FROM ANGST TO ASSURANCE:

WHY YOUNG WOMEN NEED CREATIVE COMMUNITY

by

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This thesis examines the healing and motivating influence of creative community through the lens of creative young women. My research elucidates mechanisms of creativity deterrence facing young women today and offers an intervention. Through thorough literature review, I have identified four intervention elements evidenced to aid confidence and creative development: (1) therapeutic creative practice; (2) mutual recovery; (3) peer support and mentorship; (4) all-woman spaces. Combining these factors (and existing research on Creative Youth Development [CYD]), I propose a novel program for the encouragement of young women's creative writing and connection with one another. Additionally, I employ personal narrative throughout my inquiry to reflect a common young woman's creative arc indicated by my research. My findings illuminate the role of creative community in girls' collective empowerment, as well as both artistic and personal fulfillment.

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Introduction: "Dear love, I am that girl"

> *I've always felt misunderstood. I don't blame most. I don't understand myself. Paper. I'm hoping paper will understand me. I want to give my secrets and observations and tales to no one but paper.*
>
> —Hailey O'Donnell, April 1, 2016

> *I have gone out, a possessed witch,*
> *haunting the black air, braver at night;*
> *dreaming evil, I have done my hitch*
> *over the plain houses, light by light:*
> *lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.*
> *A woman like that is not a woman, quite.*
> *I have been her kind.*
>
> —Anne Sexton, "Her Kind," 1960

I. A Popstar Reads *Ariel* on the Lawn

A girl is looking at her hands. All she has—the soft evidence of regeneration. Capacity and caution. Amusement and acumen. She turns them over, marks the diamond weave that will deepen someday, that is deepening now. All she holds. She seizes a pen. The fingers' quiet collaboration, crowding the barrel. How the middle and index adapt, blushing carnation with the pressure. She will write something. She will write the way walls whisper to her, the way she

concedes—persistently, in secret. She will mind notches in trees. She will score a moment's blueness, ice to sky to admiral. She will list desired charms, silver or otherwise staggering.

And she will be writing a poem, but she will not call it one. "How could I ever call myself a poet? How could I be so self-assuming?" she thinks. But she is a poet. She has a poet's hands.

On April 1, 2016, I was fifteen years old. My hands cradled a smooth, chestnut leather journal with wide-ruled pages. Not my first, but the first I would fill. Previously, my words preferred more ephemeral locales—loose sheets of construction paper, math workbook margins, wet sand. But I always wrote. I wrote before I could write. My mother has proof—a notepad page, where my father had transcribed "Hailey's Butterfly Story" (an epic oral tale of a "lonely" butterfly learning hope) in blue cursive. An illustrated novel, wherein the sentences are a series of "W"s and "M"s—the meaning implied somehow, I suppose. Early songs so misspelled they are nearly incomprehensible, such as "Something Rong with My Hart." The soft evidence. The stretching and sounding.

An only child until nine, I had ample space to delve into this creative aptitude. I quickly aligned myself with "the creatives" of the world and declared it as often as I could. I conducted living room one-woman shows at every family gathering—my relatives can attest to receiving hand-written "tickets" to my performances, where I would belt some popstar favorite I had spent all evening rehearsing. In fact, "popstar" was my answer to "and what do you want to *be* when you grow up?" for most of my childhood. It was the obvious choice at the time, and perceivably as valid and attainable as "doctor" or "teacher." I kept a glittered spiral notebook with "My Songs" pasted on the cover in foam stickers. I sketched myself receiving multiple Grammy Awards.

By fifteen, I had already lost and relocated this creative vigor countless times. My drive to create had always been the simplest facet of myself—I wrote my first song at age three ("Follow the Chimney [Ring the Bell, Mom!]"). And yet, each year seemed to obscure my artistry. I learned that "popstar" was no longer a passable career trajectory. I noticed how peers mocked my loud ambitions. When I entered teenhood, I counted the girls surrendering their imaginations, their theatricality, their willingness to sing with me. They were disappearing. I was disappearing.

But when I wrote my "first" journal entry on that Friday in April, I was reevaluating my obscurity. Knowing that writing has always been elemental to my living, it seems odd that I would address paper with such novel wonder. Just as I have always felt misunderstood, I have always felt that paper understands me. But then I remember the grief, the sobriety of cleaving the artist from the girl who should find another way, the yielding, the mouthing along. I had sincerely forgotten about paper—that is, until I met Anne.

"Her Kind" found me low. I was embittered by how at-odds with proverbial teen girlhood's magnificence I seemed. Young womanhood emerged entirely contrary to all I had imagined it would be. Growing up, most girls I met were obsessed with adolescence—we would stay up all night planning lavish "sweet sixteens" and practicing how we would carry our books to our lockers. From our vantage point, existing as a teenage girl was the ultimate assertion of power. We expected—we insisted—we would be high on proms and passing glances from thirteen to nineteen. But at fifteen, I'd already had enough.

"A woman like that is not a woman, quite. / I have been her kind" (lines 6-7). I can hardly describe what reading those lines for the first time, within that moment of stark discomfort and sullen refrain, felt like. A mussel opening at my feet. A talon on my shoulder. "Lonely thing" I

was—embarrassed by my disdain, riddled with inexpressibles. “Twelve-fingered” indeed, with how bizarre I felt—finger number eleven my shame, number twelve my dread. “Out of mind” puts it mildly—my dearth in divine feeling had reached record scale. If you asked me to illustrate my worldly presence, I might have offered a mirror image of Anne’s speaker: flying feckless in the terrified dark, collecting glares, plotting my cumulative scream. No, there was nothing quite “woman” about that at all. But it was my persuasion.

Anne’s poetry (along with Sylvia Plath’s and Adrienne Rich’s) enlivened my creative impulse again. I contacted my artist self, who had not strayed too far after all. Reading the work of women poets before me—who had similarly contested socialized expectations of womanhood—I felt hope begin again. I could redeem my scorn for sharpness. I could stand in a living room and assert my place. I could really have something worth asserting.

So, I started writing poetry again, this time knowing exactly what it was. I wrote about “social crimes” and the “certain forgiveness of the ocean.” I wrote aggrieved lyrics on fabricated relationships during history class. I wrote in and out of form. I wrote according to intrigue. And when I had finished writing—forged a new, smoldering invention—I felt shatterproof. Or rather, I felt my words beaming blue through my shattered edges, casting inalienable light. I had made something astonishing out of my heartache, and all I needed was myself and *paper*.

And yet, there was something more. Sure, maybe I was all I “needed” to produce art, but what I craved was mutuality—creative community; evidence that other girls as possessed by and enamored with creative recasting existed. Retrospectively, there was reason beyond the relatability of feeling unwomanly for my obsession with “Her Kind.” The phrase “her kind” in itself implies communion. “Her kind” means that, somewhere, leagues of similarly afflicted women exist in similarly fraught air. And though I did not permit myself to feel its extent, my

longing to reach my “kind” was severe. I wanted to compare twelve-fingered hands, evil dreams, transformed promises. In a vision I dreamt the summer before my first year of college began, I laid in a tree’s shade with three other young women. A faceless girl beside me read from *Ariel*—no one else spoke, content to savor Sylvia’s wits and edges. A soda bottle tipped over, spilling into the grass and hissing. No one moved. Everyone smiled.

Consider this project an extension of that dream. What if we inspired (and urged) creative young women to catenate? What fresh and acute creative insight might emerge from valuing girls’ distinct perspectives and emotions? From promoting their collective healing and flourishing? *How* can we move toward this reappraisal of young women’s artistry? My research suggests a pathway. I posit that cultivating young women’s creative and personal confidence is vital—and that synthesizing therapeutic creative practice, mutual recovery, peer guidance/support and all-woman union into a creative writing workshop space (with a cumulative anthology outcome), introduces a promising model for realizing this goal.

I want to give my secrets and observations and tales to no one but paper. But I knew all along that this was untrue. Even so, the paper was never really just paper—it was letterhead. And the *secrets and observations and tales*? Correspondence, with the young women beside me in the field, waiting for their turn to speak.

Sincerely,

Her Kind

II. Research Questions and Methods

Research Questions

1. What existing obstacles prevent young women from thriving as long-term creative beings?
    a. What are some potential solutions to the problem of creativity deterrence?
2. Can/how can creative community positively influence young women's creative efficacy, self-esteem and sense of creative identity?

Methods

All presented research was gathered through rigorous literature review, collecting qualitative data from a database of relevant peer-reviewed material. To investigate creative young women's position, I first reviewed the state of creative industries, with particular attention to gender discrimination and/or discrepancies. I then inquired into how this state influences creative motivation and development, as well as feelings of self-confidence. Considering these factors, I resolved to devise an intervention method (in the form of a young women's creative writing workshop) and identified four pillars based on capacity to promote (1) creative productivity, (2) self-esteem and (3) communal healing. I then conducted a similar review of these elements (therapeutic creative practice, mutual recovery, peer support/mentorship and all-woman spaces). To understand the existing scope of creative youth development programs, I conducted a search based on five criteria (which I indicate later ["Intervention Elements: VI. Field Survey and Missing Areas of Research"]). The cumulative result of this research (in addition to studying past methods of youth creative support in workshop/development spaces) is a proposal, which suggests a strategy for remedying the issue of creative young women's isolation, self-doubt and creativity deterrence.

III. Defining “Creativity”

Prior to beginning this discussion, it is essential to establish a definition for its most central word: “creativity.” Drawing from existing definitions of the term (Barbot et al. 34; J. A. C. van der Zanden et al. 2; Kleibeuker et al. 74; Wang and Wang 184), I define “creativity” as the ability to generate original/imaginative compositions or concepts. While many existing concepts of creativity insist that “usefulness” is integral to creativity, I suggest a definition which regards creativity in terms of visionary authenticity and faithfulness to emotional impulse—meaning a creative act is inventive (or reinventive) regardless of the invention’s subsequent functionality.

The State of Creative Women: "I came to explore the wreck"

Imagine how much easier life would be without the constraints of my mind. I think too much, I feel too little. I want to forget. To feel, purely. To be in love, to be genuinely happy, genuinely comfortable. And I could sound more poetic if I wished, but that's the most simple way to put it.

—Hailey O'Donnell, September 17, 2016

My night awake

staring at the broad rough jewel

the copper roof across the way

thinking of the poet

yet unborn in this dark

who will be the throat of these hours.

No. Of those hours.

Who will speak these days,

if not I,

if not you?

—Muriel Rukeyser, "The Speed of Darkness," 1968

I. Women and Creative Work

Young women who dream of professional creativity might have a certain idyllic, maverick image in mind. The idea of concentrating on (and profiting from) their creative work alone is appealing. The promise of an enriching career, the potential for satisfied self-

sufficiency—autonomy and artistic authority. It is the notion of utter talent fulfillment. Reis presents a definition of this fulfillment (or, as she dubs it, "talent development") in women:

> Feminine talent development occurs when women with high intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership ability or potential achieve in an area they choose and when they make contributions that they consider meaningful to society. These contributions are enhanced when women develop personally satisfying relationships and pursue what they believe to be important work that helps to make the world a healthier, more beautiful and peaceful place in which diverse expressions of art and humanity are celebrated ("Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development" 217).

