An Analysis of Youth Poems from River of Words:
Environmental Identity, Education, and Youth Development

By

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Abstract

This study explores the use of poetry as a tool for understanding the dynamic, nuanced, and highly political representation of youth place experience. I suggest that the story-oriented and constructive practice of place-based poetry facilitates the development of personal engagement with environmental values, attitudes, and meanings, and leads to empowered place identities among a sample of American youth. Further, I argue that more, and new models of place-based education are needed to combat disempowering public discourse around youth and the environment, and the traditional modes of environmental education that fail to provide youth with the tools to constructively challenge it.

This project utilizes a grounded theory approach to identify and analyze young people's expressions of place identity through poetry. 677 poems about "watersheds" are analyzed that have been written by over 600 young people between the ages of five and nineteen. The poems were selected as finalists for the River of Words Environmental Arts and Poetry Contest between the years of 1996 and 2009. I analyzed the content of the poems to discover what environmental subjects were expressed by youth poets, and what was meaningful about them for youth identifications with place.

Findings include the increased valuing of family and human relationships in environmental experiences as youth grow from grades K-2 to 10-12; the local environment as a key site for independent growth through risk taking for K-6 youth in the sample; a relative decline in emotions of hope and idealism in regard to the environment as youth get older, coupled with a relative increase in sadness and

pessimism; and the emergence of apathy and cynicism in poems written by youth in grades 10-12.These findings suggest that developing constructive, place-based environmental identity, which I argue will facilitate stronger environmental stewardship in the future, hinges on the personal and critical engagement of young people with local environments in ways that allow them to create knowledge about their places, and engage in their environments in active, participatory ways.

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Introduction

In this project I have focused on a large body of environmental poetry written by youth to explore in what ways youth debate and express their identities in relation to their watersheds. By pursuing a grounded theory approach to identifying salient environmental subjects and meanings within youth poems about local watersheds, I have carefully considered those subjects and meanings in an effort to understand more about the environmental attitudes and values of a group of over 600 diverse American young people.

This study explores the use of poetry as a qualitative tool for understanding the dynamic, nuanced, and highly political representation of place experience. I contend that the story-oriented and constructive practice of place-based poetry facilitates the development of personal engagement with environmental values, attitudes, and meanings, and leads to empowered place identities among a sample of American youth. Further, I contend that more, and new models of place-based education are needed to combat disempowering, over-generalized environmental discourses around youth and the environment, and the traditional modes of environmental education that fail to provide youth with the tools to constructively challenge them.

While I feel strongly that it should not be necessary to justify the importance of youth development for the practices of community development and environmental education, and while I personally consider the study of youth attitudes and expressions through poetry intrinsically valuable given the impact of childhood experiences on adult

decisions, values, and actions later on, the poetry written by youth in this sample makes a compelling case for the role of engaging in youth development for improved environmental stewardship through poetry.

Solving the very real environmental problems that face us today depends upon the development of better environmental stewardship and stewards. Analysis of youth poetry from the River of Words suggests the significance of a theory of place engagement and learning for this effort. Namely, education on environmental issues must become more than the passive receiving of information about the ecologies and histories of landscapes. Instead, the forms through which youth interact with their environments must personally engage them as participants and contributors to political, cultural and ecological understandings of environmental issues. More importantly, the River of Words poems suggest that when youth are allowed to participate as creators of knowledge in their own communities through poetry, they personally and critically engage in understanding their environments in constructive ways.

This is why poetry about the environment is so relevant to the study of environmental discourse and action. Poetic engagement with place is relevant and crucial as a means of environmental education because it asks youth to actively experience their local places, to become critical observers of and participants in their communities. Most importantly, environmental poetry allows youth to become the creators of place knowledge: a constructive mode of learning which is essential to the development of environmental identity for stronger stewardship.

With this context in mind, my guiding research question takes on three parts: First, what are the environmental experiences, attitudes and values expressed by American youth through poems about the environment, where the experiences and meanings represented by youth in their poems are interpreted as components of youth sense of place, or environmental identity? I have explored this question through poetry analysis of environmental subjects and meanings are they are portrayed by the young people in this study.

Second, how do the environmental attitudes and values expressed by youth in this study relate to poetry as the medium of their expression? Third, in order to focus more on understanding the cultural and educational systems that are likely to inform the environmental experiences and/or artistic expressions of youth in this study: What are the implications of this data for existing approaches to environmental education, public discourse on youth and the environment, and the relationship between youth identity and agency at the local level? And finally, in hopes of more fully addressing the methodological challenges of using poetry to study youth, I test how a methodology of grounded theory can be used to generate new theoretical possibilities within the study of youth environmental attitudes and values.

Sense of Place as a Guiding Concept

This research project has grown out of my interests regarding the role of poetry in identity politics, the role of youth in community development practice, and the approach of place-based education as it relates to community development and the

American environmental movement. Central to these interests is the concept of a sense of place: not only "the ability to recognize different places and different identities of a place," but more so the complex and highly personal "sense of identity *with* a place," and the "full range of possible awareness" available within this relationship, from "simple recognition and orientation, through the capacity to respond empathetically to the identities of different places, to a profound association with places as cornerstones of human existence and individual identity" (Relph, 1976: 63). The spectrum or range of sense of place development within this definition makes sense of place a dynamic concept for comparative study across communities or individuals.

The link between youth and sense of place is not something new to social geography – from Roger Hart's wonderful study of a group of children's uses and experiences of place in Inavale, PA in the 1970's; to Patsy Eubanks Owens and Innisfree McKinnon's survey of the role of nature in adolescents' lives in Pasadena, CA in 2009; to Kaplan and Kaplan's extensive research on the psychological benefits of green spaces on youth stress levels, attention spans, and academic performance, and Korpela's study on the restorative qualities of favorite places for youth (Hart 1976, Owens 2009, Kaplan and Kaplan, 2002; Korpela, 1996). Geographic and psychological researchers have certainly been active in considering youth relationships to place and the impacts of those relationships on youth health.

The concept of a sense of place is so important to this project because it symbolizes the interface of three overlapping areas of inquiry with which the project is concerned: the development of identity, the interface of environmental attitudes and public

discourse on the environment, and the role of educational approaches in mediating between individuals and society. First, sense of place is crucial because it focuses on the development of an empathetic and authentic personal identity in direct relation to one's place.

Second, as Relph discusses in *Place and Placelessness*, an authentic sense of place – where authenticity is linked to the concept of "rootedness," and describes a relationship to place which is organically developed and deepened through local, specific experiences over time, and reflects a melded integration of specific landscapes with cultural practices, beliefs and knowledge – is no longer something unselfconsciously enjoyed in modern culture, but something that must be consciously created: pursued, debated and organically planned for in the face of widespread "inauthentic attitudes of placelessness" and modern landscape planning and development. Or, in simpler terms, the popular notion that we, as human beings, are losing our senses of place due to generalized patterns of development, land use, and the manufacturing of mass cultures of place and place identity (Relph, 1976: 80, 92, 146).

This second emphasis on senses of place as consciously, specifically developed in the face of development (both in land use and politics) that would otherwise generalize them aligns with the place-based education component of this project, and the educational approach advocated by the River of Words organization: namely, that nature, culture, and community studies take place with local environments as the sites for learning and curriculum (Smith, 2002; Michael, 1998). This is not only connected to the function of education as the conscious pursuit and valuing of local knowledge, but

also to the fact that educational content is driven by cultural values about what should be taught and what shouldn't, what is important to learn, and what isn't, and where the site to frame that learning should be located.

More specifically, the River of Words organization that I will discuss attempts to sponsor the development of authentic senses of place through place-based, watershed education in art and poetry. Through this approach, ROW works to enable teachers to rearrange the driving concepts of environmental education toward more interdisciplinary, local, and empathetic learning models. Importantly, the terms "environmental" and "the environment" are used broadly here, to encompass the ecological, the physical, and the cultural environment of a place, both in present and historical forms. I also use the terms in this context throughout this thesis.

Personal Background and Relevance

I came to the study of community development from a background in literature and political science. When I first saw the River of Words youth poetry archives in spring of 2009, I had been studying the role of poetry as a tool in experiential and place-based learning, and was also very aware of the increased attention being paid to environmental issues in public and political discourse around climate change and sustainability. In 2007, sustainability had again become sexy, after similar waves of public interest in the 1970's and early 1990's, and almost immediately nebulous as a result – a mainstreaming topic that was now as much a brand as an approach to environmental practices and management. The term's popularity elicited comments from friends and colleagues that the word itself, much like "community," had become

dangerous in its ubiquity. Concerned with this rapid generalization, I had done some work as a student on what the notion of "green" meant as it was being portrayed in public media, specifically in print and online newspapers, and my work in community development later on in 2008 and 2009 led me to repeatedly consider how individuals – especially in marginalized groups and communities–were dealing with these quickly changing messages in their daily lives. How did notions of public opinion compare to and inform individual opinions on the ground?

I was, and am, particularly concerned with self-efficacy, so more specifically, I wanted to know something about how individuals made sense of their environments – broadly defined as the dynamic and interrelated physical, ecological, and cultural systems in their communities – in ways that were constructive and empowering. How do individuals negotiate between their conceptions of the environment as a social construct of culture, public media and politics, and the actual environment, namely, the landscapes, ecosystems, and communities of people and things around them? And further, how does this become a constructive mediation given the prevalence of both positive and negative discourses of the environment and human attitudes toward place?

It could be said that I was looking for a project that would allow me to explore one process through which these elements were interfacing. Was there a project I could pursue in which poetry was an active tool in the debate and expression of environmentally-related identities? Could this be linked to agency and self-efficacy in daily life? I use poetry in my own life very tangibly, as a tool for processing the world around me. It is a space in which I can share my experiences and surroundings and

through which I can more fully understand my role within them. So, my personal

motivation for this element of the project was strong. Finding the River of Words poetry

felt like finding a diamond. I was immediately struck by the quality of the youth poems,

their breadth of subject and depth of expression, and when I discovered they were

written by youth about their local environments, I felt I'd located a fantastic opportunity

for exploring the interests I'd been trying to marry.

Clarifications, Limitations and Caveats

First and foremost, I want to impress that when I refer to "youth," "young

people," or other similar terms in this study, I am referring to the group of 650 young

people whose poems I have analyzed here. The terms youth and young people risk

suggesting that I treat youth as a uniform group, and this is not at all what I mean to do.

I use the terms as succinct ways of referring to the group of young people I have

studied, and do not mean to refer to all youth or to imply that "youth" is a uniform

category of group; all youth are certainly not the same. As the poems show, this sample

of youth is incredibly diverse in age, location and diverse place experience, and while I

did try and locate some commonality in youth expressions in the sample, it was

precisely because of these distinct differences that commonalities were worth looking

for.

The process of analyzing the poems and understanding more about the context

in which they are situated has been an extremely gratifying adventure and a lesson in

the depth of qualitative inquiry. While I've done my best to portray my findings from the

data sensitively and articulately, and have pursued a rigorous methodology to ensure my interpretations are consistent, using poetry as qualitative data means painfully reducing creations that contain rich independent meanings as wholes, and that often symbolize multiple meanings and experiences at the same time.

The blessing of looking at poetry written by youth is the freedom it affords: as I mentioned, a poem is a freer creative space in which the personal, intellectual, and emotional elements of experience are fair game, with looser technical rules than other forms of writing. As a method, looking at poetry written by youth for an environmental poetry contest also circumvents the limitations often introduced by researchers when controlled studies are done with youth. As Roger Hart discussed, these limitations have often kept us from getting to a fuller understanding of youth values and feelings in relation to place, as it remains so difficult to understand youth feelings and values within behavioral contexts, and equally difficult to create a respectful and accessible space for youth expression of attitudes and feelings outside of immediate contexts (Hart, 1979: 153). Poetry is one exciting way to attempt to meet these challenges.

There are significant challenges to using poetry as data for the study of youth identity and sense of place, including the level of technical proficiency in writing, individual learning styles, the degree of prompted writing (both in form and content) from adult advisors, and finally, more nebulous cultural stereotypes that persist about what poetry is and who writes it, and what nature and the environment are, and to whom. So too are there challenges in consistently interpreting and measuring data, insofar as poetry analysis is a subjective process that always leaves some information to

chance or mystery. Artistic license, influences of public discourse, and the level of authenticity in the writing are all things that cannot be deduced from the poem alone, but must be ferreted out beyond the poems by speaking with youth, their teachers, examining their places and place experiences, and finding measures to interpret this information accurately. Addressing this lack of certainty on a case-by-case basis is the next step in research of this type.

Despite these constraints, this data presents a fascinating array of experiences and meanings represented creatively by the youth who experienced them – from a 15 year old writing about starting each Sunday by watching the dawn with her father in Baton Rouge, to an 11 year old in Tucson writing about a border crossing through the Sonoran desert; or from a 12 year old in Michigan writing about a forbidden field where he goes at night to think, to be alone, to trespass. In poems written using their personal environmental experiences as subjects, youth express the dynamic interface between their own environmental realities and the relationships, emotions, and attitudes that give them significance. I begin here by exploring the themes at play within those expressions, coming to as full an understanding of the contexts in which they were written with the information available, and all told, count them as a valuable resource for understanding existing research on youth environmental attitudes and values, and as a guide for hearing youth voices more dynamically and clearly in future research.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study of youth environmental attitudes and values (in this case as components of place identity) is a growing research field with deep connections to the fields of environmental and social psychology, place-based and experiential education, and youth development. While a significant body of research exists in the study of adult environmental attitudes, relatively little research specifically focuses on understanding the environmental attitudes and values of youth (Evans et al, 2007). Further, previous studies of youth environmental attitudes, like those of Williams and McCrorie, and Leeming and Dwyer, have largely been adapted from adult-centered measures and concerns, and thus were not as successful in identifying the distinct features of youth experience that contribute to youth attitudes and behaviors (Evans et al., 2007; Eagles and Demare, 1999). While Hart, Kahn and colleagues, Musser and colleagues, Owens, Kellert, Evans and others have adapted more youth-appropriate approaches to understanding youth environmental experience, more diverse and creative approaches are still needed to meet youth where they are in both development and their everyday lives, and to delve deeper into the relationships between attitudes, values and experience (or, in environmental psychology terms, between intentions and behaviors) (Bonnes et al, 2003: 171; Evans et al, 2007; Hart, 1979; Jaus, 1984; Loughlan et al, 2003; Kellert, 2005; Owens, 2009).

Additionally, this research suggests that youth poetry and artwork could provide researchers with unique opportunities for understanding youth perceptions and values about the environment in more situated ways. The realm of youth feelings and values,

especially in regard to environmental attitudes, continues to be difficult ground for

researchers, insofar as youth perspectives cannot be determined as successfully through

traditional, semantic modes of qualitative inquiry used with adults (Evans et al, 2007).

Geographers and cognitive scientists have been able to achieve deeper understandings

of youth *behavior* in the study of place experience, but values and feelings remain

elusive (Hart, 1979). As Roger Hart expressed in *Children's Experience of Place:*

> It is a popular notion that poetry and good literature more accurately capture childhood experience than does behavioral science. In some respects this is true. Unfortunately, while this belief has left us with descriptions of children's experiential engagement with the environment which are both beautiful and voluminous, they are at the same time narrow. The writers, almost exclusively from rich, highly-educated, rural backgrounds, have presented us over the past 200 years with a most romantic image of children's empathic engagement with the natural world. Behavioral scientists by comparison have largely retreated from saying anything about children's feelings for the everyday world of places and things, having limited themselves to the materials of experiments, tests and simulations. The combined result is that we have a very warped view of children's feelings for their environment (Hart, 1979, p.155).

Hart's warning is well-taken – it speaks to the confluence of the temptation to

romanticize in poetry (often a deliberate artistic device) with the equally strong

temptation to romanticize about childhood (also, one might argue, a deliberate social

device, since we are hard pressed to find widespread evidence of perfect childhoods).

And this analysis, though based on poems that are actually written *by* youth, – as

opposed to their rich, rural, and scholarly adult predecessors – and a diverse population

of youth from varying ages, levels of education, and places at that, is certainly not free

from the influence of over 200 years of very eloquent "warping."

Each day, we mediate between our physical experiences of place, our existing knowledge and feelings about places, and the new, cultural information we receive about what place is, or means, from others. The active process of mediating between these elements to decide, consciously or unconsciously, what they mean to us, constitutes sense of place in practice. Further, it seems that the mirror image of a sense of place, the other side of the coin, is the process of consciously situating and representing oneself within this framework of place experiences and cultural knowledge: environmental identity, or in other words, what sense of place in practice means for one's personal identity in relation to place. These two facets of sense of place – internal and external perspectives of place identity - are rooted in sense of place theory espoused by Relph, Tuan, Nairn and others, and in social psychology that looks at identity in terms of place and social attachments, and personal attitudes, values, and traits (Relph, 1976; Bonnes et al, 2003; Tuan, 1974).

Youth are certainly mediating between these elements, and doing so in ways particular to their ages, places, personalities, and levels of knowledge. Yet, while we can fairly assume that adult experiences and attitudes come with relatively large and broad amounts of experience to go by (if adulthood starts at 25 years of age, then we can take 25 years of experience to be the minimum), and a relatively high degree of independence to act, feel, and believe as one chooses, in comparison youth have a narrower breadth of experience, less experience overall on account of having had less time to accrue it, and a lower level of independence to act and believe as they choose (Listen, Inc. 2000; Checkoway, 1995). Because of this, youth engage in and process

more new, external information on a daily basis: their own new experiences and ideas, content in school and activities, advice from parents, teachers, coaches, and other adults in their lives, public discourse from the media, and information from other youth.

We can also consider that youth place experience is even more specific and regulated than daily adult experience, on account of parental restrictions, lack of mobility by car, etc. While studies of adult environmental attitudes and experiences employ knowledge often drawn from one's youth, and while my writing and your reading of this study are certainly filtered through our own childhood memories, we must remember that looking at adult environmental attitudes is not the same as looking at those of youth, who participate in communities in distinctly different (and often less empowered) ways (Hart, 1992; Checkoway, 1995).

Indeed, youth perspectives of place come from distinct forms of place experience and knowledge in and of themselves; they are not just partially developed adult identities, not just an early stage in a linear progression to adulthood. Looking comparatively at youth poetry across ages, localities and genders gives us the opportunity to understand portions of these different senses of place more accurately. Conversely, commonalities of experience in expression from diverse populations of youth can be explored more closely as signifying potentially critical experience at certain points in development, shared ways of obtaining knowledge, or the resonance of certain messages from public discourse.

Youth in Public Environmental Discourse: Nature Deficit Disorder Meets Future Leaders

Understanding more about youth experience of place is becoming increasingly relevant to the study of environmental issues in contemporary society, as public discourse around environmental degradation, climate change, and the impacts of human activities on the environment become more mainstream and urgent. As mentioned, in one form discourse around environmental problems has led to an enthusiastic embrace of the term sustainability across fields and sectors: everybody wants to be green, whether to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, protect a local economy or species, or sell a new line of hair care, and the entry points to considering "the environment" as a more present factor of daily life are numerous (Peet and Watts, 2004: 5). Not surprisingly, as the oft-mentioned "leaders of future generations," youth are garnering more attention – both positive and negative – as the environmental actors upon which the hopes of current generations, and the campaign for sustainable communities, rely (Evans et al, 2007).

However, modern discourse on the environment spends more time construing youth as victims rather than leaders. Contemporary media on youth and the environment largely revolves around what is lacking in environmental experience for youth and in espousing the dire consequences of "changing" (read, degraded) youth experiences of place. Although Relph pinned the tension between "widespread inauthentic attitudes of placelessness" and constructive processes of authentic place-making and identity-building over thirty years ago, his argument is more relevant now than ever, as media attention toward youth and the environment has increased in the

form of reinvigorated press over the same issues of global warming, environmental

pollution, and public health (Relph, 1976: 146).

In his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder,* Richard Louv argues that children (and adults) are becoming more and more removed from the pristine "nature" around them, and that this removal has dangerous implications for children's psychological and physical health – the manifestation of this being what Louv coins "nature deficit disorder" (Louv, 2005: 10). Louv and others therefore prescribe access to "natural" spaces and places as treatment for and prevention of nature deficit disorder and public media around the issue is replete with the urgency of this treatment for youth (NPR 2008, New York Times 2008). The diagnosed psychological condition of Eco-anxiety, in which individuals exhibit anxiety disorders whose specific triggers are thoughts of environmental degradation, is another fitting symbol for the growing atmosphere of worry and fear around environmental issues (Watson, 2008; Crawford, 2009).

