Mother/Art: A Journey into Selfhood,
Motherhood and
Art Education through Personal Works

A Thesis in
The Department of
Art Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Art Education)
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

April 2014

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Mother/Art: A journey into Selfhood, Motherhood and Art
Education through Personal Works

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master Of Arts (Art Education)

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ABSTRACT

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This study begins with a look at creative blocks in the lives of creative women, and how these contribute to contemporary feminist discourses on maternal art. These discourses consider how real mothers deal with the ambivalence and contradictions of lived motherhood.

Consequently, I considered from a feminist perspective, how women have traditionally been and are still predisposed to care for others, and how this responsibility both feeds and obstructs one's creative self.

Personal issues of identity and social roles within the context of marriage, motherhood and "daughterhood" were explored through studio-based research in the form of personal visual memoirs. Visual memoirs were inspired by photo elicitation and reflective journaling.

This study concluded with the idea that "peak experiences" during the creative process functioned not only as a form of escapism, but also served to reconnect with one's selfhood. This study also looked at how emotional bonds are intertwined with one's lived experience, and how all these combined contribute to personal growth and creativity.

These findings extend beyond the personal by attesting that reflecting on lived experience through memory work, photo elicitation and visual memoirs can be used as a motivational tool in art education to unblock creativity. This journey also determined that no subject is too personal or too small to not be considered on a more global scale.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to the entire faculty and staff in the Art Education Department, but there are a few admirable women without whose support I could not have completed this journey:

--My deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Linda Szabad-Smyth for her invaluable help, guidance, insight, kindness and generosity. I could not have completed this thesis without her relentless support. Thank-you.

--My deepest thanks to the members of my committee, Dr.Lorrie Blair and Dr.Kathleen Vaughan for not only graciously accepting to be on my team, but also for always providing guidance and reassurance in times of doubt. I will be forever grateful.

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This thesis was a long hard voyage that demanded time away from my family, even when I was physically present. It culminated into a labor of love and I want to begin by paying homage to my mother, for her strength and courage, my father for his perseverance and loyalty, and my brothers, Gianfranco and Joseph, for being the best big brothers in the world. I miss them all.

A warm hug and deepest thanks to my children, Max, Alex and Roxanne for cheering me on—for never accepting the idea of having a "graduate drop-out mom" when times got rough ---and for inspiring and enriching my life in so many ways. Fyodor Dostoyevsky once said, "the soul is healed by being with children"--- and they, without a doubt, have healed my soul time and again.

I also want to thank my extended family, and everyone both near and far, who offered words of encouragement. They are all close to my heart.

Last but not least, I want to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Tino, as a token of my intense appreciation, admiration and gratitude for taking on the extra load with such grace, for his persistent love and support, and for being my guiding light.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

My thesis originated from an inquiry on creative blocks. This brought a recurrent theme in my life into sharp focus: the fact that, as a mother, artist and caregiver to an elderly parent, I face a persistent battle between my natural predisposition to nurture and my need to create. In fact, research shows that a major block among creative women is trying to balance family needs with the single-minded devotion that is necessary for creative accomplishment (Reis, 2002).

As a married middle-aged mother with children, I fall into "the demographic double bind" or "sandwich generation" that assumes multiple responsibilities for the old and the young. In *Characteristics of Middle-Aged Daughters and Help to Elderly Mothers,* Lang and Brody (1983) concluded that in the context of family, when the dependency needs of the aging parents increase, the children respond despite other responsibilities, and very often the caregivers are the women in the family. This reflects the social positioning of women as primary caregivers (that still seems true, despite the many shifts in gender roles and family structures through the 30 years since the original text was written).

Over the years I have had difficulty finding time for my creative production. For this reason I used arts-based research, in the form of *visual memoirs,* to examine from a feminist perspective issues of identity, social roles and the complexity of

relationships within the context of marriage, motherhood and family. More specifically, I explored *how deep emotional bonds both feed* and *obstruct one's creative self.*

My Story

Ever since I could remember, drawing was my favorite past time. To a certain extent, my environment also provided a natural stimulus for creativity. Both my older brothers were gifted self-taught artists: one was a musician and the eldest, a painter. In the case of the latter, art was originally his domain and I loved to watch him paint. He also exposed me to the world of art through the only art book we owned, the Encyclopedia Britannica with the letter "P." This volume contained wonders: reproductions of famous masterpieces that I absolutely loved to look at. I still have a vivid recollection of contemplating Edouard Manet's *Folies Bergères*, Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, Edward Hopper's *Night Hawks*, just to name a few. However, as a young girl, I never had aspirations of becoming an artist. Somehow that title didn't seem to belong to me. My reference book indicated that most celebrated artists were males. Growing up in the 1970s, I inadvertently accepted this stereotype, unaware of the patriarchal influence that dominated the art world at the time.

Humanist theorists such as Moustakas (1974) state that individuality and identity emerge from the "sources and talents that exist in each of us" (p. 6). My drawings were praised both at home and at school and essentially this served as a

building block of resilience. Being a child who always felt like an outsider, art became an assertion of identity.

Years later when I entered Concordia University, I originally enrolled in Graphic Design, thinking I had a brighter future as a commercial artist. Despite the fact that I never mastered the technical precision that this learning required (this was the pre-digital era), my young, rebellious nature could not comply to follow instructions that I then believed could only serve to promote capitalist consumerism. I felt compelled to create but it was no longer just a question of identity. It was essentially to fulfill an inner-need, deeply connected to how I coped with the world. This vital connection between art and self has always served as a form of therapy --- especially when I lost my brother Joseph to cancer.

Due to my parents' unhappy marriage I never thought I would marry. Meeting my husband changed that perspective. When I became a mother, I came to the realization that I desperately wanted to have my children to have a happy childhood—unlike mine. I enjoyed their companionship and wanted to care for them every step of the way. To do so I realized I could not be a part-time mother or a part-time artist for to enter a deep space of creativity I felt I needed to disconnect both physically and emotionally. However, if I indulged in motherhood and the domestic duties that came with it, I missed my private creative life. If I satisfied my creative self, I felt guilty about not tending to my children and domestic duties. No matter what I did, I felt guilty either way.

When my children were old enough to be in school, my father had a stroke. He depended on me and I tended to him for four years. In the meantime I was also a part-time art teacher in my community and a fulltime housewife. Shortly after my father died, five years ago, I came to the realization that during those four long years, my mother had aged considerably. When she started forgetting, repeating the same questions and misplacing things, I reacted in the worst possible way, I got angry with her. I didn't want her to slip away—but she did.

I have been taking care of her for the past two years. The strong, independent woman she used to be has now faded into the distant past. She says she dreams about her mother all the time and sometimes in her dreams, I become her mother.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The impetus behind this thesis began with an interest in creative barriers, which revealed the fact that creative barriers influenced by relationships either through marriage, parenthood or familial ties mostly prevail in literature related to women artists. For instance in 1869, as an attempt to console her sister Edna, who had given up painting upon getting married, Berthe Morisot wrote: "This painting, this work that you mourn for is the cause of many griefs (*sic)* and troubles.... Come now the lot you have chosen is not the worst one...you have a serious attachment, and a man's heart utterly devoted to you." Yet in another excerpt she states: "Men incline to believe that they fill all of one's life, but as for me, I think no matter how much affection a woman has for her husband, it is not easy for her to break with a life of work" (Rouart, 1986, p. 29).

Marriage

Almost one hundred years later, Jo Hopper, Edward Hopper's wife, faced the same situation within the institution of marriage. In *Art and the Crisis of Marriage,* Fryd (2003) explains how Jo Hopper, "forfeited her career as an artist for her husband's sake, and although she also worked at his side as his business partner, she did not give up her career willingly, nor did she enjoy cooking, cleaning and

other household duties" (p. 47). Yet while Jo expressed resentment in giving up her artistic aspirations, Georgia O'Keeffe gave up her aspirations of being a mother. Although she belonged to the era of the "Modern Woman" (Fryd, 2003, p. 35) and had Stieglitz's full support with regards to her validity as an artist, O'Keeffe disagreed with Stieglitz about their having children. Stieglitz argued that it would interfere with her work. Nonetheless she insisted that she felt compelled to have a baby and that if she did not, she would not feel complete as a woman. In the end, she sacrificed her desire to be a mother with some resistance and regret (p. 35).

In *Collecting Souls, Gathering Dust* (1991), Belcher and Belcher recount the lives of artists Alice Neel and Rhoda Myers Medary who met in the 1920s and reunited more than fifty years later. Neel broke free from a life committed to motherhood. In fact in one passage, she describes how the birth of her first daughter was a "distraction who (*sic)* took time away from the day and night painting schedule that had been "established before her birth" (Neel cited in Belcher & Belcher, p. 81). Rhoda Myers Medary, on the other hand, gave up her passion for painting and assumed the traditional role of wife and mother. Many decades later she emerged as a devastated woman, but was rescued by being recognized for her work with a one-woman show at the age of seventy-three and began painting again in her final years. According to Belcher and Belcher, "she learned what her friend Alice had discovered decades ago, that painting was central to her identity as a woman" (p. 270).

Identity

Self-discovery and actualization through art making can be traced back to Socrates' saying, "know yourself" (Marias, 1967). This supports the humanistic psychologists' belief, which maintains that creativity is a basic inner need, and the motivation behind it is personal growth and self-actualization (Adams, 1986). London (1989) in *No More Second Hand Art* states that the artistic process is more than a collection of crafted things and is "more than the process of creating those things. It is the chance to encounter dimensions of our inner being and discover deep patterns of meaning" (p. 7).

