University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Theses and Dissertations - UTB/UTPA

8-2015

Adolescent street literacy: The art of the hustle

Regina L. Welch
University of Texas-Pan American

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/leg_etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

ADOLESCENT STREET LITERACY: THE ART OF THE HUSTLE

A Thesis

by

REGINA L. WELCH

Submitted to the Graduate School of
The University of Texas- Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2015

Major Subject: English

ADOLESCENT STREET LITERACY: THE ART OF THE HUSTLE

A Thesis
by
REGINA L. WELCH

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Danika Brown
Chair of Committee

Dr. Matthew J. Christensen
Committee Member

Dr. Alyssa Cavazos
Committee Member

August 2015

ABSTRACT

Welch, Regina L., <u>Adolescent Street Literacy: The Art of the Hustle.</u> Master of Arts (MA),

August, 2015, 216 pp., 49 references, 30 titles.

This thesis is an ethnographic analysis of street youths, runaways and foster children. It

focuses on the rhetorical and literacy practices that serve as a foundation for an underground

community. Very little research, within the English field or from a literacy perspective, has been

done on this demographic. This study includes data from interviews conducted with eight

individuals who were "homeless" between the ages of 12 and 18 years old. Homeless is being

defined as any duration spent absent of a stable living situation, including, but not limited to,

foster homes, sleeping on the streets or in temporary settings, with adults or predators that were

not related to them or in places accrued through their personal work or independent finances.

This piece serves to raise awareness to their plight and to offer a clearer understanding of how

these children navigate and survive through the use of nontraditional language and customs.

DEDICATION

I owe, in large part, the completion of my Master studies to the patience and motivation of my instructors, the unwavering support of my sons Carlos and Cruz Lopez, my best friend Nancy Jarmon's belief in my ability to complete this journey, the love and understanding given unconditionally by my husband, Steve Mason and more than anyone- I wish to dedicate this work and extend a heartfelt thank you to Wendell, Lauren, Heather, Buckwheat, Merick, Linda and Pamela for sharing their stories and giving a voice to the survivors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER I

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Introduction

We are just like you...we walk and talk like you, allowing ourselves to become invisible and yet we exist in an imagined community; a community composed of derelicts and deviant behavior, harlots and hustlers, all with eat or be eaten mindsets. We are just children, but we have been lost or possibly discarded by society and have learned to live by our own rules. I come from a community built on survival; it is constructed and maintained by runaways, foster children, street youths, and homeless teens. I lived this experience for seven years. It is not mine alone, but my voice is meant to serve as an outlet for every child who was silenced, whether by grooming, shame, abuse, or fear. I am choosing to tell our secrets, in hopes of helping to raise awareness of the plight of the innocent.

Three years ago, I ran across a book by Benedict Anderson which explored the idea of *Imagined Communities* built in large part through literacy and highly identifiable as a building block of nationalism. Anderson asserts that a community "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). I focused on the multiple definitions of community and seriously pondered the ideas behind inclusion/exclusion- rules, norms, requirements, and power. Anderson constructs the idea that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" and that

1

"communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). I was intrigued by Anderson's observations of how people conceptualize these communities and sought to discover where my ideas about community differ. Anderson competently conveys his beliefs that "print languages laid the basis for national consciousness" and attributes imagined communities, in large part to the creation of what he refers to as "print-Capitalism" (44-45). I stopped to examine my time as a homeless adolescent and my community, which was largely void of traditional, school-based literacy and institutionalized education foundations.

My population pits oral discourse practices and rhetorical patterns against false ideas that written discourse is superior in the construction of a community. The data collected for this study proves how identifiable, viscerally driven rhetorical practices and customs serve to solidify membership in "imagined communities" composed of "thrownaway" and runaway children. These practices have been created out of necessity. These displaced youths cultivate and utilize rhetorical systems that combat the daily challenges of homelessness. They develop street smarts; this type of knowledge cannot be learned in a book. The survivors of this underground culture demonstrate a deeper understanding of language and the rhetoric that is needed to navigate the dangers of the streets. Strategies are developed that advance rhetorical skills and heighten their ability to read a situation on a more in-depth level. Coping mechanisms are devised to mask the reality of dehumanizing acts by reframing the situations and redefining words such as "victim" and "predator." We learn to see past the denotation of words and look at a person's actions to more accurately extract the meanings. How we determine a predator's tone, gestures or phrasing can mean the difference between life and death. Our heightened observations and interpretation of language and communication enable our survival.

I will argue throughout this piece that street literacy not only adds to the English field's understanding of what constitutes academia, but that homeless children's discursive practices are a valuable addition to the study of how and why people learn. Through the application of my academic discipline (Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies), this study sets a precedent in academia for a research methodology by establishing a rigorous model for future researchers. This model defies the ways that we think about rhetorical practices and pushes forward scholarship's understanding of how rhetoric and language is negotiated, utilized and actualized within individual cultures. This thesis challenges traditional views on literacy and broadens the conventional academic limits placed on language and rhetorical identifiers. At this point in my journey, I separate my ideology of community constructing components and the forms of literacy needed to solidify an "imagined community" from Benedict Anderson's, but I give full credit of the inception of my thesis to Anderson's writings.

I set out to decipher what makes my community connect and to study the language, rhetorical norms, accepted truths and culturally constructed practices which were and are exclusive to our situation. I chose to take an ethnographical approach to my research, in order to create an authentic portrayal of my community that would be "framed within [my] discipline or field" (Heath et al. 121). I sought to expose the practices that allow us to remain invisible, insist that we remain silent and that secure our positions as victims. These customs are what drive our construct and simultaneously serve to destroy its inhabitants. As I assembled my analysis of who and what made us a community, anger started welling up in me…anger at the parents who fail their children, anger at the system that leaves their young unprotected, anger towards the predators who exploit vulnerability, anger at the hurdles that impede these children's escape, and anger at society for looking away. I set out, not only to study our perverse literacy, but to gain

knowledge that will contribute to solutions to these atrocities. I entered this thesis unwavering in my belief that this plague of homeless youths needs to be addressed and solutions aimed at saving our children from street victimization need to be enacted. By examining street youths' advanced rhetorical skills and intricate systems of survival, this thesis' rare look at how rhetoric and language practices are constructed and executed based on situational context and goal oriented practices will bring society closer to a solution.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness, estimates that currently "380,000 youths," under the age of eighteen, spend one week or more homeless in America each year and that out of these teens "about 50,000 youth in the U.S. sleep on the street for six months or more" ("Youth" pars. 1-4). These children, lacking the maturity and resources to live on their own, are highly susceptible to becoming targets for street predators, sex crimes and drug abuse. Teenagers enter into these high risk scenarios in an effort to stave off hunger, attain shelter or meet other basic survival needs. These youths, referred to as "thrownaway" or "runaway" children, are said to number, according to the National Runaway Safeline (Formerly the National Runaway Switchboard), in excess of "1.6-2.8 million…each year in the United States." ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 4). My thesis focuses on this population and at the factors that facilitate their lives on the streets.

The numbers found in these statistics represent individual human beings, each battling his or her own struggle against homelessness. Heath, Street, and Mills believe that "Simply recording numbers of individuals and elements of the environments [provide] no basis for deep cultural and linguistic understanding" (115). Faces and voices need to be attached to these statistics in order to more effectively understand how this population survives individually and as a group. This thesis provides a model for RCLS scholars to humanize these statistics and

recognize them as a contributing, active discourse community. This research offers academia a way to gain a better understanding of this population by uncovering the adaptation, design, and implementation of language patterns and rhetorical skills that are developed in order to stay alive.

Current studies involving street youth express the need for more empirical data, in addition to the expansion of qualitative research involving the homeless youth population. My insider's knowledge and unique application of Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies was necessary in order to successfully gather qualitative and empirical data during my research process. Throughout this thesis I further address this need by looking at how displaced children network, who the individuals are who are meeting their needs and at the friends and relationships that lead to unsafe practices that are considered social norms. I explain how interactions between these children and their agreed upon rhetorical traditions that are adhered to, concerning silence and navigating deficiencies, clearly demonstrate how environments and communities dictate language interpretations and contextual connotations.

The data collected throughout this thesis is focused on RCLS, but I believe that the evidence presented within this piece will contribute to and answer a call to fill deficiencies in a multitude of fields. In the journal article "Childhood Sexual Abuse, Adolescent Sexual Coercion and Sexually Transmitted Infection Acquisition Among Homeless Female Adolescents," researchers note that "little is known about the characteristics of adolescent women who report sexual coercion" (Noell et al. 138). The need to expand research to include narratives and qualitative studies could serve in better understanding this demographic by identifying the practices and language that facilitate sexual exploitation. Region I Title X Family Planning Training Center defines sexual coercion as:

The act of persuading or coercing a minor in engaging in an unwanted sexual

activity through physical force, threat of physical force or emotional

manipulation. It may also include substance coercion. Coercive situations may

occur along a continuum and may not be obvious, even to the coerced individual.

("Sexual Coercion and State Reporting Laws" par. 1)

This thesis fills this void in academia, offering first-hand accounts of sexual coercion from

inception to execution from former adolescent victims. I present an in-depth look at how

displaced youths talk about these situations to each other and how this discourse differs from

conversations held with non-community members. I explicate the rhetorical markers and

language cues within these dialectic exchanges, noting crucial elements needed to decipher street

literacy. Throughout this piece, I will be discussing how former street children's language

choices change given word cues, contextual clarification, and in response to varying audiences.

The data obtained throughout this research was only attainable through my understanding

of and my adherence to my community's rules. My success in collecting data relied heavily upon

my knowledge as a community member. Tyler and collaborating researchers cite difficulties

faced by non-members of homeless youth populations in collecting data which gives "specific

details of their relationships (e.g., Are females trading sex with friends out of necessity for food

or a place to stay?);" he explains that collecting this type of data "would be helpful for

explaining why victimization is occurring" (517). The narratives found within this study serve to

supplement many of the literacy gaps concerning this facet of street life.

My story, as a displaced adolescent community member, is not unique. I was a product of

a physically abusive home. I entered the foster care system at the age of 12. Within a year, I had

run away from or had been kicked out of seven placements and had taken to existing on the

streets. I was a little girl who quickly learned to survive on her own. I had to ask myself why I chose this life over the foster care system. I had to explore how a world of exploitation and hustling came to seem normal… even comfortable. I wanted to find out what kept me on the streets and what role I played as a victim. This piece is my exploration of my initiation into this world, the development of survival skills and the circumstances that served to imprison me in this community. I still speak the language shrouded in secrets; I still understand the way we lived was a necessity; and I still respect the ones who made it out, as well as remember those who did not. This thesis contains the accounts, by way of interviews, of seven other survivors, whose voices join mine in an effort to save other children from becoming members of our community. We spent years constructing a world where children were the only ones that could be trusted. In order to explore who we were…who we are…I had to strip down and stand naked- baring my weaknesses- revisiting my nightmares and allowing parts of me, that I have long since buried, to be retrieved, revived, and remembered.

What I was asking of my volunteers was one of the hardest things to ask of a former street kid…I was asking them to trust me. The only thing that pushed me forward in the darkest days of my research was the promise that I had made to my community members that if they put their trust in me and if they shared their experiences, I would produce an accurate and meaningful representation of our homeless world. I had entered into a pact with each participant that led them to have faith that the nightmares I was stirring up inside of them, that the crimes that were to be revisited and the atrocities that were about to be exposed were not being given in vain; they would have purpose. The completion of this thesis belongs to these amazing individuals and is offered as evidence to them that I have kept my word.

I don't think that I understood, when I began this project, what I was asking of the participants. I don't think that I even knew what I would be asking of myself. These interviews affected each of us in different ways. I found myself struggling with the reframing of our community through adult eyes. My protectors had become pedophiles, my father figures were now sex traffickers, and my friends, displayed in a retrospective light, had become victims. I had never stopped to think about the subconscious reframing of these scenarios that my child's mind had employed as protective measures from the truth. At the time, my mind adapted my behaviors to suit the circumstances, my brain manipulated the language to redefine it in terms that I could endure, and my body reacted to the cues being given by the predators with little thought of the toll that these atrocities would take throughout my lifetime. The reality of what we went through and the coping mechanisms developed as children to survive fell apart when reexamined by our adult selves. Heath, Street, and Mills assert that "Identities shift as group members both sustain old habits and values and invent new ways to relate, display, and transmit who they are and how they came to be as well as what they see themselves becoming" (14). I found this to be true, as I have maintained close relationships with all of this study's participants since the completion of my research. We have spent hours discussing the toll that revisiting our past has taken on us. Some of us have admitted to enduring life-long struggles with depression, thoughts of suicide and low self- esteem, others have unresolved feelings of anger over what we endured and at the people who failed us, but above all of the negative aftermath we have each voiced a sense of pride in our personal ability to have overcome and survived our debasing circumstances. Somewhere throughout this exploration of language and rhetoric, my participants and I have managed to forge a new dialect…a language built by adult survivors. Painful memories are now recounted as evidence that we are resilient. Our very existence speaks to our strengths and once

8

again my community proves that actions, in the form of trust given to me, displays the true value behind our words. It is with these "words" that I offer a picture, framed by academia, of the advanced rhetorical practices, unconventional communication system and sophisticated language utilization built and carried out by a community of displaced children.

Overview of Study

This thesis focuses on the homeless youth population that exists in the United States. I spent six months conducting face to face interviews with willing individuals, now between the ages of 30 to 65, concerning their experiences and lives as street children between the ages of 12 and 18. I chose this demographic to fill the void in current literature concerning this population. Due to a number of existing difficulties in finding and following up with homeless individuals, such as transient life styles and a lack of available documentation as adults, research studies rarely follow this group throughout their adulthood. Researchers acknowledge that "Longitudinal data…over longer periods of homelessness, would be extremely valuable," but have found that "homeless youth are a difficult population to track" (Ennett et al. 76). A need also exists for empirical evidence involving the rhetorical acts, language choices, dialectic norms and survival skills that children cultivate and apply in order to survive on the streets. This study and its participants' narratives provide an unexplored look into this world and the empirical evidence gathered by way of interviews serves to supply answers to many of these existing research deficiencies.

The voice of this thesis, as well as the development of interview questions and focus of data analysis, is built around my own experiences as a homeless teenager and is corroborated by the narratives and similar experiences given within the interviews. Throughout this thesis, the

9

reader will be given an authentic sampling of what street life entails. I introduce communally agreed upon language customs and common rhetorical practices which comprise an overview of homeless teens' culture and traditions. I also provide explicated examples and narratives given by the participants to identify and demonstrate various components of displaced adolescents' nontraditional literacy. Interview design, a description of this study's population, transcription methods, data coding, the use of pseudonyms, analysis approaches and thesis structure are explained in detail in Chapter III: Research Design and Methodology.

Since existing studies have collected statistics using quantitative research, I chose to use a qualitative approach, analyzing the intentions, language, and rhetoric that is being used by the individuals in this community. Examples of quantitative research documented thus far in research studies would include age, sex, nationality, number of children currently living on the streets, and what percent has encountered sexual assault, drug use, behavioral issues in school, or contracted venereal disease. These studies are valuable in assessing a wide range of issues that need addressing in this population, whereas qualitative research takes a closer look into the individual situations that lead to these statistics. An example of a qualitative question from my study would be, "How would you go about finding shelter while you were on the streets? Please, be as detailed as possible when describing these practices". The detailed answers to these questions were analyzed for similar rhetorical patterns and word choices given by the other interviewees. The interview passages were then used to formulate assessments as to accepted language norms and common practices. Excerpts of the data collected, analysis of the interviews, findings, and function of the data is discussed further in Chapter IV: Findings and Chapter V: Conclusion. The structure of this thesis and overview of its content is listed below:

CHAPTER I: Introduction- Purpose and Significance of Study explains the conception of this thesis and my personal relationship to the material being discussed, the objective of this piece and purpose behind my research, an overview of the entire thesis, and it builds a case for why this study fills an important void in academia.

CHAPTER II: Review of Literature presents existing studies and established quantitative data collected by academically acknowledged researchers and organizations. I inserted these documented statistics throughout this piece to corroborate the volunteers' accounts and to give the reader a clearer understanding of how common and wide spread specific practices are within the displaced youth community. I also used these studies to reveal deficiencies in current systems, organizations and agencies, which are failing this population at an alarming rate. The quantitative evidence given by these researchers offers a clearer picture of the circumstances and environments that form homeless youths' cultural traditions, rhetorical foundations, and linguistic norms developed to meet basic needs and avoid danger on the streets.

CHAPTER III: Research Design and Methodology introduces the population and volunteers who are the focus of this thesis and explains my study's primary objectives. I inform the reader of the recruitment methods, interview format, security measures, ethical decisions, data collecting instruments, and analytical process chosen and applied throughout this exploration for the purpose of gaining authentic, unfiltered evidence and accurate, unedited accounts of community patterns and literacy. This chapter also discusses my role and responsibility as a researcher. I document the challenges that I faced as the primary investigator, and I look at the changes to my methodology that were enacted to circumvent unanticipated hurdles.

CHAPTER IV: Findings presents the evidence collected throughout my research and offers extensive analysis of the data and interview excerpts, with a concentration on areas that demonstrate elevated rhetorical skills, contextually constructed communication patterns, complex navigational routines, and socially agreed upon survival methods. A glossary of terms is provided as evidence that communal consensus of definitions and situationally created meaning nullifies and negates established denotative language use and words. I demonstrate how homeless children's instincts, partnered with a heightened ability to read people and interpret situations, surpasses traditional education application, allowing them to develop a literacy that facilitates their survival. This evidence and analysis is organized in sections that look at displaced children's histories, the epistemology behind routines and mindsets that contributed to or perpetuated survival measures, narratives describing navigational practices, and the negotiations that took place between the individuals and their networks. I also examine neglect and abuse of power by authorities and agencies that directly impacts how these children view and create their reframed realities.

CHAPTER V: Conclusion, discusses limitations that I encountered while conducting my study. I also identify areas in need of future research that could benefit this demographic and add to existing documented knowledge. This chapter recognizes active organizations that advocate for the homeless teen population and offers solutions that serve to end child victimization. I describe the relevance and contribution of this thesis to academia and the Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Study field and I provide my participants' final thoughts and reflections.

Research Objective

The purpose of this study is to inform and incite academic minds to reach beyond established ideals of what constitutes literacy. By documenting and analyzing homeless adolescents' non-academic literacy practices and by identify the language applications and implementation of rhetorical strategies, which have been developed and designed in direct response to the adversities presented during displaced living; this thesis is a look into the complex system behind their existence. My main objective is to accurately depict and authentically confirm my understanding of the ways that this vulnerable population learns to navigate and survive, while deciphering what roles language and rhetoric play in the construction of this community's agreed upon conventions. In achieving these goals, I will contribute significantly to the RCLS field by providing researchers a structured model of exploration and methodology that can be applied to future studies. I have focused the collection and qualitative analysis of the participant's interview excerpts on attaining empirical evidence that will serve to better understand these at-risk youths. This study looks at the highly developed rhetorical practices that are used by these children to ensure safety and attain basic needs. It also establishes the legitimacy of these street skills as a valid form of literacy which often goes beyond the scope of oral or written discourse.

This thesis expands scholarship, pertaining to the homeless youth demographic, to include English and literacy fields. This thesis offers RCLS scholars a rare opportunity to see our world as we see it. It invites them to understand rhetoric and language as a communication system linked to survival. It attempts to merge my academic voice and street language in order to change the ways that scholars engage, participate and exist within academic research.

Existing studies have focused more on the psychological and social ramifications of these children's victimization. Areas of concern in existing studies focus on statistics of street effects and practices, such as sexual survival, drug use, mental illness and venereal diseases. These symptoms are widely documented and prevention measures, social services and therapy are being actively sought to combat these inflictions. Current completed studies rely greatly on active homeless populations to attain their statistics and concentrate more on the quantitative data to understand the magnitude of this crisis. Minimal studies examine the recruitment, development and implementation of homeless youths' self- constructed rules, language and rhetorical practices, and few attempt to outline the oppressive measures, such as a lack of education, poor life skills, limited opportunities, aversion to authority, and absence of rights, which serve to keep these children on the streets. Current scholarship, void of rhetoric and language analysis, offers an incomplete understanding of who these children are. These partial representations prevent current researchers and help organizations from successfully understanding, intercepting, and helping many at risk teens.

I am certain that the key to locating and assisting these children exists, in large part, within a population overlooked by recent researchers; adult survivors of street displacement and victimization are underrepresented in this quest for answers. Insufficient data exists from studies seeking to follow this population later in life. This thesis concentrates on adult subjects who are now able to articulate and collaboratively analyze, from a point of retrospect, their experiences as street youths. The qualitative nature of this study, highlighting individual experiences and accounts, will reveal areas of origin and duration factors that can be studied to further understand and prevent child victimization. Unfortunately, gaps in education, transient lifestyles and an aversion to sharing their stories, contributes greatly to the fact that very few of these survivors go

on to share their narratives on a broader scale. First- hand accounts and a look at how these former homeless children talk about their experiences are necessary to establish existing patterns of what constitutes street smarts. Due to the custom of secrecy found within this community, it is also important to analyze what is not being said and to note instances where the silence being given says more than the words. By documenting the communication techniques used by these children to survive and the situational development and execution of linguistic norms, I believe that prevention measures can be put in place to save many of these children from at risk behavior and abuse at the hands of predators. I also believe that this study is a unique opportunity to open doors to new forms of research concerning the validity of alternative literacy styles.

As previously mentioned, a strong sense of secrecy and shame has contributed significantly to the absence of available information on this unique cultures' underground customs. Heath, Street, and Mills stress the importance of "studies of language, literacy, and multimodalities [dependence] on closely linking patterns of symbol systems with the abstract behavioral systems" associated with "language in action" (84). Secrecy is the single behavioral staple within this population which serves to obstruct the linkage of patterns, behaviors and language. I set out to establish trust and a safe environment in which to unite our experiences and release our most guarded secrets. My goal was to make this thesis an academic bridge into my community. This research serves as this bridge and invites academia to view the exploitation practices and predatory, often pedophilic, acts being perpetrated on a defenseless population of children and to explore the individual forms of literacy that these minors construct as a direct result of this perverse system. With my participants' help, I have constructed an unfiltered narrative displaying the introduction, acclimation and perpetuation practices carried out in the homeless youth community. I use their personal accounts to demonstrate the employment of

exclusive discourse and communicative behavior built within the networks and social relationships that homeless youths maintain while surviving on their own. This thesis addresses Susan T. Ennett and her fellow researchers claim that "common assumptions" about the correlation between social environment and street practices are premature because "there has been limited empirical study, however, of the social relationships of homeless youth that could influence or constrain risky behavior" (63). I firmly believe that my volunteers offer this piece of the puzzle and I am thankful for their bravery and honesty in relaying their experiences. Although there are no direct benefits of participation, there are a number of indirect benefits that may positively impact society. The participants draw attention to an epidemic of homeless youths in America and reveal practices that are harming children. The knowledge gained through this research increases the understanding of these children's struggles and instills their existence into the consciousness of a wider audience. Their participation also legitimizes their intricate system of survival as an authentic form of literacy, insisting that their knowledge base be recognized by the academic world.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Statistics, Abuse, Sexual Survival, At Risk Behavior and Education Deficiencies

Researchers in the sociology, medical, criminal justice and psychiatric fields have spent

decades looking for solutions to and the effects of the epidemic of homeless youths in America.

Research has been gathered in large part to understand the magnitude of this epidemic and to

further explore its effects on society and the people that are affected by it. Links to mental

illness, behavioral disorders, and crimes, such as theft, prostitution, substance abuse, and

victimization of children are at the forefront of these studies and resources are actively being

sought to prevent and treat the symptoms and the atrocities that lead to them. In order to

formulate a cure for these problems, awareness of this demographic need to be incorporated in

American's knowledge base and an understanding of how these children navigate and

communicate needs to be established. Misconceptions about who these individuals are and the

circumstances that led to their homeless status is key in addressing this ongoing problem.

As stated in Chapter I, currently 380,000 youths, under the age of eighteen, have spent

one week or more homeless in America this year and that out of these teens "about 50,000 youth

in the U.S. sleep on the street for six months or more" ("Youth" pars.1-4). The National

Runaway Safeline assesses that "between 1.6-2.8 million youth runaway each year in the United

States" ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 4). These children are immediately put in

danger the moment they enter the streets. From this population it is "estimated that many young

people, especially girls, begin engaging in survival sex within 48 hours of leaving home. Sex for

food and a place to stay can quickly escalate into formalized prostitution" ("The Truth About

Runaway Youth" par.17). Extensive quantitative studies have been conducted on sexual survival

practices, with the goal of gaining understanding into contributing factors of this form of

exploitation. Ennett and associates cite that within their study, "Almost one-half of sexually

active youth reported having more than ten life-partners (43.7%) and trading sex for money,

drugs, food, or shelter (46.6%)" (68). Sexual survival directly raises street adolescents' chances

of being trafficked, abused or victimized.

In an effort to understand at risk behaviors that contribute to sexual survival, a study

consisting of 372 homeless youth participants in Seattle showed that within this population "23%

of females have experienced sexual victimization on at least one occasion since being on the

street" (Tyler et al. 511). Females are more susceptible to sexual assault, rape and to becoming

victims of human trafficking than their male counterparts. Noell and his collaborating

researchers found, in their study of 216 females drawn from a pool of 536 street adolescents that

"sexual coercion of some type was reported by all the participants" (141). It is important to find

intervention methods to prevent or intercept these females before they get introduced and

acclimated to sex trafficking or become sexual abuse targets. Even though a void of research

concerning the predators' profile is available, it is reported that 41% of the females that report

victimization were sexually assaulted by "male acquaintances," not strangers (Tyler et al. 511).

The networking that takes place between homeless youths and the relationships formed and

maintained, in order to ensure survival, may hold the answer to these statistics. Ennett's study of

homeless youths' networks showed that "the odds of using illicit drugs, having multiple sexual

partners, and engaging in survival sex were higher for youth who did not report any social

relationships" citing that "youth without a network were almost eight times as likely to report survival sex as youth who had a personal network" (70,72). Researching these children's socially constructed behavior, rhetorical routines, communication markers, and linguistic interaction practices may also be key to finding intervention and preventative solutions.

Information concerning networks and the increase or decrease of deviant behavior, which results from social clusters, may show how certain practices raise street children's odds of becoming victims. Based on Wall and Bell's combined research of 1, 625 homeless teen participants, 74.6% of those surveyed reported alcohol consumption "at some point in their life" (428). Alcohol use by adolescents can contribute to other risky behaviors which may lead to danger. Alcohol and drug use has been linked to higher rates of sexual victimization among females by strangers and researchers surmise that "being high on drugs is likely to limit young women's capacity to protect themselves," allowing "potential offenders" to view them as "an easy target for sexual victimization" (Tyler et al. 515). Drugs and alcohol are often provided to displaced youths by predators and this easy access secures the use of substance as an accepted constant within the street scene. Paired with substance abuse, it is also speculated that early trauma and durations spent homeless may contribute to victimization while on the streets. Research seeking to trace the "onset" of certain risky behavior found that "experiences, of physical or sexual abuse at home, early independence on the streets, spending nights on the street, associating with deviant peers, and delinquent behavior all contribute to a higher level of physical victimization" (Chen et al. 1176). A culmination of abuse, risky behavior, and displaced durations raise the likelihood of these street kids being subjected to various levels of abuse on the streets.

In regards to risky behavior, drugs are often used as social mediums by displaced youths, as well as being used to numb the pain of current or past trauma. Of the adolescents surveyed by Walls and Bell, varying numbers, ranging from 10.4-32.2 percent, admitted to past use of drugs (428). Drugs and alcohol use not only increases the likelihood of becoming a victim, it also creates an opportunity for sex traffickers and pedophiles to intercept these children. Drug addiction is one method used by human traffickers to lure and trap many young people into the sex trade by feeding their addiction.

Sadly, statistics gathered from this study also point to repercussions of displaced living and the mental trauma associated with sex trafficking. In the study "Correlates of Engaging in Survival Sex Among Homeless Youth and Young Adults," 33.7 percent of the 1,625 respondents reported attempting suicide at some point in their lives, as a result of emotional strain and exploitation duress (Walls and Bell 428). Many of these children develop coping mechanisms to deal with the reality of their situations, such as drug use, denial, varying levels of acceptance/submittal and constructing false realities. Mental health issues are heavily documented within this population and struggles of dissociative behavior, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and thoughts of suicide plague this demographic (Noell et al. 144). With no way to break free of their circumstances, many homeless adolescents fall victim to traffickers and addiction, trapping these victims in sexually exploitive scenes. Many of these children believe that there is no other means of survival. A lack of resources, education, and job skills turn many of these children towards the sex trade, theft, or drug related crimes to sustain their existence.

Displaced conditions ultimately escalate deficiencies which serve to keep these children on the streets. Educational gaps often lead to low wages and limited opportunities. Many of these

children find that they cannot support themselves financially and remain dependent on the predators and pedophiles who they believe are taking care of them. For many street youths homelessness becomes a cycle; the lack of a stable living situation contributes to the prolongation of street existence. Displacement interferes with school and, as a result, when these children do come of age to work, they tend to be ill equipped to enter the job market, have no employment history and have limited proficiency in academic areas. In the article "Homelessness Comes to School," Tobin and Murphy note that the homelessness epidemic is "pulling [an] increasing number of children and unaccompanied youth into its gravitational force" (32). Education lapses and attendance gaps make it difficult for many street kids to excel in the classroom. In Ennett and associates study published in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior, statistics involving 327 homeless adolescents show that "approximately one-third (33.4%) had dropped out of school" (68). No research has been done to see if this demographic pursues GEDs, high school diplomas or continuing education as adults. Early intervention and permanent, stable foster care placements would help tremendously in regards to educational consistency. Researchers have found that "to improve educational outcomes for children in foster care, states need to consider both efforts to improve educational stability and attendance as well as reduce overall placement moves" (Zorc et al. 827). These opinions coincide with my own experiences in foster care, citing placement gaps and other interview subject's accounts of remaining unenrolled from school during placement moves and behavioral assessments- the longest duration reported being six months without attempted enrollment. Zorc and associates assert that the "lack of prompt enrollment due to challenges in information transfer and other bureaucratic hurdles has been a significant problem, recognized and addressed by federal

21

legislation" (827). In light of this information, the government and its associated agencies are failing to produce resolutions to this documented obstacle.

Currently the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office's definition of what constitutes "homelessness" fails to recognize many runaways and street youths as classifying within the legal definition. These identification deficiencies limit qualify funding for this demographic. Cities looking to help the displaced youth population or address a need for these services to extend to this demographic are limited to the fact that "Current law prohibits a Continuum of Care from using more than 10% of its funds to serve families and youth in Category Three. This means even families and youth who can meet that definition are highly unlikely to get help." (Facts About the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R.576/S.256) par. 5) Homeless adolescents' inability to document frequent moves and meet the burden of proof set forth by government agencies of their homeless status, such as valid identification and proof of temporary living conditions, is a large part of why this community is being underserved and rejected by help organizations. Displaced youths face insurmountable hurdles concerning their inability to enroll themselves in school or homeless programs and a large portion who seek help, find themselves turned away from the agencies serving populations that are 18 years of age or older . They are ultimately redirected into the same state school and foster care services from which they originally ran.

Even schools and educators find that their hands are tied when it comes to helping and identifying displaced students in need.   Schools find themselves unable to gain needed assistance in order to aid their homeless student populations and are prevented from accurately reporting the qualifying children in need who fit this demographic, due to the exclusive government definition of homelessness. By not identifying this population, it becomes almost

impossible to track this demographic as they move or are shifted through the child welfare system. In a study conducted on 209 school aged foster children, it was found that "nearly a quarter of the children had a history of at least one prior placement in foster care" and that 49 of these children had experienced enrollment gaps "ranging from 1 to 230 total days not enrolled" within a twenty-four month time frame (Zorc et al. 828-829). An inefficient integration system on the part of the foster care agencies is directly to blame for these lapses. It is duly noted that illness and other factors may contribute to these numbers, but it is reported that while the "mean number of days absent per year for the children in the study was 25…13% of absences were due to days not enrolled in school" (Zorc et al. 828). Multiple school transfers and placement histories are the primary reason that these children are accruing absences. Statistics show that an average number of schools attended by children in Zorc et al.'s study was "2.7 with 20% in 4 or more schools," noting the "highest rates of school change were among children with unstable placement histories, who averaged 3.7 schools over a 24-month average observation period" (828-829). It is important to note that these children miss foundational content areas during their absences and have to re-adjust, relearn and readapt to a new classroom, peers, teacher and subject curriculum every time they are moved to a new school district. In the article "The Relationship of Placement Experience to School Absenteeism and Changing Schools in Young, School-aged Children in Foster Care," researchers concur that "this larger group of children could benefit from improved coordination responsibility between the school system, child welfare, and behavioral health around absenteeism"(Zorc et al. 831). The very systems set up to protect these children are failing them and reducing their chances of completing their education; this becomes crippling too many of these street youths later in life.

Low literacy levels, in addition to deficits in common knowledge associated with an educational foundation, leads to social and skill deficits when they attempt to join society and its workforce. A need for identifying this demographic becomes key in fixing this dilemma. Zorc and fellow researchers emphasize that "there is opportunity for intervention either by improving placement experience directly or decreasing its impact on absenteeism and delayed school enrollment or school changes" (832). A collaborative effort on the part of schools, agencies and government services need to adhere to their mission statements and provide these children with the tools they will need to survive and thrive as contributing members of society. In the article "Homelessness Comes to School," Murphy and Tobin note that "of particular importance are the educational consequences of homelessness for America's youngsters," assessing the fact that "homelessness almost always translates into less opportunity to learn" (33). They also concur with other researchers that as a "proposed solution…greater collaboration among agencies that work with homeless families and unaccompanied children and/or homeless adolescents" (36). The instability experienced by these children is detrimental to their growth, knowledge and confidence needed to someday stand on their own.

Effects of this instability can be seen in studies following the academic success of these children. Researchers conducting a survey on "Behavior Problems, Academic Skill Delays and School Failure Among School-Aged Children in Foster Care: Their Relationship to Placement Characteristics" found that " slightly more than one-quarter of the children (74/268;28%) had lived in five or more out-of-home placements during their lifetime" (Zima et al. 94). A direct correlation between multiple placements and school deficiencies have been made and detriments associated with numerous moves can be seen in these youths' school performances. Zima and associates found that related to school failure, "children living in group homes had three times

24

the odds of repeating at least one grade than children living with a relative in family foster care"
and "the number of changes in foster homes was associated with having at least one severe
academic delay" (97, 99). These delays, partnered with existing impairments related to the
causation of their placement with social services, further impede the learning process. Zima et al.
recommend, in consideration of the fact that the "proportion of school -aged children in foster
care studied with behavioral problems, severe academic delays and school failure was alarmingly
high," that "child protective agencies, community mental health programs, and schools serving
children in foster care would do well to examine the nature of these placement characteristics in
planning their services for this vulnerable population" (101). It will take a collaborative effort on
many levels to ensure that these children are given the tools needed to succeed in the future.

