Abstract

This exploratory feminist research project presents how ten young women who are mothers narrate their identities and their experiences, as well as articulate the differing ways each woman navigates through hegemonic discourses that seek to restrict and define her into a reductive and singular identity as a ‘teen mom’. The purpose of this thesis is to come away from the limiting and pervasive labels and stigmas that are attached to young women who are mothers. The ten participants (four women of colour, one woman of Jewish ethnicity, and five women who described themselves as white) were recruited and the research was carried out at a Vancouver-based program, which provides predominately low-income women who are mothers educational upgrading and employment skills. I adopted the pastiche (Ely, Vinz, Downing, Anzul, 2001) method of narrative -- a multi-genre approach where each of the women created visual, written, and oral narratives. Within the narratives the themes of body/ appearance, exclusion, and stigmatization arose. Woven throughout each of the chapters is an articulation of how each of the women in various and unique ways actively negotiated themselves and their experiences, revealing themselves to be complex, dynamic, and multi-faceted young women.
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Chapter One: Introduction

This project is narrated polyvocally by myself as researcher and writer and by ten distinct women who enrolled themselves in the fifteen week “Step” program. Rebecca articulately summarizes my intention for this thesis:

Even if I am a younger mother, I am not a bad mother, and I’m not angry. It is important for me to tell my story. I am not just a Mom, there is a lot to me that people choose not to see. I also think it is important for people to look and relate if they can. And if not to see another side and for everyone to not so easily step into labels and be so bigoted.

I choose to engage in this exploratory feminist research project because I want to open up space to listen, read, and see what each of the Step women themselves have to say and do not have to say about who they are. I am interested in the ways each of the Step women narrate themselves and their experiences, and their articulation of how they make themselves and are made by dominant discourses. Throughout this project I will unravel power inequities, contexts, and social meanings. While I write this thesis from a critical, feminist theoretical and practical perspective, the scope of this project is not on the macro-political level. This project revolves around each of the women’s narratives, as I am interested in the various personal meanings each of the women make as they navigate their way through the social realm and hegemonic discourses that seek to restrict, dominate, define, subjugate, and immobilize them.

My research raises the question how do the women enrolled in the Step program construct, articulate, negotiate, and/or challenge their multiple identities in visual, written, and oral autobiographical narratives. As you will read in the data chapters, the Step women’s responses to this question arose thematically.

1 I have created this pseudonym for the program in order to ensure confidentiality.
Purpose of project

At the heart of this project is my political interest to expose how young mothers experience, make sense of, and/or challenge the fixed, singular identity that dominant discourses reproduce. The discourses are pervasive and reduce women to stereotypical images of the ‘ruined’ victim; of the ‘loose’ ‘bad’ girl who made a terrible mistake for having a baby at a young age. She becomes the label. The purpose of this project is to respond to Rebecca’s words and actively “choose to see” these women in all their subjectivity. They are not solely young mothers and more importantly, their identity as mothers at a young age does not automatically assign them to a life of misery and ruin. Relying heavily on the narratives of the women themselves, I wish to show how they challenge, and are also contained by available storylines and pervasive dominant discourses that reduce young women who are mothers to unaware, static victims, and to what Roman (1996) names “moral spectacles”. This project serves to contest the power of dominant discourses that define who young mothers are and dictate how and the ways in which they live.

Informed by McRobbie (1996) where I place an emphasis on “lived experiences, personal meanings, and spoken voices” (p. 31), I am interested in how the women themselves translate experiences, tell stories, and narrate their lives. Chapters three, four, and five focus on key thematic areas that each of the ten women addressed: body/appearance, exclusion, and experiencing judgement/stigma that have impacted each of the women’s identities differently. Woven through each of the chapters is the way each of the women “constructs themselves in stories and analyses that interrupt and reframe

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2 I use ‘single quotations’ for words and phrases that I find problematic. I use “double quotations” when presenting direct quotations from participants and when using theoretical sources.
them as much more than victims” (Fine, 1994, p. 75). To place young mothers into a static mold where they are solely victims fixes identity and reifies hegemonic discourses. **Providing Context: Construction of the “Teen Mother”**

The label and the stigma surrounding young women who are mothers “has a history” (Nathanson, 1997, p.11). Joan Sangster (2002) traces female delinquency from the Second World War to the present as being equated with “sexual abandon and illegitimate pregnancies” (p. 38). Unwed young mothers have been made into a moral panic which Roman (1996) defines as “a condition, person, or group of persons [who] emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by mass media; the moral barricades are manned by socially accredited experts who pronounce their solutions” (p. 9). Young motherhood has been made into an epidemic. Social institutions such as the school, religion, government, and family enforce this understanding of young motherhood.

Young motherhood is made into an epidemic based on notions of immorality and irresponsibility. The blame is always placed on the young woman herself and/ or her upbringing and rarely on the man with whom she became pregnant. The blame is also rarely directed at the systematic barriers in place for in particular, women of working class backgrounds to access contraception or to exercise other options. Certain young women of colour such as women who are African American/ Canadian, First Nations, and Latina who become pregnant are further degraded due to their sexual impropriety (sic), with racist understandings that it is somehow ‘expected’ that they would become pregnant at a young age.
The moral panic that has been created and the stigma that is associated with young motherhood forces many young women to fear and repress their ‘dangerous’ and emerging sexuality. The ‘good’ girl/ ‘bad’ girl reductive dichotomy becomes enforced through the ‘othering’ of the young mother. My aim for this thesis is to call into account and trouble a way outside of the stigmas, by focussing on how the women themselves represent themselves in their own terms based on their own experiences. In the telling of their experiences as young mothers, each of the ten women individually “proclaimed a right to construct their identities rather than assume those constructed for them” (Cocca, 2002, p. 62).

Background to Research and Step

Three years before I carried out the fieldwork for this project, I entered the office building in downtown Vancouver where the Step program is located, and rode the elevator to an upper floor. I was there doing an agency visit – an assignment for a fourth-year undergraduate level Women’s Studies class in Women, Work, and Education. I was told that the Step program serves to assist young single mothers to prepare for and access further education such as the GED/ High School equivalency, vocational training, and/ or to obtain suitable employment.

The space consisted of a reception area with posters on the walls pertaining to anti-drug campaigns and ending racism: “Eracism”. Many laminated pieces of paper with the word “yes” were scattered around the space, which echoed their mandate of “esteem, positivity, and betterment of the lives for all women.” One of the main rooms of the program served as the area for morning check-in where for fifteen minutes the women would meet each morning and candidly discuss feelings, news, problems, jokes,
and events. When I was there the discussion ranged in topics from issues with BC Housing, to daycare problems, cheap places for curry, Jennifer Lopez’s dating sagas, and stretch marks.

This room was also used for the personal development component of the program, which included art therapy exercises such as having each of the women introduce themselves to each other by making a collage of their “past, present, and future”. This important component of the program also included the showing of films such as *Private Benjamin*, counselling sessions, and discussions on self-esteem, stress management, relationships, nutrition, sleep, and mothering. Lastly, the space was used for the career planning component of the program where the women did interest assessments such as “True colours” to fit “attributes with careers”, worked on resumes, and worked out volunteer and/or work placements. The other room served as a classroom where the academic component took place for GED preparation in the areas of math and English. This room had fifteen computers where participants practiced typing, wrote essays, and prepared resumes.

During my initial visit to Step three years ago, I shadowed the personal development counsellor Beth whom I witnessed then and during my fieldwork as both the backbone and heart of the program. As I witnessed then, and upon my return for my fieldwork, the women in the program were voraciously attached to her. Many of them articulated in their interviews with me that one of the main reasons they were “sticking the program out” was because of her. I include this at the onset of this thesis because I feel that Beth enables the women to feel as Rebecca said, “okay to be myself and have all my faults. She lets it be okay that I don’t have everything figured out and that I am

3 I have created this pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.
scared”. I saw her working within the systems, frustrations, and limitations of government cutbacks, and the doctrines of the Step program itself.

These included discourses such as ‘back to work productivity’, and responsibility. I see her as working inside these discourses resourcefully and respectfully in order to forge a way through and out of them. By working through them in this fashion, she was able to inventively carve many paths. Step, like too many programs in B.C., which have a focus on women and social justice, have been facing continual cutbacks. The Step program lost the daycare that they provided to the participants’ children while enrolled in the program. Beth was able to work to find donors to partially subsidize daycare. She also worked hard to find vouchers for groceries, a pass to a gym for the women while enrolled in the program, and free tickets so that the women in the program were able to take their children to various events such as the circus and Christmas festivities in Vancouver.

Her personal development sessions were also referred to as life skills. When I inquired about the problematic usage of that term in that it assumes that the women enrolled in the Step program are somehow lacking the skills needed to live their lives and are in need of an ‘expert’ to teach them, she responded, “yes I know, though I see it more as the tools needed to apply to life”. She would often close the door and then smile or laugh, “now I can say what I really feel and what is on my mind”. She spoke candidly, often swearing, and distributed the official handouts to then get into, for example, an honest discussion of sexuality in which she would confront and challenge the common slut stereotypes and even address the heteronormativity of the program⁴. She apologized to the women stating that she “had been assuming that everyone is heterosexual because

⁴ I go into more detail about the heteronormativity of the Step program in Chapter two.
they are mothers”. She acknowledged her own biases and was vocally accountable for the systematic silences that made up the Step program.

My first visit to Step was on a day when Beth was doing art therapy exercises in the personal development component of the program. I found her facilitation and counselling style to be candid in that she would bring in relevant personal experiences of her life history and “tell it like it is”. At the same time she was self-reflexive and spoke with tremendous warmth. In November 2000, there were only two women, Heather and Cindy, enrolled in the program. At that time the program was twenty-one weeks long and was restricted solely to teen mothers between the ages of thirteen and eighteen who were residents of East Vancouver and on income assistance. Beth informed me that every year “getting funding is a battle. Step constantly has had to reinvent itself and adapt”. The Provincial government and the Ministry of Human Resources fund the Step program. Step also receives donations from Van City Financial Services and the Vancouver-based gift shop Hope Unlimited. Their funding goes specifically towards partial daycare subsidy, education resources, and Christmas gift hampers

Cindy and Heather were extremely open with having me present at the program. I was able to not only observe, but to also talk with them and participate in the art exercise called “gremlins”. This exercise consisted of drawing a picture that haunts or frightens you. The picture Heather drew represented and embodied such a range of meaning. I knew then that a critical analysis of how these young women choose to represent themselves would lead me to a more complex understanding of young mothers, which is absent in society and in the media. As I watched and spoke with Heather, she began to draw her “gremlin” as her “mother’s pink fluffy slipper”. I was filled with excitement
and knew that for my graduate work, I wanted to “do something at Step because I wanted to speak, listen, and work with young women who are mothers, and hear who they are, and of their experiences in their own words in order to counteract the media and the labels placed onto them”\(^5\). Some would call it a click moment. Something snapped into place and I began to seek out literature on identity, narrative, and young motherhood.

Heather’s narrative and drawing spoke of being stifled and seen by her mother and others as a ‘bad’ girl. She spoke of being seen constantly in one dimension, and not in all of her subjectivity. *Heather* is a poem I wrote, after spending the day at Step. From her narratives about her mother, partner, and baby this poem emerged. The italicized words are direct quotes from Heather.

*Heather*

Tiptoe. Mouth full of whispers at the edge of thirteen.
*So romantic. I guess it was risky, but I felt safe.*
*My spine against a trunk of a tree,*
*Mark holding me tight.*

Cross-legged, we sit, green carpet rough on the underside of our thighs.
There is sun on her face she calls herself Heather.

(Always bouquets of roses, white.
Always awake, her mother’s Eyes open on her)

She carefully fills in the slipper, pink
*I couldn’t stand living in that quiet house,*
*cold all the time, hungry.*

Her favourite things:
*kisses,*
*lying down in tall grass,*
*warm chocolate chip cookies,*
*the first time she heard her baby cry.*

\(^5\) This excerpt was taken from an entry in my journal dated November 21, 2000.
I include this poem here in my introduction, as it was from this single day at the Step program I felt inspired and mobilized to take steps towards creating the research project that you now have at hand and are reading. It was from this experience that I began seeing the possibility of braiding my interests as a writer, feminist activist, and academic. I began to seek out how I could create a research project where the participants themselves would in part, be able to represent themselves. I wanted to create a research project where I would be re-representing the women within the context and for the purposes of my Master’s thesis. I began to explore the possibilities of including the multiplicity of each of the women’s identities by bringing in three different genres to access their autobiographical narratives.

My focus for this project is not on the Step program rather, my focus is the women who enrolled themselves into the program. I credit both the connection I made and Beth’s keen interest in feminist work, which enabled me to carry out this project at Step with the women. I was able to observe the women enrolled in the program, recruit participants, facilitate art and writing workshops, and conduct interviews for this project all within the space of the program. While it is not my task to critique the program, I do feel that I need to place it into a context and provide a brief description. Beth articulated to me that, “writing up the Step policy and mandate in order to reapply for provincial and ministry funding is a stressful balancing act”. She spoke of the tremendous pressures that the program faces each year. Therefore, it is important to note that the Step program is located within and therefore, is shaped by, larger institutional and social conservative agendas. These agendas produce discourses that then trickle down and put pressure upon programs such as Step. The agenda that becomes most pronounced at Step is the focus
on getting women as Beth stated, "disgusted with being on welfare and determined to become ready for work". Mothering therefore, is not seen, let alone valued, as work.

It also must be noted that Step's very existence as a program for young mothers is part of the discourse that shapes young mother's identities. Because of this, in casual discussions, many women would in my opinion, seem to take on and/or internalize some of the Step doctrines by speaking of a need to "get off of the couch", "get off the system", "out of the house", "become something", "stop being lazy," and "find a job other than motherhood". There were many statements that they were "going to make their lives begin" and "get back into the world" on a "new path". When I first met with Catherine, the program manager, we discussed possible times to carry out the art and writing workshops. She said to me "most of the women didn't finish high school so I think that a writing workshop will be above their level. Feel free to try though and see how it goes". I was angry and saddened by this, the fact that the Step women were seen solely as uneducated because most did not graduate from high school. Catherine subtly placed blame upon the women themselves for not finishing high school. With the exception of Danielle, all of the Step women did not graduate and because of this, they were seen as entirely 'uneducated'. What is implied in this statement is that as researcher I "should not expect much from them" as the women are not 'capable' or 'intelligent' to carry through (as Catherine stated) "my vision for research". What is implied in this statement is that the women enrolled in the Step program do not have the facilities for complex thought and self-reflection.

The women at Step were incredibly articulate. They used language in an unexpected, fresh manner. Also when I asked Catherine about the dress code that

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6 I have created this pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.
disallowed thin-strapped tops, shorts, and sweat pants she said, “although the program is not a 9-5 it is a 9-3 and we are getting these women ready for work”. I see this understanding of ‘responsibility’ like Valerie Walkerdine (1990) who states, “this responsibility places women as at once safe, yet potentially dangerous (the ‘bad’ mother)…women have been placed as guardians of an order from which it is difficult to escape” (p. 63). The discourse that was the most present and at play that I witnessed, was that of getting life and self in ‘order’, and hence, living life productively, responsibly, and respectably. It is laden with gender, race, sexuality, and class inflections. Inherent in a discourse such as this, is the claim that the lives the women are living are not responsible or productive. What is assumed is that these women need to learn that there is a single ‘right’ way to be and that it is what should be practiced.

I must also note that the women who took part in my project simultaneously took on, challenged, and negotiated the discourses that the program was based on. For example, some challenges and negotiations to the program included a remark that was uttered during the collage presentations during the two-week observation component of my fieldwork. Rebecca challenged the very exercise stating: “I cannot divide my life into past, present, and future. I am all parts of it”. Shanny stated, “simply having a place to come to and being able to be with other young Moms is really why I am here”. Danielle said, “the program depends on how much you put into it, and what you yourself make of it”.

Participants

As I will discuss in Chapter two, (the methodology chapter), by adopting the multi-genre narrative method “pastiche” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, Anzul, 2001), through
carrying out art and writing workshops and open-ended individual interviews, I was able to see into who the women represented themselves to be. I was able to see how each of them reflected on and challenged the experiences they have had, as well as the various ways they each articulated how they actively negotiate their identities as they drew, spoke, paused, wrote, crossed out words, sat silently, asked questions, and listened.

Each of the women in this study occupies complex, multiple, and fluid subject positions in terms of race, ethnicity, age, social class, family background, sexual orientation, sexuality, religion, and ability that braid together to produce socially constituted subjectivities. Avery Gordon's (2001) eloquent understanding of subject positions informs my work. She states, "complicated workings of race and class and gender are names we give to the ensemble of social relations that create inequities, [privileges], situate interpretations, create particular kinds of subjects, and create possible and impossible selves" (p. 4). Each of the women shared a general commonality of becoming mothers at a young age and enrolling in the Step program located in downtown Vancouver. However, I must stress that I reject an essentialized understanding of identity and the notion of experience. Specifically, I refute making sweeping generalizations and reducing individuals to a homogenous category based on gender and/ or age, race, class, and sexuality. The women in this project are heterogeneous and dynamic. Their narratives articulate that their experiences of being women, mothers, and participants in the program are very different from one another. This project aims to challenge various dominant discourses' persistence to homogenize young mothers into both a unified and collective experience, and a devalued subject position.
In their narratives, the Step women reveal how they as subjects are at once shaped by, resistant to, and/ or able to actively negotiate their way inside of dominant discourses and hegemonic social structures. As Patti Lather (1991) states, “such structures are posited as largely invisible to common sense meaning making but visible to those who probe below hegemonic meaning systems to produce knowledge intended to challenge dominant meaning systems” (p. 224). It is my aim to explode the myth that hegemonic social structures are ‘natural’, ‘invisible’, and ‘fixed’. It is my intention to re-represent how each of the women themselves in their own way, in their own narratives, chose to probe and challenge hegemonic social structures. However at times, it is also important to note that some of the women reinforced hegemonic social structures. For example, Kelly’s statement that she needs to “get off the couch” reflects her internalization of classist understandings upon which dominant society (that the Step program exists within) is based.

All ten women who participated in this project shared particular words and silences with me. These are rooted in each of their complex subject positions where meaning is made individually from their own identities and experiences. Words and silences that produce meaning(s) are also mediated by dominant discourses that become attached to the women. Meaning(s) become attached through peers, the media, religious institutions, government, schools, and family. They are seen reductively and represented solely as young, mothers, not married, on income assistance, sexualized, unemployed, a problem, a colour, a shade. It is important to note that many of the women such as Danielle stressed that they are “more than just a mother...and by far not a Super-Mom”. Sarah stated: “while motherhood is a big part of who I am, it is not the only part”.

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Because of this, mothering and being a mother will be configured in this thesis as one, albeit important, part of who each of the women are.

