ANXIOUSLY YOURS, (FE)MAIL: A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF ANXIETY, EMPATHY, AND HOPE IN ART MUSEUM EDUCATION

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This research explores the relationship between narrative, empathy and anxiety in art museum education. The study begins from my personal experience with anxiety and is methodologically rooted in narrative inquiry and friendship as method. In this study, I propose a creative method of narrative postcard writing called *(fe)mail* – rooted in a feminist ethic of care that seeks to understand and empathize with the experience of others through correspondence. This research asks relevant questions about the future of art museum programming for mental illness and the act of writing (fe)mail as a reflective practice for academics and educators in the field of social science. In my narrative analysis of the program and the data, I also problematizes my role as researcher, educator and friend throughout the study by considering my own biases, expectations and personal educator agenda.

The study is divided into two parts. The first comprises correspondence and analysis of (fe)mail between myself and my best friend/co-participant, Atleigh. In Part I, I conduct a narrative analysis of the (fe)mail data produced between us in order to answer the following questions: What qualities of (fe)mail will appear in the exchange? Can (fe)mail be used as a tool for self-care during the research writing process? In Part II of the study, (fe)mail is brought into the museum by way of a virtual museum program for six women in order to answer the following questions: In what ways does the museum program create a sense of community among participants? In what ways might (fe)mail create empathy for works of art, the self, and others as part of a museum program?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Page

Tables

Figures

CHAPTER 1

ANXIETY, EMPATHY NARRATIVE AND MUSEUMS

Background to the Story: An Opening Narrative

In May of 2019 I sat cross-legged on a comfy cream-colored loveseat across from a therapist. My demeanour on this day was one of excitement and nervousness. I believed I knew exactly what was wrong with me and thought that, perhaps, this woman whom I did not know could help me fix it or, at least, help me cope with life a little easier. Toward the end of our session, I gripped my notebook tightly. I proceeded to ask her a question I desperately needed an answer to in order to move forward with certainty: "Do I have anxiety?"

Perhaps it was an obvious or stupid question, but behind my inquiry, I was looking for a professional diagnosis, a certain line I could draw in the sand between normal and not normal. The therapist answered in a very "therapist" kind of way by asking me another question, "Why is it so important for you to know the answer to that question?"

I must admit that I was both annoyed and somewhat intrigued by her reply. What did this label mean to me? Did I need it to hold onto? Would it validate my experience of anxiety? I am still not sure I have the answer to these questions, but that day in her office, I answered by going off on a tangent about how I did not want to misuse this word to describe my feelings if they did not correspond with this particular experience termed clinically an "anxiety disorder." Before I left her office, she concluded our session by saying, "Well, if it really matters to you, based on your symptoms and what you have described to me, I would say, yes, you have anxiety." I left feeling somewhat a strange relief in having a name to call my irrational fears and daily anxious thoughts.

This was one of my first encounters with a formal diagnosis of anxiety, and I struggled

with whether to put it in this introduction. I suppose that by telling this story, I am hoping that you get a small glimpse into who I am and how I came to accept myself as an anxious person. Although I've had a diagnosis from a mental health professional, there are many things I do not know about anxiety. I want to jump right in and tell you that I am not a health professional. I am also not writing from the perspective of someone completely healed and looking backward.

Rather, this dissertation was strung together in the midst of my anxiousness, which only increased with the onset of the global COVID pandemic. You might be asking yourself why in the world you should care. This is an art education dissertation, after all. I want you to know that while I am curious and care about anxiety, my own suffering, and the pain of people around me, I also care deeply about art education, more specifically, museum education. My dissertation topic hit me in the spring of 2019, coincident to the period in which I fell in love with museum education, discovered narrative inquiry, and accepted my own anxiety. Oh, the serendipity that all of these developments culminated in what is now the final stage of my doctoral journey.

Because of this perfect synergy, it was as though my topic had hit me over the head unexpectedly. For this reason, instead of describing my process as that of searching, I often find myself saying that my dissertation topic found me.

I felt inspired to write about my struggle with anxiety after reading my advisor and committee chair Laura Evans' dissertation, primarily an autoethnography about her struggle with mental illness in the form of an eating disorder. Autoethnography provided a meaningful and liberating way to express myself in my research field. I knew immediately upon immersing myself in this methodology that it had chosen me. Still, I found myself wondering, where is this methodology inside the museum? I had spent years working in galleries and museums in the small city of Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. I had racked up so many internships that I graduated

with a professional practice specialization at the end of my undergraduate art history degree. My museum experience was curatorial, and so it was object-based and object-focused. It was analytical and serious, and rarely did I encounter the personal in a wall label or exhibition didactic. While narrative inquiry had pulled at my heart strings, I couldn't seem to connect it in any way to my first passion and true love, museums.

In February, 2019 a special exhibition opened at the Dallas Museum of Art. I would spend most Friday afternoons there with our museum education class, and I would gander over at the massive black and white poster of Georgia O'Keefe and her sister Ida O'Keefe. The exhibition title hung above the photo of the sisters: *Ida O'Keefe: Escaping Georgia's Shadow*. I did not care too much about American modern art, and so I waited until the last weekend to see the show. I entered the gallery to a dark room with a short video playing. The video shots cut between curators and historians telling of Ida and Georgia's lives, their complicated relationship, and their love triangle with photographer Alfred Stieglitz. I was immediately intrigued and proceeded into the next room. The next gallery was beautifully curated with Stieglitz photographs of Ida and Georgia. The labels were short and revealed hidden secrets and symbolism in the photos that may have referenced the forbidden affair. As I walked into the next galleries, I saw Ida's paintings. Her sophisticated abstract style was seen for its own merit, completely separated from the shadow of her sister's more famous work. It took me a few weeks to realize it, but I loved this show so much because it was my way of finding storytelling in the curation and interpretation of works. For the first time, I had found narrative in an exhibition. If it existed in the construction or curation of exhibitions, then narrative certainly was present in our interpretation of works of art and in museum education. In the next few semesters and during the summer of 2019, I began seriously exploring the connection between my own anxiety and

storytelling, trying to understand how I could bring it to the museum.

As I made sense of this personally, I was taking part in a museum education seminar during the fall of 2019. I became completely enamored with the creative and meaningful ways museum educators in my class engaged with works of art and presented ideas for various programs. I realized quickly that museums were in the business of caring about people and that exhibitions and museums could not exist without people or care. I was moved by the responsibility and mission that I believed museums should have for their communities. This sentiment sparked a desire to use museum programming and my experience with anxiety for the betterment of those around me. I began to ask myself, what if museum education could change the way we see ourselves? What if it could make us more empathetic to the struggles of others? What if museums were a place we could go to talk about shared experiences and connect with others? In this manner, I thought, museums can be not only servants of the community, but community builders. Emily Wiskera (2019), Manager of Access Programs at the Dallas Museum of Art, notes:

> Museums are a common ground for human diversity, embracing difference and promoting understanding and respect among people from different communities. As such, they hold a distinct responsibility to the public to ensure equitable access to their collections through unique programs and services. (p. 21)

If this is true, then we can only assume that within the structure of the museum institution is an inherent ability to care and empathize. I began to ask myself, amidst the plethora of dynamic programming, do museums care about anxiety? I wondered about what museums were doing to help those who suffer with anxiety. After coming to my own acceptance with anxiety, I quickly learned that I was not alone and that many others suffered with similar fears. In fact, anxiety disorders are the most common mental health illness, affecting forty million adults in the United States (Kluger, 2020 p. 7). One in five university students in America suffer with anxiety

(Anxiety in College Students, 2019). I was shocked by these numbers and wondered why campus museums were not more involved in questions of mental health in their universities. I remember thinking back to my time as an undergraduate, when I worked for four years as a gallery events coordinator. As a gallery, we never once got involved in any campus or student organizations that worked with students' mental health.

I continued my research on museums, wondering about how they could better fulfill their civic duty and institutional body language. I began to see the good that public and private museums were doing in their communities, which I discuss in the literature review of this dissertation, but I also began to see some problems. In university museums in particular, I noticed a lack of intentional programming for mental illness, specifically for anxiety. While I spoke to museum educators who talked about great initiatives in their institutions to get students from different departments and colleges to walk through the front doors, not many had tackled mental illness. I learned of great work that museum educators were doing in partnership with medical schools and language departments across campuses. They served their community members with dementia and those with autism spectrum disorder of all ages. Yet it looked like anxiety was missing from the museum conversation altogether. I felt all the more compelled to find a way to bring anxiety to the forefront of museum education.

My research, then, accentuates the museum education field, addressing a gap in the literature. I also propose that storytelling and empathy can address anxiety in museum programming. During the writing of my dissertation, I worked through much of my anxious overthinking by being open and honest about my fears with those I trusted. That is my own form of storytelling. My dissertation topic emerged out of this kind of storytelling, sheer curiosity, and passion for those who struggle with the same anxiety as I. Having engaged in continuing

conversations about my anxiousness, I must admit I am still wary of wearing this label boldly in public. It is something I am slowly opening up about in an academic setting. Even though I speak openly about my anxiety to family and friends I love, I catch myself retreating from this label in other situations. I came to this realization a few years ago during an appointment at the eye doctor.

Upon checking in with the lady behind the desk, I was handed a clipboard and took a seat next to my husband while I filled out a general health questionnaire. I checked all the usual boxes: no, no, no. Family history of high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease, check! I froze as I read the next question. "Any history with the following: depression or anxiety." I quickly checked "no" on the box next to "depression." The pen in my hand loomed slowly over the word "anxiety." I moved my pen back and forth. Yes, or no, I asked myself. I glanced over at the lady behind the desk and then at my watch. We had arrived five minutes late already. I looked over at Philip, who was scrolling absent mindedly on his phone. What an inappropriate question, I thought. Really? The eye doctor needs to know this? I checked the "no" box next to anxiety. Not entirely convinced I had made the right decision, I tapped my husband on the shoulder, waved the clipboard in front of him and pointed to the anxiety box.

"Why did you check 'no'?" he asked, confused.

"I don't know. They don't need to know that."

I suppose at the time that was my frustrated answer, but it wasn't the true reason I had checked "no" instead of "yes." The real reason was fear. I was afraid of carrying this label, of owning it, identifying with it, of having it safely lurking away in my HIPA file somewhere. I was afraid of how the eye doctor would perceive me, whether it would come up again during my consultation. As I contemplated the kind of research I wanted to do in this dissertation, I thought back to this

moment at the eye doctor, when the anxiety label stared me right in the face, and the very real anxiety inside of me made me doubt my decision on what to do with it. Well, I'd like to take this moment in this introduction to tell you this is my way of checking "yes" next to the anxiety box.

The more I make my way through this introductory chapter, strangely enough, the more I warm to the idea. Not because the anxiety box is any different here or less scary but because something meaningful that looms on the other side of it. Something worth checking off "yes" for. Laura Evans (2011) stated this beautifully regarding her own dissertation research: "It will be painful, but it will be purposeful" (Evans, 2011, p. 66). I know that undertaking this kind of research—checking off this box—will be purposeful. My hope is that it has purpose, not only for the women I work with who struggle with this specific mental illness, but for the field of museum education as a whole.

Statement of Purpose: What Do I Want to Do?

In the literature review of this dissertation, I identify a lack of concern about anxiety inside the campus art museum, evinced by the absence of anxiety-specific programming available to students. I hope to rectify this in my research by proposing an anxiety program at the Meadows Museum of Art. This study is not only a personal account of my own struggle with anxiety but a call to advance this discussion in the museum field. In this dissertation, I make the case for museums as cultivators of empathy and community, of friendship and connection. In this study, I will use my voice autoethnographically. I will also speak empathetically to the voices of other women heard through (fe)mail postcards written to one another, themselves, and works of art. Throughout this project I hope to illuminate the bonding attributes of writing (fe)mail, both with my friend Atleigh and with the women who participated in my museum program.

Throughout the summer of 2019, I felt my own anxiety rise inside of me in a way I could

no longer dismiss or pretend away. I began to face my fears head on, not through a physical fight, but with words. I began to talk about my fears out loud, to tell my own anxiety stories to the people I trusted around me. I can't tell you how much this helped in moments of panic and overthinking. I was comforted and reassured, and I did not feel as anxious because my thoughts and fears no longer had as much space to brew and grow. I would often engage in writing my stories of anxiety to my best friend Atleigh through Facebook messages or on postcards from art museum gift shops. Our correspondences were sweet, short, and vulnerable. Atleigh has been my best friend since ninth grade. We journeyed through a rigorous visual high school arts program and then went our separate ways after senior year. I went to University of Waterloo for my art history degree, and Atleigh continued on to a prestigious art school in the city, where she earned her BFA. We have seen each other in person very seldom since graduation. Despite our infrequent meetings, we have remained best friends. Aside from our lengthy conversations on Facetime and Skype, we have a shared love for letter writing and postcards, which we try to send often to one another. The content is usually of a work of art from a museum that we loved, or a picture that reminded us of an old memory. Before you make assumptions about our kindred friendship, I must note we are very different people. We come from different backgrounds, family dynamics, religious beliefs, and values. Atleigh is a cool, practicing contemporary artist living in a studio apartment in Toronto. Her work is rooted in intersectional feminism and deals with her experience as a mixed race feminist artist living in Toronto. I am married and have been in school for the past eight years (not counting high school). I live in the suburbs of Dallas, and I could never see myself living in the hustle and bustle of a big city. I moved out of my parents' house a few years ago, coming from a very loud and lively Brazilian family.

We are also very similar in many ways. We think very deeply about art, politics, and the

world. We are ambitious and easygoing introverts. We can spend hours talking or just sitting quietly, sipping tea, or cross-stitching. Like me, Atleigh struggles with anxiety. The bulk of our conversations revolve around our shared experience of anxiousness and how it weaves in and out of our lives. We laugh, cry, and analyze our shared experiences together. More importantly, we articulate our fears to one another. We sit with uncertainties and comfort each other during tough times. Through our vulnerable back and forth, Atleigh and I find empathy, joy, and true friendship that has managed to endure time and distance. When I decided to pursue the idea of anxiety and museum programming for my research project, Atleigh and I talked at length about what my project could be, what museums could do, and how the project might even affect Atleigh's own artistic practice. I decided after meeting other women in my church community that there was something special about our ability to listen and support one another. It's not that this is not true for men, but talking to and listening to women feels personal and close to my heart. Thus, I decided to pursue a project with only women-identifying participants. Atleigh and I developed a vulnerable and deep friendship through conversation and shared experiences.

While instant messaging has been an incredibly large part of that, our postcard exchange is the anchor of our friendship. It's our personal and honest way of interacting with one another. As I looked though some old postcards and spent time with them while cleaning my office cupboard, in the fall of 2019 I began to think about them more critically in light of my research ideas. Could these postcards be considered stories of anxieties in and of themselves? Could this practice of postcard writing be used in a museum program to talk openly about anxiety? How are they different from other postcards I've written or received? As I attempted to make sense of these questions, Laura Evans sent me a book recommendation, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* by Margaretta Jolly. I felt inspired by the network of care that second

wave feminists had developed with one another. I shared these ideas with Atleigh, and it quickly became clear to me that our postcards were something special. More importantly, postcards with personal stories would not hold up for me as a method of autoethnography for my research project. Atleigh pointed out that since feminist movements had their own networks and ethics of care in the late twentieth century, perhaps feminist letter writing should be called *(fe)mail.* This was a genius pun that I have slowly developed into a method or genre of feminist autoethnography. It is not only the perfect description for my and Atleigh's postcards but for the kind of narrative writing I want my participants to engage in. (fe)mail is vulnerable, honest, empathetic, and community building. It is very different from open-ended journal writing, formal letter writing, or mail advertisements. It requires a personal leap on the writer's part to share experiences with another person and to receive the experience of the other with empathy. In this way it is always in network with another, an empathetic form of writing that "suffers with" (Krznaric, 2014 p. 55) even if from a distance.

It was precisely here, out of the conception of (fe)mail, that my research project began to take shape. This dissertation project unfolded in two parts. The first took place between Atleigh and me. It began in the fall 2020, and continued throughout the semester. It consisted of correspondences between the two of us as we engaged creatively with (fe)mail. During this period, we explored how (fe)mail both shaped and transformed our relationship and our expressions of anxiety. It was also a way to make sense of and process these ideas through a network of support and care with my best friend. There is also something to be said about the written experience, the distance, and the call for interpretation it creates. (fe)mail is sweet, short, and always addressed to another being. Perhaps it is even conceptually more tied to anxiety than I had originally anticipated. It is a feeling that I live through, experience, write down

expressively and creatively, and then let go. A way of remembering the past in the form of a tangible object, similar to a painting. It carries specific meanings as it ages. While Atleigh and I have done postcard writing and letter writing to one another over the years, there is something especially intentional about (fe)mail. In order to prepare for the second part of my research project, a museum program, I decided to try out this new method of autoethnography with my best friend living in Canada. The first part of the project consisted of weekly (fe)mail writings to one another for about seven months. During this time, I further developed the practice of (fe)mail and discovered what it reveals about the experience of anxiety, friendship, empathy, and art making.

The second part of the project was made up of a single visit museum titled *Anxiously Yours: Creating Postcards and Empathy in the Art Museum*, held exclusively for six women who identified with having experienced anxiety. It incorporated empathetic interpretation and response to Miquel Barcelo's *Soup of Europe* at the Meadows Museum of Art at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. The program took place with six women, including myself, who engaged in creating (fe)mail for a specific work of art. It incorporated Bonnie Pitman's "Art of Observation" teaching criteria and a slow looking exercise. In addition, the women made their own postcards and wrote (fe)mail in response to a writing prompt. The program was intended to be simple and thought provoking. I asked participants to consider how and why the figure in the painting might be experiencing anxiety. This allowed for the women to speak about how they might be able to empathize with that emotion, having experienced it themselves. During our (fe)mail workshop, I prompted participants to write about an experience of anxiety and how they might be able to show empathy with that experience if it were the work of art who had experienced it in their place. Through this activity, I hoped to discover or prove the following: 1.

Museum education programming like this can help those with anxiety to respond to their experiences with empathy and connect groups of people based on shared experiences. 2. (fe)mail can be used as a tool inside the museum to help audiences connect with works of art through feeling and personal experience.

The first part of this project was inspired by the letter writing my best friend and I had been doing over the years. It was a method to process both our anxiety and memories of one another in between Facetime calls and Facebook messages. Giving (fe)mail a name and more intentional criteria for analysis, I was curious about the specific qualities it embodied. I took this personal way of writing about anxiety and found a place for it inside the museum in the creation of a one-time visit museum program. My hope was that other women might find connection and empathy in (fe)mail in the way that Atleigh and I did.

Research Questions: What Do I Want to Know?

In the first part of my study, I investigated my concept of autoethnography, (fe)mail, with my friend Atleigh. Our (fe)mail correspondence had a two-semester timeline during fall 2020–spring 2021. I conceived our (fe)mail correspondence as a network of vulnerability, safety, and support in which as both researcher and friend, I was able to process my feelings throughout the research process. More specifically, I was interested to see if our regular (fe)mail writing during the project brought us closer together through our shared experiences. My research questions were: What can I learn about the qualities of (fe)mail through the exchange of (fe)mail with Atleigh? How might the (fe)mail that Atleigh and I exchange alter my plan for the museum program in Part II? How might (fe)mail with Atleigh be a form of self-care during the dissertation writing process? I thought long about how to structure the first part of the dissertation project. I have presented the study chronologically, with Part I a layered analysis,

which then smoothly segues into the museum program in Part II. In Part I, as I began receiving and sending (fe)mail to my friend over the course of the semester, I realized that our correspondence was not bound by strict timelines and postcards sent and received. Rather, our network of connection and vulnerability with one another was created through various avenues of communication, including Facebook and Facetime. Nevertheless, my sequential presentation of the (fe)mail we created illustrates the theme of self-care, which happened over a long period of time, during dissertation writing and the struggle it entailed. Atleigh and I would go weeks without sending a postcard, and then one would show up. A Facetime conversation would take place or even quick messaging between Texas power outages. These became like interruptions to our days and months living through the global pandemic, a sweet reminder that in the midst of anxiousness we had each other. We were physically distant, but merely a postcard or a text away. For these reasons, I decided that the format of Part I should follow the form of the project itself. Thus, my analysis and postcards are briefly interrupted by our short conversations. As you make your way through my methodological, theoretical arguments and the literature review, please remember that this dissertation was not written in a vacuum or in one sitting, but is held together by threads of community, friendship, and the mundane interactions of a researcher and her best friend. I hope that the (fe)mail of friendship that you find throughout this dissertation might be a reminder that research is a complex, evocative, and personal journey.

The second part of the project culminated in a museum program that incorporated (fe)mail as a form of creative reflective writing and a tool for sharing stories of anxiety. I take (fe)mail further by bringing it inside the museum as an educational and empathetic method of engaging with art and others.

In my program, I was interested in (fe)mail as more than a tool for self-care. It was also

an interactive writing method to creatively engage with a work of art through personal experience of anxiety. My research questions were: In what ways does the museum program create a sense of community among participants? In what ways might (fe)mail create empathy for works of art, the self, and others as part of a museum program?

Theoretical Background of the Problem

The theoretical framework for my project is primarily anchored in feminist theory. I look to feminism and its ethic of care in letter writing networks during the twentieth century (Jolly, 2008) to ground my autoethnographic method of (fe)mail. I expand on how the term *(fe)mail* came into being and the criteria that describe it in the literature review and methodology sections of this dissertation. More specifically, I examine the work of Paul Ricoeur (2016) and Gloria Anzaldua (1987) as a basis for using written text as my main method of research. Ricoeur's (2016) approach to hermeneutics of interpretation positions written texts as narratives that readers must be open to receiving. Anzaldua (1987) views the act of writing as identity forming. In this project, (fe)mail is both a narrative I have to open myself to receive and a way myself and other participants can process who we are and how anxiety interrupts our lives. In this way (fe)mail is a call for empathy, honesty, and creativity. My reason for—and love of—writing in the context of anxiety also comes from my own experience with journaling as a way of making sense of my fears. The feminist framework around writing works to guide the communal and empathetic aspects of the project as a whole. I detail how (fe)mail embodies such qualities in the methodology section of this dissertation, and I explain my theoretical framework more fully in the literature review, in which I have chosen to include alongside other research that has inspired me to create this project.

Significance of the Study

I have many hopes for this study and the significance it might have for the future of museum education. I have found through my own research that with rising prejudice and the political divide in America, art museums across the country are concerned more than ever with the practice of empathy (Daley, 2017). The Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA) received a $750,000 grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation in 2017 to establish the world's first Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts (Cascone, 2017). This museum push towards funding empathy programming is essential, and I consider how empathy has shaped education programming in the museum field in my literature review. At the same time, I have also noticed a lack of attention to mental health programming in museums in general, but more importantly, on campus museums. This lack of programming stands out especially as anxiety in college students rises (Woolson, 2021, p. 157). I believe that this project offers a way educators can begin to address the question of anxiety in museum programming to provide a sense of community for university students.

My hope is, at the very least, that this project can bring awareness of anxiety as a mental illness and publicize the need for anxiety-specific museum programming in university museums. Furthermore, I hope this project reveals that empathy for others and even for the self can be practiced inside the museum through (fe)mail. I hope that educators might see that this kind of autoethnographic writing has a special place inside their museums. (fe)mail practiced in museum programming invites audiences to be reflective and to connect with works of art in new ways. In Part I of my study, I specifically look at how (fe)mail might be a tool for self-care for me as a researcher, educator, and future academic. I hope the nuances I have uncovered about (fe)mail might also suggest practices of individual self-care for educators and researchers pursuing social science research in the field of art education.

Limitations and Scope of Study

I want to start off this section by honestly admitting that I am not an expert on anxiety or a therapist. Although I am very interested and concerned with how anxiety is experienced among women of various backgrounds, I am by no means claiming that this study will heal anxiety in anyone. It is not art therapy. It is also worth mentioning that the goal of this study is not to clinically reduce anxiety, but rather to encourage open conversations and allow a safe space for reflection and community through shared experiences. I provided a survey at the end of my museum program in which participants could answer whether the activities made them more or less anxious. This was interesting feedback but was not the aim of the museum program, and thus not something I had specified in my research questions. The goal for the second part of the project was to see how (fe)mail was used as a tool to engage with works of art. Did (fe)mail inspire an empathetic response with the work of art? Was there connection between the participants through the museum program?

The study is exclusive to adult women because I personally feel connected to this group of people. As researchers, we are often tasked with speaking for or analyzing the words of others. This is something I struggled with and felt particularly uncomfortable doing in other research projects in which I analyzed the writing of someone with chronic pain, something I had never experienced. I struggled with self-doubt, constantly wondering if I would be able to accurately and justly articulate what it was like to live with a physically debilitating illness. I am drawn to anxiety not only because I found it missing from the museums I loved so dearly but because it is something I experience. Although I am not attempting to fit all forms of anxiety into one optic, I feel confident that I can fairly represent the voices of the women I work with in this study because I know their struggles on a personal level.

I engaged in what Heong-Jee Kim (2016) describes as "backyard research," (p. 247) done with friends. There are limitations to undertaking this kind of research, and I elaborate on these thoroughly in the methodology section of this dissertation, specifically in my analysis of friendship as method and autoethnography. It is worth noting that a vulnerable project such as this might not have yielded the same results if had I selected a group of strangers to participate. For this reason, I have anchored my project in methodologies and theories that support friendship and community co-participation. Rather than themes I look for in the (fe)mail data, they form the substrate of the research itself.

Lastly, this study intersects research areas of autoethnography and narrative inquiry, exploring themes of community, connection, feminism, self-reflection, and self-care—inside and outside the museum and the field of education. Thus, if you are a student, an educator, an aspiring museum professional, or someone who is coming to terms with anxiety as a daily struggle, this dissertation is for you, friend. I hope that you may see yourself reflected in these pages and that the (fe)mail that I have written alongside my participants can serve as a source of encouragement to you. My hope is that the work we have done together can be meaningful not only for the field, but for anyone who stumbles upon this work.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Opening Narrative

When I first started graduate school, my anxiety was at an all-time high. I was planning my wedding while simultaneously trying to finish a master's degree in one year. I commuted three times per week for as long as two hours each way and arrived home past 11 pm, completely exhausted. You could say I was an ambitious art history student, but this combination of stress and little sleep lead to a brewing cauldron of anxiety that festered inside of me. I remember complaining to my friend Shelly in the graduate office that I was having serious trouble focusing on just one thing at a time. Each reading or essay I worked on was interrupted by the need to finish the next. With multiple densely written articles and presentations to get through for each of my classes, this was a distressing problem to have.

My friend Shelly was the eldest in our MA cohort of seven women. She had been a nurse before coming to the program. After her two grown children finished high school and enrolled at Western University for their undergraduate degrees, she took a leap and decided to pursue a master's in art history. I finished ranting to Shelly about my problems, not really expecting a response. Perhaps I just wanted another graduate student to validate my frustrations. After I had finished talking, my friend turned her head towards the computer on her desk and very meekly asked, "I wonder if that's anxiety?" As I heard those words out loud, my heart sank and my stomach turned into a knot I couldn't untie. I could feel my ears and the back of my neck heating up as I rushed outside the graduate office and into the bathroom across the hall. I quickly locked myself into one of the stalls. I hoped no one would come in so that I could wipe my tears in silence without being seen, without being asked if I was okay. I breathed heavily with my back

against the side of the hard cold stall, as I attempted to calm down. Although at the time I was unwilling to confront that sharp and frightening diagnosis, I knew deep down that Shelly was right. It was anxiety that was keeping me from focusing on my work. Perhaps I had allowed it to get out of control? More than that, it was anxiety in its most heightened form that I fought against and tried to deny in that locked bathroom stall.

As I look back at my childhood and reflect over my years in graduate school, it is clear that anxiety has remained a close companion throughout the years. I am no longer the scared and naïve MA student in the art department bathroom, and, as I write these words, I am happy to say that I have taken ownership of my anxiety, its part in who I am and in not defining me. I won't go into detail about the reasons my anxiety appeared in recent years, but I do want to share with you my experience of coming to terms with my diagnosis, and how I encountered a sense of support and acceptance through different forms of community. Furthermore, my acknowledgement has not only led me to a more positive place, but it has turned into the catalyst for this entire dissertation project. The dissertation is about so much more than my self-awareness, or even about my own suffering. It is also about community building, friendship, empathy, feminism, narrative inquiry and how all these themes intersect inside the art museum. By exploring current literature and my own personal experiences, I will attempt to make sense of and unpack these concepts. I will define anxiety and empathy in light of my own personal story, also tracing how they are present in museum programming and art education research. I examine how community, friendship, and feminism coalesce, unpacking the empathy movement in art museums drawing upon the work of educators and curators who write about museums as empathetic spaces.

Defining Anxiety

This dissertation project is one of the most personal academic decisions I ever made. It was not an easy choice to pour out my soul to you, my reader, in these pages. However, it was a very intentional and purpose-driven decision. It took me a few years after my bathroom episode to come to terms and fully accept that I had an anxiety disorder. I often find myself browsing medical internet sources in search of definitions or confirmation for feelings. In spring 2019, I received a copy of *Women's Health* magazine in the mail. I typically don't read magazines, but one of the headings on this issue caught my attention. The headline read, "Anxiety vs. Stress: How to Tell the Difference (and Why You Need to)." I could not resist the urge and quickly flipped to page 85. The article began with the subtitle "Living on the Edge." The author, Elizabeth Bacharach (2019), wrote from her personal experience of having a generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). She noted that as a society, we are speaking out about mental illness more publicly than ever. While this helps destigmatize mental illness, it has also blurred lines between stress and true anxiety or other conditions (p. 86). Bacharach (2019) quotes doctors with PhDs in clinical psychology in order to buttress her stress vs anxiety test. Admittedly, I read through each one and tried to measure my reaction to the hypothetical posed. The first was simple and perhaps the most common identifier for diagnosing anxiety. Unlike stress, which is directly connected to a specific event, and leaves shortly after, anxiety tends to overstay its welcome. Anxiety stays with you for days after the nerve-racking presentation or test is over (p. 86). This one hit close to home as I contemplated the many sleepless nights I spent worrying about things well past their deadline. Bacharach (2019) also notes that unlike stress, anxiety is irrational (p. 87). One small error can easily go from simple mistake to "I am not qualified for this." Michelle Newman, director of the Laboratory for Anxiety and Depression Research at Pennsylvania State

University, distinguishes between the two: “stress is the cause or source of anxiety, while anxiety is the brain and body’s response to that stressor. Stress is the interpretation of something as dangerous or problematic, while anxiety is the emotional response the perception elicits” (Heid, 2020, p. 14).

For a thorough and clinical definition of anxiety, I have turned to Aaron T. Beck, or as my therapist referred to him, the father of cognitive behavioral therapy. While Bacharach and Newman distinguish between stress and anxiety, Beck (2012) differentiates between anxiety and fear, which, much like stress, can often be used interchangeably with anxiety. Fear is a basic automatic state of alarm consisting of a perception or conclusion of imminent threat of danger to our safety. Anxiety, on the other hand is a prolonged, complex emotional state that occurs when a person anticipates that some future situation, event, or circumstance may involve a personally distressing, unpredictable threat to vital interests (p. 15). As I made my way through numerous blogs, articles, and even practical workbooks on cognitive behavioral therapy, I quickly became familiar with the differences between PTSD, OCD, social anxiety, also known as agoraphobia, and GAD, all of which fall under the large anxiety disorder umbrella. Each specific disorder is more complex, with its own set of symptoms, causes, and treatments. Because my project does not touch on these differences, I shall refrain from offering specific definitions for each anxiety disorder. The Mayo Clinic offers a similar definition to that of Beck and Clark (2012), defining anxiety as the “experience of persistent, intense and excessive worry and fear about everyday situations” (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2018). In this dissertation I use the word “anxiety” to describe both myself and my participants.

According to a *New York Times* opinion article by Daniel Smith (2012), the term *Age of Anxiety* has been used to categorize the last six decades. We all live with overarching fears about

environmental disasters, religious fundamentalism, political instability, disease, and threats to privacy. This looming fear that seems to leak into everyone's mind helps to normalize the experience of anxiety, as "just the way life is." Therefore, many people actually suffering from anxiousness that impedes their daily tasks might never actually acknowledge their struggle and seek help. I expand on this crisis that affects both adults and children in the United States in the following section. Because this is the case for so many who suffer with anxiety, I don't wish to close off my participant requirements to fit only those who have been formally or clinically diagnosed. My hope is that the museum program can be experienced by those who are actively seeking help for their anxiety, having been, like me, diagnosed by a mental health professional. But it may also serve those who have not had this experience and do not self-identify as having anxiety. Furthermore, the purpose of the program is to develop empathy, friendship, and community through a shared experience, not to diagnose participants or treat specific symptoms. I think a broad definition of anxiety is best suited for this kind of project and allows for different ideas and experiences to be heard, shared, and supported.

Anxiety and Campus Museums

There are an estimated 40 million American adults—about 18% of the adult population in the United States—suffering from clinical forms of anxiety. More shocking than these numbers is the reality that only one third of them are receiving treatment. An additional 24 million children and teens will also be struck with anxiety disorders by the time they reach adulthood (Kluger, 2020, p. 7). It is not surprising that these numbers continued to rise as we headed into the second year of a global pandemic. Alan Leshner, chief executive emeritus of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, notes, "the problem is great and it's not getting better" (Woolston, 2021, p. 171). In an article on the mental health crisis on university and

college campuses, Leshner pleads with American universities across the country to invest more resources. He argues that universities must pay special attention to their graduate students, many of whom face unusual pressures of keeping up with their work, teaching, career, and family obligations. He calls for an all-hands approach to mental health that starts at the top with university presidents and involves all faculty and staff members.

The pandemic has severely increased the need and demand for support. Mental health services are overwhelmed. Sara Oswalt, a public health scientist at the University of Texas at San Antonio, states that the challenges students are facing now are different than they were in the past. “It’s hard to quantify what it’s doing to their mental health” (Woolson, 2021, p. 171). She adds that counselling centers and other services can be especially scarce in small private universities and small colleges. More than that, “counsellors are fighting uphill battle against a culture that works against mental health and emotional well-being” (Woolston, 2021, p. 171).

We are living in an escalation of the problem on university campuses. As I sit with books about museums and empathy spread before me, reviewing facts about museum exhibitions and programming and my own experience working in small campus museums, I am led to believe that museums have a part to play in the cultural shift towards creating resources and accessibility for mental health. In other words, museums today should not only be concerned with pedagogy, but with relevance to their communities and the issues that are prevalent in that community (Munro and Morse, 2015, p. 364). This should ultimately mean that if university campuses are filled with students struggling with mental health, overwhelming faculty and counseling services, then small campus museums should join in the fight to create change and become a resource for mental health across campus. This is what Jennings (2019) and the empathetic museum model define as civic vision: museums joining with other institutions of civil society to shape quality of

life in their communities (p. 510).

I saw this effort take place on a minute scale while working as an educator at a small campus museum in Dallas. In 2021, I had the privilege of pursuing an education fellowship at a small campus museum at a private university in Dallas. This was a dream come true for me, and I was excited when my supervisor asked me to run an evening program in partnership with the university library. The campus library decided to partner with the education department to promote relaxing art making in a socially distanced environment throughout the spring semester. In a Zoom meeting, the librarian interested in the program noted how stressed students seemed with the ongoing pandemic and lack of social programs offered on campus. We decided to collaborate and host a print making night during which students could drop in the studio and "DIY a print and de-stress." I was asked to lead the workshop on a mild Thursday evening in April, but as we got close to the program date, my boss warned me that perhaps students would not show up. I prepared the room with ink stations, rollers, and paper before sitting down to my laptop and doing some work in silence. To my surprise, within a few minutes, a student showed up and timidly asked if she could come in and try out print making. After chatting with her, I discovered that she was a PhD student visiting from another university in the area. She opened up to me about her struggle with imposter syndrome and having to take a step back from her coursework. She admitted that she worried she was not good enough to practice in her field and that this severely affected her confidence. Her words were all too familiar to me. I met her in her honesty by talking candidly about my dissertation writing journey, and the worries and doubts I had about my research. In the end, I encouraged her to keep going and to know that with practice and time she would be able to fulfill her research goals. I shared a personal story of struggle with her about my first time teaching as a master's student and how it took me years to feel

comfortable teaching as a doctoral student. “It took years and practice for me to get where I am today, and I am still learning. Don’t give up on your research project. This is only your second year, you’ve got so many years of practicing and learning ahead of you,” I told her. She smiled and told me how much I had made her day. She finished her print, sealed it in a plastic bag, and remarked how her little print would be a permanent reminder of our conversation. She left the studio and went about her day.

Through this program offered by the museum and joined by other institutions on campus, I had the opportunity to see storytelling and art making come together as an empathetic practice. Interestingly, this small program did not require teaching any students how to do print making, or tons of money or funds to buy new supplies or pay experts to come in and teach. The program was made up of a graduate student museum educator and a PhD student in neuroscience who knew very little about art. The conversation I had with this student opened up the possibility not only that museums could do specific programming for mental health on campuses, but that this kind of programming could make a difference in the lives of the people brave enough to attend, to be vulnerable, and to connect with others. I will perhaps not see this student again. We don’t have each other’s contact information or even know each other’s last names. However, for me, our encounter remains more than a beautiful memory. It is a signifier that museums can and must invoke change on campuses, if even in the smallest of efforts.

Being part of this small DIY collaborative program with the museum and the library inspired me, even if only one student benefited from the activities. This experience made me think that perhaps the gap between the students and the campus museum was getting smaller. When I first started this research endeavor, I was motivated to address the lack of mental illness programming in campus art museums. My program for women with anxiety was originally born

from this gap in the museum literature. While I go on to write many paragraphs on empathy programming in museums across the United States, Europe, and Canada, I am aware that mental illness-specific programming is not common. In the following sections, I investigate this gap more closely by pointing to specific museums that have either implemented small resources and others that have omitted this kind of programming altogether.

I found that anxiety and depression, among other mental illnesses, are almost missing entirely from the museum education conversation. I came across an article in 2021 by Charlotte Coates (2019) titled "Museums Joining the Mental Health Conversation?" The title pulled me in immediately, but as I made my way through, I realized that most of the museum examples were exhibitions or special workshops featured on mental health awareness dates such as the workshop *Flight* held at the Tate Modern. I was pleasantly surprised by one example that featured a collaborative partnership between the Horniman Museum and Gallery with the SLaM Trust Recovery College to promote good mental health. The program joined a group of visitors in a communal activity in which they created mini-museums in a box. They were free to include whichever works from the collection they chose and were responsible for deciding on a theme (Coates, 2019).

Upon reading about these small initiatives abroad, I decided to turn to the American Alliance of Museums to see if the organization had some kind of mission statement on museum responsibility for mental illness. I was surprised to find a lengthy pdf document titled "Museums On Call: How Museums Are Addressing Health Issues." The report was assembled to showcase the many ways museums have joined the health conversation and served their communities in several health categories. While the document boasted lengthy descriptions and examples of how museums are contributing to the conversation by offering programs for Alzheimer's, hospital

outreach, and visual impairment, the section on mental health was short and rather vague. The examples featured were the Otter Tail County Museum and its exhibition on the Fergus Falls State Hospital and a public program at the Harriet Beecher Stowe Collection in Connecticut on destigmatizing mental illness. While there were some small examples of how museums are talking about mental health on a wider scale, it seemed there were few programs in North America that directly served those suffering with anxiety or depression. The lack was even greater in the realm of campus museums. The Blanton Museum of Art is one example of a museum on a major university campus that has a wealth of programs for art educators and K-12 resources. The Blanton had no programs available for mental health, wellness, or even students on campus. Sadly, the Blanton is not an anomaly. The Meadows Museum, located on the university campus at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, is another example of a campus museum that does not have student-specific programming for mental health. Upon interning at the museum and visiting their website, I learned of great work that museum educators were doing in partnership with medical schools and departments across campus. They served their community members with dementia and those with autism spectrum disorder of all ages, yet anxiety was missing from the museum conversation altogether.

Following the onset of the global pandemic, campus museums that would perhaps not have considered programming for students on campus started to implement some resources to help students cope with stress or unwind. For example, the Hood Museum at Dartmouth offers a series of art and wellness resources for students on campus. Some of these are as simple as coloring sheets of the collection, drawing workshops, and guided tours that encourage students to get outside and walk around campus. Some other activities are more elaborate, such as meditation and mindfulness practices in the museum. The Hood Museum partnered with the

Dartmouth Student Wellness Center to offer this resource.

Another example, albeit not located on a university campus museum, has created wellness programming for the mental health of its community. Through the lecture series at the University of Texas in Houston,"Health and Wellness Presented by MD Anderson Cancer Center," healthcare providers and museum staff collaborated to provide unique opportunities for visitors to reflect on art in connection with mindfulness, wellness, and living a balanced lifestyle. Over the years, I have worked at university campus museums as an intern, educator, and gallery attendant. Some were enormous private collections funded by boards and foundations. Others were small gallery spaces located inside fine arts departments. Some had education departments, programming, in-house editors, and valuable permanent collections. Others solely hosted rotating exhibitions of local contemporary artists. After looking through resources and programming in the United States and cities around me, I have concluded that mental health-specific programming is lacking. The few programs that do exist, such as the one I participated in as an educator, and others across the country, are focused loosely around mental health, using terms like "mindfulness" and "de-stress." Museums seem uninterested in or unwilling to tackle mental illness. I see these small efforts tiptoeing around words such as "anxiety" or "depression." This raises a question relevant to my research and the kind of program I have created for this dissertation: are museums safe spaces for discussions about mental illness? Furthermore, are educators (even the ones that advocate for empathy programming) uncomfortable with these words in the galleries? In the following section, I look at the issue of anxiety in the museum from an art therapist's perspective.