Back in 1980, Erica Jong's article, "The Artist as Housewife" stated that problems with creativity in women were related to "self-hood," in other words difficulty in acquiring an "authentic sense of self" (p. 117). According to early feminists, self and identity were lost in motherhood. In fact, writing some decades before Jong, Simone de Beauvoir perceived the fetus "as a foreign invader that robs woman of her individuality" and she viewed motherhood as a form of oppression (Zerilli, 1992, p. 115-117).

Motherhood versus mothering

In *The Ancestress Hypothesis* (2003), Kathryn Coe points out that myths and fairy tales passed on from generation to generation have always encouraged daughters to be generous and care for the vulnerable. Good mothers have always been described as unselfish; bad mothers are those who place their self-interests

first. In *Feminist Art And the Maternal* (2009), Andrea Liss brings forth a new perspective on motherhood.

According to Liss, the problem lies within the omnipresent patriarchal representation of motherhood that devalues real mothers. She points out that there is a distinction between the institution of motherhood and the reality of maternal work for somewhere in the middle there is the love and passion that one lives with on a daily basis. And while the crucial aspects that were brought forward by feminists in the past are still vital--which are mainly rejecting patriarchal limitations and fulfilling one's potential and desires to the fullest--- to be a feminist mother today also means:

> temporarily losing one's soul connection to one's work and one's
> self in order to give love and care to the new other. For some
> feminist mothers, this also means allowing one's self to become
> completely absorbed by the mystery and inexplicable joy that the
> infant brings. Oftentimes the mother's desire collide with the artist
> self. (Liss, 2012, p. xvii)

Liss argues that it is essential to break the myth of the all-loving, self-sacrificing mother. "She still loves, forgives and sacrifices for her children but not at the expense of losing herself" (p.xviii). Furthermore, lived motherhood can translate into rich and complex bodies of work, and this is exemplified through a collection

of artworks that join the visions and voices of practicing artists that redefine motherhood and maternal culture.

Meryl Chernik and Jennie Klein's *The M Word, Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* (2011), includes personal essays, critical and historical writing on how women artists grapple with the ambivalence that exists with regards to their work and identity as mothers. Through theoretical and narrative reflections on motherhood, the authors present various perspectives from artists of different age groups, races, ethnicities and socio-economic background.

In *Reconciling Art and Mothering* (2012), Rachel Epp Buller focuses on "representations and experiences of maternity within visual art form" (p.5) throughout the world from North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia. Each artist works against the patriarchal, hegemonic construction of motherhood, and re-claims it as "mothering." The author adds they also embrace their maternal status along with all the complexities and ambivalence that it entails.

The ambivalence or, to a certain extent, the tension that is created by the interplay of *mothering/nurturing* versus *artist/identity/self* is a common theme in the aforementioned literature. In Reconciling *Art and Mothering*, Buller mentions Denise Ferris quoting Louise Erdrich as saying:

> The truth is, I like doing these things, up to a point, but when the
> sludge of incremental necessities becomes suffocating, I rebel
> and let the details slide. How glad I am to know that I am not
> the only one.... I come to know that we are all struggling, with more

or less grace, to hold on to the tiger tail of children's, parents',

and siblings' lives while at the same time saving a little core of self

of our own, just enough to live by. (2012, p. 201)

Yet these same relationships, these emotional ties that involve time away from our "creative selves " are also extremely precious. It is not just a matter of tending to duties: it is tending to the ones we love. It is the complexity and ambivalence of this duality, that I wanted to explore further in my art making, which led to the question:

As I reflect on my living experience and situate myself within the roles of wife, mother, and caregiver--- how can I translate the dichotomy between selflessness and selfhood in my visual work?

I have a vivid recollection of returning to university after the birth of my first child and attempting to create a painting that would represent the close emotional bond I felt towards my four-month-old baby boy. When contemplating on the composition, there was no doubt that the omnipresent representation of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus was ingrained in my subconscious and served as an inspiration. However my interest lay in Käthe Kollwitz's *Mother and Dead Child* (1903). Although Kollwitz had been inspired by the traditional Christian iconographies of the Virgin Mary, her depictions were far removed from any religious connotations. What struck me was the heartfelt poignancy of the image, which

I had hoped to grasp in my painting. When my painting was completed, my

professor commented that although the emotional content was well represented,

there was something in the way the woman "held her head" that communicated that

she was still very much her own person. I was perplexed by this contradiction. On

the one hand I viewed it as a compliment, on the other hand I felt I had not

been able to express the mother-child dyad in visual form. This was the first

and last time I dealt exclusively with the topic of motherhood in my work.

As a new mother, I was caught between my old self and my new identity. My life

had been transformed --my priorities, my body, the dynamics in my marriage--had

all changed, however being under the impression that I had failed at depicting the

strong symbiotic attachment I had towards my child, I shut it out completely rather

than using my lived experience as a catalyst for creative work. Furthermore, the

exogenous views of motherhood had also contributed to the belief that it was not a

viable topic for artistic practice anyway. In fact, even until recently motherhood

is not a dominant discourse in feminist contemporary art (Liss, 2009: Chernik &

 Klein, 2011: Buller, 2012). For instance, in the book *Women Artists* (Grosenick,

2005), only one artist, Louise Bourgeois (1911) refers to the social status of women

"and their allocation to domestic territory" (p. 40).

Over the years, my teaching practice has naturally gravitated towards adult

women who, in most cases, also happen to be mothers. Through personal reflection

and exploration, my goal was to study how domesticity and familial bonds may be

used to help others develop creative personal works, ensuing the question:

As a married woman, mother, artist, and art educator --- analyzing her

own creative process --- what meaning or meanings will be extracted from this

research that can be incorporated in my art education teaching practice?

As a mother to my children and now, as a mother to my mother, my aim was to explore how issues related to motherhood, marriage and the vicissitude of everyday domestic life affect or influence creativity and, in the process, hoped to contribute to contemporary discourses on feminism and maternal art.

Theory

Theoretically this study aligned itself to psychoanalytic theories of identity while also extending the dialogue between feminism and art history as women artists' self-representation in art reflects a shift towards a psychological awareness. The aim was to depict and examine deeper dimensions of the feminine as well as to challenge the dominant images of women (and motherhood) that exist within the Western culture: basically, as an object of male contemplation as it was in the past (Knafo, 2009). In essence, this study centered on feminist discourses that examine "women's diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations"(Creswell, 2013 p. 29). For example, in her MA thesis, *The Mother Image* (2010), Laura Endacott explores her identity as a mother and contemplates on how this transformed her life as an artist. She used fibers,

sculptural installations and performance art to question the commercial, social, educational and religious spaces connected to motherhood. One issue that is examined in her thesis is the iconic symbol representation of the Virgin Mary, where Endacott shares the feminist view that it is rooted in self-sacrifice. According to the feminist theory this perspective on motherhood stems from the dominant institutionalized *idea* of motherhood (Liss, 2009). This presented study focused on an unexplored area of feminism, which is the *feminist-mother-theory.*

Feminist-mother-theory stems from the cultural feminist movement. Cultural feminism reappraises women's inclination to nurture as well as her subjectivity and advanced self-awareness. Thus, feminist–mother-theorists acknowledge that one can be a mother, artist and a feminist. Rather than deny one's maternal identity, they recognize that mothering plays a central role in defining who they are and deliberately build bodies of work around that identity. Like feminists, feminist–mother-theorists also refute the patriarchal representation of motherhood that depicts an ideological, sentimental portrayal of selflessness and self-sacrifice; but they also articulate and recognize "maternal ambivalence" (Rich, 1976) and re-define motherhood as "mothering" (Buller, 2012, p. 3). Mothering embraces the complexity and ambivalence that come with the daily living experience of motherhood and it is also viewed as a potentially empowering experience (Buller, 2012). For instance, artists who express the daily-lived experiences of motherhood address themes such as the invisibility of domestic chores, as presented by Mierle Laderman Ukeles in *Maternal Care* (1973), or the mourning of children growing up as depicted

in Leslie Reid's *Afterimage* (2004) or the mother/daughter role reversal

elucidated in the installation *Alzheimer's Still Life* (Cole, McIntyre, 1999)

–themes that are deeply intertwined with my own everyday existence.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

In order to explore my personal living experience as a mother-daughter/caregiver, the chosen methodology for this inquiry was an arts-based research in the form of *visual memoirs*. Within the qualitative paradigm, the arts are used as methodological tools to broaden and offer unique insight in human knowledge and understanding. Barone and Eisner (2012) state that "the aim of arts based research is not to replace traditional research methods; it is to diversify the pantry of methods that researchers can use and address the problems they care about" (p.170). Ultimately, the practice of arts-based research is to grasp and examine the complexities of life and human nature that may not be captured with linear, scientific procedures alone (Sullivan, 2005, 2006; Barone & Eisner, 2008).

