

# Dismissing Voices of Resistance? Adolescent Girls and "Teen Angst" Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the label "teen angst poetry" might serve to silence the voices of adolescent girls. It raises issues around how certain discourse traditions and communities label our words and then use these labels to either accept or dismiss our experience of the world.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore comment l'étiquette donnée à « la poésie existentielle de l'adolescence » sert de moyen pour faire taire les voix des adolescentes. Il soulève les questions au sujet de la façon dont les analyses des traditions et des communautés donnent une étiquette à nos mots et ensuite se servent de ces étiquettes soit pour accepter ou pour rejeter notre expérience du monde.

*... I'm a pathetic dreaMer; I'm an insignificant speck, desperately seeking a drop of (!)meaning(!) and identity in a world where triviality has taken over anything that I could ever have WANTED... Maybe when I get older I won't feel so strongly that I'm simply taking up room... I wish I wasn't an angsty, disgruntled teenager. Give me something more.*

~ Boivie, 1999 (excerpt from "The Rantings of a Disgruntled Teenager")

*... adolescence is a critical time in girls' lives - a time when girls are in danger of losing their voices and thus losing connection with others, and also a time when girls, gaining voice and knowledge, are in danger of knowing the unseen and speaking the unspoken and thus losing connection with what is commonly taken to be "reality."*

~ Gilligan 1990, 24

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Webster's Dictionary defines angst as "a feeling of anxiety, apprehension or insecurity." The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines angst as "anxiety, anguish, neurotic fear; guilt, remorse". I first started thinking about the meaning of angst

during my doctoral research. This research was focused around trying to understand the aesthetic dimensions of the writing and lives of Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler (pseudonyms chosen by the girls), three adolescent girls who participated in my study. My interest in the aesthetic emerged from a realization that, in my own life, I often used songs, poems, novels, films and other art forms to help make sense of my experience of self and others in the world. As I thought about the power of these experiences, I realized I had no language to adequately describe the knowing and learning that so often emerged when I wrote a poem or read a novel, for example. As I thought more and more about these experiences, I came to see this kind of knowing as residing in the aesthetic. As a result, my understanding of the aesthetic does not rest upon traditional notions of beauty, nor on the immense body of philosophical literature that attempts to define or explain what the aesthetic is and how it works. Rather, I prefer to think of the aesthetic as describing "a particular form of sensuous understanding, a mode of apprehending through the senses the patterned import of human experience" (Abbs 1989, xi).

I met with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler once a week for several months during the latter part of their ninth grade year, and into the early part of their tenth grade year. Most often, we met in a student lounge at the university, a small room with couches, tables and chairs. Our meetings were, for the most part, unstructured, with the exception of a

brief writing activity. For the first ten or fifteen minutes of our time together we collected our thoughts and wrote them down. This writing helped us leave the day behind and focus on the next hour and a half we would spend together. We always shared this writing by reading it out loud; it became a ritual that helped us enter into conversation with each other.

Our time together focused on poetry: we talked about writing, attended occasional poetry readings, shared poems we had written, and, inevitably, told stories of our lives. The research was not intended to be a study of teaching writing, nor was it intended to be a study of poetry *per se*. Rather, I hoped the focus on poetry and poetry writing would provide an opening for talking and thinking about significant experiences and, in so doing, help me better understand what it means to engage with the world in aesthetic ways.

#### TEEN ANGST POETRY: PERCEPTIONS OF RANMA, JEREMIAH AND SKYLER

The word angst first surfaced in our conversation in connection with a poem Jeremiah shared during one of our meetings, a poem she had written several months earlier:

Bargain

It's been a week and a  
day and the sun still rolls around.

It's been a month and a  
year and I still shine.

Patiently passing through a day.

Blindly wandering through a  
crooked life.

Tastefully wasted on a 15  
dollar high. Grimly smiling at a  
15 year old hand.

I blend nothing of habit  
and all of colour.

It's a typical gray day, a

typical stone, brick, gray building  
that I love.

Not too strong, and not  
too silent. Pathetic and cynical  
all in one day.

I control the speed.

I control this photo I've  
arranged to save.

It's been an hour and  
a minute, and the night still runs.