Researchers in the RCLS field have the tool set to begin contributing to this
collaboration. Over the past fifty years, ambitious scholars have begun expanding and
challenging the ideas of literacy and its impenetrable cannon. In the halls of the universities,
names like Friere, Giroux, and Shaughnessy bring to mind academic change and innovation.
Pedagogical practices are now answering the call of underrepresented, misrepresented and
oppressed populations to be recognized and heard within the academic arena. Meeting these
demands have required scholars to acknowledge the validity of the contributions that various
cultures and literacy styles are bringing to our discipline.

Educators and students alike are developing methods and strategies to incorporate and
utilize the extensive benefits that come with the diversification and broadening of our academic
fields. Researchers, such as James Paul Gee, have begun stressing the value of multimodal
literacy and the belief that "meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action
in the material and social world" (par. 6) Ideas of how identities and language are co-constructed

and situationally conveyed are at the root of Gee's work. In his article "Reading as Situated Language: A Sociocognitive Perspective," Gee views "Discourse" as:

> A tool kit full of specific devices (i.e., ways with words, deeds, thoughts, values, actions, interactions, objects, tools, and technologies) in terms of which you can enact a specific identity and engage in specific activities associated with that identity.

Although Gee expands conventional views of traditional literacy, author/educator Lisa D. Delpit, challenges the limits that his theories place on minorities and women in her article "Acquisition of Literate Discourse: Bowing before the Master?"(297). Delpit's theories are based on empowerment and the cultural ownership that is connected to life both inside and outside of the classroom. Delpit implores educators to "acknowledge and validate students' home language without using it to limit students' potential" (301). She touches on the idea of existing knowledge with the "students' home discourse" as being "vital to their perceptions of self and sense of community connectedness" (301). Delpit speaks as both an educator and as a community member.

Bridging these two researchers is Malae Powell's work "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing." Powell does not reject the idea that language and identity are linked to the power and context of circumstances surrounding academic standards, but she applies the term "survivance" (survival + resistance) to express her belief that "we can begin to reimagine ourselves, our pedagogies, our scholarship, our discipline in relation to a long and sordid history of American Imperialism" (400, 428). Powell's study of language is partnered with rhetorical strategies and tactics that have been developed and applied to empower and define her and her people in a way that they wish to be seen, not as oppressors portrays them.

Her roles as a community member, activist, advocate and researcher requires her to carefully and ethically balance her position in her multifaceted world.

Researchers in the English field are beginning to embrace the different ways that people acquire applicable knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom. Shirley Brice Heath's work explores the ethnographical approaches needed to observe and study "language socialization, social theories, and theories of social change and adaptability, including identity" (Heath, Street, and Mills 96). Heath not only sets a detailed model for researchers to follow concerning ethnography, she also practices her approaches in her own work regarding minorities, social classes and gender. In her article "Oral and Literate Traditions Among Black Americans Living in Poverty," Heath shows the disconnect between schools, community and employment opportunities. She, like Delpit and Gee, address an audience largely comprised of educators, in order to enact pedagogical change.

Each of these contributors have earned their unique place in academia by broadening the ideas and perceptions of what constitutes literacy and knowledge, but what is lacking in the English discipline is the culmination of these approaches. This thesis meets this void in scholarship by creating a new model for RCLS researchers to follow, that employs a hands on auto-ethnographic approach, which extends to validating and incorporating the voice of an invisible community through the study of and participation in the discursive and rhetorical patterns of communication, negotiation and construction of the culture as a whole. The research found within this piece explores and explicates the contextually constructed rhetorical practices that are developed and implemented as tools for survival. These practices are born out of necessity and serve as proof of the resilience and adaptability of humans faced with adversity. This research model also serves to validate its participants and humanize them by giving them a

legitimate place in academia through their contribution and ownership of a complex and intricate system of literacy practices. The empowerment that comes with institutional acknowledgement allows the population being researched to reimagine, redefine, and reconstruct their identity and in doing so, they break the chains of oppression, erase the stigma of victimization and renounce the roles that were forced upon them. This thesis also offers a look at a culture whose language practices and rhetorically structured survival methods are absent within the English field. Through these pages and through their words the volunteers for this study will be seen and heard, allowing them a platform to advocate and speak for all the children who have been silenced.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

For this thesis, I took an ethnographic approach in examining my homeless adolescent

community, with a focus on confirming my understanding of this multifaceted discourse

community and the literacy practices being employed in order to survive it. I rooted my

methodology in Brian A. Hoey's assertion that "Ethnography may be defined as both a

qualitative research process or method (one conducts an ethnography) and product (the outcome

of this process is an ethnography) whose aim is cultural interpretation" (par. 3). By viewing my

community as a culture, I was able to research various communal patterns, applied conventions,

discursive practices, the rhetorical factors that demand and direct the development of coping,

survival and navigational strategies and to ultimately look at the ways that these components

work together to form a complete and functioning literacy system within the homeless adolescent

community.

My main objective for this research was to put together an accurate representation of the

displaced youth population, which would prove "street smarts" to be a complete and complex

form of literacy. This collection of survival practices serves to help people outside of this

community garner a better understanding of who these children are and how they exist. My goal

in doing this was not only to legitimize the intricate scholarship being exchanged among these

children as a valid academic entity, but I also hoped to raise awareness to the unacceptable

conditions that these vulnerable adolescents are being forced to endure and to move people to

advocate and take action for these children. I chose to do this by presenting a comprehensive

compilation of the rhetorical practices and language that make up this nontraditional system of

street literacy. I had to figure out how to not only gather, but somehow translate our

unconventional conventions and perceivably perverse…at times pornographic practices to the

outside world.

One of my best friends, also a survivor of this community, asked "How are you going to

explain a feeling?" This became the question that I sought to answer. I started thinking about

how I was going to convey practices and communication that had very little standard logic and

that had been instinctively developed and intrinsically woven into our beings. Our survival

methods were reactions. We reacted to our environment, our bodies reacted to our needs, our

minds reacted to abuse and exploitation, and our humanity reacted to the people enduring it with

us. I felt that the only way I was going to be able to explain the language and actions that

emerged from these reactions was to talk to the other survivors and try to form an understanding

of the circumstances and events that comprised our literacy during our time as displaced youths.

My engagement as both a researcher and as a community member were needed in order to

accurately obtain the valuable, personal information required to begin understanding my

underground population. I knew that academia did not hold the answers to my community; other

scholars didn't have the insider's knowledge needed to penetrate my culture's tough exteriors

and I knew that outsiders could not engage in the dialogue required to communicate with this

population- I came to the realization that I am the link between scholarship and street smarts, and

I knew that I had to be the person to accurately and authentically represent my complex group. I

set the task of conveying and informing my academic discipline about my other world by

presenting a study that gives new approaches to understanding and thinking about rhetoric and

the ways that it works within my "imagined community." I wanted traditional education institutions to have an example of how to humanize statistics through the methodological and ethical decisions made while researching. I sought to demonstrate the breakdown of how and why we learn by employing a systematic approach that was created, in large part, out of existing knowledge. I knew that I could competently achieve this through the application of my academic tool kit. My institutional education was rooted in rhetorical understanding, my comprehension of traditional literacy had been grown in a classroom, and my mind was nourished and bloomed through the care and communication offered by the Masters, my instructors, and my peers. In every way possible, I had organically and authentically grounded myself in an academic world, and I believed that 'an academic by any other name would sound as sweet.' It was time to balance my identities. After stripping away the Institutional Review Board's oppressive standards, I began instinctively exploring my community. I was driven by my curiosity. I was led by my questions. And in the end…I was surprised by the answers I received.

I knew that the only people that could to help me deconstruct this world were the ones that had helped construct it. In order to avoid complications I anticipated when working with minors and in an attempt to find volunteers whose experiences would mirror my own, I chose to research the language and experiences of adults, now between the ages of 30 to 65 who had existed as runaways, foster children, street youths, or homeless teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18. Since our community is "imagined" and hinges on little more than understanding what it means to live on the streets, I had no other criteria for participation in this study, aside from my decision to exclude individuals incarcerated or suffering from mental illness. I attached these two measures to make sure that all of the participants would have equal control over their

environment and faculties during our interactions. Control and power are the two oppressive elements that could not be present in this study, due to my populations' sensitivity and rejection of victimization and authority. I knew that my research approach had to avoid applying any techniques that would be viewed as a threat or could risk triggering the volunteers to shut down; for this reason, I remained mindful of the power balance throughout my entire data collection process.

At this point in my journey, I had outlined what I wanted this study to achieve and who the people were that could help me accomplish these goals. My next step was deciding what tools would need to be designed and implemented in order to garner the desired results. I decided that the most effective way to study the language and communication methods of my community members was to talk to them. I felt that a face-to- face, in-person interview, which would consist of questions designed towards identifying specific community markers, would be the best way to gather data. I entered into the task of creating the interview questions with the goal of remaining as neutral and objective as possible. I was mindful of Heath, Street, and Mill's caution that "Every ethnographer must always be on guard against letting one's own beliefs about what *should be* overcome the accuracy of detailing what is" (37). I wanted my interactions with the volunteers to be free of personal agendas or angles. (This goal seems unreasonable in retrospect since my entire culture's communication system is built on rhetorical cues, verbal and nonverbal, that would need to be adhered to in order to establish my authenticity as a community member and execute the discourse needed to get the volunteers to open up about street life).

I made a list of all of the practices that I felt were unique to our community. After compiling a four-page list of every facet of street life that I could recall, I noticed patterns that would allow categories to be used to organize my interview questions. These categories were:

causation and duration for displacement; how shelter and basic needs were attained; networks and relationships; communication norms and language; survival strategies and the factors responsible for keeping these children on the streets. Having made the decision to collect qualitative data and gather empirical evidence, only using quantitative statistics as an identifiable cohesive tactic, I designed open ended questions that focused on obtaining narratives and in-depth descriptions of routine street practices. My questions were aimed at every phase of the homeless process. (Interview Questions Appendix D)

My first set of investigational tools were questions involving causation and duration of homeless status. My wording of these questions was aimed at attaining data on the age that the participants became displaced, history of abuse, durations spent living in foster homes or with friends or relatives, and the amount of time spent living on the streets. The questions then transitioned into the category of how shelter and basic needs were attained. These questions were focused on exploring living conditions, navigational practices, and strategies used to attain needs. They were followed with queries concerning networking and relationships maintained by the homeless adolescents and were posed in an effort to further explore who the people were that met their needs during their displacement and how these exchanges were negotiated. My next set of questions concerning perpetuation of their predicament were developed in an effort to attain education and employment histories. They were also designed to establish the role of agency and authority's in the homeless adolescent community, explore the participants' attitudes towards these entities, and to expose the existing deficiencies that contributed to these adolescents remaining on the streets.

Up until this point, my questions were developed in a noninvasive manner. I preceded constructing the next set of questions cautiously because they dealt with survival strategies. I

knew that this category could expose sex, crime, substance abuse or an array of other community norms that threatened to cast the participants in an unfavorable light. I developed these questions with an insider's knowledge of what survival entails on the streets; this is why this section would need to be executed in a manner which served to build a trust between the participants and myself. I will explain this thought process more when discussing the structuring of my interview format. An example of a question contained in the survival strategies portion of the interview can be seen in question 23 which asks, "Was sex ever involved in acquiring food, shelter or other necessities, such as clothes, toiletries, personal items, etc. If so, who were the individuals that generally offered these items for sex?" This question is posed with the intent of identifying certain behaviors that are indicative of sexual trading, trafficking, and abuse. I developed a series of follow up questions that hoped to solicit narratives that would include the exploitive practices of sexual survival, sexual recruitment, sexual negotiations, prostitution, and norms affiliated with these practices. I felt it necessary to develop a list of terms associated with these practices and ask that the participants define them or put them in context to what we have been discussing. These terms would serve to demonstrate how meaning and connotations of language used on the streets differs from standard language use. I constructed my last set of questions with the goal of empowering the participants' voices and to invite them to reflect on their time as a homeless street youth. The success of these questions' design hinged greatly on the structure and manner of execution that I would be implementing.

Anticipating my community's traditional adherence to silence and reluctance to talk about our experiences with people outside of the community, I employed several rhetorical tactics within my interview structure that would be crucial in getting the interviewees to share their stories. The need to establish myself as a community member would be my first task. This

is easily achieved by employing the homeless adolescent community tradition of "going first" (This convention is discussed in detail within the Breaking the Silence: Initiation, Inclusion and "Going First" section). The practice of "Going first" can be applied as an initiation strategy to teach expected behavior or as an oral tactic to gain trust. This would require me to tell my history, experiences, and credibility markers-- such as instances of abuse, time spent in foster care or as a runaway, and the survival methods I routinely engaged in as a homeless teenager. It was only after my credibility as an insider was established that the interview questions could be introduced.

The next strategy that I would need to build into my interview structure would be the order of questions. Slowly acclimating my participants into what is being asked of them adheres to homeless youths' literacy practices. Grooming measures are rhetorical strategies commonly used by predators targeting our demographic and this learned behavior is adopted by street kids and later employed when acclimating new community members into practices such as sexual survival. This strategy begins with just the idea of what is to be expected; this introduces the individual to an idea or a behavior. The person being groomed is then shown the behavior that is expected of them and eventually the individual is slowly initiated into participating in the actual required act. I knew that I would have to apply this technique carefully and ethically as to not manipulate or force the volunteers to share more than they wanted to. I made the decision to use this rhetorical arrangement within my interview format because this practice is a staple in my community's communication style, and it would quickly build a rapport with the volunteers that would normally take an extended amount of time and shared experiences to establish. Based on my word, these participants were being asked to trust me. It is important to note that in the

homeless adolescent community we are taught to never trust anyone. We do not trust words and we do not trust actions. It is communally agreed upon that all is fair when survival is on the line.

So for this reason, I designed my interview format to follow this pattern by first introducing the volunteers to the purpose of this study; I then informed them of their rights to refuse to answer any questions or stop the interview at any time with no negative consequences and I encouraged them to only answer within their comfort level. All of these steps were being done in order to secure the participants' rights and to maintain the balance of power between us. I then proceeded to introduce myself and establish my authenticity as a community member, adhering to communication norms and the conventions of "going first." I reminded them that the interview was being taped (these measures are found in the Audio Release Form Appendix A and the Informed Consent Form Appendix B forms given to the volunteers to sign prior to a sit down interview) and then started the tape interview process. The questions were sequenced in a manner that quantitative questions were placed first; an example of these questions would be "At which age did you initially experience instability with your living environment or begin living on the streets?" These questions were nonthreatening and opened up a dialogue with the interviewee.

I chose to format the interview in a way that would slowly transition through the sequencing previously described in interview question design. The questions increased in difficulty, so I felt that it was important to script several stopping points throughout the interview that reminded the participant of their rights and to make sure that I was staying within their comfort zone. This was being done as an ethical measure aimed at protecting the volunteer from experiencing any unanticipated duress or harm. I executed extreme caution and paid close attention to body language, speech digressions, and facial cues that exhibited signs of stress as

the questions began to broach more sensitive issues. I purposely positioned the questions that I perceived would be difficult to answer near the end of the interview to establish a rapport with the participants prior to addressing some of the more difficult aspects of street life. By the time that we reached the final questions of the interview it was my sincere hope that the participants would have opened up and have begun to feel empowered by this cathartic process and that they would offer free and unedited opinions, advice, reflection, and ideas. With the interview structure and questions in place, I felt ready to begin recruitment.

I developed a recruitment e-mail letter designed to invite the adult survivors of the homeless adolescent community, who fit the research requirements, to participate in this study. (Recruitment E-mail Letter Appendix C). I wrote the recruitment letter following the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) content and language requirements, but I felt it necessary to insert one paragraph that translated the academic jargon into layman's terms and asked my community to join me in this study. After IRB approval of the recruitment letter and method, the recruitment e-mail was sent out to Covenant House, several business owners whose establishments served this demographic and to three individual acquaintances that I knew had access to this population. Due to difficulties tracking down individuals with homelessness in their past, I relied heavily on word of mouth and circulation of my recruitment e-mail to find participants. Several factors played into the complications of locating other street survivors. First and foremost is our desire not to be found. For many of us, this chapter in our lives is so far from who we are as adults. We are parents, spouses, students, co-workers, professionals…and we are living proof that humans are resilient in the face of adversity. A fear of judgement holds us back from exposing everything we did to survive and what was done to us as targeted street youths. These fears prevent many of us from coming forward or revisiting our days on the streets.

Personally, within an academic setting, I fear that my past and gaps in my education will void my authoritative voice or reveal me as a fraud, donning the apparel of a scholar. Our pasts are just that; we are no longer hunted, but we are still hiding.

Another speedbump in locating our demographic is that juvenile records are sealed and we take on a freshly undocumented identity at 18 years of age--we get a clean slate. Names have been archived, crimes taped up and stored, and accountability for those who failed us is collecting dust created from ashes of our forgotten case numbers. Without continued follow up with members of this community, from adolescents to adulthood, these individuals become virtually impossible to track. Transient natures also contributed to hurdles in locating potential volunteers for this study. As a result, I feel that my community is underrepresented, not only in this study, but in academic research in general. From this recruitment e-mail, I was contacted by nine interested parties before later making the ethical decision to stop recruiting. The interview questions were causing unanticipated stress to my participants, and I made the choice to use my own experiences as the root of this thesis and to use the seven interviews that I had collected to corroborate my claims (this decision is explained within the Researcher's Role section).

In between developing the research instruments needed to carry out a thorough, ethical and authentic study, I submitted my research tools and study proposal to the IRB for approval to proceed. I was about to encounter the one obstacle that threatened to shut down my entire thesis: the IRB's rejection of various components of my study. From the time that I started my IRB process, eight months would pass before I would receive approval. Due to the sensitive nature of the material I was discussing and the vulnerable nature of the population that I was seeking to interview, the IRB was relentless in their rejection of my material's content and the goals of my study. I was asked to reword, revise and retire a large portion of my material. In order to get IRB

approval, I had to transform my study to fit their stringent demands, in addition to completing the IRB's extensive testing process which educated and instilled ethical guidelines. Every word had to be scripted, my modes of communication and interactions were limited or completely denied, my recruitment measures were restricted, my participant pool was narrowed, and I was personally heavily cautioned to obey these oppressive measures that were to be placed on my research methodology or risk losing my study in its entirety. Essentially the power considerations that I had taken while deliberating the needs of my future volunteers were not extended to me by the institution claiming to protect them. They had stifled my voice. They had removed the discourse from my community and tied the hands that I needed in order to reach out to my participants (this setback is discussed in greater detail within the Researcher's Role section). Just as I had learned to navigate around obstacles when I just a kid on the streets, I knew that I would find a way to navigate, while still in accordance with IRB limitations, around the constraints that their lawsuit fearing institution had placed on my thesis.

As earlier stated, nine participants responded to my call for volunteers. Based on the ethical decision I had made not to include individuals who were incarcerated or suffering from mental illness issues, two participants were declined for this study. One of them was upfront about suffering with Depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the other one was pregnant at the time I began interviewing. My final interview pool consisted of two males and five females (including myself). I took great consideration in answering the question of "How will I protect the identity and interests of those whose lives I propose to examine?" (Heath et al. 47). In order to protect their anonymity, I will not be giving specific details related to their current locations, professions, identifiable age, aesthetic characteristics, or distinguishable

personality traits. I can say that they are all contributing, functioning members of society and they are all amazingly brave and positive individuals.

Continuing with the task of ensuring that the participants remain anonymous, pseudonyms of their choice were assigned prior to the interview process. I had documented within my IRB that the taped interviews would be stored in my personal safe for no longer than three years from the time they were collected. The taped interviews, which I will discuss in the section immediately proceeding this section, were transcribed and kept locked in my personal safe or with my personal belongings at all times. Prior to the interview, the volunteers were given a standard IRB approved Audio Release Form that outlined the participant's understanding that their interviews were to be recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of this study. They were made aware of their rights and informed of the security measures that would be put in place to protect the data collected. If the volunteers declined these terms, they would not be included in the study and they were assured that no negative actions would result from their decision to decline. If they did choose to participate in the recorded interviews, the transcriptions made from their interview recordings were made available to them upon request, and they were given the opportunity to remove or edit any content or data that they did not want included in the final study. As for my personal choices on editing the transcripts in a way that would further protect their identity, identifiable markers were removed, such as family member's names and physical traits, such as tattoos.

An Informed Consent Form, adhering to the IRB requirements, was also provided, informing the participants of their rights as research volunteers and citing that their participation was strictly on a voluntary basis. They were made aware that their participation in this study could be retracted at any time with no negative penalties. They were also made aware of their

rights to refuse or pass on any line of questioning or stop the interview at any time with no

negative consequences. The Informed Consent Form also outlined safety measures that were

being put in place to ensure that their identities would remain anonymous, such as pseudonyms

and the secured location of their recorded data.   This document also provided the background

and objectives of this research study and outlined the possible risks and benefits associated with

their participation. If the volunteers opted not to sign this agreement, they were excused from

this study with no negative consequences to their withdrawal. (This is discussed in-depth within

the Data Collection section.)

After the university requirements for this study were met, time and location choices were

given to participants. I had decided to structure the sit down interviews in a way that allowed the

volunteers to retain as much control over the process as possible. In addition to having them

create their own identities for the study in the form of a pseudonym, I had constructed the

questions in a manner that did not limit or obstruct their personal views or voices. This allowed

the power balance between the participants and myself to maintain a safe medium in which to

explore our shared community. My decision to drive to meet the participants in towns all over

Texas and to let them pick the environments that the estimated one hour interview was to take

place was done with the hope that their setting choices would foster a nonthreatening atmosphere

that would allow them to feel safe.

During the interviews, I encountered several unanticipated hurdles. The first being the

IRB's caution to not deviate from the approved script for my interview questions. The almost

robotic tone of the interviews and uncomfortable pitting of power that could be felt between the

role of researcher and "study subject" threatened to counter my credibility as a community

member and derail the discourse and language norms that could only be established through trust

and dialogue. I made the decision to stay true to the questions and format of the interview, but I made the choice to abandon the fake persona that came with the institutional constraints and turn these interviews into conversations. The only way to study my community's language was to speak it (discussed further within the Researcher's Role section). The decision to abandon my tethered academic tongue also served to reinforce my ethnographic approach to this study and my objectives of analyzing the homeless adolescent community's discursive practices and rhetorical markers. Through the use of dialogue, I was not only able to gather a plethora of research material and data to explore, I also was given the honor of making new friends.

The next difficulty I encountered during the interview process was the unforeseen risks to my participants' emotional states. As I explain in the proceeding subsection, the delicate subject matter being discussed in this thesis and the unpleasant memories that were revivified by my interview questions made me stop and reexamine the damage that this research could potentially do to my volunteers. I had to make a difficult ethical decision on whether or not to continue recruiting and interviewing community members or to find another means of collecting data. To ensure the mental and emotional safety of my community members I made the decision to base the core of this thesis on my own experiences. I would use the seven completed interviews and the voices of the participants to collect data and support my observations. I decided to also include more secondary sources to supplement for the small population sampling.

With eight completed interviews, including myself, I was done with my data collection process and was ready to begin coding and analyzing my data. The first task was the tedious process of transcribing the eight tape recorded interviews. During the transcription process I made notes of the participants' emotional states and behavior, anticipating that it would be important later when I undertook the task of deciphering the connotations and meanings attached

to the situations and words. I reminded myself that the context of the situation and the communal meaning attached behind the words was more telling than the words themselves. I employed a systematic coding that relied on an RCLS frame for the focus of my categories, in order to identify and extract instances of rhetorical practices, moments that negotiated and constructed language, showed the different ways that this literacy was taught and learned and the various components that demonstrated how our survival system functioned. I documented the content and categories that were reoccurring themes throughout the interviews and listened for threads that tied the volunteers' narratives together and exemplified the components of my community's complex literacy. I decided to keep the categories and objectives applied to the instrument design of my research questions, with the additions of a subsection concerning drug and alcohol consumption under the heading Community and Networks and a deeper exploration of power under the heading of Perpetuation of Predicament: Power and Authority.

Transcripts were sent to two of the volunteers who had requested to review their interviews and add to or edit the content that they had provided. Once I had the final drafts of all eight interviews, I read through the transcribed interviews summarizing the content of each respective section and annotating excerpts and instances that adhered to my designated categories. These examples and community patterns would be used to demonstrate a comprehensive system of street literacy, composed of survival strategies formed as reactions to the rhetorical demands of the homeless adolescent environment, language practices that defy linguistic conventions, and navigational strategies that show the members of this community to be skilled in their literacy application and resilient. At this point in my analysis process I was becoming aware of just how sophisticated this child-constructed society was.

I knew that the language that was being used by the participants was being given from a point of retrospect. Even though I wasn't getting a child's perspective of the events, I looked at the opportunity to have the adult survivors articulate and apply two different viewpoints of their experiences, as a unique opportunity for language study. When examining their recollections I looked for places of reflection and paid attention to areas where the interviewees reframed their experiences. I also looked for instances where they realized that time had reframed the experiences for them. When we were street kids we weren't aware that we were a vulnerable population, looking back and recognizing instances of victimization was one of the most difficult part of this process. I looked at linguistic choices, instances where definitions were being applied to words that deviated from standard denotation, discursive practices and most importantly areas where silence expressed what words could never convey.

Each chapter was then categorically constructed, attaching narratives and examples to the community behaviors and language customs being introduced. I explicated each excerpt, identifying the discursive practices, rhetorical strategies, and literacy patterns that solidify and identify our demographic as a valid and unique discourse community. I then examined the explications, assuring that I was providing qualitative data and empirical evidence. This evidence was supported by the secondary sources outlined in Review of Literature. I had started this study with a collection of eleven pieces that I felt would suffice as supporting evidence to my observations and claims, but over the course of my study my research grew. For example, when I found out that The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) refused to recognize displaced adolescents as fitting the definition of what they had applied to "homeless," I spent three days following and researching a string of legislation acts, advocacy organizations, and I spent hours writing letters to my representatives. My research led in so many directions

that I ended up crediting forty-five different pieces for giving me a better understanding of my own community. Partnered with my qualitative data, the quantitative data from these sources provided numbers to the atrocities reported by this study's volunteers and illuminated just how widespread victimization of the homeless youth problem has become. My final step in the construction of this thesis was to build an argument that demonstrated that these components all worked together to solidify and create the homeless youth community's literacy (discussed in-depth within the Data Analysis section).

As a person that shifts in their chair when faced with uncomfortable silence and who is rarely found at a loss for words, I find it surprising that I am having difficulty explaining the growth (mental, emotional and personal) that came out of this research. I feel validated and empowered by representing my underground community through written word and by being granted an opportunity to insert our voice in academia. My two identities have merged, leaving me at peace with my duality. I believe that many of the methods used throughout my study, such as auto ethnography, face to face interviews, engaging in discourse, and utilizing existing knowledge would benefit a large array of students struggling to find their voice within the constraints of the academic arena. I not only learned about my participants, I was able to learn about myself and my thought processes (metacognitive analysis). I learned to trust myself and my abilities as an academic. The inner dialogue needed to balance my personal voice and drive my ethical decisions for this study made me dig deeper and look closer at every aspect of this process. My methodological choices and personal reflection on these choices serve as an example for future researchers struggling to set limits of involvement with the cultures they are hoping to study. I was also amazed at how effective my RCLS tools were when being used for

the purpose of understanding my community. My academic knowledge was put into praxis and I learned through the process and experience of applying them.

Researcher's Role

I entered my role as researcher and primary investigator carrying a very serious academic lens. I set out to write an objective piece, based solely on collected data, using academic jargon and sophisticated terminology, void of preconceptions or angles. My initial audience was to be my academic peers, my mentors/professors, and scholars who could expand and possibly influence the scope of my study in the future. I had carefully scripted my interview questions, dancing around Internal Review Board's (IRB) cautions. I had prudently crafted a recruitment letter, adhering to the disclaimers and exemptions set forth by the IRB. I had forms to sign, releases to cement volunteers and big words for my academic community to nod at. This thesis had gotten away from me-- the words were no longer mine, the voice no longer belonged to my community; the same limits that solidified us as powerless children existing on society's streets were being woven into the fabric of my piece. I was using my participants' words, yet half of them would not be able to understand the language being used or recognize their contribution within this thesis. I had to sit back and evaluate if I even had the right to collectively homogenize the volunteers' voices with my tone and rhetorical style. I played back Patricia A. Sullivan's words in my head:

> The Question is not whether the ethnographer has gotten the other right, and
> hence has produced an account that can be taken as authoritative, but whether the
> ethnographer has the right to appropriate an other for the sake of knowledge and

46

can 'speak for' another without compromising the other's own powers of

representation. (103)

I had to figure out how I would preserve each individual voice and create a cohesive collection

of accounts. I vowed to adhere to the belief that an ethnographer's role, in regards to the "other,"

"advocates in their place a self-reflexive epistemology and a rhetoric of unremitting authorial

presence, a mode of ethnographic writing in which the ethnographer continually declares himself

here, and here, and here" (Sullivan 102). I realized that it was not my job to extract our culture

and bring my "imagined community" into the academic arena, and that by accurately and

invitingly representing our community, I could bring the academic institution into our world.

To represent our world, I recruited seven individuals who fit the study requirements and

whom willingly volunteered to participate in one-on- one interviews, given by me as the primary

researcher. Pseudonyms were chosen by the volunteers and their participation was solidified by

their signing an Informed Consent Form and Audio Release Form. I went to different cities and

met with each individual at a location of his or her choice. With the knowledge that they could

skip, refuse or stop any line of questioning, with no negative consequences, as well the ability to

choose to quit at any time or retract their participation entirely, I began my sit down interviews.

Scared that I would somehow violate someone's rights or cause undue harm and have my entire

work stripped from my hands, I systematically, almost robotically, began my stringent line of

questioning. The purpose of the interview was to gain insight, by way of specific examples and

personal account narratives, into the experiences, language customs, socialization practices, and

survival techniques commonly used by homeless teens. My goal of uniting our voices, was to

raise awareness of what we endured and to give our suffering purpose by establishing our

validity as a discourse community and confirming that our world was constructed and sustained

47

by an authentic system of literacy practices. After the first seven interviews, I became aware of certain unanticipated concerns to the volunteers that led to my decision to stop recruiting and to use my own experiences as a core for this thesis. My personal experiences will be corroborated and supported by the data I have obtained throughout the interview process with my seven volunteers and will be further bolstered by my use of secondary sources.

To further explain this decision, I must discuss the circumstances surrounding my research and my responsibility and evolution, as the researcher, to honor my participants' story. I was aware from the inception of my project that delicate issues, such as sexual survival practices and drug use would be a focal points of the community norms. Although I vowed to conduct my research blank and free from angles, the research formulated from my own knowledge base, unintentionally gave me an advantage over my participants. I was aware that my line of questioning could evoke painful memories and I, personally, had time to sit in retrospect, examining the consequences, both good and bad, that these situations had manifested throughout my life. My participants were essentially blindsided by the bluntness and "secrets" that I could potentially expose. If I had to do it over again, I would attempt to rectify this setback by sending the participants my interview questions prior to our sit down. I am extremely thankful for the trust and honesty that the interviewees allotted me, but seeing them get emotional or have difficulties during the interviews made me rethink my line of questioning and abandon, as well as edit out, many inquiries that appeared to cause duress. In layman terms, I didn't expect any of my volunteers to cry. We have all told…rehearsed…edited our stories as to not show emotion when we tell them. This is part of our communal strength and a tool for survival. A lack of emotion or a toughness is an admirable and revered quality within our community. It is the badge that authorizes street cred or marks you as a survivor. For example, Buckwheat and Heather both

discuss our required tough veneer during our sit down interviews. Heather and I discuss the bond

that street youth survivors feel when we meet another member of our community:

> PI: Most people don't get it-that when we meet each other… it is an understanding- it's
>
> almost a respect of how much you could take and not break. I respect the hell out of you.
>
> Heather: You never break. You never break. If you break you don't come back from
>
> it…you know? People tell me I have a bunch different personalities.

Heather's word choices stating that "you never break" refers to the mindset that displaced teens

must not allow the hardships endured on the streets to destroy their mental faculties, evoke

emotion, or interrupt the rhetorical practices which facilitate survival. This conviction is shared

by the majority of our community members. As coping mechanisms, many of us find ways to

disconnect our mental from our physical being when we are being sexually abused, practicing

sex trades, or dealing with the destitution of homelessness. Blocking mechanisms are a means of

self-preservation mentally. I did not include this phenomenon in my interview questions so, I

will not address it extensively within this thesis, but I can speak from personal experience as to

mentally removing myself from the victimization by putting my mind elsewhere in order to

protect my sanity. Sex becomes a job. Sexual exploitation doesn't define the victim, but they

believe that it is necessary to sustain them. This disassociation with reality gives the appearance

of toughness and is created in direct response to incidents where we are victimized. There is no

time for tears when displaced adolescents' focus needs to be on maintaining their existence.

Buckwheat reiterates this point when asked what he "would want people to know about [his]

time as a homeless youth":

> Buckwheat: That's a really weird question… very strange question. Because what you
>
> learn to do- you either learn to deal or you crumble. You either learn to deal with it and

learn to live with it or it'll tear you down one way or another- the best thing is you get

through it and you nut it up. It is what it is. Shit happened.

Buckwheat's use of the word "learn" speaks to the fact that the coping skills and attitudes created

by street kids has to be taught and that the children must develop elevated strategies to decipher

and absorb the lessons that each situation and experience conveys. These adolescents are being

required to push beyond innate responses and readapt their behavior to meet the environmental

demands that are being forced upon them. How they learn and the ways that they apply their

knowledge forms a language and set of rhetorical customs that exceed America's standards of

what is expected of children. Displaced adolescents' acceptance of their circumstances and their

belief that they are powerless to prevent the things happening to them is part of the reason that

they do not discuss or dwell on life's hurdles. As Buckwheat says "It is what it is. Shit happens."

Street kids adhere to the belief that crying will not change anything, only staying hard or void of

emotion will protect the parts of you that others can never reach. Within our community, we are

expected to give the façade that we are not capable of being broken…our veneers do not crack.

This piece holds the power to expose the places within us that are fractured…these cracks allow

our humanity to seep out and that is exactly what makes this thesis dangerous.

By my having created my interview questions, from an insider's view, I inavertedly held

a power position over the participants. I was reminded of a question posed by Shirley Brice

Heath and her fellow researchers. They asked: "If an ethnographer is identified with a colonizing

power or institution promoting inequities of opportunity, then how does this alliance affect

responses to questions and the behavior of the informants and the observed?" (123). My

academic voice threatened to make me an outsider; it threatened to silence my community. We

all came from situations that rendered us powerless, in some regard, and my purpose of this

thesis was to create a safe forum to explore these exploitations and abuses of power, not reinstate them or establish myself above my community. I had to remove my academic mask and remember who I am and where I came from. I had to rejoin my community and abandon the sanctuary of a sterile script. My interviews went from a barrage of uncomfortable questions to conversations… Friends speaking the same language, regaling the old days of a hidden world that would make little sense, if observed by outsiders. Pride of survival… a celebration of our existence- this thesis is written to accurately convey our stories, not villanize or victimize the children who endured it. For these reasons, I write with the goal of not portraying any of the participants as victims; they are victors, but I will not conceal the truth or edit the abuse to make us un- authentically victorious. By conducting conversations, I was able to minimize the power imbalance with my participants and hopefully reduce the pain affiliated with a lot of the material being discussed. I had rejoined my community. As Brueggeman so articulately assesses in *Ethics & Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*, "I had, in effect, gone native" and "I myself had become one of the multiple subjects of my own study." (26, 31)

Data Collection

Building on the idea of what makes a community, I focused my research on the language use and rhetorical practices that contribute to its rules, accepted truths, and socially constructed patterns. I chose an ethnographical approach to developing my thesis and gathering qualitative data. Ethnography is defined as "the study and systematic recording of human cultures; also: a descriptive work produced from such research" (Merriam Webster's). In a search for commonalities, I designed a recruitment letter asking for volunteers between the age of 30 to 65

who were homeless at any point between the ages of 12- 18. As my primary method of research, I chose to conduct in person, one on one interviews with these individuals.

