

Voices in the Debris:  
Children's Use of Poetry in Response to the Social  
Crisis of September 11, 2001.

by

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## Abstract

This thesis explores children's use of poetry as a response to the social crisis brought on by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. An unprecedented amount of child-authored poetry emerged out of the destruction and debris left in the wake of the attacks on America. Asserting a perspective that treats poetry as a cultural phenomenon that can be taught and learned, I examine a body of poetry written within adult-facilitated programs taking place in classroom settings and analyze the social implications of the child's poetic voice. I argue that if taught under a specific set of conditions, the child demonstrates the potential to possess a deep understanding of the creative process and that this understanding facilitates the development of authorial agency. I then further this argument, making the claim that the combination of authorial agency and the safe space created within the poetry programs leads the children to an awareness of their potential social agency, encouraging their active involvement in their communities.

Within my first chapter, I analyze the child's poetic potential. Aiming to discredit the widespread social misconception of the child's inability as a poet, I frame the interest of the child poet in historical terms. I then turn to a discussion of contemporary theories of study regarding the child's potential as a poet. In a discussion of the pedagogical premises and methodology of these theories, I work to reveal the child's capacity to display a deep understanding and ownership of the creative process, which I argue legitimizes his potential as a poet.

In Chapter Two, I address the frequent hesitation of educators towards teaching the poetic process and the effects this hesitation has on the child's perception of his poetic voice. I then move to a discussion of institutions, such as poetry programs geared towards children, that do provide poetic instruction. I conclude this chapter by introducing a case study of a specific poetry program, the Community Word Project, and a discussion of the project's teaching methods. Analyzing poetry written within the Community Word Project in response to September 11, 2001 I offer concrete examples of a method used to teach the child the poetic process.

My third chapter begins with a discussion of the concept of space in relationship to the child's production of poetry. Making the claim that poetry programs must construct a space in which the child feels safe to experiment with his creative voice, I look at the way in which the feeling of safety within the programs facilitates the child's sense of social agency. Moving into a discussion of the child's use of poetry as a vehicle for social change, I examine the social connotations of the process of creating a "community poem," a type of poem used within the Community Word Project. I conclude this chapter with a significant amount of analysis of poetry written by children in response to September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, examining the presence of authorial and social agency within the texts.

In my fourth chapter, I explore the importance of the social potential of the child's poetic voice as it responds to the terrorist attacks. I first look at the way in which the child's poetry becomes a coping mechanism and cultural resource for adults and then analyze the complications of the adult's relationship to the child's poetry of social crisis. Finally, I explore the role of the child's poetry in the process of "community building," discussing the importance of the child's early apprehension of an active role within his community.

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**Introduction:**

The Day

Everyone started the day like any other.  
The usual hustle and bustle of the morning.  
People drinking huge mugs of coffee.

Until,

Something unusual happened,  
two airplanes crashed into the  
World Trade Center.

The whole city froze for a second.

The whole world froze for a second.

Now everything is different.<sup>1</sup>

The last line of this poem, written in response to September 11, 2001<sup>2</sup>, expresses a powerful sentiment that echoes throughout the nation as Americans, regardless of their age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, or religion, struggle to cope with the tragic events of the day. As lives were lost, land destroyed, and security threatened, all to the most severe degrees, the claim that, "Now everything is different," becomes undeniable. In fact, as the condition of the country fell into serious question after the terrorist attacks, this author's claim becomes a definitive statement concerning the state of the union operates as one of the few certainties in the uncertain time following the events of 9/11. Writing with simplicity and eloquence, this author uses poetry as a tool to express the unstable condition of an entire nation of people. Though this type of poetic act may not be considered a monumental accomplishment for a veteran poet, in this particular case it proves to be quite extraordinary. This poetic response to 9/11 is not written by a poet, a

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley Harwayne. Messages To Ground Zero: Children Respond To September 11, 2001. (Portsmouth.: Heinmann, 2002). 10.

<sup>2</sup> I will refer to September 11, 2001 as 9/11 from this point on.

scholar, or even an adult. The author of this poem is an elementary school-aged child from New York City.

The proceeding poem does not stand alone in its content, caliber, or authorship. In fact, the events of 9/11 have led to the appearance of an uncharacteristically large amount of poetry written by children of elementary school age (first-fifth grade). As the child attempts to find ways to cope with the attacks, he often turned to the use of artistic means, poetry included, as a way to deal with the complicated emotions that emerged. Writing poetry at home, in school, and within community organizations, the child created an almost unprecedented body of work in response to 9/11. A New York City school superintendent contemplates this body of work:

Students throughout our country, picked up their pens,  
pencils...and attempted to make sense of this most  
incomprehensible of acts. Our children attempted to use  
their words...to wrap their arms around the tragedy that  
befell families in the New York City metropolitan area as  
well as residents of Washington and Pennsylvania, a tragedy  
that brought heart-wrenching sorrow to citizens throughout  
our land. Our children also used their writing...to offer  
condolence, comfort others, and, or course, bear witness.<sup>3</sup>

As the child used poetry as a way to “bear witness” to a historical event, he simultaneously displayed a voice speaking within a traditional literary genre in response to a national issue.

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<sup>3</sup> Harwayne, 2



The mere presence of a significant body of poetry written by the child as a response to 9/11 makes his voice an undeniable component of contemporary American society. Yet, despite the reality of this voice within society, the child's voice is rarely acknowledged, let alone legitimized, within a contemporary social context. Often seen as incapable of using language effectively, the child is denied a significant voice. Elizabeth Goodenough, University of Michigan professor and editor of the two part special edition of the Michigan Quarterly Review titled, *The Secret Spaces of Childhood*, remarks, "The problematic of child language and consciousness is radically signified by *enfant*, the French term for child, and its Latin cognate *infans*, 'unspeaking'. The English derivative, 'infant', defines one who cannot speak...in...a world of discourse not yet fully inhabited by the child."<sup>4</sup> Goodenough asserts that the adult in contemporary society considers childhood an unutterable experience and believes that "the child going through it lacks the language to convey its reality to others."<sup>5</sup> In doubting the child's ability to articulate his own experience, and therefore restricting his presence in the adult world of discourse, the adult prevents the integration of the child's voice into society.

The poetry written by the child in response to the events of 9/11 not only draws attention to the presence of the child's voice within society, but it also contradicts society's assumption that the child is incapable of effectively using his own voice. Within this thesis, I aim to refute the widespread cultural assumption that the child is incapable of his own verbal expression. Through an examination of the child's poetry written in response to the events of 9/11, I argue that the child displays the potential to demonstrate an authorial agency within his creative expression that reveals the deliberate

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Goodenough, ed. *Secret Spaces of Childhood*. Spec. issue of *The Michigan Quarterly Review*. 2 Parts. (Spring and Summer, 2000), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Goodenough, 3.

and informed nature of the child's voice. In an analysis of the domain of theoretical and applied innovation in relation to the child's poetic potential, I explore the way the child's awareness of his voice materializes as a result of his experience with the process of poetic expression. I examine the teaching methods applied in contemporary poetry projects geared towards the child out of which I develop a perspective rooted in the notion of poetry as a cultural phenomenon that can be learned. Placing the emphasis on the process rather than the product, I present the child's possession of the process as the essential factor in developing authorial agency. Finally, I look at the way in which the child's poetry in response to the events of 9/11 operates as the poetry of social crisis and displays the child's potential to acquire social agency, making the argument that the child's creative expression within his poetry demonstrates the capability of initiating social change.

In order to classify children as capable of learning the poetic process, a definition of a poem must be clearly laid out. The definition of a "poem" used in my discussion comes out of The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics and reads, "A poem is an instance of *verbal art*, a text set in verse, bound speech. More generally, a poem conveys heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, or consciousness in heightened language."<sup>6</sup> The body of work examined in my investigation of children's poetry as a response to 9/11 proves to be an extremely solid example of "forms of perception, experience, meaning, or consciousness in heightened language," as the child consciously responds to a social crisis through an exploration of his individual and

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<sup>6</sup> T.V.F. Brogan and Alex Preminger. The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 938.

common experience, wrestling with multiple levels of meaning, expressing his experience through the manipulation of language.

Another component of the notion of poetry that is central to my argument operates under the assertion that poetry is something that can be learned and is not an inborn form of artistic expression. Often, poetry is thought of as an exclusively inspired medium, one that emerges within an individual without explanation or process. Hughes Mearns, a pioneer in his work with creativity in New York schools, defines this enigmatic view of poetry:

Poetry, an outward expression of instinctive insight, must be summoned from the vastly deep of our mysterious selves. Therefore, it cannot be taught; indeed, it cannot even be summoned, it may only be permitted.<sup>7</sup>

In this type of categorization poetry appears as an uncontrollable force and the poet appears passive. While this view of poetry is widespread within contemporary society, it is not one I share. Within this discussion, I treat poetry as a cultural, not a natural, instinct. This type of instinct is something than can be learned within cultural institutions. A continuation of the definition of a poem in The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, reads, “to convey heightened consciousness requires heightened resources.”<sup>8</sup> In the case of the child these resources become absolutely essential.

The child’s poetry I present in this discourse emerges as a result of very specific interactions between the child and equally specific sections of adult society. These

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<sup>7</sup> Myra Cohn Livingston. The Child as Poet: Myth or Reality?. (Boston: The Horn Book, Inc., 1984). 6.

<sup>8</sup> Brogan and Preminger, 938.

interactions take place in a classroom settings, are facilitated by an adult, and are associated with contemporary poetry projects dedicated to teaching the child the poetic process. The child receives the heightened resources he needs in order to write a poem through his participation in these poetry projects, which I refer to in my discourse as “institutional resources.” Most often offered by schools and community-based organizations, institutional resources provide the child with the tools that enable him to employ intention for specific purpose; in this case, the purpose is making poems. Following a curriculum in which the child receives adult-facilitated instruction, the child learns how to use creativity in the process of artful writing. The child is encouraged to a more specific understanding of poetic apprehension. However, after this apprehension the institutional resources display the ability to function to benefit the child in a larger social and cultural context.

Institutional resources such as the Community Word Project, a New York City program in which local writers enter the elementary school classroom to teach the child the poetic process, allow the child to cultivate his poetic ability through instruction. Exemplifying the notion that poetry can be learned within a cultural framework, these programs also incite adult responsibility in the creation of the child’s poetic voice. As adults facilitate the construction of the institutional resources, acquiring the space, developing the teaching methods, and presenting the process to the child, the existence of institutional resources depends on adult involvement.