Jeremiah's first words after reading this poem were, "I don't like that." When I asked her why, she said it was "just stereotypical teen angst" writing. When I questioned further what she meant by teen angst, she described teen angst poetry as writing focused on how bad life is, and then recited, "my life is ending, my world is crashing down on me" in a high pitched, dramatic voice (transcript, May 4, 1998). Angst was not mentioned again during that conversation, but Jeremiah had piqued my interest, so I asked about it during our next meeting.

This time, Skyler, Jeremiah and Ranma offered further explanation. Skyler said teen angst is "cliché, I hate life, my life sucks, I want to kill myself ... I went to hell and back (feigning sobs) ... just everything that has to do with being a teen." Jeremiah described it as "the stereotypical, cheesy, I-wear-all-black-things teenager, my life is horrible, my parents are mean, my curfew is midnight" (spoken sarcastically in a sing-song voice). Ranma continued by saying, "I wear black lipstick, I light black candles..." as a way of describing the stereotypical teen who writes teen angst poetry (transcript, May 25, 1998).

In trying to ascribe meaning to the word "angst," it is perhaps helpful to return to the dictionary definitions that open this paper. Both Webster's Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary define angst primarily in terms of anxiety, perhaps due to the etymology of these words. In fact, both "angst" and "anxiety" derive from the same Latin root: "angustia" (Bamber 1979, 7). According to Bamber, it was this shared etymology that caused Freud's early translators to

adopt the word "anxiety" for the German "angst" (1979, 7). As a result, much of our understanding of "anxiety", and, by extension, of "angst", is tied to Freud's work in psychoanalysis. For Freud, anxiety is seen as a reaction to not being able to acknowledge "repressed wishes that have become powerful" (1962, 64).

However, while this Freudian sense of "angst" is helpful, particularly as it relates to psychoanalysis and the development of the self, it does not seem to hold the girls' sense of "stereotypical teen angst." Instead, the girls' sense of angst seems more connected with Heidegger's notion of "dread," and the "fear of metaphysical insecurity" (OED). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1967) suggested a feeling of dread or angst brings the individual to a confrontation with death and the ultimate meaninglessness of life. This sense of the word angst, that is, angst as a reaction to having to confront "death and the meaninglessness of life" seems to be more in line with the girls' descriptions of how angst has surfaced in their poetry and in the poetry of their peers. If we return to the words of Boivie that open this paper, this sense of angst becomes exceedingly clear: "I'm an insignificant speck, desperately seeking a drop of meaning and identity in a world where triviality has taken over anything that I could ever have wanted."

The girls told me they first heard the term "teen angst poetry" from a language arts teacher, who shared examples from the Internet. According to Ranma, Jeremiah, and Skyler, these Internet poems were viewed as examples of how *not* to write because they were full of cliches and stereotypes about how bad teenage life can be. Jeremiah said, "You should go to the teen angst thing on the Internet and you'd see what we're talking about. It basically sums it up to see it. I remember one of the poems was like, 'My life is shattering/all the black raindrops fall on my face/like dirty ...'" (transcript, May 25, 1998). When I searched the Internet for examples of such poetry, I found dozens of web-sites devoted to adolescent writing. The following is an excerpt from a poem I found published on the Internet:

3 A.M.

I touched myself and I felt pain  
I whispered in my ear and I heard lies

I looked into my eyes and I saw fear ...  
...I dreamed a dream and awoke to a  
nightmare

I couldn't sleep late one night and I got up  
and wrote this poem.

(Angel's Place Web Page,  
[www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/3727/](http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/3727/)  
retrieved 26 / 04 / 99)

While this poem is a strong and moving description of an adolescent life, that in itself does not make it remarkable. What is remarkable is that this is only one of perhaps thousands of poems written by adolescent girls that are published on the Internet.

For Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, this poem, and others like it, would likely fall under the category of teen angst, and might therefore be dismissed as unimportant, trivial, or boring. In our conversations, they described how they thought teen angst poetry was a stage everybody went through. One some writers never moved beyond. Jeremiah said, "... I think everybody kind of goes through the period of time when it's like teen angst, [and] everybody really understands it ... everybody has sort of been in the same boat, so it's easier to describe [through poetry]" (transcript, May 25, 1998).