This description suggests an immense ambition in young, "talented" women—not only to make meaning, but to make meaning which heals, connects and inspires. The ability to share in the production and circulation of new creative work within community enhances talent evolution. This poises creative industries to be ideal environments for women to become their most honest creative selves—and yet, the state of the professional creative world today often provides more deterrents than encouragements to young women.

"Creative industries" are those "supplying goods and services that we broadly associate with cultural, artistic, or simply entertainment value…and that 'have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent'" (Ruth Eikhof and Warhurst 3). A pattern of male preference over women in these spheres has been well-documented. American Community Survey data from 2012-2016 indicates that women visual artists earn $0.74 for every dollar their male counterparts earn. Female editors earn $0.89 (*Artists and Other Cultural Workers* 28). A recent examination of the United States Copyright Office Electronic Catalog found that authorship of registered

works is predominantly male, with male authors constituting two-thirds of the catalog (Brauneis 22). Knowing that, according to "signaling theory," the ability to see oneself within an organization is critical to feeling welcomed and, in turn, to success (Grow et al. 661), this disparity has significant deterring potential when presented to young women hoping to make a creative living. As Conor et al. state, "whilst creativity and creative labour are often framed as open to all, by dint of their universalism ('everyone is creative'!) in fact, inequalities are rife in these industries and at times of economic crisis and instability, are worsening" (4).

Women who can secure space within a creative industry are often then confronted with gendered environmental challenges, which threaten both their position itself and their capacity to create freely and honestly. A study by Thompson-Whiteside et al. examines "impression management" (IM) behaviors in advertising industry women. They discovered a pattern of "paradoxical tension," (303) as the women saw it necessary to both "fit in" and "stand out" in their male-dominated surroundings. Their IM behaviors in response to this pressure caused "tension and frustration," as they felt compelled to suppress aspects of their personalities: "In an attempt to secure belonging, women are employing ingratiation and exemplification behaviours as part of an assertive strategy. They are engaging in IM behaviours both in and out of the office which do not feel authentic" (310). The stress caused by this strain to belong and thrive can stifle women's creativity, and even urge them to leave their positions (297).

A similar study by Grow et al. highlights women's conflict with a culture of "hegemonic masculinity" in this industry. "[C]reativity is inherently embedded in the context that informs it and nurtures it'…In short, how one bonds and to whom one bonds can, and often does, define one's creative career," they write. "For women it appears that bonding within the 'boys' club' is significantly constrained" (661). Their analysis, which considers the experiences of both Spanish

and American women in the advertising industry, found a "global culture of masculinity" and gender biases, which motivated many participants to exit the field (674). This research, along with the Thompson-Whiteside et al. findings, tells a staggering story about what it means to be a career creative woman. It casts a massive shadow on that glimmering image of artistic professionalism that so many young women aspire to. What does it mean, when in one of the most significant cultural creative industries a woman is at best acquiescing, at worst evaporating? What does this communicate to the girl writing, dreaming of the day her words have their own lives—real, bright and unencumbered?

Beyond the state of creative industries, additional obstructions influence the young and talented woman's development. Reis presents a summary of various external and internal barriers to women's talent fulfillment, including: lacking encouragement from family and friends, feeling compelled to make choices between work and family, colleagues' negative view of women in the workplace (external); feelings of isolation and lack of support, internalization of collective gender role interpretations and diminishing one's own abilities (internal) ("Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development" 236). She expands on this last factor—detailing the fate of several talented women in her life, she writes,

> They were extremely bright in school, but as they grew up, they began to feel ambivalence about their future and their responsibilities to loved ones. Their dreams for future high-profile careers and important work wavered and diminished and they began to doubt what they previously believed they could accomplish. Their beliefs about their own ability as well as their self-confidence were undermined during childhood or adolescence. They acquired some

"feminine modesty," leading to changes in self-perceptions of ability and talent, which subsequently affected others' perceptions of their potential (220).

As time unfolds and these driven young women are exposed to more and more presumed evidence of their inadequacy, unlikelihood of creative success and frivolity in even venturing to wield their creative wit, they become (plainly) exhausted.

Callahan and Cunningham similarly stress the role of ability perception in creative success in their study of "gifted" young women. They note that "all theories of achievement motivation recognize the links between perception of ability and achievement motivation"—and since young women are undervaluing their skills, they are not selecting careers proportionate to their true potential (par. 6). After observing five middle-school-aged young women deemed "gifted" by their school districts, they detected several talent-deterring patterns. These included: concealing their intellectual abilities for the sake of conformity, feelings of self-doubt and attributing their success to "chance or luck" rather than their own abilities. "None of these females ever acknowledged their extraordinary abilities," they write (par. 33). These young women—twelve, thirteen, fourteen years of age—had already become so familiar with shame, and only for extending themselves toward their artfulness.

This is the air enclosing the girl. Beyond that pen, that choice to swim inward—a flurry of disputes. How loud might it become? How much can she bear? With such pervasive mechanisms of doubt at play, of course these questions appear to her. To understand how they influence her creative life and what she needs as a result, we must first delve into what these questions mean for the fate of her poem, and the fate of the poetic gear which galvanizes it.

II. Creativity Deterrence

Adolescence presents novel demands, dilemmas and tension points. The stage, which signifies a transition between childhood and adulthood between ages ten and nineteen (J. A. C. van der Zanden et al. 3), is critical for both identity and creative evolution (Barbot, "Creativity and Self-Esteem in Adolescence" 280). As adolescents, or "teens," experience neurodevelopmental transformations allowing them to process information at a more advanced capacity, they are newly apt for creative identity exploration. During this process, they are more impressionable to social, emotional and relational experiences, which shape their perspectives further (J. A. C. van der Zanden et al. 3). Concurrently, they commonly undergo a steep decline in self-esteem—often reaching the lowest reported levels across the life-span (Barbot, "Creativity and Self-Esteem in Adolescence" 280).

And yet, this age is perhaps the ripest for creative achievement. Bardot et al. define "creative achievement" as "an accomplished creative output, recognized as valuable in a domain-based context," adding that "[c]omponential approaches have posited that creativity results from people's unique combination of multiple resources coming into play in creative work, including aspects of cognition, motivation, and personality" ("Peaks, Slumps, and Bumps" 34). They note that in adolescence, "insight ability" steadily progresses with age and "divergent-related variables" (including curiosity, complexity and risk taking) peak around ninth grade (36). Additionally, a study of creative ideation training by Kleibeuker et al. found that adolescents progressed further than adults in fluency and originality after two weeks of twenty-minute sessions, suggesting that adolescents are more responsive to creative development (80). At this stage, possibilities for artistic emergence and flourishing are innumerable. But how does this potentiality react to the established complexities of creative womanhood?

In short, it is intimidated. Existing teen proclivity to declining self-esteem is magnified by the devices of "expected womanhood"—or the mirage constructed in women's minds which (informed by entrenched American gender values) provides a spotless model of aspirational femininity. This results in an erosion of confidence and, in turn, creativity. A few of the primary ways this process occurs in young women include self-criticism and/or perfectionism, pressure to conform with peers, dismissal of their work as cliché expressions "teen angst" and the absorption of gender roles via socialization.

Bender et al. note that women generally are more self-critical than men, demonstrating more distrust in their creative potential (39). Their study utilized a variety of tests evaluating creative thinking, personality and self-esteem. In women, they found that creativity was correlated with self-criticism and inner conflict. The women participants' endorsements indicated a "low opinion of one's competence and abilities," as well as "feelings of personal ineptitude and disorganization" (42–22). These correlations confirm previous research suggesting that women are "handicapped" creatively by their diminished confidence. Their inability to establish faith in themselves presents an outstanding internal barrier to creative fulfillment (39).

Simultaneously, many young women fear revealing their creative identities, concerned their abilities might separate them from their peers unfavorably. Existing research suggests that many talented young women possess a stronger need to feel liked, accepted and similar to others (Reis, "Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women" 311). They feel as though their peers will scrutinize them for having a fierce and concentrated interest—that this will become all they are, all they could be. This dilemma appears in a longitudinal study by Lammers and Marsh. Their subject, a teenage writer named Laura, mentioned she felt her classmates were

judgmental of her tenacity and academic excellence: "'Like sometimes my classmates, I think I'm kind of resented at school just for being like the writer girl'" (104). *The* writer girl—a certain weight in that first word, which implies a sort of fixed singularity or even oddity. To the many "writer girls," the decision becomes clear: keep your artistry zipped up, or else be damned to "the."

A more recent phenomenon casts young women's most vulnerable and candid art as insipid, trite and sucralose—labeling works of a more melancholic and distressed tone as just more "typical teen angst." Hart examines this experience, interviewing adolescent girls regarding their poetry and the dismissive attitudes that interfere with it. She notes that while "angst" is traditionally synonymous with "anxiety" (both words derivative of the Latin "angustia"), in this context, it is more reflective of Martin Heidegger's notion of "dread"—"angst" evoking the feeling of confrontation with "death and the meaninglessness of life" (4–5). And yet, the phrase "teen angst" carries a much cheaper connotation. The young women Hart spoke with were quick to write-off their own work as "just stereotypical teen angst." Elaborating on the banality of such work, they pointed to a series of clichéd commonalities: "'my life is ending, my world is crashing down on me'"; "'I hate life, my life sucks, I want to kill myself... I went to hell and back (feigning sobs)'"; "'I wear black lipstick, I light black candles...'" (4). To write such poetry is seen not only as a failure, but an incredibly boring and groan-inspiring one.

Noticing the profound influence this perceived poetic pitfall had on the young women, Hart posits that this fear of producing "typical teen angst" poetry can become a significant obstruction to honest (and, perhaps, healing) creative work:

> What happens when we fail to value the writing of adolescent girls, label their poetry as "teen angst," and dismiss the powerful feelings that lead to this kind of

> writing? How do girls come to see themselves as authors of their own feelings, thoughts, and indeed lives, when the outside world tells them there is no merit in self-expression unless it is able to transcend the label of teen angst? (7)

The message dispatched to young women artists becomes: "If you're about to create *another* piece on deep feminine anguish, do not even bother." This voice permeates the young woman's creative thought process, therefore inhibiting her from creating with full honesty. If the truth is black lipstick, dead roses and a tear-stained copy of *Ariel*, why should a young woman be penalized for it? If this "teen angst" art could be, as Hart suggests, an avenue for "knowing the unseen," "speaking the unspoken" and subverting the male perspective imposed upon them (10), anything but permission to execute it could be considered gendered creativity suppression.

Perhaps most overtly an arm of expected womanhood, internalized gender values (which demand that self-expression and even self-discovery be fed through a feminized sieve) inhibit young women's capacity to embrace creative truth. As Reis mentions, socialization "narrows women's options while broadening men's options" ("Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women" 310). This applies to creative choices. Despite popular knowledge about the role of subversion and risk-taking in creative work, many young women feel pressured by gendered expectations to only present art which is "safe," palpable and unassuming. Reis discusses this conflict:

> Many highly creative young girls have problems reconciling messages that have emerged from home and school about their creative potential. Encouragement for polite behavior may conflict with the characteristics necessary for high creative potential to evolve into adult creative productivity. These characteristics include the ability to challenge convention, question authority, and speak out for

> change…Some of the characteristics associated with older creative women (Reis, 1996) including determination, commitment, assertiveness, risk taking, and the ability to control one's life, directly conflict with the good and appropriate manners parents demand from daughters ("Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women" 311).

