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Surveying the Soul: Shaping Auto-Criticism with Reflective Arts-Based Inquiry to Assess a Female Doctoral Experience

Abstract

This dissertation is an arts-based auto-criticism assessing the author's experience in her doctoral program. It is also perhaps the first dissertation elaborating on a method called auto-criticism, as derived from educational criticism and connoisseurship. The process of inquiry is rooted in arts-based methods of representation and theories of educational criticism and critical theory in the humanities. Philosophical approaches to artwork and the use of it in these methodologies was inspired by the independent arts practices of intuitive artists. The purpose of this project is for the author to develop, articulate, and create a sense of what auto-criticism entails in the social sciences and beyond. It is also to use arts-based inquiry to fully explore this method as it fits the author's perspective.

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Surveying the Soul: Shaping Auto-Criticism with Reflective Arts-Based Inquiry to Assess a
Female Doctoral Experience

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Monica Fain Rezac

June 2019

Advisor: Dr. Bruce Uhrmacher

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Author: Monica Fain Rezac
Title: Surveying the Soul: Shaping Auto-Criticism with Reflective Arts-Based Inquiry to Assess a Female Doctoral Experience
Advisor: Dr. Bruce Uhrmacher
Degree Date: June, 2019

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an arts-based auto-criticism assessing the author's experience in her doctoral program. It is also perhaps the first dissertation elaborating on a method called auto-criticism, as derived from educational criticism and connoisseurship. The process of inquiry is rooted in arts-based methods of representation and theories of educational criticism and critical theory in the humanities. Philosophical approaches to artwork and the use of it in these methodologies was inspired by the independent arts practices of intuitive artists. The purpose of this project is for the author to develop, articulate, and create a sense of what auto-criticism entails in the social sciences and beyond. It is also to use arts-based inquiry to fully explore this method as it fits the author's perspective.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

FINDING MYSELF AT THE BEGINNING

It's an unusually grey day in Colorado as I sit at my kitchen counter, 2-week old baby in his swing asleep next to me, trying to put into words an explanation of the purpose of my dissertation. Purpose can be a shifting notion, presently illustrated with a newborn a few feet away. Events occur in your life that change your feelings around purpose, around faith, around meaning. My doctorate experience has not been immune to this shifting.

With this work, I look to deeply and systematically reflect on the past few years, and how events have shaped my input, experience and approaching outcome of my doctoral program. I seek to acknowledge the heartbreaks and joys, the triumphs and embarrassments, and the many life events threaded throughout the years that contribute to the final work. To unravel and reweave; to break apart to make whole again. The purpose is to recognize that the doctorate experience does not exist alone and that the ordinary lived experiences that coexist in its time color both the contributions and the results.

I understand that the concept of a person's daily life shaping the type of student, or person, they are, or the resulting student experience is an accepted idea. There are many works on the contribution of life events of a student on their academic persistence in a variety of methodologies. I am specifically interested in the commonly shared "ordinary" life events that are shared across many groups. I am more specifically interested in how to systematically unravel the

every experience—those experiences that may be considered commonplace, and therefore potentially limitedly focused on as meaningful—and assess how the handling of these contributed to or took away from my experience as a doctoral student.

But, as I sit here sleep-deprived, words aren't coming easy and I struggle to convey something so big and so personal; to feel I'll do it justice and have it heard how I intend for it to be heard to capture years of my life and the meaning I feel they hold in illuminating a cultural undercurrent.

I have, and will likely be told again, that this topic holds less value than others; that because the focus is not on a culturally trending issues that it is less pertinent. I have been told that it is not interesting. I have also been told that it *is* interesting. The takeaway is that its interestingness will be subjective, as is true of all things, and the reason to focus on this work is the potential to move this method of auto-criticism forward and move me forward as a steward of it. Additionally, I look to contribute to the broadening of arts-based research usage in dissertations, which I believe serves as an effective mode of communication for auto-criticism.

This work and its details are my heart factualized within the span of this doctorate program. Many shared worries, heartaches, joys, and tribulations that were expressed over the years in countless text messages and emails among peers, moments before and after classes, and written all over the faces of fellow classmates assures me that this personal story can serve as an echo of others' hearts. It gives voice to the commonplace experiences that possibly have farther reach than we yet know. And beyond the personal experience, this work offers a systematic approach to making sense of the humanness attached to a student's navigation of an often unfeeling process.

As my life moves forward, with my doctorate program alongside, it is continually shaped by life events. Events that roll forward like salty murky waves, unclear and stinging at times. I feel

I'm on those waves, in those waves, being crushed by those waves at times. The undulation of experiences swirling and propelling me forward, culminating in peaks and then tumbling inevitably, drenching everything within reach, only to draw new breath and retreat out in perpetual motion. This is the sensation, the pull, over such a stretch of time. Something that needs this amount of time to expose such a pattern. At the edge of this rhythmic revolution, as a time of turmoil or change recedes and there is a quiet, it feels like renewal, an exhausting but exhilarating ride. Other times it's difficult to come up for air and can feel as though you're being pulled under. This is the ride I've been on; the progression of my program. A mini life within a life. Hidden presences beneath are exposed briefly before being covered up again. There is a knowing in this pattern of ups and downs that persists, with every passing day, year, or event. This has created a motion I've set my daily life to.

While many of these events are specifically unpredictable, their inevitable existence and the knowledge that another will soon come is reliable. How fast it comes, how steady I am in handling it, all contributes to the overall experience. I intend to describe the impact of those waves, my ability and inability to ride them, and the balance I've attempted to gain through their rhythmic presence in my life. This is not a shockingly unique account in that a reader may see themselves in my life events. While the volume of events that have stormed at times is impactful personally, it is not entirely unique. Most, if not all doctorate students surely face a tide of life events over the course of a years-long program. The uniqueness of this account is not in any shocking or exceptional events, but rather in the embracing of the ordinary. Their ordinariness is where my interest lies given that despite how *normal* they are, their impact and strain on a person's life can feel exceptional. It seems there is less conversation about events that touch most lives in terms of our choices, or lack of choices, and the impact the feelings around those have on the experience wholly. The presence of rather life-changing events (marriage, divorce, employment, children) are often encompassed in a list of survey questions, at times even combined into a single checkbox, even potentially and impersonally excluded as an influential

component to one's experience. My pull to share and critique my story is to allow light to get into those murky places where we, as female students, just keep going, just keep doing what's expected of us, what we expect of ourselves, with little conversation and critique of this experience available relative to our growing numbers. There is an opportunity to evaluate first-hand how this experience is shaped by these experiences, but also how we go about shaping it ourselves. I will only speak to my experience in this work with a focus on the systematic disentanglement of the contributing threads of the larger piece.

Reflecting on the Path

I've been faced many times with the question of why I've pursued a doctorate degree. Colleagues and friends have asked the natural questions of why I'm seeking the degree, what I plan to do with it, and the most frequently asked question; how long until I finish. These are reasonable questions but can feel very heavy at times of uncertainty, or when focuses outside of my program have most of my energy and attention at a given time making it difficult to wrap my head around an answer to that question. As my time in this program stretches on, I've frequently been asked how much longer I have left until I'm finished. These are all questions I've asked myself along the way also, so when compounded by the repetition of others also asking, it can become heavy. There is an overwhelming need within me to produce, achieve, and do things the "best" or "right" way. I imagine this partiality simultaneously allows me to continue pushing forward while earning the responsibility for my anxiety.

"Why am I doing this?" "What good will come of it?" "Why am I doing something that results in so much debt?" I believe that it means something and will go somewhere even if I don't fully know where that is right at this moment if for no other reason than I don't feel so much of one's heart can be invested in something without it impacting them. Like first-time parents, don't we tell ourselves that we will figure it out even though we have next to no proof that this is the case? If you're embarking on something so big there is a requisite leap of faith. So, when asked

at the onset of the program what your desired goal is, you have about as much knowledge of what an end result may look like as a never-before parent. Some will predict more accurately than others what life will look like. Others, like myself, will need the education of experience to arrive at the place I was meant to. To speak it accurately ahead of time would have been next to fortune telling for my personal journey. There was too much that was going to occur in my life over the next six years that I could not have predicted; too much that would shape who I am as a human, what this program means to me, what it doesn't, and where I'm going from here.

With so much shifting in my objectives for the program, as well as the knowledge I gained throughout about my field and myself, I need to critically evaluate the life events I experienced to better understand my persistence and purpose in review. Having faith in myself and my choices has kept me going even when the question of "Why?" has come at me after a late night of struggling over seemingly impossible coursework, pure exhaustion, an argument with my spouse over how little time I have to give to our relationship, or a requisite explanation to my boss about needing time away for something school-related that left me feeling less-than in my career. I just keep going. That inclination to *keep going* is driven by something within. And, despite, or because of, those difficult situations with my spouse, my work, my (enter in every person/group I know in this space), how has my experience in the program been shaped? Would my "Why?" be different with different coinciding life events at the end of all of this? Would the outcome of the work and time I've invested be different? I imagine it overwhelmingly would. Am I alone in trying to juggle so many roles? I don't think I am.

For the duration of my graduate education, I worked full time in public libraries, often in supervisory or management roles. In my field of public libraries, there is no financial benefit or upward promotional career track to holding a Ph.D. While I have not been opposed to it, I have not actively pursued the path of faculty. (See earlier paragraph regarding lack of clear objective at the outset). I've been intrigued by the possibility of this, but ultimately always felt I am not as good as the next student, don't have as much to say or to offer as a teacher. I've asked myself, "What

do I have to contribute?" And, "What could I really offer in the way of expertise as a faculty member?" More on self-doubt later.

I entered my doctoral program in, what I've learned is, a unique (and somewhat negatively judged) state of mind. I came open to learning and to the possibilities of what this experience could uncover. It was basically as straightforward as that. I didn't initially have a clear end-goal in mind for the career I expect after my program, unlike many of my peers. I had completed my Master's in the same school and taken a couple of classes in the program of my would-be doctorate program, but it was more of a tugging at my soul than a clear career choice. I am a reliable pro/con list-maker but vacillate between head-centered decision making and heart-centered (Gramm, 2012) when big decisions need to be made. My desire for logic battles my feelings and dreams at times.

Intimidatingly, upon introductions in my initial classes, peers had impressive answers to questions about their research interests and long-term goals. If I hadn't been so intimidated, I would have found it somewhat humorous given that the one thing I have learned without question in life is that we do not know what's ahead. While I do like a long-term life map, it rarely is accurate when I come upon any distant road markers. I used to feel apologetic for this, feeling it meant I was incapable of setting goals and achieving them, but I've since learned that not knowing can often be synonymous with openness to opportunities unimaginable before their time. My path seemed to lack direction, which I guess was accurate although perhaps not negatively so.

To be fair, many coming into this program already have a great deal of experience in the field. For those individuals, they undoubtedly had a clearer vision of what they were there for. But I find it dangerous to be so narrowly focused as well. If you go into a doctorate program with an end goal so defined, how do you see all the other opportunities presented to you. I am certain I came off a bit spacey, all the while beating myself up on the inside for not having a more

impressive answer. This weighed on me initially. But, with a little time and a head-down mentality to getting coursework completed, I was able to put some of the program behind me, gain a foundation in the work and what was possible, and start to develop my own answers to these questions. It took getting through some of the preliminary self-doubt and gain comfort in the rhythm of the program to be clear-headed enough to think about *my research*. Ultimately it proved beneficial to leave myself somewhat open. I explored courses I wouldn't have otherwise taken perhaps, met peers outside of the program, and avoided as much comparison fatigue—a constant danger in my past. My choices, and their influencers, will be addressed in Chapter 4.

What I did know coming into this program was that I had the drive and innate desire for something intellectually challenging and more meaningful to me in my career, and this felt like the next step in uncovering that. Where it would lead, I didn't claim to know. While I did realize it would be a massive undertaking in both time commitment and financial strain, I couldn't have begun to fully understand what that would look like until those realities were creating a complicated relationship between my program and the rest of my life.

So, when asked throughout my program why I was pursuing a doctorate degree, so often I felt I had an unsatisfying answer due to my inner turmoil; insecurity over my direction, anxiety about the debt to unforeseen benefit, my own fears and anxieties. I feel strongly that the outcome would have been different regardless of my answers due to the trajectory of personal life events and their impact on both my program and my personal purpose.

Where Do I Go From Here? The Academic Pursuit

Given the weight of responsibilities in my life, and my own uncertainties, I have not followed a path that looks like many of my peers. I have not amassed published papers and presentations. I've been told it's never too late for that, which means this experience parallels life in that regard at least. However, I had high expectations for myself around these aspects of my

program at the start, which were quickly adjusted with the reality of my work life balance, or lack thereof. It was not an intentional choice, but rather a product of my circumstances and choices. The phrase, *there are only so many hours in the day*, ran on loop in my brain at times. It was an attempted salve to soothe my burned expectations, never quite offering complete relief. I also made conscious decisions, in hindsight, that contributed to the direction of my path.

The overall academic experience of a doctorate program proved different than what I entered expecting often due to my work and personal life dynamics. Mostly, the demand for my time was something I had a hard time fulfilling. I came to feel as though I was constantly letting someone down. Spending days reading and crafting interesting discussion points for class was far from the reality of my long days spent commuting between home, work, and school, barely squeezing in enough time to caffeinate, then starting all over again on little sleep. Although I relied on student loans, the ever-growing impending balance kept me career focused.

I was never able to obtain a job with the university, which may have afforded me either tuition breaks or proximity to classes, although I tried many times early on. Bills still mounted in my personal life, so the importance of maintaining work was always there. The reality I tried not to think about was, and still is, the terrifying student loan total I'll lug away at the end of this. It creates additional pressure for this degree, my choice to do it, and all of the time poured into it, to have really been worthwhile.

Additionally, I had worked incredibly hard to put a career together for myself after financially starting over post-divorce and pre-graduate school. I would not easily give up the career progress I'd made. Choosing between my career and being a student in this program was not a choice I ever felt I should make despite suggestions from some. I was resolute in doing both, even as the opportunities at work grew bringing more responsibility and expectations. I had moments when I wanted to quit my program. Many moments. Mostly late at night when I'd worked a full day and was attempting an impossible class assignment all with the reality of

needing to be prepared for a work meeting by morning. But, after a (usually small) panic attack I was able to come back to doing the work and maintaining faith in the fact that it would take me where I was meant to go.

As the landscape of my doctorate experience, and of my life, evolved, I maintained an openness to what my degree path may lead to. Work had ideas of what my degree path could lead to. Professors and peers had opinions about where the degree could take me. My family members had their own thoughts. Each of these individuals know me in a different way and could see possibilities for me that aligned with the pieces of me they each see. I needed the idea to come from within though. I needed it to be something that spoke to me from a place of advocacy and heart in order for it to be worthy of all the time away from my loved ones.

As I reached the dissertation phase of my degree, I felt a longing to reconnect with the pieces of me that felt like emotional litter along the road to this degree landmark. I needed a way to explore how I got here before I could understand what that meant for what was next.

There is value in assessing where we've come from to better know where to go next. The life events I'll speak to over the past few years are not as challenging as what many face in life. Individually they're commonplace stressors. Even compiled into one big mess they are still far from what many deal with. And, to be sure, I am deeply grateful for the blessings in my life; these opportunities to grow myself included. But this collection of life events threaded throughout my doctorate program has been difficult for me, with layers of historical context and physiological stressors. And instead of feeling the relief I'd expected by making it through my coursework and most of my program, this place is something closer to a weighty feeling of requisite revelation. Reconciling that is a part of what this work is about to me, but further it is about how we do that and better understand the choices made, the results, and the path forward.

As the author Elizabeth Gilbert states:

The women whom I love and admire for their strength and grace did not get that way because shit worked out. They got that way because shit went wrong, and they handled it. They handled it in a thousand different ways on a thousand different days, but they handled it. Those women are my superheroes. (2014, June 22)

“Shit” has not necessarily worked out like I planned. Not during this program, not before, and I suspect not after. Sometimes it hasn’t worked out at all. At least not in a clear and linear manner. Things get in the way, often stressful or expensive things, just when you really need them not to. Staying the course, or adjusting the course, is what a years-long commitment to this program has required. Through this work I will share details of the storms I weathered, and how on clear days I can see the shore ahead. And how on cloudier days I still have moments of wanting to jump ship.

Defining an Experience

To discuss how life events shape an experience, we must first understand what is meant by “experience”. John Dewey, a philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer known for his research and discussions regarding art as process and experience, emphasized the value of examining the effect of lived experiences. Dewey (1934) explains that no matter how similar or dissimilar experiences are from one another, they have common patterns and conditions. “The outline of the common pattern is set by the fact that every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives” (Dewey, 1934, p.45). He explains that “an experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship” (p. 46). Seeking out these patterns and structures will help enable us to make more sense of the experience.

So often in this program, and in my work life, my mindset has been about checking things off a list of required accomplishments to get to the next phase. The experience of going through it is often realized in hindsight, as opposed to actively participating in the moment. If experience is

defined by our conscious life events, then being presently conscious is essential. One, of a small handful of, practices that kept me in the moment, digesting what I was experiencing day to day, was journaling. Whether meditative and positive or lonely and tear-stained, the act of journaling helped me see the experience as it was unfolding. This is a place I can revisit to see my story.

Journaling, for me, has been more about the process of physically writing down and sitting with my feelings on a matter. It has been more about the action of getting thoughts out of my head and onto paper as though I was telling them to someone, than about the actual output of something tangible to revisit at a later time. If I'd known I'd be revisiting them they would not have been as honest or uncensored.

Women's Many Roles: Life Events That Shape the Doctoral Experience

When detailing the doctoral experience of a woman around the average age of a Ph.D. student, there are many potential life events a student may face; marriage, divorce, career advancement, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, aging parents, and illness to name a few (Bowen & Rudenstine, 2014; Long-Jacobs & Gorlewski, 2014; Lynch, 2008; Maher, Ford & Thompson, 2004). Additionally, these events may lead to within-program events, such as changes to student status of part time or full time, financial support needs, advisor support needs, and the ability to relate to or have time to interact with peers (Maher et al., 2004; Sattell & Raine, 2001). These collective events will change and shape the individual's overall experience, including what they bring to the program, and possibly the outcome of a degree or their career path. The reasons why women struggle at the doctoral level are layered and not immediately recognizable according to Carter, Blumenstein, and Cook (2013). Women are often navigating many roles in their lives, some of which they may not realize are impacting their role as a doctorate student.

The lack of support across women's many roles may also contribute to their ability to fully engage and commit to the various responsibilities they have. As Heymann and El-Dardiry explain

(2009), the U.S. provides less support on social and economic issues such as paid parental and family leave, sick leave, and early childhood care. The lack of these supports at the federal level may limit a woman's ability to balance work, education, and family life.

Often the doctoral experience is examined through the perspective of a student's background, ethnicity, or cultural setting. While these aspects are important informants, the examination of everyday life events that occur given the age and gender of a doctoral student would benefit from additional input.

Making it Work: Institutional Support for Doctoral Students

There is a body of work discussing the pitfalls of student debt, difficult job markets after graduation, and the value, or lack thereof, of graduate degrees (Begun & Carter, 2017; Graham & Kim 2011). A quick Google search of "Should I Get a PhD" yields pages and pages of warnings against pursuing a doctorate, primarily surrounding issues of debt and a discouraging job market for PhDs.

This doctoral program is an effort to grow my professional career in a deep and meaningful way. It is an effort to explore my deepest academic interests and push the boundaries of my own capacity. I'm interested in examining how this has shaped me and how I've shaped the experience conversely due to, at least in part, the life events that have taken place over these years in this program. My age, gender, and circumstances, to name a few factors, have influenced my perspective and what I've both brought to and taken out of the program, but the collection of life events, which are at times treated anecdotally rather than as a pervasive force, is an influence worth examining. Critically looking at the relationship of life events during a doctoral program and the complexity of contribution can offer insight into where I go from here, how students can navigate these life events, and how a program can support students with these experiences.

My experience will not represent all female graduate students in their 30s. Those with a different combination of life events, as well as the range of positivity or negativity applied to their approach, and their own personal story of culture, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation to name a few, would certainly offer a different perspective of this experience. However, I suspect that a commonality would be the emotional weight of such life events and various roles placed on an already burdened student. Examining a personal experience, while unique on its own, may be able to speak to a doctoral student's navigation of life events more generally and bring more attention and access to this discussion. So much of how we function (in a graduate program, in the workplace, in our homelife) and at what capacity is due to life events and responsibilities circling around us and shaping how we move through our worlds (Gibson, Shanks, Dick, Czerniawski, Pratt & Vigurs, 2017). To learn more about the process of self-research and self-critique, I believe we can contribute to better learning outcomes. There is nearly always something to take away from each contributing life event you are emotionally invested in if you take the time to reflect upon it's impact-whether subtle or obvious.

According to the *National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS 2000) Methodology Report, 1999-2000* (Riccobono, Cominole, Siegel, Gabel, Link, & Berkner, 2002), the average age of a graduate student is 33.4. In the past decade higher education has seen a rise in individuals seeking degrees, especially among women (Gardner, 2008). In 2012, women earned about 52% of all doctoral degrees awarded, an increase from years past (Aud et al., 2012). With a rise in female doctoral students, there is also a need to contribute to our knowledge of what impacts women's lives throughout a doctoral program, and how their doctoral experience is impacted conversely. Given the average age of a student pursuing a doctoral degree, it is probable that a woman is in the thick of personal and professional pursuits alongside her pursuit of a higher degree. There are likely life events taking place during her program that both contribute to and detract from the experience and quality of the outcome. Women students have expressed issues related to their gender and how that affects their experience overall (Gardner,

2008). Examination and critique of the female doctoral experience with contributing life events will provide a valuable perspective.

This study does not attempt to specifically address female experience, but rather the impact of coexisting life events during a years long pursuit of one woman. There are a variety of focuses that could be taken with specific focus on a single factor. Rather than investigate this journey from a cultural perspective, I am interested in the critical reflection of the whole lived experience.

Additional contributors to the doctoral experience are attributed to the level of support they receive in their program. This support can be defined in several ways; financial, academic, emotional to name a few. With rising debt levels, graduate students are faced with finding ways to meet the financial demands of maintaining a years-long degree (Doran, Reid Marks, Kraha, Ameen, El-Ghoroury, & Roberts, 2016). Indebted college graduates have lower net worth, less home equity, and compromised ability to accumulate assets, as compared to their peers with the same level of education but no student debt (Elliott & Lewis, 2015).

Throughout my coursework, I've educationally benefitted from working alongside students from several different degree programs, various life stories, and unique motivations for seeking higher education. The peer support that exists among doctoral students is often close-knit and supportive as it is generally a small group of people together over a stretch of years. The benefit of multiple disciplines often enriches the learning environment, with different perspectives uniquely contributing to the group. This time with peers has also provided a window into how students across programs are supported and how that informs how they manage their degree path. It is insightful to learn of the various ways students are supported and supporting themselves through their degree work. Based on conversations with peers, some colleges within the university provide funding and paid work, thereby lessening the need or burden for a student to divide their time and focus by pursuing potential unrelated supplemental work. Some students

find jobs on campus offering close proximity to classes and an understanding environment to their work as a student. Others are financially supported by partners and family. Some, whether for the sake of maintaining a career trajectory or to maintain financial responsibilities at home, or both, must balance both full time work and doctoral work, creating the necessity to find a way to make school and work fit together. For those of us in this camp, there is little that can be done from a funding standpoint as the commitment to a full-time job and a doctorate program leaves few hours in the day for additional responsibilities for the sake of funding compensation.

Hoffer, Dugoni, Sanderson, Sederstrom, Ghadialy, and Rocque (2001) stated that at the same time the number of doctorates awarded to women was increasing, so was the length of time it took to earn the degree. Financial aid options available to doctoral students was cited as one of the main contributing factors to this length of time to complete the degree, particularly among women. According to Hoffer et al. (2001), women were more likely than men to depend on personal resources, whether it be from savings or off-campus employment. With rising costs in education (Mason, 2018), the various roles women may balance (McClintock-Comeaux, 2006), and a seemingly more frenetic pace to our lives overall (Brown, 2014), the purpose and value of pursuing a higher degree, particularly among women who comprise the majority of doctoral students, must be examined. What does a woman bring with her to the experience and what does the experience give back?

Sharing the Experience: Auto-Qualitative Approaches

A variety of research has been done surrounding unique circumstances students bring to the graduate student experience (Maher et al., 2004; Gardner, 2008). How everyday life events that occur during a doctoral program, particularly a woman's, may impact the process and experience has not been fully represented, particularly from a critical viewpoint of student engagement and outcome. Doctorate student experiences may be shaped by cultural orientation but not exclusive to and can be addressed more largely to the female student experience. For example, the trajectory of a woman's life, considering family and career milestones, may impact

the timing of pursuing a doctorate degree that may not match that of her male counterparts (Brown & Watson, 2010). Concerns regarding financial issues and the ability to support children and families, strains on personal relationships and productivity, and work-related stress, and issues around professional identity are reported as being of concern to women (Moyer, Salovey & Casey-Cannon, 1999).

Additionally, examining the impact those life events have on how an individual contributes to their own learning and engagement in a program has not been addressed in the form of critique. An auto-qualitative approach, or automethodology (Adams, 2013), can contribute a unique perspective to the whole of the voices on a topic. Extending that to include a critical viewpoint of the experience itself allows us to not only learn of the circumstances but recognize how those circumstances and the environment were handled, navigated, and how they either complemented or reduced one another providing us with another layer of inquiry.

This study aims to initiate a conversation around a critical self-inquiry method and the process of that exploration using a personal experience. There are several auto-qualitative methods that seek to better understand an individual's lived experience. Methods that stretch and take on new form across many disciplines contribute and borrow from one another. In addition to auto-qualitative approaches in the social sciences, the arts and humanities offer approaches in living inquiry and *autoethnography* (Irwin, 2013; Springgay, 2005; Springgay & Irwin, 2008). These methods inform this work as it too stretches across disciplines. The work of a lived experience may be researched and assessed innumerable ways. Borrowing from these methods to help shape the specific exploration I intend to conduct is necessary and beneficial.

In social sciences, autoethnography is often employed for this type of individualized exploration of the student experience. Ellis (2004) describes autoethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). This approach may include a female perspective, similar to the aim of this account. However, given that ethnography, and autoethnography by extension, address issues

through a cultural lens, ethnicity and cultural background are emphasized in examining that female experience. Critical ethnography aims to address positionality of an experience. Bhattacharya (2008) describes critical ethnography as the practice of focusing on the “intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability” of an experience (p. 305).

