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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Writing for Transformation:

Teen Girls of Color and Critical Literacy in a Creative Writing Program

by

Rebecca Alber

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2016

Writing for Transformation:

Teen Girls of Color and Critical Literacy in a Creative Writing Program

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by

Rebecca Alber

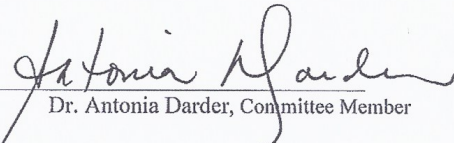
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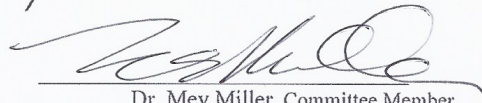
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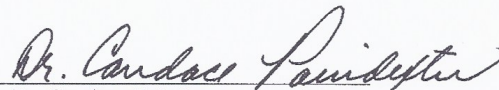
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## DEDICATION

To the four young women featured in this study, for sharing with me their stories and passions for the written word. Included in this dedication as well are the young women and girls who silently journal, who bring forth their own voice and liberation.

And to the hundreds of students with whom I have had the pleasure to read and write with while I was a high school English teacher—I learned far more from you.

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## ABSTRACT

Writing for Transformation:

Teen Girls of Color and Critical Literacy in a Creative Writing Program

by

Rebecca Alber

This qualitative study explored the experiences and insights of four alumnae from a girls' after-school writing program and the program's transformative impact on development of their literacy, their voice, and their confidence. The writing program, InkGirls (a pseudonym), was for girls of color ages 13 to 18 who lived in metropolitan Los Angeles. Participants attended high-density public schools located in low-income neighborhoods. Curriculum and instructional practices in such public schools have been critiqued as substandard, rote, and lacking opportunities for critical thinking and student voice (Darder, 2015). Gender bias in the classroom, and the lack of representation of women of color in instructional materials also have been legitimate concerns in U.S. public schooling (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009).

Using a theoretical framework of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000) and critical feminist pedagogy (Weiler, 1988), this qualitative study investigated practices of critical literacy

(Christensen, 2009) in the writing program that promoted development of literacy and voice and elevated the critical consciousness and social agency of the participants. The program's elements of critical literacy included studying relatable texts, reading from critical perspectives, writing personal narratives, and completing social action projects in public readings for a live audience. The findings from the program's curriculum and public readings, and the perceptions of the former participants pointed to critical literacy as an effective approach to literacy instruction and development of voice and agency.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In the two decades I have worked in public schools as a high school teacher, literacy coach, and teacher education field supervisor, I have noticed a trend when it came to female students in the classroom. When I observed primary grade classrooms, girls had their hands raised, shared their opinions and ideas often and routinely, and volunteered to read aloud their essays, poems, and short stories. But something happened around sixth or seventh grade: female students became much quieter and less outspoken than they had been in primary grades. In my observations of middle and high school classrooms, male students often controlled the dialogue. They raised their hands more often to answer questions than did female students, and they volunteered more frequently to read aloud their writing or the class texts. Because of this, teachers relied on male students as their go-to responders and volunteers. Girls were then called on less frequently, compounding their silence and resulting in unintended gender bias in instructional practices (Liu, 2006). Researchers have identified and termed those students who dominate the teacher's attention and time and classroom resources as *focus students* (Tobin & Gallagher, 1987). These focus students are typically males, and also typically White. Sadker et al. (2009) found similar patterns in K–12 classroom participation throughout the United States, foreboding systemic gender bias in these schools. My experiences, sadly, echoed exactly the bias Sadker et al. identified in their study.

In addition to gender disparity between males and females in class participation and teacher attention, Weiler (2009) found male-dominant curricular materials prevalent in schools throughout the United States. I investigated and analyzed three language arts textbooks currently

in use in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest school district in the United States. In the eighth-grade English textbook, 76 authors were featured in total: 54 were male and 22 were female. Of those 22 female authors, nine were women of color. It was notable that in this school district, females comprised 52% of the students at the time of this study. Of the total student population (male and female) for this school district, 73% were Latino, 10% were Black, 4% were Asian, 2% were Filipino, and 10% were White (*District Enrollment by Ethnicity*, 2014). The other two textbooks were similarly written for the most part by male authors. In the eighth-grade English textbook, of the 54 male authors, 38 were White and 16 were of color.

This disparity in the district curricular materials I analyzed revealed a significant underrepresentation of both females and people of color. As Giroux (2009) asserted, “The dominant school culture generally represents and legitimates the voices of White males from an affluent social class to the exclusion of economically disadvantaged students, most especially females from minority backgrounds” (p. 454). These practices have been harmful to girls of color from working-class backgrounds, as they have kept them from being represented in the schooling experience.

### **Teen Girls of Color and Critical Literacy**

The function of traditional literacy in U.S. schools, where students simply have decoded and comprehended rather than questioned and countered texts, has been largely to maintain the status quo (Kozol 2005; Macedo, 2006; Morrell, 2009; Shor & Pari, 1999). This hidden curriculum of U.S. schooling, therefore, has not permitted the voices of girls of color from low-income, working-class backgrounds to find room for expression. The traditional, standardized

literacy curriculum has been used to bolster further hegemonic practices already in place in schools and has done little to transform the inequalities that have placed girls of color on the margins, both instructionally and in the curriculum. Moreover, it has not taken into account the biases they have experienced as females, their experiences living in a racialized society, nor the impact of living in high poverty, urban areas (Muhammad, 2012; Winn 2011).

Critical literacy practices have demanded curricular inclusivity for those members of society who have been historically pushed aside or often altogether ignored by the status quo (Darder 2015, 2012; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Jones, 2013; Lopez, 2011; Morrell, 2009). As an innovative classroom approach that has placed marginalized voices and lives in the forefront, critical literacy has addressed the underrepresentation and silence of people of color—and particularly women of color—in curricular disparities, in voice between male and female students, and in gender-biased teaching practices.

Critical literacy was not designed as a program or model, but rather as an emancipatory approach to language and the process of becoming literate that has challenged asymmetrical power and structures of inequality in working-class communities and the larger society (Jongsma, 1991; Lopez, 2011; Morrell, 2009; Shor & Pari, 1999). In a learning environment that utilizes critical literacy, one would observe several important tenets: (a) student sharing of personal stories and life experiences; (b) use of texts from multiple, often marginalized, perspectives; (c) ongoing dialogue; and (d) use of empowering writing projects for social action. At the time of this study, the prevailing belief was that these tenets supported the development of critical consciousness—which entailed a better understanding of oneself and the socially constructed conditions of inequality, exclusion, and injustice in the world that affected individual

and collective lives. Critical literacy, therefore, is a key element of an education that is, at its heart, emancipatory, equipping learners so that they are armed to read the word and the world critically, so that they might change it (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As discussed, the education system has not permitted the voices of girls of color from low-income, working-class backgrounds to find room for expression; therefore, there is an urgent need for a gendered lens for critical literacy. The negative impact of early and secondary schooling on females, particularly for women of color and women with low socioeconomic status, has been documented in numerous studies (Hayes & Flannery, 2000):

As gendered persons we learn who we are as girls and women: we learn how to act, how to interact with others, how we are valued because of our gender, and what place and power we have as women in various groups and societies. (p. 4)

When girls have an opportunity to engage their lived histories and everyday world critically, they participate in creating a counter-hegemonic space where they develop their voices, empowering themselves and each other, while also becoming critically conscious of the words and the worlds around them (Darder, 2012, 2015; Muhammad, 2012; Winn, 2011; Wissman, 2009). As for teen girls of color from working-class homes who have been attending Los Angeles public schools, such critical literacy practices could provide a learning environment that many of these girls have yet to experience in their schooling.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Due to a lack of robust learning opportunities, many youth of color do not develop the critical literacy skills that would enable them to critique their own experiences (Winn, 2011). At the time of this study, children of color from working-class homes who attended densely



populated public schools were often subjected to one-size-fits-all curricular materials, rote procedures, and learning environments lacking opportunities for critical thinking, student voice, and choice (Kozol, 2005; Lopez, 2011; Ravitch, 2010). Freire (2000) explained formulaic curricula as so dehumanizing that it “may lead formerly passive students to turn against their domestication and the attempt to domesticate reality” (p. 61). Darder (1991) concurred and asserted that students often displayed resistance by disobeying school and classroom rules, while “Often the refusal to be literate has constituted an act of resistance” (p. 44). A common reaction in schooling has been to label students who resist with what Bartolomé (2009) described as “a deficit orientation toward difference, especially as it relates to low socioeconomic and ethnic minority groups” (p. 344). In essence, a deficit orientation has been assigned to urban, working-class students who were primarily of color. As Duncan (2000) explained, these “urban pedagogies” (p. 30) have focused on control and discipline rather than on intellectual engagement that could develop important critical skills. Ladson-Billings (2006), moreover, documented the inequitable and substandard schooling received by economically marginalized students who were African American, Native American, and Latino as part of the United States’s legacy.

Linking literacy to democracy, hooks (2003) explained that teachers for democracy must automatically support widespread literacy, while Freire (2000) posited that emancipatory literacy prepared and equipped those who have been systematically oppressed to critically perceive and confront the world in which they have found themselves. At the time of my study, the traditional ways of teaching the three R’s—reading, writing, and arithmetic—were, unfortunately, still firmly in place in traditional or banking approaches to education (Freire, 2000), particularly in

underserved public schools located in working-class neighborhoods (Giroux, 2001; Kozol, 2005). This instructional formula has been considered by a number of social justice educators to perpetuate the hidden curriculum, which has safeguarded the status quo and has reproduced both economic and achievement gaps (Apple, 2004; Darder, 1999; Freire, 2000; Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2010). As I began this study, the existing literacy gap further supported this notion. Educational leaders for social justice understand that literacy can liberate and, thus, have continued to advocate, insisting not only on its focus in schools, but also that it should be effectively and inclusively taught in schools so as to close the literacy gap in the United States.

As discussed earlier, gender bias in the classroom and the lack of representation of women of color in instructional materials have been legitimate concerns in the schooling of vulnerable populations (Sadker et al., 2009; Tobin & Gallagher, 1987; Weiler, 2009). In Los Angeles, adolescent girls of color have seen minimal representation of themselves in their language arts textbooks. This study examined a nonprofit, after-school writing program that placed these girls' lives, experiences, and voices front and center in its curriculum. This program, unlike those in public schools, focused on the use of texts that reflected the lives of the participants—their concerns, their communities, and their gender. All of the authors whom they read were female and many were of color. Additionally, the women leading the program saw themselves less as teachers and more as guides or facilitators. The girls were provided with a space and ample time to engage in discussions where they brainstormed and reflected on what they were writing. The goal of each workshop session was for as many girls as possible to participate in an open-mike reading of what they had written that day.

The literature of previous studies has indicated that critical literacy has served disenfranchised students not only academically but also in their lives, so that they might confront the economic system of capitalism that, by its very nature, has benefitted from keeping the majority of the population disenfranchised, not fully literate, and silent (Lopez, 2001; Morrell, 2009). Further, with high school graduation rates lower for girls of color than for White female students (*Public High School Graduation Rates*, 2011), and in conjunction with the national literacy gap—working-class students of color reading at lower levels than White, middle-income students—it is important that there be further educational research on the ways in which teen girls of color from working-class communities have received and perceived literacy education. Hence, an innovative instructional approach such as critical literacy has warranted serious consideration and further investigation.

### **Research Questions**

As an educator who has observed the curricular underrepresentation of females, particularly females of color, and who has been concerned with the dearth of female participation and voice within secondary classrooms—exacerbated by gender-biased learning environments—my experiences have led me to seek to investigate effective literacy practices for educating girls. This study focused on understanding the development of critical literacy among girls of color who attended predominantly large public secondary schools in low-income areas of metropolitan Los Angeles. The study investigated an after-school writing program through which girls participated in literacy education based on key tenants of critical literacy.

Four main research questions guided this study of alumnae of an after-school writing program for teen girls:

- How did participants describe their experiences within the program? What were the highlights of the experience and why? What were the difficult moments and why?
- What aspects or practices of the writing program did participants consider to have been the most important to their overall literacy development? To their performance in school?
- What particular relationships and practices of the program did participants consider life changing or transformative with respect to their personal sense of empowerment?
- If participants were designing their own literacy program in their community, what would they consider essential aspects or practices to building literacy and supporting the transformation of teen girls of color?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and insights of alumnae from a girls' after-school writing program, with respect to the program's transformative impact on the development of their literacy and sense of transformation, both key areas of focus in critical literacy. The term *transformative* referred to how their experiences supported development of their voices and how this empowered them in their personal lives, as well as in their experiences in school. The program, InkGirls, a pseudonym, was a program for girls ages 13 to 18 living in metropolitan areas of Los Angeles. Most of the adolescent girls attended high-density public schools and lived in working-class neighborhoods; and most participants of the writing program were teen girls of color.

## **Significance of the Study**

The female in contemporary school culture is often overlooked—fended off from the mainstream of sociological writing on youth. (McLaren, 2009, p. 230)

At the time of this study, the literacy gap and high school graduation gap indicated that the literacy education in public schools was not serving all students. This study was designed to contribute to literature on the topic of instructional reading and writing practices for secondary students, particularly adolescent girls of color, living in low-income, working-class communities. Additionally, the study was designed to produce findings that would provide valuable information for literacy teachers to employ as they designed curriculum, and selected and prioritized instructional materials and practices in the classroom. More specifically, this information was designed to inform teachers and teacher educators on the differences between using critical approaches to mentoring student writers and readers and initiating them into the writing process, and simply instructing in the traditional or instrumental ways that often have been used in large public schools.

Furthermore, this study sought to contribute to critical literacy being viewed as a standard instructional approach in the quest for closing the current literacy and graduation gaps between adolescent children of color from low-income homes and White adolescent children from middle- and upper-income homes. Lastly, this study intended to fill a gap in the current educational research on literacy instruction in classrooms and in after-school programs, particularly for working-class teen girls of color. In my research, very few articles surfaced on this topic. This study contributed to addressing this deficit in the educational literature.

## **Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy**

The primary theory used to frame this study was critical pedagogy. This critical education theory has been tied to democratic principles and social action, and has been committed to the empowerment of socially and economically oppressed populations (Darder, 1991, 2012, 2015; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2009). Further, critical pedagogy has acknowledged and confronted the ways schooling itself had operated to reproduce economic inequalities and social injustice. There have been many concepts associated with critical pedagogy; hence, there has been no one set or definitive collection of principles defined (Bartolomé, 2009). However, critical educators have shared a vision of education as humanizing and emancipatory (Darder, 2004, 2015; Freire 2000).

As outlined in this introduction, teen girls of color who attended U.S. public schools in working-class neighborhoods have been marginalized in various ways in their schooling experiences. With the participants and the purpose of this study in mind, the concepts of critical pedagogy that informed this research included: (a) a rejection of the banking concept of learning, in which learners are seen as empty vessels to be filled with information (Freire, 2000); (b) an acknowledgement that learners are active subjects of history and social change agents (Bartolomé, 2009; Darder, 1991; 2012; 2015; Freire, 2000); and (c) an understanding that learning should begin with the lives and experiences of students, encouraging students (and teachers) to further develop a voice that affirms their cultural, class, racial, and gender identities (Darder, 2012; Giroux, 2009; Hooks, 2000, 2003).

Furthermore, dialogue has played a central role in critical pedagogy; teachers and students have been co-investigators in this dialogue (Bartolomé, 2009; Giroux, 2009) working

mutually for emancipatory purposes. Together they have engaged in “a language of critique and a language of possibility” (Giroux, 2009, p. 252).

### **Critical Feminist Pedagogy**

Grounded in critical pedagogy and echoing its vision of education as humanizing and emancipatory, Critical feminist pedagogy centers the experiences of girls and women in the learning environment and curriculum. Working for liberatory purposes and social change, critical feminist pedagogy is distinguished from other pedagogies by making female experiences central in the production of knowledge. Critical feminist educators are conscious of sexism, and issues of gender and sexism, while revealing a commitment to analysis and critique of texts, social relationships, and power structures that maintain and perpetuate injustices toward girls and women (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Weiler, 1994). This pedagogy encourages the transformation of students from passive receivers of knowledge into experts of their own histories and life experiences, therefore, equipping them to be agents of change.

In centering lives of students and female lives, and decentering the male, or dominant, narrative, feminist approaches to teaching and learning assist learners in developing a feminist standpoint—a critical view of the gendered division of labor and the social, political, and economic sexist structures that exist (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; hooks, 2000). It is these concepts of critical pedagogy and critical feminist pedagogy highlighted here that speak most to the liberating intent of the critical literacy curriculum of InkGirls and, thus, were used as a conceptual framework for analysis of the data and in generating research findings and conclusions.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study employed critical narrative methods to conduct the research at an after-school creative writing program for girls in Los Angeles. With the goal of answering the research questions posed earlier, I gathered data that focused on the experiences of former members of the program, who were alumnae. The criteria required that participants in the study were female, of color, and 18 years old or older, and from working-class backgrounds, and that they had attended public secondary schools in Los Angeles. Four alumnae participated in this critical narrative study.

Data collection took place through narrative sessions with the women who, while attending middle and high school, participated in the creative writing program. In addition, an individual interview was conducted with the associate director of the program. The information gained from this session provided useful insights about the history, the purpose, and the philosophy behind the writing program's critical literacy foundation. Also, the researcher observed public events where current members of the program presented their writings. This observational data further informed the story of the program. Lastly, artifact analyses were conducted of both the curriculum used by the program and the published anthologies that showcased the writings of the girls in the InkGirls program.

## **Positionality**

My particular location as a White, middle-income woman was important to acknowledge in this study of women and girls of color from working-class backgrounds. My positionality was of issue because there was potential for essentializing or misinterpretation when presenting the voices from cultural and class communities different than my own. Therefore, I was careful in



presenting their voices, weighing my own agency, assumptions, and perspectives throughout my collection of data, analysis, and writing process of this dissertation.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

As a former public high school teacher, I have developed my own definition, understanding, and applications for critical literacy. Therefore, I was mindful to keep the focus on the participants' perceptions of their literacy experience, in order to avoid researcher bias. In addition, this study was based on the perceptions of participants of only one program. The findings and conclusions of this study, with such limited scope, might not be generalizable or applicable to other writing programs that, for example, were for mixed gender or were compulsory.

### **Summary**

Research, as noted earlier, has indicated that in secondary public school classrooms, female students were called on less than male students, received less attention from teachers, and were underrepresented in the curriculum. For female students of color, the curricular and instructional disparity has been even greater. Critical literacy has offered an instructional approach that is inclusive of all students, where students' histories, backgrounds, and worldviews played a pivotal role. Unfortunately, at the time of this study, instructional practices in secondary public schools were heavily aligned with standardized state testing, therefore, rote, one-size-fits-all curriculum was commonplace; this was even more so for students historically marginalized because of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation. The purpose of this study was to investigate, through the experiences of alumnae, the role of critical literacy in a

nonprofit writing program for teen girls of color from working-class backgrounds who had attended high-density public schools.

### **Definition of Terms**

There are a number terms I used in this study that could have been defined in various ways. To clarify the data presentation and discussions, I define them below.

*Achievement Gap:* The achievement gap refers to the disparity between academic and educational performance between different groups of students specifically defined by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender (Public High School Graduation Rates, 2011).

*Adolescent Literacy Gap:* The adolescent literacy gap refers to the disparity in reading and writing (literacy) abilities between different groups of students specifically defined by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender (Barone, 2006; *National Institute of Literacy's 2012 Report Card on Reading*, 2013).

*Counter-hegemonic:* Counter-hegemonic refers to a space that is both intellectual and social that reconstructs power relationships in order to bring to the forefront the experiences and voices of those who have been historically marginalized in public institutions (Darder et al., 2009).