While the rhetoric employed by Louv and other media sources is nothing new to politics – a conservative discourse that appeals to parental protection, the understanding of the world as a dangerous place, and victimization of youth as motivation to act more responsibly in regard to the environment – what is interesting is how popular the phrase became, suggesting that Louv's particular logic and symbolism was not isolated to a particular group of environmentalists or concerned parents, but linked to a larger concern among populations across political sectors (NPR 2008; New York Times, 2008; Lakoff, 2004). Indeed, the rhetoric of environmental disorders, as we

might call them, is fascinating because it signifies the bridging of fear over

environmental health and youth across political affiliations, and engages the already

problematic notions of "nature" and "wilderness" as they apply to different populations

in American society (Cronon, 1996; Kosek, 2004).

It is especially in light of this public discourse of fear, placelessness and worry

that I chose to focus on environmental poetry written by youth from a grounded theory

perspective: to ground my project in data that youth produced, and to systematically

analyze it in such a way as to avoid hypothesizing *over* youth voices with the claims of

louder, more legitimated, or well-meaning but assumptive adult voices – positive or

negative, and including my own – in public discourse and research. This is not to say, of

course, that theoretical perspectives have not informed my research, but that I

structurally organized my project to protect against glossing over youth expression in

the data. More on this will be discussed in the Methodology section.

Place-Based Education and Public Discourse

Since *Place and Placelessness* in 1976, in which Relph theorized sense of place in

terms of authentic and inauthentic place-making, and self-conscious and

unselfconscious identification with places, the fields of environmental psychology, social

geography, and environmental education have grown immensely. Environmental

psychologists now explore existing psychological theories, such as attachment theory

and the theory of planned behavior, as they apply to place attachments and

environmental attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Twigger-Ross, 2003). Research on

youth environmental attitudes has considered the impacts of this atmosphere on youth feelings; in 2007, Evans and colleagues adapted a "worry meter" measure that they used with youth to describe their levels of anxiety about the state of the environment (Evans et al, 2007).

Unfortunately, in the meantime, traditional modes of classroom education have struggled to keep up with newly pressing environmental issues in constructive ways. Existing classroom education on the environment often employs curriculum that is de-localized, impersonal, and disempowering (Sanger, 1997). Content around environmental issues is often highly abstract and cerebral, with study situated in textbooks and the focus placed on contexts drastically different from the contexts of students' daily lives (Smith, 2002; Sanger, 1997). Meanwhile, nature in this context is often presented as pristine nature or "wilderness," which is almost always elsewhere, and certainly not in the backyards of students who live in urban or industrially developed areas.

When I consider examples of this mode in my own education, I vividly remember the classic apple activity that helped me, then a fourth grader, understand the relatively minuscule amount of fresh water available on Earth. Each student was given an apple and a plastic knife, and we were asked to cut the apple in half, then cut one of those pieces in half again, and again, until there was virtually no apple left. Then, we were told that this is all the water we humans have left to drink, so we'd better conserve. I don't think I visited the water fountain much that week.

This anecdote is not meant to imply that water conservation education is unnecessary, but that the model through which it was administered is disempowering and inappropriate if we consider education to be an institution that helps youth become active and motivated citizens, especially in light of heightened information about the environmental impacts of human activity. Further, it constitutes an abuse of empathy in youth that should be respected with, for example, greater attention to linking environmental concepts with practical experience, and steps to consider thinking about how to act in constructive, relevant ways to address issues after concepts are learned. This method of instruction also de-politicizes environmental issues in such a way as to negate the web of human relationships that are intimately connected to them. Within the apple activity, I distinctly remember feeling as though I was solely responsible for the world's system of water, and thus already culpable for its paucity.

Many American educators, including those using the River of Words curriculum, have begun to pursue models of place-based education in the attempt to combat negative public discourse and traditional education around youth, sense of place, and the environment, by seeking to "ground learning in local phenomena and students' lived experience" (Smith, 2002). According to Gregory Smith, because place-based education has thousands of potential applications given its focus on immediate environments as the sites for learning, generalized curriculum would be inappropriate (Smith, 2002). However, there are common characteristics of place-based education that almost all models share, which include: using the immediate sites around them as the basis for curriculum, as mentioned; emphasis on learning that enables students to "become

creators of knowledge rather than consumers;" an increase in the "permeability" of the

barrier between community and classroom, in which students actively take roles in the

community setting, and in which community members share knowledge in the

classroom (Smith, 2002; 593). The explicit aim of this approach within nature and

community studies is to frame a learning environment in which youth can build self-

efficacy and agency.

Figure 1 presents the differences between traditional approaches to

environmental education, and place-based approaches:

Figure 1. Traditional Versus Place-Based Approaches to Environmental Education

	Traditional Environmental Education	**Place-Based Education**
Content	Macro: global issues, locations and systems	Micro: local phenomena and community
	Nature as elsewhere, knowledge as elsewhere (textbooks)	Nature as where we are, knowledge as both where we are and elsewhere.
	Simple: Problem-oriented, protecting against a threat (as in conserving water to protect against drought, or cleaning up to "fight" pollution)	Complex: Embracing, relational, considering accessible reality and then relating it to larger systems and information
	Compartmentalized	Holistic
Mode of Instruction	Intellectual, cerebral, abstract, removed	Physical, experience-based, tactile
	Passive, receiving	Active, creating or producing
	Impersonal	Highly personal
Impact	Disempowering	Empowering, constructive

Table: M. La Rochelle, 2010

Linking Place-Based Education to Experiential Learning Theory

Figure 2. Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning
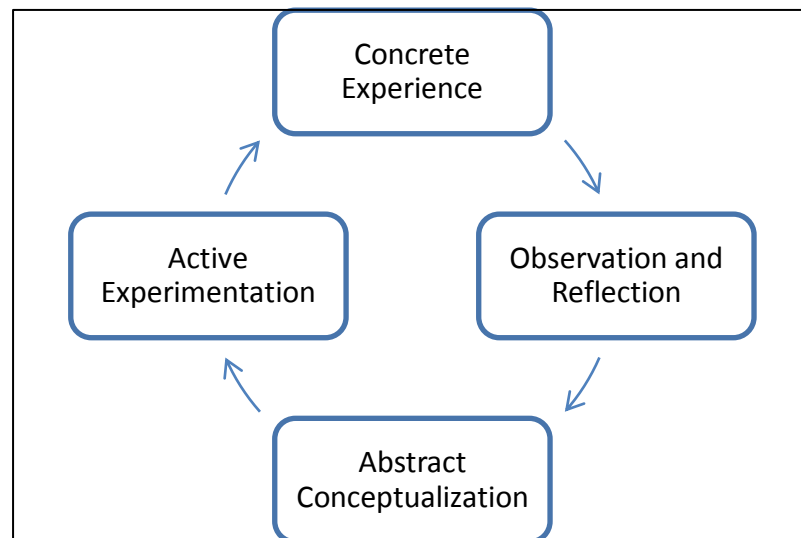
These characteristics and approaches to place-based learning are deeply situated

within the tradition of experiential learning first espoused by John Dewey in the early

1900's through *Experience and Education*, and the concepts of a continuity of

experience, and continuum of experience within learning (Dewey, 1938). Dewey's

principles of the continuity of experience and the importance of educative experiences

within experiential learning were further developed by David Kolb, along with the

contributions of cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget and social psychologist Kurt Lewin

(Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). In his 1984 text *Experiential Learning: Experience as The*

Source of Learning and Development, Kolb carries Dewey's principle of the continuity of

experience and Kurt Lewin's cycle of experiential learning into a theorization of the

cyclical process through which experiential learning occurs. Specifically, Kolb

conceptualized a continuous learning process that occurs through four repetitive, cyclical modes, displayed in the figure below.

As Figure 2 shows, "immediate concrete experience forms the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a "theory" from which new implications for action can be deduced. These implications or hypotheses then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences" (Kolb, 1984, 21). These four stages – Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Generalization or Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation – are discussed as iterative, ongoing processes in the world of the learner, such that multiple processes of learning can be taking place at once in regard to multiple concepts and ideas. This cycle of learning, in which lived experiences of the learners are the content for learning, and informed by more generalized inquiry, underpins the approach of place-based education.

Now, where does poetry fit in? This project explores the idea that poetry plays a facilitating role in the second and third steps of the process: observation and reflection, and abstract conceptualization. It also situates poetry within Bloom's taxonomy of affective learning – learning that deals with attitudinal characteristics and values (Langan, online, 2010). In this research, I wanted to explore the creative process of poetry with youth as a potential means of building environmental identity and awareness on the basis of experiential and affective learning theory. As an artistic activity that calls for the observation and recognition of one's surroundings in both rational and intuitive ways, and the internal reflection upon those observations as means to representing one's experience, poetry has the potential to allow for flexible

and diverse means of expression within the reflective observation process. I wanted to consider whether an intentional degree of reflection through an artistic mode of expression helps the learner:

- Observe more closely his or her surroundings in order to learn about them and write about them. (receiving, recognizing, reflective observation)
- Evaluate experiences and surroundings, explore how new experiences relate to one's worldviews, how they'll be represented. (valuing, reflective observation)
- Work through the process of translating those observations and feelings into sense-making or values, "characterizations" and concepts about the world that can be explored with real motivation and reflected upon through an artistic lens. (organizing, characterizing, abstract conceptualization)

Since poems are made most often for sharing with others, the representation of an experience through art enables that experience to be shared again and again through the eyes of its artistic host. This constitutes a relationship between the artist and the experience that finds its expression in the artwork itself, and through which meanings can change and be re-considered over time.

Theoretically, and in light of these perspectives, this project cannot claim to know the impact of environmental poetry on the self-efficacy of the youth who participated: do they still write poems? Do they feel positively or negatively about their local environment or community? If they wanted to take action on an environmental and/or local issue, do they feel as though they could, and do they consider their participation in River of Words an influencing factor in this confidence? I would have needed to talk with the youth to ascertain any of these –a goal for future research to come. Nor can looking at youth poetry about local watersheds in this archive tell me the extent of environmental experiences that take place in the daily lives of the young people in this sample. Thus, looking at youth environmental identity through poetry

does not allow us to understand youth behaviors, but rather the artistic representation

of some of those behaviors, and the attitudes and values conveyed by the subject and

form of expression. I suggest that salient experiences depicted in the poems are

correlated with the development of authentic (or inauthentic) senses of place for youth,

by considering the ways in which youth express their experiences in relation to

themselves and to existing cultural meanings across genders and age groups. And, as a

symbol of place-based education in practice, we can consider the ways in which the

poetry in this archive informs the interdisciplinary theory of place-based learning and

engagement.

The Organization: River of Words

> *"My solutions to the world's problems, theoretically at any rate, always kind of end up with education. To me if you reduce any societal problem ultimately it seems it comes down to education. So, my approach for a long time, which was a little hard in the environmental movement to be sure, was to forget about adults pretty much because if they don't get the issues by now, about certain things…then, forget 'em. So, it always made more sense to me to approach children and youth because there you have a chance of actually affecting change in a way that you don't usually with adults."*

> –Pamela Michael, River of Words Director and Co-Founder

While the focus of my inquiry in this project is the group of roughly 650 American youth poets from across the United States whose poems I've been poring over for the last 8 months, the focus of this section is to discuss the particular social and organizational context through which those poems were created. I did not obtain the poems through data collection of my own – in other words, I didn't solicit poems from youth on my own the way one would obtain data from direct interviews, for example. So the story of these particular pieces of writing, and how they got from the young people who wrote them into my hands, necessitates a discussion of the mediating organization and individuals that are active in facilitating, sponsoring, selecting, and showcasing the poems. This is an incredibly important piece of understanding youth expressions because it helps us understand the potential filters placed on those expressions by virtue of the contest and educational settings.

The job of working with youth to explore their watersheds and produce poems about them is directed principally by the educators who teach their students poetry, and facilitate the submission of that poetry to the River of Words Annual Environmental

Art and Poetry Contest for youth. The contest is facilitated by the River of Words (ROW) arts and place-based education nonprofit in Berkeley, CA. River of Words sponsors the annual contest from which the poetry originates, sets the prompt of local watersheds as a guiding topic, disseminates a Watershed Explorer Educator's Guide for teachers to use in the pursuit of place-based watershed education, and publishes the anthologies of the poems I examine here. These actors and elements make up the supporting context for the youth and their environmental poetry in this study. Understanding more about the social conditions through which this poetry is filtered can help us understand more specifically who I mean when I refer to "youth" in this study. Further, contextual knowledge helps us critically consider the implications of using youth poetry both as an educational tool, and as a medium for understanding the particular youth environmental attitudes and values examined here.

Understanding the role that River of Words plays in the production of the poetry also helps to account for some of the uncertainty we have about why and how youth write about the environment in the poems. Constraints of time, the large number of poets, and the wide dispersal of the youth poets across the United States limited me from speaking with youth and teachers to further understand the social and cultural contexts of the data on a case-by-case basis. Further research could benefit immensely from a comparative form of qualitative inquiry on the environmental attitudes of these youth, using methods other than poetry, for example, or in a longitudinal study with the poets on the impact that their practice of poetry has had on their environmental views and their senses of place and place identity.

However, I had the opportunity to intern with River of Words on a regular basis from September 2009-March 2010, and during this period I closely observed and came to understand ROW as an agent in the dynamic between youth poets and their teachers, and less directly, between youth poets, teachers, and their places. Not only does ROW frame the context through which youth write about their environments by hosting a themed contest, it also filters the poems I have looked at through certain selection criteria, and influences who submit poetry in the first place through outreach and development with teachers and coordinators, and through a curriculum that encourages certain types of place-based activities. Thus, by understanding more about the cultural and educational systems through which the poems were produced, we can get closer to clearly interpreting the poetry.

Organizational Background and Activities

Origins

The organizational history of ROW's activities presents a perfect example of doing much with little and acting strategically. [*] River of Words spent its first 6 years, from 1995-2001, as a project of the International Rivers Network (IRN). The project was headed from the start by Pamela Michael, a writer and activist with experience in international and domestic media and education. Michael had been hired as a part-time

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[*] Much of the material and knowledge that I use for discussion of River of Words comes from my time spent with the organization as an intern in Berkeley, CA, from September 2009 to March 2010. Contextual knowledge about the River of Words structure, documents, and organizational activities comes from this experience and the participatory observation I conducted while I was there.

consultant to garner more domestic publicity for IRN, whose activities were mostly international. Michael was hankering for a catchy idea and had landed on an annual environmental poetry contest for youth when a friend offered to introduce her to new US Poet Laureate Robert Hass, saying, "Think of something you two can do together!"(Interview, PM, 1/5/10). When Michael pitched Hass the idea, he was engaged; the idea of an annual environmental art and poetry contest for youth coincided with the increased activity around the environmental writing community that he was organizing in Washington D.C. at the time (Interview, RH, 1/5/10). In summer of 1995 the two began planning with a group of local (and well-connected) environmental writers, activists, educators and friends in Berkeley. Fortunately, with well-connected actors at the table, the contest quickly developed its own momentum.

Hass was in the process of sending a letter to schools and teachers about environmental education via the Governor's office of every state, and the newly fledged River of Words Contest was included in this letter, billed as a way for teachers and students to get involved. Further, a contest poster was displayed in hundreds of libraries across the country on the initiative of a project team member who was affiliated with the American Booksellers Association and Penguin Books. These strategies garnered around 3,000 entries for the first year alone, and once the word was out, poems kept coming (Interview, PM, 1/4/10). Hass' position as Poet Laureate enabled River of Words to link up with the Library of Congress Center for the Book, and each year, River of Words hosts its International Awards Ceremony at the Center in Washington, D.C. In these ways, River of Words obtained a significant amount of

exposure across the United States very early on, and offers a very motivating contest for teachers and students. And all this with a very small price tag, and Michael remaining at part-time (Interview, PM, 1/4/10).

The growth of the contest and quality of youth art and writing spurred River of Words to leave IRN in 2001 and become its own non-profit, with Michael and Hass as co-directors for the first years, and a Board made up of a similar variety of writers, artists, activists, and IRN members that had initially contributed to its development. While the organizational capacity of ROW has grown from one to three staff members, it has not grown proportionally with the contest. Today, ROW has a paid staff of only one part-time and two full-time members, while the Annual River of Words Environmental Art and Poetry Contest regularly receives more than 10,000 art and poetry entries for them to process. The staff continues to work relatively close to home in the Bay Area through teacher education workshops and conferences, and runs the contest, but due to limited capacity, does very little outreach while its name recognition and scale of activity continue to grow, and to branch across state and national lines. Finally, despite this high level of national recognition and awareness of the organization, River of Words keeps its head just above water financially, mostly through small grants and philanthropic donations. This is surprising for friends and interested parties from the public, who assume that because of its name recognition, contest size and scope, ROW is financially stable.

Mission and Activities

Michael, Hass, and ROW outreach manager Susan Sarratt identify the mission of River of Words as an attempt to connect (and re-connect) youth with their local places through holistic, place-based interdisciplinary inquiry within and beyond the classroom (Michael 1998, ROW Educator's Guide, Michael 2004, Interview, SS, 3/6/10). River of Words encourages youth to engage with and examine the built environment, the cultural environment, and the ecological environment within their particular watersheds– in short, to learn "their ecological address" (Michael, 1998). Next, its curriculum and contest encourage youth to express what they've learned through art and poetry.

ROW also states that its mission is to address "the disconnect" between young people and place, to "offer a useful model for reclaiming our lost landscapes and our places in them" (Michael 1998). When ROW organizational literature refers to this disconnect between people and place, it is referring to what it sees as the lack of knowledge among youth and adults about their proximal environments, as well as a sense of personal connection to those environments. To address this, ROW's educational model focuses on inspiring learning that emphasizes the dynamic relationships between these entities, and the importance of the role communities and individuals play within them. The contest solicits personalized expressions of this learning by asking youth to creatively express their environmental experiences and views through artwork and poems.

Thus, there are three main avenues through which River of Words works: curriculum, including a watershed-based K-12 curriculum for teachers called the Watershed Explorer Educator's Guide, and other small teacher and community-oriented curriculum materials; an annual environmental art and poetry contest for all youth (nationally and internationally) of ages 5-19; and lastly, through an extensive network of volunteer state coordinators and affiliated teachers who help to publicize, organize, and participate in the curriculum and contest.

While there is a fascinating amount of discussion possible on the River of Words organization and its activities – nonprofit management structures, grassroots organizing and activism, media use and name recognition – they are not the focus of this project. Rather, I've chosen to include discussion only on those pieces of organizational information that help contextualize the youth poems in the River of Words anthologies: how they're generated, where they come from, and who helps them get there. For a more detailed discussion of River of Words as an environmental education organization, please see Mary Pardee's analysis of the development of the Wisconsin River of Words program and contest (a fellow master's thesis!).

The River of Words Curriculum

> *"Back to the original question of how ROW is subversive: I think that our curriculum…I used to call it the Stealth Curriculum. Because people weren't talking about sustainability in classrooms in 1995, or a lot of the things that our curriculum addresses. And also because what happens in the classrooms has become so proscribed and narrow, just to offer an interdisciplinary model to teachers as a way of working is subversive. So… our curriculum is more necessary and more in demand than ever now, I think, because of that. We're losing so many good teachers."*
>
> –Pamela Michael

The Watershed Explorer Educator's Guide is ROW's concrete educational material. Other than the annual contest, it is also ROW's main site of interaction with teachers via the educator training workshops that Pam Michael provides by request at a sliding scale for schools, libraries and youth organizations around the country. The Guide and ROW workshops constitute the most formalized link between River of Words and the teachers whose students submit to the contest. The guide spans from grades K-12 and has a mostly inspirational focus, built from texts on watersheds, writing, and ecological literacy by environmental writers like Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry, and including sections on teaching poetry with youth, scientific inquiry through kite-making and direct observation of the local landscape, cultural and community mapmaking, and visits to local historical sites, rather than a standardized series of lesson plans for specific grade levels and disciplines (ROW Educator's Guide). The River of Words workshops serve primarily as introductions to the Guide, and an inspiration for teachers to think about adapting its activities for their particular environmental setting and group of students.

As an observer in one of these workshops in the fall of 2009, two things struck me. First, the enthusiasm of teachers was striking. We were conducting a workshop with a group of teachers from a public elementary school in a middle-upper income area of Oakland, CA. The principal of the school sponsored the workshop for a professional development day, and over half the staff of the school was present. We conducted three simple activities: we started with an activity in which the teachers were each given a small object within a brown paper bag, and were asked to draw and describe that object on a piece of paper without looking at it – their only reference was touch. Afterward we went around the room and gave each teacher a chance to guess what theirs was and give a brief description why. The teachers, especially those of younger students, exclaimed that they would do this with their students, that it was a great way of briefly appealing to different skills and thought processes than the visual or auditory norms.