Confused and vulnerable, the young woman confronted with these incongruities is adrift—floating between the proverbial maverick woman she dreams of and the prodigious feminine archetype she swims beneath. In these ambivalent waters, she cannot even begin to view herself as the artist.

That stark question returns—"How could I ever call myself a poet?" "Artist," according to Merriam-Webster, means "a person who creates art (such as painting, sculpture, music, or writing) using conscious skill and creative imagination" (def. 1.a). Consequently, thousands of young women could confidently and correctly identify themselves as artists. No academic, professional or otherwise quantitative criteria exist within this definition—one who creates art is an artist. And yet, countless young women feel slanderous in labeling themselves as such. Reis suggests that this contributes to a broader lack of women in creative industries—when women cannot "place importance on the works they produce," they can become deterred from pursuing their creativity entirely ("Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women" 308).

The sum of these external and internal influences is a compelling formula for weakened self-confidence, which has a demonstrated negative effect on young women's creative process and production (Reis, "Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women" 312). Conversely, a healthy level of self-esteem has been associated with heightened creative productivity (Barbot, "Creativity and Self-Esteem in Adolescence" 279; J. A. C. van der Zanden

et al. 5). Wang and Wang offer a few reasons for this: self-esteem can lessen perceptions of threat or anxiety, heighten self-regulation and encourage “approach goals” over “avoidance goals” (187). When a young woman can recognize the artist intramural—who is already living, who *is* the girl carrying the pen—she may begin building immunity to the apparatuses coaxing her toward immobility. A fresh, radical woman-vision emerges: lucid and unlimited, nothing like the statuettes she has imagined. This woman has her breath, her gait, her hands—she is not what she “should” become, she is the natural outcome of creative latitude.

III. “yet unborn in this dark”

Who will speak these days, / if not I, / if not you? On that Saturday in September 2016, I may not have believed that Muriel was speaking to me. I felt erroneous and inferior, writing the way I was. *I think too much, I feel too little. I want to forget.* I remember swearing I would never share such writing. Muriel wants the woman who will speak these days in watercolor—limitless phrases that pierce and inquire. *I could sound more poetic if I wished*—a phrase I jotted to absolve any accusations of “typical teen angst,” should my journal be disseminated. “I promise I can sound like a poet,” I thought, “even though I certainly am not one.” *Thinking of the poet / yet unborn in this dark*. Walt Whitman telling me he is under my boot-soles. At sixteen, I saw nothing but plain, uncompromising earth.

In conversation with poetry professor Arielle Greenburg, Becca Klaver (a poetry editor herself) poses the question, “if girls don’t need an antidote to angst, if they don’t need ‘girl power,’ then do they need, as you say, to see themselves in the culture and the culture in them, and to see their own symptoms as cultural symptoms” (197)? A young woman recognizing that her shame, anguish and ferocity are not singular; that they are rich shadows of girlhood’s

silhouette, and they are deeply, entirely important—this is the idea that ignited my research project.

How do we show young women both the validity and the vitality of their creative ambition? The short proposal: show them each other. As Reis mentions, feelings of loneliness and isolation are commonly cited as creative impediments in women (“Toward a Theory of Creativity in Diverse Creative Women” 312). The girl writing her poem must be able to sense the other girls—writing their poems, spelling their need—to continue. Previous research has posited that peer support “positively influenced students’ creative self-efficacy and attitude toward creativity” (J. A. C. van der Zanden et al. 3). In Lammers and Marsh’s longitudinal study, Laura identified her friendships as key motivators in developing her writer’s identity and completing her project (109). Existing creative girlhood scholarship implies the promise of collaborative, creative community.

Program Proposal: "My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth"

Somewhere beyond I am dancing. And the air is damp with freedom and wine. And I am clean and I am clever. And the yellow lights flicker as eyes do. And I am laughing and I am melting. And I am not bittersweet in memories unmade and dreams unraveled. And there is no screaming desire for unearthly intervention, no creed of flight. Somewhere beyond I am dancing.

—Hailey O'Donnell, February 25, 2017

Misprize thou not these echoes that belong
To one in love with solitude and song.

—Emma Lazarus, "Echoes," 1889

I. Project Description

When I was a teenage girl, I became overwhelmed by the thought that my creativity had to mean, yield, *be* so much more that it had been before. Having no external destination, no place to dilute itself, this thought became colossal—so colossal, at times I felt it crowding all of me, right to the pliant edges. But I couldn't say a thing. Who would understand? And I wished, I wished always, for someone to understand.

My proposal is, at its heart, an attempt to fulfill this wish. Drawing from existing knowledge of how young women experience creativity (and all its external and internal knots), I present my vision: a peer-directed creative writing program (with an adjoining literary journal) with the objective of promoting collective creative flourishing and healing for young women.

While my research pulls from broader experiences of creativity (visual art, film, performing arts, et cetera), my proposal narrows to focus on creative writing, primarily due to my personal experience and academic interest, as well as evidenced psychological/physiological benefits of expressive writing. The program presents creative flourishing and self-esteem as mutual beneficiaries—meaning, the creative practice aims to bolster self-esteem as much as the bolstered self-esteem aims to enrich creative productivity. Alleviating wounds caused by mechanisms of gendered creativity deterrence is a central pillar, as is unearthing creative selves unburdened by expected womanhood.

Each week (for ten weeks, plus an additional week or two for editing/compiling the journal), participants will engage in group inquiry and receive/offer workshop comments. Participant-directed weekly discussion will provide space to exchange experiences, insights and guidance, along with prompting strengthened interpersonal relationships. Topics will be responsive to participant interest, but generally focused on interrogating personal/creative distress, improving allyship, enhancing self-esteem and nourishing writer's identity (I offer topic examples within my program outline ["Program Outline: II. Program Overview and Session Structure: Ten-Week Overview"]). Participants will set intentions for improvement (personal and/or creative) each week. Corresponding (optional) writing prompts will also be assigned each week, encouraging participants to continue their reflection individually. Additionally, participants will answer twenty survey questions pertaining to self-confidence and writer's identity at the beginning and end of the program, to ground the experience in personal progress and measure program efficacy.

A meeting's second half is reserved for workshop, where (after a writer states their objective[s] and reads their piece aloud) participants will share constructive feedback and guide

the writer toward further success with their piece. Writers will also share what they have gathered from the feedback, and how they plan to improve upon their work. Meetings will be facilitated by an individual of "near-peer" age. The facilitator's role is to handle meeting logistics/organize meetings, introduce the agreed-upon weekly topic, ensure meetings are operating efficiently and act as a resource for participant questions and concerns.

At the program's end, participants can submit up to two workshopped and revised pieces to a group anthology/literary journal. Throughout the program, participants will designate meeting time to discussing their vision for the literary journal and making collaborative decisions on design. Participants might opt to elect three-to-four "lead" editors (likely those with more design and/or editorial experience) to manage production. Final submissions will occur Week Ten, with the journal completed in the following two weeks.

In her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde writes:

> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought (Hart 10).

For young women experiencing the discomfort of their creative reckoning, writing is both a way out and a way in—that is, by creating with intention to interrogate the emotional weight of their disillusionment, they can discover both new senses of self and new senses of their world. Simultaneously, by offering names to the nameless, speaking the unspeakable, they can assure other women that their emotions are not flukes, but legitimate symptoms of a culture inapt to adequately support young women.

II. Core Questions and Mission Statement

Core Questions

How can we teach young women that their creativity matters? How can we show them that their instinct to seek, share, scream, solve, sing is not a mistake—that they are not wrong, are not irritating, are not average for wanting to be heard? How can we tell them we need them, every one? Above all: how can we make them *believe* it?

Mission Statement

To nurture and fortify young women's creative identities through artistic inquiry and collective healing.

Intervention Elements: "We have been sad together— / Oh! What shall part us now?"

"I often dream of living in a small apartment and blasting old records. Yet I know it's not in my nature to be alone forever. It's somewhat poetic. I crave this loneliness, this sense of self-dependence and introverted freedom because it's comfortable. Yet what I need to fulfill me is reassurance from others. Reassurance that I mean something, that I'm not too boring, or too much of a bother. This bitter conflict never fails to burn me."
—Hailey O'Donnell, April 16, 2016

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
—William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," 1802

To demonstrate the merit of a peer-led, healing-centric young women's creative writing program, I have conducted research on the therapeutic and creative benefits of four relevant categories: (I) creative practice and/or expressive writing, (II) "mutual recovery," or group creative-therapeutic approaches, (III) peer support and mentorship, (IV) all-woman spaces (particularly in a generative context). When layered, these components evidence the outstanding

restorative potential of an aggregate program. An image begins to form: young women expressing their wounds, both personal and collective, waking to the chasmic artistic value of their perspective—because it is their own, and because they are not alone in feeling it deeply. An additional section of background considers the field of Creative Youth Development (CYD), examining some past and current programs. Finally, I propose the merit of composing and publishing a cumulative creative project (in my case, a literary journal).

I. Therapeutic Creative Practice

To understand how creative writing can repair and fortify young women's self-esteem, we will first examine its reported value in healing from trauma, balancing mental health and catalyzing identity exploration. When young women can begin alleviating pain caused by gendered strikes on their self-confidence, recontextualizing their anguish as an asset, they can begin viewing themselves as artists—bolstering self-esteem and, in turn, creative drive.

Anne Sexton said that poetry led her "'by the hand out of madness'" (Lowe 60). Existing research indicates that it has done the same for many others—and (beyond moving away from "madness") that it can guide a person toward contentment, security and peace. As Stuckey and Nobel note,

> [T]here is evidence that engagement with artistic activities, either as an observer of the creative efforts of others or as an initiator of one's own creative efforts, can enhance one's moods, emotions, and other psychological states as well as have a salient impact on important physiological parameters (154).

Even mere company with creative effort inspires ease—not just momentary ease, but an ease that asks to be sustained. There are particular virtues in poetry, both reading and writing. The structural asks of some poetic writing can prompt psychological benefits via reorganization of

unconscious thoughts, while reading poetry has been shown to regulate mood. In a study by Philipp, which examined the effects of reading/writing poetry on health, almost seventy-five percent of the 196 participants said that writing poetry "reduced stress and anxiety," while sixty-five percent reported the same effect from reading poetry (Lowe 66).

Several sources indicate writing's physiological benefits. Particularly by addressing negative experiences and/or trauma, writing can contribute to significant improvements in "various measures" of physical health and fewer necessary physician visits (Stuckey and Nobel 259). Enhanced immune system functioning has also been reported, as well as reduced stress in the cardiovascular system (Stuckey and Nobel 259; Lowe 61). The suggestion is that while suppressing emotions related to traumatic experiences can cause long-term stress to the body, confronting such experiences via expressive writing can help relieve this damaging strain. A process of "cognitive restructuring" occurs, wherein the writer can "re-frame" their distress and develop a sense of control and understanding. Writing about trauma, even someone else's, has demonstrated physical health benefits—purportedly as it allows the individual to realize that they are capable of managing difficult emotional experiences (Lowe 61–65).

