

ARTISANS OF THE SELF:
SOUTHERN WOMEN READING SOUTHERN WOMEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Elizabeth A. St. Pierre)

ABSTRACT

This layered text examines how Southern women read Southern women as a practice of the self. Interviewing ten young white women who grew up in the Deep South, the author conducted a qualitative study to inquire into how the women employed texts by and about Southern women in the ongoing construction of their subjectivity. She applied Foucault's analysis of care of the self to consider how participants, alumnae of her modern Southern literature course, used reading, writing, and relations as self-constitutive arts of existence.

Here, the author reviews the body of literature critiquing Southern women's writing and regional constructs of female identity; summarizes Foucault's work on the ancient Greek ethic of care of the self; and offers an overview of poststructural feminist epistemology and methodology, reviewing scholarship on feminist interviewing in depth. Layering participants' spoken words throughout this text, along with their creative writing and her own, the author sets these alongside theoretical discussions of how they adopted textual practices to craft elaborations of subjectivity.

In reading and rereading, writing and talking about texts together, the young women, in a communal spirit, engaged guides for ethical living and self-examination as they tested their

actions and beliefs and troubled representations of Southern womanhood. Through texts assigned for and inspired by the course, they resisted gendered identities reified by a patriarchal culture and deconstructed the tropes of the belle and the lady, assimilating fictional figures of the resistant mother, defiant daughter, and willful wife. Through their collaborative literary transactions, participants also re-imagined female power, rejected a duality attributed to Southern women, re-remembered personal relations, and reconstructed home place. This text explores how the women deployed Lee Smith's (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies* and Eudora Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples*, particularly, in their self-formative practices.

Fostered by shared texts and enacted in a liminal female space on the porch, relations among these readers served as a dynamic site for their arts of existence. Skilled artisans of the self, they created, through books and the readerly sisterhood they cultivated, multifaceted and ethical ways of being in their world.

INDEX WORDS: Southern women, Care of the self, Southern women's writing, Subjectivity, Teaching literature, Foucault, Welty, Lee Smith, Poststructural feminism, Feminist interviewing, American South

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DEDICATION

For the women on the journey

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CHAPTER 1

ENTANGLEMENTS

Entanglement is a phenomenon in which the quantum states of two or more objects have to be described with reference to each other, even though the individual objects may be spatially separated. –*The Language of Physics*, 2008

What entanglement...does do is remind us that the real world is much stranger than we imagine.
–Clegg, 2007

Background of the Problem

Something magical happens in my modern Southern literature class—not always and not for every woman, certainly. But something profound transpires for many who take the course at the Southern women’s college where I teach. I wondered what mysterious alchemy occurs when Southern women read texts by and about Southern women, and my desire to know more about those transactions became the genesis of this ongoing research. As every teacher knows, such charged experiences are rare, and this transformative magic electrifies my other classes much less often. I make no claims to be the agent of this powerful force when it erupts: the books and their readers perform this magic.

My alma mater, another Southern women’s college, proudly quotes an alumna’s description of it as a place where “mind sparks mind.” When such sparks fly in my Southern Lit classroom, the students are visibly engaged: their eyes light up, they lean into the conversation, talk over each other in an excited, mostly amicable way, and wave marked-up books around. They often continue our discussions, pointing to dog-eared pages, as they leave the classroom. During the semester, I sometimes see groups of the women gathered in a corner of the dining hall or sitting together on a porch with books and pens out, intent in conversation. It seems obvious to

me that something powerful is at play, so in this study I set out to find out what happens and why. At the beginning of my research, a former student said, “I think you’ll find that everybody who took the course was transformed in some way.” Not everybody, but perhaps a few, I thought, fully aware that claiming transformation is quite a daring act.

My purpose here is to examine how the young women who participated in my study, ten former students, employed the Southern texts we read together to construct their subjectivities, perhaps to enact transformation. Like bell hooks (2000), I try to “encourage students to relate the information they are learning to the personal identities they are working to socially construct, to change, to affirm” (p. 83). My students question themselves and their place in the world through literary practices, and, in the process, create new ways of knowing, affirming, and being themselves. If “literary transaction is, first of all, a way of knowing something about the self” (Probst 1992, p. 63), then, as my research indicated, my participants experienced something of the self in its rich multiplicity through their conversations with books and the readers who shared them.

But the magical qualities of the women’s transactions with text involved something beyond self-recognition: nothing less than self-formation. I believe that “[readers] can only [say] what the text says to them, and what it says to them will always be the result of what they were ready to hear” (Marshall, 1993, p. 313). In this case, the readers were young college-aged women when they first encountered the books that spoke so compellingly to them, and they were still in their twenties when they participated in this research. They were—and are—young women embarking on a life, figuring out how to make their way. And reading these texts together helped them navigate a dangerous journey. In fact, many participants often employed a journey metaphor in our conversations, asking, as one put it, “Where are we as women on this journey?”

Another woman said, “I still wonder where the women in the class are on the journey now.” These readers sometimes wondered, too, where a particular character might be “on the sacred journey now,” using a fictional woman’s experience to illuminate their own movement toward the self. In texts by and about other Southern women, my former students and participants in this research heard what they were ready for, what they needed to equip themselves for the journey: inspiration, encouragement, and advice for the work of constituting themselves. They created through the texts they read, wrote, and talked together possibilities for “‘constructing a ‘version of [themselves] in the world’” (Bruner as cited in Agee, 1997, p. xi). In other words, Southern women read Southern women as a generative practice of the self.

For this qualitative study informed by poststructural feminism and Foucault’s ethical analysis, care of the self, I interviewed and collected documents from ten white Southern women aged 24-28 who were alumnae of my course on modern Southern literature to consider how they used reading, writing, and talking texts together as Foucauldian practices of the self. I began with the idea that the young women recognized themselves in the texts, and I wanted to know how this experience shaped their view of the Southern female subject. I was curious about how reading Southern women writers and characters might have affected participants’ perceptions of themselves as women, especially in relation to their region. Early in the study, however, my emphasis shifted from perceptions to practices, to what the women *did* with the texts, how they used them in their lives. In fact, I found that they continued to work the texts in ways I never anticipated, employing them as potent arts of existence.

Like the women in my study, the ancient Greeks used literary practices as self-formative arts. The Greek ethic of care of the self, which Michel Foucault (1983/1991, 1984/1987, 1984/1990a, 1984/1988, 1988b, 2004) analyzed extensively, emphasized developing relations

with oneself in which deliberate and laborious effort is exerted to constitute the self as an ethical subject. Purposefully treating the individual life as a work of art, the subject enacts an aesthetic and ethical mode of existence. Like the ancients, my participants employed reading, rereading, writing, listening, speaking, and relations as self-constituting practices. In this research, I considered how the women deployed their textual practices to trouble representations, re-remember relations, reclaim female power, and reconstruct home. In their reading and rereading, they engaged guides for life, self-examination, and administrative review. In writing their own texts, the women performed other elaborations of subjectivity through marginalia, epistolary practices, journalism, and creative writing. In their relations with each other through shared texts, these readers cultivated friendships that became a dynamic site for their arts.

In considering the relations these women developed with each other and the fictional women they read, I witnessed what I can best describe as a readerly sisterhood, meaning in this case the intimate connections encouraged by collaborative transactions with texts. In their mutual use of books to care for the self, the women formed what one participant called an ensemble, in which they could trust implicitly and risk telling their own stories, which were often personal and sometimes painful. As she explained, “In our magic circle, it was safe to *go there*, to cry and be vulnerable.” Another participant said that they created a “private shared language” through texts they read together. When I term the women’s relations a readerly sisterhood, I do not intend the adjective *readerly* to convey the Barthian (1970/1974) sense of readerly texts in which passivity marks the relations between book and reader. To the contrary, I refer to the active communal construction of textual and personal possibilities that these women crafted together in a spirit of sisterhood and reciprocity, in what Foucault (2004) described as a “flexible exchange of soul

services in which we try to be of service to the other in [her] journey towards the good and toward [herself]" (Foucault, p. 360).

In treating reading as an active project rather than a passive activity, I consider text as fluid and spacious, inviting construction and deconstruction of possible meanings, not as an inherently closed system with finite meaning situated deep within. The concept of text as an open space that calls the reader to her own interpretations and makes room for her experience counters the New Critical view of text as possessing a hidden meaning that waits for the right reader to unveil it in one correct move. Instead, I argue that the text remains virtually inexhaustible, with an almost infinite number of meanings constructed by readers, so that with every reader and each reading, meanings shift, reconfigure, and multiply.

In a deconstructive sense, "text refers to the fabric of culture itself, in which we and our students find ourselves already woven, even as we try to learn and teach how to reweave those garments" (Scholes, 1998, p. 73). The metaphor of woven and rewoven cultural fabric makes sense, for the word *text* derives from the Latin for "to weave." As Spivak (1987) said, in constructing interpretations about ourselves and our world, we create "a weave of knowing and not-knowing which is what knowing is" (p. 78). Similarly, text presents a complicated pattern of the known and the unfathomable. Revisioning the self through cultural texts they are already woven into, the women in my study brought to bear on their readings their unique experiences with Southern construction of white womanhood, an identity freighted with contradictory expectations.

In this research, I considered how the readers I interviewed created individual and collective interpretations of texts by and about Southern women and, in the act, performed ongoing construction of their subjectivities. Through their textual practices and the sisterly

relations they fostered, these young white women critically examined their world and invented possibilities for constituting themselves in it. They engaged in lively dialogue about the significance and relevance of the texts to their lives, celebrating the power of their collaborative efforts to interpret both their readings and Southern culture in conversation among women. In fact,

If we are to regard meaning as a process, we also have to regard meaning as a continuing conversation. . . , an ongoing dialogue. If we regard reading as the act of having temporal experiences and exploring the situations of others and ourselves. . . , then progress can be determined. . . by our willingness to continue participating in the conversations of humankind. (Vine & Faust, 1993, p. 134)

The women in my study willingly, actively continued those conversations of humanity, books in hand.

Theoretical, Literary, and Cultural Contexts

In this qualitative study, I employed macro- and mid-level theory as I collected and analyzed data and wrote a representation of my research. Poststructural feminist epistemology foregrounds the concepts and methodologies central to my work, and Foucault's theories on care of the self offer an analytic through which I considered data, while literary criticism and theory about transactions with text informed the conversations I had with participants. In theorizing my research on Southern women reading Southern women, I considered the intersections of place and gender and text from several perspectives, approaching Southern culture and its patriarchal construction of acceptable feminine identities with attentiveness to the contingency of such constructs.

Poststructural Feminism

Judith Butler (1990/1999), paraphrasing Foucault, wrote that “systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent” (p. 4), so that powerful structures produce the subjects they desire. Butler argued that patriarchal structures and discourse produce subjects (women) that are formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the system's requirements. This production of subjects seems particularly forceful in a patriarchal society like the American South where women find themselves on the wrong side of at least one binary, relegated to otherness. Poststructural feminists like Butler (1990/1999, 1993, 1995), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Patti Lather (1991, 1993, 1996), Bronwyn Davies (1993, 2000), Jane Flax (1990), Laurel Richardson (2000), Wanda Pillow (2002, 2003, 2007), and Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997, 2000), among others, insist that troubling binaries that define women as an inferior other is necessary to an examination of female subjectivity.

It seems relevant to comment briefly here on the use of this term, subjectivity. Paul Thompson (1994) explained that subjectivity is “a word that does not really have a proper equivalent in English, because subjectivity combines the sense of consciousness with the sense of self, self-identity; it brings together those ideas” (p. 5). So we can envision subjectivity as a doubled consciousness of self and self-identity, with a subject that constitutes itself through practices and yet is both dispersed and constituted by power relations. Subjects make a double move of constituting themselves through deliberate acts and arts while recognizing how they are being constituted by discourse.

Structures in power relations with the subject are embedded in our daily lives in insidious, sometimes invisible ways that can be harmful to women. Butler (1990/1999) explained that the task of poststructuralist feminism is to “formulate within [a] constituted frame a critique

of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize” (p. 8). Through their reading and writing and sisterly relations, the women in my study critiqued and revised identity categories, circumventing entrenched binary oppositions. With these practices, they wrote new ways of being Southern women into existence and actively resisted or re-imagined the old ideals.

Social constructionists like Vivien Burr (1995), Brian Fay (1987), and Joan Scott (1991) explained that subjects are socially constructed and culturally, historically contingent. As Robert Scholes (1985) asserted, “If human beings are constituted differently in different cultural situations” (p. 13), then their subjectivities are unmistakably stamped by contingencies of location and time and the forces of cultural institutions. Few cultures emphasize place, history, and social convention more zealously than does the American South. To examine the Southern female subject and the ways in which patriarchal structures constrain this self and determine the identities available to her, we must also question, as Foucault (1984/1991b) argued, how we are “constituted as subjects of our own knowledge, . . . as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations. . . [and who are] constituted as moral subjects of our own actions” (p. 49).

Care of the Self and Southern Subjectivity

In his ethical analysis, care of the self, Foucault (1983/1991, 1984/1987, 1984/1990a, 1984/1988, 2004) examined Hellenistic and Roman emphasis on striving to create life as a work of art, treating the self as an object of knowledge and the subject of one’s ethical responsibility. Practicing transformative arts of existence followed a deliberate choice to create an ethical self or subject living a beautiful life as defined by the culture. In fact, in this ancient ethic, “the self [becomes] the definitive and sole aim of the care of the self. . . . One is one’s own object and end” (Foucault, 2004, p. 177). To care for “the soul as subject” (Foucault, 2004, p. 57), the

Greco-Romans adopted rigorous programs intended to improve and examine the self, which they likened to intensive athletic training. They read and reread, kept notes on wisdom gathered from books or conversation, and wrote letters that proffered advice for others caring for the self while helping the writer rehearse her own preparedness for whatever life presented. Writing and reading were vital, valued self-formative practices, as were friendship relations, in which friends assisted and educated each other in a project of mutual cultivation and liberation.

Care of the self required constant creative labor, and Foucault (2004) made it clear that the ethic, from its early Platonic incarnations, advocated practices of the self, not practices of self-centeredness. In fact, caring for one's relations with oneself demands arduous work, stringent discipline, concerted effort to make of one's life beautiful art, and a deliberate choice to practice as a dedicated artisan of the self. Rather than seeking to uncover and rediscover a lost self, the subject constantly undergoes reconstitution through social interaction and the arts one performs to elaborate subjectivity. In both its ancient and contemporary applications, care of the self did not and does not connote self-absorption, but instead denotes a socially predicated ethic to know and care for the self and others because "the person who takes care of [herself] properly . . . will at the same time know how to fulfill [her] duties as part of the human community" (p. 197). Care of the self requires art and skill in individual examination in conjunction with collaborative effort.

For the ancients and for the women I interviewed, "the self is not merely given but is constituted in relationship to itself as subject" (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 372). Approaching the self as artisans with the power and ability to shape, craft, and hone the subject, we may daily "make ourselves anew in fresh formulations" (Hutton, 1988, p. 134). As St. Pierre (2004) explained, "The subject itself is a *construction*, a product of curiosity, imagination, and desire.

But therein lies our freedom, the freedom to problematize who we are and then think of who we might become” (p. 346). In this freedom, the women in my study employed the texts they read and created and the sisterhood they fostered to problematize who they are and to imagine what they might become. In talking and writing about their readings together and collectively questioning representations of identities attached to Southern women, they relished the liberty to “invent forms of experience other than the ones previously prescribed” (Rajchman, 1985, p. 37).

Literary Conversations and Cultural Conventions

Approaching the texts of Southern women writers, my participants brought their constituted experience in the contemporary South to the transaction. They met there the familiar—places and people they recognized in all of their imperfections and glories. As Richardson (1997) noted, “We are restrained and limited by the kinds of cultural stories available to us” (p. 2). We may even be constituted by those stories that seem so grounded in place. Certainly, we experience “the evocative nature of place in the formation of identity” (Gwin, 2002, p. 88). In my study, Southern women reading Southern women engaged in “vigorous conversations” (Booth, 2000, p. 351) about gender and region, female experience and identity formation.

Contesting identities the culture has traditionally assigned women, the participants in my study joined a spirited dialogue in progress. Scholarship on Southern women’s literary traditions and current concerns thrives, notably in the work of Mary Louise Weaks (2002), Mary Louise Weaks and Carolyn Perry (2000), Anne Goodwyn Jones (1982, 1984, 2002, 2004), Susan Donaldson (1993, 1997), Bettina Entzminger (2002), Patricia Yaeger (1988, 1997, 2000), Peggy Prenshaw (1984a, 1997, 2002), Carol Manning (1993a, 2002). While criticism of Southern letters by conservative white Southern men flourished in most of the twentieth century, first with the

Agrarians and then with the influential New Critics, scholarship by Southern feminists on Southern women's writing has emerged as a vital body of literary criticism only in the last thirty years. In chapter two, I review the literature critiquing the imaginative texts that spoke so compellingly to my participants and to me, considering where we entered these vigorous critical and cultural conversations.

As women in the contemporary South, my participants inevitably engaged the "intense and always unending negotiations [that define] gender within the region" (Jones & Donaldson, 1997, p. 6). In a region where womanhood "seems so difficult to control," the need for troubling gender constructs becomes particularly compelling because, given "Southern dichotomous logic, gender in the South has traditionally been. . . even more constrictively defined and polarized than elsewhere in American culture" (p. 6). Even now, the South remains "an excessively gendered culture" (p. 7). Given their region and the contingencies of twentieth-century life in this place, the women in my study faced the contradictory and repressive "ideal of southern womanhood [that] still flourishes as a dangerous force in southern culture" (Godwin as cited in Flora & MacKethan, 2002, p. 968).

Perry and Weaks (2002) asserted that "Southern womanhood is a concept laden with symbolism. . . and with the need of southern culture to justify its actions to itself and to the outside world" (p. 430). The white woman as a laden symbol of a vanishing civilization was pressed into service and forced to stand for the South itself throughout the nineteenth century. In a region where myths of the virtuous, self-sacrificing white Southern lady and the iconic belle linger still as ideals of the white female subject, the women in my study found much to confront and reject or rewrite. Grappling with these impossible ideals and marking the distance between

the images and their own realities, my participants troubled traditional concepts of what Southern women should be and deconstructed the old myths.

Southern women's writing often implicitly or explicitly exposes and questions the structures that shape the culture, particularly as they discipline women. Perhaps this persistent literary troubling of powerful patriarchal discourse accounts, in part, for the intensity of my participants' reactions to the books we shared. My students are often in a time in their lives ripe for questioning and testing the limits imposed on female subjectivity, which may contribute to the passion with which they read these texts for our course. Through their literary practices and friendships, participants resisted the patriarchal fabrication and imposition of impossibly paradoxical, symbolic identities for Southern women.

While feminist scholars have critiqued Southern women's writing with eloquence and insight in recent decades, little research has been conducted that focuses on how Southern women readers use these texts, perhaps employing them as self-formative technologies. My study on contemporary Southern women reading Southern women writers addresses this oversight. I argue that the women who participated in my study became skilled artisans who used texts by and about Southern women and the sisterly relations they fostered to craft themselves as ethical subjects with empowered ways of being in their culture. Foucault (2004) contended that the guiding question must be, "What shall we do so that the self becomes and remains what it ought to be?" (p. 178). In their reading and writing and relations, the young white Southern women in my study engaged that question in all its fruitful complexities.

Personal Entanglements

Throughout this research, I remained keenly aware that I must look closely toward my own entanglements: I, too, am a white Southern woman navigating identities the culture imposes

while constructing my own subjectivity. I, too, studied modern Southern literature in a Southern women's college with other outspoken Southern women. I, too, grew up in the deep South, but unlike my participants I spent most of my twenties outside the South, returning with a deep ambivalence about home place. I, too, feel the seductive resonance of these texts. I have spent most of my academic and professional careers reading and writing and talking about them, so I came to this research already part of it, inextricably implicated. I proclaim no masculinist, positivist impartiality here.

As a feminist researcher, I contend with the double bind of being both an insider and an outsider because “a feminist interviewing women is by definition both ‘inside’ the culture and participating in that which she is observing” (Oakley, 1981, p. 57) while being outside the dominant culture. In this research, I found that double bind doubled and doubled again because not only was I an inside outsider as a feminist conducting research, but I was also, like my participants, a white Southern woman reading Southern women and writing about them as a practice of the self. Here, our positions “double upon themselves, and in the doubling double again, amending but never taking back” (Welty, 1949/1977, p. 265).

Given my complicity and my affection for these women, I approached efforts at representing them and their ideas with trepidation and a fervent desire to treat them truthfully and respectfully. I wanted to articulate their uniqueness adequately and vividly enough to do them justice, but knowing that was impossible, I wrote with a goal of honoring my participants' trust and candor in talking with me about something as important as the ongoing creation of the self. As Judith Priessle (2007) explained, “In representing their participants, [researchers] are also representing themselves and facets of themselves that they share with the participants. Similarity and difference merge, and the ethics of research become the ethics of everyday life”

(p. 527). Such a convergence has infused my project as I strove to represent us honestly and ethically. Realizing the limitations and complications of such an effort, I understand that I have only limned the complexities, hinted at the possibilities of the case at hand.

And I remain ineluctably entangled—with the texts, with the women, with the place.

Significance of this Study

In this report, I took care not to romanticize what happens for some women in the Southern literature course because I am certain that over the ten years of my teaching it every other year, dozens of women walked away unmoved, unscathed. This fact was brought home to me during the course of this study when I taught the course again, expecting the old magic to transform the classroom—and nothing happened. Maybe a few women were affected, but many seemed indifferent, so that disappointing experience was a valuable lesson for me in just how extraordinary and rare the transformational moments are when they do occur. Long after this study ends, I will continue to wonder and write about what mysterious magic happens when Southern women read Southern women as a practice of the self.

I believe this study to be significant because it examines how literature helps us interpret our culture and question the subject positions we come to occupy, exploring in this case the lived experience of young white Southern women and their use of texts to care for the self. The research will, I hope, contribute to the fields of feminist literary studies, Southern studies, and studies in the teaching of literature, particularly at the points where these disciplines converge in their concerns with subjectivity as shaped by region and gender. Employing Foucault's ethical analysis, care of the self, to theorize how participants used literary texts in self-constitutive practices offered a rich and nuanced way to approach the data and helped me suggest how textual transactions can "fold [us] into the world in a new way" (Gwin, 2002, p. 52). This study

highlights the unmapped space where Southern women readers work, folded into the world anew.

On the Porch

You'll have to write a definition of our porchin'—in a preface maybe. -Phoenix

We developed a regular ritual—we'd all gather on that shady side porch and talk about our day, have a drink maybe or a cigarette, talk about books or politics, laugh, and, most important, tell stories about ourselves or things that had happened to us or somebody we knew. Everything became a story. Sometimes we'd sit out there until after midnight, just talking. We really bonded by porchin'. -Amelia

Maybe that's what porchin' is—a spiritual ritual. Because you're purging and you're taking in, and it's all natural. But that's kind of what porchin' is—the church of the South. -Lydia

Some of the most important conversations of my life took place on porches. -Amelia

I think being on the porch, especially with other women, we're all okay with it not being either in or out or maybe both. And it's a sense of acceptance. You don't have to choose. You don't have to choose in or out. You can just be there. -Phoenix

The porch almost has that mythic, Joseph Campbell-type feel, like it just *is*. -Zelda

Our entry into the labyrinth? -Debra

Describing the American South as she imagined it after reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Janice Radway (1997) called it “a world where ladies rocked on porches and sipped cool water” (p. 347). What Radway failed to invoke is the vital art those women practiced—and still practice—from their rocking chairs on the porch: conversation. They talked with each other. And together they reacted to the world around them by spinning stories of their own experiences, relating tales told them, often by other women, and framing collaborative interpretations. In the pre-air-conditioned South, a chance to cool off in oppressive heat afforded women an opportunity to talk with neighbors, family, and friends. Sometimes it gave them a quiet moment

alone to think, but more likely it offered a comfortable place to work, shelling peas, stringing beans, shucking corn, piecing quilts.

Women in rocking chairs still engage in what students in my Southern literature course called *porchin'*—and never with the *g* intact. They invented this verb, dropped the *g*, and gave it a Southern accent to describe a way of communal meaning making among women that they wanted to reclaim and reinvent. In their usage, the concept of *porchin'* encompasses much more than rocking with a cool drink, although it might include that, too: *porchin'* denotes a reconnection among women that my students found essential to exploring the self in relations with place, others, and self. On the liminal porch, they developed a space in which a sense of sisterhood flourished, enabling them to take risks together and speak truths, even the painful and personal ones. Here, they also celebrated mutual discovery with joy.

In this refreshing and open space, the women crafted collective interpretations of texts and shared stories of lived experience, equipping each other with wisdom and courage for whatever life might bring. The act of *porchin'* became a touchstone for the women who invented the term, and *porchin'* remained a compelling concept for subsequent students. Our classroom became a place for *porchin'* as we read texts that depict Southern women seeking the self while also grappling with identities culturally constructed for them. Interpreting texts by or about Southern women and creating their own texts, the women read and wrote to “make sense of their world” (Scholes, 1985, p. 15)—in this case, a still-distinctive culture in a rapidly changing region.

I employ the liminality of the porch in this text, both thematically and structurally, treating it as a space where the women can “speak the language of shared experience, revealing themselves as they talk. . . , constructing a joint narrative” (Spacks, 1986, p. 3). I intend the

porch inside/outside this text to function as it does as in our classroom, in a space akin to Homi Bhabba's (as cited in Faust, Cockill, Hancock, & Isserstedt, 2005) third space, a "'place of agency and intervention' within which new identities are fashioned out of concepts that were once understood to exist in binary opposition to each other" (p. 45). On the porch, I offer observations from participants without commentary and with minimal editing, hoping to let their voices speak out as directly as I can manage, understanding that I bear "the burden of authorship" (Geertz, 1988, p. 138) in my selection, arrangement, and positioning of their words inside/outside this text. In the space of freedom on the porch, however, I hope we might witness something of their readerly sisterhood, an enabling condition born of and made possible by the women's textual practices of the self.

While the porch has traditionally played a visible role in Southern culture for an obvious reason, heat, it also carries a more complicated set of symbolic associations. In fact, for "as long as they could remember, Southerners had been struggling to stay cool...[by] fighting the heat with dogtrots, breezeways, galleries, piazzas, porticoes, and plain old porches—and in the process developing an elaborate set of social rituals and practices to go with them" (Dolan, 2002, pp. 198-199). My participants invented their own disruptive porch rituals and practices, talking texts in the company of women. They continued "the conversations of humankind" (Vine & Faust, 1993, p. 134) in women's voices, spoken from female perspectives, and with fictional women at the center of the dialogue. Their porchin' rituals radiated from a female center and employed the transformative threshold of the porch space. Here, the women generated a different kind of heat than that usually escaped on the porch: the fire in the mind.

Tangibly, the porch serves "as a vital transition between the uncontrollable out-of-doors and the cherished interior of the home" (Price, 1992, p. 1). But beyond marking the boundary

between the outer world and the domestic, between the community and the individual, the porch acts as a threshold where transformations may occur. On this threshold, we can cross from one state into another. In fact, “socially, politically, and psychologically significant, the porch is a charged transitional space between. . . spheres,. . . a ‘liminal’ space” (Donlon, 2001, p. 13). In such a charged space, the women in my study practiced transformative care of the self, working texts and reworking gendered identities. Donlon explained the liminality of the porch:

“Limen” is Latin for “threshold”; thus, liminality is an “in-betweenness,” a condition that allows a person participating in a ritual performance to disrupt traditional norms and expectations to enter—sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently—a state that is “neither here nor there” (Turner 232). Liminality is thus a “gap between ordered worlds,” where individuals during the ritual process, are “liberated from normative demands” by being ambiguously situated between, not within, social systems. (pp. 13-14)

In their disruptive, ritual performances of porchin’ with texts and with each other, my participants engaged this liberatory liminality to constitute themselves as they wished. And “because porches allow for a renegotiation of the rules, new. . . relationships can be created” (Donlon, p. 15). On the porch, the women joined together to rewrite the rules and enrich their relations with each other and the books they shared.

In fact, “Southern porches have been and will continue to be vital settings for the construction of cultural identity” (Donlon, 2001, p. 25). In this case, the women in my study claimed the porch as a transitional space where they were free to construct new subjectivities together and resist the old identities designed for them. And Southern porches are “still sites where identity politics get played out” (Donlon, p. 159), where “individuals, if they are able to seize power, can create an identity” (p. 27). The women in my study used their porchin’ as a

means of reclaiming power and inventing new selves. Beckham (1988) argued that the liminal porch is a specifically feminine space and a place where women can and do seize power. Here, my participants wielded their considerable powers of self-formation.

Sometimes the porch can provide a “‘constant, gentle, and predictable’ space of healing. It can even be a place of spiritual revelation for those who are inclined” (Donlon, 2001, p. 167). The liminal porch can be a place for revelatory arts where “interpretation [becomes] a communal act, serving the collective subjectivity” (Bleich, 1975, p. 95). I witnessed such revelatory moments with the women in my study, and I hope in the porchin’ space constructed inside/outside this text to let the women’s words hint at the collective and individual subjectivities they nurtured there in a spirit of unity and sisterhood. By sometimes situating the women, and occasionally myself, on the liminal porch, I try to invoke their voices as they practiced transformative arts of existence together.

On the Porch

There’s a sense of freedom on the porch. You feel like maybe you can really talk about a lot of things there. –Rachel

I’ve always struggled with [Southern identity]. I’ve always loved the South in a way. I mean, I like Southern things, I love Southern people. I like porches. I like sweet tea. I like the closeness of nature. But I also have a deep resentment for all the issues with slavery and all the religious hypocrisy and overkill on the God stuff. –Zelda

I always feel that urge to go, to do something, but then I can’t imagine leaving, going somewhere else. I struggle with that—sometimes I want to leave the South. But then there’s something about it—it’s nurturing and it’s home and the stories, and the idea of leaving is exciting, but then what if they don’t understand my stories? What if the porchin’ isn’t there? –Lydia

CHAPTER 2
ACCOUNTABLE TO COMPLEXITY:
THEORETICAL AND LITERARY FRAMEWORKS

Introduction

In this chapter I review the body of feminist literature that critiques Southern women's writing, examining constructions and deconstructions of white Southern womanhood. I first describe the mythos surrounding women as imagined by the patriarchy dominant in the culture and then consider how women have redefined Southern literature, reclaiming marginalized writers and re-visioning Southern women's writing. I then move from Southern feminist writers and critics to the poststructural feminist theory that informs my work. Poststructural feminists lead me to Foucault and his analysis, care of the self. In that discussion, I review Foucault's explanation of how he came to the Greek ethic as his final analytic, outline his concepts of the four dimensions of *epimeleia heautou* in treating the self as an ethical subject, and describe the arts of existence employed to care for the self. I then turn specifically to the case at hand: Southern women reading Southern women as a practice of the self. As part of my own feminist writing practice, I introduce each scholar by her first name as well as her last name on first reference in order to offer clues about gender. I also feminize pronouns throughout my text, regardless of original usage.

Construction and Deconstruction of White Southern Womanhood

On the Porch

So what you find in the South—it is a construction. We do create a memory of the South. We do create which South we want to. —Deirdre

And you see that maybe the image of the Southern woman hasn't been true all along. Maybe it's just what people want you to think we're supposed to be. And I don't think any of us have ever been that woman, I would argue! –Cassie

Breaking up the idols of the old order is usually the first step for the artist of the new.
- Seidel, 1985, p. xiv

It's the power of the word! –Rachel

Before reviewing the literature on the macro- and mid-level theoretical frameworks I employed in my research project and before moving more fully into this particular study, it is important to review the construction of the subject, white Southern woman, because that gendered identity construct foregrounds, in complicated ways, much of the conversation to follow. We must confront the mythos of white Southern womanhood before we can dispel it. And the myths associated with Southern women linger with surprising tenacity. Following is a summary of critiques of the impossible identities constructed—and powerfully enforced—for women in the South.

While tracing origins is a dicey task, especially with something as slippery as the identities constructed for Southern women, we must examine the structures that traditionally generated and imposed debilitating limits and absurd demands on women before we consider the ways in which women subvert these expectations, often through writing. We must ask who controlled the discourse and dictated the narratives of femininity. The rigidly structured, if hard to control, gender identities in the South were a product of the white patriarchy that dominated—and still dominates—the culture where the white Southern lady was invented not just to epitomize domesticity but to represent a region. These gendered “constructions took a prominent place in antebellum proslavery ideology” (Donaldson & Jones, 1997, p. 2) because through them wealthy white men justified and enforced the systems of subjugation they required to maintain

their culture. In fact, “the notions of feminine decorum and limitation are designed, not to protect women, but to control them and ensure their continued usefulness to men” (Entzminger, 2002, p. 7).

Feminist writers and poststructural theorists vigorously contest the cultural constitution of gendered roles that require unstinting obedience and are constructed and enforced with condescension and contempt. Jones (2002) explained the dichotomous gender constructs employed by the slaveocracy to subjugate women:

The genders not only differed from one another: they were mythical opposites. Men dominated, women submitted to their “lords and masters.” Men thought and were educated to reason and to lead; women felt and were educated to beautify and to follow. The oppositions did not differ radically from those of Western tradition generally, but they were implanted more profoundly and enforced with more power because of slavery. . . . Women, like children, slaves of both sexes, and dim-witted or lunatic men occupied a lower, inferior rank. Like children, slaves, and madmen, then, women could be trained only to the limits of their capacity. Therefore the primary lesson for them had to be obedience. (p. 277)

The lingering ironies and dangers of this discourse are not lost on contemporary Southern feminist scholars, writers, and readers. The conflicts inherent in the myths echo through the twenty-first century, so that contemporary Southern women continue their struggles with such dangerous positions. While female identities designed to serve a slave-holding society might seem irrelevant in the twenty-first century, I argue that the participants in my research—and the writers they read—still grappled with these problematic gender constructs. Recognition is a first step toward resistance, as the women in my study reminded me often. Acts of resistance and

rebellion require recognition of how Southern women find themselves positioned by the society's dominant structures as other and inferior. Troubling binary oppositions becomes directly or indirectly a project of these writers and readers. Mab Segrest (1995/2000) argued that we must practice "imagining and visioning ourselves out of patriarchally prescribed roles that depend for their power on oppression of the Other" (p. 362). To re-imagine and re-vision the identity roles prescribed for those on the wrong side of the binaries, women writers and their feminist critics confront the loaded stereotypes of Southern women that persist in literature and popular culture, "cling[ing] with a potent tenacity" (Francisco, Vaughan & Francisco, 2001, p. 1163).

All feminist scholars in Southern literary studies deal in some way with the impossible and disturbingly persistent images of Southern womanhood fabricated by the South's ruling class. Peggy Prenshaw (1984a) argued that "rarely does the Southern woman of fact or fiction ignore the region's old binding stereotypes" (p. viii). African-American women have been stereotyped as mammies, jezebels, or tragic mulattas, while white women have been represented as the iconic belle or that epitome of "pedestalized femininity" (Cobb, 2005, p. 133), the Southern lady. Southern women writers and readers face, sometimes indirectly, the implications of these mythologized female figures that Margaret Walker (1992/1995) lamented as the "set of stereotypes from which the literature has yet to free itself" (p. 29).

However, despite their long endurance, these stereotypes of women stand on slippery literary ground. "In general, because writing required or produced some degree of consciousness, some slippage between myth and person, [modern Southern women] writers... offered resistance to the mythology" (Jones, 2002, p. 281). As Donaldson (1997) noted, "For even though [masculinist] southern literature has long been marked by its project of imposing boundaries and

exclusions—and by the gender and racial anxieties prompting the project—[it]...has also been marked by the slippages, disruptions, and battles in literary texts inevitably resulting from the imposition of those boundaries” (p. 493). It is in this area of slippage and disruption that feminist critics and writers and readers find fertile ground for reworking the patriarchal myths that have traditionally confined and constricted Southern women. In subsequent chapters, I describe how the women in my study worked this slippage in their own textual practices.

In the afterward to the second edition of her classic study, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930*, Anne Firor Scott (1970/1995) said her intent was to destabilize the “old narratives” and document

the existence of a wide gap between the image of the “southern lady” and the reality of women’s day-to-day lives. [The first edition] suggested that the whole edifice of pro-slavery thought rested on the theory of patriarchy and on the belief that women and slaves were happy in their place within the hierarchy. For this reason the profound discontent women felt as they tried in vain to live up to the expectations the image put upon them, their unhappiness with the actual experience of their own lives and with the institution of slavery, constituted a danger to the whole system. (p. 272)

The dangerous gap between the ideals constructed for Southern women and the realities of their lives often informed their writing in ways that endangered the dominant order. Manning (2002) noted that in the early twentieth century, “given the pervasiveness in the South of the southern belle and southern lady as ideals of southern womanhood, questioning the status quo—even privately—could not have come easily to southern women. Yet many did feel intensely the discrepancy between the conventional female role, so exaggerated in the South, and their

enlarged desires” (p. 244). And many dared through writing to threaten the very systems that enforced this discrepancy by pursuing their own desires.

Jones (1982) explained origins of ideals imposed on Southern woman:

As an image, southern womanhood has been the crown of Dixie at least since the early nineteenth century. Roughly interchangeable with the image of the southern lady or (for the young unmarried) that of the southern belle, southern womanhood was born in the imaginations of white slaveholding men. Thus southern womanhood was linked directly to fundamental southern questions of race, class, and sex, and. . . ‘revealed more about the needs of the white planters than about the actual lives of women, white or black.’ (p. 8)

The rigidly constructed identities inflicted on them by wealthy white men denied white women their “enlarged desires” and made impossible versions of themselves that they saw as authentic, forcing the women into roles that restricted and objectified them. Many women explored the distance between their culturally dictated roles and their own desires through their writing, “demythologizing...the cult of southern womanhood and, by extension, of the southern hero and southern traditions” (Manning, 2002, p. 247). Such demythologizing becomes a dangerous business because it exposes the mythic discourse and threatens the systems reifying it.

Images of Southern womanhood derived, of course, from Western European patriarchal traditions but took on a particularly tenacious form in the South. In a “slaveocracy,” white male planters and their supporters used the image of a chaste and idolized white lady to justify their system of subjugating black men and used the image of an insatiable black jezebel to justify their subjugation and violation of black women. Southern patriarchy invented these archetypes to rationalize, defend, and advance its slave system, constructing demeaning identities for black

women and paradoxical ideals for white women. The ideal white Southern woman was to be meek and obedient, beautiful and self-sacrificing, and above all, sexually pure. Not only was this woman to personify perfection, she was meant to represent the region itself in both its prelapsarian form (as envisioned by the patriarchy inventing the myth) and also in its fallen, defeated state. This was as impossible for the women as their culture insisted it was necessary.

Jones (1982) described the lingering distinctiveness and impossibility of identity roles the South cast for its women:

Efforts to join person and personification, to make self into symbol, must fail because the idea of southern womanhood specifically denies the self. In that, southern womanhood is not alone. . . , [having much in common] with the British Victorian lady and. . . American true womanhood. All deny to women authentic selfhood; all enjoin that women suffer and be still; all show women sexually pure, pious, deferent to external authority, and content with their place in the home. Yet southern womanhood differs. . . [in that] unlike [the other women], the southern lady is at the core of a region's self-definition; the identity of the South is contingent in part upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady. . . . Perhaps, for that reason, the ideal of southern womanhood seems to have lasted longer. (p. 4)

Indeed, this ideal lingers today, as witnessed by the women I interviewed. Southern women's writing from the mid-nineteenth century to the present has dealt, purposefully or tangentially, with the paradox of this tenacious stereotype. As Florence King (1993) remarked, "The angel in the house simply will not leave. . . . The Southern woman's problem with the virtuous image has been intensified by constant articulation" (pp. 46-47).

Perhaps the most surprising thing about this impossible paradox is its persistence today. “The oxymoronic ideal of the woman made of steel yet masked in fragility” endures; this image of “southern womanhood has appeared as an element in the ideology of every period in southern history” (Jones, 1982, p. 13). Not just a Civil War or antebellum trope, the iconic Southern lady haunts the twentieth century and its writers. In the Agrarian manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*, John Crowe Ransom (as cited in Westling, 1985) stated the masculinist Southern perspective of women clearly: “The feminine form is likewise hallowed among us under the name of Service. The term has many meanings, but we come finally to the one which is critical for the moderns; service means the function of Eve, it means the seducing of laggard men into fresh struggles with nature” (p. 15). And, of course, what good Southern lady wants to be accused of shirking her Edenic duty, refusing her sacred service, even if it means profaning her hallowed feminine form? The Agrarian demand that women selflessly seduce “laggard men” to fight brutal and feminized nature illustrates the implied hostility and patent absurdity of the position.

In the twenty-first century, this image of the white Southern lady persists and exerts material effects but remains under continual contestation from feminist writers and critics. Louise Westling (1985) explained an intrinsic problem with the mythos of Southern womanhood: “the truth is that the patriarchy of the South never really liked or fully believed in its custom-made goddess. The white southern male might offer her ecstatic toasts or use her as a divine reference point, but he also betrayed a paradoxical condescension which sometimes revealed hostility or contempt” (p. 17). Given the secret masculinist dislike masked by public worship of the “custom-made goddess” and the power and endurance of her image, perhaps it should be no surprise that women in the South still find themselves refuting the iconic figure and the contemptuous—and absurd—expectations forced upon her. This conflicted space between

socially dictated roles and the inner life proves to be fertile fictional ground for contemporary Southern women writers and readers as they reject the goddess and reinvent the myths she haunts.

While the Southern lady as dutiful angel of the house and sacrificial mother lives at the center of the mythos of Southern womanhood, its most famous figure remains the nubile, unmarried belle. Feminist scholars (e.g., Entzminger, 2002; Gwin 1986; Jones, 2002; Roberts, 1994, 1999; Scott, 1970/1995; Seidel, 1985, 2002) critically examine the role—and evolution—of the Southern belle in modern fiction. The belle makes her debut in John Pendleton Kennedy’s (1832) *Swallow Barn*, enters a fierce adulthood and masters a new South in *Gone with the Wind* (Mitchell, 1936/1974), and memorably disintegrates in the modern world in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Williams, 1947/1974). She has populated countless paperback romances, flirted her way through dozens of films, and still manages to dominate as a cultural icon. Scarlett O’Hara, the quintessential belle and arguably the most famous woman in twentieth-century American literature, remains an internationally recognizable emblem of Southern woman—of a certain race, class, and temperament. Thousands of tourists from all over the world visit Atlanta every year in search of a Tara that never was. As Nina Baym (as cited in Bennett, 1998) asserted, “‘The fact that a myth is a myth—that is, a falsehood—does not mean that it lacks power. And if it has power, then it has real—this is, material—effects’” (p. 109).

A recent online search of Amazon.com, for example, revealed that the belle still exerts a contradictory power—with very real material effects—despite some feminists’ hope that she is dead or, at least, dying. Books for sale included: *What the Southern Woman Knows (That Every Woman Should): Timeless Secrets to Get Everything You Want in Love, Life, and Work* (Rich, 2000), *The Southern Belle Primer: Or Why Paris Hilton Will Never Be a Kappa Kappa Gamma*

(Schwartz, 2006), *Hell's Belles: A Tribute to the Spitfires, Bad Seeds, & Steel Magnolias* (Ballenger, 1997), and *We're Just Like You, Only Prettier: Confessions of a Tarnished Southern Belle* (Rivenbark, 2005). As this lists attests, the myth lives and transforms itself in sometimes troubling and mystifying incarnations to fit new eras.

The symbolic significance of the belle shifts according to who tells her story and when and why. Kathryn Seidel (as cited in Bennett, 1998) explained that

[the belle is the] “central metaphor” for the South: the “pure flower of an ‘Edenic Garden’ that has been devastated by war and Reconstruction.” The belle was placed on a pedestal because men made her the objective correlative for the ideals of the South. Of course, this image would be impossible for any living woman to exemplify, and in the early twentieth century, “critical modern writers use the darker side of the belle—the repressed narcissism, etc.—to indict the Old South or to describe the New.” (p. 110)

Feminists read in modern and contemporary women’s writing cautionary tales about the dangerous central emblem in the gender-geography myths. Prenshaw (as cited in Bennett, 1998) argued of the belle that “the image is damaging to the mind and life of every woman who lives in a society with such a stereotype held up as the ideal: ‘what stands revealed. . . is the enormous psychic cost to women of a role absurdly inconsistent with life, and yet rigidly defined and extolled with religious fervor’” (p. 109). The stereotype still exerts material power, despite the damage it inflicts.

Remarking the tenacity of the damaging and divisive icons of white Southern womanhood in fiction and culture, Donna Tartt (1999) contended, “Both Lady and Belle are so popular as extreme types because they are forced to operate subtly, with their hands tied behind their backs, and in their proper places” (p. 100). So perhaps it is their power to resist and subvert

their roles, despite harsh repression and against all odds, that may account for their longevity. These figures also remain popular because of the constant articulation that King (1993) bemoaned—and perpetuated. As the myths are rearticulated, their symbolic associations move in doubled directions. In fact, “the belle is still a symbol of the Old South, but now she is also a symbol for the cultural obstacles standing in the way of progress for women, specifically, of the myth that southern white women are frail, uneducated, naïve, dependent, and sexually repressed” (Bennett, 1998, p. 110). Paradoxical expectations associated with the belle continue, however, as she is frequently depicted in popular culture as a powerful figure with secret ways of knowing that supersede those of mortal women. As those titles of books currently for sale suggest, the belle now tends to represent women who are sexually potent but appear innocent and who are powerful but appear dependent on men. She must be masterful at flirtatious manipulation while remaining virginal—or so the doubling goes. And so the myth goes.

Modern Southern women’s feminist writing reveals the “incongruity—with the contrast between the official mythology and the daily reality. . . . Being a survivor in a society that still assumes a southern white woman should be virtuous, nurturing, and helpless, requires first acknowledging the past and its mythology and then reacting against it” (Bennett, 1998, p. 109). In reacting against the myths of Southern womanhood, feminist critics and writers and readers rewrite the central female figures, altering their purpose and recasting them. One way in which we see this demythologizing in modern Southern women’s writing occurs through reappropriations of an iconoclastic figure that Entzminger (2002) called “the belle gone bad,” a doppelganger for her simpering belle sister. She explained that “the bad belle is a type of femme fatale—sexually knowing, physically powerful because of her allure, and morally dangerous” (p. 3). Bad belles in the early part of the twentieth century often parodied “their society’s conception

of women who have stepped beyond proscribed roles...and [acted] as vehicles for social criticism” (p. 7).

Entzminger’s (2002) interpretations of these figures drew on Butler’s (1993) theories of performativity and parody. In performing the regulatory fiction of the archetypal belle, the bad belle emphasizes the artifice of the patriarchal construction of the belle figure. Paraphrasing Butler, Entzminger explained, “By exposing the performance, [the bad belle] exposes and challenges the strategies used to maintain a patriarchal power structure, wresting and reasserting gender identity on different terms” (p. 8). Further, “the femme fatale out-womans woman on the surface, and underneath she out-mans men. In doing so, the southern femme fatale, the bad belle, challenges and parodies her society’s negative conceptions of powerful women and highlights the hypocrisies and weaknesses of the society that imposes limiting roles on its women” (p. 8). By subverting the iconic belle through this potent parody, Southern women writers today question the culture that created the original figure and reject the structures that enforce the stereotype, suggesting new subjectivities.

Jones (2002) pondered the fate of constructions of the belle and white Southern lady in the contemporary South and in its literature:

Where the myths of southern womanhood coalesced in constructing a divided, hierarchical, and dependent view of human relations, southern women writers imagined alternatives that broke boundaries, toppled hierarchies, and led away from dependence. The very act of writing was an act that wrested, out of subjection, new subjectivities. (p. 282)

In wresting new subjectivities from the old symbols, contemporary Southern women writers and readers subvert the myths and rewrite the female figures that inhabit them, opening new worlds of possibility.

Literary Conversations: Southern Women Reading Southern Women

On the Porch

There are still extra pressures to be Martha Stewart or whatever. [laughter] I mean, all things to all people. And appearances matter in a lot of ways. I'm sure Southern women aren't the only women in the nation to suffer the pressure, but I think it's worse here. —Kellie

And think about all the battles the South has had. It's part of the culture that makes sure you feel a battle. It's part of living in the South, and even if you've never seen a real battle, you feel that battle every day. I don't know if men experience that, but I feel it every day. I always feel that battle between what's within and what the culture thinks I should do. —Lydia

The image you get when you think of Southern women—the whole Scarlett O'Hara idea—but when you read about their real lives, it's really eye-opening, especially for those who aren't from the South. But these women aren't just sipping tea on the porch. They are going through hardships and they are having to struggle with life. —Phoenix

The tangled intersections of gender and geography in the American South mark its literature profoundly and distinctively. As Doreen Massey (2005) explained,

The intersections and mutual influences of “geography” and “gender” are deep and multifarious. Each is, in profound ways, implicated in the construction of the other: geography in its various guises influences the cultural formation of particular genders and gender relations; gender has been deeply influential in the production of “the geographical.” (p. 177)

Feminist critics have developed a substantive body of literary analysis in which they examine these multifarious intersections to learn how modern Southern women writers reveal the region's

patriarchal gender constructs through depictions of women who resist the identities prescribed for them, instead envisioning and enacting subjectivities that might be possible.

These writers and critics of their work map daring “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 3), threatening or crossing borders on all sides and challenging the boundaries of gender in a literature traditionally defined by conservative white men. Deleuze and Guattari argued that “writing has. . . to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come” (pp. 4-5). In Deleuze and Guattari’s famous metaphor, the rhizome depicts “a map and not a tracing. . . . The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is. . . susceptible to constant modification” (p. 12). A rhizome “contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, . . . as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight” (p. 9). Lines of flight become “movements of deterritorialization and destratification” (p. 3) that interrupt reified accounts of truth and offer potential directions of freedom. With multiple entryways and points of rupture, the rhizome negates binary thinking. In rhizomatic ruptures, lines of flight erupt in new possibilities where points of multiplicity connect and reconnect.

Southern women writers and readers work the ruptures and map the lines of flight in texts that offer new ways of thinking the subject, Southern woman. In the discussion that follows, I review the feminist criticism that treats Southern women’s writing as a respected body of literature and maps its contours. I examine how these texts take up the project of demythologizing Southern womanhood and resisting the discourse that traces the old myths. In chapters three and four, I consider where my participants and I entered this critical conversation and describe some lines of flight we took.

Given its rich past and robust present, it seems startling that Southern women's writing has only received the attention of literary critics in the last thirty years or so and of feminists in the past twenty. In the wake of Civil Rights' and Women's movements of the 1960s-1970s, critics began to focus on questions of race and gender; however, in the field of Southern literature "it was not until the 1980s. . . that feminist murmurs. . . began to be heard" (Manning, 1993a, p. 2). Not surprisingly, literary studies were also dominated by a Southern patriarchy, first by the Agrarians and Fugitives and then by the extraordinarily powerful New Critics who evolved from their ranks. This masculinist domination began to lose its strength only in recent decades as feminists and reader response theorists altered the Southern literary terrain. Feminist scholars destabilized the canon, retrieving lost voices and critiquing the structures that silenced them. Since then, feminist criticism of Southern women's writing as a body of literature has flourished, moving from murmurs to manifestos to postmodern meditations.

