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Donovon Keith Ceaser

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EDUCATING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:  
SOCIAL/ENVIRONMENTAL MARGINALITY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF  
EXPERIENCES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM AND  
PROENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctorate of Philosophy

in

The Department of Sociology

by

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August 2013

The author would like to dedicate this work to the pursuit of a greener world that's truly for all, as well the recognition that it is the lessons learned from the "bad environments" that are needed to teach us how to truly reconcile the conflict between society and nature.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Encouraging environmental action and greater proenvironmental behavior has been a main focus of environmental education since its inception. However, many scholars feel that environmental education has largely been unsuccessful at achieving these goals. To invigorate the potential of environmental education, researchers have become more socially critical and started questioning old stances such as addressing the role of action within environmental education and embraced new techniques like examining the role of personal experiences in shaping people sense of identification with the environment. This dissertation is four separate studies that examine how a socially critical environmental education can help produces students who are prepared to tackle social and environmental problems. Using data collected from six months of participant observation at an environmental justice youth program in New Orleans, LA and a review of the environmental justice literature, I examine the role of critical environmental education in shaping youth proenvironmental behavior, the power dynamics between youth and adults in such a program, and the role of significant life experiences in shaping youth environmentalism. I also use the data to generate theory on the significance of negative significant life experiences in shaping one's social/environmental identity- a theory that can be used as a pedagogical tool for understanding how to generate future activists who will be able to genuinely tackle the world's social/environmental problems.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **Environmental Sociology, Environmental Education, and Activism**

For the past 30 years, environmental sociology has made significant contributions to sociological investigations by revealing how the social and environmental worlds are interconnected (Bell 2004; Yearly 2005). Unlike mainstream sociology which operates under the classic assumption that focusing on the natural world or one's surrounding environment can be minimized so that one can gather social facts (Dunlap 2002; Dunlap, Buttel, Dickins and Gijswijt 2002), the main argument of this sub-discipline is that our environmental connections have serious implications for our social world. Further, how we construct our understanding of the environment socially determines how we treat, protect, and manage environmental priorities (Buttall 1987, 2002; Grieder and Garkovich 1994; Ioris 2011; Kalof, Dietz, Guagnano and Stern 2002). This interrelationship between society and nature is regularly highlighted by environmental sociologists through the use of the phrase social-environmental, or socio-natural, to explain the phenomena they investigate.

While social-environmental investigations range as widely as other sociological inquiry, from macro to micro, and include quantitative and qualitative methodologies, environmental sociology is unique in that there has always been a constant focus on the issues of activism and ecological justice (Cole and Foster 2001; Hug 1977; Schlosberg and Dryzek 2002; Shellenbarger and Nordhaus 2004). The impetus for environmental sociology came from the second wave environmentalist movement of the 1960's and 70's (Brulle 1996). As groups such as the Sierra Club began calling for greater protection for nature, and a growing change of consciousness or New Environmental Paradigm (Catton and Dunlap 1978; Olsen, Lodwick and Dunlap 1992) began to influence personal and governmental decision making, sociologists argued that we must also do our part to raise awareness about the state of nature. This deliberately proenvironmental stance, while not a feature of all environmental sociology, strongly connects the sub discipline to inquiry regarding activism, educating about the environment and environmental problems, and addressing issues of social-environmental inequality (Chawla and Cushing 2007; Gould, Lewis and Roberts 2004; Mertig and Dunlap 2001.)

Because of its proenvironmental stance, there has always been a focus within environmental sociology on examining how environmental attitudes and behaviors are shaped, maintained, and how proenvironmental behaviors can be encouraged (Kraus 1995; Olli, Grendstad and Wollebaek 2001). Early studies that examine proenvironmental behavior assumed that attitudes were directly linked to behavior. This model, called the ABC or attitude-behavior complex, argued that by raising awareness of environmental issues, people's attitudes would change, leading to a subsequent change in behavior (Culen 2005; Hines, Hungerford and Tomera 1986/1987; Hungerford and Volk 1990). Studies that examine the ABC complex, however, found inconclusive results, especially when examining the distribution of proenvironmental attitudes along various socioeconomic indicators such as race, class, and gender. Most studies have found that women, middle-upper class people, and whites are more concerned about the environment than men, lower-class people, and ethnic minorities (Bell 2004; Burningham and Thrush 2003; Kalof, Dietz, Guagnano and Stern 2002; Parker and McDonough 1999), but how exactly this translates from SES to proenvironmental attitude is not clear. The

inconclusiveness of this work has led scholars to believe that the relationship between attitude and behavior is more complex than the ABC model would lead us to believe.

Within the past decade, scholars have turned to understanding proenvironmental behavior from the perspective of one's identity (Clayton 2003; Clayton and Opatow 2003; Stets and Biga 2003; Thomashow 1995; Weigert 1991, 1997). One's environmental identity, or the identity-behavior model, examines the social understandings and patterns of identification that people exercise in relating themselves to the environment (Clayton and Opatov 2003; Fraiser 2009; Kiesling and Manning 2010; see Jerolmack 2007). This theory blends the social-psychological concepts within social identity theory with a microsociological investigation of environmental constructions and meanings (Brewster and Bell 2010). While environmental identity is only explicitly used sometimes within environmental sociological literature, it has opened an important avenue for researchers to investigate changes in proenvironmental behavior that may be more permanent and successful in bringing about a positive change to the state of the environment.

In particular, environmental education has consistently focused on the generation of proenvironmental behavior more than any other genre within environmental sociology (Bamberg and Moser 2007; Hines, Hungerford and Tomera 1986/1987; Hungerford and Volk 1990; Newhouse 1990). Since its co-current conception in the 1970's along with the environmentalist movement and environmental sociology, environmental education has consistently argued that education is essential for generating proenvironmental change (Harvey 1977; Hungerford 2005, 2010, Short 2010, UNESCO/UNEP 1978). Environmental pedagogy has its debates about how best to educate about, or for, the environment (Fien 1993), but scholars generally agree that environmental education should include four pillars: ecological foundations or a knowledge of basic biology and ecology, a conceptual awareness of environmental issues and values, the ability to investigate and evaluate environmental issues, and the promotion of environmental action or action which is centered on bringing about a proenvironmental change (Hungerford, Peyton, and Wilke 1980:43; Marcinkowski 1993; Simmons 1991; Stapp et al 1969). These pillars support what is considered the "superordinate" goal of environmental citizenship or the production of people who are educated, responsible, and capable of addressing environmental problems and focused on the most strategic actions toward accomplishing that goal (Chawla and Cushing 2007).

While environmental educators are largely in agreement over the main pillars of what should be taught such as ecological foundations, conceptual awareness, and issues investigation and evaluation, there has been a longstanding debate over what should constitute and how should educators teach for environmental action (Childress 1978; Hug 1977; Malone 2006; NAAEE 2010, Simmons 1991). Prominent members within environmental education such as the North American Association of Environmental Education (NAAEE n.d.) have argued for focusing on "education, not advocacy", while others contend that environmental education should promote "action, not just education" (Gough and Robottom 1993; Percy-Smith 2010; Simmons 1991: 19). This debate characterizes the history of the field, from its origins in nature study and environmental science to its more recent focus on being socially focused and socially critical (Gough and Robottom 1993; Kyburz Graber 1999; Stapp et al. 1969; Stevenson 2007). Environmental educators are thought of as wearing two hats, one of the neutral educator and the other of the active environmentalist (Hug 1977; Rennie 2008; Stapp 2010), yet the question of

how to educate for environmental action (or how to balance two hats on one head) persists despite an acknowledgement that environmental education is not meeting its stated goals (Lahiry, Sinha, Mallik and Mishra 1988; Robottom and Hart 1993a; Tillbury 1993; Tillbury and Walford 1996). Those who advocate action components within education are supported by both the use of environmental action as a foundational pillar and the fact that environmental education, as well as environmental sociology, has become more socially critical over time (Branagan 2005; Gough and Robottom 1993; Lange and Chubb 2009). Two research strains have attempted to invigorate discussion about environmental action within environmental education: critical environmental education and significant life experiences research (SLE). The former is highly socially critical and integrates action into a larger pedagogic system while the latter offers qualitative microsocioal understandings of environmental identifications. Both involve engaging in significant experiences which may change one's environmental identity. It is these two approaches that I examine within this work. For that reason, I will outline them below in greater detail.

### **Critical Environmental Education**

Critical environmental education is informed by critical theory, which is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx (1844/1988), the Frankfurt school of thought (notably Horkheimer, Adorno, Harbermas and Marcuse), the liberating educational work of Paolo Friere, and the work of postmodernists/poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault (Gruenwald 2004; Kinchelowe and McLaren 2002). Critical theory holds that reality operates on three levels: (1) structures and processes, (2) interactions and events and, (3) experience. In critical environmental education, students are taught to take their everyday experiences and connect them to the larger social structures that shape social issues by questioning the values, perceptions, conditions, and opinions of themselves and those in power (Huckle 1993). This process involves a commitment to praxis, or developing a continual process of critique, reflection, and action in order to achieve enlightenment, or self-conscious awareness of knowledge distortion (Huckle and Sterling 1999; Kearins and Springett 2003). Acknowledging that the educational system can be used as a space for indoctrination or emancipation (Giroux 1981, 1988; Ewert 1991; Gibson 1986), these scholars advocate this approach because it goes further than simply raising awareness or disseminating facts- an approach they argue results in the continued reproduction of inequality (Gruenwald 2004; Stevenson 2007).

Critical approaches to environmental education aim to empower both students and teachers and change reality by developing a dialectical discourse within an egalitarian relationship where knowledge is deconstructed, one's relationship to the larger culture is questioned, and solutions for achieving greater freedom are conceived and, most importantly, enacted (Giroux 1981:82; Kincheloe 1991; Kyburz-Graber 1999). This is done through the action of constructing contextual value-laden knowledge within the framework of a participatory teaching-learning culture. A participatory teaching-learning culture treats learning as a transactional egalitarian process. Students and teachers are both engaged in learning and teaching, examining their experiences and beliefs, and critiquing democratic processes in our society. This is an unpredictable process where teachers must adapt their teaching so that meaningful learning can be connected with students' pre-existing knowledge (Walker 1997). This meaningful learning, or constructing contextual value-laden knowledge, links the process of critical reflection to a commitment to action. Students are taught to create knowledge that is deeply connected to the local environment, both social and natural, by developing an in-depth

understanding of human actions (including purposes, conditions, and reasons for acting) and the effect they have had on the local environment. Students then learn the power of their own ability to act by using their knowledge to engage in and develop local solutions to environmental problems. By focusing on a concrete problem, students connect their critical reflection to genuinely addressing social issues, teaching them to learn with a sense of self-responsibility.

Despite its potential success for addressing environmental action and adhering to the goals of environmental education, critical environmental education has its critics. Some argue that the focus on local environments, or place-based pedagogy, comes at the expense of acknowledging inequalities based on race, class, gender, and sexuality (Garrard 2010). Some argue that action-oriented critical education is antithetical to the liberal-progressive ideas that brought about modern education, and that these ideas weaken critical EE's transformative power when institutionalized within the school system (Gruenwald 2004; Stevenson 2007). Other critics argue that action research is so difficult to implement that "student action" should be defined as simply changing students' values (Walker 1995, 1997). Some question the teaching practices of critical EE because questioning norms may make students experience disturbing, unpleasant emotions and that using negative "ecological crisis" language may deter youth and marginalized groups from taking an interest in environmentalism (Moore 2005; Mueller 2009). Additionally, the earliest studies of critical EE found the practice difficult to implement due to a lack of previous framework and the creation of a long list of requirements (OECD-CERI 1995; 1991; Walker 1997), and currently little research has directly examined how the individual processes of critical education directly contribute to a change of attitude, behavior, or identity. It is precisely for these reasons that critical environmental educational approaches need to be examined in greater detail.

### **Significant Life Experiences (SLEs)**

Interested in creating pedagogical tools that would help environmental education in "the production of an active and informed citizenry," Tanner (1980:20) conducted the first study of what significant life experiences (SLEs) led current environmentalists to choose a life of activism. If such experiences are known, he argued, they can be reproduced for educational purposes. He interviewed members of conservation groups such as the National Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club and asked them to recall the formative influences that led them to choose conservation work. Among the top three, respondents most often cited being outdoors and interacting with natural, rural, or other relatively pristine habitats as their most significant influence. Next was the role of parents, teachers, other adults, and books related to environmentalism. Third was habitat alteration or seeing a negative change or loss of a pristine environment. Subsequent research has produced similar results (for a review see Chawla 1998a, 1998b; Palmer and Suggate 1996; Sward 1999; Tanner 1998).

Since our experiences and how we ascribe meaning to them form the material that we use to construct our identities, both social and environmental (Stets and Biga; Stets and Burke 2003), SLEs are important because they teach us how people link their feelings and self-understandings to their knowledge and attitudes, transforming them into action (Marcinkowski 1993; Hsu 2009). Additionally, by engaging in meaningful experiences with the environment, one's sensitivity to environmental issues is increased (Chawla 1998a, 1998b), making one more likely to get involved in activism. Thus, SLE research offers a promising avenue through which to study ways of strengthening proenvironmental behavior and increasing environmental activism.

Despite the potential usefulness of SLEs for environmental education pedagogy, the genre's successfulness has been limited by a disproportionate focus on the experiences of white, adult environmental activists and positive experiences over negative experiences. While a handful of studies have examined SLEs in other cultures (Hsu 2009), cross culturally (Chawla 1999), or among ethnic minorities in the US (James and McAvoy 1992; Myers 1997), the vast majority of SLE studies focus on white, adult, male, middle class environmental activists, leading some SLE researchers to accuse the discipline of practicing an implicit type of "environmental racism" (Gough 1999b: 385). Similarly, the disproportionate focus on adults and not youth experiences (the group for whom SLE research was designed to support) has led many to question exactly whose SLEs are considered significant (Arnold, Cohen and Warner 2009; Gough 1999b). Indeed, this orientation to SLEs is very limited in scope. It offers a narrow, privileged conception of who is an environmental activist and what constitutes environmental activism (Gough 1999; Payne 1999; Tanner 1980). Additionally, by focusing on those with greater social/environmental privileges, SLE research has inadvertently become disproportionately focused on capturing positive, acceptable pedagogical experiences. Throughout the SLE literature the top three most significant findings are time spent in wild nature, important person or book, and "habit alteration"- the loss of an environment (Tanner 1980; see Chawla 1998b; Finger 1994; Thompson, Aspinall and Montarzino 2008). While the first two are largely conceived as positive experiences, "habitat alteration" is a negative experience. Despite this difference, SLE research does not discuss habitat alteration at great length or explain how such negative experiences are different than those with positive valences. Instead, focus is paid to producing reliable results, assuming generalizability, and thus producing replicable teaching experiences (Chawla 1998a, 2001). This may be because educators see negative experiences as difficult to justify as a teaching tool and as factors that may actually discourage people from activism (Chawla 2001:457; Moore 2005; Mueller 2009; Strife 2012). This is despite an observable appreciation in the number of activists who cite social justice concerns as related to their SLEs (Chawla 1999; James and McAvoy 1992), an admission by scholars that "negative experiences have emerged as new motives for practical concern" (Chawla 1998b: 19), and an acknowledgement that privileged constructions of nature often ignore the environmental concerns of minorities and other disadvantaged groups (Burningham and Thrush 2003; Parker and McDonough 1999; Whitehead 2009). For these reasons, more research is needed about the SLEs of minorities and of youth.

Critical environmental education and SLE research have similar themes. They both argue that experiences motivate actions (Chawla 1999; Kyburz Graber 1999). By having an experience of engaging in action or a meaningful environmental experience, one's identity is altered, moving them in a trajectory toward greater environmentalism (Breiting and Mogensen 1999; Chawla 1998a, 1998b). Both of these methods offer support for environmental identity theory. Also, both models offer an excellent investigation into how changes in one's identity relates to issues of inequality. Critical environmental education makes student's aware of how inequalities are connected to larger issues of power in society, urging students to engage in actions to change the status quo and engineering a proenvironmental change of "enlightenment" in the process. SLE research, as it currently stands, demonstrates that one's privileges shape their environmental priorities. One could assume that, in turn, one's disadvantaged status will produce SLEs that correspond to their lack of privileges. My research investigates how critical environmental education leads to greater proenvironmental behavior and how SLEs are related to inequality. Before discussing the studies contained in my dissertation, however, we must discuss the

importance of addressing inequality within environmentalism, environmental sociology, and environmental education. This occurred during the 1980's and 90's with the rise of the environmental justice movement.

### **The Environmental Justice Movement**

The environment justice (EJ) movement began in the 1980's as minority and lower income Americans began to protest what they perceived as an unequal distribution and exposure to toxic waste sites in or near their neighborhoods, a relationship confirmed by scholarly research (Bryant and Mohai 1992; Bullard 1983, 1994a; for overview see Szaz and Meuser 1997). These communities, well versed in the tradition of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's, perceived this issue as one of racism, undemocratic practices, inequality, and injustice- something that was not on the radar of environmental or social justice groups (Bullard 1994b). These factors led these communities to rearticulate the environment as a social justice issue from their unique standpoint (Bullard and Johnson 2000).

Redefining the environment as an issue of justice, equity and rights offers a new and critical way to think about ecological and social conditions (Ageyman 2002; Bickerstaff Bulkeley and Painter 2009). First, by labeling the places where people live as environmental, it redefines the focus of environmentalism to include the spaces that people occupy in their everyday lives: the places where people "live, work, and play" (Novotny 2000). This not only gives everyone a reason to care about environmentalism, but also by connecting it to issues of injustice it allows for groups to address social problems which ultimately result in greater protection of nature, such as anthropogenic climate change and global equity concerns between the Global North and South (Ageyman and Evans 2004). This new advancement in environmentalism has resonated well both geographically beyond U. S. borders and through domestic conceptions of race/ethnicity to embrace any movement that focuses on environmentalism, the human costs of industrialism, and the need to fight for the rights of certain disadvantaged subdominant groups (Ageyman 2002). Additionally, the inclusion of environmental justice into environmentalism has altered the scope of both environmental sociology and environmental education. Researchers now speak of the environmental justice movement as the "third wave" of environmentalism, which further bolsters those who have argued that addressing social problems are essential for solving our environmental troubles and critical to current notions of what it means to be an environmentalist (Shellenburger and Nordhaus 2004).

Not only has this movement made achievements within the symbolic environment, but they have had notable successes in the real world as well. Within the United States, shortly after a 1982 protest in Warren County, North Carolina against a PCB landfill, the U.S. General Accounting Office (1983) released a study which revealed that most off-site commercial hazardous waste landfills in Region 4 (which comprises eight states in the South) happen to be located in predominantly African American communities, even though Blacks are a minority of the region's population. Later, a 1987 United Church of Christ study "Toxic wastes and race in the United States" showed that predominately communities of color are disproportionately at risk from commercial toxic waste. This culminated into participants at a 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. drafting a "Principles of Environmental Justice" document, demonstrating the potential of a multiracial grassroots movement around environmental and economic justice (Bullard and Johnson 2000). This led to



the 1990 National Minority Health Conference led by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which compelled the EPA to conduct investigations into environmental equity. This then led to the passage of President Clinton's 1994 Executive Order 12,898 making environmental justice part of the mission of each federal agency (Ageyman and Evans 2004; Bullard 1996).

Despite the success of the environmental justice movement for generating greater proenvironmental behavior and activism by advancing the inclusion of disadvantaged groups into environmentalism, little research examines the environmental justice movement within environmental education, and even less approach understanding environmental justice from a critical environmental education or SLE perspective. While significant mentions of environmental justice do appear within environmental education (Di Chiro 2006; Warren 1996), by and large the discipline has not updated itself to the “third-wave”. Much of environmental education is argued to be highly “monocultural”, as is demonstrated within SLE research (Gough 1999b; Li 2011). In order for environmental education to achieve its stated goals of generating greater environmental activism, more pedagogy that addresses social justice and the concerns of disadvantaged groups within environmentalism is necessary.

In this work I bring forward an increased focus on environmental justice. For the past three years I have examined the processes of critical environmental education and the SLEs of the environmental justice movement. I did this by first conducting participant observation at Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG), an urban farming non-profit school located in New Orleans Lower Ninth Ward, an area historically disadvantaged both socially and environmentally and, more recently, an area where the levee system broke after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, leaving it heavily devastated (Bildner 2010; Wilson 2011; Wright 2005). OSBG was created in 2009 around the notion of growing food as a source of empowerment and community- building in order to address social-environmental inequality. For six months, I worked alongside students at OSBG as they shoveled compost, pulled weeds, and engaged in group discussions about environmental justice. Additionally, I conducted groups interviews where I asked questions about what they were learning from the school, how the educational process changed then, and what significant experiences led them to care about the environment. This information was used initially to corroborate my observational data and makes up a significant portion of the material used in my first publication (and first in this series of works). Next, I attempted to write an article that examined the SLEs of the youth at OSBG, however, I found myself with findings that were far different than typical SLE studies and with little theoretical orientation within which to frame them. To address this lack I have conducted a study of the SLEs contained within the environmental justice literature. I use this material to generate theory on social inequality and environmentalism that I call social/environmental positionality and marginalization. From the theoretical progress made in this work, my following work examines the the SLEs of environmental justice youth at OSBG. Finally, because the issue of age inequality was an important topic regularly discussed by students when speaking about personal experiences with injustice, this dissertation will end with an autoethnographic account of “adulthood” within OSBG as my final study. Theoretically, this dissertation is greatly in debt not only to critical theory, but also feminist theory for its insights into the meaning of personal embodied experiences and their relationship to both environmentalism and social inequality. Feminist theory offers a unique perspective that is capable of bridging critical theory with more personal insights into the nature of everyday experiences with social/environmental marginalization. For that reason, before

launching into this study's setting and methods, I feel it is necessary to explain the role feminist theory has played in developing the framework of this dissertation.

### **Feminist Social-Environmental Theory**

Feminist theory's greatest contribution to theory is the acknowledgement of differences between men and women in terms of knowledge construction, interpretation of experiences, and culture formation (Beasley 2005; Lorber 2010). The ability to interpret women's perspectives as different from men has taken many forms within the history of feminist thought, from supporting women's traditional spaces to acknowledging race and class as important intersections of gender (Collins 1991; hooks 1984) and even questioning the power structure which creates and maintains notions of difference altogether (Butler 1990; Smith 1987). In particular, this study utilizes theory within feminism that discusses race and class differences, inequality, and their relationship to the environment or the body (the "invironment") (Bell 2004; Haraway 1991; hooks 2009).

Third-wave and postmodern feminists have argued that identities are multiple and intersectional (Collins 1991; hooks 1984; Butler 1990). This means that we must examine people from multiple lenses and see the ways in which different elements of one's identity combine to produce an overall sense of who they are. Additionally, we must also acknowledge that if people are not singular, neither is a person's area of knowledge production. Knowledge is partial and specific to certain domains (Haraway 1991; Rose 1997). The body is an excellent example of intersectional identity and partial knowledge (Alaimo 2010; Sze 2006). Our bodies are important sources of knowledge because they contain our feelings and emotions (Ahmed 2004; Haraway 1991: 195,208; Lyon 2009; Plevin 2006). We store memories and social understandings into our bodies which tell us how to respond socially to other people and how to interpret our own emotions (Gieryn 2000; hooks 2009; Sibley 1995). Our bodies are made different by race, class, and gendered social effects (Haraway 1991). For example, ecofeminism has long held that the environment holds different meanings for women than for men, especially if we include notions of risk (Gaard 2011; Krauss 1993; Norgaard 2007). The environmental justice movement demonstrates the effect of race and class inequality on environmental perspectives and definitions (Harvey 1996; Pulido 1996).

Acknowledging that one's social position is linked to their environmental perspective is what I call social/environmental positionality. This term not only acknowledges an environmental component to social locations, but admits that such a component is a fundamental part of how social power and social inequality operate (Harvey 1996; hooks 2009; Freudenburg and Jones 1991). Disadvantaged groups do not access or interpret their bodies (invironment) or nature (environment) the same way as those with more privilege (Edelstein 1988; Ioris 2011; Nightingale 2011; Pulido and Pena 1998; Turner and Pei-Wu 2002). This means then that the social/environmental experiences and SLEs which characterize these groups must be reflective of this difference in power and perception as well (Alexander 2004; David 2008; Edelstein 2004; Entrikin 2007; Erikson 1976/2012, 1994; Eyerman 2004). While feminist theory informs all of my work, it is most heavily used in the two SLE papers that make up this dissertation.

