share their life stories. As explained by one of the girls,

> Because like the first day we started this, I was just like, who can I trust in this group? Who am I going to talk to in this group. And then when I started, the more that we did, the more that started to talk to in this group. And then when I started, the more that we did, the more that we started expressing stuff in front of each other and talking in front of each other and talking to each other. I just like, OK, these people I can talk to and express my feeling without saying, "Hey, you're not supposed to do that.

In the safe space of the LBT book club, the girls established a familiarity and sense of community which them to voice conflicting 'social viewpoints' with the equal right to speak. The out-of-school literacy setting was a response to the need for African American LBT adolescent to have a space outside the confines of school walls where they could disrupt societal

labeling and curb some of the damaging effects of the normalization process. As confirmed by one of the girls,

> It did all help that we were all lesbians in the group. It helped. But it's just like if we had heterosexuals in her, I think we probably would have had more problems. Because it would be like-because we were always talking about lesbian things sometimes. I kind of think it went more easier because we were all lesbians, and we all kind of basically been through the same things, or seen it happened in somebody else's life or something.

Orchestrated together, the voices of the girls helped to invent, reformulate, and elaborate on each other's stories without the fear of discourses that serve to silence, reprehend, and disavow them.

Shelton (2007) states, it is important for adolescents to be provided the space to develop their own language and support their peers in the articulation of identities. In the social environment of a LBT space that supported and recognized the girls' lived experiences and social identities, the African American LBT adolescent had the opportunity to "talk back" to literature and their multi-voiced identities in a safe and supportive setting. The use of multiliteracies and the book club context offered the girls a way to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their understanding of gender and sexuality portrayed in literature and their lived experiences.

To conclude in a sense, literacy is "fundamental to aggressively constructing one's voice" while creating a new relationship with the wider society" (Freire &Macedo, 1987, p.7). This is the case for each of the girls making changes in their lives.

- "I learned how to talk to people and be cool with people. It's not hard for me anymore to be-because I used to be antisocial. And I'm not antisocial like that no more. And it's like it's not hard now for me to talk to people."

- "If I got my GED, can't nobody tell me nothing, I feel like the world is mine and I could do   anything that I want. Because I didn't get I'm just a statistic."

- "So I basically want to do go back to school, have a job, be able to get out of living with my brother. Because that's not cool. I don't want to live with him. I just want to try to be mature."

I argue it is necessary for the African American LBT adolescent to have the opportunity to participate in literacy practices that do not hold her to a textual contract or norms in terms of her sexual and gender identity. The African American LBT adolescent needs to see her experiences in the world represented in text and not the unquestionably dominate ideology as the universal truth of what counts as literature (Cherland, 1994, p.16). It is crucial for the African American LBT adolescent to understand how literacy functions as a means of participation in society, and how it constructs her life and identity as a literate citizen.

APPENDIX A

The Interanimating of the Polyphonic Identities of Queer Adolescent Girls in Two Social Worlds (GLBTQ Community and the Heterosexual Community).

Polyphonic identities of queer adolescent girl's identities

Roles of a queer girl in different social worlds

varying degrees of...

Performance in GLBT community

outness

authenticity

voice

Performance in heterosexual community

weaving in and out of different social worlds

Process of Interanimation

religious affiliation
straight friends
closeted
queer friends
GLBT community events
reader
writer
artist
lover
girlfriend
community activist
drag king
family
employee
aunt/niece/sister/daughter
student
"boi"

family
straight friends
queer friends
student
school community
aunt/niece/sister/daughter
religious affiliation
neighborhood community
reader
writer
artist
athlete
employee
closeted
lover
girlfriend
drag king
"boi"
community activist

APPENDIX B

Semiotic Activity is a Matter of 'Design': Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned

Proficient in negotiating the
multiple discourse of social worlds
Awareness of maintaining identity
and social positions
Creating of new meanings and genres
Resist and challenge dominate ideology
Become agents of change
Sense of agency
Become a critical reader

The Redesigned

Skills as a reader and writer
Peers
Facilitator
Six modes of communication
Selected novels
GLBT setting

Available Resources

History of a reader and writer
Conflicting discourse
Bits of the world
School experiences
Life stories
Multiple discourse

Queer Girls as Designers

Social Interaction

APPENDIX C

Participant Questionnaire

Preliminary Participant Questionnaire
(The purpose of this questionnaire is to identify queer girls willing to participate in a research project)

The research project will consist of you doing the following (all materials will be provided).