As the editors (Francisco, Vaughan & Francisco, 2001) of a recent anthology of Southern literature noted, "People have long speculated on the reasons for the South's rich and diverse literary heritage, citing influences as disparate as the Civil War and the front porch rocking chair as factors contributing to the significant literary production" (p. xxvi). Whatever the reasons for the South's prolific literary past, its literary present and future lie, many argue, in the hands of women. Whether from the battlefield or the porch,

The voices of contemporary southern women writers—writers such as Doris Betts, Florence King, Lee Smith, Alice Walker, and Rita Mae Brown, as well as southern female critics such as Anne Goodwyn Jones, Lucinda MacKethan, and Peggy Whitman Prenshaw—are strong, stubborn, powerful, and courageous. Their writing has become a vehicle for valuable change, a re-visioning of the past and present—and therefore the

future—transforming the old, patriarchal, white South to a new South seen through the eyes of women of many colors. (Bennett, 2002, p. 446)

While it is virtually impossible to consider one facet of the race-class-gender “trinity” (Ladd as cited in Bone, 2006) that dominates the region’s literature to the exclusion of the others, for the purposes of this research, I focus on critiques of modern and contemporary white Southern women writers, looking at the strategies feminists employ in their reading of the texts. Here, I review the body of feminist criticism that treats Southern women’s writing as a vibrant body of literature, examining how it re-visions Southern literature and envisions thematic concerns anew.

Redefining Southern Literature

It’s hard to articulate the beauty of the place where you’re from. -Cassie

The South is “both an emotional entity and a geographical place.”
-Simpson as cited in Gwin, 2002, p. 88

Feminists working this field today explore an encouragingly diverse range of interests, but they all rethink definitions of Southern literature. In considering what distinguishes Southern literature, feminists depart from the conventional definitions inscribed by the Fugitives and Agrarians, who decreed the essential themes of modern Southern literature: a nostalgia for the past, an obsession with the Civil War coupled with a sense of guilt about slavery and the Lost Cause, and a preoccupation with the rampant, feminized landscape of the South. Donaldson (1993) noted that for (male) writers like Faulkner, Warren, and Tate, Southern literature was “defined in one way or another by its preoccupations with history, traditions, and the boundaries between what is and is *not* Southern” (p. 177). Feminist scholars argue that those concerns are not necessarily relevant or particularly compelling to modern and contemporary Southern women writers. Perry and Weaks (2002) pointed out that, in fact, “this very definition has often

been used to exclude women and African-American writers from the canon of southern literature, and it makes little sense to much contemporary southern literature (p. xiv).

Patricia Yaeger (1997) rejected the masculinist emphasis on the “southern family romance with its mythy fathers, pithy sons, its dim wives and daughters—as these characters were conceived by white males” (p. 287) who preferred “the three *p*’s of southern studies: plantations, patriarchy, and the past” (p. 304). Modern and contemporary Southern women writers and critics still contend with the legacy of the three *p*’s and the reification of an experience dissonant with their own. In other words, the concerns that presumably preoccupy Southern letters are not—and never were—necessarily those of women writers and readers.

On revisions to traditional definitions of Southern literature, Perry and Weak (2002) observed that works by rediscovered women and a

burgeoning crowd of contemporaries [are now] widely taught in classrooms. One result has been revisionist regional history, i.e., in much women’s writing we discover that many southerners are not eternally Civil War-obsessed; they don’t all chew tobacco, hunt varmints, or make moonshine; they’re neither rednecks nor aristocrats; they never owned a verandah or drank a mint julep. (p. 3)

And most women were never belles or angels of the house either. This revisionist history takes into account a multiplicitous South and a body of literature with female experience radiating from its center. We see that “the usual literary motifs historically classified as ‘Southern’ are being modified” (Betts, 1993, p. 267). Kentucky writer Bobbie Ann Mason (as cited in Magee, 1992) said, “I don’t think people I write about are obsessed with the past. I don’t think they know anything about the Civil War, and I don’t think they care” (p. xxiii). What counts as Southern literature has been redefined by women writers, readers, and critics.

Rejecting and rewriting patriarchal definitions of Southern literature, feminists stress that the male experience differs so profoundly from woman's that his terms and interests cannot limit the female experience or bound her creations. Betts (1993) argued that "women in the same latitude heard in the kitchen less of battles or emancipation, more of fevers and bastard babies and deathbed sayings" (p. 274). Southern women's literature "follows a different trajectory from men's, in ways that are linked inextricably to women's specific experiences and relationships in the South, and to the ideological constructions of the defeated South" (Helen Taylor as cited in Rowe, 2002, p. 624). Southern women writers confront those constructs, deconstructing the patriarchal desires that built them.

For modern women writers, thematic concerns and narrative choices rely less on inherited guilt and lingering fantasies about a romanticized past and "much more on the reclaiming of one's voice, one's citizenship in the South" (Tate, 2002, p. 491). While it would be reductive to generalize too confidently about such a diverse range of texts, many feminist critics suggest that Southern women's writing as a body of literature deals more with the personal and less with the parade of history, more with women's constituted experience and less with patriarchal myth. Southern women's fiction and autobiographical writings often emphasize the central significance of communities of women, sometimes in the midst of a re-visioned landscape. The work of many modern and contemporary Southern women explores the interior life and questions of female subjectivity. Of their texts, Prenshaw (1997) said, "One discovers a rich cultural record of the constraints and tensions attending upon an effort to maintain connection with community and family while enacting a self that struggles to locate a separate life and find a personal voice" (p. 461). This struggle for self in the midst of relations became a vital concern for the women in my study.

Rather than looking back, like the Agrarians, on a South that never was with sentimental longing, women writers look back and witness a different reality. They tend to focus more on a dynamic present, often suggesting a future ripe with possibility. That is not to say, however, that these texts are all necessarily optimistic. In rethinking what Southern literature is, feminist critics and writers refuse narrow masculinist definitions and preoccupations. Instead, they put female experience and subjectivity firmly at the center of their work, resisting the stereotypes and remapping the margins imposed on them by the South's patriarchal literary and cultural traditions. Modern Southern women writers and readers experience a different consciousness of "the past in the present" (Tate as cited in Flora & MacKethan, 2002, p. 979) than did the men who declared that a "backward glance" (p. 979) to a vanished civilization was the central concern in Southern literature. However, women writers' backward glances reveal contradictory realities and disparate experiences of place from those defined by the Agrarians, which became reified in English departments as the central and perhaps sole concerns of Southern literature. Instead, Southern women writers glimpse a future for which their Agrarian counterparts were unprepared and realize a present of which they were unaware.

Reclaiming Our Own

On the Porch

I was raised basically in the foothills of Appalachia. The Southern traditions were still there through the oral traditions, storytelling, and also through my upbringing, how I was raised and disciplined as a child. You just work very hard to do the best you can do. And anything less than that is not tolerated. –Mary

I had never studied any of these women writers before, not in high school or even in other college classes. -Amelia

Southerners are not very good about dealing with change, especially people who are truly from here, and I think that's been especially hard on some people who have been here forever. This change doesn't sit well. And change happens slowly here or it used to, and when things change fast, it sets everybody on edge, I think, and people are much less tolerant of the change. -Cassie

I kept thinking, I know these women! –Ashley

By confining character, [place] defines it. - Eudora Welty, 1983a, p. 122

Feminists reject the traditional (male) view of Southern letters and a revival demarcated by martial boundaries, wedged in between a couple of world wars, and reclaim women writers who have been systematically ignored. They work to restore voices excluded from the canon and challenge what counts as literature, arguing for the inclusion of forms associated with women's writing in the home—letters, diaries, journals, and even cookbooks. Despite the popular success of white Southern women writers in the second half of the nineteenth century, their works went largely uncollected in anthologies and untaught in classrooms. Women writers speaking from the margins of race, ethnicity, sexuality, or class were effectively silenced by the dominant hierarchy. Will Brantley (as cited in Perry & Weaks, 2002) noted that “the all too frequent omission of women writers from the intellectual history of the Southern Renaissance suggests. . . the inability of masculinist critics to accommodate women's texts to paradigms derived almost solely from the texts of men” (pp. 625-626).

Revisionist feminists, however, are busily correcting such short-sightedness. As Rebecca Mark (1994) observed, they are “engaged in the archaeological agenda of unearthing previously silenced women writers” (p. 10). *The History of Southern Women's Literature* (Perry & Weaks, 2002) offered the first comprehensive critical look at Southern women's writing as a vital body of literature, with many essays focusing on recently reclaimed writers. This impressive collection traced in its eighty-six critical essays for the first time “the evolution of Southern women's writing” (p. 2). Jones' (1982) seminal *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South 1859-1936* contained critical essays on seven writers, all but two of whom had been virtually ignored by literary critics. She reintroduced writers like Frances Newman and Grace

King, who enjoyed a wide contemporary readership but failed to make it into anthologies edited primarily by men. *Southern Women's Writing, Colonial to Contemporary* (Weaks & Perry, 1995/2000) is still the “only text available that surveys women’s literature in the South from the early settlement period to the present” with the hope of adding to “the larger endeavor of retrieving the ‘lost voices’ of the southern past and [enlarging] the context for studying southern literature” (p. xii).

In *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, editors Donaldson and Jones (1997) collected an impressive array of critical essays, mostly feminist and often poststructuralist, to examine the region’s treatment of gender in literature. As they noted,

Surely no bodies ever appeared more haunted by society. From the body of the white southern lady, praised for the absence of desire, to the body of the black lynching victim, accused of excessive desire, southern sexuality has long been haunted by stories designating hierarchical relationships among race, class, and gender. (p.1)

And so we return to that “inextricable trinity” (Ladd as cited in Bone, 2006, p. 119) and the complex intersections of power/knowledge, geography, and gender.

Talking about gender in the South has always been tricky because, as Donaldson and Jones, 1997, explained:

Seemingly stable categories of...womanhood, invoked and repeated though they may be in numerous cultural texts, are everywhere inevitably susceptible to destabilization and alterity. Leftover areas of ambiguities always threaten to reassert themselves. The assumption of a special clarity and permanence about *southern* gender in time-honored stories of white cavaliers and belles, of black Jezebels and rapacious Nat Turners, might

well owe its origin and persistence, then, to general unease with the sometimes intense and always unending negotiations defining gender with the region. (p. 6)

In reworking gendered categories and directing these negotiations, Southern women writers and readers dispel the old sexist myths and invite the construction of new subjectivities, using texts as practices of a female self. In these subversive acts, they destabilize the structures that perpetuate the old subject positions.

Re-Visioning Southern Women's Writing

On the Porch

I needed that license to be Southern. -Deirdre

There's so much rebellion and excitement in these texts, and I think the class opened our eyes to that. -Lydia

I guess I see that every time a generation progresses, the South gets more modernized. I don't know if that's exactly the right word, but things become more acceptable. You know, interracial dating is more acceptable, not as acceptable as it would be up North, but more accepted. And it's not completely weird that I go to work and I'm not at home. And I don't go to church right now, and not everyone freaks out about that. So I guess there're these teeny steps forward. -Zelda

Feminist critics not only respond to demythologized and reinvented images of Southern womanhood, but they also invent a number of new paradigms for interpreting texts by modern and contemporary writers. Following is an overview of several fruitful ways in which feminists today are re-visioning Southern women's "vociferous writing" (Yaeger, 2000, p. 10). Yaeger's *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (1988) and *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing* (2000) rewrote traditional images of women and developed a new emphasis on female desire. In "Beyond the Hummingbird," Yeager (1997) focused on "the political effects of the grotesque in southern women's fiction, . . . their mingling of dirt and desire" (p. 287). Yaeger (1997) envisioned the grotesque bodies in modernist women's writing as "premier sites for exploring the work of a southern polity in which women

are barred from public power but become central players in its symbolic scripts” (p. 295). She examined the role of the gargantua in refuting “woman’s repeated miniaturization” (p. 301) in Southern literature and culture, applying her ideas primarily to the fiction of Welty and McCullers. In *Dirt and Desire*, Yaeger (2000) proposed “new categories” to consider in Southern literature: convulsive white bodies, covert black mothers, stories of the daily trauma of domestic and agricultural labor, blackness as something to be inventoried, and a South obsessed with dirt and place as a site of trauma (pp. 12-13).

Yaeger (1997) grounded her criticism in Bourdieu’s poststructuralist ideas that “the ways we divide up the world are not innocent schema but ‘internalized, embodied social structures’ that are chaotic and culpable; they help to enforce the most unsavory oppositions between dominant and dominated” (p. 307). Like contemporaries Jones (2002, 2004), Donaldson (1997), Manning (2002, 1993a), Entzminger (2002), and Gwin (2002), to name a few, Yaeger resisted the binary oppositions that often organize Southern culture, uncovering their functions in its literature. Bennett (1998) noted that “instead of focusing on the defeats of the past, [contemporary] southern women concentrate on the potential of the present and the future” (p. 120). Further, she argued for the power of the comic female voice in Southern literature to overturn patriarchal binaries, observing that

“comedy that recognizes the value of female experience may be an important step in developing a culture that allows women to self-critically question the stereotypes that have governed our lives.” Unlike traditional male comedy, women’s comedy does not end by reestablishing social structure and hierarchical order. Women’s comedy attacks the order already in place, questioning its validity and control over society, and often

suggesting new possibilities for a more positive social construct. (Merrill as cited in Bennett, 1998, pp. 123-124)

Feminist critics and women writers in the South focus increasingly on strategies like reinventing the comic for resisting the traditional constructs of gender and the hierarchies that perpetuate them.

Minrose Gwin (2002) took a postmodern turn through place and space in looking at gender in Southern literature, arguing with Foucault and Butler that “the rituals of spatial organization are always implicated in power dynamics and social control” (p. 20). The complex relations of “what Rose calls ‘the gender of geography’” (as cited in Gwin, 2002, p. 21) preoccupy contemporary Southern women writers and their feminist critics because this is familiar terrain, this intersection of gender and geography in a paradoxical space. Gwin’s (2002) project was to “map a geography of poetics” (p. 25) in Southern stories, what Linda McDowell (1999) might call feminist geographies.

Contemporary feminist scholars continue to map new territories in Southern literature, creating a “revised cartography” (Gwin, 2002, p.121) that problematizes the old, feminized landscape of the South where “nothing is innocent, particularly places striated from centuries of patriarchy and racial prejudice and unremarked poverty” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 268). Studies like Louise Westling’s (1985) landmark *Sacred Groves and Ravished Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor*, Lucinda MacKethan’s (1980) *The Dream of Arcady*, and Elizabeth Jane Harrison’s (1991/1994) *Female Pastoral: Women Writers Re-Visioning the American South*, among others, rejected the traditional masculinist objectification of feminine landscape in favor of an empowering female pastoral. This form of pastoral depicts land as an equalizing force rather than as an object of patriarchal ownership. In

the re-visioned pastoral, “explorations of ways of achieving female autonomy and changing interactions among characters of different class, race, and gender depend upon the invocation of land not as ‘property’ but as an empowering life source” (Harrison, p. 15).

The female pastoral sometimes invokes a re-imagined landscape in which shared agricultural labor can blur social boundaries. Such a vision counters the male pastoral that sees Nature in general and land in particular as woman objectified, a feminine terrain meant to be confined, domesticated, owned—a savage force to be subjugated. Many modern Southern women writers “express hope in feminine southern landscape where women can join communities” (Weeks, 2002, p. 987). Scholars note that a sense of community shaped by place informs much of the fiction and autobiographical writing by contemporary Southern women and often extends to the cadre of feminists analyzing those texts (Magee, 1992; MacKethan, 1990). The female connectedness that arises from a communal landscape stands in stark contrast to the struggles against nature that “laggards” must be seduced to face. The re-visioned female pastoral, as seen in works by Welty (1946/1991, 1949/1977) and Smith (1983, 1988), for example, treats the Southern landscape not as a site of defeat, dominance or nostalgic longing, as in the male pastoral, but as a source of hope, strength, and liberation.

From this fertile new landscape in which class may become more equalized and the archetypal images of the white Southern lady seem increasingly irrelevant and ironic, feminist critics noted the evolution of another figure of Southern womanhood: the powerful daughter-artist. These women “seem to create themselves. They become, in a sense, their own artistic creations, a symbolic embodiment of the work the writer herself creates” (Entzinger, 2002, p. 127). Such characters act as artisans of the self, creating a subject through arts of storytelling or writing. Westling (1985) called these characters “venturesome daughters” who may inherit

stereotypical images of Southern women from their mothers but who reject or reinvent these images through the power of their creativity. We might also apply this interpretation of daughter-artists to Smith's work, as my participants did, but Westling applied her interpretation primarily to fiction by Welty and O'Connor, noting that Welty's female characters "move freely and comfortably across the landscape, at the center of a world which affirms them and denies male pretensions of control" (p. 179).

Ruth Vande Kieft (1993) said that Welty's "women in particular are independent, asking to be seen as always changing, not taken for granted, inviolable in their center of self" (p. 246). Rebecca Mark (1994) argued that Welty, with "an inviolate independence of spirit" (p. 13), empowered her daring daughters like Virgie Rainey in *The Golden Apples* (1949/1997), who still exerted fascination for my participants, by expropriating masculinist myths and transforming the female figures into questing heroes fully "capable of doing battle with, making love to, becoming, and laughing at the heroic king" (p. 5). Welty's women often act as their own heroes, wielding considerable power to craft subjectivities previously denied them. Usually seen as a transitional figure in the history of Southern literature, Welty crafted strong, defiant female characters that continue to inspire writers like Lee Smith to create "venturesome daughters" who embrace multiple selves in a postmodern South, the Bible Belt turned Sunbelt. Such venturesome women offered inspiration to the women in my study as they, too, worked to construct and care for the self.

Gwin (2002) observed that while "the stories we tell ourselves about home. . . are the means through which we undertake the excruciating, redeeming work of renegotiating identity . . . For some daughters, home. . . is [where she] can. . . write her own story, create her own felicity (p. 115). Home and place, however, can be something we construct and deconstruct. As

one of my participants said, “Home and memory of home, memory of the South—that’s something we construct. And it changes as we change.” In fact, Southern women readers and writers often reconstruct home. Rejecting or renegotiating identity roles culturally constructed for them, the daughter-artists “write themselves into being” (MacKethan, 1990, p. 2), as their authors “remake their realities in language” (Gwin, 1986), p. 12). These daughters create their own home space, situating it in a newly visioned, nurturing female pastoral.

Scholars have also noted the centrality and regenerative creativity of the daughter-artist in the fiction of Lee Smith, whose work my participants discussed passionately and at length. Smith “combines the rich oral heritage of storytelling in the South and the significance of geographical place with a postmodernist perception” (Parrish, 2002, p. 578) of multiple truths. She writes of the “ways in which Southern women...try to salvage a sense of self within a system that tries to define that self for them” (Jones, 1984, p. 271). In Smith’s (1988) epistolary novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* protagonist Ivy Rowe resists those systems and writes herself, her mother, and her sisters into being through a lifetime of letters. These letters are Ivy’s art—the telling and crafting of her stories, her memory, and her vision of the surrounding mountains that both confine and sustain her.

Smith (2002) acknowledged the unremarked significance of women’s art in a letter to the author:

I think that a lot of female creativity is put into things that won’t last: a beautiful cake, a flower arrangement, a good dinner—the process is often more important than the product. For Ivy, the writing of the letters was more important than the letters themselves....I think that (traditionally) so much of women’s art has been private (in the home, or for someone else) rather than public, exhibited and seen as art. Women’s art has been

ephemeral (eaten up, worn out, whatever) rather than permanent. (Personal communication, December 2, 2002)

Smith, like Welty, often celebrates the “ephemeral” art of women as letter-writers and storytellers, cooks and gardeners, quilters and creators of new possibilities. The women in my study also employed some of these arts, and they considered their significance for women in Southern literature, in Smith’s (1988) and Welty’s (1949/1977) fiction particularly.

Lucinda MacKethan (1990), whose *Daughters of Time: Creating Woman’s Voice in Southern Story* critiqued the fiction of both Smith and Welty, considered “the possibilities for reversal, for empowerment, that southern women seized upon when they moved beyond the role of daughter and into the role of storyteller” (p. 5). As the speakers of their own stories, the narrators of their own experience in the intersections of gender and geography, these fictional women, like the women in my study, made different truths and subjectivities possible. Inventing themselves, in part, through practices with text, these young Southern women became powerful artisans of the self.

Poststructural Feminism

May we “be accountable to complexity” (Lather, 2000b, p. 305).

John Rajchman (1985) argued that modern “literature discovers death, anxiety, and nameless desire as the limits and truth of experience. It is no longer an art of glorifying heroes or pleasing the senses. It is an art of transgression” (p. 16). The transgressive art of modern and contemporary Southern women writers explores the contours and limits of human reality as manifested in a particular place and time. Foucault (1965/1988) said that a work of art “draws the exterior edge, the line of dissolution, the contour against the void” (p. 287). Texts by and about Southern women, art that draws a contour against the void, called my participants to an

“exploration of the boundaries of the self as produced by culture and those resistances to social construction that constitute a unique subjectivity or individuality” (Scholes, 1998, p. 97).

Poststructural feminists can help us consider the cultural construction of the identity of Southern women. Butler (1990/1999), invoking Foucault, pointed out that “juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent” (p. 4). The poststructural feminist argument that discourse creates subjects regulated by patriarchal structures that form, define, and reproduce women in accordance with the structure's requirements seems particularly germane when considering Southern women, who often find that their culture constructs them to suit its own needs, in this case, to define its own identity. The challenge is that we must

continually question our “taken-for-granted structures of intelligibility” (Lather, 1996, p. 540), to make visible the foundations of the very categories we are dependent upon—truth, progress, rationality, humanism, gender, and race to name a few—and. . . to consider how such questioning would affect what we research, how we do it, and how we know it. (as cited in Pillow, 2000, p. 22)

Further, Butler (1995) argued that “the question of whether or not a position is right, coherent, or interesting is. . . less informative than why it is we come to occupy and defend the territory we do, what it promises us, from what it promises to protect us” (pp. 127-128).

Poststructuralism aims to “describe the surface linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the control of populations, and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of systems of thought” (Bové, 1990, pp. 54-55). And according to Bové (1990), poststructuralism also “celebrates the increasing impossibility of defending ‘truth’ in any metaphysical way and welcomes the political possibilities for self-determination inherent in a

recognition that ‘truth’ is made by humans as the result of very specific material practices” (p. 55). Such epistemology can open sites of rupture. Davies (1993) offered this helpful explanation:

Poststructuralist theory looks at the constitutive force of social structures and of language as well as at the individual person (or subject) and sees each of these in their social and historical contexts. The individual subject is understood at one and the same time to be constituted through social structures and through language, and becomes a speaking subject, one who can continue to speak/write into existence those same structures through those same discourses. But, as a speaking subject, they can also invent, invert, and break old structures and patterns and discourses and thus speak/write into existence other ways of being. (p. xviii)

Speaking/writing/reading women can bring new ways of being into existence by re-inventing and inverting the discourse that categorizes them.

All experience is contingent upon a complex mix of social, political, historical contexts that shape the selves possible to us. Poststructuralism emphasizes the impact of such contingencies on personal experience, with the understanding that experience is not pure truth in and of itself. Scott (1991) explained that we must engage “questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured. . . , [and] how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (p. 777).

Davies (1989) observed that “poststructuralist theory, with its roots in Freud, Marx and Foucault, provides a radical framework for understanding the relation between persons and their social world and for conceptualizing social change. . . . The individual. . . is constituted and reconstituted through a variety of discursive practices” (p. xi). She continued, “Individuals,

through learning the discursive practices of a society, are able to position themselves within those practices in multiple ways, and to develop subjectivities both in concert with and in opposition to the ways in which others choose to position them” (p. xi). So poststructuralism relies on “understandings of how knowledge is contextually situated, local, and partial” (Richardson, 2000, p. 154). As Massey (2005) noted of situated, contextualized identity constructs,

From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places...both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. The [traditional] limitation of women’s mobility, in terms of both identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination. (p. 179)

Poststructuralism insists on a troubling of the binary oppositions in which the other is always subordinated. According to Butler (1992), we need to ask, “What possibility of mobilizations is produced on the basis of existing configurations of discourse and power? Where are the possibilities of reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted, of reconstituting the legacy of that constitution, and of working against each other those processes of regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes?” (p. 13). She remarked the ongoing nature of these reconfigurations, saying, “For if the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and again” (p. 13).

Poststructural feminists argue that it is impossible to separate “out gender from the political and cultural intersections from which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 5). Lather (1991) explained that “within feminism. . . recognition of the doubled

movement of inscription and subversion presses one to acknowledge the ways in which feminism is both outside the discourse of the fathers and, simultaneously, inscribed in Western logocentrism [and] patriarchal rationality” (p. 89). The recognition of such doubling, of women being both inside and outside their culture, inscribed by it, becomes important for feminist work, as “women’s simultaneous experiences of both privilege and marginality [becomes] the material ground for practices of self-interrogation and critique” (p. 29).

In practicing this self-critique, poststructural feminists focus on “reflexivity, authority, authorship, subjectivity, power, language, ethics, representation” (Richardson, 2000, p. 156). Of reflexivity and representation, Davies (1993) noted that “poststructuralist theory calls into question the authority of the author and breaks down the division between the one who knows (and tells) and the ones who are written about” (p. xi). In a connected move, poststructural feminists trouble the binary oppositions that structure patriarchal cultures. As St. Pierre (2000) pointed out,

Those who find discomfort in poststructuralism—its critiques of foundationalism, absolute knowledge, a single truth, power, and transcendent rationality, a subject defined in advance of living, etc.—often ignore how uncomfortable humanism has made many of the rest of us, women in particular. Those on the wrong sides of humanism’s binaries may be eager for access to analyses that can shift those power relations. (p. 506)

Foucault’s analyses can offer us such access.

Jana Sawicki (1991) explained that Foucault aimed for the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges,” a project that remains vital to feminists because, as “these disqualified knowledges arise out of the experience of oppression, resurrecting them serves a critical function. Through the retrieval of subjugated knowledge [we] establish a historical knowledge of

resistance and struggle” (p. 57). This retrieval of subjugated knowledge remains, as I discussed, a vital project for scholars of Southern women’s writing as they examine the history of ideals of Southern womanhood. For Foucault, as Sawicki noted, “our freedom consists in our ability to transform our relationship to tradition and not in being able to control the direction that future will take” (p. 99). In other words, “identity formation is both strategically necessary and dangerous” (p. 108). Exploring knowledge freed from subjugation as a self-formative practice is indeed risky business.

Care of the Self

The ancient Greek philosophical formulation to care for the self flourished for a thousand years, continuing in altered versions with the Romans and early Christians (Foucault, 2004). From about the fifth century B.C. to the fifth century A.D., the notion that one must purposefully and with active practices cultivate the self “permeates all Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman philosophy, as well as Christian spirituality” (p. 11). In this precept, one labored deliberately to make oneself “as excellent and reasonable as possible” (p. 7). One had to care for the self as an ethical responsibility, both to the self and to others. The idea was to treat existence as an art with a multiplicity of elaborations, which could be cultivated by practices of the self like reading, writing, conducting administrative reviews, and fostering relations with others.

Foucault (2004) described variations the ethic assumed over time, citing evidence from writers and philosophers from Plato to Seneca, among others. The call to care for the self often accompanied the call to know the self, but Foucault argued that the former gradually took precedence over the latter. It began, he explained, with Socrates, who “is, and always be, the person associated with care of the self” (p. 8). His role, he claimed, was to awaken the elite to the need to care more for the self and less for material trappings and political roles. The philosophy

grew in influence across centuries and generated permutations across cultures. In fact, “throughout the long summer of Hellenistic and Roman thought, the exhortation to care for oneself became so widespread that it became. . . a truly general phenomenon” (p. 9). However, this widespread, thousand-year ethic denied the possibility that women might also practice care of the self.

As I review Foucault’s thought on care of the self in this chapter, my goal is to have Foucault’s voice dominate the discussion. I quote him abundantly so that he can speak for himself as much as possible. Here, I review the development of Foucault’s final analyses, examine the Greek ethos of *epimeleia heautou*, outline the four dimensions of care of the self, and consider how the self came to be treated as a subject constituted by ethical actions. In subsequent chapters on methodologies and interpretations, I apply Foucault’s analysis to the data in my study.

Foucault’s Final Analysis

In the last weeks of his life, Foucault discussed and corrected proofs of his work that dealt extensively with care of the self, the second and third volumes in his planned six-volume *History of Sexuality, The Use of Pleasure and the Care of the Self* (Gros, 2004). In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, a compilation of his 1981-1982 lectures at the Collège de France, he spoke extensively about the ideas shaping those texts, so we have a wealth of Foucault’s own words about his thinking as he worked on his final project, his last investigation into the nature and construction of subjectivity, before he died of AIDS in 1984. In the fall of 1982, Foucault (1988a) said, “My present work deals with the question: How did we directly constitute our identity through some ethical techniques of the self which developed from antiquity down to

now?” (p. 146). In the introduction to his second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1984/1990a) proposed to

analyze the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves and themselves a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being. . . . With this genealogy the idea was to investigate how individuals were led to practice, on themselves and on others, a hermeneutics of desire. (p. 5)

Foucault (1984/1990a) pointed out that his project asked how “forms of self-relationship (and the practices of the self that were associated with them) were defined, modified, recast, and diversified” (p. 32). This creative recasting became vital to Foucault’s analytic: “The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p. 9). The freedom exercised and attained through care of the self remained central to his project. His own aims to think differently and see the familiar anew, to show alternate dimensions of possibility, guided Foucault’s entire body of work. As Foucault (1982/1988) explained, one of his

targets is to show people that. . . things that are a part of their landscape—that people think are universal—are the result of some very precise historical changes. All of my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and show many changes can still be made. (p. 11)

This space of freedom offers innumerable liberatory possibilities—and along with them, dangers and ethical responsibilities. A Foucauldian sense of ethical freedom provides fertile

ground for cultivation and reinvention of the subject. Foucault (1982/1988) insisted that people are “much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up. . . during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed” (p. 10). Exercising this freedom requires recognizing the contingency of such “so-called evidence.”

Rather than uncovering and rediscovering the lost self that concerns much of Western thought, the ethic of care of the self recognizes that the subject is constantly recreated in social interaction. Hutton (1988) explained that Foucault contended that “human nature is not a hidden reality to be discovered through self-analysis but the aggregate of the forms we have chosen to provide public definitions of who we are” (p. 127). Care of the self involves not the recovery of truth but becomes, according to Foucault (2004), “a question of arming the subject with a truth that [she] did not know and that did not dwell within [her]” (p. 501).

Foucault (1983/1991) proposed a genealogy of problematizations and explained that his point “is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous. . . . If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do” (p. 343). Foucault never took the rest cure himself, troubling the dangerous right up until his death. Gros (2004) noted that the final volumes in *The History of Sexuality* were a departure for Foucault in that his project “is no longer a political reading in terms of power apparatuses, but an ethical reading in terms of practices of the self. It is no longer a genealogy of systems, it is a problematization of the subject” (p. 508). Foucault situated his analyses of the arts of existence “at the point where an archaeology of problematizations and a genealogy of practices of the self intersect” (1984/1990a, p. 13). He substituted for his methods of archaeology and genealogy a “history of ethical problematizations based on practices of the self” (1984/1990a, p. 13).

St. Pierre (2004) observed that “care of the self is often called Foucault’s ethical analysis, the third axis of his analyses after archaeology and genealogy, which examine the domains of systems of knowledge and the modalities of power” (p. 337). Foucault (1984/1987) explained the development of his analytic, saying,

One cannot care for self without knowledge. The care for self is of course knowledge of self—that is the Socratic-Platonic aspect—but it is also the knowledge of. . . rules of conduct or of principles which are at the same time truths and regulations. To care for self is to fit one’s self out with these truths. That is where ethics is linked to the game of truth. (p. 5)

In fact, he explained, “It is precisely the historical constitution of these different forms of subject relating to games of truth that interest me” (Foucault, 1984/1987, p. 10). Foucault (1984/1990a) analyzed “the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience; that is, as something that can and must be thought” (p. 7).

The point, Foucault (1988b) argued, is to analyze “so-called sciences as very specific ‘truth games’ related to specific technologies that human beings use to understand themselves” (p. 18). The problem becomes to “give one’s self. . . the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the *ethos*, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination” (Foucault, 1984/1987, p. 18). Thus, he said, he “arrived at the hermeneutics of technologies of the self in pagan and early Christian practice” (1988b, p. 17). Rabinow (1984/1991) insisted that Foucault proffered in “an elusive and joyous [mode]. . . a heroic refusal to sentimentalize the past in any way or to shirk the necessity of facing the future as dangerous but open” (p. 27).

Foucault (1984/1990a) asked what value passion for knowledge would hold if it did not result—in some way and to the extent possible—in “the knower’s straying afield of [herself]. There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently. . . and perceive differently. . . is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (p. 8). Foucault’s body of work showed an exuberant joy and defiant bravery in this straying afield. The Greek ethic of care of the self on which Foucault focused in his last books and lectures emphasized the need, the necessity, to stray away from the self in order to cultivate an ethical subject. Foucault (2004) explained that “to become again what we never were is. . . one of the most fundamental themes of this practice of the self” (p. 95).

As he worked on *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, Foucault (1984/1990a) said he was inspired and motivated by “the only kind of curiosity. . . that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself” (p. 8). Writing about care of the self became Foucault’s own final, transformative practice of the self. He said, “My problem is my own transformation. . . ‘Do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?’” (Foucault, 1983/1990, p. 14). Just as we cannot leave certain texts unscathed, Foucault could not leave his own work unchanged.

With his analytic of care of the self and the problem of his own transformation, Foucault sought the unforeseen places in an ethic that contemporary philosophy largely ignored, courageously straying afield. For him, “the *point* of doing philosophy [was] to occasion new ways of thinking about the forms of experience around which there exist controversy and protest” (Rajchman, 1985, pp. 97-98). Foucault worked these forms to open possible lines of flight. In fact, Foucault asked (as cited in Gros, 2004), “In what does [philosophy] consist, if not

in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently?” (p. 509).

Biographer Didion Eribon (1991) talked of the personal significance of Foucault’s work on care of the self during his final weeks, quoting Foucault’s friend Paul Veyne:

Ancient wisdom became a personal matter for him. Throughout the last eight months of his life, writing his two books [*The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*] played the same part for him that philosophical writing and personal journals played in ancient philosophy—that of work performed by the self on the self, of self-stylization. (p. 325)

Foucault practiced the arts of existence as he fashioned his own art of dying. My participants in this research practiced the arts of existence as they fashioned their own art of living. I discuss their practices and performances on the self through texts in detail in chapters three and four, but the parallel with Foucault’s practices merits mention here. As with the women’s relations to their academic and professional fields, Foucault’s relations to his professional field became a practice of self. As Davidson (1994/1999) explained, “For Foucault himself philosophy was a spiritual exercise. . . in which one submitted. . . to modifications and tests, underwent changes, in order to learn to think differently” (p. 123). In his last books and lectures, Foucault not only explicated the antique ethic of care of the self but also practiced a philosophy of self-cultivation that freed him to think differently—and to explore fresh fields of thought.

Davidson (1994/1999) argued that Foucault’s work on care of the self remains “far more complex and multilayered than most commentators have acknowledged. . . . This idea. . . of ethics as proposing styles of life is one of the most forceful and provocative directions of Foucault’s later thought” (pp. 119, 123). In fact, “showing how to embed our relations to

ourselves in a grid of ethical intelligibility, Foucault has helped to articulate the kind of complexity these relations actually embody” (Davidson, 1986, p. 232). In directing his inquiry toward the complexities of Greco-Roman ethics, Foucault (2004) focused on the “art of life or art of existence which. . . becomes the fundamental definition of philosophy. Care of the self becomes coextensive with life” (p. 86). The aesthetics or arts of existence—“technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p.11)—became Foucault’s project for his last two books and provided a final personal ethic and philosophical focus for his life’s work. Davidson (2004) pointed out that “when Foucault speaks of the idea of the care of the self as an ‘event in thought,’ we cannot help but hear in these words an invocation of some of the most original dimensions of his own philosophical practice” (p. xxi).

It is important to remember that Foucault himself never proffered care of the self as a newly remembered postmodern remedy. As St. Pierre (2004) noted, “Foucault did not find the ancient Greeks either admirable or exemplary. Nor. . . did he think care of the self could simply be overlaid on contemporary society. He did, however, think that care of the self has something to offer us today” (p. 341). Foucault (2004) asserted that care of the self is an “event in thought. . . a cultural phenomenon. . . within the history of thought. . . that is still significant for our modern mode of being subjects” (p. 9). While he apprehended applicability of the ethic for contemporary life, Foucault never presented it as an antidote for modernity. While perceiving contemporary relevance of care of the self for ethical self-formation, Foucault fully recognized the exclusionary dangers of the ancient ethic he theorized. He (1983/1991) explained, “The Greek ethics of pleasure is linked. . . to dissymmetry, exclusion of the other, an obsession with penetration, and a kind of threat of being dispossessed of your own energy, and so on. All that is quite disgusting!” (p. 346). Further, Foucault (1984/1987) vigorously denied that he offered the

ethic of care of the self as a forgotten panacea for contemporary society or as a newly uncovered philosophical solution, stressing that he did not proclaim,

“Unfortunately we have forgotten the care for self. Here is the care for self. It is everything.” Nothing is more foreign to me than the idea that philosophy strayed at a certain moment of time, and that it has forgotten something and that somewhere in her history there exists a principle, a basis that must be rediscovered. (p. 14)

Epimeleia Heautou

In Plato’s first dialogue, *Alcibiades*, Foucault (1983/1991) found “the first elaboration of the notion of *epimeleia heautou*, ‘care of the self’” (p. 342). A central question was, “What is this self of which one has to take care, and of what does that care consist?” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 25). Foucault examined this question in its first appearance in Plato and then considered how care of the self took shape for the Romans and the early Christians. The purpose and practice transformed from the Delphic injunction to know oneself to a moral imperative to care for oneself in order to help the city-state and, finally, to the cultivation of an ethical subject as an end in itself. In this ethic, aesthetic, honorable self-constitution is enacted in the subject’s relations with self and with others.

Foucault (2004) explained that *epimeleia heautou* required “attending to oneself, being concerned about oneself” (p. 2). However, care of the self “expresses something much more serious than the simple fact of paying attention. . . . It is already a real activity and not just an attitude” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 24). Care of the self required practices, arts of the self. The primary concern became the soul; however, “the care of the self is the care of the activity and not the care of the soul-as-substance” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 25). The soul was viewed as the acts that composed it, not as an ethereal substance permanently separated from the physical self. Care of

the self demanded constant creative soul work, and Foucault made it clear that the ethic revolved around practices of the self, not practices of self-centeredness. Foucault (1983/1991) explained that

Epimeleia heautou. . . means taking care of one's self. It does not mean simply being interested in oneself, nor does it mean having a certain tendency to self-attachment or self-fascination. [It] means working on or being concerned with something. . . . It describes a sort of work, an activity; it implies attention, knowledge, technique. (pp. 359-360)

Being concerned with and attentive to self requires more than “a general attitude, an unfocused attention. The term *epimeleia* designates not just a preoccupation but a whole set of occupations” (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 50). Such labors, or arts of existence, might be reading and making notes on texts that indicate how one should live, writing in journals or letters, meditating and actively constructing and reconstructing memory, or cultivating friendships, for example. Caring for the self demands that we labor to craft the self as an ongoing project and treat it as a continually re-imagined object of our knowledge. This act must follow a deliberate choice, a commitment, to care for the self for the good of the individual and the community. In fact, “for the ancient Greeks, the kind of relationship one ought to have with one's self, *rapport à soi*, was not just self-awareness but deliberate self-formation” (St. Pierre, 2004, p. 339). The decision to craft an ethical self as an art denotes purposeful relations between self and self, the cultivation of *rapport à soi*. As Foucault (1983/1991) observed, “There is. . . the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*, which I call ethics, and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute [herself] as a moral subject of [her] own actions” (p. 352).

Foucault (1984/1990a) said his aim was nothing less than to explore the “whole rich and complex field of historicity in the way the individual is summoned to recognize [herself] as an ethical subject” (p. 32). Taking care of the self requires embracing a challenging freedom because “Greek ethics is centered on a problem of personal choice, of aesthetics of existence” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 348). To practice technologies of the self and create a beautiful existence, “one must emancipate oneself. . . [and] hold one’s self sacred, honor oneself, respect oneself, feel shame in front of oneself” (Foucault, 2004, p. 85). Responsibilities to act on freedom, recognize the sanctity of the self, and hold oneself ethically accountable become central to caring for the self and predicate the practices, or technologies, that elaborate subjectivity.

Four Dimensions of Care of the Self

Foucault broached the “rich and complex field” of care of the self through four dimensions: the ethical substance, the mode of subjection, the “elaborations of the self, and the moral teleology” (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p.32). To consider care of the self then, we must think about “the part of the self to be worked on by ethics” (St. Pierre, 2004, p. 342); the ways in which we are “invited or incited” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 354) to work on the ethical subject; the transformative acts we perform to create the ethical subject; and the kind of ethical being we labor to craft.

In looking at how these facets of being developed in antiquity, Davidson (1994/1999) said that Foucault showed “us the various ways in which continuities, modifications, and ruptures can occur in one or more of these four dimensions of our relations to ourselves” (p. 23). In moralities—ancient or modern—that focus on forms of subjectivation, “the emphasis is on the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which [she] works them out,

on the exercises by which [she] makes of [herself] an object to be known, and on the practices that enable [her] to transform [her] own mode of being” (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p. 30).

Foucault said (1984/1988) that several things must be considered about the individualism of care of the self: the “intensity of the relations to self, that is, of the forms in which one is called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purify oneself, and find salvation” (p. 42). The rarity of salvation and the labor implied in care of the self help shape it as a transformative practice. In fact, “by practicing ‘the cathartic of the self’ . . . the soul discovers both what it is and . . . what it has always known. It discovers both its being and its knowledge at the same time. It discovers what it is, and in the form of memory it discovers what it has contemplated” (Foucault, 2004, p. 176). This cathartic of the self ultimately takes precedence over relations of the self to the society. As a result, “the self [becomes] the definitive and sole aim of the care of the self. . . . One is one’s own object and end” (p. 177).

Self as Ethical Subject

Foucault (1984/1990a) looked to antiquity “for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes [herself] *qua* subject” (p. 6). Foucault (as cited in Davidson, 2004) concluded that “in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject; not of the individual, but of the subject [herself] in [her] being as subject” (p. xxiv). Further, Foucault (2004) said, “For the subject to have right of access to the truth [she] must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become. . . other than [herself]. . . . It follows from this point of view that there can be no truth without a conversion or transformation

of the subject” (p. 15). The transformative qualities of care of the self become both means and end.

One performs ethical work on oneself not only to comply with moral codes, but “to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behavior. . . through a decipherment as painstaking, continuous, and detailed as possible, of the movements of desire in all its hidden forms” (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p. 27). There is more freedom than we might imagine in our capacity to decipher desire and to act upon the self. Foucault’s (1984/1990a) interest rested in how the “acting individual. . . operated, not just as an agent, but as an ethical subject of this action” (p. 26). This agency denotes a powerful freedom—and an ethical responsibility. As Foucault (1984/1990b) asserted, “The subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty” (p. 50).

What we do with this freedom to construct our subjectivity and problematize it was central to Foucault’s project. Considering multifarious moral forms and behaviors, Foucault (1984/1990a) said he was “concerned with the models proposed for. . . relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object” (p. 29).

So through care of the self, we become subjects continually reforming and transforming through acts of self-constitution and the artistry of ongoing self-construction.

Arts of Existence

Foucault (1984/1990a) explained that arts of existence are “intentional and voluntary actions by which [women]. . . set themselves rules of conduct, . . . seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (pp. 10-11). These aesthetics and

values require an artistic approach in order to transform a subject in a way that meets cultural and personal criteria for an ethical existence. In caring for the self, we become artisans of ourselves, constantly recasting our creations. St. Pierre (2004) observed that

the principle of this ethics is a radical freedom that operates not only as *choice* but also as *resistance* to self-forming practices. Care of the self describes a permanent political relationship between self and self in which one's goal is to both produce oneself as the ethical subject of one's actions as well as to create one's life as a work of art. (p. 340)

Foucault (1983/1991) posited that “from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (p. 350).

We can practice care of the self by seeking in “personal life a form that answers to criteria of brilliance, beauty, nobility, or perfection” (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p. 27). Rather than rejecting this aim as too lofty or distanced from experience, we might labor to constitute the self with the brilliance of art. In such acts, we can practice as artisans who craft beauty and nobility in an individual life and, in the act, enrich others' existence as well. Foucault (1983/1991) noted that “in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?” (p. 350).

The Greeks “acted so as to give to their lives certain values (reproduce certain examples, leave behind them an exalted reputation, give the maximum possible brilliance to their lives). It was a question of making one's life into an object for a sort of knowledge, for a *techne*—for an art” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 362). Care of the self “requires, still and always, that the individual conform to a certain art of living which defines the aesthetic and ethical criteria of existence” (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 67). Arts of living, as both Plato and Foucault (2004) made clear,

involve intensive labor, “a work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labor. . . in order to finally become capable of truth” (p. 16). Arts of existence, or practices of the self, include self-constitutive and potentially transformative practices like reading, taking notes on texts and conversations, rereading, listening actively, writing letters, and using the wisdom gathered in those acts to evaluate, test, and improve the self. In practicing art or artisanship, we adopt “a set of practices by which [we] can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. . . . It is a process of becoming more subjective” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 35).

The process of becoming more subjective involves a duty to seek truth and enlarge a capacity for it through action, through practicing the arts of living. Foucault (1984/1988) explained that with cultivation of the self,

The task of testing oneself, examining oneself, monitoring oneself in a series of clearly defined exercises, makes the question of truth—the truth concerning what one is, what one does, and what one is capable of doing—central to the formation of the ethical subject. (p. 68)

In fact, for the ethical subject, “the responsibility to create meanings and values anew is a perpetual task. . . . For Foucault, it is through such creativity that our power is revealed, and it is in our capacity to use it well that our destiny lies” (Hutton, 1988, p. 140).

The telos of practices of the self is a subject able “to withstand in the right way all the possible accidents, misfortunes, disgrace, and setbacks” (Foucault, 2004, p. 94) that might befall. Care of the self equips us to constitute a subject that can endure sorrow and struggle, as “the individual must be given the weapons and the courage that will enable [her] to fight all [her] life”

(Foucault, 2004, p. 495). In fact, *Epimeleia heautou*, with its necessary labors, forges “the individual’s armature” (p. 94) for dealing with the world. The goals and principles of care of the self require attentive practices. As Foucault (1984/1988) insisted,

Taking care of oneself is not a rest cure. . . . There are the meditations, the readings, the notes that one takes on books or on the conversations one had heard, notes that one reads again later, the recollection of truths that one knows already but that need to be more fully adapted to one’s own life. (p. 51)

Practices to care for the self focused on reading and “listening, writing, and taking stock of oneself” (Foucault, 2004, p. 500). We see writing, especially, deployed as a self-generative technology among the ancients. In fact,

Writing as a personal exercise done by and for oneself is an art of disparate truth—or, more exactly a purposeful way of combining the traditional authority of the already-said with the singularity of the truth that is affirmed therein and the particularity of the circumstances that determine its use. (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 212)

In writing, we pursue nothing less than truths and personal freedom, new ways of being and knowing. Foucault (as cited in Racevskis, 1987) explained the centrality and vitality of writing as a practice of the self: “the purpose of writing has therefore been to ‘know to what extent the exercise of thinking one’s own history can free thought from what it thinks silently and to allow it to think otherwise” (p. 22).

Self-examination also became a central technique in the arts of existence, with sacred time set aside for retreating into oneself. Practices of the self required “a practical proof, a testing of the manner of living and of truth-telling that yields a certain form to this rendering an account of oneself, a life-long examination that issues in a certain style of existence” (Flynn, 1987, p.

109). Time spent reflecting and remembering was anything but passive. It “was an active leisure—to study, to read, to prepare for misfortune or death. It was a meditation and a preparation” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 27).

Foucault (1988b) described three practices of the self that should be performed during this reflexive “active leisure”: “letters to friends and disclosure of self; examination of self and conscience, including a review of what was done, of what should have been done, and a comparison of the two. . . . The third. . . technique. . . [is] not a disclosure of the secret self but a remembering” (pp. 34-35). To care for the self then, we must write and purposefully practice the arts of memory, re-envisioning experience so that the wisdom gained through recollection and meditation becomes “an everlasting and unanxious possession” (Seneca as cited in Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 66). In relations with others, in writing and reading and remembering, we practice arts that require a movement of self toward self, an ongoing formation of the ethical subject.

And these practices first articulated by the Greeks and theorized by Foucault lead us to my study of young Southern women, contemporary artisans of the self

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the body of critical literature on Southern women’s writing, summarized poststructural feminism, and reviewed Foucault’s work on the ancient Greco-Roman ethic of care of the self. In my study, these thoughts and theories converged. Foucault’s analysis helped me to theorize participants’ use of texts to construct subjectivities and to think about how participants cared for themselves in relations with other Southern women in a spirit of sisterhood, which was fostered by collaborative reading and communal interpretation. Poststructural feminism informed my analysis of how the women perceived themselves in relation to regional discourse. That theory, in conjunction with the relevant literary criticism,

shaped my examination of regional patriarchy. Scholarship on Southern women's texts helped me consider where my participants and I entered the dialogue, where we joined the critical conversation about the texts under discussion and about cultural representations of women in the South.

In directing my inquiry toward arts of existence, I considered how Southern women writers and readers become practicing artisans of their subjectivity. However, it is vital to note that care of the self initially applied only to free white men. While we cannot forget the exclusion of all women and of men of lower classes, I have taken Foucault's (as cited in Rabinow, 1991) advice on Freud as guidance in my own research: rather than dismiss all Freudian discourse as untruths, he said, we might instead actively set "aside those statements that are not pertinent" (p. 25). Rather than dismiss care of the self as untruthful because it was not available to women, who were deemed unworthy and unable to be subjects practicing arts of existence, I focused upon what care of the self could mean in contemporary elaborations of female subjectivity.

Foucault (1984/1990a) dealt with moral problematizations, pleasures, dietetics, economics, and erotics in *The Use of Pleasure* and with technologies of the self—dream interpretation, proper care of body and soul, and men's relations with boys and wives—in *The Care of the Self* (1984/1988). I set aside as not pertinent to this project discussions of dietetics and erotics. I must note, however, that Foucault (1984/1988, 1984/1990a) gave a great deal of attention to the problem of proper love of boys by men in the final two volumes of his history of sexuality and sees these relations as a vital concern in the ethics of the subject. I instead examined women's friendship as a fruitful site of self-constitution. While the Greek ethics Foucault examined related specifically and solely to men, I applied his analytic to the study of women's subjectivity specifically and solely. And as part of my own citational practice here, I

feminize Foucault's pronouns to fit the subjects of my study. Using his work in my selective way, I can only imagine that I make Foucault "groan and protest" (Foucault, 1972/1980, p. 54).

The question of liberty to practice problematization and transformation lay at the heart of Foucault's ethical analyses. Foucault (1984/1990a) sought to "define the conditions in which human beings 'problematize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live" (p. 10). Such problematizing of the self and one's actions and relations is, I contend, what happened when the young Southern women in my study encountered texts through which they problematized their culture and all that it demands they be.

In the next two chapters, I examine how the women in my study used their reading; writing, including marginalia, letters, creative, critical, and journalistic writing; and relations of sisterhood to recollect and reconfigure familiar truths and to conduct a candid review of the self. Through their arts and relations, they also performed mutual "soul service" (Foucault, 2004, p. 115), helping one another in the move toward the self. In fact, Foucault (1984/1997) argued that "through the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing, one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read" (p. 214). Reviewing the self and one's actions and labors on the spirit through textual practices dominated care of the self for the ancient Greeks and for the contemporary Southern women I interviewed.

