

## **ABSTRACT**

BIRD, TAMMY S. Blogging through My Son's Incarceration: An Autoethnography Exploring Voice and Power in an Online Space. (Under the direction of Diane Chapman.)

Analytic autoethnography is qualitative research in which the researcher is a full member in the research group or setting, is visible as such, and is dedicated to increasing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. This study stems from the researcher/self's sudden move from the positive side of the dichotomies that built her world to the negative and from her need to find a way to mother a son she loved, who she also wanted to forget. The purpose of this analytic autoethnography was to understand the expression of voice and power in a technological space and to use that knowledge to help others to find their voice, as well. The findings focus on the expression of voice and power in a technological space that is both real and virtual. This swirling of what we perceive as real space and what we perceive as virtual space allows for what Davis (2000) calls "identity overflow," a space that Cixous (1993) speaks of in her work as a space where one writes "in flashes." This created space offers a place to write not what you already know or are supposed to know but what you cannot know, as you attempt to understand, face, and think the incomprehensible, inaudible, and unthinkable of a life crisis. Data for this study was collected over a two and a half year period that began on the day that the mother/researcher found out that her son was incarcerated. The primary data source (the situation under study) was the blog, which includes original posts and comments from other bloggers on the posts. Other data collected consisted of letters to and from the blogger and her son, emails written by visitors to the blog and journal entries kept by the researcher while analyzing data.

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Blogging Through my Son's Incarceration: An Autoethnography Exploring Voice and Power  
in an Online Space

by  
Tammy S. Bird

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my son, a child with a freckled nose and freckled elbows, who for many years felt as if his soft qualities had to be hidden under a hard exterior; this work is dedicated to my son, a man now, whose freckled nose and freckled elbows remind me still that we all live in that space somewhere between wo/man and child, soft and hard, good and bad and that it is okay to talk about it. In fact, it is imperative that we talk about it, write about it, and acknowledge it, out loud for all to hear.

## BIOGRAPHY

I am a high school drop-out who thought that her parents did not know anything. I traveled a path that many others have traveled – having a daughter at 17, a husband at 18, a son at 19, and a divorce at 20. I waited tables and lived from pay check to pay check. While working at a local seafood restaurant, I met a woman who changed my life forever. Her name was Lianne Lambriola. She was an English instructor at a local community college, and she was first my regular customer, then my cheering committee as I walked through the process of becoming a student, then my teacher, my mentor, and finally my friend. At 30 years of age, thanks in no small part to this amazing woman, I had an Associate's degree in liberal arts. After my years at Tidewater Community College, I transferred to Old Dominion University in Norfolk VA, where I obtained a Bachelor's degree in English with a minor in women's studies and a Master's degree in Literature focusing specifically on women's literature and African American literature.

Following my graduation, I opted to focus on teaching and on my home life. Over the years, in addition to my studies, I had come out as a lesbian, adopted a third child, accepted two other children into my life, lost my father to a heart attack, and struggled with a son who continuously made bad decisions that landed him in detention homes, boys' homes, and jail. I never stopped thinking about learning, though, so when an opportunity arose in 2003 to return to school to take classes toward a doctorate in education, I was thrilled. Currently, as I continue on this educational journey, I am living in Raleigh, NC with my partner and our two cats. Our grown children visit often, and my grandchildren fill my life with more joy than I thought I would ever know. Life is good.



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First, to those who entered into my blogging space, whether it was daily or only once, I appreciate your words, your courage, and your willingness to share. I truly respect and admire each of you.

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To the many other family members who took this journey with me: my father, my hero, who never quit believing in me even when I quit believing in myself, my mother and sister who continue to brag to anyone who will listen even though they still have absolutely no idea what I have been doing, and my children and grandchildren who sometimes refused to leave me alone so that I could write, I am thankful to each of you for never wavering in your belief in where I was going and why, and for reminding me that sometimes I had to step away to return. It turns out that I needed some of those moments even more than you did; I just did not realize it until later.

To the face-to-face friends that I have met along the way, the ones who struggled beside me and with me through one more statistics class, one more Spanish lesson, one more dissertation discussion over chips and salsa. Abbie, Janie, Lorielee, Shelly, Tracey, Viki, Bob, Janet. The list goes on. You know who you are. And to the virtual friends who I have never met outside of the computer screen, the ones who cried, laughed, and learned with me. Beth Anne, Ira, Brenda, Angela, Michelle, Micah. Thank you all for encouraging, goading, and never giving up on me or on your own dreams.

I owe much, as well, to Dr. Diane Chapman, who stepped in and guided me after a long struggle with finding my way in the dissertation process, to Dr. Tim Luckadoo, whose monthly meetings kept me pushing to produce, and to the many other faculty members who have provided me support and encouragement along the way. Each of you challenged me in different, but equally important ways. For this, and for your continued support, I thank you.

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## PRELUDE

*People like that made her want to go to the roof of a building in the middle of the world and scream loud enough for all to hear.*

*"They are not bad, not all of them anyway, not even most of them. They are hurt and lost and afraid.*

*They are not you. But they could be.*

*One stupid, thoughtless, life-altering decision and 'they' could be 'you.'"*

*But she didn't scream - couldn't scream – at this group of women in the local Barnes and Noble bookstore.*

*Just like she didn't scream in the past when it had been a couple in the line at the supermarket, a father walking with his small son, two men on a train, students waiting for their instructor to enter the classroom.*

*Everyone, it seems, knows how to prevent this thing from touching their lives, from existing in their world. Everyone talks as if their son or daughter "knows better" than to even try something stupid like selling drugs or stealing an old lady's purse or pawning a stereo or shooting a friend.*

*But they don't.*

*If they did, no one's son would rob a bank. No one's daughter would shake a child to death. No one's mom would back a car over a dad. No one's sister would wake up alone and afraid in a crack house.*

*But they do.*

*Every day, they do.*

*They do it even though someone loves them, even though someone cares enough to beg them to seek help, even though they are hurting themselves and those around them. Even though they don't belong where they are going, and we don't belong visiting them there.*

*Even though.*

*But you don't tell them that – can't tell them that – because then they would know that you are the mother they are talking about..... (tbird36, 2004, September 17)*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

This is a story of who I am, and who I am not. It is a story written in the digital blogging ether by a mother of a convicted felon, both of whom are living in the spatiotemporal world of bodies and things. It is a story of writing to (un)become, a story of both/neither, here/there, everywhere/nowhere, a story where many are invited in to write, to change the story as it moves through their own digital ether beings. Back and forth. Forward and back. Seeking, creating, changing. Life inside the Internet. Can you feel it? Can you see the rhizomatic movement from point to point, from pixel to pixel? The Internet and the tiny spec within it that is my blog are both vast complex realities where historical sedimentations begin to double-back on themselves, a space such as those that Lather (2001) seeks where “things begin to shift via practices that exceed the warrants of our present sense of the possible” (p. 200). Here there is no *big ‘T’ truth*, no pure and closed identity. Everything is contaminated and (re)created by everything else, including my story, which begins (again) here in an analysis of this space between being and not being that is the Internet.

The first thing I remember about seeing my son after his arrest was the line of people waiting to gain access to those they loved. The line snaked back and forth in front of the huge secure structure. The sharp barbed wire mimicked their snake-like line. It was cold. I was sweating. My eyes met the eyes of one person after another. Many were women, about my age, and mothers, mothers of the statistics (some 2,258,983 in prisons and in jails) that were

housed securely behind the prison walls (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2006). A few of them fit the stereotypical expectations that I had of what a mother of a convicted felon would be - unclean, foul-mouthed, and edgy - but most did not. Most of the women reminded me of me, and I didn't look like what I expected, at all. And yet, there we all stood, waiting together to be buzzed into a world of deviance, into a world of bars and steel and broken dreams. As I stood there, I thought, "One hour per week. Would the deviance seep in? Would those in our real world sense that we are now those mothers who we have all talked about, those mothers who somehow allowed their dependent baby boys to turn into unspeakable objects of scorn and ridicule?"

In that moment, and daily thereafter, I fought with the idea that this was somehow my fault. I sought out research on mothers of incarcerated sons. I found little. Feeling alone, I started a blog (<http://tbird36.xanga.com>). Words in a *safe* space, I felt, would allow me to express my pain and anger and love and fear where no one *really* knew me, where I could sit *alone* and cry and work through intense moments of pain without anyone that I *cared about* noticing that there was anything amiss in my world. Funny thing about journaling in a public space, though, it is a much better place to learn about being than not being, a much better place to learn about not hiding than it is a place to hide.

### **Problem**

The overarching problem that this study seeks to address is power, power that becomes connected to universals and meta-narratives and symbols and language, power that oppresses, marginalizes, and silences a person or a group in a given society. Lather (2007)

has extensive conversation concerning the construction and use of meta-narratives, or grand or master narratives as they are sometimes called, and the construction of universals and binary modes of thinking that these entail, along with the particularly problematic practice of “power over” or “abuse of power” (p. 57) that forces *Other* ways of knowing and thinking into invisibility. (For additional research in this area, see Anzaldúa, 2007; Lather, 1997; McCoy, 1997; Morgan, 2000; and St. Pierre and Pillow, 2000). As noted elsewhere in this study, the terms meta-narrative, master narrative and grand narrative stem from the work of Lyotard (1979). For consistency, the term meta-narrative will be used throughout this study. It is to a discussion of these meta-narratives that I now turn.

Meta-narratives are stories of stories (Lyotard, 1979). *Family* is an example of a meta-narrative that relates directly to my own study. Based on the writing of Lyotard (1979) the meta-narrative of *Family* is the story of the story of family that provides a framework against which an individual’s own experience is judged. The family meta-narrative normalizes and legitimizes the *Truth of Family* and allows for the constructing of some families as superior to others. Any deviation from the behaviors of this construction is an inferior arrangement and must be punished, corrected, brought back in line, and/or silenced or eliminated (Aguirre, 2005). In the meta-narrative *Truth of Family* there is a structure that begins with the heterosexual coupling of a man and a woman. Another meta-narrative, that of *God*, mandates that man is the head of the household and woman, made from his rib, is the keeper of the home, the bearer and caregiver of the children, the nurturer. Together they protect the integrity of the unit. If the unit functions and behaves as *Family* should, with the

man at the helm as yet another meta-narrative (*Patriarchy*) dictates, it will produce new appropriately functioning and behaving heterosexual beings that will go out into the world and create new families.

Meta-narratives, as Aguirre (2005) stated, “legitimize the knowledge, programs, or schools produced by any particular group of people seeking to transform that knowledge into *Truth* [emphasis added]” (p. 16-17). Throughout this dissertation you will find the word *Truth* capitalized and italicized. This is to indicate the noted difference between the idea of a *Truth*, *One Truth*, *The Truth* housed in the meta-narratives discussed and the “petit récits” or little ‘t’ truths found in localized narratives spoken of in the work of Lyotard (1979). Meta-narratives function in seamless and invisible ways to validate particular views of human behavior (Aguirre, 2005). The universal nurturing mother mentioned above resides in the *Family* meta-narrative. I chose the idea of the universal mother, here, as mine is an autoethnographic study of a mother/self. I could just have easily used the idea of the universal father mentioned above or any other universal within the meta-narrative under study. The universal son is another modernist myth that resides in the meta-narrative *Family*. This myth is different than the myth of the universal daughter. Mothering a son, with all of the privileged political position that universal entails, demands, as psychodynamic theories of development suggest, that he be taught to break free from his mother and develop an autonomous self (Chodorow, 1978), and yet, as mothers, though we want to help our children formulate their own identities, we want them to do so in a way that allows for an independence that is not too independent from us (Baber & Allen, 1992). Performing

motherhood, then, becomes a role filled with as many contradictions in this very hierarchically structured world as the concept of mothering itself (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989; Trebilcot, 1983).

The work of feminist scholars such as Bell (2004) and Ragone and Twine (2000) look at intensive performances of mothering and motherhood. These works speak to the complexities and ambiguities of the created space of universal mother and explore many multiple identities and meanings of mothering by looking at the particularities of embodied motherhood and by considering how perceptions and interpretations are mediated through discourse. Here is a post from my blog that shows how the perceptions of children are molded through discourse:

So much energy and thought being spent on your daughter during the day takes my night dreams to you as a child. Last night, you were four again, and we were sitting at the dining room table with family and friends.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Sandy asked. "I think I want to be a mommy," you answered. "Boys can't be mommies," Sandy said. "They can be daddies, though."

This realization took at least a full minute for you to process, and then you looked us both in the eyes and said, in a sad but determined voice, "Then I guess I'll just be a fireman." (tbird36, 2004, November 14)

Why can't boys be mommies? They cannot be mommies because mommies do not have penises or deep voices or hairy legs. Mommies have vaginas and sweet soothing voices and

smooth legs. That is why. St. Pierre (2000) uses the metaphor of a chess board and the pieces that are moved from internal space to internal space to help her reader to understand the concept of the universal striated space. Like the chess board, striated space is “sedentary space, space that is coded, defined, bounded, and limited” (p. 263). A universal (mother, prisoner) is such a bounded space. Players can only move within the confines of the clearly marked edges if they are to be kept in the game, if they are to be allowed unrestricted (but surveyed and calculated) movement. One false move and pieces are exiled to the margins where they remain until something within the game changes in such a way that they are invited back in.

When we talk of mothering our sons, we talk of two things: how society views mothering in a mother/son dichotomy and the position of women in this relationship. These societal views and modes of positioning determine both status in the domestic sphere and place in society. Thus, each (and everything, really) must be explored in ways that call into question some of the existing thoughts that bind the complex web of issues into oppositional binaries such as male/female, rational/emotional, inside/outside, presence/lack, fertile/barren, and good/bad. Some of those whose work deals specifically with women and binary issues include: Ballif, Davis, and Mountford, 2000; Cixous, 1976; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Haraway, 1991; and Irigaray, 1985.

Others, as well, have researched and questioned the idealized portrait of a *good* mother (Contratto, 1986; Glenn, 1994; Krane & Davies, 2007; Rich, 1976). As seen through the work of these authors, this powerful fantasy of nurturing perfection and faultless adult

children leaves little room for mothers of less-than-perfect children to feel anything except enormous guilt within their selves and censure from others who do not want to acknowledge that they too could at any moment be in the position of marginalization. Mothers nurturing middle/upper class White families do not produce felons. If they do, the mother has done something terribly wrong, something worth hiding, something unspeakable. This universal idea of mother resides in the meta-narrative *Family*, with all of its rules and rituals, all of its statuses, normalizations, and legitimations. If you deviate from this norm, you are silenced and banished to the borders of society through embarrassment, ridicule, and treatment by others who exert power over you. Specifically, then, the problem that this study addresses is the silencing and marginalization of women faced with a life crisis such as the imprisonment of a son that are being forced into a “vague and undetermined” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.25) space that Anzaldúa (1999) calls the borderlands. This space is a space of silence and invisibility created by the sudden bumping up against the meta-narratives of a society that operates on principles vastly different from and very judgmental of the norms and mores these marginalized groups are forced to establish within the new life-crisis space.

### **Purpose**

This analytic autoethnographic study had a dual purpose. First and foremost I sought to increase understanding of the ways in which today’s social networking technologies, or participation technologies as they are coined by Jones and Conceição (2008), blogging in particular, allow for agency and voice of those in the midst of life crises. The secondary purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the ways in which meta-narratives

function to validate particular views of human behavior as they relate to dominant cultural power.

### **Research Questions**

In keeping with the dual purpose of this dissertation, my questions were as follows:

1. How do the blogging experiences of a woman in the midst of a life crisis help us to understand the process of developing agency and voice?
2. How does the act of blogging through a life crisis and the subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior?

### **Significance of study**

This study contributes to the small pool of experimental feminist analytic autoethnographies. As such, personally, it extends my own knowledge of self and how I came to explore blogging as a way to an agency and voice that I had not known standing alone and, more broadly, it extends efforts to understand the finer and subtler dynamics of the workings of perceived differences and power structures vis-à-vis sites of injustice. Like Lather (2007), I am committed to writing in a way that troubles “habitual frames of representational space that too often [offer women] up for consumption and voyeurism” (p. 35). The blogosphere, where many people come together to work through grief and to learn from others who have grieved through similar life events, is an informal learning space. Analyzing this situational space to better understand the ways in which it creates and informs our life and the lives of others and for the ways in which the meta-narratives at play in the

situation function to validate particular views of human behavior, particularly of mothering, not only gives us new insight into how a self learns informally through a particular type of online discourse, but also allows us to transfer this informal learning to other views of human behavior in the midst of silencing life crisis.

The findings of this study are intended to inform and encourage adult educators who seek more creative ways to research marginalizing situations by helping to develop a more in-depth understanding of marginalized populations. Throughout this study I sought to impact methodology that has been typically used to explore marginalized spaces in adult education studies by introducing a study with human (for example, my real and virtual selves and the virtual selves of those who interacted with the blog) and nonhuman (such as the prison, both real and metaphorical, the posts and the responses to the posts, and cultural and societal histories) subjects/objects, at the (non)center, that is, an exploration of a situation where all subjects and objects were equally likely to be placed at the center and just as likely to be removed from the center as something else slid into view. Educationally, this translates into “adult education’s concern with helping people understand their experience, and with the field’s preference for experiential methods” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 37).

Further implications may include the development of improved support groups online and the open dialogue between mothers of incarcerated sons. In addition, the results may encourage marginalized groups to be more vocal and to be more creative in providing additional spaces for interaction, exploration, and healing.

### **Theoretical Frame**

“What we believe today about our world, our place in the world, and the institutions that we build to live in that world, are fundamentally formed by the philosophies of the Enlightenment and its subsequent modern implementations” (Aguirre, 2005, p. 3). It is from this space of modernity that the problem that this study addresses is formed. Bauman (1999) convincingly argues that this Enlightenment desire for and establishment of *Truth* results in nothing less than the desire for and the establishment of domination of one person, one thing, over another.

Lyotard (1979) held a similar belief and, with a vision of progressive politics grounded in the cohabitation of an innumerable amount of locally legitimate language games, he proposed that those who had moved beyond modernity to post-modernity focus on specific local contexts and diversity of human experience. Lyotard (1979) is often quoted because of his defining of the postmodern turn as a mental rejection towards modernity’s meta-narratives. My need for Lyotard is no different. It is from his idea of *petit récits* or localized narratives that I enter into my own discussion of my own theoretical frame, that is, postmodernism and, under this larger umbrella, post-structuralism and post-feminism, all of which have “doing difference differently” (Lather, 2006, p. 4) as a central theme.

Next I will briefly discuss postmodernism and position post-structuralism and post-feminism as I will use them in my own study under the postmodern umbrella. The overarching theory of postmodernism will be presented first. This will include a general overview of post-structuralism and a general overview of post-feminism. To conclude this

chapter I will discuss my research approach within this frame and my intention for using positional maps to (de)construct it.

### **Postmodernism**

There are thinkers who have claimed that postmodernism is a meta-narrative (Callinicos, 1991; Habermas, 1983) in that it criticizes universal rules but does so with a universal skepticism towards meta-narratives. It is not within the scope of this dissertation to argue the two sides of this long standing debate. Instead, I will acknowledge it and indicate here that I am not suggesting that we can do away with the ideas that hold meta-narratives in place, or even that we should. I am suggesting, though, that we question each as we bump up against it, that we question how it was formed, the ideologies it upholds, the ways in which we can think otherwise. Postmodernism, as Clarke (2005) stated so well, delights in “playing with unpredictable possibilities” (p. 34) with an eye toward “partialities, positionalities, complications, tenuousness, instabilities, irregularities, contradictions, heterogeneities, situatedness, and fragmentation” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxiv). This is key to the framework of my study. In particular, I reside squarely within the position taken by those such as Clarke (2005) who state that all knowledge is socially and culturally produced and must be looked at in relation to their sites of production or, as Haraway (1999) claims, in relation to their situatedness – in relation to who produces them and who consumes them. My study looks at the process of creating voice and agency through a move from the face-to-face realm of private journaling through a life crisis to that of the very public realm of the Internet and blogging. Because of this, of particular interest to this study are Omi and Winant (1994) who

focus in part on the involvement of particular gendered social formations in projects of knowledge production; Haraway (1991), Irigaray (1985), Lather and Smithies (1997) and Leach (2000), who concern themselves with the relationship between knowledges and their sites of production; and Foucault (1972, 1973, 1980) who calls forth genealogies of knowledges and their discourses and practices.

According to Anderson (1998), the first showing in text of the term postmodern was in the 1870's by the British artist John Watkins Chapman, who used the term to put forth the notion that modernism, as it stood at that time, was limiting and that we must imagine a world *post*-modernism. Dorfman (2002) adds that it was not until the 1960's and 70's that the term was used with any consistency. This change in usage, he notes, can be attributed to three figures: American literary critic, Leslie Fielder, who "tied postmodernism to the growing counter-culture in the United States and Europe" (p. 3); Ihab Hassan, Egyptian-American literature professor, who furthers Fielder's ideas and adds new ideas to include that of the connection between postmodernism and post-structuralism; and Jean-Francois Lyotard, who is said to have met Hassan and a conference in 1972. It is Lyotard's (1979) work and his constant disruption of the notion of one unified source for *True* knowledge that I am most involved with for the purposes of this analytic autoethnographic study. Interestingly, in his text, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard ponders a working hypothesis that is that "the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (p. 3). Postmodernism, as stated in Anderson (2003), is "a broad

umbrella” under which various traditions of thought converge. Within postmodernism there are many terms and means of struggle. There is not time nor room within this dissertation to discuss all of them. However, there are two more focused theories that are housed under the postmodern umbrella that I have yet to put forth that must be understood in relation to the author’s stance going into this study. These theories are post-structuralism and post-feminism. I do realize that there are practitioners who would argue this placement, due to divergences between them. I acknowledge this, as well, but argue that the resemblances allow for this structure. Most notably, these approaches are all more inclined to the construction of knowledge and meaning, largely through language.

The first section following this introduction will give a brief overview of post-structuralism. The second section following this introduction will give a brief overview of post-feminism and define its relationship to the other theories and terms presented as they relate to the proposed study. And the final section following this introduction will put forth my research approach as it relates to my study.

**Post-Structuralism.** Two of the main features of post-structuralist theory according to Sarup (1993) are the “deconstruction of the self” (p. 53) and “an abandonment of all reference to a center, to a fixed subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, to an absolute founding and controlling first principle” (p. 53). A third feature, discussed in the works of postmodernist/post-structuralist thinkers such as Davis (2000), Foucault (1972), Irigaray (1985), Lather and Smithies (1997), and Lyotard (1979), is language. For post-structuralists, language is power and language used differently can open up spaces of discourse to make

visible dominant language practices. It is through this exposing and deconstructing and re-visioning that subjects can use the power of discourse to reposition themselves, realign themselves, in ways that make visible, in ways that give voice (Davis, 2000).

My own study is of a virtual space, a situation of discourse, where electronic linkages allow the reader to create a new narrative with each visit, with each click, thus blurring the lines between author and reader. This blurring points back to Sarup's (1993) abandonment of a fixed subject, of a privileged reference. It also points to a crossing of borders and a move from print as a product to discourse as a reader's performance, both of which are explored by authors who reside in the postmodern, post-structuralist, and post-feminist realms (Ellsworth, 2005; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Sandlin 2005, 2007). Each of these ideas will be taken up in more detail in the literature review. As an introduction to my frame of reference, though, I will note its importance here as a way to introduce the idea of thinking differently about how we think (Butler, 2004; Lather, 2006), which is a central theme of post-structuralist thought.

**Post-feminism.** Just as in post-structuralist thought, thinking differently is a key aspect of post-feminist literature and, for the post-feminist thinker concerned with societal and cultural production (Butler, 2004; Ellsworth, 2005; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Sandlin, 2005), this does not exclude thinking about feminisms, past and present. "Feminism," as Butler (2004) asserts, "is a mess" (p. 175). Lather (2006) agrees that we must continue to think about how we think. She uses these words of Butler (2004) as a spring board in her own piece that deals, in part, with the feminism to which she is committed. In (Post)feminist Methodology: Getting Lost OR a Scientificity we can Bear to Learn From, Lather (2006)

notes that two of the goals of post-feminism are to “raise troubling questions about how we think about how we think and learning to learn differently where ‘giving voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ ‘telling and testifying’ and ‘empowerment’ have lost their innocence” (p. 5). My blog is a space of this lost innocence. As such, it fits nicely into a discussion about how we think and about how we can learn to learn differently.

Along with the postmodern umbrella and post-structuralism, I will discuss post-feminism in more detail in the literature review, specifically using two examples (Lather & Smithies, 1997; Pillow, 2000) that exemplify how postmodern, post-structural, and post-feminist work seeks the excluded and brings it into play; “uses and troubles a category simultaneously, operationalizing the classic move of deconstruction: under erasure” (Lather, 2006, p. 5); and celebrates unknowingness and self-reflection. Before turning to the literature review, though, there is one more area within my theoretical frame that must be discussed. That is, “What approach to my research will I take within this frame?”

### **Research Approach**

As I will discuss at length in my literature review, I am studying self and culture and society through a method referred to as autoethnography, a method that Lionnet (1990) defines as one used to “open up spaces of resistance between the individual (auto-) and the collective (-ethno-) where the writing (-graphy) of resistance cannot be foreclosed” (p. 391). This method fits within the postmodern, post-structuralist, and post-feminist frame in both its spaces of resistance that challenge the struggle of a singular identity constituted by culture and its highly personalized style as “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves

in ways that engage with representations that others have made of them” (Pratt, 1991, p. 35). Autoethnography “lets you use yourself to get to culture” (Pelias, 2003, p. 372) and, as I will also discuss at length in the literature review, deconstruction of this space once presented will help us to think differently about thinking and learning as it increases understanding of the ways in which technology, blogging in particular, allows for agency and voice of those in the midst of life crises.

The deconstructing of a space or a situation is an approach discussed in the work of Clark (2005). It is to her work, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn* (2005), a text that has at its core the need to call forth the researcher’s responsibility to “include extended efforts to understand the finer and subtler dynamics of the workings of differences especially but not only vis-à-vis sites of injustices” (p. 74), that I now turn for a brief description of the maps that I will use to deconstruct my auto (*self*) ethno (*collective*) graphy (*writing*) space. For Clarke (2005), maps used in situational analysis are one tool that can successfully be used by researchers to cast light on power structures, to reveal silences, and to “allow pathways into thorny problem areas” (p. 75). Clarke’s (2005) mapping strategies offer the tools to use to begin the process of exploration. This method builds on Strauss’ (1987) situation-centered “social worlds/arenas/negotiations” framework and offers to the reader three cartographic approaches to working with data:

1. Situational maps that lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements in the research situation of inquiry and provoke analysis of relations among them;

2. Social worlds/arenas maps that lay out the collective actors, key nonhuman elements, and the arena(s) of commitment and discourse within which they are engaged in ongoing negotiations – meso-level interpretations of the situation; and
3. Positional maps that lay out the major positions taken, and not taken, in the data vis-à-vis particular axis of difference, concern, and controversy around issues in the situation of inquiry. (p. xxii)

Situational analysis, with its grounded theory framework, “allows researchers to draw together studies of discourse and agency, action and structure, image, text and context, history and the present moment – to analyze complex situations of inquiry broadly conceived” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxii). Using these maps will give me a way to analyze positionalities, a fresh way to deconstruct discourse that centers on the situation of inquiry. Deconstructing the situation of mothering through a life crisis will move us in and out of the borderland (Anzaldúa, 1999) that a perceived universal such as *Mother* or *Family* helps to create. This is a good thing. As Derrida (1978) tells us, it is necessary to lodge “oneself within the traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it” (p. 111).

### **Chapter summary**

Based on the above discussion, it is clear that within the theoretical frame where I situate myself, there is a belief that there are no *Real* or *True* universals (Lyotard, 1979), and yet, I must note here that because of societal constraints and the slipperiness of the language from which I must build, I am knowingly beginning from the universal notion of mothering. This goes back to Lather (2006) and thinking about how we think. I put the words on a page

(real or virtual) using the language set forth by a society seeped in what Davis (2000) points to as *phal-logos*-centric thinking that demand that “any statement be either true or false, but never both, never neither, and never a third option” (p. 136). Putting the word on the page calls forth its discourse. We must start here, and so I did, in this chapter.

My study followed my life. Well, actually, my study studied my life, or a messy, nonlinear, language piece of my life, where “notions that are apparently foreign to each other ... and notions that are so close that their 'relationship' seems merely metaphorical” (Colombat, 1991, p. 13) came out of hiding for the world to see. I used situational mapping (Clarke, 2005) of a particular informal learning space to increase understanding of the ways in which technology in general and blogging in particular allow us to use language differently (Davis, 2000), opening a new space for agency and voice of those in the midst of an *Otherwise* silencing life crisis.

My theoretical frame is as eclectic as the worlds that I inhabit. It is informed by post-feminist postmodern/poststructuralist, narrative, and discursive perspectives. While I know that it is impossible to define any of these paradigms definitively, I have attempted in this chapter to explain the spaces within each that have informed and continue to inform my study and my world. The intent, as well, was to explore the idea that showing others how to create discourse maps (Clarke, 2005) of such spaces and situations will further the call to bring attention to cultural politics in order to create a reflective awareness that has the potential to generate positive social change (Ellsworth, 2005; Sandlin, 2005).

In the next chapter I will further explore postmodern, post-structuralist, and post-feminist literature and explore literature surrounding blogging as a way to create agency and voice and literature that has been created around the idea of informal learning.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Literature Review**

This chapter provides a thorough backdrop of the research that informed this study. It begins where chapter one left off, with a discussion about my theoretical frame. In chapter two, though, I focus less on general information about the postmodern umbrella (Anderson, 2003) and the subsets of post-structuralism and post-feminism and more on the specific concepts of deconstruction, discourse, and power, three concepts that guide my study. Following this portion of the literature review, I tie my theoretical frame to the situation that is under scrutiny, my blog, and to Xanga.com in particular. I discuss what it means to be an activist blogger and explore activist pedagogy, types of informal learning, and the discourse used to create and maintain the blogging situation under study and establish the importance of narrative in general and of autoethnography and women's writing of self, in particular.