### **Youth Positionality and Adulthood**

Finally, this focus on power dynamics includes not only issues of race, class, and gender, but I also examine the perspective of youth inequality or "adulthood" as it took place at OSBG. Most of this dissertation involves interacting with youth and understanding their constructions of

the world. Secondly, these interactions took place within a service-learning educational setting, an area where high expectations are placed on youth, but an adult-youth dynamic exists where youth may not necessarily be given power. For these reasons, it is important to understand the positionality of youth and their feelings of inequality regarding their situation, or what is called “adulthood” (Bell 1995; Tate and Copas 2002).

Students at OSBG are at period of adolescence known as emerging adulthood- the period of roughly high school onwards when youth begin to assert themselves as adults (Berzin and De Marco 2010). Youth activism is significant during emerging adulthood because as they try to shape society, youth are often shaping their identities, making them very sensitive to social forces and influences (Harre 2007; Wray-Lake, Flanagan and Osgood 2010). However, despite the need of youth to assert themselves, most scholars argue that aside from prisoners, youth are more controlled than any other group in society (Bell 1995). Adults control every aspect of youth lives. We tell them what to do and how to behave, and can take their privileges away when we feel they need discipline. We live in an adult-driven, authoritarian culture which assumes that adults know better than youth what is in their best interests (Tate and Copas 2002). This attitude is reinforced by social institutions, laws and customs, and forms the background of all adult/youth relationships (Bell 1995; Flasher 1978; Gordon and Taft 2011). The attitudes and behaviors of adults that are based on the assumption that adults know what is in the best interests of youth and are thus entitled to act upon them without their agreement is known as “adulthood” (Bell 1995; Checkoway 1996; Tate and Copas 2002).

In particular, this dissertation examines the adulthood that occurs in educational settings, a place, scholars argue, where pervasively negative attitudes about youth are prevalent (Tate 2001). The rise in participatory youth programs offers a promising way to address adult-youth relationships by empowering youth and challenging conventional school norms (Skinner and Chapman 2000). However if adulthood is as pervasive as this literature describes, then empowering youth cannot be a simple, smooth process, but must be filled with moments of tensions as youth challenge the power inequalities that take place within their educational environment. Using feminist theory and its focus on embodied experiences, this dissertation will examine how the positionality of youth influences their ability to learn about social/environmental relations. Addressing such inequalities within educational settings, especially those that claim to operate under a rubric of youth empowerment such as OSBG, is crucial for the success of an environmental education ethic that focuses on youth environmental justice activism.

## **CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Setting of Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans**

The Lower-Ninth Ward is a longstanding lower-middle income African-American neighborhood located east of the French Quarter and Central Business District or main commerce and tourism areas. The Lower Ninth is traditionally known as an area of high poverty, crime and school dropout rates, but also high homeownership (Garibaldi 1992; Green Bates and Smyth 2007). In other words, prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the L9, while facing struggles with crime and poverty, also had many of the things we associate with suburbia: rows of houses, cars in driveways, manicured lawns, and kids playing outside. However, little of that exists today. During Katrina, a barge broke through the levee wall holding back the Mississippi River,

flooding the neighborhood and much of the city. Most of the remaining older houses have been abandoned and are rotting away. Five years after Katrina, empty lots abound- some with trimmed grass, many overrun with tall weeds- giving the L9 the feel of a rural area. The educational and financial difficulties of accessing funds for rebuilding have resulted in few residents choosing to stay and rebuild. Those that stayed find themselves in a neighborhood severely lacking in resources. The neighborhood is considered a “food desert” because there is little access to healthy food: the L9 has no grocery stores and many corner stores that sell only items such as junk food and liquor (Schafft Jensen and Hinrichs 2009; Wekerle 2004). Since Hurricane Katrina much of the population has relocated, some to other areas of the city, leaving behind many elderly and poorer residents.

### **Setting and Characters of OSBG**

Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG) is a non-profit urban farming school located in New Orleans Lower Ninth Ward. Nate Turner, who also goes by the name of slave rebellion organizer Nat Turner or simply Turner, started the school in 2009. Turner was a high school teacher at an upper-middle class school in New York City, a vegetarian, and a self-styled Marxist revolutionary. From hearsay with students at OSBG I learned that Turner actually took his class on a trip to Cuba against the wishes of the school’s administration which either jeopardized his employment or frustrated him to the point that he decided to create something of his own that was social justice oriented. After a few years of working with local rebuilding organizations following Hurricane Katrina, Turner experienced corruption or “poverty pimping” by local officials who lied about their work, or lack thereof, in order to continue securing grant funding. After losing \$25,000 to these groups and seeing nothing for his efforts, Turner spoke to the Blair family- owners of an abandoned neighborhood grocery store- and arranged for Turner to use their building and land for his purposes. The Blair family charges Turner a dollar a year so that the property will still be controlled by the family.

Turner, who on occasion is known to engage in hyperbole, claimed to have created OSBG from “a dollar, a used school bus (which he bought so he could have a place to sleep), and a black dog (a stray he found in the area).” However, it was through the use of volunteers and later his staff, as well as his New York based social networks that allowed him to strip the building down to its walls, clean the mold, and slowly rebuild as funds became available. During my time at OSBG, the school building was still in a state of serious disrepair. The walls were bare, poorly painted, and had exposed insulation material and wiring. There was air conditioning downstairs, but none upstairs and the house had no heating. The walls also contained several holes through which bugs and rats passed regularly. The kitchen upstairs contained an electric refrigerator but no stove only a gas burner connected to a small propane tank. Further, while student’s largely stayed downstairs and cleaned their area after their extended stay, Turner and staff rarely cleaned, often leaving dog feces on the floor for weeks, and once let a chicken (Annabell) into the house who and defecated on tables and the dish dripper where the clean dishes and utensils were located. This state gave OSBG the feel of a stereotypical hippy commune more than a school and contrasted sharply with Turner’s rather serious attitude toward running OSBG.

The farm at OSBG is located next to the school. Behind the house were makeshift fences that held chickens, pygmy goats, and dogs. To the left in back there were rows of lettuce, rosemary and other herbs, and in front more lettuce, spinach, garlic, and peppers. The

greenhouses and compost piles are along the fence opposing the house. During my time at OSBG this went from one large compost pile and no greenhouses, to two large compost piles and three greenhouses. Students and I spent much of the day around this compost pile working together and talking, in addition to the group conversation that took place in the house.

Turner describes OSBG as a school focused on providing a “youth based participatory social justice education.” OSBG students must fund their own trip to New Orleans and meals, and operate under a “community of practice” or a community where egalitarian action-focused interactions are highlighted. While Turner had initially created the school in the hopes that the Lower Ninth Ward community would rally to his side, most residents showed little interest, leading Turner to recruit mostly college but also some high school students from around the country. Students came to OSBG in groups of about 10-20 and stayed an average of a few weeks, but some continued for up to four months. They were college and high school students from all areas of the country, but many came from New York City, where Turner was formerly employed. Student groups typically ranged in age from 16-21. Approximately half were women, half men. About half of the students were white. The rest came from a mix of many different ethnic backgrounds including black (African American and Caribbean American), Latino/a (from North, Central, and South America), and Asian (primarily Chinese). A few identified as mixed race. Five adults were on the school staff: Turner, his assistant Rob- a young, white, largely silent man half Turner’s age, and three teachers who instructed and worked alongside students: Brittney- a young farmer from Michigan and the only female staff member, Cameron- another young white man, and Kasim- a young black man. Occasionally student chaperones, usually a parent of one of the youth, attended and worked with students as well. While Turner consented to his name being used in research accounts, this was not the case for his staff and other adults. For that reason I have chosen to either omit their names or give them pseudonyms when necessary.

A typical day at OSBG is as follows. Students wake up, shower, and eat breakfast around 9AM. They meet outside as a group to discuss that day's event. At the event, there is always a specific task and a goal that is expected to be achieved that day. Goals differed for each group depending on their particular skills. While all groups made and sifted compost, pulled weeds, and planted seeds, more specialized groups did things like build an aquaponic system or organize a food accessibility survey. Students and teachers work together all day, discussing anything that may come to mind. They often engaged in singing, which was an entertaining way of passing the time and getting through the work. Everyone takes a break at noon for lunch after which work resumes until the afternoon. In the afternoon, students meet downstairs for a group discussion. Afternoon group discussions are centered on a different topic each session such as "Gender at OSBG", "What is Environmental Justice (and why do we care)?" and "The importance of building community partnerships". Following group discussions, work resumed until dinner, after which students shower again and convene downstairs for their nightly wrap up meeting. At the wrap-up meeting, the day's events and everyone's feelings and thoughts are discussed, and plans for the next day are enacted. Both the group discussions and the wrap-up meetings last around an hour and a half, the latter ending around 10PM. Student then go to bed in cots downstairs provided by the school.

## **Timeline of Events**

This project began after a brief meeting with the school's founder at a local environmental conference. After interviewing Turner and touring the school during the Christmas holidays when there were no students present, I agreed to volunteer alongside student groups when they returned in January. From January until the end of May 2010, I volunteered every weekend, largely working alongside students as they engaged in farm work and discussion. Occasionally, due to the heat or my physical and sometimes emotional exhaustion, I left the scene to make recordings either in my car or behind the school with my cell phone. I later listened to and transcribed audio recordings. When the project concluded, I was so moved by both the school and the attractions of a larger city that I moved to New Orleans. I volunteered for the school for a few months more, but my time began to diminish as I grew increasingly frustrated with Turner's personality and management style. Shortly after I stopped visiting, the staff voiced its frustrations with Turner as well by issuing a list of demands that urged him to spend more time at the school instead of at conferences and a greater say in how things are run if they were to continue working there. Turner responded to this ultimatum by firing his whole staff outright minus one new recruit and his assistant (who, it was later revealed, was also his boyfriend). Turner felt his staff "wasn't doing a very good job anyway and he would be better with new people." After leaving the school, I began working in depth at gathering the literature needed to produce the four studies that make up this dissertation. I worked on one paper at a time, in the sequence in which these works are presented here. Each paper took roughly six months of time in which I compiled a literature review, analyzed my data, produced my results and discussion/conclusion, and then engaged in multiple edits while preparing each work for publication. Currently, only the first work has been published and the second is under revise and resubmit to a journal.

## **Methods**

To analyze the data I gathered from OSBG as well as my work on SLEs and environmental justice, I used mostly qualitative but also quantitative approaches. These included participant observation, group interviews, and survey methods. At OSBG, I predominately engaged in participant observation as a highly active, student-positioned, observer. This perspective allowed me to understand on an embodied level exactly what students were feeling every day as we shoveled and sifted compost in the hot sun, interacted and made jokes, and engaged in serious conversation together. I was told explicitly from the first interview with Turner that I was expected to work alongside youth. This left me with no options to stand around and hold a microphone or sit and work at my laptop. While at OSBG I was constantly engaging in farm work or discussion with students, and had to quickly disappear behind the house or into my car for a moment of relief as I adjusted to the difficulties of being around so many people, uncleanliness, foul farm smells, and Turner's mood swings. I also ate and periodically slept alongside students on cots provided by the school. In addition to short recordings during the day, I also made recordings as I was driving away from OSBG, recapping the group discussions that occurred that evening. These recordings were often more reflexive of the educational process that was taking place at the school, instead of the more emotional blow-by-blow account of what took place at the school during the day. In total, I spent over 192 hours over the course of five months in the fields.

In addition to engaging in participant observation at OSBG, I attempted to triangulate my data by giving out a survey and conducting group interviews. Surveys and group interviews were

conducted during afternoon group discussions or nightly wrap-up meetings that OSBG students arrange to discuss important topics or events of the day. This ensured that there would be roughly 10-20 students seated in a circle together quietly facing each other and prepared to take a long survey and an organized, formal discussion. The survey was a combination of items from a survey on proenvironmental behavior and another on civic engagement. I had intended to analyze this survey with the help of a colleague, but due to time constraints he was unable to complete his portion of the work. For that reason, I decided to remove the survey from the material that makes up this dissertation. After the survey, I conducted group interviews by moving from student to student with my recorder to collect data. Interviews were structured along five topics: 1) initial motivations for coming to OSBG and New Orleans, 2) what they had learned at OSBG that they did not know before and what effect did working at OSBG have on them, 3) any connections they perceive between the environment and the social world, including an understanding of democratic rights or citizenship, 4) their perception and feelings about ecological crisis concerns, and 5) what significant influences led them to care about the environment or come to OSBG. Students were also free to discuss whatever issues were important to them.

For the research on the SLEs of the environmental justice movement, I collected scholarly qualitative articles from the social sciences using a Wilson Web search. Articles were chosen for their use of identity and SLE descriptions. I define identity descriptions as direct quotes by individuals containing information that relates to how they view themselves, their life events, and their relationship with others and the environment. SLE descriptions are statements within this material that describe a significant motivation for activism. People often used the language "significant", "important", or "main" in their descriptions of these. While most SLE research is conducted using interviews and not textual analysis of academic literature, these descriptions capture the important or memorable experiences and generalized regular occurrences that are typical of SLE investigations (Arnold, Cohen, and Warner 2009; Chawla 1998a; James and McAvoy 1992). Analysis of this material was guided by qualitative open and focused coding procedures (Emerson Fretz and Shaw 1995). An initial open-ended coding procedure was done in Microsoft Outlook. Identity and SLE descriptions were read and coded by significant themes. Similar codes and corresponding content were grouped together. Next, these categories were rearranged so that the particular story of EJ activists would emerge from the data. Because of the overlapping of the SLE content with other codes, SLE content was distributed into other appropriate categories. Finally, an axial coding procedure was done which compared the three traditional SLEs (experience in wild nature, important person or book, and habitat alteration) to these categories. Categories were then condensed into three significant findings.

Using the findings of my work on SLEs and environmental justice, I engaged in a focused coding procedure to analyze the SLEs of youth at OSBG. First, all SLE descriptions were coded. Next these codes were grouped according to the results of my previous work such as "recognizing social/environmental marginality", "embodied knowledge", and "empowerment" as well as the tradition SLE categories of "experiencing wild nature", and "important person or book." SLE descriptions were then arranged so that the most significant experiences, and the context which gives them significance, is described.

Finally, to examine the issue of adultism at OSBG, I used a blend of ethnographic and reflexive statements to examine both the issue of age inequality as expressed by youth themselves as well as my growing understanding of how such a dynamic took place at the school. Expanding the reflexivity required in ethnographic practice by including statement that refer to myself, my feelings and opinions, allows me to examine the position of myself as researcher, my relations with others, and my impressions of the field. Two important things should be noted. First, this is considered a reflexive ethnography, not an autoethnography. An autoethnography involves only material in which the author refers to himself for analysis. I have chosen instead to blend self-referencing material with other ethnographic material so that a better picture of adultism at OSBG could be composed. Secondly, I spoke with Turner about the writing of this work, and he preferred that his name and OSBG not be used for the paper. I have renamed OSBG as “Green Shoots” and Turner as “John Browne” in the paper itself.

Analysis for this paper began with an open ethnographic coding procedure where reflexive codes were created that related my sense of self to the experiences of working with students at the school. Secondly, I created codes that linked the material in the literature review to my data about students. Finally, using an axial coding procedure where a combination of inductive and deductive thinking was used to understand the larger structural nature of how adultism took place, I combined reflexive codes with codes about youth and crystallized them on the issues of adult-youth discussions, work demands, resistance strategies, and the effect of adultism and other social locations such as race/class/gender.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Addressing the world’s environmental problems requires an in-depth understanding of not only social-environmental relations, but also a deep knowledge about how our social notions of the environment can inform our actions, behaviors, and activism. Within environmental sociology, investigations that examine the relationship between environment attitudes and behaviors have moved from more simplistic models toward more complex understandings of identity. Examining environmental identifications offers a strong potential for invigorating environmentalism because it allows for research to not only link people’s experiences, feelings, knowledge, and action together, but to view how these factors intersect and reinforce each other, allowing for a broader analysis. In particular, critical environmental education and SLE research are two types of investigations which foster this deeper understanding of how we construct our identities in relation to the environment. The former does so by linking knowledge to action within praxis, while the latter examines how important experiences inform how we direct the actions connected to our larger life goals. More research is needed on both subjects, particularly regarding the knowledge, experience, and actions of disadvantaged groups.

This dissertation expands our knowledge of critical environment education and SLE research while addressing the lack of focus on disadvantaged groups. This is done through four separate studies, each of which examines a particular pedagogy or important topic regarding youth environmental justice activism. First, by examining the critical education processes taking place among groups such as OSBG I capture the benefits of an action oriented education for educating about environmental justice issues. Second, by utilizing black feminist theories of intersectionality in this work, I give a heightened focus to how significant experiences relate to people’s everyday embodied experiences of social and environmental discrimination. Further, I



demonstrate how such SLEs can translate into catalysis for activism to address such debilitating conditions. Third, by focusing on a youth environmental justice group I am able to expand our knowledge of the role of age in terms of shaping youth SLEs and addressing particular issues related to youth perceptions of discrimination. This information is crucial toward creating an environmentalist movement that truly can address issues of social justice. This work can help elucidate strategies for increasing diversity within environmental activism, expand our notions of social justice within environmentalism, and hopefully empower disadvantaged groups to address their social/environmental marginalization.

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## **CHAPTER 2: OUR SCHOOL AT BLAIR GROCERY: A CASE STUDY IN PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION THROUGH CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It's Monday morning, the second week of May. The sun has barely risen, but it's hot nonetheless, and I'm starting to sweat as I drive across the Clairborne Avenue Bridge which separates the French Quarter/Bywater area from the Lower Ninth Ward (L9). Prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 the L9 was a suburb-like, lower-middle income African-American neighborhood with rows of houses, cars in driveways, manicured lawns, and kids playing outside. Little of that exists today. During Katrina, a barge broke through the levee wall holding back the Mississippi River, flooding the neighborhood and much of the city. Most of the remaining older houses have been abandoned and are rotting away. Five years since Katrina, empty lots abound- some with trimmed grass, many overrun with tall weeds- giving the L9 the feel of a rural area. The educational and financial difficulties of accessing funds for rebuilding have resulted in few residents choosing to stay and rebuild. Those that have stayed find themselves in a neighborhood severely lacking in resources. Crossing the bridge feels so jarring that arriving in the L9 momentarily gives one the feeling of being transported to another planet, or entering the ruins of an ancient civilization. I learned later from talking to students that this feeling is the adjustment one makes transitioning from the "first world" to the "third world".

Situated in the L9 is Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG). OSBG is a non-profit urban farming school started in 2009 by Nate Turner (Turner). Today, Turner is taking his student's and me on an environmental racism bus tour around the L9. Starting with the spot where the barge broke through the levee, we hear stories of heroic neighborhood residents (some of whom are ordinarily known as local crackheads) who saved lives after the hurricane. Next, we visit a saltwater marsh that has been destroyed by chemical refineries, then an abandoned community garden overrun with weeds. Finally, we end up on top of an embankment where Turner gives an analysis of how the focus on New Orleans tourism and the French Quarter (the hotels of which loom splendidly over the impoverished L9) traps local residents into a service-oriented secondary job market with little ability to build economic or social capital. He then asks his students, many of whom have come specifically to the city for post-disaster rebuilding in addition to environmental concerns, if these problems exist in their hometowns. The students momentarily look perplexed, but after a few seconds of thought they all say yes. Turner then proposes urban farming as a means to rebuilding the L9 and teaching these students skills which they can use to repair similar problems in their home communities. As I listen to this, I ask, "Can such an education really bring about such a momentous change?"

In this paper, I draw on a six months of data collected from interviews and participant observation at OSBG to examine how a critical approach to environmental education (EE) promotes student environmental action. While some EE scholars argue for an "interpretative"

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter previously appeared as Ceaser, D. 2012. Our School at Blair Grocery: a Case Study in Environmental Action through Critical Environmental Education. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 42(4), 209-226. It is reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

approach of "education, not advocacy" (Huckle 1993; Hug 1977; NAAEE n.d., 2010a), others contend that a more critical approach of "action, not just education" would make EE more capable of addressing the world's ecological problems (Gough and Robottom 1993; Percy-Smith 2010; Simmons 1991:19). Critical environmental education (critical EE) teaches students by motivating critical reflexive thinking about and action in their local environment (Kyburz Graber 1999; OECD-CERI 1991). However, critical EE has its own challenges in terms of addressing student action and the use of negative "ecological crisis" language (Kyburz Graber 1999; Mueller 2009). The results of this study indicate that critical reflection and action within an egalitarian, youth-centered community located in a disadvantaged neighborhood produces students who are more enlightened and empowered to create change. However, concerns around funding and safety led staff to not adhere to maintaining an egalitarian ethic, undermining the individualism and unpredictability that critical EE thrives upon and producing "disconnects" in student's education. I conclude that action is a crucial but problematic part of the educational process for both interpretative and critical models and that methods used at OSBG are instructive for how others can address student action within EE.

### **Environmental Action**

Encouraging environmental action has been a goal of EE since its inception (Stapp et al. 1969; UNESCO/UNEP 1978). Environmental action is typically listed as the fourth (technically fifth) level among the goals for EE curriculum development and is defined as:

"those skills necessary for receivers to take positive environmental action for the purpose of achieving and/or maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between quality of life and the quality of the environment" (Hungerford, Peyton, and Wilke 1980:108; Hungerford and Volk 1990).

While this definition is relatively simple, and there is wide agreement with the other four levels of curriculum development<sup>2</sup>, EE educators and researchers have continuously considered the promotion of action to be contentious (Childress 1978:10; Hug 1977; NAAEE 2010, n.d.; Simmons 1991). Educators using the "hermeneutic or interpretive" approach employ a model centered on raising awareness and changing behavior (see Culen 2005: 38-9; Huckle 1993; Kraus 1995; Robottom and Hart 1995). Others believe adding an action component to socially critical thinking is essential to producing the "superordinate" goal of citizens capable of addressing environmental issues (Breiting and Mogensen 1999; Gough and Robottom 1993; Jensen and Schnack 2006; Short 2010). One method for accomplishing this is to incorporate critical theory into environmental education (Fien 1993; Palmer 1998; Robottom and Hart 1993; Sterling 2004).

### **Critical Environmental Education**

The origins of EE are rooted in "interpretive" nature study and environmental science studies that focus on the natural environment at the expense of discussion about the social environment and its problems (Kyburz Graber 1999; Stapp et al. 1969; Stevenson 2007). In contrast, critical EE teaches students to question the current social order and envision a world more in tune with their values. This process involves a commitment to *praxis*, or developing a continual process of critique, reflection, and action (Huckle and Sterling 1999; Kearins and

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<sup>2</sup> Which are ecological foundations, conceptual awareness of issues and values, issue investigation and evaluation, and the "superordinate goal" of environmental citizenship.

Springett 2003). Developing praxis allows students to critique ideology (particularly capitalist ideology) - which is considered distorted knowledge- in order to achieve enlightenment, or self-conscious awareness of knowledge distortion<sup>3</sup>. This process enables students to achieve greater individual freedom and self-determination (Huckle 1993).

Critical EE is informed by critical theory, based on the philosophy of Karl Marx (1844/1988), the Frankfurt school of thought (notably Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas, and Marcuse), the liberating educational work of Paolo Friere, and the work of postmodernists/poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault (Gruenewald 2004; Kincheloe and McLaren 2002). Educational approaches based on critical theory, or critical pedagogy (Giroux 1981, 1988), teach students that reality operates on three levels: (1) experience, (2) interactions and events, and (3) structures and processes. Students are taught to take their everyday experiences and connect them to broader social-structural reality by questioning the values, perceptions, conditions, and opinions that shape people's actions (Huckle 1993). Going further than simply raising awareness or disseminating facts-- which some argue results in the continued reproduction of inequality (Gruenewald 2004; Stevenson 2007), critical pedagogy aims to empower students and teachers and change reality by developing a dialectical discourse within an egalitarian relationship where knowledge is deconstructed, one's relationship to the larger culture is questioned, and solutions for achieving greater freedom are conceived and enacted (Giroux 1981:82; Kincheloe 1991). This process requires students to engage in and reflect on action using action research. Action research gives students "a challenge for initiative, independence, and responsible action" by having them "experience their environment as a sphere of personal influence" and giving them "opportunities to shape it in socially significant ways" (Kyburz Graber 1999; 13).