Handmade journals were the second activity, with discussion on potential uses with students in both language arts (as a creative journal) and the sciences (as a field notebook). In this the teachers were extremely focused and detail-oriented; many stayed during the lunch break to finish. The final activity was a poetry writing activity, where the teachers responded to small, limited prompts for each line (i.e. "First, put yourself somewhere outdoors, choose an outside setting and say something about it; second, what's the weather like? Involve the weather in your second line," and so on) and generated poems around them. Finally, the teachers shared their poems out loud, often asked to read twice (an exercise used with youth by ROW) as the second reading

was often more comfortable and clear. This was an experience that seemed to drive home the memory of how nerve wrecking it is to publicly share something original, and the atmosphere of the room became soft and supportive.

As a whole I observed that the activities were about attending to each teacher personally – both to his or her way of observing and seeing the world, and in expressing those ways in creative, or less frequently used forms (i.e. poetry instead of prose, touch instead of sight) – and in building appreciation or empathy for the way this was done among the other attendees. The teachers left as though they'd been at a day spa or a counseling session – many expressed that they hadn't felt "this creative in a long time." According to Pamela Michael, this isn't unique, but is a consistent piece of feedback: "I see so many disaffected teachers, that when they do a workshop, it's like some little dessert all day for them…it kind of reminds them that it can be fun to teach! I see it as a revitalizing tool for [the way teachers teach]" (Interview, PM, 1/4/10). This practice of empathy-building and personalized learning is a large piece of understanding ROW's concept of "holistic" learning – it involves providing personalized tools and models to enrich increasingly depersonalized content.

My second observation of the day was that none of the activities we conducted at the workshop are actually in the Watershed Explorer Educator's Guide! Though this was initially perplexing, it demonstrates that the specificity of lessons and activities in River of Words curriculum are not as important as the concepts, attitudes, and values that the curriculum attempts to inspire. Namely, creative interdisciplinarity that often means applying the arts across disciplines, linking the similarities in scientific and artistic

inquiry in terms of direct and detailed observation of the natural world, and creating

sensitivity and empathy toward other things and people. The Guide is certainly more a

guide than a curriculum.

Further, River of Words makes it clear that proscriptive curriculum is

inappropriate in its line of work. There are two reasons for this. First, the River of Words

curriculum is intended to be place-based, that is, locally oriented by the teachers who

implement it. As River of Words staff have asserted to me many times, it would not only

be impossible to orient their curriculum to each bioregion of the populations in the US

and beyond that they work with, it would be inappropriate to do so. Michael puts it this

way:

> People are always asking, "How many schools are you in? And how many
> projects are you doing in schools?" And River of Words really isn't about that.
> Our strategy is to give teachers information and techniques and train them to
> then do that work in their own schools, not for us to be in the schools,
> transforming the schools from some vision that we have...it's not really about
> partnering with a particular school, it's about giving that school something they
> need and going onto the next school rather quickly. (Interview, PM, 1/4/10)

As Michael's explanation shows, attempting to inspire teachers involves a second and

perhaps more important goal: to build a network of teachers in different places that

share similar values. More on this will be discussed below in relation to the contest and

the State coordinators program.

ROW's conscious choice for teacher development over direct youth education

supports its curriculum choices of inspiration over activity, value over standard. Susan

Sarratt articulates her view of the curriculum as symbolic of River of Words' advocacy

for teachers. She sees River of Words acting as a "conduit" for teachers in the

curriculum, using its role as a nonprofit to adapt educational tools that maintain curriculum objectives on the basis of interdisciplinary, holistic principles, creative development, student self-efficacy, and environmental and cultural empathy, and to build activities from there (Interview, SS 3/6/10).

Unfortunately, this broad, value-oriented choice does present significant practical challenges to the ROW curriculum in terms of its applicability in classroom settings. Already overburdened teachers do not necessarily have time to modify the existing curriculum to their students' needs and their region's particular ecosystem, especially if they are not familiar with that ecosystem to begin with. Culturally, the workshop impact River of Words has is somewhat sporadic: the occasion of giving a workshop to half the teaching staff of a school is an exception, not a norm (normally, workshops are much smaller). Further, such a curriculum has led to mixed feedback from teachers. They love the inspirational quality and content of the curriculum, but its lack of objectives and standards-focus, especially in regard to ages of students (the curriculum is K-12) make it difficult to defend to school administrators, especially in struggling schools where teachers are even more proscribed in their material.

ROW walks a fine line between attempting to build a broad community of culturally sensitive teachers and youth, and presenting a programmatic approach that is structured enough to do so. One opportunity exists in finding common concepts, like that of a watershed, which are both present and unique in each community. There is certainly potential to focus a part of the ROW curriculum on the local Bay Area community and watershed, as a kind of case study for other communities, but due to

limited staff capacity, this element is underdeveloped. These and other weaknesses identified by ROW's teacher partners over the years have led to a curriculum revision process that is currently in place, which will re-conceptualize the River of Words' curriculum under a new place-based, "one square block" focus, and will include age appropriate activities and projects, as well as local examples and projects from the curriculum to use in ROW's local community.[*] ROW's hope is that this new curriculum will be more practically applicable for teachers while maintaining a broad conceptual focus that extends to a diversity of communities and settings.

Finally, River of Words' curriculum and model of teacher education must be considered insofar as it is related to the submissions of poetry we'll examine here. River of Words is confident that the majority of teachers whose students participate in its annual contest have been exposed to its teacher education materials and guide (Interview, SS 3/6/10). However, this is not a requirement for entry to the contest, and a number of entries come in each year from unfamiliar teachers, schools, and students (Interview SS 3/6/10). River of Words does not formally keep track of whose students submit versus who has attended a workshop. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section, but it is unclear whether or not the methods for teaching poetry to youth within the River of Words curriculum were used by many of the teachers whose students submitted. Thus, while a great deal is known about initial contact with teachers through education workshops, very little is known about how teachers apply this curriculum once they return to their classrooms, and how much that curriculum guides

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[*] The first phase of the River of Words curriculum revision is expected to be complete by fall 2010.

the youth poets here – whether in the development of technical proficiency or the development of positive environmental and creative attitudes.

 The ROW Contest and State Coordinators

Today, the Annual River of Words Environmental Art and Poetry Contest is intended and used as a "motivator" for teachers and students to engage in place-based education using the River of Words curriculum (Interview, PM, 1/4/10). It is the ultimate double-edged sword. In 1995, the curriculum was presented the other way around, as secondary to the annual contest, which helped ROW get it into the hands of interested teachers and around administrative "gatekeepers" who saw the benefits of recognition for students but were wary of curriculum from the environmental movement, of which ROW considers itself a part (Interview, PM, 1/4/10). However, today, ROW struggles to re-direct its image away from the contest and toward the educational mission it has always valued most. And still, the contest grows.

However, the contest is by far ROW's best tool for attention and involvement from both local and national interests: new teachers and students often get involved initially through contest participation, and the annual ceremony attracts interested members of The Library of Congress Center for the Book, members of the US EPA, the Department of Education, and other governmental entities involved with environmental education in DC. Its value for networking opportunities and visibility cannot be understated. In my observation, the contest and all its moving parts engender an increasingly complex relationship between mission and practice, organizational growth

and organizational sustainability, in the River of Words organization. I think of a phrase akin to, "can't bite the hand that feeds you," where that hand requires more and more of an appetite on your part.

Political Positioning of State Coordinators

As mentioned, submissions for the contest, especially outside of California, are generated largely through the work of volunteer ROW State Coordinators and teachers. There are 33 ROW State Coordinators that work in 32 different states in the US (Massachusetts has two). At minimum, these coordinators act as local contacts for the annual large contest. Beyond that, individual coordinators are encouraged to grow their own River of Words educational programs in-state using the Watershed Explorer Curriculum and "ROWing Partners" guide, host their own state contests in addition to the larger one, and perhaps most valuably for ROW, use the inspiration of interdisciplinary environmental education to develop new programs and activities (Interview, SS, 3/6/10). The emphasis River of Words places on recognizing and showcasing youth work in multiple venues may be one reason for this repetition; another is the employment of River of Words coordinators in many state's Departments of Natural Resources or Centers for the Book, which have their own structures and programs of education into which River of Words elements are integrated (SS, Interview, 3/6/10). Thus, River of Words' curriculum has multiple models of application within the distinct frameworks of existing state environmental education programs. These models are not implemented by River of Words staff in Berkeley, but by state

coordinators who work within local, regional and state systems – a significant network of grassroots organizers.

The loose and dynamic quality of the relationships between River of Words in Berkeley and its state coordinators is the same flavor as the River of Words style of work mentioned above. Coordinators serve voluntarily and with a high degree of independence, both out of a belief in the appropriateness of coordinator agency, and out of necessity. The Berkeley staff simply does not have the capacity to regulate or provide extensive support to Coordinators, though they would like to have closer relationships with them (Interview, SS, 3/6/10).

The development of the state coordinator network has also been highly organic: "We've never recruited a coordinator," says Michael, "because I've found that when you ask other people to do something, they're less committed than when they ask you (laughs), so…we wait to be asked"(Interview, PM, 1/4/10). I nodded emphatically when she said this, as it rang true to the conditions under which I initiated my internship with ROW: with a high degree of self-starting and independence, with enthusiastic welcome and support from ROW staff. To my comment that this also took less outreach time, Michael responded, "Yes, but also you get better coordinators. Now we have a stipulation that they need to have some kind of institutional backing because there is expenditure and you need networks to reach an entire state...So there have been individual teachers that have wanted to do something and we've sort of demurred, or partnered them with some other institution." The River of Words style of coordinator development resonates significantly with theoretical foundations of asset-based

community development: the identification of connector leaders within educational

communities, and the choice to act within existing capacities and structures rather than

creating others externally and imposing them on schools and teachers (Green, 2006: 11-

13).

The implications of the state coordinator program for this data are that while

River of Words is sure that the actions of many state coordinators significantly influence

the bodies of work submitted to the ROW contest each year, the level of that

significance varies by coordinator as much as it does by individual teacher. Some

coordinators embark on proactive and extensive River of Words state projects and

contests, while others simply publicize the contest each year to state school districts,

and distribute entry forms. Tracking the connections between teachers, state

coordinators, and youth poets could strengthen our understanding of the data, with the

aim of discovering the links between particular poets and the educational and

community development systems that have influenced them, and the impacts of those

influences.

<u>Challenges and Future Steps</u>

As an organization, River of Words situates itself in an educational leadership

role – it consciously attempts to provide constructive, applicable environmental

education models for teachers and relies to a large degree on an image of positive

impacts on youth environmental attitudes and knowledge (mostly via the contest) to

attract grantors and donors. However, as I observed repeatedly at my time at ROW, the

staff considers legitimizing youth expression and perspective a major part of its

community-building mission, and honestly representing youth attitudes about the

environment, which may be negative, fearful, critical, or apathetic is an integral part of

that mission. Representing this honestly can certainly be used as a motivator for the

nonprofit to continue its activities, but ultimately, bad press from youth or teachers via

ROW's largest attention-grabbing activity, the contest, could threaten the financial

stability of the organization, whose grantors want to see positive results in youth

attitudes and behaviors. Thus, while the contest forces River of Words to consider its

selections more politically in terms of its own public image and survival, the role that

River of Words seeks to play in community development and environmental activism

places significant attention on the entire gamut of emotional themes youth represent

from year to year.

Much of River of Words' mission today is consistent with what it was in 1995. As

Hass puts it: "My thought, 15 years ago was, 'how do you begin to get environmental

education into the classroom?' The whole body of environmental literature tended not

to get taught at any levels because it falls between categories. So I thought...how do we

put this set of concerns that gave rise to this kind of writing [into mainstream

education]?" Today, ROW enjoys a broad network of affiliated teachers, but the

educational involvement of those teachers varies and is difficult to measure other than

by participation in the contest. As with other grassroots campaigns, knowledge about

broad-based school projects is limited, and word about them is up to individuals to pass

along. A crucial question for River of Words is therefore: Are teachers consistently

integrating interdisciplinary, empathic environmental education into their classrooms,

or do they simply participate in the contest each February and go back to their existing

curricula afterward? More so, what do these models substantively do to engage

students?

This tension reflects a greater tension between value-based social and

environmental activism, which often focuses on identifying and attracting attention to

social problems and the need for change, and education, which focuses on anticipating

and building solutions-oriented approaches to those problems through systems of value

inculcation and aligned content (Interview, RH, 1/5/10). To be both activist and

educator within these existing paradigms presents challenges that are not easily

commensurable. River of Words negotiates the landscape between activism, education,

and community development in particular ways. Central to this project – curriculum,

community partnerships, and contest included - is the education of environmental

attitudes and values. It is through this conceptual and political perspective that I've

come to understand ROW's business best – as an agent attempting to merge youth

development, environmentalism, and social activism under the conceptual umbrella of

increased sense of place and interdisciplinarity.

ROW's status as a non-profit gives it credence to market itself as an activist

organization and member of the environmental movement in a way that would be

limited if it were part of a public educational institution. My impression is that ROW

represents crucial but marginalized spaces in both the environmental and educational

camps, and its flexibility as a non-profit is equally crucial in enabling this. However,

ROW's ability to systematically gauge its own success in the mission it works so hard to progress is not within the capacity of the organization. Further, while its chief freedom as a nonprofit lies in the autonomy to represent marginalized values and concepts, the barriers to implementing those concepts in mainstream institutions are significant, and the availability of funding streams to fight mission drift toward less critical, open environmental perspectives is limited. As a result, ROW's organizational activities are tending more and more toward robust professional development for teachers, who it recognizes are the real agents in making its vision a reality.

Conclusion

The feedback provided by the River of Words poems – looking over time at the impact of the contest, its participants, and their organization on youth attitudes and opinions - is a unique opportunity to understand what it means to try and support the reorientation of educational contexts toward more local, holistic, and interdisciplinary models. This discussion should impress that the environmental experiences, attitudes, and values expressed by the River of Words youth poems are not just symbolic of the River of Words project (if only it could be that simple), but of the dynamic relationships between the River of Words model and competing models of environmental understanding used by teachers and parents. In our analysis, we must remember that the poems are extremely political expressions, which symbolize the interface of public and private messages received by youth about environmental meanings, and the uniquely personal ways in which youth make sense of them.

Methodology

<u>A Grounded Theory Approach</u>

Glaser, Strauss, Creswell, Dey, and others problematize a grounded theory approach to qualitative research as one in which data collection precedes theoretical assumption – instead of taking a particular theoretical approach, developing a hypothesis, and then collecting data under that approach, grounded theory involves a more organic process, in which data are collected and reviewed, and theoretical assumptions and hypotheses made, generally, after one sees what content is in the data (Dey, 1999, Creswell, 1998, Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

I chose to take this approach to analyzing the youth poetry for two reasons. First, youth constitute a vulnerable population in both society and research insofar as they often lack the authority to make independent choices and decisions (Listen Inc., 2000). This often results in youth expression being filtered through the lenses of adult systems, norms and decisions (Checkoway et al 1995, Hart, 1992). While such filtering doesn't necessarily mean that youth expression is subverted, it certainly maintains power within the hands of adult decision-makers, who can choose the level of participation of youth members, and the legitimacy of that participation as well (Checkoway et al, 1995, Hart, 1992, Listen, Inc, 2000). Since these are both definite factors in my project in regard to the highly interpretive quality of poetic analysis and the levels of adult influence in the ROW contest, pursuing an iterative process of reading the poetry multiple times, identifying themes and coding, informing that coding with contextual knowledge, and making theoretical judgments last helped prevent glossing

on my part. And second, this large body of work has not been previously researched, so

inventorying what is present as clearly as possible now is designed to lay the

groundwork for further research in the future (Creswell, 1998).

Methods

I employed two primary qualitative research methods to conduct my research:

content analysis and in-depth interviews. Content analysis was used to analyze the

environmental poetry, and in-depth interviews with key staff from the River of Words

organization – Robert Hass, Pamela Michael, and Susan Sarratt - were used to

complement my analysis and to gain feedback on evolving ideas about poetic themes

and meanings.

Additionally, I conducted participant observation during my time as a

professional intern with the River of Words organization from September 2009 to March

2010. Observation of how the organization worked on a daily basis provided invaluable

contextual knowledge of the poems I was reading, and re-reading, and re-reading.

Finally, because the sample of poems is large in number, I also utilized some simple

quantitative methods in the discussion of my findings, in order to visualize the

distribution of youth poets across gender, place, age, and poetic themes more

accessibly.

Integration of Content Analysis and Literary Criticism

The content analysis of the ROW archive of poetry anthologies made up the bulk of my research time. Because I worked with poetry as opposed to other forms of qualitative data (like interview transcripts or focus groups) I used traditional poetry analysis as a key tool in the process of analyzing the content of the poems. This first involved reading the poem for significance of subject and meaning, asking for each poem, "what is this poem's main environmental topic?" and afterward, "What is this poem saying about that topic?" while noting the context in which the piece was situated (insofar as it could be determined from the poet's demographic information or ROW staff). I did this by paying attention to the use of poetic devices, particularly metaphor, simile, naming and other forms of symbolism, and to the device of self-location in the poetry: how the speaker of the poem situates herself in the text, and how she situates the environmental subject she is using.

These methods of close reading were the main tools I used to understand the meanings of poems. Once I'd read through each poem at least once in this way, making my own notes on salient or especially poignant devices and lines, I began to read more methodically, and it was here that I integrated the process of content analysis into the process of poetry analysis I'd begun. In other words, I started coding.

I applied poetry analysis as a method within a larger method of content analysis, and a methodology of grounded theory. While poetry analysis comes out of the theoretical tradition of literary criticism, I am working with theoretical perspectives from

social geography and environmental psychology, experiential learning, and community development. This project thus operates from the claim that poems are political documents informed by socially mediated values, experiences, and contexts, and that poetic forms and devices are used to express personal emotions and positions towards these contexts.

Unlike qualitative research in the social sciences, in which access to the research subject is common, literary criticism does not often carry the assumption of this access. Emphasis is often placed on analysis of the piece of *text* as an independent artifact separate from its author (focusing on the literary in literary analysis, as opposed to author analysis). Thus, the creative text is viewed as a socially produced document with its own meanings and significance, which is significantly connected to (but not synonymous with) the artist who produced it. During the iterative process of reading poems and formulating ideas, I had the poems to return to, as opposed to the poets. This provides one important rationale for looking at demographic context for the poets; though poems themselves are full of rich material for research, informing that analysis with contextual knowledge about the poet can help me to triangulate more effectively between author, text, and my own interpretation, and give me a better chance at interpreting poems correctly.

One limitation to using poems as qualitative data lies in the gray area between poem and poet: one cannot equate the speaker of a poem with the poet in exactly the same way one can equate the speaker of an interview with the interviewee. However,

we do know that the youth poets here were asked to write poems about their own watersheds, and we can infer that youth poets of all ages are writing from their own experiences and imaginations. So, while we cannot ultimately be certain that the opinions expressed are those of the poet, and there is of course plenty of artistic license being used, we can interpret the attitudes, values and experiences put forth as equally significant and often more contextualized presentations of genuine youth perspectives on local place and identity. Stating this at the outset is important for understanding the use of poetry as data in qualitative research, but it certainly does not preclude us from examining poems as rich sources of information about the attitudes and values of their authors.