When defining the qualitative approach of critical personal narrative and autoethnography, Burdell and Swadener (1999) explained that they sought “texts that allow us to enter the world of others in ways that have us more present in their experience, while better understanding our own” (p. 21). They went on to detail the growing work around giving voice to tensions in everyday lives from a methodological perspective. The use of “critical” in their description was to describe the political nature of their work, but their motivation for this type of approach resonates with auto-qualitative approaches generally, and auto-criticism specifically as we’ll explore further.

Kaplan (1998) refers to approaches of personal story as “outlaw genres” (p. 208) and Smith (1998) describes them as “autobiographical Manifestos” (p. 437). Burdell and Swadener (1999) explain that there is importance of recognizing who contributes to these shared individual stories and aim for a collective benefit rather than only an individual one.

There is still a restlessness around the legitimacy of auto-qualitative methods and what they can contribute to research. Further, to utilize arts-based methods draws further questioning that must be addressed (Barone & Eisner, 2011). To add depth to personal story, and more personal accounts to the larger human story, the use of arts can offer an alternative explanation of experience (Eisner, 1995).

The quest for certainty and verified facts has been long pursued by researchers (Eisner, 2008). But to describe facts is difficult. Eisner explains that to describe what water tastes like is basically impossible because few words are adequate to do so; “Words, except when they are used artistically, are proxies for direct experience” (Eisner, 2008, p. 5). “Words are like cues to

guide us” (Eisner, 2008, p. 5). Similarly, artistic expression can also serve as a cue in guiding us to access an experience, emotion, or understanding.

Many qualitative researchers have worked to develop deeper understanding and wider respect of these methods by reporting their uses and offering criteria for quality work (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012). Regardless of the approach or what the method is called, there is a similarity among auto-qualitative methods that empowers the individual voice as a valid contributor to the conversation. The distinctions of each method bring a unique focus.

Critical Self-Inquiry: Auto-Criticism to Understand a Doctoral Student Experience

The process through which I will examine my experience is to be stretched, expanded, and grown from its emergence, in both the field, as well as from the beginning of this work to its conclusion. Auto-criticism is in its infancy as a unique method. The idea of such an approach was brought to being by scholars Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye, and Flinders (2017), of Elliot Eisner lineage, working in the educational criticism realm. Auto-criticism seeks to ask; what is our role in what we contribute and how do we shape our own story? With a value on how connoisseurship develops the ability to extend critique, the lived experience is the expertise of the researcher and the inquiry of it the path to understanding. An “interpretive frame” is created to include “both the researcher’s point of view as well as the theories she applies to the situation” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 42). A layered description infuses the study to provide context in answering that question and providing the basis for critique. An auto-criticism “[employs] analytic categories” but is not bounded by cultural perspective (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 79). Instead, it allows the researcher to “write about one’s own life in the contexts of being a teacher, a principal, a social worker, a nurse, or a business leader, and in doing so, one would want to interpret one’s own narrative with categories that bring new intellectual ideas to life” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 79). Not exclusively sharing viewpoints, or inquiry with the objective of determining purposefulness, but extending that to a critical assessment of those viewpoints and understandings of purpose to determine the nature of the participation in building those. In this view, I will write and paint about my life in the

context of a woman's life alongside a doctoral pursuit with the objective of researching, evaluating, and critiquing the effort, contributing factors, and immediate path forward.

In addition to relying on literature around other auto-qualitative methods, as well as their use in examining the female doctoral experience, I will also look to criticism and self-inquiry in other disciplines for overlap and understanding. An understanding of cultural theory, living inquiry, arts criticism, and criticism across other disciplines will add to the development of auto-criticism within the social sciences.

The term "auto-criticism" is debated among those of us venturing into its formation. Criticism, as I'll discuss later, may conjure negative associations of harsh judgment and disapproval. Also, the term criticism may not wholly describe what the purpose of the method is, which embodies more reflexivity than traditional cultural criticism. A social science researcher's valuing is through the eyes of the social group or self. The reason for this is to explore the human experience through this methodology. The term criticism, in the social sciences, stems from educational criticism and connoisseurship. While it borrows from cultural theory on aspects of critiquing something, often an object, this aims to critique an experience. Steps to offer critique borrow from the term in its traditional sense but are interpreted differently as they apply to a social being instead of a work. To further apply this method to the self is to turn the lens inward and leverage the systematic strategies of critique to experience meaningful reflection; not to assign a star rating or offer approval or otherwise to the experience.

For these reasons, the word *critique* is tentatively used by those of us moving forward with this method, which leans more toward the arts, inquiry, and storytelling. As in educational criticism, there is importance in both reflection and evaluation in this method. Reflection "refers to the intrapersonal and sometimes interpersonal process of deriving new learning from past experience" (Woodbridge & O'Beirne, 2017, p. 13).

Auto-criticism data and findings do not require representation in a personal manner such as journals, poetry, or artwork. The process and presentation of findings of an auto-criticism can take shape in many ways, much like an autoethnography. The representation of work is best served in a format that allows deep access to self-inquiry, reflection, and critical valuing, whatever form that takes for the researcher as participant. Personally, journaling and painting spur a more effusive and unstifled expression. For others, solely writing through the process may feel most communicative. For others still, it may be dance and movement. Arts-based research methods partner well with auto-criticism, particularly for those who seek an additional avenue for exploring their findings beyond the page. In psychology, inner work is said to be most meaningful when it comes through a process of letting go (Welwood, 1984). "It is hard to just let ourselves be, without holding onto some structure, some agenda, some goal or purpose" (Welwood, 1984, p.68). To find a process for this inquiry that allows for that can both underline the findings as well add reach to audiences. More on this in Chapter 3.

There is a body of auto-ethnographic work of female doctoral students addressing specific experiences as a person of a culture group; ethnicity, generation, sexual orientation, etc., however, an approach of auto-criticism has not yet explored the female doctoral experience with primary focus on the navigation of the experience and the cultural aspects as sub-focus. These methodologies differ in that an auto-ethnographical approach seeks to describe these cultural distinctions of an individual's experience. While it may take a critical viewpoint, the thread of an individual's cultural or background or orientation is a specific lens through which the experience is examined. An auto-criticism seeks to examine an individual's experience and critique the encounter. In auto-criticism, the experience is primary, and the cultural aspects provide supportive detail.

How to Share the Story: Inclusion of Visual Representation

Selecting the most transparent and descriptive representation of any qualitative research is important to provide the reader, and future research, with the fullest understanding of that

experience possible. According to Holm (2008), visual methods are gaining popularity in qualitative research. Photography and video are examples of increasingly used formats for sharing “truth and reality” (Holm, 2008, p. 325). This aim for “truth” in how an autobiographical account is shared holds the goal of representing the data in as transparent a way as possible to provide data for analysis. Qualitative research, particularly auto-qualitative methods, endure scrutiny for objectivity. What’s important to capture in an autobiographical account is the individual experience to contribute to the larger body of work and research on a topic, or to explore a new avenue. To do this, finding the best representation of that experience will contribute to the reader’s understanding of that individual’s lived account. In some cases, a visual representation, such as photographs, may help words come to life, and a reader to connect on an emotional level to experience being shared. This is beneficial when examining aspects of the human condition as qualitative research nearly always does.

“It is recognized that images, like words, can be used to twist and distort and mislead” (Weber, 2008, p. 50). Weber explains that it is important to acknowledge ethical implications and provide critical explanation of the process. He also prefaces this type of work with a reminder that not all artistic interpretation will lead to understanding or theoretical insight, but that this is true of all research. The use of visual representation for research is argued as worthwhile by many, including Cole and Knowles (2008), as it provides an accessible process for those who find understanding through these channels. Cole and Knowles (2008) share the following:

Drawing on our artistic sensibilities, relationship to the arts, and respect for ways in which artists of all genres have, throughout history, tackled society’s pressing sociopolitical concerns and confronted public audiences with their messages, we [turn] our attention to the relationship between art and research and the possibilities inherent in infusing processes and representational forms of the arts into social science inquiry. (p. 58)

In embracing the potential of arts to inform research, Cole and Knowles (2008) explain that one must be open to ways in which the various forms of the arts can represent scholarly inquiry. Through this openness, we may find a new way of understanding.

Inclusion Criteria

This work is about exploring and shaping the method of auto-criticism. “Arts-based inquiry can explore multiple, new, and diverse ways of understanding and living in the world” (Finley, 2008, p. 71). For me, it is also about using that method to disentangle my own doctoral experience and establish a systematic process for doing so. My personal journals will serve as my data. The technique I use to develop the process of data analysis in an auto-criticism is best represented with an arts-based interpretation of my findings. The *process* of creating a painting is where truth and authenticity unfolds for me; the physical action to work through thought. The importance is not necessarily in the resulting completed painting, but rather the time spent with it. The painting does offer a visual representation to share for possible wider or varying audience reach. Through that process from the data collection phase involving rereading of journals to the data analysis phase of retelling risen themes through a painting process, a deep exploration of my experience will be thoughtfully investigated with a systematic structure of what we look for when performing criticism.

Importance of Stylistic Choices

The Writing

It is important that the writing be less sterile and more personal as the researcher is also the one being exposed, and the intention is to access an artistic sensibility to see these experiences in a new way for different understanding. Vulnerability in the writing will offer more insight and the rigors of criteria inclusion and systematic processes to handle the data will provide reassurance of credibility. While emotion and first-person accounts are often discouraged in academic writing the benefit is a more embodied and natural way of communicating the personal (McNiff, 2008, p.29). “I urge [arts-based researchers] to use their own natural ways of speaking and try to get at the essence of what they perceive, discover, and want to communicate” (McNiff, 2008, p.29). As Eisner (2008) states, “The reason the deliteralization of knowledge (as a philosophy) is significant is that it opens the door for multiple forms of knowing” (p. 5).

The Data

The *style* of data used is personal account with hundreds of pages of journals dating 6 years prior to this study to present day, and with no original intent for use as data. The importance of using the most intimate of data for this is to examine the raw and uncensored account to gain new knowledge of this type of experience.

Eisner (2008) states:

Knowledge as a term is a noun. Knowing is a verb. And knowing may be a much more appropriate descriptor of the process of inquiry made in pursuit of a problem that will not yield to a set of rigidified procedures. Inquiry always yields tentative conclusions rather than permanently nailed down facts. (p. 4)

The process of dealing with this type of data will include untangling the threads of the personal experience to distinguish the strongest fibers most representative of the major themes throughout the collection of entries.

The Paintings

The paintings will serve two purposes. They will offer a metaphor and illustrative example of the process of untangling these themes, as well as represent the individual themes themselves. The paintings will be in the form of abstract mixed media paintings, incorporating paper, ink, and paint. The purpose for use of abstract techniques calls upon intuitive painting techniques that aim to access freedom and spirit within our souls to allow us to “let go” (Bowley, 2012, p. 32). I believe that to more objectively address the subjective we must first allow ourselves to *let go*. An arts-based approach to analyzing and presenting data honors the various ways in which we both live and tell our stories. “Seeing methodology through an artful eye reflects a way of being in the world as a researcher that is paradigmatically different from other ways of thinking about and designing research” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 1).

Purpose of the Present Study

Given the limited research utilizing an auto-criticism approach, the purpose of this study is to work to develop this method to seek a deeper understanding of the impact of peripheral life events on shaping the female doctoral experience. The purpose is to explore both the methodology and the critical viewpoint of this issue.

An auto-criticism allows for examination of this experience through a critical lens that accounts for the individual experience as well as the setting that experience is encountered through. It allows for a contemplative description of how the various individual factors play into the experience, but also for a critique of how that shaped the setting. A critique of the setting itself is also examined, in this case a doctoral program within a college of education. The aim is to explore how both a woman's life and their doctoral experience are simultaneously impacted by the balancing act of these roles an individual embodies.

Qualitative methods will be used to understand my own experience more fully, as well as the capabilities of an auto-criticism approach. Through this research process, I hope to provide meaningful reflection of my personal story to contribute to the knowledge of an aspect of the female doctoral experience as a way of shaping this emerging method. I will utilize arts-based research (ABR) methods for data analysis as a means of deepening access to a reflective process. These methods will assist in providing a layered and descriptive personal account to support this method.

Research Limitations

There is a limited, but growing, body of research specifically focused on how the various roles women possess in their life during a doctorate program speak to the overall experience. At the time of writing this work, there isn't any completed research within the methodology of an auto-criticism. With limited to no research performed using auto-criticism, there is both a

challenge and an opportunity to explore this method deeply. I will be tasked with adhering to other auto-qualitative methods and standards for framing a trustworthy contribution to existing research, drawing from these other methods where there is overlap and differentiating where an auto-criticism can provide a unique perspective.

Research Questions

My research questions are as follows:

1. How do life events of a woman in her 30's shape her doctoral student experience?
2. How does an auto-criticism uniquely describe and evaluate an experience, in this case a student's path in navigating their doctoral experience, and what does this contribute to our understanding of that experience?
3. How can an arts-based representation contribute to our understanding of the criticism and auto-criticism as a method?

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

To better understand aspects of the female doctoral student experience through auto-criticism, it is necessary to first review existing personal accounts of student life experiences of doctoral students in various auto-qualitative approaches. It is also necessary to explore the methodological approaches used to uncover these experiences that contribute to our understanding of a self-reflective account of this lived experience. Issues to be examined include; the impact of life events on an individual in a doctoral program, support resources, the student's contribution to the program and their own experience, various roles a female student may encounter throughout, and the question of timing for pursuing a doctorate degree in the trajectory of a woman's life. These issues offer a guide as a guide and starting point, remaining open to possible differing paths.

Method selection and differences among auto-qualitative approaches will be examined with the objective of introducing auto-criticism as a unique approach. With this emerging method, it is important to explore the methods often used to tackle this topic and determine how auto-criticism differs. It is likely that there is some overlap in what the methods can uncover. Regarding the subject matter of a female doctoral experience, previous accounts offer differences in findings due to life circumstances, backgrounds, locale, and field of study. For this exploration, life events generally around the average age of a female doctoral student will be a consistent framework for examination of the experience, with this as the content to develop a practice around auto-criticism as a process. Awareness of the voice and mode this is shared through is important in assessing

the methods used, as well as what the perspectives contribute to our understanding of this topic generally. Research around what is generally thought of as everyday life events in a woman's life (marriage, divorce, pregnancy, childbirth, career, motherhood, etc.) will provide a better understanding of how one's doctorate experience may be shaped by these events and will provide a basis for applying auto-criticism with its unique objectives.

Impact of Life Events During the Doctoral Student Process

When collecting information regarding life events of a woman in her 30s, topics include: Marriage, divorce, career advancement, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, aging parents, and illness. Not every woman in her 30's will experience these events of course, and the weight of any one event on an individual's life will never be identical. This supports the use of qualitative methods to deeply explore this topic to provide a fuller understanding. However, there is potentially some commonality in how events impact how an individual approaches life events, including her doctoral program and the balance of concurrent events. According to Maher et al., (2004), women who take longer to complete their doctoral program encounter "one or more major obstacle that seriously delayed her progress, including child-care responsibilities, disruption of family life from death or divorce, and/or an inability to secure stable funding or funding that did not severely interfere with her degree progress" (p. 402).

Should a student need to limit their involvement in their program to part time, they may face additional struggles as a counter to the necessity of more time for other aspects of their life. According to Gardner (2008), part time students express feelings of separation and a lack of integration in their programs. There is also an increase in the number of students with children in doctorate programs, which women have discussed as a factor in the assessment of their experience more than men in recent studies (Gardner, 2008).

Women may feel they have to defend their study time according to Carter et al. (2013). Partners and family members may feel that too much of their time is going toward studies, while some women report that they've heard academics state that a 60-70 hour per week time

commitment to the program (studies, courses, etc.) should be expected (Carter et al., 2013). This is perhaps expected on top of another job, family, and partner commitments of the individual. Carter et al., explains that “many doctoral student women come up against difficulties with partners because their emotional, sexual and social availability may have decreased” (p. 346). There are tensions across the various roles they hold that affect relationships and time available to each.

According to Mason, Goulden, and Frasch (2009), universities may be positioning themselves to lose some of their most talented students due to the expectations placed on students that does not allow for work-life balance. With the makeup of academia shifting considerably over the past several decades to a higher percentage of women (Gardner, 2008), the focus on balancing female roles and what those may be must be studied. The academic fast track, which Mason et al. (2009) refer to as tenure-track faculty positions in research-intensive universities, is a bad fit for those needing and wanting to focus on family and more balance in their lives for example.

The lack of work-life balance encouragement and understanding in many doctoral programs may cause a student to shift their overall goals, moving away from pursuing faculty positions (Mason et al., 2009), which leads us back to the question of purpose and motivation to pursue a doctorate program. Even if a faculty position was initially a student's goal, it may not be by the time they are finished with their program, instead seeking careers in business or government (Mason et al., 2009). The environment as a student and ultimately where a student pursues work with their Ph.D. is notable as priorities shift with generations and the majority gender of doctoral programs changes.

With an average age of a female doctoral student falling within a potential timeframe to begin forming their families, the pursuit of a Ph.D. for the purposes of a tenure-track faculty position may be impacted (Mason, et al., 2009). With the reality of the amount of time it takes to

complete a Ph.D., as well as seek a tenure-track faculty position, let alone receiving tenure, can be an intimidating timeline.

There is a body of work studying persistence and attrition of doctoral students and the possible factors contributing to those who do not complete their degrees. At the doctorate level, students are “extremely capable, academically successful prior to the program, and carefully selected”, however they are least likely to complete their chosen degree (Golde, 2000, p.199). For women specifically, there is question of how personal factors and life events contribute to this situation. Wasburn-Moses (2008) found that “doctoral students felt least satisfied with their ability to juggle work and family with their overall workload” (p. 263) and as Smith (2006) described, students deal with feelings of guilt, worry, and anxiety around time away from family contributing to already high levels of stress. According to Lovitts (2001), 70% of students who left their doctoral programs incomplete cited personal reasons. Uncovering what may qualify as a personal reason is something these and many studies have investigated. Finances, health, and family have been some of the notable reasons. When conducted by survey, students can select any and all of these reasons, but personal insights are limited in this format. Reasons seen as more universal deserve a closer look because they are more pervasive. If they’re so prevalent they are notably contributing to attrition, there is potentially something beyond the general qualities of the events themselves that are contributing to the collective feelings around the experience.

Relational support resources for students throughout their program and as they navigate life events also may impact the overall experience. There is a great deal of research dedicated to the student-advisor relationship and its impact on a student's success in a program. A woman's experience in the program is, in part, impacted by the relationship she has with her advisor. This is one of several relational support factors to consider.

According to Golde (2005), the career trajectories and professional life portrayed by faculty may not fit with what the student perceived for themselves. If a woman has different purposes for pursuing a Ph.D. than her advisor may seem fit, this may be a cause for strain and a

perception of inadequate support. In some cases, female students have indicated that having a female advisor is not necessarily what provides the most supportive relationship, but more that the individual simply need to show overall supportiveness and mentoring and that this can occur regardless of advisor gender (Kurtz-Costes, Andrews Helmke & Ulku-Steiner, 2006). However, it has also been noted that women doctoral students do not see enough female role-models in faculty positions who are successfully showcasing family-friendly schedules and work-life balance (Mason et al., 2009). This limits where they can draw comparisons and encouragement from for their own path. Regardless, the student-advisor relationship is deemed important to the student's success in a doctoral program (Mainhard, van der Rijst, van Tartwijk, & Wubbels, 2009; Stallone, 2003).

Another supportive relational resource for doctoral students is peer groups. This has been explored in the literature in terms of their contributing impact on student experience. Peer study groups prove to be beneficial in encouraging relational and supportive behaviors among students, which is difficult to directly measure but arguably has long-term impacts (Devenish, Dyer, Jefferson, Lord, van Leeuwen, & Fazakerley, 2009). One potentially related outcome includes higher completion rates of programs. The reality is that peer study groups are time-consuming though. They require preparation and time out of a student's schedule. Depending on other life commitments, this may not be an option for some students, placing them in a different academic setting overall than some of their peers who are able to participate in peer groups. Programs that match students in peer groups with like experiences may assist students more (Gardner, 2008), but the likelihood that students navigating these life factors would be able to accommodate such group meetups would still be a challenge.

According to Stubb, Pyhalto, and Lonka, (2011) scholarly community plays a role in a doctoral student's socio-psychological well-being and their engagement in their studies. This is important to note as we explore how female doctoral students experience the doctoral program. It has already been mentioned that female students encounter programs differently than males in

many ways. Supportive resources and keys to engagement are essential in shaping that experience. Stubb et al. (2011) state that emotional, and potentially depressive, symptoms may contribute to or detract from a doctoral student's interest, inspiration, and engagement in being a part of their academic community.

Many students persist in their program despite difficulties faced (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek & Hopwood, 2009). It is difficult to ascertain, but the intention and purpose of an individual's pursuit of a doctoral degree may contribute to their persistence. A body of work around persistence exists to address this topic specifically.

Doctoral students' ability to cope with stressors is in part reliant on the support systems they have in place. Social support can mediate stress and even shift a student's outlook on a potentially stressful situation simply by being available (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). According to Jairam and Kahl (2012), social support impacts degree completion. This social support can come in the form of family, friends, and faculty. "Feeling cared about and appreciated at the departmental (or faculty) level has positive effects on doctoral students' emotional exhaustion" (Devine & Hunter, 2016, p.52).

With all of these factors playing a role unique to each individual, it is important to think of the whole, which is the environment and a student's role in it. "Persistence in doctoral candidates is the result of the individual and his or her interaction with the social and institutional environment" (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012, p.204).

Connoisseurship and Criticism

According to Uhrmacher et al. (2017), connoisseurship entails the skills of using one's senses to capture a present experience and of making detailed distinctions. Connoisseurship takes place mostly in private. It is the development of a deeper knowledge of something at the level of its most intricate qualities and subtleties. It does not mean there is a public element to this knowledge. A critique of that item, with all the deep knowledge a connoisseur can draw from, is where the utility for that knowledge comes to light. Providing a critique of something with a deep

personal understanding is what provides access to the experience for those without a deeper understanding of it. All female doctoral students possess a level of connoisseurship on what it means to be a female doctoral student. It is the critique of that experience that allows it a public forum and access to others for better understanding. It is also where differences and similarities can be seen.

Arts-based approaches further this reach to audiences outside academia. The idea that traditional research approaches to sharing information keeps “researchers in and communities out of the ivory tower” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 57).

Connoisseurship is often thought of in terms of the arts. Eisner (1991) defines connoisseurship as a process of “epistemic seeing”, with episteme referring to knowledge and the seeing of that knowledge referring to the use of “all of the senses and the qualities to which they are sensitive” (p. 68). An individual gains expertise beyond general knowledge about a topic or experience. Once this expertise is gained, the extension of this becomes criticism. Critiquing this topic of expertise comes from the deep knowledge an individual possesses about it.

The aim of connoisseurship, according to Eisner (1991), is to “make fine-grained discriminations among the qualities that constitute a complex and subtle perceptual field” (p. 199). By discriminating, a connoisseur can differentiate small variances of an experience or its contribution to a setting. Further, the connoisseur’s perception and interpretation of those subtleties allows them to provide a valuation or critique on the quality’s impact to that experience or setting and offer new insights. Uhrmacher et al. (2017) explain that there are three main points that create the foundation of connoisseurship. “Connoisseurship is grounded in the connoisseur’s interests and belief in the importance of what he or she seeks to understand” (p. 11). The expertise and understanding are from firsthand experiences. And, that the direct experience is open to and can be enhanced by learning from others. In other words, the connoisseur is open to and welcomes social and cultural factors to shape and inform the meanings of what they continually learn.

Criticism was paired with education as an approach by Elliot Eisner in the mid-1960s (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). However, criticism as a practice has been in place in the arts and humanities for centuries. Literature, art, and performance have long been critiqued in their own disciplines. However, through evaluative work of education, Eisner brought the concept of connoisseurship and criticism to the curriculum and educational environment. Educational criticism has four elements: description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). The reason for this distinction will be explored again when other forms of criticism and theory are used to inform the approach of auto-criticism. These distinctive elements prepare a researcher for active valuing, meaning that the purpose of the critique is to apply informed judgment on a situation and take action of some kind and to seek improvement in real world settings (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). This is also a differentiation from other forms of auto-qualitative methods.

Qualitative approaches from the individual's perspective are reduced by critics at times for a lack of transferability. However, as Uhrmacher et al. explain (2017), "experiences are often multilayered and there is often more than meets the eye" (p. 5). This reality can be recognized when addressing social issues through qualitative approaches, specifically auto-qualitative approaches, opening us up to explore the individual experience and gain deeper insight into a particular topic. Criticism as a method encourages examination of everyday experiences that may otherwise go unnoticed as a contributing factor to a larger issue or setting dynamic, and emphasizes the importance of making "the familiar strange" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 5). This practice of making "the familiar strange" allows us to look at something with fresh eyes and see things we may not have seen before. We often cannot see our own daily realities clearly without making a conscious effort to step back and examine. This concept is a guiding principle in criticism but becomes even more important to acknowledge when exploring an auto-criticism, which will be further determined in the methods section.

Criticism to Process Experience

Research in general, and criticism certainly, aims to advance our understandings of an experience (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). As mentioned, there are many qualitative paths toward understanding an experience, so why criticism?

Critical storytelling is the process of an artist or storyteller confronting some phenomena or qualities in people and settings under scrutiny (Barone, 1992). Critical storytelling aims to reexamine the values and practices of settings and institutions. This can occur observationally or from a first-hand account. The aim of this study will be to adopt a “critical storytelling” process through which we will learn of the values and practices, life events in this case, in the context of a female doctoral program.