CHAPTER 3

VIGOROUS CONVERSATIONS: METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

Introduction

In previous chapters, I discussed the background of the problem and described my own entanglements with this question of Southern women using texts to construct their/our subjectivities. I reviewed the theories at work in my project, and I offered a glimpse onto the porch. From Foucault and feminist poststructuralism and literary criticism, I turn to the methodologies and methods of qualitative and feminist research. I employed interviews, document collection, and writing as inquiry for both data collection and interpretation. I collected and analyzed these data and more during the past two and a half years of my formal study, but, as I have said, this research cannot be bound by this text: it began informally years ago when I first taught the Southern literature course and will continue in some fashion long after this project ends. I came to the problem already and still inside it.

In this chapter, I describe my research design, introduce the women who participated, and attempt to map the multiple fields at play here. I consider various kinds of data, questions of validity, and the ethical challenges of representation and reciprocity. I then review the literature on feminist interviewing, my primary method of data collection, and describe in greater detail what I did and when, how, and why.

Research Design

As Southern women and as former students and professor, my ten young white participants and I occupied connected subject positions. We shared a history of experience as

collaborators working texts together in the company of other women, so we also connected in our convergence on texts. I had taught all ten participants within the last ten years, some only three years ago. When I first envisioned this research project, I wanted to examine how these young women came to see themselves and their constituted experience in this particular place through the Southern literature that appeared to affect them so profoundly in the course. As I collected “response data” (St. Pierre, 1997), my emphasis moved more from the women’s attitudes to their actions, from perceptions to practice. Of course, I still wanted to know what they thought, but I became increasingly interested in what they did, in how they used reading and writing and talking about texts together as vibrant self-forming practices.

For this qualitative study informed by poststructural feminism and guided by Foucault’s analysis, care of the self, I selected participants whom I thought might provide “information-rich cases” (Patton as cited in Agee, 1997, p. 405), women I remembered as voicing spirited opinions about the texts and whom I could locate and contact. I selected white participants between the ages of 21-35 because most students taking the class have been white and traditional-aged. I also selected women who were born or raised in the South.

I interviewed ten alumnae from three sections of the class in individual sessions that ran from forty-five minutes to two and a half hours. I began with a pilot study in which I interviewed three women and then conducted interviews with seven others. Given their enthusiasm, I invited all of the women to reread a novel that they discussed often in the interviews, Lee Smith’s (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and to meet for brunch to discuss it. I intended this gathering as a gesture of reciprocity for their participation, but it also became a site for the collection of vital data. Seven of us had a lively conversation for over two hours. I then conducted individual in-depth follow-up interviews with three more women. I audio-taped the individual interviews and

the brunch and transcribed our conversations verbatim. I collected documents associated with the course and Southern women's subjectivity, participants' writing done for the course and subsequent to the course. And I wrote to collect and analyze data throughout the project.

In this chapter and the next, I examine, primarily through feminist qualitative interviews and document collection, how my participants cared for the self in relations with text and other readers and writers. I consider how the women practiced arts of existence by reading modern and contemporary works like Eudora Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples* and Lee Smith's (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*, writing their own texts in response, troubling representations, and negotiating meaning with other women in what one called "the magic circle," where a spirit of readerly sisterhood thrived.

Statement of the Problem

For this qualitative study informed by poststructural feminism and Foucault's ethical analysis, care of the self, I interviewed and collected documents from ten white Southern women aged 24-28 who took my course on modern Southern literature to consider how they used reading, writing, and talking texts together to construct their subjectivities. I examined how, through their textual practices and collective interpretations, participants fostered a spirit of readerly sisterhood and enacted self-formative arts of existence. In transactions with texts by and about Southern women, these readers created new ways of being in their world, and in writing their own texts, they crafted yet other elaborations of their subjectivity.

In the interplay between reading and writing texts lay the most promising technique of the self for the readers at the heart of my research. Davies (2000) posited that "in entering into the reading or writing of [literature], we are, to a large extent, entering the 'already known' and experiencing it afresh, perhaps finding out how the already known can be spoken for the first

time” p. 182). Through transactions with texts, my participants practiced seeing the familiar awry when they encountered representations in literature of Southern selves they might have been. They envisioned the familiar askew in ways that opened lines of flight and suggested new possibilities for exercising freedom in women’s problematic relations with the patriarchal region that shapes the subjects imaginable to them.

Research Questions

This work was guided by the following research questions:

1. How did reading assigned texts by and about Southern women inform participants’ concepts of female subjectivity in the South—both their own and those of women they know?
2. What effects, if any, did reading and writing about the texts have on participants’ gendered relations with the region and on their perceptions of its literary treatment of women?
3. How did reading and writing texts inform participants’ relationships with other Southern women?
4. How did participants use texts by and about Southern women as practices of the self?

I began this study in the summer of 2005 with a pilot study in which I interviewed three women individually. In the fall of 2005 and in early 2006, I interviewed five more women individually. I interviewed two more women in late 2006 and early 2007, and I continued intensive scholarly reading throughout the summer and fall of 2007. In the spring of 2008, I interviewed a group of six women who reread Smith’s (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*. I then conducted in-depth individual follow-up interviews with three participants.

As a result of pilot study data, I added document analysis as a method of data collection and gathered writing the women had done as requirements for the course and writing they created subsequently, including a Master's thesis and journalism inspired by texts read for the course. In collecting texts participants devised, I also looked at how the women's writing advanced ideas posed by scholars who explore the myths and stereotypes of Southern women—in life and in letters. I also collected my own critical and creative writings related to Southern women's literature and subjectivity. I continued scholarly reading throughout the study, and wrote literature reviews during the summer of 2007. I wrote intensively throughout the project as a method of data collection and analysis, preparing a representation of the study during the summer and fall of 2008.

Over the course of two and a half years of formal study, not surprisingly, some of my research questions remained the same, but as the study progressed, my guiding questions about perceptions shifted to inquiry about practices. For example, my original research questions focused more on participants' impressions or perceptions of gender in the South, but as I continued scholarly reading and conducted pilot study interviews, my object of knowledge shifted to the women's actions, their textual practices. In my scholarly reading, I found that Foucault's ethical analysis, care of the self, emphasized reading and writing as technologies of the self, everyday practices people used in the construction of their subjectivities. Thus, my questions about what the women thought changed to questions about what they did, how they used texts as arts of existence. I designed interview questions (see Appendix A) that respected the interviewee's expertise and the constituted, contingent nature of her experience as an undergraduate scholar of Southern literature at a Southern women's college and as a young white woman in the contemporary South. That kind of respect, as Borland (1991) argued, is part of our

“responsibility to our living sources” (p. 64). Acting with an awareness of my responsibility, I tried to respect every participant as the expert of her own experience and as an insightful reader and creator of her own texts.

I developed a set of eight flexible interview questions based on my research questions asking first about the participant’s relation to the South. I asked which texts read for the course (e. g., Chopin’s (2000) short stories, Faulkner’s (1930/1990) *As I Lay Dying* and (1961) *Old Man*, Welty’s (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples* and (1983/1995) *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Smith’s (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Morrison’s (1991) *Beloved*) had caused the strongest reactions and why. And I asked if and how their reading of the books had come into play in relations with other Southern women. The directions our conversations took depended largely on which novels or stories the women wished to discuss. An interview in which the participant talked extensively of Faulkner’s (1930/1990) Addie Bundren from *As I Lay Dying* could vary wildly from an interview dominated by Welty’s (1949/1977) Virgie Rainey from *The Golden Apples*. The characters the women wished to speak about and the personal stories they evoked lent a distinctive coloration to each interview.

I interviewed the ten young white women in hopes of discovering what they engaged in texts by writers like Welty, Faulkner, and Smith that illuminated their own experience and inspired their practices. In reading such texts, my participants encountered Southern women perhaps not unlike themselves who found the subjectivities available to them shaped in many ways by place. In addition to their reading and rereading, the women and I also talked about the stories and essays they created as assignments for the course. I had been impressed with the quality of the women’s critical and creative work, and they vividly recalled their writing and spoke of it at length in the interviews. I had many of their essays and stories already collected in

books they compiled for final projects, which I discuss in detail below. During the study, I also discovered that two participants had written texts subsequent to the course for professional and academic purposes that were inspired by our readings, which they shared with me. In writing their own texts, the women I interviewed created new possibilities for being, contesting traditional representations and revising cultural boundaries.

I prepared verbatim interview transcripts from digital recordings of all the individual interviews and the book club brunch, and I wrote extensively to collect and analyze data throughout the study. I collected data from document analysis, reviewing the literary works under discussion and the critical essays and creative writing that participants had prepared as class assignments. I collected works that two participants wrote subsequent to and inspired by the class, a Master's thesis that deconstructed the iconic belle and journalism that depicted Southern culture. I also examined documents related to women's colleges, like catalogues and yearbooks dating from the nineteenth century as well as contemporary recruitment materials to get a greater sense of their history and culture. I continued reading poststructural and Foucauldian theory, literary criticism, and texts on feminist research methodologies. In the summer and fall of 2008, I wrote this dissertation and struggled to represent the women and their experience in that writing.

This study examined the intersections of gender and region through participants' reflections on their lived experience, their reading and collective interpretations of literary texts by or about Southern women, and their creation of original texts. Through shared books and the readerly sisterhood they encouraged, these participants found ways to resist the rigidly gendered identities imposed upon them and wield the freedom to construct their own subjectivities in fresh

and surprising formulations. Southern women reading Southern women as a practice of the self led to a deconstruction, a troubling, of power relations between women and place.

Site of the Study: Multiplicity of Fields

On the Porch

So what you find in the South—it is a construction. We do create a memory of the South. We do create which South we want to, and as I look back, it is filtered. But there is something there for me. And reading literature like this, I know that's why I want my doctoral work to be grounded in the South: it sustains me. There are roots there! -Deirdre

My family's just Southern to the bone. I love living here. I love everything about it, and I would never want to live somewhere that's not here. -Mary

I don't feel so ashamed of being Southern anymore, like I don't have to keep it a secret anymore. It's part of who I am and that's okay. -Cassie

My parents aren't from here, so I had to learn Southern-ness. And that was a hard lesson. -Rachel

I mean, the South's its own little world. -Lydia

Those who've stayed in the South, we're tied to the womb—my mother, myself! -Zelda

The sites of this research defied simple explanation and neat definition. While the larger field here was a Southern one, the multiple fields at play were not as tangible as this description might suggest. While the sites and objects of knowledge in this research were indelibly marked by place, by the American South, the fields of my study existed on several planes: in the memories of those recalling events and conversations past, in our classroom at a Southern women's college campus, and in literary transactions that still resonated with the women and with me. Richardson (1997) explained the complexities and play of defining our fields:

Multiple connotations [are] topologically embedded in parallel and intersecting discourses. The 'fields' are. . . theory and gender, and the settings in which those are done. "Fields' are where ethnographers go; and I am the 'field which I never leave. The

‘field is also a . . . war zone, as well as an open inviting expanse, as well as a place where ‘energy’ converts to ‘matter.’ (p. 4)

In the fields of my study, I encountered those intersections where theory and gender, battle and empowerment, energy and matter converged. Rather than demarcating boundaries, I celebrated the fields’ overlapping spaces, believing that the poststructuralist theory guiding my project offered “a more level playing field and more of them, where everyone can...create new...convergences, new ‘fields of play’” (Richardson, 1997, p. 4). In the sections below, I describe several fields at play in this study: the field of a Southern women’s college, fields of literary text, and fields of personal and collective memory.

Women’s College as Field

Having spoken about Southern women in general in the previous chapter, I turn now to particular women in a specific place, the visible field of a Southern women’s college. I found myself entangled in this field of my study in multiple ways: I earned my Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in a Southern women’s college and have spent the last ten years of my career teaching in another one. I read Southern women’s literature with women in both fields, so I have a kind of doubled vision of my participants’ physical fields of place and text. Their alma mater, Bridges College, is a small, private, 130-year-old institution, located in the Appalachian foothills in an area that was rural a generation ago but now edges the sprawl of a big New South city. The college began as something of a finishing school, an identity it has fought hard to dispel in this century. It also began with Baptist affiliations and, although no longer religiously affiliated, remains conservative, with prayers at all assemblies. Popular majors in 1878 were home economics, music, and art. Popular majors today are education, psychology, and health sciences. The school still has a vibrant arts program, although the emphasis is increasingly on professional

majors. The college added graduate and evening and weekend co-educational programs and several satellite locations, becoming a university about twenty years ago. The women's undergraduate college, however, remains the university's distinguishing feature and matriculates residential and commuting day students.

Residential life at the college melds old and new with an emphasis on tradition. All the women still pledge themselves to an ideal composed nearly a century ago that promises service, honor, and authenticity. For a small school, it teems with clubs and organizations and hosts a dizzying array of cultural and sporting events. The women here can be as busy as they wish, with plenty of opportunities for leadership and friendship. The environment is perhaps more social and less intellectual than that of the women's college I attended, where it was not unusual to see students studying late on Friday nights. Almost everyone there during my time was very focused on academics and many, about 70%, went on to graduate school. (That number is higher today.) On this campus, I don't think anyone studies on Friday nights, and about 15% go on to graduate school.

Students live in dormitories in their first year and then often move to sorority houses. Greek life thrives as a tradition on this campus. Here, all women under 21 are still required to live either on campus or with their families. Seniors and graduate students occupy the many small, white Victorian houses that dot the campus and line nearby streets. And I might add that most of these houses and many of our academic buildings have spacious porches, some with big white columns and waiting rocking chairs. My participants fondly told a number of porchin' stories from their years of residence here. One said, "Yeah, we'd have maybe two smokers on that shady little side porch, and about fifty more crammed in there just to tell stories."

While a number of old oaks were recently bulldozed and paved over for parking lots, many ancient magnolias still shade parts of the sprawling campus. In spring, pink azaleas and dogwoods bloom all over campus, and in winter, like all good Southern children, we long for snow that seldom falls and for snow days that rarely materialize. Graceful sculptures dot the campus grounds. Sounds lovely, doesn't it?

This women's college has never had a woman as its president—not one in its 130 years.

Of the approximately 1,000 students enrolled in the women's college, about 70% are white and 30% are African-American, Latina, and international students. Like half of my participants and me, many students are of the first generation in their families to attend college. The women's college matriculates mostly traditional-aged students, and that describes the population from which I selected my sample. A few middle-aged women have taken my Southern literature course over the years, but most students have been between 19-22-years old, and nearly all have been white. Most were born and raised in the South, although a few international students usually join the class. Women of color have been largely absent from the class, I regret to say. We read texts by and about African-American women, and I am saddened that so few African-American women have chosen to take the course. Several participants talked at length about how they missed those women and their voices in our classes. So have I.

Fields of Text

On the Porch

I think that book especially speaks to women, and most Southern women can relate to *Fair and Tender Ladies* or find something of themselves in it. And I suggest it to people. On my MySpace page, it's my number one book! –Rachel

Fair and Tender Ladies is still my favorite book of all times. I hold it close to my heart. It's like a bible. I know where the parts are when I need them. –Lydia

Honestly, I remember when first hearing that we were reading it, I was like, It looks terrible!
 And it was just because my perception at 18 or 19 was that a novel named *Fair and Tender Ladies* would be about Southern ladies in huge giant dresses living on a plantation and living this great life, and it didn't sound very appealing. The title fooled me, but the book dispels those myths and brings a whole new perspective on what being a Southern woman is really all about. – Rachel

I still think about Virgie and wonder where she is on the journey now. Isn't that crazy? -Cassie

When the person I was dating couldn't get into Welty, I knew it was all over. -Amelia

While our transactions with texts occurred in the field of our classroom on a Southern women's college campus, it was the texts themselves that served as the site of our relations. Texts in this study were both field and data—they were where our practices occurred, and they were the transformative space in which we worked. Like the porch, texts—as both field and data—became a liminal space in which the reader was “not *here* or *there*, one or the other, but neither the one nor the other, simultaneously inside and outside, dissolving both by mixing them together” (de Certeau, 1984/1988, p. 174). There is plenty of room to travel or play in the field of the text, inside it and outside it.

In the modern Southern literature course, we usually begin with Kate Chopin or Zora Neale Hurston and end with a contemporary writer like Toni Morrison or Alice Walker or Mary Hood. While I do assign male writers, my focus is certainly on the Southern woman writer and the female experience, a vital choice given my women's college audience. I include multiple genres so that we read short stories, novels, plays, personal and critical essays, memoirs, and poetry. I vary selections from semester to semester, but I always assign a Faulkner novel, some O'Connor stories, and Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples*, a story cycle I never tire of rereading, a “constellation the heart could read over many a night” (Welty, 1949/1977, p. 276).

In most sections of the class, including all three sections from which the participants in this study were selected, we read Lee Smith's (1988) epistolary novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*,

which immediately became a lively topic of discussion in our interviews, as did Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples*. I was fascinated to see which texts participants recalled when I asked in the interviews which had evoked their "strongest reactions." I purposely did not specify what kind of reactions they might have experienced, nor did I offer a list of books included on their syllabi. I simply said in my invitation that I would like to talk with them about the texts we read in Southern Lit in relation to Southern women. I was immediately impressed that their recall of the literature was so vivid, and I was simply astonished when several women quoted lines from memory years after having read the texts for an undergraduate course requirement.

From the first interviews in the pilot study, several works dominated the conversation, and I was inspired and thrilled by how animated the women became when they talked about their memories of the texts and the women with whom they read them. The texts participants named most often in response to my question about strong reactions were Smith's (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples*, and Faulkner's (1930/1990) *As I Lay Dying*—they referred specifically to his character Addie Bundren. Some women also discussed works by Williams (1974), Morrison (1991), O'Connor (1965), and Chopin (2000). However, Smith's (1988) and Welty's (1949/1977) books garnered the most attention by far, with their protagonists Ivy Rowe and Virgie Rainey, respectively, eliciting much spirited dialogue.

These texts formed the terrain of the material field and became data as the women assimilated them, rewrote them in our conversations and in their rereadings and writing, and used them to help construct their subjectivities. In this study, text was field and data and means of analysis as I wrote to consider the women's words, spoken and written, read and remembered.

Fair and Tender Ladies. Before talking further about how participants used these texts, making them "groan and protest" (Foucault, 1972/1980, p. 54), I will say a few words about the

books and writers that dominated our interviews. Smith's (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies* features the letters of a feisty Appalachian girl, Ivy Rowe, tracing her life from her childhood in the isolated mountains of turn-of-the-century Virginia to her death at her home place seventy-five years later. Smith (2006) has described how she found a box of letters at a yard sale while driving home from the hospital where her mother lay dying. The letters, she explained, weren't particularly interesting, but they inspired the epistolary form of this novel. Writing longhand on yellow legal pads, Smith (2006) said it was as if Ivy dictated to her and she had to scribble as fast as she could to keep up with her narrator's voice as she spoke. Smith noted that this was the only time in her career when her writing had happened in that way. The novel's last line, "Oh, I was young then, and I walked in my body like a Queen" (p. 316), came to Smith first, and she started there, knowing where she was going but not how she'd get there (Personal communication, December 2, 2002). Smith (2002) said that with this book, she was "writing for [her] life" while both of her parents lay sick and dying.

The novel convincingly depicts the grinding poverty and isolation of Appalachia and the ravages of strip mining, as well as the strength of family and the struggles of women to endure—and sometimes triumph. Ivy and her parents and brothers and sisters, like the other families on Blue Star Mountain, live hand to mouth, practicing subsistence farming and rarely producing enough food to feed themselves. In the letters she continually writes, Ivy details their existence, fraught with sickness and back-breaking labor, but rich with stories and alive with "a mountain to rest [your] eyes against" (Smith, 1988, p. 11).

In her letters Ivy describes her own hopes and dreams and the stories that nurture her. She writes to a prospective pen pal in Holland, Hanneke, "the ice queen" (Smith, 1988, p. 25), to her teachers, separated siblings, a school friend, and even her dead father, talking of her family and

the mountain, the books she loves and the stories she retells. In one letter, she recounts how two little old ladies, the unmarried Cline sisters, with faces “squunched up like apple dolls” (p. 33), arrive on Old Christmas to tell their tales. The women, Ivy believes, “live on storys” (p. 33). Ivy describes how, after telling their stories all through the night, the sisters say goodnight, “sounding like fairy bells in the snow. [But] when they tell a story, you can hear them. . . . So we. . . stood barefoot in the snow. . . , watching the lady sisters skitter like waterbugs over the snow, moving faster and faster it seemed until they were lost in the shadders” (p. 38). The stories Ivy takes in on this snowy night help sustain her for life.

Ivy’s desire to hear and tell stories engenders her self-formative practice of writing letters, which continues until her death. She writes to the living and the dead, knowing that many letters will never be read by anyone, but that does not matter to her because “it was the writing of them, that signified” (Smith, 1988, p. 313). Ivy uses her letters as a practice of the self, much like my participants employed Smith’s book and the epistolary writing for creative class projects as practices of the self.

Smith, author of twelve novels and three collections of short stories, received the 1999 Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Southern Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, among other prestigious prizes. Her work has become of increasing interest to scholars since I first began to include it on my syllabi. (See, for example, Flora & MacKethan, 2002; Jones & Donaldson, 1997; Parrish, 2002; Perry & Weaks, 2002; Tate, 2000). In my opinion, Smith’s best work may be her short stories, and *Fair and Tender Ladies* remains her most profound and accomplished novel. One participant said, “It’s probably the best book I’ve read in my entire life, and it’s meant so much to me. I think that everybody who reads that book—at least women—will have some sort of powerful experience with it.”

I was amazed by the extent to which the novel still resonated with participants years after they first read it as a class assignment. I knew I was on to something compelling with my research when the first woman I interviewed in the pilot study quoted the novel's concluding line from memory: "Oh, I was young then, and I walked in my body like a Queen" (Smith, 1988, p. 316). Rachel explained, "Ah, those last lines—it's very rare that I remember something like that. I used to be really good at remembering lines from poems and books, but I'm not good at that anymore. But I remember that book very vividly, and it stuck with me." Subsequently, two more women also quoted the line from memory our interviews. One participant said, "That book was simply life-changing."

The Golden Apples. The other text that participants cited most often was Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples*, a collection of seven connected stories. Welty, author of four novels, four collections of short stories, a memoir, many essays on writing and book reviews, and a book of photographs, has received literary awards too numerous to mention, perhaps chief among them the Pulitzer prize, and more critical accolades than I can recount here. In my view, she remains one of the twentieth century's literary giants. I sometimes assign additional Welty texts, but I always assign *The Golden Apples*, and many women talked about the book and its protagonist, Virgie Rainey, extensively and excitedly in our interviews.

Situated in mythical Morgana, Mississippi, Welty's (1949/1977) story cycle depicts the lives of a cast of local characters from around 1900 to the 1940s. The first story in *The Golden Apples*, "A Shower of Gold," opens with Katie Rainey gossiping about her neighbors in Morgana to a passerby, the reader, and ends with Katie's funeral that gathers all the characters in the final story, "The Wanderers." In the first story, Katie's baby daughter, Virgie, swallows a button, an act that links her loosely with several mythic women who swallow forbidden seeds. In "June

Recital,” Virgie stands out as a wild child and the star of the town’s annual ritual, the piano recital, and she unlike the other girls, has “gone direct into the world of power and emotion” (p. 59).

In the final story, “The Wanderers,” Virgie finds absolution and freedom after her mother’s death. *The Golden Apples* ends with Virgie, sitting on a stile in light October rain, “the rain of fall, maybe on the whole South, for all she knew on the everywhere” (p. 276) with a nameless old woman “alone and together in the shelter of the big public tree, listening to the magical percussion, the world beating in their ears” (p. 277). Virgie is poised to begin her wandering, recreating herself as she goes, to start the cycle anew. When my participants talked about *The Golden Apples*, it was Virgie who intrigued them, who stayed with them, although many other memorable women populate Welty’s book. They gloried in her rebellion. One woman said, “I love Virgie. It’s like she’s my evil twin!” And another said, “I think about Virgie still and wonder what’s she’s doing now. It’s like she’s still out there living somewhere.”

Other texts. In addition to the two texts by Smith and Welty, several participants also talked at length about the impact that two female protagonists invented by men had on them, Faulkner’s (1930/1990) Addie Bundren from *As I Lay Dying* and Williams’ (1947/1974) Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. These two writers, long a part of the Southern and American canons, crafted women, who, unlike Virgie and Ivy, offer negative examples. Addie, dead and silenced for most of the novel, still controls her family’s fate by exacting a vengeful promise, leading them on a grotesque odyssey to bury her rotting corpse. She lived miserably, resenting everyone in her family, except the one child she loved. Blanche, on the other hand, is the decadent belle who still dreams of the ancestral home, crumbling Belle Reve. She is destroyed by her own illusions and desires and her brother-in-law’s brutality. In Blanche and

Addie, the deluded belle and the resentful matron, my participants read examples of Southern women they do not want to be.

Interestingly, the characters used most often as models of independence, defiance, and triumph, Ivy and Virgie, were created by Southern women writers, while the two characters used as cautionary tales, Addie and Blanche, were created by Southern male writers. Faulkner and Williams portray these two women as being inevitably crushed, annihilated by their culture's expectations and negations of them. These problematic and inspiring fictional women called my participants to what Scholes (1998) explained is

an exploration of the boundaries of the self as produced by culture and those resistances to social construction that constitutes a unique subjectivity or individuality. What we know about ourselves is largely what our culture has enabled us to know—just as those selves are mainly the selves that our culture has enabled us to have. (p. 97)

Through the fictional women, the women in my study questioned those contingent, constituted selves that “our culture has enabled us to know” and, testing their own experience against them, articulated ways they hoped to be in the world.

Fields of Memory

And I remember when I was a kid, my grandparents lived in this old house. It's all different now—there's a Publix and a strip mall there now. But they lived in a house that had no indoor plumbing, and my grandmother still remembers raising hogs when she was little. As far back as I can remember they were just country people, very country. That's just the way they were. They've been here since time was. –Cassie

I remember we'd just play in the woods all day long, like little wild girls. And I think that's why my sister and I are both so creative still. –Deirdre

Ours was a dirt road for a long time, and when I was little, school was really far and the bus took forever, but as we got older things just really changed. –Cassie

What I wrote down while I reread is “memory and identity.” –Deirdre

The struggle of [woman] against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.
 - Kundera, 1980/1986, p. 3

While the women and I worked and played and rested in the fields of the text, both before and during this research project, our interviews drew upon their memories of particular, situated readings of the texts, so one of the fields of this study lay in memory. Like texts, memory functioned here as both a site of research and as data. de Certeau (1984/1988) observed that memory, too, is an art, a construct that is always being shaped anew: “the oddest thing is. . . the *mobility* of this memory in which details are never *what* they are: they are not objects, for they are elusive as such; not fragments, for they yield the ensemble they forget; not totalities, since they are not self-sufficient; not stable, since each recall alters them” (p. 88). This description of elusive, constantly reconfiguring memory applied to at least one site of my study: multiple memories of reading and relations. Such fields of memory always shift in unstable categories as they are continually being remapped, resisting finitude. Perhaps like the place and literary space of the other fields in my project, the field of memory cannot be finally bound.

Thelen (1989) noted the link of memory with identity, another complicated convergence in the field of a study that examined subjectivity: “Since the memory of past experiences is so profoundly intertwined with the basic identities of individuals, groups, and cultures, the study of memory exists in different forms along a spectrum of experience, from the personal, individual, and private to the collective, cultural, and public” (p. 1117). In my research, personal, cultural, and collective memory of experiences with texts and other readers formed the ground where inquiry entered.

My participants’ memories of their reading and writing for our course were inextricably linked with private memories of growing up in the Deep South. Hiss (1990) explained that “our

relationship with the places we know and meet up with. . . is a close bond, intricate in nature, and not abstract, not remote at all: it's enveloping, almost a continuum with all we are and think (pp. xi-xii). Place and memory fold together, enveloping. As one participant said, "the South is a place we construct and reconstruct." Place becomes an intricate and ongoing construction of memory. In my study, the women constructed memory and reconfigured experience of place and text. Their perceptions of Virgie and Ivy and the other characters they encountered mingled with their own recollections of a Southern girlhood. They brought all of those memories into their reading and sometimes onto the porch, making them part of the collective memory. And the field shifted yet again. In the overlapping fields and data of memory, this study took up different elaborations of memory: personal, collective, and cultural.

In my entry into the fields of my study, I was already in the literal field of the women's college, in the literary field of the texts, and in the field of personal memory, which shaped my own reading and writing, as well as the interviews I conducted. Memory became field, data, and a condition for what the women and I were able to think. And then there is another field in which I found myself situated—a green, living field. This field and the place it represents shaped in inescapable ways what I was able to think and how I crafted my own memory constructs and wrote my participants' recollections of theirs.

On the Porch—Literally

You'll have to tell about how you're porchin' our porchin'. —Amelia

I wrote from the porch. A sense of place, inherent in the problem at hand, permeated my collection and analysis of data in unexpected ways, doubling and trebling. The women's subjectivities and mine intersected at least three times in the liminal space of the porch—in our

original porchin' of the texts, in our conversations about our porchin', and then in my seemingly solitary porchin' with the data of their words and memories.

Thinking and writing of our talks and transactions with literary texts, I worked primarily on my back porch. When forced inside, I wrote in my overstuffed chair in the tiny library that opens onto the porch and a view of the field and woods beyond. Technically, this porch is a deck because it doesn't have a roof like the front and side porches do. The back porch runs the length of the house and faces woods thinned by pine beetles. Light reflecting off the lake at the edge of the woods shimmers in wavy patterns through the trees. Shaded by a leaning hickory and an ancient water oak, my porch is fringed by overgrown pink and white and lavender azaleas and big blue hydrangeas. A weeping cherry is planted too close, so I have to keep lopping branches back as they overgrow the porch. Gardenias and ginger lilies stand at the southern and northern ends so that the air is perfumed no matter which way the wind blows. In the fall, the tang of chrysanthemums and wood smoke wafts across the porch. Through the woods beyond, camellias and sweet shrub mark the path down to the water. But the best thing about my porch is the view it affords of a large field that my grandfather farmed when I was a little girl. His father farmed it before him.

The scuppernong vines my grandfather planted for his mother still run riot over the arbors along my side of the field, laden with fat clusters of sweet Southern grapes. Across the field from my porch and atop a gentle slope sits the little red brick house my grandparents built when they got married. My husband and I bought a corner of the family property from my grandfather when our son was young, just after I returned to the South and my Yankee husband first landed here. We eventually built a house on a plot my great-grandfather plowed. My father owns all that's left

of the family property now. He rents out my dead grandparents' house and plans to sell the property as soon as he can find a buyer rich enough to purchase three lake lots.

So my grandfather's field is endangered. It may have seen its last cycle of seasons before it is bulldozed to make way for strangers' houses. I grieve for what is to come. And I lament the recently planted row of cypress trees intended to shield me from the impending destruction. As I write on my porch, breathing in the freshly cut field that endures, I look up to see where the watermelon and the strawberry patches once were and eye the spot where a lone apple tree used to cast welcome shade on anyone working the field. It took three separate lightning strikes to kill that old tree. I missed its fleeting, fragrant blossoms this spring.

I still vividly picture my grandfather striding across his father's field like he was the strongest man in the world. I sometimes think that if I'm quick or attentive enough, he might remain and solidify in my line of vision.

Working on my porch as I theorized my research about a group of young Southern women, the books we read together, and the subjects we constructed in collaboration with each other and in relations with the characters, I observed my ineluctable entanglements with place as I watched the green field whose sights and scents and shadows imbue this work, just as they infuse my own efforts to practice care of the self.

Participants: The Women on the Porch

On the Porch

Now I don't feel so alone, so isolated because I've got all these women who *get* it. –Cassie

The texts seemed to open up a whole community. –Zelda

I think the class and what we read brought us closer, and it made it easier to identify without having to use the words. Because when you have one of those experiences, women sometimes just bond without words. It's like there's an experience of living that doesn't have to be explained. And then you add that to the Southern experience, and with both of those things, you

always have to explain to others. But being an all-woman group definitely made a difference. I think it would've been completely different if it had been a co-ed class. It would have still had a huge effect, but it just wouldn't have been the same—no way. -Lydia

Our connections and the way we just sparked off of each other took our discussions and interpretations of the texts to a deeper level. And we were all at different levels of maturity and had vastly different experiences and personalities, so that was cool, too. And we just ignored anybody who wasn't up to it or hadn't read because they weren't on the journey with us. -Amelia

With that class, those women, unlike most other classes, I go, Where are they? Where are those women? I wonder what they're doing and where they are. Where are those women we met then and said, Where are *you* on this journey? -Deirdre

Virgie's on this spiritual journey, like we are and like we were on in that class. Welty gives us a sense of the danger and mystery we encounter on the journey. -Amelia

I still think about all those different women and wonder where they are on the journey. -Cassie

For this research, I selected as participants ten young white women who were born and raised in the South or had spent much of their lives in the region. I chose them for several reasons, some pragmatic and some a bit more complicated. Without looking back at class rosters, I tried to envision the students who had seemed particularly engaged in the class or who had written papers powerful and memorable enough to leave an impression among the thousands this English teacher has read. I conjured up the faces in our classrooms, and I could still see, in large part, where people sat and who was close to whom, who was in the circle and who chose to be outside it. In inviting the women to participate in this research, I didn't care particularly what grades they had made or what their majors were or how well they wrote, but I did want to interview alumnae of the course who had voiced opinionated responses to the texts. I remembered those students teachers dream of: smart, fully engaged, prepared and bursting with insightful ideas to share or pressing questions to pose. I wanted to interview women who—I hoped—might provide “information-rich cases” (Patton as cited in Agee, 1997, p. 405). And I needed to be practical: which women could I locate? Who was still in the area? Who was too

busy with graduate school or a new career to meet with me? Who might be interested enough in the project to give up personal time to talk with me?

I invited eleven former students to participate, and ten readily agreed. The women were between 18-22-years old when they were enrolled in the Southern literature class and between 24-28-years old when I interviewed them. The eleventh person's invitation was waylaid en route, but I have since heard from her and she accepted, so I still hope to interview her, as this project will no doubt continue in some other form long after my study formally ended. Ten women from three sections of the course participated, sharing information that far exceeded my hopes for rich data. The women were wise and witty and still curious about literature and about what it means to be a contemporary Southern woman. And there are many more that I would like to interview, former students whose faces and comments stayed with me. I did not design selection criteria in terms of levels of education, marital status, or socioeconomics; I simply wanted to find interested and interesting former students who might engage in "vigorous conversations" (Booth, 2000, p. 351) about the texts we read together.

I approached telling the stories of these young white women with keen awareness of the crisis of representation. I pretend no masculinist indifference or positivist neutrality where these women are concerned because I liked and appreciated them. As a group, I found them to be smart and sassy and strong, doing meaningful things with their lives. The women amazed me with their articulation and insight, and I felt a fondness for them that I wanted to honor as I wrote to think about our interactions.

The women I interviewed came from working-class and middle-class families. Half were of the first generation in their families to earn college degrees, an experience I shared with them. Another striking similarity among the women soon became clear: most of them had continued

their education in graduate school, even though I did not deliberately select women based on their having advanced degrees. Seven participants had earned graduate degrees, and two participants were enrolled in graduate school at the time of our interviews. The remaining participant planned to continue her education, too. Three of the women had become English teachers themselves, and another worked in a library. One woman worked with autistic children, and another worked for a nonprofit agency. One woman served as a legal advocate for women and children who are victims of domestic violence, and another was enrolled in law school. Six of the women had married since graduating, and one woman was a single mother. Among the ten women, there was only one child—a daughter.

These women were accomplished people accomplishing vital work; however, they were not unscathed by tragedy and struggle. During the course of this project, one participant became a war widow at the tender age of twenty-five. One woman's mother died when she was a child, and one woman lost her father in an accident when she was a girl. At least two women had dealt with serious illnesses, and several had families who experienced addiction, alcoholism, depression, divorce, financial crises, or violence. While they—and I—enjoyed a certain level of privilege, simply by virtue of our having been together in a private college, these women had also experienced loss and uncertainty in their lives.

I knew most of the women who participated in this study better than many students because several of them worked as writing tutors in my university's Writing Center, which I direct. Most took multiple classes with me, and I supervised independent studies for some of them. Three of the women traveled to England with me for a month of summer study at Cambridge University, so we had the kind of bond that develops when you travel together for an extended period. I wrote letters of reference at some point for virtually everyone involved and

served on honors' and Masters' thesis committees for a number of them. One participant attended my alma mater for her Master's degree in teaching English, and one was a graduate student working in the Writing Center. Some of the women kept in contact as they went on to graduate school or got married. I attended several of their weddings and read Yeats' (1889/1988) poetry at one. I would say that I have friendships with some of the women and feel fondness for them all. They were not strangers chosen at random for this research. Impartiality would not be possible here, even if I desired it.

And it is my respect and affection for my participants that made it difficult to write them, to inscribe them in words on a page—an infinitely elusive project. I acknowledge that this was and will always be an impossible task.

Methodologies and Methods

Feminist Research Methodologies: An Introduction

Feminist researchers (Lather, 1991; Pillow, 2000; St. Pierre, 1997) note that keeping methods and methodologies separate from each other and from the epistemologies framing them is virtually impossible and perhaps undesirable. Pillow (2000) reminded us of distinctions to consider when we talk of methods and methodologies as she cited Sandra Harding's definitions: "a research *method* is a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence' (p. 2) while "*methodology* is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed' (p. 3)" (p. 22). Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2007) commented on the interconnections: feminist postmodern research asks "new questions that expose the power dynamics of knowledge building. 'Subjugated' knowledge is unearthed, and issues of race, class, sexuality, nationality, and gender are taken into account. . . . In asking new questions, feminist research maintains a close link between epistemology, methodology, and methods" (p. 16).

In fact, feminist research practices “are never matters solely related to collecting, analyzing, or presenting data, but instead are modes of thought and action that continually inform these mutually constitutive stages of the research process” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 176). My practices in this study were guided by feminist epistemology, which informed the methodologies I ascribed to and the methods I employed. I offer here a brief introduction to the hallmarks of this way of thinking and working.

Crotty (1998) summarized the spirit of feminist research methodology thus:

To all outward appearances, feminist researchers may share methodologies and methods with researchers of other stripes; yet feminist vision, feminist values and feminist spirit transform these common methodologies and methods and set them apart. Far more than ways of gathering and analyzing “data,” methodologies and methods become channels and instruments of women’s historical mission to free themselves from bondage, from the limiting of human possibility through culturally imposed stereotypes, life-styles, roles and relationships. (p.182)

As Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) contended, feminist research has “transformed conventional qualitative methods as well as generated new forms of methodological inquiry” (p. 149).

Feminist approaches may be distinguished within a qualitative tradition by “the heightened moral concern for respondents/participants, the attempt to redress the male/female hierarchy and existing paternalistic power structure, and the paramount importance placed on membership [of women]” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 711). In fact, “research in our society has long been seen as a male preserve, especially a White male preserve, associated with class and privilege” (Seidman, 2006, p. 43). Feminist research works arduously against this tradition.

Pillow and Mayo (2007) noted that feminist research “entails a complex examination of the identity positions and community and cultural associations that structure” (p. 156) our lives. As I said in chapter two, talking about gender is always tricky. I believe with Jane Flax (as cited in Crotty, 1998) that “because there cannot be just one way in which patriarchy permeates thinking, there cannot be just one women’s standpoint” (p. 173). Nor can there be one Southern women’s standpoint, something I considered in designing, analyzing, and representing my research. DeVault and Gross (2007) insisted that “feminists must maintain a reflexive awareness that research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power, but, rather, are always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference, and significance” (p. 181).

DeVault’s (1996) flexible definition of what it means to do feminist research took this multiplicity into account:

‘feminist methodology’ [is] a field of inquiry rooted in feminist activism and in feminists’ critiques of the standard procedures of social science. Feminist methodologists do not use or prescribe any single research method; rather, they are united through various efforts to include women’s lives and concerns in accounts of society, to minimize the harms of research, and to support changes that will improve women’s status. (p. 29)

Distinctively feminist research methodology is “inquiry united by membership in. . . overlapping research communicates—bound together not by agreement about answers but by shared commitments to questions” (p. 30). Despite such a shared commitment to questions, Margery Wolf (1996) cautioned that in feminist research “mutual respect of difference is essential, but this respect should not pretend an equality of power that does not exist. . . . We can do a lot for our informants as individuals and for their communities, but we cannot erase the differences

between us” (p. 217). Nor, postmodern feminist researchers argue, should we try to erase difference because sameness can be a dangerous and illusory state.

In considering relations with the self and the other, feminists raise vital questions about traditional research: “How can one be a non-exploitative researcher? How does one produce research that is useful and empowering to women? How do we make research that is linked with political action? How would our research be different if we were reflective at each step of the research process?” (Pillow, 2003, p. 179). One response to these guiding questions is an ongoing emphasis on reciprocity, “doing research ‘with’ instead of ‘on.’ . . . This practice has led to ‘multivocal’ texts and exploration of attempts to let the data, the subjects, speak for themselves” (p. 179). I explore such attempts on the porch inside/outside this text, and in this chapter where I try to let the researchers speak for themselves as much as possible in an effort to decenter authorial authority.

Qualitative Inquiry: A Wild Profusion

The relationship between feminist and qualitative research has been and remains vital; in fact, “some practitioners insist explicitly on that linkage” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 189). Some argue that “theory and practice are inseparable in doing qualitative research” (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, St. Pierre, 2007, p. 29). In my primary means of collecting data, the qualitative and feminist interview, I found that this inseparability of theory and practice naturally occurred, so that I could not speak of the interviews as only qualitative or only feminist because the principles of both methodologies infused my praxis.

Researchers interviewing in the qualitative tradition do not desire to “control or predict the experience being studied. . . , [instead] they will appreciate more the intricate ways in which individual lives interact with social and structural forces” (Seidman, 2006, p. 52). These

intricacies became an object of knowledge for this qualitative feminist researcher as I considered how the women in my study found Southern womanhood defined for them, depicted in literature, and enforced in their own experience. A qualitative feminist researcher may find links between her experiences and those of the people she interviews, even though their lives may be quite different. Because researcher and researched are “affected by common structural and social forces, [the researcher] can help [reveal] patterns in that experience” (p. 52). Considering personal interactions and power relations with social and structural forces formed a vital part of this research. And as another Southern woman, I cannot *not* bring my own positionality and experience with place into play in exploring those familiar patterns.

Glesne (2006) argued that for a qualitative interview to be effective, a foremost goal must be to envision “the researcher as learner” (p. 46). This advice guided my own position, especially because I wanted to upset the power relations that might have been preconceived when the researcher was a professor and the participants her former students. I wanted to position myself as the learner in my study, so I worked to counter perceptions of me as the expert, letting the women know that they were the experts of their lived experience and that I sought and valued their knowledge, an effort that melded the qualitative and feminist traditions. As a learner, I agree that “the intent of [qualitative] interviewing is to capture the unseen that was, is, will be, or should be” (pp. 104-105).

Scheurich (1995) explained that

the interview interaction is fundamentally indeterminate. . . . The indeterminate totality of the interview always exceeds and transgresses our attempts to capture and categorize. . . .

An indeterminate ambiguity, a ‘wild profusion,’ lies at the heart of the interview

interaction. . . at the lived intersections of language, meaning, and communication. (p. 249)

I traversed these “lived intersections” with women who broached the tangled crossroads of place, gender, and subjectivity, using reading and writing to navigate their way. My research attested to the “wild profusion” of words and laughter and tears that may mark the qualitative interview interaction.

Feminist Interviewing: An Introduction

Feminist interviewing, Ann Oakley (1981) argued in her landmark essay on women interviewing women, is a contradiction in terms. She noted that traditional interviewing relies on a one-way flow of information, a sense of the interviewee as objectified data, with little recognition of the interview as a social interaction. While qualitative interviewing has shifted these parameters, feminist interviewing in particular transgresses and subverts their bounds. Oakley (as cited in Crotty, 1998) claimed that ““a way of seeing is a way of not seeing”” (p. 55), and contemporary scholars, some thirty years later, note the sexist biases that still limit the vision of research interviewing.

Denzin (as cited in Fontana and Frey, 2005) explained that ““gender filters knowledge’ . . . [and] makes a difference because the interview takes place within the cultural boundaries of a paternalistic [capitalist] social system” (p. 710). As Scheurich (1995) advised, “Watch how changing the race, class, gender, or age of the interviewer changes what [the participant] says” (p. 244). Traditional interviewing perpetuates the patriarchal, positivist “myth of ‘the dispassionate investigator,’ . . . a very powerful myth. . . [that] is classist, racist, and especially masculine” (Crotty, 1998, p. 176). Fontana (2003) contended that “in the methodological world

of interviewing, women have always already been spoken for in the very structure of the traditional interview” (p. 57). Oakley (as cited in Reissman, 1987) urged that

the mythology of “hygienic” research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias—it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives. (p. 189)

As I troubled the mythos of Southern womanhood in this study and in my life, I also resisted the patriarchal myth of the all-powerful, disinterested researcher.

Feminist interviewing holds “as a primary focus. . . the transformation of asymmetrical power relations. . . . Not only do feminist researchers ask questions about the role power and relationship play at a societal level, but also at the level between researcher and researched” (Glesne, 2006, p.17). Given my history with the women I interviewed, I worked hard to put the power relations associated with my being their former professor under erasure. I bore in mind that qualitative feminist interviewing “is not simply devoted to data acquisition. It is also a time to consider relationships, salience, meanings, and explanations—analytic acts that . . . lead to new questions” (p. 94).

Feminists who challenge traditional interviewing paradigms pose these transgressive questions, which I took to heart:

How can we co-construct interviews? How do we learn from each other and create a dynamic in which no one person is pitching the questions while the other is sending words flying? In other words, how do we co-construct knowledge? Whose story are we telling when we do interview research and for what purposes? (Glesne, 2006, p. 107)

Central to the feminist approach is an understanding that “striving for equity is not only an ethical imperative, it is also a methodological one” (Seidman, 2006, p. 110). Interviewing women and engaging participants’ questions “gives a voice through interviews to those who have been silenced; talking back becomes a political act. . . . If positivists disempower interviewees, feminists intentionally empower them” (p. 26).

Feminist Interviewing: A Review of the Literature

Because interviewing was my primary means of data collection, I review the body of literature on feminist interviewing in detail, as it explores the possibilities and responsibilities associated with the qualitative feminist research methods I employed. This chronological survey presents the hallmarks and dilemmas of feminist interviewing—with the “modes of thought and action” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 176) that inform the interaction and interpretations of it. Whenever possible, I let the researcher speak directly in an effort to construct what Lather (1991) called a “many-voiced discourse” (p. 84) that resists an authoritative critical approach and offers abundant quotations. In this polyvalent text, multiple voices articulate common concerns in feminist interviewing research, describe methodologies that inform such work, consider methods employed, and wrestle with the tensions inherent in woman-to-woman interviewing. The mostly chronological frame I adopt suggests the historicity of such research and indicates possibilities for the future of feminist interviewing and the research that theorizes it.

Like the body of criticism that treats Southern women writers’ work as a body of literature, the body of critical literature on feminist interviewing has only formed in the last thirty years or so. In her pioneering work on feminist interviewing, Oakley (1981) argued that research protocol that treats as illegitimate the interviewer’s and interviewee’s feelings, relationships, and social contexts assumes “a predominantly masculine model of sociology and research. . . . This

lack of fit between the theory and practice of interviewing is especially likely to come to the fore when a feminist interviewer is interviewing women (who may or may not be feminists)” (p. 31).

One reason for this lack of fit is a masculinist paradigm that constructs the interviewee as passive, as one not allowed to ask questions or participate in making meaning of the interview.

Oakley (1981) described textbook interviewing guidelines that advised the interviewer to obfuscate questions—to laugh them off, parry them, avoid them. In other words, in the traditional, positivist paradigm, interviewers should pretend that questions were never asked, ignore their significance, and assume that they do not matter because such information was not part of the data sought. Here, the speaker of those questions is treated as an object of knowledge—but only the knowledge that fits the researchers’ agenda. Oakley (1981) observed,

Indeed the entire paradigmatic representations of “proper” interviews. . . owe a great deal. . . to the masculine social. . . vantage point. . . . For example, the paradigm of the “proper” interview appeals to such values as objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and “science”. . . which take priority over. . . more individualized concerns. Thus the errors of poor interviewing comprise subjectivity, involvement, the “fiction” of equality and an undue concern with the ways in which people are not statistically comparable. This polarity of “proper” and “improper” interviewing is an almost classical representation of. . . wide-spread gender stereotyping. (p. 38)

Countering this masculinist research paradigm, Oakley (1981) claimed that when feminists interview women:

(1) use of prescribed interviewing practice is morally indefensible; (2) general and irreconcilable contradictions at the heart of the textbook paradigm are exposed; and (3) it becomes clear that, in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through

interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest. . . her own personal identity in the relationship. (p. 41)

Not surprisingly, central to Oakley's thesis was the recognition that "all research is political" (p. 50). She explained that "interviewing women [is], then, a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives. [It becomes] a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society" (pp. 48-49).

Feminist scholarship on interviewing often focuses, not surprisingly, on language as a gendered construction. Dale Spender and Edwin and Shirley Ardener (as cited in DeVault, 1990), considered the "idea that women are a 'muted group'. . . [and] speak in ways that are limited and shaped by men's greater social power and control, exercised both individually and institutionally" (p. 98). DeVault explained Spender's argument that "women (like members of other subordinate groups) are highly skilled at listening—to both men and women—and. . . that women together can more easily cooperate in understanding each other than speakers in mixed groups" (p. 101). In fact, "language itself reflects male experience, and. . . its categories are often incongruent with women's lives," so feminists must direct "attention to research as activity fundamentally grounded in talk" (pp. 96-97).

DeVault's (1990) research indicated that "in mixed-sex dyads and groups, women are less listened to than men and less likely to be credited for the things they say in groups; they are interrupted more often than men; the topics they introduce into conversations are less often taken up by others; and they do more work than men to keep conversation going" (p. 97). Another study of same-gendered and mixed-gendered groups found that "'96% of the interruptions. . . in

conversation were made by male speakers” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 216). These facts, alone, suggest advantages for both researcher and researched in woman-to-woman interviewing.

Feminist “researchers need to interview in ways that allow the exploration of incompletely articulated aspects of women’s experiences” (DeVault, 1990, p. 100). DeVault claimed that

women interviewing women bring to their interaction a tradition of ‘woman talk.’ They help each other develop ideas. . . , cooperating in the project of constructing meanings together. When this project involves the recovery of unarticulated experience, as so much feminist research does, researchers have another resource: they can listen for the everyday process of “translation” that [forms] part of women’s speech. (pp. 101-102)

However, DeVault acknowledged that “women [do not] always (or even usually) understand each other easily. While understanding and familiar comfort [may develop when women interview women], they are not guaranteed by gender alone. Women who are positioned differently learn to speak and hear quite different versions of ‘woman talk,’ adapting to distinctive blends of power and oppression” (p. 98).

We must trouble the idea of easy access and instant relationship based solely on gender. Reissman (1987) said, “Gender is a haunting presence. . . , constituting both a spoken and unspoken bond between the interviewer and the interviewee, enabling certain things...to be said and understood” (p. 178). However, gender is not a guarantee of instant rapport or some pure understanding because other cultural identities may supersede the connection of shared gender. It would be simplistic to assume that gender identification cancels all differences across race, class, ethnicity, and socio-economics.