### **Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, and Post-feminism**

The first three sections following this introduction define the related terminology within my postmodern, post-structuralist, post-feminist frame that directly influence the proposed study and that will be used throughout the dissertation. The concepts include: deconstruction, discourse and power.

**Deconstruction.** Derrida's move to critique Western philosophy's logocentric thought is referred to by Derrida (1976) as deconstruction. In the beginning, language produced a particular form of reality (Derrida, 1976). Language, Derrida (1976) wrote, is both speech and writing. Historically, though, speech has been the primary mode of

language. We meet. I transfer my thoughts to you through speech. If you do not understand me, I say it again and again until you do. Then you go off and teach someone else what you have been taught by me. Writing as language has historically been the inferior mode, the bad side of the binary opposition of the speech/writing dichotomy. Historically, it has been said to not allow for the communication that ensures that you know what I mean. It silences me once the words meet the page. You can interpret it any way you feel appropriate, and I can do nothing about it. My interpretation of what Derrida (1976) insinuates, in my words, not his, is “So what? Your speech is a creation of ambiguous signs, anyway. You are not creating a communication that is ever received as you sent it, because the receiver’s ambiguous signs that are being used to interpret your ambiguous signs are based on what discourses she or he has bumped into along the way to this moment.” Here is Newman (2001) on Derrida and speech and writing:

Speech claims to be a self-presence that is immediate and authentic to itself, whereas writing is seen as diminishing this presence. However, Derrida shows that this authenticity, this purity of self-identity is always questionable: it is always contaminated by what it tries to exclude. According to this logic no identity is ever complete or pure: it is constituted by that which threatens it. Derrida does not want to deny self-identity or presence: he merely wants to show that this presence is never as pure as it claims to be. It is always open to the other, and contaminated by it. (p. 8)

Deconstruction is a type of analysis by which the ambiguity of signs and the meaning they convey in a text or image is called forth (Derrida, 1976). My blog is a written document.

As such, one of the main dichotomies that hold it in place is the speech/writing dichotomy.

Deconstruction of this space, then, makes sense as a way to begin critiquing the space.

Fairclough (1999) adds a great deal to the discussion of the deconstructing and analyzing of discourses. For him, and for me, the reasons are clear: (a) Discourses “constitute one important form of social action” (p. 203), (b) texts of any kind “constitute a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations, and processes” (p. 203), (c) perhaps most important to my own study, “texts are sensitive barometers of social processes, movement and diversity, and textual analysis can provide particularly good indicators of social change” (p. 204), and (d) through texts, “social control and social domination are exercised (and indeed negotiated and resisted)” (p. 205). As Clarke (2005) states, “Discourses are dense and complex sites for analysis” (p. 149) built from not only language but from visual images, symbols, non-human elements in a situation, movements, signals, sounds, and dance, for example. My blog is built from various discourses. Deconstructing these discourses is central to my exploration of agency and voice within the space of life crisis and technology. Hence, I will now turn to the idea of discourse in general, followed by a more focused look at discourse and technology, and to the problem of marginalization that the discourses of modernity create.

**Discourse.** Discourse concerns the construction of meaning, of meaning-making, by those who share a culturally and historically situated moment in time (Clarke, 2005). Society can be conceptualized as being constructed by layered mosaics of social worlds and arenas, by universes of discourse that remain in a state of flux (Clarke, 2005). Layers of participation

in these social worlds and arenas changes constantly, and each of us participates in various layers at any given moment in time. These shared and changing layers of discourses are what make and mark boundaries, as opposed to geographic boundaries that attend to the relationships of these groups to other “social wholes” (Clark, 2005, p. 45). Anzaldúa (1999) refers to these shifting boundaries as borderlands. Her work is important here, as it presents how a particular world is created by the layers of discourses presented.

***Borderlands.*** The margin or the borderland (Anzaldúa, 1999) that I reside in as a mother of a convicted felon is created by the layers of discourse that Clarke (2005) discusses.

On the day that my son called and said, “I have been sentenced to 10 years in prison,” I wrote the following in what would become the first of many blog entries on xanga.com,

Yesterday my son was sentenced to 10 years in prison. When he called from the jail to tell me what had happened in court, it took some time for him to explain to me just what that meant. What it means, in terms that I could understand, is that he will spend 10 months in prison - 10 years minus 5 years suspended, minus time served (5 months), minus "good time" (15% overall), minus time that will be spent on parole.  
(tbird36, 2004, June 16)

The world that I have lived in since that moment is a world created by discourse, a world created by “the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is [a world] in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 25). The discursive layers that I inhabit in the moment of this writing include the world that is and

is not the world of mothers and prison and convicts and stereotypical expectations of what it is to be a mother raising a son. It is a world where the silence that is built of fear and guilt and pain is as deadly to mothers and mothering as speaking it into being is deadly to who we were before we spoke. These layers place me outside of what society deems the valid Family metanarrative, and therefore into a position to be *Othered*. The idea of *Othering* resides under the postmodernist/post-structuralist/post-feminist umbrella and securely within the metanarrative *Family* and now needs to be discussed in order to more fully understand the phenomenon that is such an intricate part of this study.

***Othering.*** As Abbott (2006) has noted, there is a long tradition throughout much social theory that “argues that people on the edges and frontier zones of social groups, those whose status and standing are uncertain and contested, are the most active agents of social change” (p. 600). When I was a mother whose children followed the rules set forth by western society I was comfortable. Like others like me, I had little reason to wonder or worry about the culture or social milieu that constituted my little corner of the world. My encounter with and becoming of *Other*, changed that, and I became a great example of what Abbott (2006) put forth when he talked about marginal people who “have to consciously decide to work to establish their identity” (p. 600). This work, he stated, is the work that “often generates new ideas and ways to look at social situations and phenomena” (Abbott, 2006, p. 600).

In *Culture as praxis*, Bauman (1999) spoke of being inside the boundaries of that that is good and right, of treading on familiar ground. What is *here* is what we know, what we

deal with regularly, what we are free to speak of. Being within the boundaries is being at home, being where one rarely feels at a loss, being where one knows how to act, how to feel, and how to be. The *out there* holds all that we are not, all that we know little about, all that we fear knowing, fear becoming. *Out there*, things happen that you cannot anticipate or comprehend. *Out there*, knowledge as we know it is twisted and turned and made into something *other than* that that is good and right. This *Other Knowledge* that we inside the boundaries must eradicate is defined by Landry and MacLean (1996) as “not simply information that we have not yet received, but the knowledge that we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social positions” (p. 4). Here, artificial social borders of the good and right keep out the unnerving others whose voices must not only be silenced, but must never be heard at all if we are to keep the boundaries in place. I would like to pause here briefly to make two important points that map to my own thoughts on Othering and difference:

First, as stated in the section titled, *Power*, an important point made by Hall (1996) in his discussion on identity formation is that our identities are built via our perceived differences from those that we identify as *Other*. In other words, we construct our identity in relation to what we are not and, hence, we have a need to *Other*, a need that perpetuates marginality. This idea of Othering and identity as it relates to the Internet and blogging will be explored in more depth in this chapter’s sections on identity and on the blogosphere.

Second, I must pull in the thoughts of Worsham (1998) who discusses difference, disagreement, and even despair as “occasions to hear one another’s words,” as “an alliance

that recognizes that our histories and experiences are not only diverse in all the ways we have learned to name them, [but] are also intertwined in complex and mutually determining ways” (p. 329). And also the thoughts of Ballif et al. (2000) each of who go to great lengths to help the reader understand that it is not enough to acknowledge difference or to accept it.

Acknowledging and accepting can only take us so far. Acknowledging and accepting simply say that you are not like me and that may be okay, or it may not be ok, but I am still going to stay on whatever I consider the safe side of this very unstable good/bad binary. Using philosophers such as Foucault (1994) and his discussion on hearing the Other, Derrida (1974) and his work with deconstruction and *différance*, and Taylor and Saarinen (1994) who coined the term “*interstanding*,” or glimpsing what lies between—between the *I* and the *Other*, they take the thoughts of Worsham (1998) and their own discussion of feminists learning to *listen* for and negotiate difference and *différance*, even further.

It is *only* in our difference—or, rather, our *différance*—that something like solidarity becomes possible.... All we share is precisely what divides us, our inability to be-one and to beat-one with ourselves and with others. There is a kind of solidarity that becomes available in this originary non-belonging (impropriety, impertinence) that precedes any and every condition of belonging. (Ballif, et al., p. 586)

We must learn to listen, to unlearn, to analyze our own thoughts in new ways. The space of *interstanding*, the space that lies between the binaries, allows conversations to emerge and flow in a multitude of directions (kind of like the Internet that houses the blogosphere of this

study). The space of interstanding is a space of fluid, chaotic, relational postmodern complexity and it happens when we can no longer tuck our world into neat binary packages.

We must seek *différance* and *interstanding* in situations if we are to help others to do the same. In much the same vein, Foucault (1972) maintains that to deal with the ideological function of a space in order to reveal and modify it, there must be questioning of it as a discursive formation. There are seats of power, and there are oppressed groups; and the work of those who contribute to the literature in these areas is necessary and valid. Moving squarely into the adult education realm, let us pause here for a moment to look to Mezirow (2000) and his discussion of development in adulthood as a learning process where meaning becomes “clarified through expanded awareness, critical reflection, validating discourse, and reflective action” (p. 25). This discussion aligns well with both my own analytic autoethnography and with Taylor and Saarinen’s (1994) notion of learning/unlearning and analysis in the space of interstanding where “learning that reflects on itself can only be accomplished through ... a ‘leading out’ from an established habit of mind, an order of mental complexity that enables self direction, a qualitative change in *how* [italics in original] one knows” (p. 26).

Foucault (1972) adds to this discussion of the space of interstanding, as well, in his discussion of the importance of exploring the subtleties and complexities of power. Questioning at the micro level and, I would argue, at the mezzo-level (Clarke, 2005) as well, involves mapping the system by which particular objects are formed. To do so, one must problematize taken-for-granted practices and assumptions by looking at them differently. In

Foucaultian discourse it is not about validating what is already there nor is it about declaring what is to be done (Foucault, 1980). Taylor and Saarinen's (1994) notion of interstanding, Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, and Foucault's theory of points of power in the everyday, are postmodernist approaches to the construction and representation of identities, and to the articulation of power, and each will assist in the deconstructing of the texts and discourses which are an important part of this study. As stated previously in this chapter, there will be a focus throughout this dissertation, as well, of the relationship between knowledge and power. The next section will elaborate on this.

**Power.** Everything is political. Every point is a point of interconnected and interrelated power. To better understand how I became a middle class, White, mother of an incarcerated son, I must go beyond the hierarchy of the family and how it fits into the society as a whole. I must explore the specific forms of power exerted within the family and how those points of power overlap, are absorbed by, and absorb other points of power within other mechanisms of power. Universals contain within them "infinitesimal mechanisms, which have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics" (Foucault, 1980, p. 99) and, if we are to begin unsilencing and giving voice to those pushed to the margins of these universals, focusing on the interconnectiveness of these mechanisms, focusing on how they come to exist, is a good place to begin. As Foucault's life and work illustrates, "theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice; it is practice" (1982, p. 208). For Foucault, the idea is not that knowledge = power, or that power = knowledge. Instead, it is the relation between the two, the articulation of each on the other, in any given

instant that is intriguing. We must explore how power is exercised in everyday life. Foucault (1980) puts it thus:

The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power.... Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; ... it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (p. 52)

What is important, then, is to constantly explore the ways in which those two things interact and how one determines, changes, maintains, the other. For the purposes of my topic, then, the importance lies in the exploring of the power/knowledge construct that surrounds those middle-class mothers of incarcerated sons.

I am a woman and a mother. I am employed, literate, middle class, and white. I am *Normal*. Or, at least I am normal as long as I go no further than this, never discuss the Other 'I's that reside here, as well.

When one mothers under difficult and unusual circumstances, the physical and emotional weight of mothering often becomes invisible (Krane & Davies, 2007). This means that as we realize that we are bad mothers, that we have bad sons, that we are not worthy of belonging to the universal group, *Mother*, we begin to speak less, involve ourselves less, and include our deviant child in fewer of our conversations with those who do not understand or relate to our new realm of mothering. We carry the weight of this mothering alone, typically in hiding and in silence. This happens as a response to both internal and external stimuli,

stimuli that *Others* by placing an entity or a group-entity (mother, prisoners) into the position of object. Though *Othering* and identity are discussed in more depth elsewhere in this chapter, what is important to understand here is that, as Hall (1996) puts forth in his discussion on identity formation, our identities are built via our perceived differences from those that we identify as *Other*. In other words, we construct our identity in relation to what we are not and, hence, we have a need to *Other*, a need that perpetuates marginality.

This assignment of object status that Hall (1996) discusses places a group such as that of mothers of incarcerated sons in a subordinate position by use of language (Lather, 1996, also addresses the politics of language). You are not me, because your son is not imprisoned, because you did what good mothers do; you kept your son out of the system; you created a son who is good and right, and productive in society. But I did not. Here, *You* are the subject; I am the object; we are power constructs assigned a place by the use of language (Foucault, 1980). And so I am quiet.

My silence normalizes me, allows me to be a White, middle class, literate, employed, mother and to not be one of *those mothers* who mother an incarcerated felon. My silence mingles with the silence of other *Others* who are grouped into this same category, as it works to uphold the self/other dichotomy that it wants desperately to fight against. The multitude of power points (Foucault, 1980) that surround and weave in and out of this silence can be seen in action in Lather and Smithies (1997) and in Pillow (2000), both of which are discussed further later in this chapter. Together, we (I and Other) maintain the status quo of society where normalcies and the observable and natural process of their functioning are determined

(Foucault, 1984). Foucault discusses this idea of normalizing judgments as it pertains to differentiating the subject/object in relation to the norm throughout his work (1965; 1973; 1979; 1980; 1990). We are each placed on a hierarchy in terms of value. Here, the “perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchies, homogenizes, and excludes” (p. 195). In other words, through the intersection of multiple, interconnected, relations of bio power and disciplinary power, my always shifting, always changing, “I” that defies being any one thing is normalized, generalized, inscribed, and (ab)normalized based on the categories within which it is forced. By forced, here and throughout this dissertation, I am not talking about a covert overpowering of one being over another; instead, I am talking about what Foucault (1980) calls overt power, a power that is always already there. It is to this discussion of power that we will now turn.

***Defining Foucault’s Theory of Power.*** Let us first make a brief distinction between covert domination and overt power, after which, biopower and disciplinary power will be discussed in turn. Domination, for Foucault (1980) begins with the dominator/dominated binary structure that assumes “a massive and primal condition of domination” (p. 142). This is an absolute and seeable privileging of one side over the other. Power, on-the-other-hand, is always already there in everything that we do and are; one can never be outside of power. Power permeates and weaves within other types of relationships such as family, kinship, and sexuality, in a way that creates conditioning and allows for it to become conditioned. Points of power are everywhere, but so then are points of resistance, and both are just as capable of

being utilized as strategies. In Foucault's theories of power there can be no relations of power without resistances and, even, the latter is

all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies. (1980, p. 142)

**Biopower.** Biopower, having power over the bodies, is traced by Foucault (1990) to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where sovereign power, power pointed at the potential for death, is replaced with a power that points to the potential for life and on the regulation of the body. Biopower does not emerge from a central location or specific subject. Instead, it is exercised through tactics, connecting together, propagating, forming comprehensible systems whose objectives and aims are clearly visible and yet have not been invented by any one party. Examples include regulation of sexuality, reproduction practices, family, and societal customs. Think for a moment about Foucault's (1979) discussion on prisons and power. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he notes, a more efficient "technology of punishment" began to be established that would allow for self-discipline as never before. The prison would contain the prisoner who would be made to perform particular tasks, move and act in particular ways, and work toward a particular end, which is to reform and conform. In the idea of biopower, then, the body is something to be manipulated and made to obey.

Having power over bodies demands putting to work and ensuring obedience to the imposed mechanisms of inclusion and/or exclusion. This is accomplished through the development of disciplinary institutions that include, but are not limited to, prisons, factories, asylums, hospitals, universities, and schools. These structures are discussed in Hardt and Negri's (2000) text, *Empire*, which has the noted political task of not simply resisting the processes that sustain Empire, but to "reorganize them and redirect them toward new ends" (p. xv). Disciplinary power rules in effect by structuring the parameters and limits of thought and practice, sanctioning and prescribing normal and/or deviant behaviors" (p. 23). Biopower regulates social life from its interior. Disciplinary power gives it the tools to do so.

***Disciplinary Power.*** Disciplinary power is mass control of bodies and movement (Foucault, 1979). Disciplinary power may be best understood by thinking about the two pieces of the term separately. Discipline, according to Foucault (1979), is a series of techniques by which the operations of the body can be controlled. Disciplinary techniques in the work of Foucault include, but are not limited to, surveillance, normalizing, judgments, and examinations. Disciplinary power functions through the academic disciplines and the power that functions through techniques of discipline. 'I' is constituted through the disciplines; it emerges through the disciplinary techniques such as surveillance, normalizing judgments, and examination. 'I' is the effects of the coming together in a particular moment of these functions of power. In the words of Foucault (1990), "Certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourse, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as

individuals” (p. 98). Disciplinary power, functioning through the mechanism of surveillance, subjects one to a continuous gaze.

Due to the nature of my topic, it is fitting, here, to give as an example the idea of the panopticon that was first created by Jeremy Bentham and later used by Foucault (1979, 1980, 1988) to discuss the concept of *The Gaze* that situates perspective in matrices of power. Foucault (1980) first discovered the theme of the panopticon when studying the problems of the penal system. All of the great projects dated around the first half of the nineteenth century, he found, invariably referenced Bentham’s panoptic device. I wrote about this panoptic device in my blog shortly after my daughter, who is two years older than her felon brother, was hired to oversee male prisoners in a local prison:

As most of you know, my daughter is a guard at a local prison, so I get to hear stories both from the inside looking out and from the outside looking in.

Recently we discussed the panoptic set-up of prisons, which allows for seeing without being seen. The idea is, because the prisoner never knows if he or she is being watched, but might be watched 24/7, he or she will actually start policing him/herself. Foucault calls this the automatic functioning of power.

Sounds like a great idea, huh? Perhaps, at first glance, but what has been observed is that this type of complete loss of privacy creates feelings of vulnerability, violation, and shame, feelings that diminish one's personhood. Diminishing the personhood of people who are going to be placed back into society doesn't sound like such a great idea to me. Does it to you? (tbird36, 2004, Nov. 17)

The panopticon is a circular form of a prison where the guard tower is positioned in the middle of the structure and the cells are structured in such a way that the potential for a prisoner to be seen and monitored is always present but unknown. This illusion of an all-knowing gaze is created through the positioning of the tower and the cells and the use of backlighting that “enables one to pick out from the central tower the little captive silhouettes in the ring of cells” (Foucault, 1980, p. 147). The gaze that emanates from the site of power is transparent, “always already appropriating the right to look and see, attempting to do so hegemonically, and thereby invisibilizing/silencing other perspectives/gazes” (Clarke, 2005, p. 58). To effect disciplining in any matrix of power, then, the surveilling gaze of power is always already internalized so that disciplining is what he later called a “technology of the self” rather than something that is imposed from without.

Surveillance also functions through an obsession with details (Foucault, 1984). A discourse arose in the 1800s in which no facet of a subject/object was too infinitesimal for observation and documentation. Every move, gesture, word, and performance was noted. Through this meticulous practice of surveillance, a form of biography arose that went beyond the descriptive, delving into the cause of behaviors composing an inseparable link between the deed and the subject, forming categorical positions of the normal/abnormal. This categorization not only constitutes my intelligibility within institutionalized normalcy, marginalizing the abnormal to the constituted outside, but also makes power invisible and me responsible for my classification through my deeds. Foucault (1980) calls this discourse – psychology – “the truth and the shame of nineteenth-century philosophy” (p. 150).

Foucault (1972) maintains that to deal with the ideological function of a space in order to reveal and modify it, there must be questioning of it as a discursive formation. There are seats of power, and there are oppressed groups; and the work of those who contribute to the literature in these areas is necessary and valid. However, it is important, as well, to explore the subtleties and complexities of power not only from the top down, which Foucault (1980) believes is too deterministic, where a “central supervising agency is identified ... and the focus is on studying how this agency extends its control ever more widely by forcing people to act in a certain way” (Brookfield, 2001, p. 5), but from points of everyday action at the bottom. This ascending analysis, such as is seen in Lather and Smithies’ (1997) research on living with HIV/AIDS and Pillow’s (2000) research on pregnant teenagers and their use of bodies as resistance, begins by studying “infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics” (Foucault, 1980, p. 99) for, as Brookfield (2001) puts forth, “power relations are infinitely diverse and contextual,” and they “originate in unpredictable ways at particular times and places” (p. 5).

“Infinitesimal mechanisms” (Pillow, 2000) are what postmodern/poststructuralist thinkers seek to deconstruct. And they do so by unmasking the processes of exclusion and domination that go into constructing it (Foucault, 1994). For post-feminist thinkers such as Irigaray (1985), Lather and Smithies (1997), and Leach (2000) the focus is the same. These post-feminist thinkers, and others in their field, focus their work on the construction of universal subjects, on how we come to think of ourselves as *normal*, *rational*, *moral* beings and on modes of active resistance and on “what it would mean to create new lines of flight,

fragments of other possibilities, to experiment differently with meanings, practices, and our own confoundings” (Leach, 2000, p. 223). It is to three such thinkers and their work within the postmodern, post-structural, post-feminist frame that I now turn.

### **Examples of Active Resistance**

When considering my topic, three authors who embody postmodern, post-structural, post-feminist thought were studied at length. Each seeks to create feminist pieces that disrupt and call forth power structures. The authors are Lather and Smithies’ (1997) in *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS* and Pillow (2000) in *Exposed Methodology: The Body as a Deconstructive Practice*. I will briefly touch on the key points in each of these and note the importance of each to my own study. I will conclude this section by discussing how today’s blogging technologies allow for acts of resistance similar to those advocated for in the works of Lather and Smithies (1997) and Pillow (2000). I will do this by first giving a working definition of the blogosphere and a brief discussion of the blogger’s space that I chose, to include an example of a binary that holds it in place and that studies such as this seek to deconstruct. I will then return to the idea of active resistance, this time specifically as it pertains to blogging and to educating and informing for social change.

*Angel messengers.* In much of Lather’s work she discusses “capturing the elusive via an embodied knowing” (2006, p. 4) and being politically attuned to “doing difference differently” (2006, p. 4). These are important concepts for my own study, and hence, I will provide next an example of what such thought looks like in production. Lather & Smithies (1997) created a text that was aimed at the general reading public in such a way as to force

them to read in new ways and, in doing so, forced them to move beyond the skimming of women's lives in a "not me" comfortable sort of way toward a messy, layered, uncomfortable space that intertwines and connects trauma and shock with the everydayness of our lives. The purpose of such a use of language is to help the reader to lose their way, to allow the reader to decide how it all comes together. Lather (2000) puts it this way:

Our hope is that each reader will work through ... how the various layers of information about HIV/AIDS, researcher reflections, and the women's stories interrupt one another into some place of not making any easy sense. At some level, the book is about getting lost across these various layers and registers, about not finding one's way into making a sense that maps easily onto our usual ways of making sense. Here we all get lost: the women, the researchers, the readers, the angels, in order to open up present frames of knowing to the possibilities of thinking differently. (p. 288)

Thinking differently is a key aspect of post-feminist literature, and Lather and Smithies are far from alone in their pursuit. Pillow (2000) also challenges societal master-narratives in her work. Next, I will look at how Pillow (2000) presents women's bodies as a site of resistance and a way to gain voice within and against the meta-narrative called *Education*.

***Invisible by design.*** Pillow (2000) set out to look at women's bodies as a site of resistance and, in the process, discovered the use of space to create silence within the discourse of teenage mothers and their places of education. Like Lather and Smithies (1997), Pillow (2000) uses the word "messiness" to describe that which exceeds the boundaries of

the norm. Hers is an exploration of the voice of pregnant teenage women as they maneuver in a system that is set up to exclude them. What I found interesting here is the use of space to (ab)normalize those within it. Chairs in *normal* classrooms do not fit the growing bodies of these women, they are exorcised from their schools of choice and sent to one school that houses a program designed to *help* them, their classrooms are hidden down hallways and around corners (Pillow, 2000) in an area of the school that cannot be easily accessed, and there are no indications anywhere within the building that they exist.

The practice of reading this experience called forth memories of my own encounters as a mother of an incarcerated son. I have visited my son in more prisons than I care to admit, and never did I simply turn off of a main road and find the prison gates. Typically, the roads were not only surrounded by trees, they were down winding paths with only the tiniest of signs to indicate that I was going the right direction. Once inside, there was no waiting area, or an empty waiting area that could hold one or two families at most, so everyone waited outside in a line, exposed as *Other* in so many ways. Here, as in Pillow (2000), architecture is operating as a form of disciplinary power. (See also Weedon, 1987; Game, 1991, as both are interested in practices of space.) Disciplinary power (Foucault, 1990) as discussed previously includes the use of surveillance, normalizing, judgments and examination to control the body.

Lather and Smithies (1997) and Pillow (2000) study those living in the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1999). My own study proposes, as their work does, that it is possible to “[do] difference differently” (Lather, 2006, p. 4). Looking at HIV/AIDS through the lenses of

everyday women battling life and death while living life and death differently forces the reader into uncomfortable new spaces of discourse; so does a study of voice and actual space as it pertains to a group of pregnant teenagers trying to finish their high school education. Blogging through a life crises does this as well, as I will describe in the next section. Before I return to the idea of resistance, this time as it specifically pertains to blogging, I will move into a definition and discussion of both the blogosphere and the blog hosting software that I used to create and house my posts as I blogged through my own life crisis.

### **The blogosphere**

Between June 16, 2004 and July 20, 2009, I posted 316 entries in my weblog entitled, “*My son the convict and other motherly ramblings*” (Xanga.com/tbird36). These posts, and the links and comments associated with them, make up the space to be mapped and explored as a form of informal learning and expression of agency and voice in the midst of life crisis. A weblog, or *blog*, is a personal online space that is updated randomly by an author, also known as a *blogger*, who publishes a series of chronological, updatable posts that are intended to engage others in discussion and/or share information on any number of usually subjective topics. Posts are typically searchable by category, archived over a long period of time, and shown in reverse chronological order; the blog as a whole utilizes hypertextual facilities of online communication such as internal linking between posts, linking to other web content, and linking to other blogger’s posts or comments. (Barlow, 2007; Nardi, Schiano,&Gumbrecht, 2004; Tremayne, 2006). Collectively, the space that houses these social networking blogs and their links is called the *blogosphere*, “a space for

the exercise of public communication and individual free speech” (Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2008), a space that, according to Sifry (2007) houses over 75 million weblogs worldwide.

As the blogosphere houses many different types of blogs, used in many different ways and by many different people, next in this section of the literature review I will discuss social networks and blogging communities in general, then I will focus on the blogging community where my blog resides, Xanga.com, as it relates to my overall study. Finally, I will discuss what I feel is the overarching dichotomy – public/private - that was shaken up when I stepped out of journaling alone in my room and into the very public space that is my blog.

**Blogs as social networking communities.** According to Pew Internet (2009) forty-six percent of online American adults used a social networking site in 2009, up from eight percent in 2005. This number continues to grow as new forms of social networking become available (think Facebook, Twitter and Four square, for example). With the explosion in popularity of social networking communities comes a growth in academic research of the same. Issues under study are far reaching and include, but are certainly not limited to, privacy (Calvert, 2000; Gross, Acquisti, & Heinz, 2005), identity (Turkle, 1995; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008), and the interaction between social networking sites and relationships (Choi, 2006).

In the pool of social networking communities is Xanga, a blog hosting software that hosts thousands of blogs. This particular type of social network resides in what I described above as the blogosphere.

**Xanga.com.** My silence, and my son's subsequent invisibility, was broken on Thursday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004, when I found xanga.com, a web-based journaling space, only moments after I learned from my son that he had been sentenced to 10 years in prison for his charges, only moments after I knew that people were going to know. I could, perhaps, hide my guilt and shame and anger for a month or two; but years? He would serve at least one and one half years. We would serve at least one and one half years. I felt as if I would explode. And I did. Through words.

Xanga.com is a blog hosting site that incorporates social networking's features of groups and friends. You can use words and pictures to tell your story, you can invite others to join your site, and you can join blog rings of like-minded bloggers in a show of encouragement and support. In 2004 when I started my own blog, the concept itself was still relatively new. Xanga.com was founded in 1998 as a music hosting site, but it wasn't until December of 2000 that it went public and started morphing into the site it is today. Notforprofit (19 January 2006), a long time Xanga blogger, has kept a chronological account of where Xanga has been and where it is. In 2001, he blogs, the social blogging site had approximately 40K members. By 2005, that number had increased to an estimated 21 million.

Though I did not join Xanga.com until 2004, I have been a part of the computer world since the early 1980's, the same time that the editors of Time magazine announced that the personal computer was the *Machine of the Year* and Rosenblatt (January 3, 1983) wrote the

cover story attached to the picture of a form sitting at the fully detailed machine on the cover that included the following:

This sweetheart here, this little baby, looks like any ordinary machine, isn't that so? A mess of screws and buttons, a whole heap of plastic. Comes with new words too: RAMS and ROMS. Think that's what the machine is made of, do you—the hardware and the software and the mouse? Not a chance. The computer is made of you, lady. It's got you all inside it. (Rosenblatt, January 3, 1983, p. 13)

Then, in the 1990's, I was an early adapter of online learning. So, in 2004 when I clicked the button to join Xanga, I was using modern technology in a new, albeit similar, way.

Xanga.com turned my private, isolating, despair, anger, and pain into wide open, public, despair, anger, and pain. *Other*, through this relatively new world of social blogging networks, was laid bare for the entire world to see.