The adult role within institutional resources must function within a very specific framework. While the adult makes the child’s apprehension of the poetic process possible, his presence within the institutional resources must not infringe upon the child’s

creative expression. The institutional resource must maintain an environment in which the child feels secure to experiment with his voice. In a discussion of the creation of safe childhood spaces, which she terms as the “secret spaces of childhood,” Goodenough states that the child must feel free to rehearse “the lifelong process of negotiating boundaries between what is real inside... [himself] and the world outside.”<sup>9</sup> In the specific case of 9/11 the child must feel secure to analyze his internal and external concerns in response to the attack. Institutional resources must provide the child with “the luxury of a safe center to move out from,” as he expresses his response to a national tragedy through the medium of poetry.<sup>10</sup>

As he finds his poetic voice within the safe space created by institutional resources, the child displays the ability to write poetry that examines the social crisis from both his “internal” and “external” perspective. The child’s internal perspective speaks from the world created within him. It is an individual world in which his own imagination, desires, and personal realities dominate. The external perspective emerges from the part of the child that relates to the outer world, realizing his place within his community and expressing sensitivity and concern for issues, people, and realities beyond his individual self. Beginning to develop an awareness of the reciprocal relationship between himself and his community, the child frequently mixes personal and communal experience in his poems. Danielle, a fifth grader from Brooklyn, New York, writes a poem in which this mixture is apparent:

#### The Unknown Tragedy

Mom wakes me up.  
I brush my teeth.

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<sup>9</sup> Goodenough, 185.

<sup>10</sup> Goodenough, 184.

Do my hair and get dressed.  
 Go to school.  
 Like any other normal day.  
 Teacher leaves the room.  
 Comes back in sorrow.  
 Kids have no clue of what's going on.  
 Teacher tells us the World Trade  
 Center is now gone.  
 Pentagon also hit but not destroyed.  
 Kids sad and worried.  
 School right there and then was  
 a scared angry place.  
 Tears wanting to come down.  
 Kids hoping parents are okay.  
 School right now is over.  
 I went home early.  
 Not with my mom but with my  
 grandma.  
 2:30 P.M. my mom comes home.  
 Sisters happy with joy.  
 Mom tells the amazing story.  
 I go home in peace.  
 But sleep in terror.<sup>11</sup>

Danielle's initial discussion of the news of 9/11 focuses on the responses of other people. Teachers are sad, kids are confused and worried, and the school becomes "a scared angry place." Even the joy displayed over her mother's arrival at home is conveyed through the reaction of Danielle's sisters. However, the last two lines of the poem illustrate a shift in perspective. As Danielle goes home in peace to a safe family, but goes to sleep in terror, she exhibits an inability to dissociate herself from the events she witnessed within her society earlier that day. Danielle's association with her community and the communal response shows her awareness of the events of 9/11 as a social crisis not simply a personal crisis.

The child's poetry not only speaks to a mixture of personal and social ramifications of the 9/11 attacks, but it also advocates social action in response to these

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<sup>11</sup> Harwayne, 21.

attacks. Contemplating ways in which he can help his country and displaying opinions concerning the action social institutions should take as a reaction to the events of 9/11, the child exhibits a budding social agency. Leovina, a Brooklyn fifth grader, encourages drastic social action within her poem:

Why?

People's lives are destroyed  
 They are more than annoyed  
 A heap of garbage everywhere  
 Look at the terrorists, they don't care  
 The terrorists might be here today  
 We must destroy them, they must pay  
 They have hurt us in more than one way<sup>12</sup>

Leovina's advocacy of an aggressive response reveals her understanding of the necessity of social action. Furthermore, as she writes, "We must destroy them," she includes herself within the "we". Expressing a desire to take part in the social response to the 9/11 attacks, Leovina displays social agency.

The body of poetry appearing as a result of children's responses to 9/11 speaks to the child's ability to learn the poetic process and use it as a vehicle to acquire social agency. However the problem of establishing this poetry's social significance still remains. The poetry within this discourse suggests that the child offers a unique and important perspective through his way of contemplating social crisis. The acknowledgement of his words and perspective serves as invaluable resource to contemporary society. While the adult's "sense of endangered survival on this shrinking planet becomes acute, children are our last frontier... they represent 20 percent of our population but 100 percent of our future."<sup>13</sup> Adults must take a stake in the recovery of

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<sup>12</sup> Harwayne, 74.

<sup>13</sup> Goodenough, 180.

the child's utterance as he speaks for the future of a nation. The creation of adult aided public space in which the child's voice can be heard becomes imperative for the survival of this voice. In constructing environments in which the child is urged to speak with authority and conviction he begins the process of acquiring authorial and social agency. Learning at a young age that he can use his voice as a tool for social change, the child realizes his potential to become an effective member of society. As he responds to a social crisis, offering an investigation into the emotional and social consequences of such events, the child becomes a "community builder."

Recognizing the necessity for the child's voice to be heard, various institutional resources to attempt to make American society aware of the child's potential as a community builder. Through the publication of poetry anthologies, display of the child's work in public venues, and emphasis on the child's public performance of his poetry, institutional resources serve as the mediator between the child's voice and the larger society that this voice strives to occupy. Speaking of the intended purpose of a collection of the child's poems, Messages To Ground Zero: Children Respond to September 11, 2001, a New York City superintendent, Shelley Harwayne states:

It not only captures a moment in history, it is an archive of what children were thinking and saying...these honest and heartfelt messages directed to Ground Zero could just as well be directed to us all—bringing new dimensions to our own feelings about the events of that day and to our hopes for the future.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Harwayne, Back Cover.



The poetry written by the child not only offers a sense of hope to our country, but it also serves as a documentation for the individual and social experience of a group of people that generally lack a voice in society. In a discussion of his poetry project, Ross Talarico, former director of poetry programs for Rochester, New York, recalls Mallarme's phrase, suggesting that, "poetry is the language of a state of crisis."<sup>15</sup> In this particular case, the poetry examined becomes the language of social crisis as it is written in response to the events of 9/11. Harwayne suggests that it is imperative that the adult listens to the child as he expresses his "language of a state of crisis."

Goodenough makes the statement that, "Though children, like poets, might be called the professors of the five senses, their research is silent and invisible."<sup>16</sup> The body of work that I examine within this thesis, in which the child is not simply like a poet but actually is a poet, makes this research audible and visible. It is my hope that this exploration of the process of the child's creative expression and the institutions that facilitate this expression will undermine the contemporary social assumption that the child lacks a voice of his own. This study focuses on a discussion of the way in which the child becomes capable of apprehending authorial and social agency and the potential social affects of this apprehension. Though the discourse is complex at times, delving into analysis of theoretic and applied research, the driving motivation behind the inquiry into the effects of the child's poetry written in response to a social crisis remains quite simple. This investigation emerges out of the basic belief that the voice of the contemporary child needs to be heard.

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<sup>15</sup> Ross Talarico. Spreading The Word: Poetry and the Survival of Community in America. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). 88.

<sup>16</sup> Goodenough, 186.

## Chapter 1: Poetic Potential of the Child

In the weeks and months following the events of 9/11 an unprecedented amount of poetry written by the child emerged out of the destruction and debris left behind by the horrific attack. Written in response to the immediate and lingering effects of the attack, the child's poems demonstrate how creative expression can be used as a way to comment on and wrestle with social crisis. Though every poem displays a unique set of concerns and conclusions, the poems all share the common characteristic of having child authors. Through the commonality of author type, the body of poetry produced by the child in becomes a testament to the individual and social effects of the events of 9/11 from the perspective of the contemporary American child. The social and cultural implications of this body of work raise a multitude of questions concerning the potential of the child's voice to operate within contemporary society. However, before these questions are explored it becomes imperative that the child's poetic potential is established.

The purpose of this first chapter is to explore the poetic potential of the child. Often seen as a fictionalized manifestation of adult desire that resonates within our culture, lingering from a more romantic tradition and time, the role of the child as a poet is frequently discredited within contemporary society. However, within this chapter I aim to contradict this falsified notion of the child's incapacity as a poet by discussing the child's ability to learn the poetic process. I first frame the interest of the child poet in historical terms and then turn to a discussion of contemporary theories of study regarding the child's potential as a poet. In a discussion of the pedagogical premises and methodology of these theories, I work to reveal the child's capacity to display a deep understanding and ownership of his creative process. Establishing the child's possession

of his creative process legitimizes his poetic voice allows an exploration of his voice in social and cultural terms.

The idea of the child as the natural poet has been the topic of debate since it crystallized in the Romantic literary tradition. Constructing the child as the ultimate symbol of truth and honesty, this designation depends upon a specific view of childhood. Within this idealized view, the child is a free being driven primarily by his own will. In, Emilius and Sophia: Of a New System of Education, Rousseau addresses the child's unique ability to act in a wholly instinctive manner:

[The child] pursues no formula, is influenced by no authority or example, but acts and speaks from his own judgment. Hence you must never expect from him studied discourse nor affected manners, but always the faithful expression of his ideas, and the conduct influenced only by his inclinations”<sup>17</sup>

Here, Rousseau exemplifies the tendency of Romantic writers to value instinct above reason. The child's “faithful expression of his ideas” allows him to enter into a sphere of human perception and creativity that has been lost to the adult.

The domain occupied by the child is greatly coveted by the adult who often attempts to recover the childlike perception. In his work, Letters to a Young Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke instructs a young man that anyone wishing to produce poetry “must be a world for himself and find everything within himself and in Nature with whom he has allied himself.”<sup>18</sup> Should Nature ever be cut off from sight, should the young man ever find himself in prison, Rilke says, “would you not then still have your childhood, that

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Emilius and Sophia: Of a New System of Education. (London: H. Baldwin, 1783). 307.

<sup>18</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke. Letters to a Young Poet. (New York: Vintage Books, 1986). 19.

precious, kingly possession, that treasure house of memories?”<sup>19</sup> Analyzing Rilke’s advice, Myra Cohn Livingston, author of The Child as Poet: Myth or Reality?, identifies a persistent adult desire to conflate the child within poetry:

If we are not poets able to summon up our own recollections as Wordsworth does in “The Prelude” and as Rilke also advises, then somehow—in some manner—we wish to hear from the children themselves how it is to feel ‘more’ and know ‘more.’ And so we turn to the child as ‘natural poet’ to tell us.<sup>20</sup>

The child as a natural poet becomes a subject created out of adult desire to apprehend an idealized memory of childhood. In the construction of this desire, the child may be assigned a poetic ability that rivals that of the adult poet. In an essay, “Pages from a Notebook,” Robert Duncan asks the question, “Can the ambitious artist who seeks success, perfection, mastery, ever get closer to the universe, can he ever know ‘more’ or feel ‘more’ than a child may?”<sup>21</sup> The heightened emotion and knowledge projected by the adult onto the child through the label of the natural poet creates a notion of falsified ability based on nothing more than adult longing and attempted reconstruction of childhood. In fact, this projection of heightened emotion and knowledge not only creates a falsified ability, but also falsifies the condition of childhood as it assigns the child a greater intellect and emotional capacity than the adult. A mere glimpse at contemporary society would suffice to prove this presumption to be unrealistic.

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<sup>19</sup> Rilke, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Livingston, 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Duncan. “Pages from a Notebook.” The New American Poetry, 1945-1960. Ed. Donald Merriman Allen. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999). 404-405.

The argument asserted here fundamentally differs from the theory of the child as a natural poet. The romantic idea focuses on cognitive and psychological theories of perception and memory, emphasizing the construction of the mind, and consequently the poetic ability, through the free and natural experience of early childhood. My perspective of the child's poetic potential instead focuses on the child's ability to learn the poetic process through a very specific experience created by a set of underlying conditions and the ability of the adult to satisfy these conditions as he teaches the process. In other words, my perspective differs from the romantic tradition insofar as I concentrate on scenes of teaching and learning in which the adult and the child come together within institutional resources to make poems. In particular, I focus on situations in which the child acquires a self-conscious understanding of the poetic process and in which this understanding becomes the gateway to the finished poem.