I designed my interview instruments, towards collecting qualitative data, in the form of open ended questions and follow up questions that asked the participants to give as much detail as possible within their comfort level. My questions asked the interviewee to provide specific situations and narratives about their survival practices and other routines that they had witnessed or participated in as homeless youths; the goal was to have them articulate how these skills are implemented, developed and carried out as accepted norms and to learn more about the recruitment and acclimation measures that serve to make this population fluent in the street literacy practices. The knowledge gained from these interviews was gathered with the goal of studying language conventions and rhetorical patterns used by this demographic and to study their communication system in order to identify community specific methods that make up their overall street literacy. I also set out to collect data that would raise awareness to the homeless adolescent community's struggles and to serve as a tool to develop strategies to protect children from being subjected to unforeseen abuse and obstacles directly related to unstable living conditions.

From my recruitment letter, I obtained responses and initial waivers from nine interested participants, not including myself. Of this surveying pool, I selected seven interviews as my primary data for this study (my participation makes eight) and declined two participants, due to circumstances that I believed could result in harmful stress to their health and mental state. The participants were asked to create their own pseudonyms. The names Lauren, Merick, Wendell, Pamela, Heather, Linda, and Buckwheat were selected by the participants prior to the interview. Each volunteer was given an Audio Release Form and an Informed Consent Form to sign. The

length of the interviews ranged from twenty minutes to two hours. The interviews were done at locations chosen by the participants and included bars, restaurants, and bookstores. The interviews were taped and later transcribed, at which time the participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and give the final okay on the entirety of their information. It was only after I had received everyone's final approval that I began data analysis.

Data Analysis

My initial step in analyzing the data I had collected, consisted of transcribing the interviews I had obtained. While listening to the interviews during the transcribing process, I noted instances of sarcasm, laughter, hesitation, duress and other emotional markers and behavior cues that would be needed later to decipher the coded language and hidden meanings often found in the homeless adolescents' communication patterns. I then sent the transcription to the participants who had requested a copy of their interview, in order to get their approval on all of the information that may be included in the thesis. I proceeded to take the final approved transcripts and read through them, making annotations in the margins summarizing content. From these notes, I looked for threads that tied together distinctive communication markers, common practices, language construction, and rhetorically and contextually constructed norms which serve as community identifiers. The reoccurring themes consisted of definitions, abuse, networking, initiation/recruitment practices, sexual survival, drug and alcohol use, crimes, shelter, procuring necessities, education, agencies, perpetuation of predicament, and power and authority. I then went through the transcripts highlighting and annotating these occurrences. Next, I began examining the word choices, language framing, meaning making methods, the way that definitions were being attached to words, connotation/denotation of these words, what was

being said and how the participants were saying it, what wasn't being said, coping strategies built into language choices, survival methods, and contextual practices that were developed as reactions to rhetorical markers present in the community which were found within the participants' narratives. I looked for instances were these practices demonstrated or identified specific examples of literacy. Each category was then cohesively sectioned off as a chapter or subheading within the thesis format and interview excerpts that corresponded with each community markers were placed in their respective areas. I explicated each excerpt, describing the discursive practices, rhetorical instances, and literacy patterns with the goal of explaining each unique community specific marker and the purpose that it served within the study. I added secondary sources that supported my observations and corroborated my volunteers' experiences. I then examined the explications, assuring that they provided qualitative, empirical evidence, in addition to depicting an accurate, humanizing representation of this community. My final step was to build an argument that demonstrated that these components all worked together to solidify and create the homeless youth community's literacy.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DATA

Having previously outlined this study's purpose and design, in addition to my role as

researcher, data collection methods and data analysis of the research materials gathered, I will

now present and explicate the collected data for the purpose of reaching this study's objectives.

The evidence presented in the proceeding subsections discusses the significance of specific

accepted rhetorical routines and socially constructed language practices within the homeless

adolescent community. I will be adhering to Heath, Street, and Mills assertion that "Terms

within studies of language, literacy and multimodalities need clarification; even terms whose

meaning may seem obvious benefit from elaboration and refinement of definition" by

introducing a glossary of vocabulary which serves to demonstrate the contextually assembled

meanings and environmentally developed connotations that my community attaches to various

words and phrases (55). This culture's manipulation of language and construction of words'

meanings directly challenges standard language use and conventional application. These newly

estranged terms and the value placed on them by street kids are formed as a reaction to

experiences and in direct response to communal demands. The fact that these language practices

and the rhetorical actions attached to them are learned and taught community staples proves that

established literacy practices are recognized and exist as a functioning communication system for

this population. The following subsections will exemplify the various applications of this literacy

and attach specific examples and narratives to the evidence being introduced.

<h1 align="center">Glossary</h1>

The following are a sampling of terms and connotative meanings behind specific language and word choices that were presented to the volunteers in an effort to understand common street literacy. Certain phrases in our community have hidden motives and everyday words tend to take on new meaning when viewed through our communal lens. Through the interviews, I sought to establish agreed upon definitions, which may vary from conventional academic use. Heath, Street, and Mills stress the that "Terms within studies of language, literacy, and multimodalities need clarification; even terms whose meaning may seem obvious benefit from elaboration and refinement of definition" when conducting fieldwork (55). In an effort to clarify and establish deeper meaning into this language use, I will be using contrasting excerpts from interviews, established dictionary definitions that fit the purpose of this study, and definitions communally agreed upon by the participants and myself. Goody and Watt observe that oral cultures rely primarily on "face-to-face contact" so "the meaning of each word is ratified in a succession of concrete situations, accompanied by vocal inflections and physical gestures, all of which combine to particularize both its specific denotation and its accepted conative usage" (5). Below are the narratives given and meanings constructed through the collaborative efforts of my volunteers, in addition to a list of standard definitions.

COMMUNITY:

A.   1. A unified body of individuals: as a: state, commonwealth b: the people with common interests living in a particular area; broadly: the area itself <the problems of a large community> c : an interacting population of various kinds of individuals (as species) in a common location d : a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger

<div align="center">56</div>

society <a community of retired persons> e : a group linked by a common policy f : a body of persons or nations having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests <the international community> g : a body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered through a larger society <the academic community>

2: society at large 3a: joint ownership or participation <community of goods> b: common character: likeness <community of interests> c: social activity: fellowship d: a social state or condition (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary).

B.   My explanation: 1. a makeshift family who relies on one another to live. a: An extension of your person which includes a collection of individuals who bond over similarities in ideology, predicament, location or experiences.

DOUBLED UP:

A. To share accommodations designed for one (Merriam- Webster's Online Dictionary).

B. Wendell's explanation: 1.I slept on the floor for probably the better part of the year and a half with other people. We would sleep on the floor, on the couches and there was only one bedroom- there would probably be about five people living there.

C. My explanation: 1. It wasn't unusual to see anywhere from three to twenty of us sharing an apartment or hotel room. A lot of times we lived in groups out of necessity, not out of loyalty or friendship.

"DO YOU WANT COMPANY":

A.	Lauren's explanation: 1. That was my favorite! It works so well because you can't

specifically go ask for a dance or say 'hey can you buy me a drink?' so you had to have a very

specific line that was not solicitive. You would just say 'Do you want company?' and it's

understood that your just gonna be their friend for the next 45 minutes.

B.	My explanation: 1. An introduction to a hustle. a :You need what the men have and they

want what you've got. B: It's an easy way to establish sex is being traded for money, food,

shelter, etc.

ETHNOGRAPHY:

A.	The study and systematic recording of human cultures; also: a descriptive work produced

from such research (Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary).

B.	"Ethnography may be defined as both a qualitative research process or method (one

conducts an ethnography) and product (the outcome of this process is an ethnography) whose

aim is cultural interpretation" (Hoey par. 3).

EXPLOITATION:

A. Use or take advantage of another person, especially sexually, with little or no regard for their

desires or pleasures (Merriam- Webster's Online Dictionary).

COERCION:
 A. "The act of persuading or coercing a minor in engaging in an unwanted sexual activity

through physical force, threat of physical force or emotional manipulation. It may also include

substance coercion. Coercive situations may occur along a continuum and may not be obvious, even to the coerced individual" (Region I Title X Family Planning Training Center par. 1).

FLAT BACKING:

A. Prostituting oneself for the sake of it being an easy way to get cash, when you sleep around for money, but don't actually have to (Urban Dictionary Online)

B. Linda's explanation: 1. Working- surviving

C. Lauren's explanation: 1. Paying your way through college on your back.

GOODTIME GIRL:

A. Old euphemism, still used for: 1. tart, slut; or 2. sex worker, call girl, prostitute. A woman who is in search of cheap (if possible, cost- and pain-free) fun, particularly featuring easy and good sex, very interested in the financial generosity of dickheads (a due reward for her looks and personality and class). May either be (see definition 1 above) an "Essex girl" a "Tracy" in her leisure mode (Urban Dictionary Online).

B. Linda's explanation: 1. Me. I am always ready for a party- even now at the bar, my customers think I have a perfect life…won't hear me complaining.

C. Lauren's explanation: 1. As long as you're happy and sexual and… Always on.

D. Heather's explanation: 1. That's me dancing. I do, I have fun. I make people laugh. I make people smile and you can dance- rub up on him and hey… I won't say who… I was told "here you can keep giving me a lap dance" and I said "you better believe it- when your wife goes away" and I don't really mean it anymore… I don't have to, but that's me playing my character. Good time girl that's me wiggling my ass and dancing. Good time girl.

E. My explanation: 1. A fake persona that depicts a woman as always being happy, fun and ready to party.

HELP: The participants were asked "What does it mean when a man says "I want to help you" or "I want to take care of you?

A. 1. To do something that makes it easier for someone to do a job, to deal with a problem, etc. a.: to aid or assist someone b: to make something less severe c: to make something more pleasant or easier to deal with d: to give (yourself or another person) food or drink (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary)

B. Linda's explanation: 1. He wants to fuck you up the ass or have you fuck him up the ass.

C. Lauren's explanation: 1. You're giving me sex and I'm giving you money, but were gonna pretend like we love each other and we care about each other. We are going to play house.

D. Heather's explanation: 1. It means they want a piece of ass or for you to suck their… I tell you, I can't say it… Suck their dick, penis, flesh sack. They wanted to get their rocks off- they wanted to come all over my face- my boobs- my ass.

HOMELESS:

A. Having no home or permanent place of residence (Merriam- Webster's Online Dictionary).

B. Unanimous agreement of the interviewees: 1. Any duration spent absent of a stable living situation, including, but not limited to, foster homes, sleeping on the streets or in temporary shelters, public places, with adults, friends or predators that were not related to them or in places accrued through their personal work or independent finances.

HOOKING:

A.   To turn a trick (sell body for money) 2. the task that a hook(er) performs (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary).

B.   Heather explanation: 1. Survivor… I don't know how to say to that. Making money, not money per se but getting your needs met. You know, you go in there and you make money, but making money means something different when you're trying to eat and you're trying to get somewhere to sleep and you're trying to get clothes that fit you know?

C.   Lauren's explanation: 1. I never really associated with the term hooking. I know that's what I was doing, but that was kind of more reserved for my girlfriends… Kind of you know "all right we're going hooking". Was more of a joke; I never really took it seriously. I really didn't look at it as hooking. My dad used it occasionally on me. Like "you look like you going hooking." "Are you going to go out like that? You look like a hooker."

HUSTLE:

A. a: To obtain by energetic activity <hustle up new customers> b: to sell something to or obtain something from by energetic and especially underhanded activity <hustling the suckers> c: to sell or promote energetically and aggressively <hustling a new product> d: to lure less skillful players into competing against oneself at (a gambling game) (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary).

B. Heather's explanation: 1. Survival. Man, I hate the word. I hate that word. Survival take it. Am I wrong… is it not? It's not hustle- it's just survival… I'm gonna eat tonight and I'm gonna sleep somewhere tonight and I'm gonna wake up tomorrow- that's survival.

C. Linda's explanation: 1. Survival.

D. Lauren's explanation: 1. Well… Every day was the hustle. How much can I get for how little I can give and I pretty much got to the point where I could say 'Well, okay… I'm gonna make $1000 today and figure 4 hours if I have to or eight hours if I had to- until I hustle as much as I need'. It usually wouldn't take very long because I got so good at it.

NEGOTIATED SERVICES OR SEXUAL SKILLS:

A.   Lauren's explanation: 1. It wasn't so much negotiated, it was more like you have a little routine where you go to the guy… the guy you were dancing for and, at first, just regular dance but then- right at the end- right before the song would end- I would touch his dick and I was like

'do you want another dance?' Then he would be like 'yeah' so the second dance would be a little more involved rubbing his dick and playing with him and so on and so forth and then by the end of the song, I would start unzipping his pants and say 'so, do you want another dance ?' It wasn't really negotiated as much. I was preying on them and I knew I was going to get the reaction that I wanted out of them- it just gradually progressed until I got as much money as I could out of them.

B.   Heather's explanation: 1. That's a hard one. Sexual skills? Hell, I have all of them. Do I like to use all of them? No. It's hard- that's why I like being married to *****... like, I'm tired and he says you don't still have to do all that stuff. Sexual skills? You don't even want me to answer that one. I could screw the guy up the ass with the dildo in a heartbeat... A guy. You heard that right-you won't tell anybody right? That was the harshest one. Yeah, I have sexual skills.

PREDATOR:

A.   An animal that lives by killing and eating other animals: an animal that preys on other animals: a person who looks for other people in order to use, control, or harm them in some way (Merriam- Webster's Online Dictionary)

B.   Wendell's explanation: 1. There are definitely predators. Victim is a softer term in relation to the predators- the victim thing can cut both ways- the predator, he's definitely the predator, the hunter, the wolf, the alpha- those guys do exist-they were there constantly. Now just because I'm saying I didn't engage in any of that and that the people around me were a fairly

good group of people, doesn't mean that I had blinders on and didn't see what was happening around me and the people that are doing it-the predators definitely existed. There were a lot of people that would give you a place to say, feed your habit or alcohol, or anything you wanted just so long as you had sex with them and that was male and female. They were out there and they were definitely looking.

C.   Lauren's explanation: 1. I guess, I consider myself a predator because they would just be waiting. You just picked out the weak ones, that's awesome- I feel so empowered just thinking about it. You just "hey you want company?" And you could tell just by their reaction or how they watched you walk across the room- you know what I mean? It was like you were stalking them.

PROSTITUTION:

A. The act or practice of engaging in promiscuous sexual relations especially for money 2: the state of being prostituted: debasement (Merriam- Webster's Online Dictionary).

B. My explanation: 1. SEE SURVIVAL SEX

STREET SISTER:

A. My Explanation: 1. A female who is homeless, who serves as a full time partner for another runaway or homeless female. Her role serves as a safety measure or look out for the other girl and her presence creates a small network in which they can share the task of procuring necessities and assure that basic needs, such as food and shelter, are attained.

STREET SMARTS:

A. The knowledge needed to survive in difficult and dangerous places or situations in a city 2: the quality of being streetwise (Merriam- Webster's Online Dictionary).

SUGAR DADDY:

A.   Rich, older man who gives money, gifts, etc., to someone (such as a young woman) in exchange for sex, friendship, etc. 1: a well-to-do usually older man who supports or spends lavishly on a mistress, girlfriend, or boyfriend 2: a generous benefactor of a cause or undertaking (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary).

B.   Linda's explanation: 1. Oh hell yeah…dirty old fuckers that you smile while you fuck them and vomit when they leave. They pay your bills.

B. Lauren's explanation: 1. Yeah, you know. Someone who'll take care of you and provide everything for you and you just provide sex and that's a given. If you're not willing to provide it then they will replace you and you're disposed… as long as you're happy and sexual and exciting you're getting what you want.

SURVIVAL SEX:
A.   "The exchange of sex for food, money, shelter, drugs, and other needs and wants" (Walls and Bell 424).

B.   My explanation: 1. "Survival sex" is interchangeable with the terms prostitution or sex trade; the only difference is that this is being done with children who are coerced or forced to have sex to survive.

VICTIM:

A.   1: A living being sacrificed to a deity or in the performance of a religious rite 2: one that is acted on and usually adversely affected by a force or agent <the schools are victims of the social system>: (1) : one that is injured, destroyed, or sacrificed under any of various conditions <a victim of cancer> <a victim of the auto crash> <a murder victim> (2) : one that is subjected to oppression, hardship, or mistreatment <a frequent victim of political attacks> b : one that is tricked or duped <a con man's victim> (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary).

B.   Wendell's explanation: 1. A lot of people on the street at that time were victimized but not- it was somewhat a two-way street. They viewed themselves as they were the ones getting the deal and honestly it goes both ways- the people on the street, they can't be victims- maybe they are victims of the bad home life and poor parenting and making poor choices themselves but come on… they are just teenagers, what the hell do they know? They're just doing their best- sometimes they're just being absolutely stupid so, if somebody is a victim of their family or themselves or of the choices they made and not only that… society doesn't care for the homeless as much as they should in this day and age.

B. Lauren's explanation: 1. The men were definitely the victims. We were taking advantage of them and they were getting what they wanted, but we didn't look at it that way because we were getting more than we felt like we were having to give.

C. Heather's explanation: 1. Not me. A victim, I feel sorry for people who are victims. I've got a real compassionate heart because of what I've gone through, but if you call me a victim, I'll punch you in your fucking face… you know. Everyone knows what they're stepping into- at least they should. It shouldn't be called victim- there should be a word for something called no choice. There should be a word for that.

D. Linda's explanation: 1. Someone powerless. I was a victim to my parents.

The above definitions and explanations demonstrate the translations and situational meanings made by a sampling of former street children. The participants offer varying perceptions of words and phrases, often deviating from conventional use. My goal in presenting conflicting perceptions of established words and language is to move the audience of this piece to delve deeper within themselves to look passed the awkwardness of these former homeless kids' words in order to look at the context and crimes that precipitated these views.

Causation and Origins

I will now begin discussing the circumstances that lead many children to become displaced. I will use the words displaced, homeless, in the system, and on the streets interchangeably throughout this thesis, due to the research volunteers' rejection and varying views of what homelessness entails. I will examine their word choices and perception of what it

67

means to be homeless, in order to construct an agreed upon, all-encompassing definition for this term. Six out of seven participants stumbled on one of my initial questions, which asked "How long did you remain homeless?" The following excerpts examine the varying opinions about this word:

> Buckwheat: Parentless…I never was homeless because my parents' Social Security, when they died, paid for the apartment while I was going to school, or they thought.

Even though Buckwheat reveals during his interview that, after being orphaned, he lived with a sister, then an aunt and uncle, with friends' families, in an apartment paid for with his social security check, later in a military academy, and in transient work environments, he still does not consider himself to have been homeless. The connotations behind the word "homeless" are often related to images of degrading and dehumanizing conditions. Buckwheat's non-identification with the term shows the reframing of his situation that is produced as a way to cope with this time in life and remove himself from the negative connotations. He states that his "parents' social security" kept him from being homeless; Buckwheat's' logic allots him a certain amount of power over his situation. Feeling powerless or like a victim is a common challenge that displaced children face, as seen in the glossary when defining the words "victim" and "predator.". This will be addressed further in the Sexual Survival subsection. Buckwheat's insistence that he was "never homeless" coincides with Wendell's response that he was "houseless" not homeless. In an effort to construct an accepted definition of homeless, Wendell and I discussed his opinion on what it means to be homeless:

> Wendell: Homelessness is definitely not having a safe place that would shelter you from the elements. That's what I would define it as- under a bridge or in an abandoned building, something like that.

PI: So you don't consider foster care or living on couches homelessness?

Wendell: No. Oh, I was never homeless; I was 'houseless'.

Surprisingly, Wendell later disclosed that he had in fact spent short periods of time sleeping

under a bridge and in abandoned buildings, but the majority of his time displaced involved living

doubled up or sleeping in a variety of locations that he did not feel fit his idea of homelessness.

Due to multiple conflicting definitions of the term "doubled up" by the United States government

and various help organizations, for the purpose of this study I will be using Merriam-Webster's

definition of the practice of living "doubled up" as "to share accommodations designed for one."

Street children practice of living "doubled up" is need based; they have learned that pooling their

resources often allows them to create safer and more stable living environments than if they were

alone. This strategy, developed as a direct reaction to their circumstances, becomes a standard

practice used throughout this community. It is cliché to say that there is power in numbers, but

that is exactly what this tactic conveys; the youth feel that they are no longer victims or

powerless to change their living conditions. Mirroring Wendell's response, Linda relays a similar

view of the word "homeless", stating:

Linda: I don't know if I would consider myself homeless; I always found somewhere or

someone to stay with.

Linda's need to distance herself from this term is partnered with the assertion that she "always

found somewhere or someone to stay with." This phrase combats Linda's fears of being alone

and having nowhere to go. These are common concerns within the homeless adolescent

community and address the implication that being homeless equates with being discarded or

unwanted. Her statement is made in defense of her situation and is used to stave off a low self-

image and feelings of rejection.

At this point in my research, I realized that the connotations surrounding the word homeless and the varying definitions of what it means to each individual to be homeless, changed the way they related to or identified with the rest of my questions. Interestingly, I consulted six different secondary sources that gave different definitions of the word homeless, no two being alike; these studies conducted their research based on their applied criteria. As stated earlier, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development office's definition of what constitutes homeless does not extend to this demographic. Through the course of these interviews and with the unanimous agreement of my interviewees, for the purpose of this study "homeless" is being defined as any duration spent absent of a stable living situation, including, but not limited to, foster homes, sleeping on the streets or in temporary shelters, public places, with adults, friends or predators who were not related to them, or in places accrued through their personal work or independent finances. Given an agreed upon definition, socially constructed within the conversations with my community, I was aware once again of the negotiation and solidity involved in constructing accepted terminology and agreed upon context for almost everything built to define a society's norms and literacy. In short, community perception is the meaning maker when it comes to language.

By negotiating the term "homeless" and validating the participants' interpretations, instead of imposing a categorical label, I was able to remove the threat of inequality and remove the defensive guard that homeless children often display. Many of us have gotten so used to protecting ourselves and struggling with situations that have rendered us powerlessness that we develop abrasive, often aggressive discourse styles as a defense tactic to combat potential dangers. The goal of this subconsciously developed behavior resembles that of an animal standing its hair on end or making ferocious noises to ward off harm and appear less vulnerable.

This communication marker is employed as a protective measure resulting directly out of the child's feelings of threat and their need to feel safe. The fear of threat for many street children extends beyond there durations of displacement. The following chapter explores histories of victimization and the feelings of powerlessness that have contributed to the rhetorical patterns and mind sets exercised by the adolescents who end up on the streets.

Displacement and History of Abuse

In the previous section, I was able to establish accepted terminology, extending the definition of homeless to fit all of the participants' criteria. I will now began discussing the causation of the volunteers' displacements and conditions at home which led to them being on their own. My volunteers each have unique circumstances which speak to the origins of their homeless status yet all participants, including myself, relayed histories of abuse in our family environments which serve as a bonds for many members within our community. Abuse is the common thread. Forms of abuse recognized by the child protection agencies in the United States are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect (Definition of Child Abuse and Neglect n. pag.). Researchers found that early exposure to sexual abuse, physical abuse, and drug and alcohol use by displaced youths' caregivers led to a higher chance of victimization on the streets or initiation into similar street practices (Chen et al. 1176). The majority of the volunteers who reported participating in sexual survival and drug and alcohol use while on the streets also reported these behaviors being present within their home environments.

Homeless adolescents rarely give detailed descriptions to outsiders when asked about the abuse that went on in their past, but between abuse victims, the lines of dialogue are open and abuse becomes a credibility marker that solidifies their membership into the community. By

conveying the circumstances and abuse that were endured at home to other homeless youths, we not only make ourselves appear tougher for having endured it, but we are simultaneously justifying our position as a street kid. By giving the impression that our displaced status is a choice that we made to escape a bad situation, we are sending a message to our listener that we are not powerless and that we chose this path. This representation implies that we had other options.

Street children's ability to transform false realities into truths involves a natural inclination towards denial, the superior ability to reframe a situation and sophisticated language construction skills. Facts are being arranged and word choices are manipulated to convey the image that the displaced youth hopes to create. This is a standard rhetorical convention applied within our community as both a personal coping mechanism and an intentional tactic to create the image that we hope to portray to our audience. The way that we want the other person to see our situation often has an agenda attached, such as attempting to acquire food or shelter.

We see this strategy employed within the interviews. I asked participants "What led to you being homeless?" and followed it up with questions concerning history of abuse. I chose to examine the ways that these former street children explain their displaced status and talk about the abuse they endured. These narratives are being paired together in order to show the application of these coping strategies and to simultaneously combat misconception that these children had a safe place to go home to or that their homeless status was a choice ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 14). The following are excerpts from my sit down interviews, which relay the actual events that led to homelessness:

PI: Next, what led to you being homeless?

Wendell: Difficulties at home with my parents. My father felt it was necessary to teach me a lesson and threw me out of the house and I just a thrown out.

PI: Was there abuse in your family history? Please, be as detailed as possible within your comfort level.

Wendell: Yes, there was most definitely abuse in the family history- on part of both the mother and the father- it was physical not sexual.

PI: Okay, can you give specific examples?

Wendell: Would you like me to get further into that?

PI: As much detail as you want to give or that you're comfortable with.

Wendell: There was an episode once when my father felt he would teach me a lesson. He was trying to teach me to not be afraid of insects- which I wasn't terribly afraid of insects at the time… since then I am definitely afraid of insects these days. At one point, he wanted me to hold the locus that had flown in -a large group of locus had flown into our central Texas town- a particularly large locus landed on the ground and my father caught it. He insisted that I was to hold the locus and he surprised me by hiding it and making me close my eyes. When I opened my hand there was a giant locus sitting in my hands- at which point I was… geez about 12 at the time- I panicked and I threw the locus into the air and my father said to go pick it up, but I refused to so… I was scared of that thing. Then he wanted to teach me a lesson that I should be more afraid of him than the locus itself. And then a beating ensued- it got so bad that he eventually picked up a 2 x 4 [board] and was swinging a 2 x 4 at me. Fortunately, I had had a little bit of martial arts training so, no serious damage was done, but it ended up with me--- basically I ran out of

the backyard in my underwear, down the street screaming with bloodied arms where he

had hit me with this 2 x 4.

Wendell's use of the word "teach" four times throughout his recollection, in regards to his father, displays that abuse was a big part of how he was programed to learn. This translation of abuse as a rhetorical method of instruction illuminates a foundational component in Wendell's internal perceptions and meaning making systems. These experiences, partnered with later victimization, contribute to Wendell's approach to survival, the rhetorical practices that he will choose to employ and the ways that he will read language and actions throughout his life. "Teach" has taken on negative connotations and is being repurposed as having harmful implications; this word has been redefined by Wendell as a result of the abusive memories that he associates with the term. This demonstrates how a word's meaning can be situationally constructed, thereby overriding standard use.

Wendell's accounts of physical and mental abuse by his father also shows the immediate danger that his family environment contained. Like many homeless youths, Wendell did not leave of his own accord, he was thrown out by a parent. The Polly Klaas Foundation found that "Nearly half of the homeless kids surveyed by the National Runaway Safeline described situations where they were thrown out of their homes by their families or caregivers. These children literally have no place to go" ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 15) Pamela was another participant that was discarded by a parent and had no home to return to:

PI: At which age did you initially experience instability with your living environment or

begin living on the streets?

Pamela: I moved in with an aunt when I was 14 and then I moved in with a high school

teacher when I was 17.

PI: What led to the instability in your living situation?

Pamela: The circumstances when I moved in with my aunt, the man that my mom had just married did not want me in his home and so I moved in with an aunt and then the aunt that I was living with did not…well, she was having marital problems. She said that she really needed to focus on her marriage and that me being there only complicated things. So she asked me move out and that's when I went to live with my high school teacher.

PI: Was there abuse in your family history? If so, please explain within your comfort level.

Pamela: The family discussion is that my father was physically abusive towards my brother and my sister. I was spanked as a child but I have no recollection of me personally being excessively disciplined physically and there is also the possible sexual abuse of my mother by my father.

Pamela, like most abandoned children, was powerless to her circumstances and was given no preference in stable living conditions. Although, Pamela conveys other family members' memories of abuse, she states that she herself has "no recollection" of these instances. Like many street children, her memories are buried somewhere in her subconscious or have been blocked out of her mind as a coping mechanism. Pamela's word choices, when describing why she left her mother's home and later an aunt's house, shows a retraction of the words "the aunt that I was living with did not…." This sentence is reframed as, "well, she was having marital problems." Pamela's "well" signals her need to qualify her aunt's rejection. Her first statement that her mother's husband "did not want" her, partially mirrors her retracted statement. Pamela consciously redirected her words, reframing the rejection that she endured. Again we see a

survivor of this community's heightened ability to manipulate words and restructure realities. I feel that it is important to note that Pamela is the only volunteer that was given a stable and safe environment after being taken in by her teacher. Sadly, Linda recounts her history on the streets and her experience of living with a school teacher during her displacement which was significantly different. Linda shares her story, which demonstrates how sexual abuse victims often reframe the role of their abuser:

PI: What lead to you being homeless?

Linda: Fucked up parents.

PI: Can you give examples?

Linda: My mom didn't want us. She locked us up in closets and the state had taken us away for- she would beat us, or the neighbors would find her trying to hang me- we weren't allowed in Nevada anymore or she'd be arrested. Me and my brothers had been put in placements over 17 times.

PI: And your dad?

Linda: Hmm…he never claimed to be my dad. He claimed two of my brothers, but- another man was living with my mom- they were neighbors. I only lived with him when I was six. He ran us into a tree drunk and I was in a body cast when they gave me back to my mom.

PI: You have already answered this…Was there abuse in your family history? If so, please be as detailed as possible within your comfort level. Was there any other history of abuse that you are willing to share?

Linda: Um…well, my dad sexually abused me. He said it was okay cuz he wasn't my real dad. My mom had friends that would mess with me…sexually. As far as beatings, it

was just her. When I got sent back after the car accident, she said I…I had to balance

myself on the walls of the hallway to walk- she said I left prints and…they had to put me

back into the body cast because of it.

Later in the interview, in reference to feelings of danger, Linda tells of her sexual victimization

on the streets:

Linda: … I got raped on the streets. I ended up in a girl's home for pregnant teens.

Laurie- my first girlfriend- was a teacher there- she got me off the streets.

Linda's account of being a sexual victim of rape on the streets makes her disclosure about her

female teacher's-- whom she refers to as her "first girlfriend"-- later abuse even more impactful.

Many street youths, like Linda, tend to view their adult abuser as a friend, relationship, or

caretaker. This explains statistics that show the children within this population identify their

abuser as someone they know or as "acquaintances" within their network (Tyler et al. 511).

Linda not only reframes her inappropriate victimization by her teacher as being a legitimate

relationship, she also states that her teacher "got [her] off the streets." This statement implies that

the pedophile which victimized her, rescued her from street life. Linda's coping mechanisms,

demonstrating her ability to reframe the way she interprets her experiences, materialize through

her reconstructing the context of the situation being discussed and altering the reality of the

situation through language choices. These children, having been subjected to unfathomable

abuse, display resilience and develop strategies to protect their minds at times when their bodies

have no protection.

I feel that it is also important to note the neglect, not just by the families of the victims,

but of the organizations and agencies who failed to protect these kids. Multiple levels of neglect

from inside and outside of these children's' homes are to blame for not shielding them from

these atrocities or providing safe environments in which to exist. Sadly, statistics show that these abuses carry continued effects throughout their lives, which contribute to later harm. Lauren is another example of victimization transitioning from her home life into her street life. I examine the language she uses when discussing why she ran away:

> Lauren: It wasn't so much that I wanted to run away; I just wanted to go see my boyfriend and my mom was gone for two weeks and my incompetent brother was taking care of me and he didn't care where I went to or what I did. I never went to school so I just decided to take a cab and go meet my boyfriend at his school.

> PI: Was there ever any abuse in your family? If so please be as detailed as possible within your comfort level.

> Lauren: My mother's boyfriend's two sons were sexually abusive towards me. Nothing in my immediate family… my brothers or father.

Lauren, although a victim of sexual abuse and neglect, states that "it wasn't so much that I wanted to run away." The Polly Klaas foundation's research reveals that "70 percent of teen runaways interviewed "described their leaving home as occurring on the spur of the moment'' and that "Many kids didn't even pack a bag, make sure they had money for food and shelter, or figure out where they were going to spend the night" ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 12). It is important to remember that adolescents lack the emotional and mental maturity to make competent decisions, much less weigh the consequences. Poor choices are what makes these children easy targets for adult predators. When discussing her time as a runaway and her experiences on the streets Lauren shares a traumatic experience where she is victimized:

> Lauren: I was never actually homeless, but I did run away at one point and I went to a boyfriend's on the other side of Houston and I ended up getting raped in the back alley by

78

some man that saw us at a convenience store. So we got picked up by the cops and they

took me home.

Lauren candidly discusses her early exposure to sexual abuse and victimization. Her sexual

abuse on the streets later leads to her exploitation as a topless dancer (starting at the age of 17)

and experiences with sex trafficking and prostitution. Lauren's sexual abuse and self-exploitation

becomes her primary navigational routine by which to attain necessities. Lauren perceives her

value as being directly tied to her sexuality. This mindset is developed as a result of continual

sexual abuse and repeated instances of victimization. It is my belief that if Lauren had given

adequate supervision, early intervention, and counseling these situations could have been

prevented and she could have pursued other avenues of survival later in life. Lauren recalls

reporting early sexual abuse to her mother and the police and asking for help at different times

throughout her ordeals, but was never given resources or assistance to repair the psychological

damage that she carries with her (Lauren discusses this later within the Agency and Authority

chapter, as well as in her final reflection). Lauren was powerless in these situations and

translated the lack of intervention on her behalf into the belief that her voice did not matter. The

lack of follow up by state agencies and people with the legal authority to make decisions for

these children need to be held accountable for following up with these victims placements and

rehabilitation. Heather talks about her continued abuse, after being removed by the Child

Protection Services from her mother's custody:

> PI: At which age did you initially experience instability with your living environment or
>
> begin living on the street or in a nontraditional family structure?
>
> Heather: Nontraditional? One. Instability? I was one. Streets? I was probably 13 or 14.
>
> PI: Was this in intervals or throughout your entire life?

Heather: My entire life.

PI: Was there a history of abuse in your family? If so, please explain within your comfort level and as detailed as possible.