There are many entities that reside on one side or the other of the Same/Other dichotomy that have been discussed throughout this dissertation. They are both human and non-human, and they collide in the space of my blog. These include, but are not limited to: technology, mother, son, prisoner, prison, guards, journal, blog, friends, strangers, pictures, words, public domains, private letters, poetry, email, work, home, and fear. The list seems (and is) endless. I will call forth many of these as I work through the Xanga space that I left on July 20, 2009. I will do so in an attempt to show the agency and voice created through these collisions. For now, as a way to introduce the binary mapping of a situation (Clarke, 2005) that will be used as a way to explore the data of this study, it is important to pull one

specific binary from the many that hold the world of a mother blogging through a life crises in place. This binary is public/private. I choose this one, here, as it introduces the idea of interruption that will be discussed in the validity section of chapter three and demonstrates the multiplicities of meaning-making (Lather, 2003) that is so important in post-structuralist work.

**Public/Private collide in the blogosphere.** Gathering autobiographical data, and using it for private self-reflection and noting self and social change indiscretions, is not new (Brookfield, 1995; Clark & Dirks, 2000). In fact, journals such as *The Journal of the British Sociological Association* (1993) have devoted entire issues to exploring its uses. However, these renderings have typically been private, shared rarely if at all or shared posthumously, or as a way to compile facts for a more considered autobiographical rendering. An added aspect of online journaling in web logs, often called blogging, is that these renderings are posted in a wide open space, a space where anyone with a modem and keyboard can skim through your pages and become a part of your world. The interaction it enables between writer/reader is unprecedented, primitive, and sometimes brutal. At once public, blogging transforms this very personal and retrospective form of reflection into an utterly public and immediate one (Sullivan, 2008). As my blog entry with reader comments shows, this type of language creation, exchange, (de)construction, exposes the writer's autobiographical data and the writer himself in a manner no writer has ever been exposed before. "For bloggers, the deadline is always now. Blogging is therefore to writing what extreme sports are to athletics: more free-form, more accident-prone, less formal, more alive. It is, in many ways, writing

out loud” (Sullivan, 2008), which is interesting in and of itself, as speaking is what is supposed to be heard and writing silent (a dichotomy much discussed by Derrida, 1970).

When thinking through responses to blogging from those who defend the old media as true media, Sullivan (2008) interestingly compares blogging to jazz playing. As he suggests, jazz demands a different way of playing and listening than the more formal/classical compositions that came before. Jazz and blogging are personal, improvisational, and both individual and collective. The survival of both depends on the audience talking with them, to them, and over them. It is engagement rather than absorption that keeps them alive. Again, those who discuss the realm of blogging do so using terms that typically lend themselves to speaking rather than writing, voice rather than a quiet jotting down of words on a page, a public rather than a private rendering of life lived in the margins. Blogging demands a different way of writing than that which has come before. For the poststructuralist, “language is understood as the most powerful constitutive force shaping what we understand as possible and what we desire within possibilities” (Davies, 2000, p. 181). As such, it can give agency and push boundaries, and deconstruct binaries, but only if we allow it evolving, different, always becoming spaces. For feminist poststructuralists such as Cixous (in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997), thinking in new ways, pushing that which seems to be in ways that reveal what else could be puts at women’s disposal, “the biggest thing in the universe, and that is language. What one can do with language is ... infinite.... You can say everything, do everything, that has not yet been said, not yet been done” (p. 12).

Let us now return to the idea of active resistance, this time specifically as it pertains to blogging and to educating and informing for social change in today's technological realm.

### **Activist blogger**

Like Candace Gingrich (1996), I am an accidental activist, an activist who was propelled to engage in activism due to a series of life events and circumstances. For Gingrich (1996) it was being “the lesbian little sister of House Speaker Newt Gingrich” (p. 11). As the little sister of one in such a public realm in a time of increased media frenzy, her coming out and subsequent story telling was provided a space “to resonate with all kinds of people because [she] could be anyone's dyke little sister” (p. 12). For me, it was being the middle-class mother of a convicted felon, the mother of a son of whom I barely spoke for five long months as he sat in a jail cell waiting to go to trial for the attempted solicitation of a controlled substance, hitting an officer, and resisting arrest. I became a blogger for the same reason Gingrich (1996) became a writer of a book, to resist the silence that culture imposed. I had no idea that others would soon reach out to me and thank me for helping them to *come out*, as well.

### **Active forms of resistance in the blogosphere**

As I worked toward my degree and researched ways in which I might be able to use my own blog to help others in the margin to gain voice and agency, I also encountered an awakening of my own social and political awareness as I read the works of those such as Brookfield (2001), Burnier (1996), Cixous (1976), Ellsworth (2005), Fausto-Sterling (2000), Freire (1970; 1972), Game (1991), Glen (1994), Haraway (1991; 2003), Horton and Freire

(1990), Irigaray (1985), and Lather (1991; 1996; 2007). This newest shift in my sense of self, a term discussed in Kovan and Dirkx (2003) did not lead me quickly to label myself an activist, but it did lead me to a need to read the texts, articles and blogs of others who have used this form of observation and presentation to influence societal and political discourse (Jacobs, 2003; Mowles, 2008; Nardi et al., 2004; Riverbend, 2003; Vatrapu, Robertson, & Dissanayake, 2008). Of particular interest for my own study was an article by Mowles (2008) in which the practice and popularity of blogging as a particular form of online activism was explored. Mowles (2008) calls on her own experience as she explores the feminist notion that the personal is political. She analyzed a blog titled, *Feministing*, which she says “stands at the epicenter of the contemporary political phenomena of online activism and third-wave feminist identity politics” (p. 30). Her study, and the works of the others mentioned in this section led me to the belief that the knowledge gained by authors and readers (who were also authors) who came to my own blogging space was socially and politically important, and I know that by breaking my own silence in what I perceived as a non-threatening space, created a space of interstanding that in turn allowed for others to begin doing the same.

**Resisting big ‘T’ Truth in a little ‘t’ word world.** According to Watt (2006) 55% of current bloggers are female, women start more blogs than men, and women keep blogs active for a longer period of time than their male counterparts. However, women continue to be less visible than men on the Internet, hosting only two of the top ten most visible blogs in 2006 (Watt, 2006). Perhaps, as Gregg (2006) suggests, this is because women’s writing continues to hold a less noteworthy, more domestic, position than men’s writing.

**Identity in the space between being and not being.** A study about meta-narratives and resistance is a study about identity. A study about self blogging through a life crisis is a study of identity. Identity runs throughout this dissertation. And, for this self, in this moment, writing *live* into cyberspace was/is an important expression for self-reflexivity, agency and voice.

Combining and intertwining words and visuals, my own and those of others, has not only created new ways of writing and reading but has created, and continues to create, a new identity, a new self. I understand identity through relationality. Self is constructed in relation to the human and non-human elements that surround it (Clarke, 2005). As an *Other* mother in an *Other* space of writing and researching, I am in agreement with those such as Cixous and Calle-Gruber (1997), Eakin (1999), and Haraway (2003) in my understanding of identity as in-flux, complex, multiple, and relational. As a postmodern, post-feminist thinker, I agree as well with Mowles' (2008) emphasis on the "multi-dimensionality of identity and the inherent value of diverse identities" (p. 30). Likewise, I agree with her presentation of the popularity among many postmodern and post-feminist thinkers of "subverting the dominant paradigm (patriarchy) in highly visible and public ways and utilizing popular conduits [blogs included] to do so" (p. 30). As Smith (1998) adds to the conversation, we perform it in many stages and all of the time. It is this complexity that these authors point to in their own work and this complexity that I put forth as being of the utmost importance to focus on if we are to more thoroughly understand the ways in which identity is constructed and the ways in which we can use this knowledge to resist and chip away at the meta-narratives that threaten to engulf

us. It is in the listening, the hearing, the sharing and the commitment to the Other within that we can create new ways, as Lather (2007) shows, to think about thinking.

### **Learning in the Borderlands**

Thinking about thinking (Lather, 2007). What does that mean?

As stated in chapter one, this analytic autoethnographic study has a dual purpose. First and foremost I seek to increase understanding of the ways in which today's social media or participation technologies (Jones & Conceição, 2008), blogging in particular, allow for agency and voice of those in the midst of life crises. The secondary purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior and identity as they relate to dominant cultural power. As such, it is important to first put forth a definition of two terms as they pertain to this study: participation technologies and informal learning, which is one side of the binary formal/informal binary housed under the meta-narrative *Learning*. Then, using these definitions as a jumping off place, I will introduce those writers who reside firmly in the realm of education and those who are on the edge of education who are engaging in the educational realm in new and exciting ways.

**Participation Technologies.** Blogs and other participation technologies are defined by Penuel and Riel (2007) as “a set of people and the relationships between them” (p. 611). Jones and Conceição (2008) use this definition, as well, adding that these social-networking sites “promote the development of online communities of people ... where users apply for membership and maintain their personal profile information in a centrally organized

database” (p. 1). According to Jones and Conceição (2008) and Tremayne (2007) these social-networking sites are everywhere, and participation in them continues to be dynamic and evolving. Examples of participation technologies include, but are certainly not limited to Facebook, Twitter, SheWrites, Blog Spot, You Tube, and Xanga, where my own participation in these relatively new phenomena began. As an example of how many people have not one but multiple ways of accessing these new participation technologies, I explored the Pew Internet and American Life project web pages. In 2010 Pew began conducting and reporting on a new demographic, that of households or persons with four or more internet-enabled devices. Using this information, Madden (2010) reports that 40% of the 93% of teens and young adults and 40% of the 81% of adults between 30-49 who are using the Internet are doing so using one or more of the four plus devices that they own to do so. Among this group: 97% own desktops, 96% own laptops, and 98% own smart phones. This makes for a great deal of partaking in social networking opportunities. Interestingly, Madden (2010) adds that 91% of the four plus group goes online daily, and 68% of those who reported less than four devices go online daily. This is significant in understanding the volume of potential readers/contributors to a participation-technology site such as Xanga.

Blogs, the particular participation technology tool that is a key non-human player (Clarke, 2005) in my own situation of study, were first introduced to the readers of *The Scotsman* by Turnbull (1999) in the late 90s. According to Turnbull (2001), by the end of January 2001 one of the first blogging software products, Blogger, had grown from zero users in 1999 to 117,970 users in 13 months. By early 2004, surveys were reporting that

between 1.06 and 3.71 million people had created blogs (Lenhart, Horrigan, & Fallows, 2004). Between December 2006 and September 2010, Pew Internet and American Life Project sites reported the following: 32% of Internet users read someone else's online journal or blog; on a typical day 32% of Internet users post comments to an online news group, website, photo site, or blog; and 22% of Internet users participate in some form of discussion dealing with life-altering issues. Like the other participation technologies discussed here, the Xanga blogging site that I participated in is housed in a participation technology network such as those discussed by Jones and Conceição (2008) that facilitates communication and interaction amongst members who are there to share thoughts, concerns, ideas, documents, news items, links, photos, and videos. The concept is that the more members that participate in the production and sharing of knowledge, the greater the connections, understandings, and dialogue. The space of learning is informal, but meaning-making is happening on a grand scale and in new and exciting ways. The idea of informal learning in the blogosphere will be discussed next.

**Informal Learning.** I am using the term informal learning in a broad sense to define what is happening in the blogosphere where my blog resides and in my blog itself as people and things come together to converse about, explore, and analyze experiences learned from everyday life. Here, conversation is performed not by the face-to-face speaking body but by the virtual written body. This idea of learning through performance will be discussed in length later in this section. First, though, I will return once again to Jones and Conceição (2008) and their discussion on social networking and learning. Sharing and creating learning

in a space such as the blog that I kept for slightly longer than the 18 months that my son was incarcerated establishes new relationships, promotes collaboration, builds communication skills, and promotes personal development. Each of these skills is associated with learning. Jones and Conceição (2008) discuss each of these in turn. My summation of their research is that participation technology tools allow the development of relationships across globally diverse arenas; allows for active participation in identifying issues, for providing feedback and for promoting social conversations; encourages writing in a space which will be reviewed by peers which, according to O'Hanlon (2007), makes participants not only more comfortable with writing but better at it; and promotes personal growth and development as the user learns who he or she is, how to relate to others, and how to be in the world.

I am analyzing an informal space of learning (blogs), and I am using a boundary busting method (situational analysis) and very postmodern and/or poststructuralist theories (discourse analysis and deconstruction). In doing so, I pull from the works of authors who are easily recognizable in the world of adult education, such as Brookfield (1995; 2000; 2001), education in the community; Lovett, Clarke, and Kilmurray (1983), community education and social movements; Mezirow (1991), the transformative dimensions of learning; Lave and Wenger (1991), communities of practice; Thomas (1993; 2003), critical adult education and feminism; and Horton and Friere (1990), radical adult education. However, there are those who are slowly and steadily seeping in through the learning/education cracks and crevices who are of even greater interest to me. These researchers reside both within and without of the boundaries of adult education but are increasingly being used as sources from which adult

educators pull theory and analysis. This list is not lengthy, though it could easily be, as I have limited myself to those authors and works that I have been or will be discussing throughout this dissertation.

Before discussing those who reside squarely and safely within the educational realm, I will discuss each of these women and their contribution to learning through performance, a concept that I attach to my own blog, as well. First is Lather (2007) who I also discuss at length in other areas of this study. Here I will focus on her thoughts concerning practices of representation. Second I will discuss Sandlin (2007) and her use of culture jamming. And the third is Ellsworth (2005) and her study and use of critical performance ethnography.

Each of these researchers use performance to generate reflective thought on culture and politics, and each relies on performance of language to get their message across to their readers. For Lather (1991; 1996; 2000; 2007), Sandlin (2007), and Ellsworth (2005), questioning categories, both societal and cultural is key. Like Lave and Wenger (1991) they believe that “activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are a part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning” (p. 53). For each, as well, the situation impacts significantly on the processes that are moving about to create learning and on the generating of action to create positive social change. Specifically, in each of these, as well as those listed before, there is a need for change and a need for working in various ways with experiences in order to create that change through learning. Reflecting critically on an experience, as Ellsworth (2005), and Lather (1996; 2001), and Sandlin (2007) do, and as I did, opens up a space for negotiation, thinking, and sharing. As Wiessner (1998)

explained in her own dissertation, unexamined experience is just a happening, but when you work with the experience, when you tear it apart and try to figure out all that is in there, that is learning. Let us now turn to a more focused exploration of Lather (2007), Sandlin (2007), and Ellsworth (2005). Following this reflective review, I will conduct a brief overview of several other areas as they relate to informal learning that inform this study: learning through social action, discourse and story-telling, narrative, and *écriture féminine*.

**Troubling the very categories we cannot think without.** I choose to begin with Lather (2007) for two reasons. First, because she begins her story with a proclamation of her own struggles with the implications of post-structuralism, both methodological and theoretical, on “the doing of qualitative inquiry” (p.34). Second, because she is dedicated to experimental writing, unconventional narration in research, and life on the edge where the “yet unnamable ... is proclaiming itself” (Derrida, 1978, p. 293). Her need to analyze and explore “places where things begin to shift via practices that exceed the warrants of our present sense of the possible” (Lather, 2007, p. 36) informs my own understanding of the same need.

Lather (2007) discusses the work she co-authored with Chris Smithies (Lather & Smithies, 1997) that traces the ways in which a group of 25 women living with HIV/AIDS make meaning of their lives. Hers is an ethnography that includes thinking about ethnography. She calls on Butler’s (1993) work on subversive repetition and Schrifft’s (1995) “subversive reiteration” (p. 55) to help explain this “within/against” (Lather, 2007, p. 38) approach to ethnographic research that is “about both ‘doing it’ and ‘troubling it’

simultaneously” (p. 38). Here is Schrift (1995): “Subversive reiteration reembodies subjectifying norms while at the same time redirecting the normativity of those norms” (p. 55). And Lather (2007) once more: “The argument is that agency exists in the possibility of a variation within a repetition. In order to be intelligible, we need to repeat the familiar and normalized. The task is not whether to repeat but how to repeat in such a way that the repetition displaces that which enables it” (p. 39). Like the Derrida described in Caputo (1993), we are meant to get a little lost, to experience a little loss – of self, of author, of subject – to keep the system in play in a space that troubles the very categories which Lather (2007) reminds us that we cannot think without.

As I am interested in shining a light on meta-narratives and on the deconstruction of binaries, I find Lather and Smithies’s (1997) use of troubling angels most interesting and relative to my own study. Lather (2007) discusses her choice of the angel metaphor and her troubling of the same in an excerpt from her own research journal. She is responding to a question from a research participant about the title, *Troubling the Angels* (1997), which she and Smithies chose. She indicates that she chose the title “because these are not the romantic ladies tripping around in nighties that are so popular right now. These are angels who trouble our sense that all is right with the world, that AIDS is something ‘out there,’ unrelated to each one of us, that we can afford to distance from” (p. 46). What a great example of the possibility of a variation within a repetition that Lather (2007) seeks. “The task, Lather (2007) shows us once more, “is not whether to repeat but how to repeat in such a way that the repetition displaces that which enables it” (p. 39). For Lather, the way to this exploration was

through what she called “new ethnography” (p. 37) and “the ethnography to come” (p. 33). For me, the way to this exploration is through one of those *ethnographies to come*, that is, through analytic autoethnography, through the mapping, deconstructing, analyzing of the time that I spent learning to mother a son who was also a convicted felon. The story of this learning is housed primarily in my blog; and my blog is housed in the blogosphere in the ether that is the Internet. As such, it is also important to put forth research done on the influence of popular culture on our understanding of ourselves and others, and the ways in which popular culture reinforces or resists the dominant culture. For this, I turn to Sandlin (2007) and her work with popular culture and resistance.

**Culture jamming.** As someone who is proposing to analyze a blog to explore agency and voice, I am drawn to Sandlin’s (2007) work with popular culture as a site of cultural resistance, and as a form of critical adult education. Specifically, the influence of popular culture on our understanding of ourselves and others, and the ways in which popular culture reinforces or resists the dominant culture, is at the center of Sandlin’s attempt to begin filling a void in adult education, a void that others are beginning to fill, as well. Evidence of this seeping can be seen in *Popular Culture and Entertainment Media in Adult Education* (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), a compilation of explorations that all deal with how educators of adults might draw on popular culture in their work. The articles, as a whole, proclaim that informal learning takes place constantly around us, that the messages in popular culture affect who we are and how we think about both ourselves and others. My blog is an example of an informal learning space where learning is taking place. This informal learning can be seen in the blog

response example below in which Absterxoxo (2004, September 18) writes about educating those who have never had to experience the pain of working through a particular life crisis:

I think/hope that it is thoughtlessness that spawns these comments and not hurtfulness. I wish there was a way to educate all of these people, to help them realize that it could just as easily be them, to explain to them without them acting defensive, argumentative, morally superior. I firmly believe that if there was a way to let them know their words were insensitive they would be shocked at their own rudeness and remorseful for causing unnecessary grief to someone else ... especially someone already in so much pain.

Maybe by sharing your feelings in here ... in a safe and positive forum ... you have begun the process of educating the rest of us, so that we think before we speak and risk hurting someone without meaning to. It is a start, at least. If we can't change the world, we can begin by changing our own little corner of it.

The compilation of articles in *Popular Culture and Entertainment Media in Adult Education* (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007) put forth the same idea concerning how such a popular culture space may very well formulate an informal learning environment. It states that using popular culture and media as spaces of informal adult education to turn ideologies inside out calls forth “far more power to educate or ‘miseducate’ than all adult education programs combined because of the sheer number it reaches” (p. 1). (Think Internet, billboards, advertisements, television shows, radio, movies, news, and, as an extension to these, apparel, games, snack food, home furnishings, raw words. The list is seemingly endless.)

Sandlin's (2007) chapter in the compilation is of particular importance to me, as it speaks specifically to the idea of culture jamming as a joyful demolition of oppressive ideologies. In her chapter, she focuses on two examples of how individuals are confronting consumption through a cultural resistance strategy known as "culture jamming" in and through popular culture. Although the examples that she uses focus on advertising consumption, the ideas presented lend themselves just as easily to my own desire to use the jamming techniques presented to explore and deconstruct the boundaries between *self* and *other* as *self* seeks agency and voice. For Sandlin (2005), culture jammers:

- Are redefining what it means to enter into an experience
- Alter the ways in which public space is created and used
- Create transitional spaces of play, creativity, and cultural production
- Turn passive activities into active ones
- Redefine possibilities for the future
- Create culture together and share that culture with others in ways that allow them all to relate to each other that have never been experienced before.

For me, what I seek to deconstruct, to "jam up" are the ideologies that create the silences that are the mothers of incarcerated sons, and my transitional space is the Internet, a space where there are innumerable possibilities for turning passive acceptance of hegemonic thought into active resistances to the same. We are consumers of media, and the Internet is our newest obsession. Williams and Jacob (2004) conducted a combined Pro Quest, EBSCO, and Gale search for referred published material on the subject of blogs specifically. This

search yielded 30 results. On August 10, 2010, I conducted a similar search using the search terms *blogging* and *voice* and the limiters of articles from scholarly publications. This search yielded 942 results. Though the number is significantly higher than the previously noted search, I found few instances of researchers looking at blogs as informal learning spaces worthy of theoretical exploration. Among those I found that deal with the jamming up of hegemonic discourse and of finding voice in the blogging culture were two of particular interest to me relative to this study.

Schoneboom's (2008) look at creative resistance among anonymous workbloggers who "engage in sophisticated, creative, and networked forms of resistance" (p. 5) not only turns passive activities into active ones but does so in a way that redefines possibilities for the future (see Sandlin, 2005, for additional information on turning passive activities into active ones).

Mitra and Gajjala (2008) are redefining what it means to enter into an experience (Sandlin, 2005) through their work that looks at interspersing performative blogging with analysis of the blogging space through a mapping of themes of queering in the Indian digital Diaspora. The authors use a self-proclaimed intergenerational lens, produced in the acts of online and offline coauthoring, weblogging, and reading of instances of online queering. They use their own blogs, and explore the interplay of codes of identity through the employment of themes, language, symbols, and cultural influences in their writing. They also look at the blogs of others, examining the themes emerging from the blogs created, and questioning how power is shifted and r(e)layered in these articulations and what the inviting

interactional features of their writer-audience communities are that allow for certain kinds of self-expression while also shaping their performance of sexuality in these spaces.

The idea of performance used by Mitra and Gajjala (2008), Sandlin (2005), Ellsworth (2005), and others is drawn from a broader methodology known as critical performance ethnography/pedagogy, and is important, as well, for discussion on my own topic. Alexander (2005) explains performance ethnography/pedagogy as being positioned within the even greater history of performance ethnography that uses theatre and public performance to call attention to cultural politics in order to create a reflective awareness that has the potential to generate positive social change. My own blog is another example of what Alexander (2005) calls the “active body doing; the active mind knowing” (p. 426) in an exploration of cultural politics that creates reflective awareness. My first blog entry garnered four responses. I followed those responses forward and met four people in my new community. They invited others to view my verbal and pictorial performances. Those four people soon became ten, and ten became fifty. Bloggers with children in prison wrote to thank me for my story. Bloggers without children in prison wrote too, sometimes to sling words of hate, and sometimes to ask questions that provoked thought, but they wrote, and they read. The more we communicated, the freer I became with my thoughts and my feelings. I couldn’t wait to get online, to tell my community about my son being accepted into a work program in the prison where he would be allowed to pick up trash and mow grass along the side of the road, or to find out how another young mother’s visit went with her son in a detention center. Some days I didn’t want to talk at all, and they understood. Sometimes someone needed an

extra long post from me because they were trying to work through some new pain, and I knew that in real time and provided it. In this space of informal learning, I learned that I was not alone and that others wanted to learn from me and about me and with me as we all acted together as learning self(s) taking action to liberate all that entered the space (Ellsworth, 2005).

Like Schoneboom (2008) and Mitra and Gajjala (2008), my tools are words and pictures of the dominant culture used in alternate ways. Here again is my Good Mother/Bad Mother example:



Figure 1 A good mother

This particular example was used to call forth the binary opposites that are used in the creation of a good mother. These word constructions are present and at play in our social and cultural worlds, but we seldom think of them when we think about the term mother, because we have been trained to blindly accept this inculcation of dominant values in individuals. Studies such as this one seek to jam up (Sandlin, 2005) these blindly accepted values and to help ourselves and others in a move away from compliance and toward interactions and meanings that “are a shifting carnival of ambiguous complexity, a moving feast of differences interrupting differences” (Scheurich, 1995, p. 14), toward what Ellsworth (2005) calls learning in transition and motion. This learning self in motion is discussed at length in Ellsworth (2005). It is to her that I now turn.

**Critical performance ethnography.** Sandlin uses Ellsworth’s (2005) current perspectives on public pedagogy, which I discussed in brief above, as an example of one researcher who pays attention to and studies informal sites of learning with a focus on their “pedagogical hinges” (p. 76). These hinges, according to Ellsworth (2005) are “pedagogical pivot points,” points that, when effective, engage the learner and move him or her from being a learner of compliance to becoming a learning self that is “in transition and in motion toward previously unknown ways of thinking and being in the world” (p. 16). Learning, then, is about all parts of a situation, it is about connections between body and everything else in a space, it is as likely to be informal as formal. Knowledge is not pre-made but is always in the making, always in motion (Ellsworth, 2005). Here, as in Sandlin’s piece, we are always becoming, never static and, as such, we must work to create ongoing, active, transitional

spaces that can help us to “connect our inner realities to people, objects, and places outside ourselves” (Sandlin, 2007). My study suggests that the Internet and the blogosphere in general, and the blog under study, in particular, offer such spaces.

Ellsworth’s (2005) work, which helps us to define pedagogical pivot points in our own work, adds to an understanding of why and how culture jamming is emancipatory and lays the foundation for reflections such as my own to be seen as important in moving forward further research in educator’s self-reflection, applications to emancipatory practice, methodology, curriculum, evaluation, and the development of teaching and learning. Culture jamming, used to introduce noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver, is an innovative and destructive alternative mode of political activism and, as such, it exposes the personal, situational, and historical forces that limit an individual’s options and controls his or her life. Much like Freire’s (1972) *conscientization*, works such as these show a focus on breaking through the inertia of habit to open new dimensions of thought that lead to the liberation, agency, and voice of a self in motion that, as well as being positioned in discourse, uses discourse to position.

Lather’s (2007) task is to seek out ways to use repetition to displace that which it repeats; Sandler’s (2007) task is to explore the ways in which popular culture both reinforces and resists the dominant culture; and Ellsworth’s (2005) task is to expose pedagogical hinges that can put the body in motion toward a previously unknown. For each, as it is for me, learning through social action is key. Therefore, it is important to include in the literature review a specific investigation into learning through social action, as well.

**Learning through social action.** As is evidenced through my choice of researcher focus, my study has a definite eye toward social change. Specifically, there is a need for change and a need for working in various ways with experiences in order to create that change through learning in a multitude of environments, both formally and informally. As quite a lot of research focuses on the formal aspect of learning, and as my study is focused on an informal learning space where people are acting collectively to create stories from the borderland, I will use this section of the literature review to briefly investigate discourse that supports the idea of informal learning through social action. Learning through social action belongs to a discourse of radical adult education and emancipator education and learning. What follows is a review of each.

**Radical adult education.** Radical adult education describes how people both individually and collectively learn through their engagement with community development activities or through their participation in social movements (Foley, 1999; Horton & Freire, 1990; Jesson & Newman, 2004; Newman, 2006). The tradition of radical adult education has a long history, beginning with the early workers education groups, and includes informal social movements such as the women's movement, particularly in the women's consciousness raising groups (Burgmann, 2003) with their mainly informal pedagogy and no concrete curriculum apart from an experiential form of feminism, which served as an early site of learning that contributed to both individual and societal transformation (Freire, 1972).

Jesson and Newman (2004) argued "learning in the sense we use here means learning by people acting collectively to bring about radical and Emancipatory social change" (p.

251). According to Newman (2006), as educators, we have a duty to ourselves and to others to challenge anyone laying out an unwanted future for us. Educators teach. Educators teach process. Educators teach people to learn, “to act, to do, to behave, to perform, to use their bodies and their minds.” Educators encourage people to “live out their lives through learning, and to help others live out their lives through learning. And to do this [they] can filch stuff from anywhere: sociology, psychology, politics, philosophy and, yes, history, math, science and English literature” (Newman, 2006, ¶ 5). Learning radical action is about power; it implies that people collectively challenge social structures, changing the substance of the world they live in and gaining more control over their own lives. This can happen formally and informally, in a classroom and in a blogging space, everywhere, anywhere, and all of the time.

***Emancipatory education and learning.*** As Friere (1993) discusses in *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, when those in power, those on the good side of the binary, present themselves as the opposite of those who sit before them, unknowing, empty of *True* knowledge, voices remain unheard, students remain voiceless, and the ideology of oppression remains strong. Life experiences are learning experiences. Denying this allows continued marginalization, continued silencing of those who feel less than in their world. bell hooks (1994) discusses this experiential learning strategy extensively, and insists that “if experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing, then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence” (1994, p.84). This idea spills into spaces of informal learning, as well. By deconstructing spaces

currently used by those marginalized persons as a safe place in which to learn, teach, and share experiences, we can continue to learn and expand our own theories on learning. The blogosphere offers just such safety. It can at times take some bravery to make that first leap, to post a blog entry or even to just read and comment on someone else's entry. It is an unfamiliar space, after all. But it feels far safer than exposing oneself in a formal educational setting where change is not wholly embraced and the language and dynamics of the classroom are not liberatory or diverse. As educators, we have much to learn from this different, ever-changing, freeing virtual space.