Arts-based research has been described as having an epistemological orientation that is both postmodern and constructivist (Vaughan, 2005). Leavy (2009) notes that arts-based is not a quest for certainty, but rather to use creative practices to analyze the structure of knowledge, challenge stereotypes, dominant ideologies, as well as raise critical consciousness, build coalitions and foster empathetic understanding. Hence, its purpose may be described as an "enhancement of perspectives" (Barone & Eisner, 2008, p. 96), one that raises

questions rather than answering them. It is considered constructivist since the aim of arts-based practices is to describe and explore (Leavy, 2009), and create one's own reality through one's experience, which allows both subjectivity and objectivity throughout the process as the artist-self and the researcher-self merge.

Another characteristic of the arts-based research is not only the present, insightful engagement of the artist/researcher but also the power to examine issues on a broader social and cultural level. In fact, Dewey (1934) emphasized the importance of reflective thought in life and how it takes shape in art. By reflecting on one's lived experience one traces not only an individual history but also historical/ social/political issues (Dymond & Willey, 2013). For instance, the collages by Maryjean Viano Crowe entitled *All Consuming Myths* (1993-1994) begin with her subjective experiences as a young girl but also expand into larger issues such as an examination of women's roles in white America in the 1950s and the relationships of women and men in a patriarchal society (Leavy, 2009). Rebecca Cox's (1993) nude self-portraits (whether posing with children, her son or alone) represent her pride in the maternal body and challenge the patriarchal clichés of mothers as self-enclosed and passive. Yet, her works also allude to the daguerreotypes of black women who had to serve as mammies to white children, thus making historical reference to the oppression and servitude these women had to endure (Liss, 2009, p. 96).

In the truest sense, art is always born out of an artist's individual involvement with the joys and sorrows of a life. Although my research begins as an

autobiographical examination of the issues and challenges that I am facing as an artist/mother /caregiver to date, it might also have universal significance by helping to inform others who are going through a similar experience.

Research Design

According to Vaughan (2005) the umbrella category of arts based research includes literary or artistic creation of any kind. In this study, the arts-based approach was in the form of memoirs, more specifically *visual memoirs* that revolved around the creation of visual images substantiated by memory work.

Research designs that create visual images may blur the boundaries between research and art (Mitchell, 2008). In theory, the creation of visual images as research rests upon the concept that sometimes complex and subtle interactions cannot be expressed by words alone.

Therefore, the acknowledgement of the *cognitive process* behind visual practice as well as the *multilayered meanings* behind visual images, legitimizes its *raison d'être* in qualitative research methods since, apart from self-expression, art-making is also valued for its transformative influence with regards to learning and constructing knowledge (Sullivan, 2005; Eisner, 2008; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Since images function not only as "mediums of cognition" but also as "shapers of individual and social/cultural thought" (Marshall, 2007, p. 24) this methodology is posited as "highly appropriate for the communication of academic knowledge" (Weber, 2008, p. 43).

Furthermore, it is the embodiment of ideas into visual images that differentiates this form of inquiry from traditional forms of research. In conventional research practices *visual images support the written text* whereas in a visual inquiry, *images are the principal medium and language plays a secondary role* (emphasis mine)(Marshall, 2007).

Memory

According to Buller (2013), there is a "recent surge of scholarly and artistic interest in memory" (p. 35). Artists who work in the realm of memory begin from a personal vantage point but their focus supports Annette Kuhn's theory, which argues that "memory work is an active and inquiring practice of remembering that connects individual to cultural memory" (Kuhn, cited in Buller, 2013, p. 35). Kuhn (2002) maintains that an image, images or memories are at the center of a "radiating web of associations, reflections and interpretations" (p.5).

Memory work as defined by Kuhn (2002), has "a great deal in common with forms of inquiry which-like detective work and archeology---involves working backwards—searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together and reconstructing out of fragments of evidence" (p. 4). As "veils of forgetfulness are drawn aside, layer upon layer of meaning and associations are revealed not leading to ultimate truth, but to greater knowledge" (p.6). This leads one to think critically about one's life as well as the lives of others and offers a

pathway to consciousness that embraces both the heart and the mind, and crosses from the personal to the political.

Memoirs

The issue of personal interpretation and subjectivity are key components in Kuhn's theories. According to Kuhn, since memories are very subjective, the veracity of memory has to be considered. Memoirs do not claim to be objective representations of past events; instead they are thoroughly "subjective interpretations full of emotion and personal opinions" (Buller, 2013, p. 36). Memoir authors or artists shape and craft their stories by using experience, perception and observation (Buller, 2012). In fact the reflective practice during the artistic process (Sullivan, 2010; Leavy, 2009) allows one to relive and recover one's experience, and in the process of recovering and recording it, one creates an autobiographical "truth" (Buller, 2012, p. 10).

Visual Memoirs

Visual memoirs are born out of an individual's need to recount one's life experiences in a pictorial form. In the past, visual memoirs have been used as first person narrative, sometimes in the form of a short story or a series of stories, or as longer autobiographical volumes (Buller, 2013, p. 34). Most recently, the graphic comic book has become a prevalent medium for visual memoirs. Other visual

memoirs consist of scrapbooks that contain original photos and other memorabilia

(Willis, 2010), whereas narrative memoirs may include photos, memorabilia

as well as interviews and well developed story lines (Buller, 2012; Dymond &

Willey, 2013). The inclusion of graphic images serves to elucidatethe text since i

mages can be more evocative than the prose alone. In sum, regardless of the shape

or form, visual memoirs generally consist of a blend of words and imagery.

The addition of images to text stems from the fascination and power that

pictures have in helping us remember ourselves (Kuhn & McAllister, 2006). It also

allows us to create our own personal history and contribute to history as a whole.

However, memoirs, derived from the French language "les mémoires," often

bracket one moment or period of experience(s) in one's existence rather than

address an entire lifespan (Smith & Watson, 2010). The purpose of creating a

memoir is self-reflexivity. Recollecting and reflecting on the past helps create

meaning in the present. For instance, artists such as Art Spiegelman use the comic

book format *Maus* (1986) to recount the story of his parents as Holocaust survivors.

The psychological complexity presented via the interplay of images, texts, dialogue

and reflection allows an opening for current philosophical/social/political critical

thinking and awareness. An example relatable to the topic of this study is artist Ayub

Halliday, who began to document her adventures and (mis) adventures in *East

Village Inky* zine, in order to "save her sanity" (Buller, 201, p. 37) as she struggled as

a full-time mother in a tiny apartment in New York City.

For this arts-based research, the visual memoirs majorly consisted of images. The absence of specific textual references may allow the positioning of one's work as broadly as possible, thus allowing an easier connection with viewers and cultural memory. For example, Susan Hiller's *Ten Months* is about her unborn baby, it is also the documentation of the gradual change of a body in pregnancy (Buller, 2012). Ellen McMahon's drawings *Suckled Series* (1996-2004) stem from her relationship with her mother, but the visual works speak about the politics of intimacy and pulling forces that exist the between the desire to merge and the desire to separate (Chernick, 2003). Nancy Macko's *A Visual Memoir* (2010), documents her mother's cognitive decline, but also deals with issues of dementia and growing old (Macko, 2012). In this way, our personal images also connect with the larger world around us.

Motherhood Memoirs

"Motherhood memoir" as coined by Dymond and Willey, *Motherhood Memoirs, Mothers Creating/Writing Lives* (2013) consists of as follows:

> Motherhood memoir as we understand the term, is a site for
> self- representation of the mother as she negotiates her multiple
> roles and how her roles are interpolated by other aspects of
> subjectivity" (p. 10).

Barone and Eisner (1997) state that in arts–based inquiries the role of "lived experience, subjectivity and memory are seen as agents in knowledge construction" (as cited in Quinn & Calkin, 2008, p. 24). My memories elicited from my family photos as well as reflective journaling during the art process helped inform the artwork revolving around my research questions.

Some artist-mothers make connections between their children's lives and their own distant childhood. For instance in her zine, artist Ayun Halliday reminisces about her long-gone childhood as she lives through situations that happen in her daughter's life (Buller, 2013). In this study, I felt a need to work with old family photographs of my mother and myself as I am living through her decline and it is what distresses me the most in present-days. I reflected on motherhood and explored how to give voice to the fullness, complexity and ambivalence of motherhood not only from a daughter's perspective but also from a mother's perspective since the process also contributed to reflections on my experience as a mother to my children. Using painting as the main medium along with mixed media and collage, I explored my own interpretation of motherhood memoirs.

Reflection and Photographs

Reflection refers to the means by which the human mind has of knowing itself (Higgins, 2011). Using what we already know about ourselves, reflection stays at a conscious level. Written notes, (and in some cases sketches and drawings), in a daily journal serve to document our responses to the world around us, to other people

and events, both past and present. This knowledge is used to inform our actions, communication and understanding. Therefore, reflection is a continuous interplay between acting and reflecting (Higgins, 2011). In this sense one can conceptualize reflection as the action of turning back or fixing our thoughts on some subject. This process allows the possibility of expanding our knowledge of "self" and create new meanings (Etherington, 2007).

Berger (1992) wrote, "the thrill of a photograph comes from the onrush of memory" (p.192). I used family photographs as a point of entry. In the beginning, photo elicitation in research studies was used to enhance communication since oftentimes images provide a deeper understanding than words (Collier & Collier, 1986). This may be due to the fact that the process of visual information is evolutionarily older than the parts of the brain that process verbal information (Collier & Collier, 1986, Harper, 2002). Today photo elicitation as a research tool may include a wide array of visual imagery, from scientific visual inventories of objects, people or artifacts to depictions of experiences and events as well as intimate portrayal of one's own body, social groups or family (Harper, 2002).