While feminists listen for what is said when women talk, they also listen for what is missing. In fact, “since the words available often do not fit, women learn to ‘translate’ when they talk about their experiences. As they do so, parts of their lives ‘disappear’. . . . In order to ‘recover’ these parts of women’s lives, researchers must develop methods for listening around and beyond words” (DeVault, 1990, p. 101). DeVault (1990) emphasized listening for the gaps, for “those fascinating moments when respondents got stuck and worked at articulating thoughts they were not used to sharing” (p. 102). She explained that “this halting, hesitant, tentative talk signals the realm of not-quite-articulated experience, where standard vocabulary is inadequate, and where a respondent tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting” (p. 103). And verbal “filler” may indeed convey vital information in a feminist analytic: “‘You know’ no longer seems like stumbling inarticulateness, but appears to signal a request of understanding” (p. 103). In my study, I found that this filler often served as a signal for affirmation. Feminists encourage “a focus on attention to the unsaid, in order to produce it as a topic and make it speakable” (p. 104).

There remains “an unresolved tension between an insistence on the importance of gender and a recognition of cross-cutting differences among women. . . . Much feminist research. . . shows, often, how skillfully and creatively women speakers circumvent and subvert the processes of social control, whether they do so by ‘talking back’ (hooks, 1989) or ‘telling it slant’ (Spender, 1980/1985)” (as cited in DeVault, 1990, p. 112). As Gluck and Patai (1991) put it with wry understatement, women interviewing women “is not an unproblematic activity” (p. 9). Indeed, whether talking back, telling it slant, or conveying meaning through unspoken gaps and inchoate expression, women being interviewed by women have a chance to say the unsaid; however, this experience does not come without dangers and limitations.

Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack (1991) claimed that feminist interviewing “requires much more than a new set of questions to explore women’s unique experiences and unique perspectives. . . . We need to hear what women implied, suggested, and started to say but didn’t” (p. 17). Feminists should be “attending to what is missing, . . . ‘the presence of the absence’ in women’s texts—the ‘hollows, centers, caverns within’ . . . where one might expect [what] is missing . . . or deceptively coded” (p. 19).

In addition to listening for absences, feminist interviewers also “attend to the subject’s *meta-statements*. These are places in the interview where people spontaneously stop, look back, and comment about their own thoughts or something just said” (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 21). Here, the focus is on “the dynamic unfolding of the subject’s viewpoint. . . . This shift of focus from data gathering to interactive process” (p. 23) often marks a feminist interview. The move from data gathering to interactive meaning-making requires certain skills in the researcher: an enhanced awareness of subjective emotional experience, a sense that feelings revealed may transgress gender boundaries, and a valuing of the interviewee’s own interpretations.

In a similar vein, Kristina Minister (1991) described “paralanguage—the voiced nonverbal characteristics of the group [or individuals being interviewed]” (p. 32). She considered how groups of women in her study

consistently ignore the politeness rule about taking turns at speaking. . . . Quite unlike the male monologic ritual, one or several women may take a turn while another speaker holds the floor. Frequently one woman initiates a sentence and another woman takes it to completion. . . . Questions, comments, and encouraging remarks run throughout individual speakers’ descriptions and narrations. These interruptions, however, are welcomed by everyone, for they seem to be motivated as much to support speakers as to

clarify topics. 'Intersupport' is a better word, one that has not been necessary in an androcentric world where utterances from those not possessing the floor are regarded as attempts to take it over. (p. 33)

Minister (1991) contended that "the standard [interview] frame—topic selections determined by interviewer questions, one person talking at a time, the narrator 'taking the floor'—denies women the communication form that supports the topics women value" (pp. 34-35). She argued that, in fact, "women should do the interviewing, for obviously they know how to utilize women's communication patterns. However, it is less obvious that sex is no more a guarantee of a gender-neutral attitude than are institutionally sanctioned codes for equality" (p. 35). In their self-reflexivity and departure from the masculinist paradigm, feminist interviewers remain aware that

women use questions to maintain and enhance conversation, [while] men interpret questions as requests for information. . . . In woman talk, reflexivity is not only legitimate, it is inseparable from the process. Feminist interviews are not a radical departure. . . ; they simply make the self-reflexivity inherent in the experience of the interview explicit and part of the performance record. (p. 38)

Hence, feminist interviewing becomes a search not only for cultures but for subjectivities. In fact, "women's construction of self and gender can be recorded, analyzed, and interpreted so that it will reconstruct human history" (p. 39).

Judith Stacey's (1991) much-debated essay "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" considered the implications of feminist interviewing as a contradiction in terms, asking "whether the appearance of greater respect for an equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation" (p. 113). Stacey (1991) argued

that precisely because such research “depends upon human relationship, engagement, and attachment, it places research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer” (p. 113). While Stacey spoke specifically of feminist ethnography, we can apply her ideas to feminist interviewing in a larger sense because the researcher cannot “escape tasks of interpretations, evaluation, and judgment. . . . And the greater the intimacy—the greater the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship—the greater is the danger” (p. 114).

Daphne Patai (1991) contended that as a result of Oakley’s (1981) influential research on women interviewing women, “the model of a distanced, controlled, and ostensibly neutral interviewer has...been replaced with that of sisterhood—an engaged and sympathetic interaction between two individuals united by the fact of gender oppression” (p. 143). However, Patai (1991) also questioned the need for intimacy between researcher and researched as advocated in much feminist research theory, observing that “problems of power and betrayal expose the fragility of easy assumptions of sisterhood and reciprocity” (p. 149). She asked, “Are there no choices other than exploitation or patronage? Difference or identification?” (p. 149).

Lather (1991) explained that “‘women interviewing women is a two-way process’ ... as research participants [insist] on interactive, reciprocal self-disclosure” (p. 73). Reinharz (1992) argued that “feminist interviewing includes self-disclosure and a belief in what the interviewee said,” part of a guiding “ethic of commitment and egalitarianism in contrast with the scientific ethic of detachment and role differentiation” (p. 27). In many models of feminist interviewing, self-disclosure is thought to encourage “‘a true dialogue’ rather than ‘an interrogation.’ Self-disclosure initiates ‘true dialogue’ by allowing participants to become ‘co-researchers’” (p. 33). Reinharz (1992) said that while she did not wish to limit feminist research to a format of multiple in-depth interviews intended to strengthen ties between interviewer and interviewee, “feminist

interest in them is apparent. In addition to the potential for developing trust, the asset of this method is the opportunity to share interview transcripts or notes with the interviewee and then invite the interviewee's analysis" (p. 36). Given feminist emphasis on reflexivity, "meaning emerges through interaction. . . . This process of interpretation and clarification creates meaning and understanding between those engaged that leaves neither of them unchanged" (p. 37).

The variety of concerns evidenced when women interview women and the multiplicity of ways in which feminists approach their research problems "reflect the fact that feminist research methods are both rooted in the mainstream disciplines and represent a protest against them" (p. 22). In fact, Reinharz concluded, "for a woman to be understood in a social research project, it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman" (p. 23). Reinharz examined the question of interviewer mediation, describing methods that seek "direct subjectivity' [because]. . . the less mediated by an interpreter, the greater the potential that the material will dissolve differences between the reader and the speaker. When the differences between women are dissolved, they are better able to challenge the dominant ideology" (p. 228). Of course, this assumes that unmediated representation and the "dissolving" of difference are indeed desirable—or even possible.

Poststructural thinkers argue that such unification is neither possible nor desirable. Scheurich (1995) argued that when shifting spaces open in interviews too often "the researcher then fills this indeterminate openness with her or his interpretive baggage; imposes names, categories, constructions, conceptual schemes, theories upon the unknowable; and believes that the indeterminate is now located, constructed, known." (p. 249). What is needed, Scheurich claimed, "are some new imaginaries of interviewing that. . . transgress and exceed a knowable

order” (p. 250). Such new and transgressive imaginaries hold out fertile possibilities in feminist interviewing.

Feminist interviewers, especially poststructuralists, wrestle with the crisis of representation. As Deborah Britzman (1995) observed,

As an interpretive disturbance to the promise of representation, poststructuralists read the absent against the present, knowing that “being there” does not guarantee access to truth Subjects may well be the tellers of experience; but every telling is constrained, partial, and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure, even as they might promise, representation. (p. 230)

Representation is continually complicated by identities that “already constituted a cacophony of beckonings and involuntary returns” (p. 234). Britzman argued that “representation cannot deliver what it promises, unmediated access to the real” (p. 235). Feminist interviewers must remember the “interpretive baggage” (Scheurich, 1995, p. 249) with which they find themselves freighted and the contingencies within which they and their participants live. Britzman (1995) spoke of “clashing investments in how stories are told and of the impossibility of telling everything. . . . [The idea] is to think the unthought in more complex ways” (p. 236).

In a similar vein, Lather (2000a) asked, “Can there be a research that. . . resides in messy ‘spaces in between’ (Robinson, 1994) where centers and margins are both situated and yet [in] constantly changing intersections of interpretation, interruption and mutuality?” (p. 16). Given these fields of shifting intersections, feminist researchers pay particular attention to the spaces normally allotted to women and their narratives by the dominant ideology. “Placed outside of mastery and victory narratives, inquiry is a kind of self-wounding laboratory for discovering the

rules by which truth is produced. Here we [poststructural feminists] attempt to be accountable to complexity” (Lather, 2000b, p. 305).

Part of this complexity involves considering other identity markers. Pillow (2002) reminded us that “gender is always differentially constructed through race, class, and sexuality” (p. 12). Pillow noted that reciprocity and the ethics it engenders form key elements of feminist methodologies, requiring “an acknowledgment of what is similar across and between women in interviews by women with women that results in a reciprocal research relationship and establishes new ethics of doing research” (p. 15).

Self-reflexivity, as well as reciprocity, remains central to this new ethics. In fact, “feminists themselves engage in self-critique surrounding the politics of the gaze in feminist research: that is, who studies who and the power relations embedded in identities that impact the conducting of research” (Pillow, 2002, p. 17). Gubrium and Holstein (2003) pointed out that “continual self analysis on the part of the interviewer. . . is necessary” (p. 73) to counter these power relations. Pillow (2003) considered the tensions, possibilities, and limitations of such self-reflexivity:

This vigilance from within can aid in a rethinking and questioning of the assumptive knowledges embedded in reflective practices in. . . qualitative research and work not to situate reflexivity as a confessional act, a cure for what ails us, or a practice that renders familiarity, but rather to situate practices of reflexivity as critical to exposing the difficult and often uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar. (p. 177)

Pillow (2003) noted “Chiseri-Strateri’s (1996) distinction between reflexivity and reflection: ‘to be reflective does not demand an ‘other,’ while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny’” (p. 177).

Andrea Fontana (2003) observed that “traditional patriarchal relations in interviewing are being criticized, and ways to make formerly unarticulated voices audible are now center stage” (p. 52). Perhaps in no pedagogical approach is this aim for freshly articulated experience more emphasized than in feminist interviewing. And it is no surprise that in feminist work, particularly, “an ongoing concern has been the elastic subject position of the respondent. A leading question here...is, Do women always speak as women, or are other important subject positions part of their response repertoires?” (Fontana, 2003, p. 57). As poststructural feminist researchers have indicated, multiple and shifting subject positions are always at play, as are the variably crafted constructions of the interview interaction.

A striving for empowerment and ethical equity informs feminist interviews because “feminist researchers argue that a more open, loosely structured research methodology is necessary to learn more about women, to capture their words, their concepts, and the importance they place on the events in their world” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 26). In feminist interviews, “encouraging long and undirected answers provides space [for participants to relate their experience], but a shared vocabulary can also do so” (p. 103). Feminist researchers are “listening for gaps and absences in women’s talk, and considering what meanings might lie beyond explicit speech” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 183). Being aware of such gaps requires a self-reflexive sense of one’s own cultural contingencies because “the active listener must interrogate her... deep-seated assumptions about various worlds and her...arrogant perceptions of others in those worlds” (p. 184).

Ellis and Berger (2003) described interviews in which meaning is overtly co-constructed by researcher and participant in “reflexive dyadic interviews” (p. 161.) Such interviewing, they asserted, requires “acts of faith” in which “the researcher often feels a reciprocal desire to

disclose, given the intimacy of the details being shared by the interviewee. The interview is conducted more as a conversation between two equals than as a distinctly hierarchical, question-and-answer exchange” (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 163). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) noted that a feminist ethic “redefines the interview situation. This ethic transforms interviewers and respondents into coequals who are carrying on a conversation about mutually relevant, often biographically critical, issues” (p. 643).

Some scholars, concluding that symmetrical relations between researcher and researched were “‘neither possible nor desirable,’ . . . called instead for ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 716). Feminist interviews become “negotiated accomplishments of both interviewers and respondents that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place” (p. 716). In fact, future directions in qualitative interviewing

stem largely from. . . feminist interviewing practices. The traditional interview has painstakingly attempted to maintain neutrality and achieve objectivity and has kept the role of the interviewer as invisible as possible. Feminists instead are rebelling against the practice of *exploiting* respondents and wish to use interviewing for ameliorative purposes. . . . Denzin (1997) referred to this approach as the “feminist, communitarian ethical model.” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 720)

Rubin and Rubin (2005) observed that “feminist researchers have worked out a research methodology that. . . humanizes both the researcher and the interviewee” (p. 26). Feminist qualitative interviewers “are becoming keenly attuned to the fact that in knowing ‘others,’ we come to know ‘ourselves’ (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 697).

DeVault and Gross (2007) argued that the strongest feminist research brings. . . an awareness that researchers are always working with accounts constructed linguistically, that experience recounted is always emergent in the moment, that telling requires a listener and that the listening shapes the account as well as the telling, that both telling and listening are shaped by discursive histories (so that fragments of many other tellings are carried in any embodied conversation). (p. 179)

We must remain mindful that contingent experience and discursive power cannot *not* shape the interview, including “the questions researchers ask or don’t ask” (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 182). Feminist researchers encourage interviewees to let missing “information affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours, ‘away from abstract. . . bloodless, professionalized questions,’ toward peoples, knowledges, and experiences that have been disavowed, overlooked, and forgotten’ (Gordon, 1997, p. 40)” (as cited in DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 182). Further, “as researchers, we must be cognizant of the fact that feminists may be divided by relations of power and privilege, and that listening may require that we acknowledge the ignorance our own privileges may have produced before we can hear what others wish to tell us” (p. 183).

In the remainder of this chapter and in the next, I discuss what the women in my study wished to tell me and describe how I tried to hear them.

Methods of Data Collection in the Study at Hand

On the Porch

“Out on the porch. . .” The very words bring to mind a mood, a feeling, an image of a place to relax and enjoy a cool breeze on a warm night, a place for reading, rocking, and storytelling.
-Out on the Porch, 1992, jacket cover

And the sense of vision you have from the porch—you see who’s coming. –Amelia

And with the porch it’s kind of democratic because anybody can just step up and start talking,
maybe introduce a whole new idea. –Rachel

Whenever people are coming inside, I just go into automatic belle mode, and I have to vacuum
and serve tea and cookies and all that. But on the porch, I can just relax and be me. There’s a
freedom there. –Zelda

This qualitative study informed by feminist pedagogy employed interviews, document collection, and writing as primary means of data collection and analysis. Lather (2006) noted the need for us to consider complexity “via exploration of the ambiguity, fragmentation, undecidabilities, fluidities, hyperrealities and incoherencies of a world in process. To ‘take the side of the messy’” (p. 789). In thinking of the kinds of data that permeated this study, I took the messy side, resisting neat categories. It seems important here to remember that “data are produced from social interactions and are therefore constructions or interpretations. There are no ‘pure,’ ‘raw’ data, uncontaminated by human thought and action, and the significance of data depends on how material fits into the architecture of corroborating data” (Freeman et al., p. 27).

In thinking of memory as a construct and experience as constituted, I considered data as partial and particular to the women and to the places and spaces in which they existed. However, data was also informed by my work on Southern women in general. Most of the data collected here offered personal and collective memories and interpretations of texts, so I remained aware of the instability of categories and truth claims as I wrote to analyze and represent data. In fact, “qualitative data and information are always already interpretations made by participants as they answer questions or by researchers as they write up their observations. Neither research participants nor researchers can be neutral, because. . . they are always positioned culturally, historically, and theoretically” (Freeman et al., 2007, p. 27). Just as I acknowledge—and

embrace—my partiality for my participants, I also acknowledge my positionality as a Southern woman who, like my participants, constructs a self through texts and as a feminist qualitative researcher who resists sharply delineated categories.

In the following discussion, I describe how I collected data primarily through qualitative feminist interviews and document analysis as I conducted and recorded individual interviews with ten women and follow-up interviews with nine of them in either a group interview or individual interviews. I began collecting interview data in a pilot study and ended with a group conversation as participants and I gathered for brunch at a Southern café near the college in something like a one-time book club meeting to discuss our rereading of *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) transacted specifically for the occasion. In document collection, I analyzed the literary texts under discussion along with scholarly critiques of these books, and I considered participants' responses to the same texts in their creative and critical work, notably in their epistolary fiction. I examined a creative Master's thesis and journalism that two participants produced after the course, inspired by texts we had read together, and I looked at how participants employed the practice of marginalia, writing their way alongside and through others' texts. I also collected my own critical and creative work that dealt in some way with the construction of Southern women's subjectivity. And I collected other documents related to the course on Southern literature, including syllabi, handouts, and student evaluations. In addition to considering participants' words—verbal and written—and their use of other's words in the texts at play, I attended to transgressive data, like those generated by sensuality and memory, physicality and emotion.

Feminist Interviewing in the Case at Hand: Southern Women in Vigorous Conversation

On the Porch

Porchin'—it's not necessarily happening on the porch. There's work and women, and I have a knitting group of all women and we meet in a coffee shop, and porchin' is definitely going on.

We have a latte and we're porchin', but it's completely different if I'm sitting in a coffee shop with my male friends. I don't know if it's because work is going on or because we're women, but it's just distinct. —Zelda

I felt like we could just go anywhere together in that class. It was our safe space, and we could talk honestly and be vulnerable with each other. And we're so fragile at 22—not knowing what we're doing. —Deirdre

If we could all just get together and talk, we could save each other. —Zelda

There was magic happening in the sacred circle! —Amelia

Interview Data

Pilot study. I began this research formally in the summer of 2006, when I conducted a pilot study in which I interviewed one participant as part of a qualitative research course. I then interviewed two more women for the pilot study for a course on teaching literature in the fall of 2006. The three pilot interviews helped me determine the validity and viability of the work I wanted to undertake for my dissertation research, and the enthusiastic response from these participants catalyzed my project. I used pilot interviews in the qualitative tradition “to learn about [my] research process, interview questions, observation techniques, and [myself]” (Glesne, 2006, p. 43). Mostly I used the pilot study to gather advice from the women and to see how interested they were in talking about our texts. I asked all three women—and everyone else subsequently—to speculate about what I might find in this research. In each interview, the women expressed excitement about the project and asked for another interview. Two of the women talked at length about how they would like to gather as a group to talk about the books and the class again. Each interview lasted much longer than I anticipated and yielded rich data

that helped guide my work. In planning the pilot study, I bore in mind Gove's (as cited in Seidman, 2006) definition of the verb *pilot*, which is "to guide along strange paths or through dangerous places" (p. 38). With these Southern women, I embarked on a journey through strange and sometimes dangerous spaces and places.

The first interview of the pilot study affirmed that my research plans held promise that could entice me—and maybe sustain me—during a much longer project. Rachel was a natural choice for my first interviewee because I knew that in her I'd engage a woman with spirited opinions and a lively intellect who could bring insightful perceptions to bear on the topic. Born in the Deep South of parents who are not Southern, Rachel spoke of "having to learn to be Southern—all those ma'ams and sirs and all that scary stuff about being saved or going to hell that I sure wasn't hearing at home!" Learning Southern-ness, she said, "was a hard lesson." Rachel earned an undergraduate degree in English at Bridges College and is currently working on a graduate degree in education. Now twenty-seven, she was twenty-one when she took the course with me and twenty-five when I first interviewed her. I especially wanted to interview Rachel because I thought she seemed somewhat representative of the women in her remarkably responsive class and because I knew she would speak articulately about Southern literature and perhaps about the construction of female identities in the South.

Preparing for the first pilot study interview in the summer of 2006, I bore in mind Glesne's (2006) advice about including a range of kinds of interview questions and developed questions targeted at experience or behavior, opinions or values, feeling or knowing, along with questions about the subject's background. I considered my guiding research questions to be fluid and prepared to alter them, based on the data I gathered. I followed feminist practice and kept interview questions open and loosely structured, with space for in-depth answers. I heeded

Glesne's advice to pilot my questions and went into the interview prepared to "let some questions fall to the ground" (p. 86). In response to the first few interviews, I added and dropped questions from my interview guide, and while I kept many of my original interview questions, my initial focus on perceptions shifted to practices, and I added a research question and interview questions about texts participants had created both during and after the course, as they suggested. (See Appendix A for the interview guide.)

In the initial interview of the pilot study, I elicited many valuable suggestions from Rachel as an expert who helped make my study richer. While my primary intent had been to find out which assigned texts might have affected how participants perceived themselves to be constituted by their culture and how they chose to constitute themselves, Rachel offered a crucial suggestion that I immediately integrated into my research design: she pointed out that the creative writing projects the women created "spoke volumes" about how they saw themselves and what they learned about Southern women. I understood at that point that I needed to include as data in my study documents my former students had written, in addition to interviews, in order to learn if and how they had used the invention of their own texts as self-formative practices.

The writing assignment Rachel referred to instructed students to develop a creative text that responded in some way to one of the required readings. The women in the course often accomplished this task with a grace and profundity that I hardly expected and that thrilled and moved me. As a result of Rachel's advice, I added questions about those texts to the interview guide and included plans to collect documents for data. Doing so proved fruitful. At the beginning of the study, Rachel's excitement about the possibilities of my project helped catalyze the research. As she spoke so passionately about the subject at hand, she confirmed that my

object of knowledge was indeed worthy of study and of interest to her, and by extension, I hoped, to others I intended to invite to participate.

As a result of my pilot study interview with Rachel, I prepared a research proposal and conducted two more pilot study interviews in the autumn of 2006. In the second phase of the pilot study, I interviewed two more women, and their enthusiasm for the research, like Rachel's, indicated a "catalytic validity," which Lather (1991) described as "the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it" (p. 68). Each interview lasted from one and a half hours to two hours, although I had originally envisioned them as lasting about forty-five minutes.

After preparing verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, writing extensive field notes and keeping a researcher's log, I wrote a paper on two interviews and gave a presentation to my colleagues in a doctoral seminar. I later presented a version of that paper, *Vigorous Conversations: Southern Women Read Southern Women*, at the biennial Southern Women Writer's Conference at Berry College in Rome, Georgia, in September of 2007. The presentation elicited a warm response, but I felt very strange talking about my participants and their interview data with a roomful of strangers and a couple of my colleagues, even with names and distinguishing traits altered to protect their confidentiality. I am normally unfazed by public speaking, but I was nervous for weeks before presenting this paper. I fretted the whole time about trying to represent my participants and their stories publicly, treating them as academic fodder. I still have ambivalent feelings about representing the women. It makes me anxious to think of failing them in any way, of failing to represent them in their wonder and vibrancy. I am ethically bound to them and want this bond to guide my work but not to bind or limit it.

Interview study. In the fall of 2006 and winter of 2007, after securing approval of my research proposal, I invited more women to participate and interviewed five more women during holiday breaks when they were out of school, off work, or home visiting family. These interviews, with one exception, also became extended conversations, lasting from one to two hours and even longer in a couple of cases. The shortest interview lasted precisely forty-five minutes, and the participant adhered more strictly and concisely to the questions posed, taking few tangents or leisurely detours.

I opened each interview with a question about the participant's background in relation to the region, and this invariably led to long, often funny stories of families who had been in the South "since time was." In response to this question, many of the women spoke of coming from religiously conservative families. Surprisingly, religion hardly came up otherwise. Race was discussed in relation to certain texts, like Morrison's (1991) *Beloved*, and the women lamented the absence of women of color from our class and spoke of being ashamed of the South's racial history; however, gender got far more attention. Participants spoke often of mothers and daughters, real and fictional, and a duality they perceived in female identities in the South and in the culture itself.

When I posed the question about which texts had evoked their strongest response and why, the floodgates usually opened and the women talked with intensity about the books and characters that resonated with them. As I explained, I did not send lists of texts for possible discussion in advance. I considered doing so when planning the pilot studies, but I was glad I chose not to because the women demonstrated surprisingly vivid recall, and no one hesitated when I asked which readings had elicited their strongest reactions. Each participant plunged right into a long, impassioned reply. As I mentioned, several spontaneously quoted lines from

memory—and from texts they had read as assignments for a course taken years ago, as many as seven years in one case. The women talked excitedly of their own writing, as well. Laughter punctuated our interviews and participants seemed to enjoy themselves. Sometimes they became emotional and shed an occasional tear. But mostly, we talked and talked and laughed.

I altered my interview questions a bit with the early interviews and felt free to let the participant direct the conversation as she wished. I continued this practice in all the interviews, seldom following the order in which I had written my interview questions, instead “‘letting the women’s own logic and ideas...steer the conversation’ (p. 584)” (Davies as cited in Glesne, 2006, p. 99). Every participant came with questions and ideas, so the conversation took on a unique shape in each interview. In conducting the interviews for this research, I tried, like a good feminist, to listen for the gaps—the unspoken—and the women’s cues for affirmation, to encourage spacious expanses where they might feel free to say the unsaid and reconfigure the already-said.

With each interview, I found affirmation that my project was indeed significant and pointed toward the challenges and complexities of constructing a female self, partly through texts, in the American South. I continued with individual interviews throughout the spring of 2007. I focused intensively on scholarly reading and writing throughout the summer of 2007, and in the autumn of 2007, I prepared the proposal for this dissertation and continued interviews, document collection, and reading and writing my way through data. In the winter of 2007 and the spring of 2008, I conducted in-depth interviews with two more women and worked on verbatim transcriptions.

In the spring of 2008, I conducted individual follow-up interviews with three participants and a group interview with six of them. Second interviews were flexibly structured and lasted

much longer than I'd planned in each case, as did the group interview, which I discuss below. I developed three or four follow-up questions based on our previous interviews, and participants largely guided the direction of our conversations. After our group gathering, I conducted individual follow-up interviews with two women who had been unable to attend the brunch and another with Rachel, my first interviewee in the pilot study. I wanted to speak again with the three women because our initial interviews were particularly compelling, and each of them had suggested another conversation. While I had looked forward to all of the interviews and anticipated interesting conversations, I was not fully prepared for the wise and insightful things the women said and the sometimes intimate experiences they shared, finding that "until you have started interviewing, you really have no idea of the richness of what people have to tell you" (Thompson, 1994, p. 3).

Throughout the interview study, a familiar refrain recurred: the women often said how much they'd like to get together with other participants to talk about the texts at hand. All participants spoke about the power of working and talking texts in relations of a readerly sisterhood with other Southern women. Through conversations about books, the women had developed an extraordinary level of trust in which they felt safe revealing their vulnerabilities to each other and sharing personal, sometimes painful stories in response to the texts or to one another's experiences. In my study, they talked frequently of the bonds they had developed with each other through literary transactions. All of the women spoke passionately about the significance of their porchin' together, expressing a longing for more communal conversations about the texts and "that whole Southern deal." One participant said, "Reading those books and talking with those powerful women in my class, I realized that it's not just my family that's

weird like that. Maybe I can look at the Southern thing and think, Oh, *that's* what it is.” As one woman explained, “Being with those women and those books let me know that I was not alone.”

Book Brunch: A Collaborative Rereading

We pursue the same fugitive quarry—the nature of reading—and...the reader who plucks a book from her shelf only once is as deprived as the listener, who, after attending a single performance of a Beethoven symphony, never hears it again. -Fadiman, 2006, p. xiv

Sometimes. . .[the reader] spots the written quarry, follows a trail, laughs, plays tricks, or. . . lets [herself] be taken in by it. -de Certeau, 1984/1988, p.173

I recalled Lather's (1991) advice that “group interviews provide tremendous potential for deeper probing and reciprocally educative encounters” (p. 77) as I considered participants' eagerness to discuss Smith's (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies* and their requests for more porchin' as a group. In the spirit of reciprocity, I planned a group gathering and invited the women to reread Smith's novel and come together over brunch for conversation about the book and their experience of revisiting it. Seven participants accepted, and we met in a restaurant on the recently revitalized town square near their alma mater. While I originally planned the event as a way to thank the women for participating, it became a vital source of rich data. I had hoped to invite them all to my home, but hot weather and the presence of a roofing crew made my porch seem less than desirable, so I reserved a private room at a Southern café and ordered grits, eggs, biscuits and gravy, fruit, and plenty of coffee, despite the heat. The food was delicious, and the space was bright and inviting with windows thrown open to an early summer breeze, an evocative spot for our indoor porchin'.

We met on a sunny morning in late May of 2008, and the women were either out of school or had taken the day off work. Wearing sundresses and sandals, they didn't look too different from the young women I remembered in my classroom, but they had gained a wealth of real-life experience. The women at the table all knew each other, at least casually, and some

were close friends. They represented two of the three sections of the course from which I selected participants. The women who could not come belonged to the third section. Another woman had car trouble and could not get to the table in person, but joined us via cell phone for our entire conversation.

Since our classes, they had married, earned more degrees, traveled, volunteered, and started promising careers, and, in some cases, struggled with illness, family and financial problems, and unemployment. Only one woman had a child, but most of the others talked confidently as if children were in their future. Most of them said they intended to stay in the South, work, and raise families here. The women differed from each other in socio-economic backgrounds, political leanings, religious beliefs, and sometimes sexual orientation, but they all shared a Southern background and previous experience with the text.

To begin the conversation, I simply asked what their experience of rereading the book had been like, and we were off and running. They were eager to talk, and everyone contributed. For over two and half hours, the young women and I talked about the novel, protagonist Ivy Rowe's life, and their lives and experiences as women in the South. Spirited conversation flowed freely and moved around in a non-linear fashion as the women directed the course of our dialogue. As in the individual interviews, we laughed often.

The kind of conversational intersupport that feminist researchers like Minister (1991) described was precisely what I found as the women at our book club brunch sometimes talked at the same time, completed each other's sentences, and offered affirmation to that question, "You know?" There was no sense of the traditional masculinist interview in which speakers take turns holding the floor as the not-to-be-interrupted experts in charge. At brunch, we enjoyed an open and collaborative conversation as ideas overlapped, with the women often interrupting and

affirming each other. The merging of language and ideas was in no way viewed as some hostile masculinist takeover, but was the women's way of porchin', of catalyzing each other's thought in collective meaning making and answering stories with stories. Together, the women encouraged both group and individual efforts. Here, mind sparked mind. As one participant observed, "Everybody just joins in, and it's like an ongoing affirmation that really helps new ideas come together."

The women's candor and insight moved and impressed me. I knew the conversation would be fascinating when, as soon as I'd turned on the tape recorder and I asked why they thought reading Smith's (1988) book seemed to have had such a profound impact on them, one woman immediately said, "Well, I can tell you that this one passage got me through law school! I had to just read it every day, and say, 'This is my real life. This is it now.'" And in later interviews, I got goose bumps when two other participants cited this same passage as something they had returned to repeatedly. (They had not been at the brunch and did not know about the other woman's remarks.) I talk further about their reactions and that passage in *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) in the next chapter.

I thought of our gathering as a book club that met just once, but with memories of other configurations of reading together. This kind of book club talk "typically produces conversations that transgress conceptual boundaries separating 'text' and 'reader,' 'social' and 'personal,' and 'academic' and 'non-academic'" (Faust et al., 2006, p. 45). During our book brunch, as in our classes, participants and I joined together for collective transgression, questioning separations between text as self and reader as other and between private and collaborative interpretations. One woman put it this way: "Now I don't feel so isolated. We've got our own shared language now through the literature, and that's so cool. And we'll always have that." And as I told the

group, every time I reread a text from our classes, the women who journeyed through the texts with me before—their words and reactions—accompany me. I cannot read certain books without recalling certain readers. My former reading collaborators remain a presence in my ongoing interactions with the texts, lively and welcome companions, still speaking and interrupting and making their own meanings.

Not surprisingly, the women talked about how different parts of the book or different characters interested them more on this reading than they had when they were younger. As Fadiman (2006) said of rereading, “Sometimes the book may be so great that familiarity enlarges it rather than diminishes it; it expands like the chambers of a nautilus, growing as you grow” (p. xvii). The expanding nautilus metaphor seemed apt for this group of rereaders, as they described a growing understanding of more mature characters and various themes in this reading of Smith’s (1988) novel. The mother characters attracted more attention on a second (or third or fourth) reading. Some women said that on a first reading they’d preferred the sections when the narrator is a child, and most agreed that they found the sections when she is older more compelling on this reading. I was more interested on my rereading of *Fair and Tender Ladies* in looking at how the narrator eventually faces death, not surprising given that I am much older than my participants.

Several women said they were more drawn to the sections when the protagonist, Ivy Rowe, is a young wife and mother struggling to keep some sense of self while caring for a houseful of children, a husband, and assorted relatives. During this time in her life, Ivy nearly succumbs to depression, or what she calls a “soft darkness” that she finds difficult to climb up out of, caused by too-frequent childbirth, back-breaking and mind-numbing labor, and a growing distance from her husband and her lively old self. Here, the young women looked ahead to the

dangers of a future that might be. As one participant asked in speaking both of Ivy and of herself, “Just how much of yourself can you afford to give up and still keep yourself?” I talk further in the next chapter about how the women used their reading and rereading and the spirit of sisterhood they cultivated for help with the ongoing construction of their subjectivities.

For each of the individual interviews and for the book club brunch with the group, I audio-taped our conversations and transcribed them all verbatim. As a result, I prepared over 200 single-spaced pages of transcripts, wrote extensive field notes, and kept a researcher’s log, practices I discuss with data analysis below.

Document Collection

While qualitative feminist interviewing was my primary means of data collection in this study, I also collected documents as data. Glesne (2006) said that “documents corroborate your observations and interviews and thus make your findings more trustworthy. Beyond corroboration, they may raise questions about your hunches and thereby shape new directions for observations and interviews” (p. 65). Documents “can enrich what you see and hear by supporting, expanding, and challenging your portrayals and perceptions. Your understanding of the phenomenon in question grows as you make use of the documents and artifacts that are part of people’s lives” (p. 68). In collecting documents that have been part of my participants’ lives, I tried to understand how they used the texts they read and created as practices of the self.

Document collection and analysis offered a deeper and richer view of the problem in ways I hardly anticipated. Peräkylä (2005) contended that an informal approach in which the researcher reads and rereads the collected documents to identify prominent themes and to “draw a picture of the presuppositions and meanings that constitute the cultural world of which the textual material is a specimen. . . may. . . be the best choice as a method in research focusing on

written texts” (p. 870), especially when document analysis is a secondary means of collecting data. The women’s words, spoken and written, lay at the heart of my study, reverberating forcefully. While the documents I analyzed were secondary to the interviews for data collection, they became increasingly important as research progressed and the women talked intently and extensively about the texts they created as well as the texts they read.

I collected several kinds of documents: (1) critical and creative texts the participants wrote as students, (2) academic and professional writing the women created subsequently to the class, and (3) the literature under discussion. After rereading the women’s work, which dealt primarily with Southern female subjects, I decided to gather (4) my own critical and creative writing that also dealt with the subjectivity of Southern women. I collected literary texts and criticism, focusing on the books and writers that participants talked about most in interviews, and I reread—again—Smith’s (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Welty’s (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples*, Faulkner’s (1930/ 1990) *As I Lay Dying*, and Williams’ (1947/1974) *A Streetcar Named Desire*. While I reviewed the body of literary criticism on Southern women’s writing to help me think about where my participants and I entered the conversation, I also reviewed more specific criticism on the texts I reread. I read reams of Welty and Smith critiques, but I could only skim the Faulkner criticism, for obvious reasons: a review of Faulkner scholarship is a project unto itself and the subject of countless dissertations.

Readers as Writers: Participants’ Writing for the Course

On the advice of a participant, I collected critical and creative texts the women wrote for the course, and I located a provident source: volumes of their collected critical and creative writing, which the classes prepared as final projects in two of the three sections from which I selected participants. While these books occupy a shelf in my office and I drag them out as

exemplars for classes designing their own books, I had not reread any of them since the time of their creation. I found myself impressed with the women's perceptive responses to the texts, regardless of editing errors and grammatical lapses. The artistry of the volumes was also impressive, with original artwork and, often, sophisticated layout. I had forgotten the books' titles and organizing themes and had only fuzzy memories of the papers collected in them.

One class book, *The Search for Southern Identity: A Journey of Self-Realization and Discovery*, featured on its cover a photograph taken by a student of a sprawling white Victorian house a few blocks from the college, complete with wrap-around porch and gingerbread trim, set against a blue, blue sky. This volume contained, among other writings, participants' critical essays on Virgie and Ivy in *The Golden Apples* (Welty, 1949/1977) and *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) and creative pieces on Ivy and Denver in *Beloved* (Morrison, 1991). The back cover boasted a student's photograph of rolling blue Appalachian foothills. Inside the back cover was a photograph of the group taken on a porch of the academic building where the class had met: twenty or so women in rocking chairs between big white columns. I sat in the middle, smiling from my rocker.

The other class book that I collected for this project, *Revelations of the South: Symbols, Sisterhood, and Transformation*, had as its cover a collage of evocative Southern images: cotton and tobacco fields, Welty in her graduation gown, a young Confederate soldier in uniform, two farm boys at a hog killing, a red dirt road that vanishes into a distant horizon, and a woman reading on the porch of a shack. Included in the volume were two participants' critical essays on Faulkner's (1961) *Old Man* and their own epistolary fiction that, in many ways, answered Smith's. The back cover consisted of a photograph of the class standing before a pink dogwood

tree in glorious full bloom. I was lost in the back row behind students taller than me, with the top of my head just visible in the blossoms enfolding me.

I also collected another kind of literary response from one participant, an artifact: a piece of pottery made in answer to Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples*. Phoenix exhibited her work at a student art show and then gave it to me. The glazed brown bowl with the words *Silver apples of the moon and golden apples of the sun* etched around its lip sits atop a book shelf in my office and makes me smile every time I glance at it. The text she inscribed into her bowl concludes Yeats' (1899/1989) "The Song of Wandering Aengus," as lovers reunited in a dream of longing

. . . walk among long dappled grass

And pluck til time and times are done

The silver apples of the moon

And the golden apples of the sun. (Lines 22-25)

Yeats' poem inspired Welty and runs throughout her book, *The Golden Apples*. Not surprisingly, the woman who crafted the bowl spoke passionately about Welty in our interviews.

Post-Course Writing: Deirdre's Devised Theatre

In addition to collecting documents participants wrote for our course, I discovered and collected related texts written after our class. For example, in her Master's thesis in theatre, Deidre dealt with identities constructed for Southern white women. She created and staged a play called *Anti-Bellum: A Re-Destruction of the Southern Belle*, based on characters from Tennessee Williams' plays. She said that this work was a "direct result of the class," as was her area of interest as a doctoral student with plans to focus on Appalachian women's drama. "Without that class," she observed, "My work today would just be very, very different."

Deirdre said the course affected her choice of subject matter for her Master's thesis because we read *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Williams, 1947/1974), which piqued her interest in Williams' treatment of women. After reading dozens of plays to find one to direct for her thesis, she decided to craft one herself, she explained, because "if nothing fits your images, write your own images." She chose "devised theatre" and crafted a "string of twelve images and transitions" featuring five figures from Tennessee Williams' plays, recombining fragments of his plays to make her own. And she used the song "Wayfaring Stranger," which she first encountered reading *Cold Mountain* (Frazier, 1997) in our class, as a unifying motif to help her "get at the Southern woman's journey." She employed her own porcelain dolls, a string of pearls, and "things that women hand down" to link the images and transitions.

Post-Course Writing: Cassie's Journalism

"Did I tell you the story about how Faulkner got me my job?" –Cassie

After graduation and while working part time on a Master's degree in adult education, Cassie landed a job as a contributing editor to a slick new regional magazine. She said that she took the book her class created, which she co-edited with Deidre, to her interview as part of her portfolio. Cassie exclaimed, "It was my Faulkner paper on *Old Man* that got me the job, I swear!" Her boss, she explained, was fascinated with her paper on the problem of the failure of art in Faulkner's (1961) text. At the time of our interview, Cassie had left the editorial position to work for a nonprofit agency, but she brought me a copy of the magazine's inaugural issue, which included three of her pieces. She contributed an article on contemporary Southern visual artists who are credited with "redefining how people see the South," wrote the prose accompaniment to a photographic essay on the Mississippi River, and reviewed a "BBQ joint" that was a local institution.

The magazine claimed to offer “down-home reading for those in need of some Southern stylings.” The cover of its first issue boasted features on Georgia moonshine, underground boxing, and “romance in the mansion.” Slick ads touting Southern hospitality, pricey boutiques, and lush retirement properties, termed “untapped utopias,” filled much of the issue. Cassie said she left the magazine partly because of her frustration with its limited, clichéd vision of things Southern. For example, she had suggested exploring “front porch culture” in an issue, but instead the editor ran stories on Southern women wielding guns and the joys of mud bogging. Cassie and her new in-laws, whose roots in their moss-draped city go back centuries, brainstormed lists of things they considered quintessentially Southern, which Cassie took to her editor as story prospects. The editor, however, wanted something trendier, she said, “like something on Southern spas that use magnolia leaves. Or on modern moonshine or something.” And she complained, “They’d always ask me about, ‘What is it with y’all and this Southern thing for barbecue?’ Stuff like that because I was the only one from the South on the staff.”

Given the publication’s declaration that it was “the style of the New South,” whatever that might be, I still have not figured why the full front and back covers of the premier issue featured photographs of a woman dressed like George Washington, complete with powdered wig.

The Researcher’s Critical and Creative Texts

Inspired by reading Deirdre’s play and Cassie’s articles, I gathered my own creative writing that deals in some way with the slippery subject of Southern woman. My short stories “Maiden Ladies” (no relation to Smith’s fair and tender ladies and written before I made their acquaintance), “Love Knot,” and “Going Far Enough” and my personal essays “Homeplace: A Deconstruction” and “Luminaria,” for example, represented my own efforts to examine

creatively the identities assigned to Southern women and the subjectivities we labor to craft in spite of them. Some of my texts succeeded in a small way, and some did not. In rereading these pieces, most of which I hadn't looked at in years and a few of which I'd worked on more recently, I was struck by the ways in which my earlier writing, in a sense, interacted with my participants' writing and with the texts we read. I offer bits and pieces of those creative texts from the porch, too, because I see them as being in dialogue with the women's words.

I wrote extensively on Welty's fiction in graduate and undergraduate courses, so I also collected my critical essays on her work along with my theoretical papers written for doctoral studies. In addition, I reread Welty's (1983) essays on place in fiction, her interviews (Prenshaw, 1984a, 1984b, 1996), and her (1983/1995) memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*, in addition to rereading *The Golden Apples* (1949/1977). I also reexamined the photographs Welty took while traveling Mississippi for the Works Progress Administration, *Eudora Welty Photographs* (1989/1977). Looking again at her brilliant images evoked the world of her texts and helped me see them afresh.

Other Documents

I collected other, more mundane documents related to the course, such as syllabi, handouts, assignments, and course evaluations. And I spent many hours perusing the archives at both my university and my alma mater, another Southern women's college, poring over artifacts like recruitment materials, old photographs, newspaper clippings, literary magazines, and yearbooks that represented a century of women's education at these schools. I decided to examine these documents on women's colleges in order to get a better sense of the field from outside my position within it. I wanted to consider the environment from perspectives other than mine or my participants'.

Transgressive Data

In the qualitative tradition, my primary data were the interviews I conducted, along with the documents I collected. However, with some poststructural feminists (e.g., Lather, 1991, 2006; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; St. Pierre, 1997, 2000;), I explored other, more elusive data like that which comes to us through memory, senses, emotions, and physicality. Such transgressive data supplemented and enriched the more traditional data I collected. While the focus of my analysis was directed toward interview and textual data, I explain briefly here how transgressive data informed my collection and analysis of other data. I described earlier how memory functioned as one field in this study, but it also became data. I sketch out ideas here on the role that memory data, sensual data, emotional and physical data played in this research.

Memory Data

In my participants' remembering of transactions with text, I collected "memory data" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 970). In their stories of Southern girlhood, I collected more memory data. And then there are my memories of texts and of a Southern girlhood—all these became data, too. More recent personal memories also enriched the work at hand: the thrill of first reading *The Golden Apples*, of seeing a student thrilled on first reading *The Golden Apples*, for example. And there are the memories of excited voices and laughter, and maybe the occasional tear in the interviews. All these became data in a study on Southern women's subjectivity. Permeating my writing and storytelling about these data were the memories saturated in this place where I wrote and thought.

Thelen (1989) explained that "memory, private and individual as much as collective and cultural, is constructed, not reproduced. . . . [And] this construction is not made in isolation but

in conversations with others that occur in the contexts of community” (p. 1119). Conversations on the porch helped the women in my study reconstruct memories of texts and of the sisterhood that grew from their shared reading. In the interviews, they seemed to enjoy recalling their friendships as much as the texts they interpreted together. In our rereading of Smith’s (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*, my participants and I encountered our memories of the text—and of our earlier conversations about them—and constructed new memories in our latest interactions with the text and each other.

Constructing memory can be an act of power as well as an art. Memory produces power because “any lived experience can acquire meaning only to the extent that it is reflected upon after it occurs” (McMahan, 1994, p. 31). I wondered about how reflecting upon their reading and writing reconfigured my participants’ memories of those events. As McMahan (1994) observed, the production of meaning “is bound to the interpretative acts of remembering, thinking, and speaking. . . . We need to know how the act of oral interviewing impacts on memories; how the act of reflection influences those memories; how the act of articulation solidifies memories” (p. 32). I do not think I can ever know definitively how those articulations and reflections affected my participants’ memories of place and stories and the women who shared them. But I offer here a personal example of memory recalled by the acts of thinking, writing, and talking our stories.

Sitting on my front porch, I once practiced a very different kind of writing than that which I employed in writing up this research through three seasons on my back porch. I was inspired to write the following essay years ago, before most of the family property had been sold. I had not reread it for a long time until I collected documents for this study. Retyping the nearly forgotten words from my position on a porch with a starkly altered view, I saw and felt the old

vision again as the power of home place seemed to come full circle. I resisted a strong desire to revise the piece because I wanted the woman who wrote it to speak from the porch, too.

On the Porch

Homeplace, a Deconstruction

My great-grandfather built the place that sits across the road from my house. Floors run downhill, daylight floods through chinks in the walls, and the creek rocks my great-grandmother stacked nearly a century ago crumble in a low ring around the house, still sheltering her old-fashioned pink roses. Gray streaks the hundred years' worth of peeling white paint layered on the clapboards, and somebody's added red shutters. The original weathered tin roof still makes familiar music in the rain. Two closed-in porches doubled the size of the house years ago, and more porches got tacked on. Three of the oldest oaks shading the four corners died—lightning-struck—but after a hundred years of life and death and everything in between, the homeplace still stands.

The house and its yards, fields, orchards, and woods have been called the old homeplace for as long as I can remember. My great-grandparents had eleven children, nine of whom lived, and all but one married and raised big families, too, so the place was the original home for dozens of our grandparents, and for me. This house and its stories are what we still have in common. For me, the homeplace is a visible symbol of coming back. I returned after seven years of living outside the South surer of self, strong enough to feel steadied, not smothered by deep and tangled roots. I'd gone far enough away for long enough to understand the generative power of place as well as its ability to stifle and stunt—this poor, country, southern-to-the-bone place.

Now I rest in a rocking chair on my own front porch and look through the trees, beyond the field, across the road, past the scuppernong arbors, and watch the old homeplace shift its hues in the changing light. The sun rises behind the house and sets on its front, bathing everything in crimson. My grandfather was born here, and it was my first house. My teenaged parents and I shared it with my great-aunt, who took care of me. Memory starts here.

The best room of the house was the front sitting room that had beds pushed along the walls and a fireplace in the center. The floors slant so steeply that it's like you're moving when you're standing still. Babies were born, the dead laid out in here. I've heard since childhood the stories of my beautiful great-aunt Ruth who clipped jokes from the *Farmers' Almanac* and saved valentines in a wooden cigar box that, brimming with yellowed paper and brittle lace, made its way down to me. She was only nineteen when a growth in her throat starved her and her mother refused to take her to the hospital since her next-oldest sister had died of pneumonia in one. Ruth died in 1935, on Valentine's Day. Her body, draped in dearly-bought silk, lay on a table before the window shaded by the cedar tree. My baby bed would occupy that spot a couple of generations later.

Behind the best room, leaning further uphill, is the back room where my great-grandmother cooked Brunswick stew in an iron kettle and baked biscuits in the wood stove. In wintertime when night fell early, all eleven children (or thirteen, depending on the year) gathered in the fire's warmth, by kerosene lamplight, to play, sing, read, and tell stories. And they were born storytellers and singers, too. My grandfather, the baby, remembered how he begged nightly for his favorite story of how, when he was three, his eldest brother spoke to him for the first time,

scaring him so badly that he hid under the bed for two days and wouldn't come out. His brother had been furious with his parents for having yet another baby to feed and stayed too mad to speak to my grandpa for three whole years. The bed, stuffed with goose feathers, stood in the corner, and when it got too cold, they piled on the quilts and climbed in together. During my lifetime, my great-aunt Violet lived in the back room and slept in the fat feather bed with a faded Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane watching over her. I lived with her for big chunks of my childhood, and she never married or had any kids. She was a maiden lady. When I was grown but pitifully unready, I nursed her during a long dying in the same room where she had rocked me as a baby.

Morning sun streams through the windows, so it stayed bright and cheery in the back room, where she lived. For years, a treadle sewing machine and a primitive rocking chair claimed the space closest to the window, where my aunt whipped up puffed-sleeve dresses and gingham gowns for me. Leftover scraps of fabric not destined for quilts were transformed into dolls' clothes, like the black dress my hard-used bride doll, Sylvia, wore the week of the president's funeral. And the old mantel clock that Aunt Violet wound with a hidden gold key chimed the hours and lulled you to sleep in the overstuffed bed after teeth brushing, feet washing, verses and prayers. Even the "if I should die before I wake" part wasn't so awful when I could sink deep into the downy bed beside my listening aunt. This room was the safest place in my universe; later, it comforted and reassured me during her death. Today, the house's occupant, a nice single man from up north, has painted the walls hunter green, reforming the back room into a sunny dining space with fig trees fluttering in corners and ferns filling windowsills.

I love the porches and yard best. The front porch, shaded by a giant silvery cedar that once held my rope swing, became the center of summertime life. In sweltering Georgia weather, beds and chairs stayed out here. Great-grandmother rocked and shelled peas or strung beans or mended overalls while the young ones played in the shade and the older ones trudged in from the fields, dinner pails in hand. Here, they cut watermelons and strummed guitars. Neighbors gathered on Sunday afternoons, the week's only leisure time, to sing gospels or catch up on news of births, sickness, or crops. Sometimes the women set up a frame and stitched on a friendship quilt or brought along embroidery hoops and shared patterns cut from newspaper.

The back porch, actually on the side of the house, was important, too, but for different reasons. You had to come out on this porch, built with a stone well right in the middle of it, to draw water for cooking or washing or drinking. The sweet water you scooped in the gourd dipper was cold enough to make your teeth ache, but the bucket and dipper still hanging there haven't touched water in years. We used well water for everything until we got running water. I remember taking baths in an ancient washtub out on the porch in summer after dark when floating Ivory soap and stars reflecting in the water were all I could see. Aunt Violet heated the water on the stove and patiently carried it out by the kettleful. A bathroom with mismatched fixtures was eventually built in one corner of the porch, taking up room, and the outhouse down a path in the woods was torn down. A washer and dryer appeared next beside the bathroom. Then a wheelchair ramp. Today the porch is enclosed by screen that cuts down on those shiny black dirt-daubers, and it boasts a new, nearly level floor fitted around the boarded-up well.