*Critical Feminist Pedagogy:* Grounded in critical pedagogy, and championing humanizing education, critical feminist pedagogy is an educational theory committed to making female experiences central in the production of knowledge (Weiler, 1994). Critical feminist educators are conscious of sexism, and issues of gender and sexism, and reveal a commitment in their teaching to the analysis and critique of texts, social relationships, and power structures that

maintain and perpetuate inequities and injustices in the lives of girls and women (Macdonald & Sanchez-Casal, 2002; Weiler, 1994).

*Critical Literacy:* Grounded in the educational theory of critical pedagogy, critical literacy is an instructional approach where students' backgrounds and experiences are central to the learning, as students read and write critically so as to better understand what is fair and unfair in the world (Christensen, 2009; Shor & Pari, 1999).

*Critical Pedagogy:* Critical pedagogy is an educational theory that champions a humanizing education that begins with the lives and experiences of learners, encouraging students (and teachers) to further develop a voice that affirms their cultural, class, racial, and gender identities (Giroux, 2009). It is associated with a number of critical principles (Darder et al., 2008) that ultimately encourage students and teachers to question and confront dominant groups, ideas, and injustices so as to transform their own worlds, by initiating a fairer and more just way of life.

*Hegemony:* Hegemony is when a dominant culture or group exerts social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence over subordinate culture or groups (McLaren, 2007).

*Transformation:* Transformation happens when, through development of voice, students are empowered and experience an awakening—in their lives, schooling, communities—that results in a deeper understanding or consciousness of what shapes these realities and, thus, recognize their power and ability to change and recreate themselves and their world (Darder et al., 2009; Freire, 2005).

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Important to any study that has explored issues of critical literacy has been first knowledge about the background of those U.S. public education policies and practices that have faltered in educating economically marginalized students of color who attend public schools. Hence, I begin this literature review with this discussion. Next, I provide historical information on the theoretical framework for this study, and on critical pedagogy, and summarize principles associated with it. I then define critical literacy as well as discuss its history and roots in critical pedagogy. In addition, I outline the tenets of critical literacy practices in secondary classrooms throughout the United States. Lastly, I present the findings from previous studies that have focused on teen girls of color from working-class backgrounds and their experiences with critical literacy.

#### **Background of U.S. Schooling Policies**

The overemphasis, at the time of this study, on standardized testing and one-size-fits-all teaching, accelerated with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2001, has increased rote literacy instruction in U.S. public-school classrooms (Kozol, 2005; Morrel, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). Critics of the No Child Left Behind Act and the current Race to the Top policy that was enacted in 2009 have asserted that public schools have been overly focused on preparing students as test takers, rather than on becoming critical, democratic citizens. In 1983, U.S. President Ronald Reagan's national education committee released a report titled, *Nation at Risk: An Imperative for Educational Reform*. This report deemed many U.S. public schools as failing, and spurred local, state, and national reform efforts (Ravitch, 2010). The most recent reform effort,

known as the Common Core State Standards, assigned the same deficit model and ranking system to schools and students (Ravitch, 2014; Singer, 2014). These reforms included a heavy emphasis on standardized testing.

In response to a 1985 RAND study, Darling-Hammond (1985) noted the growing standardization of teaching-to-the-test curriculum and its negative effects on instructional practices:

Teachers use less writing in their classrooms in order to gear assignments to the format of standardized tests; they resort to lectures rather than classroom discussions in order to cover the prescribed behavioral objectives without getting off the track; they are precluded from teaching materials that are not on prescribed textbook lists, even when they think these materials are essential to meet the needs of their students; and they feel constrained from following up on expressed student interests that lie outside of the bounds of mandated curricula. (p. 209)

The rote instructional approaches described by Darling-Hammond especially increased in implementation for students of color who attended public schools located in underserved, working-class communities (Darder, 1991, 2012, 2015; Morrel, 2009; Ravitch, 2014).

At the time of this study, it was important to note that an adolescent literacy gap did exist: In 2015, the National Center for Education Progress reported that 46% of White students in grade eight in the United States read at or above proficient, while only 16% of African American students read at or above proficient, and only 21% of Latino students read at or above proficient. (*Nation's Report Card*, 2015). Unfortunately, one-size-fits-all, rote curricula has often been utilized as a cure-all for this adolescent literacy gap—the disparity of reading levels between

different ethnic and economic groups in the United States—with students of color from working-class homes receiving the bulk of its implementation (Darder, 2012; Morrell, 2009).

A notable effect of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top has been the defunding of public education and institutions in favor of charter schools. McLaren (2007) warned that a testing and accountability system likely could not raise the failing rates of children who attended economically disadvantaged schools, as these schools continued to be defunded and increasingly test-driven. Darder (2012) asserted that schooling in the US traditionally has been based on fulfilling the hegemony of capitalist accumulation, and therefore, the hidden curriculum of schooling has preserved the power and privilege of the dominant culture. As such, “Students from the dominant culture will end up at the top of the hierarchy and students from subordinate cultures will end up at the bottom” (Darder, 2012, p. 5). Critical educators have explained the function of the hidden curriculum as a way to maintain class-based divisions in the U.S. labor force. At the exclusion and marginalization of women and girls, the hidden curriculum also has worked to maintain “male-dominated gender relations” (McLaren, 2007, p. 207).

Further intensifying the amount of mechanical, teach-to-the-test curricula for students has been the implementation of “exit exams” in U.S. public high schools. Currently, 24 U.S. states require high school seniors to pass an exam in English/language arts and mathematics in order to exit high school with a diploma, even if students have completed all required courses with passing grades. Exit exams have proven not to increase graduation rates and have also shown to be detrimental to the high school graduation rates of Latino and Black students (*The Case Against Exit Exams*, 2014). Hence, as graduation rates have dropped for students of color, the

rote literacy curricula described by Darling-Hammond (1985) has been more heavily prescribed as a panacea for public schools in their communities.

For adolescent girls of color, the challenges have been further compounded by biased teaching practices that have favored adolescent boys (Liu, 2006) and the underrepresentation of women and girls, particularly women and girls of color, in the curricula (Giroux, 2009; Tobin & Gallagher, 1987). In fact, Sadker et al. (2009) claimed that, starting in grade school, teachers engaged less frequently with female students, asking them fewer questions, while at the same time providing males with more feedback. The authors further asserted that there was an uneven distribution of teacher time, energy, and attention, all in the favor of male students. After thousands of observation hours in various classrooms and grade levels, they reported that the amount of sexist lessons and teaching practices was “startling” (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 9).

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Do we want our schools to create a passive, risk-free citizenry, or a politicized citizenry capable of fighting for various forms of public life and informed by a concern for equality and social justice? (McLaren, 2007, p. 184)

Researching a literacy program that has striven to create the conditions for a liberatory experience for working-class teen girls of color required an exploration of pedagogy. Pedagogy was a key concern, in that pedagogical philosophy informs learning objectives, instructional approaches, other curricular decisions, and the relationship between students and teachers. The conceptual framework, as noted earlier, that provided a lens for analysis of the findings from this study was critical pedagogy. Following the translation of his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, from Portuguese to English in 1970, Freire has been most often attributed with the

rise of the critical pedagogy movement in the United States and internationally (Roberts, 1996; Shor & Pari, 1999; Weiler, 1994).

However, prior to Freire's writing, philosophers in the Frankfurt School in Germany in the 1930s established a critical theory of culture, a way to challenge the dominant institutions, laws, and norms that benefitted the few at the cost of the majority (Darder, 1991; Morrell, 2009; Roberts, 1996). Notable members of the school, including Marcuse (1970), Adorno (1966/1981), Horkheimer (1947), and others, produced writings that critiqued elite, bourgeois society. These writings established a critical view that later served to influence the philosophical principles of critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2009; McLaren, 2007). Accordingly, critical pedagogy has been rooted in democratic principles, social action, and committed to students disenfranchised by the dominant group (Darder, 1991; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2009). About this, McLaren (2007) argued that schooling in the United States protected the interests of the ruling class, while "A critical perspective allows us to scrutinize schools more insistently in terms of race, class power, and gender" (p. 189).

### **Principles of Critical Pedagogy**

Critical education has been defined as committed to a kind of schooling dedicated to developing a foundation of empowerment for students who have historically been marginalized and disenfranchised inside and outside of the schooling environment (Darder et al., 2009; Finn, 1999). This driving purpose of critical pedagogy demanded a radical transformation of the pedagogical practices in place in U.S. public schools at the time of this study. It summoned teachers to acknowledge the false notion that schooling was neutral, to recognize school as part of an oppressive system built on ideologies that fueled meritocracy—rewarding those in power—



and suppressed the possibilities and experiences of marginalized students (Darder et al., 2009; McLaren, 1989).

In addition, critical pedagogy elicited an understanding that class reproduction was at play in schools in order to maintain the political and economic interests of the dominant ruling class in the United States. Identified by Noam Chomsky (2004) as “predatory capitalism” (p. 41), this economic system

is not a fit system. . . . It is incapable of meeting human needs that can be expressed only in collective terms, and its concept of competitive man (sic) who seeks only to maximize wealth and power, who subjects himself to market relationships, to exploitation and external authority, is antihuman and intolerable in the deepest sense. (p. 41)

Further, public schools has mirrored the privileges and beliefs of the dominant class, using meritocratic techniques such as standardized testing, high school exit exams, and student tracking (Darder, 2012; Ravitch, 2004).

In contrast, Freire (2005) advocated for a humanizing education that embraces the learner—her knowledge, her voice, her empowerment—so as to lead to transformative experiences both liberating for self and the world in which she lived. As described, this type of education entailed taking a critical view of society, education, and the world, in a quest for a more democratized society. Thus, another principle of critical pedagogy posits that to confront those injustices that have oppressed and silenced members of a society, critique and dialogue are necessary tools in challenging dominant, traditional discourses in schools and in larger society (Darder et al., 2009).

Critical pedagogy also has embraced a dialectical view of knowledge, society, and individuals as another significant principle to its praxis (Darder et al., 2009; Giroux, 2001). This has been done in an effort to “Unmask the connections between objective knowledge and the cultural norms, values, and standards of the society at large” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 11). This dialectical approach brought the interwoven link between individuals, social actors, and current and past histories to the surface. As McLaren (2009) contended, this placed learners in the center of classroom discourse, as “social actors” (p. 61) in history rather than as passive receivers of knowledge.

A theory of resistance also factored into the principles of critical pedagogy. Darder et al. (2009) contended that students from subordinated groups have rebelled against the dehumanization they have experienced in the current schooling system, resisting the hegemonic practices within schools that have attempted to further subordinate them. Some of the ways hegemony has been prevalent in public school has been through tracking, a deficit model approach to teaching with an inordinate amount of tedious remedial instruction for students from subordinate groups. To respond to this routinization, critical pedagogy has been dedicated to creating counter-hegemonic spaces for all students—“intellectual and social spaces where power relationships are reconstructed to make central the voices and experiences of those who have historically existed at the margins of public institutions” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 12).

For critical education to be realized in our public schooling system, maintained and further cultivated, retaining the relationship between theory and practice has been in order. An alliance of theory and practice—known as praxis—has led to reflection and a greater understanding of self, others, and the world, which has sought to arrive at transformative action

for the individual and the collective. Freire asserted that a true praxis was necessary for emancipatory change and warned that, without reflection, theory would fall into a state of abstraction and practice would become rudimentary and without transformative purpose (Darder et al., 2009).

Critical pedagogy has encouraged students and teachers to question established beliefs, traditional texts, and to take social action to confront issues of poverty, classism, sexism, racism, and all socially constructed inequities and injustices (Darder et al., 2009). In addition, critical pedagogy has discarded the deficit perspective of learners, propelling educators to learn to “recognize, value, use, and build upon student’s previously acquired knowledge and skills” (Bartolomé, 2009, p. 348). Critical educators, thus, have championed a humanizing education that begins with the lives and experiences of learners, encouraging students (and teachers) to further develop a voice that affirms their cultural, class, racial, and gender identities (Giroux, 2009).

On the whole, critical pedagogy has encompassed an emancipatory purpose, where learners could use their voices, develop critical consciousness, and garner the individual and collective power to challenge socially constructed injustices—in their own lives and in the larger society (Darder, 1991, 2015; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2009; McLaren, 2009). Through this process, students could become “critical agents and active participants in the development of society freed from the alienation wrought by capitalism” (McLaren, 2009, p. 39). The critical pedagogical principles and ideas posited here served as the foundation for a critical literacy, the central theoretical construct that informed and shaped the creative writing program explored in this study.

## **Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is a recognized approach to literacy instruction in public and private elementary, secondary, and university classrooms throughout North America, Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. True to its philosophical roots, critical literacy is not a scripted program, model, or curriculum, but rather an approach for engaging critically with the formation of language and literacy and its link to individual and social empowerment (Jongsma, 1991; Macedo, 2006; Shor & Pari, 1999). It is an instructional approach that uses a critical lens to question socially constructed and dominant—or hegemonic—ideas; it is a way to analyze all that one reads, hears, sees, and believes (Lopez, 2011; Morrell, 2009; Shor & Pari, 1999). It is also worth noting that *Reading the Word and the World*, published by Freire and Macedo in 1987, constituted the first major text that moved to clarify “the critical practice and understanding of literacy” (p. 37); and, as such, to articulate a critical literacy, whereby the political nature of schooling and literacy were made explicit with respect to oppressed populations (Darder, 2015).

### **Defining Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is understood as a pedagogical philosophy and practice of social action that views literacy as an issue of equity and power (rather than a neutral enterprise) and, thus, challenges the functional literacy approaches of traditional schooling (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Through critical literacy, students have engaged with important questions related to who is allowed to be literate and whose voices are most often heard (Jongsma, 1991; Lopez, 2011; Macedo, 2006; McDaniel, 2004). From this understanding, students employ discourse to challenge power structures and inequities found in their communities, classrooms, and larger

society. As a result, critical literacy works to create a counter-hegemonic environment, placing their voices and experiences at the center “of those who have historically existed at the margins of public institutions” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 12).

Through critical literacy practices, students have engaged in their own meaning making of the world, while encouraging higher-order thinking through reading, writing, and dialogue (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Lopez, 2011; Shor & Pari, 1999). Those teaching critical literacy have contended that it assisted students both academically and personally (Christensen, 2009; Finn, 1999; Shor & Pari, 1999). Further, since critical literacy values the lives and stories of learners, it has been a beacon for students who have been disenfranchised because of ethnicity, gender, economic status, and sexual orientation (Darder, 1991; Lopez, 2001; Morrell, 2009; Shor & Pari, 1999; Wolfe, 2010).

### **Historical Background**

The origins of critical literacy have been traced to the 1968 seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* written by Freire. In the book, Freire described the literacy project he began for 300 Brazilian sugarcane workers who were not literate. A goal of the project was for the workers to become literate—beyond just reading the word but also doing so critically—so that they could pose problems, interrogate texts, and question social conditions (Shor & Pari, 1999). The workers would then move to take action against the systematic oppression and exploitation to which they had historically been subjected. A military coup ended his literacy campaign, and Freire was jailed as a traitor by the Brazilian government for nearly three months until he was exiled (*Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 2014).

In addition to the belief that literacy should be used as a tool for liberation, Freire (2000) believed that educators needed to change the ways they viewed pedagogy. He advocated that they step out of the traditional authoritarian role and take a seat with students; become learners, while at the same time encouraging them to question their established beliefs and texts; engage in dialogue; and take action to challenge issues of poverty, classism, racism, and other social injustices. In his work, Freire proposed *praxis*, a combination of theory and practice that called for reflection, dialogue, and action in order to transform the world. This critical approach to pedagogy informed an understanding that literacy was not only for comprehension, or simply reading the word, but was also largely for reading the world, so as to question, critique, confront, and transform socially constructed inequities (Jongsma 1991; Roberts, 1996; Shor & Pari, 1999).

Also appearing in the DNA of critical literacy was John Dewey, whose philosophy sees education not as memorizing facts, but rather as a way to develop democratic citizens who can practice a life of liberty in pursuit of equality and fairness for all (in Shor & Pari, 1999). Dewey detested and fought against what Freire (2000) later described as a *banking system* of education, which treats learners as if they are empty containers to be filled with new information or “automatons” (p. 72) rather than as creative and capable historical subjects of their lives. Both Dewey and Freire spent their adult lives working to enlighten educators and to challenge the dehumanization at work in educational policies and practices that shaped the lives of the most vulnerable.

Also significant to critical literacy was the work of psychologist Vygotsky (1978), including his socio-cultural theory that proposed cognitive growth occurred in and through social interactions. The assertion by Vygotsky that learners constructed meaning and deepened their

understanding through discussion of ideas with others, hearing multiple viewpoints, and understanding content and concepts together has been widely embraced by critical educators (Park, 2012; Shor & Pari, 1999). This social interaction was key to Freire, who advocated for a pedagogy where dialogue is central, believing that if the structure—and, in this case, classrooms—do not permit dialogue, the culture of the classroom has to change (Freire, 2000; Shor & Pari, 1999).

### **Critical Literacy in the Classroom**

Critical literacy has been a process conducted with mutuality between teacher and students (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor & Pari, 1999). Therefore, by grounding a critical literacy approach in the classroom, a teacher might devise a space where students teach each other, the teacher learns from students, and the students learn from the teacher. Herein was found a dialogical sense of horizontal mutuality (Freire, 2000). Further, critical literacy practices promote a classroom environment in which all learners dialogue, read, and write their backgrounds, histories, and worldviews. The teacher recognizes the students as authorities of their own knowledge and experiences, and see their knowledge as integral to the learning process (Bartolomé, 2009; Freire & Macedo, 1987; hooks 1994).

A prevailing tenet of critical literacy instruction is to go beyond the traditional literacy of merely decoding and comprehending text. Opportunities are provided for learners to critically connect their experiences and worldviews, as they critically engage in analysis of language and confront mainstream assumptions that might work against their best interests (Jones, 2013; Lopez, 2011; Morrell, 2009; Shannon, 2002). The definition of language here includes spoken words as well as written texts—such as speeches, television advertisements, or even images or

photographs intended to convey a public message. This critical way of looking at language has been wholly meant as an act of “disrupting the commonplace” (Christensen, 2009; Finn, 1999; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The *commonplace* refers to dominant views or ideas within society that are generally accepted as commonsensical truth or the natural order of things—a result of the cultural hegemonic forces that have constructed the structures and beliefs of the mainstream society (Gramsci, 1971).

Therefore, critical literacy acknowledges that literacy has never been neutral and language should be critiqued through lenses of power, positioning, and perspective (Clarke & Whitney, 2009; Reidel & Draper, 2011; Shannon 2002). Jones (2006) described critical literacy as a process of deconstructing, reconstructing, and taking social action. One of the goals of critical literacy has been to allow students to question the perspective they have been taught to believe and to discover that this has tended to provide selective and limited accounts of themselves and the world (Jongsma, 1991).

### **Classroom Practices**

The literature I reviewed on critical literacy practices in secondary classrooms called attention to a variety of strategies for classroom practice. For the sake of cohesion and constraints in terms of the length of this review, I selected four prevalent and recurring themes, with respect to types of classroom practices associated with critical literacy: (a) relatable and multiple texts, (b) reading critical perspectives, (c) student-generated texts, and (d) social action.

**Relatable and multiple texts.** Text selection has been defined as a central component of critical literacy. Providing texts that offer depth, insight, or viewpoints other than those in the required texts is a common practice of critical literacy in secondary classrooms. Wolfe (2010)



referred to this as choosing a text that “represents non-dominant perspective” (p. 371). Text characteristics considered by teachers when making a selection have been texts that gave voice to those who have been historically marginalized, silenced, or rendered invisible. Students who, too, have felt marginalized can relate, learn, and feel empowered by such texts.