- ➢ **Read two novels on your own (selected by the group of participants)- one with heterosexual characters and another with homosexual characters**
- ➢ **Participate in weekly book club for 12-weeks at the center**
- ➢ **Allow me to audiotape the weekly book club discussions**
- ➢ **Allow me to audiotape four individual interviews**
- ➢ **Write weekly in a writers journal on your own time and during the literacy group**
- ➢ **Allow me to make copies of the entries in your journal**
- ➢ **Create a visual project and present it to the book club at the center**
- ➢ **I do not include your name, address or the name of the center in my research report**

NAME:	AGE:

1. **What is your race or ethnicity?**
   - ⭕ **White (not Hispanic)**
   - ⭕ **Black (not Hispanic)**
   - ⭕ **Hispanic**
   - ⭕ **Asian/Pacific Islander**
   - ⭕ **American Indian/Alaska Native**
   - ⭕ **Other _____**

2. **How do you self-identify:**
   - ⭕ **Lesbian: a girl who is physically attracted to other girls only**
   - ⭕ **Bisexual: a girl who is physically attracted to both boys and girls**
   - ⭕ **Transgender: a girl who expresses gender in different ways**
   - ⭕ **Heterosexual: a girl who is physically attracted to boys only**
   - ⭕ **One or more**
   - ⭕ **Other_____**

3. **How many years have you been "out"? ("Out" means sharing your sexual orientation with others).**
   - ⭕ I'm not "out"
   - ⭕ 1-2 years
   - ⭕ 3-4 years
   - ⭕ More than 5 years

4. **Who are you "out" to? Check all that apply:**
   - ⭕ I'm not "out"
   - ⭕ Only myself
   - ⭕ Friends
   - ⭕ Parents
   - ⭕ Brother(s) and/or Sister(s)

5. **What activities do you go to at the GLBT center?**
   - ⭕ Youth Group and their events
   - ⭕ Community Events (e.g. Gay Pride)
   - ⭕ I don't attend any event or group, I just hang out here

6. **How many times a month do you go to the GLBT center?**
   - ⭕ 1-2
   - ⭕ 2-3
   - ⭕ 4 or more

7. **Are you willing to participate in a book club that meets for once a week for 12-weeks for 1- 1.5 hours at the center?**
   - ⭕ Yes
   - ⭕ No

8. **Are you willing to be interviewed by the researcher at the center three times during the 12-week period to talk more about your reading and writing ideas?**
   - ⭕ Yes
   - ⭕ No
   - ⭕ Maybe

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Candice- 🏳️‍🌈

APPENDIX D

[Behavioral] Documentation of Adolescent Assent Form

Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events to semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives.

[Behavioral]Documentation of Adolescent Assent Form
(ages 13-17)

Title: **Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events to semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives.**

Study Investigator: Candice Moench
                                        Wayne State University, Detroit, MI
                                        (248) 797-9812

Why am I here?
This is a research study. Only people who choose to take part are included in research studies. You are being asked to participant in a research study of how queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender) girls 14-18 years of age use literature to understand their gender and sexual identity. You are eligible to participate because you have identified yourself as a queer female 14-18 years of age. This study is being conducted Affirmations located in Ferndale, Michigan and The Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, Michigan. The estimated number of participants from Affirmations and The Ruth Ellis center is between 10-12 queer girls. **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

Please take time to make your decision. Talk to your family about it and be sure to ask questions about anything you do not understand.

Why are they doing this study?
This study is being done to find out how queer girls, 14-18 years of age in a GLBT friendly, out-of school setting engage with different types of literacies activities (e.g. reading, writing, talking, listening and visually creating an object) to understand their gender and sexual identity.