One of the more disturbing ideas the girls shared with me was the notion that some adolescents fabricate problems or cultivate depression in order to write teen angst poetry. They described how they thought some girls wrote this kind of poetry as a way of seeking attention or as a way of fitting into teen culture - as Skyler said, "making things cool by making them depressing" (transcript, May 25, 1998). In fact, the girls suggested most teen angst poetry is an attempt at "fitting in," rather than an authentic expression of feeling.

Perhaps the most disturbing element of this conversation came when Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler described how they thought poetry about suicide was very often a way for adolescent girls to seek attention. In the following transcript excerpt (May 25, 1998), the girls discuss this idea with me:

Skyler: [I've heard] that more girls [attempt] suicide between the ages of 13 and 17 or something, than boys do . . . because a lot of girls want attention, and that's it, a lot of

cases, that's not all, there's a lot of reasons that contribute to it, but a lot of it is attention, and that comes out of angst too, it's attention, and teen angst poetry will come from that too. Wanting attention. . .

Susan: But isn't most of that poetry private?

Skyler: Yeah, keeping it a secret except showing certain people will give you attention, right? And then there's some people who think that they're keeping it private, and show like twenty people, so that they're all like, "Ooohhh are you okay? Don't kill yourself, everything is wonderful, we'll buy you stuff. You're wonderful, life is wonderful..."

Susan: So do you really think that's a social phenomenon, that girls fabricate suicidal thoughts?

Ranma: Yeah

Skyler: Not in all cases it's fake either, it could be just being blind, you don't know you're doing it for attention, but you are in reality, you are . . .

Susan: What about the whole privacy issue?

Jeremiah: A lot of times, the cheesy teen angst stuff isn't really private at all, do you know what I mean? Like they don't really keep it private. I used to know this girl ... she used to write all this teen angst poetry and I remember I went over to her thirteenth birthday, and she rips out her poetry book, and all of us are like, "Ohh, it's okay, life isn't that bad . . ." She just got a whole bunch of attention from everybody. . . if it was really something that was like . . .

Skyler: If it was real and serious, you wouldn't want everybody to know.

Jeremiah: Exactly

Skyler: Like if it was true, because otherwise, even if it was true letting everybody know

would be for attention - obviously...

This excerpt is particularly disturbing in light of recent statistical data. According to the Suicide Information & Education Centre (SIEC), 12 percent of all Canadians seriously consider suicide at some time during their lives, with females attempting suicide more often than males<sup>1</sup> (1999). As well, Canadian statistics for 1996 indicated that suicide was the second leading cause of death for both males and females in the 15 to 24 age category (SIEC, 1999).

The girls' attitude toward suicidal topics in the poetry of their peers might be seen as an extreme example of their dismissal of "teen angst" poetry. Of equal concern is the girls' notion that many of their peers write such poetry as a way of "seeking attention," and the underlying assumption that such attention seeking is wrong or bad. This perception of "attention seeking" is troubling, since it effectively serves to silence the voices of adolescent girls during a time when they most need to reach out for the care and approval of others. In the words of Gilligan, "With this silence, the imagery of the Persephone myth returns, charting the mysterious disappearance of the female self in adolescence by mapping an underground world kept secret because it is branded by others as *selfish and wrong*" (1982, 51).

Unfortunately, the girls' dismissal of teen angst poetry seems closely connected to their school experiences. As Ranma said, "... if I didn't have a writing class that talked about teen angst, I would have [kept writing] teen angst poetry." When teachers use "angstful" poetry as an example of how not to write, or when they begin a poetry unit by saying, "Grade eight students tend to write about death" (transcript, May 25, 1998), it sends a clear signal to students about which topics are appropriate to write about and which are not. Rather than labeling student writing as "teen angst," or focusing on "good" or "bad" poetry, perhaps teachers should place more value on the expressive nature of student writing rather than focusing primarily on form and quality.

As I continued to talk with Ranma, Jeremiah, and Skyler, I began thinking about the implications of labeling so much of the writing of adolescent girls as "teen angst." If the girls were correct in saying that "teen angst" characterized the

writing of many, if not most, adolescent girls, was it not something we should be paying attention to? Was it not something we should be valuing for its own sake and on its own terms?