The act of sharing a part of your life experience that you have, heretofore, chosen to or been forced to hide from public scrutiny is a very cathartic, empowering, liberating, experience (Jacobs, 2003). It gives one a sense of community to learn that there are others *out there* who have been where you are, a sense of relief in knowing you are not alone. This sharing and the analysis of this sharing is situated in the pedagogy of emancipation, or experiencing freedom through critical thinking. This type of pedagogy values learner expression, and puts forth the idea that we are all learners, and we all have experiences that can transform learning, that can transform the ways we know, and “can inform how we know what we know” (hooks, 1994, p.90). Emancipatory learning in adult education is to free the learners from forces that limit options and control lives, and to move them to take action that will bring about personal, social, and political change (Peca, 2000).

One way to promote learner empowerment focuses on social and political liberation and freedom from oppression. One researcher within this realm, Paulo Freire (1970; 1973),

has written extensively on this topic in adult education. Beginning with the idea of conscientization, which Wiessner (1998) summarizes as “the realization that social reality is constructed and can be altered” (p. 17), and continuing through until his untimely death in 1997, Freire provided multiple ways into very important critical thinking spaces for the topic of emancipatory learning. The goal of conscientization (Freire, 1970; 1973) is to foster a process of critical consciousness among individuals and groups who are committed to analyzing, posing questions, and taking action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives. The practice of conscientization is based on dialogue where learners develop awareness of structures within their society that may be contributing to inequality and oppression and problem-posing where learners learn to question as an essential part of developing critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Though Freire is focused on the more formal type of education found in teacher-student relationships, these concepts are equally valid within informal spaces such as the one under study here.

Freire’s (1993) insistence that education could be the practice of freedom, that knowledge creation requires active participation and critical, reflective thought, laid the groundwork for those working in today’s areas of emancipatory education that go far beyond the walls of the academy. Deconstructing, collecting data from, and analyzing the blog of a mother of an incarcerated son, a self-blog, and my use of on-line blog discussions as a way of helping myself and others to better understand the experiences of cultural silencing and stigma that is often associated with such situations, embraces these assumptions and uses them a jumping off place for explorations of the ways in which the participation technologies

spoken of by those such as Jones and Conceição (2008) allow us to use language differently, opening a new space for agency and voice of those in the midst of an otherwise silencing life-crises.

There continues to be an *us* and a *them* in every move we make. There must be in order to hold the meta-narratives that Lyotard (1979) puts forth in place, in order to maintain the silence of those who reside in Anzaldúa's (2007) borderlands, to keep in check, those that might question if they thought they would be heard. I am a White, middle-class, educated, upstanding citizen who is a mother of 5 wonderful children. I am not Black, or lower-class, or uneducated, or a hoodlum. I am on the good side of the binaries, the best place to be, until I speak of my son as a felon. As long as I am silent about that, I am safe. Speaking obliterates the goodness that was me and alienates me from other White mothers in my class who may or may not have sons in similar situations but know not to speak of it if they do. Exploring, through various discourses and the points at which they converge, allows us to open up these binaries, to deconstruct them (Derrida, 1970; 1974; 1976) in a way that is emancipatory not only for the speaker (Mezirow, 1991), the doer of the action, but for those that the speaker engages with, invites in, and teaches/learns from (Horton & Freire, 1990). As Foley (2004) noted, "The strength of the critical paradigm lies in its recognition of the connections between theory, ideology, and power relations" (p. 14).

In the blogosphere social situations are constantly read as text; here, one mother of one incarcerated son uses the space of a virtual community to both work through her own life crisis and to explore her newly changing multiplicities of self(s). This same/different mother

turned autoethnographer then returns to the same space to analyze it using Clarke's (2005) mapping strategies as a form of informal learning and expression of voice in the midst of a life crises. There are those such as Snow and Morrill (1995) who contend that a preoccupation with discourse and storytelling such as the one that I am proposing "will take us further from the field of social action and the real dramas of every-day life" (p. 361). But, as those such as Denzin and Lincoln (1998) put forth, that is not the contention of the feminist postmodernist poststructuralist researcher. We do not simply observe history; we *are* history. We are past, present, and future, in this moment. We are neither outside or inside, but either and both. We are text residing in text and, as such, we are the stories of social action and the real dramas of every-day life, and we deserve to be told. To this end, I will now turn my attention to discourse and storytelling, paying particular attention to narrative and to *écriture féminine*, or writing in the feminine, a term first coined by Cixous, (1976), but used as well to define a movement that includes theorists such as Luce Irigaray (1985) and Julia Kristeva (1984), each of whom look closely at the male/female dichotomy and language.

**Narrative.** As noted elsewhere in my study, I am not looking to legitimize meta-narratives, or stories of the whole, or Truths with a capital T; instead, this study is about the legitimacy of little t truths, of localized narratives, of what Lyotard (1984) calls *petit récits*. The situation of mothering in the margins is at the heart of this study. It is a situation filled with little t truths that agree and contradict, again and again, with everything that this researcher's world taught her was good and right and fair about universal mothers and sons residing within the meta-narrative *Family*. I seek to explore the little t truths of the

performance of mother done in the corner of the Internet known as the blogosphere. The localized narratives that are housed here are, as Ellis and Bochner (2006) discussed, “designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative,” a paradigm that stems from a want to “put culture or society into motion” (p. 433). We cannot focus only on one Master/Meta-narrative to the exclusion of others (Lyotard, 1984). Instead, we must encourage continuing conversation and encourage multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, and plural voices. As stated in chapter one, it is from Lyotard’s (1984) idea of *petit récits* or localized narratives that I enter into my own discussion of “doing difference differently” (Lather, 2006, p. 4), something that autoethnography, a particular type of narrative that focuses on localized self-narrative, does. Let us side-step for a moment and discuss narrative inquiry and the ways in which it informs my study.

*Narrative inquiry.* Narrative inquiries, in general, show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Often, they start from a blog entry such as this:

When a prison goes into ‘lockdown’ status no one leaves their cell except to take a shower -- every three days. Food is served through slots in the doors. The water is cut off except for once an hour on the hour for 2 minutes. Inmates stand next to the sink/toilet to make sure that they can wash their face, brush their teeth, and flush their toilet. The more I learn, the more I fear that this is a nightmare that we will carry forever. (tbird36, 2004, March 19)

And they work with the experience to create learning. This has to be done even in an informal space such as a personal blog. As Weissner (1998) states, it is the working through of an experience, the reflecting critically, that opens up a space for negotiation, for thinking, for sharing. “An unexamined experience is just a happening...; but you can tear experience apart and try to figure out all that is in there” (Jacobs, 2003, p. 49) and that is learning.

There are definitions and meanings surrounding the term narrative inquiry that are as varied as the inquiries produced. One offered by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) seems appropriate for the purposes of this study. They wrote,

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (p. 477)

As such, this method emphasizes communication; it lives in the space between the binaries of monologue and dialogue, between closing down interpretation and staying open to all other meanings, between having the last word and sharing the platform.

To undertake a narrative inquiry, there needs to be a “simultaneous exploration” of three “commonplaces” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). These commonplaces are as

follows: (a) temporality, which bears in mind that both the human and the non-human have a past, a present, and a future, and all are continually in transition (See Clarke, 2005, for additional discussion concerning the human and non-human of a situation); (b) sociality, including both personal conditions and social conditions; and (c) place, “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 480).

I include a brief exploration of narrative inquiry in this study because it gives the reader a foundation for the idea of the study of experience as story. This is an extremely important concept that carries over into autoethnography, a method with a much shorter time in play, and *écriture féminine*, or writing the feminine, both of which I will discuss in this section of the literature review. I did not choose this method as my own method of inquiry, as I struggled with the third “commonplace” listed by Connelly and Clandinin (2006). Place, as these authors present it, is “specific,” “concrete,” “physical,” and “topological” (p. 480). My places, though, are all of this and not all of this and more. Thus, I have chosen a similar but different sort of study, that of autoethnography.

**Autoethnography.** When conducting a self-study about how agency and voice develops in today’s participation technologies, the question of inquiry type becomes one of “how to develop a kind of critical understanding of society, even in the face of resistance by ... the dominant class (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 45). Autoethnography, like the mother and son of this story, sits on what has been labeled, until recently, the bad side of the Truth/truth binary where “a statement’s truth-value is the criterion determining its acceptability” where

“one is ‘learned’ if one can produce a true statement about a referent, and [where] one is a scientist if one can produce verifiable or falsifiable statements about referents accessible to the experts” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 25). In autoethnography the researcher puts many of his or her little truths on the page, warts and all. The contextualized local narratives that Lyotard (1979) discussed long before the blogosphere took hold are an important part of the growing autoethnographic canon that is a recent addition to the qualitative canon that is used to produce viable research. This type of narrative writing creates a new knowledge about experience of loss, grief, elation, pain, freedom. The list is long. Examples of this type of knowledge creation include Anderson (2006a), Bochner and Ellis (1996), Ellis (1996), Lionnet (1990), Melbourne (2003), Mukaia (1989), Reed-Danahay, and Vickers (2002).

A key piece of autoethnography is communication via experimental text (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Leavy, 2009). This is an important concept for a study such as mine that has, as one of its primary interests, the idea of doing difference differently (Lather, 2006). Also important to this study is the idea of bridging the micro/macro analysis gap that Leavy (2009) discusses and that Clarke (2005) discusses, though her discussion is not one that pertains directly to autoethnography but to situational analysis and mapping. I mention Clarke (2005) as a bridging tool between autoethnography and situational analysis. Clarke’s (2005) will be discussed at length in chapter three. I seek to disrupt the binaries that legitimize arguments of capital truths and hold particular knowledge and power systems in place; autoethnography, warts and all, is thus a meaningful choice to be used as a method of data collection and presentation.

**Écriture féminine.** I list the word feminist prior to any other when I describe myself because first and foremost I am dedicated to three goals that are frequently cited by feminist researchers: documenting the lives of women, seeking to better understand the world through the explanation of a women's world in her own words, and conceptualizing women's behavior as an expression of social contexts (Reinharz, 1992). As a woman and a feminist I am interested in the power of speaking oneself into existence (Cixous, 1976) and of forcing uncomfortable conversations of indeterminateness (Derrida, 1981, whose work questions tradition, questions the imbalance between dichotomous terms, questions the appearance of abnormality). This is a woman's writing, an *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976). As such, it occupies a space where, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (p. 347).

Writing deploys power, and *écriture féminine* is a philosophy within feminist theory that promotes women's experiences and feelings in an attempt to gain power over the phallogocentric hierarchy held firmly in place in traditional forms of writing and research. When Cixous (1976) speaks of women's writing, she speaks in the future tense. In doing so, she sets out, not to say what it is, but to speak about what women's writing will do. Here, experience is placed before language, and this experience places the anti-linear, cyclical writing so often frowned upon by patriarchal society in a position to be heard in Other ways. For Cixous (1976), writing is controlled by a "libidinal and cultural - hence political, typically masculine - economy" (p. 350). Woman has been given no turn to speak, she

asserts, no turn to change, through writing, “the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (p. 350).

To write. An act that will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, ... it will tear her away from the super-egoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot'; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...) - tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of a marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak....

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be coned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem. (Cixous, 1976, p. 351)

In *The laugh of the medusa* (1976), Cixous both illustrates and discusses her theories of women's writing, and her words are just as poignant today as they were when she wrote them.

bell hooks (1994; 1996), a noted black feminist scholar, though not specifically identified with the field of adult education, is widely cited by adult educators as one who has discussed the influence of popular culture and the importance of teaching people to read cultural images from a race, class, and gender perspective. All three perspectives are equally important, and all three present themselves as non-human players (Clarke, 2005) in my situation of study.

I am drawn specifically to Ellsworth's (2005) idea of "the *time* of the learning self" (p. 8), the moment when body sensations "quickly give way or rapidly mutate into a variety or jumble of thoughts" (p. 8). She draws on de Bolla's (2001) detailed description of four pieces of art: a painting, a sculpture, a musical performance, and a poem, and on his self-described "learning in the making" (p. 5) that his encounters with these pieces creates; he does so to wrestle with specific moments in his account. These moments do not yet live openly in the traditional literature of educational research; but they are moving in, and we must embrace them, for these are the moments that educatively challenge the audience to become more reflectively aware of the need to question habitual routines that survive only by placing itself against some outside Other.

### **Chapter summary**

As discussed in chapters one through three, it is my intention to use mapping as a form of deconstructing (Derrida, 1967) my personal public blog. The purpose for doing so is to pull forth binary themes for discussion that is uncomfortable and unnecessary and to increase understanding of the ways in which today's social media or participation

technologies (Jones & Conceição, 2008), blogging in particular, allow us to use language differently, opening a new space for agency and voice of those in the midst of an otherwise silencing life crises. The secondary purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior and identity as they relate to dominant cultural power.

I will do this through analysis of my own virtual blog, kept for 18 months while my son was incarcerated. In my literature chapter I have discussed those ideas, thoughts, and presentations of the research that informed this study. I gave background information on the informal learning space of the blogosphere in general and on Xanga.com, investigated the discourse used to create and maintain the blogging situation under study, and established the importance of narrative in general and of autoethnography and women's writing of self, in particular. In the next chapter I will discuss the research method used to complete the study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Research Method**

The purpose of this analytic autoethnography is to increase understanding of the ways in which today's social networking technologies, or participation technologies as they are coined by Jones and Conceição (2008), blogging in particular, allow for agency and voice of those in the midst of life crises. The secondary purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior and identity as they relate to dominant cultural power.

As a study of silencing and power in general and of the silencing of one mother in one space in particular it begins with the following questions:

1. How do the blogging experiences of a woman in the midst of a life crisis help us to understand the process of developing agency and voice?
2. How does the act of blogging through a life crisis and the subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior?

This study stems from the researcher/self's sudden move from the positive side of the dichotomies that built her world to the negative and from her need to find a way to mother a son she loved, who she also wanted to forget. Here, the blog, chronicling a journey of disrupted identity and of writing oneself into existence, is the subject of analysis. The population to be analyzed has already written itself into existence in a space that begins where the lines between spoken/written, private/public, and self/other blur again and again.

As such, it demands research that “carries its meaning in its entire text,” research that “has to be read, not scanned,” research that “acknowledges meaning in the reading” (Richardson, 1994, p. 924). It demands qualitative research.

This chapter will discuss qualitative research as my overarching method of inquiry. This will be narrowed down to a discussion of autoethnography, followed by a further narrowing of my inquiry parameters to a discussion of feminist autoethnographic research approach and an analytic focus within autoethnography. I will follow this with information concerning my own position within this autoethnographic research arena and how this position led to this choice.

Additionally, in this chapter I will discuss the research design to include the study population and types of data to be collected and analyzed, including examples of how blog data will be presented for analysis. Finally, under the data interpretation and analysis section, I will discuss Clarke’s (2005) mapping strategies and how they will be used to begin the process of exploring a situation of self-(re)creation. I will discuss rigor, representation, and legitimation as applied within a post-feminist/post-structural/postmodern frame, provide Lather’s (1993) “Transgressive Validity Check-list,” and give my intended use of this check-list as my primary method of validity verification.

### **Qualitative Research**

You can always tell the first-timer, meandering in, searching the wall literature for clues.

"Mom, the sign says only one key."

"Shit. Okay. Take this back out to the car."

"And no more than \$10.00 - in ones and change, only."

"We'll just have to get change. Take all but the ten out to the car."

In a few moments they will get their first taste of what it feels like to have their every move monitored, to be frisked, scanned, talked down to, and locked in. Until then, they will wait, alongside those of us who have done this more times than we can count, in the stuffy gray room that houses both the waiting area and the security check area. As they watch the process, their eyes begin to glaze over, and they begin to talk too loudly - both signs of the nervousness that is so common here.

"Shouldn't they frisk you in private?"

"I guess not. They aren't."

"They touched her breasts. That can't be right."

"Sssshhhhhh. They do what they gotta do. Quit complainin' or your [sic] goin' back to the car. You wanted to come."

Silence.

And tears.

Silent tears.

Tears for what she will have to endure to see her firstborn son, and tears for what her small daughter will have to endure to be with her on the journey.

"Bronski. Step through."

Quickly they move toward the metal detector. The ten dollar bill, the answer to her son's request for a grape soda and a candy bar, is placed in the box with the mom's driver license.

"Nothing but ones and change allowed. Move forward."

The frisk is quick but unnerving - "Place your shoes on the belt. Arms out. Feet apart." - hands, encased in clear rubber gloves move quietly along the length of her arms, down and up, to the front, under the straps of her first training bra, and down, stomach, waist, legs - "Lift your left foot. Now your right."

Her lip quivers as she puts her shoes back on.

"Nothing here is fun," I think to myself as I watch them head for the first door.

Barely out of sight, I hear it. "Kllan-k." Solid. Heavy. Certain. I can almost feel their fear, for I know what it feels like to be between the two doors where they now stand, beyond the locking of the first and before the opening of the second, where there is no way out.

And I wipe away a tear of my own as I think, "No way out. Exactly where the boys are. Where they may always be. What a cycle of pain they have started. What a cycle of pain that woman and child have entered. What a cycle of pain for us all." (tbird36, 2004, July 7)

My goal, like the goal of other qualitative researchers, is to seek "to see the unseen in its own right, to represent the unknown in living color, ... [to] give voice to the eloquence of the commonplace" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 11). While both quantitative and qualitative

research are useful and necessary when exploring our world, it is qualitative research that lends itself best to this autoethnographic study of the process of a mother blogging her way through her son's incarceration in an attempt to find voice in the midst of a silencing life crisis.

Although there is not one agreed upon set of criteria that encompasses all qualitative research, there are several factors that most agree are inherent in a qualitative study. These include: an emphasis on the importance of conducting research in a natural setting, an eye toward an understanding of participants' perspectives, an assumption that it is important for researchers to subjectively and emphatically know the perspectives of the participants, and a working knowledge that questions and theories are likely to emerge after data collection, not posed before the study begins (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Different qualitative traditions incorporate and analyze the subjective aspects of human life differently. For the purposes of my own study, let it be known that I lean toward the symbolic interactionist's focus on human life as a moving process, though I am not interested in the micro-level of analysis but in the meso-level, the level where self meets culture, that Clarke (2005) discusses in her work. Here, both human and non-human actors are constantly defining and interpreting each other's acts. What I am interested in, in general, is how these processes occur and how those within the situation and outside of it are able to take the perspectives of Others and learn meanings in given instances of interactions (Denzin, 1997). More specifically, to reiterate in statement form the questions driving this study, I am interested in how the blogging experiences of one woman in the midst of a life crisis can help us to

understand the processes of developing agency and voice, as well as how a blog on mothering in the midst of life crises - and the subsequent analysis of the same - talks back to dominant cultural powers and disrupts traditional paradigms.

In qualitative research human behavior is always bound to the context in which it occurs and, hence, must be studied in context; reality is dynamic and changing; design emerges as the study unfolds; data can take on many forms including, but not limited to, words, pictures, and objects; the work is interpretive; and the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As Berg (2007) stated, “quality refers to the what, how, when, and where of a thing – its essence and ambiance. Qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, descriptions of things” (p. 3); quantity, on the other hand, refers to the amount, to the number of or the numerical description of whatever it is that is being studied.

This study will not be about quantity or numerical descriptions. It is about exploring a situation in a particular context as it works to create voice for a marginalized mother; it is about the exploration of how the stories of human and non-human actors are created in a particular situation. And it is about creating a space for uncomfortable conversations surrounding the same. The role of the researcher is to sift through the complexities of a situation in order to bring meaning to these stories (Stake, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997). The role of the researcher in this study will also be to become a primary piece of the situation under study. Though this role of researcher as researched is not

recognized in all qualitative research, it is gaining popularity and respect (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and, because this position is extremely important in my own research, I am openly and outwardly acknowledging it here.

### **Dissecting Method**

Over the last several years, I have sought to make use of my experience as the mother of a convicted felon to help others, both face-to-face and virtually through blogging and email, more fully understand the experience of this particular kind of mothering. From this need to share and know and learn, a research agenda was born. I did not choose it. It chose me. This does not mean that I did not explore it thoroughly before making decisions about all aspects of the endeavor. From the onset, it was clear to me that my study would be qualitative in nature; it was also clear to me that because I was examining the culture of a space - in general, the blogosphere and, in particular, the blog of a mother of an incarcerated son - I should incorporate ethnography, the “inquiry that aims to describe or interpret the place of culture in human affairs... composed of those understandings and ways of understanding that are judged to be characteristic of a discernable group” (Chambers, 2000, p. 852). What I will put forth next is where this choice led me and why and, though this choice was evident, why it was not sufficient in and of itself.

**Ethnography.** Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) put forth a very broad-stroke description of ethnography that I will restate here: Ethnography “involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions ... , [and] collecting

whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research” (p. 1). In ethnography, then, the researcher immerses him or herself in a particular culture in order to study it and then stands outside of the researched culture in some discernable way in order to present it to others (Pratt, 1992). In this sense, ethnography is not enough; the purpose of my study, in part, is to explore and analyze blogging as a form of expression of voice in the midst of life crises. This exploration means my blog and my life crisis. My input, in terms of reflections, feelings, insights, and experiences are integral to the study and undoubtedly affected what I wrote, what I will write, and how others did and will interpret and respond to what I wrote. Hence, my choice of method: Autoethnography, which I will return to in the next section.

Before I begin discussing autoethnography more fully, let us pause here to look at a particular type of ethnography that I find does align itself with what I seek to do in my own study, which is to seek out and enter surfaces that are “often hidden in plain sight – the convolutions and complications below the surface, the systems that generate and keep surfaces in place” (Madison, 2009, p. 190). This type of ethnography is called *dangerous ethnography* by Madison (2009) who asserts that we need to not only think of danger as something *out there* in the field but as something within ourselves that we embody, that we take with us into the field to call forth when confronting “dangers at the root” (p. 189). As agents of danger we can endanger dangerous power. Others who embrace the notion of doing dangerous ethnography include Hamera (2007), who looks at and puts into peril the power of the politics of globality and urban migration in her work concerning the urban political

infrastructures of dance, and Pollock (1997), who puts medical discourse, reproductive technologies, and the intersections of maternity, sexuality, and reproduction into jeopardy through her retelling of birth stories. We have, according to Oliver (2001), a response-ability to respond in some form to that which we have witnessed, and to do so “in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility to respond to others” (p. 18). So what must I do with what I have witnessed? I must write. I must write to evoke a response – a response-ability – and I must do so in a way that combines past and present, self and situation, public and private; I must write what I have lived, what I continue to live, an autoethnography.

**Autoethnography.** Autoethnography, in its most generic form stems from anthropology’s ethnography and is used in various ways within the realm of qualitative research to inextricably link personal and cultural realms. Lionnet (1990) defines autoethnography as a method used to “open up spaces of resistance between the individual (auto-) and the collective (-ethno-) where the writing (-graphy) of resistance cannot be foreclosed” (p. 391). This resistance challenges the struggle of a singular identity and that that is constituted by culture. Pratt (1991) expands this definition, foregrounding autoethnography’s highly personalized style as “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations that others have made of them” (p. 35). Autoethnography, then, “lets you use yourself to get to culture” (Pelias, 2003, p. 372).

In this section I will discuss autoethnography in greater detail, beginning with what, specifically, this form of research method allows:

1. It allows the use of what Smith (2005) refers to as “alternate forms of representation, such as short stories, poems, and artistic interpretations” (p.4). This is imperative, as the central data source for my study is the historical blogging space that was created through the words that I wrote, the pictures and links that I created, and the words that others wrote in response to these forms of representation during my son’s eighteen month incarceration.
2. It allows me to tell the story of my own learning while working through the life-changing experiences of mothering an incarcerated son; it allows me to tell this story through the intertwining of this historical blog, the words found within letters written by and to my son during his incarceration, the words of the journal that I will keep during the course of the study, and the stories of those who interacted and created their own stories in my blogging space.
3. It allows me to provide what Mykhalovskiy (1997) puts forth as a unique window to a particular world, a particular culture, that could only be given by one who was actively and completely a part of that world.
4. It allows, as Gergen and Gergen (2002) stated, “one’s unique voicings – complete with colloquialisms reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness – [to be] honored” (p. 14).

With the incarceration of my son, I stepped permanently into the lived experience of a mother on the margins. In this space, for better or for worse, I became both a participant and an observer, a silencer and the silenced. From this space, I am not a seeker of *The Truth*.

Instead, I seek to reveal the voice of an insider who used blogging as a way to put forth and seek knowledges and understandings of the world I found myself in the day I answered the phone and heard, “Mom, I got arrested last night.”

As a marginalized Other who is writing her own way through continually disrupting identities, autoethnography, politically speaking, represents an objectified Female/Woman/Mother's's undertaking to (re)present herself in ways that engage with the objectifier's own terms. The precursor to autoethnographic texts, ethnographic texts, are said by Pratt (1992) to be a means by which one self represents to some other set of selfs some set of Others whom the single self has come to know intimately in some way. Autoethnographic texts, in contrast, are those stories or ways of seeing that the Others construct in response to or in dialogue with those representations. As this relates to my own study, anyone properly trained could enter my world, stand in lines with other mothers who are waiting to get in for their weekly hour of visitation in a urine scented jail, learn the language and the pain and the ways of mothering an incarcerated son. You could blog about your experience, and their experience, and about the connections you have made and the knowledge you have gained. You could connect what you have learned to theories and academic thought and share it with others in your field. You could do all of this, and it would be a valid and good and solid and important study. The difference between your ethnography and my autoethnography is that I have no need to try to become an insider in the research setting. I am the insider. The context is my own. From this position my gaze is that of an ethnographer focusing on social and cultural aspects of a personal experience and that of a vulnerable self looking inward, a

vulnerable self that is, as Ellis (2004) so well stated, “moved by and [moved] through, refract[ing] and resist[ing] cultural interpretations” (pp. 37-38).

It is important to note that there are things that I will not see as an insider that I may have seen as an outsider immersed in the blogging culture in another way. This is addressed in the strengths and limitations sections of this chapter. It is also important, here, to put forth the ways in which autoethnography differ from/add to/respond to ethnography. A key difference between autoethnography and ethnography, as stated by Ricci (2003), is that ethnography is often defined as “the practice of attempting to discover the culture of others” (p. 593), whereas autoethnography is “the use of self and self’s experience to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which you are a part” (p. 593). Autoethnographies, then, are written by “those who had been more likely to be the ethnographies rather than the ethnographer” (Behar, 1996, p. 27). Other key differences of autoethnography are as follows:

- Author usually writes in first person, placing self as the researched, so as to capture the complexities of being both knower and known.
- Often discloses hidden details and nuances of private life.
- Highlights emotional experience, and uses emotionally powerful words to recreate the situation in a way that allows readers to “feel the feelings,” and “experience the conflicts” (Ellis, 2004, p.142).
- Encourages experimentation with forms and rhetorical contexts.

- Often serves as a way to talk back to dominant representations and the powers that be in a given situation “in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces” (Tierney, 1998, p. 66).

Here, my “self,” a self that might have been the exotic subject that Duncan (2004) discussed and that your study could have explored, has a chance to let her own story, my own story, speak alongside and within the stories of others. My voice, in dialogue with your voice, adds yet another layer to our story. I hope, as well, it will call forth questions, yours and mine, about the way in which our worlds are constructed.

Autoethnography is an optimal choice for my research because, as Tierney (1998) asserted, "autoethnography confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders" (p. 66). Though still in its infancy and still widely questioned, this form of Ethnographic research, where the idea that writing in first person brings with it accountability, an active rather than a passive voice, and an eye toward blurring the boundaries between many of the binaries held so firmly in place within the ideologies of our culture, is gaining popularity. (Dyson, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Lionnet, 1990; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Chang (2008) has conducted much research on utilizing personal stories for scholarly purposes. Though she is not the first to focus her research in this area (See Anderson, 2006a; Anderson, 2006b; Ellis, 1993; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Hayano, 1979; Nash, 2004; and Reed-Danahay, 1997), she discusses four different writing styles and applies

them to autoethnography in a way that allows the reader to begin to define his or her own style and ways of drawing on self-experience to extend understanding of a cultural phenomenon. As I believe that my own study will fall mainly within the analytic/Interpretive style, I will now briefly list and define each in turn, leaving analytic/Interpretive until last so that I might be more attentive where my own analytic/Interpretive focus lies:

1. Descriptive/Realistic – With little interjection of opinion or evaluation, this style, used extensively by Bochner and Ellis (1996), is full of accurately given details of people, places, experiences, and events.
2. Imaginative/Creative - Said by some to lack significant cultural analysis and interpretation, this still very experimental style is limited only by one's own imaginative energy. Here, poetry, drama, and fiction are used in creative ways to blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in ways that connect data with a social context.
3. Confessional/Emotive – Vulnerable self-exposure is key in this style of autoethnographical research that lends itself to readers' participation in the story. A natural attraction of this style is an ability to speak to the hearts of readers (Ellis, 1996). This same attribute, though, has been seen as self-indulgent by those, such as Sparkes (2002), who see them as simply an author's way to unload personal burden in narration.
4. Analytic/Interpretive – The draw toward this style of autoethnography is the desire to speak to the hearts of readers in a way that also investigates and analyzes the culture

through the seeking of relationships among data fragments and interconnectedness with the understanding that research unavoidably reflects “the ‘prejudices’, the pre-understandings, of the interpreter” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 13) and the text produced unavoidably reflects “the socio-historical position of the researcher” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 13). It is toward this goal that I now turn, as my blogging story about the process of finding voice in a very public space while working through what traditionally is a very private life crisis demands research that is both based on what Ellis and Bochner (2006) refer to as “the flux of lived experience,” and what Anderson (2006b), calls “sensitive, nuanced, and accurate understandings of the lives and experiences of the selves and others that we study” (p. 459) and on analyzing social life in a way that explores “how people come to construct social worlds, what the consequences are, and how we might construct better worlds and enrich our collective lives in the process” (Anderson, 2006b, p. 459).

**Analytic autoethnography.** As a researcher researching an historical account of my selves as they were between June 2004 and December 2005, I am an author/subject moving between looking outward and looking inward in response to or in dialogue with the blog that I kept, the responders to that blog through the posts that they left, my own interactions with their blogs, and the culture that surrounded/s them/me. In the proceeding sections I have given the reader my choice of research method and discussed my reasoning behind this choice. In this section, I will discuss my decision to use what Chang (2008) calls

analytic/interpretive autoethnography and Anderson (2006a) calls analytic autoethnography as opposed to the more generic “autoethnography” that is used by others such as Denzin (2006) and Ellis and Bochner (2000; 2006).