As I assert the argument that the child's poetic potential is not natural but instead learned, it becomes essential to address the notion of the intellectual capacity of the child. In his book, The Process of Education, psychologist Jerome Bruner presents a view of the intellectual capacity of the child that provides the conceptual foundation for developing an institutional resource. Bruner bases his educational theory on the tenet that, "any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development."<sup>22</sup> Believing that schools have wasted a great deal of people's time by postponing the teaching of subjects they deem too "difficult" for the child, Bruner's view of education avidly supports the introduction of poetry into the classroom as early as possible. While Bruner acknowledges the fact that the merit of the work produced by the child may vary based on age, he refuses to allow age to be a deterring

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<sup>22</sup> Jerome Bruner. The Process of Education. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960). 33.

factor in the acquisition of skills. Proposing a manner of teaching, which he terms as the “spiral curriculum,” Bruner advocates a type of teaching in which the, “curriculum as it develops should revise the basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them,” and eventually becomes able to “go beyond the information given.”<sup>23</sup> The child, regardless of his age, is able to work with the material presented and take it as far as his previous experience and new stimulus will allow. Thus, the earlier a child begins to learn the poetic process, the more he will be able to extend this knowledge over time.

In presenting the “difficult” material involved with poetry in a way that continuously builds on the child’s previous knowledge and experience, the teacher is able to make complex material accessible without watering it down or falsifying it. The child subsequently becomes engaged with the material and begins to possess it rather than simply observes it. Bruner argues that, “In an age of increasing spectatorship, motives for learning must be kept from going passive...they must be based as much as possible upon the arousal of interest in what there is to be learned.”<sup>24</sup> Poetry does not simply become data that the child must learn like the facts rather than skills. Poetry becomes a process with which the child is invited to interact.

In bring up the notion of the possession of learned material, Bruner introduces a concept that becomes essential to the child’s poetic potential. In the course of this study, I have come to believe that the child will not take ownership of the poetic process if it is simply presented to him through a textbook manner. A sense of authorial agency will not emerge out of the mere memorization of poetic forms and principles. The child must be

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<sup>23</sup> Bruner, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Bruner, 80.

presented with an explanation of the creative process involved in taking ownership of his poetry. Thus, in discussing the child's potential as a poet, the key question for me becomes how does the child take ownership of the creative process? In his work, Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry, Kenneth Koch speaks of the way in which he teaches the child poetry, saying, "The secret way I found of making this work extremely interesting and enjoyable is that every class I taught involved trying to discover something new."<sup>25</sup> The constant process of discovery to which Koch refers becomes imperative in motivating the child to move past the boundaries of his present knowledge.

These strategies are not enough to create a successful institutional resource for teaching poetry, however. The teacher must also project a belief in the child's poetic potential. The child needs to feel invested in the poetry he is writing and to see this serious commitment of concern and attention reflected in the teacher's investment in the child's writing. He should get to the point where he not only has a feeling of distant respect for poetry but also feels as though it belongs to him. Koch discusses the child's need of teacher support:

Most important, I believe, is taking children seriously as poets...

Teaching really is not the right word for what takes place: it is more like permitting the children to discover something that they already have.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ron Padgett. Foreword. Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children To Write Poetry. By Kenneth Koch. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1970). xv-xvi.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Koch. Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children To Write Poetry. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1970). 18-25).

In treating the child with the admiration of a fellow writer as opposed to simply perpetuating the usual hierarchical teacher-student relationship, the teacher provides the child with the confidence needed to explore the poetic process. Instead of dictating the child's experience with poetry, the teacher gives the child conviction in the validity of his own voice.

The child needs to escape the feeling of inferiority in relation to the adult. As the child's world is constructed and mediated by the adults, especially in schools and other institutional settings, the child attaches a sense of power to the adult voice that he does not often attach to his own. In order to engage in the poetic process, the child must feel as though his voice has the potential to convey authority and presence equal to that carried by the adult voice. Thoughts, feelings, and words themselves thus become legitimate. It is only when the child feels assured enough to express his true intentions that he is able to produce compelling poetry. Part of this sense of legitimacy involves the freedom to be performative, energetic, and playful. Koch speaks about the child's need for comfort with his own voice, as he describes the importance of a permissive environment for writing:

I wanted to rouse them out of the timidity I felt they had about being "crazy" or "silly" in front of an adult in school... Children often need help in starting to feel free and imaginative about a particular theme... The trouble with a child's not being "crazy" is that he will instead be conventional; and it is truth that a conventional image, for example, is not, as far as its effect is concerned, an image at all. It's another story



when I read “orange as a rose” or even “yellow as a rose”—I  
see the flower and the color and something beyond.<sup>27</sup>

When the child is liberated into self-confidence and verbal self-awareness he is more likely to write fresh and surprising poetry. A fifth-grader from Brooklyn, New York, Jessica, writes a poem in response to 9/11 in which the “silly” way in which the child speaks accounts for a great deal of the power in the poem. Jessica writes:

9-11

On 9-11,  
September 11, 2001  
New York City  
lost its  
two front teeth.  
For that was the day  
the two  
Twin Towers  
collapsed.<sup>28</sup>

The comparison of the Twin Towers to a set of front teeth initially appears very simple. The image of the two front teeth carries a great deal of force. However, considering the author, one sees that the label of the two front teeth becomes particularly significant. At the age of about ten or eleven, Jessica would recently have experienced the loss of her baby teeth and the subsequent replacement by her adult teeth. The two front teeth are among the most dramatic teeth to lose as they leave the most noticeable gaps. Unlike Jessica’s baby teeth, the Twin Towers will not reappear in adult form. Thus, the void left by the loss of the two front teeth becomes unexpectedly traumatic. Had Jessica been hesitant to use such everyday language, she may not have been able to convey her the

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<sup>27</sup> Koch, 10-18.

<sup>28</sup> Harwayne, 11.

shock of 9/11 in such a way. This bold, uninhibited voice becomes the defining factor in Jessica's poem.

As the child becomes an active writer of poetry, there is one final condition that must be satisfied for an educational resource to succeed fully. The child must have a stake not only in the final product, but also in the entire process involved in creating it. Talarico claims that poetry "was never meant to be merely words on a page. Poetry is a way of seeing and appreciating the world around us. It is that particular vision that illuminates both without and within."<sup>29</sup> While this discussion of poetry may appear rather diffuse, the main thrust of Talarico's idea extends poets into the full experience of perception and cognition. It becomes inseparable from life. That is, poetry is suffused with an apprehension of a social and material world. According to Talarico, the mere presence of the creative process does not ensure the child's capability as a poet. In order to write effective poetry, the child cannot simply conjure up words, but must actually take part in a process that goes far beyond the expression of language. The child must become aware of the budding creative process, the relationship between this process and his outer world, and his ability to manipulate the process in order to create poetry. The child must own his creative process.

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<sup>29</sup> Talarico, 17.

## Chapter 2: Authorial Agency

Institutional resources that operate under the theoretical tactics discussed in chapter one become key factors in awakening the child's perception of the potential of his creative process. However, the general cultural hesitation about poetry within contemporary society results in a scarcity of cultural resources. Even schoolteachers, who are themselves dependent on the economy of cultural education, are not immune to the cultural aversion towards poetry. Often hesitant to teach poetry within the classroom, teachers find themselves untrained in this "remote and specialized art."<sup>30</sup> In his work, Kenneth Koch addresses the effects of avoiding poetry writing within the classroom:

My questions to teachers I worked with were always,  
"Did you try teaching poetry writing? And if so, how did  
it go?"... Those who said No, who were reluctant to try it,  
were, usually, simply afraid they couldn't do it, since they weren't  
poets and didn't even know much about poetry. "You can do  
it," they said to me, "because you're a poet and you know a lot  
about poetry; but that's not the case with me. How could I teach  
anyone to write it?" The teachers whose reply was Yes and Badly  
had either done the teaching on a bad day, or in too methodical  
and inattentive a way, and then when a class hadn't gone well  
had become discouraged and of the opinion either that (a) they  
were incapable of doing such teaching or that (b) the children  
weren't interested.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Padgett, xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Koch, 311.

The teacher's belief in his inability to teach poetry because he lacks the status of a poet displays the consequences of the widespread assumption that poetry is an inborn gift. Feeling unable to participate in or teach this kind of innate knowledge, the teacher falls privy to the self-fulfilling feedback loop that results from a sense of poetry as an unlearned and thus unteachable art. The teacher's reluctance towards poetry seriously debilitates the child's sense of his own ability to write poetry. The child frequently falls into the belief that poetry is too difficult to write.<sup>32</sup> Without the encouragement of teachers to mediate his hesitation the child often alienates himself from poetry. In considering poetry too difficult to write, the child becomes a consumer "of poetry written for them [him] by adults: nursery rhymes, nonsense poems, limericks, and poems about pets," rather than the producer of his own verse.<sup>33</sup> The child thus becomes dependent on the creative process of others, perpetuating the erroneous contemporary cultural belief that the child's "taste and abilities... [are] miniature."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the scarcity of existing educational resources, the effectiveness of programs that do exist provide evidence in support of the theory that contemporary society seriously underestimates the poetic potential of the child. The poetry emerging from established institutional resources speaks to the notion that if taught under the correct circumstances, the child proves to be capable of apprehending the poetic process. Through my research, I became aware of a poetry project, The Community Word Project<sup>35</sup>, based in New York City, dedicated to teaching the child the poetic process. Fascinated by the information I encountered regarding the CWP, and the project's ability

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<sup>32</sup> Koch, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Padgett, xiv.

<sup>34</sup> Padgett, xiv.

<sup>35</sup> From this point on I will refer to The Community Word Project as the CWP.

to share some affinities with the past romantic theories of childhood while simultaneously differing from romanticism in its belief in the source of the child's poetic potential, as a way to establish the child as a being that possesses a latent poetic potential can be invoked under a specific set of conditions, I initiated a case study of the project in the hopes of developing a concrete example of a method used to aid the child in the possession of the poetic process. Over the course of my study, I frequently conversed with Michele Kotler, the director of the project. Through our conversations via email, the telephone, and eventually in person as I traveled to New York to meet with her and observe the operation of the project, I developed a deep familiarity with the workings of this particular project. I discuss it here as a way to represent a general approach to poetry that has become increasingly prevalent in the thriving field of poetry programs for the child.<sup>36</sup> Throughout my discussion of institutional resources, the CWP acts as a representative for of the larger group of poetry programs targeting the child within contemporary society.

The CWP spawned out of an earlier project that Kotler founded in 1994, The Community Poem Project<sup>37</sup>. Beginning as part of the Nomadic Pictures Documentary, "No Time to be a Child,"<sup>38</sup> the CPP generated poetry-writing workshops for at-risk New York City youth. In 1998, when Kotler turned this once part-time venture into a full-time venture, the CPP became the CWP. Rooted in methods of teaching that allow young people to be heard, the CWP has guided over one thousand students in their pursuit of the

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<sup>36</sup> Other poetry programs that demonstrate similar aims and methods to those of the Community Word Project are InsideOut, a Detroit based project, and the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, a New York City based project.