Heather: Yes, yeah there was. Okay… my mom and dad got divorced- I guess- I was told- when I was about one. But before that age, my sister would make my bottles- she would feed me- she was only four years older than me. When I finally got to eat… she'd make me peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. My dad said he came in and my mom had a knife- she would just stop right at my chest. She had shaved me bald and said that I had lost all my hair but they could see the stubble- they could just see it. She couldn't help that-she had a brain tumor that hadn't been caught until three weeks before she died. You know… and then my dad got custody and he abused me from the time I was three until 12, I guess.

PI: Sexual, physical, mental?

Heather: All of them, I guess. All of it. He would stuff socks in my mouth and beat me- lock me in the underground cellar and tell me that people were going to kill me and eat me.

Again, we can see the abuse in Heather's early life correlating with abuse later in her life. Heather and I discuss being in danger while on the streets:

Heather…Oh my God, I was always in danger. I got pregnant with my youngest son by rape by his father. I was always… Because I wouldn't sleep with him. I didn't want to have sex with him and so he choked me out and had sex with me and I got pregnant. When are you not in danger?

It is unclear from the interview the depth of prior affiliation that Heather had with her son's

father before the rape and physical assault so, I am going to avoid making connections between

networking and victimization relationships, but it is important to note that Heather actively

participated in sexual survival while on the streets, in addition to acts that can be construed as

prostitution later in life (these examples can be found within the Sexual Survival chapter). Links

between early sexual abuse and sexual victimization or exploitation while homeless, shows the

relationship between these behaviors and indicates early abuse as a precursor for continuing

behavior and patterns. Survival sex becomes a rhetorical pattern used by street children to

survive.

Early stages of Heather and my dialogue maintains an interview format, but her hesitation

to talk about her experiences over the course of the interview was identifiable by pauses, subject

changes, digressions and broken speech patterns. I had to offer Heather more directives and

reassurances to get her to answer the questions than I did the other participants. Her nervousness

showed her uneasiness with disclosing details of past trauma.

Displaced youths construct and practice telling their "story" in a condensed form to avoid

emotion and evade having to give details. I remember when I began talking about my abusive

home life to outsiders and they would ask follow up questions that would make me

uncomfortable or make me want to cry. Over time, I learned to rework my narrative to include

extra facts; this was a rhetorical tactic used to thwart further inquiries. My word choices allowed

me to maintain control over my past and only share as much of myself with the outsider as I

wanted to. My personal protective measures have always relied greatly on my mastery of

language. Language translates in my mind as power, and my words have the power to produce

the results I am seeking. This thesis is an example of the power of words; it serves as validation

for my belief that words have the power to construct communities, create realities and enact change.

In addition to showing homeless youths' ability to reframe circumstances with words to protect their mental faculties and make choices concerning how their predicaments are perceived to their intended audience, the above accounts by my research volunteers serve to break the myth that these children chose to be on the streets and the misconception that they had safe, stable homes to return to. These excerpts also display a failure on the parts of the majority of adults, in all capacities-- personal and professional-- to intercept these children or save them from the continued abuse which they endured. I offer these failures as a contributing factor to why street adolescents feel powerless and mistrust adults. This powerlessness directly effects the way that we choose to communicate, construct and convey our situations. My experiences, in unison with these stories, are at the root of what bonds us as a community. Our connection is often born out of neglect, rejection and harm. These feelings, whether warranted or not, breed a mind-set that justifies and perpetuates remaining on the streets. Once on the streets, it is up to these children to learn how to survive; they begin by accruing the knowledge and skills needed to navigate and survive on their own. In the next section of this thesis, I will be exploring these survival techniques and show how these children use them to secure their needs.

Gimme Shelter

Having provided a foundation of causation and histories of displacement for the participants, I will now address the power of words in regards to the government's failure to include the displaced adolescent demographic in their definition of "homeless." I will look at how this limited definition has the power to shut off all avenues of help and funding that should

82

be made available to these children. Lacking this help and being excluded from homeless resources, in the form of shelter, food, medical and work programs, these teenagers are left to find their own means of survival. These measures are enacted in response to the rhetorical demands of the displaced adolescent's predicament. This chapter will look at the strategies and norms, found within the participants' accounts, which are created to overcome this hurdle.

Finding shelter while existing on the streets is one of the most difficult, but equally interesting facets of street life. A person doesn't really know the lengths that he or she may be willing to go to, in order to attain food and shelter until they are faced with the challenge of going without. Children, whom presumably have little or no history of how an adult acquires a stable place to live, are suddenly in a position to fend for themselves. Although this description seems slightly removed from the American dream, the reality of where these children seek shelter is often harsh and destitute. The Polly Klaas Foundation notes that "If homeless boys & girls do not find a reputable shelter, they may panhandle and sleep in parks or abandoned buildings" ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 17). If it is possible, imagine children hiding in plain sight; this is why I maintain that homeless adolescents are an invisible population.

I recall my first English professor, mentor and later dear friend reading my narratives of being a homeless youth. She later admitted to me that she had never heard of children that lived on their own and that she thought I was lying because the thought of such circumstances existing in America was just too far-fetched for her to believe. Admittedly, I was offended at first by her judgement, but then I realized that homeless children aren't usually visible to people living healthy, productive lives and are virtually nonexistent in the academic world. Most people have faith in the system and rely on the belief that America would never allow something as seedy as

83

sex trafficking of children or let perpetual abuse of minors exist in our own backyard. It is a common misconception that human trafficking is only a problem in foreign countries, not America; yet, "1 in 6 endangered runaways reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children in 2014 were likely sex trafficking victims and 68 percent of these likely sex trafficking victims were in the care of social services or foster care when they ran" ("Runaway Children" pars. 1-2). The systems set up to protect this demographic is failing displaced children and letting them fall through the cracks.

Most people viewing us loitering in malls or outside of a convenience store would never guess the lengths that we were having to go in order to meet basic needs. The United States Housing and Urban Development (HUD) office's failure to classify the majority of runaways and street youths as 'homeless' has added to this identification gap that refuses to accurately recognize and assist this adolescent street population. HUD's definition is:

> (a) In general.—For purposes of this Act, the terms 'homeless', 'homeless individual', and 'homeless person' means— (1) an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; (2) an individual or family with a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings, including a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground; (3) an individual or family living in a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including hotels and motels paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for lowincome individuals or by charitable organizations, congregate shelters,

and transitional housing); (4) an individual who resided in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided; (5) an individual or family who— (A) will imminently lose their housing, including housing they own, rent, or live in without paying rent, are sharing with others, and rooms in hotels or motels not paid for by Federal, State, or local government programs for lowincome individuals or by charitable organizations, as evidenced by— (i) a court order resulting from an eviction action that notifies the individual or family that they must leave within 14 days; (ii) the individual or family having a primary nighttime residence that is a room in a hotel or motel and where they lack the resources necessary to reside there for more than 14 days; or (iii) credible evidence indicating that the owner or renter of the housing will not allow the individual or family to stay for more than 14 days, and any oral statement from an individual or family seeking homeless assistance that is found to be credible shall be considered credible evidence for purposes of this clause; (B) has no subsequent residence identified; and (C) lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing; and (6) unaccompanied youth and homeless families with children and youth defined as homeless under other Federal statutes who— (A) have experienced a long term period without living independently in permanent housing, (B) have experienced persistent instability as measured by frequent moves over such period, and (C) Can be expected to continue in

such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or multiple barriers to employment. (b) Domestic violence and other dangerous or life-threatening conditions.— Notwithstanding any other provision of this section, the Secretary shall consider to be homeless any individual or family who is fleeing, or is attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions in the individual's or family's current housing situation, including where the health and safety of children are jeopardized, and who have no other residence and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing. (Section 330(h) (5)

(A). (Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition Housing (HEARTH))

It is shocking that something as elementary as a word's definition has the power to perpetuate street victimization and render an entire community of displaced adolescents powerless. Wording such as "credible evidence" and "court order" are just a couple of oppressive standards enforced by HUD which serve to exclude homeless youths or make it impossible for street kids to escape their current predicaments. Can HUD really ask these street children to get a letter from the pedophile housing them stating that his abuse is only temporary and will not continue past a fourteen day duration? Can a child residing in an abandoned building with four other teens be able to get legal documents from the courts or credible testimony from agencies or other

displaced youths that they have lived there for the required duration needed to be deemed homeless? Is it reasonable to ask a child to track down the drug addict mother who abandoned him in order to attain the social security number and birth certificate that they need just to get an ID card to start the process of applying for assistance? These adolescents are in need of help and the bureaucratic hands which wield the power to assist them, fail to even make it possible for the classification of "homeless" to be attained by these youths. Child advocates and activists behind the Help Homeless Children and Youth Now movement believe that "HUD's data is incomplete and contributes to the invisibility of homeless children and youth"; and that HUD's "lack of accurate information prevents local and state action, including private and public funding, to assist these children and youth" (Facts About the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R.576/S.256) par. 9). This deficiency, on the part of our government, leaves this population powerless, voiceless, uncounted, and without help. Children's cries of "We are here!" are falling on the deaf ears of our government, but are being heard by every sex trafficker, pedophile and predator with access to the streets.

My community is America's dirty little secret; we are proof that pedophiles can be your next door neighbor. We are evidence that our child protective system is failing. We are reminders that the pursuit of happiness doesn't extend to individuals under the age of eighteen, and we are burdens to every good citizen that sends 50 cents a day, a price of a cup of coffee, to save a child in another country, when the children in this country are trading sex, stealing, or panhandling for food. I personally think of homeless people and assume that shelters, food pantries, soup kitchens, and money allocated for assistance to help this demographic is competent enough to deal with the homeless population's needs. Yet, America's streets are plagued with homelessness.

This raises the question as to whether or not, homeless communities will even be receptive to new intervention assistance. Runaways and street youths rarely seek out these resources. Research following 327 street youth for a duration of six months concluded that "youth identified on the streets generally did not use emergency shelters or other services. Instead, they tend to live marginally on the streets, often within their own neighborhoods, moving among residence of families or friends and makeshift shelters" (Ennett et al. 66). The youths that do seek assistance are often met with limited programs that are not equipped and funded to meet the needs of runaways and homeless kids. The organization Help Homeless Youths Now asserts that "due to HUD's narrow definition of homelessness, these children and youth are ineligible for critical HUD homelessness assistance including emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing, and supportive services such as counseling" (Facts About the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R.576/S.256) par. 7). It is time for classifications and requirements to be set aside and for measures that ensure that services and help are received by these children to be enacted. It is simple…get them off the streets and out of danger and THEN worry about dotting your I's and crossing your T's on paperwork.

As a student of Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy studies, I am given a unique opportunity to study the power behind words and its ability to construct or destroy, empower or oppress, liberate or trap, and acknowledge or ignore entire cultures. My academic discipline has untethered my hands, allowing me to question and combat power imbalances. This thesis establishes my homeless adolescent community as a legitimate, functioning, discourse community that is ready to take our place within the academic world and who are prepared to assertively interject our voices into society so that government can no longer erase us with a

88

mere definition. We are not a problem; we are the inspiration for a solution. Child advocates have begun raising awareness of the homeless youth plight and are currently demanding that changes be made by our government to assist this demographic..

Moves towards solutions are being made; the government needs to be receptive to these requests. Legislation seeking to expand the definition of homeless, by the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) office, has been proposed; The Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R. 576/S.256) would not only help accurately recognize and identify the number of children that are currently living on their own, it would also raise awareness of this community, allowing funds to be allocated for runaway and homeless youth services by government and non- government agencies (Facts About the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R.576/S.256) par. 4). If the government doesn't care enough about this demographic to dirty their hands by helping, they can at least free the hands of the organizations wanting to help by lifting restrictions on homeless classification that tie up funding and by allowing revisions to the current "homeless" definition to include measures for identifying this at risk population. In Help Homeless Children and Youth Now's "Summary of the Homeless Children Youth Act of 2015," they review "federal restrictions" that reveal the fact that "current laws restricts CoCs [Continuum of Care] from spending more than 10% of their funds on families or unaccompanied youth who are homeless under other federal statues" (Facts About the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R.576/S.256) par. 2). Revisions made to the government's definition of what constitutes "homelessness" will help improve the conditions of homeless kids' shelter options, as well as help fund counseling and integration programs to equip these children to succeed on their own. A safe living alternative for displaced youths needs to be established and these kids need to have a sanctuary removed from the dangers on the streets. They deserve the right to finish school, they deserve a

chance to have a career, and they need an opportunity-- with stable food, shelter and support-- to be children untethered by adult issues and free from threat. Current resources and government agencies are not meeting these basic needs.

All of the interview volunteers for this thesis talked candidly about the locations at which they stayed, the ways they attained shelter and transportation methods used during their stints as homeless youths. When asked "Can you please give specific examples of where you stayed or the conditions in which you lived during your time as a homeless youth?" participants gave the following accounts:

Wendell: Initially, at 16, my sister had found me a place to stay with a friend of mine- he is a friend now- back then I didn't know him. She had found a place to stay with a mutual friend and I slept on the floor for probably the better part of the year and a half with other people. We would sleep on the floor, on the couches and there was only one bedroom- there would probably be about five people living there-if that is what you consider homeless then that was the first period. Then later on -a couple of days under a bridge- it was very loud and very damp. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone- no star hotel for under the bridge. There was an abandoned building that I stayed in for about a week and it wasn't so bad- a little strange and kind of scary but I survived it. There was also a former apartment that we had moved out of- the landlord hadn't moved to do anything with the apartment so I would sneak in through the window and I stayed there for the duration of about three weeks. Oh my goodness, there are so many -there was another place in which we all lived in one room with one bed and two of us would get the bed and one of us would get the chair- the chair was not particularly comfortable- we tended to rotate the sleeping arrangements- somebody had the chair off and on- the chair was probably as bad

90

as the bridge. Other than that, there have been a few times over the years of sharing the

rooms with odd people here and there but like I said, I really don't consider a roof over

your head as being quote/ unquote homeless. I would say it's just very cramped living.

Wendell's account displays the use of language and rhetorical markers to reframe his

recollections; this practice has been established within this study as a community literacy norm.

His reframing is heightened by his ability to put a positive spin on his experiences. He admits

that conditions were "a little strange and scary," but qualifies this statement between the phrases

"it wasn't so bad" and "but I survived it." He turns a negative situation into a picture of

resilience, by exerting his power to overcome and endure. This tactic is enacted in order to shape

the way he wants his audience to view him and in an effort to lessen his personal recollections of

fear and threat. He displays this same reframing when describing an uncomfortable chair as not

being as bad as the conditions under a bridge and his choice to view homelessness as living

"cramped." Wendell reshapes his reality in the way that he wants his time as a homeless youth to

be depicted. The way he structures his account, fits his overall perception of how he chooses to

view this time in his life.

The interview questions prompted reflection; at one point in Wendell's recollection he

states "Oh my goodness, there are so many," when asked about the places that he had stayed.

This realization, which was stated with surprise, comes by way of his adult lens recounting

experiences which were stored in his memory from a child's eye. It is only as an adult, now

removed from the adolescent context of being focused on survival, that he can reexamine his

street practices and estrange them from the circumstances. As I mentioned earlier in this study,

part of the difficulty faced by the participants and myself was our application of our now adult

observation being applied to our child logic. All of these practices that seemed logical and

normal when faced with the struggles of displacement, could now be seen as the acts of abuse and victimization that they really were. At the time, we had convinced ourselves that we knew what we were doing and believed that our adult behaviors made us adults. Wendell's revelation of multiple living placements temporarily removes him from the account that he has constructed and was intent on conveying. In this instance, his constructed reality is being challenged by the situational facts.

Wendell wasn't the only participant to share in this reality; out of the eight participants in this study all of us reported living in different locations, ranging from two sites to twenty seven different places. Abandoned buildings, empty apartments, and locations with 24 hour services, such as all night movie theaters, laundry mats, and truck stops, are common occurrences within our community. Merick discusses her stint as a runaway and shows the important role that networking and friends played in her daily street life. She answers the question of where she stayed and the conditions of these locations while she was displaced:

> Merick: I lived in Houston at the time. In the first week I was bouncing all over the city
> of Houston- living with friends and friends of a friend. It was weird, a friend of a friend
> had a backyard party and I ended up crashing there for the night and it was way out in the
> suburbs. At that point in time, I was living in the Hobby Airport area so a lot of it was
> around there and then the abandoned houses were closer to downtown and these were
> places that were already kind of marked out by other street kids. They took me in and
> then one of the street kids told me about the Covenant House and saying that I can get
> into there; and they were the ones that took me over there, because they were staying at
> the Covenant house. This kid was already staying at the Covenant house and…. let's say

you were to get high- then he would say "yeah, totally come with me". I lucked out and I

got in there. It was safe and clean. I ended up using my fake ID to get into the Covenant

House, which I feel bad for that now. I should donate money to them; it's a great

organization. A nice clean bed as long as you are working with the system they would

help you to get off the streets.

Merick's account touches on a very big hurdle that street kids are faced with; we are unable to

qualify for shelters or young adult facilities due to our underage status. Merick used a fake

identification card and was able to stay at Covenant House, an organization that helps homeless

young adults transition from street life into society. They assist with medical needs, counseling,

job training, and life skills and are working towards solutions in the homeless community for

individuals between the ages of 18 and 21. My choice to not include Covenant House as a direct

solution for homeless minors within this thesis is due to their age requirement, which was in

place for the age demographic of this study's volunteers, which only served individuals between

the ages of 18 and 21. It is important to note that Merick had to commit a crime by obtaining

fake credentials in order to qualify for shelter assistance; these services are not available for

individuals under 18 years of age.

Lying about your age to attain work, avoid law enforcement hassles or obtain shelter such

as a hotel room are common practices among homeless kids. In our community we not only

construct our language and survival practices, but we also set our own rules and standards for

morality. Lying and crimes are accepted or merely overlooked when done in order to attain

necessities. Stealing, prostitution and minor crimes are extremely common within our homeless

culture, but they are rarely discussed.

A code of silence is a staple of street literacy and we adhere to this expected, yet unspoken, law that hides our indiscretions and protects the people perpetrating abuse upon our vulnerable population. The act of silence as a rhetorical practice and discursive norm is explored further in the subsection Breaking the Silence: Initiation, Inclusion and "Going First." Our agreed upon rules consider "narcing" on a friend or community member a much worse offense than the crime that was committed. Because displaced adolescents exist in a world where crime and indiscretions run rampart, telling about somebody's crimes can not only shut down avenues to get needs met, but it can bring a direct threat of bodily harm upon their person. Homeless children have an unconventional code of loyalty, that will be explained later under the Community and Networks subheading, which is extended to other street kids and the people meeting their needs. We see this in Merick's story when she chronicles how she was able to stay with friends for a short period of time. Finding places to stay by way of networking is a common marker of runaway behavior.

I always tell parents whose children runaway to call friends first. Runaways usually stay close to home for the first two weeks until they start forming networks and become acclimated to street life. As much as networking on the streets can help reduce risks for the displaced teen, it can also hinders family and assistance from locating them. The Polly Klaas Foundation has found that "While most children who runaway return home safe within a week, the life changing hazards of living on the streets are very high for those who cannot return home because they have no home to go to, or they have become victims of prostitution or drug selling" ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 12). It is important to intercept these children before they fall prey to street predators.

Linda provides a face for this statistic. As I examine the accounts of her time as a runaway, I find that her admissions are riddled with victimization and abuse. Linda and I had the most in common, concerning our pasts spent in foster homes and on the street. Our knowledge and participation in many of the same survival acts, gave our conversation a familiarity that wasn't present in the majority of the other interviews. Trust was established early on and Linda appeared to be more open and unedited with her responses. I will discuss how this trust was obtained through my adherence to the community ritual of "going first" within the Breaking the Silence section; this street literacy tactic was used to establish my credibility and authenticity as a community member.

From the ages of 12 to 16, Linda was a runaway and lived on the streets. She only sought help from state agencies after a pregnancy that resulted from a rape; at that point she was placed in a state school for pregnant teens. Her accounts of where she slept while on the streets consists of very common locations for groups of runaways and thrown away kids to reside. When asked to describe places she stayed or where she found shelter during her time as a homeless youth, Linda answered:

Linda: When? After I ran away? I ran away in California and Nevada.

PI: Yeah. Just whichever you remember best.

Linda: I would usually stay with friends in Nevada. During the day we would hang out on the strip-or at people's houses cuz we weren't in school. My friends would sneak me in their windows and let me sleep there. I'd have to leave before their parents got up. In Cali, I would sleep in movie theaters…they had balconies…we'd stay up all night and…

PI: How would you go about finding shelter while on the streets? Please, be as detailed as possible when describing these practices.

Linda: We hung out in groups-if someone got a place or knew someone that was having parties, we would just follow the crowd. I could usually hook up with a guy at the party and stay with him for a day or two. We also knew how to get into vacant apartments … we'd climb through a window- let others in.

At some point in Linda's account her words trail off, signaling me that she was not ready to reveal the rest of her story. My perceptiveness to body language and facial cues, which were instinctually fostered during my time as a street youth, cued me that she was not comfortable talking about this experience, and I immediately adhered to her mannerisms warning that she was at risk of shutting me out; at this point I promptly moved on to the next question.

Linda voices the role of friends in her quest to attain shelter. She states that she "would just follow the crowd." Linda's survival methods, concerning finding somewhere to sleep, were fashioned around her social relationships. The various ways that homeless adolescents devise to meet their needs forms an intricate system of literacy that is continuously and contextually situated in a fight for survival. As previously presented, group living, called "doubling up," is typical for street children; it is extremely common to find large groups of individuals living on floors, couches or several to a bed in run down or abandoned houses and apartments. This is all part of our networking and collective survival methods. Wendell refers to this practice when asked how he went about finding shelter:

Wendell: Pretty much friends or friends of friends that we know -they'd hook you up with a place- living quarters.

Since, sexual survival is less prevalent in male social circles, homeless boys rely heavily on networking to secure shelter. Networking is an important communication component of our literacy system. Buckwheat was a rarity; he explained where he lived after being orphaned:

96

Buckwheat: Apartment… like I said, my rent was being paid by Social Security but then

I would bail out of school and skip for months go back to West Texas and go work on

rigs.

Buckwheat's situation is unique, in that he had money which paid for an apartment; this allowed

him to circumvent many of the other survival methods that are common on the streets. Social

security is typically allotted for support of children in the event of a parent's death. Pamela also

received this check, which appeared to contribute to a more stable living situation. Pamela was

the only participant that did not run away at some point during her years as a displaced youth.

Seven of the volunteers who did, including myself, reported transient life styles and all but one

of us cited hitchhiking as an acceptable means of transportation. When asked about moving

frequently and methods of transportation, I received the following answers:

Heather: I moved around all the time. I still wish I could move around- something I

actually liked… why? I don't know. I walked. I walked- you talk about getting around?

No one ever believes me but state troopers used to pick me up and they would drop me

off exactly where I wanted to go; I never told them what I was up to- they would ask

what I was doing and I would say nothing- small-town. I walked or I got a lift- which

means I hitchhiked- which were scary moments.

PI: It's my next question; was there ever danger involves when you traveled?

Heather: Yeah. Oh hell yeah. I was 13 years old and there was this trucker… A friend of

mine had had a baby. She was 14. I was 13 and she had a baby and I wanted to get to

Corpus because I was out in the middle of nowhere- that's when I'd been taken (Heather

refers to Child Protective Services removing her from her home) but I'd already come

back- but anyways… so I'm out there hitchhiking; a trucker picks me up- had a knife and

he kept wanting me to… See, I can't say the words- I just can't say the words.

PI: It is fine. You don't have to.

At one point in our dialogue Heather's use of the words "scary moments," triggers my

researcher's mind to transition into the subject of danger. Heather attempts to share her

experience, but struggles when she reaches the point where victimization is being discussed. Her

inability to proceed adheres to earlier documentation concerning the ways that my population

offer edited versions of our stories to keep from getting emotional or looking like a victim. In an

effort to minimize the risk of harm to the participant, I immediately let her know that it was okay

to stop. Some of our memories are too painful to dredge up and the way that we have masked

them or rewritten them in our minds is very different than hearing the actual words come out of

our mouth.

What Heather is unable to say in this passage, mirrors my own experience with

hitchhiking. I spent two years hitchhiking on and off and traveled to over ten states from the age

of thirteen to fifteen. Truckers are generally the people that pick up hitchhikers, but during my

time on the streets I got in dozens of cars with any variety of men. Truck stops were also good

places to find showers, get a ride, panhandle money, and trade sex for food, money, or shelter.

Heather's bad experience is a common threat to females hitchhiking alone. I give my own

account of a similar situation:

I was very fearful…I was lucky that I have a good gut, but I was very fearful

hitchhiking-I mean, you get in cars with some freaks and you get asked questions that

you immediately know you took the wrong ride- you know… sexual questions- it's so

hard to think of examples. Probably the scariest situation I was ever in was with a truck

driver in the middle of Mississippi who pulled over and told me that I was going to give

him a blow job and that he would give me $50 and that it WAS going to happen. I didn't

know what to do and I got out of the truck and went into the woods with him. He took

down his pants and ordered me to suck his dick- I told him 'no' and he said that I

wouldn't be getting out of there without giving him head. I told him I would scream- he

said 'No one will hear you' and he was right. So, I did it and as he was coming, I ran. I

just ran.

My personal account was difficult to give, but the fact that it was only me and a tape recorder

made it easier to tell the entire experience and openly admit that I was afraid. My qualifying

statement that "I have a good gut" refers to my reliance on visceral internal cues to make my

decisions.

Street life teaches you two things: never trust a person's words; and never trust a person's

actions. All you are left with is gut feelings. Street literacy is a combination of language choices,

communication patterns, rhetorical practices, and the motivations behind them. Street literacy is

comprised of the ability to interpret contextual cues and the environment in which the scenarios

are being played. It directs the homeless child to look closer at the people involved, demanding

that they pay attention to facial and body mannerisms (no matter how subtle), the tone in a voice,

what is being asked of you, what you hope to gain, and at the risk that you are willing to take.

These all factor into survival. "Street" is a difficult language to learn. Children have the

additional hurdles of age, lack of experiences, minimal past exposure to the situations being

presented and maturity, which all prove deficiencies when attempting to learn to navigate on the

streets. Transient teenagers rarely grasp the severity of danger associated with their behavior,

such as getting into cars with strangers. This speaks to the maturity of street youths and their

inability to make thorough, safe choices. People often forget that children, although they are forced to deal with adult issues, still think and react with child logic. Linda corroborates the fearless attitude associated with dangerous activities:

> Linda: I moved…a lot. I ran away from most of the homes- except the state school in Gainesville. They said to never look back cuz you'd end up back there if you did- I turned around and flipped that motherfucker off when I left. I'd just end up wherever- Vegas, Houston, Austin…wherever. I used to be called "walker'…no one knew my name- they'd yell "Hey, Walker" and I'd flash them my ass. I also rollerbladed and biked a lot, or the city buses…I hitchhiked a few times- friends with cars. No, I never felt like I was in danger- was that the question?

As young teens with few resources, hitchhiking seemed like a viable means to an end for many of us.

Our practices and routines were all put in place to meet specific needs or challenges that displaced living presents. Only as adults can we see how faulty our logic was and how twisted our community norms were. Merick was the most reflective participant in this study. She conveys regret in several of her answers and reflects on situations, like hitchhiking, from an adult perspective. We see this reflection when Merick recalls her frequent use of hitchhiking as an acceptable means of transportation:

> Merick: The bus. Either I was thumbing rides from people, I was fearless about hitchhiking. I would hitchhike- I was getting in cars for rides. And I had a few weird little moments but nothing scary. I had some old man who said that he would give me five dollars if he could stick it in my bra and I was like okay, which made me laugh the entire time. He let me out of the car because I didn't take it seriously. But yeah most of the

people who gave me rides when I was hitchhiking either got me something to eat which I thought was amazing or just drop me off. I never… That was back when you could hitchhike. Well, I say that, but it probably wasn't the best thing to do. Or I'd use public transportation. I had a bus pass.

Merick's reflection of "it probably wasn't the best thing to do" follows her attempt to qualify her choices by stating "that was back when you could hitchhike." The value of the adult perspectives now applied to adolescent actions gives this study a unique opportunity to get two varying interpretations of the same incident. She is given a chance to reexamine her ingenuity and resourcefulness in retrospect.

Throughout this section I have given examples of street children's resourcefulness and I have looked at their advanced skills of redefining their world through the use of rhetoric. I have established their ability to navigate and construct meaning as a legitimate form of literacy. I have also demonstrated how the adult survivors intertwine perspectives of this constructed literacy and show the same capacity for reframing these experiences for the purpose of this thesis. I will now look at how these children work with other members of their community to share and collaborate on constructing the rules, norms and language agreed upon by this population.

Community and Networks

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I have shown examples of how meaning is assigned to words, communication patterns are established and I have displayed how interpretations and connotations are applied to language in order to locate specific literacy markers which are exclusive to the homeless youth population. I have also analyzed some of the rhetorical tactics and navigational methods used by this demographic to compensate for power

101

inequalities and attain shelter. The previous section briefly introduced the importance of friendship and networking in the formation and application of agreed upon practices developed and adhered to by the members of this population. This chapter will take a closer look at the discourse community that has materialized out of these practices and look at the ways that these displaced children work together to construct and engage in a world built out of necessity driven traditions and contextually developed actions. Heath and associates stress that "Network analysis…enables ethnographers to see clearly the social connections of the individuals and the clustering of their relationships as well as the density and fragmentation of their linkages" (59). By studying this facet of street life, the various roles that networking plays within this community serves to expand the current academic understanding of how language and its values are negotiated within a culture.

The idea of community has been viewed with many different lenses (cultural, social, political, etc.), and each perspective builds on a multitude of definitions and inclusion/exclusion factors, but I view a community as a unit, not unlike a family. It is my theory that homeless youths seek to create their own family, replacing the ones that they feel they have lost. Street children struggle with the notion that they have been discarded or are not wanted. Surveys conducted on runaways and "thrownaway" children show that more than half of respondents claimed that they were told to leave by their guardian or parents ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par.15). By creating makeshift families and building their own networks, these children watch out for each other and share the chore of securing basic needs. In the article "Social Network Characteristics Associated with Risky Behaviors Among Runaway and Homeless Youth," researchers assert that "the notion that social support- as indicated by the presence of social bonds- is protective" (Ennett 72). It is very common to see runaways work together,

generally in pairs, when they panhandle, trade sex, shoplift, or find a location to sleep. This is a situationally required survival measure put in place for the purpose of attaining needs and ensuring safety.

Runaway networks are a double edged sword; while they serve to help the homeless youth survive and eliminate some high risk activities, they can also introduce risky behavior. Susan T. Ennett and fellow researchers observe that "personal social networks can be described along an array of dimensions, many of which can be seen to have potentially risk –enhancing or risk-reducing effects on behavior" (64). Initiation and recruitment into risky behavior is a threat faced by all street youths.

The networks in which the displaced teens exist will often dictate their behavior and survival practices. For example, subcultures of street youths who are drug and alcohol users generally expect people within their network to partake in the same activities. Drugs and alcohol are extremely accessible to street children and in many subcultures within the homeless adolescent community their wide spread use contributes to victimization. In many cases these risky behaviors facilitate and prolongs behavior that traps children in dangerous activities, such as sex trafficking and crime rings. Predators are known to use drugs and alcohol to lure and subjugate street youths into submitting to exploitation in the drug and sex trafficking arenas. Drug addiction traps many children on the streets, allowing them to be controlled by predators through their addiction. Alcohol and drug consumption has been linked to higher rates of sexual victimization among females by strangers and researchers surmise that "being high on drugs is likely to limit young women's capacity to protect themselves," allowing "potential offenders" to view them as "an easy target for sexual victimization" (Tyler et al. 515). Drugs and alcohol significantly decrease the user's inhibitions, making sexual compliance and submission easier.

Overall, studies of drug and alcohol consumption by displaced adolescent shows that 74.6% of the street youths interviewed reported having used alcohol and 32.2% admitted to various drug use (Walls and Bell 428). This risky behavior introduces street kids to many networks involving continuing danger and makes them susceptible to the rhetoric of predators seeking to exploit them through sex trafficking or as drug mules or dealers. Further research shows that "Survival requires more money than panhandling can provide. Many young people find themselves selling drugs or sex, not by choice, but through necessity" ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 1). The destitution and deficiencies of the homeless children's' predicaments leave them vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation.

When asked, seven of the eight participants admitted drug and alcohol use during their time on the streets, noting that they were "everywhere." When asked about availability and accessibility to illegal substances and underage drinking within their personal networks, I received the following responses:

> Heather: Very very! Alcohol is my… alcohol is mine- drugs not so much. I did everything- I tried meth like three weeks and I was like EH but I've tried it all…acid, I've tried it all, but I didn't like it because I couldn't stay in control and I had to be in control. I had to be in control because the whole time I was growing up, I say growing up but I was so young I wasn't growing up, someone else was in control and it was bad to an extent. I lose control on alcohol but not completely- alcohol was fine. I love my alcohol… sorry, I'll shut up. I'm a talker.
>
> PI: I'm interviewing you. Say as much as you want to say. I want as much out of you as you feel comfortable with. And you're holding up pretty good.

Heather's earlier account of falling in with some bad people, "drug dealers," who tried to pimp her out, may have something to do with her preferences of alcohol over drug use spawned from a need to stay in control. Losing control can lead to victimization, as seen in Linda's account of drug and alcohol use:

> Linda: We always had them. I hung out with girls who dated drug dealers. Older guys liked getting us fucked up and having sex with us. We drank all the time…friends would steal from their parents liquor cabinet or we'd get an old guy to buy us beer, but mostly parties- lots of parties…weed, coke, ecstasy, acid- it was offered- I never paid for…I guess they wanted us to bring people around- I don't know.

Linda's account implies that the "older guys" in her network were providing illegal substances to have sex with minors. Her need to include "I never paid [it]" is a justification strategy that is employed to defend or lessen the severity of the negative view she anticipates her audience will take on drug and alcohol use. Linda admits to struggling with addiction and alcoholism later in life, which resulted from an early introduction into the drug scene.

These "party" environments are well thought out rhetorical webs woven by predators to mask pedophilic practices and sexual abuse. By attaching the word "party," the predator exploits and manipulates the innocent child's standard interpretation of the word, thereby luring in these unsuspecting young adults. The drugs and alcohol become a tool used to lower inhibitions and allow unrestricted abuse of their child victims. As a result "party" is redefined by the street youth and the meaning attached to the term spawns a communally understood set of experiences and behavioral norms. Lauren's recollection of how she obtained alcohol further demonstrates this common practice:

> PI: Were drugs and alcohol available and if so how accessible were they to you?

105

Lauren: I'm sure they were. Let's see. I wasn't really doing drugs at that time. I was

drinking more- and customers and older boyfriend or whatever would buy us drinks or

they'd buy them for themselves and then we'd drink out of them.