Marianne Hirsch (2012) points out that increasingly family pictures have become objects of scrutiny. According to Hirsch, in any context, the camera and the family album function as instruments of the "familial gaze." The familial gaze "situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology and projects a screen of familial myths before the camera and the subject" (p.11). The familial myth is the

reality that very often the family's actual life collides with the mythical ideal we wish to portray. Furthermore, our culturally constructed familial gaze inevitably influences our way of looking at the pictures, and within this structure every family member's subjectivity renegotiates the memories with each viewing. Familial gaze also position family members in relation to one another and often reveal or conceal the "unconscious optics" of family groups. Likewise since familial subjectivity is constructed relationally, in these relations one is both self and the other, "both speaking and looking subject and spoken and looked at object" thereby being both subjected and objectified (p. 9).

Banks mentions Wright (1999), who asserts that there are three approaches to reading photographs: "Looking at, looking through and looking behind" (p. 10). In other words, one has to consider not only photos' content but also their context. The content is the internal narrative that the image communicates, which may be different from what the photographer wished to communicate. The context is the external narrative—the social context as well as the social relations within the photograph, again reaffirming Hirsch's perspective as well. Kuhn (2002) maintains that although memories elicited from family photographs are individual, they spread into "an extended network of meanings that bring together the familial, cultural, the economic, social and historical" (p. 5). These perspectives reflect postmodern thought, which sustains that one's personal vision and interpretation of the world is filtered through a social-cultural lens.

Therefore when reading and analyzing my family photographs, questions arose such as: What message is this photograph giving me? What narrative does it evoke? Through my own interpretation, memory was *reconstructed* thereby generating the creation of memoirs.

Working with family photographs allowed me to "work backwards" and reflect on the memories that they hold. The creation of memoirs was done in a visual form. Kuhn describes memory work as "fragmentary, non-linear quality of moments recalled out of time" (Kuhn, 2002, p. 5). Since memory is selective and never whole, I represented my fragments of memory in the form of triptychs (one single-panel work excepted). Triptychs have another personal meaning --we were three children and I have three children.

Procedure and Data Collection

The artworks and reflective notes in the journal were the primary data. A separate journal documented all my daily chores and activities. Documentary photos of the work in progress were also included. Secondary data consisted of family photographs and art works produced prior to the study. These served not only as inspiration but also as a means of introducing the point of entry.

The goal was to complete three triptychs; each panel's dimension 20" X 20". Triptychs were particularly chosen because they allow a multitude of juxtapositions and interconnections that leave the parameters of creativity wide open. I also

completed a larger work, 36" X 48" inches, which seemed a more appropriate format for the composition I had in mind.

The process consisted of a reflective practice by using a daily journal. The journal included notes, sketches, and photos as well as comments on any form of literature (books, articles) stories or conversations I encountered. Journal keeping also served to document the transformation or changes that emerged during the artistic process with regards to the work itself as well as my personal direction. To be analytical with experience means to treat seriously "what people are aware of and notice as part of their everyday world" (Ball & Smith, 1992, p. 55). For this reason, every journal entry had a date. A separate journal documented a breakdown of my day outside the studio. I painted almost everyday from 7:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. for two months.

CHAPTER 4

Research Process

PART 1: *Previous works*

I began my research by reflecting on a few works and images that coincided with a crossroad in my life--- a time when my parents' gradual dependency (first my father and then my mother), and my children's growing independence began to intersect.

Figure 1. *Summer's Day* (2007). Black and white photograph. Rosanna Ciciola-Izzo.

The photograph in Figure 1 dates back to 2007. I had not planned to photograph my children on that day. My husband and I had set out to shoot

pictures for a commercial project, but at some point I had the opportunity to photograph my children unobtrusively as they enjoyed the breeziness of a summer's day. A moment in time that now hangs in our kitchen. In my mind it evokes the carefreeness and exuberance of youth and stirs both a feeling of happiness and nostalgia.

That summer was a time of change. Until then, when the drudgery of suburbia got the best of me (which happened quite often), I would "round up the kids" and escape on some "adventure," be it in the city, a park, or a beach. Yet, as my eldest son became a teenager, I felt a turning point just around the corner. I sensed he was breaking away as he did not want to spend as much time with us anymore---and I knew I had to learn to let go.

During this period, the children's relationship was also shifting: They were now three young individuals who were at three distinct stages in their lives. The age difference was slight but crucial. I was now the mother of a teenager and a preadolescent while the youngest was still enjoying mid-childhood. And so, in order to deal with the regret of passing time, I made imprints of their hands as a method of capturing what once was. Although these works meant a lot to me, I was not happy with the aesthetic results and so they were simply stored away.

Figure 2. *Handprints,* (2007), 20" X 60", mixed media on canvas.

Apart from *Handprints,* my concern in art had never been solely connected to motherhood. During the same period, aside from being a full-time mother, I was also taking care of my father and working as a part-time art educator in my community. Regarding my creative output, my dilemma was not only the limited time available, I was also lost in terms of artistic direction.

Looking back, I must have been mourning the fact that my children were growing up-- albeit at a deeply subconscious level-- and it did indeed affect my work. Coincidentally, long before I became acquainted with Annette Kuhn's terminology of "memory boxes," I created the paintings *Memory Box* (2007). "Memory box[es]," according to Kuhn (2002) are "traces of our pasts we lovingly or not so lovingly preserve"(p.158). These paintings were spontaneous creations sparked by toys found in a forgotten box in the basement. Each toy had a story attached to it; each toy left a trace in my memory.

Figure.3. *Memory Box (Teddy Bear, Carrousel, Doll),* (2007), 36" X 72", oil on canvas.

The *teddy bear* represented how I celebrated each baby's new arrival by placing a brand new teddy bear in their crib before they were born. The *carrousel* related to my father. He would sometimes find random vintage toys in the old neighborhood he frequented and present them to my children, the carrousel being one of them. These outdated toys held a certain fascination for my children. Later, as life slowly ebbed away from him, these awkward testimonials of affection took on a more significant meaning. The *doll* had belonged to me as a child and had been passed on to my daughter. However she never grew attached to it as she found it "a little creepy." Also, she no longer had the luxury of staying home and playing with toys anymore. I painted the doll as I had found her--- discarded, with one eye closed. In some way I felt that by capturing the inertial state of each toy, I could capture lost time.

Figure 4*: Father's Day* (2011*).* Triptych- 20" X 60", oil and mixed media on canvas.

The triptych *Father's Day* (figure 4) was inspired by an old photograph that my mother-in-law gave to my husband. The photograph portrayed my husband as a toddler with his older brother and his father. The context in which they were photographed indicated that the subjects were outside, maybe going for a walk in their "Sunday clothes."

It was the first time I used a family photograph as an inspiration. Looking back, what I chose to do with it reflects Kuhn's observation--- the fact that although family photographs are about the past, how we use them is really about the present.

My husband lost his father when he was eight years old and among the fragmented memories he has of his father, one of them is the recollection of when his father taught him to knot a necktie. In the words of Oscar Wilde in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), "a well-tied tie is the first serious step in life"(p. 44). Since my father-in-law never got to witness my husband's entry into manhood, fatherhood or any of the milestones he accomplished, I found the symbolism and significance behind this rite of passage very moving.

Therefore, in order honor this memory, I created a tie knot in the second

panel made out of thread -- threads to connect one generation to the next.

The idea came from a father's day card my youngest son gave to my husband (cut in

the shape of a tie).

   The third panel is a replica of a drawing created by my eldest son –a picture

depicting himself with his father and brother—quasi reflecting the composition in

the photograph.

Figure 5. Detail- *Father's Day*   Figure 6: My son's drawing (age 4)

Apart from the symbolism associated with male iconography, in my mind the tie knot also represented union, marriage, and fertility ---in other words, *life*--- whereas the color black- *death*. Simply stated, apart from paying tribute to my husband's father, this piece was also a reflection on life's finitude and infinitude.

PART 2. New Works

Motherhood Memoirs

Figure 7: *Threads of Memory* (2013-2014)—Triptych- 20" X 60", oil, threads on canvas.

Threads of Memory

A photograph of my mother and myself inspired *Threads of Memory*. According to Kuhn (2002) photographs can serve to retrace our former lives and assist in a never-ending process of making and re-making sense of ourselves in the present. In my case, as the role reversal of being a parent to my mother began to

weigh on me on so many levels, I turned to this photograph out of a need to re-make sense of who *she once was* and how *we once were.* Indeed, as expressed by Ardra Cole and Maura McIntyre (1999), one needs to remember their mother as they were, as vital healthy women, and in the process of actively remembering, one returns to them their dignity.

This small photograph, which portrays my mother holding my six-month-old self in a standing position, evoked a sentiment of regret and served as a reminder that I too was once very vulnerable. In my journal I wrote; "remembering mom as sh used to be ---when I was helpless." These days it is she who holds on to my arm for support whenever we take walks.

Figure 8: Photo from my journal

According to Barthes (1980), a photograph can never deny that something has indeed existed. Yet a photograph does not facilitate the process of mourning that follows it. Rather, it brings the past back in a revenant form and, if anything, emphasizes its irreversibility and irretrievability (Barthes, 1980; Hirsch, 2012). On the other hand, in painting, one can feign reality (Barthes, 1980) and so by creating a painting based on the photograph, I intended to reconstruct the past somehow.