<sup>37</sup> From this point on I will refer to the Community Poem Project as the CPP.

<sup>38</sup> This documentary, funded by the Ford and MacArthur Foundation, aired on PBS in May of 1995 and included a collaborative poem generated by a work shop Kotler ran for at-risk Chicago youth.

creative process. In its practice, the CWP places a heavy emphasis on integrating the poetic voice the child discovers within the project into the community. Along with a CWP member, a trained teaching-artist who makes weekly visits to the public school classroom, and the regular classroom teacher, the children work together to create a collaborative poem that they perform in front of their families, peers, and neighbors at the conclusion of the yearlong program. In addition to the original, full-length poem produced by the children, they also join together with a professional visual artist to turn their poem into a team designed, team painted mural that is displayed at public venues throughout New York City and across the country.

In a phone interview with Kotler, we discussed the potential of the child as a poet. Kotler acknowledges that the elementary school aged child seems to have a natural inclination towards poetry. In her view, this inclination develops culturally as a result of exposure to nursery rhymes and short lyrics that are repeated to children from infancy. The exposure to such verse familiarizes the child with the poetic devices of alliteration and rhyme. Yet, this acculturation to poetic language is not the same thing as an ownership of the creative process. Rather, awareness of the poetic devices becomes the reference point from which the child may start to learn the poetic process. This becomes the point where the responsibility shifts to the teacher.<sup>39</sup>

Kotler places a large responsibility on the teacher, who plays the key role in aiding the child's ownership of the poetic process. Believing that it is not just enough to teach, Kotler believes that the success of her program lies in "what is taught and how it is taught."<sup>40</sup> She claims that there is often "too great... a focus on the product [the finished

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<sup>39</sup> Michele Kotler. Telephone Interview. (5 March 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Kotler, Telephone Interview.

poem] without taking the time to teach the process.”<sup>41</sup> Recalling the familiar anecdote of the difference between giving a man a fish and teaching him how to fish, Kotler asserted the importance of providing the child with knowledge not only of poetry, but also of what actually goes into producing a poem. Assigning the teacher the responsibility of illuminating this process, Kotler explained how the teachers in her program go about it. According to Kotler’s method, the teacher must ask himself the question, what is the recipe for a poem? Once the teacher establishes a list of the techniques that he views as constituting the recipe for a poem, he must then break this list down and teach the techniques one at a time, allowing the child to develop a full understanding of one poetic element before moving onto the next.

Kotler offered an example of the way in which the poetic process can be broken down in order to teach the child the component parts of the process. The example focused on teaching the child how to develop imagery within a poem. Explaining her notion of “prompting,” building self-conscious mastery by marking the steps involved in acquiring writing skills, Kotler uses questions as a way to reveal the writing process to the child.<sup>42</sup> The teaching style employed in the example appears as a version of the Socratic method of teaching in which the questions are geared specifically towards the poetic process. The Socratic Method allows for a great deal of flexibility in regards to the concepts and conclusions explored:

We can question goals and purposes. We can probe into the nature of the question, the problem, or issue that is on the floor.

We can inquire into whether or not we have relevant data and

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<sup>41</sup> Kotler, Telephone Interview.

<sup>42</sup> Kotler, Telephone Interview.

information. We can consider alternative interpretations of data and information. We can analyze key concepts and ideas. We can question assumptions being made. We can ask students to trace out the implications and consequences of what they are saying. We can consider alternative points of view.<sup>43</sup>

Manipulating the different dimensions of the Socratic method of teaching, Kotler prompts the child into exploring multiple levels of meaning in his poetry. Asking “How would you describe something that is slow?” Kotler receives responses such as “Honey dripping down the side of a tree,” creating the beginning of an image that she then uses further questioning to expand, specifically: What kind of tree is the honey dripping down? How does the honey taste? Smell? Feel?<sup>44</sup> As Kotler prompts the child, the image that he creates becomes increasingly complex. The child consequently becomes able to differentiate between a simple and a complex image.

Once Kotler feels that the child has an appropriate understanding of the basic concept of imagery, she begins to add in other techniques that can be used in combination with it. Asking the question, “How would you describe something that is fast?” Kotler might receive a response like “A river that rushes by.” Using this example she moves into the notion of the beat of the line in relationship to the imagery. Continuing her use of prompting, Kotler asks, “When you describe something that is fast how can you use the words in the line to show that the image is fast?” Eventually, the child reaches the response of writing the line using quick and choppy words and creates lines like, “Fast

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<sup>43</sup> Socratic Teaching. 2003. Critical Thinking Community. (11 March 2003).  
<<http://lonestar.texas.net/~msecifert/crit3.html>>

<sup>44</sup> Kotler, Telephone Interview.



blue water flows by.”<sup>45</sup> Aware of the use of the techniques of imagery and rhythm or “beat” the child displays an understanding of part of the poetic process. More importantly, the child was prompted to discover these techniques on his own. Thus, he establishes an ownership of the techniques that he has been able to explore.

The construction of complex imagery that Kotler prompts in her teaching becomes apparent in the lines of the poems expressing the responses of the child to the events of 9/11. One child writes, “I dream of the blue bird in the winter city chirping when the moon is working,” illustrating a very sophisticated level of imagery.<sup>46</sup> The personification of the moon illustrates an ability to make unexpected connections between visual, aural, tactile, and kinetic images, between the song of the nocturnal bird and the nighttime labor of the moon. Another line, “I am a hot heart, round apple and green blood sitting still,” displays the child’s ability to convey a sense of shock to the apple-like heart, transferring the roundness of the heart to the roundness of the apple, and imagining the apple’s own green blood.<sup>47</sup> The child’s heart is “sitting still” in response to 9/11. While this image may describe fear, shock, or numbness, as well as the heart’s robust strength, it certainly illustrates the child’s understanding of the concept of using concrete imagery to describe emotion’s impact on the body and mind.

Other examples reveal the child’s ability consciously to incorporate specific literary techniques into his poetry. One child writes the line, “Hate is bad bumblebees burning you in the destructive dirty ground.”<sup>48</sup> The alliteration used in this line exhibits

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<sup>45</sup> Kotler, Telephone Interview.

<sup>46</sup> “Fears and Dreams.” Community Poem written in the CWP. 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Class. Manhattan, NY.

<sup>47</sup> “My Heart Is Safe In The Beautiful Darkness.” Community Poem written in the CWP. 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Class. Bronx, NY. II 12.

<sup>48</sup> “Our Poem Of Rainbow Writing.” Community Poem written in the CWP. 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Class. Bronx, NY. II 13.

the child's ability to apply the techniques taught through the Community Word Project in his own writing. "I dream that I can fly fast up the fluffy white clouds," demonstrates the child's capacity to understand the concept of beat in relationship to imagery.<sup>49</sup> Using short words to describe the feeling of rapid ascent into the sky, the child's words mimic the sensation when read aloud.

Kotler combines teaching writing with teaching reading through exposure to works of established poets. Bringing in examples of the work of well-known poets, often reading aloud, and discussing the various components of the poems with the child, the teachers of the CWP allow the child to familiarize himself with models of the devices being taught through the project. An understanding of previous literary works allows the child to recognize complex examples of the techniques they themselves have discovered, introducing a critical (and self-critical) dimension. A poem written by a fourth grade student, Jack, in response to 9/11, illustrates the ability of the child to utilize the techniques discovered through literary models in his own work. Jack writes:

The Zooming Plane

so much depends  
upon

a plane zooming  
by

next to a  
building

filled with  
people<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "Fears and Dreams," ll 15.

<sup>50</sup> Harwayne, 18

Jack creates a poem that plays off William Carlos Williams's poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow," which reads:

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

besides the white  
chickens<sup>51</sup>

Displaying a use of colloquial speech and simple, yet piercing, imagery that also appears in Williams's poem, Jack uses the example of previous literary work to make a statement that readily and soberly speaks to an eerie truth depicted by the events of 9/11. Kotler asserts that the accessibility to literary devices and the time and space to experiment with these devices is imperative in the child's quest to apprehend the poetic process.

According to Kotler, and I agree with her, the ability of the child to take possession of the poetic process confirms the child's potential as a poet. While it is undeniable that the adult poet possesses more life experience than the child poet, the child still maintains his smaller well of life experience from which he can draw in his poems. Furthermore, the thought that the child lacks life experience is part of the romantic view of childhood that resonates in contemporary society. In her novel, The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison refers to the child as "the most delicate member of society."<sup>52</sup> While the child might be a delicate member of society, it is not realistic to assume that

<sup>51</sup> William Carlos Williams. Selected Poems. (New York: New Directions, 1962). 56.

<sup>52</sup> Toni Morrison. Afterword. The Bluest Eye. By Morrison. (New York: Plume, 1970). 210.

this delicacy protects the child from the harsh realities of life. In contemporary as well as earlier times, the child is plagued by and witness to abuse, violence, poverty, sickness, prejudice, and crime. The child is certainly not lacking in exposure to the outside world and subsequently not lacking life experience despite the fact that he might not have as much life experience as the adult. This is why we find remarkable poems written after the child has experienced the disaster of a day like 9/11. Kotler states, "What the child lacks in sophistication and life experience, he makes up for with his imaginative flexibility."<sup>53</sup> "Imaginative flexibility" is a term Kotler uses to define the child's ability to use imagination to create images that extend beyond the scope the reality of which he is aware. Kotler believes that adults lose this ability as our life experience leaves us extremely aware of and connected to the realities of the world.<sup>54</sup> Thus, as Kotler sees it, the child poses an ability, which the adult does not, to create unique types of images within his poetry that are characteristic to and extend beyond his own experience. In combination with the techniques the child possesses, "imaginative flexibility" becomes another factor justifying the child's potential as a poet.

Kotler's discussion of "imaginative flexibility" illustrates a perspective that appears deeply in touch with Wordsworth's psychology of creativity in attributing to the child special imaginative qualities. In his celebrated work, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798," Wordsworth speaks of his own childhood imagination, and its disintegration upon his transformation into adulthood:

Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first  
I cam among these hills; when like a roe

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<sup>53</sup> Kotler, Telephone Interview.

<sup>54</sup> Kotler, Telephone Interview.

I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides  
 Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,  
 Wherever nature led; more like a man  
 Flying from something that he dreads, than one  
 Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then  
 (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,  
 And their glad animal movements all gone by,)  
 To me was all in all—I cannot paint  
 What then I was. The sounding cataract  
 Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
 An appetite: a feeling and a love,  
 That had no need of a remoter charm,  
 By thought supplied, or any interest,  
 Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,  
 And all its aching joys are now no more,  
 And all its dizzy raptures.<sup>55</sup>

Though Wordsworth is able to recall a faint memory of his childhood days when the woods offered experiences beyond their reality, as an adult he is no longer able to have those experiences. In fact, even the memory of the imaginative experience appears faded. The after-effects of this type of childhood perception is what romantic writers use to explain adult poetic creativity. While Kotler certainly demonstrates the apprehension of the romantic belief in the existence of a creative perception unique to the child, she does not allow the poetic creativity that is believed to emerge from this perception to remain latent until childhood. Instead, Kotler attempts to draw out this poetic creativity as the child still possesses his unique imagination. The poetry written by students in the CWP and similar projects in response to 9/11 serves as an excellent example of poetry produced by the child who takes ownership of the creative process through the application of specific teaching techniques and the fulfillment of a certain set of conditions.