This might also include texts that investigate differences and conflicts rather than ignore them (Clarke & Whitney, 2009; Molden, 2007; Morrell, 2009). Also common in critical literacy classrooms is reading multiple texts written on the same topic. The purpose of reading and juxtaposing several texts about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in various communities in New Orleans, for example, allowed students and their teacher to analyze author biases (Christensen, 2009). In another case, a teacher assigned students to read the novels *The Kite Runner* and *Persepolis* to better understand discrimination and Arab American immigrants’ experiences in this country after the September 11 attacks (Wolfe, 2010). Reading and analyzing multiple texts with various viewpoints could, moreover, increase student empathy for others and for themselves, while expanding their critical understanding of the world.

**Reading critical perspectives.** Reading from a critical view requires students to analyze a book, lyrics, commercial, or poem by thinking about the context and purpose that informed the text. This reading sometimes has been referred to as *resistant reading* (Wolfe, 2010) and embodies a set of highly multifaceted skills. For example, Jones (2004) portrayed teachers who asked students to take on a different identity than the producer of the text in order to critique the purpose as well as the structure and the intended meanings of nonfiction passages. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) described this strategy as “switching,” when the teacher invited students to switch, for instance, gender, ethnicity, or even language from that of the producer of text, or in

the case of literature, from the narrator or character. In another example, Wolfe (2010) described a teacher who asked students to analyze current newspapers, “analyzing the ways in which newspapers include or exclude certain groups within our society” (p. 378). With a series of critical questions used by the students to critique the articles, the teacher encouraged students, in a dialogical manner, to unearth particular social and political agendas and biases often found in the newspapers.

Teachers also used mainstream texts representing dominant systems as tools to analyze underlying ideologies (McDaniel, 2004). For example, as students read the play *The Crucible*, they deconstructed the speeches of Joseph McCarthy, finding parallels between the scare tactics used in the Salem witch trials and those employed during 1950s McCarthy hearings that wrongly convicted individuals of communism and treason, many of whom were immigrants (Wolfe, 2010). When students have been encouraged to be critical of texts or the messages within texts that have been accepted as truth by the dominant society, they have developed their ability to critically voice their views in ways that could go beyond what they have learn within the classroom walls.

**Student-generated texts.** Using the lives and experiences of students as a focal point in literacy learning also has been known as *generative themes* (Freire 2000). Generative themes and other activities that have worked to produce dialogue and texts from the students’ perspectives and lives, reflect the Freirian approach, with the intent to read the world and change it. Therefore, student-generated writing is foundational in critical literacy, examples of which include autobiographical stories and poems. According to Lopez (2011), due to the fast-paced, testing-driven curriculum of current public education, students have been given few

opportunities to write and talk about their lives in classrooms. Valuing student-generated texts as much as those published and studied in school can boost students' sense of value for their own thoughts and ideas, empowering and preparing them to critique views commonly held in dominant society (Christensen, 2009; Macedo, 2006; Shor & Pari, 1999; Wolfe, 2010).

*Personal narratives.* By telling their stories, students have the opportunity to write the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In one such case, a group of high school sophomores generated a list of topics related to their lives that they had in common, such as: a time they stood up or wished they had, a life-changing event, obstacles they had faced or overcome, and growing up male or female and the expectations placed on them (Christensen, 2000). The students then read previous student narratives and dialogued extensively about the content and structure of student texts: the use of figurative and descriptive language, the plot and character development, and author's purpose or intent. They developed a list of writer's tools that they would employ throughout the writing process.

After the sophomores created first drafts of their own narratives, they participated in read-around activities. In these, they sat in a circle with seven or eight other students and read their drafts aloud. As students read, the other students listened and wrote down a compliment to give to the writer. The group then dialogued and made personal connections to what the writer wrote, ask clarifying questions, and offering suggestions. The read-around activities provided students with "an immediate audience" (Christensen, 2000, p. 65) and exposed them to different writing styles. One 16-year-old student wrote about how she had recently discovered she was not just a tomboy, but was also gay. A male student wrote about confronting his abusive stepfather, with this leading to his mother leaving her husband to stay in a shelter with the

children. About narrative writing, Linda Christensen (2000) explained, “They learn to sing their lives through writing. They use writing to take the power out of their pain” (p. 60).

*Counter-narratives: Re-imagining fairytales.* Christensen (2009) asserted that writing about and critiquing others’ words in relation to their own lives allowed students to connect language to the outside world in a meaningful way. When students wrote counter-narratives, for example, they were encouraged to share their thoughts, observations, and feelings from nonmainstream perspectives (Behrman, 2006). This was apparent when a group of high school students first dialogued and wrote about how they felt excluded from popular images and culture. They then rewrote classic fairy tales (such as Cinderella) removing sexist, racist, classist, and other stereotypes, making them more inclusive of those individuals and groups who had been traditionally excluded (Christensen, 2009; Clarke & Whitney, 2009). Students then took these re-imagined tales into their homes and communities and read them to small children.

*Counter-narratives: Praise poems.* Another example of counter-narrative writing was when students wrote praise poems (Christensen, 2000). Such poems balanced the critical stance and created an opportunity for enjoyment and celebration. Students first read published poems, and poems written by previous students that honored various aspects of the poets’ identities. Students and teacher then dialogued about the poems and discussed how, through praise, they could counter negative stereotypes. This process equipped them “to unlearn the myths that bind us” (Christensen, 2000, p. 52). Students then crafted their own poems and were encouraged to praise themselves by writing odes to such various aspects of themselves such as their language, their culture, their skin, their weight, and their neighborhood. Praise poems provided a positive way for students to see themselves. Students read aloud their poems to classmates, family, and

friends. This project, in essence, presented students with the right, as Freire (2000) asserted, to use their own words to name their world.

**Social action.** Critical literacy, in itself, has been seen as a social action in that it encompasses an understanding of literacy as linked to equity and power, with a critical eye toward who gets to be literate and who is most often heard (Jongsma, 1999; Lopez, 2011; McDaniel, 2004). From this perspective, students have engaged in various projects to challenge asymmetrical relations of power and structures of inequalities within their communities and larger society. This action echoed Freire's (2000) *problem-posing* approach, which he proposed in place of a banking system of education.

Morrell (2009) described one such project where high school students sought to find what inspired teens to stay in school and also what the contributing factors were for those who dropped out. With a large number of students dropping out of public high schools in their city, the teenagers designed and distributed surveys, conducted interviews, and analyzed statistics. In the end, the students gave a research brief and slide presentation of their findings to an audience of city officials. In another case, Christensen (2009) described a project where students created pamphlets to distribute to family, friends, and their communities. The pamphlets were designed to address societal issues such as prejudices toward people who were overweight and increasing incidents of bulimia and anorexia among middle-school-aged girls.

Hence, in both of these scenarios, students experienced a sense of empowerment when they had the knowledge and used their voices to advocate for positive change in their communities. Also representative of social action are personal narratives in which students share their stories and experiences that might have included a time they persevered, or might have

described attributes that have helped them prevail in the face of adversity. With social action, there is an understanding that literacy can be a tool for resistance and an instrument of joy (Shannon, 2002).

Through all these projects, the powers of social agency and self-determination were at work, providing a space in which the students as individuals made their own choices, acting independently to speak, write, and act upon what mattered to them (Christensen, 2009). In this study, it was important to note that critical literacy projects—whether pamphlets, personal narratives, or praise poems—were meant for a community audience and were enacted with a liberatory purpose; they were not meant simply for a grade and for an audience of one, the teacher.

### **Why Critical Literacy Is Important**

Writing and talking about these issues—like race, class, gender, and solidarity—takes them out of the shadow world and into the light of day, so students can understand why things are fair or unfair and how to change them. (Christensen, 2009, p. 2)

At the time of this study, critics contended that the policies of schooling were holding back the social and economic advancement of groups who had been historically oppressed in the United States (Darder, 1991, 2015; Finn, 1999; Kozol 2005; Morrell 2009). In critiques of these policies, the overwhelming focus and value placed on standardized test scores was especially noted. As asserted by Morrell (2009), the scores on these tests were a result of a multiple choice test administered once a school year and did not provide the necessary insights needed for improving literacy instruction nor did they do anything to eliminate “the tremendous opportunity gaps that exist between the wealthiest and the poorest students” (p. 96). This elevated attention

placed on “bubble-in” testing was in clear accordance with the banking system of education, producing, according to Freire (2000), the “anti-dialogical banking educator” (p. 93).

Shor and Pari (1999) proposed that critical literacy “not only embraces and examines identity differences but also acknowledges that every difference will be used against us in a society where an elite minority maintains power by a divide-and-conquer strategy, among other mechanisms” (p. 18). Therefore, critical literacy has been potentially viewed as a radical intervention by those who have favored schooling as a way to simply prepare students as test takers through scripted and prepackaged curriculum. Yet, despite the propensity of high-stakes testing across the United States, proponents of more democratic learning spaces have continued to advocate for a critical literacy curriculum as described in this review—one that could support the empowerment of students.

Through dialogue and participation in critical literacy curricula, students have been encouraged to develop voice and social consciousness in ways that could assist them to critique dominant ideologies and discourses, as well as to take action against socially constructed conditions of inequality and social injustices. Thus, critical literacy has acted as an emancipatory process, particularly for those students who have been marginalized, vilified, or silenced within the school context. A fundamental objective of critical literacy has been for students to better understand themselves and their world, while also developing a voice that could position them to be active participants and historical subjects in denouncing injustice and announcing democratic life (Freire, 2000).

## Critical Feminist Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy and critical literacy were lenses utilized to analyze the creative writing program that was the focus of this study. Since the program focused on girls, it was impossible to lose sight that this also necessitated a gendered lens; thus, critical feminist pedagogy is a pedagogical framework essential to this view. Engaging critical pedagogy with respect to feminism is distinguished from other pedagogies by making female experiences central in the production of knowledge. Kathleen Weiler (1994) asserted that critical feminist educators are conscious of sexism, and issues of gender and sexism, and reveal a commitment in their teaching to analysis and critique of texts, social relationships, and power structures that maintain and perpetuate inequities and injustices in the lives of girls and women.

Four teaching strategies are vital to critical feminist pedagogy: (a) use of personal experiences in all aspects of the curriculum, (b) development of a critical perspective, (c) participatory learning, and (d) encouragement of social action (Macdonald & Sanchez-Casal, 2002). An overarching goal of these strategies is to assist learners in developing a feminist standpoint—a critical view of the gendered division of labor and the social, political, and economic sexist structures that exist so as to bring social change (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; hooks, 2000; Macdonald & Sanchez-Casal, 2002).

In addition, an important goal of feminist approaches to learning and teaching is for leadership to be fostered *by* women *for* and with women/girls. It is not enough for female students to feel included in a learning environment. The empowerment a student discovers in the feminist classroom can become wider spread, positioning her to make decisions and to lead change beyond the classroom walls (Batliwala, 2011).



## **Teen Girls of Color and Critical Literacy**

Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of schools, and how they know it. (Freire, 2005, p. 130)

In her work, hooks (2000) asserted that to be of color in the US meant to be placed at the margin—part of the whole but outside of the main body. Critical literacy programs that have served girls of color have taken hooks’s concern here to heart, by providing writing experiences within and outside of schools that could prove to be empowering and liberating, placing adolescent girls of color at the center, in ways that could assist them in becoming aware of “counter hegemonic or misaligned classroom practices” (Muhammad, 2012, p. 210). In this concluding section, I present two programs, found in the literature, that offer liberatory experiences, where the lives of the female students of color are a central aspect of their literacy learning.

### **An Out-of-School Program**

In a five-week writing out-of-school program for Black adolescent girls (Muhammad, 2012), 16 participants who resided in an urban, working-class community, each created poems, essays, journal entries, and short stories. A key purpose of the after-school program was to create a space so the girls could “use their pens in powerful ways” (Muhammad, 2012, p. 204). The facilitators of the institute encouraged the young writers, ages 11 to 17, to write freely and truthfully. One participant, Iris (a pseudonym, as are the rest of the names in this study), crafted a poem that confronted societal gender and ethnic stereotypes while also critiquing her

experiences in classrooms of times she felt ignored by teachers or not represented in the curriculum. In an interview, she explained how the writing institute, unlike public schooling, gave her a safe space to express her thoughts and opinions. Iris and the other girls developed a voice, experiencing literacy as a tool in which to examine their lives and experience of schooling, as well as to critique the larger world. Further, the facilitators used mirror texts, stories, and narratives—female authors of color—to which the girls could relate in order to mentor their writing skills and affirm their identities.

### **An In-School Program**

At a large, urban public school, two female students made a direct request to administrators to provide a class that would include more female-specific readings and writings (Wissman, 2009). As a result, an elective creative writing course was offered. The students enrolled—all teen girls of color ages 14–15—and routinely read and discussed literary and artistic works by women of color such as June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, and Maya Angelou. The prevailing objective of the course was for students to critically engage with photos, essays, poems, and songs by women and girls of color who considered their artistic creations a means for working toward social justice.

In addition, and in regard to the purpose of the course, the instructor explained to the students, “We will consider their perspectives on gender, race, and sexuality [and] how our work [students and teacher] together can raise consciousness and create change” (Wissman, 2009, p. 39). The female students then used inquiry questions to guide their initial explorations of these texts. For example: “What inspires me?” “What kind of truth does she tell?” “What kind of

truth do I want to tell?” “What kind of change am I seeking?” (Wissman, 2009, p. 40). From there, they critically interrogated the texts, as well as their own experiences.

This approach to text exemplified a key tenet of critical literacy, as did the participation by the instructor: the horizontal mutuality enacted by the teacher in exploring the texts with the students. The girls then wrote and read aloud their poetry and autobiographical reflections in class and continued discussions on how to engage with inequities in their own lives and in their communities. For a writing task, the students crafted poems that challenged what they felt to be the most common misperceptions of women and girls of color. This created an open, counter-hegemonic space and gave voice to the teen girls and, thus, an opportunity to develop greater critical consciousness and the ability to challenge dominant discourses and beliefs.

### **Dearth in the Literature**

Although the two examples of programs above are excellent examples of the possibilities when critical literacy has been put into practice with teen girls of color, an exhaustive search of the literature indicated that there was lack of empirical research that documented effective critical literacy instruction for students of color who attended public schools in low-income areas. This dearth in empirical research was even greater when it came to teen girls of color living in working-class communities and attending underserved, high-density public schools. In using specific keywords and key terms, I found only eight articles on studies conducted in the last 12 years on literacy practices for teenage students of color who attended public schools in urban, working-class communities. Not surprising, only three of the eight articles were specifically focused on teen girls.

## Summary

The 1972 enactment of Title IX of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, which prohibited gender-based discrimination in federally funded education institutions, has not accomplished what it intended for female students in U.S. public school classrooms (Sadker et al., 2009). With high school graduation rates lower for girls of color than for White female students (*Public High School Graduation Rates*, 2011), it was vital there be further educational research on the ways in which adolescent girls of color could experience and perceive literacy education. In regard to literacy instruction, as noted previously, what was currently in place for teen girls of color in public schools at the time of this study was not working. Despite various attempts to support the girls' literacy growth through after-school programs, many have not taken a critical approach.

Although the literature on critical literacy suggested that this was an effective and necessary approach for working with working-class students of color, there existed, nevertheless, a lack of empirical data on the literacy experiences of teen girls of color who attended public schools in working-class communities. In addition, the researchers reported the findings from these qualitative studies and, thus, first person accounts from the female participants in these studies were nearly absent. Hence, it was evident that there was a great need for more research that brought the voices and experiences of teen girls of color from working-class homes to the center, in order to better understand the ways in which critical literacy in an after-school program could support transformative outcomes. Furthermore, the programs and schooling that have created critical literacy experiences for adolescent girls of color have shown promising results

and have in common “a narrative of possibility” (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009, p. 313). This study sought to contribute to this field of narrative, while employing a critical pedagogical lens.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine through the experiences of alumnae from a girls' after-school writing program the transformative impact of critical literacy on their sense of self and collective empowerment. More specifically, what was in question here was how teen girls of color in the program experienced this nontraditional literacy education experience and how it affected their lives personally and academically. My experiences as an educator who had observed both the curricular underrepresentation of teen girls, particularly girls of color, and the lack of female participation and voice within secondary classrooms, led me to investigate effective literacy practices in this after-school context.

In addition, this study focused on girls who attended predominantly large, public secondary schools in low-income areas of metropolitan Los Angeles. The study looked at Inkgirls, an after-school writing program for girls, where teen participants received literacy education that utilized critical literacy practices. This program's writing curriculum stood in contrast to the literacy curricula girls of color from working-class homes generally received in their public schooling, which was geared chiefly toward functional literacy to prepare students for yearly state exams (Darder, 2012).

#### **Research Questions**

The study sought to answer four research questions:

- How do participants describe their experiences within the program? What were the highlights of the experience and why? What were the difficult moments and why?

- What aspects or practices of the writing program did participants consider to have been the most important to their overall literacy development? To their performance in school?
- What particular relationships and practices of the program did participants consider life changing or transformative with respect to their personal sense of empowerment?
- If participants were designing their own literacy program in their community, what would they consider essential aspects or practices to building literacy and supporting the transformation of teen girls of color?

These questions were a central focus to the research and purpose for the narrative analysis. The study sought to garner findings that would be useful for teachers and teacher educators who were seeking to practice and teach more effective literacy approaches, in order to prepare students, particularly girls of color, for a life beyond standardized tests.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Approach**

For females of color living in the United States, experiences in schooling and in life that place them outside of the center have been only too common (hooks, 2000). Thus, employing a qualitative approach placed the voices of the participants of this study who were female and of color at the center of this investigation. Qualitative research was ideal for this study in that it “seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it” (Hatch, 2002, p. 7) and relies on the views of participants (Creswell, 2014). Unlike quantitative research, which often has been conducted in a controlled context, a qualitative approach should seek to capture the participants’ experiences and perceptions in real-life settings.

Merriam (2009) asserted that researchers conducting qualitative research were primarily interested in how participants described their experiences, constructed their worlds, and assigned meanings to their experiences. This study sought to uncover these very aspects in regard to the lives of teen girl participants and their experiences in a creative writing program, anchored in a critical literacy perspective. Thus, it was empirically congruent to employ a critical narrative method to better capture the nuances of the social phenomena that were their experiences with the critical literacy process utilized by the after-school writing program.

### **Critical Narrative Research**

Narrative research designs are qualitative procedures in which researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about these individuals' lives, and write narratives about their experiences. (Creswell, 2014, p. 61)

**Narrative research.** Narrative research could be categorized as explanatory and descriptive. Narrative research has been described as the study of how individuals experience the world; and of how narrative researchers have collected stories from individuals and have focused on the narrative of experience (Moen 2006). Sandelowski (1991) posited that during an experience, the stories were most often unexplainable; only when a story became the subject of a narration was it explainable. Through narratives, experiences might be ordered and infused with meaning. Polkinghorne (1995) stated that narratives were “the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful” (p. 11).

I chose participants for this study who were alumnae of the program. The women were former members of InkGirls, who completed the program one to five years previous to the study. Their experiences with the creative writing program became the subject of their narration as they



spoke of things of the past; this was effective in helping to strengthen their ability during the narrative sessions to share stories rich with insight and reflection about their experiences as members of InkGirls.

**Critical narrative.** Critical narrative pushes the researcher to ask questions “About how this has come to be, whose interests are served by particular institutional arrangements, and where our own frames of reference come from” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 321). Hence, the critical narratives moved beyond the mere descriptive nature of traditional narrative study to include a reading of power and social forces of exclusion that inform institutional and community life. As Creswell (2007) contended, “Critical theory perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class and gender” (p. 27). In summary, critical narrative shows the relationship between critical discourse and narrative analysis.