Figure 9: Panel #1. Detail-*Threads of Memory*

As I worked on the painting I recalled the enthusiasm I experienced

assisting my children achieve that milestone. My husband and I used to be amused about how proud they looked. In my mind, this image also alluded to Lacan's (1949) theory of the "mirror phase" whereby a baby standing in front of the mirror is unable to see the mother's supporting hands, and gains a mistaken image of himself/herself as an independent being.

The second panel consists of a knot made out of threads. I thought of using threads as homage to my mother who once was a talented seamstress. Once again, in my mind, threads allude to emotional bonds and tie that bind, and the knot, a metaphor for the umbilical cord.

Figure 10. Detail. Panel #2--*Threads of Memory*

I created the third panel with footprints made by baby shoes that belonged to one of my sons.

In my mind's eye, the juxtaposition of threads and footprints alluded to the tension and anxiety associated with a mother' *wanting to shelter* a

nd fear of *letting go* and a child *wanting shelter* and at the same time *wanting to break away.*
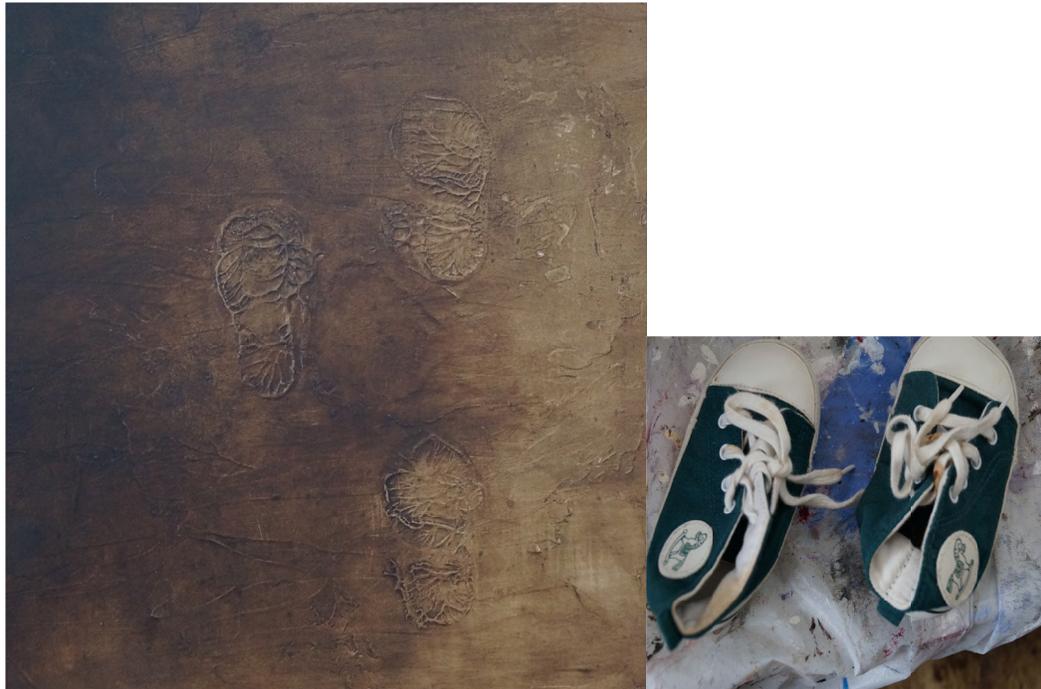
Figure 11. Detail-- panel #3. Footprints   12. Baby shoes

Still, I was not satisfied with this work. Going back to the original question, I thought it failed to express the dichotomy between selflessness and selfhood and was afraid it may have simply depicted a sentimental portrayal of a mother fostering a child towards independence by encouraging her to take her first steps. With this in mind, I went back to examine more photos in the family album.

Traces –Benches and Bonnets

   This time, a snapshot of my mother sitting on a park bench with me on her lap intrigued me. I recognized that she was wearing the same dress as in the other photograph, which points to the fact that these snapshots must have been taken on the same day. In this picture there is no interaction between her and me. She is staring off into the distance, her expression indicative that she is engulfed in some deep thought. I recognized that expression from my childhood, when she was far removed from everything and everyone and I couldn't reach her, an expression suggestive of her reconnecting with her thoughts: this particular expression was what I wanted to capture in my painting...

   Family pictures, according to Hirsch (2012) and Kuhn (2002), are resistant to deeper scrutiny. Indeed, the deeper I scrutinized her expression, the more it escaped me. Excerpts from my journal reflect my frustration.

   December 29th, 2013. A full day of painting and still I accomplished nothing. Everyone is helpful and supportive but I still feel guilty about neglecting my chores. Haven't captured yet afraid I am running out of time...

   January 10th, 2014. Painted all morning and still couldn't get the face right—could it be that my subconscious is blocking me somehow? Maybe I'm living the situation too much? I feel very insecure right now—maybe should just push it aside for now.

January 13th, 2014. Still couldn't get it —on Sunday I stopped—T. said she looked like an older R. I thought I got it, but then the next day the face just didn't seem right.

The following are some visual examples of the process and transformation:

Figure. 13. Transformation #1

Figure. 14. Transformation #

Figure. 15.   Transformation #3

Figure. 16. Transformation # 4

Figure. 17.   Transformation #5

Figure. 18. Transformation #

January 14th, 2014

Painted in the early morning—hardly had any light –it was dark and drizzly outside. I tried painting in the dark, without my glasses—tried to capture something within---beyond my preconceptions....

Finally a brush stroke, an accident; something started to appear, exactly what I had in mind: So hard and so frustrating. How does one depict a mother?

I wanted my mother's expression but not her face—a strong woman, confident: Holding her baby but still detached ---absorbed in her thoughts—with a look of worry… I checked it again at night –yes, it was right and I was happy. All is good; all is worth it.

Figure 19. Final result.

Figure 20: *Traces—Benches and bonnets* (2013-2014). Triptych, 20" X 60", oil on canvas.

Once I captured the facial expression, I was confident enough to finish the painting as well as the rest of the triptych. As I studied the photograph and began painting the figure, I became intrigued by the context of the photograph. Where had this picture taken place? Did the bench still exist? I decided to take my mother on an excursion on a winter afternoon in search of the old bench. We found the park, but the wooden bench was gone, replaced by a steel bench covered with graffiti.

Figure 21. First panel--

Figure 22. Steel bench in the park

As we walked through the park, the carvings left on park

benches inspired the next panel—evidence someone's passage.
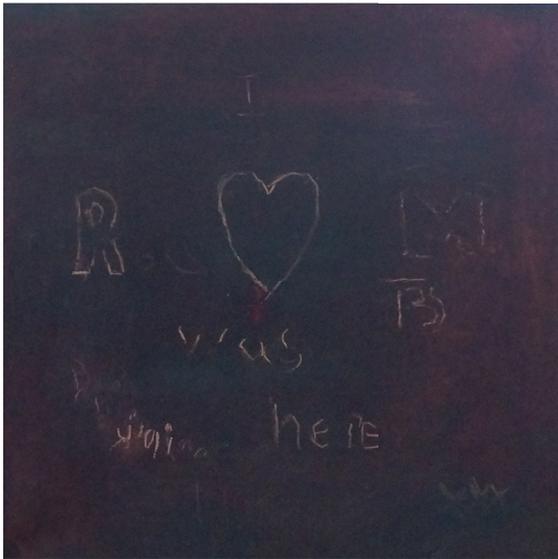
Figure 23. Second panel—*Traces-benches/bonnets*

For the third panel I wanted to point to the baby's presence. I thought of baby garments and bonnets came to mind. I found one that had been given to my daughter, albeit never worn as I had considered it a bit outdated. As I laid the bonnet on the table, I remembered how my mother would lay out her patterns on the kitchen table before cutting the cloth. Now as I studied the bonnet and studied its design, the shape reminded me of a butterfly. Butterflies made me think of transformation and the fleeting of time.

Figure 24. Bonnet

Figure 25. Construction

Figure 26. *Bonnet.* (2014), 20" X 20", cloth, thread and oil on canvas.

This, in turn, made me think of my children and muse upon the fact that although a part of me still misses the time when they were young, a great part of me enjoyed watching their personalities unfold and come into their own over the course of the years. I guess ultimately, in *Traces-Benches and Bonnets,* I wanted to express the passage of time and the traces we leave behind, as well as the interplay of absence and presence within the "hustle and bustle" of life.

Still, even though the aforementioned work had hinted at selfhood, of the need as mothers for "that moment of pause, of respite, to look at the turmoil of a single day and to locate and save ourselves" (Renfro, 2013, p. 50), it still did not seem to grasp the struggle or "ambivalence" in dealing with the daily demands of quotidian existence as a mother/housewife and daughter/caregiver; demands such as the never-ending piles of dishes, unmade beds, dirty laundry, fixing meals, not to mention mopping and dusting.