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<sup>55</sup> William Wordsworth. Selected Poetry of William Wordsworth. (New York: Modern Library, 2002). 100-101, ll 66-85.

### Chapter 3: Social Agency

The elementary school aged child involved in poetry projects such as the CWP, creates an interesting dynamic in regards to the imagination that Kotler and the romantics attribute specifically to the child. At an age where the child is able to interact in and communicate with the adult world, it appears as though the child is on the verge of losing the creative perspective associated with childhood. In this regard, the apprehension of the poetic process at this particular age takes on another level of importance. Goodenough speaks of the necessity of the incorporation of narratives in the child's assimilation into the adult world:

Once children express themselves by the system of verbal signs belonging to the adult world, the isolate integrity of infancy has been shattered. Learning to read and write may be a solitary pleasure... But to "selve" a beginning... is an immense act of specialization. Human offspring need years of extended nurturing outside the womb, and their psychic survival hungers for narratives.<sup>56</sup>

Requiring nurturing and narratives once he begins his development into adulthood, the child fluctuates back and forth between the need for individual and communal activity. The CWP and similar organizations, recognize both of these needs as the projects work "at strengthening the individual voice and at the same time developing group voice."<sup>57</sup> Through the exploration of the poetic process, the child acquires the individual narratives

<sup>56</sup> Goodenough, 187.

<sup>57</sup> Words/Community~Poems. 2003. The Community Word Project. (28 January 2003).  
<<http://www.communitywordproject.org/words.htm>>

he craves. Yet, as his poems are brought into a safe space in the community where he can be heard, his voice is nurtured.

An awareness within the institutional resource of the child's need for the combination of individual and communal experience becomes the essential factor in bringing the child's possession of the poetic process into a social context. At an age in which he is in the process of negotiating the boundaries of his internal and external realities, the child begins to explore his relationship to the outside world. Asking questions concerning how the outside world affects his internal reality and how his internal reality affects the outside world, the child expresses a conscious awareness of his interaction with the larger community around him. The child's growing consciousness of the symbiotic relationship that exists between himself and his society demonstrates a nascent social agency. It becomes the responsibility of the institutional resource to encourage this social agency through the creation of a space in which the child feels comfortable to explore his agency through the poetic process.

In her extensive work with the concept of the secret spaces of childhood, Goodenough speaks to the function of a safe space in the child's transition into adulthood. Within safe spaces, the child is able to experiment with and explore his internal and external worlds and the relationship between the two. The child is able to put up a "semitransparent curtain" between his two worlds, allowing a protected venture into the uncharted realms of the outside world, the place in which his budding social agency will soon function.<sup>58</sup> Goodenough sees a strong connection between the child's secret spaces and his creative expression:

By assembling words...they [children] perform an engrossing

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<sup>58</sup> Goodenough, 185.

fictive process which brings inner and outer spheres into synchrony... Like narratives that put structure into life, getting into this “enclosed, magical place” [secret space] is primal play. Through hand-shaping and story-making, children practice the small heroics of being human, passing back and forth across fresh territory as they hone... survival skills of their spaces... that nourish the plastic powers of youth.<sup>59</sup>

The process of narrative facilitates the negotiation of the boundaries in these spaces, making it imperative that the institutional resource in which the child learns the poetic process becomes a space with which the child associates with safety.

Goodenough examines the recollection and analysis of the secret childhood spaces of contemporary scholars in an attempt to determine the characteristics that are required within a space to make feel the child safe. Though the spaces that Goodenough studies are referred to as “secret,” this does not mean that they have to be places of solitary occupation. Speaking of the way in which the use of the term “secret” identifies the child’s possession of the space rather than any hidden qualities of that space, Robin C. Moore, professor of Landscape Architecture at North Carolina State University, remarks:

“Secret is the special meaning children give to a place when they possess it deeply. Possession, which persists like love in long-term memory, comes from the hands—from interaction or a kind of making, or the creaturely ways animals define territorial boundaries... Thus, a secret place is discovered as the first opening to a delicious mix of

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<sup>59</sup> Goodenough, 185.



predictable, anticipated change and spontaneous, surprise events, continually influenced by the perceptions, interpretations, and creative imaginations of child explorers.<sup>60</sup>

In order to possess a place fully, the child must feel as though the space offers the potential for the imagination to continuously define the boundaries of the space. The institutional resource can offer the child all of the attributes Moore assigns to the secret space. As the child explores his internal and external worlds, as well as the blurred boundary between the two, he continuously makes new discoveries, leading to the revision of previous conclusions. As long as the institutional resource permits the child to continuously construct and reconstruct the boundaries between the worlds he explores in his poetry, the child will experience the same mixture of expected and unexpected elements described in Moore's discourse. Through his poetic exploration, the child must maintain his agency in order to develop the confidence to form the dialogues in which he begins to tease out his relationship with his outside environment. As the child learns to distinguish between "me" and "not me" within his space, he begins the process that Joyce Carol Oates terms "the invention that is self."<sup>61</sup> The invention of self emerges out of the dialogues the child creates in the secret spaces, the same dialogues that are expressed in his poetry.

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<sup>60</sup> Robin C. Moore. Untitled in Secret Spaces of Childhood. Spec. issue of The Michigan Quarterly Review, ed. Elizabeth Goodenough (2 Parts. Spring and Summer, 2000), 478-80.

<sup>61</sup> Moore, 477  
Joyce Carol Oates. Untitled in Secret Spaces of Childhood. Spec. Issue of The Michigan Quarterly Review, ed. Elizabeth Goodenough (2 Parts. Spring and Summer, 2000), 489.

A discussion of the process of sharing within the secret spaces of childhood brings up the notion of trust within these spaces. Elaborating on the previous definition of “secret,” Moore continues:

For me the meaning of *secret* is deeply linked with sharing among trustworthy friends... The process usually cannot be shared with adults unless they can recapture the slow temporal and intimate physical scale of childhood exploration. For most adults, perceptually conditioned by clock time and automobile space, this is behaviorally impossible.<sup>62</sup>

Demonstrating the desire to share, the child begins to express the urge to interact in a community discourse. Though most adults threaten the sense of safety in a child’s negotiating space, as they are unable to function within a child-dictated arena, the adults that operate the institutional resources must create a non-threatening presence. The adults within the institutional resources must gain the child’s trust and make the child feel comfortable with his creative expression by supporting the child’s exploration of the poetic process and social agency by encouraging the child’s use of creativity and “imaginative flexibility.”

The CWP serves as an example of an institutional resource that constructs a safe space in which the child experiments with the poetic process as a way to encourage his apprehension of social agency. Operating on the basis of mission that aims “to give young people the life skills and safe space that they need to become active citizens,” the CWP places a large emphasis on the potential of the child’s voice to effectively advocate

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<sup>62</sup> Moore, 480.

and create social change within communities.<sup>63</sup> Deeply rooted in the belief that creative expression cultivates future community leaders, the CWP brings a classroom curriculum. The curriculum joins expression and community building. Linking social change to the poetic process allows the child to feel a sense of public agency through his poetry as it to affect a reality larger than (but including) his own. The CWP program focuses on the social making of poetry, not the composition of individual poems by many children.

In a personal interview with Kotler at a small café in New York City's East Village, I was able to inquire about the correlation asserted in the program's philosophy between the writing process, the development of the child's voice, and the initiation of social change. Responding to a question concerning the link between creative expression and social change, Kotler identified the key source of the skills involved in social agency as those needed to produce a group poem, which she refers to as a "community poem":

*KD*<sup>64</sup>: How do you feel that the apprehension of poetry enables a child to obtain the skills necessary to initiate social change within his community?

*MK*<sup>65</sup>: Let me try to explain this by asking you a question. What kind of qualities, characteristics, or behavioral traits would *you* have to demonstrate if you were writing a group poem, or what we [the CWP] call a community poem? Think quickly. One-word answers.

*KD*: Respect. Motivation. Cooperation. Responsibility. Communication.  
Desire. Reason. Purpose. Open-mindedness. Patience.

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<sup>63</sup> Community Word Project Brochure, Printed by Kinko's Inc.

<sup>64</sup> Kelly DeAngelis is represented by KD within the interview.

<sup>65</sup> Michele Kotler is represented by MK within the interview.

*MK:* Ok, throw in passion, voice, and vision and you have the basic factors involved in making a community poem. Now, what qualities do you need in order to initiate and develop a social change?

*KD:* Pretty much the same things.

*MK:* Exactly. The skills necessary for creating a community poem are the same as the ones needed to create a social change. The community poems come about after young people generate group vocabulary around hopes and fears then each student writes a line using these words. They then sequence their lines into stanzas and the stanzas into poems. They do it together, using all of the skills you just listed. This is the recipe for creating a community poem; a method I created to bring voices and visions together. When the kids bring their voices and visions together they experience that they are not alone in the face of everyday pressures and that their voice can be heard.<sup>66</sup>

Through her adamant belief in the creative process as a tool for social agency, Kotler assigns the child a significant voice within contemporary society. In her development of the community poem as a vehicle for the child's voice, Kotler provides the child with an institutional resource that offers a sense of safety and creative freedom. Not only teaching the practices of "respect," "cooperation," "communication," "motivation," "open-mindedness," "patience," and "passion" as part of a poetic process, but also modeling these characteristics as a way of life, Kotler allow the students of the CWP to feel comfortable and open in their creative expression. Within this space, Kotler

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<sup>66</sup> Michele Kotler. Personal Interview. (January 17, 2003).

builds “a world where it is safe to speak out and question the present and the future.”<sup>67</sup> Kotler’s desire to forge a community of child poets and a larger community within the city and world displays an underlying set of beliefs in which the responsibility for the development of the child’s creative and social agency is placed on his entire community. Thus, the recognition of the poetic potential of the child becomes a means of strengthening the American community as it fosters the development and encourages early social participation of those who will eventually become community leaders.

The community poems not only offer a space for the child to express emotions but they also display the way in which the child is affected by these emotions. The transitional consciousness that the child explores in the safe spaces provided by the institutional resource allows the child to write poetry in response to 9/11 that mirrors their ability to blur the line between what is real inside and outside of themselves, a process Goodenough deems as essential to the child’s transition into adulthood. In an examination of this poetry, we see that the child’s response to the terrorist attacks combines internal, external and collective perspectives. A second grade class at an elementary school in New York City writes a group poem in which the transition between individual and social consciousness becomes extremely apparent. In the time shortly following the terrorist attack, students were asked to write a line of poetry in which they expressed their notions of fear. The responses were then combined into a single 25-line poem in which multiple layers of concern are visible. Many of the lines, such as, “Fear is a small gray rock hitting my big brown eyes in the park,” focus on individual notions of fear.<sup>68</sup> Some lines, however, brought the individual notion of fear to an external level. In

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<sup>67</sup> CWP Brochure

<sup>68</sup> “Fears and Dreams.” ll 2.

another line, a student writes, "Fear is the falling of the Twin Towers."<sup>69</sup> This rather explicit line emerges as a result of the external events of 9/11. Yet, its translation into an internal emotion, fear, illustrates the child's tendency to blur the boundaries between internal and external realities. At times these boundaries appear blurred within actual lines of the text. One student writes, "Fear is like fighting for life in a war that rains on people's minds."<sup>70</sup> While the image is individual to the child, the emotion captured within the line is not. The war described in the poem "rains on people's minds" not specifically on the child's mind. The child's perception of fear clearly extends beyond himself into his community, even his entire country. Though this line does not specifically speak to the events of 9/11, the circumstances surrounding the creation of the poem allude to the fact that the "war" referenced in the poem involves the terrorist attacks. It appears as though the child is combining his internal image of the terrorist attack with his external consideration of the effects of the attack. Regardless of the line in question, the boundaries between the child's individual and social awareness prove easily movable.