*In the beginning.* The idea behind the term autoethnography was first conceptualized by Hayano (1979) when he identified various texts in which he believed that the researchers had acquired an intimate familiarity with a certain subculture with an association of the sort that produced a permanent change in subjectivity, researchers who “posse[d] the qualities of often-permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognized both by themselves and the people of whom they are a part” (p. 100). It is important to put this definition here, as it is referenced by Anderson (2006) in his rebuttal to Ellis and Bochner’s (2006) analysis of his 1999 piece on the future of ethnography. For Ellis and Bochner (2006) there is but one way to define autoethnography, and that is thus: “*All autoethnography should be evocative*” (p. 436). For Ellis and Bochner (2006) and Denzin (2006) the goal is to champion an ethnographic alternative that distances them from Chicago School ethnography. Yet, Anderson (2006a) rebutted, there is no mention of this in Hayano’s (1979) definition and, hence, no reason to limit our own definition in this way. I agree and tend to be more aligned with the thoughts of Chang (2008) who breaks autoethnographic writing styles into four areas but acknowledges that there are no clear lines between the areas and that there are as many different possible combinations as there are people doing autoethnography.

*My position on the analytic auto ethno graphy continuum.* I question Anderson's (2006a) statements concerning analytic autoethnography as "simply a specialized subgenre of ethnography" (p. 388) that should be defined by all criteria listed in and applicable to traditional ethnography. However, I do agree with him that analytic autoethnography should be labeled as such for the purposes of academic discussion concerning the combining of self-study and explicit analysis.

I believe we live on continuums, bouncing first here and then there as we continuously (re)create what we believe and who we are. I do not believe that experimenting with form and content creation means that analysis in any of its forms must be completely abandoned, nor do I believe, as Ellis and Bochner (2006) claim that realists do, that analysis should be privileged over story. I have no desire, as Ellis and Bochner (2006) and Denzin (2006) do, to distance myself entirely from Chicago School Ethnography or to "close the door on the Chicago School and all of its variations" (Denzin, 2006, p. 422), as I do not feel as if any tradition is without merit in contemporary and future social inquiry. Also, though I respect his work and agree with much of what he puts forth, Burnier's (2006) criticism of analytic autoethnography as one in which "a series of gendered dichotomies – heart/mind, emotional/rational, literary-poetic/analytic, personal/scholarly, disruptive/theoretical" (p. 416) – are reinscribed, does not ring true in my own reading of Anderson's (2006a; 2006b) work. Quite the opposite, actually. Like Anderson, I believe that it is only through the investigation and analysis of a cultural space such as the blogosphere, whether that space is a

self-space or an Othered-space, that we can call forth these dichotomies, to expose them, to show them as the linguistic construction they are.

It is my belief, as a self-proclaimed post feminist, poststructuralist, postmodernist analytic story teller, language used differently opens up spaces of discourses and makes (re)visible dominant language practices. Davis (2000) discusses how subjects can use the power of discourse to reposition themselves, realign themselves,” in ways that make visible “the ways in which power shifts dramatically, depending on how subjects are positioned by and within the multiple discourses they encounter” (p. 180). Autoethnography, then, gives the subject/object a position on the disjunctive bar, between and within those two realms that are typically forced apart in current research, and gives him or her an opportunity to generate new ways of speaking/writing. In particular, my own study of self, a self repositioned and realigned over and over again through the discourses of mothering and prison and blogging, allows me to slide and shift between and within both and neither participant observation and observation of the participant in an exciting and self-thought-provoking way. While I will rely on a personal writing style to evoke emotional responses in readers, my goal is definitely to call forth connections between one mother’s language constructions and the broader social discourses that surround them while exploring how this might create a space for both creating and analyzing voice for those on the margins who are working through their own life crisis. Hence, though I acknowledge and appreciate as acceptable scholarly research, all four writing styles presented by Chang (2008), I have chosen analytic autoethnography as my writing style. I have chosen this approach not for its poetic license but because it provided

the most appropriate means of investigating blogging as a form of informal learning and expression of voice in the midst of life-crisis.

*Autoethnographic topics.* As well as the wide range of definitions and forms, I am also aware of the seemingly limitless *topics* of autoethnographic writing in a literature that addresses such subjects as, prison life (Svensson, 1997), surviving the sudden and unexpected death of a child (Melbourne, 2003), children with schizophrenia (Schneider, 2005), anorexia (Mukaia, 1989), bereavement and grief (Ellis, 1993), mothering in a mixed family (Murad, 2005), teaching (Pelias, 2003), teenage pregnancy (Muncey, 2005), and art as research (Bochner & Ellis, 2003). There has not, though, been a great deal of self/culture writing on the process of blogging through a life-crisis and the learning and voice that happen when technology meets the margins. For this feminist analytic autoethnographer who is positioned within a new space of communication, namely the blogosphere, language allows for a space of learning/play that has yet to be explored extensively in this way and allows us to embrace “the intoxicating power of language and use it to move into the not-yet-known” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 12). “How does the blogging experiences of a woman in the midst of a life crisis help us to understand the process(es) of developing agency or voice?” This, my first research question, stated again here for emphasis, was framed with both my specific experience and the possibilities for the general experience in mind. My blog is both/neither a moment frozen in time and a fluid cyber document; it is a symbolic representation of a story waiting to be (re)told. And autoethnography, with its eye toward “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the

purposes of understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21), is a method that Allen and Philaretou (2006) discussed as one that celebrates rather than demonizes the I (eye) in research, thus making way for those of us who have had experiences that have placed us on the margins of society’s system of binaries, devalued and ignored, to “free their voice” (p. 67) and to share this voice with others in such a way as to draw attention to the linguistic constructions that bound it.

***My autoethnographic voice.*** The feminist position that I occupy as I seek to explore and analyze blogging as a form of informal learning and expression of voice in the midst of life crisis also drives my choice of method; hence, I begin this section by stating it here: I am a feminist doing research (Reinharz, 1992). I am a feminist doing research on women silenced by culture. I am a subject in my own research, and my blog, the responses to my blog, and the rhizomatic connections therein, are primary data sources. I am a feminist interested in language, a feminist doing research on women silenced by culture in the same ways that she herself has been silenced and silences. My research will move between inner vulnerable experience and outer social, historical, and cultural experiences. As a feminist doing autoethnography, I will incorporate personal reflexive dimensions into research to shed light on how domination is reproduced in every day experience (Allen & Piercy, 2005) and on blogging as a way to expose the binaries that hold this domination in place.

### **Analytic Autoethnographic Design**

Just as my first two chapters focus on issues that acknowledge not only, and not primarily, who I am, but also “when, where, [and] how” I am (Minh-ha, 1992, p. 157), so too

does my method section. Analytic Autoethnographic design calls attention to the who and the when and the where and the how simultaneously of normative social and cultural categories discussed in chapter one of this study. Mapping the situation (Clarke, 2005) of who and when and where and how is one method through which the “connections between the personal self... [and] the setting in which it is conducted” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 11) can be explored for fissures and gaps that lead to answers and questions concerning agency and voice in the midst of life crisis.

For two years I interacted with technology and with other bloggers to create an online journal that reflects on my son’s incarceration and on the process of working through my disrupted and disrupting identity of Mother. Today, this blog, with all of its human and non-human players (that includes, but is not focused on, my auto-self), is central to the proposed design of my autoethnographic study. Autoethnography/Situation. Self/Situation. Knowing my own conceptual frame and my desire to continually chase binary blurring lines of fight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), it should come as no surprise that my design takes this form. This section will lay out the way in which I propose to set a very public stage (my blog) in the middle of Clarke’s (2005) situational analysis maps with the hope that the performance will “*show ourselves to ourselves* in ways that [will] help us recognize our behavior and life worlds as well as the behaviors and life worlds of others, for better or worse, as well as our/Others unconscious needs and desires” (Madison, 2009, p. 187).

### **Study Population**

My study population is a situation, a situation where individuals, technology, and discourse collide and identities and subjectivities are produced. I am studying an historical blog created in cyberspace by one middle-class White mother of one adult convict son convicted of a third degree felony punishable by a prison sentence but not by the death penalty or by a jail sentence.

### **Justification for Choice of Study Population**

In *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn*, Clarke (2005) spends many pages discussing how and why analyzing a situation of discourse/s is important in today's postmodern/poststructuralist world. She integrates, as I wish to do, critical Foucauldian discourse analysis with her own questions of agency and self-making of subjectivities. Using her discourse mapping strategies, that I discuss in my data interpretation and coding sections of this chapter, she "seeks to represent all major discourses related to the situation of interest – not just what could be called 'the master discourse'" (p. 175). As previously stated, I am one middle class White mother of one adult convict who was convicted of a third degree felony punishable by a prison sentence but not by the death penalty or by a jail sentence. As a mother of an incarcerated son struggling to make sense of my new world in 2004, I was an insider immersed in the setting that I was blogging about and through. This blog is still available on Xanga.com to be used as historical data. The discourses that collide here hold clues to the construction of meaning, of meaning making, by those who share a culturally and historically located moment in time. Fairclough (1999) adds

a great deal to the discussion of discourse and the importance of analyzing a discursive situation. For him, and for me, the reasons are clear:

- Discourses “constitute one important form of social action.”
- Texts of any kind “constitute a major form of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations, and processes.”
- Spaces where discourses collide are “sensitive barometers of social processes, of movement and diversity, and textual analysis can provide particularly good indicators of social change.”
- Through texts, “social control and social domination are exercised (and indeed negotiated and resisted).” (p. 203-205)

As Clarke (2005) states, “Discourses are dense and complex sites for analysis” (p. 149) built from not only language but from visual images, symbols, non-human things/material cultural objects, and movements, signals, sounds, and on and on and on. Discourse analysis covers a huge range of possibilities, and the focus points are endless with different types of analysis foregrounding different substantive features of discourse. One such focus is on subject making, on the producing of identities and subjectivities through discourse (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999). This is what my study of situation foregrounds. Here is Clarke (2005) one more time: “Studies of producing identities and subjectivities through discourse center on sites where individuals and discourses meet – often where institutions and persons intersect” (p. 156). My blog is the intersection of journaling and technology, of freedom and prisons, of motherhood and borderlands. It is a situation. And it is waiting.

## Data Collection

The following are the types of data that will be collected for analysis and interpretation in this study:

**Self-reflective data.** This will be the primary data type and will include the Xanga blog that I kept consistently beginning Wednesday, June 16, 2004 at 9:49 A.M.

Here is an excerpt from my (tbird36, 2005, August 4) blog:

Some days I can do nothing but nod in sad agreement with those who have left Xanga.....

*Email from a reader:*

***"Rot in hell with your pot smoking, underage-girl fucking, cop hating, son."***

Nice, huh?



<http://www.skratch-pad.com/>

The words, though partially true (as he did smoke pot, and he did get a 17-year-old girl pregnant), hurt more than any physical blow that I could have received as I sit here waiting to hear from Robert, waiting to hear that this new place is good, waiting to hear that we can visit, waiting to hear that he is truly going to be able to begin learning the life skills needed to reintegrate into our society.....

Figure 2 Example of an Xanga post

Had someone gotten my email address before I began to write myself and be written differently, I would have had only these words to ponder, to absorb, to become. In this space of possibilities, though, I also had the following responses from some of my blogging connectors. There were 45 positive responses. I am including 4 due to space constrictions:

- Sounds like some of my mails. Lovely stuff! Hope you hear something very soon...something more intelligent than that mail... (Moniet, 2005, August 4)
- I got a comment like that making reference to my grand daughter who is pregnant and at one time was considering an abortion(she changed her mind YAY) I was so upset that I almost went private and then I just decide that fortunately in the cyber world you can delete and block people like that...sometimes I wish I could do that in the real world...I am sorry that happened to you... (nanablue2004, 2005, August 4)
- That makes me angry – very angry – that is not an appropriate comment left by anyone. Especially if they know you and have been reading your words and your heart. (anonymous, 2005, August 4)
- ‘Rot in hell’ well you kind of are, aren’t you? I mean you aren’t rotting (very far from it, your very inspirational) but any mother with a son in prison and a dreadful situation with a baby grandchild has to be in hell. ‘Under-age’ depends where you live that, 16 is legal in a lot of places, so that just makes her a young woman with a young man, therefore we can ignore that. ‘Cop-hating’ this isn’t quite accurate I would have thought ‘cop-hating, prison-admin officer hating, court-hating’ might have been more accurate, and with plenty of justification. I don’t see that the deprivation of dignity and human rights your son has had to go through is any kind of punishment fitting the crime. And the pot-smoking. Again that depends on where you live whether or not its legal/good or evil/illegal to partake of the weed or alcohol. So all in all it wasn’t that bad a letter really, but the person who wrote it set out to hurt and that’s what hurts me the most for you. Bless you and your cop-hating, pot-smoking, two-young-people in love (at least at one time!), badly-mistreated son. Bless you a lot. (SavonDuJour, 2005, August 4)

### Figure 3 Responses to the example post

My blog, kept in real time over the 18 months that my son was incarcerated, and the pictures and words incorporated into that blog, fall under what Plummer (2001) defined as autobiography, a method for creating textual and discursive spaces for otherwise silenced voices. Those working within qualitative research, in particular, have reflected on and written about the self in a variety of autobiographical ways including, but not limited to, field notes and research journals. These sources of data, Plummer (2001) put forth, are underused within social science research despite their analytic potential, typically being used as a way for the researcher to record emotions, indiscretions, and self-revelations, but not as a source of primary data for the research project.

Although neither autobiographical data nor blogging have gained substantial notoriety in adult education, both are widespread and gaining in popularity. Blogging, a form of social mass media, or participation technologies as they are referred to by Jones, and Conceição (2008), and by myself in my purpose statement, resides in the arena known as popular culture, which is discussed more thoroughly in chapter two, and is considered by many in the field of adult education to be a type of informal adult education (Brookfield, 1986; Jarvis & Burr, 2005; Sandlin, 2007; Tisdell & Thompson, 2006) which, when focused on the self-awareness about and reporting of one's own experiences and introspections, becomes an autobiographical data source that can be used as one point of reference for one who seeks to deconstruct a particular culture's ideologies.

In addition to the above self-reflective data, I will also use the comments that I left on the posts of other bloggers and a journaling notebook that I will use each time that I revisit this space..

**Personal memory data.** As Chang (2008) puts forth in her text on the process of doing autoethnography, “Self is ... a carrier of culture, intimately connected to others in society,” hence, “the self’s behaviors – verbal and nonverbal – should be interpreted in their social context” (p. 125). As I analyze the words and connections between self, others, and technology, I will also collect data of what I was feeling, thinking, doing, knowing as I wrote through this life crisis of learning to mother an incarcerated son. To do so, I will use what Chang (2008) calls personal memory data that includes inventorying self, visualizing self, and chronicling the past.

**Self-observational data.** Self-Observational Data is data collected that is tied directly to what is happening at the time of research (Chang, 2008). Mine will include two types: systemic self-evaluation that I will conduct immediately before and after I engage with my historical blog data and interactive self-evaluation that I will conduct with someone who was a part of my journey before, during, and after my son’s incarceration.

**External data.** Robert Stake (1995) acknowledged that in almost every study there is a need to examine documents. He noted, “Documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly” (p. 112). Hence, as I move forward with this autoethnographic study, additional historical documents will be collected and studied. These documents will include, but will not be limited to, court papers, fine and fee

information, pictures used on my Xanga site, the blog responses made by others who visited my Xanga site, the postings by other bloggers that I commented on, documents related to the posts made during my son's incarceration, letters from my son to me, letters written by me to my son during his incarceration, and other artifacts as appropriate.

### **Data Analysis**

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Hatch (2002) discuss, qualitative analysis involves a systematic search for meaning in mountains of data. Researchers must systematically organize and ask continual questions of the mountains of qualitative data in a search for patterns, relationships, and themes so as to develop explanations, interpretations, critiques, or theories. This process of making meaning is a complex one for narrative inquirers, as there is no step-by-step procedure, no "clear path to follow that works in each inquiry" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 134). I tried to suspend any questioning of the data in my first reading, and just take in the data as a whole. As I read, I kept at the forefront of my mind the central question I had of the data at this stage: What is the story here? Next, I created a very raw list of open codes using my research questions, conceptual framework, and literature review (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

As I began reading through the blog for the second time, I decided I needed to begin journaling my thoughts as well as noting anything in particular about the posts and the comments on the posts. I read from the first post to the last, adding to my open coding list as I progressed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The final list of open codes is included in Appendix C.

During this read-through I also attempted to note which research question I felt the post related to. I abandoned this after the first 50 or so posts, as most posts spoke to both questions one and two. This read through took weeks, as there are over 300 individual posts and hundreds of comments on the posts. Additionally, reading the posts and the pain, my own pain, of that time took an emotional toll that I had not anticipated, and I had to take multiple breaks from the data.

In mostmodern post-structuralist and/or feminist research the aim is to make the process of data analysis as visible and transparent *as possible* (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001). In my own study, then, creating transparency in the research process was an important consideration, one that I engaged with by drawing on my reflective journals at key points in writing my dissertation in order to make my decisions, and the thinking, values, and experiences behind those decisions visible, to both myself and to the reader. As noted in Harrison et al. (2001) qualitative research, especially in paradigms such as feminist and poststructuralist, is “presented in ways that make it clear how the researcher’s own experiences, values, and positions of privilege in various hierarchies have influenced their research interests, the way they choose to do their research, and the ways they choose to represent their research findings” (p. 325).

As noted in my literature review, and as discussed in the works of postmodernist/post-structuralist thinkers such as Davis (2000), Foucault (1972), Irigaray (1985), Lather and Smithies (1997), and Lyotard (1979), language evokes power, and language used differently, evokes new points of power. For post-structuralists, power and

language used differently can open up spaces of discourse to make visible dominant language practices. It is through this exposing and deconstructing and re-visioning that subjects can use the power of discourse to reposition themselves, realign themselves, in ways that make visible, in ways that give voice (Davis, 2000). My blog uses language differently. My analytic autoethnographical exploration of culture and self uses language differently. And, in my journal, as I noted each day that I went into the data and read and coded posts and blogger comments, I used language differently. Before I went into the data each time I wrote a self-reflexive statement in which I expressed my feelings and thoughts and noted any changes in what I felt was being learned from the data. Oftentimes these reflexive journal entries included themes that I was identifying and wanted to further explore. Journaling in this way and at these times enabled me to think through my ontological and epistemological assumptions and to clarify my own beliefs and expectations about the self-study. Journaling in this way also helped me to remain wakeful to the influence of my now on my then perspectives on my research.

Looking through my notes on each blog entry, I searched for the number of times that particular codes appeared and how they loosely matched up to or fit under a particular theme that I had noted in my journal. During this phase, as well, I set aside those codes which did not speak to the research questions. Armed with this loose list of themes and the codes related to them, I then turned to Clarke's (2005) mapping model of data analysis. This model provides a framework for analysis that allows me to combine the elements of my blog such as pictures, wordplay, and juxtaposition that are not as easily incorporated into other types of

qualitative analysis. Examples of this method of analysis, as used in my own study, are included in appendices E and F and are discussed throughout this chapter.

Because images and rhythmic expression came up time and again in the original and second phase of analysis, and because I had noted the same question to myself several times in my notes, to begin, I took one of the most recurring codes, *Making him human*, and created a map of all of the pictures from the blog that had been noted with this code and defined them using words from the post that housed each picture. The question from my notes was, “Is there a pattern in my use of wordplay/images and, if so, what unconscious picture/story was I telling?” I put all pictures on the map in collage fashion as it seems to me that the idea of collage with text put forth by Diaz (2002) is very similar to Clarke’s (2005) idea of mapping a situation and lends itself very well to the type of postmodern auto-analysis that I conducted. Like Leavy (2009), I believe that “the textual collage is both a work of art and an information-bearing subject” (p. 222). Diaz’s (2002) use of analysis using collage as text and Clarke’s (2005) situational analysis, “[allow] researchers to draw together studies of discourse and agency, action and structure, image, text and context, history and the present moment – to analyze complex situations of inquiry broadly conceived” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxii).

For Clarke (2005), maps are a method of analytic exercise, a way to analyze positionalities, a fresh way to look at social science data. Maps center on the situation of inquiry. Here, situation is the ultimate unit of interpretation. Situation is the place where elements and their relations can freely bump up against each other, and it is where

understanding these collisions becomes the primary goal. Here, metaphors of normal curves, which are at the heart of Glaser's (1978) concept of a basic social process, are replaced with "postmodern multidimensional mappings in order to represent lived situations and the variety of positionalities and human and nonhuman activities and discourses within them" (Clarke, 2005, p. 25).

I repeated this process for each of the following recurring codes, as these appeared more than any others throughout my posts: *Making him human*, *Various faces of (m)Other*, *Introspection*, *Poetic or rhythmic representation*, and *Giving Voice*. Examples of these maps can be found in appendix E. I followed this exercise of analysis with another mapping exercise, this time placing the date of each of the entries used on each of the individual maps on a timeline that starts with my son's date of incarceration and ends with his date of being 100% free. I chose these dates even though the blog continued for some months after his last meeting with his parole officer because this is a study of agency and voice during a life crisis, and for me the full weight of the original crisis lifted when we no longer had to worry about him being sucked back into the system for this crime. This map can be found in appendix E and is very telling of the way in which these posts lead me to a creation of agency and voice. As an additional check here, I followed Clarke's (2005) analysis strategies that follow the mapping exercises that she puts forth in her text. Looking at each post that I used to create the collage maps, the surrounding posts, and the responses to these posts that were made by readers, I jotted down my immediate response to the post and the readers' reactions, created a quick reaction map, and responded in journal form. An example of these steps can be found

in appendix F.

In Joyce Cary's novel, *The Horse's Mouth*, an artist teaches his mistress how to look at a picture. "Feel it with your eyes," he says.

Feel the shape in the flat – in the patterns, like a carpet.... Then you feel it in the round.... Not as if it were a picture of anyone. But a colored and raised map. You feel all the rounds, the smooths, the sharp edges, the flats and the hallows, the lights and the shades, the cools and the warms. The colors and the textures. There's hundreds of little differences all fitting in together. (p. 98)

Doing situational interpretation is like doing art. You can't just look at one action, one process, one space. Instead, you must feel it with your eyes over and over again. You must feel the hundreds of little differences and discover how they fit together in this time, in this space. Taking ideas from Clarke (2005) and Diaz (2002), my analysis puts forth one way that leads to such a discovery. Together, these explorations fulfill the demands of this author; they aid in making "the usually invisible and inchoate social features of a situation more visible" (2005, p. xxxvii). As a final exploration of how all of the little differences fit together, I looked at the codes and the themes that I had identified, and I eliminated those themes that did not relate to the research questions. The result of this exercise was the discovery of three dominant themes: Struggle and Acceptance, A reliance on poetry, narrative, wordplay, and creative use of pictures, and the learning process used by the blogger and other members of our newly formed community. These themes turned into my three key findings and are discussed at length in chapter four.

**Strengths**

Strengths of the study include the following: (a) the researcher has intensive and long-term involvement with data that is detailed and varied in a space that provides a full and revealing picture of what is going on; (b) an ability to, as a researcher who aligns herself with others who connect the cultural with the personal (see also Holt, 2001; Pelias, 2003; Sparkes, 1996), lead others deep into my world in such a way as to provide stimulus for them to reflect upon their own lives in relation to mine; (c) the use of historical data rather than interviews with those, including myself, who posted in the blogging space. This final strength is of utmost importance because it adds to the validity of the study, as what the informants (posters) said was not influenced by an interview setting. It is important to note here, as well, that issues of accessibility and permissibility do not present themselves as they would in a traditional ethnography where “gaining permission to become a participant observer in the lifeworld of those being studied is often a challenge” (Duncan, 2004, p. 5). The posters in the blog in question have already chosen to go public with their words and have already chosen pseudonyms to do so. It is these same pseudonyms that will be used within the study when referring to individual posts. Finally, I have already obtained permission from my son to use any and all letters, poems, and posts.

**Limitations**

Limitations of the study include the following: (a) a small number of “live” participants, notably only me. This is countered, though, by using the words of others who participated in the blogging journey when it was underway; their words became an integral

part of my data set; (b) I am no longer the mother of an incarcerated son; instead, I am the mother of an ex-convict conducting an analysis of historical data gathered some seven years ago. As such, my perception will be built from two different contexts with overlapping contradictions and similarities (see Chang, 2008, for additional information on analysis and interpretation of autobiographical data).

### **Validity**

In an autoethnography, where subjectivity and the idea that “all validity is interpretive and dependent on context” (Ellis, 2004, p. 123) is acknowledged, the inner dialogue of the researcher is considered valid. This in no way negates the need for rigor in the process (-graphy). One cannot simply tell a story, but must instead provide information that is scholarly and justifiable, information that is supported by other data and is supported by a set of criteria accepted within the field of study.

My autoethnography is situated in a postmodern, post-structural, post-feminist frame; hence, I have explored and analyzed works within this type of study within this frame that deal with the process for verification and validity. The two authors whose work appears most relevant are Richardson (1994) and Lather (1991; 1993). What follows is a general overview of validity as put forth by each author and a discussion of my intended use of these two verification procedures, specifically, Richardson’s (1994) perspective which deconstructs validity’s traditional rigid, fixed, two-dimensional description and Lather’s (1993) four frames of validity. Each of these perspectives will be discussed in turn as they relate to my

own study. Additionally, Lather's (1993) Transgressive validity checklist is attached as appendix A.

**Deconstructing validity as we know it.** In a very postmodern fashion, Richardson (1994) challenges the traditional idea of validity as rigid and fixed. For her, validity is like a crystal, "which combines symmetry substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach" (p. 522). As noted in her description of validity as a crystal:

Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose....

Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of 'validity' (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves); and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. (p. 522)

Richardson (2000, pp. 15-16) described five factors she uses when reviewing personal narrative papers that includes analysis of both evaluative and constructive validity techniques. The criteria are: (a) Substantive contribution. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life? (b) Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring? (c) Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? (d) Impactfulness. Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action? (e) Expresses a reality.

Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? If a study meets these criteria, for Richardson (2000), it is a valid study.

For my postmodern self, this is enough. But let us return for a moment to the particulars of post-structuralist post-feminist thought where doing situational interpretation, as this study intends to do, demands a framing of issues and axes through the positioning of the relations of each element with all of the other elements in play in a attempt to make “the usually invisible and inchoate social features of a situation more visible” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxxvii). For this study to be valid, then, I must ensure I meet this criteria, as well. Lather (1993) offers four frames of validity that aid in this quest: *Ironic Validity*, *Paralogic Validity*, *Rhizomatic Validity*, and *Situated, Embodied, or Voluptuous Validity*. It is to these frames that we will now turn.

**Four frames of validity.** Just as my study moves away from/against/past more conventional and prescriptive modes, it also demands an impermanent frame that calls for an exploration of “the resources of different contemporary inquiry problematics” (Lather, 1993, p. 676), a post-structuralist post feminist legitimation that attempts to unjam “the closed truths of the past, thereby freeing up the present for new forms of thought and practice” (Bennett, 1990, p. 277). Like Lather (1993) my own position is that, “the ‘crisis of representation’ is not the end of representation, but the end of pure presence” (p. 675). *Validity*, then, calls for a “self-scutinizing, non-normalizing production of knowledge ... that, by taking the crisis of representation into account, create texts that are both double without being paralyzed and implode controlling codes” (Lather, 1993, p. 678).

Quinby (1991) looks at a text that Lather later uses as an illustration of one of her validity checks, ironic validity. The text, *Let us now praise famous men* (Agee & Evan, 1988), uses photographs, vignettes, and multiple endings to foreground the insufficiencies of language in a way that “both reinscribes familiar regimes of truth and narrative and anticipates a much less comfortable social science in its embodiment of the anxiety of voyeurism” (Lather, 1993, p. 678). This ironic use of researcher power that Lather (1993) discusses points to and calls out in my own work the struggle of an ‘I’ as a universal mother to become an ‘eye’, to look inward to expose the self/other that resides in all of us that both inscribes and interrupts the normalizing power/knowledge that Foucault discusses throughout his work.

For me, as for Lather (1993), a valid study is a study about interruption, about the demonstration of the multiplicities of meaning making, about instabilities in the normal. I seek to create a research design that moves the author/reader “toward unleashing [their] own privilege and displacing the colonizing gaze” (Lather, 1993, p. 680); and I seek to create it following the timeline set forth in the next section of this chapter.

### **Chapter summary**

Analytic autoethnography cannot be used to answer every type of research question, but it is well-suited to topics that explore how people understand and (re)negotiate their constantly disrupted identities as they rhizomatically crawl into, over, and beyond other human and non-human elements in a given situation. In particular, as shown in this chapter, it is well-suited to a woman writing and being written by culture as she maps/analyzes/explores

blogging as a form of informal learning and expression of agency and voice in the midst of life crisis. Behar (1993) writes from the place of woman writer, writing of women in the position of *Other* being gazed upon as an object. Her work places women at the center of a given situation and calls for an awareness of how women are “constructed as female within a patriarchal and Eurocentric discipline” (Villenas, 2003, p. 75). I seek instead to decenter all within a situation in order to explore how all pieces that aid in the creation of a situation work together to both and/or either hold the gaze upon the *Other* woman or to create agency and voice that will allow the Otherness to implode/explode over and over again, little by little, until *Other* can no longer be. Behar (1993) and I fully agree, though, that we cannot continue to reveal nothing, or even very little, of ourselves while asking so much to be revealed by others; making others vulnerable, while we remain invulnerable, is not okay. How I make sense of mothering an incarcerated son has everything to do with my own journey, my own experiences and how they intersected the experiences of those human and non-human actors at play in and outside of my blog. Situational Analytic Autoethnographies of this type can, as Villenas (2003) notes in her own conversation about our “uneasy predicament within the academic postmodern turn,” and that Clarke (2005) discusses in her text on analyzing situations after the postmodern turn, can continually push us to “be reflective and critical about how and why we take up the politics we do and why we evoke particular regimes of truth” (Villenas, 2003, p. 76).