Anxiety, Museums and Art Therapy

Although this kind of work is uncommon, some art educators and art therapists are

interested in creating programming specific to mental health. Art therapist Jordan S. Potash (2016) advocates for museums to work in partnership with health service professionals to involve the public, widen perspectives, and contribute to community development (p. 77). He argues that the museum offers a stimulating environment to affect psychological change and that art therapists can help museum audiences express and transform emotions, which can lead to increased well-being (p. 78). Potash (2016) argues that guided discussion and reflective experiential activity are necessary for cultivating empathy in the museum space. He suggests a specific type of art making that can help clients in the space of museum art therapy known as *response art*. Response art has been traditionally defined as a type of art making that a therapist undertakes in relation to a clinical session to understand the client better. Response art can promote 'empathetic resonance' with another individual by acting as an imaginative or interpretative dialogue (p. 80). Potash (2016) brings response art into the gallery in a teaching approach called "guided relational viewing," through which he encourages participants to create their own response art in relation to a work of art. The practical steps of Potash's (2016) method include viewing directives, art making, and reflection. The viewing directives encourage visitors to identify a work of art or object that is personally meaningful to them. In doing so, visitors are able to apply a relational frame to the museum experience (pp. 80-81). In this way, the learning experience becomes less about the object and the curatorial background and more about how visitors can make meaning from a work of art. Viewers then are able to create response art based on the thoughts and feelings evoked by the work of art they respond to.

This kind of programming in art therapy suggests how to address anxiety and empathy in works of art through art making. While (fe)mail may not constitute response art, there are similarities between what Potash (2016) has developed and my program. In both (fe)mail and

response art, participants look for commonality. Potash (2016) reported that after completing an activity for two exhibitions in Hong Kong, visitors who created response art engaged in conversation about what they learned and other initiatives that could alleviate stigma associated with mental illness. There was a genuine attempt by visitors to express personal experiences through art making and storytelling in connection to a work of art. Potash (2016) argues that art making is valuable inside the museum because it can help museums in their quest to increase visitor self-reflection, reimagine relationships, and promote social change (p. 89). In other words, art making or (fe)mail creation can lead to empathy for others in the community. Specifically, for programs in conjunction with art therapy, audiences are given permission and support to reflect on their thoughts and feelings within the museum structure. This kind of thinking promotes the idea that whether writing poems, making drawings, or even writing postcards to a figure, viewers can learn about their own values, leading them to recognize shared moments with others and to conceive possible actions to alleviate suffering (p. 89). While I acknowledge my program is not art therapy, I ask participants to step into the shoes of the figure in a painting and in doing so, possibly offer encouragement to the figure, to one another, and to themselves. It is difficult to say that this might amount to significant social change in society, but Potash (2016) argues that translating emotions in art and adopting another's perspective are the seeds that cultivate empathy.

Creating response art or engaging in art making and storytelling in the gallery is a small way in which museums have brought conversations surrounding mental health into the galleries. Perhaps spending an hour with a painting allows for an imaginative meeting with someone of a different historical context. It could also allow visitors to understand each other's lived experiences and to share in one another's suffering. In the next section, I look at how this kind of

storytelling and art making can be beneficial for community building and why community is important for those who share experiences of anxiety.

Anxiety, Community and Storytelling

In the above section, I looked at how graduate school is a breeding ground for anxiety, and I write this literature review in deep awareness of this fact. During the weeks I wrote this chapter, I picked up *Time* magazine at the grocery store checkout. It was an entire issue dedicated to the "Age of Anxiety." How timely. In the article *Navigating Anxiety*, writer Jeffrey Kluger (2020) suggests lifestyle changes can offer relief for those suffering with anxiety. He argues that the sense of community and spiritual transcendence found in faith offers a perspective far larger than that of our small, particular lives (p. 7). I have found this sense of community in connection to my faith to have been monumental in my journey with anxiety. In fact, before I decided to see a therapist about my struggle with anxiety, I first sought community through my church.

In March of 2019, I joined a group at my church on Wednesday evenings. I met with a group of women once per week for an hour after the worship and sermon time, to talk about our struggles and pray for one another. We would come into a small classroom and sit cross-legged on the carpet facing one another. Some of us would have notebooks, and others would come empty-handed, only with our souls to bear to a room of strangers. I remember the first time I came to the group quite vividly. We sat around the room and took turns going around the circle, each sharing our stories of how we ended up there and how we came to our faith. There were about seven or eight of us gathered. I remember passing my hands over a pink, sequined pillow on my lap that would change colors based on the direction that I stroked the material. I stared at the sequins as they pricked my fingers, averting my gaze from the women around me. Needless

to say, I was nervous to be there, to share my fears with a room filled with women I did not know. I listened intently to every story, feeling crushed and saddened for every story of loss, abuse, and depression that was shared. When it was my turn to speak, I introduced myself with a shaky voice as I explained the reason I was there. “I have anxiety.” I swallowed and paused, letting myself catch my breath, so that I wouldn’t embarrassingly burst into tears. It had been the first time I had said those words out loud to a room of people I did not know. It was an uncomfortable but profound experience of acceptance and even of surrender, a surrender of my overwhelming fear of naming anxiety, and for me a surrender of my struggle over to God. It brought me great peace, and perhaps that day marked the beginning of my journey, my way to a kind of healing. As each woman shared their story, I visibly held back tears. I had a deep sense of compassion and empathy for each story in the room. After our session ended, I got into my car feeling an acute awareness that the session had opened up something in me. Something difficult, worth exploring and even worth unravelling. I left the parking lot that day thinking about each woman and each story that was told that night. I prayed silently for each of them, and for myself, as I asked that God would use this difficult season of my life for my good.

I would come back to this group many nights throughout the spring and summer months. I made sweet friendships there with women from all walks of life. We met up for pizza or coffee and texted prayer requests to one another throughout the week. I would be met with a sense of genuine belonging, both from women who sympathized with my feelings on a personal level and others who had never experienced anxiety. As I began sharing and opening up to my group, and the people around me I loved and trusted, I realized that my fears became less scary and even less likely to come true. I truly believe that God met me and comforted me through my group of friends that summer. The sense of community I sought and found at my church helped me to

accept my anxiousness and to be profoundly aware that it did not define me as a human being. I also realized the power I had against my fears when I spoke about them out loud to people around me. In all of this came the realization that my journey with anxiety would be one intrinsically tied to the act of storytelling. I believe stories or descriptions are another theme in my research, and one which has perhaps defined most of my life. It really is for me, and hopefully for the women I have met, an act of "repair work" (Frank, 1995, p. 52). I first came across the theme of illness as a call for stories in Arthur Franks' (1995) book, *The Wounded Storyteller*, working on another narrative project last year. Frank (1995) candidly tells his journey of battling cancer surrounded by others suffering through similar stories. Frank (1995) likens illness to a shipwreck and stories as the re-building or making sense of the wreckage. In other words, "stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life" (p. 53). Upon first reading these words, I thought about my dad, who went through open heart surgery while I was an undergraduate student living at home. I can recall the same stories he would tell over and over about the surgery, his heart pain, and his difficult road to recovery. It would be months before he would be able to run or shovel snow out the driveway again.

Last year, I also came across a fascinating article, *Cancerworlds*, written by Terry Barrett, Patricia Stuhr, and Debbie Smith-Shank (2008), which revolved around making sense of their specific battles with cancer. Barrett (2008) articulated a profound moment for me when he told of his ability to relate to his colleague during a depressing time in his recovery. Frank (1995) states a similar sentiment: "I needed the insights and articulations of other ill people to assure myself I wasn't crazy" (1995, p. 54). Community can be the mutual sharing of similar experiences for Barrett (2008) and others who have sought support from others who went

through the same process.

I found myself relating repair work to the labor that must be done around anxiety as a mental illness. Could stories be the avenue through which anxious people re-draw their maps and find new destinations? Could stories be our way of repairing the damage that overthinking and panic have done? In my own experience, this has certainly proven true. I believe that like any other illness, anxiety is also a call for stories. We must articulate our experience of anxiousness in order to begin making sense of them. My experience with anxiety has shown me that it craves silence and hiding more than anything else. The more I don't verbalize my fears, the more they consume me and become all the more real, brewing and festering in my mind. This is precisely why I believe in the power of stories and community. The ability to gather together and articulate our fears and suffering not only helps us reflect on our own struggles, but to look at the suffering of someone else and be able to say, you are not alone. This kind of empathetic response connects us as people to one another in a deep and necessary manner. In his book *Empathy: Why It Matters and How to Get It*, Roman Krznaric (2014) argues that it is also through the common experience of suffering, pain, anxiety, and loss that the most profound forms of empathy are built.

I found this caring response from the women I met with over the spring and summer months of 2020 Although I am certain that empathic community can be shared across genders and backgrounds, for the purpose of this project, I am interested in how women in particular formed community with one another and supported one another through difficult times. More specifically, I ask, what about women as a group draws out a communal support system for one another in ways that gatherings of men don't? I began thinking about this question sometime in 2019 after working on a museum curriculum plan developed for women with anxiety disorders in

a museum education class. My interest expanded from communal bonds between women who shared similar life experiences to the community or friendships that might occur inside the museum as well.

In order to situate this question and theme in my research, I will first look at feminist literature that presents historical and social examples of how feminist women were able to join together by forming friendship and communal bonds with one another, particularly through letter writing. In Maragaretta Jolly's (2008) book, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism*, the author presents an account of how the second wave feminist movement was shaped by significant relationships between women, held together through letter writing. Her work analyzes multiple correspondences among activists, lovers, academics, and families, a powerful record of women's unprecedented willingness to prioritize relationships among themselves (p. 2). Despite my avid interest in working with women, and this theme of community and friendship, I had not considered my work as being feminist quite yet. It was not until I received this book in the mail in early December 2019, that Jolly's (2008) theoretical analysis of these archival letters convinced me beyond a turning point.

My Encounter with Feminism, Ethic of Care, and Letter Writing

> *It was early December 2019, and I was deep into my copy of In Love and Struggle, which arrived in the mail a few days prior to the end of the semester. I had just turned in my last assignment for a narrative inquiry class and was in the middle of inputting my students' final grades to my computer when I decided to indulge in some feminist literature now that the semester work was done. I took a deep breath and tried to relax. I needed a breather or, perhaps, a debriefing session. An emptying of my anxieties and thought process, and some insightful conversation with a dear friend. I sent a quick message to Atleigh on Facebook, hoping that she would be home and free to talk. Upon her reply, I quickly called her on video chat, and we caught up on both the mundane and pressing events that loomed over our lives just before we entered the holidays. Our conversation proceeded to shift back to our work. Atleigh identifies herself as an intersectional feminist artist. I am not only her best friend, but an avid supporter of her work. I thought I'd pick her brain on the topic and began by telling her about my dissertation research and the book I had started reading.*

Beatriz: I found the most interesting connection to my research in feminist letter writing. It's a book I am reading about how letters helped build and sustain relationships between women during the second wave feminist movement.

Atleigh looked interested on the other side of the computer screen but did not interrupt my excited tone of voice. I continued.

Beatriz: I think it's fascinating that letters were used as a networking tool for women to connect and build relationships with one another. I started reading about the women from the Greenham peace protests during the 1980s.

Atleigh: Oh wow. What was that all about?

Beatriz: Well, I am no expert, but from what I have read, in the 1980s, the United States decided to place 96 cruise missiles at an airbase in Greenham Common in Berkshire, England. Actually, I think the exact year was 1983. What is more interesting however, is that women began camping outside the main gate of the airbase in 1981, as a form of protest. The people of England had not been consulted before such a decision was implemented by the government.

Atleigh: Wow, that is crazy man.

Beatriz: I know! I can't believe this happened, and I didn't know about it until now! Of course, it was during the Regan-Thatcher era. Neoliberalism at its prime, am I right? Anyways, there is a whole chapter in Margaretta Jolly's book on letters written back and forth between women who were part of this protest. These women were ballsy. They rejected the traditional role of staying at home and seeing men as their protectors. In 1984, they wrote an open letter for their protest which was signed, "We have one year left in which to reverse the Government's decision about Cruise missiles. There is still time to stop them. With peace and love from the women at Greenham Common" (p. 113). After looking up stories of the protest online, I also found that this was a massive movement that encompassed all kinds of women. There were

hundreds of different kinds of "feminists." Some were working moms, and others political activists. Some women wouldn't even sleep at the camp. They would go during the day in support of the cause with their kids, because their husbands liked that there were no men present (Jolly, 2008, pp. 125-126).

Atleigh: So, they formed their own community?

Beatriz: Exactly. Actually, what's fascinating is that the protest brought forth the community aspect of the movement. Particularly the feminist campaigning that went on. Jolly writes that feminists hoped to facilitate the "preservation of love among themselves" (p. 2) I am guessing this means they cared most about their relationships with one another? I thought this was interesting, but perhaps not unique solely to the Greenham movement of the 1980s. I've also been reading another book on empathy and research studies have proven that women are more empathically wired than men (Krznaric, 2014, p. 24). Of course, this does not mean that every woman is more empathetic than every man, but definitely could explain this whole feminist community aspect.

Atleigh: Hmm, this is interesting, but what do you mean by empathy? How do women connect or even care for other women differently than men do?

Beatriz: Well, coincidently enough, in the 1980s a feminist writer and theorist named Mary Mason wrote an essay titled "The Other Voice," where she actually argued that women have historically told their stories through writing about the lives of others. This is a huge contrast to the canonical tradition of men's stories or tales of public achievement as exceptional individuals (p. 81). This makes sense, if you think about the way in which women represent their lives in relational modes. I think this ultimately means that we tell our stories in relation to one another's. While the author doesn't go into any sort of explanation on empathy, I found some

connections between the women's communities of Margaretta Jolly (2008) and human empathic responses in Roman Krznaric's (2014) book on empathy. The way in which this kind of relational mode of relating or community building, whether it be through protest campaigning or familial bond, is described by Jolly as "ethic of care" (p.17)

Atleigh: How interesting. Is this ethic of care different than what is said in traditional philosophy? I did not know feminists had their own ethic of care?

Beatriz: I did not know either, but feminists like Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan (1982), Sara Ruddick (1989), and Virginia Held (1993) were the leading protagonists of this movement. Essentially, they argued that people were not the insatiable consumers and egotistic agents of Kantian liberal theory and sought to understand the ethical behavior of people in practices such as parenting, nursing, and friendship (p.86).

Atleigh: Oh wow! Friendship? This makes a lot of sense. I mean, with these kind of relationships, you would need to consider the emotion, context, and personal relationships involved. They are less transactional than what Kant may have been arguing?

Beatriz: Exactly! At the heart of this feminist ethic of care was the principle "no one shall be hurt." This is different than an ethics of justice for instance, which demands that everyone is treated the same through the principle of human equality (Jolly, 2008). An ethic of care, according to psychologist and philosopher Carol Gilligan (1982) is premised on the idea that no one shall be hurt in the face of obvious differences (Jolly, 2008, p. 87). You know, after making some sense of this out loud with you, it's beginning to sound quite familiar. I have been reading extensively about empathy in another book, and the author repeatedly illustrates that empathy is not the same as the golden rule. He says that there is a big difference between what

"you would have done unto you" and what "you would do to someone else" (Krznaric, 2014, p. 26).

Atleigh: I never thought about it that way? So, for example, if I am your friend and I care about you, I will consider my actions and how you are affected, rather than how they affect me?

Beatriz: Yes! So, I guess, for example, let's say if you came over to visit me and, at your place, you don't care too much about beds being made or cleanliness. I know this is not true, but just go with me on this example. However, let's say, I care a lot about the bed being made. An empathic response from you would be to make the bed, even if you did not want it to be done to you, simply because you know it would be courteous towards me. I think this is what Carol Gilligan and Roman are both saying. Though Carol Gilligan doesn't necessarily use the word empathy to describe her ethic of care, I think we could make the case for it, right?

Atleigh: Yes, I definitely see what you're saying.

(Atleigh is getting restless and reaches over for her cup of green tea. I can see the steam lightly rising out of her art history mug).

I think if we are to tell our very different experiences of anxiety to one another—not just you and me, but even the other women involved—empathy or "ethic of care" will be key to the project. It would need to be present in order for vulnerability and relational understanding to occur.

Beatriz: Exactly.

(My mouth is now dry from rambling, and I quickly pick up my laptop and make my way to the fridge. Fresh strawberries are looking straight at me. A perfect afternoon snack. I transfer a few berries to a glass bowl and begin nibbling away).

Atleigh: But Beatriz, I was thinking, what does all of this have to do with letter writing anyways, and the Greenham women of the 1980s?

Beatriz: Oh right! I almost lost that train of thought. Well, the way in which the

community was established during the Greenham protest campaigning was no accident. It was actually through the network of letter writing. Similarly, the way in which feminist writers position their stories relationally is through writing, and ultimately writing would be stimulated by caring relationships (p. 88). Going back to Greenham, letter writing was inextricable from the development of the campaign. The letters connected women through a decentralizing networking strategy that produced support groups, sister camps, and individual "Greenham women" sympathizers all over the country (p.118).

Atleigh: So, you're saying the letters were used to reach the public about the feminist cause, but were also what connected the women to one another?

Beatriz: Absolutely! Women from different walks of life and regions were being connected through letters to this important cause. The prime symbol of the camp at that time became the web. This was a feminist symbol of weaving wool across military areas, fences, and among protesters. It was not just a physical endeavor but became symbolic of the relationships among women. The webs that tied these women together were friendship, emotional and affective bonds, shared values, and the identity of "Greenham women." It is definitely interesting to think about our connection through letters and how it has impacted our friendship over the years.

Atleigh: Yes, I agree. So, the community or invisible web that you're describing, could this be the "ethic of care" playing out?

Beatriz: Yes! The author even states that, in philosophical terms, we can understand the web as a concrete manifestation of the ethics of care. While justice was a key aspect to the movement, nonviolence remained the principles the women embodied (p.120). Let's not forget the "no one shall be hurt" principle in nonviolence. You know, I think this feminist letter writing

will really help develop my reasons for the writing of postcards and anxious experiences in my dissertation project.

Atleigh: You know; I think this whole letter writing or postcard writing is so interesting to me. I mean, you are asking me and even other participants to write postcards of some of our most intimate experiences, in a way that is so public. Just like some of the open letters of these feminists from the Greenham Peace movement. I mean a postcard is quite different from a journal or "dear diary" type of writing. It is so public. Anyone can read it, the mailman, postal service people. It's indeed very vulnerable work, isn't it?

Beatriz: For sure! Especially, since I am asking for writings on anxiety. Some of those are even more difficult to share publicly aren't they? I am interested to see what kind of bond and deeper relationship we might develop once the project begins. I mean we are not in the 1980s, and we are certainly not trying to rally women around a protest, but this web and ethic is useful for framing my museum program. For example, if we enter into the museum program with this ethic of care in mind, and an openness to being vulnerable and empathetic with one another, this certainly sets us apart from other museum programming.

Atleigh: Of course, and I'm also curious to see if the back and forth I do with you will also impact my own art making differently? I think it will definitely change the way I approach my work as well. You know, in theorizing about feminism I am thinking about this act of sending or receiving mail. I mean, phonetically, "mail" is also "male" right?

Beatriz: Hmm, I never thought of it like that.

Atleigh: Could the work that we're doing with each other technically be considered (fe)mail? Perhaps the feminist version of the regular mail? I mean if feminists have a totally different ethics of care, can't we also claim our own form of writing mail? Or, I mean (fe)mail?

Perhaps this is something we can create for this project?

Beatriz: I love that!

Atleigh and I both laugh at her genius pun. We continue to express how excited we both are about the project, and our conversation is interrupted by Atleigh's boyfriend, who walks into the room. I hear some low mumbling. He stands outside the frame and says "Hi" from a distance.Atleigh turns her head away from the screen and proceeds to talk to him about different dinner options. I glance down at my watch and realize it is already 5:23 pm. We have been talking for about three hours. I am not surprised we have lost track of time again. Nothing new or unusual there. When Atleigh comes back into the computer frame, we say our goodbyes and I hang up the call. I shut my laptop and smile to myself, pausing for a moment to ponder our conversation before getting up from the couch. (fe)mail. That is just brilliant!

The feminist community in Jolly's (2008) text is related to the kind of bond I look at developing in my own research. I might even go as far as to describe it as the bond I share with my best friend Atleigh, as well. I am deeply moved by the sense of belonging and mission the Greenham women embodied during the 1980s and the ethic of care, which solidified itself in the web of letters that circulated the movement. I would even argue that the Greenham women developed a (fe)mail bond through the sending and writing of letters to one another. I expand and define this concept in the methodological section of this proposal.

While Jolly's feminist community and (fe)mail are quite different, Frank's (1995) point about needing the story of others to make sense informs both. Empathy for the other is in play in the act of storytelling. Because the focus of my research on friendship and community cannot survive without empathy, and because I work through this project to bring empathy into the museum through a gender-specific form of community bonding, it is imperative that I provide a thorough understanding of what constitutes empathy, it's origin in Western culture, and how it has influenced museum programming. In this section of the review, I will draw upon the writings of Roman Krznaric (2014) and others to situate the concept of empathy and identify societal contradictions and barriers to empathic learning. I will also delve into current examples of

empathy and social justice in museum programming across the country.

Defining Empathy

Roman Krznaric's (2014) book, which I briefly mentioned during my conversation with Atleigh about ethics, proposed that empathy is more than a kind of cultural norm we make it out to be. It is wired into our formation as human beings, while also requiring serious practice to make it into a daily habit. Krznaric (2014), who advises organizations like Oxfam and the United Nations on using empathy to create social change, offers definitions for two kinds of empathy which he calls "*affective empathy*: mirroring another person's emotions and *cognitive empathy*: recognizing that other people have different tastes, experiences and world views than our own" (p. 10). Krznaric (2014) combines both affective and cognitive empathy to provide us with a dual definition: "empathy as the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions" (p. 11).

Combining both affective and cognitive empathy into one definition, Krznaric (2014) makes an important distinction between empathy and sympathy, and even empathy and the golden rule. Unlike empathy, the golden rule assumes our own interests coincide with those of other people. This is not always the case, as I outlined earlier in my conversation with Atleigh. In this light, the author quotes Patricia Moore, who explains "that empathy is a constant awareness of the fact that your concerns are not everyone's concerns and that your needs are not everyone's needs" (p. xxi). Put differently, empathy requires stepping outside of ourselves into the lives and even suffering of others to feel and relate to them. This is a difficult thing to do, and for some of us, it seems almost unnatural, at times. Krznaric (2014) ultimately counsels a self-help approach. The author gives his readers ways to embed empathy into their daily lives by establishing certain

habits. Krznaric's (2014) most poignant example is from his chapter on taking imaginative leaps, in which he describes how Harriet Beecher Stowe's suffering through the loss of her own son enabled her to empathize with the loss of black women who had their children taken from them in slavery (p. 54). Earlier in the same chapter, Krznaric (2014) mentions how Oskar Schindler's friendship with his Jewish accountant made him empathetic towards Jews killed and forced into concentration camps during the Second World War. Schindler was a businessman and factory owner who by the end of the war had risked his own life and paid huge bribes to save his Jewish factory workers. When Schindler was asked to explain his actions he replied, "I knew the people who worked for me. When you know people, you have to behave toward them like human beings" (p. 49).

For Stowe, empathy came through suffering a similar experience of loss. In Schindler's story, empathy came through the act of knowing people, looking someone in the eye, giving them a name, and recognizing his individuality but, also, your connectedness (p. 49). Both examples propose ways we can cultivate empathy by imagining the experiences of others, either through friendship or the sharing of similar experiences. This is similar to my understanding of Biblical empathy. John Mark Comer (2019), a Bible teacher and author of *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, defined empathy as synonymous with compassion. To have compassion, he argued, was "to suffer with others." This definition is also similar to the German word for empathy, *Einfuhlung*, which means "feeling into." The word *empathy*, derived from its German cousin, was invented by the American Psychologist Edward Titchener (1909). It gets at the meaning of "suffering with" accurately. It is said to have been derived from the Greek *empatheia*, which meant "in + suffering" (Krznaric, 2014). Comer (2019) proposes the act of listening to others as a way of living more empathically (Comer, 2019).

Empathy Movement in Museums

My first encounter with empathy in museum education came from reading my advisor Laura Evans' dissertation. Her project was beautiful and inspiring. She asked women who suffered from eating disorders and those who did not to interpret a series of photographs from Lauren Greenfield's *Thin.* Her dissertation was captivating, personal, and meaningful. In the same semester, and with genuine excitement, I decided to pursue my own "empathetic" art education program, developing a series of curated exhibitions on a friend's bookshelf. My friend was an art education graduate student, and earlier that semester had been diagnosed with a disability. We sat in a research methods class across from one another for three hours every Thursday evening. I could tell there was so much happening in her mind. She rarely spoke or engaged with the material in class. I imagined that to think about research methodologies on top of all she had going on would have been too much.

In spring 2019, I asked her for help on an independent study project I was working on. It required me to come into her room and curate interactive exhibits every six weeks. At the end of each miniature exhibit takedown, I would email her a few questions, asking her to engage with and personally reflect on her time with the exhibition. I wasn't sure where I was going with the project. At the time, I had discovered narrative inquiry and had fallen completely head over heels for the methodology. I guess the project was my feeble attempt at "trying it out" for the first time. What I did not expect was to develop a strong sense of empathy for my friend and her struggle with a physical disability. During the course of the semester, we postponed exhibitions and delayed email responses due to unforeseen and unpredictable medical appointments. Even though I had positioned myself as researcher throughout the project, I thought deeply about my friend and her suffering. I struggled to write and articulate her experience accurately and fairly. I

found myself not only hanging out with her outside of the project but praying for her health regularly. Throughout this small endeavor, I came to experience great empathy for someone suffering with a disease I could not even fathom on my worst day. Perhaps I embodied what Krznaric (2014) and others described as "suffering with." I finished my work at the end of the semester with at least one certainty, that empathy in museum education is possible and should be pursued and valued. If empathy is both suffering with others through shared experience, or getting to know others by putting ourselves in their shoes, then before any of this can happen, we must give ourselves the space and ability to listen to the stories and experiences of others to step imaginatively into their place. The literature on empathy is extensive, and I encountered the topic in different forms throughout the months I wrote this literature review (Krznaric, 2014; Lanzoni, 2018). However, one question still remained for me: how can museum education encompass empathy? In other words, how has empathy been approached inside museums? These questions are relevant to my project, since I work to make sense of what has already been done in the museum world and how educators bring community and empathy into the gallery.

Although museums are widely recognized and appreciated for awe-inspiring objects and authentic stories, scholarship on museums and empathy shows that they are also platforms where safe and informal learning can take place. Museums have a unique capability to bring together arts, sciences, and experiential learning to foster dialogue and contemplation. Therefore, they are especially able to encourage visitors to imagine, explore, and experience empathy firsthand (Gokcigdem, 2016, p. xxvi). In the following paragraphs, I address why museums see a need for empathy in educational programing and how several museum educators in the United States and Europe cultivate empathetic exhibitions and learning spaces for museum visitors through storytelling and dialogic encounters. I examine literature on empathy and museums to analyze

how empathy is used as a pedagogical tool to bring social justice issues to the forefront and create community resonance through visitor-centered programming. I then situate my program within such empathy literature, arguing that the empathy movement in museums positions or re-imagines the museum as a space of care, community, and dialogue through storytelling.

According to museum educator and founder of the initiative Empathy-Building through Museums, Elif. M Gokcidem (2019), psychologists describe empathy as having three components: perspective taking, affective concern, and empathetic distress. The emotional aspect of empathy involves feeling what the other is experiencing, while the cognitive aspect is the ability to occupy multiple perspectives and points of view (2019, p. 1). In the past decade, educators in art museums throughout North America and Europe have created programs and activities that allow museum visitors to engage with various empathetic responses. For example, in the essay collection on embodied learning and teaching in the art museum, *Activity-Based Teaching in the Art Museum* (2019), museum educator Elliot Kai-Kee and co-authors Lissa Latina and Lilit Sadoyan examine distinctive ways activity-based learning at the Getty Museum involves emotion and movement. In a chapter titled "Empathy and Subjectivity," Kai-Kee describes how a docent-led school program invites students into an empathetic mode of perspective taking. In the activity, the students are guided to observe a painting while the docent passes out a worksheet consisting of a reproduction of the painting with thought bubbles added above each figure (p. 148). Students are invited to imagine and write out a possible dialogue between the figures in the work of art. Kai-Kee (2019) notes that when students write about what they think is happening in the painting, in a way, they insert themselves into it (p. 149). For Kai-Kee, this mode of understanding, while powerful, can in some ways be problematic. We may project our own feelings into a work of art when attempting to perceive other's feelings. This

interactive encounter can be beneficial since the students may have genuinely attempted to "place themselves in the shoes of the figures they were observing in the work of art" (p. 149), but the exercise can also demonstrate a failure to carefully imagine the perspective of someone living in the past. Experiences of empathy are to a certain extent subjective, even if they open subjectivity to other's experiences.

Educators at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York work to incite empathetic responses in visitors through narrative skills (Nilsen & Bader 2016). They offer visitors various ways of seeing a situation that most might make snap judgements about due to hindsight bias. For example, during tours, visitors are often surprised by and quick to make negative judgements about families who chose to have many children in New York City in the early twentieth century. Their hindsight bias can lead to assumptions that it was ignorant or stupid for families to have so many. As a response, museum educators use storytelling to combat visitors' bias and challenge them to engage in cognitive empathy for individuals who lived in a different time, under different circumstances. For example, museum educators guide visitors into discussions of the challenges for immigrants in a new country and share material from an early twentieth-century census illustrating how important children's wages were to immigrant households. They also show how the high mortality rate in the period would have also contributed to family planning decisions (pp. 120-121). This instance of storytelling might not pull on the heartstrings of visitors since the narrative addresses historical facts and figures rather than personal experience. Nevertheless, the approach powerfully captures the equally important cognitive aspect of empathy. Museum educators remind visitors that they must actively adopt the perspective of an individual in the past in order to grasp the limitations of their own points of view in the present.

This kind of cognitive empathy, *empathy as perspective-taking*, is the act of imagining what someone else is feeling, thinking, and seeing. I have found throughout my readings on museums and empathy that asking visitors to step imaginatively into the shoes of others is a directly effective way to create empathy. I have employed this method in my own museum program by asking participants to imagine what kind of emotion the figure in *Sopa d'Europa* might be feeling. This is not a shallow attempt at creating a quick connection to a work of art, but rather a way participants can think about their anxiousness outside of themselves and perhaps respond with empathy. An essay by Thomas Wide (2016) comes to mind. While imagining can be a fun and creative way to engage in educational empathy in the museum, Wide (2016) argues it is not always accurate, and he offers a more careful approach to this teaching method, known as *perspective-getting.* For Wide (2016), the act of assuming or trying to understand someone's emotions from a look or saddened glance is not always effective in understanding what they might actually be feeling. Psychologist Nicholas Epley demonstrates that we overestimate our ability to get inside another's head (p. 165). Wide (2016) cautions museum educators who are quick to seize on empathy, warning that working with empathy has limitations in practice.

Because empathy relies heavily on our emotional judgement and concern, it can be easily manipulated. Wide (2016) notes that advertisers use images to trigger audience emotions or court support for causes through compelling photographs or images (pp. 164-165). In this way, empathy can be emotionally satisfying in a way that is disconnected from a useful cognitive experience. After seeing an expression, we might feel good or bad within ourselves without being prompted to truly experience another's perspective in a reflective way The author goes on to introduce the concept of *empathy as perspective-getting*, which requires educators to

deliberately ask visitors about their experiences in the museum instead of assuming what they might be thinking. Overall, Wide's (2016) contribution to the definition and application of empathy as a learning tool in the museum illustrates its limitations for museum professionals. In order to overcome our own biases, museum educators must seek to incorporate the perspective of the community into our programming and exhibitions.

The Museum as an Empathetic Institution

I always loved museums as a young girl. It was my love for museums that inspired my aspiration by the end of high school to a career in museum education, and it eventually led me to an art history undergraduate degree, an MA, and years of gallery internships. Although I believe museums are essential places of learning and community, many years of studying art history have also made me highly critical of museums as places governed by elitism, exclusive national narratives, and privilege (Duncan, 1995 pp. 2-3). In my research throughout graduate school, I have needed to expand my conception of museums once again. I have been surprised by works such as those of philosopher Ricardo Manzotti (2019), who reveres the museum as primarily visitor-centered. Manzotti's (2019) "Empathic Space and Shared Consciousness" recounts the Western museum's history as a secular basilica created for deep experience. He argues that historically, museums were not designed to be object-centric institutions. Rather, amid modern secularization, museums brought people together in secular spaces. It is in such spaces that Manzotti (2019) claims new values and shared existence could be explored (p. 49). Manzotti (2019) begins by arguing that much of the object-centered quality of museums is driven by outdated philosophical ways of thinking such as Cartesian materialism and Shannon's Theory of Information. Manzotti (2019) suggests that both these theories be set aside in favor of the more open Spread Mind Theory, in which the relationship between object and subject is a moment of

shared existence (p. 50). For Manzotti, museums can be ideal places where shared identity between consciousness and the external world may be experienced through empathic connections (p. 59). Individual consciousness is not a private egocentric inner dimension, but a portion of the external world to which we all contribute. If this is the case, then communication is a moment in our collective, shared existence. Manzotti elaborates that if we see museum spaces and our interactions with them in this way, "then empathy becomes thus the most natural and sincere paradigm of communication between human beings" (p. 58). For example, two museum visitors in a gallery discussing a work of art on a tour not only share the surrounding objects they engage with, but also their individual values. This is what Manzotti describes as *world overlapping*. Museums are, then, a physical location where overlapping is achieved not by an exchange of information, but by the actual coexistence of human bodies in the presence of art work, arranged in a way that encourages moments of self-consciousness (p. 59).

As I read Manzotti on Spread Mind Theory and reflected on how museum education programs might provide such moments of overlapping, I began to think about how my own museum program for anxiety can create moments of shared empathy and existence by talking about the experience of anxiety. I know how meaningful these conversations can be first-hand from the experiences I have shared in this literature review. I was inspired to challenge the notion of the museum as a repository of knowledge and truth by completely removing Miquel Barcelo's work from its original historical context. Instead of having participants come around and learn art historical information about the *Sopa d'Europa*, I use the painting as a catalyst by which the group can begin to connect with the experiences and shared stories of others. Manzotti illustrates this idea beautifully in his conclusion: "the objects are not the goal of the museum; they are merely the means" (p. 69). The goal is what happens among visitors inside the museum

walls—shared consciousness, where empathy is the source of understanding.

Although part of me left this reading with idealistic aspirations for what museums could be, I still could not help but think of museums as often inaccessible and silent structures—beholders of history and truth. Jennings et al. (2019) have voiced convincingly such doubts in their questioning of museums' roles in the civic sphere. Jennings, who has worked in museums for over 30 years and initiated the empathetic museum movement, asks why the museum world remained silent in the national conversation around Trayvon Martin. Jennings also notes that in the midst of Hurricane Sandy and other natural disasters, museums have seemed to conduct business as usual, while public libraries provided warmth and water to their communities (2012, p. 506). In response to such silence and neglect, the Empathetic Museum initiative emerged through the work of Gretchen Jennings (2012, 2019), Jim Cullen (2019), and many others who advocate for empathy to be practiced inside the museum and at the level of the institution. The empathetic museum initiative challenges museums across the United States to adopt the five characteristics of empathetic practice: civic vision, institutional body language, community resonance, timeline, and sustainability performance measures (p. 511). Jennings and her colleagues call for an empathetic practice that goes beyond the surface, challenging museums to address issues of racism, immigration, and environment in their communities. At the same time, such a practice also asks those at the top to consider how empathy can be reflected in the culture of employment inside their institutions—even in the building itself. This requires a re-shaping or re-framing of the museum structure and forces museum professionals to consider how their institutions operate each day. More importantly, I think it challenges future museum professionals to ask ourselves why silence has prevailed around issues of social justice and how building structures have kept certain people from feeling welcome in the museum space. I

believe these are questions that cannot be ignored or brushed aside when thinking about empathy in museums. Manzotti (2019) and Jennings et al. (2019) have not only convinced me that museums are spaces where empathy can be cultivated, but that it is the primary work of museum educators to engage with these difficult questions.

Museums as Spaces of Care

My museum program titled *Anxiously Yours* invites women who have anxiety to share their stories with a group of women who might share similar experiences. The (fe)mail method of writing autoethnographically is connected with a feminist notion of care. Nel Noddings (2005), a feminist known for her ideas around philosophy of education, outlines six categories of care: for self, strangers, inner circle, animals, plants, the human-made world, and ideas. In education, Noddings (2005) argues that students should not be measured by test scores, but instead given opportunities to care for themselves, ideas, and the world around them (Barrett, 2013 p. 31). While the feminist ethic of care described by Noddings (2005) is pertinent to the (fe)mail narrative, I wondered if it were possible to find examples in museum education literature, specifically in relation to empathy.

In my subsequent research, I found an illuminating example. Morse and Munro's (2015) examination of practices of care in two British museums argues that care is defined as ethic of encounter, and that museums are often left out of the literature on institutions of care, despite being major public spaces with an interest in the welfare of others (p. 357). Munro and Morse make the case that museums today should not only be concerned with pedagogy, but with relevance to their communities (p. 364), recalling what Jennings et al. (2019) have described as civic vision as a form of empathetic practice. This form of civic vision can be seen in the ways museums join with other institutions of civil society, combining efforts to shape the quality of

life in their communities (Jennings et al. p. 510). Museums' embodiment of such civic duty towards their communities, Jennings (2019) argues, is in itself a form of care.

Morse and Munro (2015) take this concept further by illustrating through a series of interviews and field notes how educators develop spaces of care in their programming. The article featured case studies of two very different institutions, the Municipal Museum in Scotland and the Regional Museum in the North of England. The data in both case studies include observation and semi-structured interviews between the researchers and 8-10 staff members in each location (p. 364). The researchers present the data in the form of short vignettes from each museum site illustrating the caring work that takes place in various community engagement programs (p. 365). Morse and Munro found that staff are primarily interested in creating spaces where participants can talk freely, in which they will be encouraged and listened to without judgement. Staff also emphasized doing what is best for visitors, not necessarily for the museum (p. 366). The authors identify these as "mundane caring acts" (p. 364), such as taking the time to learn each person's name or share a cup of tea with visitors. These small or mundane acts of care go a long way in creating a safe space, especially for those who may feel uncomfortable in the space. This is what Jennings et al. (2019) define as institutional body language. Small acts of care by staff in a museum constitute the museum institution's embodiment of empathy through workplace culture, staffing, and building structure (p. 511). I believe that in creating such safe spaces, educators can change the institutional body language inside a museum to be personal and inclusive of those who may have often felt left out or excluded. I felt inspired by the literature on museums and care to include small "mundane caring acts" in my own museum program. I began my program by inviting light conversation and introductions where my participants could mingle and get to know one another. I also included moments of vulnerability, not only when I shared

my own story and thoughts, but when I asked for respect and care towards the stories of other women. As participants contribute to this safe space, together they can promote mutual empathy and connection.

Morse and Munro also point to museum objects as central to an environment of care because they are points of connection that may be personal or emotional for visitors. As such, care can be enacted through touching objects or creative craft responses to objects in the museum (p. 367). In this light, I have begun to think more critically about (fe)mail in the museum as an act of care towards others and works of art. In writing about our feelings and the imagined feelings of works of art, might we be able to cultivate care within educational programming? Morse and Munro discovered through their conversations with museum staff in both sites that community engagement emerged by approaching the collection as a resource for constructive identity work. In other words, the researchers ask how such an environment can lead to the creation of more positive selves. One Municipal Museum worker said that coming into a room and listening to one another, meeting new people one wouldn't ordinarily encounter, had an impact on how museum workers view the broader community around the museum and changed how they interact. I believe such individual engagement and community aspect in community programs broadens the museum's social impact by changing how we view and treat others we see as different from ourselves.