Lauren is open, during our interview, about her "older boyfriend's" insistence that she start

stripping at the age of 17. This same boyfriend and customers are the ones who she states

supplied her with alcohol. Once again, we see alcohol used to facilitate sexual exploitation

practices. Merick discusses the use of alcohol as more of a network norm in her interview:

Merick: Alcohol was 100% available. That summer the drinking age was 18. I had a fake

ID. The Covenant House was located in the Montrose area I had a blast those three

weeks. Basically, for a quarter you could buy a little Dixie cup and just drink from it all

night long… I mean for a quarter. People had alcohol. You know I was drinking every

day. I hate to say it but my running away experience was kind of fun. The covenant

house had a curfew; we had to be there by 10- you can do a lot of damage between 8 AM

and 10 at night and then pot was available but expensive. I wasn't turning tricks, I was

kind of stingy with my money because I trying to get California at that time so I was kind

of squirreling it away at that time. I wasn't trading sex for drugs so I was kind of doing

without that. Some people would get me high, but I wasn't doing a lot of drugs…

Drinking-I was because it seemed like I would blink my eyes and open my eyes and there

be a cup of alcohol in my hand at that point in time… just a lot of drinking.

Merick discusses how routine drinking was within her network. Drugs and alcohol were used by

both predators and street kids as a means to achieve particular goals. Drug suppliers will often

use the homeless teens to gain access to the street population.

Children who end up dealing drugs within the homeless culture generally have a place to stay if they are providing drugs to its inhabitants. Finding a way to give yourself value in the homeless youth community ensures certain facets of survival are going to be met. Street children have little self-worth --we believe that not even our own families want us-- this mindset breeds low self-esteem. We begin constructing our identities based on the value that our community places on us. Through these assigned values, we construct practices and behavior which adhere to these personas. The participants of this study, like so many other rejected or thrown away adolescents, realized that no one was coming to save them and no one was going to pay their way; they built an identity that would validate and sustain them within their "imagined community."

Ultimately, these discarded children, faced with the reality that they are alone, construct ways to survive mentally, physically, and emotionally; these techniques become their literacy on the streets. Beyond actions, they develop an elevated mastery of language use and meaningmaking. These contextually driven manipulations have the ability to persuade, reframe, redefine, and restructure the language and actions taking place around them. We see the art of language reframing and redefining situations in the positive spins they attach to the recollections they provide.

This reframing came as a surprise to me and I found that the participants of this study had very positive attitudes and reflections when sharing their experiences as displaced youths; many of them remember these times as being fun. As hard as it was to navigate in the world without adult guidance, it was equally as freeing to have no parents to answer to. Curfews, alcohol and drug use, and reckless acts were all practiced at our own discretion.

In addition to adopting positive attitudes to combat mental duress that our displacement can produce, humor is another coping mechanism widely used in our community. Due in large part our community's abhorrence of self-pity we often tell stories in a humorous manner about other homeless kids' victimization on the streets to remind our network members that somebody else always has it worse. Hardship breeds character and one thing that my volunteers had a surplus of was character. Wendell demonstrates positive reframing when talking about having "fun" while participating in practices, such as drug and alcohol consumption and other considered illegal activities:

> Wendell: Most of it was just sort of general malaise- you just go out looking for adventure and trouble. So, if you consider counts of vandalism, then absolutely- I would say yes. Troublemaking mostly- unsupervised youths who have no one to really keep an eye on them or guide them with any sense of moral compass whatsoever- you had drugs and a whole lot of free time and add no television into the mix and you get us, basically. They were just fun- we didn't know they were illegal activities.

Wendell also fondly reflects on other ways his network acquired needs and their role in finding the necessities while living "doubled up":

> Wendell: Pawn shops. Sometimes what was done was a slow and torturous dance of selling of our very few valuables to pawn shops over time. Losing your things through eviction and theft were common. Everything. You would lose everything that you valued quite easily. Funny, but it would seem that on the street, you find a place to keep your 'things' first – usually a friend - then you find a place to stay yourself.
>
> I forgot. Power. We stole power. Gas was a utility only the "obscenely wealthy" could afford, and electricity was a luxury. Usually, we had a ratty little one bedroom apartment

108

with 4-8 people staying there off and on. People would sleep on floor with a jacket for a

pillow… or the few smart ones that could hold on to their sleeping bag... They slept in

relative comfort. Those that paid the rent got a couch or a bed. We played a lot of music.

We drank warm beer, smoked WAY too many cigarettes and told stories about ourselves.

Some were even true. But we would also teach each other things. Like how, with a

certain type of outlet and cable, you can jack into the power grid through utility outlets.

At night, the line got put out, and for a bit, we might have television, light to read by, or a

stove. We learned when bakeries would put out their old product, and which ones

insisted on putting it in the dumpster and which ones would give it directly to you if you

were waiting there. Thank God for donuts!

Wendell's recollections show the role that friends play in creating a community out of necessity.

Networking can make a huge difference in the safety of a predicament or the knowledge gained

on the streets about survival. Wendell notes that they would "teach each other things;" in the

absence of parents and a void of academic instruction, homeless youths find ways to live, learn,

and love outside of a traditional environment. Homeless adolescent literacy practices rely on

networks to teach the cultural and communication norms.

The majority of this study's participants include "with friends" as one of the places that

they sought shelter. Networking is not only a way to acquire shelter and food, it is also a way to

ensure safety. When asked "Was there danger involved in your traveling?" Merick discusses

networking:

Merick: I always traveled with other kids. I don't think I was ever alone the entire three

weeks because that was something that I picked up pretty early on that it's definitely

better to have a partner. It seemed like I made friends easier than I do now. I liked people

back then- not so much now. I never really went anywhere alone and there were a lot of guys and I can't remember names now but they were really nice guys, but nothing sexual they treated me like I was there little sister. Mainly gay guys, they were former-street hustlers were who trying to get off the street and into their own place. There was this one guy- can't remember his name for some reason. All I remember is him singing the song memories to me on the bus … big blue eyes. Once mom pulled me out of there I never saw any of these people again. No one gave last names, I mean I don't think I even gave my last name.

Merick was able to form familial bonds, as we see by her assessment that the males in her network "treated [her] like [she] was their little sister." She also qualifies her relationship with the males as being "nothing sexual;" this alludes to the fact that it is unique to have males within a network who are not a potential sexual threat and addresses her perception that her audience would assume that sex was involved. Many youths on the streets mistake sexual acts as a sign of love or caring in their quest for affection and acceptance. It is very common to have sex with other street kids in order to solidify a bond. It is also important to note that sexual abuse survivors frequently abuse younger street or foster children, repeating behaviors that they were exposed to within family structures.

Merick's remark that traveling within a network is something she "picked up on pretty early," shows her perceptiveness towards community norms which taught her that there is safety in numbers. Females generally take on what is called a "street sister". A street sister is a female who is homeless, who serves as a full time partner for another runaway or homeless female. This relation is formed out of necessity and is made in direct response to the threats that females face within their homeless environment. Her role serves as a safety measure or look out for the other

girl and her presence creates a small network in which they can share the task of procuring

necessities. Research has shown that "the average network size was extremely small, at less than

three relationships" (Ennett et al. 73). By working together, they not only have a stronger sense

of safety, but they also double their odds for obtaining resources.

Male relationships are slightly different on the streets, in that males are often able to

avoid acts such as sexual survival by navigating in larger groups, but the emotional bonds tend to

be less binding. I look at the language Wendell uses when talking about his experiences with

male networking:

> PI: I know for females we have street sisters, did you have anything that would have been
>
> comparable like somebody that was your accountability partner or that made sure you
>
> checked on them or they checked on you?
>
> Wendell: No, I don't think men on the street really have anything like that- you are a man
>
> and you just kind of go through a tortured grisly demise- that's what we do. No, there's
>
> little camaraderie and common bond through shared experiences. Well, there's an awful
>
> lot of experience living on the street with a group- some men are your brothers- some of
>
> those friendships I still hold to this very day- very good honorable reasonable men but as
>
> far as the safety net- no, we looked out for each other but certainly not as a matter of "I'm
>
> not my brother's keeper" sort of situation.
>
> PI: You mentioned the word brother a couple of times, is there a familial connotation that
>
> goes with that?
>
> Wendell: You know… there's no family connotation at all - the people are not related to
>
> me but often times, people that you meet along your life strike cords and develop some
>
> idea of… I don't know… people- people that you hold dear and they become very dear to

you- many times greater than somebody that you actually may be related to or that hits you with two by fours on a regular basis. So, no I could say I know they're not related by blood but the bond that is created in the situation can a lot of times be a lot stronger and more enduring.

This passage shows the negotiations carried out between Wendell and myself when attaching meanings or attempting to define the situation. I initiated the conversation by establishing my membership within the street community by using terminology specific to our demographic. I offer "street sister," a term distinctly designated to street females and use the term as a directive to ask for a comparable relationship from Wendell as a male street member. I then hone in on his use of "brother" to get a deeper understanding of the meaning and value attached to male relationships. Wendell then accepts, rejects, and clarifies certain connotations attached to my inquiry and further defines his understanding of these bonds. Wendell's responses speaks to the superiority of bonds made on the streets over familial bonds, stating that they can be "a lot stronger and more enduring." A lot of homeless youths grow up viewing family as a temporary, disposable, or as an untrustworthy commodity; we grow to trust the networks that we build within our community as being more stable and trustworthy.

As stated earlier, networking on the streets is a double edged sword. The very practices that put us in harm's way also served as an escape for many community members, finding ways to exist on the streets. We seek out like minded individuals whose views and practices resemble our own. Girls who survive through sex trade generally want other girls who are willing to do the same in their circles, because the people that they are dealing with and getting their needs met by expect this behavior. Ennett states that "the ties among network members are defined according to specific inclusionary criteria- such as friendship, social support, or drug –sharing relationships

–and so represent certain spheres of social relationships, although certainly not all potential sources of social influence" (64). For example: I spent two years "dating" and traveling with rich Arabic men. These men are referred to as sugar daddies or money men. A sugar daddy is "a rich older man who lavishes gifts on a young woman in return for her company or sexual favors" (Merriam Webster's Dictionary). My "money man" and his friends, most of which came from the Saudi Arabian royal family, expected me to bring friends with me to entertain them. We would go to extravagant dinners, take all expense paid vacations to exciting locations, and most of the girls-- if well behaved and cooperative-- would make a lot of money for bills, shopping, etc. By cooperative, I mean willing to have sex with the man that picked them as a companion. One of my closest friends came to me and let me know that her feelings were hurt that she wasn't invited to these excursions. She felt it was because I was embarrassed of her or that it reflected on her as not being pretty or socially enjoyable. I had to explain to her that these was not why she wasn't being asked to join us; the reason she wasn't invited is because these men would expect sex and the other girls understood this, as well as were willing to take money for sex. By partnering with likeminded individuals who are willing to participate in your communities practice, you are able to benefit from their exploitation, while they benefit from their self-exploitation, making yourself valuable to both the people looking for sex and the people providing it. Everyone's immediate needs are met and you secure your role in this community. For females, their network is consciously constructed in order to ensure their safety and to attain needs. I ask Linda to define street sister:

PI: Street sister?

Linda: Girls like you that are out on the streets- you look out for each other…you know. Heather also includes the role of a street sister in her interview:

Heather: …I was like 12 years old and this girl that was kind of looking after me because

I'd run away.

Both participants state that the role of street sisters is to "look out for each other;" these views display the expected behavior that is attached to a community specific term.

Even though street bonds are made in order to bolster safety, many times the females who are portraying themselves as a partner or friend are actually, not always knowingly recruiting for pedophiles within their network. Sex traffickers and pedophiles tend to surround themselves with groups of young people and provide "party" environments for the adolescents to bring other teenagers into. These cultural street literacy markers are socially constructed and widely accepted practices used by the homeless youth population. This is examined closer in the "Initiation" section of this piece. An example of this can be found in my personal narrative:

I went to school briefly in Houston. A girl I met from school had begun living with a 45

year old man who she considered her boyfriend. She was 14. This man housed many

teenagers, usually encouraging them to go into professions involving some kind of

stripping, ranging from private party shows to topless dancing in clubs. He slept with all

of the females, as did his construction crew that he boarded at his home. We were

encouraged to bring friends around- it was made clear that only young females were

welcome. I lived with this man on and off over a three year span (I was even maid of

honor at his and my friend from school's wedding when she turned 18) and considered

him a father figure. I believed that he protected me and took care of me.

My realization that the man who I had "considered… a father figure" was actually a pedophile was extremely difficult to grasp. My following admission that "I believed that he protected me and took care of me" is given in past tense because now, as an adult, I can no longer mask the

114

reality of who he was. My inability to see this as a teenager demonstrates a common protective measure that allows a displaced child to create their own reality and define the situations in ways that meet their needs and protect their minds.

This account also shows an instance where sexual abuse is being perpetrated within a homeless youth's private network. The other females in this environment were being exploited for sex and encouraged to go into exploitative professions. Situations like these are all too common and usually lead to sex trafficking. It is wrong to assume that sex trafficking is limited to acts of prostitution. Many men, such as the one mentioned above, make the exploited females available for sexual acts to their friends and family members. Acts of underage girls being made to strip or dance for individuals or groups is also another form of sex trafficking; most of these situations result in sexual victimization. Another example of networking and recruitment of groups can be better understood through another personal account:

> There was an old man in Houston, a city where I ended up on the streets for four years, called 'grandpa'. He sold weed to all the teenagers and gave us alcohol. He would offer the girls ten dollars to sit on his face. He was around 65 years old, had no teeth and was in a wheel chair. He would say 'My legs don't work, but my tongue still does.' His home was a constant hot spot to hook up with other street kids. This is all part of our networking- we find each other.

The most disturbing part of this account is the fact that the pedophile in this scenario is being given the name "grandpa." This label insinuates familial bonds and attaches a harmless connotation to his person. This man is a predator and his environment is carefully constructed to procure victims. Even though these environments are initially uncomfortable for many teenagers, within time and with the effects of drug and alcohol, these circumstances begin feeling normal,

even safe. To outsiders, these situations may seem unusual, maybe even disturbing, but to many homeless children this can be a safer place than the homes that they came from. In these moments, when surrounded by other community members, we can let down our guard and forget, if only for a short time, the reality of our situation and feel welcome and wanted by other people. This section thoroughly explored a multitude of networking components and the functions that these relationships serve in the assembling of culturally agreed upon practices, ways that language and situations are negotiated and in the development and application of survival methods. I will now examine the factors that foster and bond these relationships.

The Bonds That Bind

Having explored networking norms, the idea of what purpose these relationships play in executing survival strategies and the multiple roles that friendships serve in the homeless adolescent culture, I will now attempt to discuss the circumstances, mindsets and experiences that adhere them to one another and establish an unspoken loyalty among them. One of the most difficult concepts within my community to explain is the way that we connect when we meet another survivor. Talk of abuse, struggles, punishment, and atrocities began pouring out like regaling war stories or triumphs from the battlefield. Humor plays a large role in accounts of debasement, abuse and defilements. Imagine speaking a different language than everyone else in the world and then one day, by chance, you hear another human being mumbling your unique dialect to themselves. You are drawn to them. You feel validated and scramble to find connections and commonalities. You are no longer alone. You are no longer foreign. Your words are no longer deemed void of meaning. When we find each other, we speak openly, freely, excitedly to each other. We compare stories and share experiences weighing our own situation

116

against others. This is why I initially made the connection to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Community*; most of the members have never met; but in my community we share an understanding of what society holds for those who are alone and unprotected. Whether a child has sold matches in nightclubs in the Philippines, Chiclets on the streets of Mexico, slept on subways in New York, braided hair for a dollar in London, existed in backrooms and brothels or on stages or street corners…we all understand human nature and the monstrosities that prey on the innocent. Our community stays intact outside of our circumstances and surpasses time. We are bonded through shared trauma. Our literacy is built on a shared understanding of our world and what it means to survive in it. In the excerpt below, Heather and I let down our armor and discuss safety, foster homes and wanting a family:

Heather: I always thought the foster homes would be better.

PI: No, they were worse. You're nothing but a check or they'd have a pedophile husband-they would put all the food up or abuse you.

Heather: So there's no safe place?

PI: No, there's not. The streets are safe; that's what is safe for us… The streets.

Heather: Now that's scary. Because they're not, but they are- you know. That's the sad part.

PI: That we would prefer to stay on the streets than be in the system.

Heather: That's where I had wanted to go -I wanted to go in a foster home. I wanted somebody to take notes and say I'm going to find her a family.

PI: That's what is sad- you always think you're going to find the family. That you'll get a home someday or a normal holiday. No… never like that… just got to figure out what

117

they want while you're in that house and how to get the fuck out as soon as you can. I ran

away from every home.

Heather: That's what's so unique about you; I see you and I would never see any of this

about you.

PI: That's because I'm a good time girl (laughter).

Heather: You genuinely seem nice.

PI: I am.

Heather: No, I mean you genuinely seem happy.

PI: I am.

Heather: My husband makes me happy. You're one of the few people that I feel looks at

me and doesn't judge me. You have to come back.

This is a rare moment caught between two grown up street kids that offers a glimpse at

vulnerability. It is so comforting to talk with someone who has lived without a safety net and, as

Heather points out, "doesn't judge me". Fear of judgement is a large part of why we reframe and

edit the accounts given to non-community members. We tend to feel that individuals outside of

our community would not be able to understand why certain behaviors are implemented or grasp

the desperation attached to the actions that are not just accepted…they are expected. Buckwheat

expresses this sentiment in deeper regards, he says:

Buckwheat: Very few people know what it feels like to be on your own- no safety net- no

plan B- no family to fall back on. If you fuck up, you're done.

Buckwheat voices the mindset that a lot of homeless youth experience in regards to feeling safe

or secure. We believe that we are alone in the world and that no one except the other kids that

live like us could ever possibly understand us. Our fear of being misunderstood or judged instills

a need for a code of silence within us; we rarely share who we are or what we have done with outsiders. We protect the secrets of our community and the members who understand how it works. We subconsciously protect the abusers.

If we attempt to let an outsider in, as I am with this thesis, we are breaking the seal. Silence seals in what we have done. What has been done to us. Revealing is a betrayal- to yourself, to your abuser, to the other survivors and to your community… to tell the secrets of what staying alive entails is breaking an agreement made only from an understanding that it is not yours to tell. Several years ago, I went to see a guest speaker who had come to talk about her book at the college I was attending. Her book was about molestation at the hand of her father and she spoke freely about her other siblings' disapproval of her writings. I became angry listening to her. An overwhelming sense of betrayal came over me. She was telling things that should have been kept secret. She was only one victim and the secrets she was telling belonged to her entire family. As victims, we are groomed to believe that it is our fault, that we somehow deserve it. We are scared into keeping the secrets. We are shamed into denying it was real. We are scarred into pretending that our memories didn't happen and that we did not exist, feel and live in these atrocities. Even faced with the task of correcting misconceptions about runaways which believe "Children who runaway make their own decisions to go. Let them be, they've made their own choice and must deal with the consequences. If they want to come home they will;" I struggle with the sin of confessing my community's transgressions ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par.8). I am afraid of revealing the crimes, even with the mindset that the truth about how and why these children end up on the streets could open minds, as well as avenues for help. I am nauseous at the thought that my words will re-victimize or further exploit the very people I hope to honor.

The words behind this thesis are power. I have the power to portray the homeless youth

community in any light I want and I am being given a platform on which to present it. This is

why it is so important that I depict my community accurately and authentically. I am being given

permission by this study's participants to offer a rare look into our society. Ennett, Bailey and

Federman's study of street networks noted that secrecy and the protective nature of their subjects

may account for "the absence of social networks for some youths" surmising that some

participants "did have social relationships but were reluctant to reveal them" (72). Street

children tend to build loyalties and protective qualities towards individuals in their homeless

community, both predators and victims. Giving up other members of the community is a

transgression, but I remain adamant that my admissions are not a betrayal- they are being done

with good intent, in hopes that our suffering was not done in vain. They are being given so that

they may be used to save others from going through it. Our lost innocence has become evidence

and our stories have become proof that a group of discarded children can create and entire

literacy system of survival and that our bond makes us unbreakable. The previous two sections

have uncovered how networks are formed and display the communication systems, unspoken

agreements and communal understandings that solidify these connections.

Meeting Basic Needs

In this section I will offer a look at a less obvious presence within the displaced

adolescence network; I will be introducing predators. Due to the grooming measures used by a

large number of pedophiles, victims are shamed or threatened into keeping the abuse secret. This

code of secrecy extends to the homeless youth community and the practice of protecting

predators is routinely adhered to. This aversion to discuss these individuals greatly limited the

data collected for this study on the people who are targeting these children. I will briefly be discussing how vulnerable street children respond to the rhetoric of these individuals and how their needs are being met by pedophiles who prey on this population.

Displaced children, once out on their own, experience obstacles due to underage status, such as no jobs, policing agencies/truancy officers, no shelter or food, no identification and no transportation which often make them seek out adults to assist with these hurdles. This is where predators are given an opportunity to intercept these children. Due to a lack of resources, no knowledge on how to acquire these needs independently and no facilities offering to fill these voids, street kids are placed in positions where they are easily accessed by predatory adults. The Polly Klaas Foundation addresses the false assumption that "Teenagers are rational decisionmakers, they make decisions and plan their actions with care;" they state "We are the first to admit that there are teens who make considered decisions. But, we all know that the teen years are a time of life when kids are learning emotion and decision management" ("The Truth About Runaway Youth" par. 10). In many of these situations, the teenagers, who we have established lack the development and emotional stability to make sound, logical choices, tend to believe that the predators are genuinely offering to help them. It isn't until these children find themselves trapped and exploited that they begin to realize that these adults are anything but safe. In the article "The Truth About Runaway Youth," we learn that "… there are those children who have begun surviving by exchanging sex for food & shelter or started selling drugs, these children will quickly find themselves in a web of forced labor making money for pimps and pushers. For them there is no easy way home" (par.20). Children become trapped in these abuse situations and are in danger of becoming desensitized to the severity of their predicament.

121

The predator's carefully crafted rhetoric is meant to lure the teenager in and make them believe that he understands their predicament and that he is there to provide safety and take care of them. The displaced adolescents often view these pedophiles and exploiters as care givers and become convinced that the trafficker, pedophile or pusher is the only thing keeping them from harsher street realities. This is why statistics show children being sexually victimized within their own networks. I feel that it is important to stress adults' roles in these children's lives and how detrimental it is for street kids to adopt the mindset that adult predators are protecting or helping them. I asked the female participants, who disclosed using sexual survival to procure their needs, about their exchanges with individuals over the age of eighteen, whom they interacted with on the streets. Females, more so than males, are targeted and accessed by abusers and pedophiles. When asked "Who are the people who offered to help or supplied your basic needs during this time and were they adults?"- I received the following answers:

Heather: Yes, they were adults but would you call it? I mean, yeah- I guess, I mean- I guess its help… you know. I'm sorry, I don't know how to answer that one. Yeah, it was adults and they helped me… you know.

Heather's difficulty applying the word "help" to the assistance that these adults provided is due to the sexual victimization that she had to endure in order to attain it. With the goal of getting a fuller picture of how many situations of sexual victimization these children endured during their time displaced, I ask the females in this study "How many sexual partners- please remember you don't have to answer these- did you have before the age of 18?" This question was also aimed at studying the language and word choices used to convey these experiences. Heather answers:

Heather: This is stuff I haven't thought about in a long time.

Heather: Mine is about 100. Not that bad. Before the age of what?

122

PI: Before the age of 18.

Heather: I can't count that high. I'm being serious…you are the only person who will know this- it's gotta be over 100. I can't. It's what I was taught by the way- I'm telling you- it's what I was taught. When they put you on top of them when you're three years old and tell you to grind. It's what I was taught…

PI: Out of these partners how many were adults?

Heather: They were all adults. Every last single one.

PI: And out of these adults how many of them were aware that you are under age?

Heather: All of them. I can answer that… all of them.

Heather states that "this is stuff [she hadn't] thought about in a long time." This demonstrates Heather's ability to distance herself from these experiences and block out instances of victimization. Heather's insistence that she was "taught" this behavior suggests she had been groomed and initiated into sexual abuse as a child by adults. It is not unusual for homeless teen girls to participate in risky sexual behavior and be sexually promiscuous out of necessity. Lauren explains who the adults were who were meeting her needs:

Lauren: Yes, typically clients from work- you know -you just give them a sob story about how our electricity is gonna be cut off… we need help… we don't have food… just on and on with… My grandma got ran over and… And you tell it to five or six different people- the same story- and you end up with $600 or …you know… whatever.

PI: How many sexual partners did you have – you don't have to answer these questions – before the age of 18?

Lauren: Can you say that again? Just kidding… I had a calendar that I kept track of men because I didn't want to seem like a complete whore, but then when it got to so many I

123

was like clearly I'm gonna look like a whore anyways. I don't know, I think I got to

about 80. Somewhere around there.

PI: Of these partners, how many of them were adults?

Lauren: Wow, after the age of 15, I think just about all of them were adults. 18 and up- I

didn't date anyone under the age of 18 after the age of 15. So I don't know, probably all

of them.

PI: And of these adults, how many of them were aware that you were under age?

Lauren: All of them.

Lauren uses humor, a routinely employed community communication marker which trivializes

the severity of the material being discussed, to relay her experiences. Her admission that she was

"clearly…gonna look like a whore anyways," demonstrates her choice not to create a façade that

would show her in a more favorable light. Throughout our interview, the majority of Lauren's

answers and word choices do not paint her as a victim. When discussing her "clients from work,"

her language choices show her as the predator, yet all of her sexual partners were over the age of

eighteen. Her underage status clearly makes these men pedophiles and their sexual acts are

classified as crimes. Lauren's ability to reframe her encounters with these men, shows her skills

of redirecting language and manipulate circumstances in order to remove feelings of being

powerless and victimized; these tactics are created as a coping mechanism to help her deal with

the reality that she had been repeatedly abused and exploited by these men.

 The words "All of them" were given by four of the female participants. As an adult,

looking back in retrospect, I find it revolting that hundreds of adult males, aware that they were

with an underage female- many as young as 12 and 13 years of age- initiated and participated in

sex with children. I am reminded of Heath, Street, and Mills observation that "it is often the case

124

that ethnographers 'uncover' rule-governed behaviors, norms of interactions and complex skills

for groups or activities previously unacknowledged, unsanctioned, or thought of in entirely

different ways" (43). My adult perception of and personal experiences, concerning sex with men

from all walks of life, now exposed a world of pedophiles living in our own backyards. The U.S.

Department of Justice reports that 77.7% of the victims of registered sex offenders for single

victim sexual assault in the United States are ages 17 and younger ("Sex offenses and Offenders"

31). These statistics and this study's participants show that age and the risk of arrest is not a

deterrent for sexual predators. The streets make the homeless youth population easily accessible

to these pedophiles. Many of these predators don't even need to seek out their child victims;

these children, looking to have basic needs met, will seek out these adults. The relationships

between street adolescents and these adults is investigated further in the proceeding section and

is discussed within the Sexual Survival section of this thesis.

Breaking The Silence: Initiation, Inclusion And "Going First"

In this section, I will be introducing initiation and acclimation methods used by predators

and street children to teach new community members the various facets of their literacy system. I

will also be looking at ways rhetoric is used as an intricate series of codes, taboos, and required

communication signals to adhere to and break through the cultural demand for silence. Silence is

the secret language of abuse survivors. Sometimes it is not what is being said that is revealing; it

is what is not being said. When addressing ethnographic analysis, Heath, Street, and Mills find

that "linguistic features beyond syntactic structures also reflect cognitive and social operations"

(90). During the course of my interviews, the words "you know" were used to replace the actual

details of situations, such as sexual survival, the humiliation of poverty, hunger or other

degrading elements of street life. My volunteers insistence that I "knew" what they were describing or was privy to the acts to which they referred, reassured me that they accepted me as an equal member of the community and my understanding of unspoken subjects or difficulties associated with revealing certain practices. For example, while Heather and I discussed sexual trade and the adult males that supplied our basic needs, she states:

> Heather: I was a handful, but they let me shower, they fed me, I got to put on something clean- you know…

The "you know," with emphasis on the 'you,' refers to my knowledge of trading sex for these items. Another instance, where Lauren and I discuss sugar daddies, as a type of prostitution, she states:

> Lauren: What I mean- the denial- that 'sure, what you're actually doing, is prostitution…' but it's more like 'but I love him…he's good to me and he takes care of me'… You know.

Lauren seeks validation for a common, conventional form of justifying her act as not being prostitution. At this point, I reassure Lauren by relaying more details of my personal history that fits her scenario, corroborating and validating her practice as accepted and warranted. My admission of similar acts removes the fear of being judged, this fear is directly related to the shame that survivors feel is associated with abuse. Abuse victims often feel responsible for the atrocities that are perpetrated upon them. At a different point in Heather's interview, when asking her to define what a "good time girl" is, she states:

> Heather: I dance around. It's fake… you know that.

I meet her request for understanding with "it is for all of us," at which point we have established a mutual understanding of an agreed upon perception that a good time girl is a fake persona,

126

allowing her to drop the secrecy and elaborate. She insists, "Ask me again… Good time girl!" I

meet her demand and she follows with:

> Heather: That's me dancing. I do, I have fun. I make people laugh. I make people smile
>
> and you can dance- rub up on him and hey… I won't say who… I was told 'here-you can
>
> keep giving me a lap dance' and I said 'you better believe it- when your wife goes away'
>
> and I don't really mean it anymore… I don't have to, but that's me playing my character.
>
> Good time girl that's me wiggling my ass and dancing. Good time girl.

Even though Heather adheres to the established convention of protecting the predator or

exploiter by choosing to not "say who" the man was that was involved in her scenario, she does

choose to expand on her initial assessment of herself as a "goodtime" girl. By adhering to our

tradition of sharing "our story," I establish my legitimacy as a homeless youth, sexually

exploited female and as a (former) hustler, thereby breaking my participants' silence.

As I explained earlier in this piece, the interviews became conversations. This was a

necessary tool to identify myself with my participants. I had to break the silence by going first. In

Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research, Heath and associates assert that

"every ethnographer has the obligation to reveal to those in the local site (as well as to readers of

their published research) relevant prior experience and personal features that mark one's

identity" (58). Once, I had proven my authenticity, by telling pieces of my story which contain

community identifying markers, my volunteers began opening up about their experiences.

"Going first" is a behavior marker required in our community and is a commonly used

technique executed by young females on the street to acclimate a new girl to the sex trade

necessary to procure shelter. For example, the street veteran (commonly referred to as a street

sister) will befriend a female new to being a runaway or new to foster care. The veteran street

sister brings this girl into her social circle, romanticizing the opportunity, security and fun that is awarded from her current situation. This rhetorical strategy is a grooming technique widely used by pedophiles preying on street youths. They remove the threat of their intentions by having a young female approach a potential victim and vouch for them, in a sense, as a non-threat. Recently, similar recruitment measures are being used by Isis terrorists to lure young females to volunteer for Isis. A female decoy is used to "sell" the situation in a safe, non-threatening way. In context with street youths, the female recruiter will share a room with the pedophile for a short duration, while the new young female gets all her needs met for free. The new recruit will get used to the comfort of the situation and the feeling of gratitude and respect that she feels toward her street sister puts her in a position of obligation when the pedophile starts making advances. The street sister, often in the room, assures her throughout the process that she is safe and that the pedophile has done so much for them that it is now her duty to repay the kindness by submitting to his sexual advances. In most instances, the street sister's insistence that the recruit take her "turn" leads to full initiation and participation in sexual survival practices. *The Journal of Interpersonal Violence's* article "Risk Factors for Sexual Victimization Among Male and Female Homeless and Runaway Youth" found that:

> Young homeless women have very few resources and limited options. Even
>
> though they may not be on the streets prostituting for money, many of them may
>
> be coerced by friends and/or acquaintances into trading sex for food or a place to
>
> stay. This may explain why survival sex was associated with friend/acquaintance
>
> sexual victimization but not stranger sexual victimization. Grooming was also
>
> associated with friend/acquaintance sexual victimization. (Tyler et al. 516)

128

I was initiated into sexual survival practices, through this rhetorically constructed method, by my street sister Michelle and I later initiated other females into our community using the same technique. This was learned behavior and my "imagined community's" traditions dictated that I teach it to the next set of naïve displaced adolescents.

Another example of coercion deals with initiating girls into sex trafficking. My personal experiences with these recruitment practices are best served by relaying one of my experiences as a runaway.:

My street sister and I (both 13 years old) had started staying with a grungy, fiftyish man named Barney. Barney had seen us at the laundry mat and asked if we needed a place to stay. When we arrived at his house, he began giving us alcohol and proceeded to pull out what looked like a marijuana cigarette. It became obvious fairly quickly, by the irregular smell of the marijuana and the fact that I got violently ill, that Barney had laced the joint with something. He proceeded to take Michelle to the bedroom for the night, I slept on the couch. After two days of staying with him (I was still feeling sick), Barney said he wanted us to meet a couple of his friends. It is not unusual for pedophiles preying on young females to bring other males in to sleep with the girls. They manipulate the reality and language of these situations and define these get togethers as "parties". This is a common rhetorical tactic used by men looking to exploit young girls through human trafficking. To our surprise, two females showed up, one in a gold-ish jumpsuit and the other in leggings and mesh shirt. The woman named "Barbie," who was extremely attractive, started asking us what we planned on doing for money and where we planned on staying. She invited us to stay with her. I had gotten so ill, I'm assuming from the drugs Barney was giving us, that I decided to turn myself into the group home in Temple.

Michelle went with Barbie and the other woman and I didn't see her again. I heard later

that she was prostituting in Killeen.

The same tactic of using a female as bait to lure in other females is being used. Sex traffickers,

often referred to as pimps or daddies, will have what is called a "bottom girl;" a "bottom girl" is

usually the trafficker's favorite girl or the one who has been with him the longest. She is

responsible for recruiting, keeping the other girls in line, and arranging "dates" or keeping date

logs for the other females. These terms aren't really adopted by homeless children unless they

are participating in organized sex trade, but these are familiar terms on the street.

 It is very common for young street youths to be approached and targeted by traffickers.

Once street kids enter formalized sex trade, it becomes difficult for them to quit; drugs, alcohol,

fear, and abuse keep many of these children under the control of their abuser. Heather tells of her

own close call with the sex trafficking trade:

Heather: I ran away and I was with some really bad people that did some really bad

drugs. Thank the Lord it didn't happen- but they wanted to trick me out. I was really

young and I remember there was this one girl that said "no no no no" because I used to

get in people's faces. I was always stubborn I always had a bit of "screw you" or "to hell

with you". I would punch somebody in the face before I would let that happen and I'm

totally different now but I had ran away and I some friends of mine had given me some

jewelry and they wanted to… I was so young- I didn't know they were drug dealers. It

became a whole mess and they wanted to hook me out- but anyways, I remember waking

up… I remember waking up and I was like 12 years old and this girl that was kind of

looking after me because I'd run away – [she] was having sex- ass sex - in the middle of

the bed that I was sleeping on- with a guy that was missing his leg. This guy wanted to

130

pimp me out. I can say it now but I didn't even know what it was then. I got thrown into

what is it called around here- they have one side for druggies they have one side for

behavioral disorders.

In this scenario, Heather believes that the other girl that she is with is "looking after" her. She is

being groomed and discussed as an object for sale, not as a human being with her own choice.

Young girls are exposed to over sexualized environments and quickly move from viewer to

participant. In Perspectives of Literacy, Goody and Watt assert when dealing with a

predominantly oral culture, it is found that "customary ways of behaving are only partly

communicated by verbal means" and "may be transmitted by direct imitation" (4). The young

female is being told and shown how to survive. Displaying the behavior that is expected of the

other street youth is a common teaching method used by this population; by demonstrating what

they are being asked to learn, the initiated child is being introduced to acceptable literacy

practices found within our street culture.