There are many approaches to criticism. Swartz (1993) describes qualitative criticism as a slightly different approach than the criticism described by Dewey (1958), Eisner (1985), and McCutcheon (1979, 1982). Some of the qualities of criticism mentioned by these three researchers are: “criticism is judgement anchored to a work object or work to be studied; criticism is influenced by the experience of the judge; and criticism involves the analysis of constituent parts through synthesis to a unified whole” (Swartz, 1993, p. 5). Swartz states that in addition to these qualities, his approach to qualitative criticism includes the specific focus on “values, knowledge, and experience of the creator of the thing or act being evaluated” (p. 5). This is to better understand both these additional qualities of the creator of the object or act as well as our own. In Swartz’s explanation, context refers to people, places, and situations that people encounter. The qualitative critic is interested in the context of the event, the intent of the producer of that event, and the effect of the event upon other people. He goes on to explain, “the difference between criticism and qualitative criticism is not merely the addition of the perspective of the doer/designer/producer of the thing or act being criticized, but more importantly the five axioms or assumptions of naturalistic inquiry” (1993, p. 9). This approach is a version of how to approach criticism and self-study within a natural setting.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), axioms are defined as a set of “basic beliefs” that serve as a foundation for a theoretical structure (p. 33). More specifically, they are “undemonstrated or undemonstratable” (p. 33). It is important to look at the five axioms of naturalistic inquiry when approaching self-study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define the five axioms:

Realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic, the knower and known are interactive and inseparable, only time and context-bound working hypotheses are possible, all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects, and inquiry is value-bound. (p. 37)

Naturalistic study requires that the researcher carry out the study in its natural setting. This creates the need for invested time and resources on the part of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As mentioned, another discipline to draw guidance from is that of art criticism, which can offer some parallels to criticism in other domains. As Dewey (1934) describes, “criticism is a search for the properties of the object that may justify the direct reaction” (p. 321).

Dewey (1934) states:

[The critic] will realize that his assertion of “good” or “bad” in this and that degree is something the goodness or badness of which is itself to be tested by other persons in their direct perceptual commerce with the object. His criticism issues as a social document and can be checked by others to whom the same objective material is available. (p. 321)

This supports the description by Eisner (1991) in which we see that criticism is what extends connoisseurship beyond the personal and into the public realm. It allows us to have a conversation about something deeply known by one or some.

The word *criticism* may be perceived as negative. However, it is important to keep in mind that criticism is a tool used to examine something through the eyes of an expert, and that it is openly acknowledged by Eisner (1991) and others that the public conversation around the topic allows for multiple perspectives. Dewey (1934) explains criticism as judgement and that the interaction of the object and the individual experiencing it with their own “sensitivity and knowledge” (p. 322) will result in varied judgements.

In other words, criticism is productive in igniting a discussion, that it brings expertise and thoughtful perspective to the discussion, and that the presented object or presentation is received through the critics' own experience which doesn't devalue it rather adds value to it. This openness allows for many perspectives and ways of seeing the world.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

FINDING MY WAY

“I never made a painting as a work of art, it’s all research.”

-Pablo Picasso

Philosophical Assumptions & Framework

Drawing from educational criticism and cultural criticism, and comparing to aspects of auto-ethnography, I sought to illustrate what auto-criticism is, and what it can contribute, through the examination of my lived experience as a doctoral student. As Creswell (2013) states, it is essential for researchers to reflect on the philosophical assumptions underlying their study. This study borrows from a feminist theoretical framework in that it offers a unique female voice (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995), but aims to focus on the subsequent critique and analysis as much as the personal experience offered. As DeVault describes, feminist researchers and theorists have moved in the direction of “undertaking research topics with personal significance” (DeVault, 1999, p. 189). This draw to explore a collection of experiences, many associated with roles tied to my womanhood, alongside the pursuit of a doctorate, something essentially gender-neutral, finds foundation in feminist theory. However, this work is not an intentional contribution to feminist theory. While it is informed by those who have explored feminist theory approaches in the past as a strategy for assessing my experience, the emphasis of this research is on the researcher’s lived experience and process of inquiry and critique. I will not look specifically at the doctoral

experience from a feminist viewpoint, but from the viewpoint of someone who has experienced an assortment of life events that could happen in a number of ways to women, and men in some cases, and the collective outcome of that through the expertise I've gained having lived it. The intentional awareness drawn to reflect on this experience now, and the process to systematically work through that reflection is the core of this work.

As discussed previously, the framework for this study is shaped by the facets of my life; my workplace, home life, and school environments. "Context becomes the framework, the reference point, the map, the ecological sphere; it is used to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding what they say and do" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p.41). In an auto-criticism there will be importance given to the personal account with in-depth description, as well as providing critique through my own expertise as the one having lived it. "This perspective on context-as a rich resource for examining and interpreting behavior, though, and feeling-contrasts sharply with the view of traditional positivist research, where context is a source of distortion" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p.41).

I did not aim to deconstruct a scenario or setting that is directly comparative to anyone else's, and yet by sharing such rich description, it will afford the reader to draw comparisons to others' experiences to shed light on transferable accounts. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) states, "Voice is the research instrument, echoing the *self* (or the "soul" as Oscar Wilde would put it) of the portraitist-her eyes, her ears, her insights, her style, her aesthetic" (retrieved from: www.saralawrencelightfoot.com/voice). While an auto-criticism methodologically differs from portraiture, it borrows heavily from the descriptive nature of this approach and allows for a personal narrative to come through in expressive ways. For the purposes of this study, utilizing voice, as well as alternative arts-based approaches, I will be able to fully explore the "self" and have detailed resources for evaluation and critique.

According to McNiff (2008), there is a risk in researchers making the work too personal and becoming ineffective in their inquiries, "the creation of a clear method that can be easily

described and then implemented in a systematic way that lends itself to the reporting of outcomes is ideal” (p.33).

Exploring the Doctoral Experience Through Auto-Criticism

Auto-criticism is an emerging method with little, if any, previous research attributed to its approach. There is room for exploration in this emerging method. Auto-criticism develops the ability to recognize “nuanced meanings” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 12) of the experience in which you are a connoisseur of. Being able to make these recognitions is developed over time and goes beyond what a casual observer or new participant in an experience may be able to recognize.

Qualitative research methods that are autobiographical in nature explore social theory. It is an explanation of lived experiences told in its own relative present time (Hughes et al., 2012). From the lived experiences shared with us through autobiographies, auto-ethnographies, and others, we can theorize about relatable understandings.

Creswell (2013) argues against the term autobiography stating that a “study reflects the history, culture, and personal experiences of the researcher” with a focus on how those aspects shaped the work (p. 54). While the importance of process is true of both an auto-ethnographic approach and an auto-criticism approach, there is a notable deviation when employing criticism. Like all qualitative research, criticism also provides “thick description” of these aspects but will not use any one of them as the sole criteria for critique of that experience. It is not a critique of the culture experience but rather the experience as its own entity with culture possibly informing. The evaluative call to action of criticism whether that be social action or in valuing of the outcome is a nuanced difference.

Critical social theory typically addresses specific experiences and issues around privilege, power, and economics (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). This is where critiquing of aspects of a society occurs through an individual’s personal experience. There are a variety of critical social theory approaches; feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, social justice,

and others (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Focusing on individual aspects, a researcher determines this as the basis for their autoethnographic account for example.

Cultural Theory

Having a cultural literacy around the experience or topic helps us better understand what we're seeing when constructing a critique. As Eisner (1991) describes, cultural literacy is about the "skills necessary to know how to read a wide variety of forms through which meaning is conveyed" (p. 127-128) and "the ability to read cultural forms of representation" (Richards & Uhrmacher, 2012, p. 28). Meaning that it is important to apply understanding across many forms of content. "It is essential to construing meaning, perceiving patterns, and to making sense of the environment as a whole for personal growth" (Richards & Uhrmacher, 2012, p. 28). Cultural theory can inform criticism as well. Structuralism and post-structuralism can inform how we interpret our own stories and provide reference for how to deconstruct what we're seeing and expressing from a critical viewpoint, whether it be from a structuralism viewpoint of creating our own perceptions or a post-structuralism viewpoint of framing our perceptions against established reference points, there is rich study in approaches that can guide us in using words and critique in our own telling of a firsthand account. In structuralism, the structures referred to are those constructed from our perception of the world rather than objective knowledge already in existence. In other words, we create our structures and our stories from that. From a structuralist viewpoint, "language doesn't just reflect or record the world: rather it shapes it, so that how we see is what we see" (Barry, 2017, p. 61). Post-structuralism, by comparison, questions the process of creating meaning without an objective reference point. Questions surrounding perception and our creation of meaning are not unfamiliar to qualitative researchers. What has been studied and learned from these, and other critical viewpoints, can inform our thought processes when shaping our own critique.

Like cultural theory perspectives, Geertz (1973) states, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun" (p.5). describes that the practice of ethnography is

defined by the effort of providing “thick description”, a term borrowed from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle. As we have seen, this is a hallmark of all qualitative approaches and necessary to provide the reader with a view through the expertise of the researcher.

Objectivity & Subjectivity

Eisner (1991) describes the search for objectivity in qualitative research as seeing things the way they are. “To be objective is to experience a state of affairs in a way that reveals its actual features. To see things the way they are is to experience or know them in their ontological state” (Eisner, 1991, p. 43). However, this pursuit of objectivity is complex of course. Researchers traditionally seek ontological objectivity, or “veridicality” (p. 43), to avoid subjectivity in our perception and understanding. Through procedures and established criteria, a researcher develops methods working to eliminate personal assessments. Eisner (1991) argues that while there is value in this, it may lead us to miss opportunities for researching things “we cannot measure” without taking multiple perspectives into account (p. 49). Objectivists will argue that approaches like auto-criticism threaten objectivity with its core data collection of personal judgement and observations. But, utilizing the “self as instrument” (Eisner, 1991, p. 49) allows for multiple perspectives that may not be measurable, but add knowledge and understanding to an area (Eisner, 1991, p. 34). As Eisner (1991) explains, “The belief that only through a standard prescribed procedure can a useful description, interpretation, or evaluation of the world be secured dismisses what novelists, film makers, historians, and anthropologists have provided through their works” (p. 50). Arguably, these representations of lived experiences contribute to a greater conversation and understanding of the human experience.

In auto-criticism, the approach will be one of a guide through an experience. “Unlike maps, qualitative studies are general, they are not mathematically scaled to match the territory, and they are more interpretive than narrative” (Eisner, 1991, p. 59). Eisner goes on to explain that guides often call our attention to things we may not otherwise see and allow us to have a different experience or understanding than we would on our own without that guide showing us a way.

A challenge of auto-criticism is to effectively step back and experience one's own experience anew. There is importance in identifying subjectivity in research and this is particularly true of auto-qualitative approaches. This allows to clarify personal stakes within the research (Peshkin, 1988). While all of the experiences gathered are to be examined, the process of examining them should come with a *sense* of unknowing to fully revisit and critique it. There should be a structure in place to facilitate this. While addressing various categories in an auto-criticism, in this case theories of female experience and roles, a caution is necessary not to rely too heavily on those known categories and what they may carry with them in the weight of antecedent knowledge. In other words, I sought to establish categories to explore, while leaving myself open to categories that rose to the surface. "Labels and theories provide a way of seeing. But a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (Eisner, 1991, p. 67). In taking the time to truly assess a lived experience, being aware of our proclivity to quickly move from one known theory or label to the next, our potential inattention to detail for favoring moving on to the next thing, it is imperative that attention to detail be one of the guideposts of criticism to see things not through a preestablished category, but through a new understanding. Employing appropriate data collection and analysis methods, as well as time dedicated to them, is essential in allowing for this idea of *new reflection*.

Cousins of Criticism

While auto-criticism mirrors aspects of auto-ethnography and draws from some of the same foundational qualitative concepts, specifically in data collection techniques and theme development, it is its own method. It is important however to explore similar methods for overlap, complimentary aspects that can contribute to the practices of auto-criticism, and also to see areas where there is distinction and unique objectives.

Auto-ethnography aims to express a lived experience through the lens of a cultural dynamic. It stems from anthropology and the study of culture. It is similar to other auto-qualitative methods in that it asks questions of the individual experience. However, it is specifically set within

a determined cultural context. “Many social scientists began recognizing that different kinds of people view the world through different lenses, and thereby make different assumptions about the world” (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 9). From this realization, many researchers sought new ways to represent personal experiences and their influences. “Autoethnography can be distinguished by how it affords authors the flexibility to position themselves in relation to the social, cultural, or political in ways that are otherwise off-limits to traditional empirical approaches to qualitative research” (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 11).

In an auto-ethnography, the researcher becomes the researched and may be the sole participant and focus of that research (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). “She is the intellectual idea and her voice speaks as the cultural framework and her lived experience is co-constructed through multiple reflections” (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009, p. 30). This describes some of what auto-criticism aims to explore as well, but with a slightly different take. While the individual voice is the framework through which the criticism will take place, it is without cultural weight and instead a depth of connoisseurship on the experience at hand-not just from a lived experience standpoint, but from a critical lens of both the lived experience and the setting.

According to Hughes et al. (2012), the term *auto* is often used when an “author presents critical reflections and interpretations of personal experience” (p. 209). Hughes explains:

Auto-ethnography is intended to name a form of critical self-study in which the researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researchers as similar to the self (i.e. us) or as others who differ from the self (i.e., them). (p. 11)

According to Hughes et al. (2012), it is used to also “study the self and to present alternative perspectives” (p. 12). Autoethnography is described as “an autobiographic genre of writing and research [that] displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 209).

An auto-criticism approach would mirror the approach of a systematic and categorical view of a personal experience, but through the context of a setting rather than the context of the

individual's cultural background. Instead, the cultural aspects, among other personal traits, would be contributing knowledge to how the setting interacted with that individual, but with focus on the setting at hand, in this case the doctoral experience. It would also employ the individual's experience as the expert and the process of the critique to intentionally critique the self and the setting.

Any self-study, including auto-ethnography and auto-criticism, could be considered a form of action research, offering an opportunity for the researcher to participate in and learn from the process itself (Jonietz, 1996).

To place oneself as an auto ethnographer, you are determining the context in which you're expressing and interpreting your perspective. For example, it may explore an experience of a doctoral student within the context of gender or ethnicity. These aspects are naturally a piece of sharing an auto-criticism also as its important to provide detail of the foundation of a person to critique the lived experience through their perspective, but the experience is not rooted in the cultural. While there are unique qualities of an individual's experience, the purpose is to critique how those qualities shaped the experience and what we can learn from it for future experiences.

As there are genres of auto-qualitative work that take on a critical lens, it is important to explore their unique qualities. "As an act of emancipation, autoethnography gives voice to the culturally muted in ways that scientifically challenge the boundaries of our notions of understanding" (Crawley, 2014, p. 222). Both auto-ethnography and auto-criticism provide access to experience through deeper understanding. Voice is also an important element in both methodologies.

It's important in any auto-qualitative approach to identify and frame the conversation with voice as an important input. Masculine bias has historically been argued as influencing research studies (Oakley, 1998), potentially affecting the outcomes and perceptions of contributions to research, so recognizing this and identifying female paradigms is important in understanding the view of the reflection we're looking at.

As mentioned, the reflective quality of auto-criticism is a strength of this method. There are approaches within auto-ethnography that rely on vignettes to offer personal insights into aspects of the experience being examined. This would prove beneficial in auto-criticism as well. As Humphreys (2005) explains, autoethnographic vignettes can serve as “an alternative approach to representation and reflexivity in qualitative research” (p.840). The use of vignettes allows us as researchers revisiting a personal experience in a first-hand account to return to the lived experience. Vignettes allow for illustration of an everyday life event (Humphreys, 2005). They are described settings that we can *turn back* to with the purpose of remembering and revisiting an aspect of an experience. Vignettes and journal entries live in a similar sphere, both presenting a present tense voice and snapshot in time. There is a need for reflexivity in each. To be reflexive is to direct or turn back on itself or oneself, or to be marked by or capable of reflection (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

Ellis and Bochner (2003) contribute to the topic of vignettes stating that a personal account may take many forms, suggesting platforms such as; stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, journals, and social science prose. Personal essays, or fragmented prose, are described as a “vehicle for [his] own reflexive autobiographic monologue” (Humphreys, 2005, p.841). Saldana (2003) explains that a “solo narrative” provides a process of “retell[ing] an epiphany in a character’s life” (p.224-225), which can more vibrantly illustrate the personal qualitative perspective. Denzin (2000) states that vignettes “ask readers to relive the experience through the writer’s or performer’s eyes” (p.905).

Vignettes, in a similar thought as a self-portraiture, allows a researcher, or storyteller, to reference their own life story while maintaining trust of the reader (Humphreys, 2005). As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) describe, “it does not distort the responsibility of the researcher and the authenticity of the work, it gives them clarity” (p. 96). This idea that being transparent and sharing a personal account through vignettes or small self-portraits, allows the researcher to revisit their experience alongside the reader. Authenticity and trustworthiness are

essential in an auto-qualitative approach to ensure the reader that what is being shared is a genuine account of one's experience. Vignettes are meant to be representative. A journal entry may also be representative but is not created for that purpose. Both offer a window into an individual's life with the objective of growing understanding through description and access.

This is where a first-person account is also a logical tool. Fine (1998) suggests that the "first-person voice is essential in allowing movement to the left of the 'Self-Other hyphen'" (p. 131). A journal entry can serve as a form of a reflexive vignette. Journaling as alternative data representation will be addressed in the data collection section.

Auto-ethnographer, Rosen (1991) states that "ethnographers study others in order to find out more about themselves and others" (p. 2). Humphreys adds that auto-ethnographers extend this to look within, studying him or herself "to create a reflexive dialogue with the readers" (p. 852). It could be further extended to state that an auto-criticism takes this reflexive dialogue with self and reader and poses critical questions of that dialogue.

Humphreys (2005) recognizes the possible dangers in such a self-reflexive approach. He states:

There are dangers arising from the charge of self-indulgence and narcissism but would argue strongly that the risk is outweighed by the potential in autoethnography for [what] Sparkes (2002) describes as 'acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the self of the author. (p. 853)

This too can inform the critique of a setting, as reflexivity demands a revisiting of the encounter.

Data Collection

There are many options for data types and ways to collect it in an auto-criticism. At the start of my dissertation I experimented with using video diary as a tool, but instead determined that I wanted to go further back in my experiences throughout my time in this program and so relied on written journals that predated my dissertation. The commonality of types of data across auto-qualitative methods, and auto-criticism in this case, is the use of deep description and

sharing of the setting through some form of data representation. “Description provides an account of events and situations experienced firsthand. In order to capture such experiences, the critic’s use of description is often expressive in character” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p.37). The data I felt accessed the most honest and unfiltered account of what I had experienced thus far were my personal journals.

I am a devoted journaler with approximately 15 years of near daily journaling practice. I have not kept all journals, which I now regret. The intention was never to revisit them. It was about the process of getting the thoughts into a tangible space to work through them; the physical and cathartic act of pen to paper; preferring to physically handwrite them as opposed to typing. The journals that remain are from the past 8 years; from shortly after my divorce and around the time I started graduate school to present. I disposed of the journals prior to that when they started to feel too weighty for me, holding the heartache of a failed marriage, the feelings of loss and shame around both my relationship and my sense of self. After my divorce, as I prepared to move my belongings to a new life, I rid myself of the remaining evidence of a time I couldn’t yet reconcile. I now wish I had those to reference in this process as the experiences, and journals documenting them, would inform those to come after.

During my review of journal entries during the time of this doctoral program, I utilized qualitative coding for consistent themes (Saldana, 2009) alongside a more literary and arts criticism technique of annotating for related concepts (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). “Rather than code, [literary critics] annotate the text often beginning by looking at the voice, tone, speaker, diction, syntax, imagery, and other features common to all poems” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p.57). This example is pertinent to the purpose of personal journals’ use as alternative data. In addition to practices of annotating in the arts, “an educational critic may annotate the vignettes or other descriptions that have emerged in their data collection” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 57). According to Uhrmacher et al., annotating allows us “a new way of seeing [the work] as an interconnected whole” (2017, p. 57). Annotating can occur throughout the process of gathering and assessing

the work, similar to memoing in other qualitative disciplines, notably grounded theory (Creswell, 2013). While aiming to provide a detailed description of this process for the benefit of expanding the knowledge of auto-criticism, the structure of annotating as a process is rather specific to each situation, dependent on the type of data and the researcher's perspective. As Uhrmacher et al., (2017) describe, "We refrain from overly prescribing techniques in part because we believe that each setting deserves the researcher's full perceptivity-not an attention to formula" (p. 57).

Tactics from coding and annotating were used to approach the journal entries. Qualitative coding offered more structure to the process, while annotating allowed for the personal interpretation necessary to highlight more subtle connections between themes.

Some themes eventually were combined, others fell away as less impactful in representation of the experience. A process of selecting a representative sample of journal entries around a variety of possible themes were extracted for pattern-seeking and further reflection before narrowing a set of themes and corresponding entries.

Personal journals serve as sources of data from participants and researchers alike, but journaling can take on many forms. Through studies performed on writing and its impact on emotions, Conner (2008) shares that individuals who used emotion and reflection words developed a style of writing that evolved from disjointed descriptions to stories told with a beginning, middle, and end. The theory is that "writing moves us to a resolution", according to Pennebaker (p. 103). This establishes the notion that the collection of my journals will possibly offer a series of short stories linking together life events under the umbrella of the timeframe of my doctorate program, with the resulting storyline sharing the lifespan of my program.

In sharing a personal journey, reaching back to past experiences, it was helpful to value the emotional aspects and not discard them as exaggerated. The emotion and heart space of the moment in a journal entry can be very raw. In later review, it can be evaluated more objectively and logically, but still convey a deep and expressive feeling about something in that moment. This practice of focusing on the senses through writing and reflection is also described by Lamoreux

(2010). Lamoreux navigates a process of taking down experiences and reflecting upon past experiences through journaling and art journaling and shares this process with individuals she guides through what she calls “inner excavation”. This practice of reflection allows for stories to be unearthed, seen and re-seen. As Maya Angelou imparted, “The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart” (as cited in Leavy, 2015, p. 39). Valuing this heart space may not always be seen as a rigorous research tactic, but arguably it is a rather important factor when studying lived experience.

To guide the review of journal entries and assist in identifying themes, I utilized a series of questions focused on uncovering significant topics (see Table 1). As I reviewed the journal entries, I determined if content answered these questions helping to determine reoccurring patterns and informative themes.

Table 1 Guiding Questions for Journal Entry Exploration				
	Category			
	Occurrence of Life Events	Chronology of Life Events	Program Events	Personal Choices
Research Questions	Self-Reflective Questions			
How do life events of a woman in her 30's shape the doctoral student experience?	What is the life event taking place?	In what order do the life events take place? (Create timeline)	When do significant program milestones or markers take place along the timeline of life events?	Are program choices made (courses, timing, involvement or disengagement) as result of life events and/or timing of those events?
	What role(s) does life event impact? (e.g. Student, Manager, Wife, Friend)	Do any of the life events occur because of the preceding event?	Are there program events missed or added as a result of life events?	Are personal choices made as a result of other events or program experience?
How does an auto-criticism uniquely describe a student's path in navigating their doctoral experience?	What is the impact of this life event personally, on program?	How is this life event handled given the event preceding it?	Is this event influential in coping of program?	What choices were made considering this event?
	How well did I handle the life event and its impact on roles?	Did I have any control over the timeline of events?	Did I have any control over my involvement in program events?	Were good choices made personally? How is "good" defined/what is the outcome?
What does an auto-criticism contribute to our understanding of that experience?	Am I able to assess the impact of this life event on me personally upon reflection?	Am I able to assess the impact of the series of events (on my program involvement, success, all roles in my life)?	Am I able to assess aspects of the program that stand alone as milestones and my involvement and/or performance?	Does a critical viewpoint offer insight into personal choices made, why they were made, and their impact on the program?

In addition to these forms of data, an alternative representation will be included in the form of personal paintings created during the analysis phase, which will be discussed in the data analysis section.

Alternative Forms of Data Representation

As Eisner describes (1997), “One of the basic questions scholars are now raising is how we perform the magical feat of transforming the contents of our consciousness into a public form that others can understand” (p. 4). This pertains to auto-qualitative methods, specifically auto-criticism where we aim to move the issue from the connoisseur’s personal experience and into the sphere of public conversation for further examination.

Not only has qualitative research provided various channels for researchers to explore lived experiences more deeply and descriptively, but the addition of alternative representations of data has provided even more interpretations to enlighten our understanding. Just as there is the need for various analysis to best interpret numeric data, there are various forms of qualitative representation that best interpret non-numeric data; the data of language, feelings, emotions, experiences and expression (Eisner, 1991).

The importance of the inclusion of alternative data in an auto-criticism is underscored by Eisner’s (1997) explanation regarding the influence of the type of material presented, “[It] can provide what might be called ‘productive ambiguity’. By productive ambiguity, I mean that the material presented is more evocative than denotative, and in its evocation, it generates insight and invites attention to complexity” (p. 8). As opposed to traditional research and data representation, an arts-based approach introduces various means to express the data, results in less closure and more openness to interpretation.

McNiff (2008) describes:

Perhaps a defining quality of art-based researchers is their willingness to start the work with questions and a willingness to design methods in response to the particular situation, as contrasted to the more general contemporary tendency within the human sciences to fit the question into a fixed research method. (p.33-34)

This approach is criticized by traditionalists, however “the open texture of the form increases the probability that multiple perspectives will emerge” (Eisner, 1997, p. 8). This is important in engaging more fully in the lived experiences of individuals and the critique thereof.

While an arts-based representation invites more scrutiny, and perhaps rightfully so as we develop this methodology (O'Donoghue, 2009), it can also offer added perspectives to the human story that bring new insight and value.

Visual research methods and representations of data are growing in popularity (Holm, 2008). The researcher may use visual representations to help the reader see their truth of a lived experience. This is controversial in that it is *that individual's truth* and therefore still subjective, but additional representation does provide the reader a larger window into what the researcher is sharing. It is also important to note that an autobiographical account needs that individual's truth. "How persons present themselves for the research camera is data that provide a resource for analysis" (Gibson, 2005, p. 36).

Regarding art as a way to understanding, Eisner (2008) describes:

If the arts are about anything, they are about emotion, and emotion has to do with the ways in which we feel. Becoming aware of our capacity to feel is a way of discovering our humanity. Art helps us connect with personal, subjective emotions, and through such a process, it enables us to discover our own interior landscape.....and can contribute to the enlargement of human understanding. (p. 11)

"Art practice is a profound form of human engagement that offers important ways to inquire into issues and ideas of personal, social and cultural importance" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 32-33).

O'Donoghue (2009) warns that as we grow the use and development of arts-based research practices, researchers must answer questions around providing access to the work and conditions for interpretation. "What are the implications of misinterpretation for educational research conducted in or through the arts?" (O'Donoghue, 2009, p. 365). Providing context is one way of addressing this concern.