A Play-by-Play of Content Analysis Using Grounded Theory

Figure 3. The Content Analysis

Initial Reading		**Open Thematic Reading**		**Thematic Coding (x2)**		**Categorized Coding**
•Lay of the land •Poetry analysis	→	•Running lists of subjects and meanings •Multiple codes per poem •Hunches!	→	•Formal Coding •Multiple subject and meaning codes per poem •Consistency	→	•Nvivo •6 Subject Categories •7 Meaning Categories •Specific themes are sub-coded
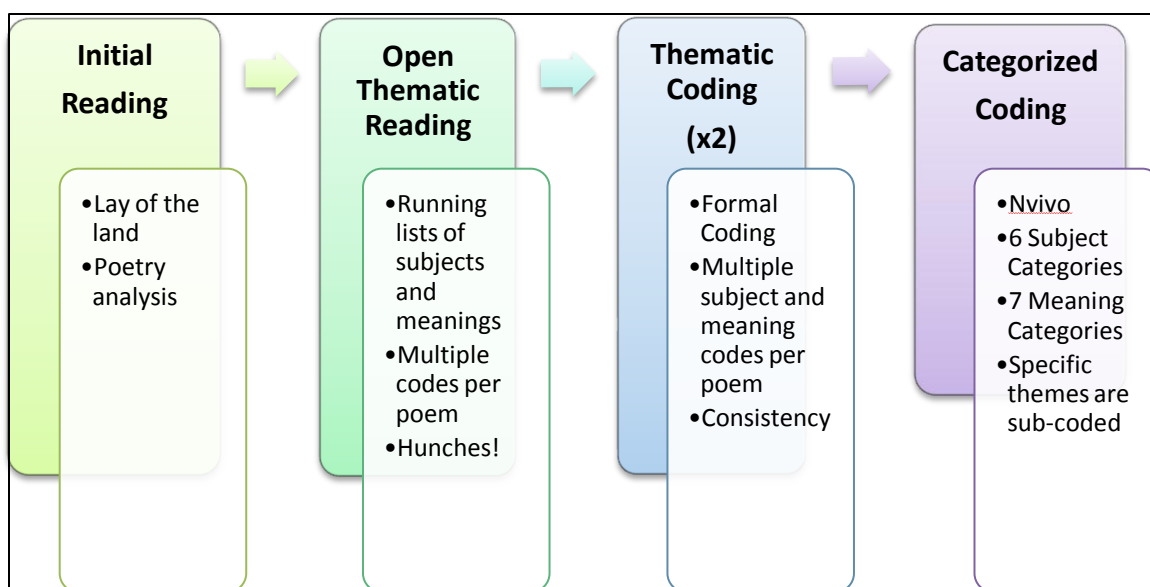
As stated, I began with a cursory reading of each poem and the demographic information attached, to get a feel for what the content of the archive is: what topics, language, and subjects are generally being addressed? What are the levels of quality in the writing? Who is submitting, and from where, and at what age? Throughout this process I made every effort to resist the temptation to follow hunches that were irrepressibly developing.

Next, I conducted a thematic reading of the texts, building a list of both subjects and meaning-based themes that were present in individual poems (i.e. the critical subject(s) of the poem and its prominent messages or meanings.) For example, a poem about spring that emphasizes the growth of new leaves on a tree might be listed with a subject theme of "Spring" and a meaning theme of "change/process." If the same poem mentioned Spring but was mostly about the tree – maybe its bright new leaves and contrasting grey bark, the sound of the wind through its sparsely covered branches, a fond memory about climbing it many times as a younger child – then it would probably be listed with a subject theme of "trees" as opposed to Spring, and a meaning theme of "change/process" and/or "nostalgia."

This thematic list was open-ended and running, and allowed multiple themes, or codes, for individual poems: if I felt spring and trees were being emphasized equally, both were listed as subject themes. The purpose of allowing the initial theme list to be open and running was to allow for as many themes within each poem to be identified freely by what they substantively expressed, rather than preemptively classifying poems into categories that might be too narrow, or miss the mark on a particular meaning

(Creswell, 1998). By this point, however, hunches about common themes and salient relationships were no longer being repressed, as it was the hunches about the poems – given my theoretical interests in environmental identity and sense of place – that needed to be the guides in determining which codes I selected to analyze further. My initial list of all codes, as well as my final list of codes and categories, is included in Appendix B.

Once the first thematic reading was done, I considered the list of themes/codes I had developed and looked for similarities between them: larger categories under which they could be coded. Due to time constraints, I had initially planned to choose a few particular themes at this point and code only for those themes, but this seemed preemptive and wasteful of all the careful attention I had already invested in each poem. Instead, I found that there were 6 or 7 larger categories in both Subjects and Meanings under which more specific themes fell.

So, I grouped my list of themes under these categories and proceeded to code each poem with at least one larger category, like "Water" or "Nature," and note the salient codes as sub-themes, like "Water-River" and "Nature-Fauna." Assigning categories for meanings was a little trickier, but I was able to use functional categories that, while not a perfect representation of all the specific codes with them, at least represented a connection that could be inferred by readers: for example, the specific code "environmentalism" went into the "Questioning and Debate" category, because poems that express environmentalism often did so by evaluating human actions, or questioning the motives of human actors.

At this point in the research process, I obtained access to the qualitative analysis software NVivo and to electronic copies of most of the poems (thanks to River of Words' publisher, Marian O'Brien, only a few days at the scanner were needed), which I then proceeded to code systematically, one by one, using this system. In all I coded at least one subject reference, and one meaning reference for every poem of the 677, each of which was linked to an age group, a locale, a school, teacher, and a gender. For students with multiple winning poems across years, I counted each poem as an individual case, so the number of poets is actually slightly smaller than the number of cases reflected in NVivo.

Finally, I used the analysis and visualization tools within the NVivo software to chart the distributions of different themes across age, gender, and place categories, to discover the most popular subject and meanings themes, and to consider the relationships between themes of subject and meaning. These exciting results are viewed and discussed in the analysis and findings section. Figure 4 below visualizes the final hierarchy of codes, identified by key categories of subjects and meanings within the poems. Note that the sub-codes listed in this visual are not exhaustive – for complete lists of codes, please see Appendix B.

Figure 4. Hierarchy of Subject and Meaning Codes
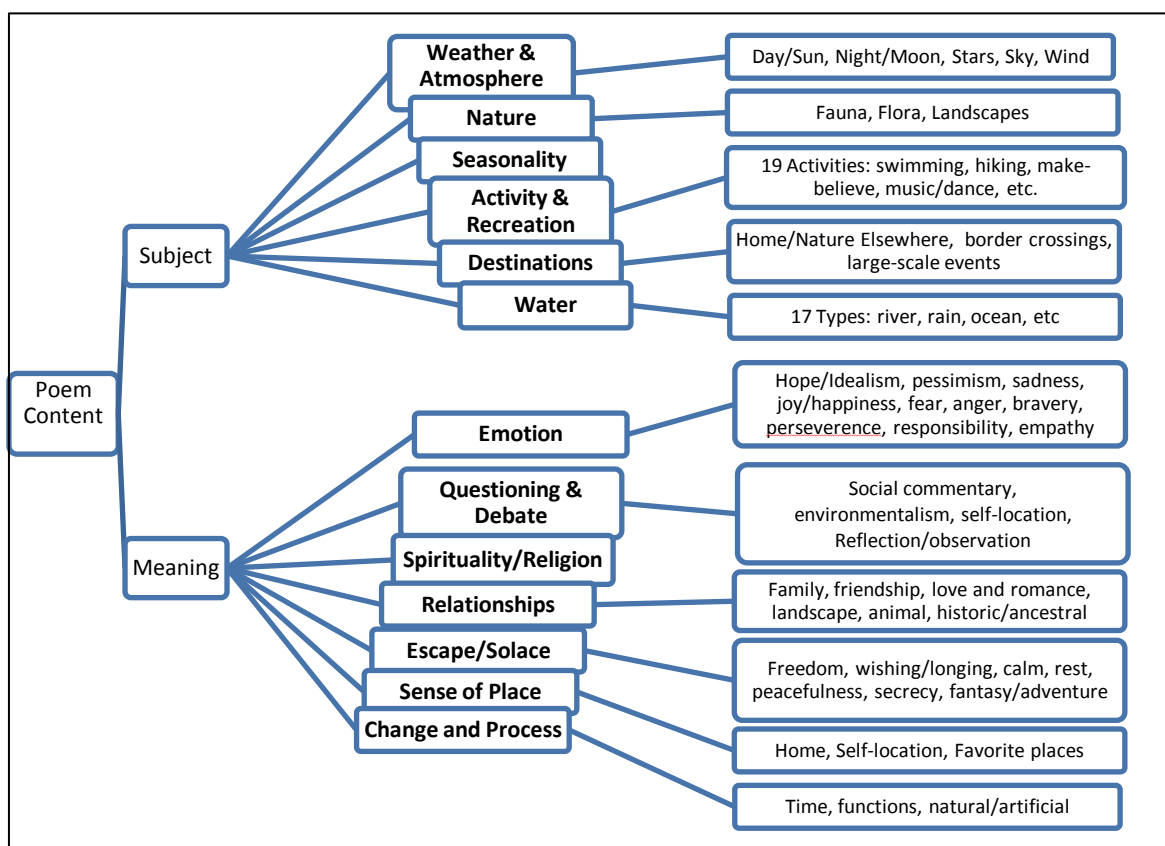
<u>Who Are the Youth? Contest Structure and Details of the Sample</u>

Who are the youth associated with each of those codes above? The following section begins to answer this question by considering the breakdown of the demographic data available for each poet, which included: name, age or grade, school, teacher, and the city and state of the poet's hometown. Also discussed here is more specific information on the River of Words contest and its rules – in subject, organization, and judging - that also help us understand the sample.

Each year, the theme of River of Words' art and poetry contest is "watersheds." Though the total number of poem submissions from year-to-year are not calculated in detail - ROW keeps data on total numbers of contest participants, but not on poems

versus art submissions - ROW reports that the number of poems submitted annually are in the thousands and growing, and that art and poetry make up relatively equal amounts of each year's submissions (Conversation, SS, 4/18/2010). For example, in 2009, ROW received 10, 581 total entries, about 5,500 of which were poems. In sum, the body of data I am analyzing numbers 677 poems from 268 different locales, written by poets between the ages of five and nineteen, and selected as winners in the ROW contest from 1996-2009.

Other important details of the contest include:

- Poems are accepted in English, Spanish, and American Sign Language
- The theme of "watersheds" is intended as a loose construct for writing about a place or home that one knows and finds meaningful (not just proximate places), thus, a wide variety of subjects in the poems are accepted;
- Poems have a length limit of 36 lines, though this is also a soft rule;
- The contest is free to enter with parent permission (other than postage).
- Though some students submit independently, most submit poetry through their classes or writing programs.

Co-founders Pamela Michael and former Poet Laureate Robert Hass judge the poems each year (Hass selects the Grand Prize winners), Bay Area teacher and poet John Oliver Simon judges the Spanish poetry, and teachers from the California School for the Deaf judge poetry that is submitted in American Sign Language. Bay Area artist Thacher Hurd judges all artwork.

Age Group

Students submit poems in one of four age group categories:

- Category I: Grades K-2, ages 5-8
- Category II: Grades 3-6, ages 9-11
- Category III: Grades 7-9, ages 12-14, and
- Category IV: grades 10-12, ages 15-19 (limited to high school students)

These categories are judged separately (to avoid a 6 year old being judged against a 16 year old). Of the poems selected, 4 are chosen as Grand Prize winners (one in each age category), and approximately 40-70 (the number has usually grown as the contest has grown each year) named as finalists. *Due to the incredibly large number of submissions, the data for this project are the winning poems from all years of the contest thus far, 1996-2009. .* The poems of the Grand Prize winners and finalists make up the content of each year's published River of Words anthology, and the poems from those anthologies – the winning poems - are the units of analysis for this project. The anthologies are shared with poets and their families, teachers, donors, grantors, and sold to the public for $10 each.

Figure 5. Age Groups by School Grade, 1996-2009

Figure 5 shows the distribution of poets by age group for winning poems for all years of the contest. As you can see, the sample is mostly represented by students in grades 3-9.
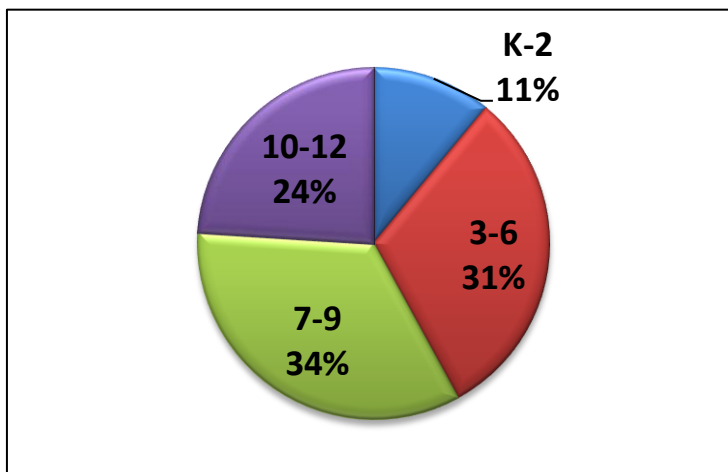
According to River of Words, this representation aligns with the years in which youth learn the water cycle (3rd-4th grade), and the years in which poetry is most likely to be taught in language arts instruction. To support this, a sample of poems from the entire archive of poem entries from 2010 showed that the grades 3-9 were even more represented in overall submissions, making up 82% of the total. In the winning sample, ROW judges select for more poems from K-2 and 10-12 grade students in the interest of having the age groups more equally represented in their anthologies.

The age distinction plays an important role in determining the makeup of certain poems in the archive, especially in terms of the number of poems submitted overall in each age group versus those that are selected as winners (the sample I'm examining). Analyzing poetic expressions by age group will tell me more about how environmental identities and values change as youth proceed into different stages of development. The social implications of this are important to consider as well, as environments repeatedly change for youth as they move from elementary to middle to high school, not to mention all changes that occur physically and psychologically. Additionally, age is a key factor in the existing literature on youth environmental attitudes and values, in which researchers test measures on specific age groups to determine changing attitudes within different stages of child development (Kellert, 2005, Evans et al, 2007; Eagles and Demare, 1999; Jaus, 1984).

Gender

Along with age, gender is another locus of inquiry for existing research on environmental attitudes in child development. I did not have self-reported information on the gender of the poets, but in the interest of getting some idea of the gender makeup of the submissions, I used poet names to conjecture the gender – either male or female – of each poet. Those names for which gender could not be easily determined, I left unassigned, and this category represented 5.91% of the data.

Figure 6. Representation of Gender within Age Groups
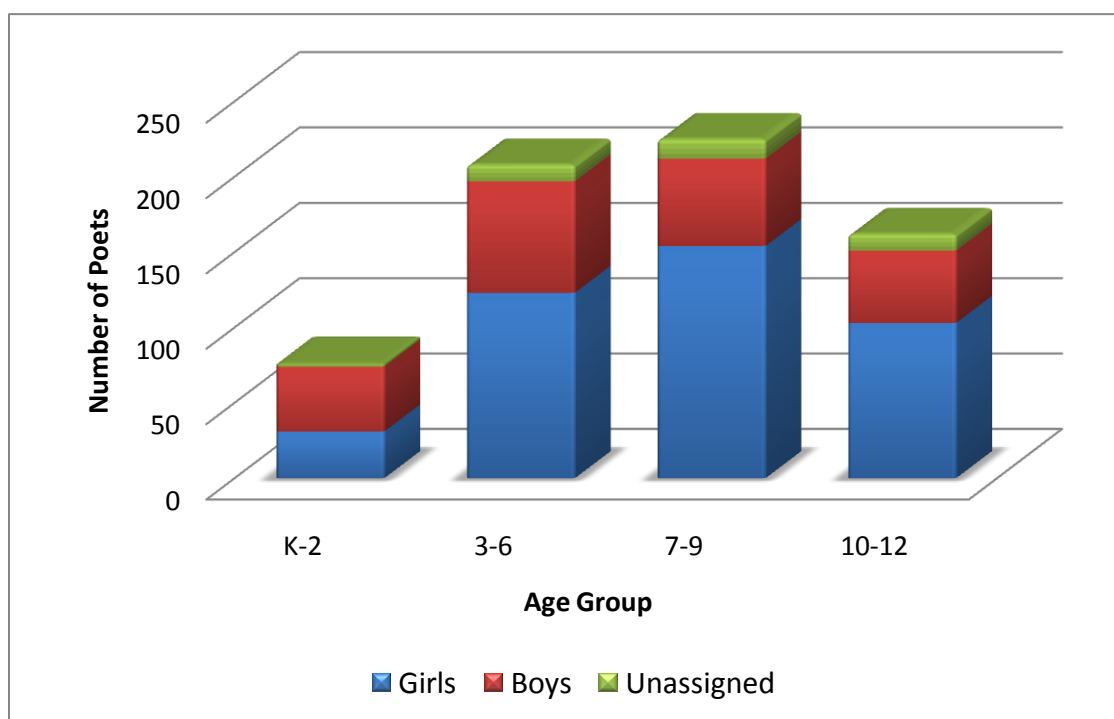
Most visibly, girls make up a much larger proportion of the sample of poets than boys, with 60.86%. Boys represent 33.23% of the sample over all. Interestingly, when we look at the makeup of gender within and between age groups, as shown in Figure 6, we

see that the overall representation of girls and boys translates more or less proportionately to the three older age groups, but not to the youngest, K-2 (with 56.6% boys and 40.8% girls). Why might this be?

Why More Girls than Boys?

There are many potential reasons that could be correlated with the overrepresentation of girls in the sample, and to account for the difference in representation for the youngest category. First, the greater number of girls submitting could be a function of simply more girls than boys in the school populations we're dealing with – one potential but unconfirmed answer. A second, more compelling possibility may have to do with cultural assumptions and gendered stereotypes about poetry and who writes poetry. Unlike other forms of more technical or discursive writing, poetry is seen as dealing with the emotions - already heavily gendered toward the feminine –and indeed, this is one of its strengths as a genre. In considering the data samples by age, we see that girls are most heavily overrepresented between grades 7 and 9, with a whopping 68% of the sample, while the sample size between grades 10 and 12 is similar, with girls representing 64% of the sample. However, in the youngest category between grades K-2, boys actually overtake girls in numbers (51% boys).

This leads me to consider the impact of gendered approaches to certain forms of writing, as it could suggest that when not exposed to feminine stereotypes about poetry, or stereotypes about stoic masculinity, boys may find the genre equally accessible, but after becoming aware of them, be less likely to utilize poetry as a

creative and reflective outlet. This possibility is also corroborated by the fact that the

graph above is shown for the winning poems, and not the larger population of

submissions as a whole. In comparing the makeup of gender between the winning

poems and a random 1000 poem sample of the 2010 submissions, I found that girls still

make up more of the sample than boys, but not to the degree that the winning sample

does. In other words, girls are submitting more poems overall, but they are also writing

more good poems. Quality, in this case, enables us to consider the level of skill

development in the particular writer, and the potential impact of gender in encouraging

or discouraging that development.

Place

Finally, the number of places poets represent is extremely diverse. A place

distribution of the hometowns of the American winning poets – identified by US city and

state – is shown in Figure 7. International poetry entries make up only 1.8% of the entire

sample of winning poems. Due to the extremely large number of submissions and the

very small relative sample of international entries, I've chosen to use only the US

submissions from the published anthologies in my research.

As you can see in Figure 7, San Francisco, CA represents the highest percentage

of entries with 6.65% of the batch (about 45 poems). The majority of contest

submissions come from the United States, with heavy representation from the West

Coast and especially the Bay Area, where the River of Words office is located. We can

also note that only ten cities represent more than 2% of the winning entries from 1996

to 2009, and that 43% of the sample comes from cities with less than 0.3% (this translates to 2 poems of the entire 677-poem sample). In all, students have submitted poems from 268 locales in the US, and 43% of those locales represent only 1-2 poems in the entire sample.