A side yard, fringed by water oaks and hickory-nut trees, offered the ideal picnicking spot where we held our huge family reunions in late September. My great-grandparents started the reunions in the 'twenties to gather their grown children, and their children, back home, and by the 'nineties, the crowd numbered more than a hundred every year. I can track my life by those reunions.

Everyone brought their special dishes, heaping them on tablecloth-covered plywood atop saw horses. When I was a girl, the women loaded the tables with turnip greens, chicken and dressing, beaten biscuits, milk gravy, field peas, cornbread, pickled chow-chow, fried okra, sweet tea and homemade lemonade, with peach fried pies and blackberry cobbler and sweet potato pies. Coconut cakes from scratch and prize-winning pound cakes came still warm from the oven. Sometimes there was fruit stack cake, too, with five or six tall skinny layers of yellow cake with spicy dried apples holding them together. During my teenage years, young mothers experimented, and store-bought items began to appear along with new recipes from *Southern Living*. Jell-O was ubiquitous—gooey pink or lime green concoctions involving marshmallows filled tub-sized Tupperware. Casseroles with cream-of-something soup and smashed up, fried onions baked on top multiplied. Syrupy canned pear halves garnished with blobs of mayonnaise, shredded cheese, and fake-looking cherries passed as salads. Homemade biscuits gave way to Sunbeam Brown ‘n Serve Rolls, and home-grown, freshly picked vegetables grew scarcer. By the time I became one of the young mothers, we proudly introduced quiches, mousses, soufflés, whole grains. Some of us began to sneak in buckets of Kentucky Fried or pans of Stouffer’s mac ‘n cheese. Diet Coke replaced hand-squeezed lemonade, and the pies came from Kroger. The old ladies—aunts, great-aunts, and grandmas—still cooked for days before reunion Sunday, but they—and their food—were dwindling fast.

Rocking on my front porch now, I envision the women from my childhood thronging beneath antique oaks, bustling around with bowls and pots, feeding toddling children, singing and laughing—always laughing. Reunions were all-day affairs for years. Everybody came straight from church to eat, tell stories, pitch horseshoes, sing gospels, and stay for supper, heading home only at first dark. When I was small, we stayed all day and played ball or waded in the creek or picked scuppernongs. Later the reunion shrank to lunch only. Teenagers were delighted to eat and escape, but those who still remembered long, languid afternoons stretching until evening regretted the quick exits.

From the rocker on my porch, I glimpse myself metamorphosing as in a time-lapsed vision—a running girl, a dreamer lying in the grass watching clouds shape shift, a bored teen, an enamored new mother, a worried niece fighting the inevitable. I conjure up an image of myself, the prodigal, returning for a reunion after years absent, gone North. My wheel chair-bound aunt managed to cook my favorites: chicken and dumplings and spicy gingerbread. I see with startling clarity a younger, thinner me chasing a grinning two-year-old who dashes by clutching a chicken leg in his chubby fist. The last reunion then appears before my eyes: my delighted grandfather recites a poem he wrote for the occasion for a video camera; Aunt Violet can barely feed herself; unrecognizable cousins and unfamiliar neighbors swell the crowd. Laughter floats from the trees.

My father, who inherited the homeplace, stopped the reunions when my aunt died and swears he’ll bulldoze the house once both his parents are dead because it’s such an eyesore. Only my eighty-three year-old grandmother, biding her time in the house across the road to which she came as a bride, stands in his way.

The old homeplace and the people who loved and died in it connect me with my different selves—rambunctious girl, happy mother, heartbroken nurse—through roots that intertwine in experience and shape-shifting memory, constantly reconfiguring past and present. In the ramshackle house that still stands somehow, beneath the single surviving oak, I envision the lives that made mine what it is. From my rocking chair, I watch the generations blur and blend as I shift my familial positions.

Listening for drifting laughter, I feel graced by the power of place.

Postscript:

My father did not wait until his mother died, only until she lay witless in a nursing home, to sell the property and raze the homeplace to the ground. I watched from my porch as the bulldozer made quick work of the demolition. However, a long center beam hewn from a huge white oak refused to break, despite the machine crunching over it again and again. Finally, it splintered with a groan.

My cousins and I started the reunions again, now held on the grounds of the little red brick church our great-grandparents founded and where they, Ruth, both my grandparents, and my Aunt Violet lie facing East.

Sensual Data

The “sensual data” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 970) of place flooded over me as I wrote through three seasons on my back porch about the data I collected in interviews and documents and memory: spring breezes floating pink cherry blossoms and the grapey fragrance of purple irises; June sun conjuring up long, hot days of childhood; autumnal light casting the air in nostalgic hues, leaves flying in little showers of gold across the field and sometimes across my computer screen; fireflies at dusk twinkling out like a cloud of tiny stars. Working on my porch, immersed in women’s words and stories, I watched over my family’s field. Into my theorizing intruded vivid sensory memory: strawberries still sun-warm from my grandfather’s berry patch piled on my grandmother’s hot biscuits and drenched with fresh cream; hypnotic sounds of night in what was then the country: the din of crickets and katydids, the melancholy cry of whippoorwills; and the tang of a dusty dirt road in summer where I waited for the bookmobile, plotting schemes to get more books than I was allowed. “My aunt wants all these,” I might have said.

Data of Physicality

Sensual data and memory data infused my study and the data collected in interviews and texts. In the writing, I tried to be attentive to these data, along with other transgressive data like

that of physicality. Throughout this research, I took long, brisk walks through all kinds of weather in every season and logged many miles on the treadmill. Whenever I was stymied in my thinking or my writing, my first response was to get my walking shoes. I recalled Lorrie Moore's (2005) observation that we "should never trust a thought that doesn't come while walking" (p. 138). Often a way out of my stuck places cropped up while I lost myself in the movement, the feeling of muscles working, the sounds of birds or the rock and roll on my headphones. Data gathered and analyzed through physicality merit a nod here because they certainly helped shape the interpretations I pose.

Of course, people take up all kinds of activities to relieve stress while they write dissertations, and I did my share of yoga and meditation, too, but walking helped open up the mental processes. In fact, "walking improves thinking....That's why Aristotle started his 'peripatetic' concept—simultaneous walking and thinking. Early Greeks believed that walking cleared their minds for solving problems of logic and philosophy" (Walking for Fitness, 2008). Using my peripatetic practice in a way that reflected the Greeks' use of walking to solve problems provided a pleasing symmetry because I walked to think about ancient practices of the self as enacted in the contemporary American South.

Emotional Physicality as Data

St. Pierre (1997) identified emotional data that irrupt into our research, and in a related kind of data, physicality and emotion converge. In the interviews, my participants and I often experienced physical reactions triggered by emotions. For example, frequently a woman said something that gave me goose bumps or made the hair on my neck stand up or shivers run up my spine. Sometimes a synchronicity or *simpatico* was at work, as she said something I was thinking, or I said something that she had in mind, or we said something at the same time. When

that happened, one—or both—of us often felt a physical reaction. Mention of this came up repeatedly in the interviews. As one woman said, “Oh, my god! I just got goose bumps when you said that because I’ve been wanting to say that for a long, long time!” Another said, “Oh, look, the hair on my arm just stood on end. I can’t believe you thought that, too!” A couple of other women commented on feeling lumps rise in their throats during our conversations, an emotional and physical response that I experienced in the interviews.

Several participants were moved to tears as they spoke of their experience, their writing, or their relations with text and the women who shared their readings. Data tied to physicality, like the ideas and possibilities that seemingly came from nowhere during a long, fast walk or the chills that ran up our arms simultaneously when one person in the interview said something that resonated bodily with the hearer, or the tears that sometimes came unbidden entered early and forcefully into my project.

In addition to tears and goose bumps, laughter punctuated the interviews. Only when listening to the tapes did I realize how much laughter had erupted in our conversations, and it felt distinctively affirmative. As I transcribed, I constantly pasted [*laughter*] in between our lines of dialogue and considered what this physical, emotional reaction might suggest as data, which I term *data of mirth*. Laughter in interviews can sometimes signal nervousness or anxiety; however, in these interviews I had the overwhelming sense that we laughed together in both pleasure and commiseration in moments of shared recognition and unspoken understanding. These physical and emotional responses are transgressive data that often inform an analysis of more traditional data. They matter, too, and can shape our interpretations in material ways.

Data Analysis

Writing as a Method of Inquiry

Writing is both data and analysis, so I used writing as a method of inquiry in both data collection and data analysis, letting texts converge in sometimes messy ways. I wrote throughout this research, believing with Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) that “writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery” (p. 967). I kept a researcher’s log, field notes, and interview notes, and wrote copious marginalia in the texts under discussion and on the transcripts of interviews. In this study, I relied extensively on “writing as a *method of data collection* along with, for example, interviewing and observation” and on “writing as a *method of data analysis* along with, for example, the traditional [...] activities of analytic induction; constant comparisons; coding, sorting, and categorizing data” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 970). It was in the writing that I made my inductions, drew comparisons, and sorted data. I chose to focus on writing as a way of knowing and to rely less on coding and sorting, preferring to map similarities and differences by grouping them loosely rather than confining them to rigid categories.

I employed my own writing as both data and a technology for data analysis. Richardson (1997) explained that we can

create new ways of reading/writing that are more congruent with poststructural understandings of the situated nature of knowledge making. In the new convergence, we become writers, tellers of stories about our work—local, partial, prismatic stories.

Writing is demystified, writing strategies are shared, and the field is unbounded. (p. 3)

In this text, I have tried to unbound the field and tell some local, partial stories, although I do not claim to demystify writing, an impossible task. I claim only to have used writing as a technology

of the self in considering how my participants used it as a technology of the self. Such is the spirit with which I approached this text and in which I employed writing throughout my research—and before it officially began, as I wrote to think about the texts and my own experience and memory.

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argued that “writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery” (p. 967). Writing *is* thought made visible, however imperfectly. As such, creating text was my primary way of thinking about Southern women and their powerful words. In my writing as data and analysis, I created and analyzed multiple texts: a researcher’s log, field notes, interview notes, journals, conference papers, creative writing, and marginalia. Only in the act of writing could I find what I wanted to say. Writing as a method of inquiry created “a condition of possibility for ‘producing different knowledge and producing knowledge differently’” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 969). As a qualitative feminist researcher, I freely used “writing as a method of inquiry to move into [my] own impossibility, where anything might happen—and will” (p. 973). As someone who has written to think since I was a child, I wrote my way all through this project—through the fields, into and out of the data, across the pages of the texts, and between the lines of the women’s words. In another doubled action, as I produced different knowledge by writing, I considered how my participants produced different ways of knowing by writing, moving into their own generative impossibilities where anything can happen—and does.

Researcher’s Log

From the inception of the ideas that grew into this study, I wrote extensive notes that became a journal and then a researcher’s log. At first, I collected provocative quotations from scholarly reading and from imaginative literature, then I sketched inchoate ideas I wanted to

work out. I used these notes as I tried to shape and articulate a vision of what this research might become, and once I began to collect data through interviews, I used my log to collect impressions of things participants said. Sometimes I jotted down key words or common themes, and sometimes I recorded sensory perceptions of our meeting, although I gradually wrote more “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) in the field notes I kept for each interview and in the log.

As my study progressed, I relied on my researcher’s log more as a conceptual space, a place to brainstorm in writing, a place for *what if*. . . ? Here, I was trying to figure out what I thought by seeing what I wrote. Ideas and interpretations came through the process of the writing; they weren’t necessarily thought of first and then written down. The act of writing generated data, just as it analyzed them, and writing created thought, just as it attempted to capture it. Sometimes data that would not be neatly categorized “might have escaped entirely if [the researcher] had not *written*; they [are] collected only *in the writing*” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 970). The act of writing brings a kind of tangibility to data because without the writing, the data and resulting interpretations could not have been realized in the same way.

Sometimes, however, especially if I were feeling too tired or confused to think, I used my researcher’s log to record details like who I met when and where, or to note what I had been reading or what I needed to locate. Sometimes I brainstormed impossibly long to-do lists or scribbled partially formed questions, which, like dreams recorded in the middle of the night, seemed inscrutably cryptic when I read them later. In times of fatigue, summing up seemingly factual experience helped me get ready to think more conceptually and analytically about data. So these notes read like a messy mixture of what I did or saw, what I wondered, and what others did or said, along with memorable bits from other texts. Sometimes my musings about

possibilities appeared detailed and sometimes fragmentary, treating both the mundane and the revelatory. Sometimes they opened lines of flight, and sometimes they just filled space.

In a more informal and urgent way of writing my way through this experience, I kept pads or post-it notes and pens by my bed, my overstuffed reading chair, my desk, in my car and in my pocket. I needed to be able to jot down incipient ideas that occurred to me while I read, walked, or drove, or that occasionally came to me in dreams. I could have kept my new digital voice recorder close for this purpose, but I preferred paper somehow. I periodically gathered these squiggly impromptu notes and made them part of my researcher's log—if I could decipher them and if they made any sense at all on a later reading.

And while I composed my field notes, interview notes, and researcher's log, as well as this document, obviously, on the computer, I handwrote these scattered bits and pieces, and I also wrote longhand when I got stuck and needed to brainstorm my way out of that stuck place, although I usually compose on a computer. Employing a strategy I sometimes used in my undergraduate days and still occasionally use in my professional life, I got a stack of pale lilac- and mint- and salmon-colored legal pads, having read once that color stimulates creativity, and bought a box of new roller-ball pens. Then I sat down and wrote when I couldn't think what to write. I let myself free write, with no worries about how absurd my ideas might turn out to be, as I filled up pages with brainstorming about what I might write about when I could write again. The tactile pleasures of the paper and pen and the motions of leisurely cursive writing helped open up possibilities. As I wrote, piles of pastel pages covered with loopy cursive cluttered the spaces around me with a colorful profusion.

Field Notes and Interview Notes

While conducting interviews and collecting documents, I kept extensive field notes and separate interview notes. I used the field notes to prepare thick description immediately after the interviews, recording as many details as I could remember about our conversations. I kept a separate set of files for interview notes, in which I wrote more interpretive comments, brainstorming about thematic and theoretical connections. As I prepared verbatim interview transcripts, I resisted adding commentary or notes to the transcripts except for a few times when I was struck so forcefully by something a participant said that I inserted a reminder to myself to come back to her comment. I did not want to slow down my laborious transcriptions any further by switching to a different document to make such notes; however, early on in the study I began to keep another open file of interview notes while transcribing our conversations because so many ideas occurred to me as I worked with the women's words. In writing I collected data, but I also engaged ongoing analysis with the writing.

As I interviewed the ten women, I wrote extensive field notes on each interview, relying on thick description and sensual data to help me think about our dialogue. I kept field notes and interview notes in addition to the researcher's log, so I generated multiple documents dealing with each exchange and my impressions of it. As data grew and analysis continued, I focused more on writing interview notes about memorable remarks and themes voiced by the women and the theoretical possibilities surrounding them.

Marginalia as a Method of Inquiry

Once I completed the transcripts of all my individual and group interviews, I reread them. Then I reread them again and marked lines and made margin notes as a way of analyzing data. I reread the interviews again and again, covering the pages of the transcripts with marginalia. Then

I excerpted highlights from the interviews, those passages in the transcripts that I marked up most, and pasted them together into over 70 single-spaced pages. I grouped participants' comments into broad categories like Southern stereotypes, gender roles, and memory, or I sorted by topics of discussion about things like mothers, home place, hypocrisy, or gossip. I then covered these pages with more marginalia. This was a helpful writing method for generating analysis or breaking out of my stuck places because the women's words always inspired me.

My own words flowed easily in the margins and in between lines as I reacted to our dialogue by continuing it in writing. I filled all the white space around the neatly typed lines with another dialogue, one happening in the margins of the interview transcripts. Here I questioned, argued, agreed, pondered, wondered, laughed, and got excited anew by the project. I reacted subjectively to what had been said and much that was left unsaid. Scribbling this marginalia felt very satisfying, I must admit, and generated more ideas and possibilities than I could possibly pursue in this space. I also worried that I had missed some gem when excerpting lines of dialogue, so I reread again the complete interview transcripts and their marginalia.

Writing marginalia has been a vital practice in this research, and not just that which I scrawled all over the interview transcripts. As I collected documents and reread texts, writing and rereading marginalia became both data and a method of data analysis. Jackson (2001, 2005) observed that marginalia combine the acts of reading and writing, conflating the roles of reader and author. Marginalia indicate "the collection and application of 'parallel passages,' the notion of improvement by verbal 'illustration,' and the direct connection between reading and new composition" (Jackson, 2005, p. 176). With marginalia, the reader enters and alters the text as "every note entails a degree of self-assertion....The reader leaves a mark and thereby alters the

object” (Jackson, 2001, p. 90). This alteration can be radical and subversive, especially when the intent is political or transformational. In fact,

There is a net gain in abandoning the notion that marginalia are innocent and transparent: if we have to let go a pleasing illusion, we end up with more human drama and come closer to the truth besides. Marginalia are the product of an interaction between text and reader carried on—since books are durable objects—in the presence of silent witnesses. (Jackson, 2001, p. 100)

However, in most cultures, margin notes were—and sometimes still are—thought to deface a book, but gradually certain margin notes came to be treasured, increasing the value of a volume. We are all familiar with the injunction never to write in library books, but now we see phrases like “enriched by MS marginal notes” (Jackson, 2005, p. 58) in library catalogues, particularly when the annotator who wrote in the text’s margins became famous. Cambridge University, for example, has led a movement to acquire for their collections books important more for who wrote *in* them than for who wrote them (Jackson, 2001, 2005). In the margins, the roles of reader and writer merge.

Marginalia have become significant to literary scholarship, and they have certainly been vital to this scholar. I regularly teach from my marginalia and usually feel confident approaching the text with a class if I have written plenty of annotations in the margins. In this research, not only did I add marginalia to the transcripts I painstakingly prepared, but I reread my old marginalia notes and wrote more marginalia in the literary and scholarly texts I read and reread. I also discussed marginalia with participants, who sometimes quoted their margin notes in interviews. Marginalia offers visible clues about how the reader/writer thinks, what she believes,

and what she chooses to resist. Further, marginalia can foster new ways of thinking about how we think about texts and our transactions with them.

As I gathered documents and reread novels and stories for this study, I had that sometimes disquieting, sometimes amusing experience of meeting past selves, running smack into the person I was when I scribbled that question about symbolic motifs or jotted down that pedestrian observation that seemed brilliant in the moment. Fadiman (2006) claimed that “one of the strongest motivations for rereading is purely selfish: it helps you remember what you used to be like. Open an old paperback, spangled with marginalia in a handwriting you outgrew long ago, and memories will jump out with as much vigor as if you’d opened your old diary” (p. xviii). The women who reread *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) talked about encountering their former selves in the spangled margins of their copies, sometimes feeling silly and sometimes proud. Several participants talked of how they felt compelled to pick up a pen to write more marginalia as they reread, while others spoke of the pleasures of reading without a pen in hand, without planning a paper as they read. I discuss the women’s use of marginalia as a practice of the self in the next chapter.

For my own rereading of Smith’s (1988) novel in preparation for our brunch in probably at least my tenth reading of the book, it took awhile to find a pen with a color I hadn’t yet used in the margins. I wanted to be able to distinguish what I was thinking on *this* reading. Apparently, I’d thought this on previous readings because the paperback copy I’ve taught from is covered with a rainbow of scribblings and littered with post-it notes. I appreciated some of my comments and cringed at others, but still I kept up the practice of marginalia, creating something of a palimpsest with layers of opinions and questions overlaying a familiar text, sometimes putting the original physically under erasure.

Reading as a Method of Inquiry

As I wrote throughout the research, data and analysis overlapping, I also continued scholarly reading as new interpretations formed and questions erupted. In the midst of my research, I turned back to macro- and mid-level theory as I read extensively and wrote with this project and the women's interviews in mind. Sometimes one theoretical or literary text demanded that I read others, as books so often do, so my analytical reading moved rhizomatically (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) across fields and disciplines, across genres and styles. Sometimes I read for inspiration, especially when I couldn't seem to think. Opening Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples* on any page was a guarantee of renewal, and Foucault's (2004) *Hermeneutics of the Subject* always sent me off on another line of flight.

I read extensively on the Southern literary and critical tradition, poststructural feminism, Foucault's care of the self, qualitative research methodologies, and feminist interviewing. I read books and articles on space and place, gender and literary transactions, women's colleges, marginalia, memory, and the role of porches in Southern culture and literature, among other things. As I said, I reread the literature that came up most often in the interviews and reread the women's texts and my own. I also followed plenty of reading tangents. Throughout my research, I read to think about how to think about the data.

Validity

In feminist research, the question of what counts as valid knowledge comes under constant scrutiny because there are multiple ways of knowing and sources of knowledge, like perception, intuition, representation, remembrance, and relations. In fact, "knowing, for feminists, is an interactive process within relationships" (as cited in Sielbeck-Bowen, Bristolara, Siegart, Tischler, & Whitmore, 2002, p. 3). In this study, I treated these ways of knowing as

valuable and valid sources of knowledge, particularly in my analysis of the readerly sisterhood that my participants cultivated because they articulated perceptions and intuitions, addressed representations, and constructed remembrance in an arena of friendship relations.

Scheurich (1995) said that across epistemologies and methodologies, validity becomes “the boundary line...for what is acceptable and not acceptable in research” (as cited in Freeman et al., 2007, p. 27). For feminist research to be valid, it is conducted with an attention to gender, a focus on lived experience and researcher subjectivity, and attention to women’s empowerment (Pillow, 2002). Reflexivity also becomes central to validity in feminist research (Lather, 1991). However, as Pillow (2003) explained, reflexivity cannot guarantee validity.

I constructed validity in this study by employing practices designed to lend credibility to the research, including multiple methods of data collection and analysis, which I describe in detail as I represent the research in writing. In trying to “enhance the accomplishment of validity” (Seidman, 2006, p. 24), I conducted a pilot study and multiple in-depth interviews, prepared verbatim transcripts of all interviews, wrote thick description, kept interview notes and a researcher’s log, and sought feedback from members, peers, teaching colleagues, and my doctoral committee. I also followed feminist research principles that cultivate validity: awareness of the researcher’s subjectivity and recognition of the constituted nature of participants’ experience.

Catalytic Validity

From the first interview in my pilot study and in every interview since, participants expressed considerable excitement about the project, showing a still-active engagement with the texts and much curiosity about what I might find in talking with other alumnae of the course. Their certainty about the merits of my research and their eagerness to talk about Southern

women, real and fictional, inspired me and affirmed that the study had significance. Each participant's enthusiasm for the project and her stated desire for a gathering with other participants and for further conversation indicated what Lather (1991) called catalytic validity or "the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it" (p. 68). This work toward transformation, particularly of the subjectivities available to young white Southern women, informed the interviews and ran like a potent motif through our discussions of the texts. One participant said, "Everyone on that journey was transformed in some way." Every woman I interviewed expressed keen interest in what I might find and in what other participants thought. Several said they were sure the research would produce, in one woman's words, "profound results."

Response Data

To help ensure validity, I sought "response data" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 184) formally through feedback from a pilot study, member checks, and peer debriefers. Employing feminist research methodologies that advocate co-construction, I asked each participant for advice on how to conduct the research and asked what she thought I might find. The women offered invaluable ideas in return, making suggestions that helped shape my research design. For example, as I mentioned earlier, my focus on the participants' writing came about because the first woman I interviewed spoke fervently about the transformative power of the writing assignments for the course, especially the creative writing, and subsequent interviews indicated that the women saw their own writing as a fruitful way of exploring subjectivities. I described my pilot study in my discussions of data, so here I describe the response data I gathered from member checks and peer debriefers in an effort to advance the validity of my research.

Member Checks

I talked with two participants for member checks during my study, asking questions, verifying information, testing conclusions, or just thinking aloud. One participant asked to read the transcripts of our two lengthy individual interviews, but she has not yet responded to the documents I sent her—not surprising, given that she was hard at work in graduate school. Several times in interviews and subsequent email, she exclaimed, “Oh, I just can’t wait to read your dissertation!” The other member made similar comments, as did a number of participants. Their remarks suggested “catalytic validity” (Lather, 1991, p. 69) and indicated the transformative power of the research.

Both women who helped with member checks repeatedly expressed excitement and the belief that my study examined a vital and valid object of knowledge. They posed questions that helped me clarify my thinking and formulate my plans for conducting the research. Both members offered wise suggestions and insightful ideas, as did all the women I interviewed. Their predictions that the research would formulate “profound results” or that it would “reveal how transformative the class was” affirmed the validity of the study and encouraged my progress.

This has felt very much like a collaborative project, although my co-constructive work of writing appeared solitary—but only outwardly. Inwardly, I interacted with all the women in my study as I wrote, and I also engaged in silent conversations with others who had offered response data long before this work began formally: friends, family, other students and teachers. All these memories and conversations contributed in some way to my thinking and writing about how Southern women read Southern women as a practice of the self.

Peer Debriefers

Throughout this study, I worked extensively with two peer debriefers, although I also talked with other friends and colleagues about my research. My primary peer debriefer, Jo, my best friend of twenty years, acted as a sounding board from the project's inception and throughout the research process. She has a Bachelor's degree in English, a Master's degree in library science, and years of experience as a children's librarian. In fact, we met and became friends when we worked together in a small-town library, where we formed our own readerly sisterhood. With her academic background in English and her professional background in literacy, Jo's feedback on how readers respond to literature was most helpful, but her insights on Southern women and Southern culture were invaluable. And I always counted on Jo to tell me the truth.

Raised in Michigan, Jo lived in the South for several years. It was helpful to get a perspective from someone not raised in the South, and she often observed interesting parallels between repressive cultural pressures exerted on Southern women and those imposed on Catholic women, which certainly makes sense from a poststructural feminist position, but that is another book. I talked through this research with her at virtually every stage. In fact, before I began doctoral studies, we had long conversations about my students' transactions with texts and how they appeared to create themselves through Southern texts. Jo has been in the field with me, having visited my classroom, once helping me help students writing on Welty. She has also traveled those other fields with me—through text, memory, and my grandfather's field. We had a fruitful conversation once about the ideas in this research while walking in the field on a full moon night, watching her children chasing lightning bugs and moon shadows on the grass, which looked as bright as day.

Jo and I talked my developing theories through, finding directions and connections together. Her initial enthusiasm for this research was vital in its early stages and her ongoing feedback enriched the work throughout. Not only did my peer debriefer affirm the potential significance and validity of my project, but she read and annotated drafts and commented on memorable lines from the interview transcripts. She also reread Lee Smith's (1988) novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* and wrote marginalia to help me think, and she did additional reading on subjectivity and care of the self, calling me with quotations to consider. Jo cheered me on and tried to help me when I got stuck. My friend has, in many ways, been my co-researcher throughout this study—and long before it began officially.

I consulted my other peer debriefer, my writing partner, Rhonda, as I wrote, theorized, and represented findings. She also offered critiques that stimulated my thinking. Having been my writing partner during several years of poststructural and literary coursework, this peer debriefer, who is also working on her dissertation, has seen this project develop and understands well the theoretical frameworks that informed it. Rhonda's knowledge of theory, her shared interest in feminism and Foucault's care of the self, her experience in writing poststructural critiques, and her expertise as a qualitative researcher made my work better. She asked relevant questions that helped me to think about multiple perspectives on the data and the thorny issues of ethical representation. As a colleague at the women's college, she also knew first-hand how challenging it was to balance the demands of a full-time teaching load with doctoral studies. Just having someone to talk with who understood how impossible it can seem was a comfort and an encouragement. My only regret was that, given the demands of our schedules and dissertation research, we had little time to consult with each other over drafts.

Both peer debriefers helped me generate data and analysis by listening when I needed to talk what I could not write. Our conversations about Southern women reading and writing Southern women, using texts to construct subjectivities, helped my work considerably. Our exchanges of verbal and written reactions to the data inspired me to keep seeing them askew, aslant, awry.

Ethics and Politics

As I wrote up this research, I remained keenly aware of the dangers and ethical responsibilities of representation. These participants were women I cared about and whose opinions and texts I valued, so I felt all due anxiety about telling their truths as well as I could. I understood that I could never write one final version of their stories that would somehow be *the* truth. I agree with Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), who said that there's "no such thing as 'getting it right,' only 'getting it' differently contoured and nuanced" (p. 962). I understood from the beginning that I could not deliver "unmediated access to the real" (Britzman, 1995, p. 235); instead, I aimed to co-construct not *the* real, but one honest, nuanced account of my participants' experience as readers of texts by and about Southern women writers and our conversations about their memories of literary transactions performed in the arena of sisterhood.

Borland (1991) explained that feminist interviewers "seek to empower the women we work with by revaluing their perspectives, their lives, and their art in a world that has systematically ignored or trivialized women's culture" (p. 64). This study focused on the women's individual and collective textual practices as arts of existence. Further, Borland said, the performance of a personal narrative is a fundamental means by which people comprehend their own lives and present a "self" to their audience. Our scholarly

representations of those performances, if not sensitively presented, may constitute an attack on our collaborators' carefully constructed sense of self. (p. 71)

She maintained that "when we do interpretations, we bring our own knowledge, experience, and concerns to our material, and the result, we hope, is a richer, more textured understanding of its meaning" (p. 73). While I hoped for a richer understanding, I remained cognizant of the dangers and limitations of reciprocity and representation and wished to respect each woman's "carefully constructed sense of self."

As a feminist researcher, I acknowledged and recognized the socially constituted nature of my own experience and that of my participants. I remained attentive to the politics of representation and insisted on seeing "women interviewees as agents of their own lives" (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 188). A belief in women as agents with power in the interview interaction can shape the feminist researcher's approach to the problems and possibilities of representation, which may require a rethinking of the purposes of writing up research because "when we write for, rather than about, the people we study, we begin to redefine the relationship between our work in the academy and the world we live in" (DeVault & Gross, p. 191). In this feminist ethic both inside and outside the academy, "a guiding question has been, how can we best listen to, work with, and represent the people our work is intended to serve?" (Freeman et al., 2007, p. 30).

Such a reflexive approach to research presents a new set of ethical responsibilities as we attempt representation. Priessle (2007) noted that "the writing itself, who writes about whom, creates imbalances in power and an inevitable 'othering' of participants," and she cited Wolf's focus on the "'double responsibility' of 'feminists doing research on women,' responsible both to their women participants and to the broader world of women" (p. 526). As Priessle remarked, "In

representing their participants, [the researchers] are also representing themselves and facets of themselves that they share with the participants. Similarity and difference merge, and the ethics of research become the ethics of everyday life” (p. 527). This merging of similarity and difference, of self and other, does not denote a dismantling of difference but a convergence of ethical theory and feminist practice—within the academy and without.

I was aware that, as the participants’ former professor and as a poststructural feminist, I needed to work vigilantly against the expected positions of power in my relations with the women, respecting them as experts of their lived experience. In doing so, I remained mindful of my own entangled subject positions as woman, Southerner, student and teacher of literature, creator of texts, researcher, friend—and as a subject continually constructing and reconstructing herself. And I remained mindful that “we are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves. We are always writing in particular contexts—contexts that affect what and how we write and who we become. Power relations are always present” (Richardson, 2000, p. 154). As I represented what I continued to learn from this research, I tried to open up those power relations, taking scrupulous care to honor the women who trusted me with their words.

Reciprocity

My participants received no monetary recompense for talking with me, although I believe they may have received other, subtler benefits. Glesne (2006) explained that

the interview process particularly provides an occasion of reciprocity. . . . By providing the opportunity to reflect on and voice answers to your questions, you assist [participants] to understand some aspect of themselves better. If your questions identify issues of importance to interviewees, then [they] will invariably both enjoy and find useful their

roles as information providers. By the quality of your listening, you provide context for personal exploration. (p. 143)

While this kind of reciprocity may not be at play in all interviews, it certainly felt to me as if the women I interviewed did enjoy our conversations, and they did appear to use the talk for ways to understand their own experience. I tried diligently to listen with respect and an open mind.

Glenace Edwall (1994) spoke of “the enormous power of telling and the emotion it releases” (p. 15). The power and catharsis of telling seemed to be a benefit my participants experienced, as the laughter and tears I described suggested. A few women contacted me weeks after our interviews to say that our conversations were still reverberating with them, a sign of their importance.

I reciprocated in a modest way with brunch, lunch, dinner, or coffee and dessert at the restaurant of my companion’s choice. Before or after our interview, the participant and I walked to a tea room or café where I bought our meals as a token of my appreciation for her time and willingness to share their stories and opinions. In every case, we had a lively conversation over our meal, sometimes longer than the one I’d recorded. I usually drove away wishing I’d recorded that talk, too. And I always left participants with a sense of admiration for their intelligence and thoughtfulness and articulate voices. As I said, these women gave me hope for the future.

Summary

In this chapter, I described my research design and the feminist and qualitative methodologies that guided the study, reviewed the literature on my primary method of data collection, feminist interviewing, and integrated scholarly views on my other means of data collection and analysis. I indicated the project’s timeline and introduced the women who participated. I explained how I conducted interviews, collected and analyzed documents, and

read and wrote as methods of inquiry. I also discussed the multiple fields and transgressive data at play in the study. In the next chapter, I offer analyses and interpretations of these data.

CHAPTER 4

LIMNING THE COMPLEXITIES: INTERPRETATIONS

Introduction

On the Porch

And if you think about it, the idea of stories and the effects they have on you, aren't they as real as the effects real people have on you? -Rachel

Hey, that's my thesis! -Debra

And those fictional women teach us as much sometimes as real women, and they stay with us. And they're as real as the real women sometimes, so our memory of them is real, too, which is wild and wonderful to think about. -Deirdre

I hadn't thought about my identity as a Southern woman so much before the course, but after, yes. -Mary

People who don't read the subtext in the South have no idea what's really going on here. -Rachel

How to limn this complexity? -Minrose Gwin, 2002, p. 19

In Chapter 2, I reviewed the body of criticism on Southern women's writing to show where and how my students and I entered that literary conversation and engaged the feminist cultural critique. I also reviewed Foucault's thoughts on the ethic of the ancient Greek practice, care of the self. In chapter three, I reviewed the body of literature treating feminist interviewing as method and methodology. I employed feminist research methodologies, particularly interviewing, to reconstruct a version of the women's self-constituting work with the texts we shared. In this chapter, I deploy Foucault's analytic to examine how the Southern women in my study used texts by Southern women writers as practices of the self. I describe how I used

Foucault's theory to consider literary practice and to inform and analyze interview data. Here, care of the self converges with literary critique and poststructural feminist methodologies.

In this chapter, I focus on how the women in my study used reading and writing and talking about texts together as self-formative practices. After summarizing Foucault's thought on the primacy of reading and writing and relations in care of the self, I consider how, with a readerly sisterhood as the enabling condition of their particular practices, participants found guides for living and ways to conduct self-examination, test themselves, trouble representations of Southern womanhood, and resist cultural pressures. Further, I describe how the women performed self-constitutive arts of existence to trouble images of the belle and the lady, looking particularly at how they assimilated fictional figures of the resistant mother, defiant daughter, and willful wife as guides. I also present some participants' thoughts on teaching the texts under discussion. I then examine how the women re-remembered relations and reconstructed home place.

I approached this chapter with both jubilation and trepidation. I was pleased and relieved that it was time to turn more directly to the women in my study and their words, but I felt daunted by the impossibility of representing them in all their complexity. I knew I could only offer one rendition of what passed among us and point toward the multiplicity of possible variations on my rendering. Stacey (1991) observed that representing interviews in writing "is not cultural reportage, but cultural construction, and always a construction of the self as well as of the other" (p. 115). In writing about the women's construction of the self through text, I created another doubling as I constructed myself through text designed to examine their self-formative practices.

Lather (1991) reminded us to consider research as a construct, cautioning against a sense of research and representation as self-evident:

The texts constructed from interviews are not transparent; they are constructions which inherently distort due to the shift. . . from words spoken by one person to words shaped into written form by another. Written texts, then, are a “point of intersection between two subjectivities” . . . which could easily have produced a different story with different emphases given different interview conditions. (p. 94)

As subjects and their points of intersection shift, intersubjective co-constructions change, too. I remained steadfastly leery of trying to interpret definitively what participants said or to proclaim, “I have *the* answer: *this* is what it all means!” Like Foucault (1984/1990b), “I believe too much in truth not to suppose that there are different truths and different ways of speaking the truth” (p. 51). I knew that there was no one correct way to represent the truths of this project, and I understood that I could not reveal some essentialist truth of the women I interviewed. Instead, I bore “the burden of authorship” (Geertz, 1988, p. 138), as I acknowledged and celebrated multiple possibilities for speaking the truths of the women’s words. I turn now to Foucault’s theories on care of the self as a multifaceted way to suggest those possibilities.

Care of the Self: Four Facets

In analyzing care of the self, Foucault (1984/1987, 1984/1988, 1984/1990a, 2004) described four dimensions of the ancient Greek ethic: the ethical substance, mode of subjection, practices of the self, and the telos of such work on the self as an ethical subject. Davidson (1994/1999) offered a helpful explanation of these Foucauldian concepts:

The self’s relationship to itself [has] four main aspects: the ethical substance, that part of oneself that is taken to be the relevant domain for ethical judgment; the mode of

subjection, the way in which the individual establishes his or her relation to. . . moral obligations and rules; the self-forming activity or ethical work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself into an ethical subject; and finally, the telos, the mode of being at which one aims in behaving ethically. (p. 118)

In applying the four dimensions of care of the self to my data, I considered the fact that patriarchal, Christian, and repressive racial codes dictate virtually every structure in this geographic region, limiting possibilities of experience for women. Because my participants were young and white, they escaped many strictures applied to older women and women of color, but still they found themselves categorized as a lesser other in a rigidly gendered culture. Incited to work on their ethical substance, the women explored powerful means of resistance and guides for ethical self-formation in the textual practices they shared with each other.

Ethical Substance

The ethical substance for the participants in my study was both the female self bound and limited by dominant codes and structures in the South and the self that they labored to construct. In other words, it was both the subject dispersed in discourse and the subjectivity that the women as artisans might craft. My participants used their reading and writing of texts in a doubled way, both to constitute themselves and to recognize how they are being constituted by their culture. The ethical substance in their care of the self extended beyond the sinful, desiring self of Christianity that must be fought, overcome, and denied. The ethical substance on which these women practiced was the subject they could construct, the women they might yet choose to be.

Mode of Subjection

Foucault (1983/1991) explained that the mode of subjection requires us “to build our existence as a beautiful existence” (p. 356). In this analysis, a beautiful existence is an ethical

one. The mode of subjection becomes “the way in which one is invited to become ethical” (St. Pierre, 2004, p. 343). It acts as the “means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 354). For the ancient Greeks, desire for “political power, glory, immortality, and beauty” were modes of subjection (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 354). For my participants, desire for a beautiful and empowered existence as Southern women was their mode of subjection. For the women in my study, a desire for a beautiful life meant finding a way to accommodate social roles while exercising personal freedoms to construct subjectivity. They wanted to create meaningful, productive, creative, and fulfilling lives. They were invited to become ethical subjects of their own practices by a desire for personal, moral aesthetics which could be achieved through “the art of existence” (Foucault, 2004, p. 178). Part of this art “involved . . . liberation within the axis of immanence, a liberation from what we do not control so as finally to arrive at what we can control” (Foucault, 2004, p. 210). In this liberty, my participants were incited to become practicing artisans of the self.

Technologies of the Self

In ancient Greek care of the self, the question guiding the art or technique of the self became, ““What shall we do so that the self becomes and remains all it ought to be?”” (Foucault, 2004, p. 178). This philosophy of how to live properly required intensive labors designed to help transform the self into all that it should be. The dedicated practitioner of the art of life tried to “transform [the] self so as to be able to have access to the truth” (p. 178). Technologies of the self “permit individuals to affect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1982/1988, p. 18). Participants in my study employed transformative

practices of the self, like reading guides for life, writing in notebooks, and nurturing relations, as they labored to craft happy and ethical lives as wise and strong women acting as agents in their self-formation, despite a culture that aims to limit female agency, prescribing rigid gender roles.

The ancients emphasized reading, rereading, writing, reflection, and rigorous self-review as technologies of the self, and the women in my study employed those textual practices with verve. The project of self-transformation demands courage and laborious effort. Foucault (1984/1988) reminded us that “taking care of oneself is not a rest cure. . . .There are the meditations, the readings, the notes that one takes on books or on the conversations one had heard, notes that one reads again later, the recollection of truths that one knows already but that need to be more fully adapted to one’s own life” (p. 51). My participants performed their technologies of self as they read, reread, wrote, and talked, enacting their arts within the arena of friendship cultivated by women reading together.

Telos

The telos of care of the self is “the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 355). My participants aspired to become women prepared and armed for an ethical or moral, liberated life in the contemporary South. Foucault (2004) explained that care of the self can result in a way of being in the world, providing a means “to withstand in the right way all the possible. . . setbacks” (p. 94) that life might bring. The women in my study used their practices “to withstand in the right way” the gendered, regional expectations they perceived as setbacks to overcome or endure, and I argue that they also used arts of existence to equip themselves for more affirmative facets of living—friendship, family, artistry, and education, for example. Care of the self forged “the individual’s armature for dealing with events” (Foucault, 2004, p. 94), and the ancient Greeks knew that in caring for

themselves, they armed themselves with wisdom and courage for whatever they might experience. In fact, this armature can offer protection and strength for meeting the joys of life, as well as the dangerous events and limitations that may challenge our very being.

The goal of care of the self for the young white Southern women I interviewed was nothing less than the constitution of themselves as powerful and ethical subjects with the strength and wisdom to cope with whatever might befall them. They aimed not only to cope but to find fulfillment and pleasure in being. As Foucault (1984/1988) explained, “The individual who has finally succeeded in gaining access to [herself] is, for [herself], an object of pleasure. . . . Access to self is capable of providing a form of pleasure that comes, in serenity and without fail, of the experience of oneself” (p. 66). My participants pursued this pleasurable experience of the self through relations with each other and the fictional women they encountered.

Practices of the Self: Southern Women Reading Southern Women Together

On the Porch

I think the course was empowering in a way no other course I ever took was. Because [reading texts about Southern women is] a way of making you self-aware when you've spent your whole life not being self-aware. You know, kind of unveil part of who you are, give you understanding and strength. –Mary

If you're open and ready and let the reading impact you and change you, it will change you, but it also lets you know more about where you come from. Because it's written by our sisters and brothers, even Faulkner! [laughter] We have this real connection. And with Tennessee Williams and Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor and then you. And I do think the ground has to be ready to receive that and to say, Oh, okay, I *get* it! These women characters and the writers are really, really powerful, and they're writing in a time when women maybe weren't writers and maybe needed to be homemakers and 'good' women and raise wonderful children and that they just said, I have a voice and I'm going to write and write and write! And it's fantastic. –Deirdre

So what do you think fictional women like Ivy and Virgie are trying to tell us about Southern women? –Debra

That we're crazy! [laughter] -Kellie

The Greeks emphasized reading and writing and relations with others as necessary arts of existence. As I explained in chapter two, Foucault focused on the arena of male sexual relations, but I focused instead on the arena of Southern women's relations in what one participant called a "magic circle" of readers. Given Foucault's emphasis on proper love between men and boys in ancient Greece and given the deliberate exclusion of women from care of the self, I point out that in applying Foucauldian concepts of care of the self specifically and exclusively to women I engage in what Sawicki (1991) called the "continual contestation" (p. 66) that marks feminist use of Foucault. While his analyses of care of the self applied meaningfully to my data, I acknowledge that the fit between theory and data worked fairly neatly only because I chose to ignore a site of relations central to his project in favor of the site central to my project, a sisterhood fostered when women read and write together.

One of the profound joys of this research was seeing the excitement with which participants talked about the books we read together and the relations that shaped the interaction. Foucault (1984/1988) explained that "around the care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together" (p. 51). On the porch, in the "magic circle" or "our sacred space," those links became powerful and sometimes transformative. I was struck in the interviews by how vividly the women remembered the texts and by the extent to which they still used them in their lives, and I was surprised and encouraged to discover that they continued to engage in porchin' with each other and the books they had shared. This was no ordinary group of readers, I admit in full acknowledgement of my partiality for them. Most of these women were, and probably always have been, avid readers. Several of them taught English themselves, so the

texts became part of their professional selves as well as their private selves, but for all the women I interviewed, reading still played a vibrant, empowering role in their lives.

Foucault (1983/1991) argued that for the Greco-Romans, the point of textual practices of the self was not to unearth the unspoken but to “collect the already-said” (p. 365), to gather and reassemble fragments of experience and memory in ways that only reading and writing made possible. In fact, one could come “to know oneself through reading” (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 51). My participants constructed new self-knowledge when they read other Southern women’s experience reflected and refracted in texts. Books, as Foucault (1984/1988) said, may “serve as salutary treatment” (p. 6). In care of the self, reading can be a healing force as well as a self-constituting technology, showing readers what could help as they strive to create their lives as works of art. A scholar of Southern women’s writing described such transformative powers of text:

Reading works of the imagination can shape an interior world in which laden questions of identity, location, and cultural productions of gender can be imaginatively thought.

Reading can shape an exterior world in which such imaginings can be put to the service of large and complex issues. . . . Reading can even take us into dangerous woods where, despite our deepest desires and strangest dreams—perhaps because of them—irrevocable mutations take place. (Gwin, 2002, p. 53)

I found that the women in my study used the books they read for our class to guide them through the deep woods of Southern gender construction.

After Foucault’s (1984/1991a) critique in “What is an Author?” (1986/1990) he was asked about his own relations with imaginative texts and replied, “For me, literature... was a thought on the way, a badge, a flag” (p. 307). It bears mentioning that when asked about his own

voracious reading and what he read for pleasure, Foucault (1982/1988) responded, “The books which produce in me the most emotion: Faulkner, Thomas Mann, Malcolm Lowery’s *Under the Volcano*” (p. 12). Perhaps he felt this affinity for Faulkner in part because they both dealt with what Faulkner (2004) in his Nobel acceptance speech in 1950 called “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about” (p. 119). With a similar sensibility, Foucault (1965/1988) took up what he called “the disorder of hearts” (p. 60) in his first book, *Madness and Civilization*. I ran across Foucault’s (1982/1988) comment about his favorite books a few years ago while chasing some other idea, and seeing Faulkner’s name heading his list first starting me thinking about Foucault’s work in relation to Southern writers. For Southern women reading Southern women, literature may also become a kind of badge, an emblem signifying their navigation of the South’s dark and dangerous intersections of gender and geography, or a bright flag heralding the subjectivities the women might find themselves constructing.

Porchin’: Readerly Relations as Practices of the Self

On the Porch

Porchin’—it’s not necessarily happening on the porch. It’s about when women get together and work gets done. —Zelda

I really enjoyed our reading, particularly with the group we had. I can just hear their voices, and reading their writing was a whole other story. Lots of us were very close friends, and so to experience that together was extremely powerful. And sometimes we didn’t even really have to finish what we were saying because we were thinking the same thing, so that was pretty amazing. I’d never want to read it with a different group of people. It wouldn’t be the same at all. —Cassie

Close friendships went to another level and lifelong bonds were made in that class. It was the only course I took where we actually talked about the texts outside of class. We spent hours on the porch talking about Virgie and Ivy and Easter and Calixta and Desiree and Addie and Blanche and Sethe. It was by far the most empowering course I took, even more than gender studies, which really surprised me. I hadn’t expected that at all when I signed up for Southern lit. No offense, but I thought I might be about girls in hoop skirts or something. —Amelia

We were just rapt with it. And Deirdre and I used to run in the afternoons, and we'd talk about the class and what we were reading. You know, like, how about those fertility symbols? And then, Why are we still talking about this? Let's just run! But with that particular group of women and with it being all women, I think it was a completely different experience because we were more apt to talk about how we felt about the texts. And most guys kind of miss that piece of it, you know? But maybe that's just my biased opinion! [laughter] -Cassie

And it came out of when we read *Fair and Tender Ladies* together, and you could see light bulbs going off across the room. You could see, Oh, she gets it, and you get it in your way, and I get it in my way. Oh, my gosh, and tears and talks, and it was incredible. I had railed against the idea of going to a women's college. No, no, I don't want to be just with women. And it was the one class where I got it. It was like, Okay, *this* is what it could be, *this* is what it's about, that we can talk like this as women. And then we found this common woman's journey through Ivy Rowe. And then we could write our own literature, our own letters, and read them together—very powerful. —Deirdre

Mutuality in care of the self was central for the ancient Greeks and Romans. The ethic was inherently intersubjective because for proper care of the self, one must constitute oneself and one's ethics in relations with others. Self-constitution was not—and is not—a solitary or selfish act. Foucault (1984/1987) explained the vital role of relations in practices of the self:

Care of the self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others. . . . Thus, the problem of relationship with others is present all along in this development of care for self. . . . [However,] one must not have the care for others precede the care for self. The care for self takes moral precedence in the measure that the relationship to self takes ontological precedence. (p. 7)

In other words, if we do not care for ourselves, we cannot care for others. Care of the self, rather than being solipsistic, focuses on concerns and practices that make it an ontologically social practice, much like the Southern women's practice issuing from the porch.

Foucault (2004) said that “care of the self always entails a choice of one's mode of life. . . [and] is linked to practices or organizations of fraternity, brotherhood, school” (p. 113).

Upsetting gender here, as is my practice, I argue that caring for the self is intimately linked to relations of sisterhood. In the ancient ethic, “soul service is integrated with the network of friendships” (p. 115). Foucault (2004) explained that one form “in which guidance of the soul is practiced” occurred in “friendship relations between. . . persons fairly close in age, culture, and situation” (p. 497). In these relations, one offered a “helping hand” (p. 134) to extricate the other from “the condition, status, and mode of life and being in which [she] exists” (p. 134). In such acts of friendship, assistance, elevation, and education of the other also enriched the self.

For the ancients, mutual salvation was achieved through work on the self by the self in practice with others. With this aim, “teachings about everyday life were organized around taking care of oneself in order to help every member of the group with the mutual work of salvation” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 21). In fact,

saving yourself is an activity that takes place throughout life and. . . leads to a final effect, which is its aim and end. This consists in the fact that salvation renders you inaccessible to misfortunes, disorders, and all that external accidents and events may produce in the soul. (Foucault, 2004, p. 184)

Salvation requires “the subject’s constant action on [herself]” (p. 184) as well as reciprocal actions in exchange with the other. Rather than the Christian sense of salvation through self-renunciation, or “the religious form of salvation linked to a binary system,” salvation in Hellenistic and Roman care of the self “ensures an access to the self that is inseparable from the work one carries out on oneself” (Foucault, 2004, p. 185). Such work was carried out in relations with others to ensure that when joined with others one could find access to the self through artful practice. The women I interviewed spoke repeatedly about how women united could save each other. Given the rigors of such labor and the rarity of salvation for both ancients and

contemporaries, care of the self requires that we cultivate mutuality and act as dedicated, inventive artisans of the self.

The women in my study practiced a “‘soul service’ . . . performed through multiple social relations” (Foucault, 2004, p. 497). Relations formed a central practice of the self because “soul service is integrated within the network of friendships” (p. 115) and in communities that shared cultivation of “knowledge, meditation, apprenticeship, reading, allegorical interpretation, and so on. . . .The care of the self always takes shape within definite and distinct networks or groups” (p. 117). In their readerly sisterhood, the women on the porch cultivated communal ways of knowing, being, reading, writing, and interpreting literary and cultural discourse.

On the porch, “the lived-through experience of reading [becomes] folded into that of reading with others producing a kind of ‘third space’ in which familiar binary distinctions [are] redescribed in terms of both/and” (Faust, et al., 2005, p. 51). In the porch’s liberatory and inclusive space, the women practiced a readerly sisterhood that promoted “both/and.” As one participant said when speculating on what my research might suggest about their relations, “You’ll find that people made life-long connections with the fictional women, with the texts, and maybe with the women they read the texts with. So I hope and think you’ll find in your other classes that the women are still in contact with one another like we are. I mean, that’s huge!”