By approaching the interview with the familiar practice in our community of "going

first," I was able to solidify my authenticity as a member and open a dialogue. I, in essence, was

taking my "turn" by revealing details about my own history of family violence, personal

accounts of sexual abuse and exploitation as a teenager living on the streets. My personal

narrative displays how a typical initiation into sexual survival is negotiated and carried out:

I began sexual survival at the age of 13 after being on the streets as a runaway for only

two days. I ran away with two girls that I had met at school. They were staying with

military men in the area. Four foster homes and group homes that I had stayed in were

located near a military base. Three soldiers lived in a dingy, three bedroom trailer.

Michelle slept in a room with one man, Tammy slept with another and a girl nicknamed

BJ (blowjob) slept with the third. I got the couch for the first two nights (as is common in

street initiation). We were provided alcohol (also common for adult males to provide

minor females alcohol and drugs during the grooming process), marijuana and pills. I had

never used drugs or alcohol but the other girls said we were going to have fun. Groping,

kissing and sexual talk was playfully interjected by the men over the course of the two

days. The men knew that our ages ranged from 13 to 17. These men were pedophiles.

This was a part of the grooming process. If I rebuffed advances, the other girls made me

feel like I thought I was better than them or not cool enough or tough enough to hang

with them. The third night Michelle told me that it was my turn to sleep in the room. I

cried and begged her to please let me have the couch. She told me that I either took my

turn or I had to leave. I had nowhere to go so, I went and got in bed, where I was later

joined by a soldier and forced to have sex. That was my initiation into sexual survival.

Sexual survival is both a commonly taught and learned behavior of street life. The rhetorical

actions and verbal demands being carried out by the predators, fellow street children and within

the environment are what builds survival strategies and instructs the displaced adolescents in the

traditions and cultural norms that they are to adhere to. Other girls often show the new girl the

ropes by demonstrating the actions that are expected or direct her verbally on what is she

required to do , such as going to sleep in the same room with the predator. Even the negative

reactions to rebuffing a predator are met with corrective measures that reinforce the standard and

expected practices. Desensitization comes with time for many sexual victims and the practice of

using sex to meet needs becomes the child's main survival technique. Before the displaced

teenager realizes it, they are trapped in a world of exploitation and sex trafficking. These

initiation conventions serve as examples of street literacy and legitimize the fact that language, behavior and actions are being learned and taught through a multifaceted system of education practices constructed and carried out by its community members. I have shown throughout this thesis that rhetorical situations and discursive practices structure the patterns, language, traditions and meaning attached to communal norms. Language becomes contrary when viewed from the contextual lens applied by this discourse community.

Beyond Language: What Is Really Being Said

In looking at the ways that rhetorical language and actions construct this displaced adolescent community, it is also important to study the behavior and communication patterns of this demographic in order to decipher what is really being said. In this section, I will be looking at the multitude of factors that serve as clues to what connotation and meaning are being placed on words and how the often contradictory styles of communication used within this discourse community creates a disconnect and language barrier between the street youth and members outside of their community. I will be looking at the divide that exists between traditional literacy and street literacy and how the homeless youth population uses different modes of communication which are constructed within their culture. Understanding community literacy practices such as respecting methods of communication and the definitions and currency that are attached to actions and language is key in breaking through the tough protective shell of our demographic.

The homeless youth community relies heavily on oral tradition, rhetorical vocabulary, and face to face socialization. In the absence of familial and authoritative protection, these children must learn what is safe and beneficial within their daily interactions. Sensitivity to

physical cues and body language are heightened in large part by necessity. Micro expressions,

motives and intentions are studied carefully by street youths, in an effort to better gage the risks

versus the rewards in varying situations. Any gestures or vocabulary that trigger feelings of fear

or threat can be viewed as a reason to run or to shut down. False promises and empty words

spoken by adults have taught these children that action transcend language, but neither of them

are to be fully trusted. These adolescents have developed their other senses in the absence of

traditional literacy and they learn to trust their visceral perception over the denotation of words.

This is called street smarts. This term refers largely to one's ability to navigate and survive

obstacles or meet physical needs with minimum danger and maximum rewards while ensuring

survival. Merriam Webster's dictionary defines street smarts as "the knowledge needed to

survive in difficult and dangerous places or situations in a city" and "the quality of being

streetwise" (Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary) The level of a child's skills in reading

individual's intentions often plays a huge role in avoiding or coping with danger on the streets.

People hoping to understand this demographic must first be taught how to listen to them. This

can only be accomplished by studying them as a discourse community.

This thesis is my first endeavor at making sense or attempting to explain the homeless

community of which I was once a product of. I have noticed that rhetorical practices and

community patterns are more telling than what is actually being said by displaced adolescents. A

challenge exists between situational meaning and connotation as it defies the denotative words

and actions found within this community. Language patterns and communication markers are

created and used by these children as a coded and complex system of nontraditional, non-

academic literacy. Rules, communication requirements, and agreed upon communal conventions

134

are being taught and learned through set actions, behavioral cues and reconstructed language norms. The children become students and teachers within their environments.

The one thing to remember when talking to displaced children is that they are speaking another language, but using familiar words. Looking back at my time as a homeless adolescent, I recall telling people to leave me alone when I wanted nothing more than to be held. I translated my feelings of hurt and need for love into the words "I hate you." I acted tough to hide the reality of how scared I was. Heather and I discuss the difficulties related to traditional literacy:

Heather: Hell, you're so… I forget what you're doing this for. I mean I know it's for your thesis but what are you doing this for?

PI: Actually, my degree is in English, but they usually don't study us from a language perspective- they study us from a sociological or psychological interest…social behaviorist and social services study us. Nobody looks at us as empowered. The language that we use or don't use- the practices that are our literacy… How my best friend can barely read and write and is smarter than anyone I know… she can't read or write yet she is smarter than any person I've ever met in my life. Its street smarts… that's all it is- its street smarts.

Heather: Some of us don't know how to sound smart. What do you want us to say? We've guarded our hearts and our bodies and our lives for our whole lives… you know everything you know. They don't know how to take me when I'm real- so you hold it back. I thought this [interview] would be easier… I thought it would be easier questions. I thought it would be like 'hey did you ever…' and I would be like 'yeah I did.' I thought that would be it.

PI: I know, I thought that when I wrote them.

135

Heather's use of the word "guarded" accurately describes how homeless children communicate. It sounds contradictory to ask for these children to be heard, but then turn around and say that their words are paradoxes. Heath, Street, and Mills find that " Within every group, ethnographers and close observers find contradictions between what is believed and expressed and what is actually done and is often inexpressible" (16). This is a part of what makes this demographic so difficult to understand.

This study is presented with the goal of explicating the homeless adolescent literacy system in terms that foster a better understanding of who these children are. It is my hope that this thesis' complete representation of this population and its language practices bridges some of these language barriers that trap these children in a world where deficiencies breed atrocities and where these children are being hunted.

Sexual Survival

This section explores one of the most debasing and dehumanizing practices that is routinely used by homeless adolescents to meet their basic needs- it is called sexual survival. Sexual survival is one of the most prevalent practices conducted by female homeless youths in order to attain food, shelter and other basic needs. Sexual intercourse with men or women in exchange for a place to stay or to meet rudimentary needs was acknowledged as a common and accepted practice by all participants. All of the volunteers for this study stated that they were familiar with sex trading as being a prevalent convention within the homeless adolescent community. The participants of this study gave first-hand accounts of either participating in sexual survival or knowing someone personally who traded sex for food, shelter or basic needs.

I use the term "survival sex" interchangeably with prostitution, hooking, and sex trade for the purpose of this thesis. I will also be using N. Eugene Walls and Stephanie Bell's definition, found in their *Journal of Sex Research* article "Correlates of Engaging in Sexual Survival Sex Among Homeless Youth and Young Adults" that interprets survival sex to mean "the exchange of sex for food, money, shelter, drugs, and other needs and wants" (424). This term gets muddled and the meaning is blurred when put in context of the homeless condition.

Although sex is discussed freely by my participants, difficulty entered the conversations at the mention of the word prostitution. The act of labeling survival measures as prostitution and varying identification with acts that can be perceived as "hooking" caused distress for three of my participants who later admitted that they had in fact participated regularly in acts that may be construed by outsiders as prostitution. As an interviewer, I tried to avoid terminology and lines of questioning which my volunteers found off-putting or that appeared to stifle the flow of conversation. There is a level of shame that the participants carried with them and apology's scented their admissions, even though they readily admitted that they would do it all again if put in the same circumstances. I broke this shame barrier by first sharing my own experiences of hustling money at truck stops, procuring money men or sugar daddies, finding places to live by engaging and later exploiting men in conversation and sex for the purpose of procuring food, shelter or necessities. I spoke freely about my form of networking with other street youths, and my involvement in recruiting and initiating other runaways and females into the sex trade, in an effort to get my volunteers to open up about their own experiences. Below are excerpts that explore the participants' association with survival sex and prostitutions. Lauren is asked "Well, the next set of questions are a little more sensitive in nature. You can refuse to answer or stop

any line of questioning at any time. Was sex ever involved in acquiring food shelter or other

necessities, such as clothes, utilities, personal items, etc.?" Her response:

> Lauren: I mean, yes. I never really thought of it that way, but yes. I mean, I
>
> needed money for rent or electricity- I needed money for groceries and I thought
>
> 'Okay, who's gonna call?' or 'Who can I do?'… it all just seemed normal.
>
> PI: Did you ever participate in any act that could be construed as prostitution?
>
> Lauren: Yes. (Hesitant)

Lauren's reflection that she "never really thought of it that way" and her hesitation when

equating survival sex with prostitution demonstrates the detachment she has made between sex

and survival. Street children's goal is to attain necessities for survival; they do not initially set

out to acquire them with sex. These situations are generally requested or required by the

predators offering these items. The demands of the environment and the behavior dictated by the

context of the situation is what forms the displaced youth's understanding of what is being

expected of them. The language being used to negotiate these exchanges is coded and often

contains very few directives. The street youth, once shown the appropriate survival tactic, is

expected to pick up on the connotations and cues being given and is then expected to carry out

the required acts. The language used in prostitution, as opposed to sexual survival, has a specific

monetary exchange attached to it, but for a homeless teenager practicing sexual survival, the

negotiation can be as simple as a predator saying "Are you hungry?" or "Do you need a place to

stay?" The powerless station of the displaced adolescent dictates the majority of the negotiation.

In many of the scenarios, the child isn't really being asked, they are being told what is going to

take place.

As I mentioned before, the female participants who had practiced sexual survival encountered difficulties when discussing it in terms of exploitation and prostitution. Heather had a more difficult time with this line of questioning, and I had to stop the interview at some point to see if she was comfortable with proceeding. When asked "If you want to move somewhere else for the next line of questions we can. The next questions are of a more sensitive nature. You may refuse to answer or stop this line of questioning at any time- you can skip anything you don't like. Were you ever involved in acts that could be perceived as prostitution, to acquire shelter, clothes, toiletry, and personal items?" Heather replies:

Heather: Of course.

PI: Who are the individuals that generally offered these items?

Heather: Who? Or do you mean gender? Men. I can't.

PI: Okay. If sex was involved how would these situations be negotiated or which language was used? Please be as graphic as possible within your comfort level.

Heather: What language was used? English. Let me read it for myself.

PI: What language was used? Word choices?

Heather: How did I offer a blow job… is that what you're asking? Trying to avoid this question.

PI: Okay, let's move on. Did you ever participate in any act that could be construed as prostitution? You don't have to answer it if you don't want. Are you doing okay?

Heather: Yes. This is going well. (Sarcasm)

At this point I stopped the tape to make sure that Heather was comfortable with continuing. She felt it was important to continue.

PI: We are continuing our interview with Heather. Did you ever participate in an act that could be construed as prostitution?

Heather: (Long pause) Maybe. Nobody's here right? I don't know, sorta. Maybe-ish. Kind of.

Again, we see the participants' struggle with connecting the acts of survival with the act of prostitution. Heather and I begin a conversation about survival and what it entails. A rare look at my community's discursive practices can be seen in the excerpts below. Our dialogue begins with the question "How did you go about finding shelter during your time on the streets? And how did you go about finding food?" Heather responds:

Heather: You made friends. You made friends. How do you say it? I didn't hook, but I did practice survival. I didn't hook. What else do you do? I mean my God. I mean, do you want to spend the rest your life sleeping in the store corner? Or do you want a bed and maybe breakfast in the morning? Maybe some clothes on your back and maybe a hot shower so you can be clean? Hey deodorant, hey a shower, hey shampoo, hey fresh freakin' clothes.

PI: That's actually the next question… how would you go about attaining necessities, such as washing clothes, personal items, toiletries, soap, deodorant, etc.?

Heather: You… I don't know if I can…
PI: I stayed in a lot of laundry mats so when men would come in late- I lived in a military town- so when they would come in late, to wash their clothes… if I hadn't found somewhere to stay- just like you- I couldn't do another night on the streets and I would just ask them 'Can I go home with you…I don't have a place to go?' Heather: I would be taken in, but not for very long.

PI: It was never for very long.

Heather: I was a handful, but they let me shower, they fed me, I got to put on something

clean- you know… I mean sorry, I think I'm a bad interview

PI: No, you're not. I know some of the answers are difficult.

My rhetorical tactics as both a researcher and as a community member are demonstrated within

this passage. When Heather begins shutting down, I offer more of my personal accounts. This

tactic serves many purposes. The first is to remove the shame of her admissions. I am choose to

employ a common community convention of showing vulnerability when discussing our

experiences, but the most important part of our exchange is my vocal validation of her feelings

and the reassurance that what she is feeling is being heard. I am letting her know that she is still

in control and that her words have value; this confirms that I am not exploiting or abusing our

roles as researcher and volunteer- we are equals. My confirmation that "Some of the answers are

difficult" is an understatement. At times these questions seemed unbearable; I wrote them, and

yet I didn't want to answer them either. I even found that when I originally sat down and

answered all of the questions myself, I made a number of qualifying statements and disclaimers.

These were my initial notes on acquiring necessities and acts perceived as prostitution:

It wasn't straight out 'You put out and I'll give you all of the stuff'-it was more just kind

of an understood- they would be nice to you and you would give them sex. You knew it

was being asked because they would begin rubbing your hair or your back or them

touching your arm-some of them would just grab your hand and put it on their dick. So,

yes. I mean, I used sex to get everything… everybody that I met, sex was a currency- I

mean, that's what they wanted and I had to so…

Rereading my words, I notice the use of the words "I had to." This suggests that I felt like I had

no choice. I did not initially see my words as encompassing a powerless mindset or 'helpless to

141

my circumstances' reflection. This discovery came as a surprise to me. I then explored if I had participated in acts perceived as prostitution and how these situations were negotiated. Here is my personal narrative:

> Trading sex for necessities was just staged like a pickup-'do you need a place to stay? Let me help you.'-it was a given that you were expected to sleep with them. This is so unusual to think about now. You'd go home with them and they would you say 'Are you ready for bed or do you want to shower first?' It was almost staged like adults…or what I would picture adults in a bar doing to pick each other up, but they were picking up children. The men would always make the move… so I don't know if there was really a negotiation. I mean- like I said- a few times that a truck driver would give me money to blow them or just touch it. Oh my goodness, I could think of so many old perverts with the pockets cut out of their pants or who wanted a hand job and would offer to buy me something. With the Arabs it was a lot different; I would get $2000 shopping money every time I had sex with one of them. So, prostitution? I think I've answered that one. Not many people would've told you I was a hooker… I looked at it as hustling…surviving. I was dating rich men and sugar daddies- I was being taken care of; bottom line-it was prostitution. At the end of the day I would get money. Some of the other situations were straight out tricking [hooking]. Even though I didn't consider what I was doing as prostitution, my whole lifestyle was pretty much prostitution.

Like Heather and Lauren, I concede that the acts we were participating in were prostitution, but my mind didn't, and to some extent still doesn't, look at what I did as prostitution. Linda is the one volunteer who participated in straight prostitution (setting up a date for sex and receiving payment for the act), but even her explanation blurs the lines of what she perceives as

prostitution when asked "Was sex ever involved in acquiring food, shelter or other necessities, such as clothes, toiletries, personal items, etc.? If so, who were the individuals that generally offered these items for sex?":

> Linda: Yes, yes and yes. You just knew if you stayed with someone that you would share their bed. It was more like dating- you'd get a guy to take you to eat or shopping- sometimes he'd let your friends come- I liked girls so I got a lot of couples and swingers trying to buy me shit.

Linda's assessment that "It was more like dating," is reverberated throughout the female participants who were sex trafficked. Lauren and I discuss the denial that we used as coping mechanisms and how we would view many of the men who we traded sex with as boyfriends and how this related to what we call "the hustle;" these tactics became our rhetorical norms:

Lauren: Really, I was kind of innocent for a prostitute. I don't know how you could be that way, but I was.

> PI: I was too and I think it made them want to take care of me. That's part of the hustle, the sincerity.

Lauren: Yeah.
PI: It sounds so heartless, but it's not though. You love these people- you make

> connections and you buy into your own hustle- you believe you love a lot of these men.

> Lauren: That's what I mean- the denial- that sure, what you're actually doing, is prostitution… But it's more like 'but I love him…he's good to me and he takes care of me.' You know?

> PI: Yeah, even with the Arabs. I had a boyfriend… nobody would ever call me a hooker, but what was I doing? I was basically a prostitute… Well I was… I was a prostitute.

This exchange between Lauren and myself offers a rare look at a discussion about sexual survival and our method of framing the acts. These situations are routinely kept secret, but if the subject is broached between two exploited survivors, it demonstrates an extreme comfort and tremendous amount of trust between the street kids.

As previously cited, all participants acknowledged the common practice of sex being traded for shelter, food, money and necessities, even if they themselves had not practiced sexual survival. When asked "Were there sexual norms put in place in your community? For example, did you know that somebody would want sex for a place to stay and things like that?"

> Lauren: Yes. Yeah yeah yeah, they were all very normal and very accepted. Just understood that 'Hey you want to stay the night or can I give you a ride home?'-all of those things were just kind of normal lingo for 'hey, we're going to get sex'.

Lauren's use of the word "normal" speaks to the everyday acceptance of the sex trade practice within our community. Sex was an expected convention used to acquire necessities. Heather also relays her knowledge of sex trade as being a customary way for displaced youths to meet their needs. When asked the same question posed above, Heather responds:

> Heather: Yes. I say yes because there were two people that didn't ask for it, but for the most part- Yeah… if you want to sleep here, suck my dick. Sorry, it's the truth.

Heather feels the need to apologize for her bluntness and for telling "the truth." Our community members usually edit our accounts when discussing atrocities or degrading practices because we do not want to shock a non-community member or be looked down on because of our acts.

In my experience females face a higher demand for sex trading, but the opportunity exists for both male and female street youths. Wendell acknowledges his familiarity with the practice

of sexual survival, putting it in a predatory light, which demonstrates how children in need are marked as sexual targets. When asked to define predators, Wendell explains:

> Wendell: There are definitely predators. Victim is a softer term in relation to the predators- the victim thing can cut both ways- the predator, he's definitely the predator, the hunter, the wolf, the alpha- those guys do exist-they were there constantly. Now just because I'm saying I didn't engage in any of that and that the people around me were a fairly good group of people, doesn't mean that I had blinders on and didn't see what was happening around me and the people that are doing it-the predators definitely existed. There were a lot of people that would give you a place to stay, feed your habit or alcohol or anything you wanted just so long as you had sex with them and that was male and female. They were out there and they were definitely looking.

Wendell acknowledges that "they were a constant," when speaking about the frequency of the threat of predators. He states that "They were out there and they were definitely looking." If only help organizations and rehabilitation agencies worked as diligently as the predators to locate these adolescents, fewer children would be falling victim to sex crimes and abuse. Merick is another participant who states that she did not directly participate in sexual survival, but she discusses her knowledge of sex trade as a common convention within her network:

> PI: Were sexual norms expected or put in place within your community? For example, did you know that sex was required for a place to stay?
>
> Merick: The short answer would be yes but the long answer would be not directly. I did not participate in sexual acts but I was lucky I was with a group of kids that were protective of me, but I know they performed sexual acts for food and I ate that food. They would perform sexual acts for places to stay and I was invited along so

145

technically… Sexual acts were performed but I didn't have to; somehow I lucked out on

that one. But 'yes' sex was involved for places to stay, food, shelter… things along those

lines. In the homeless community, yes I knew that was basically standard.

Merick's disclosure that sexual survival was "basically standard" within the "homeless

community," displays, yet again, street kids extensive exposure to and acceptance of sexual

practices as a community norm. I am again struck by the realization that the circumstances

experienced by many homeless adolescents who were subjected to sexual trade shows them to be

more comfortable with these scenarios than the ones being offered by their families or help

agencies.

This led me to question "Where does the disconnect and distrust begin?" One of

Heather's answers speak to answer this question: When asked "Can you explain the social

relationships that you maintained with friends, relationships, family, and strangers?" Heather

states:

Heather: Men. Men. Men. I had no real friends. I kinda had some family but no, they're

Christians and they say you should be a certain way and they're supposed to forgive and

if you don't want to think that way you won't… Fuck you, that's what I say. You know I

don't use that word, but fuck you. 'You're supposed to forgive him for doing that to

you;' that's why my family bailed him out of jail and 'you're not supposed to get angry-

you're supposed to be happy what's wrong with you?' That's what I heard. 'What's

wrong with you?' - That's what I heard. No other family except my sister, but she was so

far away, I did get to see her often because she went through the same stuff- not as bad as

me because she was smarter than me and married a rich husband.

Heather begins her answer about relationships with the answer "Men. Men. Men." She is

alluding to sexual survival in this passage. Her next admissions demonstrates the betrayal she felt

because her family expected her to forgive her father for molesting her and the fact that they

"bailed him out of jail." Her validation as a victim was minimalized and she no longer sees these

relatives as having her well-being in mind. Instead, they ask "What's wrong with you?"--

insinuating that it is not normal to feel the way she does. Heather does include her sister as

family and acknowledges that "she went through the same stuff," but states that she was "so far

away." Heather feels abandoned and betrayed by her family; this is at the root of Heather's

distrust and her disbelief that anyone will understand what she has gone through or will help her

if she is in need. The majority of the people offering help, in her mind, are "Men"-- this mindset

is a dangerous trap that allows many children to believe that the predators are care givers. This is

a tragically common mindset of street children. They are helpless to their circumstances and they

feel a lack of help and protection from the people they believe should be on their side. It doesn't

take long for displaced youths to adopt a mindset of "it is me against the world." With only

themselves to rely on, these children band together against the adults and authorities who they

feel betrayed and threatened by. Predators are given the chance to intercept these hurt, desperate

youths, gaining power over these vulnerable youths because these children feel that they are

alone. Feelings of loneliness are often partnered with feelings of powerlessness; this will be

further explored within the next chapter.

Perpetuation of Predicament: Power and Authority

Power is a key term that will be explored throughout this thesis. This "Power and

Authority" section deals with power imbalances and distrust of authority which contributes to

runaways and "thrownaway" children remaining on the streets. A common denominator among all of this study's volunteers is an aversion to authority; even the most conservative of my interviewees expressed views of distain or distrust towards authority figures. I had to ask myself why we chose to learn to survive on the streets, in lieu of seeking outside resources or asking for help from adults. I also had to look at how these choices and our aversion to authority contributed to our victimization on the streets. I set out to explore the context of the rhetorical situation and power distribution that made four of this thesis' interview subjects run away from foster homes, relatives and state schools, choosing to take their chances of surviving on the streets instead of in a system designed to protect them. Even though many displaced kids "choose" life on the streets instead of living within the system, they often feel rejected and betrayed by the adults who failed them.

Anger was openly expressed concerning law enforcement, social workers and adults claiming to want to help. I hope to produce answers to the questions of "Why were the streets safer than the homes we came from?" and "Why were other children making the rules devoid of adult supervision?" The easiest way to explain this phenomenon is through examples. One of the most common reasons is related to sexual abuse. Four participants openly discussed multiple sexual encounters with law enforcement, facility employees, and adult predators who claimed to be helping us in some way. All of this study's interviews revealed victimization and varying levels of abuse perpetrated by adults known by the subjects personally or related to them. I was surprised to find that the majority of the volunteers, when asked if they were afraid during their time on the streets, were frank about their fear of being picked up by police or social service agencies that would put them back into the system. I had expected answers concerning street

148

victimization by predators, but this fear of authority sent my analysis in another direction. I had to start looking at where this fear and contempt originated.

My interview with Linda outlined an example of abuse of power. Linda was very open about her history as an incest and molestation survivor. There was also an extensive history of physical violence in her past. Linda relayed that she had already spent ten years in foster homes and institutions before choosing to run away and live full time on the streets. In addition to sexual molestation during her foster home placements (both by other children and guardians), she shared that, after being sexually assaulted on the streets, she had become a sexual victim and had a sexual relationship with a trusted teacher who befriended her during her last encounter with a state school for pregnant teens. Linda and I discuss danger:

PI: Did you ever feel that you were in danger? Please, give specific examples.

Linda: Of being caught?

PI: Anytime you were scared.

Linda: I didn't want to get picked up and taken back to a home.

PI: Did you feel safe on the streets?

Linda: No…not really. I got raped on the streets. I ended up in a girl's home for pregnant teens. Laurie- my first girlfriend- was a teacher there- she got me off the streets.

Even though the majority of sexual street victimization is perpetrated by adult males, Linda was molested by and later lived with her female gym coach from the state facility. Linda's distrust of adults and authority figures, who violated their role as protectors, is grounded and backed by legitimate experience. She was given good reason, at an early age, to distrust people outside her homeless network. These experiences directly influence the ways that Linda constructed her realities, language and street practices. The majority of this study's volunteers had prior

149

experiences or negative association with law enforcement or people put in positions of power over children. Merick is an example of why street children are scared of authority; when asked about danger, she replied:

> Merick: My danger was more from the authorities than it was from other street kids. I was more scared of getting caught like by a police when I was shoplifting or someone that worked at the store or somebody that worked at the Covenant [House] or with my mother finding me. I had more of a fear of being caught. I didn't live in fear of predators or people on the street. I wasn't turning tricks and I wasn't getting into strange cars. I heard about that fear from other kids but I wasn't doing that. My fears were just my parents tracking me down or taking me home.

Merick's fear was of adults, not "other street kids." She states that she did not want to be found and returned to her home, but does not go into detail about this aversion. She admits in her interview that she had stolen food to survive on the streets and refers to her fears of "getting caught like by the police when [she] was shoplifting." Displaced youths often take on illegal activities, such as shoplifting, prostitution and drug dealing to meet their needs. This behavior paired with truancy from school and runaway status makes these children take on the mindset of being a fugitive. Merick at no time views the adults in these scenarios as a trusted avenue to meet these needs or as someone who is trying to help her. She is taking care of herself and authority is a possible hurdle in her acquiring what she believes she needs to survive. She views the adults and police as an enemy to her well-being. Out of these views and the context of her situational need, she develops complex strategies and patterns to navigate around the people and things that she believes are impeding survival goals. This is a common mindset by displaced youths; we feel that the authorities are working against us. We devise ways to circumvent the system and

150

authority; these practices are adopted as a direct result of our exposure to these individuals within our environment. Wendell speaks about police's treatment of homeless youth and the harassment that he endured:

> Wendell: On feeling threatened…I forgot one of the most dodged (but not most severe) predators on the street earlier when you had asked. The police. Police would constantly hound and harass. They knew you were a street rat. Less than human, but more than an insect. They would constantly zip out of nowhere with lights flashing. They would search our person and our effects, and say something rude. Occasionally, we were threatened with violence, but it was extremely rare one of us tried crossing that line. They were always looking for an arrest. Only once did one officer ask if I needed help, but by that time, it was too late. There are rules. 'Police are not to be trusted. They are not your friends... at best, ever.' Police would show up at your doorstep of places you were staying. They would try to enter without a warrant and search the place for drugs or whatever they could find. They harassed our neighbors trying to find out 'what we were up to'. Our neighbors would tell us these things after they left. It was the police's general behavior, I think, that – in part – causes street kids to distrust aid workers and organized charities. I mean, who is not brought up believing that a police office is there to protect and serve? An officer is a branch that shelters you from the rain and weather of injustice, but in reality they are a branch… one used to bludgeon and threaten. Once that seed of distrust starts, it can run wild in the mind of a drunk and drugged teenager, and anything that smacks of 'government' is not to be trusted.

Wendell's recollection is an accurate sampling of many homeless youths' experiences with law enforcement. Personally, I had more than fifteen encounters with police during my time on the

151

streets, in addition to three traffic stops that lead to sexual encounters to avoid being ticketed or taken to jail, my experiences were hostile, harassing, and unpleasant. After being shuffled from over seven different placements and group homes, the majority of which I ran away from, I made the decision to remain off the grid and live fulltime as a street youth. My choice to exist outside of the "system" came in large part from my distrust of the case workers, therapists, and facilities that had failed me. I firmly believe to this day that I was nothing more than a case number for some…a pay check for others (people get paid to foster children; the more issues, physical, emotional, and mental that the children are labeled with, the larger the check), and I served as a sexual outlet for more husbands and sons in these placements than I wish to recall. As a runaway, the police would pick us up and treat us like we were less than human. My encounters with police translated to jail cells, sexual encounters, and their facilitating my return into the system. I had stopped seeing law enforcement as the good guys; my experiences redefined how I saw them and their purpose in my world. My brain simply translated authority into the feeling of threat.

Many of our words become replaced with feelings-- not to be mistaken with emotions; we try to stay free from those. I briefly discussed evolved visceral perception as an important component in avoiding danger. Street children learn to trust these feelings-- not the words or the person-- our heightened ability to read people is applied and we take cues from what our bodies and minds are reacting to everything being conveyed in a situation. Our feelings of threat and fear of authority breeds a mindset of distrust.

This distrust of adults our aversion to authority fuels many homeless youths' decisions to take their chances surviving on the streets. Buckwheat is a good example of someone who repeatedly chose to run away from caregivers and facilities. Buckwheat came from two alcoholic

parents, with a background in neglect and mental abuse. At the age of 11 his mother died and by

the age of 16 he was orphaned. Buckwheat explained his reasoning behind leaving his initial

placement with a sister, then his decision for leaving his aunt and uncle's home and eventually

running away from the group home and choosing to live on his own, away from adult

supervision:

> Buckwheat: I had to go back to work after the aunt and uncle that I moved in with… they
>
> were devout Baptist- mine not so much… we didn't get along that's why a moved out-
>
> got an apartment. Which they paid for with my Social Security so that I could get out of
>
> their house because I was extremely disruptive and really did not like authority
>
> whatsoever, not at all. And it went from there to being put in military school and
>
> reformatory- mainly reformatory- but I escaped them. I ran.

Buckwheat chooses to use the words "escape them" instead of "leave" or "get away from."

Escape is a very loaded term; escape implies feelings of being held captive or of being confined.

Buckwheat, like many displaced youth equates authority with a threat and the power that they

have over the homeless youth makes the child feel like a convict.

I will not attempt to defend the fact that many displaced youths have behavioral issues,

deviant conduct and are committing crimes. What I will defend is that the majority of these

children are products of their environments and their bad behaviors are all cries for help. Heather

shares a situation that displays juvenile delinquency and the consequences that she received:

> Heather: I never did anything wrong. One day, my best friend at the time, had said 'let's
>
> go smoke a cigarette' I said 'okay, but we will miss class-we can go to my house by the
>
> school' that's before the rest of it and we were at her house when the school called her
>
> house and I'm like 'oh shit, that means they called my papa's house and I'm not going

153

home' so I ran away yet again… five days later they [the police] caught me in the middle

of a field. They were like 'if you run, I will tackle your ass' and I ran. I remember being

in the back of the police car and my Granny saying she thought it was funny- she thought

it was the most hilarious thing.

It is important to note that Heather qualifies her story with "I never did anything wrong." This is

a loaded statement. It is directly followed by underage smoking, skipping school, and running

away. Heather also chose to break the police officer's direct order, which states the consequences

if she disobeys. Surface level, it appears that Heather is wrong on all accounts and that this

unpleasant situation is of her own making. Looking closer at her account, it becomes obvious

that Heather sees herself as the victim and this incident is stored with negative memories

associated with police encounters. I will attempt to analyze Heather's point of view. First,

Heather's guardian contact information is her grandparents, which led me to believe she was

living with them; during the interview I learned that her mother had died and that child protective

services removed her from her father's home, due to sexual, physical and mental abuse. She had

a history of abuse and of running away at the time of this incident. She shows her awareness that

she has done something wrong because she chose to run away when she discovered that her

"papa" has been called; despite her claim that she "never did anything wrong." Finally, the

police officers threaten her with physical abuse when they follow their command up with "I will

tackle your ass," not to mention that the language used by the officer is disrespectful and asserts

his power over her. She is not being made to feel safe or as if the officers are there to assist her;

she is instead feeling threatened and is scared. I cannot conjecture whether or not counseling and

interception to help with past abuse and her pattern of running away would have prevented this

situation, but I feel confident in my assessment that Heather was in need of help from agencies

and the authorities to prevent her from becoming a victim on the streets. She gives another

account of a police encounter:

> Heather: Well, I became angry. I was a difficult person- I was hell fire. I was spit and fire
>
> and that's how my husband fell in love with me- I was totally spit and fire. I didn't know
>
> my mom well…like, she died when I was really young. There was one time I got to stay
>
> with her after the divorce. She tried having me arrested. She didn't know any better but
>
> the cop showed up and handcuffed me and I was good up to that point. I don't know what
>
> was going on, but as soon as they tried to put me in the car and said 'spread eagle!'- I
>
> said 'hell no' and then they got me in the car but they took me to the judge and the judge
>
> told me 'your mom says you're on drugs' and actually that point in time I was not. I was
>
> just a little girl. I said 'hell no, I'm not. I'm going to P test for you right now' and I told
>
> him what happened and I did punch my mom. I wish I could take it back because I didn't
>
> know she had brain cancer… now, she looked at me and said- my mom was adopted-
>
> 'my father may have given me away, but your daddy fucked you' and I turned around
>
> and I waylaid her. I was just like 11 or 12 years old. I was young. She sent the cops to try
>
> to get me arrested and said that I was on drugs, but I was not at that point in time anyway
>
> and I was never really heavy on drugs- believe it or not. I wasn't and I told the judge
>
> what happened- he listened to my accounts and said 'Honey, I would've laid my mom
>
> out cold too- you're okay'. He almost arrested her because she banned me from going in
>
> to get my stuff -my clothes. I couldn't get my clothes…I couldn't get to nothing.

Heather's story shows two different approaches for addressing a problem youth; the police once

again chose aggressive language and a threatening approach when dealing with an "11 or 12"

year old girl, but the judge, who Heather is much more receptive to in this scenario and who is

155

shown more favorable in her recollection listens to her and attempts to empathize. There is little doubt that the judge and the police adhere to the same laws and are given the same directives, but the less threatening of the two has the ability to garner respect. When looking at adolescent rejection of the mistreatment they endured at home, it becomes apparent that what these children are truly running from is the fear of threat-- the threat of being powerless.