Figure 27. Household chores

Drift

Once again, I revisited the family album and found an old photograph of my

brothers and myself at the beach. The three of us are standing in the water and both

my brothers are holding my hands. What caught my attention is the fact that

although my mother is nearby, she has her back turned to us and is floating away. It

is obvious that my mother was unaware that she was being photographed, but the

camera can expose hidden dimensions of ourselves (Hirsch, 2012). Here she is

enjoying a moment of repose. Maybe after having tended to me for most of the day

she was freed of childcare for that particular instant. The decentralized composition

reveals that my mother was not meant to be in the picture. A photograph's

punctum, according to Barthes (1980), is "that accident which pricks me (but also

bruises me, is poignant to me)" (p.27). This accident touched me for I recognized

that feeling of "liberation" when my mother would insist on taking care of my young

children so that I could rest for a while or dedicate a few hours to art making, a

privilege that I had often taken for granted.

Figure. 28. Photograph-Beach

I decided to focus and crop the "accident" in the picture. However, whenever I tried to paint or draw the figure, there was awkwardness in the depiction of the pose— maybe due to the foreshortening, so I decided to use a collage approach. I then proceeded to revise all the lists I had written of household chores. Below are some examples:

Friday, Jan.10th, 2014

- *Cleaned upstairs/laundry*
- *Bought coffee for mom*
- *Went grocery shopping*
- *Came back home- fixed supper/ washed dishes*

Sunday, Jan.12th, 2014

- *Painted in the morning/felt guilty— R. wanted to go shopping*
- *Went shopping, passed by mom's /cooked for her*
- *Took out the garbage*
- *Went back home, fixed supper/ dishes/laundry*

Saturday, Jan 18th, 2014

- *Went to put drops in mom's eyes*
- *Bought more art supplies*
- *Looked for birthday gift*
- *Baked cake*
- *Painted*
- *Guilt started to set in— had to leave…*

Sunday, Jan.19th, 2014

- *Woke up, painted*
- *Left to go put drops in mom's eyes*
- *Went to buy art supplies*

- *Came back, mom called—wanted to know what we were doing today-*
  felt guilty
- *Worked on "Butterfly"*
- *Prepared supper*
- *Passed by mom's again*
- *Came back, washed dishes and started taking down the Christmas tree (can't believe it's still up!)*

I then rummaged through the boxes of collected small tokens of affection that my children had given me over the years when they were younger, such as birthday and mother's day cards as well as drawings. Some of these notes and drawings inspired the drawings pasted on a wooden board. At the center of the painting I placed the cropped section of the photograph—a woman with her back turned, floating in the water. As Kuhn ((2002) and Hirsch (2012) point out, the photographs we normally frame and choose to show are more about our "family romances than our actual familial life" (Hirsch, 2012, p.119). Normally, in our household this cropped image would not have been mounted and displayed since it is not a flattering or idealized version of someone's mother. Still, in order to emphasize the contradictions and complexities of lived motherhood, I decided to place a frame around it and surrounded it by romanticized versions of motherhood as is very often presented in mother's day cards; I also included discarded "to do" lists.

The result is a woman drifting away, disconnected from everything and everyone.

Figure 29. *Drift*---Work in progress

Figure 30. *Drift:* Finished work (2014). 36" X 36", oil and collage on wooden panel.

Love Letters

For the last work, I wanted to create a triptych about the institution of marriage.

Figure 31. *Love Letter* (2014), Triptych, 20" X 60", oil, collage, and mixed media on canvas.

Love Letter (2014) was inspired by a photograph of my parents' wedding--- not the official photograph shot in a photo studio, but a tiny casual snapshot that was taken on a dirt road on the way to church—my mother's face still covered by a veil, a traditional custom in her time and generation, symbolizing purity and submission.

Pieces and imprints of veil covered the first and last panel. Veils, in my mind's eye revealed a masking of reality, and /or embellishment. For the second panel, I sculpted a chain: In my mind, the chain symbolized support, resistance, the power of strong bonds---**or** imprisonment. Yet the fact that the material used to sculpt it is polymer clay contradicts the notion of strength associated to chains, for it is light and easily breakable. If anything, it is fragile and deceptive. In the last panel I enlarged and copied a passage from a love letter found in the many documents left behind in my parents' home, which is also a "hate" letter, evidence of how relationships may shift and dissipate over the trials and disappointments of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 5

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2013) in order to interpret and make sense of the data, one begins by the "development of codes" and connecting the themes found in the data into "larger units of abstraction" (p.187). In other words, a deconstructive approach allows one to investigate, analyze and organize the data, which is then followed by a "reconstructive" process organized into an interpretive form (Sullivan, 1996). The process of deconstructing and reconstructing calls upon the notion of "revisiting" (Sullivan, 1996, p. 213) whereby "meanings" are extracted as one identifies common themes. This process may begin with "hunches, insights and intuition" (Creswell, 2013, p. 187) which, supported by the data analysis, eventually shed light on personal interpretations. These findings are then linked to social, cultural/political issues found in existing literature developed by others.

As a means of exploring how my role as a mother and caregiver both feeds and obstructs my creativity, I began with an analytical review of the notes in my journal. I then highlighted recurring themes. I typed all the texts in my journal and re-organized them in a scrapbook.

I re-examined my reflective notes, my photos, my journal, as well as my agenda and revisited my art making process. I found that the repetition of certain themes

and situations coincided with studies such as "Conflicts in Creativity: Talented Female Artists" conducted by Robert J. Kirshenbaum and Sally M. Reis (1997) and "Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women" (Reis 1998), which examined how close personal relationships affect female artists. The themes are reviewed in the following section.
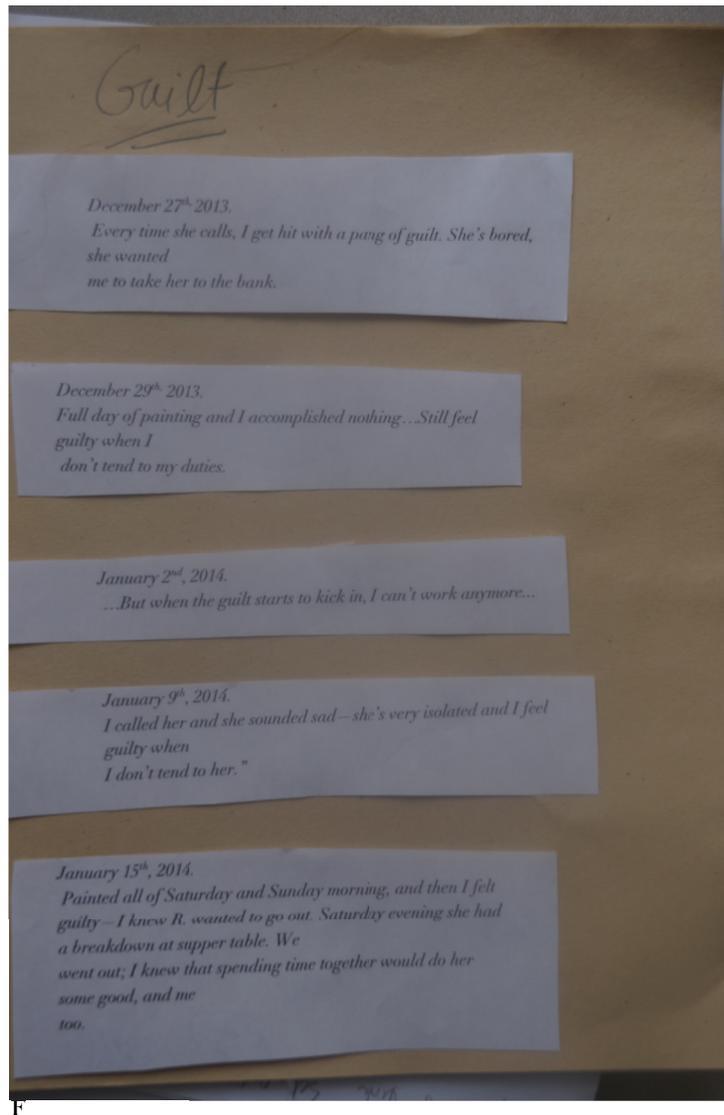
Figure 32. Data/Analysis Scrapbook

Analysis: Reflective and daily journals

Guilt

Within the two-month period that was dedicated to arts based research (December 18th to February 18th), the main obstacle that I encountered by prioritizing art making over personal or household demands was a sense of guilt. A few excerpts from my journal reflect this matter:

> ***December 27th, 2013***. *Every time she calls, I get hit with a pang of guilt.*
>
> ***December 29th, 2013***. *Full day of painting and I accomplished nothing… Still feel guilty when I don't tend to my duties.*
>
> ***January 2nd, 2014.*** *…But when the guilt starts to kick in, I can't work anymore...*
>
> ***January 9th, 2014.*** *I called her and she sounded sad—she's very isolated and I feel guilty when I don't tend to her.*
>
> ***January 15th, 2014.*** *Painted all of Saturday and Sunday morning, and then I felt guilty— I knew R. wanted to go out … I knew that spending time together would do her some good, and me too…*

Other passages in the journal also refer to "feeling guilty" for one reason or other: In Kirshenbaum and Reis' study (1997), feeling guilty for devoting more attention to their art rather than their family seemed to afflict several of the

female participants. Liss (2009) points out that mothers are still represented as eternally self-sacrificing and self-giving. According to Lisa Baraitser (2009) the notion of "fantasy mother" to be able to fulfill everyone's needs is often reinforced by cultural conditions. In the *Mommy Myth*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) state that there are certain ideals that on the surface seem to celebrate motherhood, but actually promote a standard of perfection that is beyond one's reach. This may cause an internal artistic barrier that, according to Reis (2002) affects many creative women.