### THE STRUGGLE TO SPEAK AND BE HEARD

Researchers in the areas of education and psychology have discussed the importance of creating spaces for adolescents to express themselves through poetry (Barbieri 1995; Bates 1993; Bowman 1992; Clark-Alexander and Larkin 1994; Gardner 1993; Hart 1999). For example, Barbieri describes how poetry in the classroom might serve as a means of "breaking the silences that can suffocate adolescent girls" (135) with:

Certainly, as girls enter adolescence, the adult world signals the priority of thought over emotion. At what price do girls suppress all they know through their senses, their imaginations, and their intuition? Could it be that more poetry would help them stay in closer touch with these parts of themselves, even as they progress through an educational system that clearly values other ways of knowing? (126).

Clark-Alexander and Larkin (1994) describes how poetry writing can be a safe and private way for adolescents to express their feelings. They suggest this kind of writing may offer teachers a window into their students' conflicts and anxieties. While they acknowledge that teachers must seek assistance from trained professionals in the case of students who appear to need counseling or intervention, they also emphasize the importance of teachers letting students know they have been heard as a primary means of preventing more serious problems.

Unfortunately for Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, the sense of being heard has been missing from many of their writing experiences in school (Hart 1999). Sometime between seventh grade and tenth grade they have been taught their words will be ignored at best and dismissed at worst when their writing takes the form of "teen angst poetry" and deals with the difficulties and turmoil associated

with adolescence.

What happens when we fail to value the writing of adolescent girls, label their poetry as "teen angst," and dismiss the powerful feelings that lead to this kind of writing? How do girls come to see themselves as authors of their own feelings, thoughts, and indeed lives, when the outside world tells them there is no merit in self-expression unless it is able to transcend the label of teen angst?

Gilligan has written extensively on the struggle adolescent girls face in trying to speak and be heard (Brown and Gilligan 1991; Gilligan 1982, 1990, 1993). According to Gilligan, adolescence is particularly troubling for girls, since it is a time when they are forced to reconcile the female need for connection and relationship with the adolescent need for separation and independence. Unfortunately, since human development has been understood historically almost solely in terms of male experience, the former of these two struggles - that is, the need for connection and relationship - has largely been ignored.

Brown and Gilligan (1991) have written about their own struggle to give voice to what they call the "canonical no-voice voice," that is, the "objective, dispassionate, and disembodied" voice that is "generally not construed as a voice but rather as the truth" (43). They write about their work with Tanya, a girl in one of their studies, and point to the difficulty adolescent girls face in trying to hold onto their own experiences and speak in their own voices when faced with the "practice of truth" that is still so pervasive in our patriarchal society:

... we have to ask why, as Tanya moves from age twelve to age thirteen, does speaking about what she feels and thinks in her relationships, once so simple and genuine for her, become so fraught with difficulty and danger? As we saw, Tanya struggles to hold on to her experience - to know what she knows and to speak in her own voice, to bring her knowledge into the world in which she lives - in the face of authorities and conventions that would otherwise muffle her voice or bury her knowledge. (56)

Gilligan (1993) has also written about how girls are "at once inside and outside of the world

they are entering as young women" (148). She believes that their resultant ability to see and speak in two ways might enable girls to resist taking on the male perspective as their own. Unfortunately, however, the taking on of a male perspective is a lesson girls learn as they enter adolescence, and if this lesson is learned well enough, it becomes part of the invisible cultural framework that assumes the "male conversation" is, in actuality, the "human conversation" (148). In the words of Gilligan: "On a daily basis, girls receive lessons on what they can let out and what they must keep in, if they do not want to be spoken about by others as mad or bad, or simply told they are wrong" (149).

I am concerned that Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler have already learned these lessons. Are they becoming experts on what they can let out and what they must keep in? Have they learned that in order for their poetry to be valued in a school setting, it must avoid others' sense of cliché and stereotype and not dwell in the dark shadows of painful personal experience? Have they learned to accept and even embrace the idea that "teen angst" poetry is a valid label for such writing? Finally, have they learned that others can and do label the things we say and the ways we choose to speak, and that these labels carry an immense amount of power?