Like ethnography, visual research methods have foundation in anthropology. Visual anthropology has been explored for decades, but even after the field was well established anthropologists still had to defend their methods according to Holm (2008). It wasn't until the last

few decades of the 20th century that social scientists began to take notice of the benefits of using images to enhance understanding of human condition (Prosser, 1998b). Much of the introduction of the use of image-based methodologies stem from sociology and anthropology (Weber, 2008, p.43). Arts-based research and visual representations in auto-qualitative approaches are often scrutinized for their potential subjectivity. It is important to recognize the impact of subjectivity while also seeing the purpose and benefit of visual representations as contributions to the whole understanding. “Most researchers see the need for written text to accompany visual images in order for the viewer to understand their meaning” (Barthes, 1977 as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008, p. 334). Some argue that the visual representation should be seen as equal to text, but an intertwining of both provides the reader with the fullest resource for understanding. “As colleges and universities offer master’s and doctoral programs that combine the arts with other disciplines and artists look for ways to use their skills as researchers, the academic environment is becoming more responsive to new methods of investigation” (McNiff, 2008, p.30).

Leavy (2015) suggests that artists and qualitative researchers often share the aim to illuminate something about the social world. It seems a natural relationship that qualitative researchers would be open to the arts as a form of data representation, but arts-based research (ABR) are still debated. But as Leavy argues, “our methods history shows such debates are critical to scientific progress, as they create a space for professional public renegotiation of disciplinary practices and standards” (p. 11). Arts-based methods are “making use of a larger spectrum of creative intelligence and communication” (McNiff, 2008, p.33).

Leavy explains that as the quantitative paradigm is guided by positivism and follows a deductive model largely, the qualitative paradigm is guided by many epistemologies that value subjective knowledge and follows more of an inductive model. Both the challenge and the asset of this type of work is in the variations in conclusions that can be drawn. “An image can be a multilayered theoretical statement, simultaneously positing even contradictory propositions for us

to consider, pointing to the fuzziness of logic and the complex or even paradoxical nature of particular human experiences” (Weber, 2008, p.43).

Eisner addresses the arts as tools for research (as cited in Knowles, J.G. & Cole, A.L. (2008), and argues that they will continue to create a way to help human understanding. He goes on to predict that there will be resistance to this form of exploration around research, but that those committed to arts-informed research pursue it and create good examples of artistic inquiry. Art reflection can be a means to bring our ideas forward that cannot be accessed in other ways (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). Art journaling as data is another approach, which typically involves participants creating visual art journals or a piece of art on a particular topic or theme (Leavy, 2015). In the case of an auto-qualitative approach, the art may be created by the researcher who is also the participant.

According to Dewey (1934), it is up to the artist to determine the control of the connection between what he has already done and what he is to do next. This comes with intention. The artist must see each connection and the relation to the whole. While content and products of ABR are not necessarily viewed as works of art, they are works using art to express content, much like an artist aims to do. The intentional choices made, and description thereof, will be applied to the analysis phase of this study.

For the purposes of this study, journals served as data and paintings as both a representation of the data analysis process and the findings. Sullivan (2008) describes painting as a process “that can change the way we understand ourselves in the world we inhabit” (p. 245). He goes on to explain that because of this, ideas expressed through works of art have a different capability for interpretation by the audience as they will see it. “[Painting is] associated with image making whose purpose is to open up dialogue between the artist and viewer, and among an interpretive community whose interests may cut across disciplines” (2008, p. 245). This study was as much about opening up a dialogue about my experience as it was about exploring and critiquing my participation in it. The process of this work held as much importance as the resulting

findings as this will provide knowledge around performing future auto-criticisms, as well as how to incorporate personally meaningful modes of representation to access self-inquiry in a critical way.

Data Analysis

A systematic review of journal entries documented major themes throughout the course of the program. A narrowing of these themes was necessary to illustrate the most prevalent and potentially impactful elements. This review was conducted by rereading all entries and determining key repetitive phrases and words for later compilation and evaluation. Representative selections from the journal entries were then extracted to summarize those themes. One objective in reading and seeing the words written on a page is to bring back the senses of that moment. A written account will allow for a more accurate recollection of an event and its impact on emotional state at that time than memory alone. Once themes were gathered and narrowed, a review of those themes, along with an account of the life event taking place was critically assessed in terms of its impact on the direction of the program experience using guiding principles from Eisner (1991).

The tool I used for expressing my current assessment of those life events, my relationship to them, and any lasting impact was the use of an intuitive painting process as created by Bowley (2012). The journal entries served as a prompt for the paintings. Painting provided me with a process to physically work through and offer visual expression of past and present emotions for tangible critique. The inclusion of a painting process as part of the analysis was to give both thought and action to working through the emotions in a creative way that allows me to access my truest thoughts and provides time with themes in a way writing does not always facilitate. This time spent with the process allows for more meditation on each life event and theme. The time then allows for *stepping back* both physically in witness of the work and metaphorically in the mental space given to it, to see it more critically. Life events that influenced my navigation of the program alongside my current feelings on those events and my handling of them, assisted in an overall critical assessment of the experience.

So easily we can forget how we truly felt in a moment as time passes, particularly when mentally working to get through something difficult. While the feeling is subjective, the impact is seen through the entries. Intense feelings of overwhelm, sadness, achievement, and competition to name a few did appear to impact my choices and direction. The journal entries allowed for revisiting uncensored feelings around an event, or combination of events, while a tool for present day reflection provided a more distanced response now that time has passed. In this way the paintings acted as both data collection for present day perceptions and analysis for past, but their aim was to ultimately represent my assessment of the experience as I see it upon reflection.

I answered the following questions:

How is this theme best represented through this process?

How did specific life events, and my handling of them, influence my navigation of this degree program?

What is the culminating feeling of those lived experiences now?

I will refer to this unearthing process of present-day valuation through “intuitive painting” (Bowley, 2016). Bowley describes intuitive painting:

Intuitive painting offers a rare and wonderful opportunity to loosen your grip of control, dig beneath the surface of your daily existence, and respond spontaneously to ever-evolving circumstances. In this way, painting allows us to become the alchemist of our own unique experiences, while providing a tangible vehicle for expressing them to the world. (p. 7)

Intuitive painting involves a process of intention-setting and movement while painting to allow for a freedom and ease to the process (Bowley, 2012). This strips away the penchant for perfectionism. The longer I worked with this approach, the more freedom and flow of thoughts and paint come through. Practicing intuitive painting directly after reviewing journal entries surrounding a theme allowed the journal to be the painting prompt but gave space thereafter for it to evolve organically. The painting process served as the emotional communication and release of that, allowing dedicated time to honor it and offer conclusion to it.

I've found that when I can attend to creative art-making, it brings me back to myself. It rebalances my inner dialogue from one of stress and overwhelm to one of more clarity. Knowing that it can have this clarifying effect positions it as an analysis method that fits well with creating a critical and reflective dialogue with myself during interpretation of an experience. The series of paintings relating to the themes identified in the journal entries as a supplementary representation of the innerworkings of telling this personal account are shared in Chapter 4 along with a sampling of the journal excerpts examined.

Including textual explanation to accompany the painting process helps to share the steps taken and provide context for the resulting work. Upon completing review of a section of journal entries, I responded with a session of intuitive painting to work through current emotions of that memory. Challenging life events are often what I journaled about as a way of releasing pressure from daily rigors, particularly the challenges that stayed with me over some time and became heavier to bare. It was a way of working through things inwardly before taking action outwardly. Reading through these was often intense and emotional. At times it brought back memories I had pushed past and forgotten about as a way of moving forward. Arguably this helped me persist in the program at the time, but their inclusion in a reflexive critique offered insight into decision-making and participation in the program, linking together all impactful events regardless of scope. Sometimes the way I feel after time has passed is much different than how I felt in the unfiltered moment living it, but the critique of the resulting experience must examine the in-the-moment decisions that built the path to the result. Present-day, I worked through the painting process as a response to my earlier self. I conducted a series of paintings to coincide with the themes I determined from the journal entries. A critical written account of those entries and the painting process offers support to this alternative form of data analysis.

In using paintings as a form of data analysis, the term visual field notes is applicable. Visual field notes during data collection and analysis can mirror the process of text-based memoing in ethnography, according to Leavy (2015). Leavy provides an example of this in the

work of Lisa Kay (2009) who created mixed media collages from paper, pastels, and found materials to document her reflections and observations throughout her research process (p. 244). The collages were later displayed in a gallery and presented at conferences, arguably opening up the research to wider audiences, both public and academic (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). The paintings I created were both a representation of the process of working through the data and then a resulting analysis in their final form, as though the visual field notes were the layers throughout the process and the final work the concluding assessment. Paintings can also serve as emotional “artifacts” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 33), shedding light on the “researcher’s perceptivity” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 34).

I was influenced by experts from many disciplines and found value in several processes for evaluation that have been previously developed around both educational fields and the arts. The evaluation and critical assessment of the themes and the paintings as representations was influenced by Dewey’s (1934) aesthetic ideas and Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye, and Conrad’s (2016) concepts of aesthetic experience based on Dewey’s work and Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) ideas on flow and experience. This spoke to me because of the emphasis placed on Csikszentmihalyi’s theories of *flow*; referring to the psychological perspective that focuses on mind and consciousness; seeking answers to questions about happiness and meaning (Uhrmacher et al., 2016). Dewey’s theories of aesthetics describe the possibility and space for experiences to encompass the religious or mystical. As described by Dewey (1934) and outlined by Uhrmacher et al., (2016), these aesthetic ideas leave space for religious and spiritual acknowledgement in an experience. Because of theories on human experience and larger purpose-seeking questions we ask ourselves, both Dewey and Csikszentmihalyi’s philosophies speak to the process I have undergone in my intuitive painting response to deeply personal work. There is space for the spiritual experience and also flow in the experiential seeking of meaning and answers.

The process was dynamic with active back and forth between collected data and analysis. Paintings were developed throughout the process of reviewing the written journal entries as a reflection method. This occurred systematically throughout the review of journals as themes were identified. A description of the process, choices made, and personal responses accompany the paintings in Chapter 4. Criteria for assessing these alternative representations follow in the next section.

Meeting Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

In accounting for quality in the work of this project, I will look to the criteria proposed by Tracy (2010) to assess for quality in the qualitative methodological research, as well as the guidelines presented by Eisner (1991) with specific focus on connoisseurship and criticism. For guidance on evaluation criteria for the ABR components of the study, I will refer to Barone and Eisner (2011) and Leavy (2015), with influence from Dewey's (1934) aesthetic ideas.

Eisner (1991) explains that there is not a specific procedure for producing "perceptive, insightful, or illuminating study of the educational world" (p. 169); that there is not a formula for how to conduct meaningful and quality research when employing these methods. Instead, he urges that qualitative researchers embrace the lack of standardization and what it can bring to the outcome. Leveraging the researcher's unique strengths, allowing for personal style to share new perspectives, allowing for flexibility and a flow of events to define the significant variables as opposed to defining those too early in the process, and to be comfortable with a lack of "finality and specificity" that you may find in quantitative research proposals (p. 170). "As in a good conversation, one listens to the other, and how, when, and what one says depends upon what the other has said" (Eisner, 1991, p. 170). This applies to criticism as well as auto-criticism in that what is explored in the data gathered during the experience itself and in the reflection thereof will help navigate where the conversation goes.

To add depth to the reflective nature of an auto-criticism and to assist in unearthing what is found in the written journaled data, a visual account will present a supplemental view. For this,

the criteria for evaluation provided by Barone and Eisner (2011) and the standards presented by Leavy (2015) will be employed. Leavy describes that the standards presented for ABR are unique but adapted from qualitative research standards. Leavy encourages that the methodology constitutes the use of ABR. In the case of auto-criticism it is a natural choice to assist in expressing the process of sorting through the reflective data taken in real time throughout the experience. It allows for a second layer of reflection after the fact upon review and in an alternative format to provide additional understanding of the experience. When analyzing ABR data, Leavy explains that it is important to engage in an internal dialogue with ourselves, particularly in auto-ethnography or sensitive field research (Leavy, 2015). Being aware of emotional triggers is essential in analyzing the data in a transparent way. Tactics are also suggested for translating artistic inquiry. Leavy explains that it is important to show the process by which the research occurred (2015). Authenticity is an important factor in ABR. If the work provided and the process described are authentic and transparent, the work will be more trusted. This is important in growing trustworthiness around the study in question, as well as the use of ABR more largely.

Leavy states that a unique strength of ABR is that it allows for a “multiplicity of meanings” to emerge, contrasting with quantitative research which typically enacts authoritative claims about outcomes (Leavy, 2015, p. 26).

To contribute to the structure of evaluating an arts-based approach, Barone and Eisner (2011) suggest the following criteria: Incisiveness, concision, coherence, generativity, social significance, and evocation and illumination. Incisiveness is whether the arts-based approach gets to the heart of the issue. Concision is how well the work can serve its purpose and offer new perspective with minimal explanation. Coherence is how well the work “hangs together” and works as a whole (p. 151). Generativity is how well the work communicates an individual experience to help “reshape our conception of some aspects of the world or that sheds light on aspects of the world we had not seen before” (p. 152). Social significance refers to the meaning

of the central ideas of the work and if they raise important questions. Evocation and illumination in arts-based representations are about ensuring the reader takes away feeling and meaning from the work. Barone and Eisner (2011) explain that “criteria facilitate the perusal and the judgment made by someone regarding the significance or value of what has been created” (p.146). These serve as guidelines to give structure while leaving room for an individualized experience. As Dewey (1934) explains, “[The critic] is concerned with something individual, not comparative” (p. 307).

Curating a Collection of Representative Entries

The Journal Inquiry Process for Themes

1. Organization of Data

Personal journals spanning the timeframe of my doctorate program were reviewed once in their entirety to refamiliarize myself with the topics discussed, noting reoccurring patterns, words, and sentiments. I made notes and annotated meaningful sections as I revisited the journal entries, taking down possible patterns, significant emotional qualities, and life events being discussed. Entries were tentatively tagged with subject matter flags to revisit for theme development. As I worked through the journals, the tagged entries that felt they contained the most information and touched on key patterns, were included in a final representative collection. The annotations made throughout assisted in summarizing and connecting a narrative of events and emotions to refer back to during the painting process. These entries could be seen as field notes or “artifacts” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 33) from the experience serving as the data. These helped to develop “emergent themes” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 34), which shaped my understanding of the events that made up the experience.

2. Surfaced Themes

Reoccurring patterns were reviewed in the notes and annotations, and journal entries were organized into like-subject matter. The entries were then revisited to distill many

topics to a smaller number of broader themes. Individual life events were noted within the entries but not used as themes, rather as factors under a theme. A representative collection of entries for each theme were selected.

3. Excerpt Selection

After determining what the persistent and overarching themes were, representative entries that best encapsulated the theme were narrowed. The narrowing of entries was done for each theme followed by the art-inquiry painting process for that theme.

This was done by rereading entries initially narrowed and grouped under a theme and determining which entries provided the most descriptive detail. Due to the nature of journaling, some entries rambled about frustrations rather than debated meaningful concepts. They were about venting and de-stressing, which was an important purpose of the journaling process, and often would lead to more insightful entries after the venting was allowed space. The entries that were truly about dissecting an inner struggle or life event were added to their respective theme(s)' collection. Once this revisiting and curation of a theme's representative entries was complete, the art-inquiry for that theme would follow. Once the painting for that theme was completed, the excerpt selection for the next theme would take place. More details on the successes and limitations of this process will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The Art-Inquiry Process for Reflection and Analysis



Figure 1. Author as Artist. A visual of the author working through the inquiry process.

1. Field Note Reflection

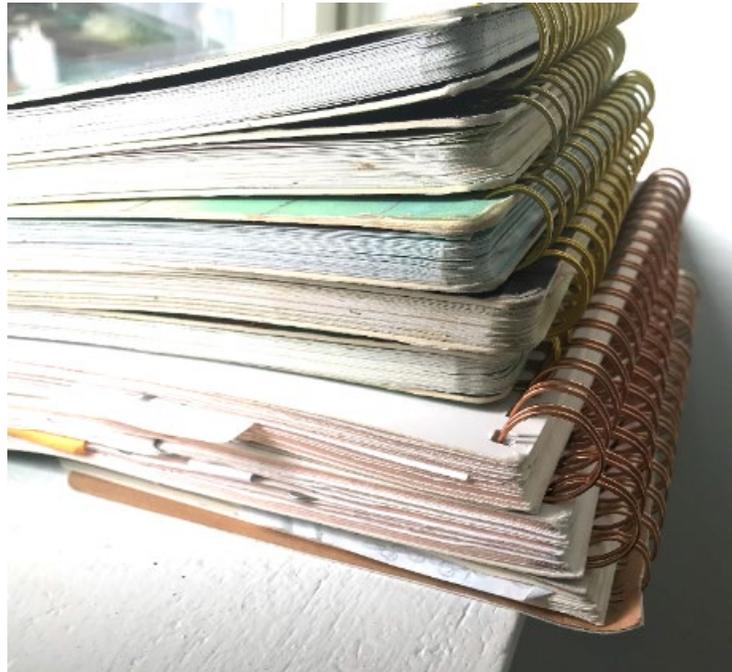


Figure 2. Journals as Data. This image illustrates journals collected throughout the doctoral program.

Once the collection of entries for each theme was curated and revisited, and notes reviewed, a few lines of journal entries were focused on surrounding one of the 6 determined themes. A representative clip of a journal entry is included below under each theme as an example of the type of entries I worked with while responding through the painting process. The entries shown are just a sampling and not the entirety of the collection for any theme, which included around 10 entries each. The clips are intended to provide a tone for the reader without providing too many specifics on what contributed to the visual at this stage. A larger sample of the journals is provided to show the rhythm and tone of the entries (See Appendix A). This is emotional work and part of the process was to first sit with the narrowed phrases that best represented the theme to determine a general feeling and direction of interpretation. Both as a metaphor and a tactic for starting each work, a base application of paint was selected and applied in an intuitive and free-

formed approach. This was done outdoors by loosely applying paint in colors that spoke to me upon response to each theme's entries.

2. Theme Shaping the Paint Process



Figure 3. Inquiry supplies. This visual shows some of the tools used for the painting process.

Once a base layer of paint, with a representative color palette, was applied, journal entry snippets (phrases; not complete sentences) were written directly on the canvas over the base layers of paint. These were scrawled for a second time in their life, and my own, to be seen again. They were lifted away from hundreds of lines of text that made up the journals. The words were placed on the canvas to be a part of the process of their artistic representation. Not all words were kept visible, as you will see next in the outline of the process but remain beneath the layers as a part of the experience. The words that remained represented the essence of the theme's experience.

3. Distilling Meaning

Focusing on the words that rose up upon reflection allowed for distillation of those sentences down to their most meaningful jolts; those words that surfaced above all others to best represent the theme at hand. These were the words and phrases that did the heavy lifting of the topic and truly got to the point through the venting of frustrations and emotions. They were then blocked out on the canvas with neutral toned paint. This blocking/highlighting let them come forward and the others recede to be supportive background.

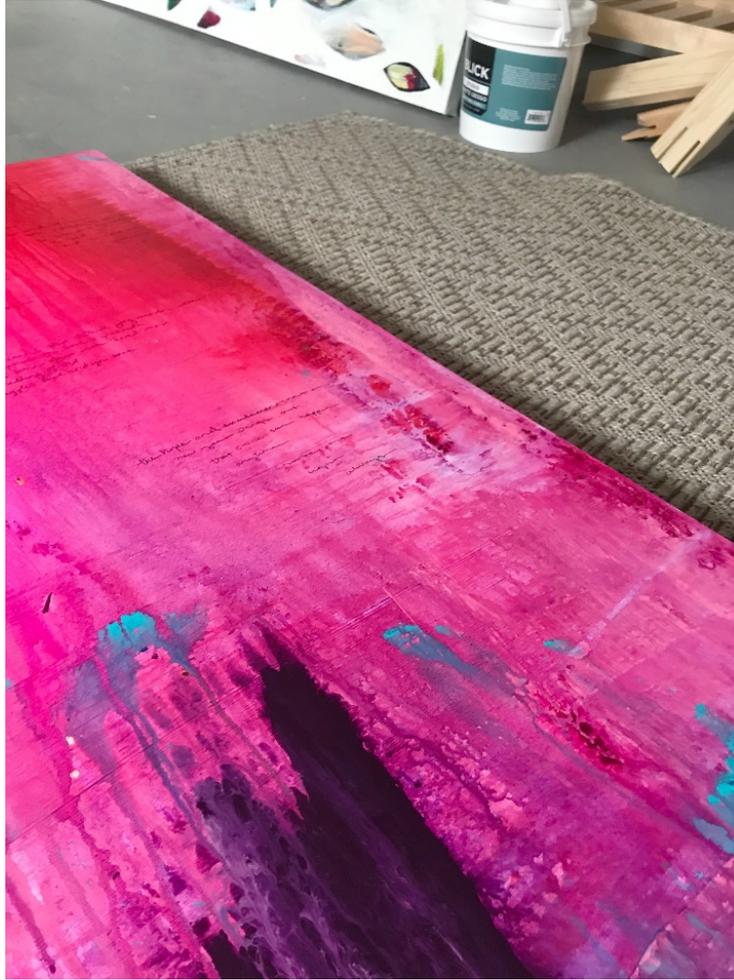


Figure 4. Reflection with words and paint. Figures 4 and 5 show a part of the process for capturing journaled words on panel in the early stages of the intuitive painting process.



Figure 5. Reflection with words and paint.

4. Closure//Presentation



Figure 6. In progress in studio.

What came through the layers of paint along with the important representative words were bits and pieces of the process, drips and smudges during times dedicated to making this experience come to life for others to see. Lastly was the task of determining when a piece was finished and when it felt representative of the words, feelings, and experiences. Like any artwork, it can be difficult to determine when a piece is finished. You hope it speaks to people. In this case, I'm working around some very specific emotional themes, but what an observer takes away

from the finished piece may be something else entirely. But that's true of any artistic expression. The main objective is to evoke a feeling, not the feeling I had necessarily. As in all qualitative work, writing, and inquiry, what is taken from the research will be interpreted through the experiences of the recipient.

The most important element that hopefully shines through is the process, and in this case the time spent with each theme throughout the process to offer a better understanding of this experience. Certain words that surfaced from the journal entries and themes that felt important in my experience and selection will mean something different to others based on their personal experiences. This is the beauty in producing something that does not specifically spell out what the reader *should* be taking away from a work. Instead, works of art allow the onlooker to be a participant, to actively decide for themselves what it means to them, if anything. And the supportive writing helps share what the creator was experiencing but does not exclude the participant/observer from having their own feelings. The writing and the work together share the process, which is what results in the understanding in an auto-criticism.

Themes and How They are Seen: The Painting Process

As described in the journal inquiry and art-inquiry processes, an initial theme was determined and then responded to with painting. This depicts the painting response for each theme. A summary of the findings for each is included in Chapter 4.

When approaching the themes, I critically asked myself how a theme like "Paying the Bills" could be translated to a painting? Ultimately, I determined that the purpose was in the process not necessarily in the resulting artwork. The artwork may speak to someone who would not receive the writing, or who may see something else of themselves in it. The process for each theme is outlined in the steps below.

Paying the Bills

1. Field Note Reflection-February 11, 2014: Year 1 of Doctoral Program

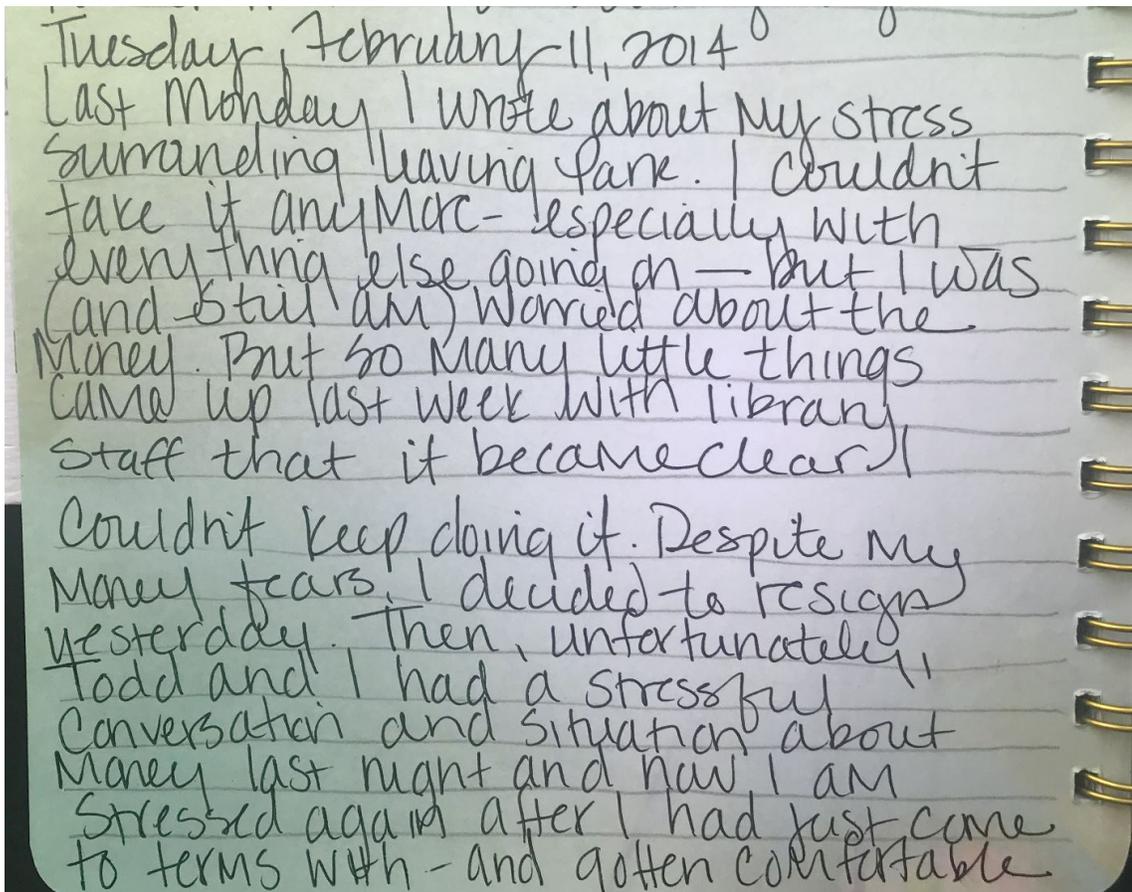


Figure 7. Journal sample 1. This sample provides an example of the tone surrounding issues relating to finances.