When I asked my participants what kind of difference it made to read the texts in an all-woman group, they unanimously said that it made all the difference. “I couldn’t imagine reading that stuff with anybody else. It just wouldn’t be the same,” one said. Another explained, “We just had such a level of trust that we could go anywhere together.” One participant described the group as a tight ensemble: “We just formed an ensemble where it was safe to *go there*—to laugh and cry and be vulnerable.” Another said, “We just had that connection in our sacred circle.

Sometimes you didn't even have to say anything because they just knew what you meant." As one woman explained, "I can never read those books again without the women in the room being there, too." Another commented, "And with that class, those women, unlike most other classes, I go, Where are they? Where are those women? I wonder what they're doing and where they are. And where are those women we met then and said, Where are you on this journey?" As Foucault (2004) explained, the point is "to try to be of service to the other in [her] journey towards the good and toward [herself]" (p. 360).

Foucault (1984/1988) noted that, in fact,

The interplay of the care of the self and the help of the other blends into preexisting relations, giving them a new coloration and a greater warmth. The care of the self—or the attention one devotes to the care that others should take of themselves—appears then as an intensification of social relations. (p. 53)

This enhanced coloration and warmth often developed in the women's preexisting relations, if they had known each other before, through their connections with texts. Fast new friendships also emerged from their shared reading and writing. They performed "a round of exchanges with the other and a system of reciprocal obligations" (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 54) as they read and wrote together. Such reciprocal practices of the self cannot be "something that the individual invents by [herself]. They are patterns that [she] finds in [her] culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on [her] by [her] culture...and [her] social group" (Foucault, 1984/1987, p. 11).

So the women on the porch engaged familiar patterns as they worked texts together in a liminal space, but they also invented variations on old cultural patterns, and their shared work created its own distinctive patterns. As Cassie explained, "I do think it made a huge difference

that we were an all-women group. We were all humming in the same key. We really wanted to talk about things and work them all out.” This study examined the generative confluence of women readers and fictional women, indicating the powerful sisterhood that can arise of sharing the construction of meanings and cultivation of the self through reading and writing together. While my participants used Welty’s and Smith’s work, particularly, in private practices of the self, they also reveled in their collaborative readings and interpretations, relishing their “flexible exchange of soul services” (Foucault, 2004, p. 360).

Many women I interviewed talked of how working the texts together offered the power to ameliorate what they described as isolation and “secrecy about identity in the South. You know, we [Southern women] don’t talk about certain things.” Zelda said, “We don’t share relationships about certain things or talk about family issues.” When I asked if she thought the South in some way isolates its women through the pressures it places on them to “just be sweet” all the time, she replied, “Right. And then it makes it where we can’t even talk to each other because we don’t want anyone to see what’s really going on and that we’re not perfect. So then the secrecy about that isolates us and messes with our sense of identity.”

Lydia said that perhaps the most meaningful thing she took from the texts and conversations was an “understanding that [she] was not alone,” that other women understood her feelings and her experience. Cassie commented that a lasting benefit she derived from her experience of reading Southern texts with the women in her class was a feeling of “being less isolated now.” Several women articulated a desire that became a continuing thread in the interviews: a desire for community among Southern women, a longing for a way to make meaning collectively in what one called “a kind of literary club where we could talk to each other and get stuff off our chests.”

The women extended this possibility for sisterhood to the fictional women they encountered, seeing the usefulness of such female unity for the characters they read together. Zelda said, “So if Addie and Calixta in ‘The Storm’ and Sethe and even Edna would’ve been able to form a club to talk to each other and get stuff off their chests, maybe things wouldn’t always have been so tragic. I don’t know, though, but at least there wouldn’t be that feeling of, I’m alone and nobody understands.” Lydia also observed that if women could just get together and “form a club, they could save each other.” Another participant said, “Even though these [fictional] women seem isolated, if we could just put everyone in group therapy, get ‘em in there together, there’d be such a great dynamic. You’re not alone! It’s not just your family that’s weird. Nope, we’re all eccentrics!” The emphasis on mutual salvation was at work here and seemed to take on renewed power in the liminal space of the porch, a transformative threshold.

Participants often expressed a desire to connect with the others involved in my study for more vigorous conversations about Southern women reading Southern women. They asked for porchin’ because they knew the power of constructing meanings together about how the texts might illuminate their lived experience as twenty-first-century women in the Deep South. The women in my study wanted to engage at the level of the particular, local, and personal the questions Foucault (1984/1991b) said we must ask when we consider our subjectivity: “How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations?” (p. 49). Perhaps they wanted to pose the Foucauldian (1982) alternative to the Cartesian question of who a self is and explore instead what *we* are (p. 216).

Reading and Rereading Texts as Guides for Living

On the Porch

The book has the power to transform you if you let it and if you're ready. –Amelia

Well, if you think about reading a text, you create meaning. You read a passage and you use that as something that signifies in your life and use it to reflect on a part of your life. I mean, not all books change lives, but it can change your perspectives and feelings on a certain issue or occurrence in your life just by reading a text. –Rachel

If I couldn't read, I'd just lose it! –Kellie

That book was very liberating for me because it was seeing how Ivy embraced her desires that gave me courage to accept myself and embrace my own desires. –Amelia

It's like somehow we're reflecting on our own lives. Yeah, I feel so connected with that book that there are times that if I'm upset or mad or I feel something, I'll just turn to a particular page.

It's not exactly like a Bible, but I know just where the parts I need are. You just flip to those passages, and sort of like some kind of spiritual text, you sometimes turn to it for comfort, sometimes for encouragement. Sometimes you're sad, and you identify with it. –Lydia

There's something biblical in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. And I realize I *need* the fiction and the stories! I need that as much as I need all this theory I'm studying. –Deirdre

The Greeks turned to texts for advice, instruction, inspiration, comfort, and courage to invent life as a work of art, “to build our existence as a beautiful existence” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 356). To craft such an existence, one had to get “to know oneself, through reading, through the precepts and examples that will provide inspiration” (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 51). Reading and rereading to care for the self offered vital ways to find guidance for life, examine and test the self, and question representations. Foucault (1984/1990a) described the ancients' use of texts

to suggest rules of conduct. . . , “practical” texts, which are themselves objects of a “practice” in that they were designed to be read, learned, reflected upon, and tested out, and they were intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct. These texts served as functional devices that would enable individuals to question their own

conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects.
(pp. 12-13)

In their practices, the women I interviewed used imaginative literature as a guide for living and as a means of administrative review, analogously testing themselves, their actions, and their beliefs. Gerald Graff (1994) pointed out that as readers, we are “concerned with both the questions posed by the text and the questions we bring to it from our own. . . backgrounds” (p. 42). In fact, reading reveals “culture at the points where it most clearly impinges upon [us], where [we] already have tacit knowledge that needs only to be cultivated to become more explicit” (Scholes, 1998, p. 102). These women used their reading to review and improve themselves but also to see their culture’s complicities in the selves they can imagine.

Posing questions from a Southern background, my participants constructed ways to be in their world. Through texts, they troubled representations of Southern women and resisted female identities traditionally prescribed by the culture. My participants confronted the belle’s legacy and actively rewrote the roles associated with the iconic white Southern lady: self-sacrificing mother, obedient daughter, and submissive wife. Through fictional women, the women on the porch read their own lives as they might have been or may yet be, rejecting or reinventing identities that threaten female potential. In fact, “making sense of a text and realizing one’s concerns are not separate experiences. We become empowered as readers and persons when we can realize and explore our own concerns in relations to the concerns of others” (Vine & Faust, 1993, p. 116). Through the female protagonists they encountered, the women in my study actively envisioned how they might face challenges in their own lives and withstand forces limiting the construction of their subjectivities.

Through transactions with texts, the women in my study, as Laurel Richardson (1997) said with a little help from Eliot, came to see “themselves, knowing themselves through another’s life story, re-visioning their own, arriving where they started and knowing the ‘place for the first time’” (p. 6). Arriving in new configurations of familiar terrain, participants recognized themselves—or themselves as they might be—in texts by and about Southern women. In interviews, they responded eagerly to my questions about their reading and writing, often with stories of their own sparked by an observation about a text. They freely offered “associative analogies” (Bleich, 1975, p. 12) that linked the fictional women to their own experience or to the women in relations with them, often their mothers or grandmothers or sisters. Through their empowered reading, writing, and relations, participants engaged in communal meaning-making—porchin’—with the Southern women present in the texts, in our classroom, and in their lives or memories.

In their practices of the self, the women in my study used fiction for guidance in crafting a beautiful, meaningful life. In interviews, participants often told me of finding “inspiration and comfort” in the books they read about Southern women. They looked to the texts for advice on how to live. In much the same way as the ancient Greeks used their texts as models for living an ethical life, the women in my study used texts to learn how to build their “beautiful existence” with freedom and integrity. The women found that these texts by and about other Southern women examined “power as a productive force—as something that calls realities into being rather than suppresses them” (Peräkylä, 2005, p. 880). In an interview, Phoenix explained how she used fictional models of strong women to guide her own actions:

I think that realizing through their example what to resist and what to let go at the age when we realized it has helped us in our professional and personal lives. Now I know

when I'm being thrown for a loop and I can correct it. Reading the texts in that class has been absolutely a gift in the strength it still gives us.

I discovered that, in fact, a number of the women still regularly turned to the books we read together for illumination of their own experience and for daily guidance.

Often in our conversations, they spoke of how the fictional women's attempts to construct their subjectivity provided them with guides for attempting the difficult in their own lives. Mary explained,

I think you have to be fierce in a way if you want to be who you want to be here. You can't be half-hearted. You have to be fierce if you're going to stand up to the pressures and expectations people put upon you—if you want to be who you are and not who people expect you to be. And [*Fair and Tender Ladies*] was about a woman growing up in the South, somebody with a very strong spirit, and she had to fight against a lot of oppression and the social structures that wouldn't allow her to have that free spirit in a way. And that's very understandable to me, being a woman coming from a very conservative Southern family.

For the Greeks, techniques of the self were “exercises of the soul” with an objective of “training and strengthening courage. . . , which we should understand as resistance to external events, the ability to bear them without suffering, collapsing and letting oneself be overcome by them; resistance to external events, misfortunes, and the rigors of the world” (Foucault, 2004, p. 247). My participants used their reading practices as techniques for facing the rigors of the world. For example, many of them employed fictional Ivy Rowe's experience to arm themselves for the struggle to care for the self. As one woman observed, “Ivy reminds us of what you have

to hold onto in the deepest part of self. And Ivy reminds me that you have to have things that are *all yours.*”

In talking of how they used reading and rereading Southern women’s texts to guide their own lives, Phoenix explained that “women [in the study] are definitely learning something from the women in the texts. And it’s helping them to find themselves. It’s helping them to make decisions in their lives to either reflect or to go against one of the characters. It’s about how the characters view the world versus who the readers are and what they’ve experienced.”

Rereading texts and writing and reviewing notes on them was a vital part of care of the self for the ancients. As Foucault (2004) observed, through writing and rereading, one absorbs and “assimilates [truth] to the point of making it a part of oneself, an internal, permanent, and always active principle of action” (p. 500). With their rereading of *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) for our book brunch, the women in my study emphasized their employment of the novel as a guide for life in the ongoing project of constructing subjectivity. They assimilated Ivy’s experience to help inform and interpret their own experience, looking to the past, present, and a future they anticipated. Fadiman (2006) explained that some texts seem to be written with “invisible ink, legible only on rereading” (p. xviii). As my participants contemplated their roles as women now and perhaps in the future, rereading the sections of Smith’s (1988) novel that deal with the struggles and joys of marriage and motherhood rendered the ink visible for them.

When reading a book “about something you haven’t yet experienced—love, parenthood, vocation—until you reread it fifteen years later, all you can do is press your nose against the glass” (Fadiman, 2006, p. xviii). The women I interviewed were not pressing their noses against glass that separates them from experience—they were arming themselves for life, deploying rereading as a technology of self. They vicariously tested themselves against what could lie

ahead as they read ways to be wives, mothers, and daughters—both in the present and in their futures. In rereading, “memory and experience press themselves into each reading so that each encounter informs the next” (Goodman, 2006, p. 164). And on every reading, we see newly resonant things in the text, perhaps glimpsing future possibilities. Rereading can help guide us, fold us into future selves accompanied by the selves we were on a first reading.

Rereading *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) for our brunch, Rachel examined through Ivy’s experience the danger of losing a sense of self and found inspiration in her reclamation of self through textual practices. She explained,

After reclaiming herself and her stories and poems, Ivy was able to be herself and find a life outside of her family. And I think that kills a lot of women when they devote themselves to their families so much that they neglect their own inner life, and so once you lose that outer life of yours, what do you have left? You know? I feel like once again that—balancing the desires and expectations of others, like in-laws—is something I’m struggling with right now, just trying to figure out what I’m doing right now, where I’m going in life. And there’s another passage on a page I folded over even more this time, something Granny Rowe used to say to her: “A body can get used to anything except hanging but I think that is wrong, Silvaney. I think a body can get used to hanging too, a body can get used to anything.” And to me that was just like, Whew! Whoa! Yeah! And it’s not a physical death, but it’s the death of your soul. What can you do? What can you enrich yourself with?

Rachel read the risks of not caring for the self, of sacrificing too much while caring for others, through Ivy’s trials and found in them a guide for subverting such loss. Mary, too, described the pressures put on Southern women to be self-abnegating nurturers, saying, “As a woman of the

South, you're raised to have insight into people's feelings and to be able to perceive them and take care of and nurture other people, but yourself. . . ."

Phoenix, married three years, also talked of employing texts for continuing guidance in the struggle to care for the self while caring for others. She argued,

I think in the South, there's an expectation of motherhood and of feeding others, of literally feeding others—literally and emotionally. And there's so much just drained from these women, taken from these women that it helps you realize in your life the moments when that's happening to you. So you can look at your life as it is now and say, Okay, I can correct this before things get out of hand and I become so-and-so, you know? Or I'll see moments in my life when I'm like, Okay, you're being taken advantage of or people are expecting too much of me. And I can correct this *now*. And I think reading stories about women who never had the courage or the ability or the strength to do that allows you yourself to be able to do it in order to avoid the same fate. Or with Ivy and Virgie, they show you how to be strong and take care of yourself.

The women in my study, like Foucault's Greeks, employed textual practices, and their rereading of Smith's (1988) novel, in particular, to help them figure out how they wanted to live and what kinds of subjectivities they wished to construct—or deconstruct.

Reading Southern Women to Examine Self and Other

Care of the self for the Greco-Romans involved getting "to know oneself through reading, through the precepts and examples that will provide inspiration" (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 51). Reading "sets up and develops relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object" (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p. 29). Through

reading texts and framing collective interpretations, the women in my study, like the ancients, found means of self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, and perhaps the transformation of the subject.

Southern women's writing became a technology for rigorous self-examination as my participants read versions of themselves, or themselves as they might have been, and recognized in the texts mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and best friends, as well. Mary remarked on the self-examination the women engaged through transactions with texts:

When you're part of something, part of a culture, it's hard to step back and see the situation. But I think the texts we read and the course and the discussions we had kind of forced us to pull out of the environment we were in and reflect on the way we were raised and the way we perceive ourselves, so I think it was making us aware, making us analyze our situations more. I never thought much about being a Southern woman before, but I do now.

Part of the women's self-examination revolved around looking to the texts to identify and challenge gendered identities. In examining the self, the women re-imagined and transgressed the boundaries drawn to confine them. Jones and Donaldson (1997) argued that "in the American South, texts, like their writers and like the excessively gendered culture that speaks through them, are deeply riven. . . . [Women readers and writers] can produce new texts that remember, dismember, and lay old ghosts to rest" (p. 7). In their self-reflective transactions with such texts, the readers in my study remembered, dismembered, resisted, and laid to rest what the South has traditionally said white women must be: self-abnegating mothers, obedient daughters, and compliant wives. Talking about this research, Phoenix noted how participants examined possible selves through reading texts by and about Southern women: "Well, it's about identity, you know,

and who one is. And I think that everybody is searching for that, and anything that can help us along the way, if it's an interview or reading, my lord, I'll do it!"

The interplay of subjects became vital in the women's textual self-examination because "reading involves a confrontation between the self and 'other.' The self, the reader, encounters the 'other,' the text, and the nature of that confrontation depends on the background of the reader as well as on the text. . . . Reader and text interact with a degree of mutuality" (Flynn, 1992, pp. 267-268). However, it may be that this degree of mutuality can be heightened to the extent that the separation of self (reader) and other (text) ruptures or collapses, particularly when Southern women read Southern women. We might ask, as some feminist reading theorists urge, "What does it mean for a woman to read without condemning herself to the position of other? What does it mean for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by a woman writing as a woman?" (Schweickart, 1986/1992, p. 51). I posed the local version of this question: What does it mean for Southern women reading as Southern women to read literature by a Southern woman writing as a Southern woman?

I was struck in the interviews by how often the women merged their pronouns so that the "she" of the text became the "I" of the participant. They blended talk of their own experience with that of a female character. For example, in talking of Ivy, Lydia said, "It's like she's me and I'm her somehow." Phoenix and Deirdre both talked of Ivy using the first person, as if she were they. In their brunch conversation, I noticed that first and third person pronouns were often substituted for each other, sometimes making it difficult to know whether the speaker referred to herself or the character. Cassie conflated herself with Welty's (1949/1977) Virgie Rainey, saying that Virgie was her "evil twin" who did rebellious things she admired. And with Smith's (1988)

Fair and Tender Ladies, the women repeatedly commented that they felt as if Ivy Rowe's letters had been written to them or by them.

If it is possible to fracture the supposed distance between self and other, reader and text, Southern women reading Southern women offers a fertile site for such an act. This kind of reading of women by women

features an intersubjective construction of the relationship [between reader and text]. The reader encounters not simply a text, but a "subjectified object": the "heart and mind" of another woman. She comes into close contact with an interiority—a power, a creativity, a suffering, a vision—that is not identical with her own. The feminist interest [is] in reading as an intersubjective encounter. (Schweickart, 1986/1992, p. 52)

My participants indicated that they experienced and relished these intersubjective encounters in transactions with the texts and in collective meaning making on the porch. In this spirit, Welty (1983b) said that as a writer "[her] wish, indeed [her] continuing passion, would be...to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight" (p. 355). Welty, Smith, and other Southern women writers lifted the veil between self and other for the women in my study, collapsing the distance between subject and object. And in exploring relations of self with other, readers examined relations of self with self.

Reading to Test the Self

Foucault (2004) described how in caring for the self a person engages in meditative, philosophical reading "as an exercise of the subject in which, through thought [about text], [she] puts [herself] in a fictional situation in which [she] tests [herself]" (p. 358). The Greco-Romans meditated on the worst possible thing that could happen in order to equip themselves to cope

with whatever might befall them. Putting themselves in such fictional situations and meditating upon them, rehearsing the scenario in careful detail, enabled the artist of the self to review ethical behaviors and test them against what they might have been,

I describe in detail here the powerful use one reader, Zelda, made of reading to test herself as she took in Faulkner's (1930/1990) Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*. Zelda, a victim of sexual violence, employed Addie's plight to imagine the worst that could have happened: abuse could have silenced her, erased her from being, much as Addie is erased in Faulkner's text. Rife with "the disorder of hearts" and unsettled by "a great disquiet" (Foucault, 1965/1988, p. 13), Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930/1990) follows the Bundren family on an epic journey to bury Addie, the wife and mother, in a grotesque "counterpilgrimage" (Foucault, 1965/1988, p. 10). Faulkner's (1930/1990) novel, "a bleak and black comedy," depicts "a family coming unhinged as it moves homeward" (Parini, 2004, p. 143). Addie remains silent until long after her death and then speaks in only one brief chapter positioned halfway through the novel. For Addie, "the ultimate room of one's own [becomes] the grave" (Showalter, 1999, p. xiii). Zelda, who talked extensively and passionately about the novel in our interview, imagined through Addie's experience the deadly silence that she might have known, given different choices.

Zelda explained,

I really identified with Addie. I think part of the reason was when I came to school, I was pregnant and I did not get married. I'd had a very big beef with my family. And the guy got drunk and lived in a trailer, typical Anse-type guy [Anse was Addie's selfish, incompetent, and indifferent husband]. And if I had made the decision to get married as opposed to coming to Bridges College, I would be living a very different life than the one I'm living now. I would have been like Addie, so there's no telling what I'd be doing. I'd

probably be in a trailer somewhere having kids. What I remember is that, it was like [Addie] was smarter than everybody else. She could've done something else, but she was put in a situation where, given her time and given her situation, she had to marry this jerk of a guy, and she was still expected to be breeding and at home. And just the way she was so silent. She didn't have an outlet, and she didn't have anyone to talk to or anyone to understand her until after she's dead. And then she has a voice. And that's how I felt in that situation, that if I had—oh, my goodness!—if I had married this guy and lived with him, there would be no telling when I would've had a chance to be myself or think or do anything—like make my own decisions or anything, much less have a voice.

Faulkner's (1930/1990) character became a way for this reader to test and affirm her rejection of the violence in her own life. Zelda imagined herself silenced and disempowered like Addie in this parable of what her life could have been.

Deleuze (1988) said that Faulkner, whom he called “the great luminist,” explored “centres of power that are unknown, unseen and unsaid, the eroding or eroded focuses that are overturned and degenerate in the family from the Deep South: a whole becoming-dark” (p. 81). Struggling against these family centers of unspoken power and the “whole becoming-dark,” Zelda interacted with Faulkner's text in a very personal way, reading in it the grim alternatives to difficult choices she had to make in her own life. Struck by Addie's experience as a voiceless, powerless mother and miserable wife, Zelda assimilated Addie's experience into “the stream of [her] actual life” (Rosenblatt, as cited in Marshall, 1993, pp. 312-313). So if “one serves one's 'self' in part by *taking in* the new selves offered in stories, we can begin to see how the process of taking in or surrendering [to texts] actually works” (Booth, 2000, p. 352). Not only did Zelda surrender to the text, but she did something much more active: she *took in* Addie as a test.

Phoenix also took in a fictional woman, Ivy Rowe, to guide her and help her test her ethical choices. She explained, “And I think that sense of good and evil that we see in Southern lit plays a role in my life, too. I may think one thing, but I know that it’s not right or acceptable, so I question, Am I a bad person because I think that? Or am I a bad person who looks good because I don’t say it, you know?” Phoenix assimilated the character, comparing Ivy’s ethical struggles with her own and placing them within their cultural contexts. She observed,

Ivy keeps saying, Am I evil? Am I evil? I don’t think I’m evil. She really questions that. She says she’s not, but you know it’s a real concern for her to know what constitutes evil, and I think that has a lot to do with, especially in the South, how important reputation is and how she considers herself ruined. She goes, “I don’t care if I’m ruined. I’m going to push out my stomach and I don’t care what people think.” But she does. She says, “I’m compromised.” And I think that idea of where you are in society and how you’re viewed in society—even though she rejects it as being unimportant, it actually is important. And in our lives today, it still is, especially for women here in the South.

Phoenix, like Zelda, used reading to test herself against expectations she faced in her own life. Both women imagined how they could have faced ostracism and condemnation as “evil women” being punished, in their cases, by an abusive man and a culture critical of women. In acts similar to those the Greeks undertook when they meditated on the worst that could possibly happen in order to arm themselves for life, the women in my study also imagined how to bear what might have befallen them.

My participants used textual practices to review their actions and test their ethical choices. Through transactions with texts, they envisioned rich possibilities for autonomy in the construction of their subjectivities, rejecting silence, powerlessness, and social censure. The

women meditated on ways of being in the world and facing difficulty by checking their own practices and behaviors against those of the women they read. Like the ancients, they employed fiction as a guide for life. Schweickart (1986/1992) argued that “the point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to *change the world*. . . for it is in [reading] that literature is realized as *praxis*” (p. 39). As Mary said, “The course and the readings and our conversations gave me a greater understanding of what pressures and expectations were put upon me as a Southern woman and the social structures [imposing them]. And I think that awareness is very empowering.” Such awareness and the praxis it catalyzes can indeed transform the self—and perhaps the world.

Troubling Representations of Southern Women

On the Porch

You’re expected to have the table set *and* your lipstick on. –Kellie

We all tame ourselves at times because we try to fit in that mold made for us and we don’t quite fit, and then we just say, Oh, to hell with it! And do our own thing. -Lydia

You might be threatening if you show your strength. And I think that exists today, that we’re supposed to be sugary and nice. We’re told Southern women are supposed to be compliant and make everybody happy and smooth everything over. Just be sweet! –Cassie

For the ancient Greeks, troubling representations was a central practice in cultivating the self. Foucault (2004) explained that a person who is not caring for the self “lets all the representations from the outside world into [her] mind. [She] accepts these representations without examining them, without knowing to analyze what they represent” (p. 131). In the fertile field of the text, the women in my study found ways to analyze and recognize, resist and subvert traditional representations of femininity in the South, particularly the enduring belle image and the false ideal of the white Southern lady. Foucault (1982) observed that “maybe the target

nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. . . . We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality" (p. 216).

My participants refused or reinvented the culturally constructed individualities of the belle and the lady in her various forms. The problem, as Foucault (1984/1988) reminded us, is “not to try and decipher a meaning hidden beneath the visible representations; it is to assess the relationship between oneself and that which is represented, so as to accept in the relation to the self only that which can depend on the subject’s free and rational choice” (p. 64). My participants critically assessed degrees of relationship between themselves and the women they read and the obedient women their culture claims they should be.

I asked my participants to speculate as to what my research might reveal about how they used these texts to refute what we have been told Southern women are. In an interview, Cassie and I had the following conversation about representations of women in relation to my research.

Cassie: I think that you are definitely going to discover the link between self and the characters. You’ll see that. But I think that the whole textual aspect of it is going to be something really interesting, and if I were you, I’d go with the whole intertextual idea and the storytelling, and the postmodern version of it, and that we can construct our own narrative about what we are as Southern women, and that might be different than what people think. So I think that will be a really cool discovery, and looking at the discourse a little more will be cool.

Debra: Yes, and to see what we are constructing for ourselves—because there was a lot of construction going on in that class.

Cassie: Yeah, and a lot of deconstruction, too—bursting people’s bubbles about who we are! There is something rebellious about it, and I like that!

Through the texts and the porchin' they shared, the women in my study deconstructed what being Southern and female can mean, rebelliously and joyously "bursting people's bubbles."

Though texts, in fact, "'categories can be owned, resisted, and enforced'" (Burke as cited in Peräkylä, 2005, p. 880). Through their reading and writing, my participants resisted and deconstructed the two iconic categories of white Southern womanhood, the belle and the lady. These stereotypical representations of the flirtatious but pure belle and the selfless angel in the house have proven hard to erase, even today, as I discussed in earlier chapters. Troubling those traditional categories, the women in my study witnessed the damage inflicted by such enforced identities in fictional women like Blanche and Addie and assimilated models of subversion in others like Ivy and Virgie.

Participants mentioned the belle in several interviews, usually with great irony. Phoenix commented on the belle's lingering presence as a current ideal for women:

Expectations are put on women here—you know, the whole Southern belle mentality, and I think parents today still expect their little girl to be the Southern belle. You know, proper young ladies don't say those types of things and young ladies don't do that. And it's here! It's here where it was born and created, and I think especially the men and older generations are still trying to hold on to that image or expectation.

Cassie also contested the belle, a gendered "lie that keeps [us] unfree" (Carter, 1997, p. 38), saying,

And I think a lot of it, even now, is just for show. People love seeing women dressed up in the old Southern belle dresses, and there's still the sorority belle, and the guys wear the Confederate uniform and the women wear the big belle dresses [to formal events]. And none of us have ever really been that.

Another woman conflated the belle with a kind of perfect domesticity, explaining that one reason she found the porch a liberatory space was because she did not have to go into “automatic belle mode and vacuum and serve tea and cookies, like [she] would if people were coming inside.” However, on the porch, she explained, “I can just relax and be me. There’s a freedom there.” Deirdre, who also conflated the belle with the domestic, talked about “reclaiming the belle if that’s what [she] felt like.” She described in our initial interview how her reading and writing helped her revisit and reinvent the archetypal paradox. She spoke at great length about the image, so here I offer a substantial excerpt from her remarks in that conversation:

And as far as identity, it’s a Catch 22: you’re this strong steel magnolia. And yet we really are strong and because we’ve had to be, but also it is praised culturally. She [the Southern woman] cooks and she raises her kids, possibly alone. She’s strong and she’s Mama Bear and she’ll never abandon them, and yet she can be a little softer in the South. The whole idea of what is woman is very problematic. It is very different from my Ohio relatives. It’s a different kind of ideal of the woman. So it was really great and very important to go through that class to know more about where I come from and who I am and to go out and say, I can do both. Yeah, it’s hugely problematic and complex, and yet to be woman is to be 5,000 different things. I don’t know how to articulate it, this knowing that you can be all of those things. And then I think about knowing where we’ve come from, and there is a very clear kind of gender ideal. And I’m particularly interested in the belle. This is the “ideal,” so we’ve come from that, and it’s still lingering. Still! We still have debutantes and coming out. The things that are past can be positive and could be negative, and we could be reclaiming things that are passed down, like a lace

handkerchief and your great-grandmother's china. And looking back and thinking, this is ours! And I think that's really the crossroads of the Southern woman now, of young Southern women. I think now there's pressure to be everything. You do get educated, you do get the degree and the awesome power job and the power suits, and yet you can still cook and make wonderful sweet tea and throw gorgeous dinner parties and have beautiful children, and—aahhh!—it's all that! [laughter] So it's rich, and I love it. I think it's an exciting time to study both where we're going and what we're teaching our daughters.

Deirdre refused to repeat the belle as she has traditionally been written and transformed her into a powerful figure who manages everything well. She also took up a similar project in her graduate thesis, *Anti-Bellum: A Re-Destruction of the Southern Belle*, which I discuss later in this chapter.

Resistance as a Practice of the Self

Troubling (M)other

On the Porch

I think one thing I recognize is that in all the texts we read, there always seems to be this sort of ambivalent relationship with the South and things that are Southern. And even all the things we read about mothers, there's this kind of ambivalence. You know, I'm doing the best as I can, and I love my children, but is there something more? But it's okay to feel ambivalent about it. I guess that's what I took from the course. -Zelda

We've been almost caricatured, caricatures of ourselves for so long. . . . Maybe the image of the Southern woman hasn't been true all along. Maybe it's just what people want you to think we're supposed to be. -Cassie

How much of myself *can* I give up? -Phoenix

As my participants troubled representations of the belle, they specifically resisted the roles associated with her mature sister, the white Southern lady, and the doubling that often marks both. The women vigorously contested the traditional manifestations of the domestic

paragon of virtue: the selfless mother, the obedient daughter, and the subservient wife. Cassie took issue with these impossible categories, saying,

And I think for the longest time we Southern women were characterized like—we wore aprons. We cooked biscuits, you know? We've been almost caricatured, caricatures of ourselves for so long. Yeah, anybody you would've asked [what Southern women are], it would've been the same description, but it's just not true. And the more you read, you find women who are not like that, characters like Ivy, like Virgie. And you see that maybe the image of the Southern woman hasn't been true all along. Maybe it's just what people want you to think we're supposed to be.

In resisting the material effects of being caricatured as the Southern lady, my participants voiced a common concern about the role of the self-abnegating mother. They feared that conforming to cultural expectations of the role would destroy a sense of self. They found Ivy's (Smith, 1988) efforts to care for the self while struggling with motherhood especially empowering and instructive because they worried about resisting the pressures to sacrifice themselves for their children. A key feature of Ivy's strength is her determination to constitute herself, despite the demands of motherhood, back-breaking labor, and life in "a world of men." Ivy's role—and resistance—as mother evoked intense and lengthy conversations in individual interviews and at our book club brunch.

Phoenix described the conflict that she and the other participants faced: "I think we struggle as women with, is it worth giving up part of myself to raise children? And how much of myself *can* I give up? And not to fulfill aspirations and dreams of a career in order to do these maternal things." The women around the brunch table nodded and verbalized affirmation to Phoenix's questions. They talked about how Ivy, having too many babies too fast, sinks into

deep depression and then fights to redevelop relations of self with self, to treat herself as the object of her knowledge and care—primarily through her epistolary practice. Her letter writing, her way of making truth and caring for herself, ceased with the births of so many children.

My participants found these sections of the book fascinating, particularly on rereading the novel at this time in their lives because they were reading possibilities for their own futures, anticipating motherhood. For the ancient Greeks, a vital part of their practice of the self was a “meditation on, or rather, training for death” (Foucault, 2004, p. 504). Such an exercise “offers the possibility of looking back, in advance so to speak, on one’s life” (p. 504). The women in my study used texts to train not for death but for future motherhood, looking back in advance on their lives. As one woman remarked,

Rereading *Fair and Tender Ladies* this time, I really liked the part where she gets married and has a child. It’s interesting to see how Ivy keeps her own identity while she is also part of the identity of all these other people. And these people are a part of her, but she still keeps a sense of self, and I think, How does she do that? Because I don’t know how! I guess I question, Am I keeping myself? Am I being true to myself, or am I doing this to please someone else? Is this what I *really* want, or is this what I think people want me to do?

As Kellie explained, “Now, it’s Ivy’s later life that interests me more. Not that I’m her age or that I have children, but her talking about being worn out, that blackness, and I am not at that point in my life, but I know people in my life who are. Just stuck.” Through Ivy’s experience, my participants recognized and faced the consequences of not caring for self while mothering others. I offer from the porch the conversation the women and I had in response to Kellie’s observations.

On the Porch

I think the real point is that you have to find that balance between giving and taking care of others and saving yourself. And you don't have to *lose* yourself either. Yeah, you have to keep something for yourself in order to give even if it seems selfish. -Phoenix

Well, you can't give when you've got nothing left for yourself, and I think that's a really hard adult lesson for lots of us. -Debra

And Ivy's just so spirited and makes those choices that I think are particularly difficult for Southern women. When you look at all she does to live life on her own terms and still send out all this love that she's "fair wore out with" at the end, and she manages it somehow. -Kellie

And that idea about being selfish—it's always this bad thing, especially for women, and for us because we're supposed to be givers and nurturers and all these things. And this is a good selfish in that she does what she wants. This sense of selfishness is actually a *good* thing, and I wish that I could do that. -Phoenix

Reading that last part and through the whole book, talking about how Ivy's selfish but in a good way, I think she's selfish because she realizes if you're not a selfish person you can't keep yourself from giving away too much of yourself and getting worn out like her mother. And you have to be selfish to have the life you want to. It's kind of like the opposite of what you think about when you think of Southern women, what they're supposed to be like. But like you said, women are supposed to be nurturers, and if you're not selfish enough to take care of yourself, then you're not going to get what you want out of life. -Rachel

Well, you've got to sustain yourself if you're going to give to others. Ivy said she was writing for her life, and that comes through. But I think you're right, Rachel—that's not what Southern women are *supposed* to do. We're told that Southern women are never *supposed* to say an unkind word and must always be calm, sweet, put together, self-sacrificing good Mamas. -Debra

Well, yeah, but you're just not allowed to say that motherhood and true self maybe conflict. Be a mother first, and that's supposed to be enough. And what if it isn't? What if you need to read a book? Like when Ivy loses her stories and poems and she can't write her letters, she loses her true self along the way somewhere. -Ashley

So maybe that's what Ivy does for us—gives us something to help us on that journey inward, outward, wherever it's going. It's interesting and sometimes profound, but I think she can show us what not to do, like falling into the darkness after having all those babies every year. That part is really painful for me to read because she's totally losing herself. -Debra

And she doesn't want to compromise her true self. -Zelda

I think that's probably the hardest thing to read, and I really don't flip to that part much because it hurts me and because that's one of my worst fears—for me to look in the mirror and not see myself anymore. And for other people not to be able to recognize me. -Lydia

Zelda, the only participant who had a child, talked in depth in our initial interview about the role of motherhood in life and fiction, using Addie Bundren (Faulkner, 1930/1990) as her cautionary example. For her, reading motherhood was not training for the future, but a meditation on her own experience and a way to evaluate her difficult choices. She identified personally with Addie's sense of ambivalence about her children, saying,

I just keep thinking of the whole, you know, what was it? The “shape to fill her lack”? Her whole desire to find what I [she] needed—a shape to fill her lack. And I also felt similar to her ‘cause I love my daughter and I think I made the right decision, but motherhood's very hard for me. I mean if someone said to me, You could be a stay-at-home mother, I'd just cry. And because I was impregnated in a very violent situation, I thought that I would not love my child, that I would have a very hard time bonding, but I did not have that. And so that's one thing I could say that was different [from Addie]. She loved Jewel [her illegitimate son] because that was with the man she loved, and Anse [Addie's husband]—well, you know what I mean. So I felt like I had a child with someone who was very much like Anse, but I love my child.

Zelda's response indicated Rosenblatt's (as cited in Probst, 1992) “compenetration of a reader and a text” (p. 56). Through Addie, Zelda examined her own choices and explored a fate she escaped: life as a mother and wife with few choices and no voice until after death, a woman banished to the margins in life and in death.

The women learned through fictions like Ivy and Addie what to do and not to do in managing motherhood. Unlike Addie, who was totally silenced and only spoke from the grave, Ivy cared for the self through writing, reading, storytelling, and persistent resistance. Lydia commented on Ivy's self-constitutive practices:

In the South, as a woman certain things are expected of you. And you grow up thinking that in order to find happiness, you've got to get married [smacks fist to palm] and have this guy and have kids, and you *have* to do this and this and blah, blah, blah. And Ivy thought she was going to find that true love through those things, but she'd already found it—at the very beginning, with her first story. She found it with herself, not the husband and kids. And she figures it out. Storytelling, that's her love. And she's going to write and tell stories. And if she doesn't, well. . . . And we may already possess something that powerful, but we're just looking past it.

Lydia read both the perils of motherhood and the power of writing through Ivy's experience and her ultimate triumph as a speaker and writer of truths.

Through Ivy, the readers in my study vicariously experienced both the risks of a role they anticipated and recognized ways to narrate themselves away from the dangers of selfless motherhood. Ivy reestablishes relations of self with self by writing herself into being again. Like Lee Smith, she writes for her life. Through their use of Ivy's fictional example, the young women I interviewed found practices to help them channel their power and create their own happiness—as mothers and as self-constituting, speaking subjects with stories to tell.

Defiant Daughters

Many of the women in my study talked of daughters and future generations, even though only one participant had a child, expressing concern for the women who will come after them. As Zelda said, "I hope that when my daughter grows up maybe the South will be more accepting." Deirdre, who had moved to the Midwest with her husband, explained,

I do think about the future and about children and where we will live. And we have sort of an unspoken understanding that we both want children to be born here, to be in the

South. . . because there is something there! We will want to come back home. There is something there in the land and the dialect and the food and the people and the culture that you want for whoever your kids may be someday. And I've only been able to say that out loud since rereading *Fair and Tender Ladies* this time.

For her, rereading this text made it possible to articulate the future she envisioned.

Most participants said they felt drawn to raise their children in the South, but many intended to raise them differently than they had been raised. Zelda talked of how she parented her child differently from the parenting she received: "I was raised, Always act like a lady and la di da. But I have not raised my daughter like that. Now it bites me in the butt quite a bit. [laughter] But she's not growing up with this, You're a Lady, so you *must* do blah, blah. So she might have a completely different perspective [on what Southern women are]. It'll be different for her." In challenging stereotypes of Southern women, my participants resisted roles and representations that can be damaging not only for them but for "our daughters." Their textual practices of the self became a powerful way for them to do "soul service" (Foucault, 2004, p. 115) for themselves, each other, and those girls who will follow as they revised expectations for mothers and daughters.

The women read Smith's (1988) Ivy Rowe from her impoverished childhood to her empowered old age, and Welty's (1949/1977) importunate Virgie Rainey from birth to middle age. In their rereading, my participants talked mostly about Ivy's struggles to construct her subjectivity in confluence with motherhood, but in their discussions of Virgie they focused on her role as wandering daughter and daring artist, one determined to invent herself. Throughout the stories of *The Golden Apples* (Welty, 1949/1977), Virgie persistently defies everyone's efforts to tame her. She eventually executes her daughterly duties, but in her own rebellious way,

so that Virgie's womanhood unfolds unlike anyone else's in Morgana, Mississippi. As one participant said, "Virgie just resisted, resisted, resisted and exerted her own powers."

Virgie, who appears in three of the connected stories in Welty's (1949/1977) cycle, goes from being an irrepressible child and precocious pianist to a middle-aged woman who sacrifices her freedom to care for an ailing mother. While the mature Virgie outwardly conforms to her mother's expectations of a dutiful daughter, she refuses to conform to the dictates of her hometown, mythical Morgana, Mississippi. She stays in her ailing mother's home to take care of her, but she also takes lovers, smokes cigarettes, and earns her living typing for the logging company destroying Morgana Woods. Although Virgie comes home to milk the cows and cook dinner every evening, her mother realizes that "it was a blessed wonder to see the child mind" (Welty, 1949/1977, p. 235).

As an irrepressible young girl, Virgie "let herself go completely, as anyone would like to do" (Welty, 1949/1977, p. 51). Outside on "the sweet soft speaking nights" of June in Morgana, she "never rested as long as the music played except at last to throw herself hard and panting on the ground, her open mouth smiling against the trampled clover" (p. 51). Virgie does everything with passionate abandon—as a wild child and even as a grown woman trapped back at home. In a scene that subtly suggests Virgie's rampant nature, her mother laments the fact that Virgie defiantly sews on Sunday and realizes, "There's nothing Virgie Rainey loves better than struggling against a real hard plaid" (p. 234).

At the book's conclusion, Virgie has become a mature woman released to follow her own desires. When her mother dies, Virgie finds herself freed to wander again. Once she clears the house of mourners bringing banana cakes, butterbeans, ham and biscuits, fried chicken and okra, along with "flowers from their dooryard, princess feathers, snow-on-the-mountain" (Welty,

1949/1977, p. 247), Virgie takes a baptismal swim in the Big Black River. She stands naked on the willow bank and

let herself into the river. . . . It was like walking into sky, some impurity of skies. All was one warmth, air, water and her own body. All seemed one weight, one matter—until as she put down her head and closed her eyes and the light slipped under lids, she felt this matter a translucent one, the river, herself, the sky all vessels which the sun filled. She began to swim in the river. . . . She felt the sand, grains intricate as little cogged wheels, minute shells of old seas, and the many dark ribbons of grass and mud touch her and leave her, like suggestions and withdrawals of some bondage that might have been dear, now dismembering and losing itself. . . .

She lay on her outstretched arm, not breathing, floating. Virgie had reached the point where in the next moment she might turn into something without feeling it shock her. She hung suspended in the Big Black River as she would know to hang suspended in felicity. (pp. 248-249)

On moonlit nights as the river, Virgie, eying the moon, connects with “a daughter far, far back” (p. 267). Virgie knows that she can transform herself and rests in that felicitous knowledge, anticipating her acts of self-constitution. As Gwin (2002) observed of Southern women’s texts in general, and which I apply specifically to this moment in Welty’s story, “What writing such as this—and the type of readerly travel it demands—can do is to point to that other space, that ‘elsewhere,’ in which the daughter can begin to write her own cultural story, create her own felicity” (p. 115).

Envisioning the daughter as a storyteller and creator of her own felicity became important to the women who participated in my study. “Virgie,” one said, “keeps herself no matter what.”

They spoke of Virgie with admiration and recalled several scenes at the Big Black River, often with surprisingly vivid detail. Amelia remembered, “And that moonlight swim where she gets absolution and finds herself still sticks with me—the rich symbolism of the river and the woods and that bright moon. Virgie embraces her desires and her sensuality. Virgie’s on this spiritual journey, just like we are, and like we were on in that class.”

Cassie and I had this conversation about Virgie’s impact.

Cassie: Gosh, my strongest reaction to what we read? *Golden Apples* pops out the most because it’s one of those that I still think about sometimes. I love Welty. But I think about Virgie at times, you know? Isn’t that weird? It’s like she’s a character that’s alive, a character who’s so alive to me—even when we read it, you know? It’s like her life still goes on somewhere. So I guess that’s the one I wrestled with the most—trying to figure out what she was trying to show us or tell us, you know? But it has, it’s stuck with me. And I think about her sometimes and just how daring it was just for Welty to write her, just to create her. Because you know those people existed, and they still do exist, but to not be afraid to show her was really fascinating to me.

Debra: Yeah, Virgie holds that kind of fascination for me, too. I still want to know where she is. I can picture her on that road to MacLain Courthouse. And I know she’s causing hell wherever she is!

Cassie: Absolutely! Being Southern made us different somehow, and my friends and I talked about that a lot, which makes me think about Virgie and how rebellious she is. I think Virgie’s my evil twin! [laughter]

Debra: That’s why we love her.

Welty (1983/1995) offered her own explanation of Virgie the rebel, noting, “She comes into her own in. . . ‘The Wanderers.’ Passionate, recalcitrant, stubbornly undefeated by failure or hurt or disgrace or bereavement, . . . she knows to the last that there is a world that remains out there, a world living and mysterious, and that she is of it” (p. 102). Welty (as cited in Brans, 1984) said that Virgie shows “an awareness of the spaciousness and the mystery of—really, of living” (p. 307). It is the spaciousness and mystery of living that I believe my participants explored, in part, through their reading and writing.

Virgie’s “serious daring” (Welty, 1983/1995, p. 104) inspired my participants and me because her acts of defiance are nothing less than acts of self-constitution. Welty has Virgie create herself in utter disregard for what anyone in the small town around her thinks. She tries to shield her mother somewhat, but does not let her daughterly duties render her untrue to herself and her own desires. In “The Wanderers,” Virgie lives with her stricken mother and cares for her, like a dutiful daughter, but she does not sacrifice her sense of self or surrender her desires.

Phoenix says this about the final story in *The Golden Apples* (Welty, 1949/1977):

Yeah, it’s so generous in “The Wanderers.” And I still think about those two kinds of people, wanderers and sojourners. And then you try to identify yourself: which one am I? You know, as I’m reading *Golden Apples*, I’m like, Well, am I Snowdie or Miss Eckert? Or Virgie or Cassie? Mother or daughter? Do I stay or go? Who am I? I think all of them are embodiments of who we can be.

Virgie became an embodiment of the daring daughter who crafts her own narrative. The women in my study still entertained questions of her fate, wondering how she recreates herself after she leaves the sheltered stile in autumn rain for a new road. As one woman said, “I just wonder where she is on the journey now.”

Resistance and Doubling

On the Porch

I just always felt like I had to keep my fire hidden. That was absolutely essential that it not show on the surface. My mother's all about appearances. –Lydia

But emphasis on appearance just feels stifling and unhealthy for women. –Debra

It is. I know that from my experiences with my mother. You know, she always said appearing proper, not fiery, was important. And I felt wrong about it. –Lydia

Like you're too feisty or something and that's bad? –Debra

Right, and a mother who wanted to do things right was actually doing things that were hurtful to me and limiting or confining and restricting. –Lydia

And then that sets you up because you're to believe that you should be meek and obedient and nice all the time, and when you're not, you're made to feel that it's a sign you've failed somehow? –Debra

Exactly! And you're going, What *is* that? I guess it's kind of rushing between two forces. There's a force of the world and people's cultural expectations and then there's the force of the spirit and the fire. And maybe that's what it is: when you go toward the spirit or fire, you get that good push and then, No! You run up against culture. And then if you go with that flow, you feel like you're going against the spirit. So it's just a constant battle. . . . I don't know if men experience that, but I feel it every day. I *always* feel that battle between what's within and what the culture thinks I should do. –Lydia

As my other participants troubled literary and cultural representations of mothers and daughters, they frequently voiced resistance to a duality they perceived in Southern culture and particularly among women: a disconnect between appearances and realities, between the outer and inner. Literary scholars often noted the “existence of a wide gap between the image of the “southern lady” and the reality of women’s day-to-day lives” (Scott, 1970/1995, p. 272). The problem of a duality emergent from this gap and present in the daily lives of contemporary women came up repeatedly in our interviews. Participants spoke frequently about a doubling of self that women in the South sometimes perform. And the women described this doubling most

often in relation to mothers and daughters. Sometimes the women deplored the duality they saw, and sometimes they deployed it.

The women commented on what they perceived as a cultural emphasis on appearance over substance and the conflict that the split between the two causes. Cassie described the tension inherent in this doubling: “I think there is a divide, even in the literature we saw, between the Southern woman’s self and her life outside of who she is, and I think that still exists. I think maybe we’re raised to worry about preserving appearances more. You know? I really do. Yeah, I think we’re raised to worry about it a whole lot more.” Rachel commented on another facet of preserving appearances, the need to read subtext:

There’s the public face and the private face. There’s what you say in public and what you say behind in gossiping. There’s the “bless her heart.” Every time I think about Southern, bless her heart comes to mind. And I say it all the time. [Laughter] Yeah, and if you come from up North, it’s much more direct if you’re insulting somebody. Here, if you’re insulting somebody, it won’t sound like an insult. But if you’re from the South, you’ll immediately know it’s an insult. You’re like, I can’t believe she just said that to her! And that’s what I think about when I think about Southern folk, women in particular: what’s the subtext? Because you have to read people here. If you’re only paying attention to what’s being said, you’re not going to get what’s really going on. And you have to be wittier than the average person. Other people want to think Southerners are dumb, but they have no idea what’s really going on until they’re down here for awhile.

As another woman observed, “So it’s like you’re not supposed to show your true feelings. Oh, no! And maybe that’s supposed to be for women in general, but it’s true here especially.” At brunch, Ashley commented in a similar vein,

What I liked, what I highlighted when reading *Fair and Tender Ladies* this time is that I think Smith puts things into words that are impossible to put into words. And when she's writing to Silvaney, she says, "I'm bursting with news but I can't tell a soul. I have no one to talk to. I feel like things are happening two times always. There's the thing that's happening which you can say and see, but there's another thing happening too inside and this is the most important thing, but it is so hard to say." I just feel like, especially in the South, there are things you can have on the surface and things that you can say and that are appropriate to discuss and then there's everything else that's going on.

Phoenix replied, "Yeah, the important stuff is what you can't say!" The women in my study used their practices with the texts to help them articulate that "important stuff" in relations with other women. They vigorously resisted being silenced about that which is significant, especially the female subject.

Another participant spoke at length about the distance between appearance and reality in her own life. Lydia said that her mother, a conservative Southern Baptist, secretly encouraged her daughter's "fire within," but outwardly advocated female compliance and conformity. She said that while she was always told as a girl to be obedient no matter what, the women in her family appeared subservient while actually being quite dominant in the household. "My mother," she explained, "is all about appearances. You've got to act like a Southern lady no matter what is really going on." Lydia described a silent complicity in female resistance that she and her mother and aunts and grandmother shared. The older women also formed a united front in pretending subservience. The women in Lydia's family, like many Southern women, felt compelled to shroud their power in the family with the appearance of domestic docility. As Foucault

(1978/1990) observed, “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power” (p. 101). The women Lydia described sheltered their considerable but secret power by projecting powerlessness.

This outward compliance seemed rooted in the region’s construct of the subservient Southern lady, a stereotype that writers like Smith (1988) and Welty (1949/1977) subvert. My participants used the models of Ivy Rowe and Virgie Rainey to test and resist the construct’s doubled manifestation in her own lives. As feminist scholars noted,

The dominant group in the male-female relationship rightly fears and suspects that the docility of the subordinate caste masks rebellious passions. . . . Women in a patriarchy have traditionally cultivated accents of acquiescence in order to gain freedom to live their lives on their own terms, if only in the privacy of their own thoughts. (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, p. 291)

This strategy seems to be the *modus operandi* of the Southern mothers some of my participants described: they outwardly masked their “rebellious passions” with “accents of acquiescence” while silently admiring the daughters’ resistance, even as they verbally condemned it.