The children who fall victim to the streets are more so victims of society; their predicament is based largely on power and control. These children come from dysfunctional homes, the majority riddled with varying levels of abuse, and are powerless to address the actions of their parents or guardians. Many are "saved" by the social services, who sweep in donning the disguise of someone that hopes to make the children's lives better. I chose to put the word "save" in quotation marks because in relation to state agencies, "save" and "help" lose their standard definitions due to how these agencies' redefine these words to meet their idea of what these children need. These ideas differ greatly from what the homeless youth feel that they need; but the power imbalance of the situation dictates that these children must adhere to the dominant structures meaning and endure the effects that come with it. The majority of these children are then shifted to another situation where they have no say on what happens to them or where they go. Many of the choices which are made in the child's best interest cause more abuse and duress to come to the child. This powerlessness breeds mistrust. When the children's predicaments don't improve, they no longer have faith that anything will be done to help them. They have been taken from one bad situation and are placed in another.

These children are once again living by somebody else's rules. They are dependents- for many their age prevents them from supporting themselves. Tyler and associates conclude, based on research conducted on 372 homeless youth in Seattle, that "those who leave home for the first

time at an early age may have fewer street survival skills and less experience, making them more susceptible to victimization" (505). A lack of education contributes to low wages and if by chance the adolescents are old enough to work, few can hold a fulltime job and maintain going to school. The problem is that laws prohibit them from dropping out of school, but school is preventing them from supporting themselves. Without schooling, their chances of a getting a better job are narrowed. These hurdles are addressed in more depth in the "Education and Employment" chapter. While I argue that street smarts is a legitimate form of literacy, it is not the literacy valued and commonly used to construct the world outside of the homeless adolescent community. Academic literacy is the socially accepted currency needed to succeed and survive in America's competitive system. These children must be granted the opportunity to develop the tools needed to escape their underground world and to join mainstream society.

These children find themselves with no trade, little education, and fragmented knowledge of how to survive. Many are armed with very few life skills. If they take to the streets, they believe they are in control and create their own environment. The Catch 22 is that they will be labeled as a runaway and will now be hunted by the system that is forcing them to live within their ideal of protection. The runaway's life becomes a game of cat and mouse; they hide from truant officers during the day, learn to live underground, and begin existing in a world that comes alive when everyone else falls asleep. The criminal status that comes with the act of running away seals their fate, ensuring that if they are caught they no longer get family placements or a group home with privileges; state schools that have prison security measures to keep them in become their new home. Then why run? Maybe, the 34 year old uncle living with the family has started sneaking into their room at night? Perhaps the nice Baptist family uses enemas to cast the demons out of them daily? Maybe the streets seem like a better option that starving to death

157

because the house mother keeps the refrigerator under lock and key- claiming it is to keep the other children's mental health medications safe? Whatever the reason-- they leave. They can no longer wait for the powers that be to sweep down and turn them over to another poorly explored option. They are caught in a trap. These teenagers are snared by their belief that they are the only ones who hold their best interest in mind. Violated and betrayed by every kind-faced adult that had promised to help them--the only people they can trust are the street kids that run beside them. These children are victims too—these children share the daily struggles and combat the dangers that come with living on their own. These are the only factors that needs to be in place in order to start building a community. The rejection of authority becomes the basis of how street kids create the attitudes, language, and behaviors that will be attached to these figures when constructing their literacy norms.

Education And Employment

In the previous chapter we discussed power and the ways it shapes homeless teens' attitudes, behaviors and practices concerning authority figures. The only way to break these adolescents' powerless mindsets and enable them to exist outside of their "imagined community" is by giving them the tools to empower their voice. Shirley Brice Heath and fellow researchers note that "Formal education systems now [look] to reading and writing as key marks of individual power and status" (18). Street kids need to be given a chance to master standard language and literacy practices, in order to adhere to outside communities' conventions. In this section, I expose educational gaps and academic deficiencies that serve as one of the primary reasons that homeless youths remain on the streets. Studies tracking risky behavior and consequences of child displacement note that "Approximately one-third (33.4%) had dropped out

of school" (Ennett et al. 68). Six of the eight participants I interviewed for this thesis reporting having dropped out prior to attending or during high school and half of the volunteers in this study suffered education deficiencies due to multiple foster care placements or transient behavior. A fact that people outside of the child welfare system do not recognize is the lapses in education and school attendance that foster care placements produce. Studies tracking foster care aged children's attendance show absences "ranging from 1 to 230 total days not enrolled" over a twenty four month time period; citing that "the highest rates of school changes were among children with unstable placement histories (Zorc et al. 828-829). Personally, I spent anywhere from three days to six months not enrolled in school with each placement during my time as a foster child. The reasons usually given for these absences range from allowing for adjustment periods in the new placement, enrollment issues, such as incomplete transfer paperwork, temporary placements and mandatory behavioral assessment and evaluation durations. Zorc and associated have found that " a lack of prompt enrollment due to challenges in information transfer and other bureaucratic hurdles has been a significant problem, recognized and addressed by federal legislation" (827). The government's awareness of multiple placement detriments paired with deficiencies in identifying and aiding this population, correlates with inadequacies and academic failures plaguing this demographic. Studies show that the solution to these educational disadvantages may be as simple as having "improved coordination responsibilities between school systems, child welfare, and behavioral health around absenteeism" (Zorc et al. 32).

As a product of this system's deficiencies, I struggled to keep up and competently complete my education. Due to constant placement moves and multiple school transfers, I missed the majority of my seventh grade year. I was supposed to repeat seventh grade, but my academic record allowed me to advance to the eighth grade. Researchers have found that

"children living in group homes had three times the odds of repeating at least one grade" (Zima et al. 97). I started in a new school again as a freshman and attended only a few months into my sophomore year before dropping out of school to work two retail jobs fulltime. My lack of education contributed to minimum wage jobs and I soon found myself practicing sexual survival again, later raising the stakes by finding sugar daddies to support me. I felt that sex was the only job that I was qualified to do. My lack of education and job skills proved a detriment in my ability to support myself. Linda gives a similar account of educational deficiencies due to multiple foster care placements and numerous moves. These educational gaps lead to a lifetime of societal hurdles in Linda's quest to support herself. Linda shares her education history: PI: What level of education did you complete? Did your living situation effect your education?

> Linda: Huh…that's a hard one…I didn't really- I don't read or write well- can't even get a driver's license- I was always moving- since second grade- I can't even help my son with homework. I took a test once that said I read like a fourth grader, but I'm not dumb- second grade- I went for a while at state- I guess- I don't know.

Looking at Linda's overall account of her history, she had been intercepted by the foster care system at the age of "seven or eight." She recalled being sent to at least seventeen different foster care placements. Linda attributes her inability to get a driver license to her low reading and writing levels. Not being able to accept jobs that are in areas with no public transportation greatly limits Linda's employment opportunities. Her reading and writing deficit reduced her career options and serves to contain her in a certain financial class. Linda admits to prostituting for money and working exploitative jobs that required her to be naked or provide sex and to having men pay her rent and bills. These accounts are not unique within our community.

160

Heather, currently unemployed and formerly a bartender, speaks on her education level within her interview:

> Heather: Eighth grade, but I did go back years later on my own, I did, but it was eighth grade. Last completed grade was eighth grade. I did go back a few years later and get a few more -I guess I was smarter back then. They tested me… it was years later…it was eighth grade. That's my highest level of education 12345. While partially completed.

As an adult, Heather's primary means of support aside from sexual exploitation is bartending. There is no way of knowing what role this lack of education has played in Heather's life and economic standing, but what is certain is that she has a disadvantage in a world that values and rewards higher levels of education and literacy. Heather feels powerless to change her status.

Laws need to be enacted to make provisions available to homeless youths that serve to bridge these learning gaps. In addition to bridging education deficiencies, vocational schools and job training services also need to be offered to the homeless adolescent population. Buckwheat dropped out of school to work full time on oil rigs. He discusses finding jobs and the governments' and schools' role in his not completing high school:

> Buckwheat: I was a senior or junior I think. I can't remember the year… a junior, I think. And then my sister called and said that one of the work over companies that I used to work for out in West Texas was moving down to the Valley and once I found that out, I went and got in with the tool pusher and I went to work and I quit school. I went to work full time.
>
> PI: How did you go about finding employment?
>
> Buckwheat: West Texas back then- he walked into a café at 5 o'clock in the morning or 4:30 signed your name on a blackboard and they would come in and call your name. And

if they were shorthanded and you had your hardhat and your work boots then you get to work. But back then there were no HR department -no application- you got up, you got out of the booth, you went to work and then they paid you.

PI: Where did you live when you were on the rigs?

Buckwheat: Wink, Texas. But even when I was in high school we had minor releases signed and we would take our boots and our hard hats to school with us in case they were shorthanded and they would come to the superintendent if they were shorthanded- and this is here again back in the Vietnam era- they were always shorthanded. They needed people to work so the oil companies paid the taxes for the school and they wouldn't deny them employees. So we would go to work- they would call us into the office and asked if we wanted to work and then let us make our tests up or whatever and we would go to work on the rigs and then we would come back later and make up our stuff. This was the 60s, dear.

Buckwheat's ability to support himself allowed him to create a semi stable environment for himself. When asked "What affects you see in your life as an adult that may have been different if you'd been given a stable childhood?" Buckwheat replies:

Buckwheat: Who knows how that would've worked out? College, education. Who knows how stable it would've been. My mother was an alcoholic- my old man died of cancer, ran around on her. I would get up at 2 o'clock in the morning and hear stuff going on; he'd be throwing cold pictures of water in her face trying to get her to sober up- shit, she finally died an alcoholic. He sent her to rehab three times and never did take… it finally killed her so, stable? NAH.

Buckwheat considers himself lucky to have created a life for himself and to have obtained a job that would support him. His ability to support himself combats feeling of powerless and returns his feelings of control over his environment to him. He now gets to dictate how stable his home life is.

Pamela is the only participant that expressed that her foster care placements were more stable living environments than her home life and that the stability greatly contributed to her education. When asked "What level of education did you complete and did your living situation effect your education?" Pamela replied:

Pamela: I completed a doctorate of osteopathic medicine. I'm a physician and the people that I lived with valued education so I would say "yes" it affected me, in that they encouraged me to seek higher education- both my aunt and especially the high school teacher. I was particularly blessed and I think that many people in the situation that I was in- having not been cared for by people who offered the stability that I had- could've really taken some turns for the worse as far as the choices they make and how they can handle school or the choices that they're not able to make… like not being able to apply to go to college or get a job because they might not have the education that I was able to get.

PI: What effect do you see in your life as an adult that could've been different if you had been given a stable home life as a child?

Pamela: That's an interesting question. Had I stayed at home with my mother and the man she married, I would not have called it a stable life- it would've been filled with different sorts of situations. So overall, I think my life is better because I was out of a

situation that could've added more social and psychological and emotional stress in my life.

Pamela was unique in my study because she was the only participant who was given the stability and security to explore her full potential while displaced. I would like to state that all of the participants of this study are extremely intelligent and articulate. More research following this demographics' education later in life needs to be conducted on the long term effects of early education deficiencies. It is important to note that half of the interviewees pursued higher education as adults, signaling that given the opportunity during their time as displaced youths they were capable of excelling in academic environments had they been awarded the opportunity. Lauren discloses how her sexual exploitation did not stand in the way of her achieving her goals, but reflects that it does still affect her life in other ways:

> Lauren: I have a Master's degree. Hustling and dancing… I continued to do that well into my 20s up until I was 32 so that got me through school and provided a nice home and everything else, now I'm kind of paying the consequences for being… I don't know… Having lower self-esteem for allowing people to use me in ways and so forth.

Lauren was able to turn her negative into a positive by using her oppressive circumstances to attain a degree which would allow her to escape the predicament of sex trafficking, but she addresses the fact that she is "paying the consequences" from her exploited past and struggles with "lower self-esteem" as a result.

The courage and perseverance shown by all my participants made me extremely proud of my community. One thing that they all have is street smarts and a keen sense of who they are as adults as a result of what they went through as children. Each one serves to break stereotypes about runaways or "thrownaway" children being derelicts who chose a life on the run or to live

164

on the streets. Even as homeless adolescents, five of the eight participants in this study stayed

employed in lieu of their homeless status, showing the drive and determination to survive on

their own as contributing members of society.

Very little opportunity lends itself to this demographic in the way of fair wages and

steady employment. Even though all of the participants held jobs at some point in their

displacement, the positions and wages were not conducive to maintaining a stable home or

continuing with education. I got my first job at the age of fourteen at a movie theater. I lied

about my age to gain employment. Sixteen was the legal age to work and runaways were not

offered hardship work permits. I made $3.35 an hour. This was not enough to support myself so,

I took a second job at a retail store that employed illegal immigrants and was paid $2.75 an hour

cash. I had to drop out of school to work full-time. The public buses cost eighty-five cents for me

to get to work and, partnered with food and apartment expenses, I wasn't making enough to stop

practicing sexual survival. I started sexually exploiting myself to procure sugar daddies at the

age of fifteen.

This choice brought me to a point of self-reflection within this thesis. I debated whether

or not a person can practice self- exploitation. Doesn't everyone sell his or her skill set to procure

work? Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines exploitation as "Use or take advantage of another

person, especially sexually, with little or no regard for their desires or pleasures" (Merriam-

Webster online). I disagree with this definition because of the words "another person;" it is

power and leverage that enable exploitation. Need exploits the youth. Desperation exploits them.

Helplessness exploits them. Hunger exploits them. All of these things give others, as well as the

street child, the leverage to take advantage of the situation and force them into these practices. I

believe that many of my participants were exploited, but I also believe that several of them went

on to exploit themselves. I explored this further through conversations concerning work history. I asked my participants "Did you work? If so, how did you go about finding employment?" These are the range of answers I received:

> Wendell: Yes, I worked constantly- though I haven't always had a home, I definitely have not gone pretty much at any time at all with not working… sometime or another and initially it was Jack-in-the-Box- my very first day job and it was just to survive and after that pretty much lead from job to job to various jobs to where I am today.

Neither male volunteer for this study participated in sexual trade practices during their time as a displaced youth. I hope to broaden my research in the future to include a greater population of male homeless adolescents. I believe that studies collecting empirical evidence on gender differences within this community would prove beneficial to generating assistance solutions. Buckwheat stated in earlier excerpts that work was made available to young men during times of war and that recruitment measures were in place to fill oil company's worker demands. As earlier stated, Buckwheat's predicament is unique; other volunteers for this study found lower wage jobs, with little opportunity to procure a career. Pamela discusses early work history:

> Pamela: I worked at Sonic during the school year once I turned 16. I found a job because it was across the street from the high school so I figured that I could just apply there and then I worked there during the school year into the summer. I was involved with a Boy Scout camp that I had friends at- I was also involved with a group called Explorers. Some of the boys in my group were going out to work and I went to summer camp to work too and that's how I came up with that job.

Pamela is the one participant who had a stable placement and was able to work and go to school. The other females in this study, like myself, fell into sex trafficking situations and relied on male predators for their income. The other female volunteers discuss how they obtained work:

> Lauren: Seventeen... I started topless dancing and decided that I didn't need my mother telling me what to do or that I needed to come home at a certain time or go to school or anything so I had to plenty of money dancing so I moved out I found a place with a roommate and pretty much did whatever I wanted.
>
> PI: How would you go about finding employment?
>
> Lauren: Going in and stripping down and showing them that I had a nice body and you know…

Lauren supported herself through a sexually exploitative trade. Linda also used self-exploitation and sexuality to meet her needs and make a living, in addition to supporting a child as a single mother. She shares some of her work experiences:

> Linda: Uuuuuh…. I answered an ad for escorts- you know- one of those $150 bucks to meet perves in hotels. My best friend would sit in the car and we'd score coke after. That's when I had a drug problem. I only did it for a few months. Oh…funny…I used to work as a nude waitress for Filipino poker games. They were disgusting- ate baby chicks and shit… then I started traveling with a Turkish guy- got to travel- and we would go everywhere- stopped when I got pregnant again.

Linda's choices for employment were a result of sexual abuse and a history of sexual victimization and drug addiction. Her admission that she had a "drug problem" shows the partnership found between drug use and sex trafficking. Female youths who participate or are forced into sex trades, often get trapped in underground crime rings. When asked about working,

Heather states:

> Heather: No, I didn't. I met people. I never did legal work. No.

Heather qualifies her account of not being employed by revealing that she "never did legal work;" we learn throughout her interview that she was involved in various illegal activities to meet her needs while on the streets. All three of the female participants are extremely honest throughout their interviews about participating in acts which can be perceived as prostitution to get their needs met. It is important to note that many street kids are not at a legal working age and sex trades are one of the few ways they have to earn money. Unfortunately, the security of knowing that your needs will be met and the difference in wages between legal work and sex trade, often keep the homeless youths in exploitative trades, even after they come of age. Sex trade as a profession or means to support themselves is an act born from the destitution and limitations of their predicament. There is a common mindset among victimized and sexually abused children on the street that the sexual violations will occur whether you get paid for them or not, so why not make money doing it? For example, Lauren turns her over sexualization, developed in large part from years of molestation and exploitation, into an art form where she reframes her reality to believe that she is the predator and is no longer victimized. Lauren's job as a topless dancer empowered her to utilize her sexual assets to manipulate and benefit financially from the men who visually exploit her. Lauren equates sex with power; the terms become synonymous. These are learned skills developed out of years spent powerless and abused. Lauren articulates the transition from victim to predator and how her finely tuned observations can lead to meeting her basic needs:

> Lauren: The men were definitely the victims. We were taking advantage of them and they
>
> were getting what they wanted, but we didn't look at it that way because we were getting

168

more than we felt like we were having to give…. I guess, I consider myself a predator because they would just be waiting. You just picked out the weak ones, that's awesome- I feel so empowered just thinking about it. You just 'Hey you want company?' And you could tell just by their reaction or how they watched you walk across the room- you know what I mean? It was like you were stalking them.

Lauren and I's discussion of the art of the hustle demonstrates how context and community consensus establish dominant definitions that challenge standard word use. In Lauren's interview excerpt sexual exploitation is viewed as a job instead of a form of abuse. Within this thesis, it becomes abundantly clear that rhetoric is an art. By using her sophisticated ability to manipulate words and reframe the power structure to show herself as the dominant one, Lauren has painted a new reality and has completely transformed the position that she holds within it. Lauren uses the word "empowered" to describe her feelings about these situations. Victims of abuse tend to feel powerless to their situation, just as homeless youths feel powerless to their predicament. She has rhetorically and linguistically reconstructed her status in life by reframing her predicament to gain stature. By owning and exploiting this abuse, she no longer feel victimized by it. Self-exploitation offers control of the situation and also serves to meet financial needs. Lauren gives an example of a hustle in the excerpt below:

Lauren: Well… Every day was the hustle. How much can I get for how little I can give and I pretty much got to the point where I could say 'Well, okay… I'm gonna make $1000 today and figure 4 hours if I have to or eight hours if I had to- until I hustle as much as I need'. It usually wouldn't take very long because I got so good at it.

PI: Yeah. Negotiated services or sexual skills?

169

Lauren: It wasn't so much negotiated, it was more like you have a little routine where you go to the guy… the guy you were dancing for and, at first, just regular dance but then- right at the end- right before the song would end- I would touch his dick and I was like 'Do you want another dance?' Then he would be like 'Yeah' so the second dance would be a little more involved rubbing his dick and playing with him and so on and so forth and then by the end of the song, I would start unzipping his pants and say 'So, do you want another dance ?' It wasn't really negotiated as much. I was preying on them and I knew I was going to get the reaction that I wanted out of them- it just gradually progressed until I got as much money as I could out of them.

When processing the transition made from being a victim of sexual exploitation to the predatory nature that emerges as a hustle, I would like the reader to note that we are talking about children. These are teenagers who aren't getting asked out on their first date. They aren't holding hands at a football game or being asked to prom; many of them enter the streets without ever having so much as their first kiss. They are robbed of their youth and they are robbed of their innocence. Homeless youths who are coerced, forced, manipulated, or convinced to practice sex trading are being robbed of their childhood and this is a crime. These children are being sexually abused. Reading the excerpts from relayed narratives is very different from having to actually live the atrocities. As I mentioned earlier, tough exteriors are admired in our community; I ask that the reader not mistake the seemingly callous or emotionless accounts of the participants as the abuse not being real or as harsh as it really is. Theses personas are created as protective measures to combat fear and abuse tied to their realities. It is easy to misinterpret their adult actions and mature mindsets as appearing cold and calculated, but these children are

170

victims of sex trafficking and these practices are the only way they know how to meet their needs. They have adapted to their environment by observing and applying community norms and learning the values placed on acts and language that make up the homeless adolescent literacy. It is very common for these child victims to use their rhetorical tools and internal reframing to mentally transition into being the predators.

They begin perceiving that their very identity and worth is directly connected to their value as a sexual object. They tend to believe that the only thing they have to contribute is their body. They learn that the predators have currency, too. The street kids learn to study situations- while the men are pounding away on top of their child frames… they are somewhere else- numb. They get used to giving sex and skilled at figuring out peoples' sexual fetishes before they are propositioned. The street youth, if she is skilled, tough, and smart, employs her superior skills at reinvented herself and ultimately learns to exploit herself. She convinces herself that she is preying on the men. She believes that she is hustling and hunting them. This is a survival technique developed by many homeless, sexually exploited females. They exist somewhere between denial of the true situation and acceptance that they are being forced to participate in debasing acts.

One of the participants I turned down for this study had a history of Dissociative Personality Disorder developed from years of sexual abuse. She disclosed this prior to our interview and due to my decision to not interview people incarcerated or with mental illness issues, I had to decline her participation. She is a good example of what can happen to the mental faculties of sexually abused children. Some have post-traumatic stress disorders; others develop drug habits, suicide attempts, nightmares, and depression. Lauren's ability, paralleling my own experience and approach to sexual survival, is to choose to deny the role as victim and instead to

view the men meeting our needs as prey. It is important for interception, therapy, and rehabilitation programs to intervene at early stages in these children's homeless adaptation and recruitment. Prevention of these predatory practices and mindsets are crucial in these young people's recovery and integration into society. The first step is to get them off the streets; this can only be accomplished by equipping them with the tools, such as education and job skills, needed to survive outside of these degrading conditions. If no one intervenes children will remain lost in a world of exploitation and abuse. In the next subsection I will be looking at the agencies designed to intercept these children and transition them into stable, safe lives. I will look at the volunteers' views on what role, if any these agencies held in their society.

Agencies

As demonstrated throughout this thesis, child protective agencies, foster care programs and state child welfare laws are failing the homeless adolescent population. This section challenges the assumptions that children are being placed in safe, stable environments and that accountability measures are being executed to follow up on and ensure that displaced children are not becoming victims of further abuse. I will be looking at the ways that these former street youths reflect on these organizations and talk about why more children do not seek out homeless help agencies. I am adamant in my personal belief that failure, abuse and feelings of betrayal by adults are at the root of why street youths do not trust that they will receive assistance from agencies, law enforcement or adults seeking to help this demographic. My personal experiences include, but are not limited to, case workers that did not follow up on my placement, families that seemed to care more about a check than assisting a child, sexual predators within the homes and food and necessities which were withheld. Case workers forgot my name as soon as my file

172

was off their desk. Due to my runaway, transient lifestyle, I was assigned a different case worker in every state. There was never any follow up that I am aware of and by the age of fourteen I was completely free of any contact with agencies claiming to assist homeless teens. During my time in the system, I was never asked if I liked or wanted to be in any of the places I was relocated to, making me feel powerless and re-victimized. These feelings are my focus of my next set of questions which explore agency and adult roles in my participants' lives. I asked my participants "Which agencies or other resources, such as educators or social services attempted to help you?" I received the following responses:

> Pamela: I was not contacted by anyone at any time and as far as governmental support, they just issued the only thing that I had- which was my Social Security check that was coming in every month. When I lived with my mom, it went towards my mom… when I lived with my aunt, it went towards my aunt- when I lived with my schoolteacher, it went into my own bank account. I had opened my own account.

Pamela's situation and whether or not her state issued check was going towards items that met her needs was never investigated or received follow up by child care agencies. She stated that no agencies attempted to contact her during her time as a displaced youth. Pamela is the only participant who reported outside help by an educator; this assistance resulted in a stable living environment. This interception by a teacher also awarded Pamela the stability needed to finish high school and immediately go on to college. She is the only interviewee who was given this luxury. By providing these displaced teenagers a healthy environment to exist in, the child can begin fostering new practices and attach new meaning to a world beyond the streets. It is important to note that this piece is not suggesting that all agencies or educators need to personally take in displaced youths, but it is important to note that intervention and involvement

by sincere, caring adults can benefit these children and help them avoid dangerous situations on the streets. Buckwheat was another respondent who stated that he received a social security check after he was orphaned. When asked if any one offered to help him or followed up with his orphaned status, he states:

> Buckwheat: No, never asked. Never asked. We learned to be self-reliant- you don't depend on anybody but yourself… that's pretty much it.

The two male participants in this study convey that the males on the streets are expected to "man-up" and take on an adult role regardless of their age. This speaks to the tough exteriors that male street kids are expected to adopt. Wendell conveys similar thoughts on being independent when asked if any agencies had stepped in to offer assistance:

> Wendell: No, and I wasn't seeking it, to be quite honest; even if they had contacted me, I don't necessarily think I would be smart or world wise enough to know that they were generally trying to help- I would probably just thumb my nose at them and stubbornly continued on in the fullest direction I went.

Wendell expresses that no help was offered, but he voices that, had it been, he would have most likely rejected it. Wendell, as well as all participants in this study, showed a great distrust of authority figures. A closer look at aversion to authority is given under the previous subheading Perpetuation of Predicament: Power and Authority.

The female sex trafficked victims in this research also voiced failures by authority figures to help them. They conveyed more emotion in regards to this failure; when asked "Did agencies and outside resources, such as educators or social services, ever attempt to help you during your time on your own, as a minor?," they responded:

> Heather: None, none at the time. Did they try to help you?

174

PI: Never. They never looked for me. They don't.

Heather: None. I will make sure you hear that. I was nobody.

Heather's assessment that she was "nobody" speaks to her runaway/ street kid mindset. Many displaced adolescents believe that they aren't important enough for anyone to come looking for them. They think that they aren't good enough for someone to save them. They feel like nothings and nobodies and convince themselves that they are not worth caring about. Feelings of rejection and the belief that they are disposable make them more receptive to sex traffickers' agenda filled rhetoric that claims that the predator wants to take care of them. Lauren fell victim to sex trading and was exploited. She reflects on her cries for help while being sex trafficked as being unmet:

Lauren: No. That would be a big no. Times when I was like 'somebody help me! Somebody take me out of this! I don't really want to be doing this!' and then you go back into denial and say 'no, this is okay… this is fun. I like this.' But the times that I was more coherent and like 'somebody help me!' I had people say 'oh, you should stop doing that'- but I never really had an alternative to how I was supposed to live or make it, because at the time, all I had was a high school diploma and I was still going to school for year of that.

Lauren voices a common problem found among homeless females, in addition to feeling like we have no safe place to go and no one who is trying to help us get off the streets, we don't have the skills or education to support ourselves and often fall back on the financial security that can be found in sex exploitation trades. Programs aimed at building self-esteem and attaining marketable job skills are necessary to help get displaced females out of these situations. Services need to be offered and child protective agencies need to be held accountable for these children's falling through the cracks. Foster care case workers are responsible for finding safe, stable homes

for abused or thrown away children, yet often times without a file on a desk to serve as a reminder, these children are forgotten about. It is understandable that large caseloads and the transient nature of many street kids makes it difficult to account for every child who goes through the welfare system or turns up missing, but this is no excuse to give up and forget about these individuals. Laws must be changed, programs must be initiated and funding has to be made available to reach and intercept this population. Linda explains what happened when she attempted to get help from agencies:

> Linda: No one tried to help me. I asked for help a couple of times, but I didn't have an ID and I couldn't give them an address. I told them I was sleeping in a car and hooking. They couldn't "verify" my information so they said they couldn't help me. I never asked again.

Words like "verify" or "prove" become dirty words to children trying to navigate around the system. Linda feels rejected again and one little word- "verify"- has the power to keep her on the streets. Misconceptions concerning these children's choice to be on the streets need to be broken. These teenagers are conditioned to believe that adults can't be trusted and that no real help exists for them. I asked the female participants what it means "When a man says 'I want to help you' or 'I want to take care of you'? I received the following responses:

> Linda: He wants to fuck you up the ass or have you fuck him up the ass. (Laughing)

> Lauren: You're giving me sex and I'm giving you money, but were gonna pretend like we love each other and we care about each other. We are going to play house.

Heather: It means they want a piece of ass or for you to suck their… I tell you, I can't say

it… Suck their dick, penis, flesh sack. They wanted to get their rocks off- they wanted to

come all over my face- my boobs- my ass.

The words "help" and "care" take on negative connotations. These excerpts demonstrate how

words get redefined and how the experiences which these girls endured formed the new meaning

behind them. For many street girls, help comes with strings attached. The most important thing

to note is that these youths aren't in a position to help themselves and can fall victim to anyone

who holds a power position over them. Pledges of help from a stranger can mean anything from

the man becoming a sugar daddy to a pimp. These young girls, with no outside agencies

monitoring them, easily disappear into worlds of sexual perversions and sex trafficking. It is

essential that these children learn the language and contextually constructed meanings developed

on the streets and applied within their environments. These definitions can be the key to

avoiding danger. These excerpts also show how these former street kids see past standard

definitions and the people using them; they choose to adhere to the standards set for language

within their community. If a homeless teenager interprets a situation wrong or attaches incorrect

meaning to what is being said, she risks abuse, exploitation, or worse. Heather reflects on her

fear of repercussions from her past exploitation and explores her victimization further in the

passage below:

Heather: My kids would hate me. My son doesn't hate me; my daughter does. My

daughter knows and she kinda hates me. My family has a big mouth and in my family,

like I said, they're all Christians. You wear skirts down here and you act a certain way

and because you don't act a certain way, the problem is they are like… my dad got

arrested in 1983 so that made me 10… 9…10 years old. Yeah- you bailed him out of jail-

you're here for me? You got him a lawyer and you threw me to the wolves and let CPS

get a hold of me. They say 'Well, he was our family.' But what the hell was I? What the

hell was I?

Heather, again, spoke of her perception that she was betrayed by her family. What I find

interesting is her assessment that they "threw [her] to the wolves and let CPS get a hold of [her]."

Heather's statement speaks of not only being discarded, but compares child protective services to

wolves. I am unsure at this point in my research on what exact measures need to be taken by

agencies and authorities to secure a safer image for street youths. I am also at a loss when it

comes to offering advice to these organizations on how to proceed with the extensive

reformations that are needed concerning policies, services and accountability measures, but what

I am confident in, is the fact that changes must be made to attain these children's trust again and

allow them to feel safe when help is being offered. By going beyond just recognizing that a

literacy system in the homeless adolescent community exists and by actually attempting to

understand the codes, language, and contextual meaning that is built out of their situational

rhetoric, in addition to accepting their discourse practices as a valid form of communication and

the key to their survival, agencies can begin to understand what these children are truly asking

for and find solutions aimed at meeting these needs.

Summary of Findings

This thesis' study of language and rhetorical norms has unequivocally outlined and

demonstrated the literacy system that exists within the homeless adolescent community. Through

the use of first person narratives, I have been able to provide examples of how rhetoric shapes

and constructs community practices and language. I have shown how the situations that the

homeless youth population are forced to endure create strategies on how to survive this environment- mentally, physically and emotionally.

Prior to beginning my research, I was aware of physical traditions that were being employed by this population to meet their needs and ensure safety. Several of these survival methods are included within this study. Surprisingly, networking proved to be the most successful survival tactic in attaining shelter and in acquiring essentials. This thesis has revealed how these children build their networks as a reaction to the environments that are supplying their needs. Examples include females participating in the sex trade. The narratives provided show how female displaced adolescents who are participating in sexual survival are able to build relationships that bolster or sustain this means of existence. A language is developed between the individual subcultures found within this community that allows them to understand, through physical cues and rhetorical situational context what practices are expected of them. This is seen in the practice of "going first," grooming, and initiation rituals. A street sister is another demonstration of this facet of displaced living. These girls, as a reaction to the dangers in their environment, have constructed and negotiated a mutually beneficial relationship. Street sister's relationships are not only important in ensuring safety measures and procuring needs. I discovered when analyzing the interviews, that these females also instruct and initiate their street sister into the communal norms. One girl is teaching the other one the language of the streets. This demonstrates the implementation of an education system in which street children teach and learn from each other. I argue that the education components of this discourse community, where behaviors and language are taught and learned through experiences, actions, communal communication norms, and through the implied meanings that are attached to situations and

179

language, are all proof that a legitimate, sustainable, constant, applied literacy is in place within the homeless adolescent culture.

The males in this study also reported the role that friends played in securing places to stay. Wendell's reports of living "doubled up," shows the street children's ability to devise a strategy, by using other members of their community as a tool, to create a more stable and sustainable living option. This behavior has been created out of necessity. As seen with the majority of the participants, most of the accounts given included "with friends" as a reported way that they had found shelter. These children's utilization of their networks is a navigational strategy that allows them to overcome the hurdles presented with displaced living. These children have physically adapted their behavior, practices and patterns to respond directly to the demands of their environment. These are rhetorical strategies being created and applied to ensure survival. We see the evolution of their networking skills as the children become acclimated and fluent to the street practices when viewing how the networks are narrowed to maintain their particular methods of survival. We later see within the excerpts given by the female volunteers who practiced sexual survival, how they progressed from being initiated into sex practices, then being exploited by these practices and how they eventually take control of the exploitation and initiate these situations. Just like with any academic discipline, once the literacy is mastered, the student can then become the teacher.

This thesis' look at language and rhetorical practices also demonstrates how past experiences, such as histories of abuse, play into the meaning and connotations attached to language and words. This phenomenon was seen in Wendell's use of the "teach" in his narrative about physical abuse at home. The same meaning making components of this underground society and the constancy of use and application beyond the street child's immediate network can

be seen in the definitions given by the participants that are used to assemble the glossary. These individuals, having never met, each attach the same meaning and connotation to the language used in their "imagined community." The experiences and community traditions that serve to redefine these words, separating them from standard use, are proof that the established cultural conventions build a society that bonds these children beyond the structures of a set environment, shared locations and time. Situational experiences, distinctive to this culture, are what create this displaced community and the street literacy to which all members are expected to adhere.

In addition to physical survival practices, this research uncovered a number of mental strategies developed and employed by this demographic to protect themselves. I knew from personal experience the protective measures enacted by many street females who participate in sex trade, such as denial or disassociation between the person and the act, but I was shocked when I discovered that these measures are woven into and reinforced by language. When I started analyzing the excerpts that adhered to the categories I had chosen, there were obvious language patterns present which contained instances of digression and reframing that sent my mind reeling. I observed the participants' ability to restructure their wording and reframe their situation in a way that empowered them or justified the actions taking place. The use of qualifiers and their ability to manipulate the structure of their reality was an unanticipated skill that made me note the sophisticated use of language and strategies employed by these street children's bodies and minds. They had actually interlaced protective measures into their discursive practices. The mastery and ability demonstrated in the restructuring of recollections can be seen in the redefining of roles that takes place between the predator and the victim, as seen in Lauren's interview excerpts. Several of the female participants reframe their times being sexually exploited or trafficked, conveying their role in the scenario as that of the predator and

the men getting the sex are the victims. This coping mechanism is also seen and supported by existing data when the predators victimizing these displaced youths are perceived by the child as a caregiver or parental figure. It is only through the analysis of language and word choices that these unique mental strategies can be explored.