A line taken from a poem created by a second grade class in the Bronx, New York, reads, "I am darkness with planes blowing up the world trade center with its missing hearts and buttercups, dandelions, and fuchsias."<sup>71</sup> This particular line, which is part of a poem in which the children were asked to contrast images of safety and darkness, not only demonstrates a young child's comprehension of the immediate events, but it also offers a deeper insight into the child's understanding of the event. Describing the World Trade Center "with its missing hearts," he clearly grasps the implication of the

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<sup>69</sup> "Fears and Dreams," ll 10.

<sup>70</sup> "Fears and Dreams," ll 5.

<sup>71</sup> "My Heart is Safe in the Beautiful Darkness." ll 14.

numerous deaths caused by the attack. Another line from the same poem uses the imagery of darkness to voice a concern about the event that extends beyond the self: “Dark is dusty smoke covering newborn babies that are loved and dreaming.”<sup>72</sup> Using the image of darkness to communicate a vision of the endangered but still “dreaming” innocence threatened by the terrorist attacks, this child is certainly cognizant of the events that result in complex emotions, emotions that should not be internalized or left unspoken.

The child is not passive in regards to his emotions. In fact, the emotions expressed by the child in the community poems appear as motivation towards action. As one child writes, “I dream of saving the city from dark green clouds,” he expresses a desire to act altruistically in response to the terrorist attacks.<sup>73</sup> Expressing the urge to aid his devastated city, the child glimpses his potential ability to act for the benefit of his community. Another child desires to maintain his normal way of life: “I dream of going to school everyday.”<sup>74</sup> Whether out of a quest for comfort or defiant determination, this child does not want the emotional or physical consequences of 9/11 to disrupt his daily routine.

Finally, one child expresses even his most inward affections in terms of action: “I am safe because I protect my private heart from love.”<sup>75</sup> The peculiar locution here makes the heart protected *from* love, not *by* love, although this may be what the child meant. The emotions emerging out of 9/11 inspired a multitude of poetic responses from American children. While the responses are not always similar, the fact that children

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<sup>72</sup> “My Heart is Safe in the Beautiful Darkness.” ll 20.

<sup>73</sup> “Fears and Dreams.” ll 24.

<sup>74</sup> “Fears and Dreams.” ll 16.

<sup>75</sup> “My Heart is Safe in the Beautiful Darkness.” ll 6.

demonstrated the capacity to imagine themselves in action that becomes so significant. Expressing the ability to transform emotion into action becomes a central factor in Kotler's attempt to encourage children to make social change. The institutional resource that Kotler provides is unique in its determination to inspire thoughts of action by children. It is also a successful approach to bringing the voice of the child into the community, as the child's poetry is not only published in anthologies put out by the CWP, and also displayed in public venues throughout New York City. It is a good example of what the child can do give appropriate resources and tools. As the CWP publishes the child's poetry in anthologies and also displays the work in public venues, the CWP brings the child's voice into the community, allowing the public to witness the child's agency.

The CWP is not the only institutional resource that aims to bring the child's voice and agency into the community. InsideOut<sup>76</sup>, a Detroit poetry project, offers another tangible example of a resource for the child's poetry that shares goals similar to those of the CWP. IO places professional writers in Detroit public schools for "the purpose of encouraging young people's imaginative writing and promoting self-esteem and confidence through publicizing and celebrating their work."<sup>77</sup> In a similar manner to the CWP, IO places a heavy emphasis on the development of a sense of agency through the practice of and reflection of poetry writing. Just as the CWP encourages the child to become an active participant in his community through the advocacy of social change, IO urges the child to use his poetry as a vehicle to speak to his community. An explanation of the project states, "Our writers challenge their students to examine the world and share

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<sup>76</sup> I will refer to InsideOut as IO for the remainder of the thesis.

<sup>77</sup> About InsideOut. 2002. InsideOut. (19 February 2003). <<http://www.insideoutdetroit.org>>



those discoveries with the community.”<sup>78</sup> While IO students create individual, not community poem, the program still encourages the child’s social agency through its dedication to bringing the child’s work into community venues.

IO places a large emphasis on the performative aspect of the child’s poem, operating under the assumption that if the project can provide a public space in which the child feels safe to speak he will become more likely to voice opinions later in life. In a poem written by an IO student in response to 9/11, it appears as though the child has accepted the IO writer’s challenge to examine the world beyond himself. Deyona, a Detroit elementary school student, describes the moments immediately before and after viewing the images of the World Trade Center falling:

When I get to school  
I write in my journal  
what I am going to be  
when I grow up.

When I grow up  
I’m going to be an actor, or singer.  
So I can sing  
about how much I  
love  
my life.

When another class’s  
teacher  
walks into our classroom  
and tells us turn on the TV.  
I see the World Trade Center  
up in flames.

I am terrified  
by what I see.  
I say a prayer  
for all the people  
inside.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Feels Like Jazz! 2003. Arts & Poetry Datebook. InsideOut. Printed in Canada: printing and publication is sponsored in part by Compuware and Comerica Bank.

Deyona's poem displays her ability to use the poetic process to grapple with the vision of being in public as an actor or singer, voicing "how much I/ love/ my life," to a focus on the lives of others still delivered through voice (prayer). While the earlier stanzas of the poem focus on Deyona's own life and desires, this focus quickly shifts as Deyona sees the horrific image of the World Trade Center in flames. As she writes the lines, "I say a prayer/ for all the people/ inside," she eloquently expresses her sudden sense of social concern. Though Deyona cannot physically help the people she is witnessing trapped inside the flaming building, she does what she can to help them by taking a moment and says a prayer for them. Displaying more than just a vague desire to help her fellow Americans, but an actual act of witness and intervention, Deyona becomes an active participant in American society. When Deyona's poem appeared in a published collection of children's poetry and art, her poem became a testimony to her ability to act as a citizen.

Both InsideOut and the Community Word Project share a strong emphasis on the importance of communicative sharing. Both curricula offer the child an early chance to occupy the public platform, as he is continuously encouraged to share his words with his community. The child not only learns the writing process, but also the process of taking an active role within his immediate, and at times larger, community. Though the child depends upon the adult within the institutional setting to help him acquire a public platform, it is the adult's belief in his ability to address the public that provides the child with confidence in his voice. New York City superintendent, Shelley Harwayne, published Messages To Ground Zero: Children Respond to September 11, 2001, the book

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<sup>79</sup> Feels Like Jazz! 2003, 9/11 date page.

from which many of the poems discussed in this thesis come. In so doing, she affirmed the child's faith in his own voice. Though the poems within this collection do not come from just one program, it is nonetheless, like IO and the CWP, driven by the underlying belief in the necessity of bringing the child's voice into American society. Viewing the poetic responses of the child to 9/11 as words that can speak to an entire nation, Harwayne illustrates an investment in the poetry of the child makes a plea for the adult listen to what the child has to say. Thus, it appears as though the responsibility of a successful institutional resource extends beyond simply providing the child with the tools necessary to learn the poetic process.

The poetry published in Messages To Ground Zero: Children Respond to September 11, 2001 offers numerous examples of the child's use of poetry to speak to a mixture of personal and social concerns. In a poem written in response to 9/11, a fifth grade student living in Brooklyn, New York, illustrates the way in which the child oscillates between internal and external concern. Beginning the poem with the line, "People's hearts are broken," Leovina does not assume exclusive ownership of the sadness expressed by these broken hearts.<sup>80</sup> In fact, as she refers to the broken-hearted using the word, "Their," Leovina completely separates herself from that specific group of people and its related emotional experience.<sup>81</sup> The first two lines of the poem illustrate Leovina's observations of the outer world in response to the events of 9/11.

As the poem continues, Leovina's initial external focus collides with internal concern. The lines that read, "Children's lives are shattered/ Into a smoke of terror," act

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<sup>80</sup> Harwayne, 19, ll 1.

<sup>81</sup> Harwayne, 19, ll 2.

as the point of convergence for her internal and external concern within the poem.<sup>82</sup> Moving from a generalized discussion of “People,” Leovina narrows down her focus to the specific group of children.<sup>83</sup> Though Leovina speaks of children in the third person, the consciousness behind her claim that their “lives are shattered/ Into a smoke of terror” cannot be entirely external.<sup>84</sup> Unable to separate herself from her identity as a child, Leovina’s image of shattered lives and smoky terror resonate from her own experience. As Leovina uses the poetic form to tell her story about 9/11 she moves back and forth between an examination of the internal and external effects of the event. In doing so, Leovina takes part in a developmental process that Goodenough claims occurs in the safe spaces developed in childhood in which the adult identity and social agency are cultivated.

Leovina illustrates the cultivation of both an adult identity and social agency in the final line of her poem as she makes the request to, “Let us all mourn together.”<sup>85</sup> Moving from an external to internal concern, Leovina concludes her poem by expressing a desire to become a part of a communal process. Asserting the need for her inner and outer worlds to come together in a unified act, Leovina demonstrates a developing ability to engage in an action within her community. Furthermore, as she begins her final line with the command, “Let us,” Leovina displays the ability to initiate a collective action. Leovina’s desire to become a part of a community act is actually gratified as her poem becomes part of a published anthology written by children in response to 9/11. As

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<sup>82</sup> Harwayne, 19, ll 3-4.

<sup>83</sup> Harwayne, 19, ll 1.

<sup>84</sup> Harwayne, 19, ll 3-4.

<sup>85</sup> Harwayne, 19, ll 5.

Leovina's poem operates within the collective voice of the anthology, her words provide a tangible example of the child's capacity to act with social agency.

Another fifth grade student from the Bronx uses his poem as a way to speak to the social effects of 9/11. The agency asserted within this poem does not appear threatened by the terrorist attacks, but actually appears to gain authority as a result of a contemplation of these attacks. Within his poem, Kevin examines the social consequences of the attack:

“Yes, get scared,” is what we hear

People run away  
 People jump off...don't stay  
 People are killed...with no good-bye  
 When planes fly over quiet skies,

We must now be careful  
 of those filled with  
 lies!<sup>86</sup>

Kevin uses his observations to construct a set of precautions American society must adhere to as a result of the attack. Kevin warns society that we must “now be careful/ of those filled with/lies!” Offering advice to the entire nation, Kevin expresses the desire and agency to initiate social change.