- a. Journal entries dealing with financial stress and pressure to maintain a full-time job and career simultaneous to being a full time student and the impact of that on my physical and emotional wellbeing were revisited.
- b. While the stress of this theme was centered around finances and being able to uphold responsibilities to bills in my home life, it reached nearly all aspects of my life as a result; available time for various aspects of my life, concentration levels and exhaustion, guilt issues around time spent away from something else. There

are many directions this theme could explore and could be focused on one of the preceding concepts (pressure of responsibility, guilt in managing time, etc.), but ultimately the common thread throughout many of the moments of stress and pressure originated from a deep fear of financial upheaval.

2. Theme Shaping the Painting Process



Figure 8. Paying the Bills. This image shows an in-progress stage for the work of the theme regarding finances.

- a. Painting began with a wash of colors that felt personally representative of anxiety; red and bright orange.

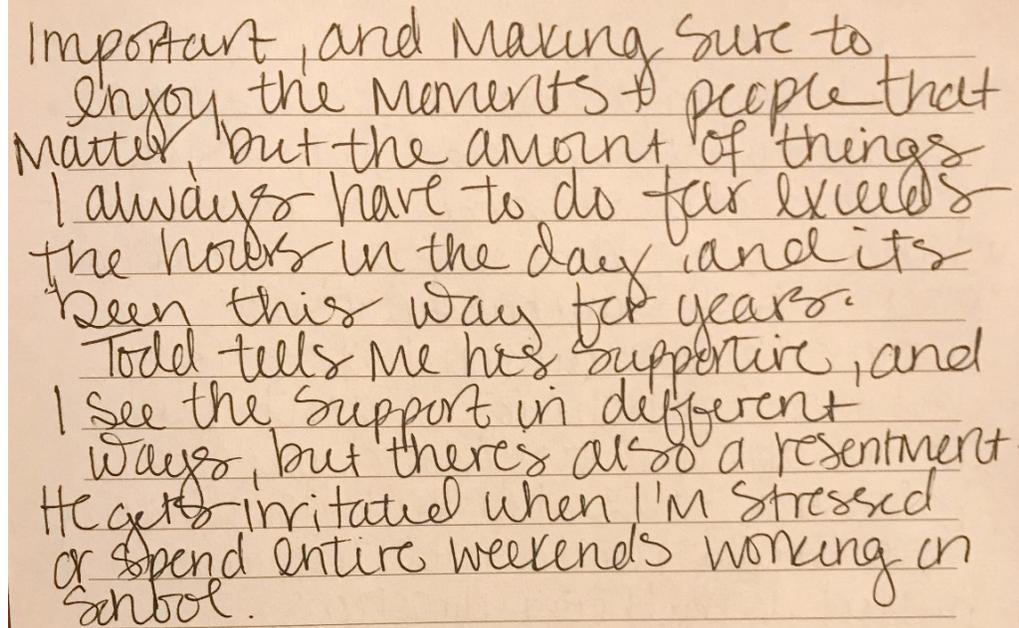
- b. Over the wash, I rewrote a segment of the journal entry.
 - c. After including words on the panel, I began to block out the words that fell away as supportive but not primary. The blocking process took multiple iterations, working for a time then stepping away for a day and returning to it to see the words new again.
3. Distill Meaning
- a. Words left behind would ultimately prioritize themselves in the entire message and begin to encourage a composition to express them. Bits of color shining through the represent the anxiety would peek out but were muted by the white blocking layer taking place over the top of it. Unknowingly this created a process that would later translate to a metaphor for the evolution of my feelings around each of the themes both through the process and through my years in the program.

Support

1. Field Note Reflection- February 5, 2017: Year 4 of Doctoral Program

I feel super alone in this process. I find myself getting defensive and feeling sorry for myself - which I then beat myself up about - when I feel someone doesn't understand how hard it is to balance everything. I don't feel like I'm doing a very good job of balancing - like I'm not doing any one thing really well because I'm pulled a million directions. I'll turn down an offer for plans to do something fun in order to work on schoolwork and then feel guilty - Am I made to feel guilty? Sometimes. Sometimes I do it to myself. I've gotten better at doing what I need to do, but I still have to deal with other's reactions or disappointment. I just feel like I'm running a race and there's never enough time to get it all done. I do believe very much that being present is so

Continued on next page.



Important, and making sure to
enjoy the moments & people that
matter, but the amount of things
I always have to do far exceeds
the hours in the day and it's
been this way for years.
Todd tells me he's supportive, and
I see the support in different
ways, but there's also a resentment.
He gets irritated when I'm stressed
or spend entire weekends working on
school.

Figure 9. Journal sample 2. This journal sample provides an example of the tone surrounding the theme of support.

- a. Journal entries addressing issues of support from employer and work colleagues, faculty and peers, and personal relationships were identified and revisited.
- b. The theme of support was also broad and ranged from entries expressing gratitude for positive support, to anger over a lack of support, and confusion over my own expectation and need for support at times. As a result, the issue of support as a theme was concluded to be one of more internal wrestling than external receiving of it. This is expressed in the process of this work.

2. Theme Shaping the Painting Process



Figure 10. Support. This image shows an in-progress stage of the work for the theme “support”.

- a. Painting with a wash of blues and purples intuitively felt after reading these entries were selected and applied.
- b. Over the wash, lines from the two journal entries were rewritten.
- c. After including words on the panel, I began to block out the words that fell away as supportive but not primary.

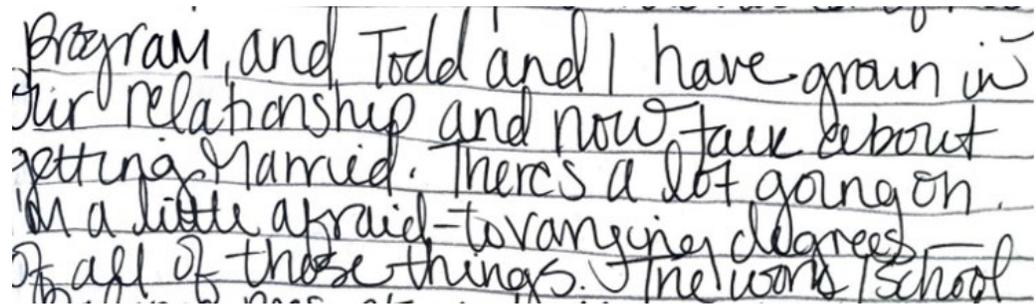
3. Distill for Meaning

- a. The process of blocking over several iterations, leaving behind the most representative words and feelings to me as a response, ultimately provided a refined meaning of the theme.

Marriage

1. Field Note Reflections-

July 24, 2013: Year 1 of Doctoral Program & April 9, 2018: Year 5 of Doctoral Program



Program, and Todd and I have grown in
our relationship and now talk about
getting married. There's a lot going on.
I'm a little afraid - to varying degrees
of all of those things. The work / school

Continued on following pages.

April 21, 2018

It's almost 11:30 the night before my dissertation proposal defense. I'm averaging 4-5 hours of intermittent sleep for the past 6 weeks since Owen was born. A couple of weeks ago Todd offered to do the last feeding of the night before he goes to bed since I get up several times through the night. But, it's always a conversation. It can't just be assumed, it's like I have to ask him every night if he can do that, and every time he acts like it's something we've never talked about. It's almost more trouble than it's worth. And I've heard that other guys say this, but he keeps telling me how tired he is even though he sleeps 6-7 hours straight every night.

Tonight I had my last dinner with my work friends. It was really sad. I'm going to miss them so much - more than I think I thought I would.

It was the first time I went to see friends without Owen. Todd has already done that several times - seeing people before we move, but I always take Owen with me. Todd watched him tonight so I could really have time with my people, but when I got home Todd went to bed and handed over all duties to me without even a conversation. My presentation is tomorrow and there wasn't even a conversation about any help I might need. It was as though because he had to watch Owen while I was at dinner (all of 3 hours gone total) that it was all up to me the rest of the night regardless of what a big deal my defense is. I feel like I was made to pay a price for seeing my friends. I'm going to be so tired and feel so unprepared tomorrow.

Figure 11. Journal sample 3. These combined samples provide examples from the theme of marriage.

- a. My relationship began near the beginning of my Master's program. We married the summer between Year 1 and Year 2 of my Doctorate program. Through this time, we have also experienced pressures as individuals and as a couple; the loss of a parent, a major car accident and injury, household moves, career

transitions, and fertility struggles. Our marriage was impacted by all of these things and impacted them conversely. The imprint of this on my doctorate program is explored specifically in the selected entries dealing with this theme.

- b. All themes found their way into all of the others, but Marriage as a theme was weightier in all themes than any of the others. This was shown by the volume of entries devoted to the topic of my marriage, relationship, and the things affecting it or that it was impacting (time at school, guilt around time away or time spent studying, the support I received, the support I needed more of). My expectations for it, the ups and downs emotionally that either conflicted with at times or were symbiotic with the ups and downs in my personal pursuits were explored in these entries.

2. Theme Shaping the Painting Process



Figure 12. Marriage. This image shows an in-progress stage of the work for the theme of marriage.

- a. A foundational wash of colors included magenta, green gold, light pink, and deep blue.

- b. Over the wash, entry selections were rewritten.
 - c. After including words on the panel, I began to block out the words that fell away as supportive but not primary.
3. Distill for Meaning
- a. The process of blocking over several iterations, leaving behind the most representative words and feelings to me as a response, ultimately provided a refined meaning of the theme.

Purpose & Value

- 1. Field Note Reflection-October 12, 2014: Year 2 of Doctoral Program

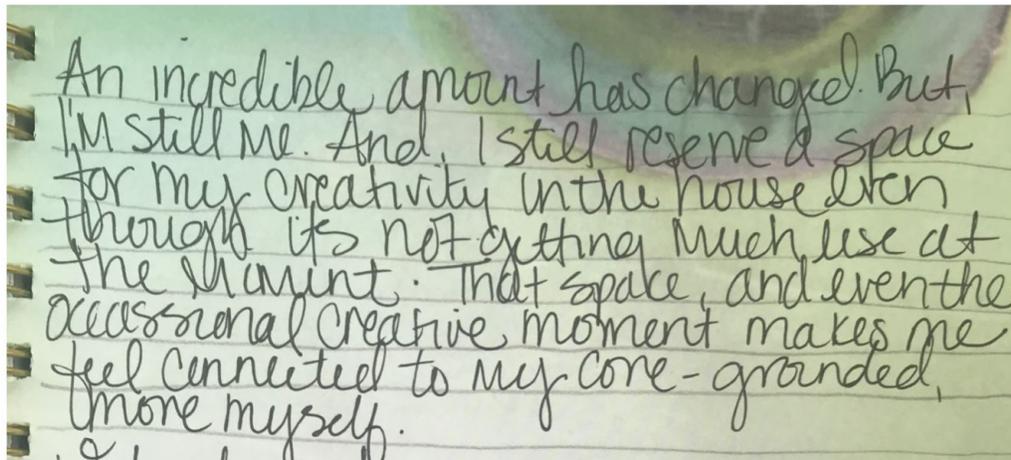


Figure 13. Journal sample 4. This journal sample provides an example of the tone surrounding the theme of purpose and value.

- a. This theme was also incredibly consistent throughout as a main focus, but its tone changed dramatically from beginning to end. Entries dealing with purpose of working on this degree and its value, as well as larger purpose in life and how this degree would support that were addressed.
- b. Focusing on the idea of purpose and value in my degree work had moments of hope and of despair. Those highs and lows were explored further upon rereading

and selection of one entry that discussed both ends of the experience's spectrum.

2. Theme Shaping the Painting Process



Figure 14. Purpose and Value. This image shows an in-progress stage of the work for the theme "purpose and value".

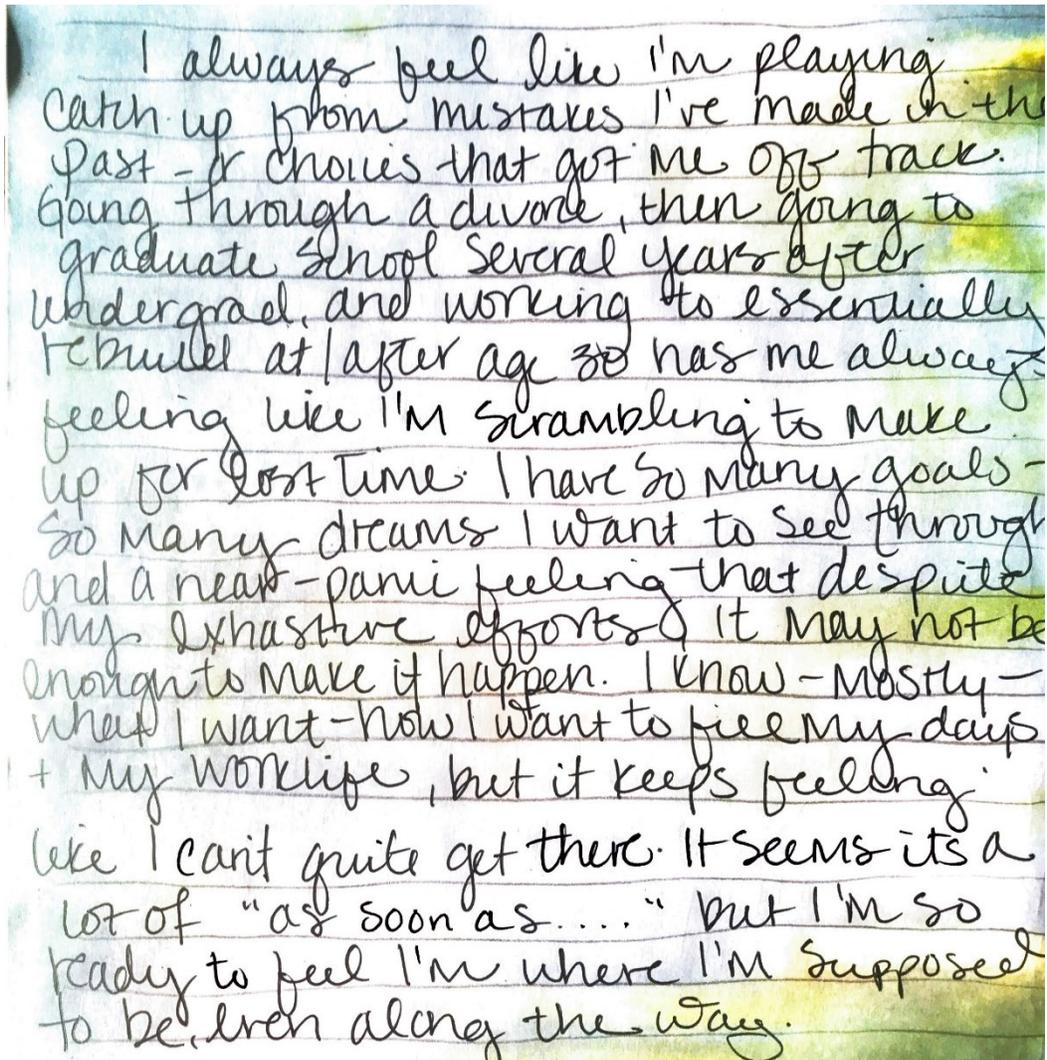
- a. A foundational wash of colors included magenta and blues was applied.
- b. Over the wash, entry selections were rewritten.
- c. After including words on the panel, I began to block out the words that fell away as supportive but not primary.

3. Distill for Meaning

- a. The process of blocking over several iterations, leaving behind the most representative words and feelings to me as a response, ultimately provided a refined meaning of the theme.

Greater Life Framing & Place

1. Field Note Reflection-May 2, 2017: Year 4 of Doctoral Program



I always feel like I'm playing catch-up from mistakes I've made in the past - or choices that got me off track. Going through a divorce, then going to graduate school several years after undergrad, and working to essentially rebuild at/after age 30 has me always feeling like I'm scrambling to make up for lost time. I have so many goals - so many dreams I want to see through and a near-panic feeling that despite my exhaustive efforts it may not be enough to make it happen. I know - mostly - what I want - how I want to fill my days + my worklife, but it keeps feeling like I can't quite get there. It seems it's a lot of "as soon as..." but I'm so ready to feel I'm where I'm supposed to be, even along the way.

Figure 15. Journal sample 5. This sample provides an example of the tone surrounding the theme of life place.

- a. This theme was more ambiguous and harder to carve out of the entries. It was threaded throughout early all entries, but subtle in its words. There were rarely words that directly mentioned a greater life map and purpose. Most entries were regarding specifics; perhaps fears around the longer-term vision of life, but not directly regarding framing that vision. However, the notion of this was ever present. Selecting a few entries to spend time with to meditate on this notion was important and ultimately resulted in clarity on how it was coming up again and again in entries of all themes.

2. Theme Shaping the Painting Process



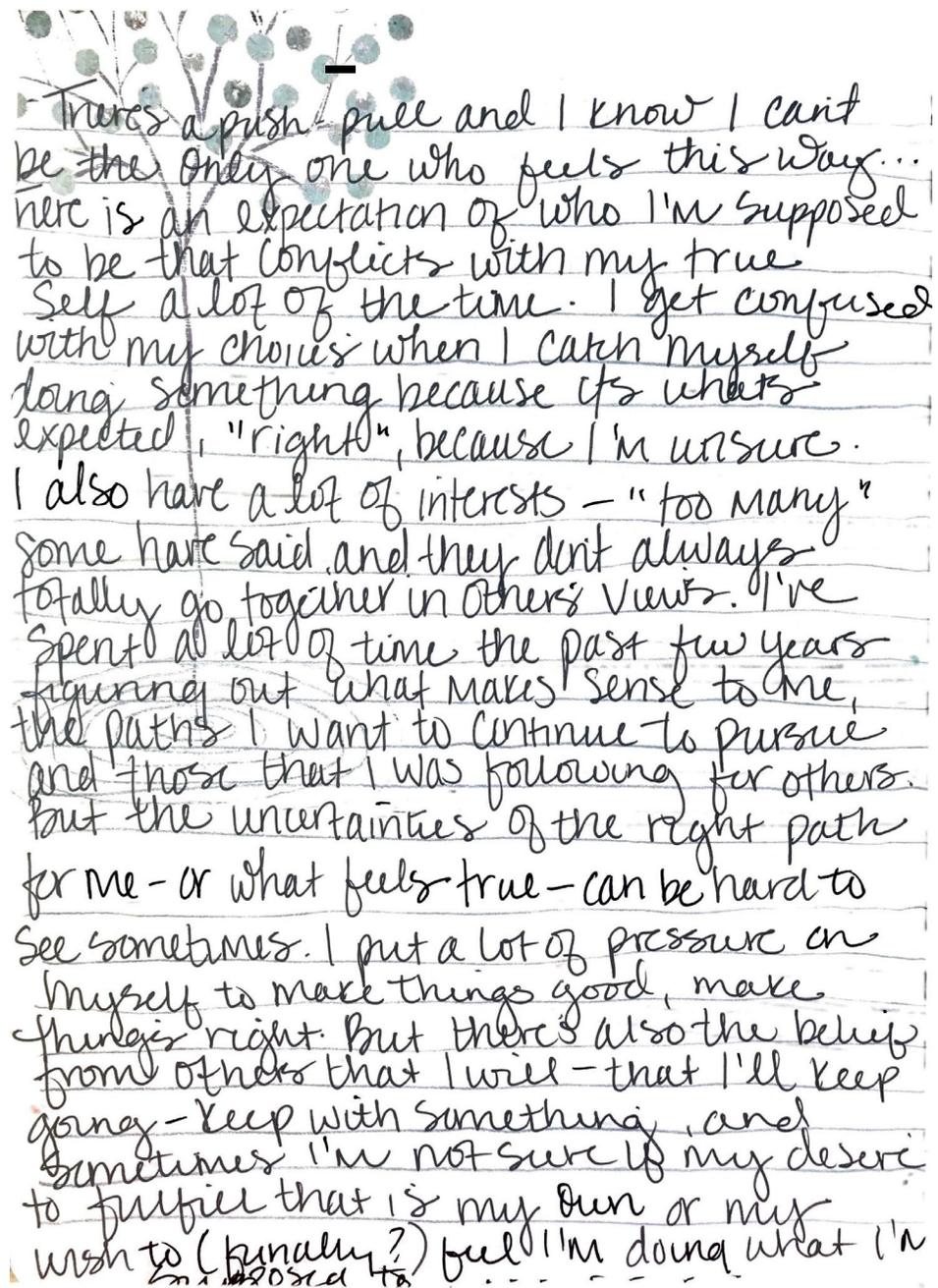
Figure 16. Greater Life Place. This image shows an in-progress stage of the work for the theme of life place.

- a. A foundational wash of colors included magenta and blues was applied.

- b. Over the wash, entry selections were rewritten.
 - c. After including words on the panel, I began to block out the words that fell away as supportive but not primary.
3. Distill for Meaning
- a. The process of blocking over several iterations, leaving behind the most representative words and feelings to me as a response, ultimately provided a refined meaning of the theme.

External Pressure

1. Field Note Reflection-February 4, 2018: Year 5 of Doctoral Program
See figure following page.



There's a push-pull and I know I can't be the only one who feels this way... there is an expectation of who I'm supposed to be that conflicts with my true self a lot of the time. I get confused with my choices when I catch myself doing something because it's what's expected, "right", because I'm unsure. I also have a lot of interests - "too many" some have said and they don't always totally go together in others' views. I've spent a lot of time the past few years figuring out what makes sense to me, the paths I want to continue to pursue and those that I was following for others. But the uncertainties of the right path for me - or what feels true - can be hard to see sometimes. I put a lot of pressure on myself to make things good, make things right. But there's also the belief from others that I will - that I'll keep going - keep with something, and sometimes I'm not sure if my desire to fulfill that is my own or my wish to (finally?) feel I'm doing what I'm supposed to.

Figure 17. Journal sample 6. This journal sample provides an example of the tone surrounding the theme of external pressure.

- a. The concept of external pressure-external from the pressure I place on myself- was a difficult one to tease apart from the many directions pressure took and came from. To objectively, as much as possible, distinguish between actual pressures being placed and pressures I perceived and self-inflicted even if

seemingly coming from outside myself, was a difficult task. To reread entries and see them anew with a critical eye was most tested in this theme.

- b. Ultimately, I selected entries that I had included paraphrased direct quotes from those in my life I felt were pressuring me. Usually the pressure was to spend time on something other than my schoolwork-whether it be personal, or work related. There is one entry that offers a direct example of the pressure to focus on the program and leave my job.

2. Theme Shaping the Painting Process



Figure 18. Pressure. This image shows an in-progress stage of the work for the theme of external pressure.

- a. A foundational wash of colors included magenta and blues was applied.
 - b. Over the wash, entry selections were rewritten.
 - c. After including words on the panel, I began to block out the words that fell away as supportive but not primary.
3. Distill for Meaning
- a. The process of blocking over several iterations, leaving behind the most representative words and feelings to me as a response, ultimately provided a refined meaning of the theme.

The paintings and interpretation are included in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

SURVEYING THE SOUL

I began blogging in the early 2000s when blogs were a new thing. Eventually I settled on a series of numbered posts I called “soul surveys” as an attempt to summarize what I was feeling or experiencing in the moment. This was an assessment of my daily life, fears, stressors, hopes, and general interests laid out publicly. Stating dreams aloud felt like a commitment to the self and an offering to the universe, and sharing any fears surrounding them felt like progress toward them. I made it a list of questions I asked myself and shared in Q&A format. I limited the content though, too afraid to be completely honest in sharing dreams and fears to their full extent, rather keeping explanations surface deep, only alluding to what was going on beneath.

As blogs and social media evolved and the presentation of seemingly perfect lives, artwork, writing, etc. grew, I became less motivated to post about my self-conscious assessments. But the concept of a quick survey of my inner thoughts was something that hung around in the back of my mind. I've continued to do this in a sense by journaling. I feel the action of writing down the dreams and fears provides them with value. It offers a place for them to live outside of my headspace. By assessing the state of my self in a moment I am essentially performing a mini auto-criticism, self-inquiry, and tallying of my experiences. It is a survey in a sense; a polling and assessment of my inner thoughts and feelings. If used honestly and systematically, it could be an effective contribution to inventorying experiences and possibly learning something from it.

The development of auto-criticism is a natural evolution of the self-work I was doing all along partnered with the systematic research inquiry procedures I gained through my degree work.

Considerations on the Work

Journaling as Process

I often feel differently about the thoughts I write the moment they're on paper. Perhaps that's partially the point of the process. In an attempt to clean the slate, I once burned a stack of journals in my fireplace. I'd written so many words that felt embarrassing or silly in hindsight. Burning the tangible did not erase the thoughts and I came to regret disposing of those written words, even if I never revisited them. I felt at the time that a physical act would help provide my heart some closure on a chunk of life I couldn't find peace with any other way. Later, through therapy and distance from that part of my life, I was able to see it more empathetically and help that part of myself move forward. I wish now I had those journals I'd burned. Although cringeworthy at times, they would have been a genuine window into my journey. We say things we don't mean to one another and I find the things we say in our journals are even more raw and unfiltered at times. This reality is why I believe journals are both welcomed and criticized as forms of data. Journal entries are likely full of emotion that can be both telling and also blurring of reality. Mine contain the saddest and darkest corners of my emotional process, as well as the big hopes and goals I was too afraid to voice to anyone else.

The Nature of Criticism and Self-Inquiry

When examining the culture of the self, or an individual and their experience, a journal can be an informative resource. Accounting for subjectivity is essential, but it should not discount its worth as contributing data. It may need additional sources of information to fill in for understanding, confirm experiences and happenings, and to help make sense of things when it's steeped in emotion. Timelines of a person's life are helpful. Also, a systematic process to revisit notes and entries for themes and patterns is necessary. As stated in Chapter 3, transparency and

description of a systematic inquiry helps the reader understand the steps taken by the researcher to deal with subjectivity. But, “Eisner points out that the ability to read cultural forms of representation is essential to construing meaning, perceiving patterns, and to making sense of the environment as a whole for personal growth” (Richards & Uhrmacher, 2012, p. 28). Journals as cultural form provide insight into the environment of the individual and their experience. In the analysis of my journals, it was necessary to systematically revisit them and look for patterns to both apply my singular understanding of the experiences being examined, as well as observe new patterns only recognized upon revisiting.

On Writing About Personal Experience and the Issue of Subjectivity

In auto-qualitative writing, the researcher aims to be as transparent as possible in the criteria and representation of the data (Hughes et al., 2012). The very nature of autobiographical work is that it is a personal experience that, although possibly very similar to many others is still their own and can truly only be told through that firsthand account. That’s the fallible beauty of it. The fact that it is innately subjective in this way does not discount its contribution to our larger human story.