I feel it is imperative to introduce the women of this project in their complexity, representing their multiple subject positions. In our open-ended interviews I asked each of the women to tell me how they would like to be described in terms of gender, being mothers, race, ethnicity, class, appearance, and sexuality. The introductions that follow (when in quotations) come directly from the words of the women themselves. Additionally, I asked each of the ten women to choose their own pseudonym for this project. I was met with much resistance when I mentioned pseudonyms. As Rebecca stated, “I trust you, and am proud and have no shame”. I found it interesting that it was assumed because I asked the women to choose a pseudonym they equated my request to ensure anonymity with shame. I feel that this is an example of their learned resistance to stigmas, labels, and external judgement. These themes figure prominently in this thesis. Many of the women wanted to use their own names, but then graciously went about finding a name they were each comfortable with for the purposes of this project. I have included, following some of the introductions, the women’s visual narratives of their body drawings. In addition, following the visual narratives are each of the women’s own interpretations of their drawings. Rebecca, Cody, Sheena, and Sandra’s body drawings can be found in Chapter three and Danielle’s body drawing is in Chapter four as they are visual narratives that fit within these thematic-specific chapters.

Kelly “just cut her hair really short. I am 18. You can call me a young woman and I’m a Mom to a son who is almost two. I am white skinned, and on welfare. I came to

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7 See Appendix three, for a table which presents the ten participants, their race/ethnicity, class, and number of children.
"This is my collage instead of my drawing. I put Jody Foster over the body, because she is somebody. I want to be like that. There’s lots of stuff on being a Mom and the words such as love, are what I value in life”.

Rebecca “is loud, punk, Jewish so I don’t see myself as white, and I’m on welfare. I am a fighter. I am 20 and a mother of a son who is three-years old. I am a woman and proud feminist, and see myself as a very sexual person who doesn’t care about gender boundaries”. Rebecca was enthusiastic to be a part of this project and we had two interviews together. She was extremely vocal, political, and enjoyed writing poetry.

Sheena “is a young 18 year old woman and mother of two boys aged two
and one year. I love them but they are such a handful. I am a shawl dancer and First Nations. I am on welfare and it is really hard, I am so tired.” Sheena was very quiet during our interview and had difficulty with her day care and had to leave the program less than halfway through.

Jessie “has crazy tangled red hair. I am 18 and want to be described as a young white woman and a mother of a 2-year-old girl. I am thrilled to be a Mom, it made my life full I am not a teen Mom, I am responsible and like talking about my experiences to demonstrate that.” She was incredibly enthusiastic about sharing her story and enjoyed writing poetry. We had two interviews together.

*Jessie’s Visual Narrative*

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The breeze melts over her baby’s head
the quiet and dark consume her
as the night bleeds on,
the air is no longer stuff
She brings confusion while he is concrete.
Her demented poison goes deep through his blood
and his anger is churning his fists clinching
his teeth grinding his heart racing
he wants to scream, shake her
make her stop this and still.......
he loves her,
her strange feminine ways,
her naked embrace holds him tight
what a girl.
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“In the drawing the pink dots are where I see myself acting out the roles of girlfriend and Mom. I haven’t figured out who I am yet—or who I am in my body. But I know I am a girlfriend and a Mom. That is why the dots are
everywhere such as girlfriend being on the shoulder and arm. I provide support, I hold on tight. The poem is one I wrote after my daughter was born and my boyfriend and I were dealing”.

Cody “is 16 and is a teenager. She is a mother of a two-year old son and is Native. I am treated as the youngest here and spoken down to. I hate the dress code—that I can’t wear spaghetti straps. I am on welfare and share custody of my son with my Mom.” Cody decided to leave Step and return to high school.

Tyff “is 18 and is a young woman and mother of a two-year old son. I have had some hard experiences with abuse, my sexuality, drug addiction, and school and I appreciate you listening. I write poetry and really relate to the world through words as you will see on my body drawing”.

Tyff’s Visual Narrative
I relate to myself and the world through words. The words on the body are words about me, words that are inside, that rarely come to the surface I connect to myself with words. Others put me down with words, but I can powerfully use words to keep myself standing strong. I fought back against abuse with words, and even if others ignore me I use words to understand and listen to myself”.

Sandra “is twenty-two, a young woman and mother of twin girls who are four and one boy who is two years old. I am an immigrant from El Salvador and on income assistance. I like to dress fashionably with name brands and my appearance is important to me, but it is hard being a Mom.” Sandra left the program to be with her ex-partner and the father of her children in Seattle.

Shanny is 18 and wants to be referred to as “not a girl not yet a woman” like in the Britney Spears song. I am of Indonesian descent and am on income assistance and the mother of a two-year old daughter.” She stressed to me that she didn’t want her appearance to be described, and therefore she did not represent herself visually on the body drawing — she used words instead.

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8 Shanny said that her drawing was self-explanatory, and therefore, she did not provide a paragraph describing her visual narrative.
Danielle “is 24 and is a white woman and mother of a four-year old son. I am a feminist, awkward, trying to understand the world and me. I will never be a super Mom, and I am much more than just a mother. I am on welfare ‘cause I need to be for now, and I finished high school in spite of people ‘cause everyone thought I’d quit.” She was the oldest woman I interviewed, extremely vocal, and interested in feminism and art. We had two interviews together.

Sarah “is 19 and a mother of a three year old son. I am white and on welfare and not used to being poor ‘cause my family and my ex are both rich. I hate not being able to provide much.” Sarah held a quiet enthusiasm for the project. She was battling whether or not to return to her ex-partner and did not show up at the graduation.

*Sarah’s Visual Narrative*
“This is me and my son in a protective, safe place. I’ve always been a princess but now not having much money, I miss it. My son is so important, but I also like to shine on my own”.

**Conceptualizations**

I feel it is important to briefly define some key terms that will reoccur throughout this project, so as to attempt to ensure that the reader will have a clear understanding of my main concepts. **Identity** is the self. It is not fixed, but changeable and created, recreated, and mediated by social silences, hegemonic social structures, and dominant discourses. I see identities as elastic and dynamic. “The self gets constructed and reconstructed across various times and places. Sometimes simultaneously in complex ways that are more or less open or stable” (Lather, 1997, p. 125). Gender, race, ethnicity, social class, age, sexuality, sexual orientation, appearance, ability, and religious affiliations are subject positions. To paraphrase James Gee (2001), it is these subject positions that allow individuals to “be recognizable” (p. 99). It has been my aim in this project to shift the conception of how young women who are mothers are positioned and recognized.

Identity particularizes a person and provides their political foundation. I am informed by Linda Alcoff (2000) who states, “identity is a process of meaning making. Where one makes sense of one’s identity based on one’s experience[s]” (p. 325).

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9 Sarah was very vocal on numerous occasions about “not having money like [she] used to”. She spoke about growing up upper-middle class, and having a partner “for many years who had so much money he did not know what to do with it. The main pain I have about leaving him, is that now I have nothing. I used to have anything and more that I wanted. Now that I have left him, he is giving me and his son nothing. I am on welfare and it is very difficult.” She struggled with classism and would often try to differentiate herself from other participants at Step. “I can’t relate to them, I didn’t grow up like them. We have different values”. When she was creating her visual narrative, she said to Tyff and Cody, “they were never princesses like [her]”. Beth had to intervene on numerous occasions and have ‘talks’ with her. Sarah’s drawing illustrates her struggle of still seeing herself as a “princess” but not having the means to support that lifestyle and her and her son. Her visual narrative also reveals her sense of entitlement based on her race and class background.
statement is echoed by James Gee (2001) who also informs my understanding of identity with his notions of “affinity identity”, ‘we are what we are because of experiences we have had” (p. 131), and “institutional identity”, “we are what we are because of positions we occupy in society”. As I have mentioned earlier, this thesis centres on how each of the women individually narrate themselves and their experiences and how they make meaning and contest meanings that are thrown upon them because they are [amongst other things] young mothers.

This project centres on a multitude of experiences from each woman. It is not my intention to essentialize or conflate the women’s narrative into a single account of what it is like to be a young mother. Rather, I am interested in each of the women’s specific experiences and the meanings that they have derived from living through them. I see “subjects as constituted through experience” (Scott, 1993, p. 26). By this I mean that individuals are shaped by the experiences they have. In addition, our identities or subject identities shape the experiences we have or can have. That is why it is important to note the discursive nature of experience, and the politics of construction. Cody, a woman of First Nations descent, was labelled as “lazy”. Teachers and peers labelled Danielle, a woman with white skin, as “weird”. Therefore, these two experiences are quite different. Informed by Jill Morawski (1990), I am interested in how experience itself is structured by social relations and the language of hegemonic culture.

Although I will go into more detail in the methodology chapter on narrative, I feel it is important to introduce it here. The method of narrative inquiry fits well with my interests of identity and meaning making. I am informed by Catherine Kohler-Reissman’s definition, “narratives are representations...individuals construct past events

10 I discuss this further in Chapter 6, when I critique Laurel Richardson’s method of “collective story”.

21
and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives” (p. 2). While I see narrative as an incredible medium for naming, speaking, and understanding the self, I reject the often-held romanticized understanding of the power of narrative. In order to stress that my understanding of the identities of the women involved in the project are multiple, dynamic, and fluid, I adopted a form of narrative inquiry, “pastiche” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, Anzul, 2001), that is founded on a multiple-genre approach.

I chose to carry out the pastiche form of narrative inquiry by incorporating three genres: visual narratives in the form of body drawings, written narratives in the form of free verse poetry and non-fiction writing exercises, and oral narratives in the form of responses to semi-structured individual interviews. I carried out these techniques to provide different access points into each of the women, providing narratives of themselves and of their experiences. Pastiche relies on more than one perspective and more than one telling and “looks at meaning and gaps of meaning across the various genres” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, Anzul, 2001, 97). Also this approach allowed for a visibility of the layers of experiences and thus, a fuller understanding of how the Step women were representing their lives and themselves for the purpose of this project.

I see the women as active negotiators of their experiences. It is my understanding that critical moments, incidents, and experiences such as living in a society based on lookism (the tyranny of privileging certain forms of beauty such as thinness, whiteness, blue eyes); enduring sexual abuse; being made into the outcast at school; and being called ‘ruined’ and ‘troubled’ for having a child at a young age serve to make and unmake identities. Many of the women (depending on context) strategically negotiated their identities, while the negotiation of others took the form of a more constrained or

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11 I discuss this further in Chapter two.
embattled negotiation\textsuperscript{12}. My term of active negotiation bounces off Valerie Walkerdine's (1986) notion of “provided subjectivities” which means that identities/subject positions are assigned discursively by what hegemonic discourses make available. By carrying out pastiche narrative inquiry, I witnessed each of the women in their own way actively contest what subject positions were available and being assigned to them. Active negotiation fleshes out the purpose of this project. While each of the women encountered and continue to face hegemonic oppression, they each chose to articulate to me an insistence of their own voices, identities, and experiences. Even if things are difficult, they insist on being “subjects of their own lives” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 279). Each woman involved in my research project insisted, in her own way, on simultaneously being subjects that are made and subjects of their own making. This insistence, which will be described in more detail in the data chapters, manifests in multiple and differing ways in each of the Step women.

As I also name Kelly’s turn to “all sorts of drugs when I finally left home,” or read that Danielle’s choice to “strip for a summer” as active negotiation, I am departing from judgemental, narrow, and simplistic understandings of women’s experiences. This project serves to honour the women’s identities and experiences and to re-represent them in all their complexity, rather than placing women’s experiences into a binary of ‘bad’ choices and ‘good’ choices. I see that each of the women have turned to drugs, or sex, or poetry, an older partner, a genre of music, piercings, tattoos, alcohol, leaving school, religion, or a dress style, in order to discover parts of themselves and work things out, themselves included. I am working to counteract how these women, as younger mothers

\textsuperscript{12} See Chapter four for Jessie and Tyff’s narratives of exclusion and my reading of them being constrained and embattled active negotiators of their experiences.
of low income and other diverse subject positions\(^\text{13}\) become demeaned, devalued, and not seen as full subjects. I have asked the women to tell me about themselves and they have graciously shared themselves with me. My understanding of negotiation is also informed by bell hooks (1990), who writes of the power of language and narrative on the political and individual level. “Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, reconcile, reunite, renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance” (p. 146). I take the Step women’s words as being rich with meaning, as they are rooted in the processes of working through, of reflecting, negotiating, and of action.

I write this project with an open stance for intellectual feminist theory and political change. By political change I mean I will expose the power inequities that both construct the social and hegemonic discourses and the effects they have in shaping women’s identities. I wish to reveal the various and often contradictory ways women respond to hegemonic discourses which are contextual and shifting. I have not set out with an answer or choreographed a seamless singular tale where the ten women fit neatly inside, as that is impossible to do and, when attempted, is just as reductive as the hegemonic discourses themselves.

\(^{13}\) Subject positions in addition to age and class; these include race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and sexual orientation.
Chapter Two: Methodology

This chapter is a reveal—an uncovering of all the various methodological strands that make up this project. I relate it to the image of an onion, whereby this chapter serves to peel away and present the layers that make up this project. These layers include the observation period at Step; and an explication of the art, writing, and interview processes. All three narrative exercises offered a new access point for the women to represent themselves, as well as for me to learn more about each of them in order to re-represent their narratives in the form of this thesis. This chapter also enters a theoretical exploration of how I understand the identities of the women in the project, and later, discussions of voice and narrative. In addition, I will outline and flesh out the roles that I occupy in this project as facilitator, interviewer, writer, reader (interpreter), woman in my mid-twenties, feminist, academic, and non-mother, to provide an explication of my feminist activist theoretical framework and to provide a response to the important question hooks (1990) raises, “how and why do [I] speak” in this research project (p. 151)?

Observation

I was a witness — an observer at the Step program, and the women’s activities for the first two weeks of my fieldwork. When I arrived on Monday morning, Rebecca, Tyff, and Danielle asked if “I was the feminist poet from UBC?” Beth had graciously put up my recruitment poster (see Appendix One), and had spoken to the women about the project prior to my arrival. Tyff stated, “you are young and not who I thought [would be here] at all”. Initially I was seen as the labels of feminist, poet, UBC, and various women
approached me based on those three positions to find out about the project. Sandra said to me: “I’m a traditional woman not a feminist, can I still be a part of your project?”

I was extremely surprised by the warm and gracious reception the women extended toward the project and myself. There was one instance with a Step participant who on the third day during morning check-in said, “I’m not going to be a part of your study because I know that all UBC students are exploitative”. I tried to chat with her afterwards, not to try to convince her to participate, but to find out more about why she felt the way she did. She did not, however, want to have a conversation. I understood, though I was left wondering what had resulted in her feeling this way, and how I could assure her (and the other women at Step) that as a researcher I would be accountable.

For the initial two weeks at Step, I observed the career exploration class, and the self-directed academics component, which usually resulted in the checking of e-mail or the reading of magazines. The women came alive during Beth’s candid personal development class. During the two weeks, every woman had to make a collage poster and present it to the group as a way of getting to know one another. As I mentioned in Chapter One, these collages were an exploration of each of the women’s “past, present, and future”. Much of the program’s mandate of being on the ‘productive’, ‘responsible’ path crept in as the women spoke of what they had lived through, and “how they are now on a journey of growth towards success”; “now on their way to being someone”. The images that were featured in the women’s collages were strikingly similar to those featured in Wendy Lutrell’s (2003) text *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds*. Like the participants in Lutrell’s study, many of the women included material objects (cars, jewellery, houses, and designer clothes) as something they aspire to acquire in the future;
things that they equate with success. I found it interesting to note however, that these same things did not figure as prominently in the art, writing, and interviews in which we engaged. As Cody so eloquently stated, "with the collage, I felt like I had to prove myself as serious and that I could be successful. But I just want to be happy".

*Body Drawings: Visual Narratives*

I held the art workshop for two hours the third Friday I was at Step. Ten women signed the consent forms and this visual narrative exercise was the first one they participated in for the project. I provided an outline of a body and I asked them to each represent themselves on the outline in whatever way they wished; whether it be a physical representation of themselves, or with words, or symbols. I provided them with markers, pastels, crayons, and magazines in case they wanted to collage. I also asked them to write a paragraph explaining their drawing, so that I would not be the sole interpreter of their drawings. Rather, that I would be able to read into both their narratives, and the interpretations they provided about their visual narratives. 14

For two hours the room was very quiet. Initially, Sheena and Tyff stated that they "couldn't draw", but Beth responded, "that doesn't matter, that is not what this is about". I watched as Jessie added a poem she wrote beside the drawing, as Rebecca flipped through her journal to find a quote by Sid Vicious, as Sandra helped Sheena white-out the foot on the outline so that she could further shape the body into a representation that was her own.

The body drawings generated extremely vivid pieces. More importantly, these drawings generated the most positive feedback from the women themselves. Visual expression allowed the women to access "a wider range of [images] and meanings than...".

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14 I explore my role as 'reader' in this chapter on pages 36-38.
those they could access through language alone" (Oliver, 1999, p. 41). Rebecca, in our second interview stated, “the artwork I did for you, the body, is me to a T. I am glad to get that out and for people who will read this thesis to be able to see me as I am. They will have a picture of me”. I colour photocopied them, and the women retained their original drawings.

_Free Writing Exercises: Written Narratives_

The writing workshop took place for two hours the Friday following the art workshop. From my own experiences of writing workshops as well as facilitating many of them, I am aware that putting words and voice to experience and writing it down onto paper can be risky. I had anticipated that some of the women would not want to write, or that some participants may not be comfortable sharing their writing with me. I understood this, and was prepared to be a witness to both choices of voicing and a “right to silence” (Razack, 1993, p. 118). I did not want the women, in any way, to feel coerced or pressured to write or share. Fortunately, all ten Step women were interested and open to participation. The writing workshop was not about ‘mastering the craft’ of poetry or non-fiction, but rather about using those creative genres to enable reflection and inspire self-representation. Tyff, Cody, Jessie, Danielle, and Rebecca expressed to me that they were writers and missed having time to express themselves creatively.\(^\text{15}\) I shared with the Step women that writing poetry is a passion of mine.

The workshop consisted of free writing -- which is essentially open-ended, unstructured (in terms of rhythm and composition) themed exercises. Free writing aims

\(^{15}\) I feel that providing an opportunity for creative writing and creative expression is one of the main benefits this project had on the women. Sheena said, “even though I don’t usually write, I enjoyed writing for this”. This project allowed the women to not only express themselves, but also as Cody and Rebecca said, be “listened to”. I, as a researcher, was in a position of power in that I re-represented the women and their narratives for the purposes of this Master’s thesis, which grants me a Master’s degree.
to elicit thoughts that come to mind and express them as quickly as possible “without censoring words or thoughts” (Oliver and Lalik, 2000, p. 33). The themes for the exercises were: home, high school, mothering, beginning a sentence with “I remember”, and writing about something of which each of the women felt strongly. These themes touch on some of the same general areas as the open-ended interview questions I posed. I found that with the written narratives the women appeared freer and “wrote things that might not have otherwise been expressed” (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 29). Some of the women wanted more time with their writing pieces and therefore, took them home and brought them back to me. Tyff, Rebecca, and Jessie brought in additional writing for me to read throughout our time together and to the interviews.