While this method is cited as a more holistic approach that teaches students to engage in action intelligently and strategically (Chawla and Cushing 2007; Sterling 2004), critical EE is not without its critics. Some argue that action-oriented critical education is antithetical to the liberal-progressive ideas that brought about modern education, and that these ideas weaken critical EE's transformative power when institutionalized within the school system (Gruenewald 2004; Stevenson 2007). Other critics argue that action research is so difficult to implement that "student action" should be defined as simply changing students' values (Walker 1995, 1997). Some question the teaching practices of critical EE because questioning norms may make students experience disturbing, unpleasant emotions and that using negative "ecological crisis" language may deter youth and marginalized groups from taking an interest in environmentalism (Moore 2005; Mueller 2009). Additionally, the earliest studies of critical EE found the practice difficult to implement due to a lack of previous framework and the creation of a long list of requirements (OECD-CERI 1995; 1991; Walker 1997).

To simplify matters, Kyburz Graber (1999), reflecting upon her investigation of five senior high schools, offers two constitutive aspects that frame a critical EE learning culture: a participatory teaching-learning culture and constructing contextual value-laden knowledge. A participatory teaching-learning culture treats learning as a transactional egalitarian process. Students and teachers are both engaged in learning and teaching, examining their experiences and beliefs, and critiquing democratic processes in our society. This is an unpredictable process

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<sup>3</sup> For a better understanding of enlightenment see Horkheimer and Adorno (1944-2002; 1-34).

where teachers must adapt their teaching so that meaningful learning can be connected with students' pre-existing knowledge (Walker 1997). This meaningful learning, or constructing contextual value-laden knowledge, links the process of critical reflection to a commitment to action. Students are taught to create knowledge that is deeply connected to the local environment, both social and natural, by developing an in-depth understanding of human actions (including purposes, conditions, and reasons for acting) and the effect they have had on the local environment. Students then learn the power of their own ability to act by using their knowledge to engage in and develop local solutions to environmental problems. By focusing on a concrete problem, students connect their critical reflection to genuinely addressing social issues, teaching them to learn with a sense of self-responsibility.

Within the contexts of the L9, critical EE at OSBG aims first to make students aware of how the social and natural worlds, and their problems, are interconnected. As Turner described, residents struggling with low wages and poor education have a difficult time organizing to stop environmental destruction in their community. They must live in the areas most prone to ecological damage, and they are the least able to recover when a disaster occurs. This "environmental racism" (Bullard 1990; Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss 2001:9; see also Wright 2005) is especially striking regarding issues of securing food. The L9 is considered a "food desert" because of lack of access to healthy food (Wekerle 2004). The only stores, called corner stores, offer convenience store items such as snacks and liquor, but rarely fruits and vegetables. They are also owned by people who are not local to the L9 and have little interest in rebuilding the community there. Secondly, OSBG's critical education aims to engage in action to empower the local community by repairing the environment. This is the reason why they teach urban farming- an activity that scholars argue connects environmentalism to the everyday concerns of urban residents such as lost-cost healthy food and improved social relations, neighborhood attachment, and sense of self (Anderson 2004; Chitov 2006; Comstock et al. 2010; Kingsley and Townsend 2006; McClintock 2010; Whitehead 2009). Connecting the self, social, environmental, and financial divide is a key mantra for OSBG. Turner's goal is to improve the L9 community by making OSBG into a local organization that hires local people to grow food locally that is bought and eaten by local residents (Bildner 2010; Wilson 2011). As an educational vehicle, urban gardening encourages youth to appreciate nature by actively engaging with the environment, dissolving the duality between doing and knowing, creating opportunities for learning that emerge from the experience (Rahm 2002). For this reason, OSBG currently focuses on bringing college students from around the county to the L9 to have a significant experience with both the social and natural environment by using urban farming as a way to address environmental racism.

While some of the aforementioned research into urban farming is critical, little research exists that examines the success of urban farming education from a critical EE perspective. Thus an examination of the important elements which structure the participatory learning culture and construction of value-laden knowledge of a critical urban farming program will allow researchers to understand the key elements behind successful student environmental action. By examining the success or failure of actions undertaken by this OSBG model, and its constituent elements of praxis, scholars can offer EE and urban farming programs a greater ability to truly address social/environmental problems as well as address the objections some scholars hold against critical EE.

According to Turner, OSBG exists to "showcase what the very best equity driven, youth based, participatory social justice education looks like." Their mission statement, written large across a chalkboard downstairs is "*we're here to engage in and build upon a model of urban farming and community organizing that can combat systemic and internal oppression both here and at home for all humanity.*" This statement places OSBG clearly within a critical perspective: there is a clear focus on critiquing social inequalities and engaging in local action that extends learning beyond simple awareness. The school is also a non-profit organization. Free from institutionalization, they are free to create innovate programs as they see fit. These factors make OSBG well suited for this study's research purposes.

## METHODS

This paper uses ethnographic and interviewing approaches to understand how the educational culture of a critical EE program affects student action. Ethnography involves observing and participating in the daily routines of a group of people to gain insight into their lives within that social context (Esterberg 2002). Ethnographers have shown how useful their methods are for experiential education and service learning in particular, which makes the method well suited for this study (Emerson Fretz and Shaw 1995). Combining ethnography with group interviews helped corroborate field observations and add depth and nuance to students' experiences and their constructions of social/environmental phenomena. In total, I completed five group interviews and approximately 128 hours of observations.

This project began after a brief meeting with the school's founder at a local environmental conference. After interviewing Turner and touring the school during the Christmas holidays when there were no students present, I agreed to volunteer alongside student groups when they returned in January. From January until the end of May 2010, I conducted participant observation every weekend at OSBG. I engaged in farm work with students by day: shoveling and sifting compost, feeding chickens, and organizing tools. At night, I sat through student meetings (where I also conducted group interviews) as well as ate and slept alongside other OSBG members on cots provided by the school. This allowed me to completely immerse myself into the school's culture and capture both the student and teacher experience. Fieldnotes were collected as voice recordings during breaks or before bed and were transcribed on weekdays when I was away from the school.

Five adults were on the school staff: founder Nate Turner (Turner), his assistant, and three teachers who instructed and worked alongside students. Occasionally student chaperones attended and worked with students as well. Students came to OSBG in groups of about 10-20 and stayed an average of a few weeks, but some continued for up to four months. They were college and high school students from all areas of the country, but many came from New York City, where Turner was formerly employed. Student groups typically ranged in age from 16-21. Approximately half were women, half men. About half of the students were white. The rest came from a mix of many different ethnic backgrounds including black (African American and Caribbean American), Latino/a (from North, Central, and South America), and Asian (primarily Chinese). A few identified as mixed race. Three adults and five young children (all African-American) from the local L9 area also participated in OSBG during the study, but infrequently



enough that my notes only mention them briefly. Only Turner's name and the name of his organization are used<sup>4</sup>. All other staff and students were given pseudonyms.

Group interviews were conducted during afternoon group discussions or nightly wrap-up meetings that OSBG students arrange to discuss important topics or events of the day. Roughly 10-20 students sat in a circle facing each other and I moved from student to student with my recorder to collect data. Interviews were structured along four topics: 1) initial motivations for coming to OSBG and New Orleans, 2) what they had learned at OSBG that they did not know before and what effect did working at OSBG have on them, 3) any connections they perceive between the environment and the social world, including an understanding of democratic rights or citizenship, and 4) their perception and feelings about ecological crisis concerns. Students were free to discuss whatever issues were important to them. This allowed me to gather specific student experiences and opinions that could be linked to observational data.

Analysis was guided by analytic ethnographic coding (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). First, open coding was done to all data to identify any ideas or themes. This yielded important codes such as "work", "stress", "utilizing agency", "judging the (food) system", and "experiencing environmental injustice". Second, a more focused coding procedure was conducted after creating the literature review on critical EE and environmental action. Significant material, such as "constructing contextual value-laden knowledge" and "learning as a transactional process", were linked to relevant data. This then generated new content-based codes, such as "youth centered culture" and "bubble effect". This process continued until all relevant data has been categorized.

While the combination of interview and ethnographic data successfully provided triangulation on the subject of the learning culture at OSBG and its relationship to engaging in environmental action, this focus has its limitations. First, it should be noted that student's voices are somewhat limited in this report. Their statements were recorded only during interviews and, while used to demonstrate significant findings, are largely absent in the ethnographic storytelling process. Secondly, critical EE can take many different forms, and can include things beyond the participatory teaching-learning culture and constructing contextual value-laden knowledge that is this study's focus. Additionally, while this paper examines the elements that constitute a critical EE program, much of the ethnographic work was descriptive, not critical. Although this paper did critically examine the issue of age inequality, it is important that future research into critical EE approach the subject from a more critical perspective itself. Third, this focus may have limited the gathering of richer contextual data to situate OSBG and the L9. Because of the infrequent visitation of local residents, I have largely focused on the thoughts and opinions of the non-local OSBG students and their experiences interacting within the school and neighborhood. These students did not experience Hurricane Katrina or have to live with its aftermath. This means that while enough contextual markers are available to give a perception of what these OSBG members experienced, much of the story of the L9 was minimized so that focus could be paid to the learning experience of the students and their engagement in action. This methodological consideration was also aided by the insular nature of the OSBG community for the reasons explained in the findings below.

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<sup>4</sup> Turner was given multiple copies of this paper to review my depiction of him and give his consent.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Learning Culture of OSBG

The participatory teaching-learning culture of OSBG aims to give students as much ability to organize and manage themselves as possible. Student groups at OSBG are considered “student-led” and must plan events, organize budgets, and coordinate their own work schedules. On a typical day at OSBG, students get up around 9AM, shower, eat, and then meet outside to discuss the day’s specific tasks and goals. Goals differed for each group depending on their particular skills. While all groups made and sifted compost, pulled weeds, and planted seeds, more specialized groups did things like build an aquaponic system or organize a food accessibility survey. Students and teachers work and talk together all day, taking a break for lunch at noon. In the afternoon, students meet downstairs for a group discussion. Group discussions center on different topics such as "Gender at OSBG", "What is Environmental Justice (and why do we care)?" and "The Importance of Building Community Partnerships". Following group discussions, work resumes until dinner, after which students shower again and convene downstairs for their nightly wrap-up meeting. At that meeting, the day's events and everyone's feelings and thoughts are discussed, and plans for the next day are made. Students go to bed around 10PM, but often stay up late talking or watching videos together on their computers.

### Youth Centered Culture

In such an environment, with 10-20 students and only 4-5 adults, the norms of youth culture form an important context for learning. Students’ discussions with teachers and each other during work were consistently value laden and contained a wide range of shifting topics, which allowed students to incorporate new learning into preexisting personal knowledge. For example, one morning while pulling weeds students were discussing their favorite TV shows and making jokes. Then, one of the black students used the words “bitch” and “nigger” while talking to others. This led to a short serious discussion about using offensive words, after which students returned to talking about TV and making jokes. After this parley, the young black men were silent until one of them pulled what he thought was a weed and discovered it was a turnip. This energized everyone to pull up more weeds and led to discussions about vegetables in addition to the previous topics. This unfocused learning environment meant that teachers and adults must accept and adapt to the flow of conversation set by youth, and that youth are capable of being critically reflective on their own. Students must be talked *with*, not talked *at*. When I tried to expand serious conversations while working with students, they often stopped chatting, lowered their heads (as if in a boring classroom setting), and quickly changed topics to continue conversational flow.

The significance of youth culture at OSBG allowed student's to discuss issues that were central to their concerns. While the focus on environmental inequality lead to discussions about race, class, and gender, it was particularly age discrimination against youth that students were most sensitive about. In group discussions, students reflected critically on previous experiences in college and other youth organizations and compared them to their time at OSBG. They often reported that their concerns are often not addressed:

Gayle: I think in a lot of these youth organizations there's a disconnect between the youth and the adults in that often they'll focus on the youth, but the youth won't be encouraged

necessarily. I know that just from talking with the adults here I learned just as much as I learned from other youth. So I think building inner connections between youth and adults that focus on helping youth explore their full potential is really important.

This conflict of interests between student's ideas and goals and those of adults and/or organizations, produces a "disconnect" that separates them from accomplishing their own desires. Students felt that type of educational environment was "like, two separate schools working on one piece of land; totally doesn't make sense." In contrast, teachers and students at OSBG are "building inner connections" by working together on issues of mutual concern related to improving the L9.

#### A "Community of Practice"

The egalitarian relationship which fosters this teaching-learning culture is guided by what students call a "community of practice" ethic. Students describe a community of practice as a "tight knit group of people working together with a shared goal", allowing members to "really understand each other through the shared experience." An important part of the community of practice is its egalitarian nature, where "no one person is authoritative or a leader, so you function as equal members in a community." Decisions (such as what assignments will be worked on that day) are made by reaching consensus, and the community is designated as a "safe space" where "people should feel completely comfortable expressing themselves both negatively and positively." Coincidentally, I observed how the community of practice was supported and learned its definition at the same time when I turned on my recorder in a discussion group and someone felt uneasy about it. Being recorded didn't bother that student personally, but he asked if anyone else had a problem with it. Students then went one by one around the room and voted whether I was allowed to record. I was allowed to vote as well, and after a unanimous yes, was told by another student:

Kofi: We're reaching a consensus; we are all coming to agreement. That's why we went around like that. If someone would have said no then we would have had to talk about it until a resolution was made.

This community of practice ethic meant that students expected a group consensus to be reached before giving their consent and they were prepared to challenge adult authority if it violated this ethic. This ethic was an important reason why student's felt engaged during their time at OSBG, it gave all students the ability to take on the role of teacher in informing other students and adults, creating learning experiences for both groups. However, as I will explain next, discrepancies between this ethic and reality, particularly around student action, was a key factor that hindered the ability of students to engage in a successful praxis.

#### **Addressing Student Action**

Many students reported being eager about coming to OSBG because of the action component of their educational model, which students felt was essential for creating solutions that genuinely address social/environmental problems. As one student explained:

Marcos: Well, I knew quite a bit about the assignment before I came here, but the school has given me the opportunity to put a lot of that knowledge into practice and deal with trial and error and figure what works best by actually doing it, not just reading about it.

While student action is essential for linking critical thought to action in order to create a successful praxis, the unpredictability that teachers much lend to their students is a central reason why teachers limit student action. Ironically, at OSBG, the community of practice ethic, while fostering a strong culture of critical thought, was the main avenue through which student action was curbed. The actual practice of this ethic revealed instead a hierarchal nature of control and interests. These interests were aided by other concerns, such as the stress related to funding and working in a dangerous neighborhood, which also curbed student action, and created a disconnect (called the "bubble effect") in student's praxis.

### Rhetoric vs. Reality

While the community of practice ethic was strong in terms of student-teacher discussions, it was clear that an antithetical hierarchal process organized the work done at OSBG. While students discussed ideas in an egalitarian fashion, one person designated as the group leader would meet with teachers and staff who then decided what would be best for OSBG. Students also felt the work they did was not commensurate to the work of adults. This became all the more clear as the weather became progressively hotter and students (and I) spent all day shoveling compost in the sun while Turner created an "inner circle" staff that either stayed inside or traveled for funding purposes. Youth and teachers worked together every day, but teachers and older adults often stopped much sooner than youth, leaving them to do the bulk of the work. Youth were very sensitive to this climate and perceived it as a form of age inequality that they called an "adult's disrespect of youth" or a "violation of youth's rights by adults." Being aware of this, and afraid I may be labeled a disrespectful adult and restricted from personal conversations, I made a constant effort to work as long as students. As we worked together, student repeatedly told me they were eager to do hard work, but only if everyone was doing their fair share. This excerpt from one morning when I arrived and was asked by students to shovel compost with them- while many adults were standing around and drinking coffee- demonstrates this sensitivity:

Ceaser: So I asked the kids if they were tired or exhausted and everyone said no, everyone seemed kinda surprised that I would even ask that. And so I wouldn't just be standing around they said very quickly "Do you want to help us?"... So at some point someone made a comment about being tired and everyone turned and looked at me, but about ten minutes later everyone started complaining. The girls are complaining that the guys are not doing any work. People feel like everyone is not doing their fair share. It's creating all this tension in the group. They have a very interesting way of dealing with all of this. They all sort of yell at each other, they make a lot of jokes, they curse a good bit, and they are not very polite. Even when someone says excuse me it's in a very rude tone, and they rarely apologize to each other.

This shows the four ways in which students addressed this inequitable climate: 1) they found ways to focus on their work such as quickly asking for help from newcomers, 2) they segregated themselves and their conversations from adults by changing topics or lowering their voices when adults (including myself) were around, 3) they denied their feelings when asked, or 4) they became irritable or idle and caused friction amongst each other. Students' frustrations are a result of the "disconnect" in OSBG's community of practice. While students were comfortable with informing adults during discussions, they were quite reluctant to challenge authority when it involved work at OSBG. The many coping mechanisms indicate that youth inequality occurs

quite regularly, making it easier to be submissive when a discrepancy occurred between OSBG's egalitarian rhetoric and its living practice. Also, students repeatedly said they will only be there for a relatively short time compared to adults so they focused on completing their tasks and learning skills that could be applied to a more personal situation when they return home.

This hierarchy, and the reluctance to challenge it, stemmed largely from the stress over the school's lack of funds. Turner, who created the school in order to work with kids on his own terms, spent most of his time either away, on his phone, or in meetings for the purpose of securing funding opportunities. Lack of funds to fully repair the OSBG building also fueled tension amongst everyone. Giving up the basic privileges and comfort of American life, such as beds, heating, and air conditioning, clearly put people's emotions and their health on the edge, as Turner described in my first meeting with him:

Turner: I'm pretty stressed out right now, pretty tired. You spent one night in our building and you look like hell, this is home for me. It's definitely taking a toll on me, aging me considerably from when I was a vegan living in NYC making \$95,000 a year with a nice warm apartment and eating fresh great produce all the time, but I'm doing the best I can.

This constant stress left Turner very bitter and short tempered, and receptive only to actions that were lucrative to OSBG, such as the simple physical tasks required to maintain the school such as composting and gardening. This lack of funds was addressed through the community of practice ethic. Because the school cannot afford to raise wages or hire a larger staff, student labor was seen as necessary to maintain the school and farm. The community of practice ethic encouraged everyone, but especially students, to work by ethical conviction- by doing these basic, simple tasks you are contributing to improving the school and (by proxy) the L9. Thus, ironically, it had the effect of greatly limiting the range of actions students could engage in, and acting as a silencer on student's concerns- they genuinely wanted to be helpful but were too afraid to voice their complaints out of fear of Turner's reaction and being labeled as unsupportive or unproductive.

### The Dangers of the L9

While the contradiction in the community of practice ethic was primarily responsible for limiting student action, this contradiction was constantly buffered by safety fears of working in a dangerous neighborhood. Situating the school in the L9 significantly shaped student learning and action, but the dangers of the local area led teachers to confine students within the OSBG grounds. This had a significant effect on student critical reflection and action, creating a "bubble effect" that is reflected in students' statements.

Seeing the daily reality of a poor black community strongly impacted students, who described the neighborhood as "disturbing" and "third world". These comments demonstrate the importance of this context:

Gina: Before I came here I saw environmentalism as like "save the earth, save the pandas", but I didn't really realize that what I bought was directly affected people along racial and class lines.

Pamela: Being here has made me both socially and environmentally conscious, or more so than before I came, mostly because we see everything first hand. Also, just seeing the people around here kind of adds an emotional touch to what we're learning about. So like, from now on I want to think about where my food is coming from.

Because their education has a local "racial and class" context, student learning went beyond abstract environmental concepts to a deeper, more personal "emotional", learning. This strengthened their desire to work together and act for social justice. Unfortunately, despite this benefit, the danger associated with the area led teachers to restrict activities to the OSBG campus. Among the things I observed during my time there were local youth regularly fighting and later stealing from the school and teachers, a drug addict in the neighborhood (who refused to be a part of the community of practice or engage in any work) invited himself over for meals despite being asked not to return, and gunshots took place a few blocks away one night, resulting in a murder. Few educators (or for that matter EE researchers) would argue that this is the most appropriate setting for a youth educational program. However, observing these events clearly gave environmentalism an entirely more practical reality in shaping student thought.

### The "Bubble Effect"

Limiting action to the OSBG campus kept students safe and maintained their focus on doing work that was in the best interest of OSBG, but it also impacted the full potential of their critical education. Students, who had demonstrated great practice in critical thought and discussion, often experienced "long pauses, thought evoking hums, and nervous laughter" when adults made comments connecting discussion topics to the concerns of local residents, demonstrating an unfamiliarity or discomfort with these ideas.

This pattern points to another "disconnect" which hindered student praxis. Sequestered to OSBG grounds and unable to integrate their new knowledge within the L9 itself, student's felt, as one young man put it, "in a bubble". This "bubble effect" is evident in many students' statements. For example, the previous student describes an "emotional touch" to her learning that was clearly meaningful, but she doesn't mention a particular person or neighborhood concern, it's "the people here" that she reflects upon. While she has "see[n] everything first hand", her statement indicates she has not actually built a relationship with local residents. The young man who referred to OSBG as a bubble had many ideas about how to improve OSBG, but few ideas about improving the local L9 community or an awareness of their central concerns. Because of the constant focus on work at the school (and work that is not individualized to student interests) students are left with little time for truly investigating the concerns of the very people whose lives they aimed to improve, fostering an additional "disconnect" in their experiences at OSBG. These disconnects have a common source: a failure to fully live according to the egalitarian and participatory ethic of the school which would have lend greater control to students as they pursued a critical education. When this ethic was violated, decisions were made to constrain students against their desires. And, while they reluctantly accepted this situation (as youth often must) and still had a significant learning experience, it also produced outcomes that were evidence of a hindered praxis, which will be discussed below.

### **Action Outcomes at OSBG**

Students' determination to use their knowledge to create change resulted in many actions being undertaken in pursuit of that goal. Limiting student action primarily to OSBG grounds led students to channel most of these efforts at the school. However, some of the most meaningful

projects undertaken by students were those few that involved learning about and actively working around the L9. While the bubble effect may have actually helped students to enact successful projects within OSBG, it also clearly hindered the projects that involved the L9, both in terms of number of projects and effectiveness.

### Action within OSBG

Within the confines of OSBG, students managed to accomplish a great deal. In the 6 months of observation, their 4x4 compost pile grew four times in size, two greenhouses and an aquaponic and rain catchment system were built, and they expanded from one garden plot to four on separate pieces of land- including a large space in a nearby city. The reason why student's felt they were able to accomplish so much is that the community of practice ethic and the eagerness to engage in action created an egalitarian community that inspired and encouraged them to act and learn. Most importantly, it gave them the opportunity to teach each other. As one student put it, it was this community of practice that made the difference between this and other types of schooling:

Angela: It's not just the school that teaches us, it's really that we teach each other and the school provides a basis for us to do things and act, whether it's just doing the task around the farm or helping out. The school really just provides a safe space for us all to come together and teach each other and not be taught by an authoritative teaching figure. So I've learned a lot from the people here. I'm really thankful for that.

Her thankfulness is indicative of the respect and empowerment that such an environment confers onto youth. Youth returned this favor by taking their education seriously, making even minimal tasks a learning opportunity. From this work student's learned many basic skills such as how to handle a handsaw and recognizing edible plants. They also learned the skill of teaching and organizing themselves and others. To the degree that the community of practice ethic was upheld, students were genuinely thankful for what they learned from OSBG.

### Action within the L9

In terms of actions that involve interacting with the L9 community, only two projects were taken up during the research period: a farmer's market and a food accessibility survey. Students created a farmer's market outside of a local church that would operate after Sunday services. This was a great example of the ideas produced in a dialectical discourse- residents don't have access to healthy food, they grow healthy food but residents take little interest, so OSBG will bring healthy food directly to where resident will often gather. While churchgoers were supportive of the initiatives of the school, and even applauded students during a service I attended, because of spotty attendance and inappropriate attire (wearing used or dirty work clothes to an event where people wear their best suits and dresses), they were asked not to return. The failure to do these simple things demonstrates the bubble effect on student praxis. Being focused solely on food and largely restricted to the OSBG campus, they neglected the interests of residents, creating a disconnect which hampered their ability to translate their learning into a successful action.