As outlined in the introduction, adolescent girls of color from working-class backgrounds largely received substandard literacy instruction in the Los Angeles public schools they have attended. This has been due to gender-biased instructional materials and teaching, as well as a dearth in content that reflected their lives. Nearly all InkGirls participants attended Los Angeles public schools. When combining the narrative approach with critical theory, critical narratives could serve to disrupt the official narrative of the status quo, with the purpose of constructing “their perception of the world anew, not just in random ways but in a manner that undermines what appears natural, that opens to question what appears natural, that opens to question what appears obvious” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 321). To better understand ways to confront

the marginalization that girls have experienced in public schooling, a critical narrative approach to this study was the most salient approach.

### **Research Design**

I conducted a critical narrative study with alumnae from an out-of-school creative writing program in a quest to answer my research questions. In the sections that follow, I provide details about the research design employed, including participants, setting, data collection, and how the data were analyzed.

### **Participants**

Creswell (2014) posited that individuals are intentionally selected by researchers in order to understand or learn the main phenomenon. For this study, I identified four young women of color who were: (a) alumnae of the creative writing program InkGirls; (b) former students of large, public secondary schools; and (c) 18 years old or older. Under purposeful sampling, homogenous sampling was employed. Creswell (2104) defined *homogeneous sampling* as selecting individuals based on membership in a group that “has defining characteristics” (p. 216). According to Merriam (2009), by observing or interviewing a specific group, researchers have often found greater depth in the information gathered. For this study, I gained access to a list of alumnae for recruitment from the associate director of the writing program. She provided me with names and current contact information (phone numbers and email addresses) of those alumnae.

The purpose in selecting alumnae and not current members was intentional. Former participants have completed their experiences with the program and have had some time to reflect on those experiences. Also, because they were out of the K–12 public schooling system,

they had time to reflect on those experiences as well. Through the assistance from the writing program, all participants were contacted by email and telephone and informed about the purpose of the study and invited to participate. Upon their agreeing to participate, I procured written consent from each participant and arranged to conduct the audio-recorded narrative sessions by telephone (Appendix A).

### **Setting**

The setting of this study was a nonprofit writing program for girls, ages 13 to 18, in Los Angeles. At the time of this study, nearly 350 teen girls who had attended 60 different schools had participated in the program's literacy workshops, writing mentorship, and public readings. The program was started in 2001, and more than half of the 350 participants were of color, attended public schools, and lived in metropolitan areas of Los Angeles. The program was a five-year program in which there were no grades or tests given, and it was free. The girls voluntarily attended weekly literacy workshops where, for example, they choose the writing genres they most wanted to develop and practice such as poetry, song writing, fiction, or journalism. In the workshops, the girls also engaged in literacy curriculum developed by the staff, teacher volunteers, and the mentors who were all professional, female writers.

In a large brick building that housed several other nonprofit organizations, the writing program had an office where three part-time employees worked answering phones, sending emails to teen girls and their families, managing volunteers, and handling donations. The building was located in East Los Angeles. Several classrooms and a big auditorium located inside the large brick structure were utilized for the monthly workshops that the writing program hosted for the teen girls and their mentors. The girls would typically meet their adult female

mentors once a week in a public location such as a coffee house or restaurant. At that time, the women assisted the teen girls with any current creative writing projects; they also wrote together, following prompts and activities that were part of the program's writing curriculum.

### **Data Collection**

The goal of this qualitative study was to better understand how critical literacy has been used to engage adolescent-aged female students who participated in an after-school writing program, through learning from the experiences of women in this study. A critical narrative research method was employed. Using the data collected for this critical narrative study, an analysis of the transcribed narrative sessions and observation data was constructed that included all the elements that comprise a complete story (Hatch, 2002).

**Narrative sessions with former members of the writing program.** I collected audio-recorded narratives from each participant, using specific questions to guide in uncovering their experiences and perceptions of the writing program and the critical literacy approach (Appendix B). The tenets of critical literacy were embedded in the questions to prompt the narratives, so the term "critical literacy" was not used. However, features of critical literacy that were outlined in the literature review informed the content of general questions used as prompts, as was the specific research questions that informed this study. Participants were asked to also share their perceptions of the program's transformative impact on their lives.

For each participant, there was an initial narrative session that lasted 45 to 60 minutes. There was a follow-up narrative session with each participant that was, again, 45 minutes to 60 minutes. Additionally, emails were exchanged as the participants thought of other points they wanted to make. I also made several 10- to 15-minute follow-up phone calls to ask the women

to elaborate on those points in the emails or information from one of the narrative sessions. Both individual narrative sessions employed parts of the research questions to ensure focus and clarification, as participants told their stories of their involvement in the program and its impact. As is the case with narrative research, the field of inquiry remained sufficiently open so that each participant had the freedom to lead the telling of her story and to explore the areas that arose during the session.

**Informational session with the associate director.** Additionally, I conducted an audio-recorded session with the associate director of the program. I inquired about the history of the program, her perceptions of the girls' experiences with the program, and the ways in which she has seen it to be transformational in the lives of alumnae. The information gained from this session helped establish the history, the purpose, and the philosophy behind the writing program. Therefore, it does not appear in the finding section in a formalized way; but rather the information gleaned from this discussion appears throughout the study to describe and contextualized the writing program.

**Guidelines for questions.** Guidelines I followed for developing the questions in the narrative sessions, and for the session with the associate director, were outlined by Hatch (2002): questions should be open-ended, focused on the study's objectives, clear, using familiar and neutral language, and respectful of the privacy of the participant. Initial questions and questioning were directly related to, and lead to, the core research questions of this study.

**Observations.** I viewed two public readings at which girls who were members of the program at the time of this study presented their writing. Hatch (2002) declared that observations help researchers better understand how participants might understand the setting.

In addition, through observation, researchers might see things that were typically “taken for granted by participants and would be less likely to come to the surface” (p. 72) in interviews or other data collection methods. Thus, the observational data collected from the public readings were used to further inform the story of the program itself and the narratives provided by the participants.

My role was as a nonparticipant observer (Creswell, 2014), as I sat on the sidelines and watched and recorded the events. The general protocol that I used for the observations was to sit off to the side and script what I saw, recording ethnographic field notes, and “notemaking,” with coding and analysis completed afterward. According to Frank (1999), this *etic* point of view can aid the researcher in avoiding leaps to judgment. I valued this discipline for the data as it produced, as Frank suggested, “other ways of being” (p. 15).

**Artifact collection.** Other qualitative data used to determine how critical literacy was employed to engage the teen girls included analyses of both the literacy curriculum (developed by the writing program staff, mentors, and volunteer teachers) and published anthologies of the girls’ writing. Hatch (2002) noted that artifacts are indicators of individual or group life, although these data were rarely the primary data source for a qualitative study. Instead, and in the case of my study, data from artifacts were used in conjunction with narrative sessions and review of the readings. It was considered to be unobtrusive data as it told a story in itself separate from the stories of the participants (Hatch, 2002). The curriculum for this creative writing program was developed during a 10-year period of time, and since grades were not given and therefore not a motivating factor, the associate director explained the curriculum needed to

engage the girls by speaking directly to their lives. Further, and as stated by Patton (2002), documents could often reveal much about an organization, including the value systems within it.

### **Data Analysis**

After I collected the data from the narrative sessions, I transcribed it and stored it on a secure laptop computer. The names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms selected by them. The name of the creative writing program was also given a pseudonym for the purpose of this study. One year following the completion of this study, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

I analyzed the transcripts from the narrative sessions by looking for repetitive themes and patterns from the women's responses on their perceptions and experiences with the program and the critical literacy approach. Additionally, I looked for themes and patterns related to how they believed the program and the critical literacy practices were transformative to their lives. As I looked for patterns, I established themes in their responses and employed the method of coding. Bazeley and Jackson (2013) defined coding as an abstract symbol of an object or phenomenon. Since raw field notes were "the undigested complexity of reality" (Patton, 2002, p. 463), I established patterns and identified themes expressed by participants in their narratives. I then coded specific responses under those themes, particularly as they related to issues directly linked to the experience of critical literacy and its impact as an empowering and transformation practice.

### **Positionality**

I identify as White, and I am from a middle class background. These identity markers, along with my education, placed me in the socially constructed dominant group. I understood

that those parts of my identity that placed me in the dominant group could affect how I perceived the women's lives as they tell their stories. I acknowledged that I was an outsider looking into the worlds of the participants, and from that perspective I attempted to convey their stories by constructing narratives from my conversations with them. I remained as critically conscious as I could, but was cognizant that my own assumptions and agency had an impact and informed my analysis.

Additionally, in terms of my positionality, I am a lesbian and have known this since I was five years old. This has affected how I viewed and experienced the world. My childhood and young adult life were spent feeling like an outsider and fearful of a society that did not accept this part of my identity. My own literacy experiences—journaling daily and reading books that carried universal themes to which I could relate such as loneliness and feelings of isolation—provided a way for me to relate to the world and also provided a form of escapism of the realities of an abusive home and a hidden identity. In the 1970s and 1980s, being gay was wholly not acceptable in the United States and was an identity marker society insisted remain invisible, except for the occasional gay character on a television sitcom who was the brunt of homophobic jokes. I know that, as a young and adolescent girl, experiencing the world through the lens of an outsider had a significant effect on my development, and was a central reason to why I became interested in equitable and just treatment and conditions for all children, both in and out of the schooling system.

As researcher, I came to this study also as a social justice educator. During the nearly 10 years I spent in a public secondary classroom, I engaged the students I taught in critical literacy and, as a teacher educator, I again have used a critical literacy approach in the university courses



I have taught. Therefore, it was essential that I was cognizant during this study of my own perceptions of how and what a critical literacy approach looked like in a learning setting to avoid biases and keep the perceptions of the participants the foci of this study.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Although the InkGirls program had been operational for more than a decade, funding was an admitted ongoing concern for its staff. That the nonprofit writing program for girls remained in operation for the duration of this study was an assumption I had made as the researcher of this study. If the program were to have gone into a moratorium due to a lack of funding, which was a possibility, access to alumnae, mentors, the director, and to artifacts, however, would have still remained.

In terms of participants, a purposeful sampling was used, and not a random selection. However, it was also a convenience sampling since this study relied on availability and willingness of participants. This presented a possible limitation to the study.

A delimitation of this study was that the data came from one writing program for girls who participated voluntarily in Los Angeles. With this limited scope, the findings and conclusions of this study might not be transferable to other writing programs that, for example, were for mixed gender or were compulsory. There is a limit to the generalizability of the findings. However, this study on secondary students' perceptions and experiences with critical literacy will be informative to those working in educational settings or facilitating writing programs.

## **Validity and Trustworthiness**

As stated earlier, I grounded the development of questions for the narrative sessions in the literature review. In the name of validity, this ensured that prior research and findings informed the content of the questions. Also, for validation and to improve accuracy, I employed data triangulation in which diversified data were used, such as narrative sessions, observations, and artifact analysis. In addition, I utilized a coding tree grounded in the literature review. For example, I utilized codes such as “voice development,” “empowering writing task,” and “authentic purpose,” and “relatable text”—all four connected to critical literacy tenets and principles of critical pedagogy as revealed in the literature review in Chapter 2. For this study, I also included member checking, in which all participants were asked to check the accuracy of the narrative transcripts. I used a reliable audio-recording device during narrative sessions to assure participants’ voices were captured fully.

## **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I have outlined the methodology used for this critical narrative study and the research used for analyzing the perceptions and experiences of alumnae of a creative writing program for teen girls in Los Angeles. As the sole researcher of this study, I gathered various forms of data in order to attain data triangulation; I conducted narrative sessions, observed writing program events, and viewed artifacts, such as curriculum and InkGirls-published anthologies. I adhered to research confidentiality guidelines, maintaining the anonymity of participants and the writing program.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The goal of this qualitative study was to better understand both how critical literacy was used to engage adolescent female students who participated in an after-school writing program and its impact, according to participants. First in this chapter, artifacts from the InkGirls curriculum and from the anthologies published by the writing program are presented, followed by the related findings. Next, observations from readings at public InkGirls events are presented and findings from those observations are shared. Lastly, the narrative sessions with the four participants are presented. The chronological order of the first round of narrative sessions determined the order in which each participant's story is shared. The findings from those narratives, including themes, similarities, and patterns, conclude the chapter.

#### **The Artifacts**

The curriculum developed and used by the after-school, creative writing program known as InkGirls included a variety of artifacts. Through the curriculum, the workshops employed critical literacy practices, such as sharing personal stories and life experiences, using texts from marginalized or fringe perspectives, on-going dialogue, and authentic writing experiences with an audience. What follows are descriptions of the curriculum for three of the workshops: the Poetry Flash Workshop, the Memoir/Creative Nonfiction Workshop, and the Songwriting Workshop. The title of each workshop is featured in the section heading; the agenda and goals of the workshop are provided, followed by the activities and materials used in that particular workshop. A published excerpt of text written by a workshop participant is also presented. The goal here was to provide examples that shed light on the group work of InkGirls.

## Poetry Flash Workshop

One of the opportunities that was part of the InkGirls program was the Poetry Flash Workshop. In this workshop, as it followed the curriculum presented as an artifact, girls were able to work with skilled writers to experience poetry in a number of different ways. The workshop included writing poems of their own and reading them aloud to the group.

**Goals and activities.** The purpose of this workshop was to give the participants opportunities to experiment with various literary devices, to read examples of poetry that illustrated those devices, to engage in discussion, and to share aloud their own finished poems or works in progress. As described in the curriculum guide, the two-hour workshops had several activities that included a reading and dialogue analysis of published female poets of color such as Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo, Wanda Coleman, and Sholeh Wolpe. The workshop began with each girl being assigned to a female artist and observing the station where that artist's visual work was displayed. The girls then responded to a prompt that encouraged them to write about the visual work such as a painting using literary devices from a list provided, or discussing the artist's intent or the message conveyed in the piece.

Local female poets who volunteered for the program circulated at this event to engage in dialogue with the girls about the pieces and to lend prompting questions as the girls wrote. The girls then discussed and shared their writing in small groups and the facilitators sat in and shared their own writing and thoughts. Next, the agenda described how the guest poets were interviewed by the girls on topics like imagery, breakthroughs in their own writing, editing tips, and finding their voice. Next, the facilitators guided the girls in a read-aloud of the work of women poets. This included such poems as "Phenomenal Woman," by African American poet

and activist Maya Angelou, or Wanda Coleman's "LA Blueswoman." The girls then analyzed and discussed this poet and her work and also did the same with the female writers they interviewed.

The girls then began to draft their own poems. During this writing time, the volunteer female writers who were poets, journalists, and novelists dialogued with individual young writers on topics, word choice, structure, and author's intent. The workshop concluded with those girls who wanted to share lining up in the front of the room and reading aloud their poems or excerpts. This was followed by one last activity: the girls, volunteers, and InkGirls staff formed a circle, held hands, and said in unison, "Never underestimate the power of a girl and her pen." (Observation notes, 2015).

**A published writing sample from a poetry workshop.** The following poem, titled "Divided," written by a 14-year-old workshop participant, illustrated the kind of writing produced. This poem critiqued the contradictions women and girls faced being from different cultures and living in the United States:

Society is a half-empty water bottle.  
The part that's full  
wants women and young girls to look  
European,  
to idolize, desire and become  
someone else.  
In contrast, the empty half  
Constantly reminds them to embrace

Their traditions, cultures,  
customs  
and appearances  
Two parts of society,  
conveying different messages-  
global contradictions that leave more than one of us  
in a state of bewilderment.  
The “correct” part to choose  
is the part that fully satisfies us,  
the choice that leads  
to confidence, cheeriness and  
contentedness.

(Taylor, 2015, p. 225)

### **Memoir/Creative Nonfiction Workshop**

Another opportunity for the girls in InkGirls was the Memoir/Creative Nonfiction Workshop. Girls in this workshop used physical items, verbal prompts, nature, dialogue and examples as inspiration for telling their own stories. They shared these stories in a variety of ways with others in the group, developing guidelines for creating their own memoirs.

**Goals and activities.** The purpose of this workshop was to assist the girls in telling their own personal stories. Analysis and discussion of writing excerpts from other women and girls helped inspire their own writing during the four-hour workshop. The workshop began with a warm-up writing activity in which, in pairs, the girls explored writing prompts written on posters

and placed around the room. Some of the prompts were: (a) “The last argument I remember was about. . .”; (b) “In the kitchen, I remember. . .”; and (c) “We sat at the dinner table and. . .” (Observation notes, 2015). Sensory objects were placed next to each poster such as a dinner plate to encourage memories and descriptive writing. As the girls wrote their memory of events and times in their lives, they recorded what they smelled, what they heard, what they saw, what they touched, and how they felt.

After this activity, the girls shared in small groups the writing they had produced. They then joined together as a whole group, and a facilitator presented a definition for memoir. Then, memoir excerpts were read, analyzed, and discussed. The following excerpt from the memoir by Supreme Court Justice Sonya Sotomayor (2014), served as an example of memoir excerpts used in the workshop.

The world that I was born into was a tiny microcosm of Hispanic New York City. A tight few blocks in the South Bronx bounded the lives of my extended family: my grandmother, matriarch of the tribe, and her second husband, Gallego, her daughters and sons. My playmates were my cousins. We spoke Spanish at home, and many in my family spoke virtually no English. My parents had both come to New York from Puerto Rico in 1944, my mother in the Women’s Army Corps, my father with his family in search of work as part of a huge migration from the island, driven by economic hardship. (p. 14)

The girls discussed techniques and tips for memoir writing and had the opportunity to create their own advice to add to the list. Some of their tips shared were

- Do not restrict yourself. Writing is for *you* first.

- Be brave and be bold.
- Writing memoir is trailblazing, adventurous, and risky.
- Memoir is universal; everyone can relate. The more specific and individualized you make your piece, the more relatable it is.

The last tip was used to prompt a discussion on how relatability and universal experiences could make a memoir something any writer can do. A participant was then invited to the front of the room to be interviewed by one of the volunteers or a facilitator. Afterward, they dialogued as a whole group, discussing the responses. Then the girls used the interview questions and their own to interview each other. One or more of the women writers who volunteered co-facilitated a dialogue with the girls and guided “a mini-memoir” writing exercise.

The next activity guided the girls to “use nature as inspiration” (Observation notes, 2015). The girls picked paper leaves out of a basket and each had an emotion written on it such as “stunned,” “overjoyed,” or “guarded.” They then wrote in their journals a memory that related to that emotion. Other prompts were provided to inspire memoir writing. The participants had a chance after this writing session to share their work with each other and in small groups. A volunteer or facilitator then read, for example, a short memoir piece by Anne Lamott called *Hair*, in which the author described the politics and assumptions made about her because she had dreadlocks. Two others read the same piece of text but used varied tones and emotions as they read it. This led into a discussion about voice, and how each girl had her own story, emotions, and experiences—and way of voicing those through word choice, structure, and spoken word.



Following this discussion, the participants had a chance to return to their mini-memoir writing. The next activity was called “Talking Sticks.” They sat in a circle of seven or eight participants. The girls drew sticks to decide the order in which they would share, and then each one shared her writing from the day. The day concluded with additional writing time where the participants could consult with each other, the volunteers, and InkGirls staff as they wrote. Lastly, the girls, volunteers, and InkGirls staff formed a circle, held hands, and said in unison, “Never underestimate the power of a girl and her pen” (Observation notes, 2015).

**A published writing sample from a memoir workshop.** A 17-year-old InkGirl participant wrote a memoir titled *What It Means to Be Garifuna* about attending her grandmother’s funeral in Honduras. In the memoir, she stated that she identified with three cultures: American, Latino, and Garifuna. She wrote the memoir in honor of the least known of the three cultures:

I stood beside my weeping mother during the funeral speech. My face wrinkled as I struggled to comprehend the words floating in the air. Garifuna, a dialect spoken in certain regions of Central America, has been spoken by members of my family for centuries. Its path to North America dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Africans were first brought to the Western Hemisphere in bondage. However, Garifuna is not only a means for my family and relatives to communicate; it is a culture. (Taylor, 2010, p. 50)

After her grandmother’s funeral, explained the young writer, the many attendees returned to the family home to eat together and to listen to music:

When my mom and I sat down I asked her why everyone was dancing and singing. She looked at me and patted my hair. “Your grandmother was a well-respected woman.