If you participant in the study, you will be asked to fill out one reading and one writing survey, participate in a book club for twelve-weeks, participate in weekly book discussions, read two novels (one with homosexual themes and another with heterosexual themes), write two entries at least two pages in length in a writer's notebook, voluntarily submit entries to an online blog, participate in a visual audit trail, create an art piece during the literacy club, present art piece to book club participants, if selected, participate in four individual interviews outside of the literacy club and willing to be audio recorded during group discussions and interviews, and your art piece to be photographed

Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events to semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives.

You will participate in a literacy club for twelve-weeks. Each literacy club will last for a minimum of one hour. The literacy club will take place in a private room in Affirmations or The Ruth Ellis Center with a door in order to protect your confidentiality. I will also interview you four times during the study about your thoughts and ideas concerning the books, writing in your journal, group discussions and creating an art piece.

Will the study help me?

The possible benefits of taking part in this research study are the creation of relationships in a different social context with other girls, awareness of gender and sexual identity by reading and writing about literature, learning how to examine books to further empower you in the community and society, to create a visual project that is an authentic portrayal of your gender and sexual identity, and the opportunity to speak freely about yourself and literature in a GLBT-friendly, safe space.

Will anything bad happen to me?

Risks may arise from the utilization of questionnaire, interview interactions, the collection of sensitive data, or the emotional stress of study participation (writing in a journal, group discussions, reading two novels with familiar themes).

Will I get paid to be in the study?

Costs
There will be no costs to you for participating in this research study.

Compensation
For taking part in this research study, you are paid for your time and inconvenience. Each of the participants will receive five dollars in cash for each literacy club attended in its entirety. You are paid the total of $60.00 after the twelve-weeks of attending a literacy club.

Confidentiality
All information collected about you during the course of this study is kept without any identifiers. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. There will be no list that links your identity with this code.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information is included which will reveal yours identity. Photographs and audio recordings of you is used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. All girls participating in the study will use a selected pseudonym throughout the study. The books clubs will be audio recorded and transcribed by me.

Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events to semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives.

To protect your confidentiality all audio recordings and transcriptions are in a
locked cabinet at my home. In addition, all audio recordings throughout the study are destroyed after three years.
The following information must be released/reported to the appropriate authorities if at any time during the study there is concern that:

- child abuse has possibly occurred,
- you have a reportable communicable disease (i.e., certain sexually transmitted diseases or HIV) or you disclose illegal criminal activities, illegal substance abuse or violence

What if I have any questions?

For questions about the study, please call Candice Moench at (248) 797-9812. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Human Investigation Committee can be contacted at (313) 577-1628.

Do I have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study if you don't want to or you can stop being in the study at any time. Please discuss your decision with your parents, Candice or one of the youth coordinators at Affirmations or The Ruth Ellis Center. No one will be angry if you decide to stop being in the study.

AGREEMENT TO BE IN THE STUDY

Your signature below means that you have read the above information about the study and have had a chance to ask questions to help you understand what you will do in this study. Your signature also means that you have been told that you can change your mind later and withdraw if you want to. By signing this assent form you are not giving up any of your legal rights. You will be given a copy of this form.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant (13 yrs & older)   Date

_____
Printed name of Participant (13 yrs & older)

_____   _____
**Signature of Witness (When applicable)   Date

_____
Printed Name of Witness

Submission/Revision Date: 12/2009   Page 3 of 4   Participants Initials_____
Protocol Version #: 0000

HIC Date: 05/08

245

_____   _____
Signature of Person who explained this form   Date

_____
Printed Name of Person who explained form

APPENDIX E

[Behavioral] Research Informed Consent

Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives.

Principal Investigator (PI)   Candice Moench
                             College of Education
                             248-797-9812

When we say "you" in this consent form, we mean "you" and "we" means the researchers and other staff.