In fact some researchers agree that for many women artists, the feeling of being overburdened affects their creativity (Ochse, 1991;Piirto, 1991; Reis; 1987 as cited by Reis, 2002). However I recognized that although family obligations and household duties constantly interrupted my creative energy, it was very important for me to be able to do both. An excerpt from my journal describes this impulse:

January 15th, 2014

Today was a good day-- Spent the early morning doing a

substantial

amount of creative work as well as housework; attended the T.A.

meeting; passed by mom's, took care of her housework, went grocery

shopping and then came back home and fixed supper. Days when I can

take care of everything and everyone make for good days---complete

days.

This suggests that being able to balance personal creative needs as well as others' needs is strongly psychologically linked. A statement from a research participant in Kirschenbaum and Reis's (1997) study also supports this observation:

> When my life is in order, the kids are happy, dinner is cooking, the house is clean, the laundry is caught up, and there's a semblance of calm in the household. It just seems like ideas flow. I can sit down and write poetry and turn out two or three pages of a screenplay. (p. 236)

Lack of time

The quasi-illegible writing in my journal indicates that apart from being burdened with the feeling of guilt, I was also pressed for time. Buller (2013) also states that the challenges inherent to combining the roles of the artist and mother are from a lack of time. In their study Kirshenbaum and Reis (1997) found that the absence of unlimited blocks of time prevented women from engaging in professional artistic endeavors.

Art making, selfhood and identity

As I combed through the notes in my journal, I noticed that a main crisis happened when I could not visually express what I had in mind (see Figure 14 to 19). Here is the passage that expressed my frustration and my ambiguity towards painting.

January 14th, 2014.

> *I have a love/hate relationship with painting. A part of me*
>
> *absolutely loves it and can't live without it. Another part*
>
> *really hates it –finds it futile—In the back of my mind I'm*
>
> *thinking there should be other matters I should be tending*
>
> *to—like my family, mom or earning a decent income. ….*
>
> *It's just that it is   so connected to my soul. When it works I*
>
> *feel validated, when it doesn't I feel totally worthless.*

In 1978, Nancy Chodorow stated that girls were not born mothers. Basically a girl develops an orientation toward nurturing because in early childhood her mother is the primary caregiver. Consequently, by identifying herself physically to her mother, she develops a continual association with her, which suppresses any attempts to achieve complete separation and individuation. As a result, this leads her to experience the self only insofar that she is connected with others. Poststructuralist feminists support this notion by stating that the self can only exist in fluid, shifting relationship with others (Alcoff, 1995; Holland 2001). Humanistic beliefs on the other hand, maintain that the self is autonomous, separate and individualistic. According to humanist theorists creativity is a basic inner need and the driving force behind creativity is an individual's quest for self-actualization (Adams, 1986). The passages in my journal emphasize the importance of creating art out of a *need* to do so. A participant in Kirshenbaum and Reis's (1997) study articulated this notion as

such: "It's like I'm struggling from a drug withdrawal. If I don't take care of this creative urge, I feel I'm going to blow up" (p. 262). Although there is substantial truth in the feminist poststructuralist notion that the self is inextricably connected with the social world, my experience displays a strong connection between art making, identity and self-validation. For instance, the facial expression in Figure #20 was exceedingly painful to execute and as a result, throughout the painting process, it deeply affected my sense of purpose and selfhood. Here is the passage that expressed my frustration:

December 27th, 2014

I got hit with a panic attack—the worst one yet—but this time it had nothing to do with my mother's situation, but with the fear that I can no longer paint. I'm hoping that my confidence comes back.

Abraham Maslow (1968) stated that a person often feels whole through peak experiences. I recognize this state of mind in this passage in my journal:

January 14th, 2014

I tried painting in the dark, without my glasses—tried to capture something within---beyond my preconceptions.... Finally a stroke of the brush, an accident; something started to appear, exactly what I had in mind... All is good; all is worth it.

This experience deeply corresponded Maslow's description:

> The person in the peak experience feels more integrated (unified,
> whole, all-of-a-piece) then other times... As she/he gets more purely
> and singly herself/himself, she/he is more able to fuse with the
> worlds... the creator becomes one with her/his work being created...
> That is the greatest attainment of identity, autonomy, or selfhood.

He continues by saying that it is "simultaneously a transcending of itself, a going beyond self hood" and described as a "pleasant state" (p. 255).

From a feminist perspective, these transcendent states are described at times as *empowering experiences* (Castro, 2010; Zappone, 1987), yet they are only partial and temporary. Feminists such as Nancy Holland and Patricia Huntington (2001) state that connecting with oneness and selfhood fully demands that one retrieves and tears herself/himself from the everyday completely. In her words,

> but to be authentic, the self cannot remain mined in the "they-self",
> but must elevate itself from the average everydayness of the "they" and
> become free of itself. One must stand alone in the knowledge that it has
> had the strength to tear itself from the opinions of the they. (p. 94)

And that, according to Holland and Huntington, is not possible since the self is integrated into the world rather than separate from it. Maslow on the other hand,

underemphasizes the importance of connections and relationships in self-actualization and their contribution to personal growth (Hanley & Abell, 2002).

Lived mothering and creativity

In fact the paradox of needing to be alone with oneself while also wanting and needing to be with others is a prevalent theme in my journal reflections. Amidst a milieu of various situations and interactions with loved ones, I recognize the fact that the experience of being a mother, wife and caregiver has contributed and continues to add to my personal and creative growth. Again this aligns itself with feminist views that consider relatedness as a powerful vehicle towards self-knowledge rather than a hindrance towards self-actualization (Hanley & Abell, 2012). For instance, in Kirshenbaum and Reis's study (1997) most of the women agreed that motherhood heightened their compassion for humanity. Another testimonial came from artist Jackie Skrzynski who quoted a friend as saying, "with each opportunity to love, we have an opportunity to expand" (as cited in Bulller, 2012, p. 194). For many women artists, motherhood is both a distraction and an inspiration for their art and they learn to exploit this contradiction in their artistic endeavors (Kirschenbaum & Reis, 1997; Moravec, 2012). This idea aligns itself with Dewey's (1934) observation that a living being is intertwined with interchanges of its environment, "not externally but in the most intimate way" (p. 12).

Analysis of Visual Data

The photographs

As previously discussed, Hirsch (2012) points out that in most family photographs, we attempt to portray and outward presentation of a happy family unit when in fact photographs can easily show us "what we wish our family to be, and therefore what most frequently it is not" (p. 8). I inadvertently chose photographs where my mother was not aware that she was being photographed, where she was not "posing for the camera" and where the independent self is to some degree detectable. Kuhn (2002) wrote, "the silences, the repression is written in the photograph" (p.22). Apart from the photograph where my mother is actively interacting with me (as in figure # 8), in figures #13 and #27, my mother never looks at the camera---she is not fully present. Her *independent center* is not paying attention to her outward *mother role*. In my mind, these photographs were the closest representations of maternal ambivalence.

The art works

While the core of my visual work relates to motherhood, family and the flux of domestic life, as I analyzed the visual results, I realized that the works that were created more instinctively and where I relied on my technical skills leaned more towards refrains such as loss and the passage of time. These themes are especially

present as in *Threads of Memory* (figure #7) and *Bonnets and Butterflies* (figure # 21).

In the works where I used photocopies and collage, such as *Drift* (figure #30) and *Love Letters* (figure # 31), I was more aware of the socio-political message I wanted to convey. For instance *Drift* may have captured maternal ambivalence more successfully than *Threads of Memory*. In *Love Letters,* I intended to raise questions about dominance and submission, and/or the emotional entanglement of romantic relationships within the institution of marriage or the impossibility of reading a woman's psychic truth behind a veiled face. Although *Drift* and *Love Letters* are just as personal as my other works, the main difference is the state of mind during the execution. Where the primacy of the hand took over, I paid a closer attention to an inner vision, to technique as well as aesthetics. In the process, the execution itself yielded to a form of escapism. On the other hand, where the works were less strenuous technically, I paid more attention to the content.

Interpretation

Angel in the House Syndrome

As I examined my reflective notes, my daily journal, the photographs and the artworks, I linked them together and recognized what Virginia Woolf (1931) described in "Professions for Women" as the archetype "Angel in the House." Originally a title from a poem by Coventry Patmore (1854) paying homage to his wife, this term continued to be used past the Queen Victorian era to describe women who embodied the "ideal," essentially a selflessly devoted wife and mother and a need to be "utterly unselfish" and keep everyone happy. This image has been easily ingrained and spread over cultures and time, subordinating generations of women.

Prior to this, over the centuries parents have read stories to their daughters about female archetypes, dutiful daughters and self-sacrificing mothers (Coe, 2003). This maintains the notion that from early on women are taught to care for and be oriented towards others, while men are encouraged from their mothers to become autonomous individuals. As a result, (albeit somewhat simplistically generalized) women are fostered to become other-directed and men self-directed (Chodorow, 1978; Holland 2001). Others would argue that a woman's body is closer to nature and that the traditional roles are imposed on her because of her body and its

functions (McKinnon & McIntyre, 1995). In fact de Beauvoir (1949) stated that a woman's body enslaves her to the mere act of reproduction of life while the male, in contrast, asserts his creativity externally. Still, despite the attempts by feminists to dispel the idealized expectations of mothers and daughters there is an issue that seems to eradicate all the social changes brought forth by feminism because it infiltrates itself in the psyches of women and hits them where they are the most vulnerable—the issue being their love for their children and family.