It is important to note “poetry tends to be a personal genre” (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 30) and often, because of this difficult subject matter tends to be more easily accessed. Writing is often seen as a safer outlet to articulate oneself. Many of the women narrated within their written narratives, a wide range of horrific experiences with sexual abuse (from incest to rape). I made an extremely difficult choice as researcher to not include all of these narratives. It was not my intention to erase the experiences the women had endured. Rather, I anticipated the possibility that including these narratives would lead some readers to problematically correlate young pregnancy with sexual victimization. I chose to include Rebecca and Tyff’s narratives of sexual abuse as they were narrated within their interviews, and as they connected to their experiences with exclusion and stigmatization.
Interviews: Oral Narratives

It was already into the fifth week of my fieldwork when I began the hour-long individual semi-structured one-on-one interviews. At various levels I felt that I had developed rapport with each of the women. I used the interview questions (see Appendix Two) as a guide, but for the majority of the interviews, the questions arose naturally and were conversational and free flowing in direction and outcome. The questions I asked were general and consciously open-ended, as I did not want to influence responses. Also, I wanted to see where the participants themselves wished to direct their responses. The interviews took place in the back office off the kitchen at Step. Each interview was tape recorded, and I transcribed each of the interviews.

On the whole, all ten Step women who participated in this project were dynamic, insightful, candid, and open. All the women’s responses were unique, and while there was overlap, some of the women were more vocal in certain topics, such as issues pertaining to the body, sexuality, and femininity. Shanny was uncomfortable being tape recorded during our interview. She asked to take her questions home, where she handwrote her responses. Due to this, some of her answers are quite short. Sheena told me that she was shy and therefore, her interview responses were quite limited. I encountered shyness only during the interviews (oral narratives). This is a possible downside in encouraging representation from participants themselves. Sandra, Kelly, and Tyff’s interviews were extremely dense and conversational. Rebecca, Jessie, and Danielle had much enthusiasm for the project due to its feminist orientation, and incorporation of creative writing. As we didn’t address all the areas and questions we wanted to in the one interview, I met with each of them again for a second interview. I
write of these dynamics to be accountable to the fact that although I have attempted to balance voices out, some participants are quoted and more present in this thesis than others. 16

Voice

Each woman in her own voice, as Chris Weedon (1997) states, “proposed a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory, in process, and constantly being reconstituted in discourse” (p. 32). I refute the concept that each of the Step women has a singular, ‘authentic’ voice that represents an ‘authentic’ self. When I came to the Step program to drop off my recruitment poster (Appendix One), Beth encouraged me to include “voice” on the poster. She felt that it would motivate and encourage the women to participate. Despite my critique of the concept of ‘voice’, I easily felt swayed to use this term. The narratives and voices that each of the ten women speak from, in this project, are not the ultimate ‘true’ selves of these women. Rather they are self-representations formed from the women’s use of images, symbols, and multi-genred autobiographical narratives. These narratives are then read (interpreted and analyzed) and re-represented by myself. I am informed by Michelle Fine (1994) and her notion of “working the hyphen”, as I do not claim to ‘know,’ who each of the women are, nor do I think it is possible to ‘know’ them. What I know, and what the reader will know, of the women and their experiences is what they themselves chose to share which, in turn, is re-represented by myself in this thesis. Different contexts and the various narrative genres

16 I do not feel that any one participant dominates this thesis. Often, certain women were more vocal in certain thematic areas than others. For example, Jessie had much to say about her experiences with exclusion and stigma (Chapter four and five) but not as much to say about issues pertaining to the body and about appearance (Chapter three). Also, Sheena, Sandra, Cody, and Sarah left the Step program early and therefore, there was not an opportunity for informal conversations. I wrote down these conversations as field notes and where fitting, have used excerpts in the thesis.
brought out multiple voices, selves, and tellings. For example, each of the women shared, contradicted themselves, and became silent, which varied depending upon context. This was dependent on whether they were alone with me, in a larger group, in the Step space, at Starbucks, or smoking in front of the building. This project is actively working against fitting each of these women into a single identity. I am interested in showing the multiple voices or as Bahktin (1986) names “dialogic” voices from which each Step woman speaks.

This understanding of multiplicity aided me when I began writing up my interpretations of the women’s narratives. My thoughts on post-structural identity connect with my purpose for this project as it challenges those who seek to make sweeping, essentialized, and simplified claims about, in this case, young mothers.17

Judith Butler (1993, 1997) explains that these essentialized claims are maintained through consistent reiteration. An example is: “all young mothers are lazy”. Every time a statement like this is broadcast in the media or stated in a public setting it is reproduced, and therefore, reinforced. It is through this reproduction or “performativity...where its regulatory power is derived and enforced” (Butler, 1993, p. 10).

This project revolves around voice. Many assumptions are made about the term voice. It takes shape in an idealized and larger-than-life form. This creates an uncritical and uneven “romantic reliance on voices” (Fine, 1992, p. 216). For example, the rhetoric becomes tired and problematic when researchers position their projects as opportunities for their participants to ‘find their voices’, when people speak of the ‘oppressed finding their voice’; when voice gets uncritically equated with empowerment, freedom, agency,

17 I see writers such as Mary Pipher (1994), Joan Jacob Brumberg (1997), and Naomi Wolf (1997) as writing overly simplistic, essentialist, and linear accounts of adolescent female identity.
emancipation, and an ‘authentic’, ‘true’ self and/ or experience. These claims are false as “subjects don’t simply tell their story or are supposedly given voice without the researchers analytical mediation” (Bettie, 2003, p. 22). Although, each of the women’s multi-genred narratives have been included in this project, I was the one who put thematic limits, thematic organization, and a theoretical framework around them. This is not to say that I do not think there is something profound, political, courageous, or important about “transforming silence into language and action” (Lorde, 1984, p. 40). Rather, understanding voice in an idealistic way and silence in a negative, passive, powerless frame rids individuals of their complexity.

It is also important to note that just because someone speaks in a research project does not mean that they are heard as they intended to be. Shulamit Reinharz (1988) critically analyzes the concept of voice. She stresses the importance of listening by stating: “if you want someone to tell it like it is, you have to hear it like it is” (pp. 15-16). I have consciously adopted the narrative method “pastiche” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, Anzul, 2001). Pastiche is a method that is based on multiple-genres, and therefore, performs or mimics this concept of multiple or “dialogic” voice. Pastiche allows each of the women to speak in her own voices within the multiple-genres.

I did not enter or carry out this project with the understanding that I was somehow “giving voice to the voiceless” (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 9). I find such thinking troubling, offensive, and a misuse of power. I am in agreement with Lather (1997) when she writes “we should be uncomfortable with issues of voice” (p. 9). I am more comfortable with what Rebecca stated in her graduating speech, “thank you Abby. You allowed me to share my voice and stories with you and others these past months”. It was because of the
Step women's willingness, openness, generosity, and candidness to access their stories, which allowed me to successfully carry out this project.

Narrative

I find it frustrating when the method of narrative inquiry becomes simplified, romanticized, and uncritical. For example, Russell Bishop (1996) homogenizes and makes an empty statement about the narrative method by suggesting, "it is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing diversities" (p. 16). Patton also makes ridiculous sweeping statements that it is somehow "so natural a genre for women to narrate" (1990, p. 3). The genre becomes romanticized much like voice discourse when statements like "hidden stories must be shared" (Patton, 1990, p. 15) are written. In addition, there are many overly simplistic and generalized statements, such as through narrative alone "a subject recovers a sense of control" (Wortham, 2001, p. 4). Narratives do not exist in isolation. They are dependent on who does the telling, who is listening, and what is done with the narrative.

Catherine Kohler-Reissman (1993) informs my understanding of narratives. She sees narratives as representations. I found that by adopting the method of pastiche the women had three genres from which to access, present, and speak about their experiences and identities. My re-representations of the women are derived from my positionality, activist feminist framework, and the women's own representations of themselves within their own autobiographical narratives. Narrative served as my analytic tool when I was coding my data. I was able to uncover "themes that held across the stories" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). From each of the ten women's narratives, informed by
Polkinghorne’s notion of “analysis of narratives”, I was able to access large and smaller themes that make up the chapters that follow.

\textit{Pastiche}

This method for autobiographical narratives suits post-structural understandings of identity superbly. It also allows there to be, in my opinion, multiple entrance or access points. This in turn, allows there to be multiple narratives or tellings. “The use of pastiche emphasizes how arbitrary it is to rely on one perspective—one telling” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, Anzul, 2001, p. 97).

As I wanted to incorporate art and creative writing into my thesis project, I found that both the visual and written narratives derived from the workshops suited the method of pastiche extremely well. These creative genres “are more layered, more than one truth is presented” (Razack, 1993, p. 108). While each of the three genres of autobiographical narrative holds their own weight and meaning separately, when brought together they also allow for a much fuller account. Pastiche “fills in identifiable gaps in meaning across genres” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, Anzul, 2001, p. 98).

I found that by adopting this method of narrative the Step women were given different avenues to access their experiences, and space to choose how they wished to speak about themselves. Danielle, for example, expressed that she enjoyed addressing issues of exclusion on her body drawing and sharing about her appearance in the interviews. I have found that by adopting the narrative method of pastiche, a more vivid, textured account was created. It gave participants a sense of freedom and openness when deciding from which genre to narrate.
Format

Each of the women’s multi-genred accounts is the crux of this project. While there are commonalities and overlap in terms of theme: body/appearance, exclusion, and encountering/challenging stigma, these topics are experienced, made sense of, challenged, submitted to, and/or negotiated by each woman uniquely. Simply, I want each of the women’s narratives to stand on their own. They are distinct, and I want to give them space to be read. My intention is to allow their stories to be their own, and initially, be read independently of my readings or interpretations of them. I have had to shorten down many of the oral narratives to allow for focus and to prevent repetition. Other than that the narratives remain punctuated and spaced as they were written and spoken.

My Role as Reader

As Dionne Brand (1990) states “no language is neutral” (p. 19). As a feminist researcher I am also not neutral. I am both an insider and outsider within the confines of this project. Therefore, I acknowledge both of my locations. I am very much aware that in this project, by not being a mother, by being a graduate student from UBC, I am an outsider. The women’s voices are heard and their stories are read from my lens. The issues of power, context, and meaning are central to my research. I am aware that power, contexts, and meanings are multiple and shifting. I find that these relevant words by bell hooks (1990) appropriate,

Often this talk about the ‘other’ annihilates, erases: “no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still

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18 On page 42, I discuss how I am an insider, within the confines of this project.
author, authority. I am still...the speaking subject and you are now the center of my talk. Stop (p. 152).

As a researcher, I am not hungry to have authority over the women’s narratives so that I can have interpretive control over them. My explicit intention is not to take away their stories through interpretation and theorizing. It is not my aim to disconnect them from the narratives they share visually, orally, or in the written form. I am troubled by the often uncontested expectation that as researcher, I have interpretive control over the Step women’s narratives. I am aware that I could have potentially taken all interpretive control away from my participants. The women’s own insights and their own interpretations of themselves and their experiences are distinct from both one another and from my readings/interpretations. I am aware however, that “voices simply don’t speak for themselves”, and that I am re-representing them by reading their narratives in particular ways (Lather, 2004, 183). This exploratory research centres on the multiple, in terms of voices, selves, and accounts.

With the awareness that the women’s narratives are mediated through me, I asked each of the women individually if they would be interested in reading my interpretations, or what I name readings, of their narratives. I felt that the Step women saw me as a worrier and/ or nuisance when I addressed the issue that I find it problematic as a researcher to have interpretive control. I also felt that I was seen this way when I attempted to ensure that they each felt comfortable sharing their writing with me. Being seen by the Step women as a worrier, even extended to their questioning of why consent forms were even necessary for this project. Each of the women stated in their own way,
that they felt comfortable having me interpret their narratives. Shanny stated she, “trusted me and there was no worries”.¹⁹

I see my analysis or readings of each of the women’s narratives as an offering of possibilities. I use the women’s narratives heavily as a springboard to explore the unique and differing ways each of the women narrates her identities, and asserts, and insists on them. My readings are not the wise words of an ‘expert’. Rather, these readings are the interpretations of a feminist researcher.

My interpretations serve as possible readings of each of the women’s stories. The stories the women share are by no means read as a complete, seamless account of their identities, their experiences, or their lives. These narratives were retold from memory and recounted for the purposes of this project, and presented before me like a moving film reel. I equate my readings as a researcher clicking through and zooming in on the reel’s frames. In doing so, I re-represent each of the women. Their narrative reels are complex, unique to the individual, and embodied. They speak to what has been, what is, and what is possible.

**Methods and Theoretical Framework**

This project is informed by Lather’s (1991) term deconstructivist, whereby I am interested in the narratives that the Step women share that foreground their personalized understandings of their experiences, and what is not said in dominant discourses. Grosz

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¹⁹ I knew that as a researcher I would carry the burden of my participants’ stories, how to best re-represent them, and read their narratives. I took efforts to let each of the women know my research question, my purpose, and inform them of the thesis content (themed-based chapters). I told them about how I would keep each of their narratives as intact as possible and distinct from other participants. Many of the women such as Sheena would smile and say, “cool”, or as Tyff said, “that sounds good”. Danielle said to me, “we’ve all agreed to work with you, and it’s your thing. Whatever you need to do is fine”. I did find it difficult to simply accept that they had trust in me, but at the same time did not want to be a nuisance and trouble them by not hearing that they “trusted me”. While I would have liked to have been able to go back to the women and discuss (some) of the initial findings, readings, and re-representations I made, it was not something the women felt was either necessary or something they were interested in being a part of.
(1994) speaks of the “blind spots and the unsayables” (p. 184). My project aims to uncover and flaunt these “blind spots and the unsayables” with regards to the ageist, sexist, white supremacist, classist, lookist discourses that dictate that which young mothers are to supposed to submit and leave uncontested. This project troubles, deconstructs, and denaturalizes the idea that certain people are of a certain construction and thus, act in certain ways. This project aims to engage the unsayables, by listening to and looking for multiple ones to include.

I wish to reveal and explore two potential “blind spots” here. While I recounted and praised Beth for commenting on her and the program’s assumption of the Step women solely being heterosexual in Chapter one I would like to explore this further here. The assumption of the program that all the Step participants were straight was very evident. Anything other than heterosexuality was “undesirable talk” and the loud silences spoke to a deep rooted “fear of naming” sexualities (Fine, 1992, p. 115). In my interviews, I asked each of the women about their understandings of sexuality. However, as the interviews were open-ended I did not ask any questions directly about sexual orientation. It is not my intention for this thesis to come across as heterosexist. The assumption of heterosexuality that was made at the program, in my opinion, created a loud silence surrounding this issue.

Secondly, it is important to note that three of the women of colour who were participants in my project chose to leave the Step program. Sheena, Cody, and Sandra, did however finish all components of my project. Despite the “Eracism” poster in the entrance, I felt there was a deep-rooted silence at Step that can be described as ‘colour blindness’. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) speaks of how the “act of seeing race is thought of
as being prejudiced” (p. 139). I feel it is important to note that Step did not appear to explicitly mention race or racism, although the women of colour did bring up these issues.

Both Sheena and Cody, who identify as First Nations, articulated that they found it difficult connecting with others. They also stated that they did not find that the program was “relating to them” or attempting to see “what they needed”. Sheena had two young boys and decided to take care of them full time. Cody stated that it was hard “being the youngest in the program and being talked down to. It’s disappointing not even being able to fit here”. She decided to return to high school. Sandra, a woman of El Salvadorian descent moved to Seattle to be with the father of her children. Catherine, the manager, said that the women who had left the program “were simply not ready and would get there”. 20

This project is also informed by the sociological method of phenomenology whereby I am interested in the “subjective” and in the “consciousness of the knower” (Smith, 1987, p. 86). It centres on the recollection and reflection on direct, first-hand, lived experiences of the Step women. As Patton (1990) states, “phenomenology offers us the possibility of insights” (p. 10). My research is based on individuals’ experiential accounts narrated within the Step program and with me as art and writing workshop facilitator and researcher. Phenomenology privileges the subjectivity of the participants. In particular, the methods of the open-ended free-style writing exercises, and the open-ended style of interviews, rely on the participants’ memory to be cued in areas particular to this project. These areas include childhood, schooling (high-school), friendship

20 I add that this is a way that the program attempted to ‘wash their hands clean’, and avoided having real, critical, uncomfortable, difficult conversations about race. More accurately, I don’t think the Step program was ready for Sandra, Sheena, or Cody. I speak more about this in Chapter four.
groups, and learning they were pregnant. Dorothy Smith understands this method as enabling “women’s experiences to be validated”. She states, “lived experiences require attention and interpretation in order to discover meanings” (1987, p. 101). I wanted to allow each of my participants to dive in as little, or as much, in a general area as they felt comfortable, and to allow them to discover what they wanted to reflect upon and speak about.

I created this project as a twenty-five year old activist, writer, and feminist researcher. The project is also very much shaped by ten women who initially allowed me to observe them at Step and who later were interested in participating in the art and writing workshops and the interviews. I see my role in this research project as facilitator, listener, witness, and reader / interpreter of ten individually drawn, written, and spoken narratives. I adopt an activist feminist research theoretical framework for this project that is informed by Michelle Fine (1992). This framework fits with me as a researcher, because I situate myself as critically engaged “but distinct from my participants” (p. 220). Activist Feminist Research, or AFR, suits this project because its aim is to “unearth, interrupt, and open new frames while keeping an eye on what is...to critique what seems natural...and [to access] local meanings” (p. 220). I adopt AFR as my theoretical framework because it fits within my larger aim to map, practice, and discuss research that is founded on consistent, critical, and careful self-reflection. Such work is imperative in order to create a feminist research project that is accountable and effective. There are three main stances that comprise AFR, and thus, also comprise this project.

First, the researcher makes explicit her stance(s) politically and theoretically. I have attempted this by making my roots visible, by bringing myself into this project and
situating myself. The multiple stances I occupy (outsider and insider) include that I am from a middle class social position, white skinned appearance, of Ashkenazi Jewish ethnicity, able-bodied, and educated. I am not a mother; am in a committed relationship with a man; I am slightly older, a contemporary of, and slightly younger than the participants in my study; I am a feminist, a writer of poetry, and someone who has experienced exclusion in the school due to my Jewish ethnicity and female gender identity.

Secondly, AFR revolves around critically analyzing current social arrangements. This entire project focuses on current hegemonic discourses surrounding the young mother and factors of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality that impact both discourses and identities. Analyzing current social arrangement ties with my larger purpose for this project, which is to trouble commonly held understandings of the young [teen] mother. The women themselves critically expose how they themselves have experienced both systemic and individual forms of oppression.

The last component of AFR research is that the “narrative reveals and invents disruptive images of what could be” (p. 221). The women themselves, in their narratives, present how they have/ are untangling themselves from the discourses that bind them. Each of the women reflexively puts themselves in the narratives they have chosen to share. The narrative in turn becomes embodied in the individual, and invested in the words and/ or images that are drawn, written, and spoken. They have drawn, written, and

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Current social arrangements include programs such as Step that young women who are mothers enrol themselves in or are encouraged to enrol themselves in. To reiterate, for the purposes of this project I only analyzed the Step program in relation to the women who attended the program. I examined the Step program within the context of observing how the women were positioned within the program; how they were each affected by the program; and/ or when the women themselves directly commented on the program such as Cody discussing the “dress code”.