Museums as Community and Visitor-Centered Spaces

My research has identified examples across the United States and Canada in which museums have practiced community engagement as a way of bridging social connections in their communities. I also found that educators use narrative to convey stories and cultivate empathy and community in their programs. A good example is the Levine Museum of the New South in

Charlotte, North Carolina. Over a decade, the museum has served as a meeting place for people of various backgrounds. Similarly, to the Municipal Museum in Scotland, it has brought people together who would not normally meet outside its walls such as those of different ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and social class (Morse & Munro, p. 219). The Levine museum's 2011 exhibition *Courage: The Carolina Story that Changed America* traced the emotionally powerful story of the brave citizens in Clarendon County, South Carolina, who, in the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision risked their livelihoods and very lives to bring the first of five lawsuits in the state demanding an end to racial segregation in public schools. The exhibition incorporated dialogue and storytelling to cultivate empathy between individuals. It was offered alongside an educational adult program called *Conversations on Courage*, which was designed to inform existing management teams from businesses, government, and community nonprofits about this important chapter in the state's history (p. 222). The program was so popular that it exceeded the number of participants expected and launched an ongoing grant making strategy to educate local leaders about the impact of race and racism in their communities (p. 224). In this way, the museum used history and empathy to connect its visitors through a relevant exhibition about the county's history as a catalyst for discussing contemporary racial disparities in their community. The museum's experience over the past decade has demonstrated that it can play a significant role in building community by telling stories of the past and of the present—specifically of those individuals who are continuously reinventing the South today (p. 224).

This is what Jennings et al. (2019) refer to as "community resonance" (p. 511). Just as an individual might be empathetic towards the feelings and experiences of another, an empathetic museum is so connected to its community to be keenly aware of its values, needs, and challenges (p. 511). *The Conversations on Courage* program not only exemplifies this connectedness to the

community and the county but also continues to educate local leaders about the impacts of racism in their communities (pp. 222-223). It does so by providing an educational space where people can express ideas and share their personal experiences with others.

Educators and curators achieved similar results at the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington, D.C., in the 2015 exhibition *Turquoise Mountain: Artists Transforming Afghanistan*. This was a "story-based" instead of an "object-based" show (Wide, 2016, p. 163). Telling the story of transformation spanning a decade of artistic revival in Kabul, the exhibit embodied visitor-centeredness by focusing on the story of one district of Kabul and the histories of its artists and residents. According to Thomas Wide, (2016) the stories used in the *Turquoise Mountain* exhibit created a sense of community through a shared feeling of empathy for the experience and struggle of others, creating emotional and intellectual connections between American and Afghan visitors. The text and video in the exhibit encouraged people to take the perspective of the Afghan artists and helped them not only to imagine, but concretely experience the artists' world view by displaying all the exhibit's text in the artists' own words (p. 177).

During the lifespan of the exhibit, curators arranged for Afghan artists to visit Washington, going beyond imagined empathy to actual physical connection (Wide, 2016). As I thought about how empathy and community were cultivated in the two examples above, I noticed the narrative structure embedded in each. I saw that for exhibitions or adult programming in museums to have a visitor-centered focus, they have to be about people and, more importantly, about their stories. Below, I elaborate upon how storytelling is a powerful tool for creating understanding and empathy, and how museum programs such as those described above have successfully used stories creatively to foster empathy.

Museums and Empathy through Storytelling and Narrative

My research showed that feminist adult programming in Canadian museum education provides additional good models for narrative in empathy programming. In "Animating 'The Blank Page': Exhibitions as Feminist Community Adult Education," Darlene Clover (2018) analyzes two feminist exhibitions in Canadian galleries to address how Canadian museums silence and marginalize women's histories and experiences, as well as their contributions of feminist community in adult education (p. 1). Clover (2018) argues that two very different feminist exhibitions use images and storytelling to animate, re-write, and reimagine "blank pages" of particularized histories and identities (p. 2). Feminist exhibitions help make the invisibility of women's oppression and erasure visible. In feminist exhibitions and educational programming, women must be provided with opportunities to advance their own authorship in their lives and stories. The author argues further that this can be achieved through visual literacy: "using art and visuals to teach us something about the world" (p. 4). Visual literacy teaches women about blank pages in history while engaging in art making practices that encourage learning to take an active part in the world (p. 4). Feminists have used artistic practices such as photography, mask making, fashion, and storytelling to engage people in community political learning. Visual literacy can encourage dialogue, active listening, and dialogic looking. For Clover (2018), all are needed to make empathy possible.

As I thought about visual literacy and its relation to storytelling and feminism, I wondered how I could incorporate it in museum programming for women. More specifically, I wondered if and how (fe)mail could become a way of engaging in visual literacy with a group of women. As I continued to read about feminist adult programming, I noticed how often the theme of museums as spaces of care and community emerged. For example, Clover (2018) argues that

creating safe spaces to explore issues or be oneself is central to feminist adult education as a practice of empowerment. Safe spaces also allow educators to foster participants' full control over how women represent themselves or construct their identities through storytelling.

Engaging in visual literacy and dialogic looking puts educators in conversation with the paradox of women's vulnerability and their power to transform themselves and others through storytelling (Clover, 2018, p. 9). Clover's reflections challenged me to think about narrative and the (fe)mail method as an act of resistance and uplift for women's voices in museum education. I was also inspired to approach my program as a kind of pedagogy of empowerment, in which women could use their voices and express their experiences artistically. My hope is that the women who participate in my program will be transformed not only through their own stories, but through the stories of others.

As I continued my research into narrative modes of exploring or cultivating empathy, I encountered an article by qualitative researchers who advocate for storytelling or visual literacy as an effective method of communication and expression for students who suffer from anxiety. In "A Day in the Life of a Young Person with Anxiety: Arts-Based Boundary Objects Used to Communicate the Results of Health Research," Woodgate, Zurba, and Tennent (2017) draw from phenomenology to explore how arts-based creative approaches can be useful to express the experience of anxiousness in teens and young adults. Although the study is not from the field of museum education, its implications solidified my ideas around narrative and anxiety.

The interview component to this project added a narrative storytelling layer that gave context to the images and objects produced by participants, which were arts-based projects developed by the participants to describe or express their experience of anxiety, called "boundary objects." The authors found that these artistic depictions of what it is like be a young person with

anxiety created the potential for enhanced empathy and understanding around a mental health issue that is often stigmatized. The boundary objects were a series of video vignettes including movement, music, and dance, which are particularly powerful for communicating emotions and promoting connections across groups that might otherwise have difficulty understanding one another (p. 4). The authors' Youth's Voices study included 58 young people living with anxiety disorder between the ages of 10 and 22. The first interviews were open ended, while the second round was complemented by photo voice. Participants engaged as co-researchers, taking pictures and documenting images that could accurately depict or represent their experiences with anxiety (pp. 5-6). Researchers found through the study that artistic representation was an effective way of empowering young people to express how anxiety affects their daily lives. Such a creative process generated meaningful opportunities for the youth to reflect and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationships with other people, places, and systems of support (p. 4).

This study revealed aspects of the experience of anxiety, storytelling, and artistic or arts-based practices that are important to my work. First, anxiety disorders are often stigmatized, especially within student populations, and often it is difficult to articulate the feelings of anxiousness using words alone. Second, the data produced in the Youth's Voices project showed that students were able to communicate their experiences creatively through the use of photo voice and informal interviews. I was reminded that like the boundary objects, (fe)mail is another creative and artistic form of expression. While the act of writing is important to the (fe)mail method, I have also come to accept that sometimes words fail. This article challenged me to think about the creative art making component of (fe)mail. For this reason, I have not asked participants to bring their own postcards or use reproductions from the gift shop in the workshop

portion of my museum program. Instead, I have allotted a chunk of time during the (fe)mail workshop for participants to make their postcards using collage, paint, and drawing. In this manner, the storytelling aspect of my project, like the Youth's Voices project, becomes a dynamic, multifaceted process. The story is told not in words alone, but also through a visual process of making.

Reflecting on some of the educational programs and museums I have explored in this essay, it is clear that stories give context, touch people emotionally, open them to new perspectives, and help them organize new conceptual frameworks. To quote master storyteller Andy Goodman and screenwriting coach, Robert McKee: "To involve people at the deepest level you need stories" (p. 219). The Levine Museum tells well-known stories alongside those that have been obscured as a way to build connection and foster empathy in the diverse region of Charlotte (p. 226). Wide (2016) recounts a similar, story-based approach to exhibiting works of art from a Middle Eastern culture. The individual and personal stories of Afghan artists produced empathetic concern and the capacity for altruistic action in the *Turquoise Mountain* exhibit at the Freer and Sackler galleries (p. 167). The feminist adult programming described by Clover (2018) presented an aspect of narrative that encouraged women to share their stories and reclaim the blank museum page through experiences of both vulnerability and empowerment (Clover, 2018, pp. 1-3). Indeed, I have found throughout my survey of literature on narrative and qualitative research that storytelling coupled with art making can serve as an effective, dynamic mode of expression through which our experiences can be articulated and made sense of. I believe that stories connect us as they let us discover common experiences. I have also encouragingly learned that museums are aware of the movement for empathy, and museum educators are eager to

explore storytelling in the gallery to bridge cultural divides and foster environments of empathy among visitors and staff.

The scope of these sections on museums and empathy has encompassed the active conversation about empathetic programming in art museums across the United States, Canada, and some parts of Europe. I have reviewed pertinent definitions of empathy and explored how museum educators and curators have applied empathetic perspectives in their programs and exhibitions. I have not only learned that museum educators care deeply about empathy, but that the museum itself is an ideal place for empathy and understanding to emerge among visitors. In the museum literature, I found that museums demonstrate empathy in many ways, but the most common is through storytelling to draw an emotional connection between people of differing backgrounds.

I looked at and analyzed museums as places of care, community, and human stories. In this framework I situated my own museum project and creative method, (fe)mail, which I will unpack in the methodology section of this dissertation. The readings I have discussed helped me critically consider my museum program and the potential for community and empathy to be embedded in the method of postcard making I have developed. I have also considered (fe)mail as a form of visual literacy that can be used for both vulnerable expression and empowerment, as well as a tool to communicate anxiousness when words alone are not sufficient. In thinking critically about cultivating spaces of care and community, I have also implemented small moments of vulnerability and social interaction into my program. My hope is that these minute instances will contribute to the larger fabric of a space of care. The visitor-centred approach to empathetic teaching and programming that I discovered in my readings also inspired me to consider how my project could bring the participant to the forefront of the conversation.

Museums are crucial places for difficult community conversations, and they are powerful spaces that allow us to express empathy for others. I believe that museum educators are increasingly challenging museum institutions, boards, and staff to think about their ability and responsibility to foster such necessary conversations. While empathy programming has accomplished much, a great deal of work remains. In the following section, I look at how museum educators have turned to strategies of observation, dialogue, and mindfulness to cultivate empathetic learning in museum programming. I shall also consider how these strategies can be useful for my program and developing conversations around anxiety and empathy for one another.

Slow Looking and Empathetic Learning Inside the Museum

A summary of slow looking practices and empathetic learning in museum literature and the work currently being done by museum educators in the field is important to include because these programs and teaching strategies have undoubtedly influenced the second part of this research project: the museum program. Slow looking is a museum teaching strategy often used in empathetic museum activities (Cascone, 2017). Museum educators such as Shari Tishman (2017), Elliot Kai-Kee (2020) Peter Clothier (2012), J. Elkins (2004), and Bonnie Pitman (2020) have written about the theory and practice of slow looking and how it can be used to teach in the gallery. Each educator implements the act of slowly looking and scanning a work of art in the gallery in distinct ways ways with different groups of individuals.

I first encountered slow looking in a museum seminar class that dealt specifically with teaching strategies. Slow looking seemed boring to say the least. When students selected which strategy we wanted to present, I steered clear of slow looking and chose to present my seminar on dialogic encounters, a method of teaching that focuses on conversation as a way of learning

about art (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011). It wasn't until I was working on my seminar presentation with my partner that I realized even in dialoguing about works of art, we had to take at least some time to look at and the scan the images we were talking about. Can you imagine having an in-depth discussion about a work of art in a museum without actually looking at it?

I think it is also worth noting here that my reasons for including a slow looking component in my museum program also have to do with how important mindfulness is for anxiety. Although I must admit I struggle with mindfulness, I am well aware that it has immense benefits for taking control of anxiety and over thinking (Corliss, 2014). Elizabeth Hoge (2014), a psychiatrist at the Center for Anxiety and Traumatic Stress Disorders at Massachusetts General Hospital has written that "mindfulness meditation makes perfect sense for treating anxiety.

People with anxiety have a problem dealing distracting thoughts that have too much power." (p. 1). She explains that generally "they can't distinguish between a problem solving thought and a nagging worry that has no benefit" (Corliss, 2014 p. 1). According to Hoge, mindfulness helps individuals with anxiety to recognize intrusive thoughts as just thoughts, separate from their core selves. A study in the JAMA Internal Medicine Review also found that mindfulness-based stress reduction program helped quell anxiety symptoms in people with generalized anxiety disorder, commonly known as GAD (Goya, Singh et al, 2014). Although I am not proposing a meditation or elaborate mindfulness exercise for programs like mine, I incorporated aspects of mindful looking in my program that encouraged breathing and remaining in the present moment.

Kai-Kee (2020) writes about the experience of looking mindfully in a museum. He cites how this practice was used at the MFA Boston between educators Kristin Hoshkins (2020) and Susan M. Pollack (2020). The program, which Kai-Kee (2020) described in *Activity-Based*

Teaching in the Art Museum, focused on bringing mindfulness into the museum gallery. The audience was encouraged by educators to engage in deep breathing and to be present in the moment. Educators prompted participants of the workshop to "notice thoughts, emotions that arise and let them go" (p. 161). The exercise brought the senses into play as audience members entered a Lawren Harris landscape in a way that felt most comfortable for each person. The lesson embraced a back-and-forth movement between awareness of thoughts, focus on breathing, and coming back to the art.

This program was a more active kind of slow looking than I had previously engaged with. I was surprised to learn about mindful looking in a way that did not incorporate one-hour looking or meditating sessions in the gallery (Clothier, 2012). Although Kai-Kee advocates for mindful looking at works of art in the museum, Shari Tishman (2017) goes further, describing slow looking in a way that is active and practicable for those (such as myself) who do not want to meditate in front of works of art for several hours at a time. Tishman distinguishes between mindfulness and slow looking. While mindfulness can accompany slow looking in helpful ways, it does not need to be present for slow looking to take place. Tishman (2017) illustrates ways museum educators can facilitate looking through the use of "observation strategies," the use of which tells the eye where to look and guides participants to their own discernments and lessons. Tishman (2017) further argues for a kind of looking that is intrinsically tied to description. The author not only encourages the audience to understand how we approach objects, but to also seek out different vantage points to see what we are looking at from different perspectives.

I devoted several minutes at the beginning of my museum program to slow looking. I was inspired by mindful practices and the role they play in helping alleviate anxiety. I assumed that when arriving on Zoom with a group of women who did not know one another well, some of my

participants might have been nervous. Perhaps they have never been done something like this before. Some of them did not know everyone in the group well. Practicing quiet looking while focusing on our own breath can be a relaxing activity before we begin discussion. It can serve as an exercise in actively looking for what we recognize in the work of art, and as a way of being present and in the moment.

Borrowing from Kai-Kee (2020)'s mindful looking strategy was meant to help some of the women feel more at ease to focus and truly scan the art. I encouraged my participants to acknowledge their thoughts, let them go, and return to the work of art. The first portion of the exercise focused on observation. I prompted the group by asking them what they saw and asked them to look closely at the image before them. In this section of the activity, I borrowed from Tishman's (2017) active looking tied to describing. I asked the women in the group to describe and interpret what they saw in order to unpack some of the emotions the portrait might be feeling.

During my research on slow looking, I came across the work of James Elkins (2001) in a museum seminar class. Elkins (2001) writes from a personal place and connects slow looking to the emotional capability in works of art to move us. He advocates for a deep engagement with paintings that requires looking and openness. Elkins (2001) blames art historians like himself, as well as modern philosophy, for overcomplicating paintings as aesthetically beautiful objects and ignoring their abilities to make us engage with them emotionally. This method of approaching slow looking differs from the more academic and mindful ways of Tishman (2017) and Kai-Kee (2020). Elkins (2001) focused on engaging with works of art at a more emotional, "human feeling" level. I am not sure that I'd want to provoke tears or crying during my program, but I do want my participants to engage emotionally with the painting I have selected for them. For my

museum looking activity, I asked the group to observe closely and interpret emotions of anxiousness in the image. I prompted the group to reflect inward by asking them why the figure in the painting might be feeling anxious. My approach to the slow looking activity at the beginning of my program was primarily inspired by Bonnie Pitman's (2020) "Power of Observation" teaching framework.

Figure 1: Miquel Barcelo's Soup of Europe *(Sopa d'Europa)* painting. Mixed media on canvas, 1985.

This method of teaching prioritizes looking closely at works of art without judgment. The observation begins as a self-guided process called scanning, in which participants are asked by the educator to take a first look, looking quickly but not thoroughly. The educator then guides the viewing experience so that the audience may begin to look closely, discovering and selecting key elements in the work of art to focus on. Pitman's (2020) framework allows for different forms of looking to occur over time, first scanning and then attending, which she deems "focusing intentionally over time." This method of approaching works of art assumes that we simply cannot trust what we see the first time we look at an image. Moreover, according to Pitman

(2020), “No two people see things the same way.” This statement reminded me of all the times I impatiently stood before a work of art with a group of people and was asked, “What do you see?” Over time, I learned that whomever I am standing next to can see and pluck out details from a painting or sculpture that I simply cannot see myself at first. This is because as individuals we observe and gather information differently due to our inherited biology and our learned biases. Our values, culture, religious beliefs, experiences, and preferences shape what we see before us (Pitman, 2020).

Soup of Europe by Miquel Barcelo hangs in a beautiful, ornate frame and measures almost three meters in both width and length. The gigantic piece is bustling with varying brushstrokes and colors that hide beneath messy shades of grey, black, and white. There is much to look at, find, and interpret. Pitman’s (2020) framework allowed us as a group of women to look closely and actively at the work before us. Through scanning and attending, participants could find meaning in the piece, first through the act of slowing down and simply observing what they saw. This kind of intentional looking inspired by Pitman’s (2020) framework was meant to allow participants to truly connect with the work of art in a meaningful and empathetic way.

After completing several semesters of museum education courses at UNT and immersing myself in a myriad of art teaching strategies, I concluded that slow looking is vital for engaging with many works of art, no matter your program or background. I have also learned over the years that there is no one right way of doing slow looking as a museum educator. For my program, I incorporated slow looking strategies as a way of engaging in meaningful conversation and meaning making in the museum.

In this literature review I have re-positioned art museums as spaces of care, empathy, and storytelling. I have re-imagined the museum as visitor-centered by considering contemporary programming and empathy literature in the field, exploring implications for developing a program that encourages storytelling, close looking, and perspective-taking with a work of art from the Meadows Museum of Art. In this literature review, I have defined anxiety as a broad and general emotion or experience that does not need to accompany a formal diagnosis. My intention was for my program to benefit and reach a group of women with varying experiences and of different walks of life. I have also positioned my program amid this literature by considering the many ways museums have been absent or silent in the conversation about anxiety and other mental illnesses. In identifying this gap in the literature of the field, I argue that my program aligned with existing work on empathy while filling a gap in art museum programming and the field of education.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction: How Narrative Inquiry Found Me

One of my favorite questions to ask narrative researchers is, how did you come to know your methodology? Perhaps all doctoral students like to ask their mentors and professors some version of this question. I could be wrong, but I feel that narrative researchers have an especially deep or special relationship with their methodology. It is a bit different than others, not because we simply know our methodology better, but because we are intrinsically connected to it in a personal way. Maybe as researchers, we didn't necessarily go shopping for a viable methodology during graduate school, but rather it was narrative inquiry that found us. I came across this idea one evening as I made my way through Shari Savage's dissertation. She wrote about her research topic as a persistent, fluttering idea that grasped her curiosity tightly and could not be shaken off once it had taken hold (Savage, 2009). As I reflected on my chosen methodology and topic, I slowly realized they had similarly embraced me during my second year at UNT. Narrative did not find me in the traditional methodology course I took in 2019. Although, ironically enough, it was one of the chapters in my big book of research methodology options. I remember being curious about ethnography at the time, but the textbook seemed boring and inaccessible.

I recall settling for phenomenology and its description of lived experience as the closest thing to storytelling I could get to in qualitative research. I spent long hours reading Max van Manen (2015), trying to understand phenomenological writing, but I was not hooked or inspired by the method I had landed on. Similarly, to Laurel Richardson (2005), I yawned through most of the qualitative texts I read, telling myself that this was academia, and if I read it enough and with great attention, it would one day become interesting. I briefly mentioned my journey

through narrative inquiry in the empathy section of my literature review, but I would like to dive deeper into how I came to know and love narrative writing, and why it's central to my research. I also expand on autoethnography as my genre of choice and why it is a pivotal method in social science research. Lastly, I unpack the method of letter writing and the concept of (fe)mail I briefly introduced in the literature review. Finally, without further ado, let me introduce to you my story of how narrative inquiry found me.

After writing an entire proposal for the final paper of my methodology class with phenomenology as my method of choice, I moved on unsatisfied, towards the spring semester, when I began taking my first museum education seminar. It was in spring of 2019 that narrative inquiry appeared to me through the dissertation of my committee chair and advisor Laura Evans. Furthermore, narrative inquiry, museums, empathy, and mental health concerns collided during this season of my graduate school life. I was captivated by Evans' personal, evocative story and very real struggle with an eating disorder. I remember reading page after page on my phone until I had lost track of time. As I put the PDF away and got ready for bed, one resounding thought echoed in the back of my mind as I drifted off to sleep: wow, I can't believe this is what research can be.

To say I was excited about narrative inquiry is an understatement. I was over the moon! I remember instantly emailing Laura Evans and asking her for more examples and other researchers in my newfound methodology. I had fallen head over heels. At this stage in getting to know my methodology, I identified greatly with Hee-Jeong Kim (2016)'s first encounter with narrative inquiry as a graduate student. Kim (2016) describes her knowledge of narrative inquiry at the time as shallow. Hee-Jeong Kim received criticism that she had chosen a methodology and settled on a topic based on what could fit into it (p. 2). While I am sure for other students, things

happen the other way around—they first find a topic and then choose a methodology—for me, it was the opposite. I delved into narrative headfirst and even attempted my own project during an independent study in the spring of 2019 with a dear friend who had been diagnosed with a chronic illness. It was clear that at the end of that semester, I still had a lot to learn, and doing an entire dissertation project around narrative inquiry would certainly require me to learn more.

Going Deeper: Getting to know Narrative Inquiry in Social Science Research

Throughout the fall of 2019, I explored my chosen methodology in a narrative inquiry class taught by Laura Evans. As a class, we dwelled with several texts and wrestled with many concepts and ideas. One work we returned to on a biweekly basis was Jeong-Hee Kim's (2016) *Understanding Narrative Inquiry.* Her book was both a thorough review of the literature and an extensive how-to guide for qualitative research. Kim's (2016) history of narrative inquiry cites Jerome Bruner (1986), who argued for narrative as a legitimate form of knowledge in social science research. Bruner (1986) states that human beings utilize two modes of thought for understanding truth and reality (p. 10). While the paradigmatic mode influenced by positivism is pervasive in the quantitative realm of research, the narrative mode uses stories to understand the meaning of human actions and experiences, the many vicissitudes and challenges of life. It incorporates the feelings, values, and perceptions of the people we want to understand, while also leading to ambiguity (pp. 10-11). More on this ambiguity later. For now, as Laurel Richardson (2005) put it, "Qualitative work carries its meaning in its entire text" (p. 960). Just as a work of literature is not equivalent to its plot summary, qualitative research is not contained in its abstract (p. 960). In other words, as researchers we cannot simply scan texts, but must read them entirely. This might seem like an obvious statement, but I thought it was brilliantly said. It hones the notion that we cannot separate surveys, charts, and data from the written experience.

Actually, narrative researchers, Clandinin (2019) and Hubert (2019) argue, experience inquiry as narratively constructed and lived. In their early work, they sought to represent research participants not as data compartmentalized into analytical categories, but as people with artistic and aesthetic dimensions, composing lives full of richness and complexity (p. 163). Their own exploration of Eisner and Powell's (2002) artistic aesthetic dimensions of experience illustrates this sense of "wholeness" perfectly through their use of metaphor and understanding of narrative as both phenomenon and method.

Narrative cannot be compartmentalized. It carries its meaning in the entire text. The narrative mode provides explanatory knowledge of human experience and allows for rich nuance to come forward (Kim, 2016, p.11). This is an interesting way young researchers like me think about the research participant in their wholeness. In my research on museums and anxiety, it is tempting to separate the anxiety from the person, or the written account or postcard from the individual who wrote it. However, narrative inquiry allows me the space to investigate and explore the data of the written experience as a whole, inseparable from its writer. When I ponder this, I think about Darlene's story from Clandinin (2019) and Hubert's (2019) "Narrative Inquiry: Towards Understanding Life's Artistry." The artist and teacher known as Darlene told her story autobiographically as she struggled to make sense of her cultural experiences as an Inuvik person. The researchers noted the movement in her storytelling was multidimensional because she went from narrating what was happening in the present to what had happened in social situations. Clandinin (2019) and Hubert (2019) called this three-dimensional space, in which metaphor allows researchers to understand Darlene's and others' life compositions as filled with artistic and aesthetic dimensions (p.167). Another example was Evans' (2011) dissertation, which displayed each woman's interpretation alongside a biographical statement. As

a reader, I felt I personally knew whose interpretation I was reading, and I was overwhelmed by the sense that this was not a written paragraph being dissected and analyzed, but a real human being's thoughts and struggles.

I liked how Clandinin (2012) spoke about narrative qualitative research in an interview following her keynote presentation at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference in 2012. "For us, this is a piece that is often missing in the research. We do research 'on' instead of 'with.'" This quotation stood out to me as I thought more about what my research might look like and the close relationship I held with my participants. Kim (2016) similarly states that as we seek to understand instead of predict or control, we must, in fact, live with our research. Our relationship with our participants will inevitably become closer. We cannot distance ourselves from the researched because they are not an "object" of research. These statements about narrative inquiry as a methodology opened up a new way of looking at research for me as a young, inexperienced graduate student. Clandinin's (2012) interview remarks were a particular hit close to home. Before my encounter with narrative inquiry, I had no plans to conduct such vulnerable research. To live with our research is tricky. For me, it almost embodies the empathetic notion of suffering with. Hmm... is it possible to suffer with our research? It is certainly not for the faint of heart.

I think as graduate students we are often thrown into several methodology classes in the hopes that we'll settle on the "right" methodology for our topic of choice. It is easy to settle mindlessly, or blindly head over heels in my case, without giving our role as researcher much critical thought. How do we approach our topic of study? What relationship do we have to our participants? How does this influence our decision making and ethical dilemmas? I thought about these questions deeply as I prepared to jump into what Kim (2016) deems backyard

research, done with the people closest to me. While it might be more comfortable to be vulnerable with a friend, researchers run into ethical dilemmas when they are close to participants. Narrative inquiry calls for the development of *phronesis*, or ethical judgement through reflexivity (Kim, 2016 p. 105). Kim (2016) states that narrative practice calls for judgement to address ethical issues arising in every respect of narrative research at the local level. Such care honors our participant's humanity and dignity (p. 104*). Phronesis* calls for reflection that is concerned with the particulars of a situation. Thus, a narrative inquirer can only acquire such ethical judgement through reflection, action, practice, and practical experience of research (p. 105). I understand *phronesis* to be our ability as researchers to deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties of our research. Therefore, it is impossible to simply read about *phronesis* and be done with it. It is only possible to obtain it by doing real work. This aspect of phronesis recalls Max van Manen's (2015) comments on writing after the fact. We can never truly articulate our emotions in the moment; only after they have passed can we have enough clarity to reflect (van Manen, 2015, p. 10). It is interesting that I can sit here with my foot tucked under my leg and write endlessly about what to do should a difficult circumstance arise in my own research. Actually, don't get me started. I am a natural over thinker, especially when it comes to dreaming up worst-case scenarios. I enjoyed reading Kim's (2016) quotation about obtaining ethical judgement only in the midst of doing research. This ethical parameter, a method of thinking about research according to the methodology of narrative inquiry, allows me the freedom and comfort to not over think. As Kim (2016) notes, such is possible precisely because *phronesis* is not developed through thinking, but only through doing. As an anxious person, this is both liberating and scary. I suddenly have no control over anything, something I am only slowly getting used to.

Kim (2016) argues further that we can only develop *phronesis* in research through reflexivity. This means placing our actions as researchers under the same critical scrutiny as the data. Rich Furman (2005) articulates this point beautifully when he second-guesses his willingness to share his personal feelings on the death of his companion animal. For Furman (2005), it is always easiest to do research on others, but we must be willing to be as vulnerable with our participants as they are with us. We must also be critical of ourselves. This aspect of narrative inquiry fascinated me and drew me closer to this form of qualitative research. While it is painful to reveal the deepest parts of myself to readers, I don't think I could ever reveal someone else from a falsely objective or clinical distance. If we are to do vulnerable work, let's do it together. This brings us back full circle to empathy. As a researcher and future museum educator, I am not interested only in what you can give me—the valuable data—but I am willing to sit in the suffering with you. For me, this is equivalent to sitting in the uncertainty and seeing the participants I am working with as more than numbers or patterns in my data collection. It is a humility that says, "I don't have all the answers, but I am here for support." Perhaps narrative inquiry is a truly empathetic form of qualitative research. I shall return to this later, when I go more in-depth on autoethnography.

Friendship as Method

The notion of empathy and "suffering with" I have described complicates the natural power hierarchy in the relationship of researcher and researched. It is more closely related to friendship. In the paragraphs below, I look at the methodology of friendship within the context of ethnographic research, expanding on how this methodology can complicate and enrich narrative modes of doing research with participants and friends. Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) argue that emotional involvement and reflexivity in research can provide an invaluable resource for the

ethnographic researcher (p. 283). In qualitative research, friendship as method has been employed to get to know others in meaningful ways. It seeks to reduce the hierarchical separation between researcher and participant and is often accompanied by efforts to establish and maintain a dialogical relationship and an ethic of care that invite emotion and empathy (p. 285).

According to narrative researcher Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2003), friendship "involves being the world" with others and actively getting to know these others. Friendship is an interpersonal bond characterized by the ongoing communicative management of dialectical tensions. As a method for research, friendship is similar to ethnographic research in that both methodologies call for a development of rapport with participants over a long term. According to ethnographer Carolyn Ellis (2007), friendship as method is not a guise aimed at gaining increased access to the participant's inner world. Rather, it is an investment in which researcher and friendship roles weave together, expand, and deepen each other. Friendship as method demands that researchers engage in sustained and acute reflexivity and self-scrutiny, contextually shifting between "studying them to studying us" (Tillman-Healy 2003, p. 735).

According to researchers such as Bakhtin (1986) and Tillmann-Healy (2003), friendship is a dialogical research method. In dialogical relationships, there is an acknowledgement that no speaker is self-sufficient. From a dialogical perspective, we are fundamentally connected, existing relationally with others. According to Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014), dialogue, created between people, requires mutual participation and recognition. Because friendship as method is based on dialogical relationships between participant and researcher, Bakhtin (1990) warns researchers against completely merging experiences with participants. Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) describe this as the ethical dilemma of "getting too close" or "rescuing

participants." They argue it is imperative to maintain a degree of ethical distance between researcher and researched. For example, maintaining a degree of distance and mutual otherness is required to sustain the boundary between people, generating a fundamental condition for dialogue to occur. There is also a level of emotional distance that might be needed for researchers to avoid being carried too deeply into the emotional baggage and triggers of their participants. This can be tedious and exhausting for the researcher, and for this reason, the authors recommend forms of self-care throughout the qualitative research process. Because Part I and Part II of my study encompass the dual role of researcher and friend, I have taken Owton and Allen-Collinson's (2014) recommendation to heart and set up multiple avenues of self-care for myself throughout the research process. They include doing the things that bring me joy such as running and baking, but also distancing myself from the research throughout the data analysis and the dissertation writing process. This is what narrative researchers define as *askesis*, which means a caring of the self as the object of research. I expand further on this concept when I discuss the limitations of the study in the next section.

The method of friendship in qualitative research lends itself well to the narrative research endeavor I have taken on in this study. Friendship as method addresses relevant issues of ethics that might arise in my study. For example, there may be times during the research process when the roles of interviewer, researcher, or participant become laminated onto existing relationships and interactional play. Goffman's (1974) concept of lamination is described by Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) as the layering of communication in which information from multiple channels becomes available during any given interaction. This often includes information available through "out of frame" activity such as casual conversations over dinner, text messages, and video calls (p. 291). While I did not conduct interviews in either part of my study,

I collected additional data in Part I to tell the story of the lives of researcher and participant during the creation of (fe)mail. Thus, the data and the narrative I tell in my analysis is made up of conversations and video chats that took place throughout the study between Atleigh and me. Handling this form of lamination was important as I considered how these "framings" came together to tell a story. Lamination is similarly known to autoethnographers as a multitude to reflexive voices that tell a story. For my project, this took the form of the postcards and the in-between conversations that happened amid the collection of written data. This part of the program requires *phronesis* to make critical distinctions between what is too personal and what is illustrative of the (fe)mail experience. Following narrative researchers such as Kim (2016) who suggest reflexivity can only be accessed in practice, I stepped away from the research and always asked Atleigh permission before including any of our conversations that might have neared the line of "too personal."

Limitations of Narrative Inquiry: Reflexivity in Research

While I am a worst-case scenario planner, I recognize that I am not able to plan for every ethical issue, scenario, or problem that may arise with my research. I identify with many of Kim's (2016) students who come into her office in despair asking her for exact answers to their queries. In this section I have outlined some of the fears I have and the limitations of this kind of research. In other words, I want to make it very clear to you, my reader, what I am not trying to accomplish. Moreover, I want to specify the dangers and limitations of conducting backyard research and how I prepared for this through narrative methods of reflexivity employed by other researchers.

The nature of my research is quite personal. As researchers we are "living with" our research and our data. Kim (2016) and other narrative researchers caution against backyard

research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1991) for its many ethical risks involving confusing and dangerous knowledge. While I don't believe I put myself in an ethically dangerous or compromising position, my advisor and I talked quite often about possible problems or decisions I made during the research process.

First, I decided to approach my research problem through confessional reflexivity, the most common type of reflexivity used by qualitative researchers for self-critique (Kim 2016, p. 249). This is a common tool narrative researchers use to reveal the biases, prejudices, and assumptions that might shape their research (Kim, 2016). I have decided to begin relating my research to you with transparency. I am not a therapist or psychologist, and while I am interested in the experience of anxiety, I am by no means an expert on it. Because reflexivity is needed to do narrative research, and it is a process of critical reflection on the kind of knowledge produced and how that knowledge is generated (Kim, 2016), it is worth noting its limitations. Throughout this study, I am not claiming to know or have an objective view of anxiety in women. I am also not claiming that my museum program or my correspondence with Atleigh can provide any kind of healing from anxiety. Lastly, I am not practicing art therapy in either part of my study. I am sharing this with you in the hopes of being completely transparent, but it is something I shared with my participants as well. I began the first part of my research with Atleigh by sharing the tenets of (fe)mail and making clear what was being asked of her in our correspondences. This was meant not to influence her writing of (fe)mail but to remain transparent and critical about how the data in my project was generated.

In the spirit of reflexivity in narrative research, I have studied a concept originally developed by Michel Foucault, "reflexivity as *askesis*" (2005). Foucault's notion of reflexivity focuses on the self as the object of care. This form of *askesis,* in Greek, refers to a philosophical

exercise to develop oneself for the better (Foucault, 2005). Foucault argues that for us to truly know ourselves, we must orient our focus towards caring for the self. Foucault (2005) emphasizes "care of the self, as not just a form of knowledge, but as an object of care before being an object of knowledge" (Geerinck et al., 2010, p. 252). This definition reminded me that while my own experience and vulnerability was important to the research, I also needed to remember to care for myself throughout the research process. Kim (2016) argues that *reflexive askesis* helps us grow as researchers, to look at ourselves from above. Therefore, it constitutes an ethic of the self for narrative researchers. It was important to me as I embarked on the difficulties of empathetic research. I was not only being vulnerable with my own experiences, but I read, reread, and analyzed the experiences of those close to me. Throughout this process, I had many doubts about undertaking the research. I often wondered if I were ready to do it, if my opinion were credible because I have anxiety and was not writing from a "healed," hindsight perspective. To remain critically aware of my participation and data in my research, I remembered to care for myself, which included, but was not limited to, stepping away from the work for a period of time and engaging in self-care. Because (fe)mail functions as a telling of stories intertwined with self-care, while at the same time *being* a form of self-care, I was curious to see how self-care would appear in both my and Atleigh's correspondence. Even more, I sought to understand how (fe)mail might become part of the routine of self-care as we wrote to one another and used postcards to capture our memories and lives through art making.

Getting to Know Autoethnography

I first came to know autoethnography through the work of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (1996, 2012, 2016). I was enthralled with their evocative and creative introduction sections in their co-authored and edited books. One of their introductions in script/conversational

form even inspired my delivery of my feminist letter writing conversation with Atleigh transcribed in the literature review of this dissertation (Bochner & Ellis, 1996). Because they were my first encounter with this genre of narrative inquiry, and they continue to be a prolific voice, I begin my introduction of autoethnography with their work. In a later book, titled *Evocative Autoethnography*, Bochner and Ellis (2016) define autoethnography as an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness.

Autoethnographers look both inward and outward, focusing on the social and cultural while also exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and through cultural interpretations. Ellis and Bochner write, "As we conduct this dance as researchers, the lines and distinctions between the cultural and the personal become blurred" (p. 65). Ellis and Bochner (2016) also argue that ethnographic texts appear in many forms such as the short story, poetry, fiction, photographic essays, journals, and social science prose (p. 65). Rich Furman (2005) emphasizes further that autoethnographic data are a valuable methodology for exploring the lived experience of intense human events (Alsop, 2002; James, 1999). It is particularly valuable for studying subjects that have previously been neglected in scholarship, or as in my research, left out of the museum.

Autoethnography also helps researchers deal with topics or subjects that are difficult or painful to talk about. It focuses attention on topics central to postmodern research such as authenticity and empathy (Bochner & Ellis 1996). Bochner (1996) elaborates on the history of autoethnography in postmodern research, acknowledging that the walls between the social sciences and humanities have crumbled. Specifically, he addresses the crisis in representation of the 1980s, when the discipline of social science confronted whether it was closer to the humanities or the sciences. That crisis allowed ethnographers and qualitative researchers to explore new styles of research and writing (pp. 18-20). Richardson (2005) writes that we are

fortunate to be working in a postmodern climate, when a multitude of approaches to knowing and telling exist side by side. The postmodern era introduced a context of doubt that distrusts all methods equally. In other words, there is no "right" or privileged form of knowledge. Such an outlook allows researchers to know something without claiming to know everything. In some ways, recognizing the limitations of the knower makes knowing easier. Richardson (2005) writes that qualitative writers are "off the hook" (p. 961). They do not have to play God, write as disembodied narrators, or claim universal, atemporal knowledge.

In the midst of writing this dissertation and thinking through my role as researcher and the methodology I chose, I was quite relieved upon reading Richardson's (2005) arguments. I don't have to know everything or have all the answers. This was reassuring for me as I embarked on a research project about anxiety outside the field of psychology or mental health practices. I appreciate the freedom I have with narrative inquiry and autoethnography to tell stories—both mine and others'—without making universal claims about the future of this research problem. I knew Atleigh was eager to begin Part I of this project, and I predicted our close bond would become stronger through our (fe)mail correspondence. I was confident that those who would participate in my museum program would take something from it, but I was doubtful that I could change the future of museum learning on a larger scale. Maybe I shouldn't be admitting this her. I wouldn't want you to read this and think less of me or all that I put into this project. Perhaps I echo Furman's (2005) own doubts about exposing his inner thoughts, or even Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy (1996), as she struggled to make sense of whether or not to share her story of bulimia with her readers. Tillman-Healy (1996) concludes her autoethnographic writing claiming she had something to say that wasn't being said: "I knew I could show you in detail how a bulimic life, and I wanted you to know" (p. 104). This quotation was compelling. It moved me as I thought

about what I had to say as an anxious person. Furthermore, autoethnographic writing allows me to show in detail what the experience of anxiety is like. Because this kind of personal and evocative writing allows for detailed description and meaningful storytelling of life experience, it is the perfect place for empathy to be come to light at the forefront of qualitative research.

Carolyn Ellis (1996) concludes her script-style introduction with Bochner (1996) by calling ethnographers to take risks: "Write from the heart, as well as the head, turn the field back on yourself" (p. 42). In this way, I see myself as both participant and researcher in my project. So much of autoethnography is about modeling the vulnerability you wish to see in others. I cannot expect my participants to be vulnerable if I am unwilling or embarrassed to put my feelings out there publicly. Authenticity and transparency in narrative research speaks to a certain kind of ethical judgement researchers need to have in order to do this kind of work. Ultimately, it can be summarized as "a knowing of the self that happens through knowing the other" (Richardson, 2005, p. 964). I briefly mentioned in my literature review the example of Arthur Frank (1995) needing the stories of others to make sense of his own story. Richardson (2005) also notes that if knowing the self (in this case the researcher) and knowing the subject and the participant are intertwined, then as researchers, we are invited and permitted to discover new forms of knowledge. Richardson (2005) makes a case that post-structuralism directs us to understand ourselves reflexively, as persons writing from particular positions at specific times, while also freeing us from writing a text that is everything said at once to everyone (p. 962). While Bochner and Ellis (1996) provide riveting and gut-wrenching examples of how researchers have told their own personal stories through fiction and poetry, in the following section of the dissertation, I unpack some of the ways I approach narrative writing in parts one and two of this project.