Purpose
You are being asked to be in a research study of how queer girls 14-18 years of age use literature to understand their gender and sexual identity. You are eligible to participate because you have identified yourself as a queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) female between the ages of 14-18. This study is being conducted at Affirmations located in Ferndale, Michigan and The Ruth Ellis Center located in Detroit, Michigan. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled from Affirmations and The Ruth Ellis Center is between 10-12 queer girls. **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Study Procedures

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked If you participate in the study, you will be a member of a literacy club for twelve-weeks. Initially, you will complete a preliminary participant questionnaire to help to identify girls interested in participating in the research study. If you are one of the girls selected to participate in the study, you will complete a reading and writing survey to help facilitate a discussion about reading and writing during the first literacy club meeting. Each literacy club will last for a minimum of one hour. The literacy club will take place in a private room at Affirmations or The Ruth Ellis Center with a door in order to protect the confidentiality of you. During each of the literacy clubs, you will discuss the selected novels, ask questions, response to others, write in a writer's notebooks, participate in a visual audit trail, and create a visual art piece. During the 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 11th weeks, you will have the opportunity to work with a local gay artist for support and ideas concerning your visual art piece
The facilitated discussions during the literacy club will consist of open-ended questions, which will help you to deepen your understanding of your identity within the context of literature and group dialogue. I will ask questions based on the discussions of the girls. For example, a type of discussion question may include the following:
  • Is there a particular character you identify with in the novel, if so, why or why not?

Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives.

- Does your selected character possess expectations or roles that you can personally identify with, if so, why or why not?

I will interview you four times at the center during the study about your thoughts and ideas concerning the books, entries in your writer's notebook, group discussions and creating an art piece. You will have the option for not addressing selected questions during the interviews. An example of an interview question is:

To what extent does participating in the literacy club allow you to "talk back' to stereotypical or perspectives of gender and sexual identities presented in the books you are reading for the club.

Benefits

As a participant in this research study, the possible benefits of taking part in this research study are the creation of relationships in a different social context with other girls, awareness of gender and sexual identity by reading and writing about literature, learning how to examine books to further empower you in the community and society, to create a visual project that is an authentic portrayal of your gender and sexual identity, and the opportunity to speak freely about yourself and literature in a GLBTQ-friendly, safe space

Risks

- There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study. Risks may arise from the utilization of questionnaire, interview interactions, the collection of sensitive data, or the emotional stress of study participation (writing in a journal, group discussions, reading two novels with familiar themes).

The following information must be released/reported to the appropriate authorities if at any time during the study there is concern that: include applicable bullet(s)
- child abuse or elder abuse has possibly occurred,
- you have a reportable communicable disease (i.e., certain sexually transmitted diseases or HIV)
- you disclose illegal criminal activities, illegal substance abuse or violence

There may also be risks involved from taking part in this study that are not known to researchers at this time.

Study Costs

- Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives.

Compensation

For taking part in this research study, you will be paid for your time and inconvenience

Risks

Risks may arise from the utilization of questionnaire, interview interactions, the collection of sensitive data, or the emotional stress of study participation (writing in a journal, group discussions, reading two novels with familiar themes).

Costs

There will be no costs to you for participating in this research study.

Compensation

For taking part in this research study, you will be paid for your time and inconvenience. Each of the participants will receive five dollars in cash for each literacy club attended in its entirety. You will be paid for the total of $60.00 after the twelve-weeks.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept without any identifiers.
You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. There will be no list that links your identity with this code.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information is included which will reveal yours identity. Photographs and audio recordings of you will be used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. All girls participating in the study will use a selected pseudonym throughout the study. The books clubs will be audio recorded and transcribed by me. To protect your confidentiality all audio recordings and transcriptions will be in a locked cabinet at my home. In addition, all audio recordings throughout the study are destroyed after three years.

Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to part take in this study. If you decide not to take part in the study, you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you or your child are entitled to receive.

The PI may stop your participation in this study without your personal consent.

Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives.

Questions
If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Candice Moench at the following phone number (248) 797-9812 questions or concerns about you as a research participant, the Chair of the Human Investigation Committee may be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

Participation
You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. If you choose not to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time. No one will be angry if you decide to stop being in the study.

Research Related Injuries
If the risks to the study are no more than minimal (i.e., protocol may be expedited or exempted), this disclaimer, including the header, may be removed if IRB chair or designee concurs with its elimination.]