While the farmer's market may not have been successful, the food accessibility survey was repeatedly mentioned as influential to students' learning. This involved them canvassing local food stores and recording what kinds of food they sold to determine resident's access to healthy options. They found the area has no grocery stores, only convenience stores. Stores sold

only five types of vegetables, but a hundred different types of liquor. Additionally the vegetables were wilted, indicating they were rarely purchased and non-local. This survey was given to community organizations and placed pressure on local stores to sell better produce, giving student a chance to shape their local environment in a significant way. Creating this knowledge also had a significant effect on student's thinking about the local area. They considered this type of food environment as a form of discrimination and the inability to obtain healthy food as a failure of resident's democratic rights as citizens. Students felt that teaching this community to farm "is so imperative for this community because what they've been given, the garbage they are putting in their system, is insane." One student eloquently explained his new awareness:

Cameron: The grocery stores here are not going to keep the community growing. We've learned to think about it in terms of a system. People are caught up in a system where the food that's available to them here is actually killing them, both because what they put into their bodies is unhealthy for them but also because it has corn syrup which requires oil, but for the oil to get here they have to drain out the wetlands which protects them from hurricanes. So when a hurricane comes it destroys their neighborhood, makes them poor, and they have to eat this shitty food which starts the whole cycle again. So it's all really connected, what hurts the land, hurts people, hurts communities, hurts everything, hurts your stomach, hurts your heart, hurts your life.

Students connected eating unhealthy food to creating poor neighborhoods which stems from and results in environmental destruction. They show a deep integration of these issues by not only connecting it to the structure of "the system", but also by relating it to a cyclical process. However, while statements like Cameron's demonstrate the effectiveness of local action for critical reflection, note that they mention nothing about how these residents can genuinely address these social/environmental problems apart from the education in urban farming they learned at OSBG. While this certainly can be one part of a solution, these statements demonstrate the disconnect between students and the local neighborhood that resulted from the bubble effect of learning at OSBG. Student's environmental knowledge is not well contextualized to the actual everyday concerns of local residents. Also, this prevented local residents from seeing OSBG as a place to address their concerns (which, from speaking with residents, was jobs, crime, and neighborhood appearance) so they saw little need to get involved themselves.

### **Addressing Critical EE Concerns**

Finally, many of the concerns scholars have surrounding critical EE were addressed by students in group interviews. When asked about ecological crisis and changes in proenvironmental behavior, students reflected on their time at OSBG and reported feeling empowered and determined to make the world a better place, both ecologically and socially. This greater awareness could be described as experiencing enlightenment as a result of spending time at the school.

### Ecological Crisis

Despite the disconnects around the community of practice ethic and the bubble effect, the combination of working within the OSBG community and engaging in action to address local specific environmental issues created an environment where students developed a greater awareness of their ability to enact proenvironmental decisions themselves or with others. This reason allowed for discussions of "ecological crisis", which students acknowledged made them "scared", "worried", "troubled", or "terrified", to be converted into "hopeful" and "optimistic"



feelings because they felt capable of finding solutions to these problems, as the following comment describes:

Angela: I feel hopeful because I do realize how much trouble we're in and where everything could be headed, but, largely because of what we've learned and done at Blair Grocery, I'm still hopeful because I know that we ourselves can act to change it. We don't have to rely on some great system to affect those changes; we are able to go out and address these problems ourselves which ensures that what I want done, and what we want done, will get done.

### Changes in Proenvironmental Behavior

This greater awareness of their ability to enact decisions themselves led many students to enact greater proenvironmental behaviors once they left OSBG. Students themselves did not consider simply changing behavior as a type of action- the focus on work at the school led students to define action in much more physical terms. However, these changes could easily be defined as a type of action (for those who feel student action is too difficult, i.e Walker 1995, 1997) as the following comments demonstrate:

Marcel: Before coming here my vegetarian diet was reliant upon soy products. Now I've learned that you vote with what you buy and by buying soy I was supporting the monoculture of American agriculture and I've got to stop doing that.

Jennifer: After being here the first time, I stopped buying a lot of stuff; I bought a lot less in general. I was more conscious of how what I buy was personally affecting people's neighborhoods.

### Experiencing Enlightenment

These statements indicate a deconstruction of previous (capitalist) ideology that has created an awareness that extends beyond individual behavior to include larger structural processes and concern for others. Students have attained a greater "self-conscious awareness of knowledge distortion" which is critical theory's definition of enlightenment. Many of the comments student's made about their time at OSBG demonstrated an experience of enlightenment, or at least signs of individual freedom and self-determination, as these final comments demonstrate:

Pamela: Being here has made me more both socially and environmentally conscious, mostly because we see everything first hand. That adds an emotional touch to what we're learning about. So from now on I want to think about where my food is coming from in terms of how it's made, how it's produced, and where the ingredients come from.

Jennifer: This trip has made everything, like whatever I've read or I've learned about, real and tangible. I don't think I can ever go back to not thinking about where my food comes from. It would just be impossible after the experiences we've had and after talking to the people here. I feel like I would be betraying all the knowledge I've learned here, and myself, by doing that.

These students show that a deep structural change in the thoughts and actions that shape their ontology and identity has occurred. By testing out their knowledge, they have a more concrete understanding of what works, making abstract knowledge "real", and forming the basis for future

direction. These students have constructed a stronger sense of their own agency which has strengthened their commitment to environmental social justice ideals about fighting inequality. While these results indicate that teachers and students could go farther in terms of critical engagement, it is clear nonetheless that a meaningful learning experience has taken place.

## CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates the challenges and constraints of promoting student environmental action through critical EE. Consistent with previous research on critical EE (Huckle and Sterling 1999; Kyburz Graber 1999), the strengths of the OSBG model are its egalitarian teaching-learning culture where one learns by engaging with others and its focus on creating local, contextual value-laden knowledge so that students connect learning to real-world environmental/social problems. This method of urban farming education is successful in offering students greater agency and critical reflectiveness in challenging current ideology, transforming uncomfortable feelings surrounding “ecological crisis”, and producing in many a sense of enlightenment (Moore 2005; Mueller 2009). While OSBG’s approach may be considered more radical than what traditional EE scholars might have envisioned (i.e. Hungerford and Volk 1990), the constitutive elements of critical EE produce exactly the type of environmental citizens that EE educators have longed for-informed students who are learning to engage in the most strategic actions to defend the environment (Chawla and Cushing 2007; Hungerford, Peyton, and Wilke 1980; UNESCO/UNEP 1978).

The weaknesses of the OSBG model center around the concerns of student action (Short 2010), which are accepting unpredictability, lending more control to students, individuating student praxis, and maintaining an egalitarian ethic. These concerns appear to remain regardless of the model an EE educator advocates or uses. This is because, as critical education points out, the classroom is a contested space (Giroux 1988; Kincheloe and McLaren 2002) where the power dynamics between teacher and student can easily be manipulated to advantage the former, with the latter reluctant or unable to challenge authority. In exchange for this inequality, students’ critical praxis is weakened. If this model is to remain successful, teachers involved in critical paradigms must engage in greater reflexivity about their own methods (Walker 1997) and be more willing to embrace a true egalitarian ethic. This reflection will provide insight into how teachers can address student action within other EE paradigms.

Incorporating this type of critical EE into the educational system may be difficult ideologically (Stevenson 2007), but this research has demonstrated some benefits as well as limitations for an institutional critical EE. The focus on urban farming and doing what is in the best interests of the school, as well as running ideas through channels of greater authority, may limit the range of ideas that youth can propose, but this will make it easier for teachers to handle giving more control to their students. Additionally, the funding provided by an institutionalized critical EE program would greatly reduce the stress among staff at OSBG, allowing them to put greater effort into their educational practices. While many of these factors may have limited the full potential of their educational experience, students still clearly describe experiences of enlightenment and a strong determination to engage in action to create change. Future research is needed to determine if this result can be maintained in a more institutional setting.

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# **CHAPTER 3: SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: POSITIONALITY AND THE ROLE OF NEGATIVE SOCIAL/ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIENCES**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Environmental education researchers have examined the significant life experiences (SLEs) of environmental activists for key experiences that can be used as teaching tools to promote greater activism among youth (Chawla 1999; Tanner 1980). However, this sub-discipline has been accused of implicit racism for its disproportionate focus on those with social/environmental privileges and positive environmental experiences, positions which marginalize the voices and experiences of subdominant groups (Chawla 1998a; Gough 1999b; Norgaard 2007; Turner and Pei-Wu 2002; Whitehead 2009). This omission is particularly startling given the rise of the environmental justice (EJ) movement, a movement heavily comprised of disadvantaged groups fighting what are largely negative environmental experiences (Bullard 1994a). While research has examined EJ motivations for activism (Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1991; Glazer and Glazer 1999:280; Turner and Pei-Wu 2002), no SLE study has yet examined EJ SLEs or offered a larger understanding on the significance of negative social/environmental experiences for environmental activism.

This paper examines the SLEs of the EJ movement by conducting a systemic review of qualitative articles within the EJ literature that indicate significant, important, or meaningful reasons for engaging in environmental activism. Using a theoretical framework which synthesizes concepts from the sociology of disasters (a branch of research that, as it pertains to human experiences, is the study of negative environmental experiences) and feminist theory, I advance the notion of social/environmental positionality to explain both how marginalized people are disproportionately affected by negative social/environmental experiences and how these groups utilize their subjectivity to counteract dominant social forces. Results indicate that the experience of environmental injustice is itself an overarching SLE with three sub-themes: awareness of one's social/environmental marginality, the embodied knowledge that comes with one's positionality, and the empowerment that comes from working with others for EJ. These findings are compared to more traditional SLE's so that the role of positionality is illuminated and I conclude by offering a pedagogical framework within which these marginalized groups can use their subjugation as a location of environmental activism.

### **Significant Life Experiences**

Interested in creating pedagogical tools that would help environmental education in "the production of an active and informed citizenry," Tanner (1980:20) conducted the first study of what significant life experiences (SLEs) led current environmentalists to choose a life of activism. He interviewed members of conservation groups such as the National Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club and asked them to recall the formative influences that led them to choose conservation work. Among the top three, respondents most often cited being outdoors and interacting with natural, rural, or other relatively pristine habitats as their most significant influence. Next was the role of parents, teachers, other adults, and books related to environmentalism. Third was habitat alteration or seeing a negative change or loss of a pristine

environment. Subsequent research has produced similar results (for a review see Chawla 1998a, 1998b; Palmer and Suggate 1996; Tanner 1998; Sward 1999).

While Tanner is commended for initiating such an investigation, his study is also emblematic of the limitations still present in SLE research. While a handful of studies have examined SLEs in other cultures (Hsu 2009), cross culturally (Chawla 1999), or among ethnic minorities in the US (James and McAvoy 1992; Myers 1997), the vast majority of SLE studies focus on white, adult, male, middle class environmental activists. This has led some SLE researchers to accuse the discipline of practicing an implicit type of "environmental racism." (Gough 1999b: 385). Indeed, this orientation to SLEs is very limited in scope. It offers a narrow, privileged conception of who is an environmental activist (Gough 1999; Payne 1999; Tanner 1980) and a construction of nature which often ignores the environmental concerns of minorities (Burningham and Thrush 2003; Parker and McDonough 1999; Whitehead 2009). Secondly, by focusing on those with greater social/environmental privileges, SLE research has inadvertently become disproportionately focused on capturing positive, acceptable pedagogical experiences. Throughout the SLE literature the top three most significant findings are time spent in wild nature, important person or book, and "habitat alteration"- the loss of an environment (Tanner 1980; see Chawla 1998b; Finger 1994; Thompson, Aspinall and Montarzino 2008). While the first two are largely conceived as positive experiences, "habitat alteration" is a negative experience. Despite this difference, SLE research does not discuss habitat alteration at great length or explain how such negative experiences are different than those with positive valences. Instead, focus is paid to producing reliable results, assuming generalizability, and thus producing replicable teaching experiences (Chawla 1998a, 2001). Educators see negative experiences as difficult to justify as a teaching tool and as factors that may actually discourage people from activism (Chawla 2001:457; Moore 2005; Mueller 2009; Strife 2012). This is despite an observable appreciation in the number of activists who cite social justice concerns as related to their SLEs (Chawla 1999; James and McAvoy 1992) and an admission by scholars that "negative experiences have emerged as new motives for practical concern" (Chawla 1998b: 19). These factors explain why the SLEs of marginalized groups continue to be absent in the literature.

This orientation is somewhat troubling considering the simultaneous rise of the environmental justice (EJ) movement- a movement centered on minority and low income people resisting negative environmental experiences and fighting for equal access to nature and healthy spaces (Bullard 1994a; Jones and Carter 1994). The EJ movement is credited with redefining the environment as an issue of social justice (Bullard 1994b; Bullard and Johnson 2000), offering new and critical ways to think about ecological and social conditions (Ageyman 2002; Bickerstaff, Bulkeley and Painter 2009), and has demonstrated notable success in its short history (Ageyman and Evans 2004; Bullard 1996). Literature regarding EJ motives for activism cite the experience of a perceived health hazard, seeing one's fate linked with that of their community, a "tenacious dedication" toward notions of democracy, a refusal to be passive victims, and organizing within one's community to create "alternative networks of power" as important motivations (Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1991; Glazer and Glazer 1999:280; Turner and Pei-Wu 2002). However, currently no research has examined the SLEs of EJ activists, links EJ motivations for action to their actual SLEs, or offers information about how to educate for greater environmentalism or negative experiences.



Gough (1999b; 386) notes, hearing from minority and working class communities "would tell very different stories of [SLEs]." This is because for marginalized communities, "their point of entry into environmental concerns is usually framed by inequality and related to access, production, and distribution issues in intimate ways" (Pulido 1996:29). This paper will address the lack of information about marginalized groups, negative experiences, and SLEs by presenting a systematic review of SLEs within the EJ academic literature. To explicate the intersection of social and environmental marginality, I use concepts from both feminist theory and the sociology of disasters (in essence, the sociology of negative environmental experiences) to advance the notion of social/environmental positionality or the mutually constitutive, intersecting, and reinforcing position produced by the combination of one's subjective experience and social hierarchy (Collins 1991; hooks 1984; Ioris 2011; Pulido and Pena 1998). It is one's social/environmental marginality, characterized by what I call the "toxic relationships" which form what is known as "corrosive community" (Freudenburg 1997; Freudenburg and Jones 1991) that produces disadvantaged people who empower themselves by rearticulating environmental knowledge from their embodied social/historical perspectives (Haraway 1991; Harvey 1996; hooks 1989, 1990; Kroll-Smith and Floyd 1997). Findings reveal that the experience of environmental justice is itself an SLE with three significant sections: recognizing one's social/environmental marginality, the embodied knowledge produced from one's positionality, and the empowerment experienced by working within an EJ community under notions of inclusion and justice. These results are compared to more traditional SLEs and I conclude with a discussion about how to educate for social/environmental marginality and EJ.

### **SLES AND POSITIONALITY**

SLEs are important for researchers because they represent important phenomenological moments when people link their feelings to their attitudes which heighten their environmental sensitivity and potentially change their life trajectory toward environmental activism (Chawla 1998a, 1998b; Hsu 2009; Marcinkowski 1993). However, these experiences are intricately connected to the social, cultural, and historical positions from which a person or group constructs their understanding of the world (Fuss 1989; Gough 1999b; Payne 1999). As such, these "subject-positions" (Spivak 1986, 1988) demonstrate both the subjective nature of social constructionism and the impact of dominant structural forces that situate people's ontological positions (Alcoff 1994; Foucault 1978). The examination of these two factors is what is known as one's positionality (Martine and Gunten 2002:46; Maher and Tetreault 2001:164; Nager and Geiger 2007:3). While the term was originally coined by Helmuth Plessner (1970) to refer to the perception of the body both internally and as a part of the surrounding environment, it was later adopted by feminist theorists in order to better examine the binary between essentialism/social constructionism and subjectivity/materialism (Alcoff 1994; Fuss 1989; Haraway 1991; Rose 1997). Similarly, although not used often within the social/environmental literature, positionality offers a way to link the acknowledgement that the environment is a social construction (Griender and Garkovich 1994; Gough 1999b) with the concerns of those who are focused on structural concerns that reproduce inequality (Burningham and Thrush 2003; Cole 2007; Fien 1999; Firth and Morgan 2010; Gough and Robottom 1993). In particular, positionality has been used to examine the specific knowledge(s) and multiple intersecting ways of identification among disadvantaged groups (Collins 1991; Di Chiro 2006; hooks 1984), and environmental researchers have examined how positionality creates different notions of the environment and

environmentalism (Clayton and Opatov 2003; Harvey 1996: 283; Ioris 2011; Nightingale 2011; Pulido and Pena 1998).

What is the positionality of those who suffer from negative social/environmental experiences? By this I mean what elements of subjective experience and social hierarchy situate disadvantaged groups socially and environmentally? The sociology of disasters literature has developed a number of important concepts for understanding how technological disasters (i.e. disasters resulting from toxic waste or other human caused pollution) affect the social/psychological nature of individuals and communities and are connected to larger elements of the social structure (Drabek 2010; Freudenburg 1997; Gill 2007; Kroll-Smith, Couch and Marshall 1997). This “human side of disaster” (Drabek 2010) could best be understood as the social/environmental positionality, or specifically marginality, of those who are affected by negative social/environmental experiences. These residents undergo a type of cultural trauma, secondary to the trauma of the initial disaster event (Gill 2007), whereby their relationship to the land moves from a pre-disaster stage of relative ignorance or unawareness of environmental problems to a highly salient state of anxiety, fear, worry, and uncertainty (Edelstein 1988; Erikson [1976/2012]; 1994, 1995). Living with toxic chemicals and unable to make normative assumptions about their environment severely impacts these resident’s health and emotions, forcing them to live within a “risk perception shadow” or “altered relationship...to the processes of nature” (Edelstein 2004; Erikson 1995:186; Gunter and Kroll-Smith 2007; Kroll-Smith, Brown and Gunter 2000). Since tech disasters are social in nature, issues of power and inequality mark the post-disaster process, creating what is known as the “corrosive community” ((Freudenburg 1993, 1997, 2000; Freudenburg and Jones 1991). Dominant institutions responsible for the disaster are more focused on protecting their own interests against those of residents. Residents often assign blame based on previous history of cultural trauma such as racism for African-Americans, classism for White blue-collar workers, and loss of sovereignty for Native Americans (Alexander 2004; David 2008; Edelstein 2004; Entrikin 2007; Erikson 1994; Eyerman 2004). While assigning blame leads many to distrust existing institutions, it also promotes the building of community by forming grassroots organizations to counteract dominant social forces and transmit these values to the next generation (Edelstein 1988; 2004; Freudenburg 1997). These groups are often led by women both because of the social/gendered concerns they have for their children and community and because men are often reluctant to engage in activism out of fear of losing their jobs which are tied to the local industry causing the pollution (David and Enarson 2012; Edelstein 1988; Kroll-Smith and Couch 1990; McGee 1999).

While issues surrounding positionality are commonly featured throughout the sociology of disaster literature, this critical component generally receives only marginal reference in the development of the literature’s theoretical concepts (see Edelstein 1988:141, 186; Erikson [1976/2012], 1994: 40; Kroll-Smith, Couch and Marshall 1997). Instead of focusing more intently on marginalization and subjectivity, more effort is paid toward legitimizing (and thus objectifying) residents’ experiences of environmental harm (Freudenburg 1993; Freudenburg and Jones 1991) and theorizing larger notions of risk and rationality within society (Brunsma and Picou 2008; Freudenburg 1993; Picou, Marshall and Gill 2004). While the focus on race, class, and gender has expanded more recently (Alway, Belgrave and Smith 1998), particularly following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (David and Enarson 2012; Hartman and Squires 2006; Johnson and Rainey 2007; Miller 2006; Spence, Lachlan and Burke 2007), the

discipline has yet to acknowledge holistically that environmental disadvantages and differences in interpretation are simply a mirror of social disadvantages (Belkhir and Charlemaine 2007; Harvey 1996) and are one component of the multiple, intersecting, mutually constitutive forms of oppression that disadvantaged groups face (Collins 1991; hooks 1984; Mohanty 2003). In other words, those disadvantaged socially, especially by race and class, are *generally always* disadvantaged environmentally, and the combination of social/environmental marginality lends itself to even further disadvantages, particularly regarding health (Alaimo 2010; Edelstein 1991; Freudenburg and Jones 1991; Kroll-Smith, Brown and Gunter 2000; Kroll-Smith and Floyd 1997) and creates a link between the subjective perception of current cultural trauma to the social-historical positionality of these groups (Alexander 2004; Stamm, Stamm, Hudnall and Higson-Smith 2004).

In order to orientate these terms toward a greater focus on subjective experience, I argue that many of the elements that characterize the corrosive community could be better described as toxic social/environmental relationships. This term elucidates the interconnectedness between compounded forms of social oppression and living in an unhealthy environment. While describing one's social situation as "toxic" is certainly extreme, the examples given throughout this literature justify a term that implies a situation of environmental and social unhealthiness that is so severe it leads to physical death and significant psychological hardship for individuals which then spreads to fracture the social relationships needed for a healthy community (Kroll-Smith, Brown and Gunter 2000). This definition is metaphorically and operationally similar to the term "corroded", however it should be noted that corrosion is often a natural process while toxic more aptly implies fewer natural and more likely technological disaster phenomena. Erikson's (1995: 189,190) observed "that disasters that provoke this reaction [corrosive community] tend for the most part to involve some form of toxicity." In sum, toxic relationships seems more fitting *and* offers a direct conceptual link with his notion of communality or a network of relationships embedded within an area that make up a community (Erikson [1976/2012]). It is the disorganization (or toxification) of resident's bodies and health in their relationship with nature that produces embodied "sedimented" environmental experiences of subjugation which are linked to similar embodied social experiences (Butler 1997:34; Kroll-Smith and Floyd 1997). The emotional meanings we then place onto our environment and ourselves, and the knowledge or vocabulary we derive from those meanings is reflective of one's social/environmental positionality (Haraway 1991; Smelser 2004; Sultana 2011; Sze 2006; Weigert 1991). Thus, toxic social/environmental relationships allow us to better examine the interrelations within the social world, their environmental components, and how these domains combine to produce not only negative social/environmental phenomena, but also a greater embodied understanding of why such experiences are interpreted in a particular way.

Finally, this theory must elucidate how these residents utilize their experiences as a motivation for activism. Activism or civic engagement is one type of behavior that is regularly cited as emerging after a disaster (Drabek 2010; Drabek and Key 1984; Drabek and McEntire 2003; Edelstein 1988, 2004; Jenkins 2012) Victims who are experiencing anxiety and anger after a disaster are motivated to find other like-minded people as a way to build community and cope. The heightened emotions experienced during an event, particularly anger, is cited as being a motivator that mobilizes disadvantaged people to question authority and articulate their own viewpoint (hooks 1984:10; Lorde 1984). In other words, since arguments about the environment are ultimately arguments about society (Harvey 1996, Ioris 2011), environmental disasters

awaken people to their social positionality and the combination of social/environmental marginalization is key to developing knowledge to counteract dominant social forces. This has been best acknowledged by hooks (1984, 1990, 2009: 8) who regularly links the creation of "counter hegemonic black subculture" during Segregation to both the subjectivity of being marginalized and the environmental attachments they endowed with collective memory and feelings, allowing them to redefine their sense of self. She and others argue that the lived, embodied experience of marginality creates people who choose to position themselves opposite to dominant social forces, creating an "*ex-centric*" or "outsider" source of power that promotes different ways of seeing, theorizing, and making space for transformation (Harvey 1996: 102-104; hooks 1989; Kozin 2008:156; Lorde 1984; Soja and Hooper 1993). From that position, one's body, health, and language serve as places of knowledge production in the struggle for authority (Haraway 1991; hooks 1989; Kroll-Smith and Floyd 1997), and as sites to link and strengthen different marginalized groups together through shared notions of injustice (Bannerji 1995; Duncan 1999). For example, the EJ movement has succeeded in redefining the "environment" as the spaces where we "live, work, and play" (Novotny 2000), empowering disadvantaged groups by giving them the space to articulate their particular concerns as environmental, which has succeeded in reorienting environmental discourses towards issues of social justice (Bullard and Johnson 2000). This type of "expertise" forces us to rethink the traditional relationship between citizen and experts (Alaimo 2010; Kroll-Smith, Couch and Marshall 1997). This transforming orientation empowers marginalized people, making them more resilient towards disasters and more likely to be continually committed to environmental activism (Mintada, Kals and Becker 2007; Reich 2006). As people who are collectively involved in environmental activism and addressing social/environmental marginalization and negative experiences, this makes the SLEs of the EJ movement an excellent subject for this investigation.