Kim Brooks, author of *Small Animals*, explains the concept of writing about oneself in her book:

Nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one’s own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions—and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas—can’t be yours alone. The way to deal with the problem of “subjectivity”, that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvelous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience...into something much larger; is after all only the understanding that one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares. (p. xi)

Our personal stories may feel remarkable at times; different from others’ experiences. Or, more often they may feel very unremarkable and unworthy of being told; not as interesting as

stories of others you've heard. But the self-perceived mundane nature is the most compelling aspect to me; the sameness or "ordinary" struggles that we share. "Good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are" (Lamott, 1995, p. 3).

I am not speaking specifically of any one life event, or of the pursuit of a doctorate degree, but rather the collection of human experiences we share; love, loss, illness, fear, hope, and the way in which we handle daily life with these layers through my own experience. What do we contribute and, as a result, what do we take with us? But, essentially, what did I contribute and what am I taking with me?

Surfaced Themes

The initial theme titles I used to prompt my painting process were simple and overarching. They were drawn from repetitive words found across the entries. For example, the early theme shown in Chapter 3, "Paying the Bills", was an umbrella for entries relating to finances, jobs and pay, joining of finances with my husband, student debt, etc. Once I worked through these entries that all had finances of some kind in common, I realized that while the concrete reality of money stresses remain, the cause for agitation is often the fear behind it. In the case of themes regarding finances, the fear and worry of scarcity and the pressure of feeling inadequate in this aspect of my life, comparing to others, is where the common thread was. While it wasn't shocking to me to learn some of these things through the analysis, some of the fears' persistence or historical context did. Years of data through journal entries would not have been related in this way without a systematic process.

What resulted through the process of wading through each related entry was an adaptation of the theme's intent and resulting name, shown in this chapter. It ultimately became clear that each theme had a duality or "multiplicity of meanings" (Leavy, 2015, p. 26) in some cases, where there were more than one thing occurring in the theme. Some of these themes overlap in both the entries they were pulled from and the areas of life they touch. However, they each have a variation on the perspective. For example, Life Mapping//Place Recognition and

External Pressure//Internal Compass were themes that blurred together at times due to their influence of one another, but they stood alone in their intention. When journaling through a difficult decision, how it shifted my plan, or map, may have been influenced by external pressures of those I felt responsibility to, but were two separate influencers on my choices and feelings about those. The themes presented are provided from my perspective as a result of the process to assess.

Pressures of Security//Fear of Scarcity



Figure 19. Pressures of Security//Fear of Scarcity. This image represents the process addressed for themes of pressure and scarcity.

Primary excerpts that rose up for the work of this painting depicted a state of stress around a job I'd taken with so much hope for what it could bring to my professional experience and work/life balance, but after 6 months in the role I knew it was a very bad fit. I didn't have anything else lined up right away, so the debate of whether to take a leap of faith and resign prior to securing something else-which goes against every bit of my nature-was a difficult decision. Much of my stress throughout these 6 years was tied to finances and the constant attempt at balancing work and the other pieces of myself. As my program progressed and the debt total continued to rise, the stress did as well. Initially, my employment goal during my doctorate program had been to find something related to what I was studying in order to strengthen my confidence and skills, specifically in statistics, but also something that would allow me enough time to study and commit more deeply to the program.

I felt a constant push/pull about how I should be spending my time. I needed to maintain a certain level of income to pay basic bills, but this also required working hours that left me with less time than I would've liked to devote to coursework. I also wanted to continue the momentum I'd built pursuing my career, but it put me in situations where I had to make difficult decisions about what got my attention and time.

I began my doctorate work immediately following my Master's degree. Graduate school became my solution post-divorce when I was seeking a career path that would better independently sustain me, and that I also thought I would find passion and purpose in. It became a labor of love, a personal devotion to the next phase of my independent life, and I poured myself into growing my experience and seeking opportunities in my new field. It brought many opportunities, as well as many uncertainties as I worked to rebuild both my confidence and my career. When I set out to piece together a new life, I never would have thought I'd pursue a doctorate degree. I never thought I'd be given the opportunities I experienced so quickly in my field. I approached my career full-on. School was a part of that to be sure, but all components

were demanding more time than I had in a day. I quickly found myself struggling to balance all aspects. This journal entry represents a period of job shifting I went through during the first couple of years of my doctorate program. I had not found what would become a more permanent position shortly thereafter. I was fearful of paying my bills and still feeling insecure in my coursework. I compromised aspects of the program for the sake of my work commitments as the financial fear almost always won out. But, the work and the successes I experienced are also what drove me in all aspects of my life. I felt myself piecing it together, which had been my goal at the start of my graduate program.

I experienced enormous stress during the time of this excerpt though, not knowing what my job situation would look like and fearing a schedule of multiple jobs on top of difficult coursework. This state of unrest around my job situation lasted about one year. During this time my general mental state was one of anxiety and fear. I had spent a year between my divorce and graduate school fearing what my future would hold. My graduate program gave me a sense of direction and, eventually, a job to pay the bills, but any time of job uncertainty took me back to a place of scarcity. It took a toll on me that likely only spurred on my devotion to the job opportunity I was given at the end of that year.

The price I've paid in stress, time constraints, and program contribution due to a energy around my job situation is unavoidable in assessment of my experience. Jobs, and my larger career pursuit, is perhaps the largest factor in the quality of work and possible lack of focus I contributed to my program at times.

Internal Strength//External Support



Figure 20. Internal Strength//External Support. This image represents the process for addressing issues of seeking internal strength and external support impact.

There are people who told me they were supportive of my time spent on my program while simultaneously doing or saying something that was unsupportive. I've learned, or decided, that it does not mean they are necessarily unsupportive, but they may have been living in that moment as opposed to the way in which I've had to look at my time the past 6 years-as a long timeline all pointed toward the end goal. They (husband, friends, colleagues) would see it as a

single afternoon of plans whereas I saw a domino effect on the entire quarter if my valuable days off were devoted to something other than catching up on school-related work.

What I found was that I had to eventually shed the guilt of time spent on my program and time spent on my job. I'd given so much of my time already and this was my time to build my career and my education. I compromised it often, more in the beginning, and sometimes I was happy to have taken an afternoon to decompress. Other times I felt remorseful as it resulted in my staying up late nights to do the work I could've done if I'd said no to the activities that were more fun. It was always a balancing act.

The reality is that no one can know what your experience feels like or truly understand how your goals *feel*-the weight of them. Not even others going through the same doctorate program as their homelife and work life situations will likely differ. We can find commonalities and empathy among one another as women experiencing similar paths, but we're of different backgrounds, abilities, relationship statuses, financial situations, and so on. So, the experience will hit us all very differently.

This excerpt exhibits the feeling of isolation I felt so many times; a feeling of letting everyone down around me and feeling frustrated with ultimately dissatisfied with the choices I made around others needs instead of my own. I regularly felt that in order to satisfy someone in one area of my life, I would consequently let another down elsewhere. It brought feelings of guilt, anger, sadness, and uncertainty over what I was pursuing. Was it worth it? Was it worth less time doing the things I love or spending time with the people I love? And when it brought about resentment (at the choices I'd made to bring me to that dynamic in my life, at my husband for not being more understanding at times, at my stamina for not keeping up with the wakeful hours I was requiring of it), I experienced deep doubt about this program and my choice to pursue it. Over time, I learned better where to prioritize my time, where I could tilt the scale and spend less or more time on something as needed, but the feeling of isolation never fully disappeared. This is

a lonely process at times. I had to go through it alone-together. I had the love and support of those closest to me, but I ultimately had to spend many hours working alone.

Ultimately the thread of “support” throughout my program was more about my interpretation of it and the importance I gave that notion. It was about where I drew it from. When I felt more confidence in my purpose and goals and more internal clarity, my need for external support lessened. When I felt surer of my choices, I felt stronger in assertively making decisions that were best for what I needed. But it took years to improve at this; not until closer to the end of my coursework. This means that I spent most of my coursework with frequent mental anguish over how I spent my time and dealing with feelings of guilt and isolation. The entries show that this impacted my focus and confidence in my program, placing doubt in what I was working toward at times. Eventually it became clear, and clearer still upon reflection, that the perception of support was often my own making and my own filling of gaps uncertainties had created. Others will feel more directed and confident in their pursuits. Some others still though will feel as I did and question themselves. This was an important element of my internal landscape throughout this program.

Commitment to Marriage//Commitment to Self



Figure 21. Commitment to Marriage//Commitment to Self. This image represents the process for addressing the balance between a marriage and the individual.

The research tells us that marriages can be negatively impacted by a spouse pursuing a doctorate degree, whether it is emotional or financial stress that is placed on the couple (Rockinson-Szpakiw, Spaulding, & Knight, 2015). “Probably the major source of stress for graduate students is insufficient time to accomplish everything that is demanded of them” (Sori, Wetchler, Ray & Niedner, 1996, p. 260). We also know that women cite pressure to juggle responsibilities and time for relationships during a doctorate program, often limiting the time they

devote to studies (Brown & Watson, 2010). I have been in graduate school the entirety of my relationship with my husband, with the only technical exception of the summer between my Master's and Doctorate programs, which in hindsight I should have relished more.

In my view, marriage is difficult and doctorate programs are difficult and when combined they can be seemingly impossible as a duo. Throughout the past 6 years, we also faced fertility difficulties in our eventual family building, financial stress, job promotions, moves, a sick parent, family relationship stressors, and all the heartache and joys of those things.

Throughout this time, my husband and I developed a way of living amongst the constant presence of my graduate work, but it was a regular sore spot. Stress would build for me at the end of a particularly trying quarter, or at a time simultaneous to heightened work pressure, and I would exceed my capacity to also tend to a relationship. My lack of available time or presence in our relationship would cause arguments. At times, I felt guilty for stressing or for spending so much time on all other aspects of my life. My husband would say things that made me feel guilty for my time spent on my program, or crazy for the stress I was experiencing. Other times I would create the guilt myself by overcommitting and then being disappointed in myself when I couldn't follow through. Often, I would receive supportive words and understanding when I felt I had to disappear for whole weekends to write and study. I never found my rhythm with it because each quarter of coursework would be so different, and each phase of the program would bring new pressures to adjust to and learn how to cope with. Its impact on my contribution cannot be measured, but it can be assessed in the knowledge that there was near constant freneticism; a feeling of never being where I was supposed to be. Upon reflection, I recognize the nervous energy I often had to consciously quell to grasp presence in any one setting.

Purpose-Seeking//Valuing



Figure 22. Purpose-Seeking//Valuing. This image represents the process for addressing the need for purpose and recognizing personal values.

My journal entries have a consistent theme of purpose-seeking and valuing. Looking back on journals that pre-date my time in graduate school up to present day entries, this theme has only strengthened. With each year and each additional layer, I've added to my interests and pursuits, the greater questions around what is purposeful and what has value have become more prominent.

This inner dialogue stems, in part, from having many interests and encountering many opinions of those interests. I've lived closely with those who cheer me on and those who have cast doubt on my dreams' worthiness. I've had a strong pull to authentically do what I love to do—whatever that is at each phase of life but have often felt I had to justify my pursuits both to others and to myself. Usually after some inner debate my personal purpose prevails over others' opinions. This has strengthened over time. I do place a significant value on making intentional choices, which has sometimes led to stalling to making a decision. Often, that means I am faced with an internal debate about a priority shift or a change to continually stay true to myself or to weigh outside forces. The strong pull to do what I am may be the creative urge that lives in me, or the history of living inauthentically at times, but whatever the reason, I have a steady pull to revisit my purpose and intention, and to evaluate my choices around what I seek out in my daily life.

The pressure I place on myself to seek out *what I'm really meant to do* has spurred me to achieve big goals, but it has also created a heaviness around each decision to be aligned with the greater plan I see for myself. And due to my history, I do feel I'm running to catch up. This pace and these heavy questions have brought a drive for achievement, but also an enormity to decision-making that can be debilitating. I've found myself faced with so much I want to contribute to my program, to my job, to my personal life and interest, and I can pour a lot into all for a period of time, but it is unsustainable and the commitments I am most deeply tied to remain and those that I can more easily allow to recede do.

Life Mapping//Place Recognition



Figure 23. Life Mapping//Place Recognition. This image represents the process for addressing the balance of longer-term planning and goals and the recognition of present.

As found in Heinrich's study (2000), the pursuit of a doctoral degree can often begin as a "recovery of personal voice" and "reclaiming of personal identity" for women. Particularly around mid-life, when women are on a "quest for self", the doctoral pursuit can become somewhat of a "spiritual quest" (Heinrich, 2000, p. 77). I began graduate school with my Master's program almost immediately following my divorce on a search for a meaningful career and next step in life. I continued directly into my doctorate program, extending that building, or rebuilding, of self. The

length of a doctoral program requires dedication, and often planning and revision of plans throughout. According to Heinrich (2000), scholarly identity is developed from “an authentic sense of self” (p. 81). An “authentic sense of self” is what brings us deeper understanding of where we’ve come from and where we’re headed next. Recognizing the place we’re in physically *and* emotionally is beneficial, but recognizing this through a lens of wanting to learn from and leverage that can be powerful.

Throughout my journal entries the theme of mapping out my plans and purpose for decisions made was a constant. With the closure of a marriage and the new commitment to pursuing this individual goal, mapping a path forward was essential. However, recognition of the emotional place I was in throughout the process was more difficult. As a planner by nature, mapping out plans and goals comes naturally for me and is evident in my journals. Recognizing where I was at in the larger picture of those plans was more difficult for me given the feeling of needing to make up for lost time, to establish a career and independence, and to feel the choices I was making were meaningful.

External Pressure//Internal Compass



Figure 24. External Pressure//Internal Compass. This image represents the process for addressing the duality of external pressures and inner truth.

As has been discussed, women face pressure in balancing the many roles they fulfill while pursuing a doctorate degree (Brown & Watson, 2010). Reconciling that with personal goals that sometimes take time away from other aspects of life is an ongoing focus of study (Brooks, 2015; Mason et al., 2009; Smith, 2006). An individual's internal compass is purely their own, influenced and shifted by outside responsibilities and decisions, but ultimately theirs to feel and

contend with alone. “The universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them” (Gilbert, 2015, p. 8). In other words, it is up to us to discover our path and our potential. The challenge, for me, has been in not allowing external voices to drown out my own. I’ve found it is not always without reasons or a negative pursuit, but a barrier or distraction at times, nonetheless. My internal compass can be ignored or deprioritized to the priorities and paths of others, those I’ve thought I should please, or as a tactic for avoiding what creates fear. When balancing so many roles, recognizing where our internal compass is pointing us can be challenging. This theme surfaced throughout my journal entries.

Written on the pages of the journal entries, I could see the moments when something was occurring in my life and I stepped back and recognized that it was pulling me away from what I felt was the better path for me. I could also see moments when I’d been distracted and pulled down a path away from my goals.

Knowing When the Work is Complete

Knowing a painting is complete is an internal pull toward closure; both in the physical application of paint to panel and the working through the theme mentally. In following the guidelines of Intuitive Painting as described by Bowley (2012) there is a “spiraling out” (p. 93) to gain perspective as a piece comes to a place of completion. “Sometimes I take notes on the changes I’d like to make as I sit across the room from my paintings. These notes guide me as I spiral back into the finishing layers” (Bowley, 2012, p. 119). Much like the process of painting for self-inquiry, the process of sharing my findings through writing, I find myself revisiting my notes and thoughts around each theme and the time I spent with it. It is never done in the sense that these themes continue and will find themselves throughout my life. Interpretations of them will vary and be presented again and again in various representations, whether formally or unknowingly. The paintings as a representation in time though are complete. They offer a visual takeaway of the experience from this segment of the larger story of an individual. They are complete in that they could never be so and therefore I conclude when the feeling says its so.

The physical action of creating and finishing these paintings is an example of the process of research through self-inquiry, and an example of finding understanding through reflection.

Culminating Representation

Once the final painting representations of each theme were complete, I began work on a larger unplanned piece. I hadn't intended to create a work outside of the individual themes but felt inspired by the momentum I'd gained. I began work on it not to include as part of my study, but for myself. The painting process that followed mirrored the earlier paintings, but instead of taking lines from past journal entries, I began writing directly on the panel as a letter to myself; a summation of what I was feeling in the moment after finishing the painting process for this entire journey. I felt inspired to go bigger in this work and felt the most comfortable I'd been with the process throughout. It felt like a genuine letter I was silently speaking to myself. There was a healing to the process and by the end of it I'd found myself writing words of hope and love. While those emotions were threaded throughout my life during the program, the themes that surfaced were primarily ones of stress and worry, mostly around an effort to balance it all. But, from the process of acknowledging that and bringing awareness to the catalysts for decisions, I seemed to find a sense of acceptance. While each of the themes represent important aspects of my experience and influenced my decision-making, ultimately my assessment of those is an evaluation of where I stand presently as a result. The combination of a systematic auto-criticism partnered with an arts-based outlet for inquiry and valuing provided a pathway to authentically expressing my experiences. What came forward in its culmination was a dissemination of acceptance in what I'd revisited. I named it "Dedication to my Heart".

I wrote the following on the painting:

With each step toward forgiveness, with

more focus on love + gratitude

more time spent with loved ones

a shedding of old

struggles that hold you back.

the hope and excitement a

new year brings, but

that choice can happen

anytime.

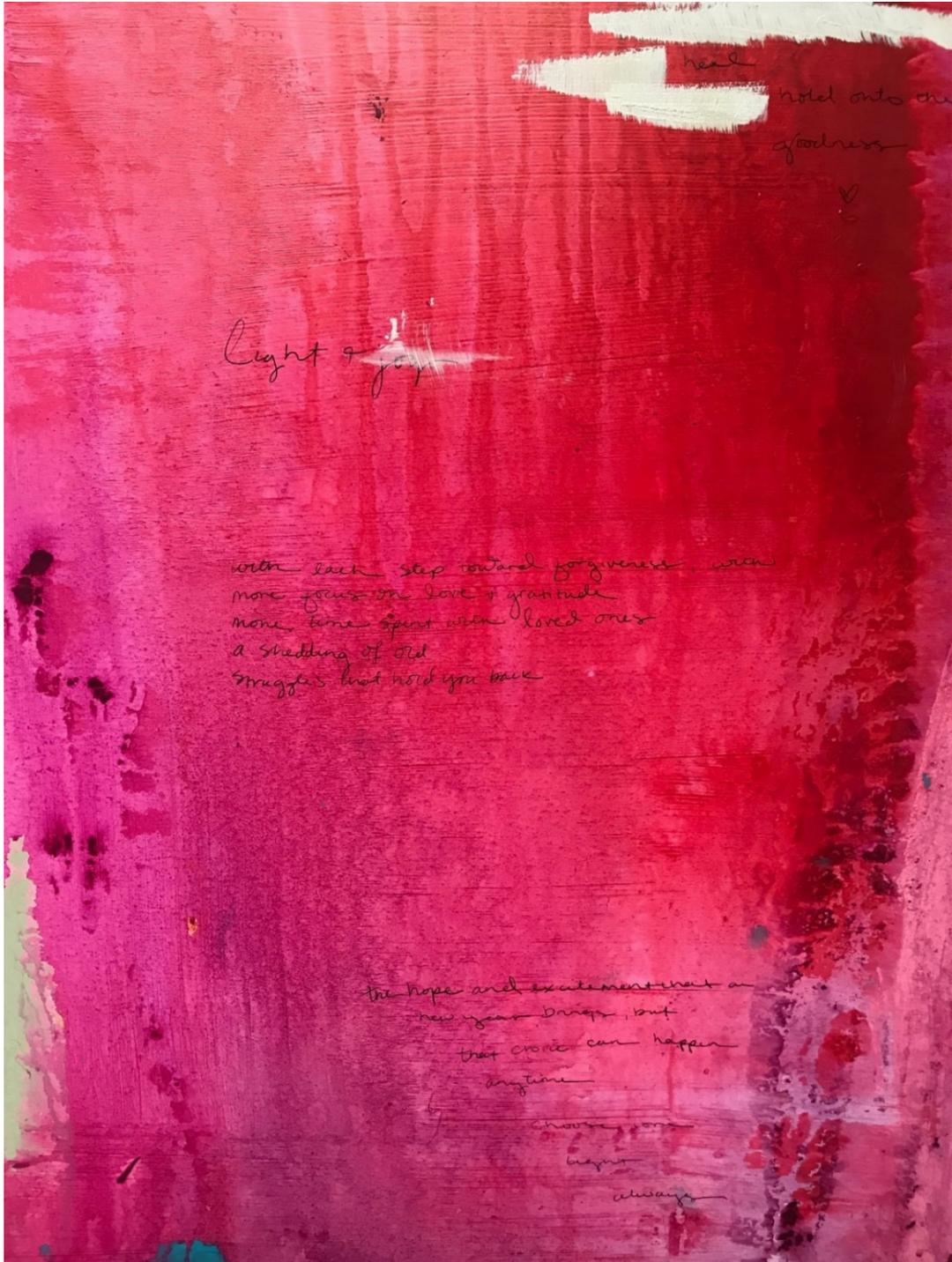


Figure 25. Dedication to my Heart. Beginning stage of concluding work.



Figure

26. Dedication to my Heart. Middle stage of concluding work.



Figure 27. Dedication to my Heart.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

IF PAINTINGS COULD TALK

Throughout this dissertation, I debated how much to allow the painting process to speak for the work and how much textual explanation was necessary to provide context. This study, like the experience it represents, finds itself between worlds. A new method benefits from open dialogue to develop understanding; however, this arts-based interpretation leans away from putting words around the process and its outcome inviting free interpretation. I've aimed for a balance of providing details of my experience employing auto-criticism as an emerging method, while leaving as much interpretation of the arts-based approach to the reader as possible.

Auto-criticism needs a continued conversation around what it can be to help shape it in hope of offering a roadmap for possible future development. Personally, to deeply participate in self-inquiry for an auto-criticism, I knew I would need to allow for my creative voice to be included. I am most expressive and less concerned with how something will be received, as well as clearest of mind, when this is given weight. An arts-based approach provided me with a way to connect honestly to a process of understanding my experience, and away from writing the experience into something I wanted it to be. It released me from the risk of pursuing perfection in writing during the process of self-inquiry. For the purposes of unearthing personal experience around something as fraught with expectations as a doctoral dissertation, an approach that

prioritized inner dialogue rather than outwardly consumed words allowed for a deeper knowing and richer contribution to the interpretation ultimately. This is not to say that detailing the interpretation of self-inquiry through written text is less valuable. The mode that will yield the most depth of understanding is what is most important in my view. For me, written journal entries is where my data stemmed from, which were streams of consciousness, event acknowledging, and therapeutic in nature. The turn to analysis and interpretation through visual means after a written account was revisited was an opportunity to give air to part of my voice often stifled in research, but meaningful in my contemplation and thus important to include in this study. I viewed my journals as my field notes and my paintings as my process to interpret and express those.

Painting loosened the grip on the expectations of the outcome and instead allowed for focus on the process. A deeper connection to the work was a result of that freedom. I found this valuable for deeper understanding of the self, but as a researcher it was also vital to share that process and findings with a larger community to advance what I see as a valuable approach to researching individual experiences.

How does one translate that search for personal insight to the page? Through both the writing and the paintings, I hope to have conveyed the importance of the process above all—the process of critical self-inquiry, how it stems from a connoisseurship of a soulful space and that the action of conducting a critique of the personal can serve a purpose beyond the self.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to reflect on my experience as a doctoral student, the life events that occurred during my program that influenced my participation and perspective, and to deeply explore the methodology of auto-criticism and how it can beneficially guide a productive self-inquiry.

The central questions of the research were:

1. How do life events of a woman in her 30's shape her doctoral student experience?

2. How does an auto-criticism uniquely describe and evaluate an experience, in this case a student's path in navigating their doctoral experience, and what does this contribute to our understanding of that experience?
3. How can an arts-based representation contribute to our understanding of the criticism and auto-criticism as a method?

These questions were an effort to shape what I expected would be an exploratory process in terms of the personalized nature of self-inquiry, the imaginative inclination of arts-based research, and the development of an emerging method. This was a study of the self as much as a study of auto-criticism as a method. The two efforts complemented and informed one another along the way. I believe different conclusions would have resulted from another method, particularly one not focused on a critique or more focused on a primary aspect of my identity.

How do life events of a woman in her 30's shape her doctoral student experience?

If this study had been an effort to examine my experience through the lens of womanhood or motherhood, it would have spent meaningful time on these aspects almost entirely. Instead, to pursue a critique of my overall experience and how it was shaped, investigating my main cultural and social identifiers was important, but the ultimate objective was to critique the experience as it was received and navigated not necessarily to speak on behalf of a community of women and mothers. Examining personal elements helps in understanding the reasoning behind choices throughout, but any one identifier is not of higher focus than another. Although individual experience is unique, many of the roles I experience will be relatable to others and commonalities found. An offering to the communities I identify with is one result of sharing my experience, but the knowledge and understanding of the experience through those aspects of myself is to serve a critical assessment. Intimately working through the foundations of auto-criticism seeks to begin building a foundation for extracting individual experience for the purposes of critical insight and meaning-making through this method.

A focus through an aspect of myself, one of the many roles I carry, would bring deep understanding of what it meant to navigate this program through that perspective. An account of my experience seeking fertility treatment and ultimately motherhood while pursuing my degree would be a valuable perspective to offer to educators and other students experiencing that. Focusing on my experience of having endured a divorce just before starting graduate school and how I built my career during my doctoral program would have offered a different vantage point. There are many universal experiences—those “considered applicable to a broad group of people” (De Jager Meezenbroek, Garssen, Van den Berg, Tuytel, Van Dierendonck, Visser, & Schaufeli, 2012, p. 161) that are simultaneously intimate and for everyone. Sharing personal stories helps us make meaning of our experiences (McAdams, 2008). “The stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in [social contexts]” (McAdams, 2008, p. 243). To address this research question, I examined the roles I claim, inhabited the emotional space of life events that took place throughout my doctoral experience, and ruminated over personal data that exposed possible reasoning for how those elements altered my decisions and direction throughout.