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

_____   _____
Signature of participant / Legally authorized representative *   Date

_____   _____
Printed name of participant / Legally authorized representative *   Time

_____   _____
Signature of witness**   Date

_____   _____
Printed of witness**   Time

_____   _____
Signature of person obtaining consent   Date

_____   _____
Printed name of person obtaining consent   Time

_____   _____
Signature of translator   Date

_____   _____
Printed name of translator   Time

<mark>Delete if not applicable</mark> Continue to HIPAA Authorization on next page

APPENDIX F

Final Writing Questionnaire

Participant's Questionnaire about Writing

The purpose of this questionnaire is to learn more about you as a _writer_.

1. **Do you like to write?**

   ○ **Yes**

   ○ **No**

   ○ **Occasionally**

2. **Would you consider yourself a good writer?**

   ○ **Yes**

   ○ **No**

Explain why you consider yourself a good writer or not a good writer_____

_____

3. **Which of the below do you enjoy writing? (Please check all that apply):**

   ○ **Fiction (stories that are made up)**

   ○ **Nonfiction (stories that are real)**

   ○ **Poetry**

   ○ **Virtual writing (e.g. Facebook, My Space, chat rooms, texting)**

   ○ **Graphic novels or comics**

4. **How much time do you spend writing outside of school including the examples in question 3?**

   ○ **I do not write outside of school**

   ○ **1-2 hours**

   ○ **2-3 hours**

   ○ **4-5 hours**

   ○ **More than 6 hours**

5. **Do you write about GLBTQ characters or themes in school?**

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   ○ Occasionally

6. **Do you write about GLBTQ characters or themes outside of school?**

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   ○ Occasionally

7. **Are you assigned writing assignments in school that address topics or issues of interest to you?**

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   ○ Occasionally

8. **Is it important to you to write about GLBTQ characters or issues in your English language arts writing class?**

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   ○ Maybe

   ○ I don't know

9. **Is it important to you to write about GLBTQ characters or issues in your out-of-school writing?**

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   ○ Maybe

   ○ I don't know

10. Do you write to understand yourself as a queer girl?

○ **Yes**

○ **No**

○ **Maybe**

○ **I don't know**

What kind of writing do you do to work out personal issues, ideas or feelings (e.g. poetry, blogging etc.)

_____

<p align="center">**Thank You!**</p>

APPENDIX G

Final Reader Questionnaire

Participant's Questionnaire about Reading
(The purpose of this questionnaire is to learn more about you as a _reader_)

1. **Do you like to read?**

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   ○ Occasionally

2. **Would you consider yourself a good reader?**

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

 Explain why you consider yourself a good reader or not a good reader_____

 _____

3. **What type of text do you enjoy reading? (Please check all that apply):**

   ○ **Textbooks**

   ○ **Non-fiction novels (the story and characters are real)**

   ○ **Fiction novels (the story and characters are made up)**

   ○ **Internet sites (including chat rooms, blogs, Facebook, My Space)**

   ○ **Magazines**

   ○ **Newspaper**

   ○ **Graphic novels (comic book format)**

   ○ **Other _____**

4. **How much time do you spend reading outside of school including the examples in question 3?**

   ○ **I do not read outside of school**

   ○ **1-2 hours**

   ○ **2-3 hours**

5. Do you read novels with GLBTQ characters or themes in school?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Occasionally

6. Do you read novels with GLBTQ characters or themes out of school?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Occasionally

7. Do the assigned novels in school address topics or issues of interest to you?

○ Yes, all the time

○ No, not at all

○ Occasionally

8. Is it important to you that your teacher assigns novels that have GLBTQ characters or deal with queer issues?

○ Yes

○ No

9. Is it important to you to read novels out of school that have GLBTQ characters or deal with queer issues?

○ Yes

○ No

10. Do you read novels understand yourself as a person?

○ Yes

○ No

What kind of novels do you read to help understand yourself? _____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX H

Example of a Gender Identity Building Task Using the MASS Framework

Language
Whole group discussion

Building task	Activity aspect
gender identity	What are the chain events in which the girls are participating?

Research Question

To what extent, will queer adolescent girls' engagement with literacies events, in a safe out-of school setting contribute to the development of personal agency in ways that enable them to enact change in their lives?

Visual
Visual audit trail

Building task	Semiotic aspect
gender identity	What cultural models are connected to the images or symbols created by the girls?