As I reflected on my daily journal, I recognized that, to a certain extent, I too suffer from the Angel in the House syndrome. How we are shaped as mothers or daughters is determined by a variety of factors spanning over a period of time. If I were to retrace and re-examine my history I would know exactly why I feel the need to keep everyone happy and be utterly unselfish—but that would be another thesis all together. The dilemma is that oftentimes the Angel in the House does not have time to pursue other activities apart from those required by her roles (Forbes, 2000). Trapped in playing the role of the angel one is in a constant battle between the inner life and the outer world.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion

The aim of this research was to produce a body of work that is personal yet multi-vocal. Its results may speak alongside the voices of artists, who spend a lot of time "mothering" and who reflect on their lived experiences---experiences that, for the most part, still remain unacknowledged because they are considered too subjective and personal. Through my personal journey, the intention was to examine the dilemma experienced by women who are torn between their need for creative expression and outside demands related to familial bonds. To a certain extent my conclusion reflects the complexity and internal contradictions that may stem from one's conscious and unconscious desires (Chernick & Klein, 2011). At its heart is the need to re-acquaint with one's selfhood. Yet, as a mother/artist/daughter placing myself at the center of the research, questions arose regarding female subjectivity and identity and led me to consider certain diverging views regarding selfhood.

For most artists, art making stems from an inner need. Maslow's *Psychology of Being* (1968) supported this notion by stating that by listening to this impulse, the self can emerge and reach self-actualization. The determinant that governs self-actualization is internal rather than social or environmental. The problem with this concept is that it isolates the individual from personal relationships or other social

forces and downplays the struggle that may arise between emotional bonds and personal aspirations. In fact feminist poststructuralists point out that the notion of "personhood" is subjected to how and where a person is positioned at any point in time (Davies, 1991; Holland, 2001). Therefore, one's selfhood is inevitably influenced by circumstances and interpersonal relationships.

Some feminist perspectives maintain that the conception of self is gendered. In Western culture, the mind and reason is coded masculine, whereas the body and emotion are coded feminine (Lloyd, 1992). As a result, femininity's association with emotions leads to a natural gravitation towards concerns connected to family and friends along with all the domestic demands that it entails (MacKinnon & McIntyre, 1995).

Of course central to this theme is the reality that women have been subordinated throughout history and that this subordination has had very serious impact on women's lives. According to second-wave feminists, writing primarily about white Western women, when women scale down their aspirations in order to comply to gender roles it is because they have internalized patriarchal values and norms (Greer, 1979, Pollock, 1988; Butler, 1990). This internalized oppression conditions their desires and most of the time leads to passivity, selflessness and invisibility usually associated with motherhood and domesticity.

Until recently, feminist discourses still associate motherhood to patriarchal ideologies which viewed mothers as self-sacrificing, a "sell out" or as a "biological trap to ensure female servitude" (Kitzinger, 1978, p. 52) --- yet this undermines

maternal love and care. In fact some feminists such as Lynne Segal, who in the 1970s advocated both women's rights and the rights of mothers, stated that her argument was never about the actual mothering practice and caring for loved ones but rather how the role of the mother and domesticity "was represented symbolically" (Segal as cited in Baraitser, 2009). This aligns itself with feminist mother theorists who focus on the "mothering" rather than motherhood and acknowledge that beneath the social and psychological constructs associated with patriarchal ideology, there is the love, care, and empathy associated to "traditional" duties and responsibilities of mothers, wives and daughters that exist and *should* exist--- for without these, the work is just unpaid labour and responsibility.

Nonetheless it is still difficult to hold on to a sense of identity when one is negotiating with multiple roles. For this reason I think that the words that inspired me years ago are still valid today:

> You have to know yourself not only as defined by the roles you play
> but also as a creature with an inner life, a creature built around an inner
> darkness. Because women are always encouraged to see themselves as
> role players and helpers... rather than as separate beings, they find it
> hard to grasp an authentic sense of self. (Jong, 1980, p.119)

By " authentic sense of self" Jong refers to finding one's own voice creatively. And doing so involves reflecting on one's experience as earnestly as possible and

using this experience as a catalyst for artistic creation. Cultural feminists and /or feminist mother theorists reexamine and reappraise what is traditionally defined as "feminine" such as nurturing and caring and, by calling attention to these values and concerns, they ensure that they are valid and morally significant.

In the meantime, going back to my original question: the internal struggle between selfhood and selflessness still persists. However as Andrea Liss (2009) pointed out, to be a feminist mother continues to mean *temporarily* (emphasis mine) losing one's self and one's work in order to tend to the other(s).

According to Buller (2013), by creating memoirs through an artistic process "we create new ways of understanding our lives"(p.17). Upon reflection, I recognize that most of my work bears an overtone of nostalgia for it is fueled by the knowledge that life is transitional and that relationships shift and change. This led me to understand that at the core of my struggle---somewhere between art making and demands of daily existence, there is the desire of wanting to seize the moment. Therefore my interpretation of maternal ambivalence deals with the paradox of *giving something up*, missing *the part of one's self that is given up throughout the vicissitude of daily existence*, yet in the end, not regretting any of it.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study that have direct bearing on my art education practice. This art based research not only allowed me to seriously consider the social and political implications surrounding motherhood from a scholarly perspective, but it also encompassed a reappraisal of the art making from an art educator's perspective that connects to my subsidiary question which consisted of: *What meaning or meanings can I extract from this study that will enhance my art practice?*

The importance of lived experience

As I mentioned in the introduction, this study began with an interest in creative blocks, which led me to discover that most women, apart from struggling with finding mediation between themselves and external pressures, also expressed finding difficulty with "voice" (Cayton, 1990). I found myself reconfirming the importance of *lived experiences* as a means of finding one's self in her/his work.

Long before I was a middle-aged woman caught in a "sandwich generation", I was a young woman plagued with a creative block that lasted several years. I am uncertain to what extent my work had been influenced by my academic environment, my community or my peers---in fact, many contemporary educators

agree that the relationships among persons, processes, products, and social and cultural contexts are significant factors in the evolution of one's creative production (Zimmerman, 2009), nonetheless my creative barrier happened when I realized, upon isolated introspection, that my work no longer related to my lived experience. Initially I pursued the common practice that my studio art practice had taught me, which involved analyzing works of art as a means of finding a resolution. This failed when I realized that other artists' work did not help me in my quest. As David Bayles and Ted Orland (2001) state in *Art and Fear,* with regards to art making, "nothing really useful can be learned from viewing finished art" (p. 90). Today as an artist teaching painting to young and older female adults in local community centers, I often encounter students who are creatively blocked, and I face the uncertainty of not knowing exactly how to guide them. This art-based research provided an insiders' perspective on how an analysis of lived experiences through self-refection, visual memoirs, photo elicitation and memory work could be used as a tools to promote self-expression. More specifically, the memory work associated to this methodology is an effective method and a practice of unearthing and telling untold stories and paves the way to critical consciousness that embraces "the heart and the mind" (Kuhn, 2002, p. 9). Basically it explores the validity of trusting one's experience, formulating a problem around it, and finding a "voice" to interpret it--- one that resonates from the individual to the collective.

Art as a means of re-connecting with one's selfhood

At the same time one must also be cautious with this approach. Although art-making may be a good motivational tool, sometimes it may address conflicts or dilemmas that are not in our power or training to address. For instance this year as a community art educator I worked with women who were mothers with very sad stories: mothers who have lost their children because of suicide or infanticide. These very devastating accounts made me very aware of the fragility of probing into lived experiences.

In these cases, I understood the validity of using art making as a form of distraction. I reconsidered the value of facilitating feelings of transcendence or peak experiences in the art making process by practicing instruction that leaned towards a purely intuitive approach or geared towards the teaching of skills. Although in the past, I felt this undermined the significance of art on a larger scale, as a daughter/caregiver going through a substantial amount of stress, I now understand the relief of being able to move away from one's daily troubles and search for a form of escapism through art not to mention as means of reconnecting with one's self.

Beyond selfhood and motherhood: Examination of maternal art from a social political context.

When Andrea Liss (2009) faced skepticism from other colleagues who thought the topic of the maternal was too subjective: her argument was that she was using her "mother" identity as a means of encouraging new ways of thinking. There's no

doubt that within the confines of patriarchy, women "who never went anywhere or did anything" (Showalter, 1972, p. 252) most likely internalize their experience as mothers, daughters, caregivers as too dull or small to be worthy enough to have any social or political impact.

With this comes the recognition that within a dominant system, those who feel subjugated must constantly find the means of asserting their identity. In this sense, a modernist epistemological perspective that focuses on self-expression and skills has its use-- for the direct experience of creating art, of tapping into one's imagination and experiencing a feeling of transcendence allows one to re-connect with oneself and possibly lead towards self-knowledge. On the other hand, a poststructuralist approach that examines modernist ideology and challenges historical and cultural myths ensures a conscious effort to provide content in art education material that not only promotes gender equity but also an empathic understanding of the world.[1] One approach is devoted to self-assertion; the other allows us to consider others and in the process exposes us to multiple perspectives ---in the end, both are indispensable.

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[1] A poststructuralist or postmodernist approach to identity also recognizes that multiplicity and in-process-ness of each of us, a reality my study has reinforced.

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