People have come from all over Honduras and America to celebrate her life, not her death.” (Taylor, 2010, p. 50)

### **The Songwriting Workshop**

A third workshop offered in the program was the Songwriting Workshop, which enabled participants to use this method as a way of self-expression. To foster this ability, participants were exposed to examples of lyrics from a variety of artists and guided through thinking about the emotions involved in various experiences. There was an opportunity to create lyrics, some of which were crafted into songs to be performed by the volunteers.

**Goals and activities.** The purpose of this workshop was to teach participants the skill of songwriting so that they could utilize this genre as another vehicle for expressing their feelings and beliefs about life and about issues and topics they find concerning. The first activity was to receive nametags with writing prompts on them. The participants wrote and also received a “Songwriting Booklet” that contained various lyrics from local women musicians and better known ones nationally. Examples of lyrics from well-known female musicians in the booklet included Tracy Chapman, Pink, and all-women pop and rap group known as Little Mix.

The participants then self-selected and went to one of five different mini-classroom areas set up throughout a large room. Each of the areas had a lyrical theme. The five themes for writing were (a) breaking up, (b) changing the world, (c) having/being a friend, (d) falling in love, and (e) wanting something. One or two volunteer female songwriters facilitated activities at each area. At the “breaking up” area, facilitators guided the young writers in writing about various objects, as if they were creating a scrapbook. At the “Changing the world” area, they

were interviewed by the volunteers who asked questions such as, “When have you felt like you needed to speak up and make a change?”

The girls also listed the conflicts and problems they found troubling in their communities and the world. At the “Wanting something” area, the participants were asked to think about people, situations, and things that they wanted or would like for others. They then were asked to engage in free writing on this topic. As they wrote, facilitators joined in discussions and offered guiding questions to the girls, as a group or individually, if they needed it to further prompt their writing. The participants then gathered as a whole group. Audio recordings of sample songs were played, section-by-section, and a songwriter volunteer explained the chorus, the bridge, rhyme schemes—and other features of a song.

The participants, with volunteers and facilitators included, identified and discussed, in small groups and as a whole group, the use of metaphor, imagery, and senses in song, as well as other literary devices. Each participant began crafting her own song, and volunteers and staff circulated and sat one-on-one with the girls as they decided on their theme and word choice, tone, rhyme scheme, and other devices. After this writing session and lunch, the “songsheets” (completed lyrics) were collected from the participants, and the volunteer songwriters, selected a song for which they would craft music and perform.

The workshop concluded with each volunteer female songwriter announcing whose lyrics they selected, then playing the song for the whole group. The volunteer songwriters sang *a capella*, or used a guitar or another string instrument such as an ukulele, while they sang. Lastly, the girls, volunteers, and InkGirls staff formed a circle, held hands, and said in unison, “Never underestimate the power of a girl and her pen” (Observation notes, 2015).

**A songwriting workshop writing sample.** The following excerpt from a song titled *Skin* was written by a 15-year-old program participant of the songwriting workshop:

I've seen you look into the mirror. . . and hide your hair  
You are dreaming of waking up looking like a skinny Barbie doll. . .  
But you see your skin is your skin. Your skin is beautiful  
Your hair is your hair, and your hair is wonderful  
So don't worry about the things you see in magazines  
They will never be who you can be. Your skin is your skin  
You can be president and see the world and lead the nation  
You could be for peace and hope  
And walk the walk in life like Olivia Pope  
Your skin is your skin. Your skin is beautiful  
Your hair is your hair and your hair is wonderful.

(Facebook page, creative writing program, 2015)

### **Findings from Artifacts**

After viewing curricular materials from the poetry workshop, the memoir/nonfiction workshop, and the songwriting workshop, as well as viewing writing samples from the workshops published in the anthologies from the writing program, the artifact findings were categorized as follows: (a) relatable text, (b) empowering writing tasks, (c) student- (participant-) generated texts, (d) dialogue, and (e) mutuality.

## **Relatable Texts**

In order to inspire the participants to write in ways they might not have before, the program used texts by women and former participants. These texts contained topics that resonated with the girls, and themes and perspectives to which they related, such as Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman," which confronts patriarchal practices in the United States, as well as negative stereotyping of girls and women of color. As previously stated, most of the participants of the writing program had been girls of color. Because reading female authors of color had not been the norm in their schooling experiences, the participants were given an opportunity in the writing program to read and analyze more relatable texts. Beyond simple exposure to more relatable text, the participants were able to critically dialogue and reflect on and uncover the author's purpose for writing the poem or other texts. This led to dialogue around issues faced by women and girls most often due to gender, race, and other discriminatory practices in society that impacted their education and their lives daily.

## **Empowering Writing Tasks**

The program devised and employed writing tasks that had a primary focus of helping girls develop their voices as a means to further discover who they were. As evidenced by the anthology artifacts, in telling their personal stories, through narratives, poetry, and song, the girls discovered and uncovered more aspects of their identities than they might have had opportunity to discuss or write about prior to the workshop. For example, the 17-year-old author of *What It Means to Be Garifuna* explained in the mini memoir, that it was the first time she had really thought deeply about the dialect Garifuna, spoken by many of her family members. In another of the program's anthologies, a participant wrote for the first time about her battle with depression.

The writing tasks offered the teen girls' writer tools such as various detailed writing prompts, genre-specific techniques, or actual stations where they could sit and dialogue about the particular genre, as they further examined relatable texts. These tools created opportunity for them to write with richer detail and more deeply and truthfully about their beliefs, experiences, and feelings. Also in the writing tasks, the participants were given ample choice; there was never just one topic or theme about which they could write. Various topic choices were presented during each workshop and a variety of modalities were used to inspire their writing.

### **Student- (Participant-) Generated Texts**

Through the various writing tasks employed, the teen girls were provided the conditions to produce autobiographic pieces such as poems, memoirs, and narratives that explored their identities and highlighted topics that were of importance to them. In the song excerpt titled *Skin*, the young writer confronted the expectations placed on her by media to look different. In the poem excerpt "Divided," the 14-year-old writer criticized the way U.S. society embraced only cultures of European descent and denied all other cultures. Many of the texts generated by the participants were counter-narratives because they questioned and challenged status quo perceptions, which have marginalized girls and women and people of color. Another important aspect of the writing workshops was that texts created by former participants were used as examples during dialogue while examining a writer's intent, the topics addressed, voice, word choice, and structure.

### **Dialogue**

In each workshop, the girls had multiple opportunities to engage in small group and whole group discussion with each other, with the facilitators, and with the facilitators and the

other girls. In addition, each workshop provided a space for the girls to dialogue in depth with the volunteers—who were all female and writers—about their processes, word choice, and topical and thematic patterns in their works. The girls decided on the format and the questions they asked volunteers during these interviews and the workshop facilitators sat in and listened, though the girls directed this activity, collecting ideas and literary inspiration from the volunteers, from each other, and also sharing their own.

In the process of critical dialogue, participants were prompted and encouraged to question and confront inequities the girls had experienced in schools, in their families and communities, and those gender stereotypes portrayed in magazine articles and advertisements, films, and television. Dialogue activities in the workshop included opportunities for the girls to get and give feedback to one another, share their experiences, and find common ground about topics and issues that were significant to their lives.

### **Mutuality**

There was a reciprocal relationship between the participant girls and the facilitators who were InkGirls staff and volunteers. The writing program created a space where the girls taught each other, the facilitators learned from the girls, and the girls learned from the facilitators. This was evident when groups were formed for discussion. Facilitators sat in chairs or on the floor with the girls and did more listening than talking. When facilitators did share, they dialoged with the girls as fellow writers and colleagues; they offered their own struggles with the writing process, such as deciding on a topic, stumbling during revision, and the bravery it takes to write one's truth.

In addition, the literacy activities were cofacilitated by the girls, who often selected the texts for group analysis, whether it was that of a published female author or a piece by a former InkGirl participant. They also directed and facilitated those discussions. The theory of mutuality has suggested that teachers and students share goals and ways of communication (Wallace & Ewald, 2000). In a critical literacy classroom, equitable, interactive, and on-going discourse among writers is highly valued. It emphasizes that knowledge is a result of discourse and that writers further develop voice and agency.

### **The Public Readings**

Public readings of InkGirls writings in small forums and an annual presentation in a larger forum were important parts of the program. These presentations were celebrations of the girls' accomplishments as well as opportunities to introduce the public to anthologies of current and past writings from the program.

### **A Book Launch**

In a bookstore located in Hollywood, California, 80 to 100 people gathered by bookshelves and sat in folding chairs placed in front a makeshift stage where two microphones stood. The audience members were InkGirls participants, family and friends of the participants, volunteers and staff of the program, and customers of the bookstore. A large poster with the emblem for InkGirls hung behind the stage. The purpose of this public reading was to celebrate the new anthology just published by the program, a collection of fiction and nonfiction writings by more than 100 current participants of InkGirls. The anthology included excerpts of memoirs and other nonfiction pieces, poems, and excerpts of fictional pieces, such as short stories and



screenplays. The director of the program approached one of the microphones and spoke about the collection in the anthology.

The writers in this anthology are diverse—in background, in culture, in experience, and in perspective, but there is a shared quality amongst all of them—a willingness to take chances and go wherever the words take them, and discover what lies beyond. (Alber, Notes, 2015)

The participants approached the stage three at a time, all smiling and most visibly nervous. With anthology in hand, each girl read her published piece. The audience applauded after each girl read, and the reader then stepped back to allow a next girl to approach one of the microphones and read. Two dozen participants of the writing program read that afternoon. The audience members vigorously applauded and most cheered after each reading. The enthusiasm of the crowd visibly affected each participant, as each would smile and exit the stage elated. At the end of the reading for the day, a woman who sat among the members of the audience, loudly said, “I loved listening to my shy daughter read on stage” (Alber, Notes, 2015).

After the readings, the participants, audience members, and bookstore patrons crowded enthusiastically around a banquet-sized, folding table that was set up with current copies of the anthology for sale, as well as past anthologies the writing program had published. Staff members of the writing program shared encouraging words with the girls, giving congratulations and hugs, as did family members and friends. Bookstore patrons approached the girls and asked to shake their hands. Several patrons asked the staff about the program, wanting to know if the program was free, where it was located, and how they might get an adolescent female family member signed up. The girls also shared with patrons their experiences and prompted them with

excitement to encourage the young female members in their lives to join the program.

Information including a few facts about the program, contact information, and website was printed on small postcards and handed out to those who inquired.

### **An Annual Program Celebration**

At the Writer's Guild Theater located in Beverly Hills, California, the writing program participants and their friends and family, the staff and volunteers, and program donors and supporters filled the seats in a large theater setting. The reason for the gathering was to celebrate the 14th anniversary of the program and to debut a new anthology. In this anthology, the focus was living in Los Angeles featuring poems, fiction, narratives the participants had written about their experiences, some with the city in mind. The event began with a silent auction fundraiser for InkGirls, with items like vintage dresses and gift bundles including such things as bath products and culinary kits on which to bid, which various supporters had donated. The founder and director of the program took to the stage and welcomed everyone. The participants in the crowd cheered as she took the stage and many whispered and smiled, visibly proud of the director. She explained the mission of InkGirls and congratulated everyone for another successful year. This prompted an eruption of clapping, cheers, and hoots from the audience. Dressed in what looked to be their Sunday best, the participants walked confidently on to the stage, any nervousness usurped by a visible glee and anticipation they felt for reading their pieces to such a large audience. A whole-hearted applause and cheer erupted after each participant read her piece.

Every girl who participated that year in the program and who was in attendance that day was able to read an excerpt of something she had written during the program workshops. One

participant shared, “It was the first time on a microphone and it was thrilling” (Alber, Notes, 2015). Several guest speakers—all female artists working in Los Angeles as actors and/or writers—approached the microphone and spoke of the importance of a program such as this one for young women. They spoke about their own empowering experiences with writing and its importance for them professionally and personally. They each then read aloud a piece by a participant of the program from the new anthology. The event concluded with the participants, their families and friends, volunteers, staff, and sponsors all gathering there to eat together in the lobby, and to look through and discuss the new anthology and past anthologies that were also available for purchase.

### **Findings from the Public Readings**

After viewing two public readings, one book launch, and an annual celebration for the writing program, the findings for the public readings are presented in three categories: (a) voice development, (b) live audience and authentic purpose, and (c) mutuality.

#### **Voice Development**

The public readings presented an opportunity for the girls to use their voices, providing space for them to share aspects of their identities that might also challenge status quo beliefs about gender, race, and class. The celebratory nature of the public readings also provided a forum where the young women were honored for their writings and for being published, as well as being encouraged to continue expressing their voices. The courage of the girls was tangible in how each young writer held her copy of the book, the way in which she smiled when congratulated and, though some were visibly nervous, the tone with which she read her poem or narrative, conveying a sense of accomplishment.

## **Live Audience and Purpose**

The public readings provided an opportunity for participants to present their writing to a live audience. Performing their written work live, in front of others, gave validity to their words. Most often in schooling experiences, the only reader of student writing has been the teacher. There also was authenticity in their purpose for writing—to create a space for the young writers to share their personal stories through a poem or memoir piece. Additionally, the possibility of being published in one of the writing program’s anthologies served to inspire and motivate the girls as they drafted, revised, and edited their writing. In the workshops, once they had gained the tools to express their voices, the participants embraced the goal of getting their work and name in print to share with both readers and live audiences.

## **Mutuality**

Staff and volunteers from the writing program spoke with the young women as colleagues. There was warmth, connection, and camaraderie expressed in their interactions with each other. The mutuality was evident in the interactions I observed. Moreover, the female writers who volunteered were published in the anthologies, often on the pages adjacent to the writing of the girls they mentored. This juxtaposition illustrated the importance of relationships between the girls and the women and the reciprocal nature of those relationships. They viewed each other as collaborative writing partners, which constituted an empowering dimension of the relationships.

## **The Voices of Former Participants**

In this section, I present the experiences and perceptions of Zurie, Janel, Jennifer, and Adre—all former participants of InkGirls, an after-school creative writing program in Los

Angeles for adolescent girls. (The names used here are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the study participant.) The narrative sessions conducted with the four participants provided space and time for each woman to reflect back on her involvement in the writing program and to express how this participation transformed her life in terms of literacy development, the development of voice and consciousness, and the process of social agency and empowerment.

### **Zurie**

Zurie attended LAUSD public elementary and middle schools in South Central Los Angeles. The high school she attended was an LAUSD school located in a high-density, urban area of the city, with 70.8% of the 2,109 students receiving free or reduced lunch (*Eligibility for Free and Reduced Lunch*, 2014). The average household income for this area of the city was \$29,447 (90001, *Zip Code Detailed Profile*, 2015). At the time of this study, the average household income for Los Angeles was \$55,909 (*County, Zip Code Detailed Profile*, 2015).

Zurie identified herself as Afro-Caribbean American, and at the time of the narrative, she was 19 years old. She grew up in the same neighborhood as her mother had in South Los Angeles—93rd street, located east of the city of Inglewood and less than a mile north of Compton. Zurie’s mother worked in telecommunications, and her stepfather was a baggage handler at Los Angeles International Airport.

Zurie began her journey in Inkgirls at age 13 when she was in the seventh grade. She was a participant for five years, until she graduated from high school. Zurie indicated that while in the program, she and the other girls were provided opportunities to visit and write about places in the community such as museums and concert halls—places to which she said she could never imagine her schools ever taking her. Seeing these places allowed her to see the world in a way

she had not prior to the program. A highlight about the program that Zurie cherished was being given the space

to take command of my writing. . . . We were not told what to write ever. (Narrative Session, October 6, 2015)

She explained further that InkGirls was so vital to developing her voice in her writing because it was a safe space to

just be yourself and write and explore and be creative and honest. (Narrative Session, October 6, 2015)

In terms of her literacy learning in the program, Zurie felt that she was a strong writer when she came to the program. However, when it came to reading, she said that in school

We'd read a book by someone like F. Scott Fitzgerald, and then sit down and pick it apart, or read some poetry and pick it apart for like a few weeks. And there's not really breadth at all, or any writing from women at all, usually. . . . In [InkGirls], the things we read were written by women and there was a presence of most ethnicities within the poems and writings we read. (Narrative Session, October 6, 2015)

Zurie expressed that this exposure to female authors of color inspired her—as both reader and writer—in a way she had never known in her schooling experience. She related to the stories told by the women authors and to their lives, which encouraged her to seek more women authors of color to read on her own. From this exposure, the topics about which she wrote expanded as well. In addition, as opposed to the mostly formulaic, analytical writing in school, the program taught her about different styles of writing. She saw how writing could be used in real life by

herself and by other girls in the program, some of whom now actually considered becoming journalists, authors, and poets. Zurie said of the InkGirls workshops:

I saw how one could actually make a difference and even maybe a living doing this thing [writing] that I loved to do. (Narrative Session, October 6, 2015)

Zurie saw her English classes and school as set up like a disciplinary program and not very creative. Further, she explained that students at her school were not given much say or choice in what they studied, whereas with InkGirls

It was like, “What do you think? What do you want to know? What do you want to talk about and write about?” and there is freedom in all that. It improved my overall confidence as a Black woman and writer in a White dominated world. (Narrative Session, October 22, 2015)

Zurie attributed to her experience in InkGirls growing a level of confidence that she did not think she would have developed if she had not been a participant in the program. A couple of years after joining the writing program, she realized that a personal sense of social agency and empowerment were developing within her.

I became fearless in the things I said and wrote, even if they were controversial. [InkGirls] gave me this kind of kick-assery way of going about life and my writing. (Zurie, Narrative Session, October 22, 2015)

Zurie related that she was asked to give a sermon at youth night at her church when she was 16. She described how having the ability to speak to a room full of people with such openness about her beliefs and thoughts came directly from her participation in InkGirls.

[The program] gave me confidence and the necessary stuff to become one with my voice.  
(Zurie, Narrative Session, October 22, 2016)

During her freshman year in college, Zurie and two friends started a branch of the organization Women of Color Alliance (WOCA). In an open invitation to women on line, Zurie wrote:

What does WOCA plan to accomplish in the upcoming year? We hope you all will join us in stimulating conversations about womanhood, sisterhood, and solidarity and celebrate the identity of and the sisterhood between women of color through an inclusive and empowering space propelled by the diversity we see in one another. (WOCA, Facebook page, 2015)

The result of the first meeting and others that followed was the establishment of a network of young women who shared their stories and leaned on each other for support, both personally and academically. While in college, Zurie also became involved in poetry as performance art. There was no question that her interest and passion for this genre was born through her experience with InkGirls.

Zurie described a literacy program that would best serve adolescent girls of color as a space that “won’t be formal at all,” where girls would communally build and engage in close-knit activities to share their writing. In addition, the girls would read female authors together, dialogue about the authors’ stories and their lives, and make connections to their own world—to the struggles of living in communities with high poverty rates, and of being female and of color. A key purpose of this would be for them to develop the necessary tools to write in various ways that would be empowering for their own lives and for their communities. From this assessment,



it was clear that Zurie's participation in InkGirls shaped her powerful sense of what girls needed and how this could best be achieved in schools.

### **Jennifer**

At the time of this study, Jennifer was 23 years old and about to begin a master's degree program at a public university in Southern California, where she had received her undergraduate degree. She grew up in Maywood, California, a city with the greatest population density in Los Angeles county (90270, *Zip Code Detailed Profile*, 2015) located southeast of downtown Los Angeles. At the time of this study, the average household income in Maywood was \$37,144 (90270, *Zip Code Detailed Profile*, 2015). Jennifer self-identified as Latina. She had attended elementary, middle, and high school in LAUSD schools. At the high school she attended, 89% of the 1,977 students received free or reduced lunch (*Eligibility for Free and Reduced Lunch*, 2014).