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spoken about themselves and about the process of continually working through their experiences. Working with the women, this project's intention is also to imagine and to try and enact what is possible.
Chapter 3: “Pushed into being a Girl”

The body is the threshold through which the subject’s lived experience of the world is incorporated and realized (McNay, 1993, p. 98).

What is more personal than the life of the body? And for women, associated with the body and largely confined to a life centred on the body (both the beautification of one’s own body and the reproduction and maintenance of the bodies of others) culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life (Bordo, 1993, p. 17).

The body will be the focus of this chapter. Here, I present how the Step women “narrate their bodies” (Fine, 1992, p. 27) in pastiche, the multi-genre method of storytelling that I have adopted for this project. The theme of the body came through from each of the women’s visual and oral autobiographical narratives. While I provided each woman with a figure of the body, not all of the women addressed the theme of the body within their visual narrative. In the oral narratives, the theme of the body was primarily articulated in response to the question: what are some of the messages you received/learned about being a girl? The women revealed that their sense of self was tied, in part, to their bodies. Sheena, Cody, Sandra, and Rebecca’s visual narratives predominately address the theme of the body and are therefore, included in this chapter. Emerging from their narratives are vivid representations and layered discussions of how they uniquely make and/or construct the “meanings of their bodies” (Oliver and Lalik, 2000, p. 2). The women make meaning as they experience and live “the body within and across multiple sites of connections, [disconnections], negotiations, [and challenges]” (Budgeon, 2003, p. 51).

In their narratives the participants reveal that their bodies are central to their identities, which supports my research question: how do the women enrolled in the Step program construct, articulate, negotiate, and/or challenge their multiple identities in
visual, written, and oral autobiographical narratives? As each of the women’s narratives are distinct, so too are the women themselves and therefore, their bodies. When speaking of the body I feel it is crucial to connect the physical form, or what I call *the materiality of self*, to each of the women’s positionalities. That is, connecting their bodies to their race, class, culture, ethnicity, age, religion, body size and shape, sexual orientation, and physical ability as “the body can play a central role in acts of oppression” (Rice and Russell, 1995, p. 20) and privilege.

In keeping with my activist feminist theoretical framework, I am interested in the women’s personal meanings/understandings of how they experience their bodies. The body is one way young women strive “to construct a subjectively acceptable identity” (hooks, 1990, p. 54). Following this introduction are excerpts from the women’s oral and visual narratives that discuss the theme of the body. The excerpts of the narratives are presented in their original form as they were drawn and/or spoken. I then offer a reading and analysis of each narrative. In my reading and analysis, I explore how each of the women makes sense of the pervasive and reductive messages about and surrounding the female body. I explore how the Step women articulate and negotiate how they want to be in their lives and bodies and what they see as possible for themselves. At the same time, the women have to name and navigate their way through systemic and intersecting forms of oppression. For example, Cody powerfully articulated dissatisfaction with her weight and her smile. She wanted to change them in her visual narrative. She articulated her experience of being on income assistance and having to endure ageist, sexist, and racist treatment for being sixteen, a mother, and First Nations.
The concept of the body is important because it fleshes out the concept of identity and the positionalities of the Step women into a material/tangible context. I must state explicitly: I am not reducing these women to their bodies. Rather, my interest lies in how the women of Step and their bodies have been shaped, policed, restricted, challenged, and understood by themselves, others, and social influences such as social scripts. Social scripts are readily available and determine "how the individual is both enabled and contained" (Butler, 1997, p. 3) in our society.

Within the women's narratives this double movement of enabling and containing is articulated. The Step women address various issues such as living out, engaging with, being troubled by, and contesting social scripts in their visual and oral narratives. All of these issues attempt to persuade, pressure, and police women into a particular way of being. The issues the women address centre around a playing out of an acceptable gender performance(s). This in turn, folds inside of the larger area of female socialization. I see this performance getting acted out vis-à-vis proper dress, having a slim body weight, a feminine demure personality, a pretty aesthetic with buying power to maintain the appearance and look, and a contained sexuality. These scripts give off the message that adolescent/young adult women must act on no desire of their own and hence, have no child(ren) until marriage.

At the same time, there is still tremendous pressure for women to be seen as desirable, and in particular within our heterosexist society, to be desirable to the opposite sex. These ways of being are informed by the white supremacist, heterosexist, classist, and patriarchal order. This in turn, serves to reduce women (in varying degrees depending on individual positionalities such as race and class) to subservient status.
Constructions of femininity are layered, large, and complex. The social scripts oversimplify and belittle them into a proper socially sanctioned ‘right’ and ‘good’ way to be, look, and act. As a result, all other ways of being are deemed to be deviant, improper, and troubling.

These social scripts are pervasively re-inscribed and re-scripted as cultural storylines by various forms of media (from television to billboards). They depict a narrow range of acceptable representations that are intended for mass consumption and replication. These scripts are laden with value statements that stem from the powerful conservative, christian, caucasian, male, right wing ideology that fuel media induced moral panics. “It is through our bodies we learn social rules, taboos, regulations, meanings, values, and relations” (Bordo, 1993, p. 21). Often social scripts and moral panics get taken up as uncontested truths by parents, and institutions such as school and government. The women’s narratives speak to how they are affected by moral panics. The panic is thrown and loaded onto their bodies in varying degrees depending on their positionality.

Theoretically, this project works to speak against and contest the historical construction of how “the feminine and the female body have been constituted as that which must be defined, directed, and controlled” (Budgeon, 2003, p. 37). This research speaks back to the dominant discourses that repetitively positions women merely as “passive dupes of cultural forces that systemically degrade” (LeBlanc, 2002, p. 8). The social scripts become, as you will read in this chapter, enacted, resisted, confused, ignored, and/ or dismissed by the individual women in a plethora of ways.
My intention is not to simplify the complexity of these women’s experiences, or to present a linear, larger-than-life account. Rather, I hope to reveal that the women involved in this project do not live in a bubble and are not one-dimensional romanticized resistors. Romanticizing women is another way of othering them. Therefore, these narratives are full of honest contradictions, multiple truths, and shifting accounts. These narratives speak to what I see as the complexity of resistance.

The complexity of resistance in these narratives is two-fold. First, I aim to highlight that the women themselves challenge the claim that they are dupes who blindly and uncritically take on and perform mainstream social scripts. It must be noted, however, that at the same time the women (to varying degrees) struggled and desired to achieve an idealized body. This struggle and desire was articulated by wanting an altered appearance, or in longing to experience the embodiment of that ‘ideal’ female body in terms of size and shape. The women also articulated a longing for the desirability and sense of freedom that is marketed along with the ‘ideal’ body.

As narratives reveal, “part of the silencing of women is through the language of the body” (Fine, 1992, p. 16). The ideal female body has its own language, speaking to those who achieve it, and in many ways silences bodies, which do not mirror it. This silencing of the body occurs in terms of size, shape, colour, age, height, and weight. Also it occurs in experiences unique to the Step women as mothers such as giving birth and breastfeeding, when the body changes form. As most of the women at Step had their children at a young age, their bodies were still developing such as Cody who was fourteen at the time she had her son. There were many informal discussions during morning check-in or in the academic part of the program, where the women would
discuss the changes that occurred to their bodies. Jessie said to me in her oral narrative, "it's hard to be heavier at eighteen now than I ever was. It is hard to deal with the fact that my body has changed so much after having Avery. Body parts have changed around everything is a bit lower now." Sarah and Rebecca would often complain about stretch marks on their thighs and stomachs. Tyff and Danielle would openly discuss the fact that they felt childbirth caused changes all over their bodies. There was a sense of relief and pleasure that everyone could relate to each other, and that, as Shanny said, "they could speak candidly about their post-pregnant bodies".

Another way these realities of the body are silenced is women's value, as well as their rejection, is based on their bodies. In Chapters four and five, I will discuss how the Step women address experiences of exclusion and judgement/labelling/stigma. In many of the narratives it becomes clear that the women both reject the social scripts and they want their body to fit within society's standards. Some of this wanting of the 'ideal' body was subtle and perhaps even a subconscious yearning. This speaks to Foucault's idea of wanting to grasp hold of "our practices that we do without knowing by making the cultural unconscious apparent" (as quoted in Butler, 1997, p. 83). I must stress that the Step women are complex subjects who challenge the messages the social scripts dictate. And, they, like myself, and many others who live within a North American capitalist culture, also consciously and unconsciously internalize and swallow powerful and ever-present messages that circulate and surround. "The messages we receive about our bodies verbally and non-verbally from other people, systems, institutions—our perceptions of our bodies as they are shaped by surrounding systemic forces, resulting in feelings about our bodies and ourselves" (Rice and Russell, 1995, p. 18).
Kelly: Pushed Into Being a Girl (Oral Narrative)

I was a tomboy growing up, and I always hung around the boys because I didn’t get along with the girls. I felt free in cords, big baggy shirts, and having short hair. When I hit fourteen my father and stepmother told me I needed to be feminine and wear skits and blouses and grow my hair. I need to be pretty or something (laughs).

I hated dressing like a girl; and on top of that I was never allowed to wear a skirt above my knees—my stepmother’s rule. I wasn’t allowed because I would sit with my legs open (laughs). So I was taught to sit with my legs crossed. I got the lowdown on being a girl and being decent and proper. When my stepmother used to tell me to keep my legs closed, I always felt like she had no right. I can do what I want, but she thought I’d just sleep with anybody because I did that.

Then I went to the total extreme when I went into foster care. I wore (laughing) skirts the ones that come up to here (motioning to her upper thigh) the short mini skirts and stuff because I wasn’t told how to be any longer and I was free. I was allowed to do what I wanted. I started wearing makeup and I started moving up in the scales in high school, especially with the boys, which was nice for a change.

It ticked me off that people were trying to push me into being a girl.

Kelly’s narrative speaks of her shifting experience of freedom as a tomboy, to being stifled and controlled. She describes having to adopt a feminine dress, overall appearance, and a non-existent or repressed sexuality as she was “push[ed] into being a girl”. She was made to embody gender; to take on and play out the role of the feminine. Her father and stepmother tied her to the role of the polite and proper girl (legs closed), where she learned that she had “to be pretty”, delicate, and soft. “Adolescence for females is a process of containment, regulation, [where they] are told how and what to be” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 17).

Kelly speaks back to her stepmother’s comments and actively negotiates her identity by seeing through the restrictive stereotypical understandings of being female. She refused to remain repressed, and therefore, chose to contest the “politics of gender” (Fine, 1992, p. 97). She told me, “I sat with my legs open because it was more
comfortable than being crossed. I had no interest in sex at that time, just being comfortable in my body”. Kelly said she felt that she was always “being watched” as a teenager. Young women are “often reminded of their bodies as a public site gone right or wrong [that is] commented on and monitored by others” (Fine, 1992, p. 185). Kelly was able to experience a sense of freedom and autonomy when she was in foster care. She configured that she was in control of her own clothes, and therefore, her own image. She was pleased by the attention she received from the boys. Kelly chose to actively resist her stepmother’s values in order to explore her style and body, in and on her own terms. She doesn’t connect dressing in a ‘revealing’ manner to being sexualized, but rather, she challenges the image and understanding of ‘proper’ femininity itself. She refused to have her sexual subjectivity, as well as her identity, be “blanketed” (Fine, 1992). It must be noted that Kelly strategically negotiates within a very confined terrain. The only options for her sexuality are tied to the ‘virgin/whore’ dichotomy. These are the most common options, and the ones that Kelly (and most women) grow up with and encounter. Still, Kelly does not passively accept but rather tries to work her way within the confines that are laid out for her. Her narrative reveals that despite the power-laden terrain of sexuality, gender identity, is actively contested by women (such as Kelly) themselves.

**Tyff: In My Way of Being a Girl (Oral Narrative)**

I think at home in my family you had to be a girl with long hair and girl clothes. I didn’t like tight clothes at all. It was really important to my Dad that I be and look feminine. At school I was more “screw you I’ll be who I want”. I knew that I wouldn’t fit with the pretty girls; they never liked me. So I just tried to be comfortable with myself in my way of being a girl. No make up, long hair, baggy clothes.

But for some reason I changed my look and decided to dress all skanky. I got so much attention especially the girls and teachers hated my guts. And of course the guys were like “yeah dude”. I wore really short tops that basically covered my
boobs and skirts that barely covered my butt. I wanted to dress like that. I took a lot of insults but I took them all. Of course the guys thought it was great—so I fit with the guys and liked that. Most of the girls called me a slut. I was like, call me what you want I didn't care.

Abby: Did you feel powerful dressed that way?

Tyff: Yeah definitely. Sexual power.

I always did the exact opposite from the messages. If they said girls shouldn't do this, I would do it.

There are similarities between Tyff's narrative and Kelly's. Again, it is Tyff's father who monitors and expects his daughter to be a "feminine girl". And again, the narrow possibilities of female sexuality—that of the virgin or the whore—is presented. Apparent in Tyff's narrative is the fact that she internalizes the external gaze of others. By this I mean that she evaluates herself as others [men and women] do. While she asserts that she "didn't care that she didn't fit in with the pretty girls", she expresses pleasure in the fact that she got attention from the guys. She learns and acts out, as many do, that her "power [as a woman] is located in her body and her ability to attract men" (Rice and Russell, 1995, p. 20).

Like Kelly, she expresses an enjoyment of the gaze and "sexual power", allotted when boys at school gave her attention. By ignoring her female peers, "not being phased" and doing "the exact opposite" of the messages directed at females, Tyff strategically and actively negotiates and asserts her identity. She explicitly stated, "I challenged all the slut messages out there by actually just being the slut, I guess (pause) according to them. It is just ridiculous. I wanted to do what I wanted and feel good doing it. No one, especially some conservative, hypocritical bitches were going to ruin it for me". Tyff's narrative directly confronts and challenges the reductive understanding
that if young women dress in a certain way, or are even curious about sex and their sexuality, then they are ‘sluts’. She directly challenges femininity by fearlessly expressing an interest in sex and harnessing her power rather than silently accepting the oppressive role allotted to her.

Danielle: From The Pages in a Magazine (Oral Narrative)

I always thought I had a big ass, big thighs because of what I saw around me. Of course I always wanted bigger boobs. So I always really focussed and obsessed on looks and my body and all the bodies that were looking at me in magazines, television, ads and stuff. I learned that women always had to be thin to be liked or considered pretty. I used to go to the library because I couldn’t afford to buy Teen and Seventeen magazines and as I read and flipped through them I thought, “so this is what I’m supposed to look like” (laughs). But I wasn’t like that so…I wanted male attention. I think everyone is body conscious. I learned if you are not sexy, you are not important. In order to make money and have a good time the summer after I finished high school I stripped for two months, it was fun. Hello male attention (laughs). I was desired. I stopped caring about what was in magazines.

Danielle’s narrative reveals the pervasive impact images have on the viewer. Her narrative speaks of “learning to desire a normalized image of the perfect woman” (Oliver, 1999, p. 220). Her narrative also speaks of the social politics of her body, as her body image was not being reflected back to her from the images in the magazines and billboards that surrounded her. The impact, for some women, whose bodies are not found in advertisements, in films, or on the runway, are made to feel that they are ‘wrong’ in their own skin, as they do not replicate what the media has dictated as the ‘right’ body or aesthetic to be. Danielle speaks of lacking the money that is marketed as necessary for women to beautify themselves. “A girl must have the economic buying power to look right” (Oliver, 1999, p. 236). So now, we see the intersections of oppression, not just gender, but also class.
Danielle speaks to a need or craving for bodily validation from men. Both Kelly and Tyff’s narratives touch on the value that becomes attached to particular bodies. Therefore, Danielle actively created an arena where she was desired, and made money by “stripping for a summer”. She speaks of the experience as “fun and freeing” and a choice that she made “happily on her own, in her own sexual self interest”. She speaks of her own pleasure when witnessing male desire for her. Danielle’s narrative speaks to how she negotiates her identity in that she challenges notions of female sexuality. She also troubles commonly held understandings that women only strip or do sex work when they are completely downtrodden, ‘desperate’, and victimized. Danielle asserts that it was her choice, and that she enjoyed the job. Danielle’s narrative challenges tired old understandings of female sexuality and making money into a narrative that in part, speaks of strength, power, and critique of the media, unrealistic standards of beauty, and female sexuality. It is important to note that this is one reading of Danielle’s narrative. My reading that I present here, is very close to how Danielle represents her experiences as a stripper. Danielle only was a stripper for one summer. I believe her experience was also a positive one because she is a white woman, and at the time lived with her mother in her middle-class home. Danielle framed stripping as a way “to make extra cash” and “to get to know her body”.

**Sarah: Aware Of My Body (Oral Narrative)**

You should be thin, nice hair, nice clothes. You should take care of yourself at all times. Pretty stereotypical but that is what really affected me. I went through anorexia. I was so aware of my body and wanted to feel light and free. I wanted to be as small as possible. I didn’t want anyone to interfere. I am not a textbook case, I still struggle. I am body conscious and scared of being fat. I need to stay in control, and my definition of control is probably a lot different than other peoples.
Sarah’s narrative speaks to a hyper-awareness that society dictates around female appearance and weight. Her narrative also asserts that “image and style [are central] to the experiences of the body” (Budgeon, 2003, p. 33). Her narrative speaks to the pressure many women experience with regards to discipline, manipulate, and shape their bodies to the ideal form. This pressure often results in many of us striving to get our bodies down to the bone. Body image is not synonymous with the body itself. Rather, body image has to do with the mind; how the mind creates a representation of what the body looks like. Sarah felt that her body always needed improvement, and that she felt “the most powerful when controlling her body by starving it”. Sarah’s story speaks to “the desire for control, mastery, and evidence of discipline, and normalization with regards to the idea that women must work hard to be beautiful” (Budgeon, 2003, p. 35). Sarah’s narrative is incredibly honest. She expresses her desire to be left alone. I see her strategic negotiation in this narrative, as she asserts that she is who she is, that she is “not a textbook case”. In voicing her struggle, her narrative about her body is still in process. She is working through with awareness and honesty.
"I drew myself the way I want to look. I just need to lose my fat." 

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22 I noticed the centrality of her children's names “Kaigen” and “Xavier”, as well as the centrality of her “mom” written in large print. Her name “Sheena” is written much smaller. I also found it interesting that radiating from herself to “[her] boys” is the word “strength”.
"The picture says I’m very conscious about my look and weight." \(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\) I noticed the centrality of the “Gap” name-brand clothing logo. I also noticed how romance with the clip “recipe for love” and the popular culture romantic film reference “waiting to exhale” is paired with body issues: “getting in shape”, “run walk diet”, and “quit drinking beer"
Cody’s interpretation of her visual narrative is difficult to read. Her tone is negative and self-deprecating. She said to me, “no one thinks I am cute, I am just a haggard Native girl who has a kid”. She expresses pleasure in gazing at “hot guys” and wanting to be gazed back at. Her narrative alludes to a self-opinion of unworthiness and hints at internalized racism.