Frow and Filak encapsulate the restorative gifts of writing through trauma via their experience coping with the grief of a student, Julia, lost to cancer. After Julia's death, Frow (her teacher), noticing her students' positive responses to sharing out their emotions, oversaw production of a literary journal which would include writing dedicated to Julia's memory. By reshaping their grief into art, Julia's classmates could make joy from tragedy and, in the process, oppose their pain's isolating influence: "Writing has helped us to cope with loss, loneliness, and now living again" (23). As Frow notes, trauma specialist Stephanie Frogge suggests that by transporting grief from the subconscious to the conscious, therapeutic writing can aid the

aggrieved in regulating their emotions (23). These students exemplify how community-based artistic intervention can promote peace with trauma, further suggesting the transformative and cathartic potential of such work.

Permission to be vulnerable and candid about upsetting emotions can be the key to accepting and working through them. Discussing the relationship between writers and depression, England et al. observe that "it is not uncommon for authors to refer to their suffering as 'unspeakable.' This sense of incommunicability— that others cannot understand what one is experiencing—fosters feelings of profound isolation and compounds the suffering" (83). "Speaking the unspeakable" via written expression offers a solution to this distress, as the writer can "give voice to their depression" and begin transforming it from a convoluted weight to a real, impermanent and, evidently, speakable circumstance—one that can even yield beauty and fulfilment. Additionally, they can reevaluate the role of depression in their lives, realizing that it is only one component of their experience, and that their perspective is always capable of evolving.

This process of reconfiguring hardship into personal and artistic revelation is what Henriksen and Gruber describe as "'metabolizing' the pain," molding adversity into wisdom by harvesting the enriching emotional truths and lessons from the experience (251). While forging revised outlooks, a sharpened artistic voice can emerge—the bearer of pain transforming into the resourceful magician. Stewart et al. refer to this process as "restorying," stating that it "provides an opportunity to recover the voice that illness and treatment silences, articulate trauma and loss, demystify the illness experience, refocus on the positives of the experience, consolidate gains and construct new maps for the recovery journey" (17). Granting words to sorrow makes it tangible, workable and gainful. It also helps in clarifying the self. Newfound harmony between

affective state and “conceptual sense making” (in addition to the development of creative skill) kindles improved identity perception (Stuckey and Nobel 261; Sayers and Stickley 151). The resulting sense of improved self-confidence can empower further creative candor—now, understanding that their story is valuable, the newly realized artist feels comfortable relaying their challenges and turmoil, shedding the learned shame that stunted their expression before (Stewart et al. 20).

The Initiative for Women with Disabilities’ Young Women’s Program established a creative writing project, the True Story Project: I Am Heard, in 2009. The workshop’s central goal was to encourage participants to write “freely and truly,” building proficiency in synthesizing and sharing their emotions in a welcoming environment of peers. The project is applicable to my own, as it demonstrates the transformative promise of guiding marginalized identities toward the noteworthy artist already within them. Over the course of six (in later versions, eight) weekly sessions, participants reported improved self-confidence, writing/speaking skills and creativity. Part of this success could be attributed to the program’s commitment to confronting prejudice. Participants would listen to monologues from experienced storytellers addressing judgement and, relating to the experience of facing preconceptions of their identities, they were encouraged to communicate their own stories. Testimonials indicated a “higher sense of self” in many participants. “I never knew that I could do this (write and share my writing),” one young woman shared. “This (TSP) pushed me to reach deep inside myself and pull out my feelings which I've always kept suppressed” (Xenakis et al.).

Similarly, an examination of creative programming’s health impact on older adults conducted by Cantu and Fleuriet evidences artistic practice’s profound influence on self-worth and empowerment. Surveying attendees of the GO! Arts Program (which offered painting,

drawing, mixed media and creative writing classes) at five different sites, the researchers discovered a number of participant benefits including enhanced cognitive focus, feelings of "relaxation and happiness" and a new sense of "self-improvement and empowerment" (130–31). As the authors note, cognitive psychologists have repeatedly cited the rewards of creative engagement, including improved focus and concentration, in-line with similar suggestions that it can "increase one's ability to banish unwanted and intrusive thoughts and help foster a beneficial sense of mastery and control" (131). Participants in this study reaped these benefits—as one student, Carolina, reported: "Creative writing class has given me the opportunity to take inventory of my life…It has lifted my soul and given me a feeling of euphoria and satisfaction instead of melancholia in remembering" (128).

On June 26, 2016, I wrote a poem titled "Someday I Won't Cry in Dressing Rooms." The day I wrote it, this is exactly what had happened. My mother was there; it was an Urban Outfitters. I needed summer clothes (the most dreaded time of year for me at that age). The last four lines read: "I won't cry in dressing rooms, / Or feel I've done wrong. / I won't cry in dressing rooms, / When I am strong." Since I began writing, I have likely written about my body dysmorphia hundreds of times. Yet this poem is the only one I think of consistently, even now as I near twenty-three. My disillusionment with expected womanhood has caused me to view my body with an extensive range of emotions throughout my young adulthood—loathing, love, disdain, even indifference. This poem was my first act of resistance to the standards that convinced me to make my body an enemy in the first place—and though writing it certainly did not solve my dilemma, it was a crucial step toward reclaiming ownership of my body.

This is not to say that a poem needs to overtly address personal plight to be impactful in a woman's healing process. For a woman to feel they have the liberty to share their experience

through creative work in general is remarkable. But on that day, I remember reveling in my own sense of "euphoria and satisfaction," "mastery and control," "self-improvement and empowerment." The idea that in one, meditative act I could turn a heartbreaking memory into a narrative of hope and resolve was miraculous. I had "metabolized" my distress and "restoried" my stance from defeated to determined. To this day, I cannot step into a dressing room stall without recalling this promise to myself—one that never would have existed had I not been called to creative processing. This is the endowment of artistic medicine.

II. Mutual Recovery

Art therapist Dr. Patricia (Pat) Allen believes creativity is an omnipresent force, as well as an intrinsic element of all humanity. She suggests that "the field of art therapy is at its best when focused on helping individuals connect to their inner creative source and the self-guiding wisdom available there," and that the "creative process ultimately puts us in touch with our fundamental nature and reminds us what it means to be alive" (Henriksen and Gruber 248). Following this notion, we can infer the acute value of community to higher creative realization. If we are to connect to the universal "creative source," as Allen calls it, we must also turn to each other as we turn inward. The capacity to not only nourish creative selfhood, but also establish bonds forged by collective experience and discover the catharsis of peer-validated dissatisfaction is invaluable. Perhaps in this way young women can accelerate the process of seeing "themselves in the culture and the culture in them" and "their own symptoms as cultural symptoms."

Sayers and Stickley state:

> Participation in a group can foster a sense of belonging for a person, with individuals sensing that they are working together with other group members, in doing so they develop positive self-concepts…An arts environment can be

> conducive to participants gaining a sense of social belonging, emotional value, confidence, unity and friendship, an environment that fosters peer support (150).

Perceived social inclusion and connectedness is powerful—it can allow a person (particularly one of marginalized identity or mental illness/strife) to realize novel self-value and/or purpose. As Grant posits, the "price of solitary writing" is compounded self-doubt and more difficulty finding fortitude in the practice (494). By contrast, artistic community can restore intention and inspire a more optimistic vision of one's creative future (Sayers and Stickley 151).

Stewart et al.'s study of "mutual recovery" in a creative workshop, Your Story Matters, exhibits the merit of connection in creative healing processes. Through sharing in regular artistic practice, a sense of community grew between workshop participants—simultaneously a sense of "social identity" grew in participants, enabling them to believe that their work was important (17–18). Additionally, the ability to discuss shared experiences within a welcoming and inclusive environment allowed attendees to feel newly accepted, both by themselves and others. One participant said: "I don't usually leave the house but I come here to be with people with the same issues that I have. Knowing that I'm not crazy, that other people struggle with the same things that I do has really helped" (19). The formation of these trauma-informed "social networks" can aid in maintaining the therapeutic effects of creative self-exploration (Lowe 62).

Research by Kim further purports the utility of community-based arts education. The study (which investigated the merit of creative community for healing from and preventing school violence) found that, by interrogating the issues within their community and problem-solving solutions via their art, the students were able to cultivate "community resilience, honoring collective courage and strength" (199). A "common emotional code" emerged, wherein

a collective spirit thrived. This spirit inspired the students not only to believe in their individual worth, but also to believe in and uplift their peers' voices:

> Through artistic activities, the students become more confident that they are valuable beings and can become more confident and brave. Students do not think pessimistically about themselves nor give up on themselves, but they also recognize that their fellow friends are as precious as they are. Therefore, consideration for others and generosity are nurtured naturally, helping them to improve their relationships and recover from their trauma (200).

Evidence of extended care for the creative spirit (or a heightened interest in the creative and spiritual success of others, beyond just oneself) is significant, as this behavior enables perpetual healing. In the context of our young women, it ensures proliferous creative articulation of personal and collective truth. The vision is unsustainable without creative young women's vested interest in the welfare of their peers (and the creative young women to succeed them). As Goessling suggests, "[a]rt-making is an embodied affective experience that can enhance youths' understanding of their own capacities for taking action" (24). Artistic community is insurance of continued creative advocacy—as much as development of a writer/artist identity is key, so is development of an advocate identity.

Another study of group creative practice by Argyle and Winship focuses on "mutual recovery," which "extends the concept of recovery beyond one focusing only on mental health service users to include context, reciprocity and community" (141). The researchers examined Clay Transformations, a project which gathered a group of diverse participants for participation in ceramic workshops over eight weeks. At the end of the experience, participants shared their appreciation for the rapport and reciprocity that developed in the group. One workshop attendee,

Jane, who enrolled in the program in hopes of rebuilding her self-esteem after her experience with anxiety, depression and housing insecurity, described the triumph of these creative relationships:

> Throughout the sessions, we have developed help and support from and for each other, not only with regard to the work but in other aspects of our lives, and some particular bonds have developed…There was some astonishing creativity, engendered, no doubt, from innate skill but augmented, possibly, by the reassurance that each person's work had value. In my case, of course, appreciation is a pleasure in itself (143).

When individuals can recognize the role of their artistic enterprise in the health and success of a larger creative community, they can become further reassured of their self-worth and motivated to continue making creative contributions.

Persistent trends toward individualism have limited community care options and avenues for group support. This advances isolation and restricts opportunities for the kind of shared enrichment, revitalization and joy observed in Clay Transformations. Argyle and Winship argue that "mental health interventions should aim to transcend their individualised approach and address the wider social contexts that can facilitate or prevent the promotion of mental well-being and 'mutual recovery'" (146). If radical and sustained creative enlightenment is possible for young women, this is precisely the reinforcement it will require. Creative community among young women is crucial in part *because* it is so oppositional to convention—in the process of asking women to interrogate personal wounds from expected womanhood, it is impossible not to reveal the urgency of illuminated kinship. Provisioning the creative self includes prioritizing

closeness to creative companions, both in spirit and in practice. After all, how else could we prove, access and celebrate the "creative source"?