## METHODS AND DATA

This paper contains a systemic review of identity and SLE descriptions within the EJ literature. I define identity descriptions as direct quotes by individuals containing information that relates to how they view themselves, their life events, and their relationship with others and the environment. SLE descriptions are statements within this material that describe a significant motivation for activism. People often used the language "significant", "important", or "main" in their descriptions of these. While most SLE research is conducted using interviews and not textual analysis of academic literature, these descriptions capture the important or memorable experiences and generalized regular occurrences that are typical of SLE investigations (Arnold, Cohen, and Warner 2009; Chawla 1998a; James and McAvoy 1992).

The first step in the data collection process was to compile a database of EJ research literature. To do this, I performed a keyword search using "environmental justice" on Wilson Web, which was chosen because of the breadth and accuracy of information available. This search yielded over 350,000 newspaper articles, journal articles, and books. This is some indication that the EJ movement has permeated many disciplines and that similar topics are discussed across disciplines. For that reason, the search was restricted to the "social sciences abstracts" literature with "environmental justice" as the subject. This produced 259 entries. After removing book reviews and published corrections to articles, 186 peer reviewed items remained. These articles represent a wide range of disciplines including economic reviews, social work journals, psychology, sociology, urban studies literature, and political science. These 186 articles

were read thoroughly with a focus on capturing identity and SLE descriptions. This process yielded a 100 page file of research findings, of which roughly half was direct quotes. Most articles, being quantitative or theoretical in nature, did not contain such descriptions and were removed from analysis. The remaining 29 articles, qualitative in nature, span 13 years of research and were used for analysis (Allen and Gough 2006; Anglin 1998; Barnett and Scott 2007; Beamish and Luebbers 2009; Bell and Braun 2010; Brown et al 2003; Carruthers 2007; Chambers 2007; Chari 2008; Checker 2001, 2004, 2005, 2007; Cocola 2007; Culley and Angelique 2011; Fan 2006; Gaarder 2011b; Halfacre, Hurley and Grabbatin 2010; Hayes 2007; Johnson and Niemeyer 2008; Macias 2008; Morrison 2009; Nagel 2005; Norgaard 2007; Prindeville and Bretting 1998; Pulido and Pena 1998; Routledge, Nativel and Cumbers 2006; Scammel, Senier, Darrah-Okike, et al 2009; Schlossberg 1999).

Analysis was guided by qualitative open and focused coding procedures (Esterburg 2002). An initial open-ended coding procedure was done in Microsoft Outlook. Identity and SLE descriptions were read and coded by significant themes such as “fear”, “conflict with business”, and “embodied risk” and by any mention of the word “significant” or similar word. Scholarly commentary within article findings were kept to clarify statements and helped in generating more focused codes. Similar codes and corresponding content were grouped together. Examples of these codes are "conflict between (white middle class environmentalists or business interests, or white middle class culture and aesthetics) and EJ", "negative emotions (distrust, disrespect, fear, helplessness, guilt)", and "toxic relationship with the land (disconnected, tied to work, problems ignored)", and "SLE". Following this stage, author's writings were removed, leaving only direct quotes. Next, these categories were rearranged so that the particular story of EJ activists would emerge from the data. Because of the overlapping of the SLE content with other codes, SLE content was distributed into other appropriate categories. Finally, an axial coding procedure was done where a combination of inductive and deductive thinking was used to understand the larger structural nature of how the three traditional SLEs (experience in wild nature, important person or book, and habitat alteration) compared to the categories in my findings. Categories were then condensed into three significant findings. This process grounds the SLE's revealed here within a larger understanding of the positionality of EJ activists, their motivations for activism, and previous SLE research.

A few things must be mentioned before discussing the findings. EJ struggles vary by positionality (Harvey 1996; Krauss 1993; see Anglin 1998; Brown et al. 2003) and the particular concerns situated in specific places (Agyeman 2002; Barnett and Scott 2007). This in turn effects their conception of EJ in addition to the SLEs connected to those notions. Secondly, the SLEs listed below are collected from articles where SLEs may have been given large or scant levels of mention. While it is still possible to gage the overall significance of SLE material, this makes it difficult to give exact quantifiable amounts to each section of findings. Third, it should be mentioned that much of the current EJ literature operates on essentialized notions of social locations, potentially leaving much to be assumed about their identity and EJ (Heinz 2005; Szaiz and Meuser 1997). Little EJ research examines masculinity (except for Bell and Braun 2010), or sexual orientation. Finally, it is expected that the category of “habitat alteration” will be expanded both geographically to include spaces other than the wild nature typically listed in SLEs, and social/psychologically by explicating a host of difficult identification and emotional processes little understood in SLE research but common in the sociology of disasters. This research will help to create an environmental education that can genuinely produce greater

environmental activism and remain relevant to current notions of what it means to be an environmental activist (Ceaser 2012; Tanner 1980; Shellenburger and Nordhaus 2004).

## FINDINGS

i tell the students  
of sidewalks and factory-centered  
towns  
of the poison produced and distributed  
by their white fathers  
through the rivers  
and waters[,]  
of the poison their babies  
will suck through the breasts  
of their mothers. (Young Bear 1980, in Cocola 2007:56)

This poem expresses the experience of environmental injustice, or what could be better called the toxic relationships of social/environmental marginality. From his position as a Native American, Young Bear can see how race, class, gender and power are intertwined and result in “poisoning” the social/environmental relationships of disadvantaged groups. The following findings illustrate how the experience of environmental injustice is itself an overarching SLE with three significant sub-sections. First, there is recognition of one’s social/environmental marginality following the experience of a technological disaster. The second SLE is the knowledge produced from both the experience of social/environmental marginality and combating dominant institutions. Third, residents describe empowerment by embracing notions of inclusion in the production of lasting changes for future generations.

### **Recognizing Social/Environmental Marginality**

The recognition of one’s social/environmental marginality is the most cited SLE in the EJ literature. This process occurs during the first two phases of a disaster where people go from pre-disaster unawareness of environmental harm to a significant disaster event ((Edelstein 1988). However, this examination has found that social positionality plays an important role in shifting people priorities and reducing their environmental focus and concern. Social constraints and economic necessities leave little energy for addressing environmental problems. As a minority activist of the CAFE (Community Alliance for the Environment) movement in Brooklyn, New York explains, in her neighborhood:

They are just so tired of being beaten up with all the problems they had, with violence, with guns, with drugs, they really did not care about an incinerator. They would not take notice of it. We had to bring it to their attention. (African American female activist, in Checker 2001: 139).

Residents of other lower income African American communities such as Hyde Park, Georgia said they “hadn’t paid it [the environment] that much attention” or did not bother to investigate even when grease from a nearby junkyard covered their yards with oil and their “water was so stinking they couldn’t take a bath in it” (Annie Wilson, in Checker 2005:14-15). ). For working class men and women, their lack of willingness to critically examine their environment can be tied to the gendered nature of responsibilities toward one’s community. A higher social demand

is placed on women because of their roles as mothers and wives which makes them very sensitive to their community's needs (David and Enarson 2012; Edelstein 1988). Women, such as Appalachian anti-coal mining activist Maria Lambert, describe a "need to protect, that...99.9 percent of the women have" (in Bell and Braun 2010:804) that occupies their time, which minimizes their focus on environmental issues (Checker 2004). For men, their jobs are often connected to local area industry, making them willing to ignore environmental issues for the sake of employment and their sense of masculinity. As Appalachian anti coal-mining activist Bill Price explains, "Men were the coal miners, so it's a little harder for them to let go of that sense of, you know, this is how I put cornbread on the table" (Bell and Braun 2010:806). Thus for reasons pertaining to residents positionality, they are so engaged in maintaining their community they are willing to ignore environmental harm.

### **Toxic Relationships**

The EJ literature is replete with examples of people suffering from the toxic relationships that characterize the corrosive community. While the examples above describe toxic social and toxic environmental situations, these positions are intertwined, particularly around issues of health as the following example from an activist with the Hartford Environmental Justice Network (HEJN) in Hartford, Connecticut, the poorest city in the state and the site of a large landfill, explains:

The smell was awful. Birds were dropping from the sky and dogs were dying. People were getting sick. We knew it was from the landfill. (Activist interview, in Chambers 2007:35)

While this resident was aware of her environmental problems, most residents do not develop a consciousness of their marginality until after a significant disaster or event such as one's child contracting leukemia (Checker 2001:139), the spraying of pesticides on one's natural habitat (Norgaard 2007), a ban on a traditional foodstuff that significantly curtails a community's economic practices (Allen and Gough 2006; Fan 2006), or a natural disaster such as a flood (brought about by technological means). What makes a disaster significant is its heightened emotional anxiety, the disruption of social priorities, and worry over physical/psychological health, demonstrating the mutually constitutive and reinforcing nature of toxic relationships. This is highly evident in women's description of disaster. For example, in 2003 in West Virginia, mountaintop removal coal mining resulted in five acres of anti-mining activist Maria Gunnoe's land being washed away during a flood in one night, exposing her and her children to psychological trauma:

It was a night that I will never forget. If I live to be a hundred years old . . . I literally thought we were gonna die in this house. There is tremendous fear when it rains . . . my daughter went through a, hey, I feel safe in calling it a posttraumatic stress disorder. She would set up at night—if it was raining or thundering, or any weather alerts or anything like that going on in the news, my daughter would not sleep. And I, I didn't notice this to begin with . . . I was so overwhelmed with everything going on, that I never even thought, "What's this putting my kids through?" Until one morning . . . I found out one morning at 3:00 in the morning, it was thundering and lightning, and I go in, and I find her sitting on the edge of her bed with her shoes and her coat and her pants [on]. [Pauses, deep breath, voice cracks] And I found out then [pauses] what it was putting my daughter

through. [Crying] And that is what *pissed me off*... (italics orig., in Bell and Braun 2010:803)

Residents engage in reexamination by using ones illness and the anxiety from their “altered relationship to nature” to question their social/environmental identifications (Checker 2005; Erikson 1995: 186; Norgaard 2007: 467). One poignant example of this “risk perception shadow” (Edelstein 2004) is from a breast cancer activist in Anglin (1998:187-188) who, after exploring typical places for radiation, begins to question whether it’s “too many X-rays during childhood...the shoe fitting machine... early birth control pills...computers...microwave ovens... [or] the power lines in our backyards” as an explanation for the high cancer rates in the Bay Area of California. This state of high anxiety is a context in which residents begin to assign blame. It’s well known that most tech disasters can be blamed on dominant social forces and that residents use their positionality to connect current injustices to historical cultural trauma (David 2008; Erikson 1994; Entrikin 2007). African Americans do use the framework of race to articulate blame (Checker 2005), however both African Americans and Native Americans connect their current trauma to historical cultural trauma, using explicitly deadly terms such as genocide or systemic poisoning (Checker 2005:24; Norgaard 2007:468; Prindeville and Bretting 1998:51; Pulido and Pena 1998:41). Since a disaster happens to a culture collectively, the heightened emotions, ability to locate blame to dominant institutions, social disruption, and social-historical assignation of blame and sense of unfairness are important factors that link residents together through notions of a shared fate (Freudenburg and Steinsapir 1991; Glazer and Glazer 1999). These links then, represent the awareness of one’s social/environmental marginality. Here, Appalachian grandfather Ed Wiley describes his guilt about working at the very coal mine that he credits with making his granddaughter sick:

Here I was part of ...setting up something that could kill my granddaughter and all them little kids and possibly the community. I mean, it was just like a sledgehammer hitting me... That hurt me...that was the wake-up call right there.” (Bell and Braun 2010:809)

Ed’s “wake-up call”, embedded within the toxic relationships between him, his job, and his granddaughter, demonstrates that realizing one’s marginalized positionality releases an emotional charge that is both painful and powerful. By realizing one’s stance opposite to dominant forces, one can be transformed toward a “call to arms” that addresses environmental and social justice (Anglin 1998; Bell and Braun 2010; Brown et al. 2003; Carruthers 2007; hooks 1989). Emblematically, this combination of marginalization and “tenacious dedication” is repeatedly mentioned across all social locations as some form of “If I don’t fight, who else will?” (Beamish and Luebbers 2009; Bell et Braun 2010; Glazer and Glazer 1999: 280). For women, their social responsibilities to their children and sense of identity as mothers often makes them determined to address personal injustice, as Maria Gunnoe further explains:

...and I found out then [pauses] what it was putting my daughter through. [Crying] And that is what *pissed me off*. How dare they steal that from my child! The security of being able to sleep in her own bed. The coal companies now own that. They now own my child’s security in her own bed. [Pauses] And how can they expect me as a mother to look over that? ... What if I created terror in their children’s lives? And that is what it has done to my children...All I wanted to do was to be a mother...in order for me to be a mother, and in order for me to keep my children safe, ... I’ve had—it’s not an option—I’ve had to stand up and fight for our rights. (Bell and Braun 2010:803-4)



Maria's decision making process shows that for working class people, the environment becomes a priority not in and of itself, but because it has a directly social function. When it came down to her "kids' water- future water- being polluted so that you can keep the lights on, it just became a no-brainer" (Bell and Braun 2010: 805). One can also examine this transformation by gender. Ed feels guilt for colluding with those in power and harming his community while Maria is angry, emotionally charged, "pissed", and determined. Men's fear of "biting the hand that feeds them" weakens the mobilizing power of their position (Bullard 1990; 1994a; McGee 1999) while women's positionality gains force because it is tied to social connections and not working for industry (Edelstein 1988: 141; Kozin 2008), making them more open to such a transformation. This is another reason why so many EJ struggles are headed by women. The realization of one's social/environmental positionality is an SLE that reorients people toward environmental activism to correct these personal injustices.

### **Embodied Positionality/Perspectives**

Within the SLE literature important people, books, or ideas are listed as the second most common source that motivated people to environmental activism (Chawla 1998a). However, for those suffering social/environmental marginality, these sources of knowledge may not be as readily accessible. What is available, however, is the knowledge produced from one's everyday embodied experiences. The embodied experiences of social/environmental marginalization teach residents to challenge the power structure and rearticulate ideas from their own perspective and can be considered the second most important SLE within the EJ literature. These include negative experiences with authority, redefining notions of science and terms such as victim and environmentalism.

#### Negative Experiences with Authority

It is well known that community activists from technological disasters face a difficult time accessing resources from dominant institutions that are keener to protect their own interests than the well-being of residents (Freudenburg 1993, 2000). The EJ literature is replete with similar examples of social/environmental marginality and negative experiences with authority (Anglin 1998; Allen and Gough 2006; Beamish and Luebbers 2009; Carruthers 2007; Chari 2008; Checker 2001, 2005; Fan 2006; Macias 2008; Norgaard 2007), but also includes negative experiences with groups strongly connected to white privilege and its constructions of nature such as mainstream environmentalists and progressives (Anglin 1998; Beamish and Luebbers 2009). The heightened emotional state prompted by the disrespectful treatment EJ residents receive encourages them to organize. In particular, EJ activists describe negative experiences with the medical/scientific establishment as a SLE that galvanized them to action. Hasidic Jews of CAFE began gathering data about the cancer rates in their community after the health department dismissed their concerns by telling them "[those] people don't go to a doctor on time" (Checker 2001:140). One significant experience, considered a "coalition legend" that led to the creation of the Roxbury Environmental Justice Group (REJG), was their treatment by officials of the Boston University Medical Campus (BUMC) over the citing of a National Biocontainment Laboratory:

[We asked] What are you all talking about? All these diseases? What diseases are they? [The BUMC official] was like, "Well, it seems like you all don't know nothing, so we're not going to even bother (with) you"...He's really calling us, like dumb..."Unaccomplished," that's what he said, some kind of word...So the white lady

from South Boston, she said...”You bringing this to Roxbury and they’re organizers from Roxbury...so can you answer their question?” And (he) was like, “Well, when they learn a little bit more”...basically he didn’t listen to us. So we went downstairs and...said, “We are going to learn everything about what they’re talking about; we’re going to investigate, we’re going to take classes, we’re gonna do this and we’re going to tell everybody and their mama about this...So that’s how we started. (REJG, female, community activist, in Beamish and Luebbers 2009:658)

These negative embodied experiences illuminate the dialectical process behind one’s social/environmental positionality (Ioris 2011:873).When residents are confronted with patronizing attitudes, unfair and uncaring treatment, being ignored or deprioritized, racial slurs, and forced into difficult and unhealthy environmental positions they become angry, mobilizing them to educate themselves and their community. This decision empowers residents by using knowledge or counter-knowledge to create “alternative networks of power” (Glazer and Glazer 1999: 280) to counteract dominant forces.

### Embodied Knowledge and Redefining Terms

On a phenomenological level, the adoption of counter- knowledge from one’s embodied social/environmental positionality empowers activists by using their experiences as a place of resistance to challenge official narratives and rhetoric (Collins 1991; hooks 1984, 1989, 1990; Krauss 1993). For example, from the experience of observing cancer rates develop among loved ones and neighbors or worrying over birth defects in their children, EJ activists have adopted the precautionary approach or precautionary principle (Anglin 1998; Norgaard 2007). This method validates the local knowledge of communities along with official sources and challenges the *disproval* of toxicity exposure rather than the proof of a toxicity connection typically expected by scientific studies, redefining released statistical information into more personal human terms of lives lost, years of worry, and the need for immediate action to correct the situation. Residents also legitimate their knowledge by creating new terms such as “street scientists” or “popular epidemiologists”; terms which legitimate the knowledge these residents possess (Alaimo 2010:62).Similarly, EJ activists also redefine the term “victim” from their positionality to acknowledge the larger social forces that have put them in their condition either as collective “victims of environmental discrimination” (Checker 2001:143), or as “victims of a social crime.. the crime of poisoning our environment” (Anglin 1998:189), galvanizing others to fight environmental injustice (Glazer and Glazer 1999).

This embodied subjectivity extends itself to notions of environmentalism. Since environmentalism is associated with dominant norms which EJ communities feel are not in their interests, activists avoid the term (Prindeville and Bretting 1998) or must augment it in some way that resonates with their everyday issues, as this student who is a part of an environmental project organized by ACE (Alternatives for Community and Environment) in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood describes:

There are things in my environment that truly outrage me. The fact that people have to wait hours for dirty diesel MBTA buses ...that someone I know is being evicted from their home because they can’t pay their rent, and the fact that a small child I see every day has died of asthma in a community where asthma rates are 6 times the state average. These things should not be happening where I live or where anyone lives. Everyone no matter what community they reside in should have the right to a safe and healthy neighborhood. So what is environmental

justice is a hard question but I know what it is to me. It is allowing everyone the right to have the best life has to offer from affordable housing to safe neighborhoods and clean air. (in Brown et al. 2003:460)

This is how the environment becomes redefined as the everyday spaces where people “live, work, and play” (Novotny 2000). It is this social/environmental counter-knowledge which has produced terms such as “environmental racism” and “environmental injustice”; terms which empower residents by “give[ing] what we feel a name” (Carruthers 2007:409).

### **Empowerment**

The third most cited SLE in the EJ literature is that being empowered by working with others within “alternative networks of power” for mutual change (Edelstein 1988; 2004; Glazer and Glazer 1999: 280). Being linked through the shared notions of injustice (Bannerji 1995), these groups adopt notions of inclusion such as focusing on democracy and diversity. Additionally, they adhere to a commitment to honesty and building leadership, stances which not only empower current residents but produce future leaders who can resist marginalization.

The undemocratic, discriminatory actions experienced by EJ communities have led activists to center their activism heavily on notions of democratic participation and diversity. Checker (2004:188-9) describes “most importantly” the care AANEJ leaders took to vocalize everyone’s opinion at meetings. One leader, Deborah Horne, remarked: You know what? We’re all coming from the same place. We argue loudly and it might seem like things get pretty ugly sometimes but that’s just the way we are...that’s what democracy is all about.” Additionally, because a plurality of voices is welcomed by the movement, it embraces people from different ethnic backgrounds, encouraging EJ members to accept diversity both personally and as a tactic for protecting their environment and communities. This passage from a CCHW leader illustrates these themes well:

Instead of trying to walk, talk, and look the same we should celebrate how different cultures, ways of acting and approaches to fighting the issues have involve many more people in our struggle and bought about change...This diversity of people and cultures also keeps those in power form knowing what to expect and from controlling us. We should embrace our diversity as it is one of our most powerful tools. (CCHW 1993:31, in Schlossberg 1999:134-5)

Developing these powerful tools offers a way for people to "break out of the impotence" they feel by exploring other ways of thinking and being in the world (Carruthers 2007; Gaarder 2011; Harvey 1996; Hayes 2007:827; hooks 1989; Prindeville and Bretting 1998; Routledge et al. 2006). This lends itself to developing innovative ways of engaging in action and learning new skills when developing their own knowledge (Buckingham 2004; Maathai 2004b:27-8, in Nagel 2005; Norgaard 2007).

A second important part of creating a lasting impact in both the movement and community is to focus on generating leadership among youth. Generating leadership is a way to empower younger residents and has the hopes of addressing the other problems plaguing their neighborhoods, as Dr. Mitchell, president of HEJN explains:

Leadership development is something you really have to do in low-income communities. And it pays off. It's amazing to see what these folks do once they're empowered. They start going back to school, they start getting better jobs, doing things to continue to develop themselves and their children (in Chambers 2007:47).

Since these groups are very diverse and may not have experience working together, maintaining a commitment to honesty is also important so that future leaders will be more empowered and cohesive than their predecessors, as this black activist explained during a heated discussion about race at a Making the Link: Health and Environmental Justice conference (M.T.L.) in Atlanta in 1995:

I think what's happening in this room is a good start, the sincerity and honesty among us regardless of ethnic hue. We go back and educate our grandchildren so that they will work together no matter what color of skin (Workshop #1, M.T.L, in Anglin 1998:201).

Creating future leaders is a way to pass down the experience of disaster and social/environmental marginality so that the next generation will inherit these values and knowledge, strengthening their ability to mobilize and resist (Edelstein 1988; 2004). This process creates marginalized communities that are more resistant to disasters and more likely to be continually committed to environmental activism and the inclusion of social justice (Mintada, Kals and Becker 2007; Reich 2006; Shellenburger and Nordhaus 2004; Warren 1996).

## DISCUSSION

Using feminist theory and the sociology of disasters as a framework, this paper examined the identity and SLE descriptions within the EJ literature to understand what SLEs are associated with EJ activism and why/how those experiences are significant. Results indicate that the experience of environmental injustice is itself an overarching SLE with three sub-themes: awareness of one's social/environmental marginality, the embodied knowledge that comes with one's positionality, and the empowerment that comes from working with others for EJ. These findings correlate well with the research on EJ motivations for activism, allowing researchers to see how the SLEs associated with environmental injustice and activism motivate residents to fight back to protect their communities (Faver 2001; Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1991; Glazer and Glazer 1999). However, as expected this information contrasts somewhat with other SLE research findings (Chawla 1998a). In particular, the role of "habitat alteration" has been greatly expanded while experiences with wild nature have been reduced (Gough 1999b). Importantly, this paper has enlarged the meaning of habitat alteration by demonstrating how a destroyed environment has also a social correlate. In particular, it is the negative experiences, difficult emotions, and sense of injustice attached to one social/environmental location that makes "habitat alteration" an issue of toxic relationships that affect one's identity (Anglin 1998; James 1992; Pulido 1996). Finally, while most SLE research involves activists reaching back to their pre-activism stage (Tanner 1980; Chawla 1999), the SLEs of EJ activist are highly connected to their *current* activism, translating current experiences into significance that is meant to address an immediate problem (Glazer and Glazer 1999; Warren 1996). This provides SLE research with a contemporary example to examine in their efforts to produce greater environmental action (Gough 1999b).

Comparing these results to traditional SLEs, we can see that there are three main categories of SLE sources: experiences with nature, sources of environmental knowledge, and “counter-experiences” or experiences that are meaningful but run counter to what one would assume from one’s positionality. Using situational analysis Clarke (2005: xxxiii), a method which “enhances our capacities to do incisive studies of difference of perspective, of highly complex situation of action and positionality...”, we can construct a positional map which indicates the valence and difference of both traditional and EJ SLE’s for each of these three categories (Figure 1). Thus for people of social/environmental privilege, wild nature and books or teachers are accessible nature experiences and knowledge sources, respectively, while habitat destruction is a significant experience which runs counter to these prevailing themes. In contrast, for marginalized people, the disasters which construct social/environmental marginality and the embodied learning derived from that experience are their accessible nature experiences and knowledge sources, while empowerment is a significant counter-experience. Counter-experiences illuminate the larger situation around which our social/environmental position is located, leading privileged groups to remark on negative experiences as significant and disadvantaged groups to notably remember positive experiences. This demonstrates how positionality affects one’s social/environmental experiences and the knowledge produced or available in relation to them.