Autoethnographic Writing

According to Jeong-Hee Kim (2016), autoethnography is a genre of narrative inquiry that seeks to analyze the researcher's personal experience, embedded in a larger social and cultural context. It presents critical self-study or analysis of the experience of the self (p. 123). It is important to mention, then, that the goal of this kind of writing is not to indulge oneself by shining a spotlight on your life, but to problematize cultural and social norms in light of personal experience (p.

124). Ellis and Bochner (1996, 2012, 2016) championed autoethnographies in academia, later referred to as ethnographic alternatives. They emphasized subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and emotionality with the goal of connecting the social sciences to the humanities through storytelling (p. 124). They wanted to present personal and visceral narratives as a way to produce meaningful, accessible and evocative research that might appeal to readers' capacity to empathize with others around them (Kim, 2016). It is important to note that autoethnography is more than telling stories of ourselves through specific contexts. According to Foley (2002), autoethnographers should find ways to use personal experience as a critical examination of class, cultural, racial, and gender struggles from historical, social, and political perspectives. This is made possible through a "space of dialogue, debate and change" between the researcher and the reader (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764).

Coming face to face with this reality reminds me of the first few examples of autoethnographic texts I encountered. I recognized Tillman-Healy's (1996) work on a secret life in a culture of thinness as more than a gut-wrenching story of a young women growing up with bulimia. Tillman (1996) concludes her narrative without indulging the reader in a crisp and clean resolution. Instead, she very humbly admits her position as someone who is both a feminist and

continually struggling with body image. Her lived experience maintains a critical attitude towards problematic cultural narratives around food, body, and health (Bochner & Ellis, 1996, p. 105). Through autoethnographic reflections and poetry, she successfully creates this space of dialogue. Autoethnographers like Tillman-Healy (1996) must distinguish their approach from simple reflective storytelling by comparing and contrasting personal experiences against the existing research, analyzing personal experience in light of theories and scholarship, considering ways others may experience similar events, and illustrating facets of cultural experience embedded in those personal experiences (Ellis, et al., 2011). Richardson (2005) argues for her own category of qualifications to determine valuable, creative, analytical ethnography. She claims that as researchers we must hold autoethnography to high and difficult standards; mere novelty does not suffice. Richardson (2005) asks, "Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded social scientific perspective? The second category focuses on aesthetic merit, and asks, does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the text open up and invite interpretative responses? Reflexivity of the researcher and text challenges the authors subjectivity as both producer and product of this text?" (p. 964). Richardson (2005) also asks if the author has held him or herself accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied.

As I reflected on what Richardson (2005), Ellis (1995, 2005), and Kim (2016) have written about what makes a successful autoethnographic text, I thought about what kind of writing I would not only be undertaking in my letters and postcards, but what would be expected of my participants as well. I decided to create my own criteria to assess the written works produced during the project. Women during the Greenham protests operated under a feminist ethic of care grounded in the principle "no one shall be hurt." They focused intently on their

relationships with other women as the foundational structure of the movement. Upon speaking to my friend, Atleigh, about the letters and community of care created through them, she made the suggestion that perhaps the written work produced in my project should be considered (fe)mail, a feminist, empathetic kind of writing that also springs from the feminist ethics of care expressed during the Greenham movement. Thus, the method of autoethnographical writing for this project was born. In the next section, I further elaborate and define the term *(fe)mail* and its purpose in my research. Just as Richardson (2005) and Ellis (1996, 2012, 2016) have made their criteria and case for autoethnographic writing, so too I establish my own criteria for (fe)mail.

Defining (fe)mail

Letters were a form of networking used during much of the feminist movements of the 1970s and 80s. Many of the letters sent between friends, activists, mothers, daughters, and lovers revealed a powerful assumption of both identity and mutual care among women. They were part of a culture of female relationship that was theorized at the time as special to women's values and communities (Jolly, 2008). The ethics of feminists during the twentieth century ultimately crystallized the ideas of first and second wave feminism as exemplary of the relational self. In other words, a woman is seen as the one who values and enjoys intimacy, whose identity is in significant measure defined through her personal ties (p. 3). This concept of feminist idealism is not without its complications and contradictions. Jolly (2008) addresses issues of class, race, and gender in her work. However, I have chosen not to go into too much depth here. While I am in no way attempting to reconstruct feminist letters, or to recreate a community around a specific feminist campaign or cause, I am fascinated by the way women during this time constructed communal ties and identities through relationships. Therefore, the concept of (fe)mail Atleigh and I developed is founded on the notion of community of friendship (fe)mail is a form of

autoethnographic writing that attempts to communicate through the postal service as a way of creating community and friendship. Autoethnography genres are defined and judged by criteria setting them apart as unique methods of research. In what follows, I outline the dispositions and sensibilities inherent to (fe)mail. These criteria later inform my analysis of underling themes in the data yielded by my study.

- *(fe)mail is empathetic*. This form of writing seeks to understand the feelings and experiences of the other. To engage in it is to attempt to place ourselves in the shoes or take up the perspective of the other. (fe)mail is relational and always directed to another person. It is an honest, open, and thoughtful conversation.

- *(fe)mail is vulnerable*. This element recalls how Ellis (2012) and Richardson (2005) describe autoethnography as evocative and personal narrative. (fe)mail requires a willingness from the writer to put themselves on the page and be open. This is very different from traditional ethnographic writing, which seeks to understand specific cultures. Vulnerability is not only needed for compelling autoethnographical texts, but it is required for true friendship and community to emerge.

- *(fe)mail is bonding*. It a is type of friendship or community building. (fe)mail is relational, and therefore operates under a feminist ethic of care. Thus, communicating through this kind of writing requires sensitivity towards the other and a sense of care that goes beyond the individual and their needs. This is perhaps most similar to the researcher's reflexivity and ethical judgement in narrative qualitative research.

- *(fe)mail is interpretative*. It is a form of writing that invites or opens up space for interpretation and dialogue to form. I have made the case that both letter writing and autoethnography calls for interpretation or criticism of culture, gender, race, etc. (fe)mail is not

solely a way we might express ourselves, but ultimately a vehicle for understanding a greater cultural context. In my project, that context is art and anxiety.

- *(fe)mail is artistic*. Because (fe)mail provides a way to communicate and connect through shared experiences, I distinguish it from other letter writing, as artistic and creative. (fe)mail invites visual and literary forms of expression, which can range from drawing to poetry, collage, and painting. It is also important to note that for my project, (fe)mail was always created in connection to art of some kind. As Atleigh and I sent postcards back and forth, we were either engaging in tangible art making or interpreting the artwork in the postcard itself.

The construction of (fe)mail came about accidentally. However, the construction of the word itself speaks to the ethics and nature of my project, which is about both feminism and friendship. My advisor and committee chair guided me towards breaking down the way the term *(fe)mail* is written. She pointed out that the parentheses were literally "hugging" the "f" and the "e." The parentheses work not only to clarify what kind of mail it is, but to add to its meaning. The parentheses connect the words, which therefore cannot exist grammatically without the other, much the same way (fe)mail cannot be done on its own. The construction of the word itself is symbolic for the way in which (fe)mail exists in connection from one person to another. The "f" and "e" signify feminism or feminist mail, but they also resemble the "Fe" element on the periodic table, iron. Upon some more research into the biological aspect of anxiety, I learned that many women who suffer from anxiety also suffer from iron deficiencies. I then found a connection between a heavy menstrual cycle and iron loss (Guillory, 2021). While it is not true that only women are deficient in iron, the research I landed upon was truly telling that this was a serious problem for women, only furthering the feminist aspect of (fe)mail. As I thought more about the connection between feminism and iron, the construction of (fe)mail started to make

more sense to my project. We are not only engaging in writing about our experiences, but sharing them with one another. How could this help our anxiety? Could (fe)mail postcards take on the "fe" of both feminism and iron to provide aid for the anxious mind? Perhaps, just like iron supplements, often used to treat anxiety disorders, (fe)mail as a vulnerable letter writing method is just what we need.

(fe)mail is a multifaceted approach to writing embedded with empathy and vulnerability. It is a specific way to do autoethnography. It is also a form of qualitative research, belonging primarily to the academic world. I hope this dissertation makes the case for (fe)mail to exist in the museum world as well. Because it is difficult to explain accurately what (fe)mail looks like, or the different forms it took after Atleigh and I first played around with the term, I have included several examples of (fe)mail postcards paired side by side in Part I and two of this dissertation.

Autoethnographic Method: Collecting, Organizing, and Interpreting the Data

I remember first hearing Kathy Brown talk about her research as a guest speaker in a narrative writing class seminar. At first, I felt completely inspired by her love of narrative methods, and in curiosity and excitement, I asked her the very question with which I started this section. Although, I felt inspired by the work of another educator and narrative researcher, I was also quite confused. There were so many things I did not yet know about this new methodology. I met with Kathy Brown a few weeks after that day and asked her what she meant by coding data. I thought narrative texts were to be read and cried over and felt deeply about. I didn't know anything about organizing or even "coding" the texts I would collect from participants and myself. Professor Brown's advice to me was simple and earnest. She told me to find a method of coding that I really liked, or made the most sense for my project, and to follow it through in the

research. Fast forward to a few months later. I had found my method for coding, organizing, and analyzing my data.

When I first read about data and what to do with it, I was completely enamored with the idea that research data could be like a cabinet of curiosities. In *Understanding Narrative*, Kim (2016) makes the cabinet of curiosities a metaphor for how researchers can collect stories from participants. The artifacts are the journals, objects, letters, books, and other informal documents shared throughout the research process. In taking in all this data, we can create our own cabinets of curiosity through which we tell more stories (p. 177). The metaphor seemed cute at first. I had a romanticized thought in my mind of exactly how I would take all the letters, postcards, emails, facetime phone calls, drawings, and poems Atleigh and I would make and turn them into my cabinet. Kim (2016) reveals, however, that interpreting and organizing data is much more complicated than that. She describes this process as a "flirtation" with data, in other words, creating a space where we can discover ways to negotiate and reach our research aims with data. It encourages us to embrace less-familiar possibilities and is a way of cultivating ideas for finding yet another story, one we perhaps had not bargained for (p. 189).

I then faced the conundrum of how I would engage in the "flirtation" with data required by my approach to qualitative research. It is tempting as a researcher to go into this kind of personal and vulnerable "backyard" project thinking I know or am prepared for exactly what I will find. Because I was planning to write back and forth with my best friend, it was tempting to think I would know her feelings, emotions, and stories in the way I know my own. I was also tempted to skip over the coding and analysis part of the project. Doing so, however, could have unleashed several dangers to the authenticity and aim of my project. I would also run the risk of missing patterns or codes present in each letter or correspondence or, as Kim (2016) states,

uncovering new or different stories that were not obvious to me at first. To avoid inadvertently undermining my research in this way, I developed a coding method inspired by qualitative researcher Heewon Chang (2008).

I began reading *Autoethnography as Method* by Heewon Chang (2008) in 2020 and was discouraged by my inability to understand it well. Perhaps I needed to get through Kim (2016) in order to understand Chang's (2008) comments on managing data and coding. Chang (2008) recommends managing data as it is being collected. When organizing collected data, we can see where more needs to be collected, where more than sufficient data have already been accumulated, and what data is irrelevant to the research study. Chang (2008) recommends labelling sets and coding them for later analysis. The categories generally used during this section of the process are as simple as who, what, when, and where. Coding and sorting are used to fracture each data set into smaller bits on the basis of topical commonality, then regrouped into specific categories (pp. 115-116). Other methods such as Polkinghorne's analysis of narratives utilize similar categories for coding data. Similarly to Chang's methods (2008), Polkinghorne describes the categories of particular themes while paying attention to relationships among categories.

I decided to employ Chang's method of managing and coding data. I thought this was the most accurate way of making sure I stayed on top of my research and organized during the process. As I began doing some more research on how to manage my data, I realized that Chang's method was used by other researchers (Creswell, 2007; Kim, 2016). Qualitative research is comprised of examining raw data, reducing data to themes through coding and recoding processes, and representing data in themes, charts, and narratives (Kim, 2016, p. 188). I coded data with multiple methods through which I attempted to find a word or short phrase that

could be attributed to a limited portion of my data (Saldana, 2009). Then, I looked for relations between similar concepts and combined them to create categories. After completing this stage for the (fe)mail letters, I identified an emerging pattern in each category, which I subsequently built into a theme.

Researchers such as Chang (2008) and Kim (2016) advise the use of various computer software or Excel spread sheets in the process of organizing data. I think if I had conducted sets of interviews or looked through multiple surveys, this might have been useful. However, because most of my data was paper postcards, letters, and drawings, sent directly through the postal service, I decided to facilitate the process by using a familiar analog method: sticky notes or labels combined with image documenting through computer scanning. I opted for both the manual and digital method of documenting because during the pilot study I was not able to keep both sets of the data with me at all times. Because Atleigh and I sent cards back and forth through the postal service, she had possession of my side of the correspondence. To avoid losing or misplacing the data, I relied on my computer scanner and digital folders for documentation.

Labelling each postcard individually with Chang's (2008) "who, what, when where" method helped me as a researcher to remain organized throughout the process. I was aware that I did not have every single postcard I sent to Atleigh on hand during the process, and I needed to improvise a coding method by hand. I sought themes or patterns in the data such as empathy, vulnerability, and descriptions of bodily experience of anxiety. I used color coding, labels to facilitate the process.

I decided to use Polkinghorne's (1995) "narrative mode of analysis" because it uses to-and-fro recursive movement from parts to whole or from whole to parts. Because my museum participants wrote short texts in response to prompts, the data collected were short stories, also

known as events, happenings, or actions, which exist as memories or stories in time. Narrative mode of analysis acknowledges certain gaps in the data and uses narrative smoothing to make a range of disconnected data elements coherent in a way that appeals to the reader (Polkinghorne, 1995). Similarly, autoethnographic analysis uses a layered account to connect or compare the personal experience to existing research (Polkinghorne, 1995). Carol Rambo Ronai (1995), wrote a layered account of her story of being a survivor of child sex abuse. Her layered account beautifully illustrates how story and analysis can embody a theory of consciousness (Ronai, 1995).

Ronai's (1995) autoethnographic analysis using a multitude of reflexive voices to analyze, critique, and interpret narrative shaped the way layering informed the presentation of my and Atleigh's (fe)mail exchange in light of our ten-year friendship and our individual experiences of anxiety. I represented data as more than written accounts or responses to prompts. The data for this project was comprised of observational looking in the museum program, video calls, messages, emails, and phone calls between me and my participants. As a researcher, I noted carefully that my analysis and interpretations were not objective or static throughout the research process. I also remembered Gadamer's (1964) point that researchers "must remember that interpretations are fluid and temporal, and that our interpretations will change over time" (Kim, 2016, p. 196). The research I engaged in was dynamic and required patience that enabled me to live with tension over the course of data collection and analysis.

Discovering Written Experience: The Postcard

I have surveyed many strategies and pedagogical tools that museum educators use to teach empathetically in galleries. As I developed a program anchored in empathy and storytelling through postcard writing, I had to consider many questions, one of which was, why postcards?

Could we just tell our stories to one another instead of writing our stories? Is there some key difference between talking and writing? What is it about written experience that connects and even heals us? My answer lies in the works of philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur (2016) and Max van Manen (2016), practices in psychology such as cognitive behavioral therapy, and feminist auto-histories (Anzaldua 1987).

One of the things I like to do on my phone is browse the internet on a topic I am curious about. It is perhaps the worst thing I can do before trying to fall asleep at night. The light on my screen keeps me up past a reasonable time, and my brain runs restlessly as I go deeper down internet rabbit holes. One of these holes is anxiety. I love to look up and read articles or blogs about anxiety. Somehow discovering more about this disorder makes me feel in control of it and deeply aware of what is going on in my brain. I must admit that, as is true with most of the information online, it is not always accurate or cited by professional psychologists. However, one writer's comments on cognitive behavioral therapy once caught my attention in the late hours of the night. If it is true that recounting one's anxious thoughts and attempting to record them helps keep track of how our fears begin to manifest, it would appear necessary to write them down. The blogger behind the "AnxietyLad," Tom Olsen (2018), answers his own question by arguing that writing down our anxious thoughts is the key to understanding them. It might be possible to understand a thought without writing it down, but it will be a weak examination. He argues that when we write down our thoughts, we are suddenly able to answer significant questions: How often does this thought enter my mind? What kind of situations cause these thoughts? Is there a pattern to some thoughts? I have often found myself doing this in addition to talking about my fears. I keep a list in my phone of worries, fears that cause me to have anxiety and even a list of cognitive behavioral therapy questions that help to assess whether my

overthinking is rational and tied to real facts or solely based on my assumptions about a triggering event. This kind of writing or cognitive mode of thinking refers to the act of knowing our experiences. In cognitive therapy, individuals learn how to change the thoughts, ideas and beliefs that play an important role in negative emotional states (p. 4). CBT has been practiced among many therapists and psychologists and thus is a widely recommended treatment for individuals suffering from anxiety in the United States (Clark & Beck, 2012, p. 5). While I am not journaling or writing down my thoughts in charts each night, tracking my thoughts helps me to understand emotions and patterns that might repeat throughout my life. Journaling has, indeed, been shown to be beneficial for those who have anxiety or depression because it provides an opportunity for engaging in positive self-talk, identifying negative thoughts and behaviors, and helping prioritize problems, fears, and concerns (Journaling for Mental Health, n.d.). Writing can be an outlet for anxiety and is recommended by psychologists and therapists in the field (Markway, 2014). It is not only a soothing activity for the anxious mind, but a key component of doing cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Psychologist Barbara Markway argues that writing our thoughts down on paper is the first step to making them more adaptive and realistic. Before we can combat stress and anxiety, we must know what our thoughts are. Writing provides a way of keeping track while learning about our thought processes. Often, in the middle of anxiety, we have a hard time identifying our self-talk, the background noise. Writing is a way of understanding what we are thinking when moments of anxiousness overtake us (Markway, 2014). Psychologists of CBT, David A. Clark and Aaron Beck (2012) and propose that in these moments of discomfort, one take inventory of their thoughts and how this might influence how they are feeling (p. 5). My own personal experience with CBT has shown me that writing these thoughts down and taking note of how they are directly tied to my feeling of anxiety has

provided me with great clarity and understanding of where exactly my anxiety is coming from.

A form of social science research that also reveres the written form of experience is the methodology known as phenomenology. I took a phenomenology class during my first semester at UNT. At first, I was perplexed by this strange methodology that focused on the description of lived experience. I remember sitting in class trying to follow the lesson of my professor, Tyson Lewis. I scribbled furiously in my notebook, attempting to jot down every word he said. We began a discussion about the importance of written experience according to readings by phenomenologist Max van Manen (2016). I nervously raised my hand to speak, something I rarely did in that class. "You know; this reminds me of something I read once in art history. It was about how art critics oftentimes have not made up their minds about an exhibition until they've written about it." My classmates seemed intrigued by my point. Some of them even laughed encouragingly. Professor Lewis appeared to be pleased with my answer and proceeded to quote van Manen (2016): "a person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience" (p. 10). Perhaps this was why the art critic was not able to make up his mind on the quality of the show while looking at the exhibit but only came to a conclusion after it. According to van Manen (2016), phenomenology investigates lived experience through the act of reflective writing. In social science research, this usually means asking individuals to write down their experiences. Phenomenological questions ask what it is like to experience an event. My study was not phenomenological, but I required Atleigh and myself to write reflectively about our lived experiences of anxiety in the form of postcards. In other words, similarly to van Manen (2016), I am interested in written descriptions of events, in this case, anxiety. A phenomenological question would be not, "what does it mean to have anxiety?" but "what is it like to have anxiety?" Unlike other forms of narrative writing, the method of writing in a

phenomenological study cannot be a free-form activity. It follows specific guiding principles, according to van Manen (2016). Phenomenological descriptions or accounts of lived experience require the individual to focus on a particular example and describe specific events. They also ask how the body feels, how things smell and sound (pp. 64-65). I think this is interesting, especially in regards to CBT, which I have attempted to explain above. In cognitive behavioral therapy, one method for calming down after an anxiety or panic attack is generally to pay attention to how the body feels in the present moment Crawford, 2018). For example, CBT therapists instruct those suffering from an attack to name something they smell, see, and feel. This technique helps to ground the experience and individual and direct their focus away from stress (Crawford. 2018). In this way, mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy are forms of description.

Philosophers who have argued for the use of written text in social science research include Paul Ricoeur. In *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* Ricoeur (2016) argues that written texts uniquely create distance, which allows for interpretation. In fall of 2020, I participated in a Paul Ricoeur study group guided by art education professor Tyson Lewis while simultaneously taking a narrative methodology course. I was able to notice fragments of narrative inquiry in Ricoeur's (2016) *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. The chapters were dense, and I took notes fervently, trying very hard to understand each new concept.

Ricoeur (2016) explains the act of reading and writing as one of appropriation and distanciation. For example, through the act of reading, the reader appropriates the text. In other words, as readers, we expose ourselves to it, receive it, and thereby enlarge our sense of self. In writing, the author is both distancing themself from their personal interpretation and taking part in the creation of worlds. This example can even be attributed to how we might interpret

paintings or other works of art. For example, when Picasso painted *Guernica*, he had a specific idea and suffering in mind which he wished to capture with paint. However, over time, many people have encountered that work with no prior knowledge of the artist's intentions. They could interpret the distorted faces and limbs of the figures in the painting to mean something different. It is even possible that someone could approach that painting and remember their own personal suffering by looking at the work and in this manner, and enlarge their own sense of self. Ricoeur (2016) also describes the dynamic between the reader and the author as one that is playful (p.148). The author plays in writing by creating worlds and assuming different voices. This is more clearly illustrated in fictional texts in which a narrative voice is present. The reader on the other hand, can use the distance between the event and the fixed, written version to guess or hypothesize multiple interpretations. As readers, we open ourselves to the text, to be infiltrated or displaced by it (p. 140). What Ricoeur (2016) explains is vital to my postcard project. As both researcher and participant, I am both creating through language and opening myself up to the written work of Atleigh and other participants. I imagine the act of writing and reading mail between us as a kind of play. It is only through the written text that we might be infiltrated with one another's stories or even feel displaced by them.

Ricoeur (2016) mentions the ability of mimicry or acting to disclose or produce something new in the world. Writing also possesses this capacity. I am reminded of the archival letters from the Greenham women and others. Margaretta Jolly's (2008) epistolary collection gives us insight into a world that is not our own. Through the open letters written from women across Europe and the United States, I have personally been opened up to a world and experiences I knew nothing about. My hope is that the letters that Atleigh and I, and my museum participants wrote can live on in this dissertation and open up the world of anxiety and art

education for further exploration. Written letters also possess the need for interpretation in a way that a spoken interview does not. For example, if I write my experience of anxiousness on a postcard and send it to Toronto, Atleigh is forced to read and interpret my emotions as they have been written out. This distance, as Ricoeur (2016) noted, is unique to written text and requires the work of appropriation in ways that spoken storytelling does not. When we encounter texts, we are left to our own interpretation.

For feminist scholars, including Gloria Anzaldua (1987), the written text is not only a means of expressing one's self, but a form of identity construction. Her work exemplifies how feminist epistemology attempts to discover the self through the act of writing. *Borderlands* (1987) reveals that the act of "writing itself assists individuals in coming to know and express the complexities of identity" (Lockhart, 2006, p. 1). Anzaldua (1987) explores the notion of "thinking in writing." (p. 2). She situates the writer as a worker, a crafter of language. Anzaldua (1987) uses several metaphors to capture the act of writing and its multiplicity: "Words are blades of grass sprouting on a page," "picking out images from my soul's eye," or "fishing for the right words to re-create the images" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 71). She further characterizes writing as both waiting and crafting, ultimately involving some kind of struggle. She writes, "That is what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be" (p. 73). For Anzaldua (1987), the act of writing is interpretative. It is also powerful in constructing meaning and identity. As I contemplate Gloria Anzaldua's words, I am reminded of the ways women of color have generally been excluded from the first and second wave feminist movements (Revelli & Webber, 2010, p. 71). Anzaldua's (1987) narratives offer a means through which many women of color could express and negotiate their identities as foreigners living in the United States in the

twentieth century. Her texts are not only literary works to be analyzed and broken apart by students who encounter these publications throughout their academic journeys, but also autoethnographies that provide mestiza women with a voice. In this instance, the written text is crucial for exploring the intricacies of identity and culture (Lockhart, 2006). For Anzaldua, the act of writing is an identity forming one, in which are writers we not only open ourselves up to the experience or worlds of others, as Ricoeur might suggest, but we discover something intrinsic about ourselves.

The written postcard is an intimate, short, and yet public form of writing. It requires vulnerability, concise language, and courage to send off through the postal service. The very few lines and sometimes blank, square space on the back calls for something as short as a moment, which we can write and then let go of. Perhaps the postcard is, then, a metaphor for recording the feeling of anxiety itself? In moments of intense fear, I sit with my feelings, I write them down, I process them, and I let them go. It requires great restraint to not let my mind run wild, to not keep writing pages upon pages of repetitive thoughts. More than anything, it requires even more courage to let the thought go, or to tell someone, even if it is someone I trust. In the postcard, I both open myself to my best friend and to the world. It is truly an identity-forming practice.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has identified and unpacked the theoretical framework and research methodologies and relevant to my (fe)mail study. I delved into my serendipitous encounter with narrative inquiry as a rigorous methodology for doing social science research, and I grappled with its structure and limitations by turning to the work of researchers such as Jeong-Hee Kim (2016) and Clandinin (2019). In the writings of Ricouer, I found ideas surrounding ethics, our relationship to the other as a way of knowing the self, and writing as an identity-forming

practice. Together, they create a compelling framework for the (fe)mail study. In the work of Tillmann-Healy (2012) and Carolyn Ellis (2012) I found the method of friendship upon which I anchored my research, as well as the approach to coding data and conducting narrative analysis underpinning my research. Multiple methodologies and my journey of discovery form the backbone of parts one and two of this project. They are not only important for making sense of what comes next, but they serve firmly as the groundwork of all my research.

CHAPTER 4

PART I: THE (FE)MAIL EXCHANGE BETWEEN ATLEIGH AND ME

Preface: The Pilot Study

Dear Reader,

Before you go into Part I of my research study, I think it is important to preface by letting you know exactly where I am coming from, what I had already discovered about (fe)mail, and where I was headed with this project prior to my dissertation research. Before we began creating the correspondence you are about to read in this dissertation, over the summer of 2020, my friend and collaborator Atleigh and I engaged in a pilot study in which we created and sent (fe)mail to one another right at beginning of the global coronavirus pandemic. I applied rigorous methodological coding, interpretation, and analysis to the data I collected and began the pilot study with two questions in mind: Could (fe)mail be a specific kind of postcard making that embodied empathy and vulnerability through storytelling? And could this method of autoethnographic writing become a form of self-care during the comprehensive exam process? I followed Creswell's (2007) method of coding and organizing my data into categories based on patterns I identified throughout the (fe)mail correspondence and quickly realized that the (fe)mail Atleigh and I produced was in and of itself a method of self-care through which we could explore our mutual connections to art, feminism, anxiety, and shared memories. The correspondence also revealed itself to be deeply engaging, empathetic, and vulnerable as we took finely considered and emotionally significant leaps to share our personal stories and feelings by way of the post.

In my comprehensive exams, I presented my data in the form of a layered analysis account, wherein I applied narrative smoothing to organize the correspondence for coherence

and interest to the reader. The (fe)mail between Atleigh and me was organized by thematic headings that I created from dominant themes that stood out amid the exchange of correspondence. Rendering the themes as headings above each exchange helped shape a coherent story, beginning with Atleigh's arrival at her parent's house for a short vacation, and ending with how we learned to apply self-care, months into the pandemic. As I wrote my account, I came to realize that beyond organizing the threads of the correspondence, these themes were generalizable to the fundamental interpretive framework of the study. As I subsequently approached Part I of this dissertation research with Atleigh in the fall of 2020, we began our (fe)mail creating and sending once again, and I expected to find the themes I had encountered over the summer once again. I certainly did, but I found that I was pleasantly surprised at how our friendship and care for one another was revealed in our (fe)mail during the seven months that followed.

Part I: The (fe)mail Exchange with Atleigh

Atleigh and I have been best friends since 2009. We met each other on the first day of ninth grade outside our first visual arts classroom. That day remains vivid and fresh to me. I recall the black polka dot halter top Atleigh wore underneath a white tee shirt and her knee-length jean shorts. She was friendly and bubbly and we became friends instantly, bonding over our love of art, movies, books, and music. Our friendship has endured, vital and strong, through our lengthy video call conversations and hours of thinking and talking about art, memories, and navigating the world with anxiety. My friendship with Atleigh and our conversations around feminism and postcard writing initially inspired the creation of (fe)mail and the analysis that follows in this first part of my dissertation.

Throughout the strenuous and tedious process of writing my dissertation while teaching

undergraduate courses and completing a year-long fellowship in museum education, (fe)mail proved more than a creative method of keeping in touch with a close friend. It served as a tool with which I engaged empathetically with my friend's own struggles and received encouragement and support for my own. I have mentioned in the methodology section of this dissertation that journaling is often regarded by psychologists and cognitive behavioral therapists as a useful tool for making sense of anxiety and quieting ruminative thoughts (McCreight, 2020 pp. 90-91). While I try to engage in journal writing regularly, there is something different and truly relational about (fe)mail as a method of writing that helps me make sense of anxiety and worries. (fe)mail is vulnerable because it does not ask me to simply write down my feelings, but to tell a story—not to the empty pages of a lined notebook, but to my friend who is waiting for my letter or postcard 1,653 miles away. In the first stages of my (fe)mail project, I wanted to find out what qualities (fe)mail embodied throughout the back and forth between Atleigh and me, and furthermore whether this method of writing narratively and creating postcards could function as my own form of self-care. After completing the pilot study as part of my comprehensive exams, I found that the (fe)mail Atleigh and I shared during summer 2020 embodied various aspects of connection. The themes organizing the pilot study were *connection through vulnerability*, *sharing meaningful images*, and *connection through encouragement*. I expected those themes to emerge once again in my subsequent analysis of additional correspondence, but I also looked for ways that the revised coding process I undertook in my dissertation research, including additional words, categories, and patterns, would illuminate other themes.

The following (fe)mail story is the result of several months of navigating a global pandemic, experiencing province wide lockdowns in Ontario, starting a new museum fellowship, and working on IRB approval for a museum program. I explore the act of creating, sending, and

receiving (fe)mail with Atleigh during November 2020 to April 2021. I review the coding method I used to sort and organize my data. At the same time, I also discern themes and patterns throughout the (fe)mail correspondence that point towards empathy, vulnerability, encouragement, friendship, and even art making. I demonstrate that in this study, (fe)mail was a method of written communication through which Atleigh and I processed memories, works of art, and day-to-day anxieties during the ups and downs of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, I argue that the postcards themselves serve as works of art that tell particular, moment-bound stories for and about us—a form of mail art born out of a pandemic that kept so many of us physically distant from one another. The postcards presented in this first part of my dissertation form a layered narrative that synthesize (fe)mail data, my analysis and interpretation, and literature on anxiety, empathy, and friendship.

It has been over 10 years since that first encounter at our High School, and since then Atleigh and I have gone on to do different and interesting things in our lives. We have shared in each other's happiest and saddest moments, and over the years, while living further and further away from one another, we have thought and worried on whether or not we have remained "good" friends. My reflections on what it means to be a "good" or "best friend" are influenced by Paul Ricoeur's (1992) *Oneself as Another*, in which he ponders the ethical self, narrative identity, and the role of friendship in our lives. Friends, for Ricoeur, are the *other* and a necessary part of what it means to live an ethical life. In friends, we find self-esteem and the ability to mirror good things about ourselves. Contrasting his conception with Emmanuel Levinas' (1989) description of the other as an unknowable face, inaccessible to us, Ricoeur argues that we are always necessarily wrapped up with the other. For Ricoeur, there is no radical separation between the two. Upon our encounter with another, we are irrecusably receptive and

therefore permeated by the other in our relationship with them. If we take Ricoeur to heart, we can know ourselves truly and live our lives ethically only by knowing and living relationally with the other.

Ricouer (1992) provides an ethical account of the narrative self and its connection to the other, and his rationale for friendship is both the starting point and the continuous thread of my project. Sharing my thoughts and memories and receiving watercolor postcards from Atleigh was a source of comfort, joy, and reassurance from a dear friend who not only cared about my feelings, but keenly empathized with my anxiety. In addition to the philosophical framework suggested by Ricoeur, my understanding of (fe)mail is also shaped by reflections on "friendship as method," the form of qualitative research ethnographers such as Carolyn Ellis (2007) and Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2001, 2006) have defined as an "ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love" (p. 13). For Tillmann-Healy (2003), "friendship as method is a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project" (p. 735). In my layered analysis, I situate communication and (fe)mail exchange between Atleigh and me employing this method, drawing upon its structure and guidelines to ethically navigate our correspondence and our relationship as researcher and co-participant. Therefore, friendship is not only a fundamental tenet of (fe)mail, but also the methodological substrate of my dissertation project. My work explores this thread of friendship not only methodologically, but also in the way Atleigh and I interact with one another through writing, retelling memories, and comforting one another through life's ups and downs.

A Brief Overview of (fe)mail

I begin with a brief overview of (fe)mail and my goals and projected outcomes for this study. Before beginning, I was interested to determine whether the characteristics of (fe)mail

would be present in my and Atleigh's correspondence, and whether the act of creating (fe)mail could function as a form of self-care for me. As I have established in the methodology section of this dissertation, (fe)mail is a creative and empathetic method of combined writing and art making that is exchanged between one or more persons. It is always addressed to someone else, and because of its transit through the postal service, it is always in motion, sustained by its connection with a network of human beings. It is a vulnerable, emotive, and creative form of postcard making and writing, based on a feminist ethic of care, which is present even in the construction of the term itself. *(fe)mail* embraces the first part of *feminism* in parentheses and connects to *mail*—letters conveyed by the postal system—while playing on *female*.

A crucial tenet of (fe)mail is empathy, which means the writer is interested in understanding the feelings and experiences of another person, making this kind of writing relational by nature. (fe)mail is also vulnerable, requiring the writer to be open about themself. (fe)mail is bonding because through sharing emerges friendship and care for the other. It is also interpretive, since (fe)mail opens up a space of dialogue between individuals in which we might be able to understand a greater cultural context or viewpoint beyond ourselves. Finally, (fe)mail is artistic and creative.

In the course of the exchange between Atleigh and me, I found that (fe)mail was indeed a form of postcard writing that practiced empathy and vulnerability through storytelling. I came to this revelation through my interpretation and analysis of the (fe)mail correspondence as well as the coding of general themes I discovered and articulated from the data. More importantly, the act of receiving and sending (fe)mail was for me an act of self-care, in which I could practice writing about thoughts and anxiousness, and even reflect on happy memories, while also communicating and extending empathy to a friend going through a similar struggle.

Throughout the course of several months, I found myself waiting impatiently for Atleigh's postcards to arrive. Each time a postcard appeared in my mailbox I felt excited and filled with joy—not because the "data" for my research had finally made it all the way from Canada, but because I felt loved and seen by my friend who had received my correspondence and cared deeply enough to respond with her own (fe)mail addressed to me, especially as the Covid pandemic dragged on. During the summer pilot study, I had been greatly comforted by my exchange with Atleigh, but I can say with certainty that I was unprepared for the craziness the following year would throw at me. I tested positive for COVID-19 and had to isolate with my husband Philip for two weeks before the holiday. I endured the raging winter freeze that crippled Texas' power grid for an entire week, then the new year also brought academic challenges. As I continued ongoing planning for an event with the student collective for my museum fellowship in education, I began teaching my own online class weekly. I continuously pushed myself to go through edits upon edits for my IRB research application until it was finally approved in April 2021.

Every time a difficult or anxiety-inducing circumstance hit me, I felt compelled to sit at my very messy desk and write a postcard to Atleigh. Something about (fe)mail as a practice of self-care made me want to pour out my feelings and anxieties in a postcard to her. Many times, I sent my postcard through the mail, eagerly awaiting her reply. With other postcards, I struggled with whether to send upsetting news to my friend when I had so little space for words on the back of a card. Often, I admit, I opted for quick advice that resulted from the many instant messages and video chats between us. Consequently, the self-care and relational nature of this study was not be confined to the (fe)mail postcards I received periodically. Instead, (fe)mail happened throughout the semester in the various forms of communication and empathy we

expressed to one another. As the semester progressed, our daily tasks and looming deadlines began to take up so much of our time that lengthy video calls became scarce. Receiving (fe)mail from one another was a quick but meaningful reminder of our presence in each other's lives, even though we were so far from one another. These moments of correspondence held this network of connection together almost frozen in time. Our (fe)mail was layered in the ins and outs of messages, phone calls and relation to one another through memories, social media and even art making. For this reason, (fe)mail did not occur in isolation from these brief moments of connection or conversation but through this network, which was ongoing and unscheduled. In order to illustrate these moments, I have interrupted my layered analysis by scattering brief dialogue between Atleigh and me throughout.

Coding and Making Sense of My Data

After I had completed the pilot version of this (fe)mail study, I realized I made some significant mistakes in the collection and organization of the data. This time around, following Chang's (2008) suggestion on data organization, I scanned the data at the beginning of the research process. This did not mean fully coding the postcards as they arrived, but I made notes and labeled them, documenting when they arrived and when they were mailed. I found that because my study took place over a period of nine months and the data collection was ongoing, Chang's (2008) method for labeling and identifying made the most sense to keep track of all the postcards Atleigh and I exchanged.

After gathering eight of the postcards between us, I began the full coding and analysis process. Beginning this process once our exchange for the project was complete let me begin envisioning a framework to make sense of each (fe)mail postcard, both in itself and in relation to the events that had transpired throughout the year. As I began for the second time a reflection

and coding process for my correspondence with Atleigh, I especially realized the importance of the retrospective nature of the practice—one that happened after the fact, not as the (fe)mail was being written in the moment. Phenomenologist Max Van Manen (1997) argues that reflection on lived experience is always recollective, a reflection on experience that is already passed or lived. A person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through it. For example, if I tried to reflect on my anger or sadness while in those emotional states, I would find that the initial emotion has already dissipated (p. 10). It makes sense, then, that the (fe)mail coding process could only be begun once the exchange was complete.

As I laid the eight (fe)mail postcards before me, both scans and originals, I felt an initial sense of discouragement at the small number we produced over seven months. Upon reading each postcard and coding the phrases into patterns and themes, however, I was pleasantly surprised at how a small number of postcards had yielded so much. In short, they told so many stories. Each (fe)mail correspondence was meaningful and intentional, telling a particular story of how we felt during the time the postcard was sent. This quality becomes evident in the layered analysis that follows. Because I was looking for the (fe)mail themes I found in the pilot exchange and which I have outlined in the methodology section of this dissertation, such as empathy and vulnerability, I determined Creswell's (2007) method of coding to be the most appropriate. Creswell (2007) reduced phrases and words into categories and patterns in order to develop generalizable themes. At the same time, as I sifted through my data of postcards and pencil-drawn charts, I began to notice the similarities between Creswell's (2007) approach and a phenomenological method of coding that seeks to identify the essence of a human, lived experience through generalizable themes in written descriptions. It is important to note that because Creswell's (2007) method and the coding process I have followed was based on

searching for themes and patterns which I already outlined in my creation of the tenants of (fe)mail, this was not in fact a phenomenological method which I followed.[1] By approaching the coding process with this intentionality and reflexivity or openness to the "phenomenon" of (fe)mail, I felt more open to what I might find this time around. In other words, something unexpected might reveal itself if I open myself up to the potential of it in this coding process. This intentionality, described by phenomenologists, makes research a caring act: to care is to serve and to share our being with the one we love (p. 5). Ludwig Binswanger (1963, p.173) takes this idea further by stating that "we can only understand something or someone for whom we care" (p.173). This was interesting as I consider not only care as a structure inherent to (fe)mail, but also as a foundation of the methodology and coding process of the data.

In Creswell's (2007) method, the researcher works through multiple coding processes to find words or phrases that can be represented in distinct categories, identified in patterns, and then developed into themes that represent threads of similarity in the data. To make meaning of the eight postcards I had gathered, I completed multiple coding processes in which I looked for a phrase that I could attribute to a portion of my data. For example, I found the phrase "I was feeling anxious" or "nervous" in three postcards as a definitive experience Atleigh and I shared. Sometimes, the feeling of anxiety expressed in our writing was followed by a reference to an event or situation. For example, in a correspondence Atleigh sent in December, she wrote how she had been feeling anxious for no reason in particular. I replied with my own admission of anxiety, confessing how anxious I was feeling about teaching a class and dealing with the

[1] According to Van Manen (1997), the methodology of phenomenology tries to ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures that would rule-govern the research project (p.29). Although I am not coding my data through a phenomenological methodology of doing research, I don't want to toss its relevancy to my research study all together. From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way in which we experience the world and to want to know the world in which we live in as human beings. Phenomenology calls this inseparable connection to the world the principle of intentionality, which all researchers must embody in order to do social science research or research of lived experience well.

aftermath of COVID-19 infection.