Writing
Writer's notebooks

Building task	Material aspect
gender identity	What particular words are being used by the girls?

Reading
Homosexual-themed novel

Building task	Sociocultural aspect
gender identity	What knowledge about the material world is relevant in the interaction between the girls?

APPENDIX I

Script for Recruiting Subjects to Participate in Research Project

SCRIPT FOR RECRUTING SUBJECTS TO PARTICIPANT IN RESEARCH PROJECT (to be used at the different youth groups at the center before each group):

This script is largely based on the information sheet.

As you may have been told, I am conducting a research project entitled "Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events to express semiotically their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives." I am inviting you to participate in the project. I will be selecting between eight to ten queer girls to participate in the study.

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire: "Preliminary Participant Questionnaire." Topics included in the research project are gender identity, sexual identity, self-awareness, and making personal connections with literature. You will complete the questionnaire and give it back to me in the provided envelope.

All the information collected from you is confidential. That means your name or identifying features will not be used in any analysis or other identifying features will not be used in any analysis or in any reporting of the research. Additionally, please do not discuss outside the literacy club any comments made by other participants. All comments made within this literacy club must be kept confidential.

All forms are retained for at least three years in a locked filing cabinet in my home office, coded so that the researcher can identify your responses.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may elect not to participate, to quit at any time during the study, or not answer certain questions, or to contact me if you change your mind about participating.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may email or call me. My contact information is available to you today.

Your signature on the assent form given to you indicates that you have read or had it explained to you, or both, the purpose of the requirements of the study, which you agree to participate. You need not sign it if you decide not to participate.

Thank you

APPENDIX J

Script for Interview

SCRIPT FOR INTERVIEW (This is to be used at the site of the interview before the interview begins):

This script is largely based on the consent form.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an individual interview. As you know, I am conducting a research entitled "Queer adolescent girls use of out-of school literacy events to semiotically express their understanding of their gender and sexual identity in order to enhance personal agency in their lives." I want to get a better idea of how engaging in different types of literacies activities (e.g. reading, writing, talking, listening and visually creating an object) help you understand your gender and sexual identity.

I will interview you four times on different topics and ideas that relate to the literacy club and you. Topics covered will include your opinions on gender and sexual identities inherent in contemporary literature and society and the impact of you participating in multimodal literacy activities. The interviews will not last any more than one hour. I am able to conduct the interview at a time convenient to you.

All the information collected from you is confidential. That means your name or identifying features will not be used in any analysis or other identifying features will not be used in any analysis or in any reporting of the research. Additionally, please do not discuss outside the literacy club any comments made by other participants. All comments made within this literacy club must be kept confidential.

All forms will be retained for at least three years in a locked filing cabinet in my home office, coded so that your responses can be identified by the researcher.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may elect not to participate, to quit at any time during the study, or not answer certain questions, or to contact me if you change your mind about participating.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may email or call me. My contact information will be made available to you today.

The information given to you indicates that you have read or had explained to you, or both, the purpose of the requirements of the study, which you agree to participate. You need not sign it if you decide not to participate.

Thank you

APPENDIX K

Script for Debriefing

Debriefing Script

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. As a reminder, the purpose

of this study is to find out how queer girls, 14-18 years of age in a GLBT friendly,

out-of-school setting engage with different types of literacies activities (e.g. reading,

writing, talking, listening and visually creating an object) to understand their gender and

sexual identity.

The data collected during group discussions and individual interviews will contribute to a

better understanding of how schools and educators can support queer students in an

academic setting.

Please remember that any data pertaining to yourself as an individual participant will be

kept confidential. Once all the data are collected and analyzed for this project, I plan on

sharing this information with the research community through conferences, presentations

and journal articles. If you are interested in receiving more information regarding the

results of this study, or if you have any questions or concerns. I would be willing to come

back to the center to share the findings of the study. The study is expected to be

completed by (insert date).

Candice Moench

APPENDIX L

Informational Flyer

I am doing a research study for Wayne State University on African American lesbians and bisexuals and literacy.

I need at least 10 girls who are willing to participate in a 12-week research project.

Do you want your voice heard as a young, urban, lesbian or bisexual (15-21 years of age) living in Detroit or surrounding areas?