III. Peer Support and Mentorship

Peer mentorship is an expanding research subject, as many educators and leaders discover its developmental advantages. Particularly for teenagers, peer-led support systems can transform an individual's approach to a given challenge or learning objective. This is largely attributable to adolescents' identity-driven ambition patterns outlined in "identity-based motivation theory," which essentially suggests that an individual's impression of their future is shaped by their social environment, which then affects the decisions they make in the present. Consequently, their drive to contribute to their future success depends on the perceived value of said future (which depends, to a great degree, on peers). Destin et al. apply this theory to educational endurance, indicating that a student is more likely to succeed if they consider their work important:

> When students encounter academic difficulty, their identities guide them to interpret the task as either important to who they are and their goals or irrelevant to who they are and what they hope to…In other words, identities can lead students toward interpreting difficult academic tasks as important rather than impossible. When school feels like an important part of a student's own future, then difficult school tasks feel inherently more meaningful (270).

Their study (which monitored the attitudes and academic accomplishments of eighth-grade students) suggests that peer support can activate this mentality. Via the company, encouragement and insight of other students who had overcome similar challenges before, these students were able to view difficulty as importance and develop an improved sense of "grit" (273).

Creativity may flourish with peer encouragement as well, with evidence propounding that peer support (even more than instructor support) "positively influence[s] students' creative self-efficacy and attitude toward creativity" (J. A. C. van der Zanden et al. 3). This approach can also help in forging more salient writer's identities (Collier 14). Seeing their circumstances mirrored, young people can appreciate the matter of their creative realization as not an obstacle, but a vital transformative agent. The work becomes "relevant to who they are," as they cultivate shared identity with "relatable models" (Destin et al. 270). For our young women, a generative net of peers further promotes creative longevity—likeness making it all the more simple for a girl to see all she can achieve (and all she already holds).

Additionally, company with peers nurtures an atmosphere of safety, acceptance and empowerment. In Stewart et al.'s study, workshop participants noted the merit of having peer mentors checking-in on them. One attendee stated: "They made me feel like I matter. I got a text message from [a peer mentor] when I missed a workshop—so many times so much in your life you feel no one misses you" (19–20). The knowledge that their persistence, in art and in life, counted to others mattered. That sense of "social identity" (18) thrives where young people can feel intrinsically that they are elemental to a group. In a sociocultural atmosphere designed to deter young women's expression, this sense becomes vital.

The ability to perceive and harness this sensation of belonging is aided by shared experience. A six-month trial conducted by Mahlke et al. comparing one-to-one peer support on top of "usual" treatment to treatment alone for patients with mental illness found regular peer support resulted in "significantly higher" self-efficacy (8). Peer mentors drew from their own experiences with mental health challenges, and served as "role models of recovery" for their partners (2–4). In addition, a two-month study by Ding and Yao focused on adolescents during

the COVID-19 pandemic (which asked participants to engage in weekly peer educational seminars focused on health knowledge and behaviors) suggests that the peer education approach can significantly reduce levels of anxiety and depression, while improving sleep quality (533). This research indicates the healing and empowering potential of relating on an experiential level—peer intervention makes it more feasible to see one's "own symptoms as cultural symptoms," and thus step out of isolation's constraints.

The benefits of this approach are not reserved for mentees—the mentor role also offers opportunities for growth and fulfillment. An examination of Plymouth University's "Writing Café" program saw peer mentors become more confident, content and capable of inspiring change while supporting fellow students. During the program, Writing Mentors were empowered to experiment with their own developmental ideas, allowing them to "act as 'change agents' and 'active collaborators' rather than consumers" (Pritchard 10). One mentor stated: "Seeing people come to these workshops quite [skeptical] and then having a really positive experience is great. It's often emotional, and for me it's made me happy and that is really rewarding." Another attested that it "changed [their] life," adding, "I've grown so much as a person. It's made me feel a lot more confident in myself" (7).

This is the distinct efficacy of peer-based programming—self-esteem garnered via encouragement from and affinity for like-experienced individuals is augmented by self-esteem derived from fulfilling the educator role. For the mentee, the ability to see the likelihood of their own success through the success of their peers fuels their willingness to continue their own self-invention (recalling the motivating agent of "seeing oneself" within a desired environment outlined in "signaling theory" [Grow et al. 661]). As they identify with their peers' blossoming through challenge, the work ahead becomes the work of becoming and belonging—work that is

not individualistic, but that depends on their earnest individual spirit. For the mentor, inhabiting the supporter position offers the assurance that they can substantially contribute to another person's flourishing. By taking on a "role model" function, they can recognize the role model already thriving within them. Notions that they are unworthy or unexemplary fall away with the truth that their voice, their attention, their affinity matters enormously to their peers.

Applying this system to our young women, mutual peer appreciation opens the potential for realized expertise—that is, recognition that the only experts on creative young women *are* creative young women themselves. Furthermore, their proficiency in this experience is indispensable. Without the honest exchange of insights—the disbursed proof of creative resilience—among young women, how could they understand their distinct vocal and artistic muscularity?

IV. All-Woman Spaces

In "Planetarium," poet Adrienne Rich's speaker confronts a staggering light. It is a light "that shrivels a mountain / and leaves a man alive" (lines 28-29). It is the impossible beam of a sky's history in full, all at once. It is the light of women who have tried too much ("A woman in the shape of a monster / monster in the shape of a woman / the skies are full of them" [1-3]), and it is "exploding" (23). "I am bombarded yet / I stand" the speaker declares—they remain to interpret the flashes (34). The poem concludes:

> I am an instrument in the shape
> of a woman trying to translate pulsations
> into images   for the relief of the body
> and the reconstruction of the mind (42-25).

Amid blinding notions of womanhood's place on Earth, its silhouettes and cosmic charges, the speaker hunts a more elemental truth. They embody agency, identifying as "an instrument," their devotion to divine revision eclipsing any assigned "shape." "What we see, we see / and seeing is changing," they submit (26-27). And perhaps if they can draw the actuality—the tangible, un-monstrous voices of these "galaxies of women, there / doing penance for impetuousness" (13-14)—from the constellations, then the "reconstruction" will follow.

It begins and ends with the company of women—or, at least, desire for it. First viewing the starry woman-shapes is a whisper of communion; a girl discovering Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Then, she sees their monster-shapes—their cultural relegation to tortured siren, the accusations of viral melancholia. The "battery of signals" (36). And yet, the standing still. The need to translate the "untranslatable" (38), the need to become a solace mechanism. The need to reel the women in from space, hold the shrouded hearts of their brilliance, compare them to her own. Truly "all [a] life" (35) could be spent in this pursuit—not even of other women per say, but of witness; of proof that the brutal pulses had nothing to do with her, of confirmation that her instinct toward celestial affinity was correct and consequential.

All this to say—closeness to other women can be vital, and the desire for it profound. In diagramming potential for a peer-led young women's creative writing program to provide "the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind," understanding the worth of companionship among women is crucial. Reviewing examples of women's supportive and/or creative programming, we may elucidate why relationships with other women can clear paths to heightened self-esteem and creative efficacy.

One way to measure the value of women's relationships is network theory. Research by Coleman suggests that networking and mentoring are key to women's career success (769). In an

additional study, Coleman considers the state and merit of all-woman social networks in educational leadership. "Social networks" can serve both personal ("friendship and trust") and professional ("promoting business contacts") functions (770). For women, all-woman networks can inspire improved self-confidence, provide meaningful mentorship opportunities and contribute to improved workplace equity. McCarthy posits: "'Through their ability to connect women with other women, networks disrupt the patterns of social connectivity at work that have for so long privileged men, and in so doing provide a new way to alter the balance of power'" (Coleman 772). Coleman's study (which examined two all-woman professional networks in the educational field) saw educators expressing appreciation for the "safe haven" they found in meetings, where they felt encouraged to air concerns they would not have expressed in a mixed-gender environment (778). A woman from "network A" (a principal's network) stated: "'We could meet and let our hair down, say 'how do we cope with this?' We could not do that in a mixed group. Men would appear to have the answers even though they did not'" (775). "'We could share how to deal with problems. Getting that confidence was magic,'" one founder commented (774).

Research by Cassese and Holman similarly examines relationships between women in education—in their case, political science academia. They focus on the issue of women's scholarly productivity, which can be limited by a "chilly climate" marked by gender biases and promoting isolation (401). They argue that the "traditional model" of peer mentoring is inadequate for women in this contentious atmosphere, with evidence suggesting that male mentors "may show a reluctance to mentor members of underrepresented group" due to internalization of negative stereotypes. Additionally, existing research indicates that "matched" or same-gender mentor relationships are distinctly beneficial to women in male-dominated

professions (402). The researchers present a case study (a professorial writing group) that substantiates these benefits—with reported advantages including enhanced accountability, moral support, a sense of community and accessible professional advice (403–04). The last point is particularly significant, as existing research indicates that women "are less likely to engage in self-promotion and they request recognition and advancement opportunities less frequently" (404). All-woman support systems, such as this writing group and Coleman's social networks, enable women to engage with and express their most authentic concerns. Divorced (even temporarily) from man-centric conventions and constraints, they may act with a novel clarity. They are less "bombarded" by the pulsing light. The star-women speak louder.

Grant testifies to the rewards of women's mutual productive support in her examination of a week-long writing retreat. Scholar Valerie Hey suggests that there are "complex redemptive pleasures of female friendship in academic feminism"—Grant's retreat aims to elucidate these relationships (484). Many retreat attendees reported an invigorated sense of writer's identity at the experience's end. One participant stated: "Writing feels more pleasurable and creative—partly because I have more choices about what I do and how. It also seems less solitary because I have friends…with whom I talk about writing, share drafts and so on" (490). In addition, approximately two-thirds of attendees reported increased writing productivity (491). Grant attributes much of the program's success to "refusing the boundaries between individualism and community," arguing a need for transition away from "traditional individualism" and toward solidarity in academia (494). Her program demonstrates the cathartic and catalyzing value of women working alongside each other—readily accessible encouragement and advising from similarly experienced women makes external forces urging isolation less influential.

Turning again to our young women, it appears that longing for creative companionship with other women has existed for centuries. Burke examines girlhood's literary culture within the production and proliferation of Victorian girls' manuscript magazines, describing how the periodical press inspired a "participatory peer culture" (721). Within this generative atmosphere, young women could inquire into a breadth of academic subjects and articulate their creative spirit via poetry and prose. Simultaneously, these magazines opened avenues for "belonging and friendship" among contributors. Girls' writings served as "semi-autonomous tools of socialisation"—scholar and professor Sally Mitchell submits that girlhood was a "'provisional free space' where girls were acutely aware of their own culture and 'its discord with adult expectations'" (Burke 720–21). "'[G]irlhood was of value in itself, not merely a transitional stage to hurry through,'" she adds (741). For young women of this time, literary endeavors were expressways for expounding their subversive singularity and, in the process, locating their companions in calling out.

One particular writing sample referenced by Burke, a submission to girls' magazine the *Evergreen Chain*, encapsulates the importance of these literary communities for young women's creative self-concepts. The poem, by nineteen-year-old Katharine L. Osler and titled "An Apology," grapples with feelings of creative inadequacy as a girl writer, in comparison to more established, published writers. It begins:

> If England's poets had never sung
>
> Then might my verse adorn your page.
>
> But with such store to choose among
>
> The best they gave to every age
>
> 'Twere waste such lines as I could write

Within your album to indite (739).