24 Cody’s interpretation of her visual narrative is difficult to read. Her tone is negative and self-deprecating. She said to me, “no one thinks I am cute, I am just a haggard Native girl who has a kid”. She expresses pleasure in gazing at “hot guys” and wanting to be gazed back at. Her narrative alludes to a self-opinion of unworthiness and hints at internalized racism.
"The picture is a representation of me; it is me being myself. I dress like this: red fishnets, black boots. I am surrounded by music, a quote by Sid Vicious, as well as the feminist slogan “riot don’t diet”. My politics are a part of me and I live them".
Rebecca: My Look is Me (Oral Narrative)

In terms of my appearance I am outgoing, I stand out in my body. I wear knee high boots with steel toes, black mini skirts and leopard print, and leather jackets. I have dyed black hair, black eye make-up, and always-red lipstick. I have tattoos, body jewellery. My look is me; my identity is found within my body. My look is very much tied to my politics and who I am. I have looked this way for so many years that I don’t think about it anymore. It is not a get up that I feel I need to put on and look a certain way. This is me, who I am and I don’t need to prove myself. I don’t feel that I need to fit into a certain group.

Rebecca interprets her body as a direct reflection of herself. I see her self-described “loud” “punk” aesthetic (from our detailed conversations), as embodied resistance. She strategically negotiates and forges her own identity separate from, and set against, the norms of femininity, convention, and passivity, as well as the traditional notions of motherhood and female sexuality. Rebecca creates and defines herself through her appearance, and in her body. “Dress is her self-production, she produces herself” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 143). With a desire to be distinct and stand out, Rebecca actively has created her look and her identity. It was important to Rebecca that her “punk” look was not reduced “to a costume or act or anything poser-ish”. She directly challenges the claim that her “punk” look is a ‘phase’ or meant for ‘shock value’. Her appearance is a direct embodiment of her subjectivity and “anarchist, feminist politics”.

Conclusion

Within each of their narratives, the women presented complex understandings of femininity, ‘proper’ sexuality, dress, lookism, in all their (theoretical and) respective contradictions. The women presented their individual negotiations of how they see themselves and their bodies; how others have influenced how they experience and understand their bodies; and how they work through their experiences to make/ attach (multiple) meaning(s) to their bodies and themselves. This chapter explored how each of
the Step women experienced her body through dominant cultural storylines and through their own resistant and complicit subjectivities and storylines. This chapter also reveals how each of the Step women in their own ways have insisted on themselves and stood their ground by commenting, challenging, and seeing through beauty and body standards. This chapter speaks of occupying a space of resistance (critique of dominant scripts about women’s bodies) and at the same time taking up and consuming those scripts.
Chapter Four: The Odd Girl Out and Isolated

Danielle's Visual Narrative

"I wrote an Awkward Girl Lost on the drawing. That is me. I am not a popular person. I am a loner. I am kind of stuck — where am I going? What do I have to offer others? I feel like I am full of muted shades and there are more vibrant..."
shades underneath. I can’t sustain the vibrant colours throughout my everyday life even though I want to”.

Danielle’s written explanation of her body drawing articulately explores what many of the Step women narrated about their experiences of being an outsider, and how not fitting in or being popular had an impact on their identities. Their narratives speak to various, complicated, and differing experiences of exclusion and estrangement from social groups in, and outside, of school. Danielle and Jessie also articulate that a disconnection from others created a disconnection within themselves. Their lack of closeness with others prevented them from what I see, as a playing out of their identities. Therefore, as Jessie articulated, “I haven’t figured out who I am yet, or what I’m about. I’m in roles such as mother and girlfriend, but it’s like I am cut off from myself too”.

My interest here lies in exploring the various ways each of the women express how they have or are negotiating their subject positions, as Danielle named herself the “awkward” girl, and as the other women referred to the subject position as being the “different” girl. I adopt Patti Lather’s (1991) method of the “reflexive tale”; wherein the teller of the tale directs the narrative. Therefore my reading (interpretive analysis) is guided by the Step women’s own insights and reflections that they have chosen to share with me in their narratives with regards to the various ways each of them have individually made sense, or are making sense, of their experiences of being as Rebecca states, “the odd girl out and isolated”.

The theme of exclusion was prominent in response to my interview questions: what was high school like for you? As well as what was your friendship group like growing up? The theme was also very present in the Step women’s written narratives, especially in the free writing exercise on the topic of “high school”. Being both inspired
by and ensuring that I am attentive, to the “activist feminist” framework I have adopted from Fine (1992) for this project, I have kept a critical eye on what is being said by the Step women about the institution of the school, the social sphere in schools, and the powerful, painful dismissals and treatments that they have had to endure. I wish to pry open an exploratory discussion in this chapter around what shapes exclusion. I wish to explore how the “different” girl is constructed.

It must be noted that I am not making the claim that all young mothers encounter exclusion with others, in school, and within themselves. The claims I make in this thesis stem directly from the oral, written, and visual narratives the Step women shared with me. Reading the Step’s mandate that Beth graciously gave to me, the program centres on (amongst other things) providing services pertaining directly to “filling the gaps in young mothers’ education” by providing upgrading skills, basic courses in Math, English, and Communications, and offering GED preparation and the examination in a “safe, non-judgemental environment”. Step’s mandate mentions that many participants tend to come from situations where they were “socially isolated”. Many of the Step women experienced “school related hassles when they failed to conform to dominant perspectives of how they as [women and students in the school system] should speak and behave” (Cocca, 2002, p. 70).

Directly based on my interactions with the Step women, many of them, like Sarah, told me “how bored [she] was at school”. Danielle said she was “not stimulated throughout high school,” but in her case chose to “stick it out ‘cause everyone thought I’d drop out, I stayed to prove them wrong”. In my study, she was the only participant to graduate from high school. The Step program draws young women who have had
difficult high school experiences. Many of the women spoke of being “singled out”, “targeted”, and “unable to get along with teachers”\(^\text{25}\). Therefore, due to their lack of connection, many of them did not do their homework, skipped school, got poor grades, and as Cody said got, “kicked out by the cops when I could not not fight back”, against peers who were bullying her.

The Step women all, in different ways, expressed in their narratives their experiences as outsiders Shanny spoke about “not [being] accepted for who they [were]” and how they were judged and ostracized by their peers in high school. This left them without a friendship base for support for their identity and interest exploration, as well as a lack of support to combat rumours, bullies, fights, feelings of loneliness, and isolation. The Step women’s narratives speak to how they were seen as targets for ridicule and were dismissed and ignored. They were seen as ‘different’ and were told that they were so. “Stories are constructed by others, and then taught and learned. But once internalized they shape the way life feels and looks” (Rice and Russell, 1995, p. 27). As Sheena says, “I dunno if it is because I am Native or something but I was made to feel like I didn’t belong with anyone anywhere”. By the process of iteration they themselves took on the identity as different, to which they speak in this project. Rebecca and Jessie both articulate that they see the word ‘different’ as something they are proud to claim. These women are taking ownership over that label and negotiating its meaning -- an act of resistance.

\(^{25}\) Schools shape identities; they privilege certain identities (white, heterosexual, middle-class, from a nuclear family) and certain attributes (polite, clean, friendly, academically interested). Schools oppress certain identities (students of colour, different sexual orientations, working class, single-parent families) and certain attributes deemed as loud, unruly, socially awkward/ anti-social and those who appear un-stimulated/ disinterested in school.
The process of ostracization and the experiences of combating teasing stem from a combination of gendered, sexualized, racialized, and class based oppressions. These oppressions intersect and conflate to produce, as Rebecca names, “the odd girl out”. A dominant and recurring thread that ribbons through Kelly, Tyff, Jessie, Rebecca, Cody, and Danielle’s narratives is that they were made to feel not ‘good enough’, and therefore, could not be accepted or befriended by the popular girls. Nor were they able to get support from teachers and/or administrators in the schools. They were made ‘other’ and constructed as the troubled, ‘wrong’, ‘problem’ girls. Rebecca’s narrative touches on her experiences with being reduced to a single identity as “the slut” in her high school; after her horrific rape by multiple men was misrepresented as her “asking for it”. Kelly was teased for having eyes that were two different colours. Tyff, Jessie, and Danielle were belittled for, among other things, not having the ‘right clothes’ because they couldn’t afford the trends. Cody and Sheena articulate that they were treated terribly by others in school because of racist judgements and claims about their First Nations identities.

The Step women’s narratives, as well as my own experiences in high school, speak to the omnipresent gaze in the school, one that was full of judgement. In their narratives they articulate that they constantly felt scrutinized and devalued because they weren’t seen as ‘pretty enough’. Many refused, as Jessie stated, to “do everything in their power to conform to be like them ‘cause that would make me fake like them and be like a sheep for nothing more than a surface non-genuine friendship”. The Step women’s narratives speak to the toxicity of the social game that is played out in high school and the deep-rooted institutionalized oppression that makes up the school. These work
together to poke and prod at students which produce either conformity, or silent resistance, as Danielle did by “just getting by” or becoming the ‘drop out’.

In their narratives the Step women express what I see as how they have and are negotiating their experiences with exclusion. Each of their individual negotiations, are acts that are at once dynamic, difficult, embattled, confused, surprising, constrained and transformative. It must be noted that in the various schools that the Step women attended many of the women expressed that they were aware that they were seen as the problem, rather than the institutionalized oppressions that shaped and caused their exclusion. Being seen as the problem ‘conveniently’ constructed them as triggering their own exclusion. It constructs the myth of the misfit. It constructs the image of the ‘bad’ girl who has gone in the ‘wrong direction’. Just as this pervasive myth is enacted and perpetuated I worry too that readers could interpret the Step women’s working through, or what I name strategic, or constrained, or embattled negotiation as taking a disastrous path towards self-harm. I am not seeking to romanticize or downplay pain, hardship, or coping mechanisms. Rather, I wish to trouble the notion that for example, turning to drugs is inherently deviant and is ‘expected’ of a girl who fights her bully back and gets kicked out of school for standing up for herself.

Oliver and Lalik (2000) write, “some [personal] histories are valued and others demeaned” (p. 15). I re-represent the women’s narratives as they were articulated to me. I read (interpret/ analyze) their narratives in such a way that positions them as active agents who care to live their lives in order to forge connections with themselves and others. I refuse to reduce the women, in my study to this kind of destructive, static character stereotyping that many of the women, such as Rebecca, have said that she has
often “battled” in her life. I am not placing value on the women’s decisions, but rather presenting the women’s narratives as they were articulated to me. I see the Step women as struggling, and at times stumbling, and shining along the way as they turn to different outlets in order to find multiple places and purposes to assert and make sense of their identities and their experiences. While doing so, they attach a wide range of meanings to their identities and their experiences.

Each of the women spoke about different experiences they had upon leaving school such as Kelly, Tyff, Jessie, and Cody attending an alternative school, getting into drugs, or moving towns like Rebecca before learning that they would become mothers. There is not one path to follow. Although there is a mythic, socially constructed ‘right path’, in actuality, there is no such thing. In each of the women’s narratives that address exclusion, none of them use this right path as a reference point. Therefore, I will not set them against this mythic and pervasive construction. I believe that “part of the finding is in the exploration, the twists and turns—in the getting lost” (Lather, 1991, p. 104). The Step women each experienced and found various avenues to take in their lives.

The insights the women had about their experiences with exclusion utterly moved me. Their accounts of what I name active negotiation are also about how they have shaped their identities through the experiences they have had. Active negotiation is part of how the Step women consciously shaped their identities in the (re) telling of their experiences and in their sharing of themselves to me in their visual, written, and oral narratives.

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26 This construction of the ‘right path’ is that women should be desirable but not sexual; that they are and should act ‘feminine’; that they are educated; that they are heterosexual and have intercourse within a monogamous relationship preferably marriage; that they have children once they are married; that they work and are not on income assistance.
Kelly’s Written Narrative: High School

I was at the bottom of the barrel. 
There are the jocks, 
the popular people, and then there is us. 
I didn’t have anyone, ‘cause I was 
different from the other girls. 
I wasn’t as good as them. 
I wasn’t as pretty as them. 
I have different coloured eyes, one brown, and one blue 
and they thought that was weird 
and wrong. 
So I got stuck way down. I fit nowhere.

Kelly only addressed the theme of exclusion in her written narrative on high school. She told me that the “poem just came out, ‘cause high school was really terrible”. Kelly’s words speak of how she was made to feel that she “wasn’t as good as them”. Her narrative speaks of being devalued. Value is attached with being “pretty”. Kelly’s precise and honest detail of having “different coloured eyes” speaks to the petty and evaluative nature that dictates what is seen as ‘normal’ and worthy of praise and admiration. Therefore, this sense of normative beauty deems what is likeable. Kelly said to me during a break “she had nowhere to go in high school”. Kelly found no support or space in the school where she could connect or feel supported.

Rebecca’s Oral Narrative

I never really fit in. I was always different from the rest of the kids. I was kind of the outsider. School was just terrible. People would not hang out with me because of the rumours around my gang rape; that I consented to it and asked for it. All sorts of slut rumours that I was over-sexed. I was the odd girl out and isolated.
I was so frustrated with life in a small town. I had to battle through a lot of stereotypes that I was a lesbian and a man-hater after the rape too. The girls and some teachers even ‘cause I dressed punk would look at me and scowl. Many people hated my guts and they knew nothing real about me.

It was so smothering to be a woman in a small town. Especially a woman who was proudly ‘different’ than everybody else. I was happy to be seen as ‘different’. I was not a bigot, rapist, hypocrite bitchy white girl. I was a punk, raped, Jewish girl who was determined to find my way and place. I was determined to confront and battle through all of it.

So I dropped out halfway through Grade eleven. I moved towns, and became part of the Squeegee Punk scene. I found people to connect with—a community. I was no longer left out. I saw a counsellor and explored my sexuality. I also began writing which was an important outlet for me. It was like all this light came in and I could breathe for the first time.

Rebecca’s Written Narrative

Anxious, vomit, outsider
Fights, red necks, four by fours.
Anger, anti-society
Three boys, older
throw me down to rape.
So punk rock, slut, slut, slut, call out, riot
Outsider
Walk the line
Drugs booze
Mosh
Drums, drop out
Move away
Try to live like me. To be me.

Rebecca’s narratives are full and multi-layered. Her language is vivid and clear allowing the reader to envision her being pushed to the edge of the small town she lived in. She did not fit, in large part, due to the fact that peers at school reconfigured and retold her rape by multiple men as her ‘fault’, because she was an ‘unruly slut’. “There is no private domain of a person’s life that is not political” (Burch, 1997, p. 17). She was made to endure the rumours and the silencing of the violence that was done to her.
Rebecca also did not fit in terms of her punk appearance, and her progressive politics that included the anarchy movement and feminism. She made her politics and in particular her positions known then, just as she did at the Step program. She struggled to find a place, as she describes in her written narrative, that would enable her to attempt to “try to live like me”, despite efforts to displace her again and again as “the odd girl out and isolated”.

The silences and the gender oppression that was placed upon her, compelled her to “confront and battle” the mistreatment. It should be noted that being white-skinned and from a middle class background, she had the cultural capital to resist. Her articulate insights in her narratives also reveal this. Rebecca actively and strategically negotiated a way out of the small town and avoided being stuck both literally and figuratively in the actual town. By moving away, she was able to take care of herself and begin to heal from the experience of the rape. This allowed her to begin to experience the freedom of being herself and living without judgemental eyes on her. Rebecca’s articulation of finding outlets through both a counsellor and writing reveals a proactive move towards healing and understanding.

*Jessie’s Written Narrative*

I didn’t fit. I learned to like being alone; well I had no choice really. I wasn’t like the girls. I found them boring all they did was gossip and care about their expensive trendy clothes. I did not know how to find my place. So I said okay I like being different. If that is what normal is, those girls I mean. They were so fake. Everybody was like sheep. Everybody was trying to blend in like everybody else and I didn’t like that.

*Jessie’s Oral Narrative*

When I quit school in Grade 9 I had nothing going on. I wasn’t doing anything with my life. So when I found out that I was pregnant I felt like I had begun to have a purpose. I felt that I could find a place to fit. People said to me “oh you
are going to ruin your life, it will be over. It will be such a tragedy”. But that is not my experience whatsoever. I found a connection, and my life is fuller than ever before.

Jessie’s written narrative expresses how she negotiated her experiences with exclusion. Although she was constrained because she “had no choice” with regards to her experiences with exclusion, Jessie was able to assert herself by remaining fiercely independent, despite the lack of company or support. Her narrative reveals that she could see through the superficial popular group. Jessie was able to retain her interests, and more importantly, her self worth. I see her as reclaiming the label “different”, to imbue it with the meaning of distinction, value, and self-respect.

I read Jessie’s oral narrative as a direct challenge to the perpetuated understanding about teen moms that Jessie herself explores. This dominant discourse argues that getting pregnant at a young age causes all sense of purpose to be taken away from the woman and put into a child. For Jessie, finding out that she was pregnant, giving birth, and raising her daughter set her “life into motion”. She speaks of “finding a purpose” and of her “life becoming full” since she became a mother. Her pregnancy provided her with a raison d’etre, and she notes this time as when her life fell into place. As I will describe in Chapter five, Jessie goes into high schools and gives talks as she wants to show other young people that as a young mother she is “responsible, happy, and is living a full life”.

Jessie’s representation of herself as a mother is very much idealized. As I read her narratives, I see her role as ‘mother’ both enriching and limiting her. She speaks of “not knowing herself” and describes herself in her visual narrative as occupying the “roles of mother and girlfriend”. Jessie’s narrative both challenges the dominant discourse of the teen mom and at the same time re-inscribes it. She re-inscribes the
discourse by revealing that her entire self and entire purpose is now distilled into the role of the ‘selfless’ mother,

Tyff’s Oral Narrative

High school was pretty horrible. I did not know what to do most of the time. Pretty girls never liked me. I was called ugly and then called a slut by the girls by how I dressed. I didn’t care that much but I really doubted what I looked like and stuff.

I was in a cloud for most of high school! I faced abuse, rape, sexual assault my whole life (quietly) since I was three. All these incidents really affected me and who I am. I became able to stand outside of myself. I guess I didn’t really care that I was being left out, because I was preoccupied or something.

I took my grandfather to court. I got to tell him what he did was wrong. But I turned to drugs to cope. I never had anyone that I could connect with, so I had drugs. I wanted to get away from my body, but getting pregnant brought me back. I started writing poetry because I was really down and needed to connect to something.

I found Tyff’s narrative to be courageous, because she was extremely open and candid. She said after the interview that she “wanted other people to know how violence affects someone”. Tyff’s narrative expresses how she was elsewhere — that the social sphere and the fact that she was left out or excluded in high school was an after thought. Throughout high school she was preoccupied and working through her experiences with sexual abuse. This came about by initially confronting, and then trying to escape the horrific multiple violent and violating experiences she endured.