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Key Findings**

#### **Introduction to the Findings**

My blog, started in June 2004 on the day after my son was incarcerated for selling marijuana to an undercover policeman, is the representation of my struggle with identity and marginalization during a time of life crises; ultimately, the 300+ posts that I made became the culmination of a desire to capture the little ‘t’ truths that I came to know through this process, expressed in a form where others were invited to enter, share, and create.

The data analysis conducted in this study led to the emergence of three key findings. The first finding describes a strong delineation between my struggle with this new form of mothering and the new normal that was created through my ultimate acceptance; the second finding focuses on the sense of community created in an open networking space where I and others felt safe to discuss our struggles openly and freely; and the third finding explores the learning process used by the blogger and other members of our newly formed community as they worked together through various life-crisis events. Evidence for these findings comes from the researcher’s blog postings, responses to posts made to the researcher’s blog by other bloggers, and journal entries made by the researcher during the data collection process using the data collection and analysis methods described in the methodology. What follows in this chapter is the presentation of each of these findings in turn.

Just as any story has a beginning, middle, and end, so too does my findings section. We begin with our first research question: “How do the blogging experiences of a woman in

the midst of a life crisis help us to understand the process of developing agency and voice?” Finding one is the beginning, showing a mother in crises, alone and afraid, entering into a new world of mothering and journaling. A move away from silence and words in a notebook that is kept in a drawer and toward voice and words in a public sphere set the stage. Tap. Tap. Tap. This story of agency and voice begins with a struggle.

Finding two finds the main character creating a virtual community of bloggers with those who have entered into her space. Communal voice and agency is developed and discussed as the tempo of the story increases. As with any good story, more than one thread is introduced and followed. In finding two, the idea of community as a meta-narrative to be explored and questioned calls forth our second research question: “How does the act of blogging through a life crisis and the subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior?” How could the main character sit alone at a computer screen and also be a part of a community? And yet, she was doing just that.

Stories end by wrapping up what the reader has learned and by putting forth a moral or take-away for the reader. Finding three, for this autoethnographer, centers on what was learned by calling forth the meta-narrative *Family* by a mother forced into the margins and on the importance of speaking out. As such, finding three speaks to both questions one and two of this research project.

Let us now enter into the little ‘t’ truths of my findings.

**Finding 1. There is a strong delineation between my struggle with a new form of mothering and the new normal that was created through my ultimate acceptance.**

Last month, at a gathering with family and friends, I overheard my youngest son who was barely into his teen years when his brother was incarcerated saying to one of his siblings, “Remember when Robert first got out and he ate with his arm wrapped around his bowl and his mouth down close to the rim? His spoon was like a shovel moving precious material into a safe.” Unlike seven years ago, on this day no one had to ask from where Robert had gotten out; and no one had to ask why he was so protective of his bowl. Talk of prison and change and re-admittance to the world is the new normal in our circle. Today we do it as easily and unthinkingly as we breathe (Journal entry, August 2011, made after a large family and friend gathering at my son’s graduation ceremony). However, learning to mother differently, and teaching others along the way that it is healthy to talk about all aspects of *Family*, was a process, a process that can be traced in the blog that I kept during and after my son’s incarceration. This process became apparent as I began analyzing the data from my blog. What struck me most profoundly was the clear delineation between what I categorized as the *struggle* and the *acceptance* of mothering in the margins. To create these distinctions I used the codes that I had placed under the theme *Struggle/Acceptance*, the creation of which is discussed in the analysis section of chapter three and the outcome of which can be seen in appendix C. This finding pulls almost exclusively from the researcher’s blog posts, as it speaks most specifically to the first question asked of the data: “How do the blogging

experiences of a woman in the midst of life crisis help us to understand the process of finding agency and voice?”

For the purpose of presenting these findings, I will first report on the struggle and then on the acceptance phase. For each of these, and throughout the remainder of the findings section of the dissertation, I will refer to entries made in the blog as blog entries and entries made in my journal that was kept during the analysis phase of this research as journal entries. I will further distinguish clearly anytime I am using the words of a fellow blogger by using the moniker that he or she created for use in the blogging space within the citation.

**The struggle.** This section explores the struggle that I went through as I learned to (re)mother a son that I had silenced and forced into a space of invisibility. Making him visible again demanded that I find agency and voice in the margins of m(O)ther. Themes include: The timeline; Storytelling; and The transition.

**The timeline.** The struggle begins day one of my son’s incarceration, and is quite clear on day three:

By the time that he appears in court, I have bought into his BS yet again, and I believe what he says about how likely he is to get out (since it really wasn't his fault). I wait all day for the call. It never turns out the way he says it will. And I find myself wandering around in a nebulous darkness. And then the cloud lifts, and I am able to function in the world again. The steady ache of a mother's love for an imprisoned child remains, but it can be hidden under a smile, between bouts of laughter, within time spent with others. (Blog entry, June 17, 2004)

The majority of this phase, though never ending completely, lasts through August 29, 2005, three months and seventeen days before my son's release from the system and 8 days before his release into a re-entry program, a program that is in place to reintegrate prisoners into the general population. The time between the first struggle post and the last struggle post made with any regularity is 13 months and 15 days. To put the struggle in perspective, I made a total of 314 posts over a period of 4 years and 6 months. This is the time between my son's incarceration and his date of full release from parole. 193 of those posts were made in the 1 year, 1 month, and 15 days of the struggle period. This means that 61% of the total number of posts was made during the first quarter of the time that the blog was used. The number of posts in this short amount of time is the first indication that this period was a time of struggle.

*Storytelling.* Of the 193 posts made during this phase, 90 (47%) of them were coded with one of the codes presented under the struggle portion of the struggle/acceptance theme as compared to 24 (20%) out of 121 posts made during the last  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the life of the blog. Of the 90 struggle posts made during this time most used storytelling techniques including wordplay, poetry, and narrative to look introspectively, to reflect, and to generate an emotive response from the readers of the blog. On July 2, 2004, while trying to maneuver through emotions of joy and pain as my granddaughter was being born while her daddy sat in a prison cell, I wrote, "What are you thinking – alone in your cell – alone and dead to the beauty of life taking place hundreds of miles away? Any moment now, she will come screaming into the world – you – yet not you – all of us – and no one – until we welcome her, our Destiny" (Blog entry). How fitting a name, I remember thinking. "8 lbs. 20 in. 10:12 A.M.," I added

later. “Robert didn’t know until 6:00 P.M. Our Destiny” (Blog entry, July 2, 2004). I wrote many of these emotion posts while sitting alone at the computer, tears streaming down my face. From my journal entry dated August 7, 2011: “There is a pattern to this emotional writing. I do it when I need to make others feel, when I need to feel myself, when I need to get something out there and off of my heart for a moment. When I wrote *Visitation is on Sundays* and *The orange jumpsuit* (June 30, 2004, blog entry), I remember being in my office, the door locked. I had to write them. Right then. They needed out if I was ever going to get better.”

*The orange jumpsuit* (Blog entry, June 30, 2004) shows my struggle between acknowledging his being a man and my need to protect him as my little boy:

Long legs, covered with material of a too large jumpsuit, poke out from underneath the thick mahogany desk. Beside them, these legs that demand most of my attention, a beautiful lady sits poised - ready to do battle if another draws near.

His profile is that of a man - freshly shaven, soft, strong jawline, slightly twitching. Does the woman know that he does this when he is nervous? Has she noticed it during their many private meetings? Will she gaze his direction on this day, and notice that he is afraid, not of her, as he has grown accustomed to her closeness, but of the others in the room, of what they are thinking, of what they will say when he stands to confront them.

His shoulders sag slightly, but not enough to hold anyone's attention. His arms are long and lean, strong from hours of push-ups. But what pulls my eyes onward is

not the slight bulge of manly muscle, but the stark whiteness that seems to leave the orange brightness of the jumpsuit only because it is forced to do so.

Freckles. His elbows are covered with freckles. I want to scream, "Look at his elbows. Look closely. You have been deceived. He is but a boy. Please remove the shackles and allow him to return to my arms." But I will not. For he has committed the crime of a man. And so I wait - behind the beautiful, well-poised, woman - to hear the verdict.

Guilty.

Again.

Guilty.

Other posts show this struggle, as well, and can be seen in the emotive words taken from several posts and put together here as a different/same story: First, the steel door painted beige to mask its strength. My man-child and my crying heart, locked up tight in a world of grey. Silenced freckles. Alone. Dark. Desperate. Simmering. Happiness calling. Feel our life-lines. Rejoicing. Excited relatives and basketball hoops. Nod. Smile. Wait. Waiting. Talking too loudly. Fear and self-blame. A mom-child of two. I scream. Dreams of you tied to a telephone pole. A helpless child. But only in my mind. Appearances. Glancing. Hard cold lines and windowless curves that mirror the worn edges of these men. Alive. Dead. Men in corners, hands resting near their belts, not smiling. Watching. Eyes darting. Urine stained air. Mothers. Feeling the pressure against the smiles, and the weight of the steel walls. One

minute remaining. I love you son. I love you too, mom. Out loud, I say nothing else. And then, he is gone.

The struggle can also be seen in the blogger's repeated use of white on black writing. It appears stark. Powerful. "Even today it makes me feel and reminds me of the two sides of the thick pane of glass that stands between good and bad, between being okay and drowning in one's own fear as you talk through a small germ-infested, wire-filled hole to the son who is a felon, to the son who you adore, to the son that you cry for as you cry too for yourself" (Journal entry, July 15, 2011). The words of a fellow blogger sum up the struggle nicely when she posts this on my blog entry titled, *Barriers of love*:

What can I say that I haven't already said about you, your son, your writing...I love the image of the glass here because it is transparent, enables seeing, fully, yet is a barrier [sic] to touch...and I can feel the pressure through the glass, in the poetry of your sentences, for the contact of love, that he needs, that you need, that we all need, and which we must prize all the more because it can be taken, and locked behind glass. (BrendaClews, Blog response entry, July 15, 2004).

The struggle can be seen, as well, in the short blog posts that are made throughout the struggle phase. Posts such as "Damn this is hard" (Feb. 11, 2005), and "My stomach is churning. My head is spinning. I don't want to be a mom today" (Feb. 27, 2005), and on July 24, 2005, "Perhaps tomorrow, while you turn another year older in an isolated cell, I will find a way to look beyond the bars to celebrate your birth."

*The transition.* On January 24, 2011, as I prepared to re-enter the blog that I had long since set aside I wrote the following in my data analysis journal:

This is my son. He has lived in one detention home, one boys' home, one jail, two receiving centers, two penitentiaries, and one diversion center.

I am his mother. I live in two worlds. I have lived in two worlds since he was 12-years-old. I have loved him and made him invisible. I have held him close and pushed him away. I have been patted down, belittled, judged, watched, lied to, and made fun of.

He is my oldest son, my middle child; he has made me laugh and cry, love and hate, feel and be numb, and usually at the same time.

We are walking contradictions, he and I. We live in the borderlands, on the disjunctive bar, spinning out of control, neither here nor there, neither alive or dead, neither in or out. Scared. Alone. Angry. Brave. Together. Understanding. Good. Bad.

This is my son.

I am his mother.

It is obvious from these words, this reliance still on wordplay, that the struggle still rears its head from time to time as we continue to learn and grow from our experience. It is also clear from the last two lines that we have moved into a space of acceptance of this new mother/son normal and that I am committed to continuing to speaking out and to using language to regain power over my own voice and to help others on the margins to do the same.

On September 6, 2005 my son was moved from the prison system to a diversion/re-entry program. This milestone movement for him was also a milestone movement for me and can be seen in the change in tone of my posts and in their frequency. These changes mark what I termed the acceptance phase of this process and are presented below.

**Acceptance.** This section explores the movement into the acceptance phase of my blogging story. It begins several months before my son completes his time in a prison cell and continues through December 12, 2008 when my son bounding up the stairs is captured in a blog post:

"Mom?" he begins, "I just left the probation officer's office, and guess what?"

"What, son?"

"It's over," he said, barely able now to contain his excitement. "I am a free man.

100% free. No more probation visits, no more peeing in a cup once a month, and no more 30 dollars a month for probation fees. Free!"

Pinch me. I want to make sure that this isn't a dream. My son, who has had some connection to the courts since he was about 14, is totally, completely, free. And I am crying, again. Only this time, the tears are cleansing in a much better way than ever before.

Themes in the acceptance phase include: The timeline; Reporting out; and Re-entry.

***The timeline.*** Between August 29, 2005 and December 12, 2008 I made 121 blog entries. Only 24 of these entries were coded as emotive, reflective, or inspective. That is 121 posts in 1,195 days, as compared to the 193 posts in 410 days during the struggle phase.

**Reporting out.** My need for poetry, narrative, wordplay, and creative use of pictures that were so prevalent during the *struggle* phase, diminished, as well. While, at the same time, as I spoke less to those in my blogging circle, my ability, my need, my desire to speak to those in the real world about my experience of blogging through a life-crisis and turning that experience into a dissertation topic increased.

**Re-entry.** “Robert looks less like a convict and more like a daddy every day. The change in each of us over the last year is just amazing” (October 17, 2006, blog post). I used many pictures of Robert, of our family, of life lived in the months after his release. It was important for people to see him, to see us, learning to live this new normal. It was important to show that the margins are not on the margins, at all, but everywhere, in everything. This growing need to be heard outside of the blog where I first learned that I was not alone is clearly seen in an entry dated January 21, 2007:

When my son was arrested and sent to prison for 18 months for possession of marijuana and intent to distribute, I started this blog. I started it because I was afraid and alone and angry.

It wasn't that I didn't have anyone around me, I did. And it wasn't that they didn't care or that we didn't talk, we did. My family and I talked a lot, and it helped, but the raw pain that I felt, the insecurity, the fear that this was somehow my fault, that I had somehow let him down, let my family down, was something that only I knew, something I only shared on a surface level with those I loved the most.

And to those outside of my family circle, those I worked with or ordered

coffee from or saw only occasionally, those people knew nothing, or very little, of what I was feeling as a mother of a son who I rarely called into being through general conversation. Those people never knew that they were talking to a mom whose son was a convict. They never knew that they knew someone who visited a prison every weekend. They never knew.

I had an invisible son. I wanted him to be invisible in those moments of general conversation almost as much as I wanted to have him home with me, with us, in all of the other moments.

Why, though? Why do we as moms feel so responsible for the broken dreams, for the drift from the normal?

That is where I am now. I want to know why we create this invisibility, what stigmas and power structures are in play, and how we can make our voices heard so that others might not feel so very alone.

As I wrote these words in my blog, and as I wrote fewer words, fewer entries in my blog, I also spoke more outside of it. In February 2007 there was only one short blog entry: "I am turning my experience into a dissertation topic." It doesn't get much bolder and outspoken than that.

The vast difference in the number of posts, the frequency of posts, the content of posts, and the coding of posts shows clearly the separation between a time of struggle and a time of acceptance of what would become a new *Family Normal*, a *Normal* that others came to accept as such as well, a *Normal* that I learned through blogging openly through a life

crises was one *Normal* of many that this newly formed community carried. Finding two will discuss the forming of the community of which I became an active participant. This finding also responds to the first question asked of this study: “How do the blogging experiences of a woman in the midst of life crisis help us to understand the process of developing agency and voice?” As will be noted later in finding two, it also speaks to the stories second thread and my second question: “How does the act of blogging and subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior?”

**Finding 2. Blogging through my own life-crisis created a sense of community and a space for social interaction between myself and others in the margins.**

Social interaction and community building, both critical dimensions of adult learning, are themes found throughout the posts and responses in my blog. One response post made by a reader in August 2004 sums up nicely the atmosphere created through words in an open blogging space:

Sometimes writing helps me to connect more intensely with my emotions, or perhaps a better way to say this would be that I am then able to feel more freely, and with more awareness of what and why I am feeling particular ways. Sometimes blogging and releasing emotions here, especially feelings of grief or loss, helps me to process them more fully and then move on, so afterwards I feel lighter, *less tender*, if that makes sense.... I do love the community, the blossoming of friendships and kindred

spirits discovering one another, the mutual support and acceptance. THAT is priceless and a gift in itself. (Blog entry response, RainyDar, August 31, 2004)

The previous example was actually signed with the author's real world name, which is one of the first ways that increased social interaction and community building was seen in the analysis. In addition to an increased sharing of actual names in a space where pseudonyms are the accepted form of introduction and sign-off, a second way in which increased social interaction and community building was seen was through the increase in the methods of interaction, the increase in the length of posts and the depth of the content of these connections. Thirdly, increased social interaction and community building is seen in the friendships that the researcher/self continued to develop after the blog was no longer needed as a means of working through a life-crisis. Presentation of each of these findings is below.

**Real world names.** On July 4, 2004, a fellow blogger blurs the line between real and virtual by signing a blog entry response with her real world name instead of a pseudonym. Also in July, a mere 14 posts into my new blog, I use the name of a fellow Xangan in a post about clouds and flying to meet my granddaughter, speaking to her as I would a friend who is over for coffee: "Brenda, I will let you know if the topsides of the white whales are as beautiful and relaxing as the undersides" (Blog entry, July 8, 2004). I am able to do this with ease, as the two of us were quickly becoming friends, and we each often signed our blog responses to one another with our real world names.

Within two months of my first blog entry I was on a real world name basis with 12 fellow bloggers whom I had previously not known. Of these 12, five are still an active part of

my life, Luna, Brenda, Beth Anne, Ira and Doris. Three of these five are now Facebook friends with whom I converse almost daily. The other two, I reach out to occasionally just to check on them, and they do the same for me. For all 12, I know the names of their children, their ages, and many of their ups and downs. We celebrate birthdays and holidays. We virtually hold each other's hands, share intimate secrets, and lend support. When Ira was considering what to do with his writing, he sent Robert and me his draft for review. When I needed an editor for this dissertation, Beth Anne agreed to help without question. Like in any community, there are varying levels of continued interaction. Unlike most real world communities, though, I have never met any of these five people face-to-face. How then, did we create real, lasting, deep friendships? Analysis suggests it was through years of increased and deepening social interaction. The next section presents findings on this.

**Delving deeper.** Social interaction and community means creating attachments, sharing stories and fears and dreams; it means getting to know one another at a deeper level than you would an acquaintance or a surface friend. In the first few sets of responses to my blog entries there are few deep responses. Most indicate an understanding, but are short and show little to no emotional connection: "People change. Most young male criminals burn out in their late 20s/early 30s" (Blog entry response, SavonDuJour, June 27, 2004); "This must be so hard for you and your son" (Blog entry response, Daydreaming613, June 22, 2004); "You are so open and so honest here, and write so well, my heart goes out to you and your family and especially your son while I simultaneously admire your courage and your writing ability" (Blog entry response, BrendaClews, June 29, 2004).

Within a couple of weeks of my first blog entry, though, bonds were forming and emotional connections were being made. Here is a post made by BrendaClews about two weeks after the one mentioned above. In this discussion, held back and forth on our blogs, we had found yet another reason to continue developing our friendship. This time, it had nothing to do with the blog itself or our children:

Helene Cixous is probably my favourite author! I wish I could read French ...blah...I have to read her in translation. She is so inspiring! I saw her when she was in Toronto in 1999, mid-fifties, sexy, gorgeous, very French, utterly brilliant and utterly sensitive and utterly not caring about herself at all but only the other ... creating as she was speaking, not from a prepared text, though her talk was recorded and later turned into a text ... that's how it is for much of her work ... an awesome woman, genius, she's a genius I think! Have you read any of her plays, that's the latest book I now have ... just counted, I have 9 of her books ... some not fully read yet, waiting to savour them ... ahhhh ... another Helene Cixious lover! How wonderful!! (Blog entry response, BrendaClews, July 6, 2004)

One additional example of the continued development of agency and voice and of community building and social interaction occurs not in a particular blog post or response but in a series of emails that BrendaClews and I shared beginning in February of 2005. Outside of Xanga, but still only in written words, we discussed education in Africa where she was born, Tibetan Buddhism, and painting as a form of expression. Brenda, as I now know her, is an amazing artist, both on canvas and in words. I have told her so on numerous occasions, to

which, in March of 2005, she said, “You are one of my muses, honey, one of those who I write for” (email from BrendaClews, March 22, 2005).

Moving away from the developing friendship between Brenda and me, there are posts from others who came back often and who become increasingly attached to the community we were creating. This one from CHicagogirl is one example:

I just wanna hold you and let you cry..... It needs out...I cry with you!!!! I ache at the pain you are feeling. You see, I know that pain. I watched it as my cousin was put in prison for life, for defending himself from a robbery that went bad and he got caught and the home owner came after him with a weapon and my cousin used it on him murdering him.... I feel so bad for my aunt.... It's not my aunt's fault. She gave him everything he wanted. She provided his every NEED. She was a good MOM, but HE made that choice. I'm here for ya tbird. Holler if you ever wanna chat. I've been down those gray halls and I've seen it and it's so sad.....you just wanna open those bars and let em all out..... but what would they learn?? They can get away with murder? Theft? etc etc.? No. Our boys have to learn. It's tough on all concerned and they are not the only ones suffering. But he will get through this and hopefully never think about touching drugs again. I'm here for ya; just holler. (Blog entry response, CHicagogirl, August 21, 2004).

It is obvious from the length of this response, much of which was omitted to conserve space, and the use of all caps, that this is an emotion-filled response, a response from someone who was forming a connection to another person within this growing community. Longer

responses are common after the first month of community building and social interaction. The emotion in the responses, theirs and mine, and the increased length, indicate as well that voices in the margin wanted out and were finding this space and this interaction to be key in allowing voice to happen.

**Continued friendships.** When one leaves a community, some of the friendships and bonds created continue to grow and thrive. This was found to be the case for many in the researcher's blogging community, as well. This is from a journal entry dated August 5, 2011:

Today I am analyzing posts and responses from June. I have friends from the Momwriter's site [another virtual community that I have been a part of for many years] posting in Xanga now. I already felt as if I knew Angela and Carma [real last names omitted, here] from our many discussions, gift exchanges, and fund-raisers through Momwriters, but through Xanga, and now through Facebook, I know additional layers of them.

My friendships with these two women, and with others, are genuine and deep. They have grown over the past ten years. Through posts and pictures and an occasional face-to-face encounter, we have created bonds that I know with very few *real* friends.

Just as there are those in our communities that we do keep in contact with, there are also those with whom we wish we had stayed in contact with but did not. This phenomena shows in the analysis of my blog, as well. During the analysis phase of the dissertation, as I re-read the post from June 24, 2004, I made the following journal entry:

This is an informal post more than anything. What saddens me re-entering this post is that I found micah's site shut down. She posted for the first time on this blog entry about her own prison and the prison of her son who is mentally ill. She feared he would someday take his own life. I hope he did not. I realized today that I miss her. I wish I had learned her real name. (Journal Entry, August 6, 2011)

Although much of the sense of continued friendships is seen through analysis journal entries, there is evidence in the blog, as well. Examples of this can be seen in later post responses where community members who had been a part of my journey for well over two years comment on family changes. These posts include: "I love when you can share photos like this.... he's looking wonderful and omgosh [sic] she's grown so much... too fast. Much love to you and yours" (Blog entry response, awhisperofme, October 17, 2006); "I AM JUMPING UP AND DOWN!!!!!! WOOWOOHOOOWOO!!!!!! This is THE most amazing, wonderful, FANTASTIC thing EVER!!! You know what I really love about this? That Robert has really taken his life in such an amazing direction... and all his hard work has paid off big time! Robert has proven that a life path is NOT set in stone, and a life path CAN be turned in whole new and amazing directions. **No one deserves this more than Robert and Destiny** [Bold in original response]. You better hug that guy for me - give him a super big squeeze, please!!" (Blog entry response to the news that my son had been granted full custody of his daughter, Breezybelle, July 26, 2007); and, after I had been away from this community for about a month and returned with an update on my son and his daughter, "Bout time, woman! I have been in serious Rob-and-Destiny withdrawal! They look so good together." Followed

by, “You're all in my prayers, every day, every night. Keep us updated, please? That child is just too gorgeous - takes after her daddy, doncha know” (Blog entry response, GracieBC, May 6, 2007).

This section is placed with the other sections that are used specifically in response to the first question asked of this study. However, it responds to the second question, as well: “How does the act of blogging and subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior?” Community, like Family, is a societal meta-narrative constructed of those ideas that have been deemed good and right under its umbrella. Community can be a literal thing, a geographical space that one can enter into. Community can be something built through shared common characteristics such as religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or occupation. Two of the benefits of belonging to a community are that trust is inherent and non-members are not allowed access. As the creator of the blog, I sat alone at a computer screen; I typed and cried alone. I never came face-to-face with another blogger from my site. And yet, as the above section demonstrates, the virtual space, a space with no geographical boundaries, no trusted faces, no hands to reach out to touch in time of need, and no defining characteristics of members, is indeed a community where trust and love and connection is evident and authentic relationships were cultivated.

The calling into question of the meta-narrative, community, leads nicely into the third and final primary finding of this study. Finding three, to which we now turn, weaves throughout its lines an answer to the first question asked of this study. However, it most

substantially addresses the second question asked of this study: “How does the act of blogging and subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior?”

**Finding 3. Journaling in this open networking space allowed for informal questioning of and informal or incidental learning about the self and the dominant culture.**

As noted in the finding above, encouraging social interaction and building community are both critical dimensions of adult learning and are present in the researcher’s blog. This finding builds on that premise, adding that encouraging online engagement is a critical dimension of adult learning, as well. All three dimensions can be seen throughout the researcher’s blog, which highlights every day, informal learning among its’ posters and readers. It is to this learning aspect that we now turn.

**Learning Awareness.** Bloggers were aware of their learning and note that this blog has been influential in their deeper understanding about societal and cultural issues such as loss of voice and prisons both actual and metaphorical. On July 6, 2004, one reader thanks me for my blog entries and tells me that my posts are helping her to better understand others. On January 21, 2007 another long-time reader thanks me, as well, this time for leading her to question more about her own imprisoned son: “I worry about my son a lot [sic]. Most don’t know. Only those closest. Shields [sic] up. Your voice has helped me so much... Thank you” (Blog entry response, jaz, January 21, 2007). And on July 7, 2004, there are multiple responses to a post about Sunday visitations. Two of them speak clearly to the questioning of societal meta-narratives such as Family and Western Law and to the learning that is taking

place within the forming community:

“You’re writing with emotions and taking people on a journey they need to see but probably have not” (Blog entry response, thenarrator).

“Keep writing, saying this, it's important, and powerfully says what the undercurrents of love are that are always flowing beneath situations like these, and there are metaphors for all of us, for aren't we all incarcerated in one way or another, something echoing with everyone's experience, not just the grip of loss, pain, tragedy, the judicial system, its pettinesses, its lack of respect for the individual, but all the times we are treated as less than ... only it's more so here, so much more we can more clearly see ... hugs to you!” (Blog entry response, BrendaClews).

Here are other examples taken from various other blog post responses:

“[You] sucked me into your story immediately.... I appreciated seeing a new perspective of the incarceration issue” (Blog entry response, July 15, 2004, turabiangirl).

“When I read the first few lines of your post, I burst into tears, feeling how deeply I am missing my own children, and had a good cry, and want to thank you for writing in such a way to allow me to feel my own experience even while I am feeling yours, and your son's through your writing” (Blog entry response, BrendaClews, July 23, 2004).

“I have so many questions, but I'll let you unfold the answers as you feel like it through your blog” (Blog entry response, anonymous, July 25, 2004).

“Thank you for keeping us in understanding of this nightmare, here in the nation with the highest percentage of people incarcerated of any nation in the earth's history- save Nazi Germany” (Blog entry response, lunaaleen, September 2, 2004).

“You are educating me. Whenever I get my mind set, someone or something comes along to shake it up” (Blog entry response, anonymous, July 27, 2004).

The final example may be the most poignant for me, as it speaks to exactly what I had hoped to accomplish with my blog, and that is to help others to learn as I learned, and to shake things up in ways that promote critical thinking about the culture that surrounds and shapes us every minute of every day. It is to my own learning experience that I now turn.

**My own learning.** My blog entries indicate two different types of learning that I was experiencing while blogging through a life crisis. First, I learned much about the judicial system. Second, I learned of the importance, for me and for those who responded to me, of speaking out so that others could begin doing the same. This dissertation begins with a prelude. In it, I am standing in line to see my son. I look around, my eyes meet other eyes, and I realize that what I have learned previously about those who end up in prison, about those who are forced to spend time with loved ones behind prison walls, is simply one possibility of many possibilities that exist. There is no *Normal* convict. No *Normal* prison. No *Normal* mother. I use my blog, then, as a place to educate those willing to listen about what one middle-class, middle-aged, White, mother of a convicted felon experienced behind the gray walls and within her own head as she maneuvered this new realm.

*The judicial system.* Lesson one: You can legally be convicted of failure to appear even if you are locked up and those within the system refuse to transport you to the hearing (Blog entry, March 15, 2005), and a hearing is not the only time you may be forgotten; they may forget to transport you to the diversion program as promised, too (June 20, 2005).

Lesson two: A release date does not necessarily mean release. It can mean that you will go into a diversion program to serve part of your parole time (April 18, 2005), but a homeless, drug-addicted mother with a history of abusing the child can live in a homeless shelter with a tiny baby even if there are family members willing to take her (May 3, 2005). This lesson in judicial systems 101 leads to more learning, as one will not be told what diversion is but must learn through outside research. It turns out, prison diversion is kind of a step down program to freedom, a program in which a limited number of adult defendants who are charged with non-violent criminal behavior are moved to a closely monitored environment for an additional 5 months. (June 8, 2005).