As the child clearly demonstrates the ability to manipulate the techniques learned through institutional resources, it becomes apparent that he has achieved considerable agency in writing. Using the confidence this agency provides, the child is able to write lines of poetry that express his complex feelings regarding the attack. Though the child does not always offer any conclusions within his lines, the ability to discuss the somewhat unsettling images in his mind and the peaceful dreams that provide an escape,

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<sup>86</sup> Harwayne, 63, ll 4-11.

he speaks to the confused condition of an entire nation of people. He speaks to his society. Thus, as the child clearly combines the numerous techniques he has learned he distinguishes himself as someone who is not only aware of the creative process but as someone who is able to apply it within and beyond his writing. However, this particular body of poetry goes even further than simply displaying the child's ownership of the creative process and the child's use of poetry as a vehicle for social discourse. As the child's voice is brought into a public sphere by making the child's poetry visible in public spaces, it bridges "the space between the public school classroom and the larger community."<sup>87</sup> It appears as though the responsibility of an institutional resource should extend beyond just providing the child with the tools necessary to learn and possess the poetic process and also include the construction of a safe space through which the poetic voice produced can be integrated into the child's community.

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<sup>87</sup> About Community~Word: History. 2002. The Community Word Project. (28 January 2003).  
<<http://www.communitywordproject.org/abouthistory.htm>>

#### Chapter 4: The Poetry Payoff

The poetry I examine, produced through educational programs in classroom settings, suggests the poetic potential of the child when he has sufficient access to supportive spaces and resources. It also speaks to the importance of poetry in the life of the child. On 9/11 the child watched as our country suffered a tragic attack. In addition to the devastating loss of life and property, the events shook our belief in our personal safety and our country's invulnerability. As the child turned to the creative process often through programs designed to help him through emotional recovery, he demonstrates the role that writing poetry can play in helping young people cope with life-changing events tragedy and upheaval.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the poetry written by the young person in response to 9/11 not only serves to help him cope with the tragedy, but it can also work as a coping mechanism for the entire country.

The poetry written by the child in response to 9/11 has generated a small, but significant, adult response. In response to the poetry written by the child, Dr. Larry Aber, a developmental psychologist and director of Columbia University's Project of Children and War, speaks of the complexity and resolution found within the poems:

The Poems... are profoundly reparative. They breathe new life into the otherwise deadly images of lost treasures... poems seem to be saying, "This is. And this is who we are now!" We're grateful that so many young visionaries, through their courageous and creative efforts to see clearly, are able to rescue meaning, purpose, and identity out of

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<sup>88</sup> Kids Respond to a World in Crisis. 2002. National Endowment for the Arts. (19 January 2003). <<http://www.arts.endow.gov/explore/Artifacts/artifacts.html>>

fear and chaos.<sup>89</sup>

The child's use of poetry saves the child from getting trapped within the initial fear inspired by the event as he uses his words to search for reconciliation and hope. Reminding a nation that the power to create is stronger than the power to destroy, the child's poetry becomes a testimony to the fact that the expression of emotion plays a key role in the salvation of a wounded nation.

Expressing an opinion similar to that of Aber, Harwayne reflects on the poetry that appears in Messages To Ground Zero: Children Respond To September 11, 2001. Harwayne views the work in this collection as an illustration of:

the innocence, hope, and caring that are special to the very young, these honest and heartfelt messages directed to Ground Zero could just as well be directed to us all—bringing new dimensions to our own feelings about the events of the day and to our hopes for the future.<sup>90</sup>

Investing in the moral conscience of the child, Harwayne sees the poetry produced by the child as a body of work that can provide the adult with emotional solace. A New York City teacher, Martha Ferguson, provides a concrete example of the theory of Aber and Harwayne as she speaks of the way in which the poetry written by her students provided her with a comfort she was unable to find for herself after the attack:

We wrote poems...Everyone had a story. Everyone needed to be heard...Over the next few weeks an amazing thing happened. I began to feel less afraid, less overwhelmed by the tragedy of September

<sup>89</sup> A Psychologist Reflects. 15 April 2002. Scholastic. (19 January 2003).

<<http://www.scholastic.com/artandwritingawards/artifacts/writings/adultreflections>>

<sup>90</sup> Harwayne, Back Cover.



11<sup>th</sup>. The young people whom I was supposed to guide through this tragedy and help place this horrific event in perspective ended up being my guiding light. They are the ones who brought me through and restored my faith in the human spirit.<sup>91</sup>

Ferguson's identification of the child's poetry as the source of her personal ability to cope with the tragedy makes a very powerful statement concerning the construction of the child's voice within contemporary society. As Ferguson, an adult, relies on the child's stories in order to come to terms with the events of 9/11, the child's voice gains an authority that it frequently lacks within society. Possessing the power to influence the subjective life and public culture of adults, the child's voice provides a social service to the entire country.

Thus, the child's poetry becomes more than a simple outlet for the author's own emotions. It becomes literary work that captures the condition of a nation and therefore must not be viewed as the insignificant musings of a young child. The author, Esmeralda Santiago, speaks to the connection between the literary and social value of the child's poetry:

Art has always provided an outlet for emotions that sometimes feel too powerful, too intense to be kept inside ourselves. These writers [the child poets] have taken grief and turned it into art. Their... poems are manifestations of our humanity. By allowing us to grieve with them, they have done the best that art can do. They have affirmed life.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> A Teacher Recovers with her Students. 15 April 2002. Scholastic. (19 February 2003). <<http://www.scholastic.com/artandwritingawards/artifacts/writings/adultreflections>>

Santiago asserts that the child work emphasizes the vicarious power of poetry as the child allows us to grieve “with” him. The grieving process becomes less isolated and the child and the adult reader can join together in one of the most basic acts of humanity.

Santiago’s desire to grieve with the child demonstrates how the difference in age between the child and the adult falls away as both strive towards the same end, an affirmation of life. Though the concept of an “affirmation of life” becomes somewhat vague, it is the companionship that Santiago seeks within the child’s poetry that becomes significant. The child’s poetry responding to 9/11 becomes a tool that the adult can use as a way to cope with the events of this national tragedy. In this way, the child’s poetry becomes a significant cultural resource.

As the poetry by the child written in response to the attacks of 9/11 exhibits potential as cultural resource apprehended by the adult in search of a coping mechanism, a disturbing aspect of contemporary American society emerges. While the recognition of the child’s voice as culturally beneficial works to strengthen the position of the child’s voice within society, the fact that the child’s voice is elevated in its position as a result of the adult’s emotional needs cannot be ignored. Possessing the power to assign validity to the child’s voice, the adult also possesses the power to take the validity away. Despite the fact that the adult may always receive the emotional support provided by the child’s poetry in the particular instance of the events of 9/11, once his immediate emotional needs have been met he may not transfer the memory of this emotional support onto future situations involving the child’s poetry. In other words, the child’s poetry cannot be guaranteed any sort of longevity.

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<sup>92</sup> An Author Reacts to Work by Young Writers. 15 April 2002. Scholastic. (19 February 2003).  
<<http://www.scholastic.com/artandwritingawards/artifacts/writings/adultreflections>>

Thus, it becomes essential that the contemporary institutional resources continue to foster the child's developing social agency, as this agency is the child's only defense the control the adult wields over his voice. As the child apprehends a social agency begins to imagine the possibilities of initiating a social change through the assertion of his voice, he acquires a skill that displays the potential to protect his own voice. Through a combination of authorial and social agency, the child may eventually manipulate the creative expression he learns within the safe spaces of educational resources to incite change regarding the place of his own voice within society.

Speaking of the effects of the combination of authorial and social agency gained by the children in the CWP, Kotler states that the poems written within the program are "from children who experienced the power of joining visions and together exploring the power of being listened to, not once, not twice, but so many times that they became aware of who they are as individuals, as a learning community, as a generation who has what it takes to make non-violent change happen."<sup>93</sup> Kotler claims that, "When young people believe that their experience, communities and ideas are valuable, they are motivated to gain the tools necessary to express themselves and to articulate their aspirations and visions."<sup>94</sup> This articulation becomes imperative for the survival of American communities as this survival is dependent on children. In the final moments of my personal interview with Kotler, I asked the question that had been lingering in the back of my mind during our entire time together:

*KD:* Why do you feel it is so important to not only acknowledge the presence of the child's voice in... but to also assign that voice a socially

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<sup>93</sup> CWP Brochure

<sup>94</sup> CWP Brochure

significant place... society using the medium of poetry?

*MK:* You mean why is it important that a child is heard?

*KD:* Yes. That's exactly what I mean.

*MK:* For two reasons. The first is because they are the future voters and we, as the adult community, need to know what's on their mind. The second reason is to save lives.

*KD:* How do you mean?

*MK:* I guarantee that those kids from Columbine never once felt heard.<sup>95</sup>

Kotler's final sobering statement speaks to the potential of the poetic process at its most extreme level and to the social importance of eloquence, verbal agency and the relational bond arising from free speaking, listening, writing, and reading. The poetry emerging out of 9/11 proves how poetry can operate as a vehicle for the child's voice to be brought into the audible arena of society. What if the children from Columbine had felt heard throughout their lives? Would they still have chosen violence over verbal communication?

As children grow up in a society in which other children bring guns to school and shoot their classmates, a massive responsibility is placed upon the adult community. Adults become responsible for taking every measure possible to promote an environment where the condition of society is discussed with children. Urging children to assume an active voice in society at in their young age proves to be one of the measures adults can take to ensure that children will become active, and not passive, citizens. The IO mission statement also speaks to the confidence children gain through the apprehension of the

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<sup>95</sup> Kotler, Michele. Personal Interview. (January 17, 2003).

poetic process and the importance of this confidence in their development into active citizens within their community:

InsideOut believes that encouraging young people to find... purpose in creating is a supremely valuable cultural goal. Becoming a fluent writer and discovering creative avenues of self-expression are essential to the development of a young person's confidence and resourcefulness. Good art education teaches young people to examine the world and their relationship to it in thoughtful, careful ways. Such experiences are not expendable. InsideOut also believes that performance and publication of artistic work build community within classrooms and in the city at large. It is our hope that celebrating the creativity of Detroit's youth can create a humanizing effect on society.<sup>96</sup>

Celebration children's work through performance and publication, this mission statement illustrates the importance of adult support of children's poetry. Adult encouragement of the child's apprehension of the poetic process is a step in the direction towards legitimizing the child's voice within contemporary society. In order for the child's voice to ever become completely valid within society, however, the entire adult community must make an effort to listen this voice. The presence of the poetry written in response to 9/11 provides adults with the opportunity to hear children's voices speaking of the condition of the country. Now adults have to listen.

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<sup>96</sup> Why InsideOut?. 2002. InsideOut. (19 February 2003). <<http://www.insideoutdetroit.org/why.html>>

**Conclusion:**

My work within this thesis has revealed the underestimated potential of the child's poetic voice within contemporary American society. Through the examination of the child's poetry responding to the events of 9/11, the child's voice not only displays authorial agency gained through a deep understand of the process of creative expression, a subsequent social agency acquired through the conviction developed in his voice within the safe spaces created within the institutional resources, but his voice also emerges a social and cultural resource within American communities. Yet, my research has only examined the potential of this poetic voice within the framework of the social crisis brought on by the events of 9/11. It cannot be assumed that the total potential of the child's poetic voice is represented within a body of work with a subject matter as specific as that responding the events of a single social crisis.