Jennifer's parents and three younger siblings lived in Maywood. Her mother had attended school in Mocolito, Mexico, until the second grade. She immigrated to Los Angeles as a young adult. Jennifer's father was born in Nayarit, Mexico, and immigrated to the United States when he was in elementary school. He graduated from an LAUSD high school. Jennifer described her mother as "a homemaker" and her father as a sanitation worker. Jennifer was the first in her family to attend four-year university, although her cousin attended community college for a short while but did not complete a degree.

A writing program highlight for Jennifer was having the freedom to write about topics of her choice and not to be concerned about using the wrong structure as she might have done or been concerned about in school. Since a structured, formulaic, "You have to write like this"

format was often required in school, InkGirls helped her develop her writing and creativity in ways she would not have otherwise had. She described a journalism workshop where she crafted a piece and shared it with one of the facilitators. At the end of the day, the woman told her she needed to read it aloud to the group because it was “Such a true reflection of my voice.” This experience had affected her as she learned she had something to say that was relevant and worth hearing.

When it came time for the college essay writing workshops facilitated by InkGirls, Jennifer used the creativity and voice development she had gained in the program to craft an essay that she felt represented her identity in multiple ways—as a woman, as a Latina, as a writer, and as student. Because of her experiences in the college workshops offered by the writing program, she was able to assist her younger brother as he wrote his college essay and completed the application and financial aid forms. Jennifer explained:

The number one thing the writing program gave me was confidence. (Narrative Session, 2015)

When describing her literacy development while in the writing program, she said she had come to a deeper understanding of

How a person’s background influences what she or he writes. (Narrative Session, 2015)

For instance, she explained how for each article or poem they read, analyzed, and discussed during a workshop, they would also explore the word choice of the writer and who was the target audience. This provided her with a much richer understanding of the concept of a writer’s intent. Jennifer explained:

I knew how to identify if something was [written] for entertainment only, or if there was a more meaningful purpose, like if we were reading the testimonies of immigrants.

(Jennifer, Narrative Session, August 29, 2015)

Jennifer also appreciated that she was exposed to many authors who had similar backgrounds to her own. These authors inspired her to tell her own story, which she did through free-verse poetry and nonfiction narratives. In InkGirls, participants read mostly female authors, and many of those authors were women of color. Of her high school experience, she said:

I don't remember reading a book by any non-White authors and we only read one or two [books] by women, but that's it. (Narrative Session, August 29, 2015)

As a participant for only her high school senior year, Jennifer said that some of the transformative effects of the writing program did not become conscious to her until she was in college. It wasn't until college that she started thinking more about her culture and how it affected her life—an issue central to the InkGirls program. Jennifer described how this helped her realize how much her own culture influenced

who I am as a person, why I think and do things certain ways. (Narrative Session, August 29, 2015)

Her high school was 99% Latino, and she knew about Cesar Chavez, but beyond that, she could not recall being exposed to historical figures from her Latino culture. This made her angry and she felt she was not the first second-generation person to have these feelings. She believed ethnic studies should be a requirement in all public schools.

I had to go out of my way to learn about my own culture. (Narrative Session, 2015)

While earning an undergraduate degree in sociology, she had to give several presentations. She was surprised that she had not been nervous, and she attributed this to the practice and support she had had when reading aloud in InkGirls workshops. Although she was still kind of shy, she spoke up when she disagreed with something or someone, to voice an opinion or to ask a question. This development in confidence and voice, coupled with her concern for social justice issues, led her to work as a canvasser for Grassroots.org in Los Angeles. She worked with the American Civil Liberties Union campaign for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) rights. This entailed going door-to-door and asking for contributions and signatures. Jennifer believed that because of what she had learned in the program, she was able to “adjust” her tone and words accordingly as a canvasser depending on her audience:

I would have my main points I would say about LGBT laws to help protect them and what we are doing to implement those laws and how that person could help. Whatever I say in between is going to depend on the person I’m standing in front of. If it’s an elderly person, for instance, I’m going to talk more formally. (Jennifer, Narrative Session, September 14, 2015)

Jennifer affirmed that, without InkGirls experiences that had helped her develop a strong voice and confidence, she would not have had the courage and confidence to do the canvassing work with the ACLU. She was also not sure she would have been drawn to social justice or taking action to help those who need it. Jennifer realized during her second year in college that she had also gained from InkGirls a strong sense of community and identity. She then joined a

chapter at her university of an organization called Hermanas Unidas [Sisters United]. The chapter's motto reads:

“Poder de la Mujer” [Power of the Woman] is what all Hermanas strive to embody, both as individual women and as an organization. The motto symbolized the strength and will of each and every hermana in their quest for higher education, the empowerment of their families and communities, as well as equality in education, the workplace and the rest of society. (Hermanas Unidas, Facebook page, 2015)

The majority of the students at the university that she attended were White, so she felt it was important for her to join a Latino-based group. Jennifer felt that Hermanas Unidas provided community and support for her. For instance, when she was questioning her focus of study, she went to the group for advice. She began college as an engineer major, but she did not feel settled with this decision. After discussions with other women in the group, Jennifer realized that her passion for social change and action required her to switch her major; and so she changed to sociology. All members in the organization also participated in community service, and this aspect of the group appealed to her as well. After completing her master's degree in demographic and social analysis, Jennifer planned to pursue a career in the nonprofit sector.

When Jennifer was asked to describe a literacy program that would best serve teen girls of color, she explained that it would be one that respected and highlighted the identities of the girls. Further, she noted that it would be important that the girls be exposed to fiction and nonfiction in order to help prepare them for the world by addressing issues that were real in their lives, such as discrimination or being female or not being White. The texts and the writing assignments should honor the culture and concerns of the girls. She emphasized that

opportunities to dialogue about what they read, wrote, and believed about the world should be a central component of the program.

### **Adrienne**

Adrienne began participating in InkGirls during her sophomore high school year. At the time of the narrative sessions, she was 19 years old and she attended a private university in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She majored in English and was on a prelaw track. She self-identified as Filipino and had grown up in the city of Carson, located in the county of Los Angeles. She attended an LAUSD high school, where 72% of the students received free or reduced lunch (*Eligibility for Free and Reduced Lunch*, 2014). In the area of Los Angeles where Adrienne had grown up, the average household income was \$40,627 (*90744, Zip Code Detailed Profile*, 2015).

Adrienne had lived with her mom and little sister until she left for college. Her parents divorced when she was eight. Her mother worked as a bookkeeper and her father as a salesman. Both of her parents completed some college in the Philippines, and both were 25 years old when they immigrated to the United States.

They never got an education here in America so I was the first generation of the family to actually go to college so it's really exciting and also a lot of pressure. (Narrative Session, August 13, 2015)

Her family wanted her to stay local but she wanted leave the area so she could have experiences she would not have had if she had stayed—"I wanted to break away." Adrienne said it was a difficult decision to apply to college out of state.

It wasn't the traditional thing; Filipino parents in the community where I live want their kids to stay local. I was scared but I got eventually over the fear and did it anyway.

(Adrienne, Narrative Session, 2015)

Because Adrienne was raised in a single-parent household, it was also difficult for her to leave her mother and younger sister.

I tried to convince myself that this dream was just a phase. (Narrative Session, 2015)

She credited InkGirls with the confidence she had developed and needed in order to apply to multiple colleges and for several scholarships.

I totally grew up into this confident girl, and now, woman. Honestly, it was because of the program. (Narrative Session, 2015)

When she first became a participant, she was scared to share her writing with anyone. But during the first workshop she attended, she realized that if she was going to become a better writer, she had to develop her voice and share it. When Adrienne had just completed her first year of college, she noticed that a lot of freshmen were still trying to find themselves, whereas she felt she knew who she was and what she wanted.

[InkGirls] allowed me to learn how to speak my mind and say what I wanted without feeling like I would be judged. And if I am, I can shrug it off and know it has nothing to do with me—how you are doing your thing. (Narrative Session, August 21, 2015)

In terms of her literacy experience while in the writing program, she realized that she not only had developed a love for poetry, but also that she was drawn also to screenwriting and journalism. She explained that through the different workshops, girls had had the opportunity to delve into various genres. These influenced how and what she wrote in school, especially when

narrative writing was assigned. In addition, Adrienne learned a different approach to reading, one that she found immensely helpful:

Before [InkGirls], I would read books as just an audience, as a reader, but because of the program, I got to read books as both a reader and a writer and it's different. (Narrative Session, September 8, 2015)

Adrienne learned that understanding the writer's purpose helped her be more critical about what she read and also equipped her to hone her own intent as a writer. InkGirls provided a variety of writing models that the girls analyzed for style and purpose, and these experiences, Adrienne firmly believed, gave her a deeper and more creative understanding of text analysis. She gained a real understanding of how an author chose a specific genre, structure, tone, and choice of words depending on the message or purpose of her writing. She was then able to experiment stylistically—in a way that her formal schooling did not provide.

The program

.taught me that I can break the rules in writing to get my point across. (Narrative Session, 2015)

An example of this was in her U.S. history class in 11th grade. The teacher gave the assignment for students to read a Langston Hughes poem "I, Too, America," and to write an analysis of it in essay form. Instead, Adrienne presented her analysis by crafting a poem of her own, titled "I, As Well," emulating some of the techniques used by Hughes, who had emulated techniques used by Walt Whitman in his poem "I Hear America Singing." She received a grade of F on the assignment. She was disappointed and angry and conveyed this to her teacher, but he did not change the grade.



The following year the same poem she had turned in for the assignment was published in an InkGirls anthology. Following is an excerpt from her poem “I, As Well”:

I, as well, sing, America

I sing with the choir, songs of freedom and tragedy,

Songs that were not born with me, but are part of me

Soft Filipino symphony, songs of the fifty stars and thirteen stripes.

(Taylor, 2013, p. 102)

Adrienne showed the anthology with her published poem to her former teacher. He thanked her and then later told her he had changed the assignment so his students would also reflect on their analysis of the poems by Hughes and Whitman by writing poems of their own. Adrienne was proud of herself for influencing the teacher to change his curriculum to make it more of a real experience.

The kind of teaching and learning she experienced in the writing program was not a norm in her schooling. She explained that classrooms were isolating spaces, with desks in rows, and teachers who expected students to be silent and do their work.

Teachers should come and observe programs like [InkGirls] and see the curriculum. That way they can learn how to make their classrooms like workshops where students get to have a voice in what they discuss, write, and in what they read. School does not give that freedom and you have to follow too many rules; it’s really stifling as a learner.

(Adrienne, Narrative Session, September 8, 2015)

In her further critique of the schooling system and gender bias in the classroom, Adrienne felt male students were called on much more often than female students. Since male students

tended to have higher confidence and raised their hands in class more, teachers, unaware, called on them more frequently. She explained that this was troubling to her throughout her secondary schooling.

I felt overshadowed by the guys and didn't want to speak up. I never felt like I had the same confidence level as they did. (Adrienne, Narrative Session, 2015)

Adrienne thought her teachers were responsible for paying attention to who is participating and also for encouraging girls more and putting more energy and effort into that. In addition, some male students would use discriminatory or derogatory language against girls and women, and this practice would go unchecked at times by teachers.

The InkGirls workshops provided a safe space where Adrienne never felt shot down as a girl and could voice her opinions often and freely during discussion and in her writing. The writing program, moreover, helped her grow as a writer because she was routinely sharing her writing and receiving feedback from other girls and the volunteers.

Your writing isn't really going to get anywhere if you don't put it out there. (Narrative Session, 2015)

From this, her confidence as a writer and as a woman really grew from reading aloud to the group.

A difficult aspect of the program for Adrienne was that the workshops were often downtown, and she lived in the southern part of Los Angeles county. Adrienne had to rely on her mother to drive her to the workshops.

She would drive me even if it took an hour and a half because of traffic. (Narrative Session, 2015)

She had sometimes missed workshops because her mother had been working and had been unable to take her. If InkGirls were to expand, or more literacy programs were created like it, then more kids would have access to this kind of learning.

In designing a literacy program for her community, Adrienne said she would make sure the program addressed the real issues that children faced in her neighborhood.

Kids growing up poor or with one parent work ten times harder than other kids.

(Narrative Session, 2015)

The program she described would include discussions and readings (fiction and nonfiction) that would reflect more of their lives, like

How to deal with growing up poor, how to deal with the city, and how your culture plays into your schooling and life. (Narrative Session, 2015)

Adrienne said that she would create a literacy program where participants could experience what she had experienced in InkGirls.

It helped me know myself so much better which has helped me in the world, helped me have the courage to go to college, and also get through my first year there. (Narrative Session, 2015)

## **Mia**

Mia joined InkGirls at the beginning of her sophomore year, when she was 14 years old. At the time of these narrative sessions, she was 18 years old. Mia had grown up in South Gate, located in South Los Angeles County. South Gate rests between the cities of Huntington Park, to the north, and Compton, to the south. The average household income was \$48,073 (90280, *Zip Code Detailed Profile*, 2015). She had attended all LAUSD schools. At her elementary school,

83% of the 1,897 students had received free or reduced lunch (*Eligibility for Free and Reduced Lunch*, 2014).

Mia self-identified as Salvadorian American. Both of her parents had immigrated to the United States when they were adolescents and had attended LAUSD schools and graduated from high school, but neither had attended college. Her mother worked as a secretary, and her father worked as a chauffeur. Mia explained that her parents had expressed interest in attending college, however,

They had much bigger concerns in terms of helping their own families and working to support them. They didn't really have an option of making that a priority. (Narrative Session, 2015)

The second oldest child of four, Mia explained that her family had noticed she was becoming confident and outgoing as she participated in InkGirls. She began joining more of the writing program events and also began assisting in planning them. For one of the events, a local female journalist was asked to speak to the participants. Mia was selected by a coordinator at InkGirls to be on stage with the writer and to interview her. These experiences were pivotal to her life:

I think I was clinically depressed when I joined [the writing program]. It was one of the only spaces that I wanted to be in. I wanted to be writing all the time and I didn't have the motivation to do it for myself. [InkGirls] helped me focus on something productive and it let me use writing as fuel to get through the difficulties I was going through.

(Narrative Session, August 14, 2015)

Mia attributed her literacy development to several key experiences she had had while in the writing program. First, the opportunity to read her poetry and short stories aloud had a significant effect on how she felt about her own voice. Having a real audience, not just the teacher grading her writing, taught her that she needed to be confident in the message and purpose of what she was writing and why. In this way, she honed her message and style, mindful of the audience, and also more aware of her purpose for writing something. She also identified the curriculum used by the writing program as another important aspect of her experience. The prompts for writing in the workshops were focused but also open-ended enough so as to provide a space for the girls to choose their own topic and even their own structure or genre in which to write.

Specifically, Mia described a creative nonfiction workshop where she remembered being very afraid to do it wrong. At that point, she had only been writing poetry. She chose to write a creative, nonfiction-based poem. The facilitator and the writing mentors with whom she shared it at the workshop supported both the text she crafted and the structure in which she choose to write her piece. In contrasting this experience to her schooling experience, Mia reflected:

Because of the nature of school, you can't really do that [with writing assignments].

There are so many guidelines for writing an essay, any writing; there's a strict rulebook that you have to follow or you will be graded down for not following it. . . . There is so much constriction and restriction. (Narrative Session, August 14, 2015)

Also, since the girls are not graded or earning credit as they are in school, Mia explained this allowed for frankness when dialoging, sharing topic ideas, and writing structure ideas with

each other and with the facilitators. InkGirls gave her the freedom to experiment and take risks with the group and in her writing when using her voice.

I was given a platform to speak my mind. . . . My voice was being nurtured in these spaces and I learned that my voice matters. (Narrative Session, August 14, 2015)

With respect to her social agency and empowerment through developing her voice, Mia further critiqued the public school system and described how many of her classes, particularly English classes, were overcrowded, with 40 or more students who didn't have enough chairs to sit in. She did not feel visible or seen in these learning settings. Her teachers did their best to accommodate everyone, but it was not possible to get the attention you needed or deserved as a student. In contrast, InkGirls offered a more intimate environment where dialogue was a foundational pedagogical practice of the curriculum. The environment of all girls and women was also empowering in Mia's development of self, voice, and as a writer:

I was surrounded by women all the time, including professional women [mentors], who were doing amazing things in their lives and in the world. It made it easier for me imagining myself doing those things too. The girls [participants] were all from Los Angeles, with various backgrounds, but struggling with the same discriminations and challenges I was and I could identify with their stories. (Narrative Session, August 14, 2015)

The environment of an all-female writing workshop gave Mia new perspective on the importance and need for schools to create a more equitable space for learning. She thought that since boys were socialized to assert themselves, teachers called on them with higher frequency. She felt this worked to silence girls in classrooms. She explained that, as a female, she was

socialized to be very quiet, polite, and even shy. Because of this, she would wait for teachers to call on her but

If the teacher didn't call on me, then I wouldn't speak up. (Narrative Session, 2015)

She ascribed the many leadership skills she had gained to the all-female writing workshops because she didn't have the fear of boys being overly competitive and changing the dynamic. In college, she saw clearly this dynamic and gender socialization and how her instructors called more often on those who were more outspoken and who tended to be males. In those situations, she said,

I now know how to assert myself and speak up. (Narrative Session, 2015)

When Mia began attending the creative program, her greatest challenge was her fear of reading aloud in front of the other participants during the workshops; she could not imagine sharing her writing in the public readings. Over time, she built enough confidence in herself and her writing, and trust in the group to have become able to read her writing in the workshops aloud and the public readings. In college, Mia performed spoken work regularly, which she attributed to what she had learned in the writing program.

Another experience that she felt helped in her life and academically was when Mia's writing was featured in an anthology published by InkGirls. Work of many of the participants had been published in these anthologies, providing the girls with an authentic audience and a concrete purpose for writing—something she described as missing in the overly structured essay and writing tasks in her regular schooling experiences.

I could hold a book in my hand and say, "My writing is in here." (Narrative Session, 2015)

As a creative writing major at a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, Mia anticipated her work being published again. She attributed the anthology experience to her confidence and also to her drive to become a working writer. Of her writing at the time of this study, she explained:

I'm very involved and dedicated to social justice issues, and I try to speak up for Latino issues and for people of color and particularly for women of color. (Narrative Session, September 20, 2015)

Mia's drive to pursue work as a published writer was prompted while in high school, where most of the required books and texts assigned in English classes represented the White male norm.

We read very, very few women, very few writers of color [she explained, and the impact of this was [incredibly discouraging for her as girl and as a person of color.] (Narrative Session, 2015)

While in the writing program, she remembered reading Sandra Cisneros's poem "Loose Women," in which the poet addressed the racist and sexist overtures she experienced as a Latina. Her consciousness of exclusion in learning institutions of people of color was only heightened when she began attending college, because

Being a women of color, a Latina woman in higher education, is not common. (Narrative Session, 2015)

In response to the marginalization she first felt in public school and then at her university, Mia wrote a poem titled "To Be a Latina Woman on a College Campus." She regularly performed this poem and others she had written at spoken-word venues on and near her university campus. A version of this poem is below.



## FOR ALL THOSE WHO DISMISS LATINO NARRATIVES

To be a Latina woman on a college campus is to face violence on the day-to-day.

It is walking into a classroom on the first day of classes and

praying another student of

color walks in.

It is seeing my culture

reflected as costume

reduced to insult:

identity shredded into

piñata scraps and slurs.

To be a Latina woman is my culture glorifying the government out of fear.

It is living every day terrified someone you love will be deported.

Last week, it was Debora's mother,

today, it could be *your* mother.

Your father. Your aunt. Your cousin. Your neighbor.

Your brother. Your sister. You.