#### **LABELING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: TEEN ANGST AND CONFESSIONAL POETRY**

When I think about the school experiences of Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, I am reminded of my own struggle to find a form in which I might begin to write in an authentic voice. Several years ago, I enrolled in a weekly writing workshop. My experience with this writing group was very positive, for the most part. However, there were times when our conversation turned to the writing by people who were trying to "find themselves," to use the words of one of the young women in the group, and this kind of writing was clearly not valued or respected. The following personal journal entry documents one such conversation:

... Erica (a pseudonym chosen by the author) talked about how she hates it when people write poetry about "finding themselves" and how it's usually forty or

fifty year old women who she hears at poetry readings who write this kind of stuff. My professor responded by saying that he's heard plenty of younger people write "finding myself" kind of poetry... but he agreed with her that it's typically not good writing. I didn't say anything, but I was thinking about how I think that many (most?) women come to poetry writing, at least in the beginning, as a way to express themselves and find out what they know about themselves and the world. At least, that's how I experienced writing.  
(personal journal entry, October 29, 1997)

I found this conversation troubling for several reasons. First, I was inclined to think of poetry if not as a way of "finding myself," at least as a way of "finding out about myself." Most of my writing was very personal; for me, poetry was a way to capture a moment, or make sense of an experience or feeling. Second, I was meeting with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler while I was enrolled in the writing course, and this conversation seemed to echo the girls' dismissal of "teen angst" writing. Hearing the words of Erica and my professor, it seemed that the "finding myself" poetry of forty or fifty year old women was being judged in the same way the girls (and their teachers) judged "teen angst" poetry. Finally, I was frustrated by my own silence; I no longer felt like the writing course was a safe place to talk about my own very personal experiences with writing. I was afraid that if I shared my belief that poetry was intimately connected to self-knowledge, my writing would no longer be respected or valued.

Historically, when women have written poetry based on their own experiences - poetry that moved beyond safe topics and ventured into the realm of madness, mothering and menstruation, for example - their work was labeled as confessional. According to Middlebrook (1993), confessional poetry referred to "content, not technique" (633). It was writing that was "technically proficient", but with "subject matter [that] made critics publicly recoil" (636). In contrast, Lerner (1987) has written that confessional poetry "deals with experience that is deeply painful to bring into public, not because it is disgusting, nor because it is sinful, but because it is intensely private" (64). However, he argues for

the use of fiction in poetry, as a way of "detaching oneself from one's own experience" (55).

I would argue that Lerner's emphasis on the importance of "detaching oneself from one's own experience" is, by and large, a male construct. It is interesting to note that, despite the fact "confessional poetry" has historically been associated with male poets such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman and W.D. Snodgrass (Gilbert 1984; Lerner 1987; Middlebrook 1993), Gilbert describes this genre as a "distinctively female poetic mode" and distinguishes between the male confessional poets and the female confessional poets by pointing out that although the male confessional poet "romantically explores his own psyche" through his poetry, he is able to "move beyond the self-deprecations and self-assertions of confessional writing to larger, more objectively formulated appraisals of God, humanity, society" (99). Gilbert suggests this is the case because male confessional poets are able to see themselves as representative of the species - as "Everyman" - while female confessional poets have no such history or social context. As Gilbert writes, "...even at her most objective she feels eccentric, not representative; peripheral, not central." The female confessional poet "cannot easily classify either herself or her problem. To define her suffering would be to define her identity, and such self-definition is her goal, rather than her starting point" (100).

Lerner (1987) disagrees with the notion that self-definition can be the goal of poetry. For him, in order for confessional poetry to be poetry, and not simply confession, "...it would have to have a reason - an aesthetic reason - for being written and read, and making form out of the poet's own inner chaos would be a by-product. If that were your primary aim, you would go to the confessional" (66). In contrast with Lerner, my sense is that there is an intimate connection between self-definition and the "aesthetic reason" for a particular poem; for me, these are not mutually exclusive ideas.

I am often torn between my own personal experiences with writing and what the canon tells me is valued and valid. For me, Lerner's words represent the "canonical no-voice voice" that presumes objectivity and hides the identity and stance of the writer. In contrast, my own writing seeks not objectivity, but complicity. I want to

embed my voice within the text, and share my experiences with the reader, not simply as the "speaker of the poem," but as the author of the work.

I believe there are strong parallels between "teen angst poetry" and "confessional poetry." Both are written primarily by women, about women's experiences, in a voice that makes it abundantly clear the writer is intimately connected to the speaker of the poem. Both have been labeled by a literary tradition that has been shaped, at least historically, almost exclusively by men. Both focus on topics that are intensely private and often based on painful or difficult life experiences. Both are relegated to the margins of what is considered acceptable or praiseworthy. And, in the context of my work with Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, both have played a part in silencing the voices of girls and women. It is one thing to feel silenced myself by a writing group of peers and a literary community that I am in some small way a part of. It is another thing entirely for Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler to be silenced by their teachers and other adults who, with all good intentions, slowly smother the voices of adolescent girls in the name of "good poetry."