<p>+++ (Traditional SLEs)</p> <p><b>Soc./Env. Privilege and SLEs</b></p> <p>--- (EJ SLEs)</p>	Experiences with Wild Nature	People or Book	Habitat Alteration (-)
	Experiencing Soc./Env. Marginality	Embodied Positionality	Empowerment (+)
	<b>Experience with Nature</b>	<b>Sources of Knowledge</b>	<b>Counter-experiences</b>

Figure 1. Positional Map of SLE Positionality and SLE Categories

### CONCLUSION

Like other SLE research, this paper aims to provide translatable teaching experiences to induce greater environmental activism. Toward this aim, this research has shown that the life experiences of those within the EJ movement require discussions about positionality and education about social/environmental marginality, both its negative experiences and its potential as an empowering mobilizing force for social change. Marginalized people suffer from interlocking, mutually constitutive social/environmental discrimination that creates an “altered relationship” to both nature and society (Erikson 1995). Thus what is needed is an educational framework that interrogates the intersection between social location, environmentalism, materialism and other political themes (Gruenwald 2003: 6). Current environmental theory, while critical, is still lacking in this regard (Bowers 2001; Gruenwald 2003; Haymes 1995; Li

2011:289), however one such framework is offered by Mohanty (2003). Acknowledging that we cannot separate our everyday existence from the larger social-material relations that make them up (Smith 1987), Mohanty (2003) argues for a dialectic pedagogy of dissent that would politicize the experience of being subjugated by connecting it to the broader socio-cultural and historical practices that bring about their existence, rooting them in an orientation of conscious resistance which will then motivate dominated people to fight back (Bannerji 1995; Gouin 2009). Much of this educational strategy is already prominent within the SLEs of EJ activists. Being able to lay blame on dominant institutions and attaching cultural trauma to current disasters, these residents consciously redefine their embodied positionality and link their struggle with others as the basis for collective action.

While this strategy may be essential for empowering marginalized people, students and those of greater privilege (who may have never experienced disaster or marginality) can still obtain a meaningful experience by supporting EJ causes by working alongside EJ groups in their particular struggles (Ceaser 2012; Di Chiro 2006). While students do report feelings of hopelessness and other negative emotions when learning about marginalized groups (Busman 2002; see Sullivan and Parras 2008; Warren 1996), it is also clear that simply being engaged in helping to fight on behalf of those disadvantaged is a meaningful endeavor that energizes students to get involved in social change.

While EJ offers important tools for engaging in contemporary environmental activism, we must be careful not to romanticize marginality as a panacea for social/environmental problems. Marginality means just that, marginal to the centers of power. Future research can determine if activists from already existing (or successful) EJ communities have the same SLEs as those who suffered from the disaster event or if their SLEs will mirror those with more privilege once their material conditions improve (Harvey 1996:101). Nonetheless, education for EJ and discussions of environmentalism and positionality offer the greatest chance for environmental education to break beyond its “monoculturalism” and adapt to modern notions of what it means to be an environmental activist (Russell, Bell, and Fawcett 2000).

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## **CHAPTER 4: WHY I CAME TO OSBG: THE SLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE YOUTH AT OUR SCHOOL AT BLAIR GROCERY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the hopes of creating teaching tools for generating greater environmental action environmental education researchers have investigated the significant life experiences (SLEs) of environmental activists (Chawla 1999; Hsu 2009; Tanner 1980; Sward 1999; Palmer and Suggate 1996). Consistently, this research indicates that time spent in wild nature, important people or books, and "habitat alteration"- the loss of an environment- are the top three listed SLEs (see Chawla 1998a, 1998b; Finger 1994; Thompson, Aspinall and Montarzino 2008). However, while a handful of studies have examined SLEs in other cultures (Hsu 2009), cross culturally (Chawla 1999), or among ethnic minorities in the US (James and McAvoy 1992; Myers 1997), the vast majority of SLE studies focus on white, adult, male, middle class environmental activists, leading some scholars to accuse the discipline of practicing an implicit type of "environmental racism" (Gough 1999b: 385). This orientation to gathering SLEs is limiting for two interconnected reasons. By focusing on groups who are socially and environmentally privileged, scholars have developed narrow definitions of what constitutes environmental knowledge and activism. Consequently, these narrow conceptualizations of environmentalism has led researchers to focus on positive experiences at the expense of growing concerns over negative experiences (i.e. habitat alteration) and social justice (Chawla 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2001; James and McAvoy 1992), a position which further marginalize the perspectives of disadvantaged groups and their contributions to environmental activism (Burningham and Thrush 2003; Gordon and Taft 2011; Whitehead 2009).

Similarly troubling is the relationship between SLE research and youth experiences. Despite being the very group for whom SLE research was designed to support, most SLE studies interview adult activists about their formative childhood experiences. While there is a handful of studies that do involve interviews with youth (Arnold, Cohen, and Warner 2009; Sivek 2002), this research rarely contextualizes the experience of being young itself in relation to youth SLE, leaving being an important source of meaning that may be important for explaining youth environmental activism (Gough 1999b). Research that understands contemporary youth activism is especially important. Despite the reported power, potential, and significance of current youth activism (Arnold, Cohen and Warner 2009; Gough 1999b) youth are reporting increasingly less concern with environmentalism (Edwards and Mercer 2007; Partridge 2008; Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman 2012; Wray-Lake, Flanagan and Osgood 2010). Additionally, combining this concern with the lack of research on disadvantaged group, this means that our knowledge of disadvantaged youth is nearly nonexistent within the SLE literature.

In a previous study (Ceaser, forthcoming) I address the lack of SLE research on disadvantaged group by advancing the notion of social/environmental positionality and marginalization by focusing on the SLEs of the environmental justice movement. In this study, I will use the theory generated in Ceaser (forthcoming) to examine the SLEs of youth involved at Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG), a contemporary environmental justice program located in the Lower Ninth Ward (L9) of New Orleans, Louisiana whose aim is to make people aware of

how social and environmental disadvantages are interconnected and to teach urban residents to grow their own food as a means of counteracting a lack of healthy food options in their neighborhood. I have previously interviewed OSBG for a separate study (Ceaser 2012). First, I will discuss social/environmental positionality. Then, I will more specifically discuss youth positionality and its relevance to SLEs. Findings revealed that the experience of social/environmental relations within another culture was the most important SLE. SLEs were notably different between White students, whose SLEs were similar to traditional SLE studies, and students of color, whose SLEs mirror environmental justice SLEs. Additionally, youth SLEs were related to their positionality as youth. Students felt disrespected by adults and sought out new experiences to learn from as young people.

### **Social/Environmental Positionality**

Positionality refers to one's social location (i.e. race, class, gender) and its corresponding hierarchy of power (Di Chiro 2006; Fuss 1989; Haraway 1991; Rose 1997). Evaluating positionality allows researchers to examine how a person or group's ontological orientation is situated by both subjective social constructions and objective structural forces (Alcoff 1994; Foucault 1978; Spivak 1986, 1988). For example, a poor farmer may see a piece of land differently than a wealthy real estate developer because of their particular subjective focus (farming vs. condos) and the economic goals attached to that perspective (Grieder and Garkovitch 1994). Different groups of people have different notions of environmentalism based on their positionality (Ioris 2011; Pulido and Pena 1998) and as such, there can be no discussion of environmentalism without addressing social issues and differences in privileges or disadvantages (Harvey 1996; Turner and Pei- Wu 2002). Because social locations are intersecting (Collins 1991; hooks 1984; Mohanty 2003), those who face multiple disadvantaged positions (i.e. poor and black, or perhaps young, poor, and black) face compounded forms of discrimination, such as a greater likelihood of experiencing environmental racism (Bullard 1994b). However, one's positionality can also be an important source for redefining terms, challenging power, and producing counter-knowledge (hooks 2009: 8, 30; Kraus 1993; Pulido 1996). For example, the environmental justice movement has empowered disadvantaged groups by redefining the environment to the everyday places where we "live, work, and play" (Novotny 2000).

In Ceaser (forthcoming), I examined the SLEs of the environmental justice movement, a group previously unstudied in SLE research. In particular, my research examined how the positionality of residents in disadvantaged communities leads them to their articulation of the environment as a social justice issue and what significant experiences motivate them to become environmental justice activists. Theoretically, I discovered that those who suffer from environmental injustice, or what is better called social/environmental marginality, live with what I characterize as "toxic social/environmental relationships" which demonstrate the interconnectedness between compounded forms of social oppression and living in an extremely unhealthy, often deadly, environment (Alaimo 2010; Freudenburg 1997; Kroll-Smith, Brown and Gunter 2000). This "altered relationship...to the processes of nature" (Erikson 1995:186) gives environmental justice SLEs a very different orientation than those found in traditional SLE research. My findings revealed that the experience of social/environmental marginality is itself an SLE with three significant subsections. First, residents come to be aware of their marginality following a significant disaster that moves them from a state of unawareness to one of immediate

danger, disrupting social priorities and linking the current disaster event to their social locations and historical disadvantages, making residents determined to seek justice. Secondly, residents use the knowledge produced from their everyday experiences with social/environmental marginality- which includes being disrespected by dominant institutions and collecting data on the health of their own communities- to redefine notions of science, victimization, and environmentalism. Finally, residents cite being empowered by working with others within “alternative networks of power” and embracing notions of democracy and diversity in the fight for lasting changes to their communities (Glazer and Glazer 1999: 280).

When compared to SLEs traditionally found in the literature (experiences in wild nature, important ideas or people, and “habitat alteration”) we can see three main categories of SLE sources: experiences with nature, sources of environmental knowledge, and “counter-experiences” or experiences that are meaningful but run counter to what one would assume from one’s positionality (Figure 1.1). Thus for people of social/environmental privilege, wild nature and books or teachers are accessible nature experiences and knowledge sources, respectively, while habitat destruction is a significant counter-experience. In contrast, for marginalized people, the disasters which construct social/environmental marginality and the embodied learning derived from that experience are their accessible nature experiences and knowledge sources, while empowerment is a significant counter-experience.

While my past work expands our knowledge of disadvantaged groups and negative social/environmental experiences, age inequality and youth perspectives was one factor that was not addressed. Since youth are the very group that SLE research was designed to support, the following section will contextualize young adulthood and its role in shaping environmental justice youth SLEs.

### **The Positionality of Youth**

While youth is a term that encompasses all people below the age of 25 (Kirshner 2008), this study’s focus is on the period of adolescence or emerging adulthood- the period of roughly high school onwards when youth begin to assert themselves as adults (Berzin and De Marco 2010). During this critical stage of development youth are creating identities and values that are very open to social forces and influences (Wray-Lake, Flanagan and Osgood 2010). Because emerging adulthood is a time when youth are redefining boundaries and the meaning of their relationships with peers and adults, they are very conscious of age and age inequality. Youth consider themselves a disadvantaged, even oppressed group (Ceaser 2012; Gordon and Taft 2011; Kirshner 2008) who often view adults, and their “adultist” assumptions about youth, as hindrances to accomplishing their actions because adults rarely take them seriously despite having high expectations for them (Evans 2007). Poor youth do not have the same privileges in emerging adulthood as middle or upper class youth who, for example, can delay moving into the workforce, get additional schooling and therefore show a greater awareness of social issues (Berzin and De Marco 2010; Evans; 2007; Evans and Prilleltensky 2007).

Activism is significant during emerging adulthood because as they try to shape society, youth are often shaping their identities (Harre 2007). Youth activism often focuses on issues that challenge the norms of our society such as social justice and lifestyle choices like consumerism and overconsumption (Deutsch and Theodorou 2010; Standbu and Krangle 2003; Wray-Lake,

Flanagan and Osgood 2012). However, unable to organize as adults because of their age, they often engage in broad “unconventional politics” such as reform movements, boycotts, and community service (Gordon and Taft 2011). This is equally true regarding their environmental activism which is often organized around unconventional food justice politics such as urban gardening, gorilla gardening, or dumpster diving (Edwards and Mercer 2007; Sbicca 2012). Most youth environmental activism is done by young white males from middle class backgrounds (Arnold, Cohen and Warner 2009; Gordon and Taft 2011; Standbu and Krange 2003). Minority youth are more likely to be involved in environmental concerns that affect their neighborhoods such as graffiti and litter (Wilson and Snell 2010). Young women are more politically optimistic than men and often focus on activism related to a gendered ethic of care such as animal rights (Gaarder 2011b, Zelezny, Chua and Aldrich 2000). How young people of all backgrounds address their environmental concerns and develop into adult activists is crucial for producing greater environmental activism and future activists (Tanner 1980, Gough 1999b). Toward that aim we must understand what SLEs have shaped current youth activists. That is the focus of this study. By examining the SLEs of youth at an environmental justice program, we will have greater knowledge of how contemporary youth perspectives shape their growing environmental identity. Additionally, we will learn more about the role social differences and privileges play in shaping SLEs, broadening our understanding of both emerging activist activities and conceptions of environmentalism for future research.

## **METHODS AND CONTEXT**

For this study I conducted semi-structured interviews of youth at Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG). OSBG is a non-profit urban farming school started in 2009 by Nate Turner that is located in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans, Louisiana. After volunteering for a local organization which he later accused of disaster profiteering, he used “\$12 dollars, a used school bus, and a black dog”, made a deal with the owner of a local abandoned grocery store (the Blair Family) to rent the property for a dollar a year, hired a skeletal staff, and created the school. Turner centered the school on issues of environmental and food justice as a way for the local population, whom has long suffered from racial, economic and environmental hardships, to rebuild their community around cultivating organic healthy food. Turner felt this process would empower the community by teaching them skills and using the communal work as an opportunity to educate residents by engaging them in critical thinking about social/environmental inequality.

Unfortunately, however, OSBG has had a difficult time recruiting locals toward its cause. Many residents I spoke with while in the field doing research (Ceaser 2012) agreed that healthy food and rebuilding their community were important but they also had other concerns, particularly economic, that took precedence to spending a day shoveling compost for free in the hot New Orleans summer sun. For this reason, Turner also uses the school as a service learning project for college students from around the country who come and stay at the school for an extended period of time (on average two weeks, but some stayed up to four months). These students were college and high school students from all areas of the country, but many came from New York City, where Turner was formerly employed. Students typically ranged in age from 16-21. Approximately half were women, half men. About half of the students were white. The rest came from a mix of many different ethnic backgrounds including black (African

American and Caribbean American), Latino/a (from North, Central, and South America), and Asian (primarily Chinese). A few identified as mixed race.

For many of these students, coming to OSBG was their first major foray into environmentalism. Because of this, understanding the teaching process and orientation of the school is important. Student groups at OSBG are considered “student-led” and must plan events, organize budgets, and coordinate their own work schedules. On a typical day at OSBG, students get up around 9AM, shower, eat, and then meet outside to discuss the day’s specific tasks and goals. Goals differed for each group depending on their particular skills. While all groups made and sifted compost, pulled weeds, and planted seeds, more specialized groups did things like build an aquaponic system or organize a food accessibility survey. Students and teachers work and talk together all day, taking a break for lunch at noon. In the afternoon, students meet downstairs for a group discussion. Group discussions center on different topics such as “Gender at OSBG”, “What is Environmental Justice (and why do we care)?” and “The Importance of Building Community Partnerships”. Following group discussions, work resumes until dinner, after which students shower again and convene downstairs for their nightly wrap-up meeting. At that meeting, the day’s events and everyone’s feelings and thoughts are discussed, and plans for the next day are made. Students go to bed around 10PM, but often stay up late talking or watching videos together on their computers. Due to the danger of the local area, students spent the vast majority of their time at OSBG, only venturing out in groups and with chaperones for work assignments. One particularly notable event outside OSBG is the environmental racism bus tour given by Turner during student’s first days at the school. The tour includes visiting four locations: the spot where the levee broke, flooding the Lower Ninth Ward during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a local saltwater marsh that has been destroyed by chemical refineries, an abandoned community garden overrun with weeds, and, while sitting on top of an embankment that overlooks the large hotels of the French Quarter, an analysis by Turner of how a focus on tourism traps local residents into service-oriented jobs with little ability to build economic or social capital. Turner uses this tour to link the disadvantaged social/economic situation of those in the Lower Ninth Ward to similar problems that exist in students’ home communities, arguing that OSBG is a place to learn skills such as urban farming to address these issues.

I conducted group interviews with students at OSBG while they were gathered downstairs before they began their nightly wrap-up meeting to discuss the day’s events and tomorrow’s plans. During this time I stood while students were seated in a circle and asked about their initial motivations for coming to New Orleans and OSBG, what they had learned there, their feelings about how the social world and environmentalism relate to each other, ecological crisis concerns, and as a final question, “what significant experience got you interested in environmentalism?” Students were free to answer these questions in any manner they chose and to speak for as long as they wanted. Student responses which indicate descriptions of “main”, “significant”, or “important” experiences, as well as the responses to the final question, were used for data for this study. While all students were asked all of the questions, over six months, I had only 14 students (4 young men, 10 young women) who responded to the final question (Table 1). This small response rate may be indicative of the fact that many youth are still in the process of defining themselves and their meaning of environmentalism, and as such may not have crystallized such a thing as a “significant life experience” as yet. I should also note that while a somewhat diverse sample was collected in terms of answering the SLE question, the vast

majority of my interview data comes from the White students. Only a few students of color spoke during interviews. Most of these students were Hispanic females, but I can also remember one young man from Haiti. Most students of color didn't speak, declined to speak, or told me they preferred not to be recorded when I attempted to reach out to them. Thus the answer to my SLE question contains a more diverse sample of people than my interview material.

Table 1. List of Students Who Gave SLE Descriptions

Young Men	Anderson	White, California
	Guido	Italian-American, New York
	Arthur	African-American, New York
	Marcus	African-American, New York
Young Women	Angela	White, Maine
	Sarah	White, Maine
	Tori	White, Connecticut
	Macy	White, New York
	Carey	White, Colorado
	Alex	Jewish, New York
	Naima	Arab-American, from Algeria now in New York
	Rosalinda	Hispanic, from Mexico now in New York
	Selina	Hispanic, from Mexico now in New York
	Melissa	Chinese, from China now in New York

I performed a three-step, open, closed, and focused coding procedure for analysis. First, all data from interviews was open coded. Examples of such codes are “worked with community”, “family getting sick”, “experience with Global South”, and “personal connection.” Secondly, in a closed coding procedure, I used the major findings from Ceaser (forthcoming) (recognizing marginality, embodied perspectives, empowerment) and more traditional SLE findings (experiencing wild nature, important person or book, habitat alteration) and linked my coded data to this material. This often led to codes being placed in multiple though interrelated categories. For example, “experience with Global South” fell into “embodied perspectives” and “recognizing marginality”. Third, using the literature contained in this paper regarding emerging adulthood, a focused coding procedure was used where linked coded were connected to important themes such as “new experiences”, and “being disrespected as youth”. This process then contextualizes the SLEs given by these students within an understanding of both their particular age concerns as well as within issues of social disadvantages or privileges. Finally, because my findings indicated that the experience of OSBG itself was an SLE, I incorporated my ethnographic notes from my previous study into this finding in order to better explain why the experience of OSBG was an SLE for these youth.

## FINDINGS

Students at OSBG described two main categories of SLEs: previous experiences before OSBG and the current experience of working at OSBG itself. Previous experiences varied but were most often tied to experiencing social/environmental relations in another culture. Within this category, significant differences exist between the SLEs of White students and students of color that mirror the differences between traditional and environmental justice SLEs. For all

students, the experience of OSBG itself was an environmental justice SLE characterized by elements of experiencing marginalization, embodied perspectives, and empowerment. These elements were strongly tied to the important processes of emerging adulthood. Notably, students reflected on being disrespected as youth and redefining environmentalism in ways that were more embodied of their experience at OSBG and connected to social justice.

### **SLEs of Youth**

Interview material revealed that the most significant previous experience described by students was experiencing social/environmental relations within another culture. For half the students interviewed, this other culture was part of the Global South. This is because many students are first generation Americans and have relations in other countries or were fortunate to travel to another country as part of a school field trip. The experience of another culture made students more aware of their relationship with nature. They realized how their individual actions connected to larger social processes and their environmental impacts. This gave them a more expanded sense of self that was focused on supporting actions that promote healthier social-environmental relations. For example, Macy questioned the level of consumption that is a part of the average American relationship with the land:

Macy: A couple of summers ago I was a bagger in a grocery store and like, when you're putting those things in bags all day you start thinking about where are these bags going to go? Do they just throw away all this stuff? It was just really daunting to me, so I went on a trip with an environmental organization to Puerto Rico and [over there] they live in the rainforest and they have a farm and they're very self-sustaining and it just contrasts to the way the typical American family lives. It just makes it very stark that the way most people live is very wasteful. I guess that's what put it into perspective for me.

All students expressed concerns related to social justice. However, significant differences exist between White students and students of color regarding their SLEs. Because many students of color were first generation Americans, this significant difference does not include the experience of another culture itself. However, white students were more likely to mention experiences with nature and sources of environmental knowledge that are more indicative of the social/environmental privileges linked to traditional SLEs such as important people and books and experiences with wild nature. Guido explained that "one of my teachers basically explained to me that every single social injustice is related to the perpetual exploitation of the earth, so I figured that I should probably start gardening." Other White students mentioned import books such as Derrick Jensen's *Endgame* (Paul), the website of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) (Tori), care for "the planet, which should be obvious" (Carey), or travels to areas of wild nature (Anderson, Angela, Sarah, Alex). For example, after describing how fortunate he was to grow up in a safe home, Anderson thanked his parents for "taking me out to places, you know, getting out of the city, sometimes go upstate (New York) and see trees... gardening... see different nature preserves. I think it has to do with that." Alex described a similar SLE:

Alex: I have a second home in the country, in Massachusetts. And the difference when I get in the car in NY, I usually fall asleep, it's just a regular car ride, but when I go there, no matter what season, cold or hot or muggy or whatever, there's like a different quality of air,

and I can always sense it, and I can sense this freshness like, move through my body. And, I don't know, that's an experience that makes me want to make all areas of the world feel the same way. Cause I think it could make other people feel really good too.

These SLEs contrast those of students of color, often starkly. Students of color, such as Rosalinda's comments below, describe the realization of one's social/environmental marginality, an experience that highlights the toxic relationships described in environmental justice communities:

Rosalinda: So in 9<sup>th</sup> grade a club for the teachers was being presented through my history class and it was a presentation that dealt with defining environmental injustice and environmental racism. And somehow, for the first time I realized I was a victim of those two things. And attending those club meetings and getting more involved with the big organization, it made me realize that the environment was connected to social problems and how unfair it was. Because I live in a community where it's like 99.9% Latinos and somehow that justified a power plant and the crap just, like, being there just because of my race and low income.

Additionally, students of color described more personal, embodied SLE motivations. They became involved in environmentalism because they wanted to directly help their own local community. Three of the students of color (Arthur, Naima, Marcus) were already involved in their community in some capacity, and they saw urban farming as a way to bring their community together in an inspiring way that focused on health, as Arthur explains:

Arthur: One thing that got me started was when I went to a community college for a youth forum, and started messaging people involved in urban farming in my neighborhood in the Bronx. A lot of the people who live around there are Hispanic and west African, so we all just started growing collard greens. We were like "if we grow this, black people are gonna come." If you grow the crops that are pleasing to the community around you people are gonna come. That how I got interested in growing food because I like to eat and I like to live healthy. I always liked to grow stuff.

This student is also demonstrating the importance of embracing notions of democracy and diversity. This is part of the empowerment experience within the environmental justice that I cite as a significant counter experience. This positionality shapes the difference between White students and students of color regarding their social/environmental experiences with another culture, particularly the Global South. While all students were concerned about Global South communities, White students descriptions focus more or as much on the natural environment as they do people as evinced by these two statements from Angela and Sarah, two White females who went to Ecuador and lived with indigenous communities there:

Sarah: So I've known about global climate change or deforestation for a long time, however, it wasn't until I went to Ecuador and I was living in this really small indigenous community that practiced subsistence farming and they were talking to me one day and they said that traditionally they'd rely on the weather patterns to know when to plant their seeds and till the land, but because of climate change, the weather patterns were no longer



reliable so they were having trouble figuring out when to plant their crops and harvest them, and that's when it really hit me that how I was living and what I was doing was affecting other people in another part of the world, people I like and that I've connected with; the people in that community. So that's when I realized I had to change how I was behaving and hopefully make others aware of their actions as well, because it made what I'd been hearing about a reality.