(Mia, Facebook page, 2016)

In describing a literacy program that would best serve adolescent girls of color, Mia stated that it would be important for the girls to read women of color and to also hear from women in their communities who could share their experiences. She proposed that the women speak to the girls about issues that affected their daily lives like racism, anti-immigration policies and laws, and sexism. Also, using literature and nonfiction texts to teach about different

ethnicities, cultures, and perceptions of gender and sexuality would be a chief goal of the program. Another goal would build a community of support for the girls.

The program, she explained, would be space in which each girl could be herself, explore her identity, what that meant to her, and how to use writing to share this. There would always be a real purpose for the writing—an audience—not just in publication form but also in the spoken word or performance poetry. Having this authentic purpose and audience would provide validation and a visible manifestation of their work.

It would be an environment where girls feel safe and empowered, and can do a lot more [than in their school experiences]. It would be a space where they could say what they need to say. (Mia, Narrative Session, 2015)

### **Summary of Narrative Themes**

Four major themes emerged from the narratives provided by Zurie, Jennifer, Adrienne, and Mia, the former participants of the InkGirls writing program. Those themes included (a) literacy learning, in the program and in school; (b) school inequities related to gender and race; (c) development of confidence; and (d) development of voice and social action

### **Literacy Learning in the Writing Program**

In literacy is freedom. Balance between autonomy, directional prompts, and supportive dialogue enhanced the freedom of self-expression that these women learned in the program. For the women in this study, the development of literacy in the InkGirls program was very different from literacy instruction in public schools. It is worth noting that important subthemes to the theme of literacy learning emerged related to the freedom of choice, writing with purpose, exposure to female authors, and dialogue.

**Freedom of choice.** When sharing their experiences with reading and writing in the program, the women all spoke of the autonomy they had had in choosing topics and structure when they wrote. They explained they were given a space to take charge of their writing and were able to write about their experiences and topics of concern and interest. The women also described the various genres of writing that they had learned, as opposed to in the singular learning in school, where they had been primarily assigned essay writing. Zurie said she was always encouraged to be creative and honest. She also explained there was a freedom in the writing program to dialogue fully and write about the topics that interested her and the other participants.

Similarly, Jennifer discussed the freedom she felt to choose topics that were important to her and to choose the structure she wished to use to write. She explained that the program helped her develop her writing and creativity in ways she would not have otherwise. Adrienne said the program taught her to experiment as a writer and to break the rules to get her point across. Mia appreciated the guidance of prompts when writing, but liked that they were always open ended enough to provide the young writers the freedom to choose their own topics, structure, and genre.

**Writing with a purpose.** Jennifer learned to recognize how her background influenced what she wrote, and for whom she wrote. The other women experienced this deeper understanding of writer's purpose and audience as well. The women shared how, while in the workshops, critically analyzing texts and dialoging with others about the text helped them grasp a writer's word choice, topic/issues addressed, her tone, the structure of the piece, and her target audience—all depending on the message she wished to convey.

Furthermore, all four women shared that having had the other participants, and the staff, and volunteers at the end of a workshop be an audience to their writing provided a motivation that propelled them to further investigate their own purpose in writing a particular poem or narrative. In terms of writing with a purpose, each woman also mentioned that the possibility of being published in one of the anthologies led them to deeper inquiry about an author's purpose—their own and the women they read.

**Exposure to female authors of color.** Because they read all women authors and many of those authors were of color, Zurie, Jennifer, and Mia spoke about relating personally to the texts of these stories and to the women's lives. This encouraged them to write their own stories and to seek out similar authors. Jennifer said this exposure to women who had similar backgrounds deeply inspired her writing, particularly her narrative writing and free-verse poetry.

Mia recalled reading a poem by Sandra Cisneros that resonated with her, and she related how meaningful it had been to read the issues of racism and sexism addressed by the poet. Moreover, all of the women noted that texts written by female authors of color had not often been found in their reading assignments in their schools. Hence, participants felt that this exposure to texts by women of color was significant to believing in themselves as writers.

**Dialogue.** The women shared how participating in dialogue often and in every workshop played a pivotal role in their development of voice, their writing skills, and their confidence. When the women recalled aspects of the writing workshops, they enthusiastically retold the times they were able to share aloud their thoughts, ideas, and feelings with other participants and the facilitators in the process of dialogue.

When reflecting on dialogue, they also described more specifically how it provided them many opportunities to ask questions, get and give feedback, encourage others, and find common ground as writers and as teen girls. Through the process of dialogue, Adrienne came to recognize that the only way she would grow was to put herself and her writing out there to others. The participants also saw dialogue with the other girls, facilitators, and authors as a way to build community.

**Literacy learning in school.** The women described their frustrations with literacy instruction in their public schooling experiences. Zurie explained that her English classes were set up like more of a disciplinary program where they were not given choices or say in what they wrote, discussed, or studied. She stated that they were assigned formulaic writing, measured mainly by essays, and that she was told what to write about. Jennifer also critiqued the limitations of the mandatory formulaic writing assigned in her English classes. It did not allow her to develop her voice or write in depth about topics she was interested in or about herself in a meaningful way.

Because of the nature of school, Mia felt that she had to follow restrictive rules when it came to writing assignments; if they failed to do so, students would be graded down. Adrienne shared that classrooms were isolating, with little discussion, and that teachers expected students to work silently and follow rules, and that this was really stifling as a learner. Mia also noted the absence of discussion in her English classes, partly due to overcrowding, with 40 or more students in the room and just one instructor. She felt it was impossible to get the attention she needed or deserved. Lastly, as mentioned earlier, the school offered participants little diversity in the texts that they had been assigned to read.

## **Gender and Race Inequities in Schooling**

The participants noted a dearth of female authors and those of color. Zurie said women writers were not really read at all, and no female authors of color were read. In her English classes, Jennifer did not remember reading a required book by a non-White male, and only one or two books by female authors. In addition, Jennifer said that even though her high school was 99% Latino, she was rarely exposed to historical or literary figures from her own culture. Mia stated that the required texts in her English classes represented the White male norm.

We read very, very few women, very few writers of color [she explained and the impact of this was] incredibly discouraging [for her as girl and as a person of color]. (Narrative Session, 2015)

Adrienne and Mia both spoke about gender discrimination as institutionalized practices in their classrooms. Adrienne stated that male students were called on more frequently and that she had found this troubling all through her schooling. She expressed that, because males are socialized to be more confident, the boys in her classes raised their hands more often and were called on more frequently, but that it was the responsibility of teachers to encourage female students to participate. She believed that teachers needed to put more energy and effort toward this, in order to make the classroom a more gender equitable space.

In addition, Adrienne shared observations of times that teachers ignored gender-discriminatory language used by male students aimed at the content of the class or at the girls in the class. Adrienne explained that, in contrast, the writing program gave her and the other girls a safe place where she was never shot down as a girl, where she was encouraged to share her opinions and ideas freely and without repercussion. Mia also explained that male students were

called on more frequently in her public schooling classrooms. She saw the same dynamic once she got to college—the inequity of the voices of male students in the classroom compared to female students.

### **Development of Confidence**

Because of the importance the writing program placed on the teen girls developing their voices and bolstering and supporting their thoughts, ideas, and writing, the women in the narrative sessions spoke about the effects this had had on how they felt about themselves. Zurie developed a level of confidence she said would not have had if she had not been in the program. She used the word “fearless” in describing the confidence she gained to write about issues even if they were controversial. She also attributed how this growth of confidence from the program lead her, at 16 years old, to give a sermon at her church.

Jennifer stated that the number one thing she gained from her time in the writing program was confidence. She related this directly to the assurance she felt to attend college essay writing workshops facilitated by InkGirls. This trust and assurance in herself led her to apply to college and for various scholarships. Adrienne, too, spoke of the confidence she had developed while in the program and of how it steered her to fill out multiple college scholarship applications.

I totally grew up into this confident girl, and now, woman. Honestly, it was because of the program. (Adrienne, Narrative Session, 2015)

Adrienne echoed many of these sentiments, when noting that she had had a different level of confidence as a freshman at university than her peers because she knew who she was and what she wanted while they were still trying to find themselves. In concert with this sentiment, Mia

attributed the confidence she gained from the program as what had most influenced her decision to be a creative writing major and to seek a career after graduation as a working writer.

### **Development of Voice and Social Action**

The women reported that the writing program experience had created a space for each to further develop her own voice in a way that pointed her toward social agency and action. Zurie explained that because of the writing workshops, she had developed a “kick-assery” way of going about life and her writing. Zurie gave a sermon at her church and co-founded a chapter of Women of Color Alliance at her university. Performance art theatre, where she read her own poetry, became an important part of her life in college as well.

In developing her voice, Jennifer described how reading aloud a journalistic piece in a workshop was a pivotal moment because she realized that what she had to say was relevant and worth hearing. When she got to university, she gave several presentations to large groups. She felt she had found her voice with her interest in social justice, which helped her to take action and become a canvasser for the ACLU, advocating door-to-door for LGBT rights. Jennifer also joined a group, Hermanas United, where she could voice personal concerns connected to her identity as a Latina and a student, find support, and participate in social action by doing community service.

When Adrienne first joined InkGirls, she was nervous to share her ideas and writing, but learned while in the program to say what she wanted to say, to speak her mind, and not to worry about being judged. She used her voice when she wrote the poem “I, As, Well” in her history class. Once the poem was published in the InkGirls anthology, she took action, showing it to her former teacher, who then was influenced to change his original assignment. Through this



experience and others she related to the writing program, Adrienne learned to speak her mind, and when she felt judged by someone, she explained:

I can shrug it off and know it has nothing to do with me. (Narrative Session, 2015)

Mia attributed her voice development to having been encouraged to take risks and speak her mind in the workshop space and, through doing this, discovered that her voice mattered. In her university courses, when male students' voices dominated the classroom, Mia said,

I now know how to assert myself and speak up. (Narrative Session, 2015)

In addition, Mia used her voice with poetry as a vehicle in spoken-word venues to confront sexist and racist issues women of color have been faced with on college campuses.

### **Designing Their Own Literacy Programs**

In designing a literacy program for girls in their community, there were commonalities in what the four women participants of this study shared in terms of what texts they would read, the program goals, and the ways the program would be structured. Zurie stated it would be important for the girls to read female authors of color and to discuss and write about issues of gender, race, and class. She said the main goal of the program should be the development of writing tools so that the girls would feel empowered in their own lives and communities.

Jennifer also described a literacy program that would best serve teen girls as one that would respect and highlight the identities of the girls. It is important that they be exposed to fiction and nonfiction that would help to prepare them for the world by addressing issues that were real in their lives, such as discrimination because they were female and not White. The texts and writing assignments should therefore honor students' cultures and their lived concerns.

In a literacy program she envisioned, Adrienne would make sure the real issues that children faced in her neighborhood be addressed.

Kids growing up poor or with one parent work 10 times harder than other kids.

(Narrative Session, 2015)

The participants agreed that dialogue opportunities to critically discuss what they read, wrote, and believed about the world would be important and central to the ideal critical literacy program. The program should include discussions and readings of both fiction and nonfiction works that would reflect more of their lives, like

how to deal with growing up poor, how to deal with the city, and how your culture plays into your schooling and life. (Mia, Narrative Session, 2015)

Mia highlighted the importance of the girls reading works by women of color. She also proposed that women from the community speak to the girls about issues that affected their daily lives like racism, anti-immigration policies and laws, and sexism.

Also, the use of text to teach about different ethnicities, cultures, and perceptions of gender and sexuality would be a chief goal of the program, as would be building a community of support for the girls. The program, Mia explained, should be a space in which each girl could be herself, explore her identity, what that means to her, and how to use writing to share this. There would always be a real purpose for the writing—an audience—and not just in publication form, but also as spoken word or performance poetry. Having this authentic purpose and audience would provide validation and a visible manifestation of their work.

It would be an environment where girls feel safe and empowered, and can do a lot more [than in their school experiences]. It would be a space where they could say what they need to say. (Mia, Narrative Session, 2015)

### **Difficulties for Participants**

There were a few difficulties related to the program that were mentioned by participants of this study. For example, Adrienne struggled to get rides to the workshop locations. If her mother was working, she was unable to attend. The bus was not feasible since workshops were held in northeast Los Angeles and she lived in the southeast part of the county. About a different issue, Mia noted that at times the program tended to emphasize more positive expressions in the writing. So, although the program helped her use writing as a fuel while she coped with personal challenges and depression, she wished that the program had challenged her to explore more deeply in her writing the unpleasant aspects of what she had been experiencing.

### **Summary**

The program curriculum discussion of the three writing program workshops demonstrated critical literacy practices and an approach to literacy learning that differed from the traditional classroom instruction in reading and writing. The texts written by teen girls who participated in the workshops offered exemplars of the concrete goal of the workshops such as the development of participant voices by engaging in telling and writing their own personal stories; and, in so doing, addressing issues and topics that were most relevant in their own lives. The public readings and anthologies illustrated the public arena created for the teen girls to share their writing. The narrative of the four woman participants of this study, Zurie, Jennifer, Adrienne, and Mia, offered a compelling story about the influence of the program on their self-

development, voice, and empowerment, as well as provided insights into an effective design for literacy programs for girls of color.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

Critical pedagogical principles served as the foundation for examining a writing program in which the participants received literacy education that utilized critical literacy practices. This curriculum stood in stark contrast to the literacy curricula girls of color from working-class homes generally have received through public schooling in the United States. In this chapter, I first analyze and discuss the findings from the curriculum and artifacts from the workshops. This section includes a discussion of literacy learning in public school and ways it sits in contrast to the workshop practices. Then, I present an analysis and discussion of the public readings, which includes a discussion of the lack of visibility of girls, particularly girls of color, in public schooling. Next, I discuss the findings from the narrative sessions with the four women who participated in this study in relation to development of voice and consciousness, and their empowerment that pointed to social agency. This section focuses on the transformative experiences the women had while in the program and beyond. Lastly, I share my overall conclusions from this study, which confirm the significance for further research in this area and proposes a call to action to schools and educators.

#### **Workshop Literacy Learning**

Featured routinely and prominently in the curriculum of the InkGirls writing program were critical literacy practices: (a) relatable texts, (b) empowering writing tasks and student/participant generated texts, and (c) dialogue and mutuality. Each of those practices support the literacy learning and voice development of the female participants and link each to critical pedagogy.

## **Relatable Texts**

The writing program used only texts written by women, many of whom were authors of color. Poems, short stories, memoir excerpts, journalistic pieces and other nonfiction texts were carefully selected. Since all of the participants were female and most were girls of color, the writing program staff that designed the curriculum understood the importance of the girls relating to the experiences and the identities of those whose work they read. They chose texts that represented “a non-dominant perspective” (Wolfe, 2010, p. 371). The inclusion of mirror texts is core to critical literacy learning, which promotes genuinely engaging learners by including relatable people, topics, and themes. Therefore, in their interactions with these mirror texts, the teen girls were able to more deeply examine the author’s purpose, the topics, the techniques and styles of the genre, and the word choice and tone of the writer. As described by the women in the narrative sessions, this type of close inspection and analysis of message and intent of the author, the style, and the structure, propelled their own writing abilities and improved their quality of writing. Use of these relatable texts is also congruent with Darder’s (2012) critical notion of the *bicultural mirror* and the process of *bicultural affirmation*, in which the stories of authors of color in this context provided the participants culturally familiar stories, as working-class females of color who must daily navigate the tensions of the dominant/subordinate divide.

## **Empowering Writing Tasks and Participant-Generated Texts**

The central focus of the workshops was to provide a variety of writing tasks that allowed the girls to explore their own identities and beliefs about the world; and through this process transform their understanding of self and the world. In *Reading the Word and the World*, Freire

and Macedo (1987) insisted, “Reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* it or *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work” (p. 23). The data from the narrative accounts, workshop curriculum, and observations strongly suggest that the practical writing activities of InkGirls moved the girls effectively toward the generation of texts that constituted a process of rewriting their understanding of themselves and their world.

Provided with opportunities to write the stories and experiences of their own lives placed the teen girls at the center of the classroom discourse and, in this case, the workshop discourse, as “social actors” (McLaren, 2009) in history, rather than as passive receivers of knowledge. In other words, the young writers were given ample opportunity to write their own histories, which prioritized the value of their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2001), allowing them to confront the traditional banking approach to schooling that views students as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge by the teacher (Freire, 2000).

The texts generated by the InkGirls, participants were not just kept in a journal to be seen by the writer and perhaps one other person. The purpose was taken to fruition by making their writing public in the form of sharing in a small circle, reading aloud to the whole group, and being included in the pages of one of the anthologies of the writing program. In addition, the philosophy of the workshop was to provide a space where the young writers could take their own texts through a critical writing process of drafting and sharing, revising and further discussing, and then publishing. This process allowed the teen girls to seek advice from peers and facilitators, and glean from the writings of others. The narratives with the women revealed the InkGirls writing process to be invaluable to their growth as writers and in developing their ideas,

agency, and voice—a process that continued for the four participants long after they had left the program.

It is important to note that those texts used for examination and dialogue by the writing program also included poems, personal narratives, and journalistic pieces generated by teen girls from the program. These texts were sometimes texts published in the anthologies or from previous writing workshops, and they served to place the voices and lived experiences of the teen girls front and center in the process of the workshop. This process of starting with the experiences of participants is fully in sync with Freire's (2000) insistence that critical pedagogical efforts begin with the lived histories of the participants themselves.

### **Dialogue and Mutuality**

In the writing workshops, the girls were provided with plenty of space and time to dialogue with each other and the women staff and volunteers, sharing their perspectives on local and global events and their own lives. They then wrote about the ways in which they viewed these events and their own experiences, and shared those in dialogue as well. This is consistent with critical pedagogy in that, according to hooks (1994), "Sharing experiences and confessional narratives in the classroom helps establish communal commitment to learning" (p. 186). The communal aspect of the dialogical relationship between teacher and students—this mutuality—is an important principle in critical pedagogy and key to creating counter-hegemonic spaces for all students, particularly for students from racialized communities (Darder, 2012; Darder et al., 2009). This differs from the hierarchical roles of adult/teacher and child/student that are well established and in practice in public learning institutions.



## **Literacy Education in Public Institutions: Rote and Domesticating**

The former participants of the program shared their troubling experiences in public schools: the classroom set up more as a disciplinary system, rote reading and writing procedures, and formulaic writing assignments. About this routinizing structure, Darder (2015) has contended, “The traditional classroom exists as an arena of domestication, where abstract knowledge and its construction are objectified, along with the students” (pp. 69–70). This type of schooling in the United States—discussed in the literature review—was also repeatedly discussed and critiqued by the women participants in this study. Finn (1999) explained that in literacy instruction, traditional, directive methods were nearly always found in working-class schools.

In her writings, Black feminist lesbian poet Audre Lorde (1984), warned that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 110), meaning, in this case, hegemonic institutions of education have no real interest in changing the ineffective literacy experiences of working-class children of color. As Finn (1999) confirmed, “Our schools liberate and empower children of the gentry and domesticate the children of the working-class, and to a large extent, the middle class as well” (p. 189). This domestication works well in the U.S. economic system referred to by educational researcher Jean Anyon as “savage capitalism” (Finn, 1999, p. 204), and by Noam Chomsky as “predatory capitalism” (2004). In other words, this type of schooling works in favor of a system that requires a class of people to work long, hard hours, with low wages and minimum rights or protections—a system where a select few benefit from the labor of many.

## **The Workshop Approach**

The curriculum in the writing program featured the critical literacy practices that wholly supported the development of voice and literacy learning for the female participants. The workshop setting is, thus, noninstitutional and counterhegemonic (Darder et al., 2009); a design that is carried out consistently with intentionality. There is an understanding in the creative writing program that school literacy experiences are wrought with formula and lack student choice and student voice. The workshop approach, utilizing critical literacy practices, counters the formulaic, traditional literacy education of “urban pedagogies” (Duncan, 2000, p. 30) that persist as a pervasive narrative in U.S. public schooling.