In *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer*, Mairs (1994) writes about the challenges women face in trying to write about personal experience. She argues that this kind of writing is risky because "public utterance" is "culturally impermissible for women" (128). She describes her own experiences in a poetry workshop where she was the only woman, a workshop where the men "knew what writing was because they were doing it" (22). She also describes how her writing was often dismissed by editors and reviewers who, while never suggesting she stop writing, all but insisted she write something else.

Despite her struggle to be heard, Mairs managed to cultivate her own voice and continue writing about her own experiences. As a result, her writing has sometimes focused on painful or tragic events. For Mairs, this kind of writing is important not only because it preserves and honors the voice of the writer, but because it has the potential to help others come to terms with their own personal struggles. To use her words: "What of the woman who wrote to me after her lover had shot herself to death? She didn't need a description of depression

(she was a psychiatrist) but a means of fathoming suicidal despair. She needed to enter and endure it with me" (129).

For Mairs, such writing is neither "confession" nor "angst," it is simply an authentic examination and expression of one woman's life, one that deserves to be heard on its own terms:

Let the masters of the written word cling to their bodiless principles. Let them pronounce what is interesting and what is not, what is a poem and what is not, what merits their grudging praise and what does not. For myself, I want another model. I want to hear this poem by this person on this muggy August morning under the pear trees. I want to know what it is doing in the life of her work, and in my life as well. I want to give her the courage to say the next hard thing, without fear of ridicule or expulsion if she strays across the borders of good taste, good sense, or good judgement demarcated by a tradition she has had no part in forming. I want her to do the same for me. (24)

How do we begin to give adolescent girls the courage to say the "next hard thing," when their poetry and, by extension, their very experience, has been labeled as "teen angst"? How do we help girls hold onto the strong, authentic voices they develop in childhood, and not cast them aside in favor of the "canonical no-voice voice" that presumes to represent all of "human conversation"?

### CONCLUSION

The questions and issues raised in the preceding pages suggest a return to Gilligan's quotation from the beginning of this paper:

... adolescence is a critical time in girls' lives - a time when girls are in danger of losing their voices and thus losing connection with others, and also a time when girls, gaining voice and knowledge, are in danger of knowing the unseen and speaking the unspoken and thus losing connection with what is commonly taken to be "reality." (Gilligan 1990, 24)

Perhaps the poetry of adolescent girls is their window into "knowing the unseen" and "speaking the unspoken." Perhaps "teen angst" poetry is one way for adolescent girls to articulate the loss of self and relationship in a society that continues to worship a male model of personal autonomy and increasingly demands we relate to one another in terms of power and control. If this is indeed the case, if "teen angst" poetry can serve as a way for adolescent girls to speak in their own authentic voices and resist taking on a male perspective of the world, what does it mean when they are taught, as Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler have been, to discredit the very form that makes their resistance possible?

Lorde (1984) has written about this problem. In an essay titled "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," she describes how our current society has been defined by "profit, linear power, and institutional dehumanization" (39). She argues that within these structures, our feelings are not meant to survive; rather, they are expected to give way to rational thought: "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" (38). Finally, Lorde describes the absolute necessity of poetry in the lives of women:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (37)

There are no easy answers. Part of the solution no doubt lies in continuing to question the patriarchal structures that have for too long labeled the things we say and the ways we choose to speak as women. For me, this signals a move away from a teaching tradition that seeks to teach the poem, rather than the poet (Heard 1989). Perhaps Barbieri (1995) was right when she said poetry can help adolescent girls stay in touch with the "deepest, most candid parts of themselves" while helping them make connections with others (142). Barbieri's hope for her students is the same hope I have for

Ranma, Jeremiah and Skyler, and indeed, for all adolescent girls who are struggling to hold onto their own voices and their own knowledge: the hope that I will see them in years to come, "still dancing, still shouting, still themselves" (144).

## ENDNOTE

1. While girls attempt suicide more often than boys, boys are five times as likely to succeed because they generally use more lethal methods (Suicide Information & Education Centre, Calgary, AB, Canada, 1999).

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