Angela: I went to Ecuador and I was in the Amazons and I had this conversation with these girls who were living there. Their backyard was one of the tributaries on the Amazon River and I thought that was beautiful and it was life changing to see them, like, you know, in their backyard and playing in the river. And they started telling me stories, you know, how it used to be bigger and how they used to be more fish and how they were so connected to the land and that was so much part of their identity and how it created this huge divide within community when some people had to stay and some people had decided to leave. And then realizing that we are all a part of that [the environment] and that we're all connected by that and I never understood- it's one thing to hear about how a lot of indigenous communities identify themselves by the land but to actually, like, see it tear communities apart, it's a different thing.

In contrast, students of color had more personal experiences with the Global South that were more focused on people and their health due to environmental problems. Many of the non-white students were 2nd generation immigrants who still have strong connections to their home countries in the Global South. This connection links disadvantaged people internationally and highlights the universal nature of social/environmental marginality. Contrast the previous statements with that of Selina, a Mexican girl from New York:

Selina: Every summer I go to Mexico cause that's where my family's from and one particular trip my uncle got really sick and he had rashes all over his skin. The dermatologist told him "you know you need to be careful with the pesticides your spraying on the crops" because they're all farm workers, we live on the countryside. But, he was like- well they didn't realize they were pesticides. They just put them there and she asked "well how do you guys get them there" and he said "well we just stand in front of big fans and we just dump these bags in front of the big fans and they just blow everywhere" and I was like "are you serious?" and he was like "yeah" and I was like "where do they ship all this stuff?" and he's like "to the US" and I was like the fact that our demand of these perfect products and stuff is causing these people without any knowledge of what all this stuff is it's harming them without them even knowing it. So it hit me right there man.

Or that of Melissa, a Chinese student:

Melissa: well my family immigrated from like a tiny village in China so when they were growing up they lived near polluted waters and my dad just recently turned 53 and over half of his childhood friends have passed away already who are around the same age as him because they grew up around those waters. But to me I didn't really feel personal investment towards environmental action until I came here because I didn't realize the same thing was happening here, like the water here, the bayou was really really polluted, it

was crazy. So I think coming here and seeing everything firsthand it's really important to me to realize that the same things are still going on here in America and that sense of security has been taken away from me

Last, a few differences were observed in terms of gender. Throughout student's SLE statements above, females gave much more personal, elaborate descriptions than males. While boys (2 of 4) mentioned being involved in only "the community", or "grow[ing] crops that are pleasing to the community around you", 4 out of 10 girls described discussions with specific people within their community (such as "my family") and close personal connections or at least mentioning specific people in their SLEs. This may to some degree indicate a gendered focus on community and personal bonds that is placed on women. Finally, one female student (Tori) strongly identified with animal rights, a common SLE for young women (Gaarder 2011b), and discussed how a visit to PETA's website was "the shocker" for her.

### The Experience of OSBG

Interview material also demonstrated that the experience of another social/environmental culture was a SLE, but that other culture was the experience of working at OSBG itself. Students describe their experience at OSBG as a SLE because the school provides them with an opportunity to engage in an experience that links their abstract or school-learned social/environmental knowledge to real life, embodied examples of inequality. Additionally, student's learn to work together to creatively develop solutions to these problems. In that way, their experience mirrors the recognition of marginality, embodied perspectives, and empowerment experiences that characterize environmental justice SLEs. However, youth SLEs were related in notable ways to their age and status as students.

Most students who spoke during interviews were White college students from middle-class American backgrounds. They regularly noted that living in the Lower Ninth Ward, a low-income minority neighborhood, reminded them of the "third world". During my time at the school, I regularly observed local youths fighting outside, drug addicts, groups of men drinking liquor all day in front of corner stores (local convenience stores), and gunshots one night that resulted in a murder. While they agreed these conditions occur in the towns and cities where they live, OSBG was the first time they were actually submerged into the daily existence of people struggling with poverty, violence, and a poor choice of food options. This moved many students in ways they describe as "really disturbing", "really eye opening, really leaving my comfort zone", and "unforgettable." Since they were largely confined to the school due to these safety concerns, this provided students with a quasi-embodied experience of social/environmental marginality which raised their awareness and served as a rallying cry to engage in actions to address these injustices, as Pamela explains:

Pamela: yeah I agree that being here has made me both socially and environmentally conscious or more so than before I came um mostly because we see everything first hand so now, like from now on I kind of want to try to think about where my food is coming from in terms of how it's made, how it's produced, um, where the ingredients come from, what ingredients are inside my food, and that sort of thing. Um but also just seeing the people around here kind of adds an emotional touch to what we're learning about.

Importantly, this experience raised their awareness in ways that was connected to their emerging adulthood. Two youth, Joseph and Naima, both came to OSBG and became involved in environmentalism specifically because they wanted to have a "new experience as a young adult." Students cited OSBG as a place where they could work together within a community of peers and engage in "trial and error" about their abstract environmental knowledge and "figure what works best by doing not just reading." This process then changed their sense of self as well as their knowledge, as Jennifer describes:

Jennifer: I think this trip has made everything, like whatever I've read or I've learned about, real. You know? And tangible. And I don't think I can ever go back to not thinking about where my food comes from. It would just be impossible after the experiences we've had and after talking to the people, I feel like I would be betraying all the knowledge I've learned here and myself by doing that.

Many students, however, felt that adults often acted in ways that they felt were not in the best interests of youth. These experiences were compared to their time at OSBG. One student during a group interview reflected on the lack of civic education that she received at school, which all students nodded in agreement. Another student described that the desires of students versus adults produces an educational climate that's "like, two separate schools working on one piece of land; totally doesn't make sense." Gayle noted that this atmosphere also occurs, paradoxically, in organizations aimed at empowering youth and how OSBG was a meaningful counter-example:

Gayle: I think in a lot of these youth organizations there's a little bit of disconnect between the youth and the adults in that often times a strong adult or a strong group of adults they'll focus on the youth but the youth won't be encouraged necessarily. I know that just from talking with [Turner and the teachers] that work here I've learned just as much as I learned from the youth. So I think building connections between youth and adults that focus on an inner connection ... in addition to adults helping youth explore their full potential is really important.

At OSBG, this focus on youth allowed for students to engage in their own self-directed actions. One memorable experience was canvassing local stores and conducting a food accessibility survey. They found that the Lower Ninth Ward had no grocery store, only corner stores that sold convenience store items, and that corner stores sold only five types of vegetables but a hundred different types of liquor. This knowledge made it easier for students to connect local phenomena to larger structural processes, and empowered them by allowing them to conduct their own actions to see the larger picture, as Cameron eloquently explained:

Cameron: The grocery stores here are not going to keep the community growing. We've learned to think about it in terms of a system. People are caught up in a system where the food that's available to them here is actually killing them, both because what they put into their bodies is unhealthy for them but also because it has corn syrup which requires oil, but for the oil to get here they have to drain out the wetlands which protects them from hurricanes. So when a hurricane comes it destroys their neighborhood, makes them poor, and they have to eat this shitty food which starts the whole cycle again. So it's all really

connected, what hurts the land, hurts people, hurts communities, hurts everything, hurts your stomach, hurts your heart, hurts your life.

Enlightened by these local experiences, students then developed an entirely different understanding of environmentalism, one that focuses on people and communities, their health, systemic injustice, and a bottom-up, personal responsibility, as these two students describe:

Gina: Before coming here I saw environmentalism as like “save the earth, save the pandas” or whatever (laughter) and I didn’t really realize that like what I did environmentally was affecting people like, um specifically along racial and like class lines. I became more conscious of how I was personally affecting like people’s neighborhoods,

Eric: And also, that same neighborhood she was talking about, I’m sure there are many neighborhoods like this across America with factories and plants and a lot of the children come out with genetic defects. It’s horrible to think about that what you buy can affect babies! And also just the people who work at these factories aren’t being paid well, or as well as they should be. That’s also something we need to think about.

Overall, students described feeling empowered from the experience of OSBG. Students at OSBG learned to empower themselves by developing skills such as urban farming, and to work with others and engage in actions they generate themselves to make social change. For example, the food accessibility survey was given to community organizations and placed pressure on local stores to sell better produce. Angela describes how she feels empowered by what she learned at OSBG:

Angela: I do realize how much trouble [the environment] is in and where everything could be headed, but largely because of what we’ve learned and done here at Blair Grocery I’m still hopefully because I know that we ourselves can act to change it. We don’t have to rely on anyone else or some great system to make those changes for us. We are able to go out and address these problems ourselves which ensures that what we want done will get done.

Student’s answers regarding future environmental actions also demonstrated evidence of self-empowerment. One student, Angie, a vegetarian, said "now I've learned you vote with what you buy and what you eat." Other students reported buying less in general. Students also said they had learned how to see similar problems in their own communities and were ready to go back home and "make a difference" by working with local community groups to "get fresh food out."

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine the SLEs of contemporary youth within an environmental justice program in order to expand our knowledge of SLEs for both youth and disadvantaged groups. Using theory from a previous study that examines the SLEs of groups within in the environmental justice movement, in this study I examined the SLEs of students at OSBG. Findings revealed that students most often spoke of experiencing social/environmental

relations within another culture as their most important SLE. However, significant differences were observed in terms of privilege and SLEs. White students were not only more likely to mention wild nature and important people or books, but even when experiencing another culture, often focused on nature as much or more as the people of that culture. In contrast, more students of color described SLEs that were more personal and in line with experiencing marginalization themselves or directly helping their own community. Next, the second most cited SLE by these students was that of the experience of OSBG itself. For the White students, living in a low-income, minority neighborhood provided them with a quasi-embodied experience of social/environmental marginalization which motivated them to engage in action and education to make change. Finally, the experience of OSBG was strongly connected to themes related to emerging adulthood. Student's valued OSBG because it offered them a way to engage in self-directed actions, allowing youth to work with adults in a way they felt would empower themselves. Through this process, they developed a deeper understanding of environmentalism that was strongly connected to issues of social justice.

This research further demonstrates the significance of positionality in relation to SLEs. Race, class, gender and age all play a role in shaping how a person sees the world and attaches significance to an event (Haraway 1991; Payne 1999). Since each of these social locations comes with a corresponding hierarchy of power, advantages and disadvantages, we must discuss issues of privilege when connected these social locations to environmental phenomena (Harvey 1996; Turner and Pei-Wu 2002). Like my previous work, this paper further shows how disadvantaged groups demonstrate SLEs that are more connected to their marginalization and negative experiences which they translate into a call to arms to counteract such positions. Importantly, this paper shows the effect of age in addressing SLEs and positionality. Young people are in the process of shaping their identity, making the gathering of new experiences and the power dynamics between adults and youth a high priority which will influence how they come to understand themselves in relation to environmentalism (Wray-Lake, Flanagan and Osgood 2010). Further, minority youth, and female youth have multiple, intersecting positions that lead them to focus on particular concerns, such as their specific communities needs for minority youth, and an ethic of care that extends toward specific people and animals for young women.

The goal of SLE research is to create teaching tools that will generate greater environmental action among the young (Tanner 1980; Chawla 1999). Toward that aim, this paper has not only created an empirical example of recent theory regarding social position and SLEs, but has extended this theory to understand the SLEs of current youth environmental activists, the very group whom SLE research was designed to support (Gough 1999b). This study was limited, however, by the fact that so many minority students chose not to speak during interviews. Gathering the impressions and opinions of minority youth is essentially important for furthering our understanding of social/environmental marginality and SLEs. Future research must be more sensitive toward fostering a climate where minority youth feel comfortable expressing themselves more openly, perhaps even free to say or think ideas that are not traditionally considering environmental even by those within contemporary environmental justice groups (Burningham and Thrush 2003). More research is needed that investigates the SLEs of youth, disadvantaged groups, and particularly disadvantaged youth, so that the goal of increasing youth environmental activism can be achieved.

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## **CHAPTER 5: UNLEARNING ADULTISM AT GREEN SHOOTS: A REFLEXIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF AGE INEQUALITY WITHIN AN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAM**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the past few decades there has been a significant growth in the number of programs which offer service learning as a way to educate and empower youth by giving them a direct, hands on experience addressing social issues (Bringle and Hatcher 1999; [author] 2012; Delgado and Staples 2008; Skinner and Chapman 2000). In 2010, I engaged in participant observation at such a school called Green Shoots<sup>5</sup>, a nonprofit urban farming school started by John Browne in 2007 located within a historically disadvantaged neighborhood in a major city in the southern United States that is currently considered a food desert for its lack of access to healthy food. Green Shoots is focused on addressing social/environmental injustice and empowering youth, or, as their student-created mantra describes, showcasing ‘what the very best equity driven, youth based, participatory social justice education looks like’. While Browne initially hoped to focus on local youth, due to lack of interest Browne began recruiting high school and college youth from around the country to come and stay at the school for weeks at a time in groups in order to see firsthand the realities of people living with both social and environmental disadvantages. Exposed to such conditions, his program teaches youth to work together to learn skills and develop ideas that can ameliorate the adverse conditions of local residents and other disadvantaged communities where visiting youth reside. Browne funds Green Shoots by using the compost created at the school to grow microgreens (lettuces, sprouts) to sell to high-end restaurants.

At Green Shoots I worked as a student volunteer, laboring alongside youth as they shoveled compost, planted seeds, fed animals, and engaged in work conversation and formal discussions during group interviews and meetings. Browne, teachers, and students explained to me that the school operates under an egalitarian ‘community of practice’ – which students described as a ‘tight-knit group of people working together with a shared goal’ where ‘no one person is authoritative or a leader, so you function as equal members in a community.’ However, my experience revealed a large discrepancy between these egalitarian statements and its living practice. Often students and I were engaged in physical labor under the blistering hot summer sun while Browne was away for funding purposes and staff were doing light tasks or sitting and discussing environmental justice over coffee. Students were very sensitive to this climate and perceived it as a form of age inequality they called an ‘adult’s disrespect of youth’. While they did report feeling empowered and enlightened from the experience of working at Green Shoots, they also felt unfairly treated and limited in their actions at the school specifically because of their age.

Using my reflections from working at Green Shoots, this paper will analyze the power dynamics or ‘hidden curriculum’ (Giroux 1988) which structured the community of practice conducted at the school from the perspective of age inequality, or ‘adultism’ - the discrimination and oppression of youth by adults (Bell 1995; Checkoway 1996; Flasher 1978). Importantly, I

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<sup>5</sup> The name of the school and all participants have been given pseudonyms.

will show how I negotiated my identity within this community of practice and learned about, or ‘unlearned’, adultism in the process (Brett 2011b). After discussing adultism and its effects on youth and youth-adult relationships, I will explain more academically what is a community of practice and delineate the particular nature of this practice at Green Shoots. Findings demonstrate that the focus on work by Browne created a power dynamic where youth were overtly challenged to work for social justice, but covertly taught not to challenge authority at the school. I learned that unequal expectations are placed on youth in conversations and in work demands and that youth deal with this inequitable climate by engaging in resistance strategies against adults they have some power over, in this case me. Finally, I learned how adultism intersects other social locations and can lead to further disadvantages and personal insights. After a discussion, I conclude that that adultism must be addressed within educational settings to truly educate for social and environmental justice.

### **Service Learning**

Service learning is defined as a formal educational experience where students participate in an organized service activity that meets an identified community need and reflect on that activity in such a way as to gain a broader appreciation of knowledge and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher 1999). This model blends academic educational expectations with community engagement, allowing students to deepen and expand their learning potential and making the educational process more engaging, active, and relevant. However, despite the potential of this type of learning to empower students, little research has examined exactly how do teachers address the power dynamics between themselves and students in educational settings (Delgado and Staples 2008). Further, little research examines how do young people themselves conceptualize this power dynamic. This is important because as youth are engaged in service learning type projects, they are also constructing a sense of identity about themselves (Harre 2007). It is crucial for adults to be supportive in order to nurture youth to become engaged responsible citizens, yet most service learning research focus on results and effectiveness instead of student-teacher interactions (Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, and Fisher 2010). While not yet prevalent in the literature, the term “adultism” has emerged as a focus for discussing the power dynamics between youth and adults. Next, I will discuss this term and its importance for educational settings.

### **Adultism**

‘Adultism’ refers to the attitudes and behaviors of adults that are based on the assumption that adults know what is in the best interests of youth and are thus entitled to act upon them without their agreement (Bell 1995; Checkoway 1996; Tate and Copas 2002). While not new, this term has only recently come into regular usage as issues of power and marginality regarding adolescence has come into focus (Buhler-Niederberger 2010; Delgado and Staples 2008). Adultism acknowledges the extreme control that adults have over youth, which is reinforced by social institutions, laws and customs, and forms the background of all adult/youth relationships (Bell 1995; Flasher 1978; Gordon and Taft 2011). To demonstrate this pervasiveness, scholars note that aside from prisoners young people are more controlled than any other group in society (Bell 1995), and that even educators who focus on issues of social justice still commit adultism despite the fact that such attitudes further marginalize those from disadvantaged groups (Brett 2011a; Flasher 1978; Gordon 2007).

As a largely ‘overlooked -ism’, most adults do not recognize the effect of adultism on youth or on themselves (Velazquez Jr and Garin-Jones 2003). Adultist social constructions of youth as inferior, ‘unconditionally subordinate’, and less capable creates a binary through which the power dynamics between adults and youth often antagonize rather than support each other (Gordon 2007). For example, adults can use overprotection, or doing things ‘for’ youth, as a method of control. As the subdominant group, youth engage in three notable resistance strategies to counteract adultism. They can act out by becoming angry or rebellious, ‘act in’ by becoming resentful or disengaged, or become ‘master manipulators’ against adults by acting lazy, spoiled, or in elitist ways that would embarrass adults (Brett 2011b; Notepad 2003; Velazquez Jr and Garin-Jones 2003). Flasher (1978, 517) notes, ‘Children may try to control adults by attempting to shame them, make them feel guilty, make them feel as though they are unloving or uncaring, or make them feel incompetent to carry out their responsibilities.’ Because most adults internalize adultism as normal age relations, scholars have used reflexivity as a means of ‘unlearning adultism’ (Brett 2011b). By asking ourselves if we would like to be treated the same way, we can see the effects of our actions onto youth, creating a dynamic rather than hierarchical relationship that would the mutual respect needed for adults to be allies to youth (Bell 1995; Checkoway 1991; Flasher 1978).

This study focuses on adultism within an educational setting, the main institution outside of the home where youth are socialized, and a place where general attitudes about youth are pervasively negative and a prevalent norm (Stewart 2012; Tate 2001). Youth oppression in schools takes place both openly and through coercive means such as what's called the hidden curriculum (Bell 1995; Giroux 1988). Through nearly twenty years of school youth endure constant control, punishment, passivity, and little ability to exercise their will to change their situation (Brett 2011a; Checkoway 1996). The rise in participatory youth programs offers a promising way to address adult-youth relationships by empowering youth and challenging conventional school norms (Skinner and Chapman 2000). However if adultism is as pervasive as this literature describes, and if those committed to social justice still commit adultism, then empowering youth cannot be a simple, smooth process, but must be filled with moments of tensions as youth challenge the power inequalities that take place within their educational environment. This paper will address the complexities of youth-adult power dynamics in a service learning program. Learning at Green Shoots took place under the educational rubric of a community of practice; therefore next I will outline what is a community of practice and its particular nature at Green Shoots.

### **Communities of Practice**

A community of practice is an educational community where learning takes place through practices and meanings that are developed, shaped, and negotiated among its members (Aguilar and Krasny 2011; Wenger 1998). This concept emerges from Lave and Wenger's (1991) work in social learning theory which argues that learning is configured through the process of working within a sociocultural practice (Lave 1993; Wenger 1998). As such, they argue that working does not only connect with learning, but also shapes one's sense of identity (Bradley 2004; Handley, Sturdy, Fincham and Clark 2006). This is especially important regarding youth because they are constructing their identity as they engage in community work (Harre 2007; Queniat 2008).

Communities of practice generally employ one of three main type of belonging: engagement (doing things together), imagination (constructing images to reflect the current situation and explore possibilities), or alignment (linking local activities with other processes so that higher goals can be achieved), although these types can be mixed, complementary or conflicting. All communities of practice are composed of three important factors: joint enterprise (how members negotiate their response to the conditions and goals of the community), mutual engagement (sustained interaction of people within community and the roles and relationships that arise), and shared repertoire (signs, symbols, tools, and language that have specific meaning to the community). These dimensions work together to shape the social learning processes of participation, membership and identity formation within a community. Social identities can be examined by their connectedness with others, expansiveness (breadth and scope of multi-membership across boundaries), and effectiveness or to what degree does such an identity enable action and participation (Wenger 2000).

Not all interactions within a community of practice are harmonious. The conflicts, tensions, and power dynamics which structure how people relate to each other within a community are essential for understanding the true nature of a community (Roberts 2006; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002, 141). The literature cites three types of conflicts: boundaries, marginal participation, and sequestering. Boundaries are demarcations which delineate communities, but also link them together through their boundary interactions. They can be a source of separation, but, for those who broker such boundaries, they can also places of radical new insights and possibilities (Wenger 2000). For example, students of color may have overlapping or multi-membership within their ethnic group in addition to another community of practice that may shape their participation in both for better or worse (Preston 2012). Another conflict is marginal participation where those at the periphery of the community, such as newcomers, are constrained from greater levels of participation (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham and Clark 2006). Finally, sequestering occurs when novices are unable to participate in the activities of experienced members (Bradley 2004). The experiences of those who sequester are often ignored in research on communities of practice.

The community of practice at Green Shoots was largely of the engagement type for the students, but also held many imagination and alignment types of belonging. Students spent most of their time together in groups working on tasks and engaging in discussion groups. Student's also spent a great deal of time using their imagination in discussing possibilities for improving Green Shoots and the local neighborhood and, as well, many had alignment plans to join other environmental organizations back in their hometowns. As mentioned, despite the egalitarian rhetoric that was regularly mentioned as the focus of the school's community of practice, there were three hierarchal groups at the school: that of Browne and his 'inner circle' staff, the other staff at the school, and the youth. In this study I examine the lessons learned while brokering the boundary between my adult status and the position of the youth, examining how adultism sequestered youth social identity and affected the joint enterprise and mutual engagement of youth-adult work at the school, leading them to embrace terms such as 'an adult's disrespect of youth' when characterizing their educational experiences at Green Shoots.

## METHODS AND CONTEXT

In this paper I blend ethnographic and reflexive statements to analyze the power relations around age that occurred at Green Shoots. Ethnography involves observing and participating in the daily routines of a group of people to gain insight into their lives within that social context (Esterberg 2002). Reflexive statements are elements of ethnographic fieldnotes where the research discusses his thoughts and feelings about himself, the people he's studying, and the effect of those people on his sense of self. By expanding the reflexivity required in ethnographic practice, we can also examine the position of the researcher, his relations with others, and his impressions of the field. Ethnographers have shown how useful their methods are for experiential education and service learning in particular, which makes this method well suited for this study (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

I found out about Green Shoots after meeting Browne at a local environmental conference. Every weekend from January to May 2010, I worked alongside students as they collected and sifted compost, planted and watered crops, and engaged in group and individual discussions both informally during work and formally during afternoon topical sessions and nightly wrap-up meetings where I also conducted group interviews. Using a recorder, I collected fieldnotes of my experiences both during the day while taking breaks and while I was driving home at night. Students at Green Shoots sleep downstairs at night on cots provided by the school. After spending a few uncomfortable nights sleeping on a cot with a few staff members during winter break, I chose not to sleep alongside students and instead return to my bed at home. Thus, while I was a complete member researcher during the day, my notes contain only brief secondhand accounts of what occurred at the school at night.