To answer the question of how life events *of a woman* my age shape her doctoral student experience, and to get at the critical shaping outcome of life events on a doctoral program, I offer my personal experience and my critical assessment of it. I do not claim to transfer my personal perceptions of any one aspect of myself or my life events to the doctoral student experience generally, but rather to offer an example and a way forward with that information for similar study. For the purposes of this study, the investigation was about the critique of my doctoral experience and how it was shaped due to these factors coexisting. I wanted to share that these things happened to me, to dive into my journals regarding the emotions tied to these events, but as I worked through my doctoral program I mostly wanted to assess if those aspects, and specifically my handling of them, were responsible for changing what I was getting out of-or conversely putting into-the program. At times the feelings and stress of all personal experiences overlapping

made it difficult to discern where the source of feelings was coming from. These larger experiences defined chapters of my life and inform how I see the world across a continuum. The collected experiences craft the lenses through which I see my life. Understanding those lenses helps me to be aware of how I was *seeing* when assessing my choices. To examine how life events shape a doctoral experience, examining this *collection* of lenses is a way of understanding choices made to build expertise of the experience to ultimately assess those choices.

Instead of detailing one life event during a doctoral process for example, which is a valuable but different narrative to share, I personally felt a more holistic reflection of identifiers would offer meaning for the goals of gaining understanding in how I navigated the decisions I've made and how that may impact my own and others' future experiences, and how my personal journey can serve the emerging method I'm working to develop.

While an auto-ethnographic approach highlighting a particular and prominent lens in my life would have been valuable in offering a detailed account of that experience, I felt there was a gap in the literature around self-inquiry as content for critique. Further, I wanted to move beyond the labels of the areas I identify with (mother, student, partner, friend, manager, employee) and the voices often associated with them (feminist theory surfaced throughout the literature in regards to my own experience), and focus on a more personalized contribution to universal events. The personal investigation is more deeply contended with through self-inquiry but offered through a visual process for this study. The surfaced themes discussed in Chapter 3 tied together collections of journal entries, organizing them into smaller groups for assessment. These served as prompts for the analysis and painting process that provided a mode for interpretation and understanding. The journal entries that told the stories of the life events unfolding throughout my doctoral program were grouped, coded, annotated, categorized, and analyzed. They were distilled to just a handful of words from thousands. I learned that taking a block of time from a person's life and summarize the meaning of the experiences that shape those years in the space of a couple hundred pages is a vast undertaking, but to solely focus on only one event would not

provide a basis for a full critique of my doctoral experience. Similarly, assessing any aspect of the larger experience of these years from a culturally labeled lens would leave out perspective more broadly felt outside of the space of a self-inquiry. In other words, I felt there was a necessity in examining the whole of my life experiences, or themes, playing out in my day to day that impacted one another and ultimately who I was as a student in my doctoral program. There are bodies of work around the doctoral student experience. That literature contributes to my own understanding of my place within it and this conversely shares an experience back with that work, but this is with focus on what was done around, and as a result of, those life events and how that altered my doctoral experience. To add to the research question, how does the personal heartache, tragedy, joy, or compounding tiny details of ordinary daily life shape a person's demeanor as they make their way through a doctoral program, because what I found was that it was ultimately more about my emotions attached to the life events, how I handled them, that affected my doctoral experience.

These questions could be answered many ways from many methodological standpoints, but the importance of this question for this study is symbiotic; contributing to the knowledge of my personal experience in order to answer critical questions of contribution and thereby infusing meaning back into the experience through analysis of those critical findings. Revisiting my journal entries and systematically working through their organization reawakened awareness around areas of my life I had left understanding and acknowledgement behind in but carried forward the stress and challenge. The history that helps to explain and take the responsibility for present day feelings had been forgotten, while the pain persisted. Revisiting reason allowed for a deeper understanding. Pointing to heartache provided understanding but also brought forward feelings of shame, inadequacy, and guilt that were somewhat numbed by the reality of moving forward with day to day life and responsibilities. The intuitive painting process that those entries prompted allowed for a healing and a present-day reflective understanding; one that came from a place of hindsight and purposeful assessment. The objective of revisiting and critiquing the experiences and how they pulled me from my program or potentially negatively impacted my approach at

times was not to cause shame, but rather to develop an awareness around the resulting path I took. The objective is in acknowledgement and deeper understanding of the import of such life events on this experience.

Works regarding persistence and cultural perspective of experiences interested me greatly as I began my study, but the heart of the question I wanted to answer was how the events in my life the background noise to my demeanor, participation, and capacity were. For me, the question was around my own accountability to my experience and seeking understanding of how I participated in the outcome.

To build a foundation of personal knowledge and understanding, journal entries were grouped into 6 initial themes: *Paying the Bills, Support, Marriage, Purpose and Value, Life Framing, and External Pressure*. After revisiting the journal entries, narrowing to those with more content to offer, and assessing the themes that covered the major events that indicated influence in the shifts and turns my program took, these served as prompts for the intuitive painting process that helped to uncover more meaning. By using an arts-based approach for inquiry and later evaluation of the experience, I exposed a part of myself not relied upon for research practice formerly. The purpose of intuitive painting for my process, as is discussed later in this chapter, is to get out of my thinking/head-space and into the feeling and physical sides of my thought process (Gramm, 2012). To dive into the human experience, and later critique it for understanding, bringing forward honest interpretation of those experiences in the mode most fruitful was valuable.

The initial themes guided my painting and organized categories for critique. Through the analysis, by way of distillation of the journal entries and intuitive painting for inquiry, more emotionally descriptive themes resulted. What was learned through self-inquiry and critique was that the underlying emotion of the combination of these life events was the driver of decisions made in my doctoral program. *Paying the Bills* was an initial explanation for finance-related issues. Threaded throughout those related events were feelings of stress, worry, inadequacy, and

an inner combat of hopelessness and determination. The theme became *Pressures of Security//Fear of Scarcity*, representing the pressures of establishing security and the fear of not having it exhibited in the journaled data. The impact of the related life events on the doctoral experience were ones of fragmented attention due to drive in the workplace to establish a career and sense of security, as well as financial stability. As noted earlier in this chapter, all themes had overlap, arguably with every other theme. The overlap of issues relating to financial security and fears of its lacking created distraction from devoted time to working on my doctoral program, but also drive in my career that fulfilled a commitment to myself and a way forward.

The theme *Support* grouped together journaled data surrounding issues of relationship support, my perception of others' understanding of me, workplace accommodation, and guidance from those in my program. Through assessment of the entries, it became clear that issues relating to support were about the varying need of external support when my internal strength was vulnerable or when multiple weighty life events occurred simultaneously. This brought the theme of *Support* to a more comprehensive one of *Internal Strength//External Support*.

Marriage as a theme seemed more straightforward when gathering the associated journal entries, but upon analysis it was revealed that the topics regarding marriage were as much about my efforts to strike a balance with myself as they were about my relationship. To be in my marriage during my doctoral pursuit, and with all of the other aspects of my personal identity, the journaled data showed issues of guilt for time spent on personal goals, self-doubt regarding my career choices, an effort to devote time to all areas of my life, and the drive after a divorce to pursue a new life-personally and professionally-and the conflicts and benefits that were a result of that determination. The theme of Marriage became *Commitment to Marriage//Commitment to Self*.

Throughout my doctoral program, there is a resounding theme of *Purpose and Value*; determining the reason and meaningfulness to the choices I made, the ways I was allocating my time, and what that said about both my personal values and my value of self. For the timeframe of

my doctoral program, much of the purpose determinations were a product of rebuilding myself post-divorce. Building my career, finding a new relationship and marriage, and motherhood, emerged as a post-divorce chapter in my life. Due to the timeline of my life events, they occurred with close timing of one another, if not simultaneous, and all held great importance to me. Balancing the pursuit of my career alongside personal life events that unfolded shifted where my priorities were within my roles throughout. There was a repeated theme in these journal entries of “coming back to myself” and showing a value in my individuality amongst the new roles I was experiencing. My purpose in the individual events, as well as my feelings around broader purpose, as well as the value I placed on those things changed as these events in my life occurred. *Purpose and Value* generally became a more descriptive *Purpose-Seeking and Valuing*, with “valuing” becoming an action in my assessment of it as my roles adapted and priorities were made.

Life Framing overlaps with all other themes. *Life Framing* captured the journal entries discussing my goals and desires that made up my longer-term vision. When entering my doctoral program, I knew it would be years before I was completed. I also acknowledged in my Introduction, under the subheading of Reflecting on the Path, that I had uncertainty around my reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree. Many of my journal entries dealt with my feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy around my choices, not just in the pursuit of my doctoral degree, but in the choices that led me to it and the subsequent choices throughout. I wondered often how all of the pieces, their range evident in these themes, fit together and how I was going to make sense of that in the future—my career implications, student loan debt, and the impact of those things on my relationship and family. The journal entries illustrated a continuous mapping of possible paths with each new job opportunity and personal goal. What came from this critique was an understanding that recognizing my place in the trajectory of the framework was important for positioning my expectations. “Place” also took on meaning of community and the places I was drawn to that contributed to the positive aspects of the framing. Understanding “place” also

allowed future planning and gratitude in the present to coexist, a source of inner conflict throughout the journaled data. *Life Framing* evolved into *Life Mapping//Place Recognition*.

If there is to be an overarching theme, or one that stretches for further reach, it is *External Pressures*. This is also the theme that changed the most contextually from conception to completion. Initially, *External Pressures* was intended to describe the multitude of pressures I experienced-many self-inflicted-from various areas of my life. What resulted from the assessment of journaled data and critique process was a recognition that while external pressures existed, my internal navigation of those pressures was seemingly responsible for how it impacted my choices and ultimately its role in my doctoral experience moreover. An acknowledgement of the reality and weight of external pressures was constantly called upon in the journal entries. I needed validation that the pressure was real. But what did not happen in a conscious way until the critique was a realization of the choices I made when pressure mounted and the impact those choices had. It was detailed in the entries, but not called out in regard to valuing my navigation of it. After assessment and critique, *External Pressures* expanded to *External Pressure//Internal Compass*.

What I learned through self-inquiry about my life events' shaping of my personal doctoral experience was that they were overlapping and all-consuming; they expanded and retracted in undulation giving way periodically to bursts of productivity before pulling me under again. They were often unavoidable. They were a detriment and simultaneously the reason for persistence not the antithesis to it. They are universal in their commonality with others but uniquely my own in my idiosyncratic response to them, and their specific combination in my life. This knowledge, and specifically the use of it, extends beyond the personal of the shared experience and more broadly to fellow women students, colleagues, and educators in the auto-critique of it.

How does an auto-criticism uniquely describe and evaluate an experience, in this case a student's path in navigating their doctoral experience, and what does this contribute to our understanding of that experience?

Auto-criticism provides a systematic approach to assess an experience with personal context and draw upon the expertise gained by living it to provide foundation for critique of the personal on the outcome. The expertise, or connoisseurship, acquired through a lived experience is stretched further through the analytic process of becoming deeply knowledgeable of the personal factors contributing to an experience's evolution. The assessment of personal factors with purpose to investigate their role in navigation of the experience places value on the personal but maintains focus on the impacted experience from a critical standpoint. Auto-criticism differs from auto-ethnography, personal narrative, and other auto-qualitative methods by placing emphasis on actively valuing inputs and outputs of the experience.

By examining personal elements and their role in a larger experience, we give weight to the likely and important impact such elements have on a person's demeanor, purpose, and approach to an experience, but we do not grant any one element, or life event, precedence over an experience's outcome. The essential criteria and values by which an experience is assessed in an auto-criticism is determined through the literature and by the expert who has undergone the experience. By valuing the qualities of the experience, we get at what and why the experience is important, moving beyond expression toward critically assessing it based on criteria developed through connoisseurship. Critiquing the experience is thought of much in the same way as an artistic critique. As Uhrmacher et al. explain, "A film critic does more than simply describe films. He or she may, for example, place a given film with the context of its production history, aims, and social messages. Such aspects of a film reflect the normative and political ecology of which it is a part" (p. 15).

Through the critique we are given social context of the experience in order to evaluate its place and impact in our lives and others'. Multiple definitions of an ideal experience and what constitutes success can exist and should be outlined by the researcher. In terms of the educational criticism perspective, "knowing a range of values and the traditions of which they are a part helps connoisseurs hone in on issues of significance, thereby offering further insights into

how teachers, students, and others make sense of their school experience” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 16).

In this study, personal journals were used as data over the course of my doctoral program to build a foundation of understanding of the personal contribution to the experience being critiqued. The experience critique encompasses determined impactful layers of the personal, but with their role in shifting my larger experience, in this case the doctoral experience, as context for the critique. From those journal entries, a systematic approach to develop “analytic categories” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017) was formed, which shaped the process for reflection and evaluation.

Honoring the truth that we can’t know the best way to navigate something until we’ve done it, and that even then we can feel so uncertain that it seeps into future decisions, through reflective analysis we give importance to all contributing decisions, not just those decisions considered *good* or *correct* according to those outside the first-hand account. In an auto-criticism, the researcher is the connoisseur having lived it, but through the literature and process of assessment, they deepen their expertise to perform an examination of how it played out and what it means moving forward. The aim is not to walk away with a glowing review of the researcher’s performance in the experience, but rather to more deeply understand exactly what is going on. A critical interpretation “is a way to get beneath the surface of routine and often taken-for-granted behaviors” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 46).

Academia can be a competitive environment (Watermeyer & Olssen, 2016), but, in my view, like the business world, upper management, motherhood, women friendships, and nearly all aspects of life; there is a culture of doing everything “the best way”, or presenting oneself perfectly (Flett, Nepon, Hewitt, Molnar & Zhao, 2016). When thinking about what a “perfect” doctoral experience would have looked like, it is seemingly impossible because it would have required eliminating, or ignoring, central elements of my life. Those elements added complexity in balancing all roles and responsibilities, but without them the perspective gained would have been

diminished. The important learning is in the human experience as much as in the classroom. Without my own experiences of professional pursuit, family building, and identity seeking, I would not be as versed in studying this experience.

Despite my awareness of value in the various areas of my life, I felt inner pressure throughout much of my program to make my experience look like other students'—other people who had a different combination of those roles and events in their own lives—and to meet others' expectations rather than carving out my own. Inevitably this created unattainable expectations of molding myself into something I not only wasn't but didn't want. Meanwhile, those same life events that were contributing to fragmented attention and stress were simultaneously creating a desire to find meaning in this commitment and systematically make sense of it.

With bodies of research around student stress and expectations (Brown & Watson, 2010; Moyer et al., 1999), pressures of dissertation topic selections (Xia, 2013), and the impact of life events on student engagement (Bowen & Rudenstine, 2014; Long-Jacobs & Gorlewski, 2014; Lynch, 2008; Maher, Ford & Thompson, 2004), we know that many factors contribute to the doctoral experience. Auto-criticism joins the autobiographical approach of sharing a lived experience with the theories of criticism to illustrate value to the elements that make up the whole. As an emerging method of self-inquiry, this auto-criticism needed and deserved unfiltered access to the personal to delve into its possibilities.

Without a critical assessment of what I experienced and my participation in it, I would not have gained as much understanding of the years dedicated to this pursuit. I wouldn't remember everything that's happened as a result of lessening the hurt and stress, but likewise losing the honor and understanding of self that comes with seeing both the pain and the joy. A doctorate program can feel both selfish and selfless at times; the pursuit of a time-consuming personal goal pulling a person's focus from other areas of life yet rooted in a field of study and community with hopes of a larger societal contribution. Culturally, with the weight of student loans (Begun & Carter, 2017; Gicheva, 2016; Graham & Kim 2011), the uncertainty of higher education's value or

intentions (Mason, et al., 2009), and the restlessness of shifting generational and gender perspectives all contributing to the various opinions of this marker of achievement (Kelly, 2016; Mason, et al., 2009), it is complicated to unravel the reasons behind why an individual feels the way they do about being involved in it. Through this process of auto-criticism, I have come to know the value in critiquing how I handled my experience through a systematic approach that considered coexisting experiences and cultural narratives to be informative. We can look back at the tiny moments and the large mile markers of our lives and gain something from reflection in all of it. There is a cultural desire to quickly move forward, move on, and keep going (Rosa, 2003), and there is benefit in the letting go and moving on at times. But, to me, the beauty and the knowledge; the power and the strength we gain, comes from the acknowledgement of a situation to gain what we can from it before we let it go. Don't let go before you take from it what you earned through time and tears. Like scars on our souls, we are imprinted with our experiences for better or worse. Reflection and critical assessment of those experiences gives purpose and reason to those scar-producing events. It means they didn't happen without cause. It means we, as humans, gain something with every experience, and more when we pay attention and share that. This is what reflection and critique can offer. A systematic process shapes a potential rabbit hole of over-analysis into a productive reflection to draw out value. By offering this critical process and resulting reflections, I offer a starting point to those who see use in it-possibly higher education, teachers, counselors, and future doctoral students. Auto-criticism is about finding ourselves where we presently are, how we arrived here, and gaining knowledge from that in an intentional way.

As discussed in Chapter 3 under the heading Cousins of Criticism, Auto-ethnography offers an insightful method for assessing the personal experience through a cultural context. Like auto-criticism, it is deeply personal and exploratory. It seeks to gain understanding of a lived experience and extend that to a broader awareness culturally. However, auto-criticism offers an alternative view that unravels a personal experience for the purposes of evaluating its parts; to take in the cultural and social elements as informative but not central, to see the experience anew

in order to critically evaluate how it unfolded, is distinctive objective of auto-criticism. Auto-criticism is about story-telling for critical evaluation; for uncovering actions and outcomes. Arguably, the difference between auto-ethnography and auto-criticism is in both the objective and the outcome. The data gathered may be very similar, but one is assessing the experience for the purposes of meaningful understanding to extend knowledge to a culture group, or inform beyond a culture group, and the other is creating a framework for critique to actionably value the experience. Narrative inquiry possesses similarities to both auto-ethnography and auto-criticism as well, but is focused more on story structure (Bell, 2002). Bell (2002) describes that narrative as analysis focuses on how “people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them, that stories are in the light of new constantly being restructured events, and that stories do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives” (Bell, 2002, p. 208). Auto-criticism shares a recognition of the ongoing contributions to personal story, but still approaches with the purpose of ultimately critiquing through determined criteria.

An auto-criticism asks, what have we learned from this experience that critical awareness can shift future approach? An auto-ethnography aims to enlighten about a lived experience and others hopefully benefit from the sharing of these stories through specific and advocating lenses. An auto-criticism does not seek expertise from a point of view, feminist for example or any other, but acknowledges there will be elements from the cultural influences of the individual’s identity. Instead, it focuses our attention to the critique of the experience and the cultural context provides us with some understanding of why the result may look the way it does. If we look at how a doctoral experience was navigated, my own for example, and see that little time was given to certain areas of career-building while others were afforded great attention, it is helpful to know the circumstances of that individual (work demands, family and financial dynamics, idiosyncratic circumstances around expectations, etc.) to see reason behind actions, but the goal is to then critique how the lack of attention in some areas and the over-extension in others impacted the result. By doing so, we can not only learn more about ourselves through the process of auto-criticism for future work and contributions to our field, but others are able to learn from our

choices. There is also an accountability to our actions that elevates self-awareness through this process. This outcome is possible through an auto-ethnography also, but the determination of methods to use is in the goal of the researcher. Like any methodological choice, which one best suit the questions you're seeking to answer? Auto-criticism fills a gap in methodological choices for a systematic process to provide productive personal critique. It provides us with the opportunity to gain resolution of misunderstood or forgotten reasons for an outcome, to heal and offer a path to acceptance of the choices made, and to extend our lessons learned to those sharing similar experiences. The work of an auto-criticism could provide an individual with a deeper awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses to better temper and bolster where logical; to provide areas for leveraging and others for growth, and to give weight to the real and personal factors that should not be discounted, but not make them prescriptive of the capacity of the individual.

How can an arts-based representation contribute to our understanding of the criticism and auto-criticism as a method?

As I've pointed to in Chapter 4, auto-criticism benefits from a mode of representation that allows for freedom and honesty; to dive deeply into the personal to extract meaning. Auto-criticism is not reliant on an arts-based method for representation. Initially, I considered a written call and response entry to the earlier journal entries, answering questions and concerns with hindsight in order to make sense of the choices made with the perspective time affords.

Incorporating a visual element to the analysis allowed for an important piece of myself to join the dialog. As is shown through the themes and journal data, the creative part of myself was not a large focus throughout my doctoral program but is an important mode of communication and contemplation for me. By choosing to reflect on the data using a painting process, I allowed for quiet reflection on the themes. The journaled entries had become chaotic over the course of revisiting them. The worry and anxiety that came through in the words from those moments needed a different method for assessment. I took to the painting process for the quiet space it

gave to sit with the themes, but also to physically create something new to represent the present-day perspective of something past.

Auto-criticism is isolating work, focusing solely on self-inquiry and reflection. An arts-based representation was helpful in creating something outside of the pages I'd spent time with both in the original moment and in their analysis. It also serves as a bridge to the viewer/reader to join in the conversation of this process. In this case, the process is where the understanding evolves, and the subsequent representation is only showing part of that process. There is purpose in the covering up of words in the artwork. Capturing the representative journaled words on canvas or panel and then ultimately covering up those that fade away conceptually is part of the illumination of the meaning, but the viewer/reader sharing in the result later misses out on that earlier stage. This is metaphorical of the personal experience and what remains outwardly for others is the product of layers of work. For this work, the viewer will likely have differing perspective of what, if any, meaning they gather from the paintings. They may project their own stories onto the work. "In interacting with [the paintings], the viewers draw their own references...viewers [draw] their own personal narratives" (Kalmanowitz, 2013, p. 45).

The painting process became the vehicle for analysis, a method for critiquing the experience, drawing new perspective of it quite literally through this visual work. The critique extended beyond that of the experience and to the study itself ultimately as I worked to shape what auto-criticism can offer. As in artistic critique, the evaluation involved comparison to "envisioned criteria [and] goals" and involved "considering quality" (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan, 2013, p. 81), and in this case the *quality* was in the resulting experience and visual representations of it.

The arts-based exploration in this study is guided by intuitive painting as it was presented by Bowley (2012). I had knowledge of the philosophies and practices of this approach to expressive painting prior to beginning this study, but it wasn't until I used it in the context of an auto-criticism, with an in-depth exploration of personal journals as prompts did I develop a deeper

understanding of the theories of nonattachment and authentic voice (Bowley, 2012) that are tied to this visual approach. I had the good fortune to experience a painting workshop with Bowley just before entering my doctoral program. She embraces freedom of expression and leans away from critique in the traditional academic sense, but ironically, the freedom she infuses into her approach benefitted my adapted view and need of critique in my own experience. Adopting aspects of her intuitive painting process brought the needed openness I needed to communicate the offerings of auto-criticism. As described in the Data Analysis section, the painting process allowed me to create something new from the experiences I had revisited and be present with the resulting emotions. It allowed me to let go of past perceptions and adopt nonattachment, and a freedom in expression, as I painted through the interpretation. "Practicing nonattachment helps you avoid hanging on too tight to your preconceived ideas about what is right and wrong and opens you up to a place of infinite possibilities" (Bowley, 2012, 108). Like Bowley's (2012) description of the painting process, it is "a back and forth conversation [that] is happening between letting go and adding in" (p. 110); similarly, the action of auto-criticism and exploring personal data is a dynamic fluctuation between the emotional and the assessment and the past experience and the present interpretation. While the intuitive painting process is not an academically rooted technique, arguably enthusiastically the opposite, it served me deeply in gaining access to an interpretive state of mind around deeply personal subject matter, for which I am grateful. It gave strength to my creative voice that was needed as a part of my own auto-criticism exploration to best tell my story and develop this method.

Process/Phases

To answer the research questions, I revisited years' worth of personal journal entries, combing through each for overarching themes. These were then used as prompts to explore a topic through intuitive painting (Bowley, 2012). Time spent moving paint across a panel in a room by myself was the most investigative work I could have done for this research. My mind wandered and I worked through things that were presently troubling me, thereby allowing my mind to clear

for everything else. It gave me mental and physical space to meditate on each prompt and topic. It allowed me to reach a part of my brain meant for creating and forward motion and forced me to physically take action, getting beyond the analysis in my mind. Art has long been recognized as a therapeutic tool, but research also shows that it allows us to connect to feelings and unconscious thoughts we may not otherwise access so easily (Perryman, Blisard, & Moss, 2019).

The choice to use “intuitive painting” (Bowley, 2012), was a logical choice for me in two regards; it’s aim is to let go and create freely, which serves self-inquiry by helping to break down barriers prohibiting true expression of thoughts and experiences, and it holds special meaning to me offering a connection to a part of myself that was vital in showing my whole true self in this study. The intentional self-discovery that has taken place during this time was hard-fought, and the journey and the way in which I share about it warranted a personally meaningful representation. Auto-criticism is about applying expertise to a personal experience and honestly assessing how it was navigated and what surrounding it had an impact. It’s about personal contribution and accountability to the self. The best way I knew how to represent this assessment was through a painting process introduced to me by Flora Bowley. Early in this chapter of self-discovery I took a workshop from her and was introduced to the mindset of “letting go of the fear and negative stories that hold us back in order to make space for the new, positive stories to emerge” (Bowley, 2012, p. 14). I’ve come to learn through exploring research methods that this is a powerful tool to self-inquiry and learning. Personally, my fear, worries, and disappointments can get in the way of thinking and seeing clearly. To recognize my experiences fully, I needed to both acknowledge these realities, but also release them to see what else was contributing, both internally and externally. For example, negative self-talk and worry around the lack of a certain achievement by a certain age in life can cloud recognition of the presence of other achievements, or how the lack of is contributing to decision-making. Bowley (2012) explains, “The first step is to recognize what stories are creating your life right now” (p. 14). She explains the process as “connecting to your inner landscape and noticing what is true for you in the moment,” allowing us to “connect to your true self along the way” (Bowley, 2012, p. 14).