Figure 7. Poet Hometowns by City and State, 1996-2009
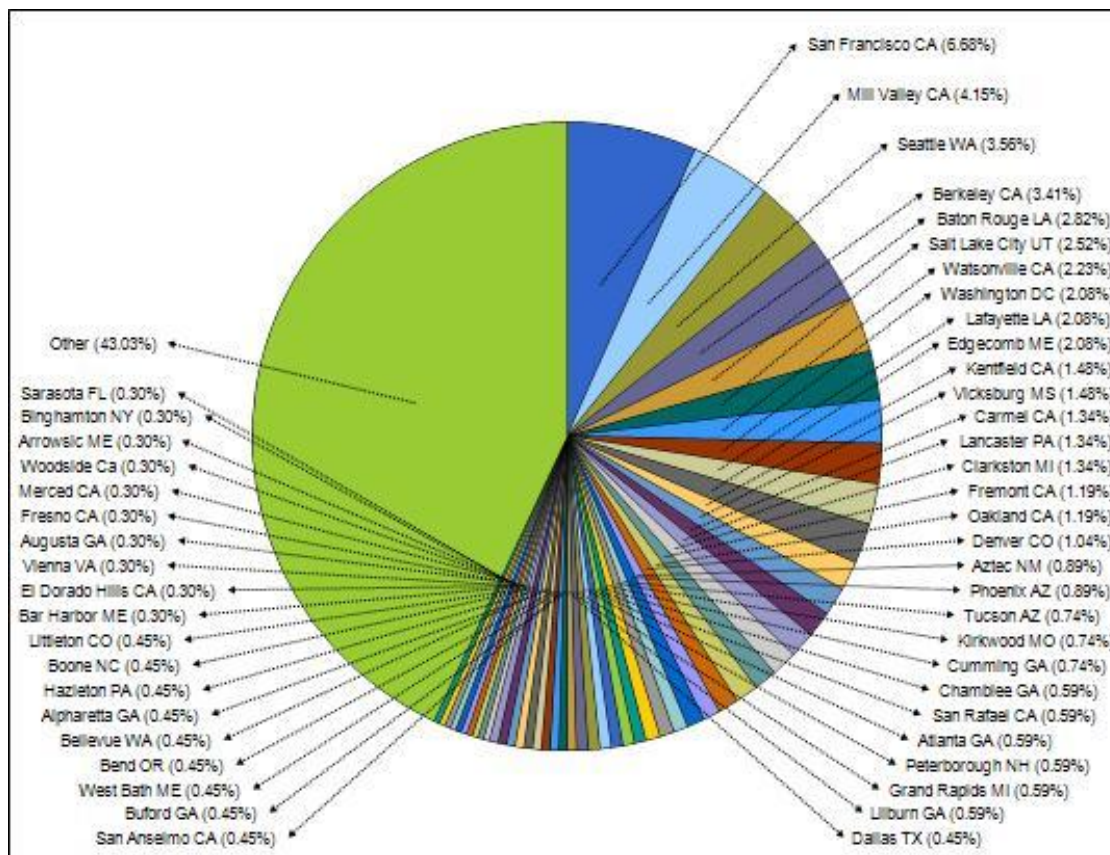
Future Inquiry to Understand Diverse Place Experience

Although the contest delineates place among the poets by hometown, this category was not as cut and dry as one would think. Beyond hometown, and its relation to urban density and form, is also the contest topic of watersheds, and the potential inquiry by youth using this delineation as opposed to their hometown for writing.

Further, the experience and meaning of one's watershed may not be specifically local (by city) so much as regional, or bioregional. Thus, there are many choices for how to consider place in the process of trying to understand youth environmental identity through poems – by watershed, by ecological region or bioregion, or by population density and urban/suburban/rural designations?

Since the theme of the contest is "watersheds," I initially considered using watersheds as my measure of place in the analysis. A quick look into the distribution of watersheds in California and the US axed this option: the high variance between US watersheds in size, geographic area, and populations made it an unequal measure for comparing across places, and would have required more work than I had time (CA has 150 watersheds alone).

Next, in the interest of maintaining fidelity to actual regions and spaces in the analysis, I researched different classifications of large ecological regions in the US (i.e. regions along the lines of Pacific Northwest, Southwest, Northeast, etc). E.B. Wiken, a Canadian ecologist with the Commission for Environmental Cooperation Working Group, which produced ecological region maps for the EPA, describes "ecoregionalization" as follows:

> Ecological land classification is a process of delineating and classifying ecologically distinctive areas of the Earth's surface. Each area can be viewed as a discrete system which has resulted from the mesh and interplay of the geologic, landform, soil, vegetative, climatic, wildlife, water and human factors which may be present. The dominance of any one or a number of these factors varies with the given ecological land unit. This holistic approach to land classification can be applied incrementally on a scale related basis from very site-specific ecosystems to very broad ecosystems. (Wiken, 1986)

The objective for me here was to find regions that were holistically defined: not just

delineated by political boundaries (i.e. the Southwest as the states of AZ, NM, CO, and

TX) or ecological boundaries, but by regions that remained true to physical attributes of

landscapes while taking population into account. However, these had to be small

enough to have readily identifiable features of place that a young poet could research

and explore: mountains, hills, plains or not, what rivers are there, what sorts of seasonal

variation, what types of weather and precipitation, what plants and animals, what built

environment, how many people? And, finally, I had to find a manageable number of

regions for the research, in and across which environmental identities could be

compared (ideally under 10).

After reviewing sets of ecoregions produced by the US Forest Service, The EPA,

Virginia nonprofit NatureServe (funded by the Nature Conservancy), and others, I

decided that the EPA's Level 1 ECORegions of North America (10 of which cover the US –

yes!) worked well enough to cover geographic areas with ecologically similar systems.

And the added benefit was the attempt made by the EPA to make these ecoregions

holistic: "Ecological classification incorporates all major components of ecosystems: air,

water, land, and biota, including humans" (EPA Level I Ecoregions Map, 2009).

So why wasn't this enough? Scholars of place and the built environment offer

many different theories of what factors influence our daily experience with the

environment the most, and here enters the consideration and social significance of

urbanism. This begs the question of which physical processes and factors in a landscape

most influence our experience in that landscape? For a young poet living in San

Francisco, how does the experience of the Pacific Ocean affect his/her identification

with nature compared to the experience of San Francisco's urbanity (traffic, buildings,

population density?) Therefore, while considering ecological regions is valuable, it may

not be enough to get at the correlations of human densities and impacts on the daily

lives of youth. Urban, suburban, and rural localities present a more ethnocentric

measure for considering the impact of place on daily experience, while eco regions

present a more eco-centric measure. I do not think we must choose one or the other,

but as of yet I have not developed a satisfying way to fairly gauge the factors of place

experience in the data. Finding a meaningful way to gauge place experience as it links to

lived experience and the expression of personal identity will be a significant part of my

future research.

At this time, I've chosen not to pursue a detailed consideration of poems as they

relate to the geographic and ecological locations of poets beyond the simple distribution

of locales shown earlier. I chose to forgo this for now because the subjective content of

the poems yielded exciting analysis to begin understanding environmental attitudes

across age demographics, and I wanted to pursue this path as thoroughly as possible

before turning to analysis for place. Having completed this in-depth subjective analysis, I

think there is an exciting opportunity in this data to examine whether and how the

factors of ecological region and urban versus suburban versus rural location influence

youth environmental experiences as they are portrayed in this poetry. While factors of

place are very likely to tangibly affect the type of access youth have to different outdoor

environments, my own readings throughout the content analysis did not suggest that

these differences influenced the content of the poems to the degree that community

relationships and public discourse did. However, this kind of geographic inquiry is

increasingly necessary if we are to consider the dynamic variety of daily lived

experiences and relationships to place among youth from different places and classes,

and get closer to understanding the impacts of environmental writing and education on

youth behaviors.

Selection Bias: Winning Poems versus All Poems

As mentioned above, the data I use for this project is limited to the winning

poems by US youth poets from 1996-2009, and does not include the larger set of non-

finaling and international poems. However, it is extremely important to consider the

differences between winning and non-winning poems, because these can be strong

indicators of selection bias in the judging, and carry larger implications as to the

organizational goals of River of Words in terms of its desired influence on environmental

activism, community leadership, and public discourse.

It is my observation that all poems that are ultimately published are to some

degree filtered through River of Words' political mission, and the particular message

that it wants to convey about environmental education and youth environmental

attitudes to the public. "We do try and select poems that are more hopeful," says

Michael. "That doesn't mean we shy away from negative or painful poems…but we try

and select poems with hope" (Conversation with Pamela Michael, 12.3.09). What does

this mean for poems that exhibit fear of the environment, or dislike, or uncertainty? My

analysis of the prevalence of poems that express hope or idealism as opposed to fear,

pessimism, apathy or cynicism supports this claim, though the latter certainly do exist.

This suggests that River of Words is invoking a kind of political oversight, which includes

not totally removing uncomfortable or painful poems, but removing the most

vehemently sad or fearful. These are poems that, according to Michael, are "just too

painful to publish" (PM, Interview, 1/4/10). For the purposes of this project, only

reviewing the published, winning poems represents a limitation of the analysis insofar

as a bias toward positive environmental emotions has been introduced. In future

research, therefore, I intend to analyze sample of the poems before they go through the

judging process, in order to gauge whether and how much bias actually is introduced by

filtering for attitude and quality.

Nonetheless, Michael and Hass both feel that their ultimate and leading

selection criterion is quality, and my observation of the judging process in 2010 confirms

this to be the case (RH, Interview 1/5/10, PM Interview 1/4/10). Other evidence in

support of this is the array of well-written poems that are off-topic, but nonetheless

make it into the anthologies because they're well-written and make interesting points

(Interview, PM, 1/4/10). Crucially, we must distinguish here between poems that

express sadness, loneliness, et cetera, and those that exhibit critical viewpoints of the

project of environmentalism and the meaning of the environment in one's life. Indeed,

this latter kind of poetry is significantly showcased in the winning anthologies, especially

in the Questioning and Debate code, and is sought by River of Words as a staple of the

project of place-based learning and activism against disempowering modes of environmental education for youth.

Interviews

       I conducted in-depth interviews with each of the founding members of the River of Words program, Pamela Michael and Robert Hass, as well as with River of Words Outreach Manager and 10-year staff member Susan Sarratt, in order to ascertain knowledgeable community input about the body of work I'm looking at. These individuals organize and/or judge the poetry contest each year, and thus have intimate knowledge of both the data and the selection criteria used to produce them. The interviews provided crucial information and feedback about the community I was studying – the next best thing to consulting with the youth themselves. The input of these "elite interviewees" in regard to my thematic interpretations of the poetry also acted as a kind of check on my own interpretations. Both during the interviews and during my internship with ROW, I could discuss the poems with Michael and Sarratt, in addition to discussing the conditions of the contest, and broader subjects, like the way in which staff viewed the mission of the organization in relation to its activities.

       Interviews with Michael and Hass were recorded and selectively transcribed. Due to time constraints with transcription, I took handwritten notes throughout my interview with Sarratt, but did not record the conversation. My interview protocols for Michael, Hass and Sarratt can be seen in Appendix C.

Analysis and Findings

This section of the research showcases the findings of the content analysis. Findings are displayed by poetic subjects and poetic meanings, and considered in light of the demographics of age group and gender. Subjects and meanings are presented for the entire group of 671 poems across all years, in order from most referenced to least referenced by category and specific codes. An example poem for most categories is provided in order to exemplify what a poem in this category might look like, and to give you a chance to read some of the poetry yourself! In the next section, I'll discuss findings on larger themes and relationships in further detail.

<u>Six Key Environmental Subjects</u>

Six major categories of environmental subjects emerged from the entire body of data, and are used as labels to group similar, more specific topics. These are: **water**; environmental **activities** like outdoor recreation, play, and agriculture; non-human **natural subjects**, like flora, fauna, and landscapes; elements of the **weather or atmosphere;** poems about the **seasons** or seasonal change; and **"destinations,"** which include homes or elements of nature elsewhere, border crossings, or about large scale events like September 11, 2001 or Hurricane Katrina. Below are the breakdowns of subject findings in terms of each category and its specific content.

Water (207 References)

Hay Un Rio Oscuro

There is a dark river	Hay un rio oscuro
In the gutter of the street	En la alcantarilla de la calle
In front of my school.	En frente de mi escuela.
It was born in the rain	Nacio de la lluvia
And isn't flowing anymore.	Y ya no corre mas.
It's sort of sad	Se queda triste
With drops of gasoline	Con gotas de gasolina
And a red wrapper	Y un papel rojo
Some kid tossed	Que tiro un nino
After eating a candy,	Despues de comer un dulce.
But although it's sad and filthy	Pero aun triste y sucio
It carries the shadow of my face	Lleva la sombra de mi cara
The tattered clouds	Las nubes andrajosas
And in white and black	Y en blanco y negro
The whole sky.	Todo el cielo.

Michelle Diaz Garza, Age 9
Rosa Baum, Age 9
Linscott Charter School
Watsonville, California
Teacher: Margaret Knox Baum
2003

- Poems using some form of water as a subject represented the largest number of poems submitted across age groups and categories. One major reason for water's prevalence as a topic is the prompt for the contest: "watersheds." Since watershed education is a relatively new concept for many youth and teachers who submit to River of Words, both the contest prompt and the name of the organization are likely culprits for this proliferation of poems about water (Interview, PM, 1/4/10). Aware of this bias, I paid special attention to detailing every form of water I came across in the poems, and the diversity is quite impressive. These were:
  - River (60)
    - River poems topped the list of the water poems, probably influenced by the bias mentioned above. However, we might also consider the allure of riverscapes: rivers are very exciting places to play, allow for a variety of activities, and are more prevalent as

water features in the US than the ocean, for example, access to which is limited to coastal communities and those vacationing.

Water poems, continued…

- o Rain (30)
- o Water systems/"Watershed" (18)
- o Creek/Stream (13)
- o Ocean/waves/tides (13)
- o Snow (10)
- o Puddle/gutter (9)
- o Lake (5)
- o Pond (5)
- o Dam (3)
- o Waterfall (3)
- o Bayou/swamp (2)
- o Tears (2)
- o Marsh (1)
- o Thirst (1)
- o Hail (1)
- o Dew (1)
- o Estuary (1)
- o Spring (1)

Nature (207 References)

When I was searching for a poem

a fox stepped out of nowhere.
His long legs stretched across the stone wall.
He paused as we stared,
both wondering where the other was going,
although it was obvious each was wandering –
 lost.
 I paused as we stared,
both wondering why the other was here,
on a stone wall,
although it was obvious each was,
on a stone wall,
although it was obvious each was

using it for direction –
lost.
He wasn't a sly fox –
at least I didn't see it in his eyes.
He was frightened.
I'd never seen a fox before.
I was frightened, too.

There.
A living poem –
a girl, a fox
connected
only by a stone wall
and a fear of the unknown.

Zoe Mason, age13
Nobleboro, Maine
Center for Teaching and Learning
Teacher: Nancie Atwell
2005

- The category "Nature" is perhaps the most general of the subject categories, and contains poems about organisms and landscapes. Many poems, for example, used some form of water as an element, but focused more on the landscape and activity around the river or ocean – its animals, plants, the light, playing there, etc – and if this was the case, they were coded as "Nature-landscapes" and/or "Nature-fauna," not water poems. The Nature category did not receive as much attention to detail in the noting of sub-codes, due to time constraints. All poems about animals, for example, were coded as Nature-Fauna in NVivo, but not as "Nature-Fauna-Bobcat," for example. Codes were:

    - Landscapes (60)
        - Development (7)
            - Everywhere I can see aluminum seeds…
        - Coastal (7)
        - Community (6)
    - Fauna/Animals (58)
        - Examples of animal poems: different types of birds and fish, caterpillars, butterflies, bobcats and mountain lions, deer, bears, foxes, etc.
    - Flora (48)
        - Trees (32)
        - Food (8)

Activities (Recreation/Play) (136 references)

> What if
>> You were a creek
> And you liked
>>>> to run
>>> with the other creeks
>>>>> and play.

Ashley Jamison, grade 2
Eel River Charter School
Covelo, California
Teacher: Alice Hawley
1997

- This code began as a strict recreational use of nature, but has broadened to embrace all activities depicted, whether recreational or work-related, active or passive. After water, the bias for which has already been discussed, this subject code is the most common. In my opinion, this code is also one of the most important, as it emphasizes the importance of play and activity in children's experiences and understandings of place. The activities coded for and noted in this section and the number of references/poems attached to them were:

    o Fantasy/Make-Believe/Dreaming (25)
    o Music/Art/Writing (23)
    o Agriculture/Work (11)
    o Swimming (10)
    o Relaxing/Repose (10)
    o Dance (8)
    o Fishing (7)
    o Hiking/Walking/Running (5)
    o Sailing (4)
    o Thinking (4)
    o Skating (2)
    o Climbing (1)

Weather and Atmosphere (96 references)

Colorful Shooting Star Night / Destellos de Estrellas Fugaces

In Puerto Rico it's midnight.
We are on the beach. My friend Jason is
on his cell phone. I'm tired and looking
at the sky.
Out of nowhere I see a blue star
go WHAM like a getaway car. Five
minutes
 later Jason says, *Junito, look at the*
shooting star!
And you didn't believe me before? I say.
We see more colors that night. Yellow,
a brightish white. I wonder if they see

them in the city. The sky that night was
like a flash of snow falling in the streets.

En Puerto Rico era media noche.
Estabamos en la playa. Mi amigo Jason
estaba en el celular. Estaba cansado y
miraba al cielo.

De repente de la nada v'o una estrella
fugaz Que hizo WHAM…como un carro
volador.
Cinco minutos m‡s tarde Jason dice,
Junito mira la estrella fugaz!

Y no me cre'ste anteriormente.
Vemos muchos colores esta noche.
El cielo esta noche parece un destello
cayendo sobre las calles.

Carlos Alameda, age 11
Lancaster, Pennsylvania
Fulton School
Teacher: Barbara Strasko
2007

- These included poems about the time of day – day, night, morning, or evening –
  and about non-water related weather elements like wind, sun, moon, stars, fire
  and sky. Codes were:
    - Day/Night, including morning and evening (48)
    - Moon (15)
    - Sun (9)
    - Sky/Stars/Clouds (8)
    - Wind (6)
    - Storm (3)

Seasonality (71 references)

Heartbeat Winter

If perhaps I close my eyes
I could forget standing
with my thoughts interrupted
by silence

I could fold myself
gently in snow
and forget
that the world never ends
on a Tuesday

everything would stop
folded in snow
but the trees
with branches too bare
to hold anything but sky
would pulse into blue
heartbeat winter

Breathing slowly
I can see
why I don't much mind the cold

Lindsay Griffin, Age 18
Brighton High School
Salt Lake City, Utah
Teacher: Patricia Russell (1997 Teacher of the Year)

- Poems about the seasons (Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter) and the dynamic changes (seasonality) between them. Often showcased through detailed changes in the appearance of environments, the behavior of animals, or the existence of heat, cold, etc. Additionally, seasonality is often linked to activities that one does in certain seasons (playing in snow; swimming in summer, hunting season, etc.)

Destination (38 references)

Crossing El Desierto

When you cross the frontera you
go with sed y calor, you feel
happy porque you
are going con un companero
but at the same
time tu te sientes triste because
you and him are illegals.

They are walking through
el norte but as they walked
they saw a cactus, green like a lime
they saw a man
and they asked him por agua
but he no los escuchaba

because he was running
and he was old.
They started to walk again
with no comida.
Una amiga se caya y su companero
was still walking tan rapido.
She saw a tuna en el nopal
and she cut it con sus dientes.
El Sol estaba muy caliente como una quemazan.
Walking again pero ella sola,
She stopped because it was noche
se perdio. It was hard to sleep
because the noche estaba muy fria.
She sonia que se was in el rio drinking aqua
y cuando se desperto she was
in the same place.

No one was there, estaba sola
no one came
except the moon, and in the light
she could see su companero
walking towards her.

DIANA ORTIZ, Age 11
Pueblo Gardens Poetry Club
Tucson, Arizona

Teacher: Molly McKesson
2003

- Specifically focused on places as destinations, or places elsewhere than in one's immediate accessible space. This code was also focused on favorite places for youth; some favorite places are generally coded as "destinations" for subjects, but were more often assigned a subject based on the activity there, and a "Sense of Place-favorite places" meaning code instead. Destination codes were:
    - Home/Nature Elsewhere (12)
    - Diaspora/Home of Origin (6)
    - Vacation spots (6)
    - Large-scale Events (5)
        - Hurricane Katrina, 2005 (3)
        - September 11th, 2001 (2)
    - Border crossings (3)

In all, these subjects were not largely surprising– knowing the bias toward water in the data helped me anticipate the prevalence of water poems, and the poems about nature, weather and atmosphere, and the seasons correlated to what one would expect from the standards of environmental content taught in classrooms, and dominant (and problematic) cultural meanings of nature solely as a site for recreation, or nature as humanless wilderness (Cronon, 1996). Destination poems, on the other hand, were often socially contextualized in a way that many of the nature or water poems were not. Importantly, destination poems like "Crossing El Desierto" above often invoked the experiences of marginalized populations in American culture and environmentalism, namely, those of non-white immigrants (Kosek, 2004). In most poems overall, I noticed that environmental contexts often took a backseat to actions or relationships at play within them – recreational, industrial, or otherwise - and these dynamics contributed most significantly to the meaning categories for each subject.

It is important to say that this list is not exhaustive. As I was reading and noting codes, I made certain choices on which topics to attend to in more detail. As a result, some categories, like the water category, are fleshed out thoroughly with detailed codes, whereas the Nature category groups all poems about animals together in "Fauna," as opposed to a list of all the animals used in the poems. I made choices as I moved through my readings, following hunches about what was most apparent or likely to be crucial. In all, this list could be significantly more detailed with specific entities for subjects, but I am not sure it would be more effective for being so due to the lack of those subjects coming through strongly in the readings. As John Dewey relates, all experiences exist in interrelation along a continuum of experience within the learner, indeed between the learner and his world, but not all experiences have the quality of being "educative," – conducive to the moral, physical, and intellectual *growing* of the learner - and it is this quality I was looking and feeling for when I analyzed the subjects of the poems (Dewey, 1938, 28).