In the pilot study, I remembered, our writing had focused on recounting happy memories and looking at our friendship in the past tense, built over many years. With this set of (fe)mail data written and collected throughout 2020-21, our writing notably focused on our current activities, hobbies, and art making. There was also a looking to the future—a kind of hopefulness for things to come once the pandemic was over. I looked over the postcards, underlining sentences and words that stood out to me, commonalities across the data. I combined those codes to form categories, in which I identified an emerging pattern among the postcards. In the process of opening myself up to meanings emerging from coding, I began to experience a redoubling in which I almost simultaneously began to espy new patterns, from which I then built new themes. I quickly appreciated that coding was a messy task that was constantly changing as I went back and reread my data. I found truth in Kim's (2016) insight that in the flirtation with data, one must allow room for surprises and curiosities.

I did this over a period of a few days, using sticky notes, pencil, and paper. I separated my findings into five categories of codes: 1) friendship and encouragement through life events, telling or retelling of an anxious moment or event, 3) art making or hobbies as a way to deal with and soothe anxiety or uncertainty, 4) interpretation of artwork: teaching or learning with art, and 5) art as a grounding and hopeful gesture towards the future. I began to label the postcards in front of me with specific colors, each corresponding to one of the five codes. I identified several core themes present in the (fe)mail data: 1) connection through empathy and shared meaningful images, 2) connection through encouragement of one another's struggles, 3) connection through vulnerability, 4) connection through shared experiences of learning or teaching with art, and 5) grounding and hopeful experience with art making.

Table 1: Coding process for (fe)mail postcards created by Atleigh and I

Codes: Phrases or Words	Categories and Patterns	Themes
I am both nervous and excited to teach my own class. Seeing this portrait – it made me happy to learn from the experience of art without words.	Friendship and Encouragement of/ through/regarding life events	Connection through empathy/meaningful images
I am so glad you started needle pointing again. I imagine working with your hands must be calming and grounding.	Telling or Re-telling of an anxious moment or event	Connection through encouragement and empowerment
Coloring has been a nice leisure activity for me. I was feeling anxious about my classes and COVID when I started coloring – I decided to make everything in shades of blue.	Art making and hobbies as a way to cope with anxiety or uncertainty	Connection through Vulnerability and friendship
• Your encouraging words me feel so appreciated. • These places are now infused with my memories of what Dallas is to me.	Interpretation of art – the experience of either teaching or learning through with art	Connection through art making of responding to anxiety
		Connection through shared memories and learning art together and apart
		Art as grounding connection of friendship that was hopeful
• Whenever I paint, I use whatever is left on my palette to do abstract paintings in my sketchbook. • I glued pieces of it to the front of this postcard. I really love all the colors. • When I come to visit, we can find a drop-in ceramics place and make some. You were always so amazing at glazing.	• Art as grounding • Art as reminder of past memories -hopeful gesture towards the future • Art as coping with pandemic and art as relief from anxiety	
• I was feeling very anxious about nothing in particular. I know you love Christmas so much, I thought you wouldn't mind a festive postcard as well.		
• Needle pointing helps calm my mind. • I am so proud of you that you are teaching your own class. I know you'll do an amazing job. • I find winter can be very depressing.		

It was no surprise that the first three themes had been present in the pilot study correspondence over the summer. Doubtless, vulnerability, empathy, and encouragement are essential tenets of (fe)mail and core values of strong friendship. I also noticed that similarly to the pilot study, all images either placed on or painted on the postcards were intentionally chosen, always in connection to a memory or interest shared between Atleigh and me. In this way, the images themselves represented and symbolized parts of our friendship and were intended to capture and memorialize a moment in time. Nevertheless, I also found that this (fe)mail exchange between Atleigh and me was different—at times more vulnerable and encompassing of our day-to-day experiences. I also discovered a quality I had not considered previously. Our (fe)mail looked to the future, perhaps a day when we'd reunite once again and bake together, or visit all my favorite places around Dallas. For me, this drew up feelings of joy and hope. I learned that (fe)mail was as much about being hopeful as about true vulnerability and its capacity to express anxiousness. Hopefulness was expressed in the ways we dreamt together of a future that embraced art making and traveling.

Narrative Analysis and Interpretation in Autoethnography

Narrative analysis is at the center of my method in this study. According to Hee-Jeong Kim (2016), narrative researchers interpret through an analysis of plot lines, thematic structures, and cultural referents (p. 190). For the researcher, narrative analysis and interpretation work in tandem to find narrative meaning. Polkinghorne (1988) argues that narrative inquiry is a way of understanding human experience through stories which, in turn, helps us better understand human existence (p. 190). In this way, narrative data analysis and interpretation is a meaning-finding act through which researchers elicit a better understanding of human existence. In this study, I use narrative analysis and interpretation to better understand friendship—specifically my

and Atleigh's connection—based on shared memories, empathy, anxiety and encouragement.

Narrative analysis and interpretation are how I make sense of the stories I collected and want to tell. As researchers, we must first understand the phenomenon we study through interpretation of the data, and then facilitate this understanding for the reader. Because I had done this once before in a pilot study, I felt a sense of familiarity throughout the process. The following section elucidates the interpretation and analysis of the data that flowed simultaneously as I worked through coding and organization. The result is a layered account examining the postcards themselves, combined with a narrative analysis of the larger channels of communication engendered by (fe)mail.

A layered account or analysis, according to Ellis (2003), is a narrative form designed to present to the reader a continuous dialogue of experience between the author and the author's self, emerging from a multitude of reflexive voices that simultaneously describe, analyze, critique, and interpret a text. Carol Ronai (1995), for example, wrote an autoethnography as a layered account to convey her story as a survivor of child sex abuse. Ronai's method employs dots on the page, literally separating narrative layers to compare and contrast her personal experience with research texts. The author and self-became subject and object of autoethnography, as Ronai took her own case as data (p. 209). Similarly, Geoff Kuehne (2013) layered narrative and analysis in an autoethnography investigating the little-studied topic of farmers' retirement in "My Decision to Sell the Family Farm." Kuehne complemented and expanded on related research by juxtaposing theory with personal lived experience (p. 204).

Other notable contributions to the autoethnographic layered narrative are Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2003) and Rich Furman (2009), who juxtaposed narrative analysis with poetry to shed light on emotion, particularly experiences of grief and struggle with an eating disorder. The way

I present the data collected—that is, tell this story of friendship—emulates those models. It is worth noting that the following narrative is not solely one based on Atleigh, myself, and our past connection to one another. It is also a story of the events that marked the year in which we lived through a pandemic. Our (fe)mail correspondence lives in the environment, events, and in-between conversations we shared quickly throughout the year. In addition to my analysis of our (fe)mail postcards, I have scattered pieces of our other conversations throughout the analysis. Similarly, to Furman and Tillmann-Healy, I hope that these pieces of dialogue can serve as continual context and poetic expression as the reader makes their way through our (fe)mail. My hope is to communicate and illustrate in narrative form the way (fe)mail exists within a network.

I expect my approach to produce "meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1). By presenting my findings in a layered account, I also intend to contrast the narrative writings Atleigh and I created during our exchange with my own interpretation of the themes present in each postcard. This approach to ethnography is "grounded in self experience, but reaches beyond it as well" (Anderson, 2006, p. 386). My analysis will be supplemented by background conversations between Atleigh and me, my feelings about dissertation writing, the reverberations of political events, and examinations of current literature on anxiety to explain and contextualize feelings evinced by the correspondence. In this way, I hope not only to reveal the thematic structures therein, but also to uncover and describe a method of friendship underpinning their creation. I hope that my interpretation and analysis of the data gathered in this study can also generate a greater understanding of how to address anxiety with empathy, encouragement, and hope.

(fe)mail Postcards: Navigating a Global Pandemic with Art, Empathy and Hope

When I first completed the layered analysis in the pilot study, I had to account for many

inconsistencies and even the loss of postcards in the mail. I was working within a ten-week frame and felt nervous that my data would not be adequate to analyze by the time I had to turn in my comprehensive exam essay. In order to present an engaging and coherent story, I employed the narrative technique *narrative smoothing*, used by narrative researchers to abrade rough edges and orient apparently disconnected raw data (Kim, 2016, p. 192). For the present study, which began in the fall 2020, the (fe)mail between Atleigh and I typically took several weeks to arrive, but because we were not as constrained by time, I found the exchange felt more natural, like a conversation through postcards that occurred over many months. I found myself oftentimes waiting for Atleigh's postcard reply before picking up my pen and writing her another (fe)mail response. It was a sweet and slow back-and-forth supplemented by short messages and conversations via messaging and video calls. In order to present this story in the form of a coherent dialogue layered by a multitude of reflexive voices in the context of lived events, I have divided the narrative into four layers, each part containing two (fe)mail correspondences, often one sent and one received. Each section is titled with a heading and dominant theme that helps guide the story through narrative waypoints: from the beginning of the fall semester, to a rise in anxiety for both of us as Ontario went into a shutdown, to a winter storm that covered Texas for a week. It also included our sharing of memories and the articulation of our methods of self-care as we continued to navigate an uncertain world. In this manner, my narrative augments the coherence of the dialogue between Atleigh and me, which enables more powerful interpretation and analysis and also makes the experience more accessible and interesting to the reader.

Figure 2: Beatriz's Dallas postcard (left) and Atleigh's Christmas postcard (right).

Dear Atleigh,

I hope you are having a good week. This is a map of Dallas. When I look at it, I don't really know how to place myself geographically but these places are now infused with my memories of what Dallas means to me. Almost every weekend Philip and I drive to this ice-cream place called Melt, located in Bishop Arts- it's my favourite! Every year in October, we drive to the Arboretum for my birthday. Klyde Warren Park is right across from the Dallas Museum of Art. I can't wait for you to visit so we can see all these places together.

Love, Beatriz

Dearest Beatriz,

I feel like I could write you pages and pages instead of this little postcard. I miss you so much and wish I could visit you in Texas. It's been so gloomy outside all day, every day this week. Last night and this morning I was feeling very anxious about nothing in particular. I know I already sent you a holiday card but I know you love Christmas so much that I thought you wouldn't mind a festive postcard as well. I started needle-pointing again after almost a year-long break (caused by the pandemic). I love it so much. I should have been doing it this whole time because it really helps me calm my mind. I've also been learning how to crochet! I've been working on this 1000 piece Monet puzzle by myself. It's taking forever, ahahaha.

Love Always, Atleigh

***

I started the (fe)mail chain of correspondence in the fall of 2020 with a postcard I had purchased at a little independent store in the Bishop Arts district in Dallas during the month of August. Philip and I had gotten in the habit of spending our Saturdays hiking in Dallas and then driving to our favourite ice cream shop for heaping scoops of homemade ice cream in the Bishop Arts district. The card felt relevant to me because it depicted an illustrated map of the major

places I visited in Dallas. As I traced my finger over the different locations drawn out on the postcard, vivid memories of Dallas rushed to mind. I contemplated the number of times I had visited the Arboretum, Deep Elum, Bishop Arts, and Klyde Warren Park across from the Dallas Museum of Art. A mere three years ago, I considered these places to be tourist locations filled with allure and the excitement I could never dream of back home in Canada. It was strange to now associate the places on this map with a new notion of home. The map, with its identifying symbols, was for me a way to place myself in Dallas not just geographically, but also emotionally. It was a memory map. The places I told Atleigh about in my short inscription have a personal significance to me, and I dreamt of sharing them with her.

Atleigh's reply formed a direct response to the memory map I created from the illustrated postcard. Her "festive" (fe)mail postcard was not a map of Ottawa, but of her feelings, and her description of her environment in the middle of November created for me their own kind of map. Words about the gloominess of the weather and her anxiousness seemingly disconnected from specific events transported me back to my first home, the place I grew up. As I read her card, I became acutely aware that although it was mild "winter" in DFW, it was truly winter up north. The days had shortened, and when the sun did come out, it departed the sky by 4:30. It was November, and while the holidays were just around the corner, temperatures had dropped below zero. Snow and gloominess had become part of every Canadian's daily routine.

It might seem trivial, but as I analyze the two missives now, I am reminded of how differently we can experience a yearly season and more importantly, how differently we each experience *home.* The correspondence described our distinct day-to-day environments and evoked the marked differences between the places we live in.

Atleigh's postcard came not only as a sharp reminder of home and how far apart we were

physically from one another, but also as an empathetic response and form of encouragement. Her card arrived just after Thanksgiving, when my family had contracted COVID. By the first week of December, it became very clear that we would not be spending the holidays together, and Christmas would simply look different that year. Atleigh's (fe)mail response was a beautiful festive looking card—a sincere and intentional attempt to lift my spirits in the midst of so much anxiety, change, and COVID-induced uncertainty. She recounted her own experience with needle pointing and crochet, and how they calmed her mind. Atleigh's (fe)mail was vulnerable, as she was open about her own feelings and struggles, but she never ceased to extend empathy, hope, and encouragement to me. Together our (fe)mail was not only a simple retelling of our hobbies, activities or places we live, but an intentional sharing of these things with one another in the midst of the circumstances we were living through. It is impossible to separate these postcards from the fall of 2020, the ongoing pandemic, the anxiousness of the holidays, or my own experience with COVID-19. For Tillman-Healy (2003), friendship involves "being in the world with others" (p. 286) and actively coming to know them. Moreover, friends come and stay together primarily through common interests, loyalty, trust, and emotional affiliation (Tillman-Healy, 2003). In the pilot study, emotional affiliation and common interests shone through in the way our (fe)mail looked back to shared memories of friendship. The memories embedded in our imagery and written words throughout the pilot study led me to believe that friendship was anchored primarily in the past. It was not until I began the analysis of correspondence in the full study that (fe)mail began to appear as a connection rooted in the present, hopeful of the future.

This first correspondence set the stage for the coming months of 2021, during which we would recount and converse with one another through our feelings of ongoing anxiety to encouragement for the future, a hopeful vision of the pandemic's end.

Beatriz: *My mother-in law tested positive for covid. We were with the family over the week and now we all have symptoms. I am isolating with Philip. He is doing well, but I have a dry cough, nothing else though. So, I'm okay, but just worried about my-in laws.*

Atleigh: *Omg, I'm so sorry. I hope you are resting lots. I am devastated to hear you are having symptoms. If you feel up to it and just need someone to talk to this week, I'm here for you. Or even once you feel better and are still isolating, we can text and chat.*

Beatriz: *Don't worry, I am resting and nothing out of the ordinary yet – nothing I haven't felt in a regular cold before. I have been taking medication, made some ginger soup with lots of fresh garlic. Thank you so much for your care. You are such a great friend.*

Atleigh: *Of course! Are you guys ordering groceries in?*

Three days later:

Beatriz: *How are you? Are you excited for your birthday? Philip and I are still pretty sick. We have lost our ability to taste and smell anything completely. This is honestly the worst. Have you received any of the postcards I sent this last month?*

Atleigh: *Oh no, do you have a fever as well?*

Beatriz: *No, thankfully. I know, I sometimes feel I am complaining a lot because I don't have any of the chills or fevers or had symptoms people get, but this really sucks. It's like my nose is completely clear – no mucus or stuffiness, but I can't smell. As a person who has anxiety and grounds themselves in their senses, it's quite disorienting.*

Atleigh: *Oh dear, that sounds awful. Are you and Philip watching a lot of movies?*

Beatriz: *Oh yes! Haha, Philip is watching shows that I think are too scary and I've been watching tons of cheesy Hallmark Christmas movies. Terrible acting, but they help me feel a little bit better.*

Atleigh: *I love that! My mom and I watch all the Hallmark movies together. I liked the New Zealand one, where they renovate the house and fall in love!*

Connection Through Art: Learning as Self-Care

Figure 3: Beatriz's Rembrandt postcard (left) and Atleigh's sewing machine postcard (right)

Dearest Atleigh,

I got your card in the mail today and was overjoyed! The art work you painted really warmed my heart. I really do love Christmas and this year has been crazy enough. Thank you for thinking of me with your painting! I can't believe it's almost Christmas next week! Wow, time is moving quickly. The more I think about it, the more I realize I have a whole dissertation to write. I am so glad you started needle pointing again. I can imagine working with your hands must be calming and grounding. Next semester I am teaching a global aesthetics course. I am both nervous and excited to teach my own class. I think it will be a wonderful and beneficial experience. Last year I saw this portrait at the Frick Collection, zero labels or didactics around it. It made me happy to learn and experience this work without words.

I have tested negative for covid and my taste and smell are almost back to normal (thankfully). Oh no, running out of space…

Love, Beatriz

Dearest Beatriz,

Yesterday I opened up my new sewing machine and started learning how to use it! I made a pin cushion! I am so proud of you that you are teaching your own class and I know you will do an amazing job. I wish I could take it! I miss going to art galleries and looking at paintings. I'm glad to have lots of new hobbies to see me through this winter. Honestly, I find winter can be very depressing. I'm still working on that Monet puzzle! LOL.

Love Always, Atleigh

***

The correspondence reproduced above came during what I thought was the height of winter and of the pandemic. Right after Thanksgiving, my family and I contracted COVID-19, which immediately led to much anxiety and panic, along with complete isolation for the next two weeks. After finally testing negative, I decided to send Atleigh an old Rembrandt postcard I had purchased a year earlier at the Frick Collection in New York. Although we were only a few days away from Christmas (my favorite time of year), great anxiety filled my mind. I could not shake off the reality of having to write an entire dissertation, complete an IRB application for my museum program, teach my own class, and deal with the aftereffects of having just recovered from COVID-19. The postcard was a gentle reminder of what my dissertation and my academic work were all about—learning from works of art. In my inscription to Atleigh, I mentioned briefly my experience with this Rembrandt painting, one with no labels, no didactics, context, or explanation, a work of art that requires us to make meaning of it by looking solely at what the painting offers. As I am typing these words out, I think back to the many days Atleigh and I spent in museums and galleries in Toronto, looking, discussing ideas with one another, and then looking again. We would spend hours thinking and talking about contemporary art, completely ignoring the curatorial didactics carefully arranged on the wall. Often, I wonder if my love for art education and the dialogical encounters it provides actually began many years ago as I wandered through galleries with my dear friend.

My (fe)mail to Atleigh feigned a kind of excited disbelief that Christmas was just around the corner, but I went on to admit the very stressful circumstances that brought 2020 to a close. Atleigh's cheerful rosy pink and puny card could not have arrived sooner. Her words were sweet and a much-needed encouragement to me. The imagery on the postcard depicted a simple illustration of her new sewing machine, which made me smile. Atleigh's words were not only

uplifting, but vulnerable, as she went on to admit she was also struggling and found the winter months depressing. She responded by taking up hobbies—learning to sew, painting, and putting together puzzles of artworks to keep busy as we made it through the winter. In this correspondence, I not only found the theme of encouragement and empathy, which are rooted in (fe)mail, but also a thread of learning, even perhaps a kind of art education. Atleigh and I had made an exploratory effort to retell or describe experience of learning, either through works of art, or through craft.

Atleigh's body of artistic work is rooted in intersectional feminist theory. While the medium she works in primarily is acrylic painting, many of her works are created through "traditional" feminine work or hobbies such as needle pointing, crocheting, and sewing. This study seeks generalizable themes that reveal themselves in Atleigh's and my (fe)mail correspondence and explores the act of sending and receiving (fe)mail as a kind of self-care. In this particular exchange, I found that the experience of learning from and through art also became a form of self-care for Atleigh and me. Even in the midst of a pandemic, province wide shutdowns, and lack of university coursework or projects, we found ourselves not only gravitating towards one another and our friendship, but to the experience or act of learning. (fe)mail in this correspondence became a vehicle for learning that embraced art making, grounding us in the present.

***

Beatriz: *Oh, I was wondering if you had sent me any other postcards since the sewing machine one? No worries if you haven't had time, I am just trying to keep track of them all through this terrible postal system.*

Atleigh: *Sent one today!*

Beatriz: *Thanks girl! So excited to receive it! You know, when I started this project I thought about all the ways I could structure the postcards to tell a story together, but I must admit receiving your cards in the mail really warms my heart. It brings me so much joy to read them.*

Atleigh: *Awe! Thanks, I love getting yours as well.*

Beatriz: *How are your quilts coming along? I saw from your card you're also making a dress?* **Atleigh:** *Ya! I started a bunch of projects like a fool so nothing is done yet. But I will finish them.* **Beatriz***: Haha! Oh but I'm sure it all looks amazing. I'm so excited to see them all.*

Atleigh: *Haha, thanks. Painting is my first priority right now cause my show is supposed to be this fall.. Look, I painted our postcards in one of my paintings!*

Connection Through Art Making: (fe)mail as a Work of Art

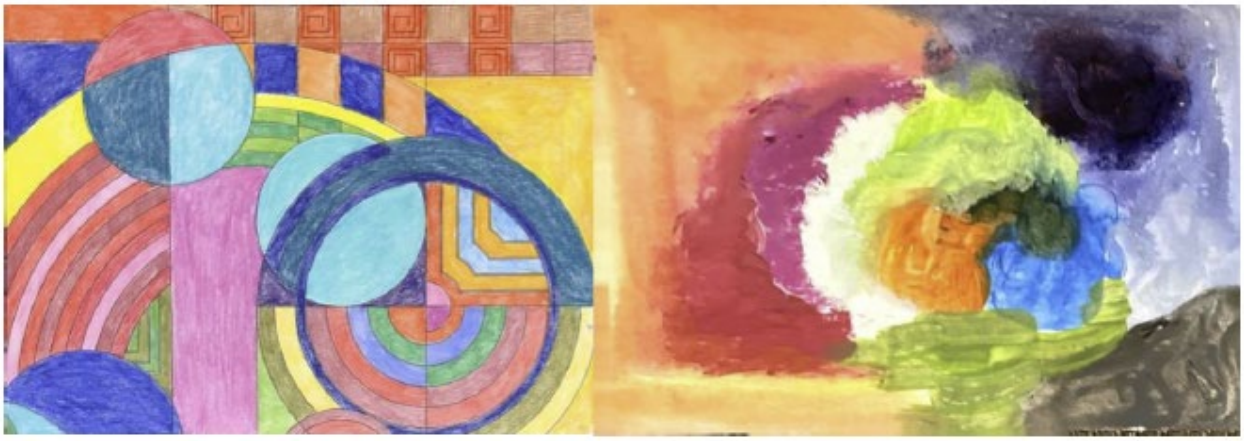

Figure 4: Beatriz's Wright abstract postcard (left) and Atleigh's abstract painting postcard (right).

Dear Atleigh,

Happy New Year! I went to the Crystal Bridges Museum in Arkansas and got this coloring postcard at the giftshop. The Museum grounds were beautiful hiking trails filled with site installation art. The days we spent in AK were rainy, cold and very wet, so it was not the best time, but we did make the most of it. We came back this Saturday and I felt like coloring this postcard. I don't know if I told you this, but coloring has become a nice leisure activity for me. I was feeling anxious about teaching my class and about covid when I started coloring this card and so I had originally decided to make everything shades of blue, but as I made my way through

it, my anxiety faded and I began to incorporate other colors. I feel good about how it turned out. I can send you some of these postcards, but I know you are busy crocheting.

Love, Beatriz

Dear Beatriz,

I was so inspired by your last postcard that you colored in! Whenever I paint, I use whatever is left on my palette to do an abstract painting in my sketchbook. Today, I thought I would do it on this postcard! I am still working on my crochet blanket, but now I am also making a quilt and a dress… I bit off more than I could chew. I am thinking about making some kind of quilt art piece, but I'm not completely sure what yet.

Love always and thinking of you always, Atleigh

***

I remember sitting on the floor next to my coffee table and coloring an abstract Frank Lloyd Wright postcard I had purchased a week prior from the Crystal Bridges Museum gift shop. My anxious thoughts had taken over, and I began to worry about all that loomed ahead in the month of January 2021, not to mention the tickle that had started in the back of my throat. I thought to myself, could this be COVID again? In an attempt to keep my anxious overthinking at bay, I picked up a postcard and Prismacolor pencil crayons and began coloring what I thought would be a very sad blue postcard—perhaps an accurate reflection of how I was feeling. As I began filling in each of the circular lines with varying shades of blue, I started to forget my worries and worse-case scenarios. Suddenly, I became focused on the postcard and the colors before me. In my postcard inscription, I reminded Atleigh of how coloring had become a fun and grounding activity in moments of anxiety.

Atleigh's response was beautiful. I could never have imagined that she would respond by creating her own colorful abstract piece. Her words called me back to our conversations about creating, learning, and art making as acts of self-care to get through the winter. In our previous correspondence, we had written several lines about hobbies we had picked up and memories of visiting galleries and museums together. This exchange of abstract, colorful messages revealed

(fe)mail not only as a form of self-care but as an art form. At this point in the course of the study, I began to ask myself, Can (fe)mail be mail art? As we were all experiencing a global pandemic during which art and museum programming existed primarily in virtual and online space, receiving a postcard in the mail with a newly created original painting was a refreshing and singular experience.

Canadian artist Paul Roorda has described a trend towards mail art that erupted among a few artists around 2020-21as a return to the analog, the art object, in the midst of gallery closures and show cancellations. Roorda (2021), who had been mailing samples of his current art project—hand-printed, limited-edition postcards from his own photographs—referred in a 2021 interview with the *Globe and Mail* to the tactile nature of the object: "When I put the postcard in the mail, it's an object. The stamp, the postbox, arriving in the mail, is all part of the art" (Taylor, 2021 pp. 2-3). Inspired to read further, I discovered mail art has an interesting history as an artistic underground practice. It was pioneered by artist Ray Johnson in the 1940s and then taken up by the Fluxus movement in the 1960s, becoming a way for artists to exchange graphic designs, collage, cartoons, and drawing with one another around the world. The movement became a kind of subversive network as it spread to countries where art was censored. Such a network is egalitarian (p. 4). Almost anyone can participate in creating mail art, an artist working in Canada or an educator finishing up her dissertation in Texas. I reflected that this stage in Atleigh's and my correspondence revealed not only a tendency inherent in (fe)mail towards interpretation and stories of learning, but the possibility of (fe)mail as a work of art.

One aspect of (fe)mail as artwork recalls the characteristics of "response art" (Potash, 2016). Museum exhibitions and educational programming can encourage empathy through participation by inviting museum visitors to create "response art" engaging with works displayed

in museum exhibitions, an approach drawing on art therapy practices designed to generate empathy (Potash, 2016). My (fe)mail postcard became my own response to work by Frank Lloyd Wright, while Atleigh's abstract painting (fe)mail was a response to the work I created with colored pencils. The empathy generated through our (fe)mail was affective, in that we allowed our feelings to guide our abstract art pieces. My postcard began with blue colors in order to demonstrate my worry and later changed to reflect my mood. While making this (fe)mail art, Atleigh and I felt isolated in virtual spaces – in the height of the pandemic. Our anxieties surrounding the winter months called for an intervention by an analog medium – (fe)mail. In this correspondence, (fe)mail had the power to re-orient our sense of communication and empathy through analog response art. It illustrated one way in which (fe)mail can be seen as an art form of its own, with characteristics and powers similar to mail art's subversive powers in other historical contexts, mentioned above. The return to the analog object was a refreshing and much needed complement to my museum program, scheduled to take place virtually over Zoom.

***

Beatriz: *Hey, our Wi-Fi is going in and out. The cell tower is down because of the storm, so if I don't answer your messages, that's why.*

Atleigh*: OMG! How cold is it there?*

Beatriz: *It's -23 with the windchill. Everything is closed and shut down!*

Atleigh: *I didn't know it could get that cold in Texas.*

Beatriz: *Oh it can't. (technically it shouldn't). This is unprecedented, very out of the norm. Global warming, I guess.*

Atleigh: *I hope things get better soon. Oh btw, did you watch the "To all the Boys" movie? Have you finished all the books? The books are so good! I wish I had all my copies here*

so that I could re-read them.

Beatriz: *I am still working on the second book. It is AMAZING! I love Lara Jean so much! I can't believe I didn't read these books in University.*

Atleigh: *It's so good. She is such a good character. When I read it, I was like "THIS IS ME"*

Beatriz: *OMG, me too! I love Peter as well.*

Connection Through Shared Memories: Past, Present and Future

Figure 5: Atleigh's Origami paper postcard (left) and Beatriz's Levain Bakery postcard (right).

Dear Beatriz,

I went to buy art supplies and found a package of really beautiful origami paper! I glued a piece of it to the front of this postcard. I really love all the different patterns and colors. I am so glad the weather got warmer in Texas and that you and Philip are safe. Maybe when I get to come and visit (after covid lol). We can find a drop-in ceramics place or something and make some art pieces together! You were always so amazing at glazing! I really miss getting to do ceramics like we did in high school. Missing you always!

Love, Atleigh

Dearest Atleigh,

I have held onto this card since February, 2020. I guess you could say it is one of my favourites! I can't think of anyone more perfect to send to than you. I received your sewing postcard in the mail and it warmed my heart! Your encouraging words made me feel so seen and appreciated. As of recent, I have started reading Jenny Han books and Lara Jean's obsession with baking reminded me of Levain in New York. I hope this card makes you smile and I hope you are baking and sewing lots!

Love, Beatriz

***

The correspondence above took place through March and April 2021. Atleigh's postcard arrived only a few weeks after Texas' historic snowstorm emergency at the end of February. The snowstorm brought grave consequences. It was a tumultuous time for many people who went without water, electricity, or proper heating over five days. The snow piled several inches and the temperature fell below zero, unusual conditions that overwhelmed and disabled the State's electrical grid. Treading through packed sticky snow in my old boots reminded me of the Canadian winters Philip and I were used to growing up. Atleigh's card arrived a week after the snow had completely melted and the sun was out again. It made me smile. Holding onto the origami paper made me feel close to my friend. I imagined her going to the art store and picking out this paper. Maybe she would include it in one of her paintings for her show in the fall, I thought. It was as if part of her artwork was now with me. As the months went on, I felt the presence of more of my postcards in Atleigh's life, including in one of her paintings, and more of her work was in Texas with me. Our postcards became more than memories frozen in time, our shared stories, hobbies, and hopes. They were also a part of us that now dwelled with the other person.

This thread continued in my correspondence to Atleigh in my postcard from Levain bakery in New York. It was one I held onto closely. The last one available for purchase in the bakery, it reminded me of the fun time my family and I spent in New York City right before the pandemic. As I began reading Jenny Han books and sharing a love for her fictional characters, I started to see so much of both Atleigh and me in the character of Lara Jean. As I spent days messaging Atleigh about these young adult books and Lara Jean's love of baking, the postcard took on a new meaning for me. It became less about my own trip to New York City and more

about this fictional character with whom I could connect my and Atleigh's shared love of baking. I responded to Atleigh's origami paper postcard with this memory in the form of a postcard that now could be shared and reminisced about between us in an implicitly imagined future. (fe)mail looks not only to the past, but to a future that embraces friendship and art making, in the words of Tillman-Healy, "being in the world with the other" (Tillman-Healy, 2003).

On a day in the spring of 2021, as I had begun dissertation writing in earnest, I chatted with Atleigh over video for several hours, and I brought up the theme of hopefulness I had recently noticed in our (fe)mail correspondence.

***

Beatriz: *I think there is something really beautiful about the (fe)mail that we created this time around. With the other postcards, I figured that vulnerability and empathy would be present in our writing, but I also saw so many shared memories between us.*

Atleigh: *Yes, I agree. I think we have these really sweet memories together built up over so many years. I think next year will be 10 years since we graduated high school right?*

Beatriz: *Oh My! That is such a long time! Yes, and our shared memories were very evident in the imagery that we sent and painted over the summer. They represent these very special moments- the peonies you painted for instance, or even the roller blades.*

Atleigh: *Yes! Those rollerblades remind me of high school and of how good you are at rollerblading.*

Beatriz: *But the theme of hope that I uncovered in my analysis and coding of our postcards was very genuine and un-expected in a way. It was not that we were no longer connected by these shared memories of friendship, but that the future, that we don't yet know of (but hope for) is also bonding our friendship.*

Atleigh: *That is so beautiful. You know it makes sense. If you think about it, friendship is anchored on shared memories and past experiences or loyalty, but it can only remain a friendship if there is a planning for the future.*

Beatriz: *Wow, I never thought of it that way, but you're right! That actually makes me emotional and happy when I think about our long friendship in the context of hopefulness. I mean I used to think/ focused on our shared memories and our love of art and high school, and undergrad. But to think of our friendship as more than just memories, but as a shared outlook towards the future is really something meaningful.*

Atleigh: *I think so too. I think our memories are important and our mutual love and interest in art is an anchor for us, but we've remained friends over so many years because we care about seeing each other and talking to each other again. I think this is really evident throughout our correspondence—we are constantly stating how much we miss each other, where we'll go and what we'll do when I visit you in Texas.*

Beatriz: *I love that! Let me write all this down, because I will find a way to put it into my dissertation somehow. So, friendship is not only about reminiscing on good ol' days, but about hoping for the future.*

Atleigh: *I think so.*

Beatriz: *Hmm, so what does this mean for (fe)mail? If (fe)mail is empathetic, artistic, vulnerable and rooted in care, what happens when it's also hopeful? I mean, it looks to the future—it's encouraging in a way that says "when" instead of "if."*

Atleigh: *Yes! Absolutely. This hopeful aspect that you've uncovered in it, I think says a lot— especially while we are all continually living through a pandemic. How wonderful to have*

this kind of hope from one another inside the museum, especially during a time when we all need it most.

Implications of (fe)mail: A Form of Self-Care during the Research Process

I began this study with two research questions: first, the nature of the (fe)mail exchange, in particular what themes would be revealed throughout the process of creating (fe)mail with a friend living in Canada and second, whether (fe)mail could function as a form of self-care for myself as the researcher. I have outlined in my layered analysis of the study the events throughout the many months I spent engulfed in writing and the great extent to which my anxiety was further exacerbated by the pandemic, notably its attendant loss of routine and structure. I contracted COVID-19, began teaching my first undergraduate class virtually in January, and endured a terrifying snowstorm in February. Through all the anxiety, I often wondered if I'd ever finish my IRB application for the museum program I had proposed the previous summer. The deadlines I set for myself loomed constantly, a sharp reminder of all I still had to do before the end of the semester, not to mention the uncertainty of what life would look like after my research was complete. The questions I then faced about self-care as a future academic are continually relevant for everyone in the field, especially because so many scholars face burnout and acute distress under the weighty demands of the university. In an anonymous 2016 piece in the *Guardian*, one academic states that "academic life frequently triggers anxious thoughts and feelings" ("Academics Anonymous," 2016). Usually, such misgivings are connected to anxiety-provoking feelings about perfectionism, control, vulnerability, and dependency. They underpin the false but unshakeable and unchallenged beliefs people with anxiety often carry with them daily. As someone who has been in school for the past nine years and who suffers from anxiety, I

often must cope with feeling overwhelmed in high-pressure situations like presentations and teaching.

I am not the first social science researcher to ask such questions or develop a method for self-care that is autoethnographical and arts-based. Researcher and Business education faculty member at University of Southern Queensland, Georgina Barton (2019) has melded the arts-based method of recollage with autoethnography to engage in daily reflection while working inside the university. Barton (2019) suggests that with so many pressures on early-career academics, it is important they engage in effective and consistent reflection. The process is similar to checking-in on one's self and others around, or to anxious individuals' practice of journaling. The act of reflection *in* and *on* action allows individuals in creative and academic professions to consciously review challenges in their lives and consider solutions (Moffat, 2014). However, reflection can often fail through words alone. Barton (2014, p. 52) has noted that the reflective process of making collage allows the researcher's unconscious feelings to be revealed. In this light, (fe)mail may be seen as a method of autoethnography with arts-based tendencies, allowing for deep reflection amid the creation and interpretation of images.

In the abstract and colorful postcards Atleigh and I created, the words we wrote to one another were not reflective simply of our current experiences and anxieties. Rather, the process of making and creating through paint and colored pencil provided an exercise in asking ourselves what was happening in the present and how we could ground ourselves in the reality that we were, in fact, safe and well. Furthermore, (fe)mail is not only a form of self-care because it allows for reflection of one's own life, dreams, and current life situations. It is also a tool rooted in empathy and connection. Unlike journal writing or Barton's (2019) method of recollage, the (fe)mail I intentionally made for Atleigh was received and responded to meaningfully and

sympathetically by another human being sharing a similar struggle.

In the summer of 2021, as I thought deeply about the previous year and the many difficulties academics experience continually within the culture of the university, I recognized how fortunate I was—beyond blessed—to have a loving and supportive husband, family, friends, and community. That support network was part of my self-care. I was more than lucky to have (fe)mail as well. My ongoing correspondence and communication with Atleigh served as a consistent form of encouragement and empathy from a friend who knew anxiety firsthand.

If (fe)mail can function as a form of empathetic and vulnerable writing that leads us to reflection, then like recollage (Barton, 2019), it can become a way to ask questions about, analyze, and ground our experiences in reality, severed from anxiety-provoking assumptions Like me, many academics can at times feel entrapped by the pressures of the university environment. (fe)mail has a place in academia not only as a method of autoethnographic research, as in the present case study, but as a form of self-care for academics struggling under high-pressure professional demands.

(fe)mail for the Museum Program

I outlined my pilot study of (fe)mail in the beginning of this section to address the many biases and preconceived notions I had about (fe)mail before beginning the present study. When I sifted through the present study's data and coded it based on phrases or words that stood out, I had some idea of what threads might be revealed. Indeed, the emergence of themes like vulnerability or shared memories did not surprise me. As a researcher who is keen on finishing my dissertation quickly, I felt some temptation to stop there in order to limit the work my analysis would require. Upon reading and reflecting, however, Max Van Manen's (1997) conception of research as a caring act, open to the phenomenon under study, I resolved to

continue work on coding, alert to the possible revelation of new themes. Consequently, amid "flirting with the data" (Kim, 2016 pp. 187-188). —the unexpected space of not knowing—I newly discovered two categories arising from (fe)mail: *connection through shared learning and teaching art* and *connection through art making that is both grounding and hopeful*. They emerged from the phrases Atleigh and I wrote about learning from works of art in museums, taking up new artistic and craft hobbies, and longing for a day in the future to share these experiences with one another. These two new categories revealed that in addition to being empathetic, vulnerable, and interpretative, (fe)mail also recounts the experience of learning, and it memorializes the experience of creating the postcard itself. In this way, (fe)mail can be identified as both an mode of self-care and an act of art education. Such capacities strengthen the case for (fe)mail as a method that reaches beyond a friendship correspondence. It embodies the curiosity inherent in learning about and interpreting art that is essential to art education programming. Therefore, I came to comprehend the ways (fe)mail served a greater purpose than sending an encouraging postcard to a friend. (fe)mail is meant not only for connection, but for learning through art making—and what better place than the museum for that practice?

Implications for (fe)mail Inside the Museum

(fe)mail tells personal stories through interpretation and art making. As I have noted in my literature review, art museum education programs can employ stories to give context to exhibitions, touch people emotionally, and open up new perspectives in ways that resonate with the properties of (fe)mail. For example, the Levine Museum of the New South embeds personal narratives within exhibitions to bridge cultural divides. Thomas Wide (2016) recounts a similar story-based approach to exhibitions that produces empathetic concern among audiences at the Freer Sackler Galleries (p. 167). Notably also, empathy programming at the Getty museum

encourages children to project themselves into paintings, while feminist adult programming encourages women to reclaim their experiences through vulnerability and empowerment. In such contexts, the storytelling and vulnerable qualities of (fe)mail can propel it into the museum space and, most crucially, into the kinds of empathy programming I have reviewed. In fact, in 2021 I led a successful virtual museum program based on (fe)mail. I asked women participants to create their own (fe)mail responding to the figure depicted in Miquel Barcelo's *Sopa d'Europa* from Meadows Museum of Art in Dallas.

Such empathetic exercises in perspective taking are common in the field of museum education and have been adopted by educators such as Elliot Kai-Kee (2020) and Sharon Vatsky (2018). The (fe)mail qualities I uncovered in my collaboration with Atleigh—art making, sharing memories, and encouragement through hope for the future—are applicable to the ways educators encourage the telling of stories in museum programming. The art making component inherent to (fe)mail particularly lends itself to "response art" in the museum, in which art making helps visitors increase self-reflection, re-imagine relationships, and promote social change (Potash, 2016). More specifically, art making in the museum, inflected with principles of art therapy, gives audiences the opportunity to reflect on their thoughts and feelings within a supportive structure (Potash, 2016). Drawings, paintings, poems, and perhaps even postcards, are activities that can inform viewers about their own values, leading them to recognize shared moments with others (p. 89). Finally, it is important to note especially that the (fe)mail between Atleigh and me revealed itself to be hopeful for the future. I strongly believe that after living through a pandemic riddled with tragedy, loss, and anxiety, all of us needed a little bit of empathy and hope, which (fe)mail can provide in museum education.

Having completed during the early summer of 2021 the research and reflection presented

thus far in this dissertation, in May, I prepared to lead a virtual museum program informed by my research. In my preparations, I hoped that my participants might find the encouragement, empathy, and support I had felt from my (fe)mail correspondence with Atleigh throughout the previous months. I hoped the themes I had uncovered in my study thus far would come alive for the women I planned to work with in the second part of the project—that they might feel connected, seen, and understood by one another through (fe)mail.