Emotional communication survival practices are also applied. The tough exteriors developed as a protective measure allows the homeless children to hide instances where they would normally be expressing emotion. Being void of emotion is equated with strength within the homeless adolescent community, as we learned through Buckwheat's narratives and the excerpt of dialogue taking place between Heather and I. This strength then serves to deter predators and threats. The reframing documented above protects both the mental and emotional state of the victim allowing them to remove themselves from the victimization and reality of their circumstances. This internal rhetoric and language use is an instinctual reaction to the experiences and interactions unique to this demographic.

Instinctually evolved community identifiers also include heightened perception when assessing the dangers or benefits of a situation. These homeless children have developed keen observation skills that are needed in deciphering the coded language and behaviors of predators and other members of this community. Sensitivity to micro expressions, tone, body language, and situational context all expand on the street youth's understanding of what is being said. This can be seen in the example showing the meaning and connotation that is attached by the participants to the phrase "I want to help you." Words hold little value in our community, as seen through the exploration of silence traditions in our displaced society, yet we are a community built predominantly on oral discourse practices.

As earlier stated our nontraditional and often unconventional rhetorical practices and oral traditions contradict and challenge the validity of written discourse and traditional literacy as a necessary component when constructing a community. Even though I argue that conventional education and outside literacy skills are necessary to empower these displaced children and eventually enable them to live on their own, I maintain my assertion that street literacy is a valid and complete literacy system that has a place in academia. My homeless adolescent community has built and applied an entire system of discursive practices, linguistically adhered to communication norms, rhetorical strategies, navigational approaches, coping mechanisms, cultural conventions, and identifiable language practices, all of which are taught and learned through the various methods outlined through this thesis. These community markers apply to all of our "imagined community" members, proving that this is an established and observed literacy by the majority of street children. The climate of this culture and the environment void of a set location and time rhetorically dictates the use of this literacy in order to survive. This rhetoric in this community is an art mastered by these children and the survival that defines their daily hustle is a literacy tied directly to their predicament.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Through the course of this study, I have successfully established and explicated the complex literacy practices of the homeless adolescent community. Through the use of narratives provided by this study's participants, I have shown multiple instances where the context of rhetorical situations has served to shape the language and practices of this displaced culture. I have demonstrated how language is constructed and described the different ways that meaning and connotation are attached to words based on experiences and environment. Standard definitions and meanings are deemed void as a language that is built on understanding human nature and the environmental demands of street life replace conventional denotation and everyday language use. Silence is left to explain the abuses that solidify our underground structure and the tradition of secrecy protects the predators that target our vulnerable population. This research has also uncovered coping strategies which serve to mask these harsh realities and protect the homeless adolescent mentally, physically and emotionally. These rhetorical practices are developed as a direct result of circumstances being endured and become intrinsically woven into these street children's survival routines. These skills allow the children to manipulate language, reframe situations and adhere to a heightened sensitivity to communication cues. All of these strategies are applied within the homeless adolescent community to ensure that these children's needs are met and safety is secured. This virtually invisible group of children have learned to navigate and survive in a world riddled with depravity.

This community's conventions are adapted and adopted by these homeless teenagers and becomes a system that can be taught and learned through discursive practices, rhetorical strategies, community specific actions and other cultural norms. As stated throughout this thesis, street smarts and the survival measures that it entails create a complete and comprehensive literacy system which is constructed and sustained by runaways, foster children, street youths, and homeless adolescents. This thesis has clearly demonstrated the value of studying this demographics' literacy practices, as a tool for understanding and helping save these children.

This research serves to expand existing scholarship's views on literacy, challenging assertions that written discourse, and traditional educational foundations are necessary when constructing and solidifying a community and its literacy practices. The homeless adolescent community's language use, communication customs, and rhetorical practices challenge standard language conventions and proves that their communally constructed and agreed upon survival practices establish a valid and recognizable literacy foundation. This study contributes to the English field by demonstrating a variety of ways for RCLS skills to be employed when gathering empirical evidence, studying language and rhetorical application, and in identifying the varying components of a complex literacy system. This thesis has also invited the academic community to explore unconventional methods used to foster learning outside of a classroom and to adopt new approaches to studying how and why people learn.

Limitations

In regards to findings, the ceiling placed on this study involves my decision to limit the number of interview participants. A wider sampling of the former homeless youth population is needed to thoroughly explore this community on a broader scale. Other factors limiting this

study include a lack of male participants and difficulties locating the adult survivors of this demographic. As stated earlier in this study, transient life styles and a strong sense of secrecy concerning communal customs make it difficult to locate and gather data from large numbers of this population. These limits greatly reduce the potential for future longitudinal research needed to follow this demographic from adolescence to adulthood.

Accuracy and reliability of the participant's recollection of events was a major concern throughout this study. Communication and protective measures displayed by my volunteers, including editing and reframing of situations, often gave incomplete or audience directed accounts of the experiences that were shared. Claims and credibility varied as the volunteers' memories revisited traumatic encounters from their pasts. Denial, repression, and time all factored into the data collection process. The participant's reluctance to reveal the conditions and circumstances that were endured on the streets and their adherence to a code of silence concerning predators greatly limited certain areas of this demographic that I had wanted to explore, as well.

While I found the above mentioned limits taxing, the most restricting elements of my research process came in the form of meeting university demands and attaining IRB approval. My research was bound and my voice scripted by IRB requirements, which greatly limited the structure of my interviews. Formatting restrictions stripped me of the artistic license needed to accurately and effectively depict my homeless community. I was given an academic brush, a single color of paint, a limited canvas and a controlled hand-- then I was instructed to cover the entire canvas with paint. Yes, the strokes were still mine. Yes, each drop of paint contained the emotion I assigned it, but in the end the blanketed canvas would still be void of an honest ethnographic picture. I opted for authenticity and I believe that I was able to adhere ethically and

academically to the oppressive establishment rules while only mildly painting outside of the lines. Every limit that I encountered during my research has sparked an opportunity for future exploration. I accept the challenges of these limits and I hope to conquer them in future studies.

Consideration For Future Research

There are numerous directions and seemingly endless openings for expansions in research concerning homeless adolescent populations. Gaps in scholarship concerning networks leaves a need for more empirical exploration of relationships made and maintained on the streets by these children. Heath, Street, and Mills maintain that "network analysis, a classic tool of sociologists, enables ethnographers to see clearly the social connections of individuals and the clustering of their relationships as well as the density and fragmentation of their linkages" (59). Gaining trust and credibility in this community will be the key to breaking the silence of networking and the unspoken code that forbids street kids from naming fellow homeless youths or predators.

Research opportunities exist in areas studying the predators and pedophiles who are preying on this population and exploiting these children. By understanding how predators access these children, safety measures can be put in place to prevent victimization. In the article "Risk Factors for Sexual Victimization Among Male and Female Homeless and Runaway Youth," researchers note that "little research to date has focused on the perpetrators of sexual victimization of homeless youth. As, such we know little about the young person's relationship to the perpetrator" (Tyler et al 504). Studies concerning the homeless child's relationship to his or her predator and the negotiations which lead to it are pivotal in implementing protection measures, as well as finding out where predators fall in networking situations.

Future research concerning this demographic is needed on greater populations of street youths who now have technology and social media outlet tools to expand their networks. Online social mediums allow easy access by predators to vulnerable displaced adolescents, creating an immediate need for prevention of pedophilic recruitment. Future studies may also choose to explore the amount of help and outreach that are made available to these children through the use of online resources. Technology can reach more at-risk children than ever before, providing help agencies more opportunities to reach these victims before online predators find them. By creating more points of interception of the street children population, we will be able to get a closer understanding of how these interactions are taking place and hopefully reinforce points of vulnerability so that these children remain unharmed.

Investigations concentrating on the agencies that are equipped to conduct these interceptions is greatly needed. Looking into how authorities, help agencies, government child welfare programs, and educators can work together to ensure this demographic gets the most effectual assistance is an avenue in need of exploring. An examination of these organizations' current programs assisting homeless youth needs to be audited and existing research needs to be expanded on in areas that are falling short or failing the displaced population. The goal of these studies should be to find ways to get children off the streets and keep them off the streets.

Studies focusing on finding lifelines to reach these children and equip them with the skills to get off the streets are greatly needed. Tyler et al. concludes that early intervention is key, noting that "being able to reach these young people and to let them know about potential opportunities, such as assistance completing their high school education and job training may save some of them from having to resort to trading sex" (517). Giving these children marketable job skills, opportunities to financially support themselves and safe, stable environments to

continue their education, would "indirectly lower their risk for sexual victimization" by removing them from the dangers of the streets (Tyler et al. 517). Solution-aimed studies will help generate jobs and programs that will integrate these adolescents into being productive members of society.

Concerning future research expanding on this thesis, I would love to see a larger population interviewed and followed from adolescents throughout their adult life to accurately gage the effectiveness of solution measures. I would also like to delve deeper into how former street youths reflect on their experiences as homeless teens and how their past continues to affect them, both positively and negatively, as adults.

Solutions and Organizations

Recognition needs to be given to organizations, such as Covenant House, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and The Polly Klaas Foundation for working to find and re-establish homeless teens' and runaways' stability. Two of my interviewees named Covenant House in their interviews as an organization that helps our population gain life skills, while providing a safe environment and basic needs to young adults transitioning into independent living. I would like to thank Covenant House for passing my email recruitment letter on to potential volunteers and I look forward to working with them in the future. The Polly Klaas Foundation does exceptional work partnering with runaway hotlines and law enforcement to bring at risk youths home and provide services to runaways and their families. PKF is working to get children off the streets and out of danger. CASA is a volunteer organization that matches child advocates to foster care children. CASA encourages their volunteers to spend time with the displaced children, meet with their families (whether foster or traditional), advocate for them in a

court of law, make sure that the conditions that they are placed in are suitable and stable, and listen to the child's wishes while simultaneously evaluating what is in the best interest of the child. CASA is always looking for volunteers and I strongly urge my readers to get involved and invest in a child's future and safety. Volunteer. Donate. Help. Care. Change.

Final Thoughts

What I found most surprising in this journey was the overall pride that the participants voiced concerning who they have become in the aftermath of their struggles. Not one of them, myself included, said that they would want to take back this chapter in their lives. As difficult as certain aspects of our past were to talk about, I believe that this thesis promoted healing and closure for its participants. I hope that by educating and writing on who we were and are as individuals within a community, that this thesis will open a door of awareness and introduce the children who remain invisible. I want nothing more than for our stories to go beyond the single dimension of this thesis- I want the words to ignite action which will move beyond its pages. Our words have joined to form one voice and that voice is meant to be heard. As for "final thoughts," I will stop uniting our voices through my personal ethnographic lens and let the survivors' voices speak for themselves. The participants were asked if they wished to add anything to this interview, cared to reflect on how their lives would had been different if they hadn't gone through these hardships, and for any words of advice they wished to offer. These were their final responses:

Linda:

Just that I'm alive.

Wendell:

I think looking at "what if" is kind of silly- There is an is- there is the what is and the what if's are kind of speculation- there's no way I could tell you in a reasonable shadow of a doubt what might've happened- I might've been a taxi driver in New York taking the denizens and people about their chores and daily lives. I don't know… I could've been an opera singer. I can't tell you. I do know that it has shaped me. Absolutely it has shaped me and it has definitely colored my perception of what I consider to be a home and personally… I don't know…that's a tough question. What I can say is this- that it broadened my perspectives and it made me see the world in a much more grim and candid eye than normally I think most people would see. Would I trade that for a shielded view? I don't necessarily know that I would trade those experiences- even if I had the opportunity and if I had actually stayed at home and my father had not been who he was. How would I have turned out? I would have been a different person, but would that be a better person? I don't know. I can confidently say I am who I am- having endured the trials that I had to endure and still came through a pretty reasonable individual. I don't know if a person that is not tested in that line of fire could say the same thing. I don't know …that's what I'd have to say- I don't know.

Heather:

As for the people that didn't look for me, fuck you. And for the people that are about to go through it- don't. If you have a way not to- if you do… a lot of them don't but if you do- be aware- carry a knife- carry a gun… I'm sorry- carry something that will slit their throat if they go wrong. If they don't go wrong- maybe they'll end up being your best friend …sometimes… maybe. I'm proud of who I am. I know that's wrong to say. They say you should not be proud of yourself, but I am.

Pamela:

I was particularly blessed and I think that many people in the situation that I was in-having not been cared for by people who offered the stability that I had- could've really taken some turns for the worse as far as the choices they make and how they can handle school or the choices that they're able to make… like not being able to apply to go to college or get a job because they might not have the education that I was able to get.

Merick:

I guess the thing that I would like to add is that if you see a kid suffering in your neighborhood or in your apartment building- if they're your friends or family- check in on them- find out what's going on- ask questions- talk to the parents and ask what you can do to help. It could be something to the level of some single mom working three jobs and trying to make ends meet and you can babysit her kids, bring them groceries, you can help out- you could take stress off that family. All it takes is getting involved.

Buckwheat:

I know it's one of the old adages- be careful what you wish for, but still, some people just don't need to be alive- some people don't need to be on the face of this earth- they need to be gone… bye-bye. I'm not one of these people.

Lauren:

I might start crying. I think I would've probably had a healthy sexual relationship and family dynamics…a happy man and the house and the home and the kids and the dog. Everything and I could've made it last. The problem with being so jaded is that I don't trust- I don't give in and I don't show my vulnerability- I don't connect. It's almost like I just go through the motions like a robot on autopilot all the time until somebody stops me

and shakes me loose out of it. I've gotten so good at turning off my emotion that now I can't really keep them on. As a mom, I would say don't do it… don't do it. As the me that went through it… it was badass.

PI: Nobody else could've survived this shit, but we did.

Lauren: It amazes me that we found each other. I was like "you're a hustler? I'm a hustler."

PI: So, what is the Hustle?

Heather:

Survival. Man, I hate the word. I hate that word. Survival take it. Am I wrong… is it not? It's not hustle- it's just survival… I'm gonna eat tonight and I'm gonna sleep somewhere tonight and I'm gonna wake up tomorrow- that's survival.

As my final thoughts…The value of this research within my academic community is found in the invitation that is being extended for English scholarship and Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Study fields to begin looking at language construction, contextually and situationally developed practices and rhetorical application within cultural structures as legitimate and intricate literacy systems. This thesis contributes a well-designed, multifaceted model for RCLS scholars to follow and build upon in order to perpetuate the challenge of expanding our discipline's methodological scope and the ways that we think about rhetoric. This thesis provides empirical evidence that shows how situational rhetoric dictates community practices and provides specific examples on how rhetorical strategies are employed to combat the contextual demands of the environment. The carefully designed methodological approaches to this research provide an outline for future scholars seeking to humanize the communities that they are analyzing and it provides the research practices necessary to ethically and interactively gathering data.

The participants of this study and the voices offered through narratives and shared discourse are the one thing in this study that are not replicable. The contribution and the value of this academically unprecedented population is given through the openness and honesty of its brave survivors. It is for these survivors that I chose to employ a method of research that would prove to be an evolution of existing models employed by the masters of our discipline. Throughout this piece, I adopt and adapt the ideas behind Gee's theory that "Meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action in the material and social world" and that "the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences are always situated, that is, customized to our actual contexts" (par. 5-9). This thesis gives evidence that supports these assertions, but it also evolves this theory by studying and displaying instances where rhetorical practices are contextually created and enacted in order to navigate around and survive within these situations. This thesis also embraces Melea Powell's study of language and traditions where the duality of cultural and academic identities are viewed as "simultaneous habitations" and are used as tactics to "[navigate] the simple binary contradiction between savagism and civilization" (426). Powell's contributions within the English field paved a road for other invisible and oppressed communities, such as adolescent street children, to be recognized and defined within scholarship, allowing them to "reimagine" their own identities (428). My thesis builds on her bravery by explicating my cultures' communally constructed identity into concrete, identifiable, population specific examples of language negotiations and applications, in addition to providing future researchers new approaches to studying the ways that rhetoric is created and employed within culturally unique literacy systems. In addition to Gee and Powell's work, the mindset needed to complete an accurate and authentic study of my unique society was built on the ethnographical foundation set by Shirley Brice Heath and her associates. I put Heath's model into practice and

in doing so, I was able to become a part of something new that was created and cultivated out of existing knowledge. This journey transformed my research process into an environment full of learning moments. Within this study, the streets have become a classroom. Other community members have become the teachers. The circumstances, experiences, language and basic human needs have become the pedagogical curriculum. A system of survival has become the knowledge. Strategies, language and traditional practices transition this knowledge into praxis. Learning from mistakes becomes a revision process. The continuance of this cycle establishes a learning institution--producing teachers and students. And the recollections and reflections that are offered by the survivors is a demonstration of the metacognitive value behind this research approach. This study is my community's message to academia, letting them know that we are here and ready to take our place within their world.

REFERENCES

"America's Youngest Outcasts." *The National Center on Family Homelessness.* American Institutes for Research, 2015. Web. 19 Mar. 2015.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 1991. Print.

Brueggman, Brenda Jo. "Still-life: Representations and Silences in the Participant-Observer Role." *Ethics & Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy.* Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. Print.

Chen, Xiaojin, Lisa Thrane, Les B. Whitbeck, Kurt D. Johnson, and Dan R. Hoyt. "Onset of Conduct Disorder, Use of Delinquent Subsistence Strategies, and Street Victimization Among Homeless and Runaway Adolescents in the Midwest." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* Sep 22.9 (2007): 1156-183. *Ebscohost.* Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

"Community." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

"Definition of Child Abuse and Neglect." *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families* (2014): n. pag. Web. 3 Feb. 2015.

Delpit, Lisa D. "Acquisition of Literate Discourse: Bowing Before the Master?" *Theory Into Practice*. 31.4 (1992): 296-302. *Ebscohost.* Web. 12 Aug. 2015.

"Doubled up." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag.Web. 19 June 2015.

Ennett, Susan T., Susan L. Bailey, and E. Belle Federman. "Social Network Characteristics Associated with Risky Behaviors among Runaway and Homeless Youth." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 40.1 (1999): 63-78. *Ebscohost.* Web. 12 May 2015.

"Ethnography." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

"Exploitation." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

"Facts About the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R. 576/S. 256)." *Help Homeless Children and Youth Now* (2012): n. pag. Web. 29 Jan. 2015.

Gee, James Paul. "Reading as Situated Language: A Sociocognitive Perspective." *Journal of Adolescents & Adult Literacy*. May 44.8 (2001): n. pag. *Ebscohost.* Web. 12 Aug. 2015.

Gee, James Paul. "Teenagers In New Times: A New Literacy Studies Perspective." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy. Feb*. 43.5 (2000): n.pag. *Ebscohost*. Web. 12 Aug. 2015.

Goody, Jack, and Ian Watt. "The Consequences of Literacy." *Perspectives of Literacy. Carbondale*: Southern Illinois UP, 1988. Print.

Heath, Shirley Brice, Brian V. Street and Molly Mills. *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research*. New York: Teachers College, 2008. Print.

Heath, Shirley Brice. "Oral and Literate Traditions among Black Americans Living in Poverty." *American Psychologist* 44.2 (1989): 367-73.Web. 12 Aug. 2015.

Heath, Shirley Brice. "So What's It About? Your Book, I Mean?" *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. Dec. 56.4 (2012): 266-270. *Ebscohos*t. Web. 12 Aug. 2015.

"Help." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

Hoey, Brian A. "What Is Ethnography?" *Brian A. Hoey, Ph.D.* (2015): n. pag.Web. 15 Mar. 2015.

"Homeless." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag.Web. 19 June 2015.

"Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Defining 'Homeless' Final Rule." *Department of Housing and Urban Development* (2015): n. pag. Web. 2 Feb. 2015.

"Hooking." *Urban Dictionary* (2015): n. pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

"Hustle." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag.Web. 19 June 2015.

Murphy, Joseph F., and Kerri J. Tobin. "Homelessness Comes to School." *Phi Delta Kappan* Nov 93.3 (2011): 32-37. Ebscohost. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.

Noell, John, Paul Rohde, John Seeley, and Linda Ochs. "Childhood Sexual Abuse Adolescent Sexual Coercion and Sexually Transmitted Infection among Homeless Female Adolescents." *Child Abuse & Neglect* Jan 25.1 (2001): 137-48. *Ebscohost*. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

Powell, Malea. "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians use Writing." *College Composition and Communication*. Feb. 53.3 (2002): 396-434. *Jstor*. Web. 12 Aug. 2015.

"Predator." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

"Prostitution." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

"Runaway and Homeless Youth Act." *National Network for Youth NN4Y* (2013): n. pag. Web. 7 Feb. 2015.

"Runaway Children." *National Center for Missing and Exploited Children* (2015): n. pag. Web. 19 Jan. 2015.

"Sexual Coercion and State Reporting Laws." *Region I Title X Family Planning Training Center* (2012): n. pag. Web. 3 Jan. 2015.

"Sex Offenses and Offenders." *Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs* (1997): 1-45. Web. 6 Jan. 2015.

"Sugar Daddy." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

Sullivan, Patricia A. "Ethnography and the Problem of the 'other'." *Ethics & Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy.* Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. Print.

"Thesis Interview : Buckwheat." *Personal interview*. 7 Nov. 2014.

"Thesis Interview : Heather Vickers." *Personal interview*. 7 Nov. 2014.

"Thesis Interview : Lauren Mcgali." *Personal interview.* 7 Nov. 2014.

"Thesis Interview: Linda Bazaar." *Personal interview*. 7 Nov. 2014.

"Thesis Interview: Merick Peterson." *Personal interview*. 7 Nov. 2014.

"Thesis Interview: Pamela Kay." *Personal interview.* 7 Nov. 2014.

"Thesis Interview: Wendell Barker." *Personal interview.* 7 Nov. 2014.

"The Truth About Runaway Youth." *Polly Klaas Foundation* (2013): n. pag. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.

Tyler, Kimberly A., Les B. Whitbeck, Dan R. Hoyt, and Ana Mari Cauce. "Risk Factors for Sexual Victimization among Male and Female Homeless and Runaway Youth." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 19 (2004): 503-20. *Ebscohost.* Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

"Victim." *Merriam-Webster* (2015): n.pag. Web. 19 June 2015.

Walls, Eugene N., and Stephanie Bell. "Correlates of Engaging in Survival Sex among Homeless Youths." *Journal of Sex Research* 48 (2011): 423-36. *Ebscohost.* Sept.-Oct. 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

"Youth." *National Alliance to End Homelessness* (2015): n.pag. Web. 5 Feb. 2015.

Zima, Bonnie T., Regina Bussing, Stephanie Freeman, Xiaowei Yang, Thomas Belin, and Steven Forness. "Behavior Problems, Academic Skill Delays and School Failure among School-aged Children in Foster Care: Their Relationship to Placement Characteristics." *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 9.1 (2000): 87-103. *Ebscohost*. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.

Zorc, Catherine, Amanda O'Reilly, Merideth Matone, Jin Long, Caroline Watts, and David Rubin. "The Relationship of Placement Experience to School Absenteeism and Changing Schools in Young, School-aged Children in Foster Care." *Children & Youth Services Review* May 35.5 (2013): 826-33. *Ebscohost.* Web. 14 Feb. 2014.

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS- PAN AMERICAN

AUDIO RELEASE FORM

Adolescent Street Literacy: The Art of The Hustle

Researcher: Regina Welch

Phone: 956-903-4333

Email Address: welchregina@hotmail.com

I hereby give permission to Regina Welch to audio record my responses during the interview for this study, "Adolescent Street Literacy: The Art of the Hustle." I understand that my confidentiality will be protected with the use of a pseudonym, in the form of a made up name which will be assigned prior to the interview and used in every aspect of collecting the data- including, but not limited to, the entire interview, transcription, final document process, in addition to every aspect of collecting the data. I further understand that neither my name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio recording or transcription of my recorded responses. The recorded material will only be used for research purposes and for the presentation of the research. As with all research consent, I may at any time withdraw permission for audio recorded material of me to be used in this research project, hereby terminating my participation in this study. If I choose to terminate my participation in this study at any time, or

for any reason, I further understand that all recordings and documents involving my participation will be destroyed.

I acknowledge that there is no compensation for allowing myself to be audio recorded.

I am permitting the review and transcription of my recorded interview by the investigator. The recording will be kept for approximately three years and will be securely stored in the researcher's (Regina Welch) personal safe. No one other than the investigators will have access to the data. After the data is collected and transcriptions are made, the recording will be destroyed.

Participant's Signature:_____ Date: _____

Investigator's Signature:_____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Adolescent Street Literacy: The Art of the Hustle

Investigators: Regina Welch

Background: I, Regina Welch under the advisement of Dr. Danika Brown, am conducting this research in order to construct my Master's Thesis and attain my degree upon its completion. My thesis is based on my desire to create a clearer picture of the lives, practices and language used by homeless youths. This study aims to ascertain information and experiences, by way of personal interviews, involving survival and navigational practices by children within an underground discourse community. The purpose of this study is to create a better understanding of how these skills are implemented, developed and carried out as accepted norms and to learn more about the recruitment and acclimation measures that serve to make this population fluent in the street literacy practices. I welcome any and all willing individuals (ages 30-65), who are not incarcerated during the time of this research or currently being treated for mental illness, whom experienced any duration of homelessness after the age of twelve and before the age of eighteen. The knowledge gained from this study will serve to protect children who are subjected to unforeseen obstacles, directly related to unstable living conditions.

Procedure: If after reading this Informed Consent Form you agree to voluntarily participate in the current study, I will conduct a personal interview with you, which will last approximately one hour in a setting in which you feel comfortable. Because I want to ensure your experiences, knowledge, and insights are represented as accurately as possible, I will ask for your permission to audio record the personal interview. If you agree, I will provide you with an Audiotape Release Form to obtain your approval. If prior to the interview you choose not to be audiotape recorded, you will be respectfully recused from this study. In order to protect your confidentiality, I will utilize pseudonyms to refer to your experiences; the audio recording and transcripts will be coded with a pseudonym in order to protect your identity. In order to ensure that confidentiality is maintained, I will not refer to specific experiences mentioned in this interview via email. After I transcribe the interview and upon your request, I can provide you with a hard copy of the transcript in person. You will then have the opportunity to read, change, and/or revise the transcript before I proceed with analysis. After making revisions, per your request, I will proceed to analyze the interview/transcript.

Risks or Possible Discomforts Associated with the Study: Although there are no anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study, I cannot rule out minimal risks involving mental discomfort or stress, due to the delicate nature of the research material which may reveal degrading acts and practices perpetrated and conducted routinely within this community. However, if you feel uncomfortable at any point or prefer not to answer a question, you have the right to terminate the interview immediately or skip any interview question. If you choose to completely terminate your participation in this study, I will immediately destroy any and all information, written or recorded, which has been provided.

Benefits of Participation: Although there are no direct benefits of participation, there are a number of indirect benefits that may positively impact society. The participants will draw attention to a plague of homeless youths in America and expose practices that threaten to harm children. The knowledge gained through this research will raise awareness of the plight of these children, allowing preventative measures and solutions, which serve to thwart future atrocities and crimes against unprotected minors, to be devised and implemented.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. If for any reason you decide that you would like to discontinue your participation, simply tell the researcher that you wish to stop.

Anonymity and/or Confidentiality: Your participation in this study will be treated as confidential. The audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will not be linked to your name. When data is reported for a presentation or publication, all identifiable information will be removed and only general references regarding your circumstances and age at the time of the experiences will be noted. I will be using the pseudonym, in the form of a made up name, assigned to you at the beginning of the study throughout the entire research process. The audiotape recordings will be kept in the researchers' home safe for approximately three years; the transcripts will be secured without any identifying information. The data will be kept separate from all consent forms. If you choose to review the interview transcripts, I will meet with you in person to deliver the transcript. In order to ensure confidentiality, I will not refer to specific experiences mentioned in the interview via e-mail. I will then meet with you in person to

obtain your revisions to the interview transcripts. You will note any changes or revisions via a hardcopy; you will not provide your name or any other identifiable information.

Who to Contact for Research Related Questions: For questions about the research itself, or to report any adverse effects during or following participation, contact the researcher, Regina Welch at rlwelch@broncs.utpa.edu or at 254-364-2322.

Who to Contact Regarding Your Rights as a Participant: This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protection (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at 956.665.2889 or irb@utpa.edu. You are also invited to provide anonymous feedback to the IRB by visiting www.utpa.edu/IRBfeedback.

Signatures: By signing below, you indicate that you are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study and that the procedures involved have been described to your satisfaction. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own reference. In order to participate, you must be at least 18 years of age. If you are under 18, please inform the researcher.

_____   ____/_____/_____

Participant's Signature   Date

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Participants Needed

To Whom It May Concern,

I am currently in the process of collecting data for my Master's thesis titled "Adolescent Street Literacy: The Art of the Hustle." My study focuses on personal interviews with individuals. I am defining homeless as any person who lived without established living quarters, including, but not limited to, runaways, foster children, and orphans and abandoned youths.

This study aims to ascertain information and experiences involving survival and navigational practices by children within an underground society. I am interested in exploring how these skills are implemented, developed and carried out as accepted norms and to learn more about the recruitment and acclimation measures that serve to make this population fluent in the street literacy practices. The knowledge gained from this study will serve to protect children who are subjected to unforeseen obstacles, directly related to unstable living conditions.

Translation: If you lived on the streets, couch hopped, or asked yourself "where am I going to sleep tonight?" before the age of 18, I would like to talk to you about how you survived, got your next hot meal, picked your friends and what you had to do to live day by day. I hope to help

people understand who we were and who we have become due to these experiences and to try to help kids that are currently homeless or at risk of being in these situations.

If you meet these criteria and are interested in voluntarily participating in a one hour interview, please contact me at welchregina@hotmail.com . Also, if you know of any other individuals that fit this research's requirements, please forward this letter to those who might be interested.

Once you contact me, I can answer any questions or concerns you have about this process. I will provide you with an Informed Consent Form, an Audio Recording Release Form and we can schedule a time to conduct a personal interview. You are not obligated to answer any question or discuss any situation that you are not comfortable with and you have the right to terminate your participation in this study at any time.

I appreciate your help in my research process and look forward to successfully and respectfully representing the lives and experiences of the participants. I am hopeful that the information shared will serve to create a better understanding of the literacy practices that enable the survival of this discourse community.

If you have any questions about this project, feel free to contact me at welchregina@hotmail.com or through the Institutional Review Board at irb@utpa.edu.

<div align="center">

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Regina Welch

</div>

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Research, "Adolescent Street Literacy: The Art of the Hustle"

1) At which age did you initially experience instability with your living environment or begin living on the streets?

2) How long did you remain homeless? If it is in intervals, please explain.

3) What lead to you being homeless?

4) Was there abuse in your family history? If so, please be as detailed as possible within your comfort level.

5) Can you give specific examples of where you slept or the conditions in which you lived during this time?

6) How would you go about finding shelter while on the streets? Please, be as detailed as possible when describing these practices.

7) How would you go about finding food while you were on the streets? Please, be as detailed as possible when describing these practices.

8) How would you attain necessities, such as washing clothes, taking baths, personal items (toiletries, razors, soap, deodorant, etc.)? Please, be as detailed as possible when describing these practices.

9) What hang outs or locations would you frequent to get these needs met? (Example: truck stops, bars, restaurants, convenience stores, etc.)

10) Were drugs and alcohol available and if so, how accessible were they?

11) Did you ever witness or partake in illegal activities? (Examples: shop lifting, drug use, taking money for sex, etc.)

12) Who were the people that offered you help or met your basic needs during this time? Were they adults?

13) What was your interaction with other people your age?

14) Did you ever feel that you were in danger? Please, give specific examples.

15) Did you stay in one location or move around? If you did, why?

16) What means of transportation did you use? Was there ever danger involved in your travel?

17) Did you work? If so, how did you go about finding employment?

18) Did you ever rent a place to stay? If so, did you experience any difficulty signing a lease or turning on utilities due to your underage status?

19) Can you explain the social relationships that you maintained during this period (friends, relationships, family or strangers, etc.)?

20) Did any agencies or outside resources, such as educators or social services attempt to help you during your time as a homeless youth?

21) What level of education did you complete? Did your living situation effect your education?

22) What practices and norms did you observe that could be perceived as unusual?

The next set of questions are of a more sensitive nature and you can refuse to answer or stop this line of questioning at any time.

23) Was sex ever involved in acquiring food, shelter or other necessities, such as clothes, toiletries, personal items, etc.?

If so, who were the individuals that generally offered these items for sex?

If the subject answered "yes" to question 23, I will proceed with questions 24-31. If they answer "no" I will proceed to question 32.

24) If sex was involved, how were these situations negotiated? What language was used? Please, be as graphic as possible within your comfort level.

25) Did you ever participate in any acts that could be construed as prostitution?

26) How many sexual partners did you have during your collective time on the streets?

-Of these partners, how many were adults?

-Of these adults, how many of them were aware that you were underage?

27) What sexual acts were you asked to participate in? Were you recruited into any sexual scenes? Please, be specific within your comfort level.

28) Were sexual norms put in place or expected within your homeless community? (For example, did you know that sex was a requirement when somebody gave you a place to stay?)

29) Where were these sexual encounters initiated and where would they generally take place? (Example: work, warehouses, clubs, in private homes, etc.)

30) Did you ever partake in homosexual activities?

31) I want to discuss specific language and word use. I am going to ask you a series of questions, based on your familiarity and experience with the following terms.

How do you define or associate these words and phrases?

-Victim

-predator

-pedophile

-Hustle

-Negotiated services or sexual skills

-Sugar daddy/ being kept

-Good time girl

-Street sister

-"your turn"

-Flat backing

-hooking

-Getting rolled/ taken for a ride

-Do you want company?

- When a man says "I want to help you" or "I want to take care of you"

-prostitute knob

Safe house

32) What would you want people to know about your time as a homeless youth?

33) What effects do you see in your life as an adult that may have been different if you were given a stable home as a child?

34) Is there anything else that you wish to add to this interview?

35) Do you have any questions or concerns for me?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mrs. Regina L.Welch attained her Master's of Arts Degree for the Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies (RCLS) track in English from the University of Texas Pan-American in the August of 2015. Her prior achievements include a Bachelor of Arts degree from the afore mentioned university, with the recognized distinction of Summa Cum Laude, and an Associate's of Arts from South Texas College (STC). In addition to her academic endeavors, Ms. Welch cherishes her role as a wife, to Stephen Earl Mason, and as a mother to her two sons, Cruz and Carlos Lopez, who are pursuing degrees in the Aeronautical Engineering and Communication fields at the University of Texas in Austin and San Antonio. Ms. Welch's permanent address is: 239 Palm Ave Mercedes, Texas, 76570. Ms. Welch spent her time as a student employed as a Supplemental Instructor for English and Government at STC. She is a staunch human rights activist and long standing member of Amnesty International. Her heart lies in working with her community to establish a unified, empowering, environment that will encourage growth in society and give our children the confidence to challenge deficiencies and enact change.