Foucault (2004) argued that “to be able to examine your representations in this way, you must become [schooled]” (p. 141) in a place that might function as a “dispensary for the soul” (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 55). While I would never depict my university as a soul clinic, some women found in our class and the texts we read together a refuge for soul work or the construction of subjectivity. As they troubled representations and resisted the roles of belle and lady, I often witnessed “the disturbance of the saturation of identity in places, [which] may create an overflow that produces those tiny explosions of the self that refuse to repeat the same I—great, shattering revolutions, in fact” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 261). My participants’ reading and

writing often led to such personal revolt because their practices dispersed that kind of self-transformative power.

Rajchman (1985) reminded us that care of the self is “not the attempt to find an authenticity of self-experience in which to anchor one's choices, projects, or artistic work, but the attempt to constantly question the 'truth' of one's thought and oneself” (p. 124). Such continual questioning of “truths” and selves became a compelling project for these young white Southern women incited by transactions with texts to trouble stereotypical representations together, resisting the roles of sacrificial mothers and compliant daughters and the duality they may perpetuate. For the ancient Greeks, practicing care of the self was a communal project of crafting truthful elaborations of subjectivity. In fact, “rather than a narcissistic, fascinated, and delighted quest in pursuit of a lost truth of the self, the care of the self denotes the vigilant tension of the self taking care above all, not to lose control of its representations and be overcome” (Gros, 2004, p. 534). My participants engaged this “vigilant tension,” refusing to be overcome by repressive and reified representations of Southern women that rectify the duality they observed.

Reclaiming Female Power

Reading the queen.

On the Porch

That fire held within *is* important, very important. And I like to think of it as something wonderful, and in the end you feel positive about it when you don't usually feel good about the things that are held in—those feel wrong, painful. And maybe there's so much fire inside us that the world can't take it. And what happens if it's let out? What's going to happen if all that fire comes out? Because that's what I think of as fire—as Southern women, there's this fiery center hidden inside. I think of that fiery woman, of the grandma standing in the door or the woman in the rocking chair stringing the beans. -Lydia

What jumped out is the power Ivy has, the effect she has on people. And that she is this woman in what feels like a very masculine world, this farming world. But yet she has a kind of electricity or magic or power all to herself. -Deirdre

In this novel, I know where certain things happened. You know where those parts are—you've just got to read that part of the story, that image or that quote, and it's for the female power you see. – Lydia

It's so gorgeous and that final day when you were reading Ivy's last letter aloud, we were all just crying and sobbing. Oh, it makes me want to tear up now! And we were seniors, so we were leaving. And that last scene was so beautiful—her litany of the flowers, the planting, and the rebirth and the renewal. Ashes to ashes. . . . –Deirdre

To everything there is a season. And that's how I would envision a good death: all the loves and the poetry and the flowers and the snows of your life passing through your mind again in your last moments. –Debra

In the ethos of care of the self, “the need to be concerned about the self is linked to the exercise of power” (Foucault, 2004, p. 36). The Greeks, Foucault (2004) explained, understood “the extent to which the exercise of power involves hypocrisy” (p. 157). The exercise of power through hypocrisy often operates in the split between appearance and actuality that my participants described. The women expressed a desire for openly reclaiming their own power, averting hypocrisy, in enacting care of the self. They also talked at length about finding models of female power through fictional women like Ivy and Virgie in texts that could “call realities into being” (Peräkylä, 2005, p. 880).

Lydia offered an example of how she used Ivy as a guide for recognizing and claiming her own power. In the midst of “drama with a boy,” Lydia said that suddenly the novel's final line, “Oh, I was young then, and I walked in my body like a queen” (Smith, 1988, p. 316), reconnected her with a female power that she'd felt as a girl. She explained:

And then that last line came in my head. I guess maybe the idea of walking in your body like a queen—I don't know, growing up, that's a fantasy you think of. You read fairy tales, and you read the princess and the queen and you imagine growing up and having that kind of power. And you grow up and you feel like you had that power more when

you were younger. You know, you feel like you've lost it, like you've missed it somehow. So it's all somehow a reflection on that female power. And we're always moving towards that kind of queen state, and then we look back and feel like maybe it was back where we were.

The line Lydia quoted from memory seven years after first reading Smith's (1988) novel in our class evokes Ivy's dying thought. The image of walking in a youthful body like a queen still resonated with participants, two more of whom also quoted the line from memory in their interviews. Rachel said she wants it carved on her tombstone. Kellie explained that reading the line "just made [her] feel what's possible." And Amelia said, "It's like a powerful opening of some sort, isn't it?" Phoenix said she thought of it at moments when she needed to conjure up strength.

I think the women read into this part of Smith's text an evocation of feminine power, which is often masked in the South. My participants described mothers and aunts and grandmothers masking their assertiveness, indicating subordination in power relations, particularly in the domestic sphere. Ivy's final line proclaims female power directly, an act the readers in my study savored. Probst (1992) claimed that "the [novel] is the experience of a particular reader performing with a particular text" (p. 56). With Smith's (1988) novel and especially with its concluding image, these particular readers in this particular place performed what they celebrated as an act of power worthy of a queen.

Willful women, wayward wives. In ancient Greek practices of the self, female power was specifically excluded, but in my application of the ethic exclusively to women, power relations offer transformative potential. Questions of female power came up over and over again in my research—in the literature and in the women's practices. My participants said that reading

Southern women like Ivy and Virgie empowered them. As one participant explained, “I feel that after reading it, you almost take some of Ivy’s strength, or it’s given to you or something.”

Deirdre put it like this: “Ivy’s a being that’s already full of magic and full of power and then realizes it, especially in writing. I just love how empowered she is. She’s this singular power in a world of men.”

While Ivy writes as an act of ongoing self-formation, she and Virgie both find power and fulfillment in a way that intrigued my participants: by embracing their sexuality. In Ivy’s case, she takes on yet another role, that of wayward wife functioning in opposition to the sacrificial mother. Virgie never marries but enjoys an active sexual life from the time when she is a teenager playing the piano at the movie theatre until the time when she dismantles her mother’s house and begins her journey anew, leaving a trail of lovers behind.

In individual interviews and at our brunch, one passage of *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) garnered more attention and generated the most intense dialogue of everything we discussed: the moment when Ivy Rowe walks away from her husband and children to follow an enigmatic lover up the mountain she has lived on all her life but never climbed. As she is struggling with too many children and feeling isolated within her marriage, a magnetic man appears and lures Ivy away. The women I talked with were fascinated with this part of the novel, particularly rereading the book now as young married women. One said, “When I read this the first time, I was like, How could you? But now I so get it—she *had* to go. She had to go get herself back.” Another said, “I was like, yeah—go!” One woman, to the surprise of the others, explained that she skipped this section of the book, saying “I hate it when Ivy does that. It’s too human, and I just can’t forgive her that, so I don’t read it.” Ashley said, “I had to get over the

fact that she was cheating on Oakley, whom I just love, but I see why she had to do it. She would've lost herself forever if she hadn't gone."

As Ivy and Honey climb to the top of Blue Star Mountain, she tells him stories—of her life, family, and the folktales she grew up on. All the stories that had been pent up and silenced came rushing out. She explained, "I am starved for stories" (Smith, 1988, p. 226). He tells her stories, too, and they quote poems for each other and recite long ballads. While they have passionate sex, their love-making seems to have more to do with desire for storytelling. The women at brunch had the following exchange about this episode in the novel.

Kellie: I think he's just the one who pulled her up because a few letters before that, she says she feels like something's going to happen. She's feeling restless and she's pacing at night, and then when she's with him, they talk about stories and poetry, right? And all those things. I mean, sex is part of it, certainly, but I think it could've been a woman who she wasn't sexual with who she went up there with, you know?

Zelda: Right, it's about the stories.

Rachel: Yeah, he's incidental, if that makes any sense. It's about getting her power back through the stories that sustain her. And they have crazy sex, too!

Mary: And stories are an indulgence for a woman in her position, so she's punished for it with the death of a child. I just had to skip that part this time.

Kellie: After it happened, she says, It's like I made him up myself. He is me, and all that.

Phoenix: Right, she invented him because she needed him, just like she needed stories when she was a girl, so Honey embodies that magical figure of Whitebear

Whittington. He's that image of love with a capital L that she idealized as a child.

Zelda: But now she knows it's idealized for a reason—it can't really exist.

Rachel: Honey makes her remember that part of herself that she'd lost. Ivy's back in her power, and if she wanted to climb to the top of the mountain without a man, she would. I believe that: she's able to climb it by herself anytime, if she wants or needs to. He's just the vehicle. He himself is incidental.

Ivy, the willful, wayward wife walks away from the roles that are killing her and climbs toward renewal. She reclaims her power through her sexuality and the stories that had sustained her and been lost to her. She renounces the silence that had robbed her of the power and voice necessary to narrate her own life. After the interlude on the mountain, where she spends weeks making love and telling stories with Honey, Ivy goes back home and resumes her life, unbent, convinced that what she did was inevitable and necessary.

When one class wrote author Lee Smith a letter asking her, among other things, about Ivy's relationship with her lover, Smith wrote back and explained, "Nobody was more surprised than I was when Ivy went off with Honey! But I knew a woman who did that once, just walked away from everything for awhile, and she swore it saved her marriage. When she came back, they just picked up where they left off and went on" (Personal communication, December 2, 2002). Zelda said of Ivy's choice, "When I read that the first time, I was like, What? She's off on a mountain with some strange dude without her kids? But now that I've had a kid, I get it! If you've been married or lived with somebody or had a child, you know that it's day to day to day. I'm like, Ivy, I feel your pain! I would go, too, if I could get myself back again."

Another participant observed that Ivy's sexual liberation was very important to her personally, explaining that she was reading the book when confronting her own sexuality. She said,

Ivy really inspired me when I was making decisions about coming out, even though she's straight, because she owned her sexuality. You know, she acted on her desires and embraced them. She was unashamed. That helped give me the courage to embrace my desires, too. Her story and her being an openly sexual creature was just pivotal to me during that time of uncertainty and wrestling with my own sense of identity. She gave me courage.

For this participant, the link between sexuality, honesty, and power became tangible through Ivy's experience and contributed to her own ability to care for the self in a way that felt authentic. She explained, "Ivy helped me be true to myself."

Passing the Word

In care of the self, one is obligated to serve the other, in part, through discussions of instructive texts (Foucault, 2004). In conversations, the ancient Greeks and later the Romans repeated wisdom gathered from texts, and in letters they related advice collected from reading and recollected through the notes taken on readings. The women in my study also enriched and enlarged their circle of relations and extended their textual practices by passing the books they came to love along, usually to other women. I experience something unique with the Southern literature class that rarely occurs with other courses: former students often tell me stories about continuing their engagement with the books by sharing them with women in their lives. Lydia said, "I just had to give *Fair and Tender Ladies* to my mother, so now we have this whole new shared experience that we can talk about." Deirdre described a similar experience: "I gave *Fair*

and Tender Ladies to my mother and said, You've got to read this! So she's now a Lee Smith fanatic and has everything. And she just consumes it, and I went, Ha! See! We can now have this connection—through literature. You know, you share a book and you both just love it, so it opens something up.”

Several women talked of sharing Smith's (1988) novel with their mothers. I had a lovely experience at a wedding when a participant's mother approached me, saying she wanted to thank me for Lee Smith. Her daughter had sent *Fair and Tender Ladies* home for her to read, and, enamored, the mother then bought, read, and loved all of Smith's novels. As the participant said, “It's so cool. We now have this whole other language we share because of that book and Ivy Rowe's journey.”

A number of women in the study said they gave Welty's (1949/1977) *The Golden Apples* to other women, sisters and friends usually. One woman even said she had ended a romantic relationship, knowing it was “doomed” when the lover couldn't “get into *The Golden Apples*. That just said it all. No point in even trying after that!” This book, like *Fair and Tender Ladies*, became a touchstone for our classes. In an interview, Amelia told me this story:

I gave *Golden Apples* to my sister and said, You just *have* to read this and call me as soon as you finish it! And she loved it, and we still talk about it. It's like book nerd talk! And we get so excited about it, especially about the stuff Virgie does because she's on a sacred journey, too, and she helps us along the path. I still think about her when I'm scared of making hard choices. And then my sister also gave the book to her sister-in-law and she loved it, too, so it just keeps going.

In caring for themselves and those they loved, these women created new texture and resonance in their relationships through “a whole other language” of shared texts.

Teaching texts. My participants shared the texts under discussion with each other and with women in their lives, but some of them passed those books along in another dynamic relationship, the one between teacher and student. Because several of the women in my study became teachers of literature, it is not surprising that they talked of their teaching practices in individual interviews and at our brunch. They spoke passionately about their desire to teach texts they had read in our class, sometimes treating this as a duty. I offer here some of the lively brunch conversation that transpired on their art of teaching the texts.

On the Porch

And I'm going to expose them to Faulkner, whether they like it or not! -Phoenix

The class certainly impacted me as an adult in my choices as a teacher. -Mary

In our Southern lit class we controlled the conversation, and I try to mimic that as much as I can in my own classroom because they must be tired of my voice, you know? -Kellie

I think that Eudora Welty had such an impact on me that I felt almost obligated to pass the education that I got on to my students, so I'm definitely working her into my American lit class. I just feel that American lit can't be complete without Southern lit. -Phoenix

Well, where in the world would we be without Faulkner and Welty? -Debra

Unfortunately, there's not a distinct section on it as opposed to chronological order, but I feel there should be because that's who we are and that's who my students can relate to. And I feel that in my class there has to be a separate section for where we are right now. What came from where we are now? So I feel that in passing along the texts to 120 students, I guess I am doing that. -Phoenix

Almost all of the novels and plays I teach in American Lit are Southern because I think that'll grasp the students' interest and because I think it'll give them a better awareness of where they're living since most of them moved here from up north, and of the history of where they're living and where it came from. -Mary

My tenth graders do research papers and often choose O'Connor because they'd much rather read her than "Gift of the Magi" or something. So they're always sort of fascinated by her and the grotesque nature of her stuff. But it's hard to tell what they think about the South because most of my students are not Southern -Kellie

I do a Southern lit unit with my high school class because I think it's so important that they know the literature that comes from the region in which they live, and seeing their reaction to that is shows how important literature from this area can be to them if they're introduced to it. And their reactions to the stories are just really eye-opening, and they have such brilliant things to say about it because these are things they can identify with, the funerals and the food, the small things that they can pick up on and identify with helps them understand these larger ideas that are being projected in these stories. I just really found that, as we talk about books becoming part of our identity, I see that more in them. And I guess I can try and find it through myself, but it's easier to see in somebody else. –Phoenix

So they seem to react more immediately or intensely to these Southern texts? -Debra

Yeah, they want to relate their own stories and they'll do that, too. We were reading "A Rose for Emily," and her father had died and the women came with the food, and she didn't want anything to do with them. And the students were like, I remember when my mama did so and so, or she made this and we did this, and it just spurred all these other stories of theirs, which I thought was really interesting. –Phoenix

Are many or most of the kids you teach Southerners? -Debra

Most of them. And we do this thing on the history of the South very briefly and the moonlight and magnolias idea of it and how it isn't really true. And how there's an ugliness to it as well, and they really pick up on that. And I ask them, Do you identify with any of these things and would you identify with religion or place or this sense of self or things like that? Some said, No, I'm from the North! And I'm like, So family isn't important to you because you're from the North? [laughter] And so, yes, they do realize that they all have some of these Southern qualities even if they're not from here; they have been important to them before, or they've adopted them. So I so think they identify themselves as Southerners at the end of the unit. –Phoenix

And it definitely makes a difference having an all-woman group like we did, and being a teacher in a co-ed classroom, you get to see that difference, and especially having both my undergrad and graduate work at [two] women's colleges, it really is a stark contrast. Here, you notice female characters more and you feel the freedom to talk about female characters for the whole class period if you want to and look at the different layers of what it means to be female. And Southern women put yet another layer on it. It's more specific. But in a co-ed classroom, I don't think you can spend the same amount of time delving into female characters. Of course, I wouldn't want to spend that amount of time delving into male characters, so I can see why boys in my class would be frustrated. But it's just a whole different dynamic. –Kellie

Yeah, in an all-woman group, we were able to focus on gender and, I don't know, I think with guys it would've veered more toward the Civil War and battles—you know, always about the Battle of Blank. [laughter] –Zelda

I teach in a co-ed high school, and all the boys were called out of one class one day for a mandatory workshop, and our discussion just totally changed. It was Romantic poetry, and the girls felt so free to talk about how they felt in a way they never would've if the boys had been

there. With an all-female group, everything changes immediately, whether it's on the porch or in a cinder block class room. –Kellie

As reading, writing, and relations with each other have served as arts of existence for these Southern women, some of them extend their practices into their arts of teaching.

Participants who became teachers of English or language arts remained passionate about teaching Southern texts and saw their work as a means of helping their students employ texts to constitute the self, too.

Hearing the women speak of teaching the texts, I recalled Showalter's (2006) comments that we should interrogate a vocation to teach literature, asking, "Why am I doing this with my life? Does it matter? Do I deserve to be doing it? What have I really been teaching? What have I really been learning?" (p. 4). I believe the teachers I interviewed explored "these fundamental questions of identity and purpose [that] are at the heart of literature as well" (p. 4). And they affirmed that my own practice matters in some way.

Writing as a Practice of the Self

On the Porch

I'm rereading the book and making notes, and Ivy's writing her letters to make sense of everything, and I thought, Oh my gosh—that's me right now in these moments writing down notes in this little notebook! What I wrote down is memory and identity. And it's about identity tied to memories. –Deirdre

I reread that part of the book and just wrote and wrote until all the margins were full. –Ashley

Now I think about my writing differently, too, with these pieces of our existence that I just never thought were interesting enough to write about. I feel less isolated now because I know other people will relate to it, you know? –Cassie

I think we wanted to write *real* things that said something *real* about us and not be afraid to say it's distinctly Southern. –Deirdre

In the ancient ethic of caring for the self, reading and writing were virtually inseparable, and both were essential practices. In fact, Greeks urged that the two not be separated (Foucault, 1984/1997). Writing became an act of self-creation and an art for turning truth or knowledge into ethical behaviors and attitudes. Foucault (2004) pointed out that the “obligation to write, the advice to write, is continually in the precepts of existence and the rules of the practice of the self” (p. 359). Care of the self originally focused primarily on three kinds of writing: epistolary, administrative review, and a recollection of the “already said” through notes (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 212). In notebooks, or *hypomnēmata*, the Greeks made notes on texts and conversations, reassembling words read and heard and spoken, in the pursuit of personal truths. Employing writing as a self-constituting technology became a central practice in care of the self because, as Foucault (2004) observed, “simply by writing we absorb the thing itself we are thinking about. We help it to be established in the soul” (p. 359).

Foucault (2004) explained that writing as a practice of the self involved taking “notes on the reading, conversation, and reflections that one hears or engages in oneself, [and] keeping. . . notebooks on important subjects. . . which must be reread from to time so as to reactualize their contents” (p. 500). Such writing was “used for the constitution of a permanent relationship to oneself” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 363). In this art of the self, writing can “invent forms of experience other than the ones previously prescribed. . . . The problem of writing becomes the aesthetics of self invention” (Rajchman, 1985, p. 37). In their writing, reading, and relations, the women in my study, like the Greeks, cultivated relations with self and elaborated their subjectivities.

For the ancients, writing in notebooks was part of daily practice, as was writing letters in which one relayed advice to a friend, often by reviewing one’s own conduct. In letters, one

helped the other as well as the self. Letters could administratively review one's actions and convey wisdom to another. Foucault (2004) wrote extensively about epistolary practices among the Greco-Romans, examining letters written by Seneca and Aurelius, among others, in which they meditated upon their own experience while simultaneously instructing and advising their recipients.

Foucault (2004) described Greek and Roman practices of making notes on texts, and I extend this idea to making notes *in* texts in the practice of writing marginalia. While Foucault (1984/1991a) did not explicitly describe how the ancients used marginalia as a practice of the self, he did explain that an author's notes in the margins of her own text were part of the text, not outside it. A reader's notes in or on another's texts became part of the text, too, as a way for her to assimilate another's ideas and add to them. In the writing and rereading of those notes, the reader/writer entered and transformed the original text. Through marginalia, the women in my study wrote their way through another's text.

In the discussion that follows, I consider how these young Southern women used the writing of metaphorical *hypomnēmata*, epistolary fiction, a creative thesis, journalism, and marginalia as practices of the self. In such writing, these women performed a doubled action as they constituted themselves and explored how they were being constituted. They wrote their way into new ways of being and modes of knowing.

While some of the participants' texts that I collected for this research were written to comply with course assignments, much of the women's work transcended that requirement and became writing for and about the self. I argue that these participants used their writing about Southern women's literature in a way analogous to the Greeks' use of the reflexive *hypomnēmata*, and their epistolary practices reflected those of the ancients in that fictional letters

were written partly as a way to know and construct the self. Writing in notebooks, letters, and margins became a vital part of existence and remained a self-formative practice for the women in my study, for, as Foucault (1984/1997) explained, “It is one’s soul that must be constituted in what one writes” (p. 214).

Hypomnēmata

As part of their daily practice to care for the self, the Greeks kept *hypomnēmata*, a kind of notebook that “constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 364). These notes were not intended merely to record thoughts, events, and so forth but had a much loftier goal: the self-examination and continual reconstitution of the self as an ethical subject. As Foucault (1984/1997) noted, “In the *hypomnēmata*, it was a matter of constituting oneself as the subject of rational action through the appropriation, the unification, and the subjectivation of a fragmentary and selected already-said” (p. 221). Foucault (1983/1991) explained that in this act of writing,

The point is not to pursue the indescribable, not to reveal the hidden, not to say the nonsaid, but, on the contrary, to collect the already-said, to reassemble that which one could hear or read, and this to an end which is nothing less than the constitution of oneself. (p. 365)

In fact, “[The subject] is constituted in real practices—historically analyzable practices. . . . [But] techniques of the self...are often invisible techniques” (Foucault, 1983/1991, p. 369). Writing offers a literal way to render these invisible techniques—and the selves they constitute—visible.

In care of the self, “the exercise of reading, writing, and rereading what you had written and the notes you had taken was an almost physical exercise of the assimilation of the truth and

the logos you were holding on to” (Foucault, 2004, p. 360). Accordingly, in care of the self, we write our way into ourselves and the truths that guide us. By writing, we inscribe truths into the ethical subject. In other words, “as an element of self-training, writing. . . [becomes] an agent of the transformation of truth into *ethos*” (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 209). Writing becomes a transformative practice that helps the writer examine herself and craft new ways of being in the world. For the women in this study, writing was both a way to interpret literature and to interpret their personal and collective histories—and perhaps to construct their futures—in newly possible ways. In writing about texts by or about Southern women and creating their own imaginative texts, the women in my study often found the freedom to “invent forms of experience other than the ones previously prescribed” (Rajchman, 1985, p. 37).

As the Greeks used textual practices like the *hypomnēmata* and their notes on books as daily guides for living, the women in my study also used texts and their writing about them for guidance in their lives. During the interviews, I was surprised and intrigued when three women independently and without knowing of the others’ responses excitedly quoted the same passage in Smith’s (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*, a section I didn’t remember our focusing on much in class discussion. [The passage appears in the data below.] They talked of having written extensively in response to the passage in the margins of their books and in notebooks and journals. The women used the passage as a guide for life, writing about it years after first reading the novel for our course. Rachel and Deirdre talked animatedly about the passage in second interviews, as Ashley did at our brunch, to the delight of the women at the table who affirmed her observations.

Discussing her rereading of the novel for our gathering, Ashley remembered earlier rereadings and the writing they elicited:

Oh, I highlighted this part again, my favorite. In my first year of law school, I was going through this hard time, and my boyfriend and I had broken up for the last time, and it was near exams, and I was like, I *need* this certain quote in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and I went and found the book and wrote and wrote about it in my journal. And all through law school, I would go back and read it over again. And it's on page 193 when Ivy writes, "I said to myself this is your life, your real life, and you are living it. Your life is not going to start later. This is it, it is now. It's funny how a person can be so busy they forget this is it. This is my life."

When Ashley read this part aloud, several women around the table replied by spontaneously quoting in unison one of the book's refrains, "Slow down, slow down now, Ivy. This is the taste of spring" (Smith, 1988, p. 82). I sat, amazed, as they chanted the lines together from memory.

Rachel also talked passionately in a follow-up interview about rereading and marking up the margins in this passage of the novel that spoke so powerfully to Ashley and Deirdre, saying, "I folded the page down even more on this reading!" She explained,

So I think I got a lot of things out of it on rereading it again, and what I wrote about is it's mostly that feeling of, *this* is my life now. And it was inspirational because you have to find something in your life to latch onto to make it significant and not lose yourself like Ivy does when she's having all those babies. Honestly, I was reading this book and reading that passage about forgetting that this is your one life, and I was like, This is *my* life *right* now!"

Deirdre also brought up this passage in a follow-up interview and described how she was inspired to write about its relevance to her life now. She kept a notebook, her *hypomnēmata*,

during her rereading of Smith's novel and brought it with her to our second interview, quoting from it as we talked. She said,

And the very last thing I wrote down is, "This is so true for me in life right now—so, so, so true!" On page 202, she says, "Ivy, this is your life! This is your real life now." And you get so busy you forget your real life. And I needed to reread this right now in life to hear her say that as I'm so busy with the PhD and teaching and theatre, but *this* is life. It isn't in five years. All grad students need this written down! [laughter] It's so powerful. And I just wrote and wrote about that in my little notebook. I really needed it right now!

Deirdre, Ashley, and Rachel used the moment when Ivy begins to reclaim her sense of self to help them actualize their own lives and live mindfully in the present. In this mindfulness, the women found a way to constitute themselves as they wished to be in the moment, writing that self into being. In making and rereading their notes, they "reactualized" (Foucault, 2004, p. 500) the wisdom of the text and transformed it into personal truth. In this case, my participants were caring for the self through the experience of a fictional woman who seeks to create herself as herself and not just as a mother. Ivy, like my participants, acts as an artisan of the self by employing writing as an art of existence. She writes herself into being through her letters.

Rereading these parts of the novel and annotating them reminded Rachel of how she kept a journal for many years, using writing to put experience into perspective like the protagonist does. She said,

Ivy needed the stories, and it's the act of telling of them, and she says on 314 about her letters, "It was the writing of them, that signified." And rereading this, I remembered how I used to keep a faithful journal, and I have all my old ones, started when I was seven or eight, and I was really faithful until after I graduated college, and I haven't had a journal

now in five years, and this makes me think, Man, I should really take up journal writing again. And I'm going to do it—that really helped me a lot...in seeing how some stuff I worried about was ridiculous.

Rachel, like Ivy, felt the need to write as a guide for living. Smith (2006) said she was “writing for [her] life” when she crafted Ivy’s experience of writing for her life. The women in my study understood the potency of writing as a self-constituting strategy and integrated its possibilities into their own lives.

Deirdre, too, spoke of the power of keeping a journal, having just been given boxes of her childhood journals, in which she was meeting the girl who had answered to her name back then (Price, 1990). Deirdre, Rachel, and Ashley used these particular passages in Smith’s (1988) novel as a guide for how to live their lives in the present—and in some future when they might become wives and mothers—and found insight into how to construct a thoughtful and meaningful existence. And it is significant that the passage to which they referred deals with Ivy’s loss of self while mothering a large brood of children. As one participant put it, “It’s helping me think about how to keep enough of yourself when you’re loving all those other people.” Their practice of reading and writing in notebooks and journals and margins helped the women envision how a subject might be constituted—and offered a technology for enacting, or perhaps saving, a self.

Marginalia as a Practice of the Self

Writing, Foucault (1997) argued, should not be separated from reading: he reminded us of Seneca’s edict that “reading and writing must not be dissociated; one ought to have ‘alternate recourse’ to these two pursuits and ‘blend one with the other’” (p. 211). Nowhere do reading and writing blend more inseparably than in marginalia, as reader becomes writer and literally enters

another's text. For this reason, I extend discussion of the ancient practice of writing about readings and taking notes *on* texts to writing notes *in* texts. In addition to keeping *hypomnēmata*, the women in my study also wrote marginalia as a vital practice of the self. Writing in the margins of a text blurs the boundaries between reader and writer, further fracturing the distance between reader as self and text as other.

Participants spoke animatedly about rediscovering their margin notes as they reread *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) for our book club brunch. Some of their old annotations pleased them, and some puzzled or embarrassed them. Most said that in their rereading they focused and wrote more marginalia on the sections dealing with Ivy's marriage and motherhood because they were especially interested in seeing through texts how to become mothers and simultaneously maintain relations with self. As Jackson (2001) observed, "Marginalia can be used to construct and to *monitor* identity" (p. 91). These young women wrote in the margins of Smith's novel, in part, to monitor an identity they wished to avoid: self-sacrificial mother. Here, marginalia became a way for these young women to subvert a future identity.

In their practice of marginalia, my participants wrote both to constitute their subjectivities and to monitor the selves they feared becoming, so it served as a kind of administrative review of the development of their thought and the growth of their character while helping them avoid dangerous pitfalls. Rachel commented on meeting herself in the margin:

There's another passage I wrote all over—it's when Ivy's writing Silvaney and she was like, Remember when I used to be so smart? And sometimes I feel like that 'cause I feel very, I don't know, like there's not as much stimulation, and even though I'm in school to be a teacher, it's not nearly the same as reading Southern lit for our class. It's on page 244 where she says, "Well, I am not that smart now! It has all got beyond me somehow."

You can lose your sense of self and it's kind of how I feel. Yeah, it reminds me of that feeling of, What am I now? So when I read that passage, I was like, Oh! That's how I feel right now! You know? I need to write more about it.

Her latest transaction with the text called Rachel to write, and her marginalia gave her a way to review and interpret her own experience through Ivy's.

Many participants talked about their marginalia when they spoke about rereading texts, commenting on sometimes surprising encounters with former selves in the margins. Some talked of laughing at themselves and ideas they saw as superficial or obvious when they viewed them scribbled in the margins of their books in handwriting now outgrown. Phoenix wondered, "What in the world was I thinking there with that margin note? Duh!" Sometimes the women ran across their old marginalia and felt proud of their insights or enjoyed seeing what they thought when they were younger, even if they didn't see things in the same way anymore. One woman said, "I read my margin notes and thought, Hey, I *was* pretty smart!" Another said, "Sometimes I'd think, What were you talking about or why did you fold that page down? Why did I think it was significant then when it doesn't seem significant now?"

Here, these young women mapped the ongoing construction of their subjectivity, examining past selves, comparing them with present selves, and recreating themselves anew with each reading and the writing it evoked. In the margins, they were in dialogue not only with the authors of the books they read but with other versions of themselves as authors of their own texts. Participants wrote and reread their marginalia partly to review and reconstruct their own thinking, to monitor their growth, and to prepare for the future. In this, they enacted their writing practice within the text in a spirit similar to the Greeks' and Romans' assiduous note-taking on texts meant as guides for living.

Epistolary Writing as a Practice of the Self

On the Porch

Those creative pieces spoke volumes about what people learned and what they thought. –Rachel

The creative writing was terrifying because we were so scared to *go there*, and it's so emotional. But it was fantastic to say, Okay, now, creatively express this journey we've had together. And when we had that reading of our own work, it was like a therapy session. And we just read and we cried because we knew each other in a much deeper way. And that group of women was so amazing. –Deirdre

I think that's what was so great about the creative pieces we wrote in there, to take a chance and put down what you'd *really* wanted to talk about for so long. –Cassie

Ivy's letters are really her way to keep alive these memories and to stay connected and to make sense of things. It's just the unpredictability of memory. She says, I want to tell you how it was before I forget it. I've got to write it down. And all that about memory made me think about our class, the memory of what it means to be Southern, and being out of the South how I think about the South. It is unpredictable—it is a created memory. And what is it about brain science? Every time we recall a memory, it's reconformed. We are always rewriting as we remember. –Deirdre

There is no reading of a work which is not also a “re-writing.” -Eagleton, 1983, p. 12

Epistolary practices were vital to both the ancient Greeks and later the Romans in caring for self and other. Foucault (2004) described “a very interesting cultural and social phenomenon of the period. . . , a spiritual correspondence—a correspondence of the soul from the subject to subject whose end is not so much giving news about the political world. . . as giving news about ourselves, in inquiring what was happening in the other's side” (pp. 360-361). Writing letters served multiple purposes, often articulating advice for dealing with life and death. In fact, “there is a triple use of the same text” (p. 362) when the writer instructs the recipient, memorizes her own advice, and helps prepare both persons for the day when they “suffer a misfortune, so [they] will have. . . ready to hand, the apparatus of truth which will allow [them] to struggle against this or a similar misfortune, when it arrives” (p. 361). In addition to helping guide and prepare the

reader for life's trials, the writer "performs an exercise. . . which enables [her], through [her] correspondence, to maintain [herself] in a constant state of self-guidance" (p. 361).

Foucault (1984/1988) explained that letter writing "reveals the state of one's soul, solicits advice, [and] gives advice to anyone who needs it." (p. 51). So letters become soul work for both writer and reader, offering a reciprocal way to conduct self-examination and construct meaning and memory. Smith's (1988) Ivy Rowe articulates the significance of her epistolary practice, saying, "Sometimes I despair of ever understanding anything right when it happens to me, it seems like I have to tell it in a letter to see what it was, even though I was right there all along!" (p.181). Writing accounts of herself and shaping her memory of events and stories in letters helps Ivy both to care for herself and to endure loss and deprivation with grace. As Foucault (1984/1997) explained, "In the case of the epistolary account of oneself, it was a matter of bringing into congruence the gaze of the other and that gaze which one aims at oneself when one measures one's everyday actions according to the rules of a technique of living" (p. 221).

Some women in my study also practiced a form of epistolary writing as a technique of living. For a class assignment, they wrote creative responses to literary texts. Several women were inspired by Ivy's lifetime of letters and wrote fictional letters between characters in books, between characters they invented, and some wrote letters to lost loved ones in their own lives. While participants did not write actual letters to acquaintances or colleagues, as the ancients did in caring for the self, they did craft epistles as practices of self, as a way to explain self to self and self to other, to account for the subjects they were constructing, and perhaps as a meditation on death. The results were often poetical and moving. In fact, I was at times astonished by the power and profundity of their work.

In the epistolary congruity of the gaze, Ivy and the women who read her deployed letters to create truths fashioned of their experience and to help keep that wisdom “ready to hand” (Foucault, 2004, p. 361). As Ivy explained, “Because I have written this letter to you, [what happened] is real now” (Smith, 1988, p. 275). The act of writing can create the reality, construct the memory, and recollect the knowledge already known. The letter serves as the writer’s “apparatus of truth which will allow [her] to struggle against...misfortune, when it arrives” (Foucault, 2004, p. 361). For Ivy and my participants, the letter functions as an apparatus of truth that arms the writer, and perhaps the reader, for the struggle to craft life as a work of art.

Lydia, who called *Fair and Tender Ladies* “the best book [she] ever read,” chose for her creative project to write a letter from Ivy Rowe to Denver in Morrison’s (1991) *Beloved*. Denver, daughter of the escaped slave, Sethe, becomes marginalized in her own home as the ghost of her baby sister takes over her mother’s life. In an incident Morrison based on a real woman’s experience, Sethe killed her youngest child to save her from slavery. When the child’s ghost returns to claim her mother’s love, Denver becomes lonely and isolated. Ivy also feels isolated within her large family, and readers meet both girls at a similar age. When Lydia proposed her idea for a letter between the two girls, I was not sure how much common ground she could find between the poor white girl from the rural mountains and the poor black girl born in slavery. However, Lydia did capture something of the young Ivy’s voice and experience. The class chose her piece to conclude their book of collected essays, *The Search for Southern Identity: A Journey of Self-Realization and Discovery*, giving it an honored position in their text. The piece was later selected for the college’s literary magazine.

Lydia was proud of her work and volunteered during our first interview to read it for the tape recorder, and in our second interview, she did. In the letter, Lydia mimicked Ivy’s dialect

and childish spelling and paralleled the structure of a letter Ivy writes to a Dutch girl she wants for a pen pal. In our second interview, Lydia sat in the corner of my sunny office surrounded by books, rocking in my grandfather's chair, and read proudly, sounding like she could have been that little impoverished Appalachian girl. I offer Lydia's epistle from Ivy to Denver in its entirety, from the liminal space of the porch.

On the Porch

Inspired by *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *Beloved*

My Dearest Denver,

I can tell you that I am truly excited to have a real-life Pen Friend like you now. The onliest one I have ever had was my Hanneke who is from Holland where there is wooden shoes and lace caps and where there is wind-meels—do you know it? They is really a place like this, I have heerd, but I do not want to travel there any longer as for Hanneke was not nice atall and did not return my letters because she is the Ice Queen. I hated her and I thought I would never have a Pen Friend, or any friend atall, but then you come along and send me a letter.

What is it like there in this little town of yourn? Ohio sounds to be much different than hereabouts. I have heard of your kind, and many people up here do not have nice things to say. I do not see what is so bad atall, you tell stories like the rest of us. But I do not know anything much about your people and I think I would like to know. I do not mind that you have dark skin, though it seems very strange. But I think you must be a princess wherever you did come from. Do you have a mountain to keep and hold? Daddy when he was alive, he said to us he needs a mountain to rest his eyes aginst. I think he is right. Daddy he died on us in the spring wich he loved the most. What is it you mean by you do not know where your Daddy exactly is? If he is still alive, then what has made him run off? My Daddy when he was alive, he would sit around and tell us stories. I know lots of stories, I can tell as many as you like. I like to hear your stories, too, like yours about your Momma running off from being slaved and you being borned on the riverside in the middle of bluefern and Miss Amy Denver of Boston who saved your Mommas life. I would like very much to be named after someone, and to also find myself some velvet as well as Miss Amy Denver of Boston. I closed my eyes after I read that part and fancied myself touching the soft cloth, back and forth back and forth, and I saw myself in a blue velvet dress, dancing around the porch at night. I would very much like to do that.

I did not never hear of no one who had a real hanted house to live in—but it sounds mighty scary to have things such as air turn sour, indoor winds, slaps, chairs that fly, and dogs turn wild and be swept aflight. I do not know what to make of this and I will say that I have wondered if you are only telling another good story, but I do like it. I think I might be afearred of any ghosts in my house disturbing the peace, but somehow I do want to see this one. This baby ghost you tell me about makes me think of my sister Silvaney, who is not younger, but she is often away there in her thoughts and sometimes is very strange. I can see how you are attached to this ghost however strange—it is good to have a friend, and you are on your lonesome like I am often here. I have many brothers and sisters but I always feel so behind—like I have

fashioned my very own window to look out of but no one can look in on me. I think you might feel about the same. Most of my brothers have run off, too. Not because of no ghost, but they have run wild away, and we haven't heard from them in a long time. The only ghost we have around here is Whitebear Whittington who is a bear by day and a man at night. He is told as in a story with a girl and her Daddy and some white white roses and she says, Three drops of blood I've shed for thee, three little babes I've borned for thee. This is my favorite story but I swear Denver, that it is real, for I have seed Whitebear in the woods with the three drops of blood on his back.

This makes me think of your Momma and the tree she has drawn into her back. It seems like such a frightful thing to carry such blossoms and leafy branches, it seems like this tree would be too heavy to bear. Your Momma must be tired like my Momma is. My Momma has no tree on her back, but sometimes she stands out in the cold and just stares. She misses Daddy, and I think your Momma must miss your Daddy, too. I think that Mommas go wild and strange when their loves leave. The separation is too much to bear, I guess. I will fall in love one day, and I will write about it. It will be Love just as big as my Momma and Daddy's love.

I am mad to hear that this man Paul D would come into your house and scare off your baby sister's ghost, your only friend. Who does he think he is to come in and steal away your Momma and ghost friend like this? I think he must be from Holland. I will write him a hateful letter too if you ask me to. I think you are right about the moving dress that sits next to your Momma when she kneels to pray to God. It must truly mean that your dead sister wants to come back home. This is a scary thought, but I know that you are alone. If Silvaney ever left me, I would want her to come back too. And we can always be friends, you and me. We will take our sisters and they will be sisters too. And we will all be sisters, living up here on this still mountain where the moon rises and watches out for us at night, and the spring tastes like gold. You will like it here. I hope that you will write back soon. I am hungry for stories.

Your new best friend, Ivy Rowe

-Lydia

Lydia's fictional letter reflected her own love of storytelling as a way of creating the self: She said, "It's how I connect—I have to tell a story." Lydia explained,

I really identify with Ivy's need to tell her stories because I'm a big storyteller. I love to tell stories. And people tease me about it sometimes because I have to present *everything* like it has to have an effect, and I'm known to exaggerate details sometimes or whatever, but I always keep the real story or whatever. And I hate it if I'm with somebody who doesn't get how fun that is. [laughter] And my friends say, "We love your stories!" And I love to hear their stories. I have a lot of stories, and I think more in stories than in experiences. And I understand Ivy's desire, the starving for stories. I really, really do.

Especially when I was in grad school with all the scientific stuff and no stories—yuck! It was awful, like starving.

Lydia desired to tell her own experience in stories and needed to hear stories to sustain herself, much like Ivy Rowe does. In her fictional letter, Lydia's version of Ivy tried to review her experience by retelling stories in order to help and advise her recipient, Denver. For Lydia, writing the letter helped her review her own experience and favored mode of knowing, storytelling. In a sense, her letter also became a kind of "spiritual correspondence" (Foucault, 2004, p. 361). Lydia's epistolary fiction suggested the self-constituting power of such practice for herself and the fictional persona she assumed.

Deirdre also chose an epistolary form for her creative writing. Deirdre was a senior when she took the course and busy planning her summer wedding. She wrote a farewell letter to her dead grandfather whose absence from her wedding she was bracing for, so in a sense her epistolary practice became a kind of meditation on death. The Greeks often used their epistolary practices "as an exercise reactivating what [one] knows regarding the necessity of death" (Foucault, 2004, p. 361). Deirdre did not use her letter to prepare for her own death, but to cope with the death of another and to integrate that necessary loss into her own life.

In Deirdre's class, we staged an open reading of their creative writing in a gazebo on campus, serving boiled peanuts and GooGoo Clusters, Moon Pies and Coca-Cola for refreshments. Deirdre, despite her experience on the stage, could not contain her emotion as she read her piece. The rest of us wept openly. In reading the letter aloud, Deirdre rehearsed her meditation and recollected verbally the knowledge it generated. I offer bits of her letter here, excerpted from the class' publication, *Revelations of the South: Symbols, Sisterhood, and Transformation*. (The women crafted the titles of their books by themselves, and as I looked at

them in analyzing documents, I was struck by how prescient they were of my own work.) From Deirdre's fictional epistle:

In our pictures, you never look at the camera in front of you. In one picture, you are frozen in a moment I cannot understand, staring at the tiny girl you hold in your arms who laughs and claps for the Polaroid snap on her third birthday. What were we, this third generation that you never had a chance to know? Did you notice your grandbaby's hair, downy tresses the hues of early autumn, the same color of that fiery and beautiful woman, Mattie, your own mamma? You left behind two little girls you never watched grow up, two women that stare over and over at your face and wonder what it was that you saw.

She wrote of a childhood ritual, visiting the grave weekly with her grandmother, and of returning to the cemetery:

Years later, in junior high school, I drove by your cemetery one early evening after soccer. With windows down, I made the curve on the road slinking by the cemetery like a green garden snake by you and your neighbors. I looked over at where you lie and was stopped by the sight of the melon sun setting slowly behind Jesus' head. I pulled over across from your cemetery and watched the sun sink. Paralyzed once again, I was unable to leave my car and visit you. This time I knew who the watching man was, this time I understood. But I still hoped it was you standing in the middle of all those graves and not him. Do you still see me, Papa? Do you watch over us like that stony figure of Christ who stands forever guarding the rows and rows of your neighbors?

Deirdre used what began as a class assignment as a way to mourn the long-dead grandfather who would not see her walk down the aisle looking like Yeats' "glimmering girl"

(1889/1989). Through the letter, she reconciled herself, in part, to that still-wounding absence and prepared herself for what lay ahead. In the writing, she armed herself for what life requires, much as Foucault's Greeks did. Deidre employed this epistolary practice to help craft her "armature for dealing with events" (Foucault, 2004, p. 94).

In their letters and their meditations, the Greco-Romans practiced a form of meditation in which they imagined the very worst that could possibly happen, not so much to immunize themselves against its potentiality but to help themselves see that it was only in their thinking that the event assumed the dimensions of the worst that could be. This practice helped forge their armature for facing life in the present and in the future. Foucault (2004) described at length letters from Seneca and Aurelius, for example, in which they exercised "a certain form of self-awareness, or a certain form of gaze focused on oneself from this point of view of death, or of the actualization of death in our life" (p. 478). In her fictional letter, with herself and the women in the "magic circle" as recipients, Deirdre actualized mortality in her own life by facing the death of her grandfather with the strength arising from her creative arts.

Another woman, Augusta, also wrote letters to an absent grandparent, her Ozark grandmother, and she, too, found a way through epistolary practice to reconcile herself to death. She used her letter-writing to cope with guilt over abandoning her grandparents in their final illnesses and loneliness. It was a wonderfully courageous act for her to write through her own failing in a relationship she never had a chance to repair. Like the Greeks' and Romans' epistles, Augusta's fictional letters enabled her to enact an administrative review and to reconstruct memory. It also gave her a voice for speaking her love to those who could no longer hear. One letter recalled joyful summer visits to her grandparents' mountain home:

I was thinking about how much I love watching you cook, peeling all those vegetables over the aluminum-topped table, or snapping beans that came straight out of your garden out back. You would always tell Sis and Bub and me to help ourselves to the berries in your freezer, and I can still taste those frozen blackberries and raspberries and blueberries, covered in cream and turning our milk icy and our tongues blue. I wish that I could be up there now. I'm getting hungry just thinking about your fried squash and fresh tomatoes, sliced and just the most perfect shade of red. Tomato Red. That should be a new Crayola color for sure.

I just heard today that Pa has passed away. . . . I wish that I could have heard him play his fiddle one more time and sing in that sweet smooth voice of his. Who will you cook for now? And what will you do every morning when you don't have to fix him breakfast or fuss at him about some thing or another?

Augusta invented a chance for herself to apologize to the grandmother whom she loved but never visited again after her grandfather died—"too busy with school and all." In writing her fictional letters, Augusta took herself to account and atoned for the youthful thoughtlessness that she knew caused pain to someone she had loved deeply. Like the ancients, she employed epistles as an art of existence, asking, "What shall we do in order to live properly?" (Foucault, 2004, p. 178).

In her letters, Augusta examined the distance between what she could have done to live properly and her own actions. In reading her work aloud, she conveyed the wisdom gleaned from her meditations and administrative review to the other women in "our sacred space." At the reading in the gazebo, the women hearing Augusta's letters cried with her, too. Such practices of

self served a therapeutic function, much as the ancient Greeks' practice did, because both the writer/speaker and the readers/listeners experienced catharsis.

Several women spoke at length in their interviews about how connections among the women in their circle were deepened through the writing and sharing of their own stories. In reading and hearing one another's texts, the women practiced another exercise the ancients practiced in caring for the self: listening. Foucault (2004) explained that the "technique and an ethics of listening, and a technique and ethics also of reading and writing [became] so many exercises for the subjectivation of true discourse" (p. 372). Although the women in my study did not post-mark and deliver their fictional letters, the letters were written, spoken, and heard in a network of relations that cultivated "true discourse." These young women performed mutual soul work by writing and reading together, speaking and hearing one another's epistolary texts, which enacted reviews and offered advice for how to live and perhaps how to die.

Deirdre and I discussed at length the dynamic among the women that made such writing as soul service possible. Part of our conversation follows:

Debra: In those creative pieces, I think some of you really went to a very deep place that had a lot to do with who you are as Southerners and as women.

Deirdre: Yes, and I think we were very scared to go there, and we would not have gone there if it hadn't been for the connections that had been happening in the circle. Yeah, and with you and with a level of trust, a level of, Can I be vulnerable and can I risk in this environment? We talk a lot about that in theatre, how you create an ensemble. And if someone in the ensemble feels scared to *go there*, to expose their heart and be vulnerable on stage, then it's never going to happen for the whole ensemble. If you can make a safe place, a place where it's fun to

laugh and fun to risk and it's okay to cry—which was our classroom. And we made this ensemble, and so we had the reading at the gazebo and did not care that sorority girls were walking by going, What? Why are they crying? And we just did not care, and we just read our pieces and cried. And it was hard just to get through it and then to look at Cassie, who wrote that essay about finding out her grandpa was illiterate, and Augusta, and they had tears in their eyes, too. We'd just been through this journey together, and it was so personal. And it's amazing that we three went back to grandparents, back to the other generation, back to our childhood and who we've lost and who's not there. So absolutely we went to that really personal place because we could trust and because the literature we'd been reading, it calls for you.

Deirdre and the other women answered the call of the Southern texts we read together and created their own texts in reply, taking their creative epistles far beyond a simple writing assignment. They used their texts to care for the self, to help constitute themselves as ethical subjects, voicing what they could not say to those who could no longer hear and articulating their experience to those poised to listen. These women took a class assignment and transformed it into a healing art of existence.

Post-Course Writing as a Practice of the Self: A Master's Thesis

On the Porch

And before the class I guess I'd never thought about myself as a writer from that perspective, thinking that personal experience could be part of my writing, that I could be a Southern writer.
-Cassie

I had never liked my own creative writing. I thought, I don't write poetry, don't write anything like that—just hate it, hate it, hate it. And that class taught me, though, that if you really believe

it, just like acting, if it's truthful and comes from a real place, then it will transcend. And maybe it's not about good or bad, it's just truth. And that could happen through creative writing.
 –Deirdre

Writing opens “a possibility of composing a space in conformity with one’s will.”
 -de Certeau, 1984/1988, p. 196

One of the most exciting facets of this research was finding out that sometimes the texts lived on with participants after our class in ways I had never imagined. I was surprised and intrigued to discover that two women, Deirdre and Cassie, subsequently wrote texts vital to them that were inspired—and perhaps made possible—by their experience with readings in our course. For her Master’s thesis, Deirdre, wrote and staged a play in which she continued to trouble representations, *Anti-Bellum: A Re-Destruction of the Southern Belle*. She collected and reassembled characters, images and dialogue from Williams’ plays and crafted her own drama. In devising her play from his fragments, Deirdre practiced gathering the already-said. Such an act illustrated Foucault’s (1984/1997) idea that “the writer constitutes [her] own identity through recollection of things said” (p. 221). From recollected bits of Williams’ dialogue and a collection of her own things, Deirdre deconstructed the representation of the belle and constituted her own identity by inventing herself as a playwright.

Deirdre described how her play came about when she could not find a play she wanted to direct for her graduate thesis because “nothing fit the images [she] had in her head.” She explained,

If nothing fits your images, write your own images. And so my thesis came out of my relationship with Tennessee Williams. I love him and I hate him. He was great, but what did he do to women? And as a man and as a homosexual man, what was Williams’ interpretation of women? What has he done to us? [laughter] Our class made me think about who we are as Southerners but also who we are as people, so I looked at five

figures pulled out of their context: Blanche and Maggie and Big Daddy and Laura and then a young man figure who's kind of a younger Tom. And I just did basically a string of twelve images and transitions. Physical theatre, devised theatre. And I used things that had really connected with me in a rough, raw way. And it was definitely rough and raw. I used my own porcelain dolls from home and a jump rope, and I used images of things that passed between women. I used a string of pearls passed between women, and I thought about what we hand down. And it is sometimes viewed as stuffy old tradition, old china, ugh, but then when it's passed to you, and I had just gone through all that with my wedding, but it's so powerful that it transcends. And so I was trying to get at some of that, and I really looked at "Wayfaring Stranger," which I got when we read *Cold Mountain*, and at the Southern woman's journey. And together we can save each other! And the next generation will be, not to say saved because the others were damned, but she [today's Southern woman] can be everything she wants to be. She can embrace the belle if she'd like to, but she can also be this new woman who goes out and pursues her dream and can raise children. And maybe just live. Just live! So the class absolutely said to me, you *can* do this and you *should* do this because your heart's really in it, as far as theatre. So in my PhD, I'm now very unashamed to say that I'm interested in the portrayal of women in theatre, and I'm very interested in the belle and in Southern identity.