CHAPTER 5

PART II: THE MUSEUM PROGRAM

Introduction: The Pedagogical Framework

The second part of the research study involved bringing the idea of (fe)mail that Atleigh and I had so caringly experimented with over the fall, winter, and spring into the museum and, more broadly, into the field of art museum education. As part of my comprehensive exams in spring of 2020, I had proposed a museum program titled *Anxiously Yours: Creating Postcards and Empathy in the Art Museum*, designed as an exploration of empathy and anxiety through the interpretation of a painting at the Meadows Museum of Art. In the following sections, I will make key distinctions between the program that I planned to teach in 2020, and what actually occurred in the program I taught this past May (2021). The program I planned for would include six women participants and be guided by me as the sole educator/researcher. Through observation and a postcard making workshop, participants would have a chance to connect to a work of art, to one another, and to themselves through empathy around a shared experience of anxiety.

The program, which was to take place in a gallery and studio of the museum, would be broken into two parts. The first would involve close looking at the mixed media work *Sopa d'Europa* by Miquel Barcelo and writing a story interpreting why the work of art might be feeling anxious. The proposed second part would consist of taking that creative story and engaging in the creation of *(fe)mail*—honest and vulnerable postcards addressed to the figure in the painting. In this exercise, participants would be asked to think about how they could respond empathetically to the work of art if they could send it a postcard. My program attempted to draw together threads of connection between painting and participant, as well as among participants,

but also *within* each participant through empathy for oneself. I aimed to demonstrate that such programs can help women respond to our anxieties with encouragement and a sense of empowerment, empathy, and connection based on shared experiences. My research question was: in what ways might (fe)mail encourage empathy for works of art, the self, and for others as part of a museum program?

In the proposal stage of my dissertation, I refined and detailed the program. It was centered upon three key components that participants would engage with throughout various activities, including observation, storytelling, and (fe)mail creation: connection to one another, empathetic response to the self, and empathy and connection with the work of art. The program borrowed from various teaching methods such as slow looking and creative writing inside the gallery, but the pedagogical framework I chose was distilled in Bonnie Pitman's (2018) method of observation, which asks participants to look closely without making judgements about the work at first, and to connect to a work of art through creative means. The framework for my project followed Pitman's "Power of Observation" (2018), beginning with scanning, attending, focusing intentionally over time, connecting, and transforming—creating a personal response to objects or experiences through creative means such as conversation, drawing, and writing.

Pitman's (2018, 2020) framework is outlined in four major stages, which track closely with the methods I devised for my program. The first is scanning, or "taking a first look," looking quickly but not thoroughly, and reserving judgement about the work of art. I asked participants to first look at the entire work of art on their own, for about about three to five minutes. Pitman's second step is "attending," focusing intentionally over time, in other words, "looking closely and thoroughly while staying in the moment and reflecting without making any judgements" (Pitman, 2018, 2020). In my program, this step took the form of a closer looking

exercise in which I asked participants to name what they see in the painting without making judgements or interpretations about the work right away. The third component is "connecting," the act of collecting knowledge and connecting to new ideas using multiple senses. This might also include "identifying and understanding points of views, personal biases, and interpreting the narrative, emotional content to build new meaning" (Pitman, 2018, 2020). Connecting, in my program, consisted of about 20 minutes interpreting what might be happening in the painting, and why the figure might be experiencing anxiousness. Transforming, the final stage in Pitman's framework, involves "creating a personal response to objects or experiences through photography, poetry, drawing, conversations." It requires engaging deeply by "sharing new meanings and understandings, and encoding these experiences to create new memories" (Pitman, 2020). In my program, transforming took the form of creative story writing about the painting. Participants would engage with the figure in the painting through a prompt that asked them to draw from visual clues and their own experience of anxiety.

My prompts engaged participants to share new meanings and understandings of the work of art by creating their own stories for the figure in the painting. In addition, building upon Pitman, I created a fifth component to the teaching framework of my program, *(re)connecting*. (Re)connecting includes the participants' creation of (fe)mail and the act of mailing their work. Having drafted imaginative stories of anxiety based on the prompt in the gallery, the group would be asked to connect back to the work of art through an empathetic response to the painting's own anxiety. Sharing new meanings and responding with empathy in this way, the participants would then complete the work of (re)connecting by mailing the postcards, manifesting materially that the connections made in the museum space would live on outside it.

The Museum Program: How It Actually Happened

In the actual program event, I was forced to adapt my proposed methods. In early March 2021, Texas authorities lifted the state mask mandate, and I determined holding the program at the museum would put participants at an unacceptable level of COVID-19 exposure risk. Making a virtue of necessity, I decided on a virtual program for three reasons: 1) It would work better with participant's schedules and those who would not be able to come to the museum due to distance/convenience, and 2) I could include activities that involved typing in the Zoom chat function/screen sharing—much like museums in the area had adopted throughout the pandemic. Therefore, I could more accurately represent and mirror the kind of programming museums had been doing, and see how (fe)mail could function in the online space. Finally, Atleigh could participate via Zoom and perhaps share examples of our (fe)mail with the group.

With IRB approval for my revised plan, in April I contacted six close friends to participate in the study. I had previously shared with each my experience with anxiety, and I knew that each participant shared an interest in my research topics. More importantly, all the participants were close friends with whom I shared a personal connection that had ranged over several years. Friendship as method was central even in this part of the study, as I required my participants to subject themselves to scrutiny by a friend and also required that myself as the researcher receive the same scrutiny (p.13). This meant that I would not only analyze the words and postcards of my friends, but that I would treat my own teaching and participation with the same attention and analysis. The participants were not only subjects I could study and generate data with, but partners with whom I collaborated to make meaning out of our creative (fe)mail endeavor.

One participant was a professional artist, one a university professor, two museum

educators, and two close friends working outside the art world and museum field. The group of women also came from differing ethnic backgrounds and personal experiences and were between the ages of 25 and 40. Almost all participants allowed me to use their real names, except for Adriana, who requested the use of a pseudonym. I approached the program both nervous and excited about what it might yield and what this might mean for (fe)mail inside the museum space. In keeping with the theme of this dissertation and my methodology of narrative inquiry, I have decided to tell this story in the form of a layered analysis (Kim, 2016). There follows a narrative account of my museum program supplemented with my analysis and reflection on teaching decisions, along with a consideration of connections to the program's original structure and framework from the proposal.

The Museum Program: A Narrative Script

The museum program took place virtually via Zoom on a Wednesday afternoon at 5:00 pm. At around 4:40 pm I sat at my dining table and organized the many papers in front of me. I underlined the debriefing statement with a blue pen and taped page markers throughout my museum program essay, each designated to a specific portion of my script. I opened up my dotted journal to the page where I split the activities up into 10-15 minute increments. Ok, first we'll do the introductions, then I'll be short and quick with the IRB statement, and I almost forgot to pull up the image we'll be looking at! Before I knew it, it was 4:58 pm, and I decided to start the meeting and wait. Knots began to turn in my stomach, and I resisted the urge to go to the bathroom again. I clasped my hands together, my fingers digging in into my knuckles. Adriana was the first to join. I took a deep breath and admitted her into the meeting.

Beatriz: Hi A! How are you doing?

Adriana: Oh, I'm good. Just busy with a few more things to do with the end of the semester, but doing well. How are you?

Beatriz: Oh that's right! Yes, my grades were due in the roster for UNT this week as well. I'm well, thanks so much for being here today and supporting me with this program.

Adriana: Of course! Thanks for thinking of me!

Beatriz: Oh. Looks like someone has hopped into the waiting room.

I admit Atleigh next and then Tressa, Virginia, and Asami, who all come in at the same time. Their faces pop up on my gallery view Zoom screen. Wow. All my friends together in one place. My eyes look quickly at the clock at the top right corner of my screen. It's 5:04 pm. The sixth participant, Kaila, is missing! I glance quickly at my phone and see a text from her that reads, "Where is the link? I don't think you sent it to me."

Beatriz: Hi everyone, welcome! I'm so glad you're all here. Kaila just texted me to tell me she did not get the link for this meeting. I am pretty sure I sent it in that email. Ok, hold on. Sorry everyone, let me get on my email and see if I can send her the link again? How to do this? Can I just copy the URL for this meeting right now? That doesn't sound right?

Atleigh: Don't worry. Do you want me to send you the email you sent all of us? That way you might just be able to forward it to her?

Beatriz: Ah yes! That is the easier way thank you Atleigh.

I minimize my Zoom screen and proceed to look for the group email I sent to all the participants. It looks like her email would have been included. My mind begins to wander. Perhaps it's the clock ticking at 5:07 on the top right-hand corner, or the realization that the participants are sitting on their computers waiting for me. My anxiety takes over and I begin to think aloud.

Beatriz: Oh man, I am almost positive I sent this email to everyone. Maybe I typed the email wrong and it went to some random person! How terrifying!

Atleigh: Oh don't worry, that happened to me once. I once sent my whole resume and cover letter with my address and phone number to the wrong email, and I knew it was an active random person's email because I never got that deactivated message.

Everyone nods and responds to Atleigh's story with an "oh no" or an encouraging facial expression. Kaila enters the Zoom meeting. It is 5:10 pm and all participants are here! It is now time to begin! I start the program by reading a quick debriefing statement outlined by the IRB. The statement outlines that we will be discussing anxiety (which is a sensitive topic). I let participants know that they are not required to share any personal information or feelings that might be difficult to articulate or that they are uncomfortable sharing. Participants smile and nod in unison. They share a quick introduction about themselves to break the ice. Adriana begins by sharing with the group her profession and that she secured a tenured position that year. Participants nod and smile approvingly. I silently clap and smile. Atleigh goes next and mentions that she is a professional artist living in Canada. She also tells the group that we've been best friends since ninth grade. Asami shares that she is an educator at a museum, and that she knows

me from UNT, and that I was in her wedding the previous year. Virginia shares that we met each other in an art education seminar class, and Tressa shares that she is an elementary school teacher. Both she and Kaila remark that they came to know me through my husband Philip. Everyone smiles and nods. Kaila and Atleigh connect on their matching Prismacolor pencil crayon tins they have decided to use for the workshop component of the program.

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This first part of the study could have been easily written off as meaningless or a waste of time. There are no art discussions or observations or interpretations of the work of art among participants. However, because I decided to use a Zoom platform to connect a group of people who were not close friends with one another, I sought to create avenues for human experience where friendly ice breaking could occur. In my proposal, the ice breaking had been scheduled to take place over baked goods at La Madeleine Restaurant across the parking lot from the Meadows Museum. The informal, virtual moment I created without recording or asking hard questions created a light, relaxed atmosphere for participants to begin to get comfortable with one another before the observations began. In museum programming, educators will often start with informal "get to know you" questions for the group before jumping into questions about the specific work of art. Morse and Munro (2018) refer to these informal gatherings and conversations as "small mundane caring acts" (p. 364). Kim (2016) also suggests engaging in conversational moments with participants in order to minimize the observer's paradox while conducting field research. By engaging with participants in light-hearted conversation, I hoped to create intimate moments where the camera could be "forgotten" (pp. 175-176).

Having taught a course virtually during the pandemic, I knew the distance Zoom lectures could create between instructor and students. In order to humanize the experience behind a screen, I asked participants to keep their cameras on and to say a quick introduction and fun fact about themselves before we began. The small albeit mundane connections and laughs during this

portion of the program were important and ultimately set the stage for the rest of the conversations in the program. I had investigated the notion of care in my (fe)mail correspondence with Atleigh, and I committed to continuing and extending this care to my participants in the museum program study. I began to understand the practice of care as a form of empathy, which became an important facet of my ultimate analysis of the program.

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I shift quickly between the Zoom screen and the Google Chrome tab only to find out the Sopa d'Europa *is not saved as an open tab. The recording begins and everyone laughs and smiles at the automated Zoom voice which announces the recording has begun.*

Beatriz: Just wanted to reassure everyone that I am recording for the purpose of transcribing my dissertation and not to post or make any information public. Oh no! It appears something weird has occurred, and the image I had pulled up is not here. I am sorry everyone; I am usually not this clumsy with technology.

Atleigh: That's okay. Take your time. It's okay.

I share my screen successfully, this time showing participants a high-resolution image of the work of art.

Beatriz: So, this painting we are looking at is called *Sopa D'Europa* by the artist Miquel Barcelo. It was painted in 1985 and it is a pretty massive painting. It's almost 300 cm over 300 cm—for those of you in the United States, that might be confusing. It's very large. As an art educator, I am very interested in how we can make meaning and interpret works of art. For this particular discussion, I'd like you to refrain from Googling background information on this work. I don't need you to find curatorial or art historical statements about the painting. I am more interested in how we as human beings make meaning of works of art. Let's take a minute to look closely at this painting and just taking note of what we see, in other words, the formal qualities that are there. Before we start, let's remember that there are no wrong answers here. I

am genuinely curious about what you see. If you'd like you can scan the painting from top to bottom or left to right, and take note of what you're seeing.

Participants look at the work while I slowly move the screen, attempting to cover the entire surface of the painting, zooming in and out slowly.

Scanning

Beatriz: Now that we've had a few minutes to look at the work, I wanted to ask you what it was that you saw and what elements stood out to you?

Virginia: I think what stood out to me was this big empty platter in front of the figure in the middle. I think that's really important to me. Maybe it's a lack of inspiration for the figure looking down into it?

Beatriz: That is a great point Virginia! It is very dark and even looks muddy as well. Thanks for sharing. Does anyone else have anything they notice?

Tressa: To Virginia's point of emptiness in the bowl, the stack of books looks empty to me. You can't see titles or words on the covers.

Beatriz: Good point Tressa. You're saying you can't identify what's in the books. It just looks messy.

Virginia: Yeah, and kind of going off what Tressa said, the same thing goes for the paintings in the background. I thought maybe they were all mirrors? They are all faded and washed out, so it looks kind of weird.

I zoom in on the work of art and circle the mirrors out with the cursor and then ask Virginia to point to the paintings that she has identified in the work. She points to the images in the middle of the background that have some color in them.

Attending

Beatriz: That's super interesting! I am also noticing these ornate frames around what

Virginia described as paintings. Anything else?

Atleigh: I definitely feel, that because of the globe in the foreground and the books, the way the space looks in the background, it definitely feels like an academic space. Definitely feels like it's pointing to history or to academia and there seems to be a human figure within the space.

Beatriz: That's a great point Atleigh. We're definitely getting some academic space vibes here with the globe, the books, the figure. I am also getting some museum or gallery vibes from this. These frames read to me as frames—I love to doodle museum frames in a salon hanging style. Anything else?

Virginia: I don't want to monopolize the conversation; sorry I'm commenting so much. I also think it could be a museum space, maybe that's because that's where I spend most of my time, but the figure in the front looks so overwhelmed. Maybe they have a headache with their hands on their head. They just look tired and done.

Beatriz: Great point Virginia. Thanks for sharing that! I would agree, the figure looks pretty overwhelmed. You guys have also mentioned the background as this academic space, and the figure almost looks small to me with all this stuff going on around them. Anything else?

Kaila: I guess for me, I can't remember who mentioned the bowl, but I remember how y'all said it was kind of plain or specific to what's there. I think it's interesting that compared to everything on the table the globe stood out to me—it looks more detailed than the other items.

Beatriz: That is a great point Kaila! Now that you mentioned that, I'm also noticing the detail in the colors of the globe. I noticed there's almost an attempt by the artist to separate land mass and water in the globe through the use of colors. So, to me it really stands out as a globe. What did you y'all think about the colors and the textures that you're seeing? Did anything else stand out to you regarding those elements?

Tressa: After you zoomed in on the bowl, I noticed that it's that same dark color from the bowl looks like its sweeping onto the person and melted together.

Beatriz: Interesting Tressa! It looks like these parts are connecting it seems. It also looks like the artist piled on a lot of media in some areas and in others it looks like the artist is drawing with negative scr…

Connecting

Atleigh: …scraping and some kind of tools that aren't paint brushes being implemented, maybe the end of a brush instead of the bristles. My eyes just keep going next to globe to the right, there's a figure that's been scraped in. My eyes keep going to that and I keep thinking, why did they do that? Because there is so much vagueness in this painting. It is super brushy in some parts. I keep wondering about that. I love that they did that there and right next to globe too, the area we've discussed as pulling our eye.

Virginia: I was thinking that same thing, where it looks like a scraped silhouette of a woman, reminds me of a famous painting by Matisse. I don't know why I'm also drawn to this figure because there are so many other parts of the painting that look so 3D.

Atleigh replies and nods in agreement with Virginia. I nod in agreement and validate the group for sharing all the great observations everyone has made, asking one last time for any final thoughts or observations.

Adriana: For me what stood out, or caught my attention was the darkness in the piece, and then I asked myself, is it really dark, or maybe is it half dark or half gilded? When I looked closely in the background, I couldn't say it was truly half and half. It looks like the gilded sections are encroaching on the darkness in a way. It was interesting, I was trying to piece that all together.

Beatriz: Thanks Adriana, I had not even considered this golden or gilded part of the

painting and how it meets the darker parts of the painting. Thanks for sharing that observation. So, I love that we have been able to go through what we're seeing and make sense of the colors and what we're seeing.

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I began the program by assuring all participants that there were no wrong answers, and that I was genuinely curious about how each person made meaning from the work we were looking at. Following Pitman's "Power of Observation" framework, we began with *scanning*, also known as looking quickly, but not thoroughly. I asked participants to think about colors, textures, and formal aspects, refraining from interpretation of any kind. Participants did this well. Virginia began by mentioning the muddy, empty darkness of the soup bowl, and Tressa complemented her observation by adding that the books also lacked identifiable detail. As we spent more time looking, participants naturally migrated to Pitman's second stage in the observational method, *attending,* focusing intentionally over time or looking closely and thoroughly while staying in the moment. As the observations began to filter and become more detailed as each participant shared, I began to paraphrase their points while building on their observations. If we had been in the museum space, I would have done so to clarify their points and even point to the painting in front of us. A technique used often in Visual Thinking Strategies is to ask participants to point to what they see so that others can see it in the work (Vatsky, 2018). I attempted to do this throughout the program, zooming in and out and using my cursor to identify specific areas that were talked about. After Virginia and Atleigh began looking at the background space and interpreting it as a museum or academic environment, Virginia initiated interpretation of the work by suggesting that the figure's posture looked tired or "done." She made a connection to her personal familiarity with the art museum space. As an educator

and researcher eager to get to what I considered the meat of the program, I must admit I was tempted to move towards interpretation and Pitman's third stage, *connecting,* the act of collecting knowledge and new ideas. I refrained, however, by asking the group to continue to look thoroughly and share what they were seeing. Using Kaila's comment about the globe, I asked participants if there were any colors or textures that stood out to them. Tressa responded by homing in on the figure, pointing out that the black color from the bowl melded into the figure. Atleigh also pointed out areas that may have been scraped by the artist to create silhouette shapes.

At this point Virginia brought our conversation into Pitman's third stage, *connecting*. Atleigh and Virginia began to wonder aloud why the artist had made certain choices, and to even distinguish why certain areas of the work captivated their attention more than others. Virginia began making connections and introducing new ideas by tying the silhouette figure back to a figure she saw previously in a Matisse painting, only furthering her interpretation of the space in the painting as a museum and the concept of the work as art historical. Adriana also chimed in with her own interpretations of the space by asking herself some questions about the relationship between the dark, muddy colors and the gilded portions of the painting. These observations were helpful for getting the group to understand one another's points of view and to interpret narrative and emotional content to build new meaning. Adriana's observation regarding the background colors, for example, would later serve as the basis for her interpretation of what the figure might be experiencing and how the background might contribute to a theme of hopelessness and hope within the work.

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Transforming

Beatriz: So, my next question for you all is, what do you think might be happening in the painting? I know we hinted at some of these things, but I'm curious to hear what you think might be happening here and what might this figure be feeling?

Virginia: My initial perception was from an artist's standpoint. If the figure was an artist in this space, they look like they're overwhelmed with all these things around them and maybe they are experiencing a lack of inspiration with their creation in front of them, because it's so dark.

Beatriz: Thanks Virginia! I love that, and it ties in well with how you got us started with the discussion, and the soup bowl as the lack of inspiration.

Asami: I have something that is probably a little weird. I didn't see it so much as a bowl but it reminded me of the model of a brain. You know when you cut a model in half you can see it, and this might be me totally me projecting, but it felt like for me like looking at bad results of a brain scan being really frustrated with it. The books could be the medical research that they're doing. I don't know that's kind of where my brain went with it.

Beatriz: I love that, I had not even considered what the figure could've been looking at or thinking about. We have so much ambiguity in this piece, that we do have the liberty to think and to interpret what might be happening. Thank you Asami. Does anyone else have any other thoughts?

Kaila: I think it's interesting that Virginia saw from the perspective of an artist and Asami saw this from a medical perspective. For me, I think I still see a bowl, but I guess we're all just projecting. Because when I first saw this I thought, oh my gosh this person is probably so sick of studying, of being stuck in the library or museum or wherever they are. I just finished nursing school, so I completely relate to this person looking so overwhelmed. The reason the

globe drew my eye initially in our earlier discussion was because this person seems like they are missing out on what the world has to offer because they're stuck studying. I am actually not paying attention to the bowl at all, but looking at the person and the surroundings. I don't know?

Beatriz: Yes, I love that Kaila. I love how you were able to make that connection and I love that we can make different meanings by coming to this work from different experiences. Knowing you, and just your ending of nursing school and the focus you had on the globe speaks to so much about you and what I know about you as a friend. Kaila mentioned the figure feeling overwhelmed, and we talked a little bit about this in our discussion, so I wanted to ask you why you think the figure might be feeling overwhelmed. If I could share my interpretation, for me I relate to the figure in this environment having books spread everywhere and the figure's hands over their head and being focused on something as this feeling of overwhelm or of being anxious. Kaila mentioned this with nursing school, I definitely relate to this as someone who has all their books opened in front of them trying to finish my PhD. So I definitely see myself represented in the figure. Does anyone else have any other ideas or interpretations on what the figure might be feeling?

Adriana: So my original thought is based on where I'm coming from in academia, there's this feeling like a calling to your work and within that, there being this bottomless pit to review before you can ever create something new. Um, but it is a necessary step in the process, and so feeling overwhelmed at the sheer amount of work and then the lack of work in front of you, it's almost on the edge of hopelessness, but then you see the gilded aspects in the painting and how it's not quite extinguished. I wonder if the mirrors in the background could reflect this idea that "you may be overwhelmed, but there is still hope and goodness and good work for you

to do." I get this from the golden colors and the globe. It's all reminding me of calling and work that serves for others' flourishing.

Beatriz: Thanks for sharing that, Adriana. I love that you've even tied in the formal aspects of the painting as being conceptual and relating to how the figure might be feeling. That is really beautiful. Thank you all for sharing really insightful interpretations and ideas here, because we have already told these kinds of stories of what we think the figure might be feeling, I think we can now skip to the postcard making portion of the program.

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In the ensuing discussion, I asked participants to elaborate on the observations they made in the first three stages of scanning, attending, and connecting and to begin interpreting the work of art and even the feelings of the figure. My question, "What might be happening here, and what might the figure be feeling?" asked them to think about and discuss what they thought might be happening in *Sopa D'Europa*. This type of question is not only an exercise in interpreting and imagining but is often used by educators as a strategy to facilitate dialogue and encourage open-ended participation when teaching in a group. According to museum educator Sharon Vatsky (2018), this strategy can encourage visitors to verbally offer their perceptions and interpretations, based on their personal experiences. By making this question central to the discussion, I expected participants would be encouraged to step imaginatively into the shoes of the figure and make connections through their own personal experiences.

Virginia started the conversation with the same thread as the observations she made during our scanning and looking. She imagined the bowl in the center to symbolize a lack of inspiration for the figure, who, she assumed, was an artist. Asami took this interpretation further by projecting into the work of art. She interpreted the bowl in front of the figure to be a scan of a

brain and the figure's posture to be one of frustration about receiving negative results from a medical diagnosis or exam. She equated the pile of books on the right-hand side to be the amount of research the figure had taken on after receiving this scan or medical news. At that point, I thought it possibly opportune to introduce the writing prompt for this part of the study, but I chose to refrain, wanting to give others a chance to speak. To my surprise, participants began sharing stories verbally and interpreting some of the feelings the figure might be experiencing, based on their own experiences.

In this vulnerable and interpretative discussion, Asami and Kaila initiated the fourth step in Pitman's (2020) method of observation, *transforming*, which involves creating a personal response to the work of art through narrative, art, or conversation. Kaila took this step by offering her own personal interpretation or response to the work. While she appreciated Asami's and Virginia's interpretations of the figure. She admitted that she could relate to the feeling of being overwhelmed, which she saw in the figure's expression. She thought perhaps the figure could be trapped in a library, burdened by the studying they must do—much like she felt a few weeks before passing her final nursing school exams. Her attention was brought back to the globe once again, and she explained that perhaps the figure, like her, was feeling like they were trapped and missing out on traveling and what the world has to offer. I thought Kaila's interpretation was fascinating. Similarly, to Asami, she saw something in Barcelo's work that I would never have thought of, so it provided a completely different perspective from what we had all been observing before us. When I had originally considered a query like "What might be happening here, and what might the figure be feeling?" as a verbal question or writing prompt for my program, I weighed including a more personal and provocative prompt, perhaps one that asked for a more obviously revealing and personal story. I decided against it, however, because

as an educator, I wanted the group to focus on the work of art present in the activity. If prompts seek only to get at participant's feelings while ignoring the work of art, the program runs the risk of becoming overly therapeutic and superfluous to the museum space. However, to my surprise, participants in this study began making those connections on their own—without being prompted to share personal experiences.

As Elliot Kai-Kee (2020) has noted, works of art themselves invite the viewer to respond or imagine being inside the space, otherwise known as *perspective taking* (p. 165). Although I found participants taking an active role in the discussion by projecting their experiences onto the figure, it is difficult to say whether *perspective taking* truly occurred in this instance. Adriana's interpretation began from her own personal experience as an academic, particularly with the work that is often required in the university space. In the colors reflected in Barcelo's work, she was able to see the entangling of hopelessness, goodness, and purpose in work that remains to be done. While this interpretation was certainly a projection of the participant's own experience onto the work, it was also a genuine attempt to place herself into the textured, dark, and gilded space before us on the screen. By pointing out the globe and a sense of calling, "work for the flourishing of others," Adriana attempted to make meaning, even to seek out purpose in the work of art.

After listening to both Kaila's, Asami's, and Adriana's stories of what the figure might be feeling, I began to notice participants had used words such as "overwhelmed," "frustrated," or "tired" to discuss the figure's emotions, but the word *anxiety* had never once been mentioned. At this point in the program I felt I could nudge the group in the *anxious* direction by giving my own interpretation of the figure—this was both my attempt at modeling vulnerability to my participants and an effort to discern whether if I named the elephant in the Zoom meeting,

someone would follow my lead. This did not happen throughout the remainder of the program, and I found it a bit peculiar. After all, my dissertation was about anxiety, the program consent form and debriefing statement addressed the state or emotion of anxiety in several sections, yet participants had not named it in their interpretations of the work of art.

Upon much reflection and conversations with my dissertation advisor, Laura Evans, I concluded there could be a few reasons for discreet omission of the word. Perhaps the experience of anxiety is much more universal or relatable than I had originally imagined, so natural to us that we did not have to name the word itself. It was clear that participants were describing the experience of anxiousness in different ways in their interpretations but refraining from naming the word. If so, I saw clearly, a program such as this is meaningful for any individual, not only those who have struggled with or experienced anxiety in a more heightened form. Another more likely hypothesis was that the word *anxiety* carries with it weighty connotations. Many people suffer undiagnosed or experience stigma around discussions of mental illness. I am by no means insinuating that the women who participated in this study were uncomfortable with or stigmatize anxiety or mental illness, but I wonder whether mentioning the word in a group of people you don't know is scary. I can certainly speak for myself that it took years before I was comfortable using that word as an identifier because for me it had been so stigmatized. I also worried about incorrectly appropriating a word that did not represent my experience, along with fearing what others would think of me.

While I modeled vulnerability for the participants in my interpretation and use of the word *anxiety* to describe what I felt as I worked through my dissertation, I decided to respect each story and journey and to not push for use of the word any further throughout the remainder of the program. I remembered what a long journey it was for me to personally carry around the

word anxiety to identify what I experience, and although I had come a long way with feeling a sense of comfort in using this word, perhaps my participants were not in this emotional place—comfortable sharing in the midst of a group of people they did not know. I also began to wonder if feelings of discomfort brought by the word "anxiety" made it even harder to name or identify in a group discussion.

During spring of 2020, I arranged for my art education students to receive a virtual museum tour to view works by contemporary artist Kerry James Marshall. Marshall's work was born of the lack of Black images he encountered during museum and gallery visits as a student. In his work, Marshall centrally positions Black figures both in his painting and within art history. The figures are, in his words, "emphatically black," a kind of stereotyping, but never laughable (Hoel, 2018). Put another way by MOCA assistant curator Lanka Tattersall (2016), by "deftly deploying the prideful rhetoric of Black Power while amplifying the notion of stereotype," Marshall creates "a paradox that is both unsettling and generative" (p. 59). When looking at one of Marshall's works with my senior undergraduate students, the educator prompted them to begin discussion by asking them what they saw or what caught their attention. Many students began listing items in the background, the colors, and even the fact that they saw two children walking along a path. After a few more minutes of observations, the educator made a compelling point which I had not realized as a participant in the discussion. No one seemed to name or identify the race or color of the two children, the central figures in the painting. The educator explained that Marshall does not want us to ignore or pretend that his figures are not black children. I came to the realization here that the majority of the white students in my class as well as myself were uncomfortable identifying the figures as black and therefore perhaps thought it best if we did not name or "see color." This experience opened my eyes to my own shortcomings

in perpetuating racist systems and structures, and it made me more aware of the anti-racist work I have yet to do. It also revealed to me that, at times, pretending that something does not exist makes it easier to deal with, or to ignore. After going through this learning experience with my students, I wondered if the not-naming of anxiety in my (fe)mail program was a way of avoiding potential discomfort, personal triggers, or baggage that the word might bring.

I came to realize that in the context of my (fe)mail program, the respect I showed to participants as an educator, friend, and researcher was actually an act not just of care, but of empathy. Empathy is stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another and seeking to understand their perspectives, tastes, and world views. According to Roman Krznaric (2014), empathy differs sharply from the golden rule, *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. Instead, empathy requires us to look outside ourselves and reach beyond recognizing what we share with others in order to actively understand that which we do not know in ourselves. As empathic people, we must resist the temptation of projecting our own experiences and world views onto others (Krznaric, 2014, pp. 58-59). For example, throughout my program, I could have continued assuming that my participants wanted to talk about their own anxiety and how they might relate to the painting in this way because it was something I would have liked, both as the educator and a fellow participant in the program. Instead of pushing for this discussion, however, I considered the possibility that my participants might not be ready for or comfortable with talking about their anxiety, and therefore, I met them where they were, avoiding a forced discussion of the issue.

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The (fe)mail Postcard Making Workshop

Beatriz: Thank you so much for your participation and for sharing your insight and perspective with everyone. Now, we can move on to the next portion of the program, which is

the postcard making workshop. I hope you all got my blank postcard in the mail and now let me tell you a little bit about this next activity that we are going to do. Let me share this very small PowerPoint I made.

I nervously pull up a power point with the word (fe)mail on the first of two slides. Everyone looks engaged and nods attentively as I continue to explain my slides.

Beatriz: I came up with this method of letter or postcard writing called (fe)mail. It's spelled out as *fe* in parentheses and then *mail* as you can see on the slide. This is a kind of letter or postcard writing Atleigh and I have been sending to one another throughout the year. It's an autoethnographical and arts-based method of postcard writing. I know that might sound like a mouthful, but it's basically a back-and-forth, writing correspondence to another person with the intention of being empathetic to someone else's experience and vulnerable with your own experience. In the first part of my dissertation research, I tried this kind of postcard making and writing with Atleigh, and this museum program is my attempt at bringing (fe)mail into the museum space. So for this portion of the program, I'd like you to take the postcard template I sent you all in the mail and to make a postcard addressing the figure in the work of art. I know we've talked about multiple interpretations of what the figure might be feeling or what they might be going through. With these ideas and interpretations in mind, I'd like us to all create a (fe)mail postcard to the figure that offers them encouragement or empathy based on the experience you described earlier in discussion or something you think they might be going through.

I quickly turn to the following slide in hopes that I can move a little more quickly and smoothly through the criteria I created for (fe)mail.

Beatriz: So a little bit about (fe)mail, because I know this is kind of weird. (fe)mail is a term that my best friend Atleigh came up with, and then I sort of stole? Just kidding! I have

given her total credit for coining this word in my writing. Ultimately, it comes out of this feminist ethic of care that was present as a network of letter writing in the 1980s. So, feminists would often write letters to one another either open letters of activism or private letters addressed to specific individuals in this "network of care." One example of this were letters written to communicate the Greenham protests that took place in the UK in the 1980s that helped form this sense of community between the women who took part in this movement. (fe)mail is the combination of feminist and of mail as in the post. So, what does this mean? I created several tenants of (fe)mail which define what this kind of letter or postcard writing means, specifically how it differs from other forms of letter writing. So, (fe)mail is vulnerable or honest about our experience, it's empathetic in that sense that this kind of writing seeks to understand the experience of someone else by putting oneself into another's shoes or experience. It is also bonding or involves an aspect of friendship, hence why I've chosen to do this exercise with people who I have a close bond with. (fe)mail is interpretative, there is idea that we are making meaning between a work of art and what we are writing or seeing. Also, I wanted (fe)mail to be artistic and creative, meaning it is not just narrative, but creative and arts-based.

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My discussion prompts engaged participants in sharing new meanings and understandings of the work of art by imagining their own stories for the figure in the painting. The (fe)mail making component of the program represented a fifth element of my program teaching framework, which built upon and expanded Pitman's (2018, 2020) method, namely *(re)connecting*. Once participants drafted imaginative stories of what the figure might be, the group was asked to connect back to the work of art through an empathetic response to the figure in the painting. This part of the method is (re)connecting, sharing new meanings and responding

with empathy. (Re)connecting also includes the physical mailing of the postcards, a way for the connections made in the museum to live on in the broader world. Hence, the connections among the painting, oneself, and (fe)mail exist inside and outside the museum.

Upon finishing my explanation of (fe)mail, I read my writing prompt to participants once again, asking that they create an empathetic response to the figure in the painting. My question was originally phrased, "How might you encourage them through their anxiety?" It was interesting that the word anxiety in connection to the figure's emotion appeared only here at the end of my explanation and towards the very end of the program. Since as a group we managed to avoid the word for the majority of the program, I myself began to feel uncomfortable and wonder if perhaps I, as the educator had projected this emotion on to the figure—perhaps one no one else noticed or felt impelled to name. I quickly added the word "overwhelm" to my question, it now read, *with the stories we shared in mind, write an empathetic response to the figure in the painting. How might you encourage her through this feeling of being overwhelmed?* This re-phrasing was a way of relating the question back to our discussion.

As I reflected on my discomfort later, I thought I may have been afraid my participants would think I misrepresented their emotions in some way. Perhaps, then, "overwhelming" was a more appropriate word choice than "anxiety." I later had the opportunity to ask Tressa why she did not mention the word "anxiety" in her observations and whether she had noticed that the word had not come up at all. She quickly said she had thought about it, but wasn't sure if she should say it, taking her cue from others in the group. She noted also being surprised that none of the other participants had used the word to describe the figure. When I asked Kaila, she replied that the posture of the figure did not appear anxious to her, but rather, the word "overwhelm" signified the state of distress subsequent to an episode of anxiety. For her, anxiety was an

implied emotion or state the figure found themself in before the feeling of overwhelming dread set in.

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As participants began reaching for the postcards and colored pencils, I also shared a quick (fe)mail postcard I had sent to Atleigh and even showed some examples of the watercolor and collage postcards she had sent me over the preceding few months. We all sat quietly behind our screens. Tressa looked pensive, and Adriana and Asami looked hard at work, their eyes fixed downward on their postcards. I received a quick text message from Kaila asking for clarification, and I made sure to make clear for the rest of the group which side to write on. The group was quiet for most of our time. Everyone seemed to have their microphones muted and focused. I stayed quiet as I wrote out my (fe)mail inscription and decided to give others a chance to do so in silence as well. After about 10 minutes, I unmuted my microphone to initiate conversation and asked how everyone was doing. Atleigh started talking right away.

Atleigh: Oh, it's raining here a lot, what's it like there?

Beatriz: Today is sunny, but we've had so much rain and weird weather. The tornado watch sirens are going off this past week and we are currently under "tornado watch." You know, I got this weather app and was checking it a lot for this event we had at the Museum, and now I'm getting constant notifications about tornados and thunderstorms.

Atleigh: Oh my gosh that's stressful.

Beatriz: Yeah, it's tornado season here in Texas.

Atleigh: Oh wow, is that really a thing?

All the participants nod and smile at Atleigh's question.

Beatriz: Virginia! How was your move? How is your dog doing?

Virginia: It went so well, he is loving it and now we have three cats and two dogs. The previous owners told us there were three cats on the property and so we just decided to adopt them.

Beatriz: That is precious, Virginia! Does anyone want to share their postcard or at least what or to whom they wrote to? I am curious if y'all addressed the figure in any way.

Atleigh: I wrote to whomever.

Virginia: I said "Hey girl" and wrote the postcard encouragement as if I was speaking to some of my friends who I know have had a really hard time with the pandemic lately.

Tressa: I wrote "hey stranger" because it's general enough for anyone, but also works if you're speaking to someone you haven't seen in a while, like "hey stranger." I also started drawing some green grass because it helps me stay calm and peaceful when I go on walks.

Atleigh: Aw, love that! I drew my Animal Crossing character doing yoga because those two things are making me really happy right now. I've been getting a lot of stress migraines due to my heavier workload, so yoga and Animal Crossing!

Kaila: I did mine as this shaded grey area, similar to the actual painting and then I drew this tunnel with yellow crayon, kind of like "light at the end of the tunnel" idea?

Everyone responds with signs and sounds of approval to Kaila's postcard. We all seem impressed at her visual connection to Barcelo's painting.

Beatriz: Oh I love it! Mine has this cute little basset hound that I cut out of an anxiety magazine, actually. I thought it was perfect because I love dogs so much. It just says "hope this precious Bassett hound makes you smile."

Everyone smiles and shows genuine interest in my postcard. We exchange a few more words and smiles, and I decide it is time to end the program after one hour and 30 minutes. I ask participants to send me the completed postcard and thank them for their time and vulnerability in discussion and (fe)mail writing. Before signing off, I make sure to let the group know that this has been a truly enriching experience for me, and their insight and discussion is a reminder of why I love art education, why I am pursuing this research, and how art can, in fact, offer us healing, empathy, and connection.

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Our (fe)mail Creations: Finding Empathy and Encouragement Through Postcards

The program ended with some participants sharing what their postcards were about, what images and colors they were drawing, and how they addressed the figure. This left me waiting

for the postal service to deliver six postcards, and I had no clue about what would be written on some of them. With each (fe)mail arrival, I felt sudden butterflies build up in my stomach. I found myself both excited and nervous at what my participants had written, and I waited eagerly to hold all the postcards in my hands in order to start coding and analyzing my data. In Part I of my study, I was looking for characteristics of (fe)mail, more specifically what themes (fe)mail embodied as it was sent between my friend and me during a period of seven months. In Part II of my study, I brought (fe)mail into the museum space and asked in what ways (fe)mail might encourage empathy for the self, the figure in the painting, and other participants. With that question in mind, I began my coding process. I followed the same procedures and structure of coding and analysis of data from Part I, but in this (fe)mail correspondence, I looked for evidence of empathy toward the self, the figure in the painting, and even other participants or friends in each inscription.

This coding process began with looking for phrases or words in each postcard that stood out to me, in particular descriptions of anxiety, past experience and encouragement, or even an interpretation of the figure's emotions or circumstances. These phrases were much easier to pick out with the museum program because I had asked my participants to answer a specific writing prompt: "Write an empathetic response to the figure. How might you encourage them through their anxiety?*"* As I coded each postcard, taking note of certain words or feelings, I began to see patterns or commonalities that revealed themselves across postcards. For example, in repeated phrases such as "I know how you're feeling," "I know you're working so hard and are feeling overwhelmed," or "I still feel that way now" I identified a genuine effort by participants to connect with the figure's imagined and interpreted experience. This thread became a category of

analysis, the attempt to become vulnerable and encouraging by acknowledging the figure's anxiety or distress, pointing out to them they were not alone in their feeling or circumstance.

From this category and others I have included in the chart below I derived three key themes of connection that were generalizable across the (fe)mail correspondence: *Connection through shared experience, connection through encouragement, and connection through compassion*.

Table 2: Coding process for (fe)mail postcards created by participants.