Lesson three: In many prisons, inmates only see drywall where you see windows. It seems the windows on the outside are typically only for show (August 8, 2005), and the inmates are only given two meals on the weekends. In preparation for when this happens, those who have money in their accounts order ingredients to make a community “swoll” (July 24, 2004). Those who do not have anyone to give them money can find creative ways to earn a share of this creation (and other food) from fellow inmates.

Poker games are common (May 29, 2005), as are drawing on envelopes and paper for other inmates who have folks to write to on the outside (letters home, 2004 and 2005), and making items such as chess pieces out of soap and alcohol out of Nyquil (September 4, 2004).

During the time that I blogged through my son's incarceration I learned that prison is not a place where inmates are given the freedom to lounge around and watch TV all day, to take classes and work out at will, to spend taxpayer's hard earned money to live well while they do without. In addition to those things that I noted above, I learned that many times these men and women spend 23 hours a day in a cell, that lock-down due to one inmate's rowdy behavior means no calls home for anyone, no leaving one's cell to shower, flushing a toilet only once per day. I learned that inmates who have no one to provide for them must freeze in cold rooms until heat is started, and that once heat is started rooms can get over 100 degrees because they are so small and the heat pipe runs right through the middle of the room (Blog posts 2004-2005; Letters home, 2004-2005).

As I learned, so did others. We had many conversations within the response areas of my posts. Some were hurtful, and some were helpful. The judicial system was not the only learning that bonded us, though. We bonded over children, and life crisis, and life. Emotional learning was as important as learning about the particulars of the system. It is to this that I now turn.

*The importance of speaking out.* It was the day after Christmas, visiting day. The lines were long, and visitation ended at 3:00:

I got to hug my son, to tell him how much I love him, how much I miss him. I got to touch his face, laugh with him as he devoured various sweets and a Dr. Pepper, and kiss his freckled cheek before heading home.

But, in real life, not every story can have a happy ending. In real life, others

were not as fortunate. While taking off my shoes, walking through the metal detector, being patted down by a female guard, I tried not to listen as they begged for a few short minutes, begged to see a son, a brother, a husband, a dad. One hug. One touch. "It's Christmas, a mother cried. "Please?"

"Door one," someone yelled. The sound of the heavy iron door became the only sound in the room. Klaaaank. And then we were in. I wiped a tear and headed for an empty circle of chairs to await the arrival of my son. (Blog entry, December 26, 2004)

In addition to teaching and learning about the judicial system itself, my posts show others the other side of the emotion involved in mothering a son in the margins. There are posts about blaming oneself for a child's imprisonment (August 10, 2004), about the pain of watching a child led away in chains (June 30, 2004), about the experience of being frisked and of watching a grandmother or child being frisked, and of the heavy, solid, steel bars clanking shut behind you as you enter a visitation area (July 7, 2004; May 10, 2005). There are stories of the fear in a mother's heart as she mothers her other children, fear of not doing it right, of not shielding them enough from her own suffering, of shielding them too much, of not being strong enough or having enough left over to give (August 2, 2004; August 11, 2004; October 1, 2004; March 10, 2005), and stories of the death of a son's other parent, which you have to tell him about behind prison walls a week after it has happened and then leave him, alone, to deal with the news (February 11, 2005). Pain. Feeling. Connections. Love. Fear. Hope. Tears. A tender heart left behind after a difficult writing session (August 31, 2004), and walking into freedom as your son cries silently behind you for the daughter he just met (October 11,

2004). Stories of cold glass separating human connection, severing the bond between a mother and her flesh and blood, her son:

Burned into my mind's eye is your hand - only your hand.

Perhaps it is because

mentally

I am drained,

and afraid.

I am afraid of what I will feel, of what I won't be able to handle, if I allow my mind to be flooded with more -

flooded with the lips of my man-child that mouth, "I love you" just before being led away -

flooded with the feel of the cold, thick glass that keeps the warmth of your palm away from mine -

flooded with the sight of the small metal-filled hole that has been built to carry our words to-and-fro.

Too many sensations to be taken in together, and so I must absorb them one at a time.

Today, as it was yesterday and the day before, it will be your hand - only your hand -

tightly pressed against the glass

your palm - straining to feel the warmth of mine

your fingers - outstretched, as if the pressure has caused them to separate

and the mist - left behind from the warm sweat of your wanting to feel love

through the glass. (Blog entry, July 15, 2004).

The blog post and the blog post responses on July 27, 2004 show much about my own learning process and the ways in which others responded to it and to their own learning experiences gained through community building in the Xanga blogging site. First the initial post (Blog entry, July 27, 2004):

At first, I was afraid to share my soul with strangers.

At first, I felt alone in a world of parents with "good" and "normal" children.

At first, I didn't know how many stories needed to come forth, needed to be shared, so that I might touch the heart of another.

At first.

But not anymore.

Sharing with all of you has been a joy and a comfort. Your words of encouragement and support have pushed me to explore places within myself that have been hiding for far too long.

So today, I thank you, all of you, but especially the following:

Brenda, who was one of the first Xangans to welcome me (and whose own writing inspires me),

Lionne, who I read first in the morning, as she is good at getting my blood pumping and creative juices flowing,

The Narrator, whose stories show the other side of the bars (and sometimes the same side from a different angle),

Micah, who knows my pain in a way that most will never know it (and I thank the gods and goddesses that they won't),

Neurotic Mom, whose blogs often make me laugh (and who has so many children she should live in a shoe, lol),

Lisa, who fights her own demons while helping me fight mine. Without her help, I would be far less capable of withstanding the pain,

and the others who visit regularly (and who deserve a blog forward, as well, though I must get back to the world outside the computer).....

Thank you.

And then, some of the blogger responses to the initial post:

“Wow. Thank you. The best thing about this (in addition to making sure I write every day) is that I hear a world of different voices. That makes me a better writer. Much more importantly, it makes me a better human” (thenarrator).

“You are educating me. Whenever I get my mind set, someone or something comes along to shake it up” (anonymous).

“Tammy, your blogs are very important to me... when I read them I feel I am entrusted with a sacred trust” (BrendaClews).

“I live in the world of "good" and "normal" children, but come from a world much different. What I see in comparing the two is that they are really not that different.... I appreciate the way you share your heart” (anonymous).

On August 5, 2004, a reader says, “Thank you for making this boil down to each life involved. We tend to forget that” (swawg). Sometimes learning is really re-learning what life has made us forget.

Sometimes, too, learning is happening because of something that you said or did, and you do not even know it. On August 8, 2004, I linked out to a fellow blogger who was struggling. I invited others to “wander over and lend support.” This blogger has a son who “lives inside a schizophrenic mind” and who, “believes that the only way to be released from his living hell is to kill himself” (Blogger post, lunaailen, August, 7, 2004). From her I learned a side of schizophrenia that I would have otherwise never known. Others learned, as well, including micha, another mother of a schizophrenic son who had been a long time reader of my site. I had no idea that my link out would create a new learning experience for these women and for myself. I learned so much about existential psychiatrists and alternate treatments for this disease from their conversations and their subsequent posts, and I gained strength and ideas from their strength and resourcefulness when trying to help their sons. For example, when trying to get one son to take his meds, the mom bribes him with cigarettes. Some are against this method, but her reasoning is clear (and makes sense to this mom, anyway). Her son loves to smoke. It is a simple pleasure that is less harmful in this reality than not taking the meds. If I learned nothing more from blogging through a life-altering crisis, it is that it is all relative.

### **Findings Summary**

The findings section of my dissertation was written with the autoethnographic idea of story in mind. However, it is also important to ensure that this study was conducted in a way that provides answers to the research questions; therefore, next, I will provide a summary of how the findings specifically address each of the research questions.

First, research question number one: “How do the blogging experiences of a woman in the midst of a life crisis help us to understand the process of developing agency and voice?” This question is answered in findings one and two.

The first finding focuses specifically on my own struggle with my son’s incarceration. It shows the time spent struggling with my own sense of identity as a mother and my path to accepting and learning to mother differently. I use my posts almost exclusively in this finding, as it is my journey to agency and voice that is prominent and my own use of blogging through the life crises that is highlighted.

The second finding, as noted in the previous section, responds to both questions. Here I will focus only on how it responds to question number one. Finding two deals with the idea of community and how a strong community can help its members through a crisis by providing support and sharing stories of likeness. The closer I felt to the other community members, the more comfortable I became in my own new skin, and the more we spoke, the stronger our voices became.

Second, research question number two: “How does the act of blogging through a life crisis and the subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which

meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior?” This question is answered in findings two and three.

Finding two deals with how a community came to be in a space where no real beings exist. Hence, it calls into question the Community metanarrative and the individual/group dichotomy housed within that metanarrative. Community is a group of physical beings coming together in a like-minded space. It develops through contact. We have particular views of how human beings maneuver in a space of Community. This finding calls this into question, and asks the reader to validate this particular metanarrative or, when unable to do so based on the new players in the Community game, to question it.

Finding three deals with the learning that is taking place in this informal space and how an informal space such as this one in the virtual corner of the blogosphere encroaches on the formal learning spaces that live in the *Real* world and, thus, blurring the line between formal/informal in a way that again forces the reader to validate what he or she knows about Learning or to begin to poke holes in it and to rearrange the human and non-human players that reside in what we see as appropriate learning spaces.

### **Chapter Summary**

Breaking my own silence led others to do the same in the blogosphere. Our mingling voices telling our *petit récits* (Lyotard, 1979) or little truths strengthened our group and, as we discovered more and more that we were not alone, a community developed. We were no longer focused on how we were the *Other* that societal rule indicated that we were, but on

how our virtual relationships were altering our own identities and the identities of some around us in ways that helped us to learn and create a deeper understanding about societal and cultural issues. In writing the blog I joined others in blurring the lines between, among other binaries, journaling and speaking, real and virtual, knowing someone and never meeting them, voice and silence, good and bad. This blurring and the ability to find voice and agency in the midst of a life-crisis that it created will be discussed next in chapter five.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Autoethnography “lets you use yourself to get to culture” (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). The primary purpose of this autoethnographic study was to increase understanding of the ways in which today’s social networking technologies, or participation technologies as they are coined by Jones and Conceição (2008), blogging in particular, allow for agency and voice of those in the midst of life crises. The secondary purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior and identity as they relate to dominant cultural power. This study sought to answer two research questions:

1. How do the blogging experiences of a woman in the midst of a life crisis help us to understand the process of developing agency and voice?
2. How does the act of blogging through a life crisis and the subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior?

This chapter contains four sections and a chapter summary. The first section provides a brief summary of the study. The second section discusses the conclusions derived from the findings based on data analysis and relates them to the literature. The third section provides implications for theory and practice. The fourth section offers recommendations for further study.

### **Summary of Study**

A qualitative study was employed using a situational analytic autoethnographic approach. No interviews were conducted. Instead, the researcher's blog kept over the 18-month period of her son's incarceration and subsequent journal entries made seven years later while analyzing the blog were used as the primary sources of data.

I first used informal open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) strategies to begin making sense of my data. To do so I read through each post and the comments made to the posts, noting in my journal, which doubled as my codebook, what each post was about and what was being referenced. I labeled posts with categorical terms. During this phase, I also journaled my reactions, thoughts and feelings. Harrison et al. (2001) note the importance of clearly presenting one's own influences in both research and representations when analyzing research findings; hence, I also noted in my journal what I believed were key points in my own decision making process. Next, going back through my notes, grouping noted categories and codes, and rereading particular blog entries, I created themes and theme maps that combined words, pictures, and juxtaposition under a particular theme. Finally, I returned to journaling to note my reactions to these maps. Going back and eliminating themes that did not relate to my research questions resulted in the discovery of three dominant themes: Struggle and acceptance, a reliance on poetry, narrative, wordplay and how these helped to create a sense of community, and the creative use of pictures, and the learning process used by the blogger and other members of the blogging community. These themes led to the key findings discussed in chapter four.

Three key findings were noted in chapter four. Staying true to the postmodern frame that surrounds this study, I found no sensible way to separate the findings by research question; instead, each finding weaves analysis of developing agency and voice in a participation technology space with the calling forth of ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior. The first finding presented describes a strong delineation between my struggle with this new form of mothering and the new normal that was created after much negotiation about and with the *Family* meta-narrative discussed in chapter one. The second finding focuses on communal relationships created outside of the normal face-to-face realm that is part of the *Community* meta-narrative and how these borderland communities work to create strong, lasting, relationships. The third and final finding presented explores learning outside of the traditional *Learning* meta-narrative and focuses not only on my own learning experience as I created my own agency and learned to raise my own voice but the learning experiences of others who consistently engaged in our community's unfolding stories, as well. The conclusions derived from these findings are presented in the following section.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

Three major conclusions were derived from the findings. First, the act of blogging blurred the lines between many binaries imposed by society and, in doing so, allowed previously silenced voices to be heard and shifting identities to be created. Second, communal relationships formed virtually not only carry with them much of the same sense of connection and support as those created in face-to-face environments, they also present a

space where the previously unsaid can be heard, discussed, and acknowledged. Third, active and engaged participation in the blogging community is influential in creating a deeper understanding of societal and cultural issues. Each of these conclusions will be discussed in turn.

**Blurring the lines.** The act of blogging blurred the lines between many binaries imposed by society and, in doing so, allowed previously silenced voices to be heard and shifting identities to be created. These blurred lines are not associated with only one finding, though I should point out that it is the first finding that deals with an overt binary: struggle/acceptance. Here, I indicate immediately that there was a delineation between the struggle that I had while coming to terms with not being the Mother that I thought I was and with having to negotiate a new space of being and the acceptance that I obtained once my voice was validated and I felt free once again to speak my son into being. This does not mean that the lines were not blurred; quite the opposite. There was never a doubt in my own mind that my son was still my son, that I would learn to master this new role. There was also much struggle in the acceptance phase of my journey, just as there continues to be today, eight years later. I cannot separate the two, nor did a line form between them in my findings. Using the verbiage that I have is the only way to make clear that which must be called into question, and so I put the binary on the page: struggle/acceptance. I follow the words with other words of the master's meta-language house, a house I am not able to move outside of, as it is all we have in this moment. To better describe this metaphor I point to Audre Lourde's (1984) discussion on dismantling the master's house with the master's tools, a

discussion within which she indicates that though we may not be able to dismantle, we very well may be able to call attention to the need of the masters to keep us occupied with trying to fit into a universal mold so that we have no time to question the validity of that within. In finding one then, it is not about whether I sit in the acceptance box or the struggle box; it is all about calling to light where I sat on the continuum in various moments as I moved through the process of blogging through a life-crisis and how the blurring of acceptance and struggle helped me to find voice and agency.

All of the Xanga posts made during my son's incarceration allowed me to release some of the raw emotion that was eating away at me, taunting me internally. As can be seen in the findings, I blogged through questions including, but not limited to: "How could this happen? How could I have raised a son to be a felon? What did I do wrong? What will everyone think? How will I explain his absence? Will I ever be able to talk to others about their own children without fearing that they will bring up my own?"

([www.xanga.com/tammybird](http://www.xanga.com/tammybird)). Much like the wheelchair-bound paraplegics housed in the Bronx Affairs Medical Center who captured the world's attention in the 1990's (Kleinfield, 1995) because of their use of virtual reality, when I immersed myself into my own virtual world I was able to escape my confinement (ironically, by putting forth bits of writing about the confinement of both myself and my son) for a fleeting hour or two. The posts, and the responses to the posts, and the responses to the responses of the posts, though created by computer users scattered across the internet, did something else, too. They gave me a feeling

of *thereness*, a feeling of *place*. Dery (1994) discusses a similar phenomenon as it relates to virtual discussion boards and the act of flaming:

Those who spend an inordinate amount of time connected to modem via telephone lines to virtual spaces often report a peculiar sensation of “thereness”; ...eavesdropping on discussions in progress bears an uncanny resemblance to wandering the hallways of some labyrinthine mansion, poking one’s head into room after room.... I’m staring at a computer screen. But the feeling really is that I’m ‘in’ something; I’m some ‘where’. (p. 565)

When I hit that button for the first time, I began creating a source of social science data, a “document of life” (Plummer, 2001), a learning tool for those interested in altered positions in society. As McLuhan discusses in his text *Understanding media: The extensions of man* (1995), I was now involved in these lives, and they were now involved in mine, thanks to this particular form of electronic media.

Many articles in which human and non-human interactions in cyberspace are explored treat the interactions within spaces such as a blog as separate from those interactions based in the face-to-face world. Some do so to show that cyber-communities expand the ways in which individuals connect to enhance solidarity (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Diani, 2000; Doheny-Farina, 1996), and some do so to dispute that very claim (Burghart, 1996; Gamson, 1996; Stoecker, 2002). In my own analysis, I took neither stance to be completely accurate or inaccurate, and what I discovered as I combed through the data, and what can be seen throughout each of chapter four’s three major findings is that human

and non-human intertwined rhizomatically within this relatively new space of being. I use the rhizome metaphor here, as I found that the blogosphere within which my own blogging community took shape, fit the criteria of a rhizome put forth by Deluze and Guattari (1987) who are referenced here and examined more closely in the literature review: (a) there must be connectivity of any/all point/s to any other point (think, for example, of the WWW in general, about how the real world must connect to it to bring it into being and yet the real world cannot control its offshoots and variations as it continuously morphs and changes); (b) heterogeneity and de-centering are key (One can enter from a multiplicity of points. There are no central spaces from which one branches off. Getting lost in the shoots and tubes is part of the draw to the space); (c) variation, expansion, and offshoots (multiplicities) are stressed rather than reproduction or tracing; (d) the movements of deterritorialization and the process of reterritorialization are always caught up in one another; (e) not amenable to structural models that use binary logic; and (f) must be continually modifiable with multiple entrances and exits, always experimenting, mapping, in contact with the said real.

Showing the interconnectivity of face-to-face and virtual spaces is not the only way in which a rhizomatic deconstructing of my blogging space is beneficial. As shown in finding one in chapter four, living in the borderlands can be silencing, stifling, even deadly. Allowing (or even forcing) ourselves and others to see the rhizomatic nature of what is happening beneath the surface of the binary oppositions that hold the borderlands that were discussed in the literature review (Anzaldúa, 1999) in place can give us voice where there was only silence, free us from that which stifled, give us life where the only choice was death (Abbott,

2006; Anzaldúa, 1999; Haraway, 1991; 2003; Lather & Smithies, 1997). When I uttered my first words on Xanga.com I did so as a mother who was afraid to talk about her son, as a woman who felt as if she didn't deserve the label *Mother*. What I learned from sharing instead of hiding, and what I learned through the process of analyzing the data that is my blog, is that nothing stands alone. Everything touches everything else, and those of us that live on the border, and there are many, many, many of us, live in multiple worlds and have multiple variations of the term mother, and that our little 't' truths are all there is in a world that tries to create a big 'T' truth to keep us in line. From the borders, we must decide whether to remain silent or to spin that disjunctive bar as hard as we can, to spin it so fast and so hard that binaries begin to crack and reveal the rhizomatic nature of everything around us.

It is ironic (or not) that I chose the Internet, the virtual, as my tool for educating myself and others as I worked through the pain of mothering an incarcerated son, as this too created a seemingly very "unnatural boundary," (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 25) between real and virtual, public and private, human and machine that fits nicely into Haraway's (1991) notion of the *Cyborg*, "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (p. 163). The cyborg is important precisely because of the tension it creates by showing incompatible things as things that are each within the other, within that which they say they are not. The intersecting and meshing of prescriptive categories and binary logic, such as, but not limited to, the meeting of human and non human, body and technology, and presence and absence, is where my own findings reside.

Like Haraway's (1991) cyborg, I advocate for noise and contamination and the uprising of the wholesomeness of un-penetrated binaries. Playing in the borderlands between the organic and the technological is the same for me as Haraway's (1991) creation of the cyborg is for her. She likens it to the salamander who suffers great loss and injury but then re-groups, regenerates, and re-grows that which has been lost but does so in a way that does not duplicate what was already there but as something new and *Other* than, something at once "monstrous" and "potent" (p. 181). The idea of the cyborg shows us that we cannot cross from one side of a borderland to the other unaltered. We mark and alter constantly as we are marked and altered. This is quite evident in my data that maps one blogger's move from struggling in a space of invisibility where posts such as "Damn this is hard" (Blog entry, Feb. 11, 2005), and "My stomach is churning. My head is spinning. I do not want to be a mom today" (Blog entry, Feb. 27, 2005), to a space of acceptance of the new role of mother where the upper case meta-narrative *Mother* no longer wields power, where I openly proclaim in both the virtual world and the face-to-face world that we are the culture, the open wounds, the unification of what we were, what we are, and what we are becoming (Spurgeon, 2009), that my son is still my son, and that I am still a mother, his mother. My role as big 'T' *Mother* was created by what Foucault (1979) calls disciplinary power. This was discussed at length in the literature review. Here, I will only reiterate that disciplinary power rules in effect by structuring the parameters and limits of thought and practice by sanctioning and prescribing that which can be normal and/or deviant in a space such as *Family* or *Mother*.

My identity as a mother was called into question as soon as I picked up the receiver on that dreadful day in 2004. The second before the ringing of the phone, I resided squarely in the normal space of *Mother*. I was not THEM. I was not the them that had a son that went to prison. No. I was white. I was upper-middle class. I was educated. I was involved in the lives of my children. And then the phone rang, and my son said, “Mom, it’s Robert. I am in jail.” I had not knowingly met anyone who had a son in jail. This did not happen in my safe, White, middle-class world, not because there weren’t any mothers grieving silently for the loss of a son or for the loss of a self, and not because I had not met them, but because they had not been created through language by them. The five months my invisible son and my “not I” spent alone in the borderlands of society (Anzaldúa, 1999) waiting for the day he would go in front of the judge made me bitter and sad and angry. I had to watch what I said to my son, as I felt it was my job to keep his spirits up as best I could, to give him some semblance of normalcy in his dark and dirty world. I had to watch what I said to my family, because they needed to see me as strong and the situation as one that we could all get through together. I had to watch what I said to friends and acquaintances when I went out, because I didn’t want to become involved in conversations about the accomplishments of our children. My son sat alone in silence in a cell on the inside, and I sat alone in silence in a cell on the outside.

This non-language is the language of the borderland (Anzaldúa, 1999). My silence was created through the language of the dominant discourse that gave me no space for voice. The language of the dominant discourse that excluded and repressed me, though, was/is full

of gaps, slippages, tubules that touch and extend and wrap around all that they try to deny, and accidental activists like me (Gingrich, 1996; Panitch, 2008; Vericat, 2010) are able to use the same language differently to begin to drive change.

Work that addresses the gaps, slippages, and tubules of language is of the utmost importance for my topic, as they point to the idea that there is no good/evil binary, but rather only relationships that are both beneficial and harmful to us depending on where we stand on the continuum of the constructed spaces (see Alvermann, 2000; Davies, 2000; Deleuze & Guattari, 1972; and Derrida, 1970). Our job as feminist analytic autoethnographers, then, is to expose those discourses that hold the good/evil binaries in place, to poke holes in them and (de)construct them differently. Language can think differently. Language, according to Cixous (in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997), can help us to become more human, to become “more capable of reading the world, more capable of playing it in all ways. This does not mean nicer or more humanistic, I would say: more faithful to what we are made from and to what we can create” (p. 30).

As Willmott (2002) suggests, the silences created by both the human and non-human players in this in-between space where sociohistorical context, public discourse, and popular sentiment meet are complex strategies of power. As Zerubavel (2002) tells us, if we have any chance of empowering those who are silenced, the silences must account for themselves. This accountability begins by exploring the idea of *Othering* those who we do not want to be in an attempt to define self.

Lawrence Cahoon (1996) explains it thus:

What appear to be cultural units—human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organizations—are maintained in their apparent unity only through an active process of exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization. Other phenomena or units must be represented as foreign or 'other' through representing a hierarchical dualism in which the unit is 'privileged' or favored, and the other is devalued in some way. (p. 11)

Exploration of this Othering in adult education arenas has been used to understand the processes by which societies and groups exclude those that they want to subordinate (de Beauvoir, 1949; Fausto-Sterling, 2000) or who do not fit into their society, including those such as the approximately seven million total estimated men and women who are housed in U. S. correctional facilities (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 2005), and those who love and care for them. However, though much has been written on populations such as these as a silenced whole, very little exploration has been done specifically on the ways in which mothers of incarcerated sons, mothers who were told and who believe that they were responsible for raising these children and ensuring that they become productive members of society, construct a presentation of self within this marginalized space once they become aware of their own positionalities vis-à-vis a life altering event and how this presentation transfers to the society at large.

***Other knowledge.*** Blurring the lines, for the purposes of this study, has much to do with positionality of self and with being forced into a space of invisibility and silence in order to learn to speak. Anzaldúa (1999), Haraway (1991), Riverbend (2003), Spurgeon

(2009) and others like them are potently regenerative border crossers whose transgressions and myth challenging language enable survival for themselves and for those of us also grappling with the realities of our own existence. Next, let us look more closely at those of us who reside in the borderlands and what we have to offer a study on the process of creating agency and voice. There is an article on insider research with family members who have a member living with rare cancer. In it, the author, Foster (2009), discusses what it is to be an insider; what it is to be an outsider; what it is like to live on the borderlands and have insider/outsider status. Foster's (2009) article is relevant to my own research in two very distinct ways: first, the author readily and without apology puts forth herself as both the researcher and the researched, as both an insider and an outsider, in her exploration of family members facing a diagnosis of cancer and the knowledge gained through this process and, second, she uses three realms to illustrate her thinking about insider/outsider positionalities that are also important to my own exploration. These realms are (a) Trustworthiness, and issues of rigor, (b) Methodological, to include how one obtains and uses data, and (c) ethical, or one's fitness to undertake the research. While I discussed issues of trustworthiness, rigor, and method as they relate to my own research in much more depth in chapter three, it is interesting to pause here to look more closely at the third, ethical, realm. I am a human data set of one. I occupy both an insider and an outsider position in my proposed research. I am Same. And I am Other. However, I am not alone in this journey. I am recall through the exploration of the historical words of myself and others who come together briefly through language, through merging discourses, to share a moment in time. Ethically, I must negotiate

my own insider/outsider status in relation to the others present. “Who defines what insider is and how it relates to the other? Is there a most important other? Are there degrees of otherness” (Foster, 2009)? Bauman (1999) does a good job of addressing questions such as these, as do others who expand/add to his thoughts (Ballif et al., 2000; Hall, 1996; Landry & MacLean, 1996; Worsham, 1998).

As adult educators, we must continually seek to accomplish *un-othering*, unlearning our privileges, and embracing *Other Knowledge*. For my study, *interstanding* was the place to start. In order to *un-other*, and to help those around us to *un-other*, we must experience the connections that are already there between the worlds that have been artificially separated through the use of dichotomies such as me/you, self/other, good/bad, and right/wrong. To learn, to unlearn, and to educate others to do the same, we must explore situations of *Othering*, situations in which someone and or something has been placed in the position of other than and less than, and we must explore, acknowledge, and wallow with all of the pieces that are at play in creating the situation in question. Based on my findings, I assert that the blog under study, and the human and non-human players within it, attacked such an exploration with vengeance and showed one way in which steps may be taken to un-other those who reside in the borderland of western society’s meta-narratives. From silence to voice. From fear to agency. For one mother of one incarcerated son this shift in identity and agency owes much to the community that surrounded her and helped her to create a space of communication within which to grow and become. The aforementioned community is shown throughout the three major findings in chapter four; however, it is highlighted and called

forth most extensively in finding two, which reads thusly: “Blogging through my own life-crisis created a sense of community and a space for social interaction between self and others in the margins.” In the next section I will discuss the conclusions drawn from thinking through this finding and the literature review.

**Communal relationships.** Communal relationships formed virtually not only carry with them much of the same sense of connection and support as those created in face-to-face environments, they also present a space where the previously unsaid can be heard, discussed, and acknowledged. As noted by many throughout this postmodern, post-structuralist, post-feminist study, language creates (Davis, 2000; Foucault, 1972; Irigaray, 1985); Lather & Smithies (1997); Lyotard, 1979). Language used differently can open up spaces of discourse that shift power points (Foucault, 1979), which create shifts in identity, as seen in the previous section. Language used differently can also open up spaces of discourse that shift communal power points. My finding two points to this shift in the virtual blogging space. In my introductory chapter, I wrote the following words: *Words in a safe space, I felt, would allow me to express my pain and anger and love and fear where no one really knew me, where I could sit alone and cry and work through intense moments of pain without anyone that I cared about noticing that there was anything amiss in my world.* Without consciously realizing it at the time of the utterance, I revealed several things about the world that is most often thought of as the real world: I no longer felt safe, I feared sharing my jumbled emotions with those I cared about, and it was important to me to hold up the façade of *Normalcy*. My findings show that learning that I was not alone eased my fears and allowed me to not only

discuss my shifting identity and the shifting identity of my son within the virtual world but in the face-to-face one, as well. This blurring of the virtual and real was first noted under finding one in the re-entry section.

Finding two focused on additional boundary blurring between real and virtual spaces, especially in respect to how this virtual, live, interactive journaling through a life-crisis created a space for social interaction and community building. As touched upon in the literature review and further discussed under conclusion one, there are those who claim either: (a) interactions in virtual spaces can be separated from interactions in face-to-face spaces and cyber communities expand the ways individuals connect, or (b) interactions in virtual spaces can be separated from interactions in face-to-face spaces and cyber communities do not expand the ways individuals connect. In chapter one and throughout this study that I explore a theoretical frame that stresses that nothing is separate, that everything touches and changes everything else (see specifically discussion on rhizomes (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), abandonment of a privileged reference (Sarup, 1993), and discourse as a reader's performance (Ellsworth, 2005; Sandlin, 2005; 2007). My findings indicate this to be the case, as well, and support those such as Brunsting and Postmes (2002) who show that cyber communities do indeed expand the ways in which individuals connect to enhance solidarity. As for the first part of the claim of each of these groups, my findings also point to an interconnectedness of virtual and face-to-face that I do not see as separate at all.