My research proves to focus on a small segment of the larger field of child-authored poetry. Continued research of the social implications of this field could be constructed within many different frameworks. However, in the course of my own research I encountered two specific areas of study that have been given little attention yet would add great dimension to the arguments asserted within this discourse. The first area of study would further my research of institutional resources. The processes and effects of poetry programs targeting the child within American communities have recently been the subject of increasing research. However, little research appears concerning the process of training the adults to teach the children within these programs.

As much of the argument here is based on the premise that poetry is a cultural phenomenon that can be both taught and learned, the question of how one is taught to

teach poetry to the child becomes extremely relevant. Is the process involved in teaching one to teach similar to the process involved in teaching the child how to apprehend the poetic voice? How does teaching one to teach poetry differ from teaching one to take ownership of his creative process? Comparing the methods used to train the teaching-artists within different institutional resources would allow for a great deal of insight into the idea of poetry as a learned art. Is there one type of training that produces the most successful teaching-artist? A deeper analysis and understanding of the processes behind the institutional resources, specifically which aspects of poetry are stressed within this training and which are avoided, would reveal a great deal the assumptions concerning childhood that dictate the child's experience with poetry within institutional resources.

The second area of research that would build upon the perspective concerning the child's poetic potential asserted within this discourse, is a study of child-authored poetry written in response to daily life. An examination poetry produced by the child in response to everyday occurrences would serve as an excellent comparison to the poetry written by the child in response to social crisis, particularly in regards to the social agency developed through the child's apprehension of the poetic process. Evaluating the presence of social agency within a body of poetry inspired by the child's daily activity, would allow deductions to be made concerning the social agency exhibited in the child's poetry inspired by social crisis. This would permit an assessment of the genuine nature of the language used to express the social agency present in the child's poetry of social crisis. Is the child's language used to express his desire to communally respond to the events of 9/11 the child's own language? Or, is the child reproducing language he encounters in news broadcasts or overhears in adult conversations? If within the poetry

produced in response to 9/11, the child's language expressing social agency is regurgitated from another source, what does this say about the overall existence this agency?

Regardless of the framework used to further investigate the social effects of child-authored poetry and its related social institutions, one specific question should never be abandoned. It is the responsibility of the adult researcher to investigate how his particular topic affects the child's perception of his own voice. A Detroit elementary school student writes a poem in which she discusses the effects of her ability to creatively express herself:

Why I Write

When I write  
I don't yell at my teacher.

When I write  
I don't stomp around school.

When I write  
I don't get angry.

When I write  
I don't throw stuff.

When I write  
I don't feel sad.

When I write  
I do care.

When I write.  
I do talk calmly.

When I write  
I feel good.

When I write  
I feel like



a dog dancing  
with a squirrel.<sup>97</sup>

The preservation of the child's ability to feel like "a dog dancing with a squirrel," should remain the primary motivation behind all research concerning child-authored poetry.

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<sup>97</sup> Feels Like Jazz! 2003, First poem with the book.

**Appendix**

## Full Text of All Child-Authored Poem Appearing Within This Thesis

## The Day

Everyone started the day like any other.  
The usual hustle and bustle of the morning.  
People drinking huge mugs of coffee.

Until,

Something unusual happened,  
Two airplanes crashed into the  
World Trade Center

The whole city froze for a second.

The whole world froze for a second.

Now Everything is different.

\*First appears in thesis text on page 1.

## The Unknown Tragedy

Mom wakes me up.  
I brush my teeth.  
Do my hair and get dressed.  
Go to school.  
Like any other normal day.  
Teacher leaves the room.  
Comes back in sorrow.  
Kids have no clue what's going on.  
Teacher tells us the World Trade  
Center is now gone.  
Pentagon also hit but not destroyed.  
Kids sad and worried.  
School right there and then was  
a scared angry place.  
Tears wanting to come down.  
Kids hoping parents are okay.  
School right now is over.

I went home early.  
Not with my mom but with my  
grandma.  
2:30 P.M. my mom comes home.  
Sisters happy with joy.  
Mom tells the amazing story.  
I go home in peach.  
But sleep in terror.

\*First appears in thesis text on page 7.

Why?

People's lives are destroyed  
They are more than annoyed  
A heap of garbage everywhere  
Look at the terrorists, they don't care  
The terrorists might be here today  
We must destroy them, they must pay  
They have hurt us in more than one way

\*First appears in thesis text on page 9.

9-11

On 9-11,  
September 11, 2001  
New York City  
lost its  
two front teeth.  
For that was the day  
the two  
Twin Towers  
collapsed.

\*First appears in thesis text on page 19.

## Fears and Dreams

Fear is like being alone in a graveyard on a cold, October night.

Fear is a small gray rock hitting my big brown eyes in the park.

Fear is like the sound of a bell at night and a lonely king in a huge castle of  
spiders.

Fear is like a black and white house when an octopus and a furious lion knock on the  
front door at night.

Fear is like fighting for life in a war that rains on people's minds.

Fear is like rocks falling from the sky and turning the streets foggy.

Fear is like being alone in a small haunted house on top of a silent hill at night.

Fear is like a big brown grizzly bear loudly roaring at a foggy, rainy night in the  
cold mountains.

Fear is like loud thunder crashing in the dark at night.

Fear is the falling of the Twin Towers.

I dream that I went walking with my mother in the park this summer and the sky  
was baby blue.

I dream of soft rain falling on the green grass in a park during a hot summer day.

I dream that I am in the D.R. in hot June playing tag on the sandy beach.

I dream of being 300 feet tall and touching the sky.

I dream that I can fly fast up the fluffy white clouds.

I dream of going to school everyday.

I dream of a black, orange, and brown tiger with scary sharp teeth in the monster forest.

I dream of fishing in the Midnight Sea, above whales and jumping dolphins.

I dream of a little girl wearing a red shirt and her mother asking for money in the dirty  
subway.

I dream of the lightning not scaring my mother when the bears growl.

I dream of the blue bird in the winter city chirping when the moon is working.

I dream of being on the tallest mountain on a stormy April day.

I dream of myself in the rain playing on the top of a white mountain.

I dream of saving the city from dark green clouds.

This summer I will go to Santo Domingo and walk brown dogs with my brown  
summer clothes.

\*First appears in thesis text on page 27.

My Heart is Safe in the Beautiful Dark

I am strong God who deeply loves the World Trade Center and misses it very much.

I am a big book about red cherry lipstick that looks like a shark's fin.

My heart is the same size as my small fist curled in a ball.

My red heart shaped heart is a big yellow apple pie but it is so big that it can't fit in my  
body.

Dark is bones with gushing blood, skeletons eating people, monsters scaring kids on  
Halloween.

I am safe because I protect my private heart from love.

My heart is snow fairies flying in light snow, covering the grass with little snowflakes.

Safe is drama lava vanilla pizza with brown spiders drinking black coffee and teachers on  
a honeymoon.

I am sweet candy and ice cream then sweet potato pie with happiness and love.

I am a kid that said I love you.

I am a gentle father at home with big hugs and soft kisses and red flowers and love.

I am a hot heart, round apple and green blood sitting still.

I am a dragon free like the wind.

I am darkness with planes blowing up the world trade center with its missing hearts and  
buttercups, dandelions, and fuchsias.

I am god floating like a bluebird in the sunset sky.

I am a sweet chocolate cookie dipped in milk.

Dark is safe when my mom who loves me kisses me goodnight and cuddles me in a warm heart.

Dark is baby monsters in the closet eating banana ice cream with their red eyes open.

Dark is smoke with fireworks, like happy stars that shine.

Dark is dusty smoke covering newborn babies that are loved and dreaming.

I am a hairy monster eating dogs surrounded by a pack of spiders as big as fists.

My real heart is a red guardian that helps nice people who need saving.

\*First appears in thesis text on page 27.

### Our Poem of Rainbow Writing

Love is praying to God in pink pajamas

Love is in the air and all around the people

I am hot fire that is fair with my dad

My heart is my mom making blue pancakes at 8 in the summer morning

I am the scarlet rose flying away in the wet winter wind.

I am powerful God high in the morning sky watching you

Love is laughing people that find your helpful heart when you are being tickled.

I am a perfect person that is reading funny fairy tales about giants.

Love is happy when my Mom is dancing with my dad to slow music.

Safe is my mother squeezing my tight so no one can get me.

Love is that I love my special beautiful mother in her blue shirt and black pants.

My heart is red and round like a daisy that I give to my mommy.

Hate is bad bumblebees burning you in the destructive dirty ground.

I am a bubble bath with pink bubbles that cleans you when you make mudpies  
after the soft river raindrops stop.

My heart is full of teardrops when my sister says she hates me and my mom hits her

I am love in the sky with my mom & dad

I am in the backyard planning to play bingo with my mom when it's hot

I am growing big and strong eating spoonfuls of spinach and bunches of broccoli.

Love is seeing red kissing birds in a tree on a hot April day

My heart I my best friend when it sounds like a rock band.

My very beautiful light brown heart pumps paintings of butterflies and flowers.

Hate is my devil doll coming to life.

\*First appears in thesis text on page 27.

### The Zooming Plane

so much depends  
upon

a plane zooming  
by

next to a  
building

filled with  
people

\*First appears in thesis text on page 28.

## Poem For All The People Inside

I go back  
to the morning  
of September 11<sup>th</sup>.  
I wake up.  
tell my mom  
good morning.  
I was up.  
I put on  
my clothes.

When I leave the house  
I look up  
and see  
the sky. Today  
looks like a good day  
to ride my bike.

When I get to school  
I write in my journal  
what I'm going to be  
when I grow up.

When I grow up  
I'm going to be an actor, or singer,  
so I can sing  
about how much I  
love  
my life.

When another class's  
teacher  
walks into our classroom  
and tells us turn on the TV.  
I see the World Trade Center  
up in flames.

I am terrified  
by what I see.  
I say a prayer  
for all the people  
inside.

\*First appears in thesis text on page 43.



### A Day of Infamy

People's hearts are broken  
Their tears could fill an ocean  
Children's lives are shattered  
Into a smoke of terror  
Let us all mourn together

\*First appears in thesis text on page 45.

### The Day

Planes fly over quiet skies bringing new hastily  
People watching unaware that death rides through the air

Planes now crash as fear dances  
"Yes, get scared," is what we hear

People run away  
People jump off... don't say  
People are killed... with no good-bye  
When planes fly over quiet skies,

We must now be careful  
of those filled with  
lies!

\*First appears in thesis text on page 47.

### Why I Write

When I write  
I don't yell at my teacher.

When I write  
I don't stomp around school.

When I write  
I don't get angry.

When I write  
I don't throw stuff.

When I write  
I don't feel sad.

When I write  
I do care.

When I write  
I do talk calmly.

When I write  
I do feel good

When I write  
I feel like

a dog dancing  
with a squirrel.

\*First appears in thesis text on page 58.

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