Codes: phrases or words	Categories or Patterns	Themes
Do you ever get headaches from stress? If this happens to you, I'm really sorry.	• Encouragement through a shared experience • Offering practical help/remedy for difficulty or struggle.	Connection Through Shared Experience
I know you've been overwhelmed lately, But I know you're an amazing artist and you're not alone! The end is in sight. You can write to me whenever you're feeling down and we can take a break from this crazy world.	Empathy shown by reaching out and offering to help.	Connection Through Encouragement
Please know you are not alone. It's normal to feel overwhelmed. I still feel that way and know this experience is part of the process. I remind myself I've felt this way before and I will overcome it. You can and will too. I'd be happy to chat with you and be a shoulder to cry on.	Empathy shown by offering compassion.	Connection Through Compassion
I know you've been working hard and feeling overwhelmed. There always seems to be an endless pile of work to be done. When you feel like you're drowning, don't forget your why. You were built for this and there is purpose in this. Don't forget about rest.	• Relating to the figure by empathizing with the difficulty of an experience. • Offering perspective in the midst of hopelessness.	
I can see you look overwhelmed. There is light at the end of the tunnel. All your hard work will pay off. The feeling of being		

Codes: phrases or words	Categories or Patterns	Themes
overwhelmed is temporary, so push through it.		
I've found peace drawing swirls. There is peace in repetition, maybe this is something you can try too. With hope of a better day.	Offering practical help or remedy- hope can be found in art making	

The theme of connection was present not only in the inscription written on each postcard, but also in the imagery each participant created on it. All the (fe)mail creations functioned as response images to the original painting. Some participants responded to the work of art by creating an interpretative postcard connected to the original image in color, scheme, and concept. Other participants decided to respond to the work by creating their own representations of happiness and peace that connected to their written inscriptions. In keeping with the theme of this dissertation, I have chosen to present the (fe)mail product of this program, my findings, in the form of a layered analysis. I use narrative analysis to better understand the channels of empathy, either present or missing, in the (fe)mail data produced in this study. In my layered accounts, I use analysis and my own interpretation of the data to draw out themes of connection tied to each correspondence. More importantly, I explore how (fe)mail might have worked or not worked as a tool for empathy towards the figure, the self, and others. Narrative inquiry is a way researchers and participants alike might tell stories about our lives. Narrative provides a practical means to construct a coherent plot about one's life with a beginning, middle, and end—a past, present, and future (McAlpine, 2016 p. 33). Narrative incorporates temporality, a social context, complicating events, and a conclusion, which together make a coherent story (p. 33). In this light, I have chosen to continue the thread of storytelling and analysis laid out in Part I of this dissertation.

In what follows, I have structured the layered analysis by creating pairs of (fe)mail drawn

from the correspondence created during the virtual program. Each pairing is categorized as reflecting one of the three themes of connection outlined above. Although the pairings may not be evidently connected at first glance, my selections were not random or an attempt to recreate the structure of data presentation in Part I of the study. Rather, as I coded the data, commonalities began to emerge across certain (fe)mail correspondences, some more obvious than others. For example, both Virginia and Adriana expressed a connection to the figure that reached beyond a shared experience to an offer of help and support. I describe this in my analysis below as "empathy that suffers with." Therefore, this pairing embodied a theme of connection through friendship or compassion, which I did not identify as clearly in the other (fe)mail data.

Connection Through Shared Experience

Figure 6: Atleigh's postcard to the figure (left) and Asami's postcard to the figure (right).

Dear whomever,

Do you ever get headaches from stress? I definitely do! It can be so annoying. Over the years I have had to come up with ways to soothe it so I can go to work or sleep or do the things I want to do. I always say I get headaches when I think too hard. It used to happen a lot when I was a student. If this happens to you, I'm really sorry. Taking long deep breaths in and out (in a dark room) can really help. ASMR is also great.

Thinking of you!

- Atleigh P.S. yoga helps my headaches!

Hi,

Through some of the worst points in my life, I've found peace drawing swirls. It may be

ironic to draw an endless thing but there's peace in repetition. Maybe this is something you can try too.

-With hope of a better day, Asami

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Roman Krznaric's *Empathy: Why It Matters and How to Get It* presents several ways human beings can become more empathetic. Krznaric (2014) argues that our capacity to put ourselves in other people's shoes is "enhanced when we are able to identify points of common experience that sensitizes us to their mental landscape" (p. 55). This means that our own experience of joy or suffering is the most effective conduit into the lives of other people. As I have noted earlier, some of the profound forms of empathy are built on the common experience of pain, anxiety, and loss. Such was the case of abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, who only went on to fight for the freedom of enslaved women after she had experienced the loss of her own son, Charley. Stowe wrote in her journal, "it was at his dying bed and at his grave, that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from" (p. 57). In this statement, Stowe made a cognitive and affective connection between her experience of loss and understanding the experience of a slave mother.

As I asked participants to write a postcard to a figure in a painting with little context or background presented, it was only natural that participants began to interpret and imagine what the figure might be feeling in light of their own personal experiences. Participants began to project their own life experiences and feelings onto the figure, making the encouragement that followed in their (fe)mail a direct link to an experience of stress or anxiety in their own lives. Atleigh and Asami's correspondence attempted to connect with the figure by identifying a common experience of stress or anxiety they may have felt in the past. Atleigh's (fe)mail postcard did so by first asking the figure if they were experiencing stress headaches. She goes on

to express empathy for the figure with the words “if this happens to you, I am really sorry.” This is not an empty expression of sympathy, but it is prefaced by her own story of suffering with headaches, making the way she related to the figure genuine. Asami’s postcard also began similarly, stating “through some of the worst points in my life.” Her words stand out as an attempt to connect with the figure’s experience by merely saying, I’ve been there too, or I know what you’re feeling.

After spending time with the data and these two correspondences, I began to notice that both Asami and Atleigh’s (fe)mail displayed a kind of compassion for the figure that went beyond connection through shared experience. They did not just say “I feel for you because I have experienced what you’re going through first-hand.” They went further by actually suggesting ways to help. The encouragement was practical in these two examples. Atleigh suggested steps or activities to help with stress headaches, and Asami suggested repetition and drawing swirls. In both (fe)mail examples, the two participants represented their encouragement and advice to the figure in the form of a drawing. Atleigh drew a video game character doing a yoga pose, a clever and cheeky response to her suggestions for headache relief and an artistic representation of what currently brings her joy. Asami’s postcard was completely covered with repetitive swirls. The more I looked at her art work, the more I thought about how mesmerizing and calm it must’ve felt to draw repetitive lines. I closely identify with this practice because it is something I do myself in moments of stress.

Before beginning this research, I had expected that empathy would occur in my program through cognitive empathy or *perspective taking*, the cognitive imaginative leap that recognizes other people have tastes and experiences different than our own (Kai-Kee, 2020 p. 10). Because Atleigh and Asami both projected their experiences of stress, anxiety, and pain onto the figure, it

appeared doubtful their responses expressed cognitive empathy of perspective taking towards the figure as a completely separate, imagined individual. Their encouragement to the figure resembled almost a kind of self-care or self-love because their suggestions were not just for a figure sitting in an art piece. They also worked as tangible advice for themselves. Their (fe)mail displayed the *self-kindness or self-empathy* described by Krznaric (2014) as an understanding towards oneself in instances of pain or failure, rather than harsh self-criticism (p. 129).

Therefore, empathy for the self was created through these two (fe)mail examples. In looking at their experiences through the lens of a work of art, both participants were able to extend encouragement and hope not just to a figure, but to themselves. This is not to be dismissed as an exercise in navel gazing or projection. Rather, empathy for the self or, as Krznaric (2014) puts it, *self-love*, is an important practice for empathic understanding. Echoing Aristotle's idea of *philautia*, Krznaric (2014) argues that people who harbor a degree of self-loathing will struggle to relate to the feelings, needs, and world views of others (p. 130). If we want to step into someone else's skin, we must feel comfortable in our own.

Connection Through Encouragement

Figure 7: Kaila's postcard to the figure (left) and Tressa's postcard to the figure (right)

Hello friend,

I can see you look overwhelmed and defeated. I just want to remind you there is a light at the end of the tunnel! All of your hard work will finally pay off and everything you've been

looking towards will be within your reach. This feeling of being overwhelmed is temporary, so push through it.

Take care, Kaila

Hey there, stranger!

I know you've been working so hard and feeling overwhelmed. There always seems to be an endless pile of work to be done! Even in the moments when it feels like you're drowning, don't forget your why. You were built for this, and there is purpose in this. Keep your head up and don't forget about your good friend, rest. I'll see you on the other side.

Love, Trey

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In their (fe)mail to the figure, Kaila and Tressa connected with the painting by way of offering encouraging words. Their postcard inscriptions followed a very similar structure. They began by first identifying the figure's physical appearance as looking overwhelmed from working very hard. In fact, these two postcards were the only ones that directly used the word "overwhelmed" to describe the emotional state of the figure. Kaila's words encouraged the figure, saying that there was light at the end of the tunnel, and the hard work the figure had been doing would eventually pay off. Tressa also made similar remarks by stating that there was an endless amount of work to be done, but there was purpose to all of it.

They proceeded to encourage the figure by prompting them to remember why they were doing this work, using words of affirmation and encouraging them to keep going. Tressa concluded by reminding the figure to rest, while Kaila affirmed to the figure that the feeling of being overwhelmed was temporary and would pass. As I completed the coding process, these two stood out to me as the most similar structurally. In this correspondence, I found positive affirmations, encouraging reminders, and a reassurance that "you will get through this." After reading and rereading the postcards, I could not shake the similarities in the structure of the postcard itself, as if line by line, Kaila and Tressa were saying the exact same words to the figure in different ways. Their words complemented one another in each sentence: "I know you look

overwhelmed and defeated" and "I know you've been working so hard and feeling overwhelmed"; "All your hard work will pay off and everything you've been looking towards will be within your reach" and "you were built for this, and there is purpose in this." The more I read Kaila's and Tressa's lines, the more these two (fe)mail examples began to merge into one. They became for me a kind of conversation between my two very best friends. It made me wonder whether they were writing to one another or perhaps writing to me?

Kaila and Tressa are my two best friends here in Texas. I first met both of them through my husband. They were his very good friends in high school, and slowly, after moving here in 2017, they became my very close friends. They are perhaps the two people I experience life with more than any other friend who participated in this project. I believe they both came to this program much like the other participants, bringing their life experiences and circumstances to the discussion and interpretation of the painting. Kaila had just finished her nursing exam, and Tressa had been recently hired as a school teacher. They both worked full days and had busy schedules, much like the other women who participated in this program. However, since I was closest to them day-to-day, their writing spoke to me in a way that was deeply specific to what each of them had gone through.

Reading their postcards individually and seeing how they came together structurally in the dissertation analysis made me emotional, especially as I considered how distance had drifted us apart. The three of us were very close before the pandemic, always planning to see one another, sending texts and spending hours talking about our joys, anxieties, and worries. The pandemic had made gathering difficult, changed our priorities, altered our work-life balance, and, therefore, also impacted our friendship. We did not see one another often, and I supposed that is natural to the season of life we were in.

Both Kaila and Tressa saw an overwhelmed figure, defeated and undone by the amount of work they were buried under. Much like Asami and Atleigh, they came to empathize or understand the figure through their own personal experiences. Kaila approached this in her drawing of a dark shaded background and a white path receding into a light yellow circle. The imagery of the tunnel with light at the end connected visually with the words she wrote on the back of her card as well as the color scheme and ambiguous muddiness of Barcelo's painting. Tressa's visual imagery was of a lightly colored road or path surrounded by meadows, greenery, and a blue background representing a sunny day. Tressa depicted an image that brought her peace and calm when she felt overwhelmed, while Kaila depicted a symbolic light at the end of a road or tunnel. After examining both images side by side, I noticed that both friends depicted their (fe)mail to the figure in the form of a path, invoking a symbolic road or journey that was difficult to get through, but which held hope at the end. Tressa furthered this imagery with her words "I'll see you on the other side," similar to the adage, "there is light at the end of the tunnel."

As I considered whether this (fe)mail created empathy for the figure, it was difficult to say whether Kaila and Tressa engaged in cognitive empathy for the figure in the painting. They were able to see the figure's physical expression and downcast pose, interpreting them as a feeling of being overwhelmed, something each of them knew about firsthand. Like Stowe, these two participants found a point of connection through which they could relate to the figure. It was not, however, an attempt to understand the tastes and experiences of the figure as different from their own. It is perhaps more accurate to stipulate that, like Asami and Atleigh, they engaged in self-empathy, since the postcards focused mostly on the tension between purpose in their work, a desired end to their feelings of overwhelm, and the need for rest from their difficulties at the end

of the road. When I later asked Tressa what she thought about the program, she remarked that it was interesting to hear other participants' interpretations and experiences of feeling overwhelmed, and she added that it made her quite selective of her own emotions. I wonder if listening to others' experiences of anxiety and difficulty can give us a better understanding of our own life and even empathy for others? Indeed, I believe Kaila and Tressa's postcards were written to themselves, encouragements each of them was in need of personally, and I think in this, (fe)mail was successful. My analysis of these two postcards revealed that they became symbolic or unconscious (fe)mail to another as well. Side by side, in light of their experience and their friendship, I saw how their (fe)mail communicated empathy and encouragement for each other.

Connection Through Compassion

Figure 8: Adriana's postcard to the figure (left) and Virginia's postcard to the figure (right).

Dear Dr. Longheart,

Please know you are not alone; it is normal to feel overwhelmed with the extant literature. Even after 10 years of formal research, I still feel that way and now know I experience this as part of the process. I remind myself I've felt this way before and will overcome it again. You can and will too. I'd be happy to chat with you, to be a shoulder to cry on or lend a hand and discuss strategies.

With carino, Adriana.

Hey girl,

I know you're overwhelmed lately because of the pandemic. Being stuck inside and having more work than ever is stressful. But I know you're an amazing artist and you're not alone. The end is in sight. You can write to me whenever you're feeling down and we can take a break from this crazy world.

Love, Virginia

***

Krznaric (2014) argues that affective empathy is less about the cognitive ability to understand where a person is coming from than about sharing or mirroring that person's emotions (p. 11). I have had several experiences with affective empathy, particularly when I've seen someone cry with anguish or grief and I, too, cry in anguish with them. If, on the other hand, I notice someone's anguish but feel a different emotion such as pity, then I am showing sympathy for that person and not empathy. Growing up in a Christian household all my life, my father always made this distinction. Pity was simply looking at the suffering of another person and saying, "oh, poor little thing." Compassion involved feeling their emotion and taking steps to actively help them. Art therapist Jordan S. Potash (2016) defines empathy as the foundation for compassion and, ultimately, actions intended to alleviate another's suffering (p. 77).

As someone familiar with Biblical scriptures, many passages from the Gospels come to mind when I consider empathy and compassion. The most familiar example might be the parable of the good Samaritan, but I can also recall another instance of empathy in a story in which Jesus' friend Lazarus has died. He arrives in time for the burial, greeted by grieving family members who cry at his feet, mourning the loss of their brother. In this passage, the shortest verse in the Bible is recorded: "Jesus wept." Although we find out in the end of the story that Jesus resurrects Lazarus, and he knew he would do this all along, being fully God and fully human, he displays sadness for this loss and empathy for his friends who are mourning and suffering. For them, there is no possibility that Lazarus will be resurrected, and so in order for Jesus to truly suffer with them he sees the situation from their perspective. The Latin origin for

the word compassion actually means "to suffer with." This is similar meaning to *Eifuhlung's* English equivalent from the Greek *empatheia* meaning "in + suffering" (Krznaric, 2016, p. 9). This suffering with or "in + suffering" (p.9) is not just the feeling empathetically for another's person's sadness or loss, but it is coupled with the intention to do something to help. This intention to do or to help is what I discovered in Adriana and Virginia's (fe)mail to the figure.

For Krznaric (2014), empathy and compassion should not be used interchangeably to mean the same thing, but he does acknowledge similarities between the two. For example, the Buddhist notion of compassion stresses the importance of empathically understanding other people's perspectives and world views (p. 12). Virginia's and Adriana's postcards stood out to me precisely because they evoked the intention to "suffer with." Unlike the other (fe)mail created in the program, Adriana and Virginia's postcards were not just hopeful and encouraging of a better day for the figure, but they wrote with the intention of extending help. Adriana does this more emphatically in her last line, "I'd be happy to chat with you, to be a shoulder to cry on, or lend a hand to discuss strategies." She not only encourages the figure with "I've been where you are, and things will get better," but actually offers help by making herself available to the figure. Virginia's (fe)mail was the only other that did this: "you can write to me whenever you are feeling down and we can take a break from this crazy world." Adriana and Virginia extended an offer to walk alongside the figure in their suffering. Adriana's words, "be a shoulder to cry on," do not necessarily offer a helpful strategy or solution, like the (fe)mail by Atleigh or Asami. It also does not offer affirmation that things will get better, like the (fe)mail by Tressa and Kaila. In her offer, Adriana extends an invitation to be a shoulder to lean on, to cry and suffer with.

Virginia echoes this sentiment in her (fe)mail with the words, "you can write to me whenever you're feeling down." I have often found in my own life, that in times of sorrow and

difficulty, more than encouragement, more than solutions, we just need someone to look at us in our suffering and to say, “I am here for you if you need me.” These are powerful words to extend to others around us, which brings me to my next question: who were Virginia and Adriana writing to in their (fe)mail?

When I first read Adriana’s postcard, my heart felt full. I could relate to her experience of writing for academia and the feeling of overwhelm that comes with reading, rereading, and making sense of the literature before me. Adriana is someone I looked up to, although we were in different fields. I admired her work ethic, her ability to articulate complex concepts, and her kind-hearted spirit. Her words “Even after ten years of formal research, I still feel that way and now know it is part of the process. I remind myself I’ve felt this way before and will overcome it again” are a great encouragement to me as I struggle through bouts of anxiety and self-doubt with this research. I don’t know who Dr. Longheart is, but I felt seen and understood by Adriana’s (fe)mail because she was speaking directly to a circumstance that I was going through. I wondered if Adriana’s (fe)mail addressed to Dr. Longheart was not so much for the figure or for herself, but for me. In Adriana’s postcard, I saw how (fe)mail became a way my dear friend extended empathy to me in my struggle to complete the project. Her imagery was simple, but symbolic of both the painting and struggle with anxiety. Much like Kaila’s light at the end of the tunnel, Adriana colored diagonal lines of grey separated by pink hearts that made their way from left to right of the postcard. Towards the end, she drew bigger hearts and a light yellow background. This imagery symbolized the end in sight. Even as I sat writing these words, I felt the weight of what I had yet to write, mixed with the reality that soon I would be done, and this dissertation would be ready. The tension of discomfort Adriana articulated and illustrated was

symbolic of the feeling of anxiousness for me. It was the sitting in tension or discomfort without solving anything.

Virginia's postcard was a beautifully colored drawing of yellow and red flowers. Instead of making a direct connection to Barcelo's painting, she considered representing an image of happiness and peace that could embody her written inscription of empathy. The words "spring flowers always make me feel better" pointed to the illustration as a form of encouragement to the recipient. Much like Adriana's postcard, it was also specific to someone other than herself, someone struggling with the pandemic who was also an artist. Her words "Being stuck inside and having more work than ever is stressful. But I know you're an amazing artist and you're not alone. The end is in sight" made me wonder whether her postcard was addressed to the artist, whom she had originally, during our discussion, interpreted the figure to be.

She also mentioned during our (fe)mail workshop that her postcard would be addressed to some of her friends whom she knew had been struggling with the pandemic. Because of this, I think Virginia was perhaps the only participant writing to a figure or recipient who was not herself, not someone struggling with the same workload or experience as an educator. In this way, I believe Virginia's (fe)mail engaged in a kind of perspective taking or cognitive empathy because her (fe)mail sought to understand the experience and perspective of someone else, perhaps someone she knew who was lacking inspiration and struggling with being stuck at home. While these feelings could be very much part of Virginia's life, making the imaginative leap easier and personal for her, I would argue that her (fe)mail felt like an extension of help and empathetic encouragement to someone else's experience of suffering. While Adriana connected to the figure through her own personal experience, and Virginia connected to the figure by imagining them as her friend, both these women displayed a form of *empatheia*, or "a suffering

with" (p. 9). Their (fe)mail was compassionate because it not only extended encouragement, but also proffered help to the recipient.

Concluding Thoughts

Several threads of connection were present in the (fe)mail data produced during the program. The first two postcards by Atleigh and Asami clearly depicted a shared experience with the figure. Their correspondence spoke to an experience of suffering or pain they had encountered in their own lives. Each postcard also suggested ways to help the figure through their struggles, whether by drawing swirls or taking deep breaths in a dark room. In their words I saw an empathetic sentiment that communicated "you are not alone." This first theme of connection, present in all the (fe)mail correspondence, may not have been an example of perspective taking, as Krznaric (2014) and Kai-Kee (2020) define it. Nevertheless, it told of empathy as an imaginative leap that begins with personal experience. The theme of connection through encouragement was also one which all participants expressed in their correspondence. This theme came through more boldly in Kaila and Tressa's correspondence. While writing a postcard to a figure they interpreted was flagging under a pile of work, both Kaila and Tressa encouraged the figure, reassuring them that better days were ahead. Often, life can become so difficult and burdensome that we tend to forget the light at the end of the tunnel. I know this is definitely the case when I find myself in the throes of anxiety. In the correspondence, Kaila and Tressa offered the figure some perspective, in turn offering that perspective to themselves, to each other, and to me. The last thread of connection through compassion was visible in Virginia and Adriana's postcards. They took their correspondence a step further by extending help to the figure in need.

While there were many threads of connection woven throughout the program, empathy was manifest in unexpected places, and in different forms. As a researcher, I flirted with the data present in this study, going back to it periodically as I tried to make sense of what was before me. As I sought help in the work of other educators in the field and narrative research, I came to better understand the tension of empathy, which was evident throughout my study. In the section that follows, I delve into these findings to make sense of the ways empathy revealed itself and why anxiety, both the term and the concept, was conspicuously absent from the (fe)mail and the program.

CHAPTER 6

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

In the following section, I analyze the virtual museum program detailed in the previous chapter in light of my research questions. I locate threads of empathy for the figure in the museum program, for other participants, and for the self. As I search for the spaces in which empathy might have emerged in the program, I reintroduce the concept not as a thread but as a series of tensions present throughout the interpretations participants offered and the (fe)mail postcards they created. In situating empathy as a set of tensions in my study, I examine how empathy did *not* occur in the ways I had originally hoped for, defined in my literature review, particularly in participants' interpretations of the painting. My analysis revealed that empathy is a more complex emotion than I had originally considered. Its presence in a museum program can take shape in unexpected ways. For example, empathy as tension appeared not only in the ways participants made sense of the work of art in relation to their own experiences, but in how I, as educator and friend, related to each of them. Empathy revealed itself in my teaching practice, allowing me to reflect on the tensions as I considered my role as educator. In this section, I explore how the study became a form of self-reflection for me as narrative researcher and educator. I came to understand my own teaching as empathetic and to consider (fe)mail as a tool for transformative learning in art museum education pedagogy. Although the program yielded unexpected results, it revealed senses of community, connection, empathy, and compassion derived from personal interpretation and the encouragement we gave to the figure in the painting and to ourselves. Lastly, I conclude by considering the outcomes of my project and asking how (fe)mail might be used in diverse programming in art museums, including addressing mental illness and social justice advocacy and healing.

Finding a Thread of Empathy Throughout

My museum program sought to create several threads of empathy—for the figure, for one another, and for oneself. The first part of the program consisted of observation and interpretation. I asked participants to think about and reflect on what the figure might be feeling or thinking and what might be their story within the muddy and textured mixed media atmosphere Barcelo created in 1985. I had hoped that this kind of discussion would allow participants to look deeply at the work and to insert themselves into the place of the figure, activating perspective-taking (Kai-Kee 2020; Wide, 2016), as well as cognitive and affective empathy (Krznaric, 2014).

With such conceptions of empathy as the stepping-off point, I asked whether participants in a museum program could truly find empathetic access points to a painting through discussion and interpretation. The answer was not as clear and concise as I'd originally hoped. In my preliminary literature review, I analyzed and read various materials on empathy, what it looked like on an individual level, and how we could become more empathetic human beings as a society. The literature on empathy in museums is also extensive. Educators, curators, and art therapists are concerned with how we might bring more empathetic programming and exhibitions into our galleries through perspective-taking and storytelling.

Projecting into a work of art can be meaningful, eye-opening, and revealing about ourselves and others, showing us perspectives we may not have considered. Making our own meaning and finding our way through a looking exercise or dialogical encounter with a work of art is precisely why I fell in love with art education. Indeed, there is much evidence of such meaning making and projection in my participants' discussion of *Sopa D'Europa*. However, upon much reflection and analysis of my program, I wondered whether perspective taking really did take place, and if it did not, whether empathy for the figure was truly present or merely a

projection of our own experiences onto the work of art? In the following section, I unpack empathy in my program by reframing it as a tension that emerged unexpectedly throughout the program.

Empathy and Teaching as Tension

It is clear that in the scanning and attending stages of the program, participants began to interpret what might have been happening in the painting based on what they saw in the work. These interpretations were founded on how each person recognized and related to parts of the painting. For example, as an artist and an art historian, Atleigh and Virginia immediately identified the background as one of academic or art historical significance. Kaila focused in on the globe and the significance traveling has to her, and Asami and Adriana interpreted the meaning of the colors in the background and murky-textured bowl shape in front of the figure. The figure's expression of distress gave participants the idea that the figure may have been feeling overwhelmed. The context of that feeling was left open to interpretation. While each woman focused on a different aspect of the painting, each attempted to connect with the figure through their own personal experience. For example, Kaila thought the figure was contemplating how much they were missing traveling and seeing the world because they were stuck studying. Adriana saw the background of the painting as a metaphor for the daunting challenge of work ahead, met with a sense of purpose and service. While the interpretations were riveting and creative, most of the participants surely imagined the situation of the figure as one similar to their own. Thus, empathy for the figure in the form of perspective-taking did not happen.

As I struggled to make sense of my goals and hopes for the program versus what actually happened, I turned to "Reconceptualizing Teacher Educator Knowledge as Tensions" by educator and researcher Amanda Berry (2007), which argues that tensions serve both as a

language for describing teaching practice and a frame for studying it. Berry (2007) claims that tensions help educators deal with ambiguities in their work, capturing and holding onto ambivalence and contradiction, rather than reducing or resolving it (p. 133). Berry's (2007) concepts helped me articulate ambiguities throughout my program. For example, I hoped for participants to imaginatively leap into the painting, considering their personal experiences, connecting to the imagined feelings of a figure, which might be very different from their own. Looking for these loose threads of empathy in my research, however, I quickly came to understand them as ambiguous and at times contradictory, tensions of empathy across participant, self, and painting.

Empathy as Tension: From Educator to Participants

As an educator and researcher, I have considered how tensions in empathy and in my own teaching were present throughout the program and (fe)mail workshop. For example, as an educator, I experienced a tension between the act of planning beforehand and being responsive in the moment. This tension emerged from difficulties associated with implementing a predetermined curriculum and responding to learning opportunities that arose within the context of practice (Berry, 2007 p. 120). Throughout the first stages of observation and discussion, I found myself deviating from the script I had so carefully written in order to accompany my participants and their interpretations of the work of art. To do this kind of adjustment as an educator is in and of itself an act of empathy for the student or participant. It means surrendering our own agendas and goals, allowing the student to dictate the climate of safety in which learning can take place. As such, we see the learning from their perspective, rather than impose our own perspective on the learner. As I think more critically about my acts as an educator, I believe the flexibility I exhibited with participants demonstrates a museum educator's ability to

put another's needs before their own.

This is a tension that museum educators are constantly made aware of in their programming. It requires letting go of the script, catering to the needs of the group rather than reflecting our own agendas. In *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*, Elliot Kai-Kee and Rika Burnham (2011) explore how the educator's own agenda is prioritized by asking predetermined questions, even open-ended ones, in a gallery setting. This approach can hinder curiosity and learning because students catch on quickly that there are specific answers the educator wants them to say (p. 96). Thus, museum educators must navigate a complex tension. We are tasked to lead a dialogue or discussion that achieves some of our goals, while remaining sensitive to where students are taking the discussion with their own questions and curiosities. For example, when Atleigh and Virginia both noticed a loosely carved-out figure in the background of the painting resembling a figure originally created by Matisse, instead of following my line of questioning about interpreting why the figures were there, Atleigh directed her own question to the group, wondering why the artist had created such a vague and "brushy" painting with these carved out figures in the background. These questions led both Atleigh and Virginia to assume the painting might be about art history.

Kai-Kee and Burnham (2011) describe dialogical encounters with works of art as acts of thinking together. Each work of art discussed exists in an infinite realm of possibilities. I argue that teaching in this manner requires a great deal of empathy from educator to participants. It means surrendering our need to control the outcome and our predetermined expectations for the group. We must allow learning and shared understandings to happen in a safe space. If you are reading this dissertation and you are an educator, I am sure you were able to discern my agenda and the predetermined route I wanted my participants to take in our discussion. I navigated this

tension shakily within my program, making quick decisions about when to depart from my script and meet participants in their ideas and interpretations of the work. This tension, which I have identified in my program, revealed to me that teaching in an art museum is an empathetic practice.

The theme of tension in teaching practice appeared in my program in other ways. I struggled, for example, with discrepancies between the goals I had set out to achieve and the ways participants learned. Throughout the program I wondered whether to share background information and context about the work of art with my participants. Would revealing the painter's intention and backstory of Barcelo's work change the way my participants interacted with the painting? Would empathy for the figure have been possible if participants knew a bit more of what Barcelo's figure was feeling and the cultural context it came from? Thomas Wide (2016) defines this kind of empathy as *perspective-getting*: when viewers are told the stories or background of a work of art in order to accurately empathize with the painter's struggle, rather than guessing or assuming the context (pp. 167-168). Looking back at my program and our discussion, it felt very much like a guessing at what the figure may have been feeling. Realizing that this may have been the case, I felt discouraged about my decision. However, when I spoke to participants about this choice, they reassured me that had I shared the artist's intention for the figure, they would have given up on their interpretations. It suddenly dawned on me the true power belonging to the educator in leading discussion about works of art. Kai-Kee and Burnham (2011) describe this as a duty educator must take seriously as they decide what to reveal and what to withhold. Every piece of information we present to a group of viewers changes and limits the way participants see a work of art. As educators, we must be aware of our power to constrict the interpretative process (Kai-Kee and Burnham, 2011, p. 95).

Indeed, I had struggled with whether to reveal background information to participants. As an art educator, I worried that participants would focus intently on the art historical background of the work and feel as though their personal interpretations no longer mattered in their (fe)mail postcards. In seeking to put the participant's story and personal interpretation ahead of the curatorial or museum label, I anchored my program with a visitor-centered approach, in which the art object and the art historical context became secondary to the participant's viewpoint in meaning making.

I also found myself navigating a tension Berry (2007) identifies between safety and challenge. I sought to confront participants in their thinking by getting them to name anxiety as an emotion the figure experienced. At the same time, I sought to respect their interpretations and personal journeys regarding using the word to describe themselves. In navigating this tension throughout the program, I demonstrated empathy towards my participants by not pushing them further to name anxiety as an emotion in the figure. In doing so, I allowed participants to relate to the figure and to the experience of anxiousness we interpreted without necessarily using the word itself. This approach foregoes "the temptation of projecting our own experiences and views onto others" (Krznaric, 2014, p. 59). As I reflected on Kai-Kee and Burnham's (2011) critique of educator-directed discussions, then, I considered whether anxiety was an emotion I read into the figure, conceived from my own experience and not made clear to the participant's reading of the painting. In the next section, I unpack these possibilities and my hypothesis for the absence of explicit acknowledgment of anxiety during the program.

Throughout the program, I noticed participants building upon one another's interpretations, sharing vulnerable aspects of their lives, and extending help to the figure in their (fe)mail postcards. In several instances, participants extended empathy for me as the educator

and researcher of this project. As I fumbled my way through Zoom, Atleigh continuously assured me and even shared her own experience of failures as a means of encouragement. We laughed, discussed, and learned together as a group. Recalling Berry's (2007) view of educator knowledge and practice, the tensions I encountered in this project offered a way to reframe my goals for the program and the way I thought empathy would reveal itself in my study or the (fe)mail data. The set of tensions I encountered held on to "ambivalence and contradiction rather than reducing or resolving it" (p. 133).

I came to the realization that empathy is messy. It is difficult both as an emotion and as a habit to cultivate for another person or a work of art, especially when a figure in a work of art is inatimate and can't speak for itself . That is perhaps why advocates of empathy such as Krzanaric (2014) argue it needs to be practiced. I find it is especially difficult to have empathy for someone when there is no starting point or commonality. For instance, I found it easier to demonstrate great empathy and compassion towards participants who shared in similar struggles than towards those going through difficulties I had not endured before. Moreover, I came to understand and extend empathy towards my participants' omission of the word anxiety throughout the program because I know personally the difficulty of identifying or sharing that identifier with a group of strangers. I also learned that empathy as an emotion towards others, ourselves, and works of art is not necessarily readily identifiable in a museum program or even (fe)mail data. Rather, empathy unfolded in this program as a series of brief moments or, in the words of Amanda Berry (2007), as tensions intertwined among teaching, discussion, and writing between myself and participants.

The way participants projected themselves into the work of art and trusted me with their anxieties was at times ambivalent and contradictory. I found empathy in the most unlikely and

unexpected places. It was hidden in the small, mundane conversational moments or short phrases within the postcard correspondence, but most unexpectedly it was present in the way I interacted with and made space for my participants' stories and interpretations. I came to realize not only that (fe)mail is a tool for empathy in the museum, but that teaching is also a highly empathetic practice. That was probably the most rewarding discovery of all.

What I Learned: Reflecting on my Teaching Practice

The knowledge of teaching or "teaching about teaching" has not received much attention in museum education compared to science, mathematics, or history (Berry, 2007; Korthagen, 2001). In the section above I addressed how some of my "event-structured" (Childs, 2004, p. 56). knowledge appeared in my own teaching of the program in the form of tensions. In Part I of this project, I have argued for (fe)mail as a method of self-reflection that goes beyond a mere narrative writing exercise, but one that is creative and arts-based in nature. In her article on self-reflection and learning, educator Katherine Childs (2004) argues that there is a creative impulse in all people, which educators can use to enrich our own lives as well as the lives of others (p. 55). Childs suggests that if we become more in tune with ourselves as educators by practicing "artistic" self-reflections or representations, then we can become more aware and accepting of people and practitioners. Thus, we will be able to teach more affectively and compassionately. For narrative researchers such as Laurel Richardson (2005), such reflexivity in research is an invitation to know and uncover new forms of knowledge. Following Childs, in order to uncover forms of knowledge afforded by my research, I here reflect on what the program and my experience mean to my own teaching practice and art museum pedagogy at large.

I came to understand this kind of practical knowledge and make sense of it in the framework of Berry's (2007) tensions only after the program had taken place. Through self-

reflection, I was able to consider not only the data I had collected but my own teaching practice as an event. The knowledge I gained from the process of teaching the (fe)mail virtual program arose in the form of tensions between action and intent, safety and challenge, and the planning of a predetermined curriculum while being responsive to new learning opportunities that arise within the context of practice (Berry, 2007, p. 120). For the program, this meant modifying the structure of description and interpretation I had developed based on Pitman's (2020) framework of observation. By the time my planned questions had arrived at an interpretation of the figure's feelings, participants had already made sense of the topic by telling their own stories. For example, Asami chimed in with an interpretation of the black shape in front as a scan of a brain, and the books beside the figure as the pile of medical research. Kaila followed this thread and interpreted the globe, the posture of the figure, and the pile of books to signify studying or missing out on traveling because of the work laid out before her. In listening to these stories, I felt both excited at the different interpretations and uncertain about whether to proceed with anonymous stories in the chat. The more I followed my plan for the program, the more I found my questions to feel repetitive.

As I reflected on this part of the program, then, I wondered whether I prepared or planned too much. I framed my consideration of this question through *phronesis*, the development of ethical judgement in narrative research. Specifically, engaging in phronesis allowed me to explore ambiguities and uncertainties in my research and place myself under the same critical lens I used to examine participants' contributions (Kim, 2016, p. 105). Phronesis became the foundation of critical reflection on my teaching and role as researcher. This practice of self-reflection not only lends itself well to making sense of teacher knowledge, but it is also rooted in the practice of self-narrative (Childs, 2004). Kim (2016) suggests that engaging in narrative

research such as writing autoethnography is an act of self-representation. The goal is not to indulge oneself by shining the "spotlight" (p. 124) on one's life, but to problematize social and cultural norms and practices in light of one's own personal experiences. Ethnographers Ellis and Bochner (2012) argue that the autoethnographer goes beyond reflection and makes themself a subject for critical analysis. The autoethnographer then engages in an analysis of personal experiences to interrogate why their story is legitimate as a research subject. It is through such reflection that I problematize and critically analyze the practice of my teaching throughout the museum program and endeavor to show its relevance to the practice of art teacher knowledge and museum education practice.

The implications of my research within this framework are two-fold. First, they represent a transformative learning experience revealed through self-reflection. Secondly, my research offers an example of teacher education practice that does not necessarily ask whether the knowledge I acquired is right or wrong, but rather, affirms its possible usefulness to inform other museum educators about ways of considering what they do, how they practice, and why (Loughran, 2010 pp. 224-225). I have made sense of this learning by writing my own (fe)mail back to participants as an autoethnographic text that makes sense of my teacher experience and critically analyzes my program. I believe the significance of the project extends beyond the method of (fe)mail or whether this program works for a group of women with anxiety, but remains relevant for experiences of teaching across the field of art education. I have attempted to make sense of this knowledge by reflecting on the program in the form of a letter I addressed to participants.

A (fe)mail Letter to My Participants

Dear friends,

I first and foremost want to thank you for your vulnerable participation in this study. I need you to know that our discussion reminded me of why I love museum education and why I am pursuing this dissertation. I hope that this virtual time spent on Zoom with a work of art was just as fruitful and beneficial for you as it was for me. I hope that you felt listened to and validated in your interpretations of the figure. Your (fe)mail was beautiful, evocative and encouraging. Weeks after the program took place, I pushed myself hard to finish my analysis of it. As a result, my body retaliated with a week-long headache forcing to step away from the research and rest. Reading over your (fe)mail postcards was a much-needed encouragement for me during that period of rest and retreat.

I am writing you this letter because in keeping with the spirit of (fe)mail, which you all exemplified in your postcard writing, I would like to also be vulnerable with you. You all made me feel at ease during the program. If you did not already know this, I was very nervous and acutely aware of my script, my guiding of our discussion, and keeping within the allotted time we had together. I must admit that all of this spinning around in my brain caused me to fumble a little through our discussion. I apologize if I spoke too much and gave my own reading of the piece too freely or even misrepresented your reading in my paraphrasing. The truth is, the program did not go exactly as I had intended or had pre-meditated beforehand. You see, as is the case with most educators, I had an agenda or goal in mind. I proposed for my committee a museum program for women who knew of the experience of anxiety first-hand. My program would be one that focused on writing about and talking about the experience of anxiety in relation to a work of art that looked a bit unsettling or 'anxious.' You all picked up on this feeling in your interpretations. I was thrilled. You described the figure as feeling overwhelmed and you projected and related this emotion back to your own personal experiences. What a

vulnerable thing to do – to see yourself reflected in a work of art. Some of your interpretations I knew about from our personal conversations. Receiving your postcards one by one and reading your (fe)mail moved me. I felt honored to read and listen to your experiences. As a friend, the letters were a gift I will treasure far beyond this dissertation project.

As a researcher, I was relieved to have made it through a monumental aspect of my dissertation project, and yet puzzled as I realized in the transcript of the program that no one mentioned the word anxiety when talking about themselves or about the figure. Some of you described the emotion the figure was feeling so vividly, but we never opened up the anxiety or mental illness discussion in relation to the figure. Dear friend, I must admit that at first this made me a bit perplexed. It has since sent me down a spiral of possibilities and ruminating as to why this was; why you did not mention the word during the program or in your (fe)mail. I realize this is not the most important thing, and I apologize if I imposed my educator agenda on you that you were not ready for or even aware of. I am also sorry if I imposed a word on you and tried to have a conversation about a painting that was supposed to truly have been open-ended.

As an educator, I struggled many times throughout this program – and not just with the technology aspect. Your questions and observations made me hopeful to see how much you cared to make sense of the work through your own lens and world view. Other times I doubted my abilities and wondered if I should answer your questions with firm answers. You see, I knew the artist's concept and intention for the painting, and I struggled with whether or not to reveal this to you during our discussion. It was a tension I navigated throughout the program and even afterwards as I wondered if giving up the true meaning of the work would constrict your own interpretations. In hindsight I am happy I never told you. I think you wouldn't have connected with the figure through such personal and meaningful experiences if you knew the museum label

description of the piece was nothing like what you had in mind.

In reflecting on our experience together in the form of this letter, my heart feels full. Not many people can say that their friends formed the research for their doctorate in a social science field. For this I shall be ever grateful to each of you. As a researcher and art museum educator, I want you to know that this program was a learning curve for me and this dissertation and even this letter is how I am making sense of my teaching. I think that whether you said the word anxiety or not is not worth being hung up on. Whether your (fe)mail projected into the work or did not meet my expectations is utterly irrelevant. Friends, you have helped remind me that this program and this (fe)mail lesson was not for me, it was for you. I have come to realize you made this into a program that was safe and meaningful to you and that is the most important lesson I learned. I hope that in this letter I met you where you are. Please know that I am honored to have had the privilege of spending time with you, of reading your postcards and of creating a program for art museum education together.