Deirdre's play featured speeches from Laura, Blanche, and Maggie, and she united the women in the end to overcome the ominous presence of an ever-lurking Big Daddy. In the play's final vignette, the women join hands, "form one triangle, turn and make eye contact with each other and sing the final chorus [of "Wayfaring Stranger"] together: 'going over Jordan to meet our

mother.” Reading the concluding moment of the play, I was forcefully reminded of Deirdre’s comment in an interview that “together we women can all save each other.” Like the Greeks’ writing in caring for the self, Deirdre’s post-course writing sought to affect “the mutual work of salvation” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 21).

Other parts of Deirdre’s devised text suggested moments from the class and from our interviews. Reading her beautifully evocative stage directions, for example, I conjured up an image of her as the child she described who played with her sister in the woods like “little wild girls”: “Lights slowly dim to blue as Blanche and Maggie enter, we hear the sounds of a southern night—hoot owls, whippoorwills, katydids, and bull frogs singing to the night. Underneath these sounds there is the constant howl of a dog baying in the dark.”

Deirdre questioned Williams’ depictions of Southern women and reinvented them as part of her own self-formative practice. In caring for the self, she “does not accept these representations without examining them, without knowing to analyze what they represent” (Foucault, 2004, p. 131). She understood that the belle is a living impossibility, a knowledge that destroys Blanche (Williams, 1947/1974) and many of Williams’ women. Through her writing, Deirdre troubled these representations to “assesses the relationship between [herself] and that which is represented, so as to accept in the relation to the self only that which can depend on the subject’s free and rational choice” (Foucault, 1984/1988a, p. 64). Deirdre critically and creatively deconstructed the belle and felt free to reclaim her in a subverted form. In her thesis, Deirdre collected the already spoken, rewrote it, reinvented it, and made it her own. Undertaking those acts helped her construct her own subjectivity as Southern woman, doctoral student, and budding playwright.

Post-course Writing: Journalism as a Practice of the Self

Cassie also created texts subsequent to our class that directly challenged representations of Southerners, particularly women. As I explained in chapter three's discussion of document collection, Cassie wrote for a slick new regional magazine that promotes itself as a purveyor of "the style of the New South" (whatever that is) and promises to "recognize and foster the lessons and traditions of the South's past, but advocate the changes and progressive moves the new South has made." Cassie remained convinced that the Faulkner paper she wrote for our class landed her a position as contributing editor for the magazine. Her contributions to the premier issue included an article on contemporary Southern visual artists, who "are redefining how people see the South," the prose accompanying a photographic essay on the Mississippi River, and a review of a barbecue restaurant. She also worked in a reference to Faulkner and the Great Flood of 1927 for the piece on the Mississippi, a direct nod to her paper and its subject, *Old Man* (Faulkner, 1961).

Short biographies of the editorial staff appeared in the magazine's inaugural issue, and Cassie's biography described her as a "Georgian born and bred [who] has spent plenty of time enjoying all things Southern—fishing, country music, pickup trucks, and Faulkner." Her profile also said that Cassie was "passionate about the written word. She aspires to pen the next great Southern novel and hopes to eradicate illiteracy. . . . She works daily to advocate that being Southern and being smart can go hand in hand." I was fascinated to see this legacy of the class—echoes of the texts and our conversations about demeaning depictions of Southern women—appear in this very different medium. Given her stated goal to "advocate that being Southern and being smart can go hand in hand," Cassie aimed to indicate through writing a way of being seldom associated with Southern women in popular culture. With her journalism, she examined

and purposefully resisted representations of Southerners, especially women, whose wits are commonly perceived to be as slow as their drawls. Through her practice, Cassie worked to constitute herself as an intelligent, articulate woman and to contest Southern stereotypes.

Foucault (1984/1997) said, “It is one’s soul that must be constituted in what one writes” (p.214). Writing as ethical self-constitution also serves others in reciprocal relationships like those my participants formed and perhaps in writer-reader relationships like those Cassie generated with her magazine’s audience and like those cultivated in our classroom. Creating original texts and writing in and about others’ texts provided the women in my study with ways to conduct administrative reviews of themselves as ethical subjects, and it enabled them to help other women with their labors on the self. Keeping notebooks and sharing ideas from them in conversation, perhaps on the porch, and in letters or expository writing worked here, as it did for the Greeks, as a “flexible exchange of soul services in which we try to be of service to the other in [her] journey towards the good and toward [herself]” (Foucault, 2004, p. 360). The women on the porch, much like the ancient Greeks, practiced this kind of “soul service” (p. 360) as they read and wrote and talked together, helping each other along the journey, valuing and validating one another’s efforts and insights.

Re-Remembering Relations as a Practice of the Self

On the Porch

And those fictional women teach us as much sometimes as the real women. And I have a very complex relationship with my Southern grandmother, but I have my Aunt Sandra and I have Ivy Rowe. And now I have these other women on the journey, so I can go, Ah, no wonder, Nanny, because you came from this—you’re so complex! I’m beginning to understand you. And they’re not the same woman, but the characters let you know some of what the real woman’s gone through that it’s so hard to know, that I’ve been struggling to understand.
 –Deirdre

As far as my grandmothers are concerned, their lives were much like Ivy's—you marry young and have six babies and spend your life trying to raise them with no money. So I think I have a better understanding of what the women in my family survived, based on her. —Mary

And of what they can endure, I guess. —Debra

I really do think the fictional women teach us about the real women, and they help us approach some of the grief, some of the things my grandmother's gone through that we can't really talk about. But then I know her through some of these other [fictional] women, which is so weird and wild and wonderful to wrap your head around. But I think they do teach us. —Deirdre

Ivy reminds me of my grandmother. This part where she says, If I feel like it, I can read all day or I can get up at 5 in the morning and eat a hotdog—that's like something my grandmother would do. —Ashley

In addition to reading, writing, and relations, Foucault (1984/1988, 1988b, 2004) explained that the Greeks also emphasized the art of remembrance in care of the self. Memory, Foucault (2004) said, was “no doubt fundamental in all Greek thought. . . [because] by maintaining the luster of the truth, its function was to be able to enlighten all those who uttered the saying anew” (p. 325). Further, examining and reshaping memory was intended to bring truths “ready to hand. . . in the form of a memory that will sing the saying anew and make it shine forth in its light, always new and always the same” (p. 325). In other words, by actively constructing and reconstructing memory, one might access truths. As the ancients vigilantly practiced remembrance of things heard, read, and said, the women in my study found a way through texts to practice as artisans of memory, too. For the women in my study, reading and writing and porchin' offered active ways to polish the “luster of the truth” they found in fictional characters, who helped them renew, recall, or reconfigure relations with the women in their lives.

While participants cultivated reciprocal relations with the women who read and wrote with them, they also employed texts to foster relations with other women through memories evoked and enriched by fiction. Through fictional women like Ivy and Virgie, participants not only found something of themselves, but they also recognized something of their mothers,

grandmothers, sisters, and best friends. They used their textual practices to re-examine and reshape memories of these women and their relations, gleaning fresh insights. All the women I interviewed told me that they came to understand or connect better with the Southern women in their lives and memories through the fictional women they encountered.

Deirdre, for example, talked at length about how she could now “remember [her] grandmother in a whole new way. Not that Ivy is her, but through her, I can kind of see some of what my grandmother endured.” Zelda also spoke of constructing new memories of her mother through texts, saying, “I think I understand my mother more after reading those books. But all I can think of is Flannery O’Connor. What does that say? [laughter] But now I can better understand and place my mom in the context of growing up in the ‘fifties.” Another woman explored the construction of memory of relations, explaining,

So what Lee Smith has done is she’s created these memories for us with these fictional women. And we’re able to have these light bulb moments of recognition. And then they connect us with memories of real women. Then these then become new memories and relationships for us—even though it’s fiction. And, wow, that’s breath-taking!

Cassie spoke about the power of these memories and our reconfigurations of them through text, even when the new vision they afford is uncomfortable. She explained,

Seeing how hard Ivy’s life was helped me feel a little more sympathetic for my grandmother. My grandmother was one of those people I simply cannot understand. I’ll never understand that woman in my whole entire life! And it’s funny because the older I get, the more I see things I do that make me think about her, and I go, Gosh, why do I do that? And then I go, Oh, I guess I do know why I’m like that! [laughter] That stubbornness, and my grandmother was the most pig-headed woman in the entire world,

and I see that sometimes in myself and I think, Oh, that's why! I always thought she was just not very nice. She was mean, and she was stubborn and really hard-headed, you know, but, thanks to Ivy, I kind of understand why a little better.

Lydia offered this version of remembering differently and seeing other women anew through texts:

And when you read these books from Southern literature, there are so many *strong* characters, and I see my mother in them. It makes me laugh sometimes, and sometimes it makes me cry. I realize now, Okay, part of the way she is comes from where we're from. Knowing that helps.

So reading fictional women led these participants to a re-imagining of personal memories, which encouraged a recasting of female relations.

Mary described how reading fiction illuminated relationships she had long struggled to understand:

I remember or know my mother and my grandmothers better now in a way. My stepmother's very, I always thought of her as a Puritan because she's very, she works so hard and never shows emotion. She's just not a very affectionate and loving person the way that I am, and I think reading those texts helped me understand her. She worked her hands to the bone, that sort of thing, very strict like an old school marm—and had that mentality. And I think reading those texts and having a better understanding of the culture she grew up in and the mindset of the Puritan work ethic helped me get a grain of better understanding of her and why she was so strict. And my grandmothers, I think I have a better understanding of what they went through and the expectations put on them before the feminist movement.

While the women in my study talked often of their mothers, interestingly, many went back another generation to their grandparents, especially in their creative writing, as I described. By writing their own texts and reading books like *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) and *The Golden Apples* (Welty, 1949/1977), many participants reconstructed memories of grandparents dead and alive, wielding fiction as a technology to reinterpret and reconfigure their understanding of familial relations.

Here, memory of reading and memory of personal relations converged, one set of recollections advanced by the other. For the Greco-Romans, exercising memory was as important as reading, writing, listening, speaking, or meditating. Foucault (1988b) explained that “a remembering. . . [resulted in] a set of practices by which one [could] acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. . . . It is a process of becoming more subjective” (p. 35). In remembering their relations with women they had known and perhaps lost, my participants practiced “becoming more subjective” by acquiring greater insight into relations significant to their lives. And this remembrance might have translated into a principle of ethical action. Reconstructing memories of mothers and grandmothers, seeing them afresh, helped the women in my study enhance their own subjectivity and imagine differently the subjectivities of the women with whom they wanted to connect, both in the present and in the past.

Reconstructing Home Place

On the Porch

And you think about what is home? And when you have some distance—you’re so right, you have to get out of the South to see it and to see home. I never knew I could love home that much until I left. A lot of people who leave either vilify the South, or they burn so many bridges that they go back and there’s nothing there for them, nothing’s left. –Deirdre

I moved here before middle school, but I was born in Nebraska on a farm and moved to urban California, which was absolutely different than here. My dad was getting transferred, and my mom could choose New Jersey or the South. She chose the South, saying it was a better place to

raise children. When I first moved here, it was very eye-opening—the “yes, sirs” and “no, ma’ams.” That was my first experience with the South. And it’s had a great impact on who I am today. I’m glad I wasn’t raised in L.A. because I would have had a different perception of respect, of elders, of family. –Phoenix

So do you see yourself staying in the South, raising children here? –Debra

Yes. I would not move out of the South. The farthest west I’d go would be Texas and farthest east or north I’d go would be Tennessee, and that’s it! I’m happy in our bubble! [laughter]
–Phoenix

And I love that final scene when Ivy starts piecing together all those fragments, which is amazing, when they’re all sitting at the table after she’d gone with Honey and come back, and she said the home felt like church. Life was sacred now. –Deirdre

Foucault (2004) described an important Platonic concept, which instructed that in enacting personal conversion, one

turned away from appearances, . . . [took] stock of oneself by acknowledging one’s own ignorance and by deciding precisely to care about the self, to take care of the self. . . .

And finally. . . , on the basis of this reversion to the self, which leads us to recollection, we will be able to return to our homeland, the homeland of essences, truth, and Being. . . , (to one’s ontological homeland). (p. 209)

This Platonic ideal was “governed by a theme of liberation” (p. 209). Through their liberatory practices of the self with other and their collaborative transactions with texts, my participants returned in a way to their ontological and literal homeland, where they questioned what passes for essential truth, particularly about womanhood.

In Chapter 2, I described how Southern women writers and critics (Gwin, 2002; Beckham, 1988; Harrison, 1994) have focused on reconfigurations of home and place as a feminist practice. Massey (2005) explained that “the identities of ‘woman’ and of the ‘home-place’ are intimately tied up with each other” (p. 180) and with questions of liberation. In fact, the arts of reconstructing home and re-envisioning home place become an act of female power.

Gwin (2002) noted that “many women writers of the South. . . have subverted masculinist systems by creating a ‘home place’” (p. 87). In this reconstructed vision, home and place become supportive communal spaces with women’s experience and relations at their center.

In the two texts that dominated my conversations with the women I interviewed, concepts of home and place take fruitful turns. Smith’s (1988) *Ivy* literally and figuratively reconstructs home. Leaving the family’s crowded mountain hovel for the first room of her own in a rough logging town, Ivy finds freedom but also laments her loss of connection with home, despite its desperate conditions. After disenchantment with life in a mining company town, Ivy eventually returns to her home place, which she and her new husband rebuild, replanting the land for their family. There, Ivy struggles to care for the self, calling herself to account through her epistolary practice. In returning to her “ontological homeland,” the familiar becomes strange and wondrous. Years later, after losing herself for a time, Ivy reclaims and reconstructs her subjectivity, partly through a new vision of home crafted by her artistry. Ivy abides and dies in the house of her father’s birth, her birth, and her children’s births, a home place she restructures with female experience at its center.

In the other text that so many participants commented on in interviews, *The Golden Apples*, Welty’s (1949/1974) *Virgie* leaves her family’s ramshackle house on the edge of Morgana as a rebellious teenager, gone where we are not told, and then returns, despite her desire to wander, to care for her widowed mother. Upon her mother’s death, *Virgie* immediately dismantles the house, giving everything away, and resumes her journey anew, shed of her parents’ home and free of the confinement it meant for her. She literally deconstructs the house of her fathers, as *Ivy* literally reconstructs the home of her fathers.

Ivy and Virgie also experience pivotal moments of understanding in that liminal place outside the house but open to the space around it, the porch. Both women find transformative power on the porch, just as they are on the verge of reconstructing or deconstructing home. Ivy, a new widow, alone in her home place for the first time in her life approaches the freedom and wonders of her new status. She loved her husband and grieves for him, but she also finds new life. Just after clearing her house of the mourners, and in her first moments alone, she says, “It started raining nice and steady, and I went out on the porch. I had sat there so long, over so many years and years, with Oakley that I didn’t hardly see how I could sit out there by myself” (Smith, 1988, p. 275). But, she determines, “I will not be lonely. Even if it is just me sitting on this porch, I will not be lonely” (p. 277). She knows that she will miss her husband, but she also discovers

another fact which is just as true, it hit me yesterday. I can read every book that John O’Hara ever wrote. I can make up my own life now whichever way I want to. It is like I am a girl again, for I am not beholden to a soul. I can act like a crazy old woman if I want to which I do. I can get up in the morning and eat a hot dog, which I did yesterday. I don’t know what I might do tomorrow! (p. 277, paragraphing omitted)

From her porch, a transformative threshold, Ivy enters a new life as a woman who invents herself moment by moment in any way she desires.

Virgie also experiences a powerful transitional moment in a house on the day of a funeral. At midnight, finally alone after the townspeople performing their roles as mourners depart, Virgie hears “a pre-emptory pounding on the porch floor” and finds there “an old lady in a Mother Hubbard and clayed boots, holding out something white in a dark wrapping” (Welty, 1949/1977, p. 267). The gift the old woman proffers is a night-blooming cereus, notable for its

briefest of blooms. The crone says, “I know you and I brought you somethin’. Mighty late, ain’t it?. . . Take it. . . . It’s for you. Keep it—it won’t do the dead no good. And tomorrow it’ll look like a wrung chicken’s neck. Look at it enduring the night” (p. 267). Standing on the porch at midnight in a doubled threshold image, Virgie rejects the fleeting flower and decides to deconstruct the home place and make her way outward, into new space.

Troubled by the “naked, luminous, complicated flower, large and pale as a face on the dark porch” (p. 267), Virgie throws the offering into the weeds. She then immediately calls to mind her moonlit nights on the river when she connected with “the daughter far, far back” (p. 267) and felt herself becoming something else, floating in felicity. Virgie rejects the blossom’s fragility and its mutability, choosing instead her own rampant vitality and determined endurance. The next morning, she gives everything away and leaves the house of her mother, beginning her quest again, a daughter transformed, absolved, and released from the ties that bound her.

For Virgie and Ivy, reconstructing and deconstructing home signals a regeneration of female power and liberation, and for the characters, like the women in my study, the act begins on the porch, a site of felicitous transformation. These defiant protagonists reflect something that arose often in my interviews with participants: a deep ambivalence about home and place and women’s role there. The fictional women embody a desire to tell new stories about home re-imagined because “the stories we tell ourselves about home—the places we come from and the places we make our own—are the means through which we undertake the excruciating, redeeming work of renegotiating identity” (Gwin, 2002, p. 115).

Lydia explained her conflicted feelings about home and the excruciating, redeeming renegotiations of self grounded in place:

So much in my family has to do with tradition and values. And the Southern way of living—it's there. And even though there's things I want to break out of, that's where my home is. And I think that ambivalence will always be there. It will. But I think as I grow and I understand it more. . . , but it's always going to be that way, I think. I have friends who don't like the Southern traditions. But they still can't leave here. They'll talk bad about it or make comments about it: Oh, the South, the dirty South! And they can't leave. Cassie also spoke about the complications of rethinking home and regional identity. We had this conversation during her initial interview.

Cassie: I've been thinking about the whole Southern thing ever since I got your email [invitation], and the thing that immediately came to my mind, reading these texts, and I guess it's a combination of two things: there's so much that has changed about the South, and you think so much less about what makes you quirky and unique. And then when we actually read the texts, they made me feel much less isolated. You know what I mean? I felt like there were people that had had some of the same experiences and the same culture that I do, and being able to read these timeless texts, these reminders, helped so much. And I've been thinking about it, and that has to be the thing I took away from the class and the texts: I felt much more comfortable with the fact that the South is part of my heritage and part of how I grew up. And that's okay—it's part of who I am. And there are other people who still feel that way.

Debra: So being Southern is an important part of your identity?

Cassie: It really is and more than I guess I ever would have thought about. And I always thought it was something secret, you know, something to be ashamed of, and I

guess this is partially just me being a kid, but if you said you were a Southerner, it was almost a bad thing, you know? And people thought you were slow.

Debra: And redneck?

Cassie: Yeah, and I remember when some of those things were true about my dad's family, and being Southern didn't sit well with me. And the quiriness of it all and then finding out that other people have the same secret, too. So then it wasn't a secret anymore, you know? And that felt good.

Cassie found pleasure and power in reclaiming or re-imagining a Southern self, seeing in the process the way the South and its people have changed in her lifetime.

Like Cassie and Lydia, Deirdre also talked of reconstructing home through reconfiguring memory of place, explaining,

So Ivy says, "It's a curse to remember as much as I do." So memory is also painful for a lot of us, and for her it's painful sometimes to remember. But necessary. And the memory of home. Maybe being so driven, driven, driven and doing this [PhD] program and living out [in the Midwest] in the middle of nowhere with my husband to think sometimes, I do remember what it's like to look at the moon and I do remember the sound of crickets at home, I do. And so it's beautiful, but it's also bittersweet. I don't want to say memory's this curse, but it can be. And what you come back to will never be the same. Even coming back to campus, it's different, constantly changing. And like your family's land, it is changing.

Deirdre's right—my home place is in the midst of irrevocable change: the county has been among the country's fastest growing for years, and most of the property that had been in my family for a hundred years was sold. Cassie and I also talked at length about the indelible

changes to home place happening all around us, considering the powerlessness we sometimes experience with that change:

Cassie: And it's a mix of old and new that seems to clash a little bit and people are, my dad is still a little ill about the people who've sold all the land out to build subdivisions. He gets really frustrated about that.

Debra: I get upset about that myself as I'm driving around—or sitting on my porch.

Cassie: I was in Grantson recently and didn't even know where I was. And Southerners are not very good about dealing with change, especially people who are truly from here, and I think that's been especially hard on some people who have been here forever. This change doesn't sit well. And change happens slowly here or it used to, and when things change fast, it sets everybody on edge, I think, and people are much less tolerant of the change.

Cassie, Deirdre, and I, like many participants, found that the South remains “‘both an emotional entity and a geographical place’” (Simpson as cited in Gwin, 2002, p. 88). In home place, geography and concepts of self and family converge and conflict. As we see in Smith's and Welty's texts, “‘this conflictual relation of place and identity has a haunting and peculiar resonance in southern women's writing’” (Gwin, 2002, p. 87). Nobody leaves a home place unscathed or returns to it unchanged, as the women in my study and in the texts discovered.

I offer the following essay disguised as a short story as an illustration of that argument. I wrote this piece several years ago in an attempt to evoke the earliest journey I could recall. It is, in many ways, a chronologically impossible answer to questions of female identity in relation to home and place as raised by the women in my study and explored in the texts we read. As I

explained, I wrote this piece before reading Smith's (1988) *Fair and Tender Ladies*, but, after the fact, I like to imagine the texts and their characters in conversation, on the porch perhaps.

On the Porch

Maiden Ladies

Finally, it's time, the day I've been waiting for—I'm going back to the mountain. My great-aunt Violet and I have gone every summer for as long as I can remember. We take great pains to get our suitcases ready. She lets me use one of hers, my favorite one. Tan with red stripes. We check my little clear plastic purse. There's the lacy black fan that Aunt Violet usually saves for funerals and revivals. I get to carry it today because it's a special occasion. And my best gloves are there, the ones with the little pearl buttons in case we go to Sunday school. Although usually over on the mountain I don't have to go, so I hope those gloves stay right where they are. And I've got the handkerchief with pink embroidered flowers that Aunt Violet ironed yesterday. Her handkerchief is just like mine, but blue. And I have one whole dollar. My aunt keeps the Juicy Fruit in her purse because she said I can't be trusted with a whole pack.

My grand-daddy takes us in his red truck and then comes back to get us in a month. Aunt Violet can't drive, never learned how. She says just riding in a car makes her head crazy. We always stop at Mrs. Simms' dusty old store with all those cement bird baths nobody buys out front. Grand-daddy lets me buy a bag of lemon drops for the trip. He doesn't like to stop once we start, but Aunt Violet puts her foot down. I love lemon drops. I bet if she could drive, we'd stop lots of places.

We're going to the mountain to stay at Aunt Violet's mama's homeplace. It's really old, but two of her cousins still live in it. They're maiden ladies, too, and they grew up in the place. One of the ladies, Claudia, is even older than Aunt Violet. She's named after her daddy, Uncle Claude, but no body ever calls her by her real name, which is a shame because I think it sounds glamorous and romantic. They just call her Claudy. She can't walk anymore because she has that same disease that Aunt Violet has, but Aunt Violet still walks around just fine. It makes their muscles turn into Jell-O. Claudy gets around inside the house pretty good with a little rocking chair with short legs that she scoots around in by moving her bottom from side to side. Her legs do don't anything. It looks like a little girl's chair, but only Claudy can use it.

The younger sister is named Clara, like the sad, pretty girl in *Heidi*, but nobody calls her that either. Everybody calls her ClaraBelle, which she doesn't like. When she signs her name, though, she writes Clara, just Clara. She's beautiful with sparkly clear blue eyes. She has a tinkly laugh, and she whistles "The Tennessee Waltz" when she's hanging out the clothes or sweeping the yard. Sometimes she sings the words. She's a good singer, and she plays the guitar, too. Sometimes my grand-daddy brings his guitar and they sing together. But when it's the two of them, they only sing church songs. When she sings by herself, she does songs I like, like "Way Down in the Valley, Valley So Low" or "Wildwood Flower." I make up stories sometimes, just for myself, about ClaraBelle and a lost sweetheart. Maybe he was a soldier who got killed saving somebody or a sweet farm boy who died young, maybe kicked in the head by his horse, something like that. Surely she's been in love. I want to ask her, but you're not supposed to ask maiden ladies stuff like that. ClaraBelle's a nurse's aid at the hospital, but mostly she just takes care of Claudy, like she did with her mama and daddy and brother before they all died.

The maiden sisters love Aunt Violet nearly as much as I do. They call her Sis.

The house where Claudy and ClaraBelle live is the only house so far up. It looks like they just carved a hole in the side of the mountain and tucked the house right in. You have to take a long twisty dirt road around and around the mountain, and you can't miss the place once you find the road because it ends right in their front yard. The road just stops there. The house looks ancient, with unpainted wood, and a front porch and two side porches and a back porch. One porch on the side is screened in so you can sleep out there when it's hot. There's a tin roof that makes such a loud racket when it rains that you'd think it's raining on the whole world.

I love the front yard best. It's tiny and has no grass, not one blade. ClaraBelle sweeps it clean every day, making little swirly patterns. Big old oaks frame the house and yard in the front, but it's just wild woods all around the rest of the house. When you step off the back porch, you're already climbing the mountain. It looks like the woods are gobbling up the barn and the silvery smokehouse, and the corn crib leans over nearly double like a crippled up old woman. Scattered about in the yard and woods are chickens, guinea hens, banty roosters, and, wonder of wonders, peacocks. It's a real disappointment to me to discover that those pretty peacocks are mean as snakes and hate little girls.

There's only one cow left in the barn, but Claudy's arms still work and she loves to churn her own butter, so they keep Daisy, who's old, too. Claudy puts it into little wooden molds that leave wheat sheaves on top of the cakes of butter. One summer, a cat gone wild had kittens out in the barn in Daisy's straw. They hadn't even opened their eyes yet when their mama ran off. ClaraBelle let me bring the raggedy kittens in the kitchen, and we fed them milk with an eye-dropper, but they died anyway. So I buried them in a shoebox and had a big funeral, with songs and everything. Maybe next time that mama cat'll come back and nurse her own babies, but now I always check the barn for baby kittens. One time, ClaraBelle killed a big old Copperhead out in the barn, and she said after she chopped its head off with a hoe, hundreds of baby snakes came wriggling out. Liked to scared her to death, she was so surprised. They were too quick to kill many, she said.

My favorite place on the mountain is the spring house. Before refrigerators, they kept their milk and butter fresh and cool out in the spring house. It isn't really a house, or even a building. It's just rocks stacked to make a square in the side of the mountain, and instead of a roof it has boards propped across the tops of the rocks. Honeysuckle, wild roses, and other vines grow across the boards and make a kind of live green ceiling that blocks out the sun except for little slants that shine through. It's shady and minty and damp in the spring house, and it always smells clean and sweet. There are little, low mossy stone walls that I use for benches and a creek with icy cold water that runs under one wall. The branch comes down from the very tip-top of the mountain, and I imagine that it becomes a raging river roaring all the way to the ocean, which I have never seen. Neither has Aunt Violet. I don't think Claudy and ClaraBelle have seen it either. In the spring house, you can lift up a board that straddles two big rocks and dangle things in the water to get them cold. Sometimes we put a watermelon in the feed sack tied to the board and let it nearly freeze before slicing it up into fat juicy wedges so cold they make your teeth ache.

Even when it's so hot that the dirt in ClaraBelle's yard bakes into hoe cakes filled with shimmering isinglass, it's nice and cool and secret in the spring house. It's the best make-believe place I know. It can be a fairy castle with a lovely maid locked up in the tower, or it can be a cozy little cottage where I have tea parties for fancy ladies. ClaraBelle lets me use real tea cups and saucers and the teapot with pink roses and gold curlicues painted on it.

The mountain seems a magical place. Everything there in summertime is greener than green. The trees grow thick and lush and tall—hardwoods, not just pines. The briars and underbrush are so tangled and dense that you can't even see any patches of red ground, except in ClaraBelle's garden and her swept yard. Millions of snakes must live on the mountain—hidden, hidden. It gives me shivers to imagine. I have always wanted to go out to the spring house at night, stretch out on my back, and watch the stars through the viney beams, but I am too scared. It's the snakes' turn at night. Who knows where all those baby copperheads are by now?

The sounds of crickets and katydids and tree frogs nearly deafen you at night, especially at first dark. And once it's real dark, you can hear the owls that roost in the barn and the whippoorwills, whose calls always give me a lump in my throat even though I don't know why. On clear nights, you can see real bright moon shadows all around the house, and the stars look so close that it's like, if you really put your mind to it, surely you could touch the Big Dipper, at least from the top of the mountain. I am not allowed to climb to the top, though. I think one reason is that it may be haunted. This is one of the most magical things about the mountain.

The story is that, once upon a time, there was a beautiful Indian maiden who was in love with her tribe's handsomest brave. They planned to meet on top of the mountain one night when the moon was full. But the loyal maid's daddy, the big chief, found out and refused to let her see her true love. The pretty maid was heart-broken, and in her despair she leaped from a high rock to certain death below. I think that when the brave found out, he jumped, too, and joined his beloved for all eternity, but I only made that part up. Anyway, ClaraBelle says that if you listen hard on wild, windy, full moon nights, you might hear the Indian maiden's mournful cries. Lying in the little feather bed that's just the right size for me, I imagine that along with the wind whistling through the creaking old house and the steady striking of the old clock, I hear long, sad wails and low sobs. I wonder what the Indian maid's name is, but nobody seems to know.

Nearly thirty years later, I was ready to return to the mountain. Without planning it, I just started driving in that direction one dreary December afternoon and kept on until I came to the road. I nearly missed the turn. The road wasn't dirt anymore, and upscale subdivisions dotted the mountain, which seemed more like a hill. I hadn't been back at all since I was a girl, and everything looked smaller, as things from childhood often do when you're an adult. There it was, though, the old homeplace still at the end of the road. Funny, I'd never seen it in winter before.

The house was a rickety shack, really, little more than a hovel—and tiny. Everything looked so bare, frozen and poor, like those pictures of poverty-stricken Appalachia in the ads that beg for pennies a day to save a child. I scarcely believed this could be the place, but of course it was.

The elderly oaks wore gnarled gray twigs for limbs, and tall pines colored evergreen dashes in the woods still fringing the house. The barn was a pile of rotting lumber, the corn crib and smokehouse gone. Clara's prized square of clean dirt was a jumble of yellowed clumps of grass and straggly weeds. I couldn't make out where the garden should be. The front porch slumped and sagged. I'd never noticed before that its posts were whitewashed tree trunks skinned of bark, stripped of branches. Had they always been like that? A wheelchair ramp tacked onto the side porch was stacked with flower pots and fruit jars. No peacocks strutted in the yard.

The place looked deserted. No lights flickered from the windows even though the afternoon was as dark and dim as twilight. I'd made a mistake, should've called first. I hadn't been in touch with Clara since Aunt Violet died, except to send a Christmas card.

A huge homely mutt barked ferociously with no sign of stopping, and, scared to get out of my car, I considered backing right back out that paved road when I saw a face peep from behind the kitchen curtain. I sweet-talked the growling monster, who rolled over and slobbered all over me when I patted his massive head. I gingerly crossed the slanted porch and called out, “Hey! It’s only me.”

Slowly the back door opened just a crack, and a blue eye squinted out, then crinkled into a smile.

“Why, gal, you better come on in here! It’s too cold to be a-standin’ out there and you with a bare head. You’ll catch your death.” The voice was unmistakable, still tinkly sounding.

Clara flung open the door and enfolded me in a tight hug. She wore an old-timey checked house dress, tattered but clean, and a raveled up men’s sweater. The smile was the same and her hair hadn’t turned either—still coppery with just the lightest dusting of gray. Clara had stayed beautiful, but she’d shrunk on a scale with the house and the mountain. The rich, savory smell of food cooking flooded out into the sharp air. She shoved the warped old door shut behind us.

“Just let me look at you, Honey. You a-lookin’ too skinny, Miss. I bet you ain’t a-eatin’ enough to keep up a fly’s strength,” Clara fussed, holding me at arm’s length. Suddenly she dropped my hands and flew uphill across the uneven kitchen floor.

“Lawsie me, I’m a-burnin’ up the supper!”

She startled me by using the tail of her sweater as a pot holder for the sizzling skillet of sausage she set off the burner. Good heavens, this old place would catch like wildfire, I thought. At least it was an electric stove and not the wood-burning cookstove she used back when I was a girl.

Then I noticed a child sitting at the scrubbed pine table, a girl of four or five with dishwater blonde hair stringing down the back of her red jumper, eating a hunk of fruit stack cake. Spicy dried apples were smeared on chin, cheeks, and corduroy. She wore scuffed up cowboy boots too big for her. It was her niece’s littlest girl, kept her three days a week, Clara said. Had to quit at the hospital when Claudia got so sick that last time.

I leaned in close to the table and the grubby child. “Why, hello, there, Sweetie. That’s an awfully pretty dress and where did you get those boots? I used to stay here, too, when I was little. Aren’t we lucky to get to come to the mountain?” I was crazy about little girls, probably because I never had one.

The child simply stared at me with clear green eyes and stuffed more cake in her mouth. Didn’t say a word, just acted like we weren’t there. She kept kicking the toe of her boot rhythmically against the wobbly table leg.

“Is it like you remember?” Clara asked over and over, following close to me while I walked around the dusty, cluttered old house.

“Yes, sure is. Still the same,” I lied.

“Oh, yeah, Hon, I been a-savin’ something for you. I swan, I was skeered I was gone have to mail it. But you done come. It’s in the front room.”

Popped on the mantel, waiting for me, was an envelope with my name written on it in spidery pencil. Inside was a faded brownish photograph of two smiling young women with carefully curled hair, wearing corsages on the shoulders of their Sunday dresses. It was Aunt Violet and Claudia standing in front of the old homeplace with their arms around each other. Laughing, I thought. It must have been taken on some long-ago Easter. Why else would they be wearing flowers tied with fancy ribbons on their best dresses?

“I just knowed Sis’d want you to have it,” Clara offered.

I swallowed hard and slipped the envelope gently into my purse. The heart-scalding from Aunt Violet's death was still healing, the scar thin and easy to bleed.

"Thank you, Clara, for everything. I guess I'd better head on home before dark."

She hugged me again, fiercely.

I waved good bye to the little girl, who pretended not to see me, scratched the giant's ears, and started back out the mountain road. Halfway down, I realized that I forgot to look for the spring house. I'd have to go back up after the thaw, take something to surprise Clara, some seedlings or a sweet potato pie maybe. I wondered if she still whistled "The Tennessee Waltz," wondered if she ever told the child about listening for the Indian maid.

I'd never seen the old homeplace in the springtime. Yes, in the spring, when the laurel's in bloom and the mountain is green.

The title of my autobiographical story refers to the way I was taught to speak of my several unmarried great-aunts and distant cousins, whom we also called aunts. Once when I called my beloved great-aunt Violet an old maid, my mother reprimanded me and told me always to say "maiden lady," an expression that intrigued me. (At home, my parents always said "old maid.") When I first read Smith's (1988) novel, I felt startled recognition when Ivy says she had never seen the ocean because I had always grieved over the fact that my aunt died at a ripe old age, never having seen the ocean only a few hours away. It seemed like such a terrible deprivation to have no memory of sunrise streaking pink across aqua water or the hypnotic murmur of sea sounds, so I wrote her lack into this tale of a revisited home place that radiates from a female center and functions on female sensibility—and has for the last century or so.

Summary

The women in my study employed texts, those of other Southern women and their own, as techniques of the self, both to constitute the self and to examine how the self is being constituted by their culture. In Foucault's analysis, care of the self, "texts and *practices* are inseparable" (Peräkylä, 2005, p. 870). In this chapter, I considered how the women I interviewed used reading and writing within sisterly relations as vital practices of the self. Here, I examined through a Foucauldian framework participants' arts and explored their use of reading,

hypomnēmata, epistolary writing, and marginalia, along with work they created subsequent to the class, a creative Master's thesis and journalistic essays. In practicing their arts of existence, these young white Southern women read and wrote to guide, examine and test themselves, to trouble representations and resist roles prescribed for them, and to re-remember relations and reconstruct a vision of home place.

CHAPTER 5

ANOTHER BEGINNING

On the Porch

You learn from the other women around you. And I think a lot of it is about society and how to find your place in it, so I guess I could say that the class changed, not really how I view the Southern women in my life, but how I view the world in relation to the Southern woman.
-Phoenix

Our class made me think about who we are as Southerners but also who we are as people.
-Deirdre

Certain books can change your whole outlook and the way you see the world. -Rachel

The story of [woman's] travels through [her] own texts remains in large measure unknown.
-de Certeau, 1984/1988, p. 170

If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? - Foucault, 1982/1988, p. 9

I began this work by seeking the source of magic, an alluring project surely, but an elusive object of knowledge. I wondered why and how interactions with texts and each other provoked transformative experiences when Southern women read Southern women. I posed research questions designed to probe perceptions of literature by and about Southern women among a group of ten young white women who grew up in the Deep South. In answer, the women told me stories, which sometimes became incantations of what they hoped to be. Speaking their literary and life experiences, they might have been chanting spells, warding off evil, transforming base matter, or divining their own present and past and future. The women performed their arts in communion with each other, enabled, in part, by the spirit of sisterhood they fostered through collaborative reading and collective interpretation.

I admit that I entered this project inextricably entangled in its fields of text and memory and place, and I leave it, at least momentarily, in that same state. I acknowledge my willful complicity. I remain bound to my participants, sharing many subject positions with them and sometimes participating in their practices. In researching how the women read fictional Southern women, I inevitably researched how I read Southern women. In looking at how they used textual practices to construct their subjectivity, I, too, used reading and writing and talking texts to construct and reconstruct my own. And together we read fictional women who also employed textual practices to constitute the self. The doubling goes on, like mirrors within mirrors, reflecting a multiplicity of women and indicating the limitless angles possible when they perform their self-constitutive arts.

Foucault's analysis of the Greek ethic of care of the self offered fruitful ways to theorize the experiences I witnessed and the conversations I engaged. Of course, I had to remember that illusion can be wrought by magic, too, and that language is never transparent or safe. In this study, I argue that my participants practiced care of the self, using reading and writing as technologies and relations as the site of their acts, much as the ancients did. They employed imaginative texts as guides for living, means of self-reflection and review, meditations on morality and mortality, tests to arm themselves for life, and as arts to help them constitute subjectivity with a sense of aesthetics, integrity, and freedom.

The women's practice answered the Foucauldian and poststructural feminist call to question representations, particularly of those placed on the wrong side of sexist binaries. In questioning representations of Southern women in fiction and in society, my participants resisted the roles of selfless mother, compliant daughter, and obeisant wife, rewriting the tropes of white Southern womanhood that still exert material power and reify the gendered gap between private

realities and public pressures. In fact, during the course of this study, new research was published that indicated alarming evidence of a very material effect of being a Southern woman.

Researchers at Harvard and the University of Washington found that life expectancy in America has risen steadily since 1960 among all groups in the population, with one notable exception: Southern women (Kornblum, 2008). They/we are dying younger, while Southern men and women and men in the rest of the country are living longer. This trend resulted in the first rise in fifty years in mortality rates among any group of Americans, a “phenomenon. . . unheard of in any other developed country” (Ezzati as cited in Bakalar, 2008). And it is a phenomenon heard of in this country only in relation to women living and dying in Appalachia and the Deep South. Such disturbing data will, I hope, lead to more research on this population and the material and psychic gaps that distance Southern women from the ideals and images associated with them.

However, the women who participated in my study did not particularly perceive Southern women as downtrodden and necessarily disadvantaged, although they certainly recognized dangers the culture poses to women, treating them sometimes with defiance, sometimes with irony. At our book club brunch, when I asked the group to play a word association game and say the first thing they thought of when I said the words *Southern woman*, they immediately, unanimously named three adjectives: sassy, strong, feisty. This is their vision. And I believe they embody it. I described how my participants, with fictional women as their media, reinvented home and re-imagined relations with self and other. They enacted their self-formative labors in fields of text and memory within a readerly sisterhood that served as an enabling condition and fertile site of relations. In reading and writing and working texts collaboratively, or porchin’, the women in my study transformed themselves into gifted artisans of the self. From the spaciousness of the porch, they joined together and, challenged by a particular text or female

protagonist, questioned how to go about the ongoing construction of self in a place about which they felt such ambiguity, but which also seemed to bring them strength and comfort.

Foucault (1965/1988) said that a work of art “opens a void, . . . a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself” (p. 288). With their arts, Southern women writers and readers can provoke a breach in which the South must question itself and the subject positions it allots women. In fact, as Foucault (1984/1991) argued, a

critical ontology of ourselves has to be. . . conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (p. 50)

Analyzing limits and transgressing boundaries becomes the project of Southern women readers and writers who question what we have been told we can be and explore what we might refuse to be, experimenting with the potential that beckons from beyond reified gender roles.

In our interviews, participants named a number of texts to which they had reacted strongly, but two books dominated their responses: *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988) and *The Golden Apples* (Welty, 1949/1977). I described in previous chapters how the women used female characters to help construct versions of themselves in their worlds, so here I entertain possibilities as to why their transactions with fictional women informed their practices of the self. I wondered throughout the study—and wonder still—why reading certain books affected participants so profoundly, often for years after their initial transactions with the texts. As previous chapters indicated, two fictional women, above all the others these readers encountered, continued to work their magic: Ivy Rowe from Lee Smith’s (1988) novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*

and Virgie Rainey from Eudora Welty's (1949/1977) story cycle *The Golden Apples*. Despite two and a half years of formal research and ten years of informal questioning, I find I cannot quite say why Ivy and Virgie cast such potent and enduring spells. The problem remains an enticing mystery to me. However, I have tried to indicate the characters' impact and suggest their continuing resonance for the women in my study by describing and framing theoretically what participants said in interviews about how they performed their textual practices.

Because *Fair and Tender Ladies* permeated so many interviews, I asked directly at brunch and in follow-up interviews, "Why do you think this book seems to have such a profound effect on readers?" All of the women replied in ways that conveyed the ineffability of an answer: "Mm, that's hard to say," one said. Another replied, "Well, I can't really articulate it. It's mysterious, isn't it?" Others said, "That's a tough question, but it's something powerful." "I have no clue, but it just does." Or, "Well, Ivy somehow articulates all those things you wanted to say and can't." "It's like Smith puts your own thoughts in writing. It's hard to put it into words." And, "We see ourselves in her and reflect on our own lives through all that Ivy goes through." Perhaps most telling was the response, "It's like I'm writing Ivy's letters or she's writing them to me."

I can, of course, speculate as to why this book resonated with my participants. First, there are the more obvious reasons why Ivy attracted intense attention: she showed the women facets of themselves and others in their lives. Readers meet Ivy as a precocious child who says, "I take a interest in Love, because I want to be in Love one day and write poems about it" (Smith, 1988, p. 15). We observe as she grows and tests her powers, adopting reading and letter writing as her self-constituting practices. The readers in my study commented often about how Ivy reminded them not only of themselves, but also of their grandmothers and mothers. They connected with

the little girl who loved to write and longed to write of Love, related to the defiant young woman exercising her sexual powers, read possible personal futures in Ivy's motherhood, and encountered a model for a fierce, unbent old age. Or maybe I am the reader reacting to the unbowed old lady who, freed of domesticity and alone but not lonely, rocks on her porch and reads voraciously.

In imagining versions of themselves or their wise old women in Ivy, my participants constructed their subjectivities "in part by *taking in* the new selves offered in [texts]" (Booth, 2000, p. 352). They *took in* Ivy's efforts to practice as an artisan of herself, crafting memory and experience and truths with every letter she wrote. As one participant observed, "It's like she's me and I'm her somehow." This sentiment echoed Ivy's own observation about a lover and an act that restored her relations of self with self, as she explains in a letter she will never send: "In fact I think he is me, and I am him, and it will be so forever and ever. What I did, I did it out of awful longing pure and simple. I did it out of love. Say what you will, and I don't care what anybody said or might say now, it could not have happened otherwise. I had to do it" (Smith, 1988, p. 230). She had to walk away from the life that made her feel desperate and disconnected from herself as she grew "starved for stories" (p. 226). Revivifying herself through her stories and her sexuality, Ivy regenerated her spirit. I think the character evoked for these readers the compelling human desire for movement toward the self, for love and friendship and the artistry that infuses the ongoing project of self-formation.

In reading Ivy together, my participants and I practiced other vital arts of existence that I have only touched on here: listening and speaking. Foucault (2004) described how the Greeks cultivated active listening as a practice to care for the self. Because much of Smith's (1988/1991) novel is written in thick dialect, with idiosyncratic syntax and childlike spelling, I always insist

that we read the novel aloud together in class. I urge my students to try and hear Ivy's accent by remembering voices they've known, not too difficult a task because our area borders the Appalachian foothills. I conjure up my great-aunts' and grandparents' ways of speaking, and I discovered in this research that many women also heard Ivy's words spoken in the voice of a family elder. I begin the oral rendition of Ivy's stories, and as we move through the text, I ask everyone to read aloud, emulating Ivy's voice as accurately as they can manage while everyone listens. We practice speaking and hearing the text daily.

I usually conclude our discussion of the book by reading Ivy's final letter aloud. I sometimes struggle to keep my voice from breaking as I speak her dying thoughts, and nearly always the women in the class cry as I read. Virtually every person I interviewed spoke about her memory of this particular moment in our class. On an early spring day, a late snow dusts Blue Star mountain like powdered sugar, and crocuses poke tender tips of palest green up through the white, reminding Ivy of long ago snows and springs and blossoms. Lines of verse and fragments of prose sift through her thoughts. As images of her past shift through her mind, reconfiguring memory and sensory impressions like a kaleidoscope changing patterns with every turn, Ivy recalls,

I used to think I would be a writer. I thought then I would write of love (Ha!) but how little we know, we spend our years as a tale that is told. I have spent my years so. I never became a writer at all. Instead I have loved, and loved, and loved. I am fair wore out with it. . . . The hawk flies round and round, the sky is so blue. I think I can hear the old bell ringing like I rang it to call them home Oh, I was young then, and I walked in my body like a Queen. (Smith, 1988, pp. 315-316)

It is a good death, I think.

When I utter the final syllable, a lengthy silence broken only by sniffles and sighs usually follows. Sometimes a few sobs escape, and occasionally someone steps out to compose herself. Once a student couldn't stop her wracking sobs, despite leaving the room and returning. The women in seats all around her got up spontaneously, put their arms across each other's shoulders and stood in a circle around her, swaying gently. They looked like an angel band, with spread wings protecting the vulnerable. The attentive silence everyone had been practicing during our reading of Ivy's life and death continued for a long time before I finally broke the spell by speaking, gathering us back to our place and time.

I have also used the final passage of *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Smith, 1988/1991) as a meditation on mortality in my own life. When my adored Great-aunt Violet died a long, excruciating death, I needed to construct some version of a good dying for her—one with flowers and blue skies and queenly young bodies. On the November morning when she died, I picked an old-timey pink rose climbing the side porch of her home place and tucked it into the last pages of Smith's novel. I had never noticed that bush blooming so late in the year. It's an old fashioned rose that my great-grandmother planted, and cuttings from it bloom in my yard now, their peppery scent spicing the air until first frost.

Once I was giving a talk on *Fair and Tender Ladies* to a group of elderly women in a local book club, and the dried, pressed rose fell out when I picked up my book. As I carefully put it back in place, a very aged woman in a wheelchair exclaimed, "Oh, Honey, there must be a story behind that flower! Can you tell it to us? Please?" So, reluctant at first, I told them my story of looking for a good death, aware with every word that these women hovered on that threshold. They all leaned in and listened intently as I read the last letter for them, too.

Listening, Foucault (2004) explained, requires “a certain art, . . . a correct way of listening” (p. 338) in order to attend properly to words spoken. For the Greeks, the hearer had to listen actively and with skill in order to direct attention “towards the right object or target” (p. 338). Then, “the *logos* [could] produce effects on the soul spontaneously and automatically . . . because it speaks the truth” (p. 338). Rereading required one, after having read and written, “necessarily [to] read [the text] again out loud” (p. 359). In the combination of those acts of assimilation—reading, writing, rereading, speaking, and hearing texts—truth might impress itself upon “the soul as subject” (p. 57). Absorbing truths by speaking and listening was and still is a risky affair. As Foucault observed, “In the logical activity of audition, there is something that necessarily belongs to the realm of pathos . . . [that] makes all hearing a bit dangerous” (p. 338).

In their multiple textual practices, the young Southern women in the “sacred circle” experienced and perpetuated a pathos inherently fraught with danger because it involved the integration of truths into a self being continually crafted and revised. Such practice required daring because it necessitated questioning beliefs, testing ethical behaviors, and conducting a candid review of the state of one’s self and one’s efforts to care for it. Listening to inscribe the soul with wisdom became a transformative art of existence that my participants practiced in concert with one another. On the liminal porch, these women talked and listened, sometimes creating their own revelatory space. I’m convinced that the spirit of sisterhood suffusing their literary porchin’ helped make their practice potent enough to transform lives.

I find it difficult to speak here of a conclusion, a finite ending in which I pronounce some irreproachable answer to all the questions along the way. Rather than answers, more questions unfold: How *does* reading exert such mystical powers? How *does* writing inscribe and transform a subject? How do relations enrich the transaction when women read together? And in how many

multifarious ways does place shape the gendered selves we can imagine? And so I return, still curious, to the question with which I began: What transformational magic erupts when Southern women read Southern women as a practice of the self?

Resisting neat answers about the sources and causes of the dynamism that first inspired my study, I engage more questions. My work as researcher, teacher, and Southern woman moves beyond the boundaries of this text and this study because I intend to keep teaching the books under discussion here, and I hope to continue vigorous conversations with other Southern women about them. However, I understand that magic is unpredictable and cannot be recreated simply because a teacher desires it so. So I proceed, still in wonder, to examine the arts and elaborations of self made possible by literary transactions conducted in the company of women.

The magic remains elusive, and my search for its catalysts begins anew.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

1. How old you are now and were you when you took the Modern Southern Literature course at Bridges Women's College?
2. Please tell me a bit about your background, especially as it connects with the South.
3. Thinking back to what we read in the course, can you recall which texts caused your strongest reactions? Tell me about what you thought, felt, or discussed with friends.
4. How have the texts you read or wrote or talked about affected how you perceive yourself as a Southern woman? Did the way you think about your relationship with the region or about your regional identity change at all? How?
5. Did any of the readings and/or writing for the class help you understand, in some way, other Southern women in your life? How?
6. How do you think that reading and discussing these texts with your particular group affected your experience? How did the fact that it was an all-woman group shape the interaction?
7. Did or do you use the texts in any way in your own life? How?
8. Did your experience with these texts and women affect your own writing? How?
9. Sometimes students of this course tell me that they found a certain writer or text so compelling that they had to share a book. Did you experience anything like that?
10. I'm working on a research project that explores this subject of Southern women reading texts by and about Southern women. I hope to interview alumnae from several sections of the course. What advice would you offer me? Any speculations as to what I might discover?