Six Key Meaning Categories and Sense of Place

I identified six major categories or themes of meanings expressed within the poems: **Emotions**; various types of human and place **Relationships**; **Questioning and Debate**; **Freedom and Escape**; **Change and Process**; and **Religion and Spirituality**. Additionally, I included a **Sense of Place** category in my coding, for which I coded poems that were explicitly related to favorite places, home, or an identification of self with place. I also coded poems as Sense of Place when they exhibited a complex number of interrelated meanings. If I found myself assigning 4 or 5 meaning codes to a poem, I

considered coding it Sense of Place as this was an indication of a deeper relationship to the subject. I found poems like these across age categories, which suggests that complexity of place understandings through lived experience is not just something possible for older youth. Older youth did, however, make use of more sophisticated poetic devices, as would be expected with more practice.

Poetic meanings within the poems were categorized more broadly than poetic subjects, and were more difficult to code given the variety of meanings and interpretations that were possible. The iterative process of coding multiple times was most important for this coding process, as I sometimes interpreted the same poem differently between readings due to the ideas I was mulling over at the time.

Emotion (228 references)

Fire in Winter

The hoof-prints of the deer
in the snow are broken hearts,
bowed raindrops,
birds' eyes painted with a bamboo brush.

The rough-furred, coal-tipped legs mince:
matchstick pistons, they
strike sparks from iced boulders,
strike a wintery rhythm to the tick and whisper of
the creeping hoarfrost,
the pliant ice sheathing
river stones' flanks.

The scent of resin and musk is in those wide
nostrils,
the leaf-shaped ears flick
to catch a memory of soft rain in summer
greenery.

Untitled

Lost in the gutter
Disowned shadows flit across
Remnants of childhood.

Bo Yan J. Moran, age 14
San Francisco, CA
Lick-Wilmerding High School
Teacher: Tamara Pellicier
2009

Now-a pine bough splits in the distance,
graced with snow's heavy embrace:

There is the sound of my heart.
There is the sound of explosion
as the deer bounds up and out,
heels kicking a spray of diamond-colored fire.

Diana Chen, age 17
Holmdel, New Jersey
Holmdel High School
Teacher: Sandra Whitten

An Emotion code could have been applied to every poem, as it looked specifically at the expression of emotion toward certain environmental subjects. I coded for emotions when they were expressed clearly and strongly in the poems – "There is the sound of my heart" – and emotion codes were almost always attached to other meaning codes. The list below focuses on the group of emotions that appeared most frequently as I was reading. Note that emotions related to restorative environments are referenced under the escape and freedom category.

- Hope/idealism (55)
- Admiration/appreciation (37)
    - Also humility, respect
- Fear/Bravery (34)
    - These emotions often came together, as in a debate over whether to be scared about something or not, a rally to be brave, or a reflective, "I used to be afraid, but now I'm not" type of statement.
- Sadness/pessimism (31)
- Joy/Happiness (22)
- Nostalgia (21)
- Aloneness and Loneliness (18)
- Empathy (14)
- Cynicism/Apathy (6)
- Confidence (5)
    - There may be more here, as this code was added somewhat late in the game. This code is related to poems in which the speaker is on top of the world, feels able to do anything, and is exhilarated and celebratory in their abilities.
- Perseverance (5)

- o Worry/Doubt (4)
- o Anger (3)
- o Shame (3)

Relationships (227 references)

Us Men

waterproofed to the waist,
see a vision, that to us
only comes once a year.
We are grumbling, stalking
out to the shed, to the purr
of engines warming.
Our breath spirits the chilled wind.
All day, work.
For the first time I am a part of it,
 deserving of the reward that will come.
We sink back into cold metal bunkers
dug along gumbo levees
 the color of potter's clay.
Dried stalks & weeds sway as cover.
 In the distance, floodwater
rises against the sunburst ray
of a dying day. I hear the geese faintly
honk & gaggle above me. I see
silhouettes
dot the horizon. There are splashes
 of touch & go, wings flapping.
Yes, I do hope they like it here.
My father reaches for his boy,
                and I give in.

Eric Wiesemann, Age 15
All Saint's Episcopal School
Vicksburg, Mississippi
Teacher: Greg Sellers
2000

Grandmother

My grandma was the color of the river.
She was beautiful.
She could speak Japanese or Chinese.
She was like the bears, the birds, and
the insects
And the snakes.
She was wonderful.
She was Winter then Spring.
She was like the wild Coyotes.
She was caring.
She smelled like fresh water.
She was loving.
She made me feel like home.
She sounded like birds in the wild.
I feel happy near the river.

Analy Nava, Age 9
Junior Girl Scout Troop 256
Chico, California
Troop Leader: Leslie Layton-Flores

Relationship poems primarily focus on identifying relationships between a human – often the poet – and another human, organism, landscape, or a combination of two or three. The different types of relationships noted in this category were:

- Family relationships (50)
- Nature-Culture Relationships (41)
  - Natural/artificial dynamic (3)
- Animal Connections (36)
- Landscape Connections (35)
- Ancestral/Historic Relationships (cultural) (32)
- Friendship (26)
- Community (17)
- Love and Romance (11)

Questioning and Debate (171 References)

Happy River

Note: American Sign Language is a visually based language that has its own unique rules and structure; it is not simply a signed representation of English. ASL poetry uses visual patterns (such as a repeated handshape, movement, or sign location) to create rhyme and rhythm. Because the poetic qualities of an ASL poem are visual, a written translation does not quite capture the poem's essence. Below is the poet's summary of the poem.

Summary: Gideon Firl's poem focuses on a boy growing up along a river. Watching the river as a child, the boy saw grass, animals and trees. As he grew, the river changed, becoming dirty, the banks lined with factories and smokestacks. The sky is now gray, there is oil in the water, and trees are falling into the river, and are being cut down. It is a depressing place. Looking back on his childhood, the man wants the river to be beautiful again. He cleans and cleans until the river looks like it did when he was a boy.

Gideon Firl, age 10
Livermore, California
California School for the Deaf (Fremont)
Teacher: Jennifer Hipskind

Species in My Brain

A little frog
jumps off a lily pad
inside my brain.
While the world spins.
throwing the souls
of non-existing species
out of orbit.
While the world
falls out of place.
And the animals
leave the jungle
of my mind.
And memories

of lost species
are erased by

the acid rain
we created.

Jenny Houfek-Grade 8
McMillan Magnet Center
Bellevue, Nebraska
Teacher: Dorothy Turley
1997

Questioning and Debate poems were poems that exhibited a critical or reflective viewpoint from the poet, or dealt in some way with political discourses of environmental issues. The two poems above exhibit two representations of environmentalism in the poetry, with two very different emotional conclusions. As can be seen here, questioning and debate poems were often correlated with emotion codes: hope/idealism, pessimism, cynicism, or apathy, responsibility, appreciation or admiration. Forms of questioning and debate ran the gamut, from an introspective experience alone swimming to protesting dams, to reflecting on one's own identity, to advising about social responsibility, to criticizing social norms or expectations of youth in society. Codes were:

- o Observation and Reflection (63)
- o Self-Location (52)
- o Environmentalism (33)
- o Social Commentary (31)

- o Questioning (17)
- o Advising/Responsibility (16)
- o Symbolism (8)
- o Environmental justice (3)
- o Protest (2)

Escape and Freedom (161 references)

Freedom Found

Channel crossing
Currents churning
Friends brought together
Freedom found

Out with the lap belt
In with movement
Out with wheels
In without support

Friends brought together
Jaryd, Katherine and me
No more wheelchairs
Freedom found

Flannery M. Weil, Age13
Kent Middle School
Kentfield, California
Teacher: Peter Gavin (2001 ROW Teacher of the Year)
2003

These meanings were fascinating to read in the poems – often linked with specific landscapes or activities, and emotions, poems that expressed themes of freedom and escape often expressed them in the contest of restorative environments. Namely, poems identified a natural place or experience as an escape or respite from something stressful, and expressed peace, rest, and calmness as a result. Particularly interesting within this meaning theme was the relationship to fantasy expressed. There was a correlation between fantasy or make-believe activities as subjects, and expressions of freedom, solace, and comfort within fantasy. Codes were:

- o Fantasy and Adventure (48)
- o Peace/Calm (25)
- o Freedom from something (23)
- o Fun and play (23)

- o Comfort or Solace (22)
- o Wishing, longing (16)
- o Dream (12)
- o Rest (7)
- o Secrecy (3)

Change and Process (107 references)

Reflections

Sometimes,
when the mountains
reflect on rivers,
you can find out things
you never knew before.
There are flowers up there,
rocks like clouds,
a little snow becomes a creek
and grows into a river.

Lindsay Ryder, Age 11
Sunriver Prep School
Bend, Oregon
Teachers: Vicki Ball/Ashley Kaneda
1999

Change and Process meaning codes were often linked to seasonality and seasonal change, and to water systems within watersheds, like the poem above. However, as the poem above suggests, there was an important element or growth to these types of poems, whether in growing up, finding a new thought or place, or learning something new. Codes for Change and Process were:
- o Time (8)
- o Function, as in change or process in the way something functions (2)
- o Natural and artificial (2)

Religion and Spirituality (51 references)

River's Soul

A man sits by a river.
He has only known it for precious few
seconds, yet again for an eternity.
He sees the river, hears the river, is the river
He flows as one with the river, one body,

one mind, one soul.
The river within him flows with the river about him.
His body sways and rolls as does the river.
The gurglings that utter from his throat
match that of the river.
Tone for tone.
Thought for thought.
Soul for soul.

Max Mosher, Age 11
Kent Middle School
Kentfield, California
Teacher: Denise Zalecki

Religious or spiritual poems were identified by their particular uses of rhetoric and diction. Religious poems employed mostly Christian references, while spiritual poems utilized more generic religious language and often identified natural elements as spiritual beings. Poems employed diction like "heaven" and "creation," employed natural elements as saviors or "Mother Nature" as creator, etc., and often expressed nature as omnipotent or omnipresent. Initially, I thought this code would be more prevalent than it ended up being, and meanings coded with this category often expressed other, stronger meanings through the use of religious or spiritual diction, as opposed to expressing something spiritual in and of itself. Codes were:
- o Omnipresence (3)
- o Purpose/Meaning (1)

Sense of Place (81 references)

On Turtle Rock

 I haul the ancient,
rattling trap across the rocks.
Brittle, it leaves a scattered trail
of tiny, fragmented memories in its wake –
memories of its time beneath the seething waters.
Even now they lap
against the jagged edges of the shore
and shatter into a million
clear glass fragments.

I lay the trap to rest
beneath a proud overhang –
the roots of a thick-boughed tree –
posed as the guardian
protecting a fragile child.

My task is finished.
I know that I should follow
the chipped path
back towards the keeper's house,
but I am unwilling
to trade the untamed rhythm of the current,
even for birdsong and meadowwind.

For the first time
I understand why strangers journey here
to stare at lobster traps
and color-coded buoys,
to peer into this salted mirror.

I could stay here forever
and know myself

and know the water.

Alison Rittershaus, Age 14
Trevett, Maine
Center for Teaching and Learning
Teacher: Nancie Atwell
*2004*

I also coded for a seventh category, or "free node," that specifically identified poems that exhibited or addressed a "sense of place." These poems were often coded as sense of place when they exhibited a complex number of interrelated meanings. More on this is discussed in the next section. Codes were:

- Home (19)
- Favorite places (19)
- Community (9)
- Home/nature elsewhere (3)

Comparing Place Meanings for Youth of Different Ages

In comparing environmental attitudes in youth of different ages, I found that the poems were surprisingly consistent in the most common categories of subjects and meanings, but, as expected, interestingly nuanced in the specific types of poetic meanings. Figure 8 shows the distribution of poetic subjects for the four age groups, and demonstrates that poems about Nature and Water are the most common subjects used by youth in the poems.

Figure 8. Comparing Subjects for Youth of Different Ages
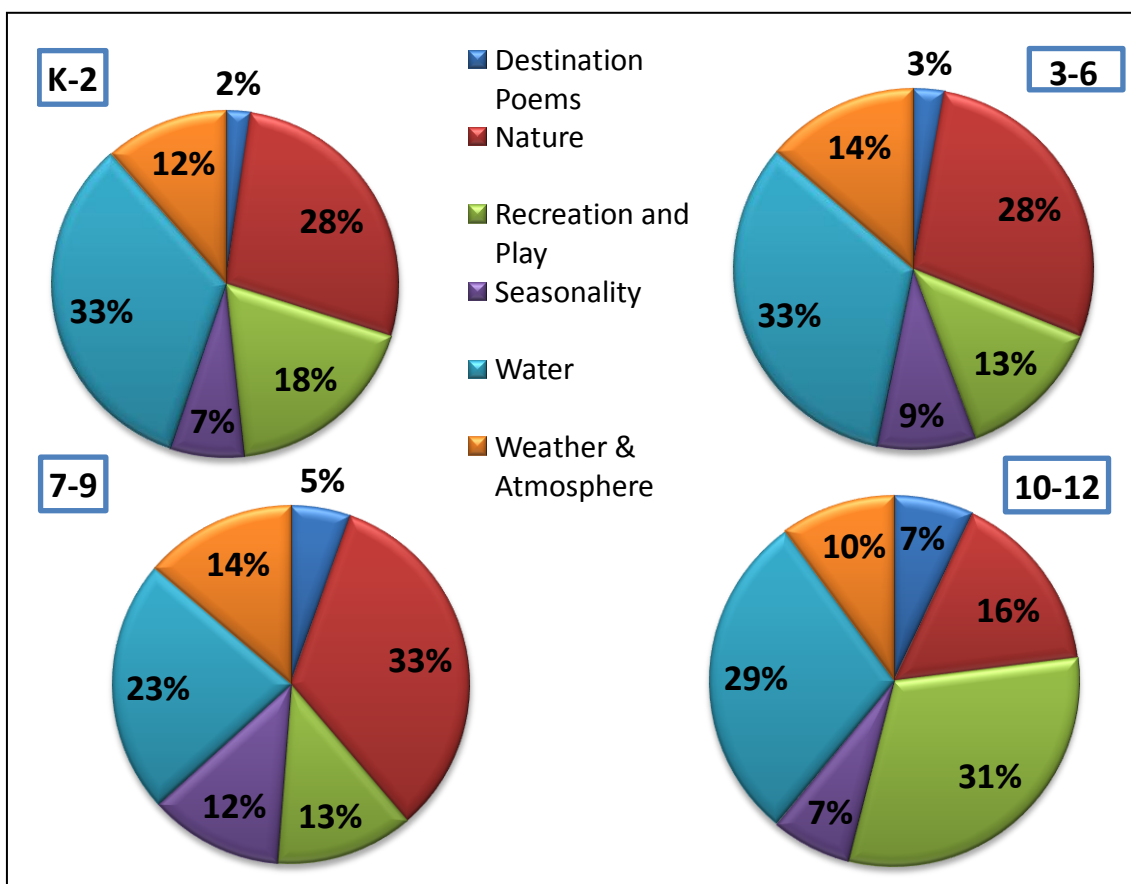
However, for the eldest group of youth in grades 10-12, poems about the watershed are most often poems about recreation and activity, about doing something in the

environment as opposed to poems about objects or things, which could be an indication of greater freedom to move around. It could also be a reflection of dominant understandings of the environment as a space for recreation only – a place elsewhere, that one goes to "do things," as opposed to an intrinsic or integrated part of one's community (Cronon, 1996).

The water and nature poems are not surprising as most common subjects as they signify both the watershed topic of the contest and the common definition of nature as flora, fauna, and landscapes: non-human things. Relatively few directly related people as natural subjects, though we certainly do see nature used metaphorically to represent people of value in the poet's life, as in "Grandmother," above.

The most commonly expressed meanings of poems within different age groups (shown in Figure 9) are where we see poignant and somewhat surprising differences between age groups. Looking at a similar distribution of categories of meaning as they are expressed in each age group shows us that the most crucial meanings associated with watershed topics are those conveying something about relationships or emotions: highly personal categories. The emotion code, like the water code, is not surprising given the empathetic mission and curriculum of River of Words, and the emotion-friendly genre of poetry. Again with the eldest age group we see a slight variation, in that relationships have overcome emotion as the most common theme used: this would mean that for youth of grades 10-12, or ages 15-18, the dominant representation of one's place, or watershed, is a space of engaging in recreational or work-related

activities and developing relationships within them. And for all groups, the poems emphasize the importance of this engagement as an emotional, reflective process.

**Figure 9. Comparing Meanings for Youth of Different Ages**
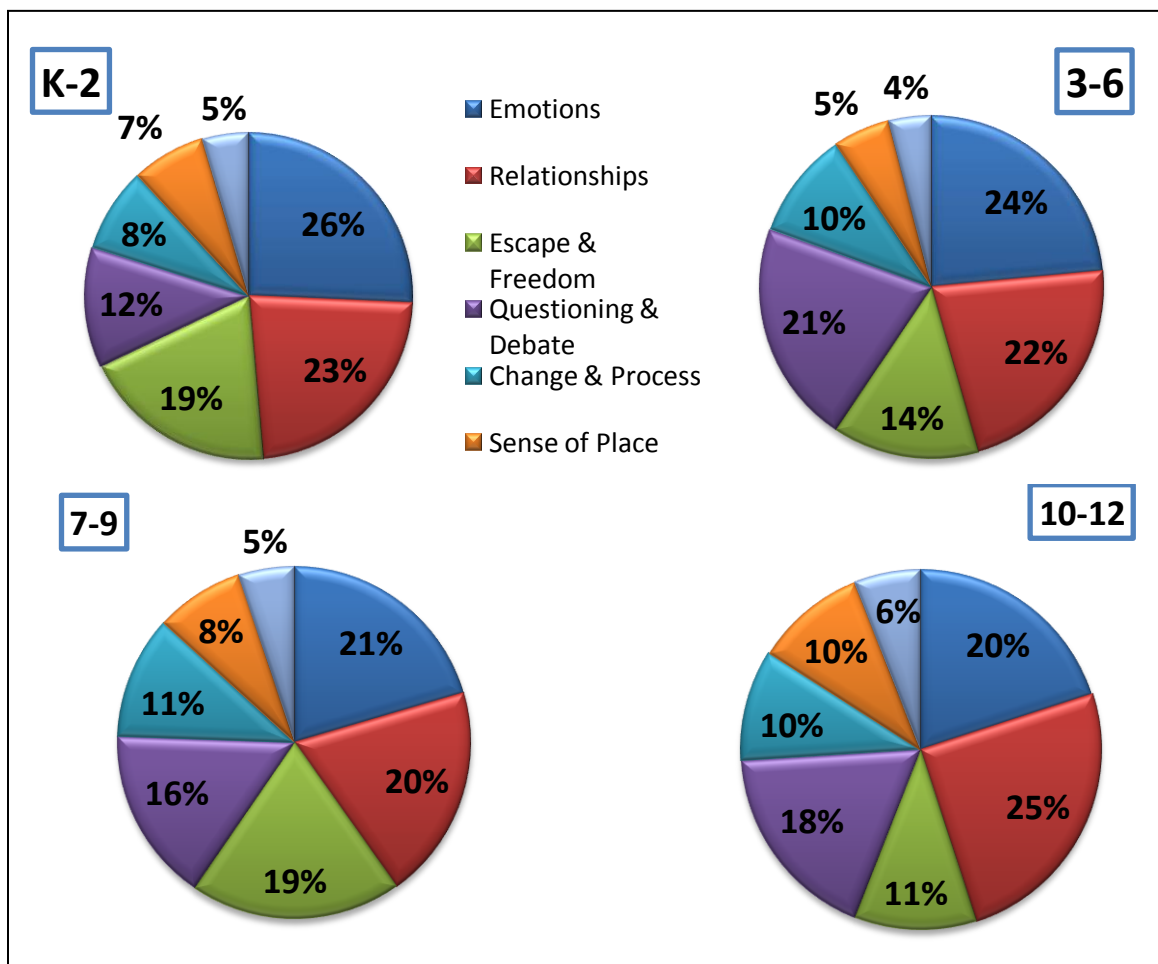
To understand what's going on within age groups we must look more closely at the specific codes within the categories that were listed in the previous section. Since emotions and relationships were the most prevalent themes, we can look at the distribution of some of their specific types, across age groups.