Tyff speaks of retreating into drugs, in an attempt to free herself from the weight of her experiences. I see her turn to drugs as a not surprising form of coping. I see it as a form of embattled negotiation; a form of protective retreat. Her use of drugs was a way of disassociating — she was watching herself from above or outside of her body. Her poetic rendering of how “pregnancy brought [her] back”, speaks to her movement back
into the ground of recovery and healing. It speaks of how sometimes as individuals, we try to become small and escape, especially after having to endure oppression(s). Tyff’s body was repetitively violated, and she never had anyone with whom to genuinely connect. Pregnancy reacquainted her with her self, her body, her capacity for language, and love. She said in ‘life skills’ class “pregnancy grounded me”.

Cody’s Oral Narrative

I had a lot of conflict with a lot of girls in high school. I hated school and the people around me. There was racism at school and some teachers would call me lazy and make judgements without talking to me. They would be bigoted because I am First Nations. A girl called my Mom a crack whore and called me pathetic. I lost it. I knocked her in the head. A cop escorted me out of the school, and they kicked me out for good. I was seen as the bad seed, the rotten apple. I was really lost doing a lot of drinking and drugs until I found out I was pregnant.

Now at Step I feel really uncomfortable sometimes, because I am the youngest in the program right now, and it is hard to relate to the others. Again I am the outsider. They talk down to me; they say, “when I was your age”, when they do talk to me. No one really talks to me here. I feel like I am always sitting by myself.

Cody’s narrative speaks of how her experiences with exclusion and their systemic relationship to racism, and how she was targeted by both peers and teachers. Her narrative addresses the gap she had to face, as she lacked a support system. The racist comments that were directed at her stemmed from stereotypical, essentialized, and offensive claims of and about First Nations peoples. Peers and teachers socially divided themselves from Cody, in terms of race. This in turn, worked to make her ‘other’. It was these instances that shaped her experiences with exclusion. As she resisted the offensive comments her peer said about her mother, Cody reacted with physical violence. The school regarded the incident as her fault. Cody became the provoker, and the ‘problem’. This allows the peer who was racist and the initiator, to ‘wash her hands clean’.
perpetuates the pathology that Cody was seen and treated as “the bad seed, the rotten apple”.

Cody also revealed how some of the Step participants “treated her as a child”, and made comments that were ageist. She said to me after our interview, “I am sad that I don’t even fit here”. At Step many of the women kept to themselves. However, Rebecca, Danielle, and Sandra formed a clique. These three women were amongst the oldest participants in the program and were the most vocal. Tyff, Shanny, Sarah, Kelly, Sheena, Jessie, and Cody were relatively quiet. Cody chose to leave Step, and return to school. She said, “I am hoping for a new beginning. I want to learn, and this program wasn’t the right place for me”.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the theme of exclusion and social isolation, derived from each of the Step women’s particular experiences that they shared in their narratives. Exclusion is a poignant, difficult form of oppression. It is a form of social politics that attacks, devalues, and ostracizes. The Step women’s gender woven with appearance, class, race, sexuality, and personal history serve as “a telling platform upon which social politics are choreographed, discussed, resisted, and negotiated” (Fine, 1992, p. 27). Sandra, Sheena, and Cody, the women of colour who left Step, continued to face differing experiences with exclusion even within the program, which did an inadequate job of looking at how race along with gender and class produces barriers. For Cody in

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27 In Chapter two, I discussed Grosz’s (1994) concept of “blind spots and unsayables”. I critique the Step program here within the context of, in this case, observing and speaking with Sheena and Cody about their experiences as women of colour enrolled in the program.
particular the youngest participant in the program, institutional constraints\textsuperscript{28} were at play during her time at Step. As she did in high school, her feelings of being “left out and ignored” allowed her to fall through the cracks of this program.

Exclusion, therefore, is shaped and is a direct manifestation of gender oppression, lookism, ageism, racism, classism, and sexualization. Using activist feminist research as my theoretical model allowed me to read each of the women’s narratives and inquire into, or pry open, how their exclusion was shaped. It was my aim to look critically at their experiences with exclusion as well as how they narrated their experiences of resistance. Exclusion had an impact on each of the Step women differently. Each of the women’s narratives speaks to how feeling isolated and estranged from others (and at times themselves) had an impact on their identities. Each of the women spoke of how being “the odd girl out and isolated” manifested in their lives. Many of the women worked through their experiences through active (strategic, constrained, embattled) negotiation in each of their own unique ways to (attempt to) forge a place for themselves. Cody, however, experienced exclusion throughout her time at Step. She said before she decided to leave the program that, “I will push on, and find a place for myself”. I read her leaving the program as a refusal to be ignored, left alone, and passive.

\textsuperscript{28} The institutional constraints that directly affected Cody included a change over in the Career exploration staff. Cody was the only woman who wasn’t assigned a volunteer or work placement. Cody did, however, express interest in volunteering at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre but no arrangements were made. The program was also lacking educational resources such as textbooks. Cody, being the youngest enrolled in the program, was in need of Grade 9 and 10 level materials. Most of the women were completing their Grade 11 or 12 Math and English. Cody had very little resources at her disposal at Step.
Chapter Five: “I’m a Mom—take the Teen out of it”.

That [label] which is given to me, and thus by definition is not something I myself have made, must be challenged, thwarted, and rebuffed precisely in order to establish my own reflective consciousness, my own power (Alcoff, 2000, p. 331).

‘Ruined’, ‘slut’, ‘too young’, ‘mistake’, ‘welfare drainer’, ‘bad mother’, ‘lazy’, ‘needs love and attention’, ‘her life is over’, ‘uneducated’— these are some of the many harsh words and phrases that are common, slanderous labels directed towards women who have had a child/children at a young age. These are labels that all of the Step women have heard and have been subject to since becoming mothers. These labels are incomplete, reductive, and problematic. Each woman in this study has lived inside and come through these labels again and again. These words are the manifestation of a persistent moral panic surrounding the identity of the unwed teen mother. The moral panic takes its shape as a stigma whereby it becomes further compounded by class and gender inequities. In addition, the stigma is shaped by female sexualization where the combination of a young woman who is visibly pregnant or is mothering her baby becomes immediately interpreted and seen as her having a “sexuality [that is] out of control” (Kelly, 2000, p. 25) and deviant.

Technically, Cody, Jessie, Kelly, Tyff, Sheena, and Shanny ‘fit’ in the age bracket (fifteen to eighteen) that would deem them teen mothers; however I, and more importantly they, actively contest that label. Jessie, Sheena, and Tyff were the most vocal on the topic of teen mothers and were extremely frustrated and tired of having to combat the phrase again and again; each time they pushed their babies in their strollers, were on the bus, or in the grocery store. Jessie, who frequently goes into schools to speak about being a young mother, stated that she does the talks for people in high school
because she wants them “to see a realistic portrait of a young woman who is together and whose life is not a tragedy, whose life is not over and is also a Mom”. From her narratives, and our interactions, I could infer that she is committed to disrupting notions of the young mother without purpose, agency, or complexity. In the talks she gives, she stated she “challenges all the horrible stereotypes I know about ‘teen Mom’s’.

I purposefully explored the theme of stigma and labels in each interview with the Step women when I asked the questions: what do you think people thought of you when you became pregnant and when you became a mother did you feel you were being labelled/defined at all? Each of the women, in their oral narratives, went inside of the labels that they had encountered and explored the judgements that were placed onto them.

All the women involved in this project referred to themselves as young mothers. The stigmas associated with young mothers serve to collapse these dynamic women into a singular, fixed identity due to their mothering at a younger age. However, each of the women asserted that being a mother is an important part of their selves, and that motherhood fits in alongside the other multiple subject positions they occupy. These varying subject positions came through in each of the women’s narratives. Lutrell (2003) understands narratives as, in and of themselves, “a self and identity making process” (p. 114). There were times, such as in Sheena’s narrative, where she stopped speaking and after a few moments, stated “I have never talked this much about myself, especially since I had not really had an opportunity before now. I got all those judgements, but that’s not at all what I’m about. I am not just a Mom. I am a proud First Nations woman, shawl dancer, from the Sunshine Coast, yeah I am young but…” My focus for this chapter is
on the plethora of ways the women in their narratives go in, out, and through the labels they have encountered in order to speak and define their own selves.

Each woman challenged both the assumptions, and as Shanny stated, the “nerve” of strangers, teachers, peers, and the media to comment about her as a young woman of colour and a mother. The labels and judgements that help form stigmas become magnified due to race. White is not seen as a colour, and therefore, on the surface does not seem to impact stigmas. However, whiteness is associated with privilege. The visible women of colour encounter harsher judgement and ‘different’ labels on top of the standard ones associated with an ‘unwed young mother’. I will explore this in more depth in my reading of Sheena’s narratives. The judgement of others, or the “nerve” which Shanny articulated stems from the fact that “identity based forms of oppression such as racism and sexism...flatten out the raced and sexed identities to one dimension and they disallow the individual negotiation and interpretation of identity’s social meanings” (Alcoff, 2000, p. 338). Focus is given to each of the women’s individual negotiations and interpretations of who they are and how they interpret other people’s understanding of them.

When I told an acquaintance about the purpose of this project and my aim to work with the women themselves in order to dispel the stigma surrounding the young mother, he said, “so you are saying that becoming a mother at a young age is a good thing”. While some participants such as Jessie, spoke of the positive aspects of motherhood, I knew that he was not speaking from this perspective. I had no words to offer in response to his sarcastic remark. His comment speaks to “ the dominant discourses of blame, shame, stigma” that this project serves to present and explode (Lutrell, 2003, p.
24). His comments reminded me that quite often people simply and solely understand young [teen] mothers in the reductive and degrading terms I used at the onset of this chapter. The stigma runs very deep. Last year (2003), on the Dr. Phil television series he did a show on “a family in crisis” with the topic of a “sixteen year old honour roll student who became pregnant”. The theme running through the show fed into the stigma: ‘will she keep the baby and ruin her life?’

Deirdre Kelly (2000) names this understanding as part of a “stigma contest” being waged by groups with distinct interests and incentives, but who agree that pregnancy in young mothers “should be stigmatized as a deterrent to early sexual activity and welfare dependence” (Kelly, p. 67). She identifies three different frames to analyze the stigmatizing discourses surrounding teen pregnancy and motherhood, including the “wrong girl frame” where the young woman “from a flawed background [is making] tragic mistakes” (Kelly, p.75). This is where a young woman’s pregnancy is seen as a “bad choice”. Blame is directed at the ‘young mother’ herself, for being ‘stupid’ and not thinking about the ‘consequences of her actions’. “Teen pregnancy brings with it the foregone conclusion of poverty, failure, and dysfunction” (Schultz, 2001, p. 582). This “wrong girl frame” is based on narrow, normative, and punitive notions of race, class, femininity, and sexuality. The ‘problem’ girl is associated with a ‘loose’ sexuality, ‘revealing’ dress, talking back to teachers and parents, poverty, drinking, doing drugs, getting into fights, and other forms of deviancy such as having tattoos, piercings, and skipping or dropping out of school.

29 These three frames are “the wrong-girl frame”, “the wrong-family frame”, and “the wrong-society frame” (Kelly, 2000, p. 74-81)
Liberal bureaucratic experts, and the conservative create moral panics which lead to the stigmatization of and about young mothers. These moral panics flood structures and influence the belief systems of the family, schools, government, and religious institutions. The construct of the young mother as being "wrong" and making a terrible mistake becomes institutionalized in state policies and programs, and thus, helps to create material conditions that get played out and reinforced in day-to-day life. I expand on these material conditions by exploring two popular stigmas directed to, and about, young mothers. First, how young women who are mothers are blamed for being sexually active and second, how poor-bashing labels\(^{30}\) are attached to young mothers.

Sexually active young women are seen as deviant, ‘loose’, and ‘bad’. This is founded on gender-based forms of oppression with its aim to closet and silent women as desiring subjects. Value statements and critical judgements are directed at young women and expectations are imposed. “Young women are warned about the risks of pregnancy. They are told that it is their job to keep male sexuality in check. Very rarely do girls learn about orgasms, sexual pleasure, alternative desires, or making choices other than saying no” (Friedman, 1997, p. 129). Many of the Step women openly discussed the frustration and difficulty of being made sexually passive. This is the main message young women receive. Sandra spoke about her first sexual experience as “not being my idea. I was afraid to say no, and I had no desire at thirteen for that guy”. Sandra felt pressured to remain silent, as the male she was with was the sexual agent. It is Sandra who bears the brunt of being sexually active. Sandra spoke of her awareness of the sexual double standard and said, “I wish I was taught to be okay in my body and know that when I felt like it I could be sexual. But instead I got all scared that I would offend

\(^{30}\) These labels include ‘welfare-drainer’, ‘worthless’, ‘lazy’, and ‘stupid’.
the guy and ruin my reputation.” Rebecca said “girls have such a narrow window that they have to act in. It was too stifling for me. I wanted to explore and be in my body after the rape. I wanted to get myself back. People judged me horribly for that. And then, having a kid, I shattered that window altogether”.

Institutional (school, government) and social policies respond to active female sexuality in young women and pregnancy in young women by labelling these behaviours taboo. They work adamantly to prevent sexual activity and young pregnancy in the future. School boards in the United States as well as in Canada have enforced a fear-based, abstinence only sex education curriculum. In Chapter 7 of her book Pregnant with Meaning: Teen Mothers and the Politics of Inclusive Schooling, Deirdre Kelly explores the “conservative” sex education curriculum in a British Columbia high school that is similar to most of the curriculums used in Canadian schools. Since 1981 the United States government has given “ten million dollars a year to the Adolescent Family Life Act or Chastity Act to use scare-tactics and to promote self-discipline and chastity. It is to advance a conservative and restrictive social agenda” (Collins, Alagiri, Summers, 2002, p.8). Traditional sex education miseducates young women and men. It has proven to be ineffective in reducing sexual activity in young women and men as well as ineffective in reducing pregnancy in young women. This has been supported by the research of such organizations as the Sexuality Information and Education Council (SEICUS) and by researchers such as Douglas Kirby. Kirby (2000) states, “President George W. Bush is on a mission to exclusively teach abstinence-only until marriage programs in schools yet no sound study exists, and there is no evidence whatsoever that shows these programs have been effective in terms of less young people becoming
sexually active, curbing teen pregnancies, or halting the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases” (p.197). As Jessie said, “teaching abstinence is ridiculous and old-fashioned. They need to be realistic. That is why I go into schools armed with condoms (laughs)”.

A comprehensive sexuality education curriculum “reinforces sex as a positive and healthy part of being human [for both males and females]. This form of education addresses the biological, socio-cultural, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality from the cognitive domain (information), the affective domain (feelings, values, attitudes), and the behavioural domain (communication skills)” (Mackler, 1999, p.67). This model not only advocates safer sex by discussing it in an open and honest fashion, but it is also emergent in that it attempts to encourage the unlearning of women as passive, non-desiring, ‘objects’. The Victoria B.C.- based “Project Respect” is modelled on comprehensive sexuality education. The aim of the project is for “women to say yes to their own desires” (Dodds, 2000, p. 11). Monica Blais, the founder of the program worked with young women to bombard public spaces with blue and pink stickers containing messages such as: “she asked for it”, “boys just want one thing”, and “good girls only take things so far”. On every sticker, below each slogan written in small print is: “warning! These gender stereotypes are harmful to your health” (Dodds, 2000, p. 12). These powerful messages explode conventional and stereotypical understandings of gender and sexuality.

The comprehensive sexuality education model should be implemented as mandatory curriculum for all school districts. Its approach troubles stigmas that are directed at young women, and encourages women to explore and know their bodies.
Comprehensive sexuality education “does not judge teen pregnancy as a mistake. A woman who keeps her baby is seen as making a difficult choice…but a choice that is for her to make” (Dodds, 2000, p. 15). Understanding pregnancy in young mothers as a choice works to rid the unfair, harsh judgement, the condescending and reductive treatment that Cody said “weighed her down”.

Poor bashing is a potent form of classism that shapes stigmas directed at young women who are mothers. The women at Step often spoke of how they were seen as or made to feel worthless. Class intersects together with race\textsuperscript{31}, however the two are not conflated. By this I mean that working-class or low-income women of colour often face unique and complicated struggles that working-class or low-income women who are white\textsuperscript{32} do not have to endure. As Cody said in her oral narrative, when discussing stigmas, labels, and judgements, “I’m not seen as only a poor girl (pause) but as that good for nothin’ Native girl”.

Judgements are often made based on assumptions alone, that young women who are mothers do not come from secure, respectable, or loving nuclear families. Rather, their perceived “brokenness” is seen as a reflection of their “broken” single parent and/or dysfunctional families. This is Kelly’s (2000) concept of the “wrong-family frame”. In turn, young mothers are seen as unstable and ‘lacking’, feeding into the ‘worthless’ stigma. Often, young women who are mothers are judged solely upon assumptions based on their class backgrounds that they are not educated. There is no consideration, such as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Race is operating in the identity formation of both women of colour and women who described themselves as white.
\item \textsuperscript{32} While informal discussions at Step took place in Morning Check-In about B.C. Housing, the food bank, and income assistance, there was never any mention about differences in the women’s struggles based on their own particular subject positions. Cody and Sheena were the most vocal in their oral narratives, citing their First Nation identities as contributing to the stigmas they encounter.
\end{itemize}
the discussion in Chapter four, about the racist and classist foundations that creep into the school and cause many young women and men to feel excluded, unaligned, and not stimulated in school. Students of colour and/or of working class backgrounds often fall through the cracks of the system because their needs are not met. Often, as evident in Cody’s narratives, her attempts to expose, challenge, and reject the racist treatments by her teacher and her peers within the school system did not have transformative results. Therefore, it is most common for students of colour and/or of working class backgrounds to stop attending or to be asked to leave school. Danielle said, “I finished school. I’m a smart person. I read more than anyone I know. But when I push my son in his stroller and stand in line at the food bank, I’m seen as uneducated, dependent (pause) as nothing”.

Poor bashing marginalizes women both materially and ideologically. In Vancouver today, social service programs, and organizations that serve to meet the needs of women, such as the Step program, are losing their funding as well as facing incredible cutbacks. The Step participants faced significant cuts to the day care subsidy that the program provides. Beth also struggled to ensure that each Step participant could maintain daycare at a subsidized rate once the fifteen-week program had ended. The women had the further burden of the recently implemented welfare cut-off for themselves and their child(ren) when their child(ren) turned two. There was a constant buzz of panic for the Step women, wondering as Shanny did, “if I’ll have the skills or some sort of training and job before my daughter is two to support us”.

Step’s purpose is to “come away from the difficult, disorganized, and chaotic past by developing skills that will bring about stability and success. Every participant will be
ready for work”. Beth worked incredibly hard to ensure food bank connections, student loan applications, volunteer placements, and to discuss with each participant routes for further education and work programs. Beth strove to work with each of the women to explore their interests. For example, Beth sought out a four-month program at Douglas College for Rebecca to be a Street Youth Worker. She also found a six-month program for Shanny to train to be an office assistant. As Beth said, “knowing that they will get somewhere and giving them the tools to get them there is imperative, as they have always been told that they can’t or they won’t be able to. Especially once they became mothers”.