Here is your chance….

Please come to an information meeting about the research study on Monday, February 15, 2010 at 5:00 p.m. at the Ruth Ellis Center, 77 Victor, Highland Park. Pizza and drinks provided. You do not have to commit to participating in the study.

Thanks,
Candice (Real Talk Facilitator)

APPENDIX M

Open-ended Questions

First interview questions with Meanz, April, 21, 2010)

Initial open-ended questions:

Start with creating self, outside influences and society influences based on what society thinks is masculine, feminine, gender, sexuality) (Girl puts the spheres together.

Tell me more about your experiences in high school concerning reading and writing. In session 1, -Was there ever a time in high school in terms of the books you and the class were reading that your ideas about gender and how you express yourself as a lesbian (were included or excluded). When, if at all, did you experience or notice this?

Tell be about your thoughts and feelings when you learned that your ideas about gender and sexuality were or not being brought up in class discussions?

-What was going on in your life at this time? (High school)

-During high school how did you make your way through the literature or readings that conflicted with your own feelings as a lesbian?

Could you describe the most important lessons you learned through experiencing…………………………….

Up to this point with reading, London Reign have you used the book and the group discussions o help figure out yourself, life, relationships, or issues? If so, could you tell me more…

Could you describe any characters or events in the book that you have personally responded to?

What has been the most helpful to you during the last 3 weeks meeting as a group, writers (Michelle Brown, Kattie Hogan) and the artist (Todd Stanton)

What was unique about the setting of the book and how did it enhance or take away from the story?

What specific themes did the author emphasize throughout the novel? What do you think he or she is trying to get across to the reader?

Do the characters seem real and believable? Can you relate to their predicaments? To what extent do they remind you of yourself or someone you know?

How do characters change or evolve throughout the course of the story? What events trigger such changes?

In what ways do the events in the books reveal evidence of the author's world view?

Did certain parts of the book make you uncomfortable? If so, why did you feel that way? Did this lead to a new understanding or awareness of some aspect of your life you might not have thought about before?

APPENDIX N

Stem Connections Prompts

Using Stem Connections as you read

(Directions: Think about what you read this week in the novel, use the stem connections to make personal connections to the text) Remember to write the page number of the setting, person or quote you are connecting with.)

That reminds me of….	I remember when….	I have a connection….	An experience I have had like that……
If I were that character, I would…	I remember another story about this….	I sometimes feel like this as a lesbian when….	I felt like that character when…

(You can add your own stems in the bottom boxes)

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ABSTRACT

QUEER ADOLESCENT GIRLS USE OF
OUT-OF SCHOOL LITERACY EVENTS TO SEMIOTICALLY EXPRESS
UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN ORDER TO
ENHANCE PERSONAL AGENCY IN THEIR LIVES

by

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May 2012

Advisor: Dr. Gina DeBlase

Major: Reading, Language & Literature

Degree: Doctor of Education

This qualitative study focused on the use of multiliteracies (reading, writing, viewing, visually representing, talking, and listening) by four low-income African American LBT (lesbian, bisexual, transgender) adolescents in an out-of-school setting. Data collection methods over a three-month period included transcribed field notes, interviews, questionnaires, participants' writer's notebooks, college workbooks and identity face masks.

The study focused on critical literacy to demonstrate how the girls used multiliteracies to understand the social practices and socially ascribed identities, which construct them as lesbian, bisexual or transgender and to critique this social construction thereby contributing to their ability to reconstruct identities and beliefs that have the potential to lead to human agency. The girls engaged with a variety of literacy activities during the weekly sessions such as reading, discussion, writing, drawing, and visual artifacts. Through a multiliteracy pedagogy, the girls developed the critical engagement with literacy required for them to be (come) agents in their own lives.

The things learned because of this study are identifying the features that contribute to the effectiveness of out-of-school literacies for African American LBT adolescents while assisting educators and stakeholders in creating strategies and literacy space to support the identity development and growth of African American LBT adolescents in secondary school settings. It is the hope that such work will aid in extending the boundaries of educational spaces, such as schools, for the purposes of promoting democratic reform and social transformation to achieve societal balance.

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