**Active and engaged participation.** Active and engaged participation in the blogging community is influential in creating a deeper understanding of societal and cultural issues. As

I wrote and moved about in the blogging realm I learned to mother differently; I learned to be differently; and I gained a sense of agency. Dealing with the demoralizing and debilitating effects of marginalization in a wide open public sphere invited conversation that was immediate and raw. And I learned to welcome it.

Lindeman (1926) discussed this in his text, *The meaning of adult education*: “The approach to adult education will be via the route of situations, not subjects,” he wrote, “because the resource of highest value is the learner’s experience” (p. 6). Clarke (2005), whom I used extensively in my methods section, has written a text on analyzing situations. Everyone in every situation is learning in relation to all of the human and non-human players found in that situation. And everyone has much to learn from every situation, whether it be housed in a formal learning environment, a non-formal learning environment, or an informal environment, regardless of the players or the centrality of each within the situation.

Learning has been defined in many different ways throughout the history of education. For the purposes of the response to this question, though, I will use the following from Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury (1997): Broadly put, “Learning may be defined as changes in knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes brought about by experience and reflection upon that experience. The experience may be structured as in courses and learning packages, or it may be unstructured as in browsing or casual learning from peers” (p.21). According to many in the adult education field, learning takes place in one of three ways, within formal education settings, within non-formal education settings, or informally. Because I am especially interested in the latter, informal learning in general and as it applies to the

blogosphere in particular, and because informal learning is the one that appears to house all that is not “True Education,” it is important to touch on each of these briefly before I continue my response. I will use the words of Coombs and Ahmed (1974) to define each. First, formal education: “Formal education ... is, *of course* (emphasis mine), the highly institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured ‘education system’, spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university” (p. 8). And non-formal education, they contend, is “any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children” (p. 8). Finally, the authors address what they call informal education. According to Coombs and Ahmed (1974) informal education is a:

lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment - at home, at work, at play; from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally, informal education is unorganized and often unsystematic; yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning - including that of even a highly ‘schooled’ person. (p. 8)

It is important to note, here, as Rogers (2004) did, that the above definition has been deemed problematic. Coombs and Ahmed (1974), and others in the field of education, define formal education as planned and purposeful. Informal education, then, is neither. Rogers (2004)

discusses this in some detail, and comes to the conclusion that the two previously discussed arenas do fall within the planned and purposeful definition of education, while the latter is instead, informal *learning*. To be completely fair, though, we must acknowledge that both planning and purpose can reside in what most would consider informal learning (e.g. a mother teaching a child to tie his shoe or a father teaching a child to read). This is what makes it fun to continually explore the ideas and theories put forth, and why I believe that various types of deconstruction activities, such as performance and culture jamming, and situational analysis play such a crucial role in propelling educational studies forward.

Keeping on line with what is typically called education, I will refer to this third space as informal learning for the remainder of my response. Informal learning can, and does, take place within both formal and non-formal education settings. It also spills into every other nook and cranny of our lives. Because of this, those residing within the realm of adult education have much to learn from the messy, boundary-blurring, language-busting realm of informal learning that has long lived on the margins of education.

*Informal learning spaces.* We learn throughout our lifetime, often in ways we had not previously imagined, and by means we previously thought impossible. From early childhood we learn from the things we do, hear, experiment with. Children learn about gravity every time they drop a toy from their highchair and watch it fall. In much the same way, adults learn from things they do, from their experiences. This experiential learning can take place almost anytime, anywhere. For the purposes of my response and my study, this space is online, through blogging, and the learners are as varied as the physical and

emotional spaces that they inhabit. Mothers of incarcerated sons, in particular, can use this space as a place of personal and social action, as can those who love them, study them, and/or encounter them, simply by surfing into one of their blog entries.

There is no “banking” of education going on in the blogosphere; there are no “all powerful, all knowing” professors depositing knowledge into their eagerly awaiting students within the confines of the classroom walls (Freire, 1993). But there is learning. There is learning through (re)invention, “through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 1993, p. 72). There are just people, many seeking out and forming ties with others to create an ever-changing community of teachers and learners. All have experiences to share; some will find comfort in exploring the commonalities they find that parallel their own experiences, and others will learn that there are no right/wrong, white/black, good/bad dichotomies that remain intact consistently and without question in the existence of our own or other’s lives. Informal learning of this kind creates learning that is just as valid and valuable as that produced within the classroom and should, even, be brought into the classroom amidst an ever-increasing desire for blurring of boundaries and crossing of borders.

As Friere (1993) discusses in *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, when those in power, those on the good side of the binary, present themselves as the opposite of those who sit before them, unknowing, empty of *True* knowledge, voices remain unheard, students remain voiceless, and the ideology of oppression remains strong. Life experiences are learning experiences. Denying this allows continued marginalization, continued silencing of those

who feel less than in their world. bell hooks discusses this experiential learning strategy extensively, and insists that “if experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing, then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence” (1994, p.84). This idea spills into spaces of informal learning, as well. By giving marginalized persons a safe place in which to learn, teach, share experiences, and express their feelings we can end the silence. The blogosphere offers just such safety. It can at times take some bravery to make that first leap, to post a blog entry or even to just read and comment on someone else’s. It is an unfamiliar space, after all. But it feels far safer than exposing oneself in a formal educational setting where change is not wholly embraced and the language and dynamics of the classroom are not liberatory or diverse. As educators, we have much to learn from this different, ever-changing, freeing virtual space.

The act of sharing a part of your life experience that you have, heretofore, chosen to or been forced to hide from public scrutiny is a very empowering, liberating, experience. It gives one a sense of community to learn that there are others *out there* who have been where you are, a sense of relief in knowing you are not alone. This sharing and the analysis of this sharing is situated in the pedagogy of emancipation, or experiencing freedom through critical thinking. This type of pedagogy values learner expression, and puts forth the idea that we are all learners, and we all have experiences that can transform learning, that can transform the ways we know, and “can inform how we know what we know” (hooks, 1994, p.90). Emancipatory learning in adult education is to free the learners from forces that limit options

and control lives, and to move them to take action that will bring about personal, social, and political change (Peca, 2000).

One way to promote learner empowerment focuses on social and political liberation and freedom from oppression. One researcher within this realm, Paulo Freire, has written extensively on this topic in adult education. Beginning with the idea of conscientization, and continuing through until his untimely death in 1997, Freire provided multiple ways into very important critical thinking spaces for the topic of emancipatory learning. As discussed in the literature review, the goal of conscientization is to foster a process of critical consciousness among individuals and groups while also teaching them how to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives. Its practice is based on dialogue and problem-solving where learners develop awareness of structures within their society that may be contributing to inequality and oppression. One such structure, class, was very important to Freire, who believed that “a thorough understanding of oppression must always take a detour through some form of class analysis” (1993, p. 13). As one who believes that the situation should be at the heart of analysis, and that class is always one piece of the situation being discussed, I agree. The ideas of Freire, beginning here and moving throughout his life, focus on those like myself, who are present and yet not visible, who are visible and yet not present. There will always be points of contention between theories and ideas. It cannot be denied, though, that Freire’s (1993) insistence that education could be the practice of freedom, that knowledge creation requires active participation and critical, reflective thought, laid the groundwork for those

working in today's areas of emancipatory education that go far beyond the walls of the academy.

*Formation of self(s).* As much as informal learning and emancipatory learning can be looked at and used in ways that inform and enhance the formal learning space, so too can they be used and analyzed to discover how moments of unexpected learning, blogging through becoming a mother of an incarcerated son, for example, call forth the ways in which multiple identities/subjectivities are formed and meanings are produced. I am interested, here, in the area of social justice and popular culture (Sandlin, 2007). We are consumers of media, and the Internet is our newest obsession. To date, though, there are few instances of researchers looking at the Internet in general, and blogs in particular, as informal learning spaces worthy of theoretical exploration, even in the area of popular culture. As I discussed in the literature review, I did find one that also seemed to fit with the exploration of my current topic. Mitra & Gajjala (2008) look at interspersing performative blogging with analysis of the blogging space through a mapping of themes of queering in the Indian digital diaspora, using their own blogs and the blogs of others.

As is evidenced also in the literature review, there is a small base of literature on popular culture and media analysis specifically in adult education. It includes those such as Brookfield (1986) who wrote about the importance of developing media literacy in adult education because of the bias in television programming and production. Graham (1989) discussed the importance of media literacy in analysis concerning women's romance fiction and the role of power relations in shaping the content of television news programs. In more

recent discussions, Jarvis (2005) presented a critique from a feminist perspective on the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, specifically examining its representation not only of formal education but of self-directed adult learning. bell hooks (1994; 1996), a noted black feminist scholar, though not specifically identified with the field of adult education, is widely cited by adult educators as one who has discussed the influence of popular culture and the importance of teaching people to read cultural images from a race, class, and gender perspective.

While conducting the literature review I also found the work of Ellsworth (2005) and was drawn specifically to her idea of “the *time* of the learning self” (p. 8), the moment when body sensations “quickly give way or rapidly mutate into a variety or jumble of thoughts” (p. 8). As noted in the review, she draws on de Bolla’s (2001) detailed description of four pieces of art: a painting, a sculpture, a musical performance, and a poem, and on his self-described “learning in the making” (p. 5) that his encounters with these pieces creates; he does so to wrestle with specific moments in time. These moments do not live securely in the traditional literature of educational research just as my own encounter with the blog that I created does not; but more and more we see them in experiential narratives such as autoethnographies. These learning moments, for me as for de Bolla (2001), that use an intense performance such as creating sculpture or blogging through a life-altering event helps one to feel “what it is like to be, or, perhaps more accurately, helps me feel being, as if it were something I might rub between my fingers, gauge its thickness, sense its surface” (p. 48) during a time when giving in to a feeling is hard. Just as Dery’s (1994) use of virtual discussion boards created for him a

sense of thereness, blogging in this way created for me “a sense of place, a sense of being there” (de Bolla, 2001, p. 48) that I could not find in the *real* world.

***Learning Defiance.*** In his text, *Teaching defiance* (2006), Newman propagates a need to look to early critical thinkers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, both of whom were founders of the Frankfurt School, a school oriented toward radical social change, as a starting place for exploring critical theory, a theory that he says takes everything into account, leaving nothing to be taken for granted and no utterance unexamined. The two thinkers are extremely important in the history of critical theory, as they also co-authored the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, a core text of critical theory, and were proponents of constant and continual critique. However, for the purposes of this response, I feel it is enough to note them here, and to put forth that both are important to the exploration of this theory. Of greater importance to me is a discussion of Gramsci’s (1971) “hegemonic control,” Mezirow’s (1991) three domains of learning, and Brookfield’s (2005) discussion on “dominant ideology.” Each will be noted here in turn as they all relate to the topic of understanding the experiences of cultural silencing and stigma that is often associated with the situations of mothers of incarcerated sons.

Hegemonic control is control by common sense. Populations sanction particular phenomena as normal, natural, and as needing no explanation even though the conditions are in the best interest of another group. (e.g., lower pay for women, separate bathrooms for blacks). Sandlin (2007) relates this idea to her own studies in her article on popular culture and entertainment media when she defines her definition of popular culture as “a political site

of struggle between dominant and subordinate social groups” (p. 74) and connects it to a Gramscian cultural-studies framework. “In this view,” she asserts, “popular culture does not consist simply of cultural commodities such as film, television shows, and magazines [to which I would add internet spaces]. Rather, these commodities are the raw materials, provided by the cultural industries, that people use to create popular culture” (p. 74). Elsewhere, I do an analysis of Foucault’s theories on power. Gramsci, too, is interested in power, specifically the ways in which power and popular culture intersect. Sandlin (2007) quotes Duncombe to explain this idea: “Culture can be, and is, used as a means of social control. More effective than any army is a shared conception that the way things are is the way things should be” (p. 75). There is hope, as well, however, for culture can also be, and is, “used as a means of resistance, a place to formulate other solutions. In order to strive for change, you first have to imagine it, and culture is the repository of imagination” (p. 75).

The three domains of learning that Mezirow (1991) discusses are: Instrumental which, though ultimately as complex as any other form of learning, can be summed up as learning that is about getting the skills and information necessary to construct systems and devise methods for making those systems work; interpretive, which is learning that is focused on understanding the human condition; and critical, which learning that seeks to understand the way we see the world. It is this third learning space that I want to elaborate on for my own work. Foley (2004) describes it well in his text, *Dimensions of Adult Learning*:

This learning involves coming to know what ‘makes us tick,’ what makes us adopt particular positions, think in particular ways, react and feel the way we

do, and take the actions we take. We learn to solve problems through reflection that may transform our whole way of thinking – that may transform our perspectives. In this kind of learning we can we can learn to see through ourselves and so may be able to better understand others. (p. 261)

Brookfield (2005), who is a noted practitioner and researcher in adult education, has spent much time in recent years exploring critical theory as a way to fill in some of the theoretical background of his own work, and to call to the forefront the idea that even when we think we are exercising our freedom as individuals, we are living our ideological battles and contradictions. This idea, he purports, forces us to think critically in ways that challenge and change “the process by which a grossly iniquitous society uses dominant ideology to convince people that this is a normal state of affairs” (p. viii). In his introduction to *The power of critical theory: Liberating adult learning and teaching* (2005, p. viii), he puts forth three core assumptions made by critical theory regarding the way that the world is organized:

1. That apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequality, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities
2. That the way this state of affairs is reproduced and seems to be normal, natural. And inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology
3. That critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a necessary prelude to changing it

Deconstructing, collecting data from, and analyzing the blogs of mothers of incarcerated sons, and their use of on-line blog discussions as a way of understanding the experiences of cultural silencing and stigma that is often associated with their situations, embraces these assumptions and uses them a jumping off place.

There continues to be an *us* and a *them* in every move we make. There must be in order to silence, to keep in check, those that might question if they thought they would be heard. I am a white, middle-class, educated, upstanding citizen who is a mother of 5 wonderful children. I am not black, or lower-class, or uneducated, or a hoodlum. I am on the good side of the binaries, the best place to be, until I speak of my son as a felon. As long as I am silent about that, I am safe. Speaking obliterates the goodness that was me and alienates me from other white mothers in my class who may or may not have sons in similar situations but know not to speak of it if they do. Exploring, through various discourses and the points at which they converge, allows us to open up these binaries, to deconstruct them in a way that is emancipatory not only for the speaker, the doer of the action, but for those that the speaker engages with, invites in, and teaches/learns from.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

To my knowledge, this study is the first to address the ways in which one mother of one incarcerated son creates agency and voice through a participation technology, in particular the blogosphere, and how this participation transfers to the society at large. The findings of this study offer implications for adult learning theories, developing feminist theories, and provides several implications for practice for adult educators.

**Theory.** This study adds to the work of feminists such as Bell (2004) and Ragone and Twine (2000) who look at intensive performances of mothering and those such as Mowles (2008) who seek to explore personal spaces in respect to the political phenomena of online activism and third wave feminist identity politics.

**Practice.** As educators we can use autoethnography and technology to teach our students how to use their own self-knowledge and questioning to analyze the social and cultural world around them and to see social networking spaces as a social and cultural kaleidoscope through which to view the world differently and to understand the finer dynamics of perceived differences and power structures that define our worlds. This study gives insight into how we learn informally through a particular type of online discourse and informs adult educators who seek more creative ways to research and analyze marginalizing situations by helping to develop a more in-depth understanding of marginalized populations.

A central idea in adult education is that of emancipation. Here again is bell hooks (1994): “If experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way ... then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence” (p.84). Teaching students to use self as a way to deconstruct culture can further transform the ways we know and allows for an experiencing of freedom through critical thinking that can be an empowering and liberating experience.

Let us also circle back to Mezirow’s (2000) learning as transformation, specifically his discussion on transforming the content of individual and group frames of reference. My study demonstrates what he notes as “the importance of creating processes and conditions

that can facilitate both discernment and critical reflection” (p. 249). Mezirow (2000) believes that as a general rule, adult educators do well with facilitating critical reflection but are less prepared to facilitate discernment, which “generates insights about current reality and images of new possibilities” (p. 290).

One of the goals of this study is to aid in the generation of insights about current reality and images of new possibilities, to both make explicit the social forces, often invisible, that influence women’s day-to-day experiences and to reflect on this explication for, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) tell us, such an exploration and reflection is precisely what enables those on the borders to uncover and put forth the social at the heart of the individual and to denaturalize the social world, to destroy the myths that cloak the exercise of power and the perpetuation of domination.

Making explicit is also central to adult education. Collaborative learning, which falls under the transformative umbrella, as well, has this at the core. Collaborative learning “dignifies newly narrated experience as formal knowledge and moves it out of the position of subjugated knowledge and into the position of one of the multiple possible narratives in which others can find their own unstoried experience expressed” (Brooks & Edwards, 1997, p. 42). I would argue that this type of analytic autoethnography offers the same. Exploration of this type, placed against and within the more practical explorations that currently exist, will enable growth, both internal and external. This combination of making explicit and reflecting is, as bell hooks (1994) puts forth in her text, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, “the expression of our movement from object to subject” (p.

211), and it is a demonstration of the importance of understanding that agency and voice, or the lack thereof, develops in response to demands from the environment, whether that environment is *real*, *virtual*, or both.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

When I began this journey my intention was to write a raw autoethnography. However, being a student in a traditional program in a traditional school, I opted to be more conservative and to combine pieces of my story writing autoethnography with a safer traditionally structured dissertation format. Hence, one of my recommendations for further research is the creation of a non-traditional autoethnography using a blog or blogs to tell a story of the creation of agency and voice. Asking the same questions of a similar study using interviews would also add to the conversation of the process of the development of agency and voice in the midst of a life crisis and would further question the ways in which the act of blogging and subsequent analysis of self and situation call into question the ways in which meta-narratives function to validate particular views of human behavior.

This study brought forth questions of boundaries and community, as well. Hence, another recommendation for further study would be to analyze communal boundaries (What marks the beginning and end of a community? How is one community marked off from another? What sorts of systems are involved in these groupings or encounters? What norms or habits are involved?) in the virtual world of the blogosphere. Finally, though not directly

related to this study in particular, I noted in my journal the need for the development of improved support groups that would bring together those at a distance who are making their way through a silencing life-crisis. Asking different questions of my blog or of others like it may lead to interesting and informative information that could lead in turn to such support groups.

### **Chapter Summary**

I am both an insider and an outsider. I fit everywhere, and I fit nowhere. That was the point of departure for this study of a mother blogging her way through a son's incarceration. Thank you to all who were willing to jump with me, first here and then there, mapping connections and lines of flight in a technological world that didn't even exist on the day my son was born. The creating of a blog that culminated in the creating of this document in many ways parallels my entire formal dissertation education and how it fit, changed, and grew, beside and with my informal self-learning as a mom on the margins. Beginning with my decision to do a study that did not fit neatly into the education department dissertation mold to finding a way to conform enough to satisfy my own desire to both challenge and learn from those on my committee and to let go enough to be coached, questioned, and challenged in return is not at all different than my decision to first blog about and then study in autoethnographic fashion myself and my struggle to help myself and others to think differently about the binaries that tie us to societally constructed meta-narratives.

Both my educational choices and my autoethnography are examples of a continual struggle to live in both the messy non-linear postmodern world and the linear more modern world that I challenge myself and others to continually call into question. The exercise of mapping this blogging space “constructs the unconscious.... It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.... [It] has multiple entryways [and] has to do with performance” (Delueze & Guitarri, 1987, p. 13). For me, mapping was/is a way to bring to the surface that which we force to hide through structure and dichotomies and language and, as Abbott (2006) discussed, it is this bringing to the surface , this confronting of silencing binaries within a situation, that generates new ways of seeing and thinking and (re)arranging social and cultural phenomena. Following in the footsteps of bell hooks (1992) and all of the other women who have fought over the years to confront the noise that drowned out their voices, I am excited to have shared with you a journey with no beginning and no end, a journey that concludes in hard copy here, momentarily, but begs to start again almost immediately as a part of something new, something that is as of yet un-thought.

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APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### **Transgressive Validity Check-list: A Simulacrum** (Lather, 1993, pp. 685–686)

#### **Ironic validity**

- foregrounds the insufficiencies of language and the production of meaning-effects, produces truth as a problem
- resists the hold of the real; gestures toward the problematics of representation; foregrounds a suggestive tension regarding the referent and its creation as an object of inquiry
- disperses, circulates proliferates forms, including the generation of research practices that take the crisis of representation into account
- creates analytic practices which are doubled without being paralyzed

#### **Paralogical validity**

- fosters differences and heterogeneity via the search for “fruitful interruptions”
- implodes controlling codes, but still coherent within present forms of intelligibility
- anticipatory of a politics that desires both justice and the unknown, but refuses any grand transformation
- concerned with undecidables, limits, paradoxes, discontinuities, complexities
- searches for the oppositional in our daily practices, the territory we already occupy

#### **Rhizomatic validity**

- unsettles from within, taps underground
- generates new locally determined norms of understanding; proliferates open-ended and context-sensitive criteria; works against reinscription of some new regime, some new systematicity
- supplements and exceeds the stable and the permanent, Derridean play

- \_ works against constraints of authority via relay, multiple openings, networks, complexities of problematics
- \_ puts conventional discursive procedures under erasure, breaches congealed discourses, critical as well as dominant

### **Voluptuous validity**

- \_ goes too far toward disruptive excess, leaky, runaway, risky practice
- \_ embodies a situated, partial, positioned, explicit tentativeness
- \_ constructs authority via practices of engagement and self-reflexivity
- \_ creates a questioning text that is bounded and unbounded, closed and opened
- \_ brings ethics and epistemology together

## Appendix B

## CONSENT STATEMENT

The below signed individual acknowledges that he is a subject of interest in the research project of Tammy S. Bird and that his name, though not mentioned in full in the resulting document, is used throughout the blog under study.

The below signed individual also acknowledges that he has been advised of the possible mental angst that could arise due to the revisiting of the time of incarceration in an open and public research project and that this open and public research could interfere with the his financial and social future if potential employers or peers read the blog or anything published concerning the blog.

To decrease potential financial and social risk, only the first name of the below signed will be used in the study. However, it is known that the below signed is indeed the researcher's son, that was incarcerated, and that he is identified throughout the blog by name.

The researcher has conveyed the potential financial and social risks to her son, and he has noted an understanding of such risks and has agreed to be a part of the project anyway.

CONSENT: Your signature below confirms that you have read the above information, have received a copy of this form, and have agreed to be a part of this project:

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

## OPEN CODING LIST

Images to bridge visual/verbal

Seeing differently

Nothing to identify with

Pictures serving to expose and alter integral relations of power

Life in and out of prison

Prison as metaphor

Releasing guilt

Various faces of (m)Other

Making him human

Juxtaposition

Wordplay to expose and alter

Poetic or rhythmic representation

    Word and lyrical invocation

    Juxtaposition

    Feeling-picture created through words

    Bringing attention to silence

    Emotional evocation

    Exposing multiplicity of meaning

    Promoting human connection

Making experience bolder than in real life

Presenting a moment of little t truth

Connection and community

Metaphor as a tool for exposing/altering learning/thinking

Using Xanga to work through struggles (Writing our way through)

Waiting

Complexity of lived experience

Power structures

Self versus Universal

Learning informally

Building community across differences

Facilitating Empathy

Giving voice

Concealable identities

Blurring boundaries

Time

## Appendix D

## THEMES CREATED FROM CODES

THE STRUGGLE	ACCEPTANCE
Time Regularity of posts	Time Irregularity of posts Focus on the external End of blog
Storytelling Word and lyrical invocation Juxtaposition Feeling-picture created through words Bringing attention to silence Emotional evocation Exposing multiplicity of meaning Promoting human connection Making experience bolder than in real life Presenting a moment of little t truth exposing/altering learning/thinking Reflection Making him human Various faces of (m)Other (my posts) Complexity of lived experience (blurring of self-boundaries while reflecting) Self versus Universal Introspection Releasing guilt Giving voice Life in prison (his literally and mine metaphorically) Facilitating Empathy Power structures	Reporting out Seeing differently Various faces of (m)Other (as we went through re-acclamation) Complexity of lived experience (explained) Giving voice Life out of prison (as a mother, a son, and a family) Power structures
Transition	My Re-entry

Figure 4 Struggle/Acceptance themes created from codes

Wordplay to expose and alter Making him human Facilitating Empathy Giving voice
Images to bridge visual/verbal serving to expose and alter integral relations of power
Voices Unite

Figure 5 Community and social interaction theme created from codes

Learning informally Using Xanga to work through struggles (Writing our way through) Metaphor as a tool for exposing/altering learning/thinking Complexity of lived experience Power structures Self versus Universal Blurring boundaries
Connection and community Building community across differences Blurring boundaries

Figure 6 Informal Learning Process theme created from codes





white font on black. Stark. The way I felt. The lack of picture saying as much as any picture could. Many posts about how I am feeling include dreams and guilt. The others show me living life in much the same way as I assume others do. Most of the posts reveling self-thoughts are made in late 2004 and 2005. This is after my son has been locked up for a while. This is different than when the majority of the posts were made where I was posting about Robert as a child, as a loving, caring, person (which were made early in the blogging process). The making him human posts were made relatively close together – 12 posts with pictures that are included in the collage map over the first 10 months. The various faces of mother posts with pictures are more spread out – 12 posts with pictures over 13 and ½ months. The first actual picture of me was posted on September 2, 2004, three months after I started the blog.

## Appendix F

**Reaction journal entry example**

**This example reaction journal entry was written after creating the collage map entitled *Various faces of m(O)ther* and after returning to the blog to read the comments made by readers of the posts and surrounding posts:**

I chose posts that included pictures for the collage maps due to the sheer number of posts and the need to find a way to manage them. Even the posts that do not have pictures during this 13 and ½ month time-frame are often written through word-play (poetry, mini-stories, different perspectives, third person, etc.). I remember tears streaming down my face as I composed, closing my office door as soon as I got to work so that I could write, so that I could connect to others who understood my pain in ways that those around me could not. I used wordplay to work through the hardest moments of my life-crisis. Just saying how I felt wasn't enough. I needed to make others understand, needed to make them feel what I felt, see what I saw. The more heart-wrenching my own posts, the more feeling I gave to those out there. Looking back on the readers' responses, I remembered how our friendships developed. Some of them still exist. We have found each other on Facebook. We know each other now, though we have never met. I feel a strong connection still as I read their words of pain and hope and struggle and love for their own children and for my Robert.

**Reader responses added to the various faces of m(O)ther:**

“We have so many similarities, it is eerie. My daughter is the single mom of a prisoner's baby.... My grandson is now 3, & has only seen his dad from prison yards. It breaks my

heart everyday.... And, remember, you did not teach him to do what he did. He can lay guilt trips on you about some things, but not that. He made those decisions on his own. Hang in there!!” (Swawg [Mary Ann], July 7, 2004)

“Your blog never fails to touch my mother's soul.” (tweeterlyn, July 15, 2004)

“This is making me cry too, never thought I could be so emotional but when these things happen with our children they have a way of stopping us. My thinking and all I thought I knew changed (actually humbling me for the better) when we had to deal with these sorts trials that are beyond our control.” (Micah, July 15, 2004)

“I too have a 22 year old son who is in a mental prison of sorts... never dreamed this future for him or us, never dreamed these kinds of nightmares.” (Micah, July 25, 2004)

“son, 24 yrs, doing community service, hoping to downgrade a felony to a misdemeanor soon, still at home, we are in default keeping him out of jail. daughter, 18 yrs, starting sophomore year in college. go figure.” (gblinn, August 10, 2004)

“My focus hasn't been on my children. My work is on the maternal body, I am immersed in motherhood, I needed something for me, separate from my intellectual pursuits and my children. So I have barely touched the pain. Your posts are heart-rending, heart-warming, poetic jewels of sorrow and pain and love and hope; they dig very deep into our soul, call us out of our complacency into the very places that count most: our caring and our love for our children.” (Brendaclews, August 31, 2004)

“It's blogs like yours that remind us how much freedom really means. I had a cousin in jail and my auntie (his mother) was so ashamed she had a breakdown and could never talk about it.” (Lordpineapple, September 2, 2004)

“Everyday I wake up and watch my son make some really stupid decisions! He's not in jail, but if he is, someday, it wouldn't surprise me. I live in fear and dread that one day I'm going to wake up and get *the call*. All I can do is be there for him, attempt to get him to look at the types of decisions he's making and hope not all falls on deaf ears. Everytime I see a street person or a user, I wonder what their parents feel like. I wonder if they care and hurt when they see their child. I wonder if that child ever sees it's parents. I know that regardless of what my son does, I love him fiercely, regardless of what he does.” (Irishlass, September 17, 2004)

“It's hard to understand what a person feels when they are inside an experience you can only see from the outside, like a visitor to the zoo of life tragedies. It's hard to experience life in a way that guarantees you will never be insensitive, accidentally. I've struggled with my son's challenges, and in part that struggle has to do with reconciling my own perceptions of disability and the disabled with my new understanding of that experience. I forgive people their insensitivities, most of the time, but I know I've given up friends because they've hurt me unintentionally.” I'm sorry, sorry, sorry this has happened to you, all of it, and I can definitely relate to the feeling of wanting to scream...at the top of a building, so everyone can hear. Maybe that's why people like us enjoy writing. It's an internal scream, with an external manifestation. Or something like that.” (Ordinarybutloud, September, 17, 2004)

The posts that were coded as various faces of m(O)ther posts lessened tremendously after the August 29, 2005 post that is included on the collage map of the same name. Interesting to note, Robert was moved to the diversion program on September 6, 2005 where he began working and learning a trade in preparation for his December 16, 2005 release date. After this move, my posts (all posts) started to be less frequent (with post frequency going from almost every day during the hardest times of struggle to a month or more between posts after Robert's move to the diversion program). Also, they started to be more about proving paternity and counting down the days to his release and less and less about my own guilt and need to connect with Others and to show the various faces of motherhood (especially in the margins). Blogs of this nature, mine and the ones I was connected to during this time, seem to be most useful during the actual time of crisis.