This is where the ideological effects of poor-bashing come into play, and where I am critical of such discourses located within society and within the Step program. Many of the women internalized the fact that they were seen as ‘worthless’. As Tyff said, “I don’t want to be stuck as just a poor young Mom. I hope Step can get me out of it”. Many of the Step messages were subtle, but I found them to be ever-present. One of the most pervasive is that women have to get unstuck, not dependent, and ‘become someone’. I witnessed, (as the program came to a close), the panic of Kelly, for example, who said, “I got to get into that peer-support counselling program. I don’t know if I even want to help youth out, but at least I’d make money and get off the couch, off the system, and be someone who is respected and working”. I am not downplaying the importance of the women needing to support themselves and their children, but rather the ideology that before Step, or before they become employed, they are simply welfare dependents and ‘drainers’. This ideology reinforces the message that motherhood does not have any value.
Step is also an advocate for getting women to see what is possible for them based on their interests. Kelly admitted to the instructor during the career exploration component of the program that she truly does not know what she wants to do. Therefore, based on her interests (from the True Colours exercise), a career as a counsellor was her top match. I see Step as working a way out of stigmas that are directed at young mothers. Step does this without understanding and recognizing the fact that they are class-based. The program does not address the material and ideological effects of poverty on individuals. Therefore, while the program has an important counselling component, it did not attempt to trouble women’s low self-esteem particularly around feelings of being called ‘worthless’. In addition, there is a problematic thread in the mandate itself, “a multi-barrier young mother needs to develop skills of full potential”. This phrase suggests that these women do not come into the program with skills, which is false. This phrase implies that the barriers reside within the mother herself, rather than in society “with labour markets that continue to be segmented by gender and race with unequal pay, benefits, and access to on-the-job training” (Kelly, 2000, p.217). This notion of multi-barrier is not defined and therefore issues of race and class are not made explicit. I am troubled by the assumption implicit in the Step mandate that when women develop ‘marketable’ skills only then do they ‘become somebody’. It must be noted that this understanding of (‘marketable’) ‘skills’ is part of the larger political economy, which has had an impact on the Step program. ‘Skills’ are seen as key to economic security.

This project addresses how stigmas affect the women and how each of them makes sense of stigmas. For example, Rebecca articulates how she seeks out pleasure despite the pervasive slut labels and stigmas; Kelly internalizes and reinforces the
classism of the Step mandate with the statement “getting off the couch and off the system”; Jessie asserts that her life is far from ‘ruined’ and in fact fuller, since she had her daughter. On a micro-scale, this project strives to confront, challenge, and begin to work a way out of the “stigma contest”.

Despite the power and pervasiveness of the stigmas the Step women endured, they made vocal in their narratives that although they have felt disbelief, anger, and hurt, they refuse to remain stuck inside the labels. Rather, in each of the women’s narratives, they each chose to focus on the unique ways they have spoken back and asserted their own power. Deirdre Kelly (2000) discusses this “stigma-is-wrong” discourse. “Whereby [young women] stress the positive and empowering aspects of their situations [with mothering] and not only recognize their stigmas but fight back” (p. 83). When I spoke to each of the women I witnessed an active refusal on their part to take on and internalize the labels to which they had been subjected. Inside their narratives recounting and/ or exploring stigma, the Step women each provided their unique interpretations and shared with me their own working through of the labels.

The intention of this chapter is to expose, and to echo Alcoff, “to flatten out” the labels and judgements that serve to stigmatize the Step women as only young mothers, by re-representing how the women themselves articulate their identities in narrative. In addition, the purpose of this chapter is to present the various ways each woman actively negotiates through her own experiences of being stigmatized.

Rebecca’s Oral Narrative

I am judged because of my sexuality, for being open. A lot of people have a hard time with me being openly sexual and sensual. As a woman it’s not allowed — not permitted to have sexual power and feelings. I am loud and assertive but I’m
also a great Mom. People cannot understand that I’m not just a Mom. And they need to understand that I don’t have to be non-sexual just because I had a kid.

I saw my pregnant belly like a middle finger pointing up to those who thought I was too young, tattooed, different, punk, or otherwise not suitable to be a mother. I get a lot of bullshit treatment about my physical appearance and that I’m a Mom. When I do, I just imagine my belly exposed to the world.

In the first part of her narrative Rebecca addresses stigma. Rebecca expresses that she was seen as unruly. She also candidly asserts that this stigma is magnified when it is associated with a younger mother. As a mother, she must become selfless and have no desires or act upon any such desires. She has to become the mythical ‘good’ woman and in turn, the ‘good’ mother. She must act in compliance with “smothering passions, appetites, and outrage” (Fine, 1992, p. 177). Yet, Rebecca resists this pressure to conform to these labels and identities.

The second part of Rebecca’s narrative directly speaks to her strategy to confront and challenge those who judge her for, then, being pregnant, and being a mother. Rebecca’s strategy of reconfiguring her pregnant belly as a middle finger flaunts the “over-represented, hyper-visible stigmatized subject like the teen mother” (Pillow, 2003, p. 7). The image of her pregnant belly as a symbol of assertion, defiance, and power is a tangible image and inspires a vivid strength. This statement reveals to me that rooting her power in her belly is a way that Rebecca embodies resistance. In this case, she embodies resistance towards discrediting stigma, labels, and judgement.

**Jessie’s Oral Narrative**

I hate the Teen Mom label, it’s everywhere. People try to put it on me and I say no way. When I give talks in high school I know initially that’s what people see. But I am a solid, together person and Mom. Avery, my daughter gave me a purpose. I had nothing before that. I’m responsible and nothing like the label.
It is extremely important for me to tell my story. I think people can benefit from me
telling about my life. Pregnant teenagers can realize their lives are not over.

Jessie uses words to deflect and challenge stigma. She told me that she “got
connected to go into high schools and speak by her own high school teacher”. She goes
into high schools with colourful condoms from “The Rubber Rainbow” store on Denman
Street. She goes into high schools ready to challenge the conventional “It happened to
me” lectures that are usually given. Jessie represents herself as someone who is focussed
and content with being a mother and mothering. She does not exaggerate the
responsibility part of parenting. She does not speak with regret, shame, or with a victim’s
discourse. She presents her experience and challenges commonly held notions that a
young mother is not together and is not content. Jessie is very pleased to be a parent.
She is selfless but also takes care of herself. She continuously goes into high schools, as
she states, to “try and get people to change their minds and understandings about young
parents”.

She has first-hand experiences of being called a teen Mom, and negotiating all the
meanings associated with the label. As she said to me before check-in one morning
“there is no way I let anyone call me a teen Mom”. Jessie actively negotiates her identity
by working towards counteracting the stigma surrounding young mothers and even
striving to rid herself of the label altogether.

Tyff’s Oral Narrative

Most people thought I was pretty dumb to have gotten pregnant.
Because I am a teen doesn’t mean that I’m going to be whatever they think a teen
Mom is.

I am not that teen Mom, no not at all.

33 See Jessie’s written and oral narrative and my reading of them in Chapter four pgs. 72-73.
It hurt to be judged like that. So many people felt that me being a teen and pregnant did not fit and was wrong. They saw me as pathetic without knowing me. They thought I'd be a bad mother, totally self-absorbed, and clueless. They thought I'd pawn off my child on others.

I am a Mom, take the teen out of it.

Tyff’s narrative reveals her first-hand experiences with being stigmatized for being a ‘teen mother’. Her narrative goes back and forth from recounting how she has been treated, to a strong and steady articulation of her asserting herself. She also reveals her feelings about being stigmatized. Tyff’s narrative addresses commonly held, and pervasive understandings of the teen Mom as ‘irresponsible’, ‘unprepared’, ‘immature’, and a ‘bad mother’. Much of these stigmas and labels are discussed in the introduction chapter and in the beginning of this chapter, as well as in the literature surrounding ‘teen mothers’ (Deirdre Kelly (2000), Wendy Lutrell (2003), Wanda Pillow (1994, 1997, 2003), Constance Nathanson (1997), and Kirsten Luker (1996)). “[Teen mothers] represent adolescent female sexuality out of control...teen mothers represent rebellion...teen mothers represent dropouts who...expect the welfare system to support their poor choices” (Kelly, 2000, p. 25). Tyff challenges being made into a degraded other. Her words are strong and steady and she spoke with emphasis in our interview together.

The title of this chapter, “I’m a Mom, take the teen out of it” is taken from a line of Tyff’s oral narrative. This line had a profound impact on me. Tyff was quite quiet in the Step space, however this statement was said with a fierce urgency. Tyff’s face became flushed, and she uttered this phrase with speed and tremendous emotion. She laughed in a slightly nervous manner, after it was uttered. Her phrase articulates the simple want to be seen, and more importantly, valued as a woman (who is a mother). Her
words are active and directive. She is speaking directly to the label, and all the reductive meanings associated with the label, to be extinguished.

Sheena’s Oral Narrative

My Grandmother took it the hardest because she had my Mom when she was a teenager too, and she didn’t want me to have kids so young. Also she wanted me to be a ‘different’ Native girl, finish school, and go on to college and stuff. It’s not like I can’t still do that. Being a Mom of my two babies is a big part of me but I still got other parts like I told ya about. It’s not like I’m going to give up being a shawl dancer or my dreams because I am a Mom.

People looked concerned all the time. They gave me looks of pity. I hated that and would stare back at them. I wasn’t quiet. Sometimes I swore.

Even today when I am with my babies they will glare or mumble something rude under their breath—something racist or because I am young. I may be young but I am a good mother.

Sheena’s narrative initially addresses her grandmother’s disapproval and sadness surrounding the fact that she is a mother at a young age. This is because her grandmother had lived through being a young mother herself. Sheena recounts her grandmother’s disappointment in her, as it is clear that she wanted Sheena to have a different experience than her. She did not want Sheena to be a part of the “serious public problem” that pregnancy in young women is deemed to be (Nathanson, 1991, p. 3). She wanted Sheena’s life to be open to other possibilities, such as getting an education. Sheena asserts that her life is not solely based on motherhood. She insists on herself and on her “shawl dancing”, her First Nations identity, and her dreams of “getting her GED and going to college”. Sheena relayed to me one afternoon that she hopes to be a nurse.

Sheena’s grandmother’s statement that she wished for her to “be a different Native girl” is a statement with many layers. It is also inflected with her grandmother’s own internalized racism. Her grandmother wished ‘more’ for her. Her grandmother wished
for her to have more opportunities, and even to be ‘more’ than just a mother to two young boys. Sheena insists in her narratives that she is ‘more’.

The stigma that Sheena is associated with is also inflected with racism. Sheena herself observes this. She is not only burdened by the gender-based stigma that is associated with the young mother, which Jessie and Tyff articulate, but also with race-based stigmas. Race-based stigmas bring with them additional reductive and pervasive claims. These include: ‘laziness’, pregnancy happens generation after generation, and (pregnancy is) to be expected. These assumptions, in turn, can generate more overtly racist claims. However, Sheena asserts in her written narrative that she is “stronger than labels”. It is as if because she is First Nations becoming pregnant and being a mother at a young age is somehow expected in society. This speaks to the third frame that Kelly (2000) names as the “wrong-society frame”. Some see it fitting that a woman of colour would become a young mother. These same people would see a white young woman, who is pregnant as a ‘tragedy’ or crisis. Sheena troubles this however, by reacting to the concerned looks, judgements, or muttered comments. “Racialized people deal with the object hood thrust upon them” (Razack, 2001, 20). Sheena does not merely deal with what is thrust upon her. Rather, she challenges it and insists upon her own subjectivities. She insists on her self, admits her struggles, and asserts her strengths.

Sheena’s Written Narrative

Be yourself
speak your mind
express it.

Hate kills
listen
try your best.
Motherhood
happiness and sadness
responsibility
frustration
pain work
enjoy
fear.

Being a woman
sacrifice.
Can you see me?
First nations
ability
I am here
not lost
not lazy.

And I am strong,
stronger than labels for sure.

Danielle’s Written Narrative

I feel restricted by society’s take on what a mother should be. I am often told that I don’t do enough for my son, because I still have a life. I think my son will appreciate having a mother who is content in her self, and not miserable and repressed. If people choose to stigmatize me for being true to myself, then they have a loose screw.

I became a mother through social expectations, influence, and slowly my own values and lots of change. I feel I was hammered into the shape I am now. I am Mama through trial by fire. I cannot fully commit to the label ‘mother’. I want to be ‘me’ as well. I can frequently be overcome with anger at society’s expectation and narrow vision of me, so I speak back loudly. Or in this case write (happy face 😊).

Danielle’s narrative illustrates society’s expectation and promotion of the myth that women who are mothers can be omnipotent ‘Super Moms’. Danielle’s narrative speaks to her awareness of society’s expectations of women who are mothers, as well as society’s expectation of how she mothers. Danielle refuses to give up her identity, and therefore she insists on the fact that motherhood is only one part of her identity.

“Realistic maternal approaches signifies a mother’s capacity to know herself and to
tolerate traits in herself she may consider less than admirable—and to hold a more complete image of her child” (Schultz, 2001, p.583). Danielle asserts that she is in process; that she is learning. Danielle asserts that she is committed to both motherhood and herself. She speaks to how society, as well as her own values, had an impact on, and have shaped her mothering.

I include Danielle’s narrative in this chapter to reveal the constant juggling act of being aware of one’s own values, and at the same time, influenced by social pressures and stigmas. Danielle’s stance on motherhood and mothering is not romanticized. She, was the only woman at Step who expressed to me that she never wanted to have children, but once she found out she was pregnant, she wanted her child. Danielle’s practice of motherhood exists outside of the conventional understandings and representations of motherhood that effect all women.

Conclusion

This chapter reveals how each complex and multi-faceted woman (involved in my study) has experienced both stigmatization and being seen solely as a young mother. This chapter exposes how these women make sense of and respond to labels and judgements that are made about them. I have presented stigmatization in motion. Each of the women in my project actively negotiated their identities by representing themselves in their autobiographical narratives as “stronger than labels for sure”.

Phrase from Sheena’s written narrative page 94.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

This thesis centres on the narratives of ten Step women, and the particular meanings found within each of their narratives. I, as researcher set out with the deliberate intention to counter hegemonic discourses and practices. My research raises the question how do the women enrolled in the Step program construct, articulate, negotiate, and/or challenge their multiple identities in visual, written, and oral autobiographical narratives. The themes that arose from each of the women’s visual, written, and oral autobiographical narratives are reflections based on lived through experiences in and about the body/ appearance, exclusion, and stigmatization. I will briefly summarize the findings of this project.

In Chapter three, each of the women narrated how they have made meaning through experiences in and with their bodies. The body is shaped by the positionalities of race, class, culture, ethnicity, age, religion, appearance, body size and shape, sexual orientation, and physical ability. These positionalities along with social and institutional beliefs shape how specific bodies are oppressed and how specific bodies are privileged. Each of the women’s narratives that addressed the theme of appearance and the body shared some common themes and were distinct. Tyff and Kelly both addressed the pressure and their resistance to appearing and behaving in a ‘feminine’ fashion. Danielle articulated her internalization of unrealistic images she saw in Seventeen Magazine and her decision to no longer consume those images. Sarah narrated her experience with anorexia and admitted that it is still a struggle for her. Sheena and Sandra addressed the theme of the body in their visual narratives and articulated their desire for an ‘improved’ slim and fit body. In her visual narrative, Cody articulated her desire to be desired by

35 These themes are individually discussed in detail in Chapters three, four, and five.
“hot guys” yet articulated that her weight and smile would not (in her eyes) make this possible. Rebecca in both her visual and oral narrative articulated, “[her] identity is found within her body”.

In Chapter four, each of the women explored how they have experienced exclusion and have been made into the ‘outsider’ within the context of high school, peers, family, and towns in which they have lived. Emphasis is given to how each of the women have shaped their identities through the experiences they have had being the “awkward girl”, “the different girl”, and “the odd girl out and isolated”. Kelly expressed how not being seen as “pretty” by her peers ostracized her. Rebecca articulated how living in a small town caused her to be isolated through having rumours spread about her. Jessie articulated how she found it difficult to relate to her peers. Tyff articulated that because she was dealing with experiences of abuse she was not “present” in high school. Cody spoke of the ostracism she experienced through racism.

What is striking about this chapter is how each of the women articulate, that their experiences in high school were also experiences with exclusion. Schools are significant structures and spaces for shaping identities. The shaping of identities within schools is dependent on each of the women’s positionalities (namely race, class, sexuality), which in turn, shape (as I discussed in Chapter four) exclusion. Each of the women also shaped their identities within the space of their schools by accepting, “taking on”, and/or challenging the label of the “different” girl. Implications for this study are to look further into how schools shape identities.

While I think that all of the women’s narratives in Chapter four would lead to an important further study, I have chosen to focus on Cody’s narrative. Cody narrates her
experiences with being expelled after physically responding to a peer who made racist comments to her. Cody also articulates in her narratives that her teachers made racist comments about her First Nations identity. Research on bullying needs to focus on not just the form of bullying (physical, verbal) but also what is the theme and content of the bullying in order to expose both why it occurs and (in this case) the institutional racism that is within the school and within society itself. For Cody, no such investigation took place. Cody’s peer who initiated the bullying was given no punishment, and therefore, a terrible injustice occurred. School administrators need to listen to their students, and not make blind assumptions and judgements based on the woman of colour as ‘bully’. In Cody’s case, bullying by a peer who was white and a verbal bully was believed over her who used physical force in defensive retaliation. Cody chose not to be quiet and to consent to the racist treatment that was directed at her. Non-profit groups like AMES: Access Media Educational Society, have begun to make videos by young women and men on topics such as racism and homophobia, which can be used as preliminary tools by schools to initiate more real and relevant conversations about how to address and deal with, in this case, racism and bullying.

Chapter five explored the stigmas directed at young women who are mothers. These stigmas are reductive, problematic, and extremely pervasive in society fuelled by the creation of moral panics by the liberal bureaucratic experts and the conservative right that influences institutions and the media. Each of the women went inside of the labels that they had personally encountered and explored the judgements that were placed onto them. Focus is given to each of the women’s individual negotiations of who they are and how they have made sense of other people’s understandings and judgements of them.
Rebecca articulated that she faced stigma due to her open sexuality and from people who viewed her punk appearance as in opposition to being a mother. Jessie and Tyff expressed their resistance to the teen mom label. Sheena expressed the racist treatment she received from others because she is a mother. She also expressed her grandmother's negative reaction to her pregnancies, which is due to the fact that her grandmother was a young mother herself. Danielle articulated that she feels restricted by society's understanding of what a mother is and who she should be as a mother.

The pastiche or multi-genre approach allowed there to be multiple avenues through which the women were able to represent themselves, and narrate themselves in this project. Woven throughout each of the women's narratives and, therefore, each of the data chapters, is the thread that links all ten women: how in their own ways they actively negotiated, resisted, and constructed their identities. Present in the various forms of negotiation in each of the women's multiple narratives, are critiques and re-inscriptions of dominant hegemonic discourses.