A workshop approach to literacy instruction is not new. For example, the National Writing Project (NWP) is a network of K–12 teachers in the United States who view literacy instruction as a collaborative process between students and teachers who read and examine writing samples together, dialogue on topics of interest, share drafts, and provide feedback for each other. Writing is not simply assigned, it is taught through modeling, dialogue, and process. In addition, the teacher writes side-by-side with her students.

In the pedagogy of a liberating education, Finn (1999) and Christensen (2009) both championed a writing workshop approach. The creative writing program featured in this study echoes an analogous philosophy to the NWP when it comes to literacy instruction. Notably, the NWP has more than 200 regional active chapters throughout the United States, with thousands of public school educators as members, and has been active for more than 40 years (*History of the NWP*, 2016). This critical approach to literacy instruction has demonstrated positive and meaningful results in accounts from the NWP and is reflected in the findings from this study.

## Visibility for Girls: Front and Center

The public event readings, reading aloud in the workshops, and the published anthologies all provided a forum for the teen girls to share their writings. This practice of sharing their writing routinely was significant because participants demonstrated gaining a level of visibility as girls and as writers—a visibility that helped them to break the silencing and invisibility they experienced in school. By creating a space, whether in a large or small group, on stage, or in the pages of the anthology, the writing program honored and celebrated the personal narratives, poetry, and other written works produced by the participants, in ways that reinforced what hooks (1994) termed their “authority of experience” (p. 84).

The women in the narratives reported that this space fortified their confidence, courage, and development of voice. It gave opportunities for the girls to use their voices, providing space for them to share aspects of their identities that may also challenge status quo beliefs around gender, race, and class. It is important to establish here that each girl came to the program with a voice already and that the program was not *giving* her voice. Rather, the program established a space and multiple opportunities so that participants could both discover and share their voices through a pedagogical process that supported their social agency, self-determination, and empowerment (Darder, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

As a result, what often occurs, as was described by the women in this study, is that through providing that space to share their voices, girls become more conscious of what they want to say and why, and how they want to say it. Similarly, this process makes more people aware of how they came to think and be as they are. This reflects Freire’s (2001) notion of conscientization, or critical consciousness—a deeper understanding of one’s self and the world

that leads to action—which is an important principle of critical pedagogical praxis. Through the event readings, reading aloud in the workshops, and the published anthologies, the creative writing program devised a space for teen girls to publicly share their interests, identities, concerns and critiques about the world, as well as their hopes, and dreams. Critical pedagogy is dedicated to creating counter-hegemonic spaces for all students: “Intellectual and social spaces where power relationships are reconstructed to make central the voice and experiences of those who have historically existed at the margins of public institutions” (Darder et al., p. 12). As mentioned earlier, the all-female creative writing program established such a space for its participants.

Sharing publicly the many aspects of themselves also amplified for the teen girls their purpose to write, because they knew their author’s message and intent would be shared with an audience—with their peers, staff and volunteers, their family and friends—and if they were published in one of the anthologies, many others whom they did not know. Educational researcher and advocate for a critical literacy in public schools, Morrell (2008) emphasized: “Critical literacy should be theorized as the textual productions that surround individual liberation. . . . Toward these ends, students need opportunities to produce multiple authentic texts in multiple authentic genres for multiple authentic purposes” (p. 17).

A call for more authentic purpose for writing tasks in public institutions is necessary. At the same time, there must be a critical examination of the formulaic essay writing that, as described by the participants of this study, is limiting and lacks authenticity. This type of formulaic “school” writing is most often produced for the sole purpose of a grade and for an

audience of one: the teacher. All four women in this study were published in one of the writing program's anthologies, and Mia and Adrienne appeared in multiple anthologies.

### **Invisibility: Girls of Color in Public Institutions**

Critical educational theorists have been concerned with the production and reproduction of class through schooling under capitalism, feminist theorists have been concerned with the production and reproduction of gender under a system of patriarchy. (Weiler, 1988, p. 3)

In the United States, only 19% of the members of Congress are female, although women are more than half of the population, at 50.8% (*Women in U.S. Congress*, 2016). Emblematic of this sanctioned political underrepresentation of women is the scarcity of females in textbooks and other curricula in public schools, as discussed in the literature and echoed by the women in this study. Additionally, for girls of color, and a district like LAUSD where students of color comprise 89% of the student population, the assigned texts and writing assignments need to speak to what reflects and affects their lives. This underrepresentation in curricula is compounded for girls of color, who see even less of themselves, as those female authors read are most often White. It is precisely this invisibility that InkGirls aims to address through its out-of-school writing program.

This invisibility also points to the need for multicultural education in public schools, to transform the current practices that Nieto (1995) described as the schooling experiences of students of color, forced to focus on European or European American texts and traditions, to the exclusion of their cultures, or perhaps only a brief, superficial activity such as “treatment of Navajo culture through an art project or a representation of the independence struggle in Puerto

Rico through a single poem” (p. 196). Matias (2015) termed this exclusion the “Whiteness of schools,” an imposition of Eurocentric curricula upon students of color, and recalls that “As an urban student of color, I was taught to hate myself because my race and my racial experience were deemed irrelevant in a realm where Whiteness ruled” (p. 13).

Just as patriarchy has been historically produced, imposed, and perpetuated in U.S. public schools, so has a politics of Whiteness. Rendering students of color invisible in the curricula creates an invisibility that can generate internalized negative feelings of self (Darder 1991, 2004, 2012; Matias, 2015). The LAUSD reported that 576,000 of its 640,000 students identify as children of color (*About LAUSD*, 2016). Therefore, the more than 900 schools in this district must scrutinize the materials and texts they assign so as to be inclusive of the students whom they serve. LAUSD schools need to embrace the aspects of identity represented in their student population—gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality—which they have persistently marginalized and even excluded in their curricula.

### **Transformation: From Voice to Agency**

As we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experience and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, to respect those hidden sources of power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. (Lorde, 1984, p. 57)

The narrative sessions I conducted with Zurie, Jennifer, Mia, and Adrienne provided space and time for each woman to reflect on her involvement in the writing program and the transformational ways that participation affected their literacy development and their lives, in terms of voice, conscientization, and social action.

## Voice

Because the women—while participants in the program—were immersed in empowering writing tasks that produced texts that explored their identity, they developed their voices in ways they were unable to do so in the public school classroom. Zurie attributed her voice development to exposure in the writing program to diverse authors who inspired her to seek more women-of-color authors, and those texts influenced and expanded the topics about which she wrote. From the writing tasks, exposure to relatable texts, analysis of those texts, her own writing, and sharing her writing, Zurie became fearless in what she said and wrote about, even if it was controversial. She further described that, while in the program, coming to her voice led to her going about her life and her writing in a kind of “kick-assery” way.

For Jennifer, the ability to choose her own topics about which to write in the program led her to realize that she had things to say that were relevant and worth hearing. Examining authors who had similar backgrounds inspired her to tell her own story through poetry and narrative writing. From there, she saw herself begin to speak up when she disagreed with someone or something, and to share her opinions more. For Adrienne, her voice really grew from reading to the group. She committed herself to sharing aloud as often as she could, and in doing so, she became more confident in herself. For Mia, the program gave her a place to experiment and take risks with her writing, which created

A platform to speak my mind . . . my voice was being nurtured in these spaces and I learned that my voice matters. (Narrative Session, 2015)

For the women in this study, the emergence of their voices was significant to not only their writing, but also the way they saw themselves and the world around them. Their voice

development and consciousness, in tandem, grew. Macedo (2006) argued that, in a liberating education—as opposed to one for the purpose of domestication—educators must “create structures that would enable submerged voices to emerge. It is not a gift. Voice is a human right. It is a democratic right” (p. 4). The narratives of the four women are, without question, testimonies that link the work of InkGirls to Macedo’s critical imperative.

### **Conscientization**

From exposure to relatable texts and from the empowering writing tasks, as their voices developed, the women reflected on the ways they also gained critical perspectives of what they were reading and receiving in school. A consciousness, an understanding on a deeper level, developed around the ways they were marginalized in their school experiences. Zurie, Jennifer, and Mia remembered instances of becoming aware of the lack of female authors and authors of color read in English classes. Jennifer was angered by the lack of exposure to literary and historical figures from her own culture given that her high school was 99% Latino.

While in the writing program, Adrienne, Jennifer, and Mia began to realize the gender inequities in the classroom whereby male students often received more energy and attention from teachers. Also, all four participants, during their time in the program, became critical of the writing assignments at their school, which they considered overly structured, formulaic, and lacking real purpose. They recognized school as, in the words of Zurie, “set up as a disciplinary program,” and in stark contrast to the literacy experiences they enjoyed in the all-female creative writing program.

The women, while as teen girls participating in the writing program, felt that they developed voice and critical consciousness, which enabled them to reflect on their public school



experiences and seriously critique what was unfair and substandard, not only in their literacy learning and English classes, but also in other classroom experiences. This outcome of a critical literacy approach is consistent, according to Finn (1991), to “Conscientizing people who are getting shortchanged and organizing them to use their talents and passions in their own self-interest is what Freire was all about” (p. 205).

### **Social Agency, Empowerment, and Leadership**

Social agency—acting upon what matters to them—began to take root for the women during their time in the program, and thereafter. Finn (1999) stated, “To acquire powerful literacy, one must feel powerful” (p. 204). The women conveyed in the narrative sessions that they felt, through developing their expression of voice, a level of power in the form of confidence not felt prior to their participation in InkGirls. With a heightened consciousness of self and the world, the women felt empowered to take their voices beyond the workshops of the creating writing program, and into their lives as young adults in the world. The following are examples that speak to their personal and political evolution.

**Zurie.** When Zurie was 16, she gave a sermon at youth night at her church and, through the experience, felt she had become one with her voice. At the time of this study, Zurie had just completed her first year of college and, during that time, she created a branch of WOCA, an organization for women of color, serving as its leader. She knew when she arrived that she was passionate about creating an empowering space for women of color on her campus, one that was propelled by the diversity we see in one another. During her first year, she also often presented her poetry live at performance art events.

**Jennifer.** Jennifer crafted a college entrance essay her senior year in high school that she proudly felt represented her identity—as a Latina, a writer, and a student—in a rich and compelling way. At the beginning of her undergraduate studies at a university where the students population was largely White, Jennifer became a member of an on-campus organization, Hermanas Unidas, that spoke to her strong sense of Latina identity and the sense of community she had developed during the time in the writing program. At the time of this study, Jennifer was starting a master’s degree, and had just joined a grassroots campaign for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights. She was placed in charge of leading other campaign volunteers as they canvassed door-to-door.

**Adrienne.** During her junior year in high school, Adrienne steadfastly attended a series of college essay writing workshops and committed herself to applying to numerous scholarships and out-of-state universities. During that same year, in lieu of an essay assignment for her U.S. History class, she wrote a counter-narrative poem, titled “I, As Well,” which celebrated her Filipino heritage and criticized the colonization of the Philippines. At the time of this study, Adrienne had just finished her first year in college. “A lot freshmen seemed like they were still trying to find themselves, and I already knew who I was and what I wanted in life.”

**Mia.** When Mia first joined the writing program, she was challenged with depression and, when it came to the writing tasks, felt very afraid to do it wrong. With the encouragement of other girls and facilitators, she began to trust the group and herself and, soon after, she began reading aloud at the public events hosted by the program. Writing poetry and reading it aloud became “fuel” to get her through the difficulties. During her first year of college, which she had just completed at the time of this study, Mia performed spoken word at various events on and off

campus. She used her poetry as a vehicle to confront the marginalization she saw on her college campus of people of color, particularly women of color. During her freshman year, she performed regularly for audiences her poem “To Be a Latina Woman on a College Campus” and other poems she had written. Her poetry largely addressed sexist and racist issues prevalent not only on her campus but also in the larger society.

### **Transformative Experiences**

The creative writing program used critical literacy practices that wholly supported the development of voice, consciousness, and empowerment that pointed to social agency for the women during and beyond their participation in the program. While teen girls participated in the writing program, they spent time uncovering and understanding who they were through writing tasks that gave space for them to write about and discover more about all aspects of identity. They were able to reflect on the inequities as female and of color—in their secondary schooling and then later in college. The experience of writing about their lives as teen girls in the writing program was transformational for the women in this study. The women continue to empower themselves, through writing and developing voice as poets, and as participants of spoken word performances, and by joining in and leading organizations that evoke liberating possibilities for women of color who must contend daily with structures of marginalization and invisibility. It is important to note that the four participants, at the time of the narrative sessions, all attended university. All four had pursued scholarships while in InkGirls and had attended, while in high school, the workshops for college application writing offered by InkGirls. The creative writing program reported that of the girls who participated for three or more years, 100% applied to and were accepted by one or more colleges (The writing program website, 2015).

## **Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

Educators need make the home lives and cultures of their students the center of their classrooms and pedagogies (Darder, 2004; Macias, 2015; Nieto, 1995), teaching in a culturally relevant way (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Assigned texts also need reflect the lives of the student population. As my own investigation uncovered, there is a dearth in the curriculum of the Los Angeles Unified School District of female authors and very few authors of color. LAUSD is comprised of 89% students of color and is 52% female. This district needs to embrace the aspects of identity represented in their student population—gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality—which they have persistently marginalized and even excluded from their curricula.

Culturally relevant teaching would include educating students about the “culture of power,” that oppression is a dynamic, and that certain ways of being (having particular identities) are privileged in society while others are marginalized. Culturally relevant teachers need be critically consciousness of gender-biased teaching practices and other biases, and must steadfastly check ways that they “other” students and work to decenter Whiteness, middle-classness and maleness, and center aspects of their students’ identities that have been historically marginalized. This would be a move to counter the current and historical reality that children who are not White, male, U.S.-born, middle- or upper-income, and heterosexual are harmed by various forms of oppression in school (Darder, 1991, 2012; Delpit, 1988; hooks, 2000; Kumashiro, 2009). By understanding this culture of power, students can dialogue, examine, and challenge what is expected in public schooling and dominant society (Delpit, 1988). The writing workshop model proposed in this study allows for such dialogue and critique, utilizing critical

literacy practices, countering the formulaic, traditional literacy that remains a pervasive narrative in U.S. public schooling.

Further, by addressing the documented classroom attention from teachers male students receive over female students (Sadker et al., 2009), educators need to reflect deeply on their biases or partialities that contribute to this gender inequity in the process of schooling and work to challenge and change their classroom practices and school policies. For example, addressing the marginalization of female students requires critiquing sexist interactions and cultures, and confronting patriarchal structures, such as a male-dominated administration with a female-dominated teaching workforce (Kumashiro, 2000). There must also be further pursuit of studies that highlight the voices of K–12 female students of color. With the current dearth in literature, educational researchers must work to bring the educational experiences of racialized students from margin to the center.

Critically reflecting on the content of Macedo's 2006 book *Literacies of Power: What Americans Are Not Allowed to Know*, listening carefully to the narratives of the women in this study, and contemplating deeply their stories and my own experiences in public educational institutions, I have come to a distressing conclusion: those who hold the power to perpetuate the domesticating structures and hegemonic practices of public schools must prefer that those students historically marginalized never truly know themselves. For social-justice minded educators to consider this as a possible reality, they must understand first that one is not liberated unless one participates actively in the liberation of oneself (Darder, 2015; Freire 2000; hooks, 2003; Weiler, 2009). Therefore, it is the duty of educators to provide the space and means whereby students can explore their individual identities and question what they have been taught

and told and the conditions that have resulted in their marginalization. For each girl of color, this space must inspire and support her development of voice to critical consciousness, in ways that point to social agency, self-determination, leadership, and liberating social action.

The possibilities, as seen in the lives of the women participants in this study, can be transformational. The writing program experiences were transformative for them in that each woman, while in the program and after, further developed her voice in a way that pointed her toward acting on the things that mattered to her. In the classroom, it is with possibility and hope that social justice-minded educators know this: through the development of voice, students are empowered and can experience an awakening—in their lives, schooling, and communities—which results in a deeper understanding of what shapes these realities. As, Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2009) have argued, this entails a critical process of transformation that can only occur when students recognize their individual and collective power and see their ability to change and recreate their own destinies.

Freire (2005) advocated for a humanizing education that embraces the learner: her knowledge, her voice, her empowerment, so as to lead to transformative experiences of liberation for both self and the world. A critical literacy education experience, where students read and write their lives, and all aspects of their identities are not only celebrated but also made integral to the curriculum, is both humanizing and imperative if we are to work toward a genuinely just world.

## **Epilogue**

A word after a word after a word is power. (Margaret Atwood, n.d.)

Through journaling as a girl and young woman, I slowly developed my voice, which I later used to speak my truth about my tumultuous home life, about being gay, and to advocate for others. As both a writer and woman, I felt inspired again and again as I watched the girls in the creative writing program workshops bravely read aloud drafts of their memoirs, narratives, and verses, dialogue about those pieces with other members, revise and fine-tune, then continue to share aloud. During this study, I often imagined what would have been if I had been given an opportunity such as the girls in this writing program had to share my poems and stories in those early years of my journaling. Nevertheless, I know this to be true: through writing, we can liberate ourselves.

**APPENDIX A**  
***Informed Consent Form***

Date of Preparation: July 28, 2015

**Loyola Marymount University**

Writing for Transformation: Teen Girls of Color and Critical Literacy in a Creative Writing Program

- 1) I hereby authorize Rebecca Alber to include me in the following research study: Examining critical literacy in an after-school creative writing program for adolescent girls.
- 2) I have been asked to participate in a research project, which is designed to examine the experiences and insights of alumnae from a girls' after-school writing program, with respect to the program's transformative impact on the development of their literacy and their identities.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I am an alumnae of this particular creative writing group.
- 4) I understand that if I am a subject, my opinions and quotations can be used in the doctoral dissertation of Rebecca Alber.
- 5) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: My participation in interviews in which I share personal information and discuss my experiences in school, in the writing program, and in the community/home as they pertain to development of my personal identity. If I do not feel comfortable with this information being utilized for this study, I can choose to exclude myself from the study or discontinue my participation. I understand that I will be audiotaped in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for research purposes only and that my identity will not be disclosed. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.
- 6) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are that my participation can contribute to further understanding and study of the effects of a creative writing program for adolescent girls. My participation also gives me opportunities to explore way being a member of the program may have influenced my life and my identity.
- 7) I understand that I may contact Rebecca Alber who can be reached at (310) 975-5850 and she will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.



- 8) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained.
- 9) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice to (e.g., future educational opportunities at LMU or denial of qualified services at my current school site.)
- 10) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 11) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 13) I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.
- 14) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact the following:
  - David Hardy, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA 90045-2659, (310) 258-5465, david.hardy@lmu.edu
  - Rebecca Alber. 1 LMU Dr., Ste. 2348, Los Angeles, CA. 90045; 310-660-3593 x3551; beckalber00@gmail.com

If you agree with all of the above statements, provide your signature below indicating your consent for participation in the study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**  
*Initial Questions for Critical Narrative Sessions  
with Participants*

- 1) Describe your family.
- 2) What was the education level of your parents?
- 3) Where did they grow up? What are some of their school experiences?
- 4) Who in your family has attended college? Did anyone in your immediate family attend college?
- 6) Did your family notice or point out changes in you from participating in [the writing program]? How do you think your relationships with them changed, if at all? How about with your friends? Your teachers?
- 7) How do you describe your experiences in the program? What were the highlights of the experience and why? What were the difficult moments and why?
- 8) What aspects or practices of the writing program do you consider to have been the most important to your overall literacy development? to your performance in school?
- 9) What particular relationships and practices of the program do you consider life changing or transformative, with respect to your personal sense of empowerment?
- 10) If you were designing your own literacy program in their community, what would you consider essential aspects or practices to building literacy and supporting the transformation of teen girls of color?
- 11) How was it being in a program that was for just girls? Describe that experience? How did it differ from experiences with reading and writing in school?

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