Sorrow presses through each line; the defeat of recognizing one is not needed where they wish to belong most. An awful resolution, this brand of deficiency—this sense of belated purpose. But by the end of the poem, the speaker playfully concedes their exclusion from literary consideration:

So be admonished pray by me

And seize the moments as they pass

Take Alfred Tennyson to tea

Keep Shakespeare by the looking-glass.

And don't until you've read *them* through

Ask amateurs for "something new" (740).

The language and tone reflect the oppositional and ardent energy of the young women within this literary moment. There is a sort of "take a look in the mirror" essence to it—both a radical cultural awareness and a radical self-awareness. This willingness to object exile (and even address the prospect with humor) is the fruit of young women's company with and uplifting of one another. Collaborative spaces, such as these magazines, allow girls the capacity to "compare notes"—highlighting the obscenities and underlining the sameness. It is within this collective context that young women can begin constructing their shared, shining submission to the broader cumulative canon.

In her study, Burke presents a quote by Rich, which posits that a girl or woman "goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together," yet when she does, she "meets the image of Woman in books written by men"; "the myths and images of women" (739). In other words, she sees the constellations. It is

not hard to imagine surrendering to their pull. Just as the speaker in “Planetarium” is “bombarded” by the colossal force of the surging light, young women experience efforts to stunt their creativity acutely. But the promise of, the yearning for celestial kin—that is what fixes them to the Earth.

V. Creative Youth Development (CYD) and Youth Publication

Creative Youth Development (CYD)

Having established the utility of curative creativity, mutual recovery, peer support and all-woman networks (along with the sociocultural factors that position adolescent women in particular for the services of all four components), we may begin to consider the sum of these parts and inquire into existing (and missing) programming.

The most robust framework for youth creative programming and promotion exists within Creative Youth Development (CYD). The CYD National Partnership defines CYD as “a commitment to supporting young people’s stories, ideas, and dreams through creative expression and honoring their lived experience,” which hinges upon three concepts: “Racial Equity and Social Justice,” Youth Voices” and “Collective Action” (“Creative Youth Development National Partnership: What is CYD?”). In her review of CYD’s evolution, Montgomery states:

> Creative youth development (CYD) is a dynamic area of community arts education that successfully bridges youth development; the ongoing process through which youth acquire social, emotional, academic, and vocational skills while also meeting their needs for physical and psychological safety, caring relationships, and community connection...and arts education (1).

CYD focuses on a “process-oriented” approach for young people, concentrated on elevating youth creative input so they may view themselves as “integral parts of both the process and the outcome” of their future (Jacobs 2).

A central tenet of CYD is promoting respect and equivalence between youth and adult creative ideas. As the CYD National Partnership website notes, “Youth speak for themselves and have voices that are valuable. An adult’s role is to be an ally—not a critic—to value youth’s stories and experiences and ensure youth leadership and decision making within organizations and programs” (“What is CYD?”). CYD recognizes that young people have a distinct standpoint, and thus, can wield a distinct artistic vision and voice that is worth celebrating. By uplifting these voices, CYD practices encourage young people to become “active agents of their own change,” capable of advocating for their needs and advancing their talents. Youth are promoted to valued community assets, rather than “vessels to be filled or problems to be solved.” In addition to empowering youth in the present, CYD structures also foster future achievement by combining “arts instruction and artmaking with life skills development; such as leadership, teamwork, communication, respect for diversity, and positive self-image…and attention to the whole person and their well being and relationship to community and society” (Montgomery 2).

Currently, hundreds of CYD-informed programs exist in the United States. Montgomery offers a few notable examples, all recipients of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities’ prestigious National Arts and Humanities Youth Program (NAHYP) Awards: Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy (which combines intensive artistic training with African cultural knowledge and professional development), Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit (which emphasizes academic success and personal development alongside artistry) and ZUMIX (which concentrates on building communal identity and cultural understanding) (3). These programs reflect the

transformative influence of CYD intervention on communities, and the "profound personal growth" possible via participation (2).

Another program rooted in CYD knowledge, New York's Kids Creative, strives for an additional outcome: peace. According to founder Adam Jacobs, the program's vision is that "a better, more peaceful future is achievable by teaching youth the creative, critical thinking, and social skills necessary to make peace within themselves and in society." Kids Creative focuses on "the journey of learning, trying, thinking, failing, and succeeding," rather than mere creative output. The goal is to promote a "peace culture," wherein participants can imagine, embrace and work toward an aspirational, care-centric future (2). When youth are granted the freedom to invent worlds and systems according to their most creative wishes, they can become further empowered to advocate—both for themselves and their futures.

Jacobs offers three main ways which CYD can generate peace—it can "Give Youth Voice," "Address Community Issues" and "Build 21st Century Skills." The first point echoes the CYD National Partnership's "Youth Voices" concept. Kids Creative promotes "problem-posing education," meaning participants are encouraged to choose how they participate and thus granted authority in problem solving and creative inquiry (3). Jacobs also suggests that relationships cultivated within CYD programs can lead to social change, as the collaborative creative nature of the programming inspires youth to think critically and view themselves as "change-makers." Finally, CYD challenges young people to "make connections between their imaginative stories and the world around them," which then prompts them to devise original solutions to problems (4).

While there is a marked lack of peer-led and women-focused creative development opportunities for youth (a lack I will expand on shortly), CYD programming demonstrates the

vast healing potential of nourishing and respecting youth creativity—both for their own benefit and for the benefit of the culture. It is evident that providing young people with apt resources (space, structure, community, funding, creative tools, et cetera) can alter their self-image and worldview considerably, encouraging them to develop and sustain artist identities while simultaneously opening them to the catalyst of "social identity." Both identity standpoints promote strengthened self-esteem, which then promotes further creativity, creating a circular model of confident-creative efficacy. Another strategy we may consider in devising the most advantageous and enjoyable experience for our creative young women is collaborative composition (in hopes of some degree of publishing or otherwise considerable dissemination). While Jacobs stresses the value of process, he also acknowledges that people "need the galvanizing effect of creating a final product," adding that having a specific deadline for a structured, cumulative project "gives all participants a common understanding of their goal" (7). Thus, it is worthwhile to investigate models of coordinated creative output for youth.

Youth Publication

Research into the psychological benefits of having one's creative work (let alone a young woman's creative work) published is limited. However, reviewing two examples of youth publication can provide us with some base context for advancing this sector with more concentrated, holistic programming.

Peter Elliot, a high school English teacher, advised the production of a student literary journal called *Litmag*. In a review of his experience, Elliot describes how the project became a healing and inspiriting experience for students and community members. He suggests that the literary magazine can be a "curricular tool to fulfill one of the aims of critical literacy, for students to develop a critical consciousness both to question the world and to feel empowered to

change it" (40). Student contributors demonstrated this ambition, submitting poems about dress code frustrations and beauty standard pressures—the journal became a "space to share ideas about identity and social justice" (41). Additionally, it became a medium for communal healing, with many students sharing their experiences with grief after the loss of two classmates (42–43). Above all, the student editors strived to promote "authentic student voice"—one stated that the magazine was a place where "'people could submit their work with no judgement and the knowledge that we would treat it with respect and care, no matter if they were one of the 'good English students' or not'" (40). Their commitment to furthering emotional honesty and courage shines through in the daring energy of the work. The young women of *Litmag* exhibit the same sharp, expository voice as the young women of the *Evergreen Chain*, displaying how girlhood still offers a distinct and vital perspective. Creative spaces like these forge opportunities not only to share in this perspective, but also to circulate it.

Janet Irby, also a high school English teacher, had a similar experience with her students. Confronted with a complex group of summer students, many of whom had failed English "at least once," Irby set out on a new curriculum—a collaborative publication, where students could "use language in meaningful ways by incorporating their experiences and abilities and creating their unique vision of the world" (50). This recalls Jacobs' idea of encouraging youth to envision "an entirely new world where they are integral parts of both the process and the outcome" (2). Engaging creative thought enables students to reorient their attitudes toward life's challenges—instead of figuring the improbability of their success, they can reinvent their situation via "restorying."

For Irby's students, this transformation in perspective was major. Irby facilitated peer "editorial groups" among the students, encouraging them to offer feedback to one another as they

formulated articles on a variety of topics, ranging from the need for an ethnic studies curriculum to students with part-time jobs (50–51). She also tasked students with interviewing one another––she notes how this assignment cultivated bonds and a sense of community between classmates (52). Overall, collaborating on the publication allowed students to feel newly welcomed, engaged and capable of achievement. Irby states,

> For many reasons, the students in my summer English classes had found traditional classroom approaches to English "repressive" rather than "empowering." When they connected their own experience and opinions with a meaningful purpose and an important audience that wielded some power over their lives, the learning of vocabulary, writing structures, revision, and appropriate rhetorical choices made sense (54).

Again, this idea of redesigning obstacles via creativity emerges. Again, we find that surrounding young people with peers facing similar challenges and emboldening them to share in creative inquiry makes their work "relevant to who they are" (Destin et al. 270).

Programs like Elliot's and Irby's suggest that collaboration on a group publication can further aid in "social identity" growth, which in turn promotes heightened senses of acceptance, confidence and self-efficacy. Publications like magazines, newspapers and journals offer revelatory space for young people to convey their distinct culture and concerns. When coupled with an environment which champions non-judgement and authenticity, youth publishing presents vast potential for creative, professional and personal development. Make this youth publication all-woman, peer-led and healing-centric and the potential becomes unprecedented—a supreme venue for girls to "see themselves in the culture and the culture in them."

VI. Field Survey & Missing Areas of Research

Inquiries into the efficacy of programming for young women's simultaneous creative and confidence development are sparse. Inquiries into the efficacy of this programming combined with peer leadership, group healing and cumulative publishing components are perceivably non-existent. To complete demonstrating the need for my proposed programming, it is crucial not only to outline areas where relevant research is absent, but also to present findings from a broad survey of the youth creative development landscape. I offer a few examples of programs resembling my vision but lacking in the synthesis of all aforementioned research topics. I reviewed the presence/absence of my posed program's components in terms of five criteria—they are: has (1) youth-focus, (2) group healing intention, (3) peer leadership, (4) all-woman/women's support and (5) publishing. All indicated programs possess a youth focus and routes to publishing (though not all guarantee publishing).

Literary Arts of Oregon's Writers in the Schools (WITS) program recruits working writers to host residencies in high school classrooms. Writers collaborate with teachers on semester-long curricula designed to sharpen creative writing skills and encourage continued self-expression. Literary Arts publishes a yearly WITS anthology, containing student writing—becoming published is not guaranteed, though all participants are encouraged to apply. This program fulfills two criteria and provides strong avenues for youth creative empowerment, but lacks in peer networking/mentorship opportunities and in women-specific support.

Colorado-based Lighthouse Writers' Young Authors Collective (YAC) poses a similar function, offering multiple spaces for young people to connect with peers and engage in workshops devised to promote creative excellence and forge "deeply collaborative relationships." While both the YAC and WITS emphasize the importance of creative community,

they differ from the collectivism of my proposed program, where an intent of communal rehabilitation from efforts of gendered creativity deterrence would be woven into the curriculum.