Emotions

Figure 10 below shows us the incidence of seven different emotions as they develop from younger to older youth. Before jumping to conclusions we should note that the diversity of emotions within each age group was very high, with no emotion representing more than 35% of that age group's expression of emotions. That said, the change of emotions over time among youth is both fascinating and sobering.

Figure 10. Emotional Development in Youth Poetic Expression
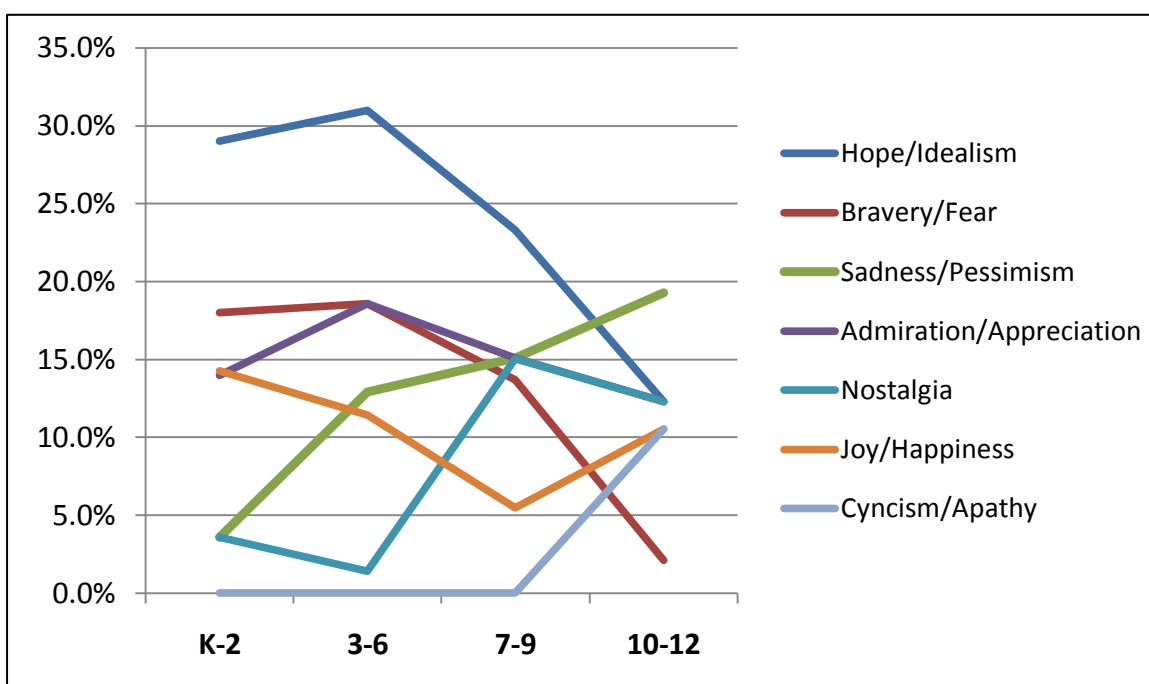
Happiness, Sadness, and Empathy: By looking at the vertical position of lines in each age group column, we can see that for the younger three groups, hope and idealism rings true as the most commonly invoked emotion within the poems, and is the second most prevalent emotion for the eldest. However, if we look more broadly at the progress of hope and idealism as youth get older, we see a decline in the expression of

hope/idealism and an increase in the expression of sadness and pessimism. For the fourth age group, 10-12, sadness and pessimism represents the most commonly expressed emotion, though only by a small margin. Promisingly, I didn't find any cynical or apathetic poems in each of the younger three age groups – a very important distinction when considering the development of environmental attitudes among youth, and the stage of development in which education could be most effective in contributing to constructive identity development. This suggests that constructive efforts at environmental education could be most effective before youth reach high school, as by the time they do, they are exposed to the full gamut of environmental issues, and in a position to make more critical value judgments about the environment, environmentalism, and place based on former experiences.

Bravery As An Important Theme for Younger Youth: We also can see by looking at the progression of the bravery/fear dynamic, that being brave, facing challenges, or combating and confronting fears about environmental experience appears to be an important theme for K-6 youth, and as youth get older, (and presumably more comfortable in their environments and with risk-taking) this form of emotional development becomes less crucial in experience.

Grades 7-9: Youth in grades 7-9 deserve extra attention in the analysis of emotions. Visually, we can see that between age groups K-2 and 3-6, change in emotional expression is present but fairly gradual. By the time we reach grades 10-12, we see a

less idealistic but decidedly more balanced use of emotions by poets – no emotion makes up more than 20% of the sample, and most hover around 10%. At grades 7-9, even a quick visual take of the graph shows us that a whole lot is happening: the expression of nostalgia makes a big jump from 2% in grades 3-6 to 15% of the 7-9th grade sample; joy/happiness is at its lowest point in grades 7-9, before recovering in the eldest group; sadness/pessimism, bravery/fear, nostalgia, and admiration/appreciation are expressed in fairly equal proportions. Further, we know that 7-9 graders also represent the largest proportion of poets in the sample, so the analysis of 7-9 graders is likely to be the most accurate among the age groups. The results of this category ring very true to my own experience, as the ages of 12-14 were some of the most tumultuous of my childhood; not coincidentally, this was also the time in which I began writing more often as an outlet for the intense changes, thoughts, and developments I was going through at the time.

Consistent Appreciation: Admiring and appreciating elements of the environment remains relatively constant across age groups. This is a gratifying result to find, as it shows that despite the emotional challenges being confronted by youth in grades 7-12 (and amidst plenty of adult messages that youth are unappreciative and uncaring at these ages), there is evidence that youth poets have consistently been able to admire, and appreciate, a healthy number of things about the environment and their lives.

Relationships

Figure 11. Meaningful Environmental Relationships for Youth of Different Ages
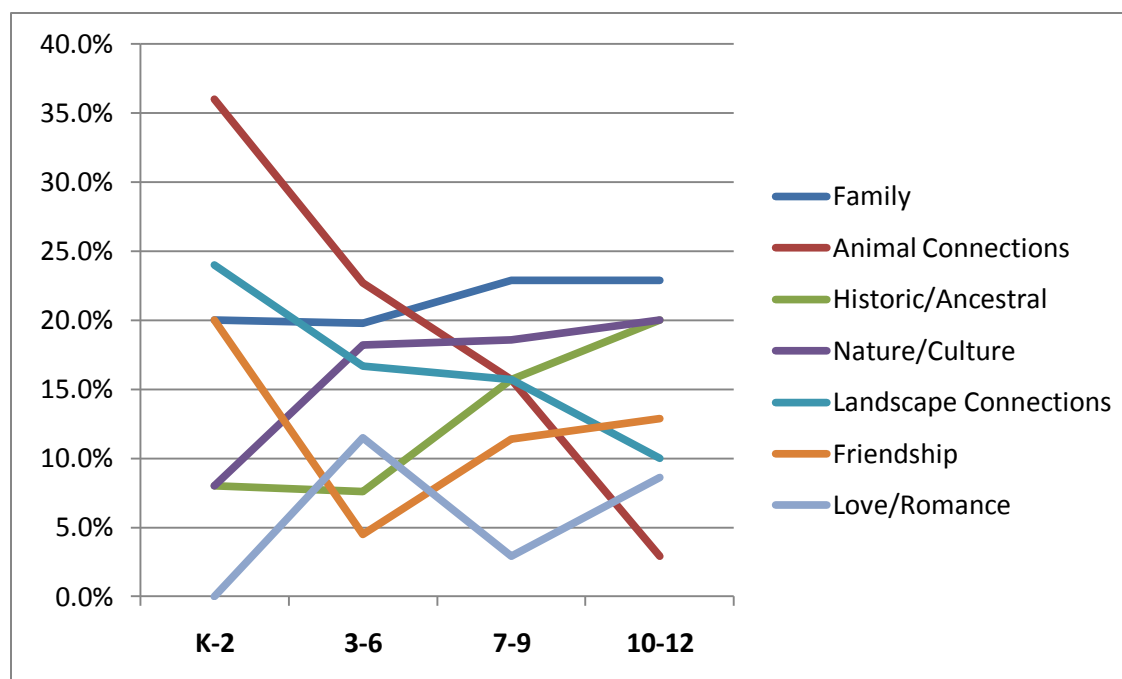
Animal and Family Connections: In Figure 11 we can look at relationships in the same way we looked at emotions. Animal connections, or relationships between youth and wild animals, pets, insects, etc, emerged as the most prevalent relationship by a long shot in poems written by K-2 youth, and led the pack as well for 3-6 graders. Interestingly, animal relationships make up the *least* expressed relationship among 10-12 graders, suggesting significant changes in youth valuation of place relationships at different ages. On the opposite end of the spectrum, family relationships begin important and end that way – they are consistently expressed by youth in writing about the environment, and actually increase as youth get older (I expected to see the reverse!) Given the contest and curriculum emphasis on connecting to place as one's

"ecological address," or home, it makes sense that family relationships figure prominently into the ways in which youth make sense of and value their local environments.

The dip in friendship relationships at grades 3-6 is probably not quite accurate as a decline, insofar as I do not think that it means 3-6 graders are valuing or writing about friendships less than other relationships. In my analysis, many poems written by K-2 youth identified animals, and not people, as friends, and these were therefore coded with both "Animal Connections" and "Friendship" codes, causing a spike in the K-2 friendship code that makes friendships in the 3-6 code seem less valued.

Increase in the Importance of Human and Cultural Relationships with Age: We can see from the chart that most relationships in the realm of human relations – historic/ancestral relationships, the relationship between nature and culture, family, love and romance, and friendship – increase in importance for youth as they get older. At the same time, we see a decline in the prevalence of landscape and animal connections, suggesting that youth tend to focus more on human place relationships as they get older, and less on nonhuman relationships to landscapes and animals.

This is a fascinating site for discussion, and brings up interesting questions about the substance of place identity for youth over time, and the stages of cognitive and social youth development. If we consider landscapes, animals, and humans to be interconnected in our understanding of sense of place, why don't these relationships become more equally expressed as youth learn and grow with age? Stages of cognitive

development in youth first theorized by Jean Piaget posit the early stage of cognitive

development (from age 4-7, or our K-2 graders here) as that of egocentrism, in which

children understand the world only through their own immediate physical realities.

According to Piaget, "egocentrism of the young child leads them to believe that

everyone thinks as they do, and that the whole world shares their feelings and desires.

This sense of oneness with the world leads to the child's assumptions of magic

omnipotence. Not only is the world created for them, they can control it. This leads to

the child believing that nature is alive, and controllable" (Swift, online, 2010). In this

sense, landscape, animal, and family relationships are the most apparent and crucial for

youth sense of place insofar as they make up the conceivable reality of younger

children. This theory is significantly borne out by the poems of younger youth, who

often utilize very effective (and egocentric) metaphors to describe their realities:

When I'm happy
100 deer
 Jump over the sun
When I laugh
100 bears
Laugh with me.

Angela Meza, age 6
Aptos, California
Watsonville Charter School of the Arts
Teachers: Jennifer Gill/Rita Uribe, Linda Cover (2007 ROW Teacher of the Year)
2007

As youth get older and move through the Concrete Operational and Formal

Operational stages from ages 7-12, they become able to understand the world from

other perspectives, and can envision and consider relationships that are more social,

cultural, and distinct from themselves. This is one possible explanation for the increased

invocation of human relationships in youth poems with age. More practically, there are

simply less people in a child's life at age 4 – Mom, Dad, siblings, pets, and a few friends,

perhaps – whereas with age comes more human relationships, and more variety within

them. The increase in emphasis we see is probably reflective of a very real increase in

the number of human interactions in one's daily life as compared to animal and

landscape interactions, but it also suggests a change in focus as a result.

One final supposition, which cannot be proven in this data but which is

nonetheless compelling, is to consider the level of transiency for modern families. If a

child has moved constantly, we can consider that the meaning of "a sense of place"

would tend to be more social and culturally defined for youth with movement to new

physical spaces, as opposed to defined by place knowledge of plants, animals, and

landscape features at a particular geographic location.

Discussion

<u>Nostalgic Place Attitudes</u>

Two larger relationships I've come across that bear discussion here are the elements of nostalgia and authenticity (authenticity referring both to sense of place, as Relph uses it, and to authentic voice in poetic expression). The first of these is the existence of **nostalgia** as an emotion showcased within the poems. We saw this powerfully with Bo Yan Moran's "Untitled:" "Lost in the gutter/ Disowned shadows flit across/ Remnants of childhood" (River of Words Anthology, 2009). This is perhaps the most concise example of nostalgia I found, but a healthy number of poems (21 of them) showcased explicitly nostalgic, romanticized remembrances of childhood experiences, many of which lamented a loss of that time. Many more still portrayed remembered experiences that were not explicitly nostalgic, and therefore not coded as such, but certainly associated a joyous or important time as far away from one's current state. Yet we know that the poet might not be more than 15 or 16, even 12 years old. Why might this be?

One practical reason to consider is the intensity of development within childhood years: there is a huge difference, developmentally, between a child at age six and the same young man at age 16 – even between ages 10 and 16, or 12 and 16. So the use of nostalgia in this view seems very genuine: for a 16 year old, being six is a long ways away, certainly further developmentally than the difference between being 26 and 36, for example. Further, one way to express personal identity is to identify oneself in comparison to who one was at an earlier date (re: Bob Dylan's song line, "I was so much

older then…I'm younger than that now"). In this way, identifying one's sense of place, and by extension, one's environmental identity, could be done through this use of reflective nostalgia about former environmental experiences of value, to identify the pieces of former experience that are valuable as an older individual.

A second, very compelling reason to consider nostalgia and memory in the poems applies directly to my second research question: *What are the implications of this data for existing approaches to environmental education, public discourse on youth and the environment, and the relationship between youth identity and agency at the local level?* In considering the impacts of public environmental discourse on youth attitudes and values, nostalgic or sad poems may also be cases in which youth mirror the pervasive uses of nostalgia in environmental discourse by adults and the media. How many of us have heard or spoken the words: "It's just not as good as it used to be?" or, in talking to youth about the environment and climate change, "Well, we botched it; it's up to you now, good luck" (As a young adult, I've heard both of these plenty)? The first words of Louv's *Last Child in the Woods,* to make an embarrassingly obvious example, are a conversation with his 10-year old son in which his son asks, "Dad, how come it was more fun when you were a kid?"(Louv, 2005, 1).

For a few paragraphs, Louv considers himself somewhat critically: "Like many parents, I do tend to romanticize my own childhood – and, I fear, too readily discount my children's experiences of play and adventure." But very quickly Louv quits that and goes onto what becomes his major thesis of the book: "He [my son] was right. Americans around my age, baby boomers or older, enjoyed a kind of free, natural play

that seems, in the era of kid pagers, instant messaging and Nintendo, like a quaint

artifact" (Louv, 2005, 1). For Louv, the implication in this statement and so many others

like it is that his own experience with the environment was not only different, but *better*

due to more outside access of open space. For Louv, the tragedy of this lack of equally

rich experience among today's youth is "nature deficit disorder," and the lack of open

space access the poisonous culprit of human health. While romantic claims of the glory

days exist across the spectrum of cultural experiences, contemporary and historical

discourses around environmental issues are particularly strewn with nostalgic drippings

over a romanticized, and as Kosek, Cronon, and others have argued, mythic past of

unfettered wilderness (Cronon, 1996; Kosek, 2004). Notions of health and restoration

that come only from retreat into the "wilderness," that set up urbanized areas and

populations as poisonous to health, and people-less open space as the antidote, are part

and parcel of this worldview.

        The point of concern here is not to decide whether the childhood experiences of

the father or the son are "better," and certainly not to claim that real environmental

issues like climate change should not be addressed with youth, but to consider the

effect that repeatedly uncritical, over-generalized statements about youth, nature, and

the state of the world can have on both adults and youth, and the ways in which these

and traditional approaches to environmental education inhibit youth from developing

informed, constructive understandings and self-efficacy toward issues in their own

communities.

As Relph says in *Place and Placelessness*:

Negative interpretations of present-day landscapes both appeal to the widespread and probably ageless sentiment that the past must have been better than the present, and are nicely uncomplicated....it is easy but erroneous to simplify placelessness, to see it everywhere in the post-industrial world, to advocate its removal by better planning and design. What is important is to recognize that placelessness is an attitude which is becoming increasingly dominant, and that it is less and less possible to have a deeply felt sense of place or to create places authentically [because of it]. (Relph, 1976, 80, 122)

Oversimplifying and glossing over changing places and place experience with narrow discourses are exactly what Louv and others appear to be doing - the point of activist media and journalism being to raise awareness to issues, and one of the easiest ways to raise awareness being to invoke danger, fear, and tragedy. Public discourse around placelessness and environmental degradation is riddled with generalities that render our situations grim, at the same time increased pressure is placed on youth to lead the next generation, as discussed in the Theoretical Perspectives section. From a media viewpoint, the scare tactics have worked: the River of Words poems show that to a large degree, youth are struggling with fear, worry, doubt, apathy, sadness and loneliness in regard to dominant conceptions of the environment as wilderness, people-less, etc. The irony of this, of course, is that the very discourse which attempts to rally the youth troops for environmental activism may actually be depressing them out of efficacy.

From an educational and community development viewpoint, generalized and abstract approaches to environmental issues are not only uninspiring, but destructive, as they present youth with all of the threats and concerns of environmental problems – global warming, overpopulation, depleting water supplies, habitat and species loss,

cultural genocide and assimilation, environmental injustice, all in exquisitely terrifying factual detail – without presenting their communities as accessible contexts through which any of these issues may be addressed. The environment has been presented as elsewhere, as global, as an abstract concept into which individual agency is a pitiful drop in the bucket. In this system, it is no wonder that replacing all one's household light bulbs with compact fluorescents doesn't seem to be helping anybody sleep better.

It is the structural disconnect between realistic environmental histories and contexts, and systems of environmental education that is the real issue at hand in public discourse around a collective degradation of sense of place, youth and the environment. This disconnect spurs the ease with which we presume we are losing something, the ease with which we presume that what came before is better than what will come next. We have not been exposed to the systems of education that connect environmental concepts and our own communities, and it is this connectedness that drives an approach of place-based education.

As Smith expresses, efforts in place-based learning and action are certainly present, and being practiced within the fields of environmental justice, food security, garden-based learning, and different forms of social justice and outdoor education (Smith, 2002). However, despite the growing number of these programs and efforts, they still remain auxiliary to mainstream educational content and practice, and with the exception of environmental justice to some degree, this means being delimited to fairly privileged communities and schools: a large amount of the River of Words poems come from schools with the funding to employ full-time poetry teachers, and from private

schools or charter schools, for example, where teachers have the flexibility to pursue

alternative approaches.

In the case of the environmental poetry and its relation to both traditional and

place-based approaches, poems could be, and probably are written from teaching

approaches in both camps. However, as I'll discuss next, authenticity in the poems was a

major consideration of the ways in which youth expressed their identities in relation to

environments, and the attitudes and values that emerged as a result can be tied (to

some extent) to these approaches. The poems can be considered in the degree to which

poetic representations of the environment take on meanings of belonging,

connectedness or complexity, and personalized knowledge as opposed to distance,

isolation, and generic definitions of nature. However, without knowledge of the

educational approaches used by specific teachers and students, we cannot make

concrete judgments about the impacts of these approaches in the poems – only

consider the spectrum of authenticity within the data and the degree to which either

approach informs it. Future research that pursues direct contact and discussion with

specific teachers about their approaches can bring us closer to linking certain poems

with certain types of education, and can contribute to understanding the differences in

youth environmental attitudes and agency, if any, between the two.

Authenticity

I mentioned that poems coded with Sense of Place were those in which complex

and constructive place attitudes, and by extension, place values and values of self, were

apparent in experiences with place in everyday life, and specifically oriented towards emotional engagement in relationships within places. I also mentioned that the entire body of poems has shown us varying levels of authenticity in youth representation of place experience and identity.

In other words, authenticity has become a crucial, fascinating point of consideration and discussion in this content. We see poems in which youth imitate popular notions of the environment and environmentalism perfectly, conveying nature as a salvific, benevolent respite from the modern urbanized world; nature as beauty; nature as suffering under the exploitation of humans and their destroying ways (as seen in "Species in My Brain" above). The "environmentalism" code is also filled with poems like Gideon Firl's "Happy River," that while genuinely hopeful, makes use of generic environmental images of destruction and resurrection that give the reader a limited sense of the poet's realistic experience.