Anxiously yours, B

Reflection and Transformative Learning through (fe)mail

In "Poets in a Doorway: Using the Arts for Self-reflection and Learning," Katherine Childs (2004) positions transformative learning as the framework to analyze her experiences of teaching, particularly modalities of self-reflection as an adult learner. She defines transformative or adult learning as "a confrontation with a disorienting dilemma" (p. 55) involving recognition of alternative perspectives, which may be accomplished through reflection, planning, and the enactment of change. For Childs, transformative learning can take place incrementally as a slow and reasoned process, where new beliefs, feelings, and actions are integrated into previous knowledge and value frameworks. As I sought to understand my transformative learning in the

study, I was also reminded of Gloria Anzaldua's feminist epistemology that attempts to discover the self through the act of writing (Anzaldua, 1987). Transformative learning took place in my reflection on the program, which I transcribed into a letter addressed to my participants and friends. It did not happen abruptly in the middle of teaching, but as a slow and reasoned process through which I reflected not on what was missing from the program or what participants failed to give me, but on the moments in which I imposed and navigated tensions of teaching.

In this letter, I opened up about my expectations of the program and reframed them into alternative modes of comprehending my teaching practice. I recast the purpose of the program as serving participants instead of myself. It is a letter or reflection, that is, a reminder that the process of learning did not only happen for my friends who took on the role of students and participants, but also for myself as the educator. I experienced transformative learning by reflecting on the ways my participants challenged my thinking, my perspective, and interpretations of Barcelo's work I tried to impose on participants throughout the program. For example, the tension created by the omission of the word anxiety throughout the program led me to develop several hypotheses about why this could have occurred. I assumed that participants felt uncomfortable with the word in the same way my undergraduate students felt uncomfortable naming the race of the children in the Marshall painting.

Lastly, this letter serves as a (fe)mail response to the postcards I received throughout the program. It is not an interpretation of Barcelo's painting, but a vulnerable opening up to participants and a thank you to each of them for giving me the gift of teaching the program. In creating my own (fe)mail to each participant, I also came both to understand and to challenge what (fe)mail could be in this research study. For example, in the letter, (fe)mail has revealed itself to be more than simply vulnerable, but also reflective of my experience of teaching six of

my close friends. My reflection makes sense of my experiences and teaching knowledge, discovering who I am as a museum educator. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) characterize teachers' knowledge as personal and practical—built from personal and professional experience. Childs (2004) distinguishes this kind of knowledge from academic knowledge by stating that teacher knowledge is often "event structured" (p. 55). This means that educators and teachers know what they know because it is tied to specific events they experience in classrooms or museums (p. 56). In the (fe)mail letter above, I attempt to make sense of this practical event-structured knowledge by recounting differing aspects of the program. My reflection of the program enabled a kind of thinking that asks how things are going, why they are going the way they are, and how can things be improved for next time (Barton, 2019 p. 50). Ryan and Bourke's (2013) work on being reflexive as professionals argues for deep reflection for academics and educators, which can lead to critical and transformative practice through which we become empowered to initiate change. My (fe)mail letter represents this kind of reflexive thinking as I shift among the roles of friend, educator, and researcher. My thinking transforms from presenting my lesson goals to empathizing with the learner and coming to understand that what they received from the program was more important than my research. My (fe)mail embodies the tension of my educator agenda, my goals for the program, and the learning of the participants. I navigate this tension through my vulnerable acknowledgment of my teacher agenda and my efforts to make imaginative leaps into the shoes of the women I taught.

The tensions in the program illustrate not only important truths about the messiness of empathy, but also the complexities surrounding the knowledge of art museum education practice. Tensions capture the essence of simultaneously meeting competing goals in the museum teaching setting. Loughran (2010) argues that in following Berry's (2007) framing of the

subsequent knowledge as tensions also helps educators see the underlying reasons for particular teacher education practices. While this knowledge is important and offers a conceptualization that other educators might consider examining in the research of their own situations, it is the knowledge that comes from researching teacher knowledge and practice that leads to the production of new knowledge of teacher education practices (p. 224). Loughran (2010) argues that production of new knowledge helps frame teacher understanding of practice as problematic and dynamic. This does not mean that my program and the knowledge I gained from it about my own teaching practice is important because it delineates a right or wrong way to teach a program about anxiety. Rather the knowledge which I frame in the method of my (fe)mail to participants informs me and even other museum educators about ways of considering what we do while teaching a one-time visit program, how we do it and why (p. 225).

The method of (fe)mail is important not only for how we come to understand works of art in light of our own experiences in the world, but (fe)mail is also a tool for self-reflection on teacher knowledge. It is a way for us to step back from the learning goals and outcomes we have set up for ourselves and to see ourselves as co-participants or co-learners in our teaching. Thus, knowledge production emerging in my (fe)mail reflection can be meaningful to other educators.

Anxiety: The Missing Word Throughout

Throughout the program, there was a tension between the feeling of anxiety and the absence of articulating it. It was present as a feeling we described in our interpretations, and I experienced it teaching, but as a word it was not named, and it was absent from the (fe)mail created in the program. In the following section, I make sense of this tension by reflecting on the word *anxiety* and the stigma associated with it as a potential reason for its omission throughout the program and the (fe)mail postcards.

Following the program, Kaila and I had a candid conversation about her view of it. She praised how honest and authentic the exercise in observation and interpretation was and affirmed that she saw the activities as an avenue for understanding others' situations and experiences based on what they interpret in a painting. She remarked how excited she was to try this activity out with friends and even her partner and see what he might project onto the painting from his own lived experience. It was encouraging to hear Kaila's feedback. For her, art observation and interpretation addressing emotions and feelings was a way to better empathize with others. She seemed less interested in what I could potentially reveal to her about the artist's true intentions for the painting and more focused on what other participants had to say. Kaila's attitude towards art exemplified Kai-Kee and Burnham's (2011) belief that "each work in a museum lives surrounded by an incredible halo of multiple interpretations, including those that visitors construct" (p. 94). When I asked Kaila why she thought anxiety had not come up in the program, she replied that she simply did not see anxiety in the painting. She interpreted the experience of the figure to be one that was beyond the state of simple anxiousness. When I asked her if perhaps being in a group setting made her or others feel uneasy about sharing or associating with the word, she agreed that may have been possible with other participants, but she had not given much thought to that feeling herself. Through our conversation, I came to wonder if the experience of anxiety was one that only I attributed to the figure. Perhaps participants did not see anxiety in the painting, and the word *overwhelm* was easier to name and associate with.

In the following section, I consider the differences between *overwhelm* and *anxiety* to demonstrate that each word carries multiple definitions and distinct baggage, some easier to carry than others. The word *overwhelm* is commonly used and relatable across many groups of people and walks of life. One can feel overwhelmed for a myriad of reasons, from too much

homework, paying bills, and work-related tasks, to being overwhelmed with someone's generosity, or even living through a pandemic. To be overwhelmed is to feel overpowered, defeated, too strong or too emotional. I have found myself feeling overwhelmed with the amount of literature before me in this section of the dissertation writing. Here, I have just expressed a sentiment that has a negative connotation. It communicates the feeling of being burdened or drowning in a pile of books and articles. I can also say that I've felt overwhelmed at how loved I am by the people closest to me and the kindness and support they've shown me throughout this writing process. This sentiment does not communicate the same negative feeling, but a sense of overpowering that renders strong emotions of joy.

When I searched for the definition of anxiety in Oxford's online dictionary, I came across three different definitions. The first two were characterized by "a feeling of worry or fear typically accompanied by unease about an event or something with an uncertain outcome." The third definition, listed under the word psychiatry, was "nervous disorder characterized by a state of excessive uneasiness, apprehension, typically with compulsive behaviours and panic attacks." In the third definition we see anxiety as not just a feeling of eagerness, worry or apprehension, but its listing as a disorder. A basic Google search not only provided me with various definitions, but an overview of anxiety as a mental health condition, along with treatment options listed under a separate tab.

Upon searching for these two words, it became clear to me that while the word *anxiety* is often used colloquially to describe worry or nervousness, it carries a certain stigma, in the same manner as depression. There is a difference between saying "I am feeling overwhelmed" and "I have anxiety." One communicates a state of temporary distress or too much of something, the other implies a condition. If the word anxiety were mentioned or associated with anyone during

the program, we would have had no choice but to be open to an uncomfortable discussion of mental illness. In taking a deeper look at the meaning and connotations of these two words, I have uncovered their complex meanings, stigmas, and structures. This is not to blame or shame my participants, but to better understand the layered complexity of an experience of anxiety that can be attached to stories of mental illness. I elaborate below by looking at some mistakes and presumptions I made about the program that are often common to educators who develop specific curricula with a learning or end goal in mind.

As a narrative researcher, I have committed to examining my own actions and teaching practice with the same scrutiny applied to my participants. In this vein of thinking about research, we must not only be vulnerable with our participants, but critical of ourselves (Kim, 2016). This is not only important for the field of art education and art teacher knowledge. It is also rooted in friendship as method. Tillmann-Healy (2003) argues that researchers must engage in acute and sustained reflexivity and self-scrutiny. This shift in my thinking and analysis of the program can be illustrated in the pivot from studying participants to studying myself as the researcher and educator. (p. 735).

In previous sections, I pointed out the several ways I struggled between achieving my teaching goals and demonstrating moments of empathy for my participants. Expanding my critique of how my educator agenda imposed my expectations of the program, I also explored first how I created the program with the intention of talking about anxiety, the figures and the participants. Explicit in my proposal and design of the program, the theme was nevertheless deeply subtle in the formulation of questions to participants. In my IRB application and my pedagogical rationale for the program, I stressed continuously the importance of the painting as a catalyst for our conversation about anxiety following our interpretation of the work. During the

program, however, I did not ask participants to name anxiety, neither did I label the figure as being anxious during our discussion. As I reflect on this program now, it is clear to me that I wanted participants to talk about anxiety, and I expected this topic to arise naturally, but I wanted them to be the ones to bring it up. It was as if I expected participants to read my mind as the educator and provide answers to questions I had predetermined.

What Participants Thought: The Survey

The results of the program and what it meant to the participants are important to me as an educator and to the field of museum education as whole. I originally planned to give each participant a paper survey which they could drop off in a sealed box at the end of the program.

Because the program happened virtually, however, I elected to create a virtual version of the survey that asked participants four questions about their experience. My research program asked for no written responses or interviews from the participants. All the data about the program I collected and analyzed was either mailed to me or recorded on Zoom. The survey sent to participants at the end of the program offered an opportunity to report their feedback about the program and their experience of anxiety and learning through a virtual platform. This feedback was useful for several reasons: 1) it allowed me as researcher and educator to measure the quality of the program from the perspective of the participants, 2) it allowed me to gauge whether the program and the activities made participants feel less anxious, and 3) it allowed me to consider whether the format of the online museum program was appropriate for our discussion and for the (fe)mail postcard making workshop.

Once participants completed the program and I had received most of the (fe)mail postcards, I sent each woman a link to a Qualtrics survey with the following four questions about the program: 1. Did the lesson and activities make you feel more or less anxious? 2. Did being in

a group make you feel more or less anxious? 3. Did being on Zoom make you feel more or less anxious? 4. Name one aspect of the program that you enjoyed and one that you did not enjoy. I formulated these questions and provided space for participants to elaborate and explain their responses. In the following paragraphs, I present some of the anonymous responses to the survey questions while offering my own analysis of the implications. Particularly, I examine how my analysis might inform the future of this program should it be held virtually again. Due to the surveys being completed anonymously and voluntarily, I found some participants elaborated greatly in their responses, while others chose not to answer at all. In order to present the responses and my analysis with clarity, I have separated each question and its respective responses, followed by my own analysis of future implications for the program.

Q: Did the lesson and activities make you feel more or less anxious?

> Participant 1: I felt less anxious completing the activities. I was interested to hear everyone's perspectives and how they were all valid and validated by Bia. It was a very supportive environment.
>
> Participant 2: At first I felt some anxiety, just because i didn't already know the majority of the participants, but I got over that pretty soon. I really liked that since we all knew Bea, when introducing ourselves to the group, she would also give little insights about how she knew each of us and that made me feel better. I guess knowing these little things and realizing that we all have something (Bea) in common, was great.
>
> Participant 3: At the beginning of the lesson, I felt more anxious because I am a shy person who struggles speaking up in groups especially with people I do not know. When creating the activity, at first I felt more anxious because I wasn't certain that I was doing the activity "correctly," but once everyone started chatting and the environment became less quiet, I felt much less anxious and enjoyed the relaxing art making.

I proposed this program to my dissertation committee with a few friends in mind for participants. This list began very small in my mind and shifted as the program changed to an online format. Still, I wondered if the program and the activities I had so thoughtfully considered would make the women gathered together (who did not know one another) more or less anxious.

This question was and continues to be important to me, even now. How my participants actually felt about the program, and whether they were anxious throughout, ultimately matters to me as an educator and for the future of the program. If participants had reported an unmatched level of anxiety due to conversations or even the queries I made of them, I would certainly question the validity of the program and its purpose for empathy, vulnerability, and connection.

I began the program with small, mundane, caring acts. According to Morse and Munro (2015), such efforts by educators help create a safe space for museum visitors who initially feel uncomfortable. Similarly, in the field of narrative inquiry such spaces are known as conversational moments, when the camera or recorder is forgotten (Kim, 2016, p. 176). I created these moments by turning off the recording and inserting fun facts between me and each participant after they finished their introduction. Participants one and two reported that these small insights I provided and the way in which all participants knew me in some way made them feel at ease about being in a group of people they did not know. Sharing a connection through me made participants feel relaxed and supported in the environment. Nevertheless, all participants did report a natural level of anxiety when the program began. I was not surprised by this revelation in the survey because I imagine I would have felt similarly, had I been in my participants' place. Participant 3 reported feeling anxious while doing the activity because they were unsure if they were doing it correctly. I intentionally turned the recorder off during the (fe)mail workshop portion of the program to allow everyone to feel at ease sharing ideas and thinking about what they wanted to write to the figure without feeling observed or recorded. I gave everyone a few moments of silence while creating their (fe)mail and then began introducing light conversation, which Atleigh graciously accompanied. Participant 3 reported that she felt much less anxious once chatting began.

I realized that being in a virtual museum program with other people you might not know can be a bit scary or even anxiety inducing. I felt a slight anxiousness throughout the program, which quickly dissipated with conversational moments among participants and myself. In a program like this, participants are required to display a tremendous amount of trust in the educator, and vice versa. I created moments of comfort and support by interjecting, validating perspectives through paraphrasing, and sharing little moments or nuggets of insight about each woman present. These small acts of care made participants feel at ease and that they could trust me and even the other people they did not know because of their connection to me as a friend and educator. Seeing all three participant responses gave me assurance as an educator that these small, conversational moments, which were not accounted for in the pedagogical framework, served a much-needed purpose.

Q: Did being in a group of people make you feel more or less anxious?

> Participant 1: I think that I felt less anxious than usual since I was in the comfort of my own home, but I would have been more anxious if I was at the museum with everyone. But that's the great thing about the experience, because I really did enjoy connecting to one another and having my feelings affirmed by them made me feel more comfortable being with them and I would definitely want to meet with them again in the future because of it.
>
> Participant 2: Usually being with a new group of people, I would have social anxiety. However, knowing that everyone knew Bia and I think of her so highly, that helped me to feel less anxious in a new group.
>
> Participant 3: More anxious at the beginning. I struggle speaking up with strangers but it would have been much more intimidating if it had been a one-on-one experience. I was also anxious because even though I recognize there is no right or wrong answer, I still didn't want to say something "wrong". My interpretation of the art work was very different so it took me a little bit to participate because of that. I think the only way I would not have felt anxious would have been if I had been in a group of friends that I had known for a couple of years. But, in general, I feel anxious all the time—with people and without.
>
> In this second question, I wanted participants to elaborate on their anxiety and its

connection to being in a group of people they did not know. They began addressing this topic in the first question, but it is interesting to see how they felt about the questions asked and what aspects of the program made them feel less anxious. For example, Participant 1 reported that they felt less anxious because they were in "the comfort of their own home." I interpreted this to mean that it was not such much the group that made Participant 1 anxious, but perhaps the unknown space they were entering. They reported feeling less anxious on Zoom because although they were entering a different activity or discussion, they were surrounded by the familiar. After having taught an online class from home during the pandemic, I can relate to the feeling of comfort and familiarity Participant 1 shares about being in their home versus the museum. I thought it significant that Participant 1 reported an interest in getting to know and connecting with others on the call, while Participant 3 reported a natural level of "feeling anxious all the time." The fact that they did not know each participant individually made sharing their viewpoints more difficult. Participant 3 also reported that the only way they would have felt no anxiety would have been with people they had known for years. I think this would be true for myself as well. Participant 2 reported that they experience social anxiety in a new group of people, but because they understood everyone participating knew me, this connection helped her feel less anxious.

Q: Did being on Zoom make you feel more or less anxious?

> Participant 1: Probably less anxious because I was at home, but I had more anxiety about my technology issues and trying to stay connected throughout the program.
>
> Participant 2: Being on Zoom made me feel less anxious, because I still felt like I had my space and I could take care of my needs if needed. It also required less time investment, since I didn't have to drive, that was one less new thing to be anxious about: driving what can feel like far away to a new place.
>
> Participant 3: I liked being on Zoom for multiple reasons: 1. I like to see people unmute themselves whenever they were about to talk. The mute button brings a sort of comfort to

> me—it makes me feel like I have a valid excuse for being quiet. 2. I did not have to drive to a separate location. Being in my workspace, gave me a sense of comfort. Not to mention that meeting in person during the pandemic can still be unsettling. 3. We were able to really see the work of art very closely where in person this would not have been a possibility.

I created the question about whether or not anxiety was present on Zoom after deciding that the program would be better suited to a virtual format. I hoped to gauge whether online programming gave participants relief and comfort or more anxiety. My experience with Zoom as an educator over the past year has been mixed. On one hand, I am able teach from the comfort of my own home and not have to drive anywhere, while also being anxious that technology will fail, students will use the chat function inappropriately, or that I will make a technical mistake. In the beginning of the program, I articulated this anxiety in the way I apologized for having to shift between screens and worried about whether Kaila had successfully received the link invite. My participants made me feel at ease navigating these online hurdles by nodding and affirming me throughout the program.

Participant 1 reported a similar kind of anxiety, saying that being at home made them feel less anxious, while the technology part of Zoom did make them anxious about staying connected throughout the program. Participant 2 reported on the comfort of staying at home and not having to drive to a new place. This reminded me of how intimidating the museum space can be. The heavy museum doors, the gallery attendants, and the security guards that stand amidst the art works in a museum are constant reminders to visitors that they are being watched. Carol Duncan (1995) describes the museum as a space of elitism governed by national narratives portrayed in the stories of paintings (pp. 2-4). The traditional art museum is also a space of privilege, where the majority of white individuals can see themselves reflected in the works of art and stories being told around them. The space functions much like an apparatus that attempts to model,

control, and orient the gestures and behaviors or discourses of living beings (Agamben, 2009, p. 14). Nevertheless, opening the museum to alternate uses can, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, "profane" the apparatus (Agamben, 2007). Being in the museum virtually, we were able to scroll closely, looking at every pixelated detail of a painting—something we are unable to do in person. Participant 3 reported several reasons for preferring the Zoom format. Aside from the issue of gathering socially in a pandemic, she noted that on Zoom, we could look closely at the painting in a way not possible at the museum. If we had been at the Meadows, I could have invited participants to step closer to see the details from a safe distance, but there is a looming anxiety about getting too close to a painting and provoking an attendant's or security guard's unwanted attention. The possibility of being called out for standing too close, the policing of our bodies inside the apparatus of the museum space, was instantly eliminated on Zoom.

Participant 3 also reported that the mute button available on Zoom was a source of comfort for her. As someone who has anxiety about speaking up and participating in group settings, I connected with Participant 3's feelings about the mute button serving as a legitimate reason not to talk. Perhaps there is something additionally comforting about being able to stay in our spaces of familiarity and engage with others online. It is a way we might feel guarded and safe from the unknowns of a physical space we are unfamiliar with. The mute button on Zoom is also interesting in terms of the museum apparatus that seeks to control the way we communicate in the space. For example, in a museum, we are often compelled to speak in a soft whisper so as not to disturb others reading and silently enjoying an exhibition. This conscientious policing or adjusting of our voices is also eliminated in a Zoom format. I found this to be true in the way participants freely participated in our discussion or gave their insights about the work of art. I wondered, if we had been physically present in a museum, would the same level of participation

in a one-time visit program have been possible? After reading the following responses from participants, I was convinced that the virtual museum program removes a great deal of the anxiety and uncertainties that come with the physical museum space. This is particularly helpful for one-time visit programs that bring together groups of people who might feel nervous about sitting with a group of strangers for the first time.

Q: Name one aspect of the program that you enjoyed and one that you did not enjoy.

> Participant 1: I liked seeing everyone's end product or their own designs on the postcards... I did not like having to end before I could finish, but I'm glad I can still send the final card to Bea.
>
> Participant 2: I enjoyed everyone getting to share their views and having all of them be validated by Bia. It wasn't major, but I am always a little anxious in new groups so I didn't enjoy that part as much.
>
> Participant 3: I really enjoyed the art making! It was calming to create art. It was also nice that no one could see what each of us were doing, so it wasn't intimidating or a competition. There wasn't anything I did not enjoy

In this last question, I wondered if there were aspects of the program participants particularly enjoyed and others that perhaps I could remove from the program in the future. This question helped to illuminate the strengths of the program and inform its future. Participant 3 reported liking the Zoom platform and not being intimidated by seeing what everyone else was working on. Participant 2 enjoyed being in a space where she could hear different perspectives and feel validated by the educator, while Participant 1 enjoyed seeing what others were working on during the postcard making workshop. A common enjoyment felt among all three participants in the program was the connection of seeing and learning from others. The art making component of the project provided a relaxing time during which participants did not feel pressured to speak, but could enjoy creating their postcards while listening to light background conversation on Zoom. The mute button and the computer screen provided a kind of safe

distance where participants did not feel forced to engage in conversation or share personal feelings if they did not wish to.

Regarding participant dislikes, Participant 1 reported that they did not enjoy that the program was incidentally cut short. Something like this would not have happened if the program had taken place in person because the participants would have been present at the museum for about two and half hours. Unfortunately, the short program time is one of the drawbacks of virtual programming. I decided as an educator and student who went through Zoom classes during the pandemic that more than one hour and thirty minutes on Zoom was too much to ask of my participants. I opted for a shorter program time, so some participants did not have enough time to complete their postcards onscreen with others. In addition, Participant 2 reported that they disliked feeling a little anxious throughout the program. This was not a major deterring factor for taking part in the program, but I can empathize with Participant 3's sentiment of anxiety. I too feel some anxiety when I am in a new group setting for the first time, and so I can imagine anyone with some level of social anxiety would feel mild discomfort in a new group for the first time. After reading through the survey responses, I have to wonder if I made a mistake by removing the anonymous interpretation from the program. Because participants reported some level of anxiety sharing personal thoughts in a group of people they did not know, I think if they had had an opportunity to share anonymously, they may have felt more at ease.

I was pleasantly surprised that the most common enjoyment of the program was the art making and engaging in conversation with others doing the same activity. I believe the theme of connection that arose from this question is significant for the future of the (fe)mail program. It revealed that although each individual was physically distant from other participants and the museum space, meaningful conversations and sharing of viewpoints took place in a safe and

supportive environment. It also revealed to me that (fe)mail can be used as a tool for empathy and art interpretation among a group of people who are not friends. This aspect could never have revealed itself in Part I of the study with Atleigh, but it is crucial for one-time visit programs, which often take place with participants who might be familiar with the educator or museum space, but unfamiliar with other visitors.

Significance of the Program for the Future of Art Museum Education

The one-time visit program I originally titled *Anxiously Yours* brought together six women by way of art interpretation and postcard writing in a virtual museum program format. Although the program took place in the virtual world of Zoom, participants reported feelings of mild anxiety commonly found in a new group, an interest in the art activity, and a desire to learn from others' perspectives. My study revealed that (fe)mail was not only a tool for interpretation and empathy inside the museum, but also functioned as a tool for self-reflection and developing teacher knowledge. My findings are similar to my analysis of (fe)mail in Part I with Atleigh, (fe)mail as a mode of self-care and an act of art education embodying the curiosity inherent in learning about and interpreting art. In the (fe)mail I wrote to participants, I uncovered important questions about my own pedagogy that were reflective of the *whys* and *hows* by which I navigated my lesson. The knowledge I obtained about my empathetic teaching, various moments of tension throughout the lesson, and myself as co-learner opened up possibilities and further knowledge for the field of education and museum pedagogy.

Two questions remain. First, why does (fe)mail matter for museums? In the paragraphs that follow I frame my virtual program and the (fe)mail activity in relation to contemporary museum education programming for mental illness and empathy. I situate my autoethnographic postcard writing method in the field by examining what other educators have done with writing,

art making, and reflection inside the museum and gallery space. Specifically, I explore response art and expressive, virtual art making, while also addressing the second remaining question: Who is (fe)mail for?

When I created my museum program for six women participants who had previous experience with anxiety, I turned to the literature of museum programming, particularly the empathy movement in art museums. The most significant was designed by art therapist Jordan S. Potash (2016), featuring response art as a way for participants to connect emotionally to works of art. Potash's (2016) response art is similar to the work I endeavored to accomplish with (fe)mail postcards. Although distinct from art therapy, (fe)mail is a way to connect people of similar shared experiences around a work of art, and potentially with the work itself. Similar to Potash's (2016) re-appropriated response art, I brought postcard writing into the museum as a way to engage with works of art and others empathetically. This kind of exercise produced not only empathy for the self but a form of encouragement difficult to access in the midst of an anxious thought spiral, or even in the midst of a pandemic.

In Parts I and II of the (fe)mail study, I encountered a defining tenet of (fe)mail, hopefulness. This tenant was present in how Atleigh and I communicated and dreamt of our friendship not only in the past, but projected into the future. This characteristic of hopefulness was also present in the (fe)mail we created in Part II. Participants encouraged the figure with drawings of peaceful looking meadows, compassion and personal connection to the figure's perceived struggle. In each (fe)mail created, there was a reminder of a better day and hope for the future. This kind of encouragement is timely for us as we navigate a global pandemic that is run with tragedy and uncertainty. In this study, I saw how (fe)mail brought narrative and art together as a tool for encouragement and reflection. As a student and teacher, I would say the

pandemic has given me an appreciation for teachers and especially for art. I have found several points of connection in my virtual classroom through art making – even with students who are not fine arts majors or artists. In a previous class I taught to future art educators, I discovered that my students engaged in self-reflection and even identity forming expression in their aesthetic assignments. I have pointed out in this dissertation, how art is a necessary tool for self-expression and even professional reflection and self-care in academia, but I would argue expressive art making in virtual spaces is all the more relevant as museum educators navigate our way through the COVID-19 pandemic. In a recent article published in the journal of National Art Education Association, educator Peaches Hash (2020) re-designs her 1st year composition courses by giving her students an outlet to express what they are feeling in art making that is not tied to university learning outcomes. According to Hash, (2020) personal expression is an effective method for educators to support themselves, and for students to support each other (p. 8). This is especially true in times of disrupted learning routines, without opportunities for expression, Hash argues, "Learning will not occur" (p. 8).

While my virtual museum program did not establish stringent learning outcomes, as sometimes is the case in a formal art classroom, the (fe)mail participants produced allowed them to spend time away from their worries, jobs, classes, and lives to reflect and create a work of art based on our time together and their own reflections to the figure in Barcelo's work. In the survey responses, three participants reported that this art making portion of the program was the most enjoyable. The postcards created varied in how each woman interpreted what to create and how to express their emotions on the front of their postcards. For example, Atleigh, Tressa and Virginia created drawings of flowers, meadows and yoga poses – completely un-related to the original painting, but relevant to their modes of self-care and encouragement to the figure.

Asami, Adriana and Kaila used different media to represent artistic connections between the original work and their postcards. Similarly, to Peaches Hash' students in the virtual classroom, participants in my study learned a little bit about themselves and one another through the (fe)mail they created. In this instance, (fe)mail functioned, not only as a tool for encouragement, but one of self-expression as well. The tools used for response art, or self-expression I have touched on above are not new to the field of art education or museum education programming. In the midst of the pandemic, as we continue to navigate the age of anxiety and mental illness on university campuses, I believe response art, recollage, creative self-expression and (fe)mail can be practical and creative tools educators might consider using in the museum or in the classroom.

Universities must pay greater attention to students' mental health on campus, and the pandemic only further exacerbated the problem, leaving counseling services on campus overwhelmed and in need of support (Woolston, 2021, p. 171). Students on campuses across the country are in need of support for mental health that extends beyond traditional counseling services. The museums on campus must not remain silent about issues that affect the student body. The campus museum must embody empathy and connect with its communities in ways keenly aware of their values, needs, and challenges (Jennings et al., 2019, p. 511). The virtual museum program explored in this study offers one way of exploring some of these issues and beginning this work of empathy and community resonance in campus museums.

The program utilized common methods of museum teaching and education pedagogy such as creative writing, postcard making, dialogue and slow looking. Within Pitman's framework, I developed a way point for a conversation that involved taking imaginative leaps in order to encourage a work of art and oneself. This program did not require multiple art therapists

to be present, nor did it require rigorous educational training or additional funding. I argue that this program serves as an example or pilot for educators who have been curious about doing this kind of work in their galleries. Perhaps, they have asked whether students would show up or whether this kind of conversation would yield any positive result. From my experience conversing with participants, the results of my program, and chatting with other students, the answer is yes, empathy and encouragement for one another and oneself is possible—even through a virtual platform in the middle of a global pandemic. My hope for this dissertation project is that a brave museum educator would take the leap and find a place for (fe)mail in their museum programming. My hope is that students would be courageous to walk into those museum programs, to share their stories, to support one another, and to participate in creating change.

I conclude my findings by addressing who (fe)mail is for. I began this project with a term which my friend Atleigh and I created—a method of postcard writing rooted in a feminist ethic of care, loosely based on the vulnerable postcard writing Atleigh and I had kept up with one another over the years. I created (fe)mail as a tool of connection that expressed vulnerability, empathy, artistic inclination, and connection through community, founded in friendship. (fe)mail was meant to be a radical form of mail writing that embraced others even in the forming of the word itself. Throughout this study, I learned more about (fe)mail than I had originally described in the methodology section of this dissertation. In Part I, I learned that (fe)mail embodies the curiosity found in learning that is essential for art education programming. It served as a mode of self-care for me and a connection with my dear friend that was both grounding and hopeful in moments of anxiety and uncertainty. In Part II of the study, I learned that (fe)mail served as a tool for empathy, compassion, and encouragement to the self and one another. I also came to

understand (fe)mail as a tool for self-reflection that was identity-forming for myself as researcher and educator. Thus, after having employed (fe)mail in this study, I learned that it is not always connected to the experience of being of a woman, nor is it always connected to friendship. This has led to me consider (fe)mail as a tool of self-care and reflection for the researcher, a tool of encouragement and empathy for both the museum educator and the participant.

As I think back to the (fe)mail we completed in the program, I note that many postcards were addressed to the figure as a gender-neutral individual. For example, Tressa's postcard addressed the figure as "stranger," Atleigh addressed it to "whomever," and Kaila addressed her postcard "dear friend." No participant made any reference to the figure as a cis-gender woman, nor did any particular experience exclusive to this group or sexual orientation become apparent in the (fe)mail. Rather, I found each postcard to be representational of a human experience of anxiety, suffering, and need of encouragement that could be identified with across different gender identities and orientations. Because (fe)mail is intricately tied to care but not to an experience of womanhood, it can be used among groups of people who do not identify as feminine or as female. (fe)mail's inclusivity across a gender spectrum opens up this method for diverse uses among participants of different backgrounds inside the museum. Although (fe)mail is rooted in an ethic of care that seeks to do no harm, it is perfect for groups of people who perhaps do not get along because the structure of the method itself calls for vulnerability, mutual respect, and even empathy for the experience of the other, which might be vastly different from our own. When I began this study, I thought that the (fe)mail method could only be used among friends because of the bond Atleigh and I shared in Part I of my study. It was not until I completed and analyzed the data in Part II that I realized (fe)mail functioned as a tool for empathy and encouragement amidst a group of people who were not friends. Each woman

present in the virtual program was a close friend of mine. This connection to me as the educator provided a sense of ease and trust to some participants. However, the women gathered did not share a bond of friendship with one another. Thus, personal friendship is not required for a (fe)mail workshop. What, then, is the future of (fe)mail in the museum? The question opens up (fe)mail to a greater spectrum of use by educators and museum participants. If (fe)mail is not only to be used among friends, then can it be used among strangers or even enemies? If this method of postcard writing is structured in empathy, vulnerability and art interpretation, can it be used as a tool for beginning difficult conversations inside the museum? In the following section, I propose how the (fe)mail method can work as a tool for reconciliation inside the museum by examining its possible integration into existing programs, especially ones based on the empathetic museum model.

The Potential of (fe)mail in Social Justice Museum Education

My program did not yield the exact results I had hoped for, but it revealed something truly interesting and significant about (fe)mail as a tool for encouragement and for beginning difficult conversations surrounding emotions. It is difficult to say whether participants would have opened up more in person, or whether anxiety and mental illness would have come up more notably with more time together as a group. I can, however, argue for (fe)mail as the beginning of a conversation with the potential to continue outside the museum through the mail, which has tremendous ramifications for the future of museum education. In mental illness-specific programming in campus museums, as well as in social justice programming, (fe)mail can be a tool for empathy among a group of strangers. I am particularly interested in its possibilities for a group of strangers with opposing viewpoints. Could it provide a way point for racial reconciliation and tough conversations regarding civil responsibility in museums?

Over decades, museums have been challenged for their silence in the face of social issues. An instructive example of a museum that responded by creating a conversation important for racial justice in its community is the Levine Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina. In a Social Capital Benchmark Survey conducted in 2001, Charlotte ranked alarmingly low in the category of "trust among different racial groups." In an attempt to respond through museum programming to potentially make a difference, the Levine Museum president decided to pilot a new approach in which educators facilitated discussion with an exhibit as a catalyst for dialogue (p. 221). Staff and board members believed in promoting a museum space encouraging civic engagement. The belief that museums can become "places of dialogue, advocates for inclusion and incubators of community" (p. 221) propelled the programming forward. The program, titled *Conversations*, attracted 111 groups made up of more than 1,700 community leaders in education, corporate, nonprofit, and government sectors. In interviews held after the program, participants confirmed the exhibition's impact and demonstrated how it had sparked stories and insights that had not been shared before. Most participants also recognized that forms of racism and segregation still exist and that neither Charlotte nor the nation had reached equal opportunity for all citizens (p. 223). Awareness and willingness among participants to discuss issues of race and segregation in their own community was brought about by something as simple as dialogue and storytelling.

Although we engaged in different dialogue during Part II of my study, the idea that a work of art can be used as a catalyst for conversation around a sensitive issue is still relevant. I wonder whether (fe)mail as a narrative method could function in this kind of museum space. I wonder if it could provide a dynamic way community members could better understand the experiences of others, beginning with art interpretation.

It is worth noting that social media, particularly Twitter, have also given a forum to

movements that challenge systems of oppression in museum structures. The following hashtags and movements might be familiar: #MuseumsRespondtoFergusson in 2014 and #MuseumsSoWhite in 2016. Incluseum, Visitors of Color, Black Girls Museum blog, Cabinets of Curiosities, and the Heritage Salon are only a few sites where this kind of challenge is taking place in conversations about social justice in museums (Eaton-Martinez, 2018). In 2018, initiatives in the museum sector such as Museums As Sites for Social Action (MASS action) tool kit, have prompted museums to reimagine their spaces as venues for communities to mobilize around human rights issues. The work of social justice-centered museums such as Museum of Impact, created by Monica Montgomery, inspired visitors to transform from bystanders to "up standers" (Eaton-Martinez, 2018) on cultural issues in their communities, which fostered community healing through art, play, and dialogue. Because (fe)mail has the potential to exist as a form of mail art among a continuous network of conversation through the postal system, I wonder if it could be part of these movements in the virtual sphere. I learned that while (fe)mail belongs inside the museum, it does not need the physical museum space to exist and function as a tool for conversation, dialogue, and empathy among participants. Considering how museums have advocated for social justice and change in the internet space, I have to wonder if (fe)mail might be a space for conversation and sharing of stories in the virtual world as well.

Concluding Thoughts: Suggestions for Further Research Closing Narrative:

I sit cross legged on my chair across from a computer screen. My laptop placed at the edge of my dresser, I stare at my own reflection waiting impatiently for my therapist to connect on the other end. My eyes shift between the time and date on the left-hand side of the screen back to my own image as I eagerly wait for our virtual session to begin. My therapist's image pops up on the screen and we quickly exchange hellos and how are yous, followed by light

conversation about our week. After a few moments, I begin a discussion about my week and how I've been able to integrate some of the exercises and techniques she assigned into my daily routine. We engage in a back-and-forth conversation about anxiety—the physical and mental experience of it. My therapist interrupts my rambling by offering me a way of thinking about anxiety I had not considered. She describes it as this "sitting in a tension without necessarily solving anything." This rung all the truer for me as I thought about what the experience of anxiety was like for me personally. It was sitting with or in a certain level of discomfort.

I think anxiety often compels us to overthink and ruminate on potential worst-case scenarios or begs us to practice our own problem-solving skills on a future problem we may never encounter. As I consider this description of the experience of anxiousness in light of my dissertation project, I find myself making parallels between the experience of teaching and the research I embarked on in this study. In my own narrative analysis, I explained and synthesized the kind of knowledge produced in Part I and two of the study employing the theoretical and methodological frameworks I set out for this project. I learned much about my method of autoethnographic writing and my participants. I discovered a place for (fe)mail in the future of museum education. I also learned about my own teaching practice as one of empathy, and that the process of learning and narrative inquiry is reflexive and constantly changing. In this study, I navigated between traditional educator tensions as I taught a virtual museum program. In addition, I also traversed tensions in my roles as researcher, educator, and friend. I have come to learn that empathy, like human beings, is unpredictable, making social science research an unpredictable endeavor to take on. Perhaps the act of doing this kind of research is similar to the feeling of anxiety my therapist described, sitting in the tension without necessarily solving anything, without having all the answers. This feeling of anxiety embodies for me Clandinin's

(2012) words about living with the research and the process of doing research "with." As I spent the past few months living with the data, the (fe)mail, and the tension of being a researcher and educator, I have found contentment in the unexpected and relief in the unknown.

When I concluded Part II of my study, I gathered my thoughts on how the program had gone and how I would begin my analysis of everything I had collected. I was met with compassion and understanding when I unpacked the results of my program and tried to make sense of my participants' interpretations. Both my committee members, Dr. Evans and Dr.

Brown assured me that it was more than okay if outcomes were not what I had expected. They encouraged me by reminding me that the beauty of doing research is finding meaning in unexpected places. As I made my way through the various tensions of doing narrative research, I clung to the truth that I was not obligated to know all things or claim absolute truth over this particular topic. Rather, I felt free to navigate this research journey with some level of uncertainty, knowing that my interpretations of my research are fluid, temporal, and able to change over time (Kim, 2016, p. 196). As I conclude my dissertation and the implications of this study for the future of museums, I am hopeful for the future of this program and method of art interpretation I developed and analyzed. I am sanguine about what it could bring to campus museums and how (fe)mail could be used as a narrative tool for beginning conversations around mental illness. I discovered in this study that (fe)mail is more multifaceted than I ever dreamed. I am curious about where it might lead and hopeful that it might be used to further empathy, community, and healing in the field of art museum education.

In keeping with the threads of encouragement, empathy and hope participants embodied in this dissertation, I'd like to leave you, my reader with the following (fe)mail…

To the Museum Educator: *The work that you have taken on is difficult, draining at times, and much needed. You might not feel like it or get the praise or attention of much sexier museum roles, but you are an important change maker in your museum and in your community. You are slowly but surely inviting conversations among strangers, encouraging curiosity, critical thinking and helping visitors imagine a better world through art. When the evenings are long, and the weekends are taken-up with programming, remember you are strong. When things get overwhelming, remember to step back, take a break, and know that you are worthy of rest.*

To the PhD. Student: *You've taken on a brave and difficult role of researcher. Remember that this does not mean that you must know all things. This does not mean you must have all the answers. I've come to learn that the beauty of research at this stage is sitting with the unknowns and staying open to what might come your way. In moments where you feel pressured to do more, remember that you are not your conference papers, nor the number of articles you publish, you are also not your anxiety or even your persistent imposter's syndrome. As hard as it might seem, try to enjoy the journey, the friendships and the many months you have ahead of you. Remember to rest often and get off your e-mail on the weekend. You are valued, loved and appreciated. Stay the course, you are almost there.*

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