WriteGirl is a creative writing mentorship organization out of California focused on promoting and empowering young women writers. WriteGirl mentees are paired with one of the program's mentors (working writers—poets, screenwriters, journalists et cetera), who they regularly meet with one-on-one. This project is much closer to my concept than WITS and YAC in its concentration on the success of writer girls, but it also lacks in a goal of communal healing. WriteGirl emphasizes peer connection less in general—though it offers monthly workshops and a network of about 500 participants and 200 volunteer mentors, individualized guidance is the primary service.

A similar program (also from California), the Intuitive Writing Project (TIWP), is even nearer to my concept. The organization offers a plethora of writing courses and programs, with devoted support for grade, middle and high school girls, all for their mission of helping young women in discovering and wielding their distinct voice. Unlike other programs, TIWP appears to emphasize the role of creative engagement in mental health promotion—a page on their website notes:

> All too often, girls are isolated with their thoughts, their homework, and their phones. Whenever we feel alone, the world does indeed feel dark. But when we get the chance to connect with others—to tell our story and listen to the stories of others—we realize that we are all the same, that we are all connected, and that we can be a source of strength for everyone around us ("Writing for Mental Health").

They recognize "the power of girls writing together," and testimonials from past participants corroborate this power. While TIWP is useful in suggesting the utility of my proposed program,

it still diverges from my vision, as it is more focused on individual improvement than peer-guided inquiry into the flourishing of young women as a class.

These four examples are not meant to serve as a comprehensive image of this field. Rather, they contextualize my program's mission. These programs are just a few of the many I have reviewed in conceiving and sharpening my proposal—they represent many others, which fall into similar categories of present/absent criteria. Altogether, my investigation into relevant active programs confirmed that there is a marked space and need for a program such as the one I will outline, concentrated on both individual and collective healing, guided by the desires and conditions of young women themselves.

In addition to the absence revealed by my program survey, I discovered similar gaps in research areas pertinent to my proposal. For example, research on publishing's relationship to confidence is limited. While the existing knowledge I have consulted suggests that a collaborative published project goal is helpful to creative motivation (and in turn, self-esteem), there is little available information about how having one's work published could influence self-confidence. This leaves substantial space for my research and programming to emerge, as my proposed workshop would include survey metrics to monitor feelings of self-confidence in participants pre- and post-publishing. Evidence indicating improvements in self-esteem as a result of becoming a published writer would implore further and more accessible opportunities for adolescent publishing.

Furthermore, the development of "typical teen angst poetry" as a criticism among youth and within broader literary culture presents a remarkable threat to future creative flourishing, and is consequently worthy of expanded inquiry. Existing research, such as Hart's study, reveals that young people (young women in particular) are increasingly fearful of ridicule due to perceived

unoriginality. This concern enforces heightened self-criticism and doubt, discouraging young people from offering their creative endeavors the attention they deserve. What warrants creative "success" becomes not authenticity or faithfulness to honest emotion, but the capacity to only show passable levels of frustration and/or anguish. This then indicates a need to research reimagined approaches to youth creative development, which include this novel culture of critique and offer solutions. As Hart suggests, perhaps this means "a move away from a teaching tradition that seeks to teach the poem, rather than the poet" (10). With a humane approach to creative progress, woven with psychology-informed personal growth and resilience contexts, perhaps our youth can construct inviolable creative identities.

An additional research area which could assist in a sharper understanding of youth creative culture is creative affinity within girlhood culture. While girlhood culture is a slightly more developed realm of inquiry, I found little substantiation for the nets of creative inspiration which connect and drive young women, both toward creative work and toward each other. By "nets" I mean the "tools of socialization" within girls' literary culture Burke indicates—the writing, the art that reassures to other young women that girlhood is a meaningful instrument of both personal and cultural reckoning; a "value in itself" (720, 741). I mean the reason why when I met a fellow Plath-inspired poet as a teenager, not only did I immediately feel related to her and invested in her success, but I also felt newly heartened in my own creative path.

A deeper understanding of girl culture as it pertains to interpersonal strength could help us develop even more robust insurances of girls' creative persistence. This inquiry might recast girls' feelings of isolation and singular affliction as results of a cultural failure to celebrate their ideas (viewing individual symptoms as "cultural symptoms")—or the realization that it is not that girls wish to isolate themselves and abandon their creative pulse, but rather they are

convinced by cultural criterion that their voices are tiresome, thus making them less likely to vocalize, thus making it more difficult to recognize the plethora of harmonizers. Pertinent further research questions might be: What obstacles to realized creative kinship among girls persist? How can these obstacles be dismantled? What rewards (for both girls and the culture) lie in connecting and healing creative young women? My proposed program strives to begin answering these questions.

VII. "…And dances with the daffodils"

For many years, my stock answer to "What is your favorite poem?" was "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth. The poem sees its speaker arrested by the vibrance of a daffodil field—the vision so potent that even out of sight the golden flowers transmit ease and joy to them. Wordsworth was inspired by a visit to Glencoyne Bay in the Lake District with his sister, Dorothy. The poem concludes:

> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude;
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
> And dances with the daffodils (lines 19-24).

As an admirer, I have acquainted myself with numerous readings of the poem. Many conclude it proclaims the delight and inspiration of finding affinity with the natural world, and how through recollection one may carry this enlightenment with them. Wordsworth himself even discusses this idea in his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*—writing that poetry "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (14). This surge of

emotion appears to be precisely what possesses the speaker in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," the daffodils' "flash" compelling them to embrace ebullience once again.

I do not condemn this translation—in fact, I recognize that it is truthful and important. However, I have always held my own reading of the piece. Imagine me, about fifteen and already skillful in brooding. I find this poem (I do not recall where—likely the Internet) and take it to heart. At the time I was obsessed by characterizing my loneliness, giving some alluringly melancholic meaning to my disappointment. I was amazed by how I resonated with Wordsworth's speaker—because to me, this was a poem of yearning. Every day I watched the "daffodils," in the shape of my fellow creative young women, dancing their vital dances shamelessly. From my own "bliss of solitude," I could see that they were wrapped in golden light—they were openhearted, energetic and everything I wished to be. And though I did not dare to imagine myself a daffodil, preferring the comforts of "cloud"-like silent vigil, my heart did indeed dance at the thought of their presence. It was the kind of isolated desire that was tender, even afflictive at times—but mostly, it was exactly as Wordsworth's speaker describes: pleasureful in its richness and sheer proximity to beauty.

> *I know it's not in my nature to be alone forever. It's somewhat poetic. I crave this loneliness, this sense of self-dependence and introverted freedom because it's comfortable. Yet what I need to fulfill me is reassurance from others.*

At sixteen, I thought the most irritating aspect of myself was that I (if I were to be honest) needed other people. Disillusioned and dissatisfied by my girlhood, I figured that the only chance I might have at living with myself would be to accept my solitude and transform it into something evocative. But my instincts whispered the truth: I have always sought company. I

want to pull the women from the sky. I want to dance with the daffodils. My inquiry tells me this longing is far from solitary.

The isolating devices of expected womanhood can convince a young woman that creative community is not for her. Lacking women's support and visibility in creative industries spells incapacity. Accusations of "average angsty teen" material set potent limits. All the while, there is the general propensity to self-criticism, disbelief and shame—the young woman's inheritance. The blaring signals. And yet, this compilation of findings reveals that creative and spiritual persistence through these deterrence endeavors is imperative, both to young women and to the culture. Girls possess a distinctly cutting standpoint, forged by the collision of adolescence's identity interrogation surplus and expected womanhood's identity restriction surplus. It is a barrage of contradictory messages, leaving young women to feel (as Burke notes) that their livelihood is in "discord with adult expectations'" (721). When offered opportunity to engage this identity and connect with like-experienced peers, the subversive nature of this identity expounds itself.

An amalgam of creative healing, mutuality, peer counsel and women's plexuses renders an ideal environment for this expounding. *I know it's not in my nature to be alone forever. It's somewhat poetic.* It is more than somewhat poetic—it *is* my poetics. That instinct that, at my core, I am just one arm stretched toward the "creative source." The other arm reaches to those other young women, also extending, also bathed in exploding light. A girl is looking at her hands. All she has—the soft evidence of generosity.

Program Outline: "these things now for my companions / I shall sing beautifully"

Dear Diary: The only way to get my feelings out is by writing, since no one in this house is listening to me now.

—Hailey O'Donnell, 2012

If I can stop one heart from breaking,

I shall not live in vain;

If I can ease one life the aching,

Or cool one pain,

Or help one fainting robin

Unto his nest again,

I shall not live in vain.

—Emily Dickinson, "If I can stop one heart from breaking," 1864

Having established the existing space for and probable efficacy of a community-based creative intervention program for the improvement of young women's creative flourishing and self-esteem, I offer an outline of such a program. In addition to my aforementioned research, I consulted Ruckdeschel's peer coaching model, which delineates "Writer" and "Responder" roles with specific responsibilities and ideas for feedback language—this is key to peer mentorship success, as adolescents engage with one another more effectively when provided with clear

linguistic guidelines. I also incorporated the model's emphasis on writers communicating clear "goals" related to each new written piece (4).

It is also worth noting that I will use "creative writing" broadly throughout this proposal, though I recognize that this encapsulates many forms of written expression. Ideally, separate workshops would be conducted for poets and fiction writers, though I believe a mixed workshop could operate just as successfully.

I. Logistics and Requirements

Participants

Program participants should be young women or non-binary, gender non-conforming or otherwise woman-identified youth between the ages of thirteen and nineteen.

Facilitators

Program facilitators (who oversee participants as peripheral guides in the workshop process) should be of "near-peer" age, ideally between nineteen and twenty-four. They should similarly be women or non-binary, gender non-conforming or otherwise woman-identified. Older facilitators may serve as guest contributors, supporting the program mission at a distanced level (guest lectures, guidance for regular facilitators, suggested activities, et cetera).

Session Length and Frequency

The program will span ten weeks, with one-to-two additional weeks for completing the cumulative anthology. Ideally, sessions will occur quarterly, with Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer timelines. Meetings will last an estimated three hours on average.

Space

The program should be conducted in an accessible community space. A school classroom is an apt choice—this program could function in an after-school capacity. Sessions could also be held remotely utilizing video call technology as needed. Access to technology for presentations, lectures or other reference material is preferred, though not necessary.

II. Program Overview and Session Structure

As the program hinges upon participant input to direct structure in terms of need and interest, the curriculum of each session will be (intentionally) highly flexible. However, I have composed a general framework for weekly focuses over ten weeks. In addition, I will present a generic meeting structure.

Ten-Week Overview

Week One: Introduction

Focus Questions: Who are we here with? What are we gathered to accomplish?

Outcomes: Understand individual and collective goals; Become acquainted as a group.

Week Two: Muses and Mirrors

Focus Questions: Who inspires/has inspired your craft? What do our muses and role models say about us?

Outcomes: Understand the role of creative inspiration in development of writer's identity; Form bonds based on shared inspirations.

Week Three: Standards and Subversions

Focus Questions: How have gender roles/standards influenced your personal growth? Your growth as a writer? How can we challenge these gender expectations?

Outcomes: Understand the consequences of gender standards to emerging as writers; Connect with peers on shared experiences and challenges.

Week Four: Affinity and Alliance

Focus Questions: What makes us feel understood and valued as writers? How can we become better allies to our creative peers?