However, we also see youth challenging less genuine notions of environmentalism, as in Emily Dwyer's, "Thanks a Lot," which bitterly criticizes the superficiality of her former involvement in environmentalist efforts at her school:

Thanks A Lot

It was this stupid thing
to exploit little kids
saying big words-
like that'd make any difference.
It was to the theme of Grease,
"We Belong Together,"
except they replaced all the lines
with recycling and do-gooder notes.
In hot-glued costumes and stage lights
we sang like there was no tomorrow:

"Let's work together/to clean up the land, the sea, the air/
It's now or never/ so get up, get out, and show you care /
Let's all pitch in and do our part/ that's the way it should be."

"Recycle what you use/ and then the Earth won't lose/ green trees
and skies of blue/ avoid polluting the air / show everyone you care/
It's up to me and you."

And we kept on singing
until there was no tomorrow.

Emily Dwyer, Age 15
North Point, FL
Pine View School
Teacher: Ann Skepper

The generic environmental values and actions proscribed by adults and/or

educators in this poem leads the poet toward anger and cynicism when, at an older age,

she discovers the lack of impact the effort resulted in: "and we sang and sang/ until

there was no tomorrow." In contrast, this poem can be compared to various pieces

about the Anacostia River, where youth involvement in cleaning up the polluted

waterway led to much more hopeful pieces, albeit those still sad over the continuing

pollution from the D.C. area.

To continue, we see varying levels of authenticity in the way youth identify

themselves within environmental experience: an "I Am" poem may be a detailed list of

the plants and animals within one's watershed, but it may not by anything deeper than

that: a list. On the other hand, "Turtle Island," as we read in the analysis section, not

only conveys an intimate experience where functional knowledge about the landscape

and its elements is apparent, but also exhibits an embrace of the experience by the

poet, and a reflection on the relationship between her own attitude toward her place,

and her identity:

> "For the first time
> I understand why strangers journey here
> to stare at lobster traps
> and color-coded buoys,
> to peer into this salted mirror.
>
> I could stay here forever
> and know myself
>
> and know the water. "

That we see very different levels of authenticity from different youth makes a lot of sense. Youth have very different relationships to place, and very different kinds of exposure to places, so seeing variation in the poems as a reflection of this is expected. The poems themselves showcase the different ways in which youth work with their experiences and the messages they receive to relate to local environments, and as I said before, everyday experience appears to be the most accessible space in which this relating takes place.

The existence of all of these poems in the content helps us understand the complexity of youth environmental experiences, attitudes and values in more detail. Indeed, as opposed to simply conveying their environmental experiences, attitudes and values in the poems, I see youth actively *debating* their identities –grappling with adult expectations, popular discourse and rhetoric, and their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the process of conveying experience artistically. More importantly, I do not think that we should assume that this debate is always a conscious process, especially for younger poets (K-2nd graders, for example). For me, this only makes the poetry more important, more interesting, because in reading the poems, adults and

youth together can consider potential impacts of discourse on experience that youth

may not consciously express otherwise. Examples of this type of implicit expression

come through in many poems about escape and freedom, and through the use of

imagery and metaphor as opposed to literal language: "You may think/ I am a shadow,/

but inside,/ I am a sun" (Dania Gates, ROW Anthology, 1998).

Linking Subjects and Meanings to Experiences and Values

In terms of youth environmental identity and sense of place, the themes I coded

helped me grasp how these concepts are being realistically conceptualized by youth. I

found that within the poetry, the meanings of the "environment," or of place, were best

showcased through personal experiences and events in everyday life that focused on

different landscapes, organisms, or elements of nature. Identifying the environment

through a particular experience also proved to be the richest site for identifying complex

meanings and a variety of emotions, as in the Sense of Place poems, in which one

experience could serve to symbolize a series of poignant emotions, relationships,

debates or morals.

Overall, the poems represent efforts made by youth to situate themselves within

both experiential and social systems of environmental understanding – the way the

speaker approaches the poem and identifies him or herself within it gives us indication

of the attitudes and values the poet has about the experience being portrayed. Of

course, this is not consistently apparent or easy to see, given differences in technical

proficiency and emotional or critical depth. Some poems were explicitly about the poet

and his feelings, and others about the environmental subject, and infused with more implicit meanings and feelings. Some were simply lists of details about place – the names of birds or plants, an explanation of what stream meets what river – with little affect. Some were hopeful, others sad, others peaceful, and still others disaffected; the diversity of experiences, attitudes and feelings in both depth and breadth is immense. What the poems have done so well, in my opinion, is to show us a broad spectrum of the varying levels of authenticity in place consciousness and identity among today's youth, and the unique details of those positions through specific representations of experience.

This being said, the poems tell us that youth situate themselves in their environments and communities through the meaningful emotions and relationships that they experience within them. In this study, we have seen youth of all ages consistently associate their environmental identities with family relationships, and therefore must consider the elements of family and place as significantly interrelated when considering what makes up sense of place for youth. For younger youth, connections with animals bear even more mention than familial relationships in terms of place association. For older youth, the significance of cultural relationships around place supplants animal and landscape connections as the major factors in sense of place development.

Thus, a theory of place engagement that seeks to understand and develop constructive place identities for youth might focus on the particular family settings, relationships and friendships of which youth are a part (whether human or

non-human!). From the emotions associated with place by poets, we might consider

that environmental sites of learning could be effectively engaged through the use of

activities that encourage youth to be adventurous, to try new things, to confront fears

or insecurities in healthy and independent ways. This is consistent with much of the

philosophy of place-based and outdoor education.

A Theory of Place Engagement

Having wandered deep into this analysis, I find myself in constant discussion over

the distinct meanings and limitations of "sense of place" and "environmental identity"

as concepts in light of how they operate in the poems. As mentioned, the poems that

expressed the deepest, most complex place identities and relationships did so mostly

through specific experiences and details as opposed to abstract stories. Further, they

often achieved this detail by narrating an activity and reflecting on that activity, as in

"Turtle Beach."

The linking of everyday activities and relationships to sense of place

development and practice contributes to the conceptualization of places and place

identities as dynamic, living processes: the process of authenticating one's

environmental identity over time, by having more and more experiences in certain

places and in so doing, learning those places and to identify oneself within them more

deeply. One fascinating example of this in the poems came in the link between poems

about fantasy and play in recreational activities, and historic or ancestral relationships.

Poems represented youth often fantasizing or linking themselves to historic

communities once present in the places they were playing in. Even if the details of the relationship were unknown (fantasized), common place acted as a marker and an invitation to make historic linkages –a context for youth to draw connections between themselves and individuals or cultures that had come before.

The notion of fantasy and play as place histories is a fascinating example of the ways in which contextualized place experience enables youth to imagine their own identities as deeper, connected, and linked to the identities of others, and the importance of play and activity in facilitating these connections cannot be understated. Imagine if play could be situated in accurate historical and cultural knowledge of places and spaces, how powerful it might be for learning? Knowing what we do now about the importance of historic relationships in place identifications of older youth, and the apathetic and cynical attitudes that potentially result from irrelevant participation and information, this idea becomes especially compelling. The poetry suggests that the best way to enable youth to build constructive, empowered place identities is to make the genuine stories of places and people accessible to them – even if those stories are painful, worrisome, or exceedingly complex.

The point made by the poetry, which contributes to the sense of place theory argued by Relph, Tuan, Hart and others, is that authentic sense of place and identity are incredibly active things. The phrase "sense of place" risks passivity, "a sense" being something not limited by time and space, but deceptively static as either present or not present. This construes sense of place as though it were a criterion that one meets once and then carries around all the time in perpetuity; a box to be checked, which leads to

the possibility of mistaking places, especially natural spaces, as static and unchanging

also. To maintain an unchanging sense of place from an earlier time does not seem to

reflect a continually active relationship with that place or a continuity of experience –

like many of us feel about our hometowns if we've left them for good, considering them

always in some way as though we were eighteen year olds. If sense of place is constant

in any way, it is as an ability; like a muscle of the body that must be worked and

stretched to continue developing, or else atrophy. Because of this, the passivity of

traditional approaches to environmental education are hard-pressed to achieve

constructive sense of place education, because the mode of instruction used renders

our view of the environment, and thus our identities within that view, generalized and

static.

Conclusion

This study has explored the use of poetry as a qualitative tool for understanding the dynamic, nuanced, and highly political representation of place experience for a diverse population of American youth. Poems from the River of Words impress that people of all ages in this sample are keen observers of place and community, and empathetic arbiters of public discourse in daily experience. The detail, depth, and emotion with which they express their environmental perspectives cannot be ignored as valuable information that both reflects and critiques existing systems of understanding about nature, youth environmental attitudes and values. The poems here also suggest that the constructive practice of place-based poetry facilitates the development of personal engagement with environmental values, attitudes, and meanings that could contribute to empowered place identities.

By the same token, the poems also impress how highly sensitive young people are to public discourse, whether conscious of it or not, and the considerable impact that negative public discourse around youth and the environment coupled with the reality of serious environmental problems has on their ability to create personalized forms of place knowledge that are both critical and constructive. Indeed, this poetic analysis conveys that as youth get older, their levels of hope and idealism toward the environment decrease, and emotions of sadness and pessimism, cyncism and apathy increase.

This important finding suggests that more relevant engagement with environmental issues and places is needed at earlier ages in order to combat apathy and

support the development of constructive, empowered environmental attitudes and

values in the long term. I content that what is needed are more models of existing place-

based approaches to learning, and new models using creative, relevant methods for

youth experience at different ages and in different settings. In this way, educators and

parents can enable youth to engage in learning in which they are not victims, but

agents; in which they can critically engage in their daily experiences, not just

intellectually, but emotionally and physically, to create distinctive knowledge of their

own places; and then to filter public discourses through that knowledge to decide for

themselves what empowered place identity means, as opposed to the other way

around.

Continuing research on the River of Words youth poetry necessitates the use of

different qualitative methods to fill in the gaps left by content analysis and interviews

with the River of Words staff. First, future research should involve interacting directly

with youth poets in their own places, in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the

lived experiences of youth, and the link between lived experience and the events

represented by their poems. While poetic analysis has given us a huge breadth of

information to which we can return in the future, a qualitative study on place

experiences of a sample of youth poets using more direct measures (interviews, focus

groups, participant observation) will help enumerate the depth that so many poems

convey, and that my first research question strives to understand.

Second, talking with teachers from the sample will also help me delve further

into answering my second question about curricular models of place-based learning. In

this inquiry, I expect to find variation in methods of teaching about place and poetry, but similarities in the use of place as the site for learning and inquiry. Importantly, I want to consider these approaches as they are employed across communities of different population densities and classes, in order to understand more about how effective place-based learning is in accommodating drastically different experiences of the environment in daily lives of youth, and the wide variety of value systems inherent in those differences as a result.

Another needed piece of future inquiry will involve returning to the findings of the content analysis more deeply in light of existing literature on youth and the environment, political ecology, and environmental psychology of place identity and attachment, and analyzing certain subjects and meanings further in terms of the development of youth environmental attitudes and values over time. This will enable me to apply findings from the data to existing literature on youth attitudes and values as they relate to youth development, and identify gaps in existing research.

A grounded theory approach to studying youth poetry has yielded insights into the process of individual identity development, and has informed our understanding of youth sense of place for a large number of individual cases. It has not, however, yielded much in the way of collective or shared sense of place in communities – a relationship that informs and is informed by individual meanings and values. I certainly think poetry could be a space for this kind of inquiry in the future, by paying closer attention to the shared images, statements, and symbols used by individuals in the same communities.

However, if there is a theoretical nugget to be found in this study, it is that the theory is in the details. Youth poets situate themselves in their particular environments by learning to own the details of their experiences in expression. Poets identify their places and themselves by choosing the particular facets of experience that they consider vivid, valuable, connected to themselves. From experience comes noticing; from noticing, looking; from looking, reflecting; and from reflecting, debating, critiquing, enjoying and identifying. I am reminded of Catharine MacKinnon's statement: "We know things with our lives and we live that knowledge, beyond what any theory has yet theorized." When youth can speak the vivid diversities of their own place perspectives, they bring sense of place into dynamic reality.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Initial, Final, and Categorized Lists of Codes

A-1: Initial List of Codes

Subjects:

river		
water	landscape	Night/day
rain	family	Sun/moon
pond	history –cultural,	work
creek	ancestral, ecological	industry/ag
ocean	seasonality	fantasy
waves	sky	plants
stream	snow	trees
swamp	stars	fountains
dew	senses – sensuality	bayou
animals –	recreation – dance,	food
bobcats/mountain lions,	fishing, play, skating,	border crossing
deer, foxes,	swimming	Hurricane Katrina
woodpecker, butterfly,	music/art/writing	Community (ecological
bear, frog, fish, dogs,	home	or human)
cattle, horses, birds	9/11	Home/nature elsewhere

Meanings:

Family	peace	human
Shared experience	rest	love/relationships –
Social commentary	calm	romance
environmentalism	comfort	fear
debate	empathy	bravery
questioning	joy	wishing
hope	happiness	longing
idealism	culture-nature	homesickness
optimism	connection	freedom, release
sadness	change/process	determination
pessimism	growth	difficulty
loneliness	movement	dislike
rarity	patriotism	nostalgia
belonging	appreciation	responsibility
spirituality	fantasy	larger than
religion	escape	life/aspiration
natural and artificial	trapped/limited	victory
ownership	self-locations	confidence
		pride

A-2: List of Codes Generated from Thematic Readings #1 and #2

Subject

Water
- Rain
- River
- Creek/stream
- Ocean/waves
- Bayou/swamp
- Lakes/ponds
- Puddles/gutters

Landscape connectivity

Flora
- Trees
- Plants
- Food

Animal connectivity

Recreation/Play
- Dance
- Fishing
- Climbing
- Swimming
- Skating

Agriculture/work

Seasonality

Family

History

Night/day
- Sun/moon
- Morning/evening
- Sky/stars/clouds

Weather grouping?
- Snow
- Wind
- Rain

Destination poems
- Vacation
- Border Crossings
- Diaspora
- Home of origin

Large-scale Event poems
- Katrina
- 9/11

Fantasy

Music/dance/art

Meaning

Change/Process
- Natural and artificial

Questioning/Debate
- Social commentary
- Environmentalism
- Debate/questioning

Emotion:
- Hope/idealism
- Sadness/pessimism/cynicism
- Loneliness/aloneness
- Joy/Happiness
- Wishing/longing/dreaming
- Fear

Solace/Escape
- Peace
- Rest
- Calm
- Comfort
- Escape/freedom

Spirituality/religion

Nature-culture relationships

Human relationships
- Friendship
- Love and romance
- Family
- Ancestral

Home
- Home/nature elsewhere

Larger Themes/Hunches:

Proximity to NatureEcological and cultural effects on identity (eco-regions versus urban/sub/rural areas)

Self-location

Authenticity
- Prompt-pleasin

A-3: Final, Categorized Codes

Subjects

Water **(H2O)**
- Rain
- River
- Creek/stream
- Ocean/waves/tides
- Bayou/swamp
- Lake/pond
- Snow
- Puddle/gutter
- Dew
- Marsh
- Estuary
- Water systems
- Dam
- Spring
- Thirst
- Tears
- Hail

Nature **(N)**
- Fauna/Animals
- Flora
  - Trees
  - Plants
  - Food
- Landscapes
  - Development
  - Community
  - Watersheds

Activities - Recreation/Play **(R/P)**
- Dance
- Fishing/Shrimping
- Climbing
- Swimming
- Sailing
- Skating
- Hiking/walking
- Relaxing/Repose
- Thinking
- Dreaming/Fantasy
- Music/dance/art
- Agriculture/work

Seasonality **(S)**
- Spring
- Summer
- Fall
- Winter

Weather/Atmosphere **(W)**
- Night/day
- Sun/moon
- Morning/evening
- Sky/stars/clouds
- Wind

Destination poems **(D)**
- Home/nature elsewhere
- Vacation spots
- Border Crossings
- Diaspora/Home of origin
- Large-Scale Event poems
  - Katrina, 9/11

A-3 Continued: Final Categorized Codes

Meanings
Change/Process (**∆ /P**)
    Time
    Natural and artificial
    Function (the fxn of sth)
Questioning/Debate (**Q/D**)
    Social commentary
    Environmentalism
    Questioning
    Advising/Caution/Responsibility
    Environmental justice
    Protest
    Symbolism
    Observation/reflection
Emotion: **(E)**
    Hope/idealism/optimism
    Sadness/pessimism/cynicism
    Loneliness/aloneness
    Joy/Happiness/fun
    Wishing/longing/dreaming
    Fear/Bravery
    Criticism/sarcasm
    Shame
    Anger
Escape/Freedom (**E/F**)
    Solace Peace
    Rest
    Calm
    Comfort
    Escape/freedom
    Fantasy/adventure
    Dream
Religion/Spirituality (**R/S**)
    Purpose/Meaning/Intention
    Omnipresence
Relationships (**R**)
    Human relationships
        Friendship
        Love and romance
        Family
        Ancestral/Historic
    Nature-culture relationships

        Natural/artificial
    Animal Connections
    Landscape Connections
    Water relationships (systems/ flows)
    Identity, self-location
Sense of Place (**SOP**)
    Home
    Community
    Favorite places/important places

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

<u>B-1: Protocol for Interviews with ROW Co-founders Pamela Michael and Robert Hass</u>

Method: In-person meeting, semi-structured
Time: 1-2 hours
Dates: January4-5, 2010
Recorded: Audio-recording + handwritten notes
Location: Pamela Michael: Pam's Home
                 Robert Hass: River of Words Office

<u>Protocol:</u>
- Tell them a little about the thesis (and for Bob, about me)
- Personal and Organizational Background
     Tell me a little bit about your own interests
          Your personal background in poetry and work with youth or in ed
     How you became involved with ROW and why
          ROW's origin story
     What was your experience like with ROW in its first 5 years (its time with IRN)? What was the organization like?
          What's the organization like now? Has it changed much?
     In your opinion, what does the organization try and do? What's its major goal?
- Contest Structure
     First, why watersheds as a theme?
     Second, why create a contest for youth? Why not adults, or all ages?
     In your opinion, what's the contest for? What does it do for the youth who submit, you think, or for teachers who get involved? For communities?
     For Pam: Could you tell me a little bit about why you chose the structure you did (length limits, etc.):
- Contest Submissions
     The nitty gritty: how do you go about judging the contest?
          Certain things you look for or expect?
               Length, language, etc
               Do you judge different age groups together or separately?
               Do you find you have different expectations for different age groups?
     What is your impression of who submits to the contest?
          Median and Mode Ages
          Places
          Other demographics: gender, race, etc?
     The Good Stuff: you impressions of what's in the poetry
          In thinking about the poems that have been submitted:

Appendix B-1 Continued: Interview Protocols

Subject/Meaning: Have you noticed any trends in subjects?
Interesting subjects or topics?
Age: Trends in poems from different age groups?
Regions: Particular themes or messages coming from different places?
Your favorites?
If you had to guess, what do you think is the most common word or words used in the poetry (other than the, a, and) as a whole?

My bet: free, I, etc

- Reflections

Do you think the contest does what it intends to do? Why or why not?
What's something you'd really love to see happen as a result of the contest or the whole ROW project??
How do you think ROW could improve to make this happen?
Suggestions of what to ask Pam/Bob? What did I miss?

B-2: Protocol for Interview with Susan Sarratt, River of Words Outreach Manager

Method: In-person meeting, semi-structured
Time: 1-2 hours
Dates: March 6, 2010
Recorded: Handwritten notes
Location: Local Restaurant

Topics to Discuss:

ROW
> In your opinion, what does the organization try and do? What's its major goal?
> What scale do you see ROW working at most effectively? Local? National? Global?

State Coordinator Program
> Brief history
> How are the coordinators organized? How do they relate to ROW in Berkeley?
> Best practices, ideal examples?
> What do you think the impact of the state coordinators is on ROW as a whole? What would ROW be like without them?

Differences between large submissions of poems and those chosen as finalists
> What differences are there?
> What are common themes you see over the years?

In your opinion, what is meant by "environmental identity?" What makes a strong environmental identity?
> How about sense of place? Is it the same as environmental identity or different?
> What kind of influence do you think a strong environmental identity has on someone's daily life? A youth's daily life? An adult's?
> How do you see ROW as affecting the daily lives of youth and teachers?

Contest
> What is your impression of who submits to the contest?
> In your opinion, what's the contest for? What does it do for the youth who submit, you think, or for teachers who get involved? For communities?

What did I miss?