Adopting this process as an approach to the analysis component of an auto-criticism has opened up my understanding of its use for a self-inquisitive state of living. The combination of making use of personal journals, stepping back and seeing them through new eyes years later, working through creative representations of those, and allowing the experience of this process to be the interpretation is valuable self-work that has led to deeper understanding. Auto-qualitative research has an objective of offering an individual account to a larger conversation (Davis and Ellis, 2008). Intuitive painting, as Bowley (2012) describes, is as a process for self-discovery can help to achieve that. It is a metaphor for our life experiences:

Often the fear of not knowing what to do or the fear of doing something wrong stops us in our tracks and keeps us from starting. If we can let go of this fear, we open ourselves up to a much larger world of expression—a world where anything is possible. I strongly believe that there are no mistakes in the creative process. Everything that happens along the way—every dab of paint, every emotion that arises, every brave new choice—is an important ingredient in the final offering. (p. 18)

Bringing Meaning to the Experience

The selection of a dissertation topic can be muddied by outside opinions. My penchant to please those I respect in the field with my choices along the way began to lead me down paths that I quickly didn't recognize. I kept coming back to the need to make meaning from what was not only a professional but personal shift in my life during my doctoral program. I recognized the need to explore and evaluate my experience to get to a fuller understanding of where I was in it. I also recognized that the method perhaps best suited to do this was a variation of others I had studied. Auto-criticism held possibility to match the work I was setting out to do, and so the development of this method became equally important. A recognition of my understanding of self as a student at the end of this program would hopefully benefit my future work and community of researchers. Through this I came to know the work of critical theorists and arts-based researchers that opened up a way to systematically and creatively seek understanding. The outlook of an auto-approach within those disciplines felt dually purposeful as a personal need and an aspect of this field of research still awaiting contribution.

A heavy feeling of regret combined with fear started creeping in as I started my final year of coursework. With the end in relative sight, I started to take inventory of what I'd gained and what I felt I would walk away from the program with. The comparisons and the expectations of what I felt I should've achieved to that point became panic-inducing. As I'd focused intensely on my career apart from my degree, I felt leveraging what I'd learned in my doctorate program to grow my existing work life path felt like the logical choice. Although a Ph.D. is certainly not required for the work I was doing, the knowledge I'd gained from it was beneficial. But, my personal life was taking a turn down a new path and my professional identity would be shifting alongside it. After years of fertility treatments, health concerns, and personal shifts with my spouse's career and our building a family, life-and its priorities-were shifting. At the prospect of not following the path I'd set out to follow at the start of graduate school, post-divorce and focused on building my professional identity, I began to question why I'd done any of this. Turning to the research, it revealed that I wasn't alone (McClintock-Comeaux, 2006), and given the time in life of pursuing this degree, not surprising that a change of course would occur. So where did that leave me? I started to legitimately panic. I considered quitting the program more than once. As I wind down my work on this dissertation, I still wonder about its purpose and place in my life. Self-inquiry has brought understanding and resolution around my reasons for why I pursued this and how I handled it, even if my critique of some aspects is regretful. Navigating a Ph.D. is tricky at best and downright depressing and panic-inducing at worst. Not finishing is a real thing and the fear of being "ABD" (Blum, 2010, p. 75) exists, but so does the fear of actually obtaining the degree and having no path forward thereafter.

I needed my dissertation research to glean as much meaning as possible from my experience and for it to speak to the aspects of my soul that had atrophied since beginning the program. I also needed to explore this method that spoke to me as a genuine match to the questions I was seeking to answer. To do this I needed to access a part of myself I hadn't employed in the research side of my life to that point. Crossing the wires of my worlds is where my story, and the method for uncovering it, would be found.

Jing Xia (2013) wrote a dissertation on students' experiences in selecting a dissertation topic, outlining the difficulty and doubt students face. I also felt daunted with the choice initially, but by the time I needed to make that decision, and had been through many moments of personal challenges and growth throughout my time in this program, I felt a lesser need to please others with my topic selection and a stronger necessity to make meaning of my experience. I felt there was less value in doing something seen as impressive by others if I had no real understanding of myself in this current place in my life; as a scholar and future researcher, not to mention individual with many roles living alongside this other part of myself. I craved deeper purpose in my work as a result of the dedication of these years to gaining the knowledge I have. One objective of a dissertation process is to gain deep understanding of a topic, method, or theory. In order to gain meaningful understanding of an emerging method focused on self-inquiry, deeper understanding of the self is vital.

Still experiencing self-doubt and unease around my navigation of the program, I wanted to explore the reasons behind that and come to a better understanding of what I'd contributed and what I valued upon completing my degree. I was still wrestling with this as I started the dissertation writing process. I determined that I needed to inquire what was at the root of those feelings as a part of examining my participation in the program that either contributed to or was a result of those views. The research questions that rose up for me were around my experiences, many conflicting and all demanding, throughout my time as a doctoral student. Alongside this recognition was the emergence of a methodology that could serve this inquiry.

I feel my sense of other students' inner battles is heightened. I mostly feel that I can better serve the roles in my life by having examined how I've approached the contributions that came before. This first-hand experience of that has assured me that this method of auto-criticism can be transferrable to essentially anyone's experience that deserves reflection in order to be more knowledgeable of the self.

I conclude this program with more understanding of my choices along the way, compassion toward myself and other students, and with a method to best honor that self-exploration. When thinking about the best method for addressing the questions I had, I felt strongly pulled toward my art student foundation and educational connoisseurship and criticism. It is very fitting for me to choose a method that allows me to be critical of myself. Of course, that is not what *criticism* in this sense is about, but it does allow me to take stock of what I know now so that I can know better how to take the next step. We want what we do to matter (Hadden & Smith, 2019). When it feels like it doesn't, I personally need to meditate on why that is. Allowing for dismissal and too quickly moving on sets us up for repeat choices and takes away the opportunity to recognize what we've learned. It's about knowing yourself. It's about giving yourself some structure around that so you don't go down a rabbit hole of hateful self-talk. It's about remembering what we experience as it's so easy to dismiss the day to day. It's about self-love even in the face of judgement from peers, professionals, and partners. It's about understanding given to all of those same people because you're doing the work of understanding yourself and can extend that to others. Auto-criticism applies connoisseurship to the self. The connoisseur is both the expert and the critic with the expertise of one's own undertakings. There is risk in the possibility of yielding too subjective of conclusions, but the potential reward comes in the form of enriching the personal understanding and be able to leverage that whether for your future self or others.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study provide additional perspective about what it means to conduct a critical self-inquiry, to apply criticism to a social experience, to productively apply methods of critique to the self, and to partner that with arts-based practices as a mode of exploration. These offerings have the potential to impact the ways faculty guide doctoral students, how students advocate for their life experiences as a part of their student identity, and how self-inquiry can include critical examination in a healthy and meaningful way.

Simultaneous to my time in this program, I had a role as a manager for a large public library system. The team of people I led were losing sight of the value of the work they were doing. There was a sense of lost understanding around the effects their personal contribution had to the meaning of the work—not necessarily that the work itself needed to hold deep meaning to them personally, but that their contributions did. It mirrored some of the unrest I was feeling in my work of this program. Similarly, to my contribution to my role as a student in this program, their role as an employee in contribution to their work was worth evaluating and finding reasons around why certain choices are made. To better know our motivations and reasons to understand the outcomes and how we feel about that, how we go forward, and what it can mean to understand when others go through something similar, a process of critical self-inquiry could serve here as well.

Implications for Methodological Growth and Future Researchers

Auto-criticism is newly emerging, and researchers will have different opinions about how it should be shaped. The best way forward is to use it and get comfortable with the positive aspects of self-critique and our understanding of what that means. Seeing criticism of the personal experience or outcome in a productive light and offering an explanation around this will be a challenge for this method. Due to this somewhat misleading terminology, those interested in auto-criticism have discussed its moniker and what may better represent the method. This is an offering to the conversation around what auto-criticism is, with recommendation to continue the conversation. It will evolve as my perspective on how best to approach it has already shifted having worked through an initial attempt. The value of knowing ourselves and being able to provide ourselves, and others in our communities of work, with a critical assessment for the purposes of meaning-making should be addressed in future representations of the work.

Limitations and Other Research Considerations

The emergence of this study is both its limitation and benefit. With little to no prior research on auto-criticism as a method it invites exploration and pushes us to ask questions of what it could be and what it could offer to an already deep pool of auto-qualitative approaches. This circumstance also makes it vulnerable to unformed structure and lack of use due to lack of understanding. It is important that those who feel connected to the objectives of auto-criticism and its unique angle on auto-qualitative work, continue to shape it and make use of it. As the arts and humanities, and educational connoisseurship and criticism have shown us, becoming an expert in something and providing a thoughtful critique to a larger conversation brings new insights and understanding (Barone, 1992; Barry, 2017; Eisner, 1991; Uhrmacher et al., 2017). What better subject matter than to truly know how we're navigating our own lives in order to offer that understanding to those in shared fields and environments?

Methodological Reflections

This study worked toward a reflection on this method with the purpose of assessing its use and place in qualitative methods. It borrows from and is influenced by methods across disciplines, and mirrors those at times, but it stands on its own as a method. To summarize what I learned throughout the implementation of an auto-criticism and the research on influential methods, I've referenced directly and also adapted elements of a table from Swartz (1993) that offers distinctions between methods (see Table 2). Swartz's table outlines the focus, credibility, elements, and function of criticism, qualitative research, and qualitative criticism (1993, p. 2). The categories of focus, credibility, and function were applicable in explaining added methodologies of arts criticism, educational criticism specifically, auto-ethnography, and auto-criticism. Swartz's table provided the structure for added methodologies and an adaption of "elements" to "qualities" that I felt better referenced the multi-discipline comparison.

Table 2*	Qualitative Research	Arts Criticism	Educational Criticism	Auto-Ethnography	Auto-Criticism
Focus	Entire Context	Object, Performance, Work of Art	Setting, Educational Environment, Curriculum, Experience	Individual Experience in Cultural Context	Individual's Contribution and Role in an Experience and/or Setting
Qualities	Deep description of settings and experiences	Informed evaluation and critique of a work	Informed evaluation and critique of a setting or experience	Informed description and evaluation of an individual's experience	Informed evaluation and critique of an individual's experience and involvement in a setting
Credibility	Experience of the researcher, prolonged and persistent engagement, qualitative methods	Experience of the critic (Connoisseurship)	Experience as the critic and utilization of critical qualitative methods	Individual involved in the experience and qualitative methods	Individual involved in the experience and utilization of critical qualitative methods
Function	Research	Criticism	Research & Criticism	Research	Research & Criticism
<i>*Expanded upon from Swartz's table, "A Comparison" (1993, p. 2).</i>					

Why it Mattered

As I sit at my kitchen table one year later writing concluding thoughts, I still find myself with some uncertainty. The baby is no longer in his swing but toddling around the room. Geographically we're 650 miles from where we were at the start of this process, although the emotional mileage is not measurable. Now, the uncertainty is not about how to go about the work. That is done, at least for this study. And, it is less about the choices made after exposing the reasons behind them. But rather the uncertainty is around this method's place in research, in academia, and in my own life. Reflection requires sitting with your emotions and deciding they're

worth examining in order to know more about yourself, your place in this world, and your contribution. To reflect and see what was put in and what was taken from a situation can shed some light, not only for the individual experiencing it, but all things that person or their work encounters thereafter. The value is in the contribution to a community of thinkers, doers, and advocates.

An arts-based dissertation does not necessarily require an extensive work of writing, or any at all, but the objective of this work was to explore and describe auto-criticism as a method and how I approached that personally. To still communicate the findings in the most suitable mode for my telling, which is arts-based, but also enrich this emerging method, it was important to share a written account of how the process was shaped and ultimately unfolded. To connect the use of a self-inquiry painting process to the perspective and structure of an auto-criticism, a written account was needed. Additionally, words add context and layers to the paintings with hope of furthering their reach. As was discussed in this study, how an individual interprets a painting, what they take away from viewing the work, and whether that spurs any action or shift within them, will be unique for each person. When expressing through artistic means to inquire about the self, the reach to audience likely becomes important after the process of the individual creating and doing the inner work. Due to the offering of a method for that inner work, a written account served both a purpose of its explanation and analysis with the intent of including more in the conversation.

As a new method, auto-criticism held opportunity and hindrance. The suggestion of an auto approach to educational criticism, with influence from criticism in other disciplines, had been made (Uhrmacher et al., 2017), but no study to our knowledge had yet been offered. With interest in a new method, I had hesitations in selecting an arts-based approach to explore, worried that may confuse the demonstration of auto-criticism as its own method apart from a particular representation. However, the choice of an arts-based process for analyzing and expressing the

data added layers that both supported facilitation of the process for me personally, as well as added depth in its explanation.

Auto-criticism as a method is evolving and the process and structure of how I approached this study is already changing in my own work. Like other auto-qualitative methods, an objective is to provide deeper understanding, of the self and the actions of the self in this case, to grow a larger knowledge. In attempting to articulate an introspective process, the task of providing a satisfying and comprehensive explanation was intimidating. I found myself thinking that if the paintings I created through this process, the walls that surrounded me during my work, the pages of my journals I touched and cried over during the lived experiences and their analysis could aid in my explanation of this method's ability to facilitate self-research, the value of this method would be better understood. But, as I'm aware from doing this work, this is my inner dialogue of insecurities creeping in, needing the work to be validated. As Eisner (1991) suggests, we can continue to broaden how we think about inquiry. This envelopes my efforts of explanation here. I offer an approach of blended disciplines to broaden self-inquiry work through auto-criticism; in how we see our experiences through a critical lens, knowing and subsequently shaping our experiences more effectively, reflecting in order to rise in our understanding.

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Appendix
Journal Samples

Wednesday, July 24, 2013
I'm right on the verge of a very new, and scary/exciting, phase of my life. So much so that I debated saving this journal for the very beginning, the official start, of that phase - my PhD program. But, isn't the lead-up to these big changes - and all the emotions, events, and shifts that take place - just as new-journal-worthy? I think so. Part of me always wants to keep the journals I write in, and another part of me wants to burn them the moment I've filled one up. So much of what I write pertains to my fears and worries, wants and wishes, and it seems unhealthy to keep written documentation. I journal not to go back and read it but to get it out! When I was packing to move from Kansas City back to Colorado, I shredded my journals from the time of my separation and divorce (modern-day burning of journals). It wasn't until my second Sojourn that I began to keep them. I've only shortly glanced once, maybe.

twice, back at any of them. But, for now, they're lined up in a bin next to my old dayplanners - which I've actually looked back over more than the journals - way more. What does that say? Does that mean something? But, as I said, journaling - to me - is for the purpose of getting things out, working through dilemmas and worries, and a way to confide my thoughts to myself. And, right now there's a lot to think about! My PhD program (Ahhh!) begins in five weeks. My job situation is sort of up in the air because of the impending time - [redacted] and expected demand of my program, and Todd and I have grown in our relationship and now talk about getting married. There's a lot going on. I'm a little afraid - to varying degrees - of all of these things. The work/school balance presents a challenge - both needing my time + neither something I'm finding I can adjust (my job mainly), but all of these things - despite my worries,

but am not sure I can handle
the hours with my school program.
It's bad timing because the library is
going through a huge re-organization
right now. It makes it all tricky... and
stressful. I applied tonight to AZA's
Emergency Leaders program. Very
long shot, but would be an incredible
honor to be chosen. I can think of
several others from my program who
will probably apply, and look better
on paper potentially. But, it would be
really amazing - and intimidating.
It requires presenting as a group at
AZA's annual conference. I need to
do this stuff though. I have to gain
this type of experience... and I must get

It's a part-time [redacted] position! I want it so badly. And after a not-so-good conversation I had with Priscilla on Friday afternoon, I want it even more than I would've otherwise. It would pay for school! And be 20 hrs. It feels scary/uncertain because I want it so much it would be a big disappointment if I didn't get it, but I really feel like this is a perfect fit for me, and ideal timing, it feels like it's meant to be. But that gets my hopes up, which is what feels scary.

At home tonight... emailed everyone I could think of who may have some connection to the DU job. I'm even thinking of going in-person tomorrow to see if I can catch her in her office. That sort of thing is always hard. You never know if that's too pushy - or if it'll be awkward. I've never gotten an interview for a DU job. I think a lot of times it

must be about who you know, and who they have in mind as opposed to who is qualified. I applied Saturday and received an email Sunday from the professor thanking me for my application + saying they were still in the process of reviewing apps, but then today the posting was gone.?? It's so strange. Did they forget to take it down + were already well through the applicants? Does it automatically go away after so many applicants? There are other postings that have been on there longer so its kind of weird. I want it so badly, and hate to even acknowledge the feeling, but it doesn't feel hopeful really. I get so many generic replies like that. I don't know, I feel like just by being a PhD level student at DeU, I should at least be given a face to face interview. The,

Maybe I will. Maybe I just feel worried and uncertain because I want it so much. Maybe I'll get an email tomorrow morning inviting me for an interview... Hopefully.

In addition to really wanting a benefited position at UIC for the tuition credit, I really want/need something part time asap. School starts back in five weeks or so, and I really need to be at part time, and it doesn't look like the library is going to make that happen. I don't want to totally break ties there and hope that I can stay on as a sub. Well see what happens

over the next couple of weeks. Hopefully I'll get some good answers.

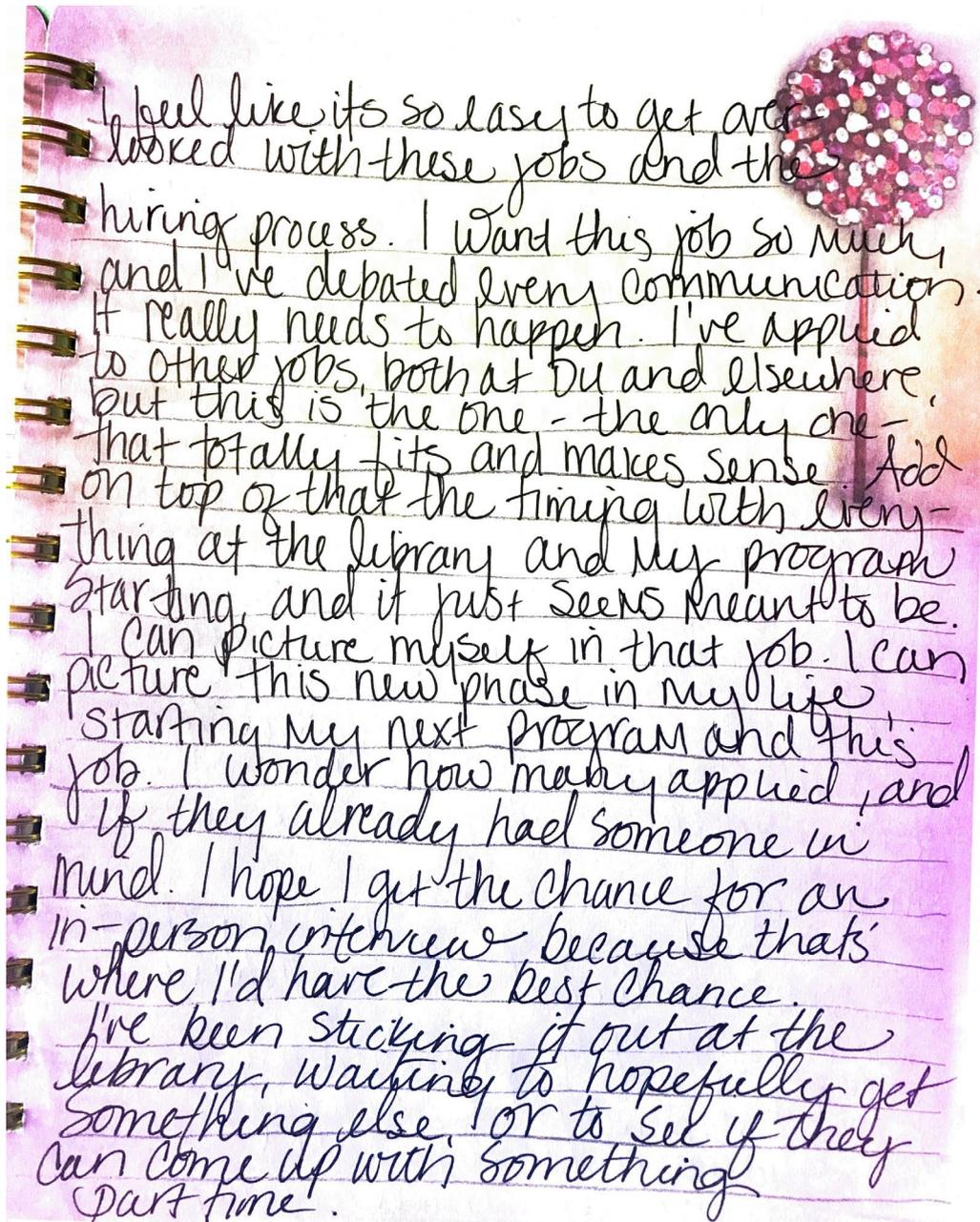
Wednesday, July 31, 2013
I am at home today, off work because Todd and I are going to a concert tonight. It's so awesome to be at home. I slept in a little bit, spent some time on Etsy, and reading. It's been so relaxing.

I'm anxiously awaiting an email about the Old job though. I'm worried that because the job closed Monday, and the current Assistant said they were going to move quickly, that it's odd that I haven't heard anything yet. I check my email about every two minutes. Ugh. I've been debating whether I should email the current assistant. I want to be sure to do anything that would possibly get me an interview, but I don't want to cross the line into annoying or creepy. The assistant said she'd let the director know I stopped by, and she seemed genuine and nice. I hope she did and that it makes a positive difference. I really want this job so badly. I'd be good at it. It would be a great fit both ways. I just hope I get the chance for an in-person interview. Another thing I've been thinking about today is how much I miss working on artwork and having that in my life. It's part of my soul and

identity - not to mention it provides this great creative community when I'm active in it. I want to get back to that and find my place in it again. This summer break would've been perfect for that. I don't know why it hasn't happened yet. I also wanted to spend time outdoors, doing yoga and reading too, and I've done all of those things. I almost feel like it's taken me this long during my break to get to the place where I could think about this. There's been so much on my mind. And I was exhausted from school at first. But, I'd really like to incorporate the creative piece of my life back in.

Friday, August 2, 2013

I'm feeling so discouraged right now. I emailed the hiring professor in the Women's Studies dept. yesterday morning and have not heard back. I'm worried I came off too pushy and lessened my chances. I debated what to do



I feel like it's so easy to get over-looked with these jobs and the hiring process. I want this job so much, and I've debated every communication. It really needs to happen. I've applied to other jobs, both at DU and elsewhere, but this is the one - the only one - that totally fits and makes sense. Add on top of that the timing with everything at the library and my program starting, and it just seems meant to be. I can picture myself in that job. I can picture this new phase in my life, starting my next program and this job. I wonder how many applied, and if they already had someone in mind. I hope I get the chance for an in-person interview because that's where I'd have the best chance. I've been sticking it out at the library, waiting to hopefully get something else, or to see if they can come up with something part time.



Monday August 12, 2013

It's been a week since I journalled? So much happens in a single week. I had a couple of rough days, followed by a couple of good days, followed by another couple of rough days, and so on. It seems I did find out that I got the 20 hrw Px position at Evergreen - great news! There are some things about this I'm nervous about - not being in control of my own schedule, some new tasks I don't know how to do, seeing someone else in my old position - but, there are lots of things that are great about it - 20 hrw for starters, still have benefits - time for school, no supervision responsibilities, more on-the-floor library/reference experience, less meetings, can stay more open for outside/research/DI type opportunities. I think this will allow me to do better in my program and if things come up I want to be involved in it.

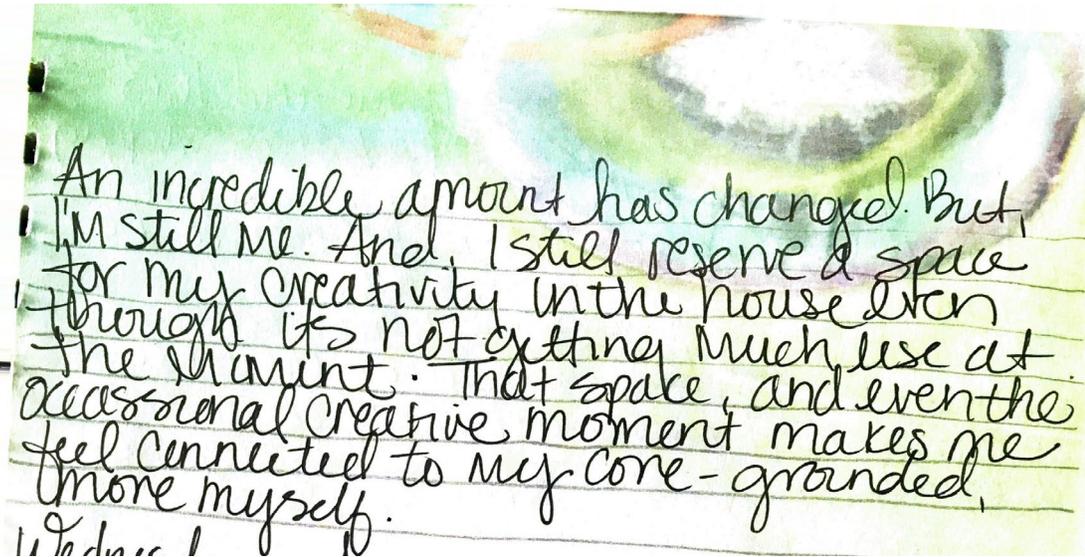
be more able to. I imagine I'll be able
to tell the pages this week. I have
mixed emotions about that. I'm glad
I'll still be at the same location +

will be nice just
is a lot to think about +
deal with while I'm also dealing
with school. I think they'll get
understanding. I do wonder/worry
who will be in that position next.
That'll be kind of weird. But,
even though I'm so thankful to
have had this opportunity over
the past year plus, (it allowed me to
get to know a lot of people in the
system quicker as a supervisor + build
a few good connections, and build
my resume) honors will be really
nice. It sounds like others may
have wanted that and couldn't,
so I'm thankful.
After I turned that out, Todd and



in a bad spot. Or that maybe I don't know everything I should. Or that it's all going to fall apart. The repetitive arguments create this fear in me. My past sets me up for this fear though too. The only way to feel better about it is for it to not happen — this argument I mean. I just don't know if that's possible and what do I go through to see? I'm worried.

Another thing that has me anxious right now is work and how weird it is there right now. The person who will be doing my schedule — Leslie — does not seem to be very good at it. It's almost September and she doesn't have the schedule finished. Part of me wants it done because I'm a planner and if it were me doing it — which it has been for the past year — it would've been done several weeks ago. Part also because I'm worried about planning for school and life.

A handwritten note on a piece of lined paper. The background of the paper is decorated with a watercolor wash in shades of green, blue, and white. The text is written in a cursive, handwritten style. The note discusses the author's feelings about change and their commitment to maintaining a space for creativity in their home.

An incredible amount has changed. But, I'm still me. And, I still reserve a space for my creativity in the house even though it's not getting much use at the moment. That space, and even the occasional creative moment makes me feel connected to my core-grounded, more myself.