Outcomes: Understand the needs of others in supporting their creative growth; Learn skills to practice informed allyship and peer advocacy.

Week Five: Antithesis and Awakening

Focus Questions: How can we challenge ourselves to evolve as writers? What methods of writing have we not yet explored?

Outcomes: Understand the importance of testing creative limits; Discover new facets of writer's identity by writing in a manner/form that is unfamiliar.

Week Six: Boundaries and Balance

Focus Questions: What are boundaries and why are they important to creative development? What are our boundaries?

Outcomes: Understand the importance of identifying and communicating personal boundaries; Learn how to enforce and respect boundaries.

Week Seven: Past Selves and Process

Focus Questions: What would you want to communicate to your past self? What might your past self ask you? How can we honor our past selves in our creative practice?

Outcomes: Understand the role our past selves play in the emergence of our writer's identities; Learn strategies to forgive and make peace with our past selves.

Week Eight: Praise and Practice

Focus Questions: What are we grateful for? How can we integrate gratitude into our routines and practice?

Outcomes: Understand the function of gratitude in promoting daily joy and enriched creative spirit; Learn how gratitude can aid in creative routine by writing a poem/piece of praise.

Week Nine: Aspirations and Agenda

Focus Questions: What do you wish for your future self? What can we do to support these aspirations?

Outcomes: Understand personal/creative goals and the steps necessary to achieve them; Learn peers' goals and make plans to assist in their continued development.

Week Ten: Conclusion

Focus Questions: What have we gained from this experience? How can we maintain the spirit and mission of the program moving forward?

Outcomes: Understand group and personal progress made since Week One; Set intentions for continued development and relationships post-program.

Weeks Eleven and Twelve: Compiling and Editing Anthology

Meeting Outline

Generally, meetings should be split in two portions: (1) Group inquiry, discussion and intention-setting; (2) workshopping. A ten-minute break should occur in-between these parts.

1. Group inquiry, discussion and intention-setting (1.5 hours)
    a. Greetings, check-ins and housekeeping (10 min.)

b. Introduction of weekly focus, discussion and optional activity (50-60 min.)

    i. The facilitator introduces the group's weekly focus, along with focus questions. The subsequent discussion should be directed by participants (conversation-provoking strategies, such as division into small groups, would be useful here). If time allows and if participants wish, they may also engage in a relevant activity to further enrich the inquiry.

c. Intention setting and optional writing prompt (15 min.)

    i. Participants will each set an intention and/or goal for the upcoming week––this can be writing related, or solely for personal growth. Facilitator will present an optional writing prompt related to the weekly topic, which participants may choose to utilize for further written reflection, either to be workshopped or otherwise.

2. Workshop (1.5 hours)

Note on workshop structure: Each week participants will be asked to either prepare a piece for workshop or prepare workshop comments on their peers' work, in a "Group A"/"Group B" format.

a. A participant briefly (and without explicating the piece's meaning entirely) states their goal with their submitted work and reads their to-be-workshopped piece aloud. Other participants then contribute their reactions and ideas for improvement. Balanced, empathetic conversation should be encouraged—participants should address how the writer's goal fares within the piece and utilize "I liked…" and "I heard…" statements to express opinions. Connecting workshop discussion to the weekly focus should be a shared goal. The participant being

workshopped should not contribute to the conversation or offer explanations while it is their turn. Depending on number of participants, each writer should receive about 10 minutes of feedback.

   b. This process (a) is repeated until all participants being workshopped have shared and received feedback.
   c. Each writer whose writing has been workshopped that week shares one or two pieces of feedback they will focus on in their revision process.

3. Closing (5-10 min.)
   a. In closing, facilitators should return once more to the weekly focus and encourage participants to sit with their weekly intentions.

III. Development Metric

In order to ground the program in personal growth and writer's identity development, I have devised a set of survey statements for gauging creative confidence in participants. This will be helpful not only for tracking the program's efficacy, but also for regularly reminding participants to monitor their emotions and attitudes throughout the process. Participants will complete the survey before and after the program. In addition, each participant will identify one "primary goal" for their writing and/or personal development at the program's start, which they will reflect on at the program's end as part of their final survey. The facilitator should complete a "check-in" with each participant during the fifth week, discussing the survey statements and the participant's primary goal.

Scale 1-5 (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree):

1. I believe that I am a skilled writer.

2. When I complete a piece, I feel proud of my work more often than not.
3. I would identify myself as a writer.
4. When I complete a piece, I feel a strong urge to share it with peers (other than family/close friends) more often than not.
5. When I complete a piece, I feel a strong urge to share it with family/close friends more often than not.
6. When I write, I generally feel that the written voice well-represents my identity as a writer.
7. I would feel qualified to offer advice about the craft of writing to a friend.
8. Writing makes me feel more confident in myself.
9. Writing makes me feel more certain of my identity.
10. I enjoy receiving constructive feedback on my writing.
11. In a group of new people, I would feel comfortable discussing my writing craft.
12. In a group of close friends/family, I would feel comfortable discussing my writing craft.
13. The thought of people I do not know reading my writing excites me.
14. The thought of people I know reading my writing excites me.
15. I want to become a better writer.
16. When I read work by other writers, I feel inspired to continue bettering my own craft.
17. I regularly seek opportunities to improve my writing craft.
18. I regularly seek opportunities to share my writing.
19. I have written work that I would be willing to submit to a creative journal/publication.
20. When I read my writing out loud, I feel confident in my work and proud to share it.

Short Answer:

Describe your relationship with your writer's identity. How does your writing craft operate within your life? How have your feelings toward your writing evolved in recent years?

IV. Program Outcomes

At the end of the program, participants will be able to:

1. Express their distinct artistic voice (writer's identity).
2. Effectively synthesize and apply critical feedback on their writing.
3. Hold a deeper appreciation for and understanding of their creative peers.
4. Begin navigating the creative writing world as young creative professionals.
5. Continue producing vital creative work with a heightened sense of pride and confidence.

Additionally, each participant will receive a copy of a group anthology (which they may submit up to two pieces to) featuring their work.

Conclusion: "heartbeat, memories, images"

When I began this journal, I hoped it would aid me in feeling less misunderstood, less hopeless, less frantic. But in the end, an empty journal is not the answer. Yes, it is cathartic, yet it is simply a mechanism, a mirror. It is a reflection of transportation. It is not me, it is a messenger of me, and there are still so many elements to be delivered.
—Hailey O'Donnell, August 3, 2017

She is working now, in a room
not unlike this one,
the one where I write, or you read.
Her table is covered with paper.
The light of the lamp would be
tempered by a shade, where the bulb's
single harshness might dissolve,
but it is not; she has taken it off.
Her poems? I will never know them,
though they are the ones I most need.
—Jane Hirshfield, "The Poet," 1997

On August 3, 2017, I was sixteen years old. Twenty days later, I would turn seventeen. I was about to begin my final year of high school, and I was engulfed in prospects and premeditation. I did not know the gifts to come. I did not know about the denim-blue house with

potted plants crowding the counters. I did not know I would finally learn to play guitar. I did not know about the neighbor's grey cat that would sit on my lap as I wrote on the porch. I did not know about the long walks in early summer, the geese crossing the trail.

But above all, I did not know about the women. Women sitting passenger, knowing the same lyrics by heart. Women inviting me to their showcases, their concerts, their presentations. Women beside me in class, corroborating my thoughts. Women swimming by me, telling stories between dives. Women in my poetry workshop saying they recognize my voice. Women pulling me into the kitchen, teaching me how to dice an onion. Women lending me their favorite books, their scarves, their attention. And yes, women laying in the grass—reading, smiling, instilling faith.

These were not the images I saw when I imagined my early adulthood. When I began leaning into my practice as a writer, I thought I was by extension leaning into my solitude. That's what the *paper* was there for—company, a promise. *I'm hoping paper will understand me*. And it did. And despite dreaming of harmony with other creative women, I recognized the risk of this desire. I knew I could not anticipate companionship; knew that directing that longing to *paper* was the necessary, self-saving move.

But that journal entry from that August reveals the actual story—that *an empty journal is not the answer*, not a replacement for gracious attention. Once again, I had exposed my need for other people. While my writing was *cathartic*, it was not a comprehensive solution. It was a *mirror*—so really, it should have been no surprise when it caught me evading myself.

In her essay "Someone is Writing a Poem," Adrienne writes:

> [M]ost often someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an "I" can become a "we" without

> extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images. A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, images of strangers (par.6).

The creative act is fundamentally un-singular. To write is to collage, snipping sentiments and artifacts, recontextualizing them with our framing, our thoughtful glue—but the medium (the clipping, the language) has passed through countless hands already. Our words are *ours*, certainly, but they are not vacuous. They arrive charged with lifetimes of gesture, obsession and heat—"electrical currents," as Adrienne says (par.1). They gleam and twist with stewardship past. *How* then, could we ever expect writing to be a solitary practice?

Her poems? I will never know them, / though they are the ones I most need. The girl writing a poem (whether she knows it or not) has stirred solace in another. A ripple rocks the creative source, dropping a mussel at a faceless girl's feet. Her opening it, making a lyric of it, will urge another wave, and another, endlessly. But gratitude for these tidal sparks feels without destination—the girl cannot find their source. She cannot greet, thank, embrace these invisible inspirations, because she cannot locate them. Because they have been coerced into hiding. Because they do not know their sway.

This research insists that we show these young women the path to each other. Confronted with a creative landscape which continually strives to intimidate them, our young women are leaving their artist selves behind; another lofty childhood fantasy to depreciate. Fearful of mockery, failure and inaptitude, many will choose to abandon imperative work. Urging the opposite direction—toward appreciating and nurturing the creative self—can help young women become more confident, connected and capable of self-advocacy. With expanded access to peer creative community, they may also become advocates for each other, and for their value as a

creative class. Translating therapeutic creativity into collective healing, and further, collective healing from expected womanhood's harm with trusted peers, can awaken novel creative vitality and abundance.

The wide implementation of young women's workshop spaces such as my proposed program is merely the start of their creative reevaluation and broader creative revolution. Moving forward, further research into systems of creativity deterrence will be crucial in reconstructing our creative culture and workforce to respect youth insight. Such reconstruction will also require examinations of youth creative career promotion, as to better understand how to effectively promote creative persistence well into adulthood. Yet simultaneously, I hope for a reimagining of "creative success" entirely—one which judges achievement on authenticity and spirit, rather than adherence to canonical standards of literary/artistic craftsmanship. Perhaps defining "creative work" as the work of self-delineation and emotional "restorying," rather than decidedly "high quality" content output, might enable more young women to continue creating.

A girl is looking at her hands. All she has—the soft evidence of generations. Care and cause. Amazement and amity. She turns them over, marks the common weave that was her mother's, that is unbounded. All she holds. She seizes a pen. The fingers' bold collaboration, embracing the barrel. How the middle and index connect, blazing carnation with the pressure. She will write something. She will write the way poets beckon her, the way she proceeds—certainly, in song. She will mind women in stars. She will score a moment's newness, dream to dawn to glory. She will list acquired charms, hopeful or otherwise heartening.

And she will be writing a poem, and she will call it one. "What else would you call words pulled from the wind? Words from a woman who dances with daffodils?" she says.

She is a poet. She holds a poet's hands.

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