Delimitations

I have a history with the Step program. I was fortunate to build a rapport and connection with Beth, the personal development counsellor, which was established before beginning my fieldwork. Because of this history and rapport, I was not only able to carry out the research in the program space, but to also recruit participants easily for this project. Beth was kind enough to mention and speak favourably about the project and myself. She also allowed me to put up my recruitment poster and observe both the women and the program for two weeks before the art workshop took place. I was able to become a part of the Step curriculum by carrying out the art and writing workshops in the
Friday afternoon art therapy/lecture time slot. Due to my history with Step and connection with Beth, there were times when I felt uncomfortable with overtly critiquing the program. When the Step women asked me what I thought about the program, I was unable to speak candidly. There were times when new women who were enrolling in Step thought of me as a staff person, and I was careful to be seen as separate from the program.

It is important to note, as I discussed in Chapter four, that the women who enrol themselves or are encouraged to enrol themselves in the Step program tend to be quite different from young mothers who remain in school and/or those who attend alternative schools during pregnancy directly afterwards. While the Step program has changed its mandate from “solely meeting the needs of women who live in East Vancouver and who are on income assistance”, the majority of the women who attend Step are of lower class backgrounds. I have noted in previous chapters that the program does not explicitly address issues of race and sexual orientation. While I did not confront the issue of heteronormativity directly, the open-ended questions pertaining to sexuality (see Appendix Two) did allow room for each of the women to discuss a wide range of opinions, feelings, and preferences. For example, Rebecca, Danielle, and Tyff alluded to the fact that they were each curious about their own sexuality and wondered if they solely desired men.

I was pleasantly surprised that all ten of the women who were part of the project narrated their experiences in each of the three genres, directly and comfortably. I am aware that each of the women were reflecting on past experiences, and therefore had time to develop insights and shape their experiences from memory. It is important to note that
the women were aware that they were contributing to a feminist activist research project. They were aware that they were contributing to a project that was theoretically and practically focussed on the movement towards change. They were aware that they were participating in a project that was feminist, anti-oppressive, and politicized in its purpose to work towards de-stigmatization. Considering this context, it is possible that the Step women wanted to please me with narratives of resistance, or as Kelly (2000) refers to it as a “stigma-is-wrong” frame. As the researcher of this project, and a reader of the narratives, I re-represented their narrative as they were drawn, written, and spoken. The women’s articulation of their narratives in the visual, written, and oral form however, was done in relation to me and their understanding of this project, which I framed as feminist I also shaped the content and the focus of the Step women’s narratives by creating specific themed drawing and writing exercises as well as specific interview questions (see Appendix Two). Cody said that she “felt good talking to me. I know you’ll take what I say and honour it”. It is my aim that in the writing and inclusion of each of the women’s rich narratives, I achieved this.

A Call for Specificity: Critiquing Richardson’s “Collective Story”

The young mothers who make up the Step program both shared some common traits and are distinct. They cannot be collapsed into a single collective identity. Within this concept, each person in the group has uniform experiences, experiences “bondedness”, and narrates a “collective story” (Richardson, 1985, 1997). Richardson defines “collective story” as “telling the experience of a sociologically constructed category of people” (1997, p. 14). The women who enrolled themselves or were

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36 The Step women are all women who became mothers at a young age and women who have each encountered various forms of oppression and stigma, they have each had distinct and unique experiences.
encouraged (by family, a social worker, a teacher) to enrol into the Step program had an affinity with each other because they were a part of the same program. They also shared a common history in that they each became mothers at a young age. As I discussed in Chapter four, cliques formed within the Step program, and Cody for example, did not find connection with any of the participants.

I provide the following example from my project to refute Richardson’s notion of “collective story”. Tyff and Rebecca articulate in each of their narratives that they were called sluts in high school. For Tyff, the ‘slut’ label was directed at her because of the revealing clothing that she describes in detail. For Rebecca, the slut label was directed at her after she was raped by multiple men. The violence that was done to her was rewritten, casting her as the one to be blamed as she was “asking for it”. While Rebecca and Tyff could collaborate and rally against the slut label, their unique and direct experiences with the label itself cannot be placed into a singular “collective story”. Therefore, their narratives cannot be collapsed into a uniform or collective experience of being called a ‘slut’.

Richardson’s initial research (1985) titled The Other Woman, was a study of single women involved with married men. In her reflective collection Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life (1997), Richardson writes, “I wanted to give voice to this muted group of women. I wanted to tell their collective story” (p. 15). This statement raises concern for me because she positions herself over her participants. Her statement claims an ability to empower and represent these women. She takes ownership over her participants’ specific stories, and thus, their agency, by placing them into a singular story.
Simply, the concept of “collective story” homogenizes women and women’s experiences. I find it reductive and essentialist. Mohanty (1987) informs my critique with her powerful words, “the experience of being a woman can create an illusory unity, for it is not the experience of being a woman, but the meanings attached to gender, race, class, and age at various historical moments that are of strategic significance” (p. 175).

After reading Richardson’s text, it is apparent that what is absent from her analysis is any consideration of subject positions outside of the white, heterosexual, female, who is over twenty years in age category. She does not acknowledge, let alone examine, how subject positions such as race, class, and age, (as the distinct narratives of each of the Step women demonstrate) allow individuals to tell, shape and attach meaning to their particular stories.

When Sheena, Sandra, and Cody left the program, I had a heavy heart. I feel that more conceptual work — research and writing on young mothers of colour needs to be done. As my fieldwork came to a close, I found myself thinking about other possible research questions and projects that could be carried out at Step. I think the silence surrounding not talking about race or acknowledging barriers for women of colour, in particular needs to be addressed in the program. Real, candid, and difficult discussions need to occur in both society and at the Step program about ‘difference’ and how ‘difference’ is constructed and shaped. I think future research examining the colour blindness that occurs at Step and its impact (if any) on the participants is important.

Cody inspired me to think of a research project that would examine how women of colour in particular are positioned not only at Step but also in society in general. There is a need for programs that are culturally relevant for First Nations women, and other
women of colour. I think it would be useful for Step to work in conjunction with other programs and agencies. For example, The Aboriginal Friendship Centre is one such organization that I think Step program would benefit doing outreach with and learning more about the centre’s programs for youth and in particular, young women. Cody eloquently stated, “It’s not the same for me being Native than a white girl who is pregnant or is seen walking with her baby. I’m already seen as good for nothin’, and having a baby (pause) well in people’s eyes I’ve just become even more despicable. I know that’s not true, but it’s what we Native girls have to endure. I don’t know if people get that here [at Step]”.

While there is overlap and similarity in some of the stories of Step women, as evident in their narratives, their identities and experiences narrate a story that is unique to them alone. When each of the women shared their “past, present, and future” collages with each other their personal histories presented various trajectories their lives took before they enrolled in the Step program. Their collage presentations revealed a plethora of varying opportunities; various family structures and dynamics; particular neighbourhoods, communities, towns, cities; personal histories of bullying, loneliness, and connection; narratives of racism; of poverty, struggle, comfort, and affluence.

I challenge the sweeping claims Richardson makes that “a collective story empowers the similarly situated individuals” (1997, p. 14). Furthermore, in the context of this project, the statement is inappropriate. A collective story does not empower the individual because it erases individual specificity. The women in my study are more than simply young mothers who are/ have been stigmatized. I believe that empowerment is not only rooted in the individual but is nurtured through support from others (such as
family, friends, community, organizations, and various, differing types of self-work). I am, by no means, downplaying the importance of collective action. Rather, I do not believe that individuals' affinities with one another need to be identical in order for them to be proactive and rally around a common cause. For example, each woman in this project articulated that they would rally around exposing, and getting rid of the various reductive and pervasive stigmas surrounding the young mother. However, each of the women has had unique experiences both with being a young mother and the various stigmas attached to them. I do not believe that individuals need to narrate a "collective story" in order to collectively act. Rather, it is my belief that individuals need to share their particular and differing narratives with one another, which would provide a rich and multi-dimensional platform from which to act in order to counter existing stigmas attached to young mothers. There were times, such as during the collage workshop when each of the women in the personal development component of Step would share their own experiences. As Shanny said, "it is neat to hear where everyone is coming from. We're all in this place, but we have such different lives".

This is what this project aims to do on the micro-level through an activist feminist framework and a multi-genre pastiche method: to re-represent each of the women narrating themselves and their experiences. Additionally, each of the women narrated the ways they actively negotiate themselves and their experiences on their own terms. By this I mean that their articulation of agency or feelings of empowerment were articulated directly through the narratives they chose to share with me. Richardson acknowledges that within a "collective story participants might not be aware of their empowerment"
Again this reaffirms the position of her as the ‘all-knowing’ and ‘all-powerful’ researcher. It assumes that by placing her participants within a “collective story”, she is able to empower them, without her participants even knowing it.

The multi-genre pastiche method allowed each of the women to both creatively and conventionally, represent themselves. Each of the women’s narratives reveal the multiplicity, courage, difficulty, effort, joy, pain, confusion, and belief each of the women put into coming to understand themselves, their experiences, lives, and at times, each other. Each of the women’s articulation of the various ways they actively negotiate themselves and their experiences revealed messy, uneven, contradictory, full, vivid, and ongoing paths of their agency. Richardson’s notion of empowerment wraps itself too neat and tidy. Her notion of “collective story” is too simplistic, in that it does not take into consideration specificity, particularity, and subject positions that shape both the experience in and of itself and how the experience is narrated.

My critique of Richardson, and my interest in stressing both the multiplicity of each of the Step women as well as their distinction, stems from my call for continuous feminist work that approaches identity in this manner. It is imperative that researchers are accountable for carrying out research that presents their participants as complex and multi-faceted individuals who are distinct and in relation to each other. Research that situates itself within a theoretical framework such as Fine’s activist feminist research, allows projects to be shaped through crucial and open stances.

37 While I am aware that it is a possibility that the women could come into an awareness about themselves by participating in this project; many articulated their active negotiation (or feelings of agency and empowerment) to me when addressing/reflecting upon certain experiences in their narratives. I read and have re-represented, this negotiation. I feel that the readings I have made stay very close to the women’s own insights. My task was not to ‘empower’ the women, but rather to see how they speak about their own negotiation of power. I find it troubling that in this statement by Richardson she finds the “empowerment” for her participants. I read each woman’s sense of negotiation as specific to herself, and coming from herself due to specific experiences and understandings.
Activist Feminist Research values such practices that I have adopted for this project: collaboration, polyvocality, and a variety of approaches to inquiry such as pastiche. I think more research that blends activism with a method such as pastiche is needed, so that participants are invited into what I see as an ‘open’ space. A space where academic inquiry can incorporate creative collaboration with participants, as well as hold a stance for political change through women’s self-representation through multi-genre or pastiche method. I witnessed, and was told, how much the participants enjoyed being a creative part of a project. Kelly said, “because I drew for you and wrote I feel like I was in control of the research and what I could share. I felt powerful”.

While I gave direction in terms of the visual drawings, placed thematic limits on the writing exercises, and provided slight structure for the interviews, this research project relied heavily on the willingness and participation of the women themselves. Therefore, I think that incorporating visual narratives and written narratives critically and thoughtfully is an important addition to feminist research. It allows participants to access various avenues to get their stories across. It allows for each participant’s narrative to be layered and multi-dimensional. It touches the participants, the researcher, and the reader directly.

*Future Directions*

This exploratory study generated incredibly vivid narratives. More work has to be done to counteract the stubborn stigma surrounding young motherhood. It will take

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38 My activism within the context of *this* project is working to reveal how young women who are mothers are stigmatized. I am a feminist who is interested in unpacking identity categories of what has been constructed as ‘natural’, ‘normal’, and ‘the way it is’. I have been struck by the painful misinformation about young women who are mothers that pervades the media. I spent much time adopting the inventive, dynamic pastiche narrative method so that it would be interesting and accessible for women themselves to create images, writing, and oral narratives. My activism for this project is to work towards de-stigmatization from the inside out; from the women who have faced stigmatization and how they themselves have made sense of their experiences and asserted their identities.
extensive and sustained political organizing to change the material conditions and interests that keep young mothers politically, socially, culturally, and economically marginalized. Work to counteract stigma can be done, in part, through an offering of more realistic images of young mothers, encouraging narratives from young mothers, and seeking to further understand the complexity of identities. It is my hope that more work will be done by academics, activists, and young mothers themselves, who will be motivated to present realistic, multi-faceted images to government bodies, the media, and schools. This in turn, will help to reshape programs like Step that aim in part to ‘normalize’ young mothers. This ‘normalizing’ is attempted with the discourses of getting young women “to follow the responsible, productive path” of becoming “someone”.

It is important for programs such as Step to be attentive to the positionalities of each of the women who enrol in their programs. Categorizing all the women who enrol and become part of the program into singular categories such as “multi-barrier” or in want of “attaining their GED” does not account for individual needs, interests, and realities that come into play. These blanketing categories also prevent programs such as Step from realizing how each individual shapes the program and how the program shapes each individual.

Programs such as Step would greatly benefit from using narrative methods such as pastiche. Narrative exercises would be useful in all areas of the program. Narrative can be used in the academic component to direct writing assignments for English; they can be used in the career component enabling women to explore interests and possible vocations through written or oral narratives. Pastiche would work extremely well in the
counselling or personal development component of the program. Pastiche would work alongside various existing themes that Step uses within the personal development component of the program. Themes such as “nutrition” “mothering,” for example, could be used by each participant as a thematic guide to explore how these themes relate in their lives and what particular issues are a concern or of importance to them. By adopting pastiche and carrying out narrative exercises, programs such as Step would gain a deeper awareness of who the women are, that are in their programs. This, in turn, would allow programs such as Step to begin to think of ways to address each of the women’s specific, unique, and multi-faceted identities. Adopting this approach, would allow for the women to have a more meaningful experience at the program. It would allow them to be more in control of their experience within the program by narrating who they are, what their experiences have been, and what they specifically are in need of from the program itself.

Beth told me that she wants to work with me to incorporate these art and writing exercises into Step’s permanent curriculum. She asked me if I’d be willing to come back and facilitate them. I am happy to return to Step, and facilitate these workshops. I see these exercises as probes into identity. I see these exercises as a critical addition that would address the program’s lack of attendance to race, class, sexualities, and abilities. They allow the individual to tell of themselves and shape themselves, as they wish. I do not see these exercises as revealing the complete individual, but I see them as touching upon aspects of complex individuals. They are a way into exploring the self. I found them to be a useful and poignant tool for creative self-representation and a step towards anti-oppressive work that can lead to social and political change.
Epilogue

This morning, outside, Rebecca and Danielle were quieter than usual. Rebecca was concentrating on her cigarette, while Danielle was playing with the plastic lid on her coffee cup. The silence in between Danielle’s poetic words: “I’m crashing against the reality that I will be done the program at three o’clock today is crazy and scary” was heavy. The silence was loud.

As I entered the Step program space, I could feel Sheena, Sarah, Cody, and Sandra’s absence. Even though each of them told me when and why they chose to leave, I wondered where they were. I wondered what they came out of the program with. I was disappointed that none of the Step staff mentioned them. They said they were “used to certain women becoming overwhelmed as the program drew to a close”. I helped Beth organize streamers and confetti, as well as figure out the order for each woman’s speech at graduation.

For two hours the six women, Beth, Catherine, and myself sat in the Step classroom together. The room filled with laughter, sighs, tears, questions, and anxiety. Many of the women expressed the loss of no longer having the Step space to go five days a week. Many of the women expressed sadness that came with the realization that they would not see Beth on a day-to-day basis after today. Catherine asked many of the women to share “what they are taking with them” from the Step program. Tyff, who was extremely soft-spoken and self-described as “shy” said, “because of Step, I am becoming more comfortable with expressing myself”. Catherine responded by saying: “sounds like you found your voice”. I found myself cringing inside as she uttered that statement. I
wanted to say something, but before I could Rebecca responded with “she already had one”.

Beth graciously said “having Abby here was interesting. She allowed me to see myself, and the program more clearly. I want to thank her for being attentive, open, and conscientious”. I was extremely moved by her words. Images from my three month and three week involvement at Step filled my mind. I returned the thank you to both Beth and the six women who were part of this project. “Thank you for allowing me into Step and your classroom Beth. I want to thank Rebecca, Danielle, Tyff, Shanny, Kelly, and Jessie\textsuperscript{39} for participating and sharing yourselves and your stories with me”

We then left the program space together, and walked the five blocks to the building where the program held graduation. As Rebecca, Danielle, Tyff, Shanny, Kelly, and Jessie walked up to the podium to make a speech, Beth handed them a stone with the word yes inscribed in it. Beth said, “I wish for you to say yes to yourselves”.

It is two hours after graduation, and as I reflect on it, it is phrases and excerpts from the women themselves that resonate with me.

“No, no I did not just say no so I’m a mother now finding my way, with my feet on the ground.” —Jessie

“I don’t know when people will begin to see me for me, but I have. Being able to talk and let my frustrations out about being seen and talked about as “just a teen Mom”, or “that young chick who got pregnant” has really helped me let it go and focus on me and what is important.” —Kelly

\textsuperscript{39} While I was unable to thank Sheena, Sarah, Sandra, and Cody at graduation, I insert my gratitude here.
“Everyday I came to Step, another piece of myself would stare me in the face, for me to deal with”.—Danielle

“I am sorting myself out. That’s a huge thing for me. When I first came here I didn’t think it would be possible. I didn’t trust myself. I just listened to the negative voices in my head and from others who said that I was nothing, or that I was stupid. I know that isn’t true.”—Shanny

“Battling for my rights to express myself has always been an uphill battle. I feel that I learned how to be always ready for war. It was always easier to be tough and untouchable. Being like that protected me, or so I thought. My whole heart is for my son and that is why I came here. I softened up a bit, spoke my mind and heart. I am going to miss it.”—Rebecca
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http://www.siecus.org/media/press0076.html
Appendix Two: Interview Questions

1) What was your high school experience like?
2) How would you describe yourself in high school?
3) What did you like best/least about high school?
4) What were some of your interests in high school?
5) Was there any teasing/name calling/bullying at school?
6) Were you ever teased/picked on/bullied at school?
7) Was there racism at school?
8) Have you had a first hand experience with racism?
9) What was your family life like growing up?
10) What is your family life like currently?
11) What was your friendship group/social life like growing up/high school?
12) What is your friendship group like currently?
13) What does it mean to be a girl in (a) high school (b) family (c) friendship group? (b) How did you learn that?
14) What, if any, were some of messages you heard/learned/saw [media] about being a girl/woman?
15) What, if any, were some messages you heard/learned/saw [media] about being a girl/woman and sex/sexuality?
16) What was your understanding of sexuality during adolescence?
17) How old were you when you became pregnant?
18) How did your pregnancy affect your schooling?
19) What was your own reaction to your pregnancy? (b) your partner/the father of your child (c) parents/family (d) peers (e) teachers?
20) What do you think people thought of you (a) when you became pregnant (b) were pregnant (c) had your baby?
21) When you were pregnant/became a mother do you feel that you were being labelled/defined? (b) If so, in what ways/how do you feel you were being labelled/defined (c) Do you feel you are being labelled/defined today?
Appendix Three: Participant Table

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<th>CLASS</th>
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<td>Income Assist.</td>
<td>Sons, age 2 and 1 year</td>
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<td>Middle</td>
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