Five adults were on the school staff: founder John Browne (Browne), his assistant, and three teachers in their early 20s (Brittney –the only female staff member, Cameron, and Kasim) who instructed and worked alongside students. There was also Samantha- a regular volunteer who, as I'll explain later, spent a great deal of time working with Brittney, Bob- a man in his 60s who owned a farm outside of town, and Bill- another man in his 60's who had been a long term friend of Browne and lived in his van next to the school, never wore clean clothes or bathe regularly, and often told over exaggerated stories and jokes. Because of his humor, efforts, and understanding he was widely appreciated by all groups at the school. He was also very critical about social issues and the operations of Green Shoots and his insights were essential for my understanding of adultism.

Students came to Green Shoots in groups of about 10–20 and stayed an average of a few weeks. They were college and high school students from all areas of the country, but many came from the area where Browne was formerly employed. Student groups typically ranged in age from 16–21. Approximately half were women, half men. About half of the students were white. The rest came from a mix of many different ethnic backgrounds including black (African American and Caribbean American), Latino/Latina (from North, Central, and South America), and Asian (primarily Chinese). A few identified as mixed race. There was also another group of about 5-10 local youth whose ages ranged from 5-15 and who were a part of the school's alternative schooling program. Local youth regularly got into fights and later some youths broke into the school and stole chickens and personal items, prompting Browne to ban after school

programming during the time I was there. Because of my infrequent interactions with them my notes contain little information about local youth.

Analysis for this paper began with an open ethnographic coding procedure where reflexive codes were created that related my sense of self to the experiences of working with students at the school. Examples of these codes are ‘I concede to youth’, ‘my emotions, I get upset’, and ‘my position, me alone’. Secondly, I created codes that linked the material in the literature review to my data about students. Examples of these codes are ‘calling the youth ‘kids’’, ‘youth work, adults talk’, ‘group consciousness around age’, ‘youth ignore me, take advantage of me’, ‘adults lack of concern for student feelings’, and ‘becoming aware of my privileges’. Finally, using an axial coding procedure where a combination of inductive and deductive thinking was used to understand the larger structural nature of how adultism took place, I combined reflexive codes with codes about youth and crystallized them on the issues of adult-youth discussions, work demands, resistance strategies, and the effect of adultism and other social locations such as race/class/gender.

## PRELIMINARY MATERIAL

### **Green Shoots’ Actual Community of Practice and My Identity**

Work=n. Activity that engages one in physical labor. Synonymous with hard work, ‘real work’. Can be used as a command- ‘*WORK!*’ When referring to old equipment, often preceded by ‘don’t’ (as in ‘the car don’t work’). Can be used accusatorily (as in ‘You don’t work’ or ‘You don’t do enough work.’).

(fieldnote 9)

Green Shoots’ community of practice was largely engagement oriented but contained significant imaginary or ideological elements. Ideologically, the actions we engaged in were always imbued with a deeper meaning. Shoveling compost was doing your small part for what was needed to improve the local neighborhood or fight for the rights of disadvantaged people and save ‘the planet’. However, on the engagement side it also meant working hard all day in the summer sun with youth while Browne was away at speaking engagements and continuing to labor even after staff quit early to discuss social justice and drink coffee. This left students and myself to do the rest of the physical labor needed to run the school’s growing microgreens enterprise. My labor-intensive definition of work above was penned after months of being expected to be constantly working, being chided for not engaging in ‘real work’ such as typing up fieldnotes or choosing to paint a door instead of shoveling compost (fieldnote 9), and seeing a dynamic where Browne chided staff, staff chided youth, and youth chided each other for not working. Thus, since educational settings contain both an overt and a ‘hidden curriculum’ (Giroux 1988), I can reflect and say that while I overtly learned the importance of working hard and acting toward social justice, covertly I learned not to question authority. This dynamic then situated the insights I made at the school. On one hand, through sifting, digging, and (importantly) smelling compost, I learned to redefine my meaning of environmentalism:

[author]: The compost had to be turned so that the new food would rot inside, so I volunteered, grabbed a rake and started turning the compost, and the foulest smell I have ever smelled in my life erupted out, and nearly sent me vomiting. I realized that up until now, most of my work in environmentalism has mostly been ideological. I hang out with



environmentalists, I go to protests, but I've never planted a thing in my life, I don't even like touching dirt. The upturned compost was covered in maggots. I staggered back and forth, fighting to suppress my gag reflex and take in fresh air. Everyone looked at me and laughed, figuring that it must be my first time doing this.

(fieldnote 5)

On the other hand, I also quickly learned the lesson of the hidden curriculum. After our first interview, Browne complained to some visitors rather loudly in front of me 'See these boxes. This is what I'm talking about. Everyone wants to talk, but there's SO much work that needs to get done' (fieldnote 3) and began breaking down a box into a flat square and moving it from the center of the farm to a pile along the fence. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> box, which Browne broke down in complete silence, I suddenly felt myself getting nervous:

[author]: I wasn't finished my observations, but I could tell from the tone of his voice that this was my first moment of truth. And I didn't want to disappoint him lest I lose my contact and future project. So I quickly went over to him and started breaking down boxes and getting my hands dirty. I didn't like it, but opening a few dirty boxes and moving them to another area wasn't that big a deal. Browne was pleased.

(fieldnote 3)

This is the environment in which work and learning took place at Green Shoots. Fostered by Browne's focus on work, staff and students were motivated by both a strong desire to make social change and an underlying fear (or internalized guilt) of being judged by others for not working hard enough. Working within this dynamic with youth is what led to my insights about adultism, captured in the findings below.

## REFLECTIONS ON ADULTISM

### Talking With Youth, Not At Them

Youth groups came to Green Shoots together in groups of 10-20 and stayed on average around two weeks where they spent the majority of their time together and created their own subculture at the school. While working, youth regularly engaged in talking and singing, a joint enterprise and mutual engagement activity involving a shared repertoire of pop culture material. While interacting with youth one-on-one and during formal group discussions was largely orderly and calm, interacting with them as a group meant random comments, overlapping conversation, and quickly shifting topics between pop culture and their personal opinions. I could hardly keep up with this and found myself never being able to actually speak in time or saying something and breaking the 'flow' of conversation. Periodically, something serious would come up, like when the black kids would use the 'N word' or a sensitive topic like abortion. With the first group of 'kids' (fieldnote 4) during one of these moments, I took my chance. We were on the bus heading for a place to eat dinner and the topic went from movies to interracial dating:

Girl 1: Yea, I saw that movie [*Guess Who*]. Aston Kutcher is soo hot.

Boy 2: Yea, well, my dad wouldn't be cool with me dating a black girl.

[author]: Well, but let's question why he wouldn't be cool? What reasons would motivate his particular opinion?

(fieldnote 4)

While I as a sociology graduate student regularly engage in this kind of discussion, student's perceived this as a form of intrusion into their normal conversation. 'They got real quiet, thought about what I said for a few seconds, started lowering their heads in thought, and then I literally saw one girl shake the comment off physically and change topics to something about boys or movies again' (fieldnote 4). At the time, I felt rejected, foreign, and lacking the basic skills to participate in this culture. Brokering this frustration, which centered on the boundary between my real self and my Green Shoots identity, led me to my first early realizations of adultism:

[author]: ...Part of me was angry as well. I work hard to educate myself, and then I attempt to offer some education and they just rejected me. But, I have to admit, if they were not young people, I probably wouldn't have spoken the exact way I did. If this were an adult conversation, I would have made a similar comment about my parents and left it at that, but these kids don't speak like adults speak. But, I can see that my whole 'need to educate' is connected to a power dynamic about educating youth and myself as educator... just thoughts. A deliberate attempt to educate them immediately made them realize they were being subjected to something against their will...

(fieldnote 4)

I know now that what I was doing was introducing discipline into their free conversations. While adults use the word discipline to mean 'an inner motivation to do something' (like educate yourself), youth regard discipline as 'conforming to what others [adults] say or want' (Tate and Copas 2002, 40). While talking *with* youth does not mean completely abandoning the need for structured conversations, it does mean that this structure is set by the youth themselves, and that it is they who decide when to enlarge conversational topics. To not give them this ability is to assume that adults know best what youth should discuss, and is one form of adultism.

### **Who Works and Who Talks and Drinks Coffee**

The adultist assumptions that undergirded my attempt to control youth conversation also took place regarding unequal work expectations placed on youth. While everyone at Green Shoots told me groups were 'student led', every weekend morning I arrived at the school and stood among the youth as they were told that day's assignment by a staff member. This may have been a recap of last night's discussion group. Youth always said nothing, shrugged, and then were told to get on the bus if we were doing work away from the school such as the time we made Mardi Gras costumes for a community organization (fieldnote 7), or weeded the Oakgrove community garden

[author]: So, that day Browne told us we were going down to Oakgrove community garden and 'help over there'. That's literally all he told us, 'help over there'. I shrug, students shrugged, and we get on the bus. Browne didn't come. Bill did and he drove the bus again. When we got there, a short trip to Mid-city, there was a shotgun-style white house being renovated next to a large garden overrun with weeds and high grass. It was a

bit cold and wet that day; you couldn't stand around for too long or your hands and face started to hurt.

Pam, the organizer of the Oakgrove community garden, comes outside with a large coffee cup in hand and a rolled up magazine under her arm, introduces herself, talks about the garden and says 'but as you can see things have kinda fallen apart here, but we're working on that.' Then she just abruptly stopped and said, 'Well, let's get started. There's some gloves over there. Maybe you guys can work in teams, and there's a spot in back of the house also. Thank you all so much for coming out.' And then quickly went back inside as if cold. We all head toward where the gloves are, which is what we do every time. In fact, there's a pattern: we get told what to do, we shrug, we go for the gloves. Then we get started...

(fieldnote 8)

This experience at Oakgrove starkly revealed just how unequal the different work expectations placed on adults versus youth were. After getting started, I pulled up grass while observing students talking and singing. After about an hour, however, I looked up into a window in the house and saw Pam:

[author]: Then, I looked up and saw Pam and two other adults in the house through the window, so I stopped for a bit and went in. It was heated in the house. And as soon as I walked in, they were quite eager to sit and talk to me once I explained who I was and why I was working with the kids. They offered me coffee also, so I hung out with them, talked about gardens, the importance of growing things, eating healthy, yada yada. About 15 minutes into it, I looked out the window and saw everyone working and felt a pang of guilt. So, I finished my coffee and went back outside. We worked until Bill said that's enough for today. It was about noon then and we were all getting hungry. I walked over to Bill and after a couple of jokes he said, 'See, these kids put up with this shit all the time. That woman was all about community and working together, but did you see her actually come here and do any work? Nope, she sure didn't, she drank her coffee, bossed us around, let us work. So I said screw it, we ain't doing this all day...' I thought it over for the first time. Bill continued, 'See, that's the thing about these liberal people. They talk about doing things, the message is great, but when it comes down to whose gonna do the work, it's never them.' I managed to stammer out, 'Yea, privileges. I've noticed that too.' and then Bill said 'Exactly. I haven't been rich, but I have definitely been very poor, and I have turned to these people for help and suddenly it's 'oh, well we'd like to help of course, but...I've got to get ready for a charity drive.'" (Laughs)

So after that, we get on the bus, and Bill walked up to Pam and said 'Thank you for letting us work in your garden.' It was a little tongue in cheek considering how much she said it was a community garden. And Pam made a slight twinge in her face but then continued smiling, sipping her coffee, and told him 'thank you so much for coming'- the same thing she had said before. Then Bill got back on the bus. He made a few loud comments while driving, but the kids didn't say anything. And the general feeling we all

had was, well, we did something important, we did our part well. Bill even said, ‘you kids are great.’

(fieldnote 8)

This excerpt demonstrates adultist expectations regarding youth and work at Green Shoots. Adults were quite comfortable with discussing things amongst themselves and letting, even watching, youth do all the work while they relax. Adults engaged in double-talk by saying ‘we’ when they really meant ‘you’ if it involved doing work. Since adults who demonstrate less intra-personal elitism are less likely to be adultist (Flasher 1978), it makes sense that Bill was the first person to make me aware of how the youth, as well as myself, were being treated. Finally, my pang of guilt as well as my conversation with Bill demonstrates my increasing solidarity with the students- a process that allowed me to reframe what others saw as problematic youth behaviors as resistance strategies youth engaged in to address this inequitable climate.

### **An Adult’s Disrespect of Youth and Taking it Out on Me**

[author]: On another day, I showed up and the kids were outside. Boys were shoveling compost while girls were sifting. I asked one girl what she was doing and she said ‘We’re sifting compost, wanna join us?’ Her face lit up and then very quickly sank. She knew my answer was really ‘hell no, I just got here’, but, not to disappoint, I quickly said ‘sure’, grabbed my gloves, and started working. Then, at some point someone wanted me to do something and kept calling me ‘Sir, sir’, and I didn’t respond. Then I realized they were talking to me and I got real shocked, even raised my hand, and said ‘Hold up. Don’t call me sir; my name is [author’s first name], ok?’ That made me realize how old I was. I think they were just trying to be polite, but that’s not how I took it...But then, maybe an hour later, I remember saying ‘Ain’t you all getting tired yet?’ and everyone had a quick jerk of silence, and the girl I had spoken to earlier told me ‘Oh, you getting old, eh?’ Given how sensitive I was about my age, that kinda dug into me. Clearly, if I don’t do the same work as them they will criticize me. I also notice I keep saying ‘they.’ Anyway, they clearly have some kind of class consciousness around work, they are aware that it’s different, unfair for them than for others here.

(fieldnotes 9)

While I increasingly became conscious of what I felt was unfair treatment of the youth, I was reluctant to bring up any of my concerns. One reason was because, despite all my education in participatory action research, I still held fast to the idea that if I greatly altered the situation I would be ‘contaminating’ my data. But the other reason, and perhaps the more personally significant one, was that I was picked on, made fun of, or otherwise got my feelings hurt by the youth themselves. Youth engaged in resistance strategies against me, the only adult at the school they had collective power over, by taking advantage of my position as an adult imbued with responsibility and authority. This particular day was very significant because I was repeatedly dealing with this dynamic and learned the phrase an ‘adult’s disrespect of youth’. About half an hour after being told ‘you getting old, eh?’ compost from my shovel blew into the face of a young girl:

[author]: She spat it out and said something like, ‘Thanks a lot, geez man, fuck!’ And I bent down and said ‘Oh, I am soo sorry’ and helped her brush the compost off, although

after about a second she stopped moving and let me do it, like a kid would for their mother. I thought that was funny, but I did a really good job of cleaning it all off. And then I said ‘Now, how’s that’, and she just nodded. Everyone else was completely silent the whole time I did it, because they aren’t that nice to each other. In fact, that niceness marked me as an adult. But frankly, I felt they took advantage of it. As I was shoveling I got tired quickly because I was working very hard to prove myself to them. And then I said, ‘Well guys how about we move the sifter closer to where the dirt is so I can do it faster (and it would be easier on me). And no one said anything, or did anything, and then someone said they didn’t feel like moving, and someone else agreed, and then I had to just shrug it off and keep working hard. I mean, I already knew I had to be nice or otherwise I would be excluded very quickly. But frankly I felt I was being excluded already. So I just kept working and stayed silent, at least staying silent helped me to bottle in my feelings and not let them interfere with my work, both as participant observer and compost-shoveler.

(fieldnotes 9)

Later that day, we stopped shoveling and sifting to water plants and move compost to another section of the farm. I walked past Bob, who cracked yet another joke about me not working. Though frustrated by his joke, I laughed instead, and walked to the other side of the farm. When I was walking back, I saw Bob walking away from a conversation with two of the youths:

[author]: They were talking real low to each other, so I said ‘What? What’s going on?’ And both of them said ‘We just witnessed an adult’s disrespect of youth.’ I had never heard that term before, but I immediately knew what it meant. Then one of the youth, a student leader, Garrett, said he had asked Bob for help composting and he basically looked at them like they were crazy and said he had other things to do. Then I said, well, I noticed that despite all this talk about work and we all working together and everything... And Garrett said, ‘But nobody does the same work. And they don’t work as much as us or ever do the dirty work. They plant things and water stuff.’ And I said, ‘Yep, yep, exactly.’

(fieldnotes 9)

This shared moment of symbolic resistance explained perfectly how youth felt about their treatment at Green Shoots. Their words confirmed that despite all the discussion of youth empowerment and social justice, students at Green Shoots learned to critically be aware of power, but not to challenge it.

After hearing youth describe the concept of “adult disrespect of youth,” I also began to notice that staff and Browne always referred to the youth in disempowering ways by always calling them ‘the kids.’ Since I was the only adult regularly working with youth on the same tasks for the same length of time, it also marked a clear boundary between my position and that of other adults. This delineation was marked even further when I stopped to have lunch and saw staff sitting in the shade near the house. I stopped there and had a conversation with Samantha over coffee. At some point I looked over and saw “the kids all shoveling and sifting”:

[author]: I caught one girl glance at me, or at least I think I did. And so I said to Samantha, ‘well, I really should get back to work, I took a long break. If I don’t they are gonna get mad at me.’ And she looked over at them and sorta pondered what I said and replied, ‘Yea, that’s probably true’, chuckled, and then went talk to someone else as I headed back over. I remember Garrett gave me a look like, ‘wow, he actually came back.’ Then we continued sifting together and Garrett said ‘hey how about we move the compost sifter over here where the dirt is’ and everyone looked at me and laughed, and I muttered ‘didn’t I say that at the beginning of the day?’ And then we moved it closer to the compost. Everyone laughing made me feel a little better, vindicated, but it also pissed me off further because no one took me seriously the first time and everyone laughing meant I couldn’t bring up the fact that I thought it was unfair. So it was real weird, being this adult who got sorta disrespected by the youth. But after this they brought up Bob and what happened earlier and I said ‘Well, I hope you all don’t think I treat you that way. I would never do that to you guys. I am very sensitive about that kind of...’ and then someone else changed the topic. Everyone sorta lowered their faces for a bit before the topic changed. I think they were somewhat conscious that they were taking things out on me...

(fieldnotes 9)

My treatment by youth was a direct expression of the age inequality they regularly tolerated. By engaging in resistance strategies such as pointing out my age, taking advantage of my kindness, and ignoring me, they could exercise their collective power over at least one adult at Green Shoots. Though they might not have described it in such terms, this was arguably one way for them to negotiate their feelings of inequality. While they were thankful for an adult who understood their position, they changed the subject when it emerged in discussion- another resistance strategy that further demonstrated their desire to feel some sense of control about their situation.

### **Adulthood and Race, Gender, Class Inequality**

Finally, the adulthood, or at very least the age dynamic that occurred at the school intersected with other social location such as race, class, and gender dynamics at the school. While these examples may not qualify as adulthood outright, they demonstrate the intersectional effects of age inequality and other social disadvantages. In particular, there were important adulthood-related incidents involving the young black students (particularly the young black men) and their subcultural language norms, the female staff at Green Shoots and work demands, and with myself and challenging my class privileges.

Because the black youth, and particularly the young black men, regularly hung out together, they represent a subculture within the youth culture at OSBG with its own norms that, I personally felt, made it difficult for me to bond with them or get to know them further. Black youth’s conversation regularly involved referring to each other using offensive language such as “nigger” and “bitch”. While they never insulted anyone else, I personally found such language to be quite annoying and often left the area to talk to other, generally white and female, youth who discussed books and ideas. Secondly, while half of the White students in group interviews didn’t speak, none of the Black students spoke. In fact, the black students were the only group that outright refused to answer my questions when interviewed or be recorded. There was one notable exception, however, of a poetically gifted young man from Haiti. Out of all the groups at Green

Shoots, only one group, an all-black youth group from Philadelphia, was cited by a staff member as ‘the worst group we have ever had here’ (fieldnote 20). These difficulties made it hard to engage in participant observation with this black youth subculture, despite the usefulness of this information for addressing disadvantaged youth in service-learning programs.

I personally didn’t realize the cumulative effect of this until the day I learned about ‘an adult’s disrespect of youth.’ I was shoveling compost with the guys, who were again using offense language, and in frustration said ‘Man! What is up with the young black men using the N-word all the damn time?!’ It was the only time I broke character and actually expressed disagreement with any of the youth. All my black male shoveler-companions lowered their heads and stopped talking. The other youths said that there had been a group discussion about it last night. Then, I and the mostly white youth had a brief exchange where they told me that it wasn’t ok for me, as a black man, to say the N-word, which, when I tried to elaborate further, a young black girl screamed “change the subject!” I never felt comfortable about this moment because I never got to explain my opinion, but in retrospect I realized that the young black men probably also felt silenced by my initial complaint when they were only expressing what is for them a normal, everyday interaction. Given this lack of support for their norms, it’s not surprising that they didn’t want to be recorded or felt uncomfortable speaking and demonstrates the compounded effect of both race and age discrimination.

Similar compounded disadvantages also occurred among the female staff at Green Shoots because of Browne’s gendered decision to only place female staff in charge of the local youth. One day, Brittney shaved her head and that day there was an afternoon discussion titled ‘Gender at Green Shoots’ where everyone (which here means youth, Brittney and Samantha, and myself) was allowed to express their opinions. I hadn’t really observed any gender inequality among the youth aside from boys shoveling and girls sifting, which I felt was only mildly notable. But Brittney began discussing gender inequality and work and Samantha responded with:

Samantha: ...but you know, this thing [gender inequality] happens here, too. Like, Brittney, I came here around the same time as you and Ryan. But Ryan was moved into Browne’s inner circle, and I got put here dealing with kids [local youth] and helping you out. I have no experience with kids whatsoever. Neither do you! And look now. A year later we are still here doing this, and Ryan is in Milwaukee right now at a conference with Browne.’

(fieldnote 12)

Brittney confessed to me earlier that she needed help in dealing with the local youth, but was afraid to tell Browne because it would reflect badly on her assigned job. This demonstrated how not addressing adultism can lead to gender discrimination. While no one at the school would ever tolerate sexist behavior and were very critical of such attitudes in general, the power dynamics of the school led to the reproduction of inequality nonetheless.

As for me, in particular, the experience of “unlearning adultism” at the school was an extended opportunity to challenge the class privileges I’ve held since a youth. As a youth I grew up middle-classed. I spent more of my time in front of a computer, video game console or TV screen than ever outside in nature or engaged in physical labor. Both my parents grew up in poverty and worked very hard so that I didn’t have to struggle and could pursue my educational

aspirations. These are privileges that many disadvantaged people do not have. I came to this realization the day I learned about ‘an adult’s disrespect of youth’. When work ended that day, I was ‘so sore I wanted to fall into a coma’ (fieldnote 9). As I was lying down on a cot, I was specifically asked by a female youth to leave the room as she came out of the shower, even though all the other young men were present. After a day of having my feelings hurt, this was more than I could handle and I started crying as I walked back to my car. As I drove home I made this observation:

[author]: I don’t know why I’m crying. Maybe I’m just tired. I realized today how hard some other people have to work in life. I have never done this much physical labor ever in my life. My entire body hurts; I’m frustrated with these kids. I never really think about people who have to do things like this for a living. I spent most of my time in school so I could avoid having to do anything with a shovel. I just did this for one day, but there are people, and certainly were people back in the day, who did work like this their whole lives. I realized how great my privileges are. As a black guy, I don’t usually think about myself having privileges...

(fieldnote 9)

Challenging my class privileges made me more aware of my own sense of agency. I began realizing things I could do to improve the school, such as mopping the floor and organizing a 2010 Census Drive for the local neighborhood (fieldnote 16). These ideas went against the grain of staff, who didn’t want to be burdened with more work, so I began exercising my greater sense of agency in my personal life. After my time ended at Green Shoots, I started recycling again, began growing my own vegetables and raising chickens for the first time, and developed an entirely different, more direct, holistic interpretation of environmentalism than what I held before.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Communities of practice, like other educational settings, have both an overt philosophy and a hidden curriculum (Giroux 1988). Overtly, students at Green Shoots learned how race, class, and gender connected to environmental disadvantages. They even learned those lessons within an overt framework of youth participation and empowerment. However, covertly, student’s learned not to question the authority of adults. Youth learned that even those who talk about social justice still expect youth to be subservient to the demands of adults, to not be considered equals in adult-youth conversations, and to have unequal work demands placed on them. They learned to expect double-talk and talk in general instead of honesty and action by adults regarding how they feel. Youth, largely powerless against this dynamic, created resistance strategies such as engaging in lots of vocal activity while working and disrespecting me as an adult whom they had collective power over. This adultism also had intersectional effects on other types of inequalities. Adultism affected my ability to address black youth subculture, it promoted the acceptance of gender discrimination at the school, and it lead to personal insights about my class privileges and sense of agency. Thus while students felt they were engaged in something meaningful and enlightening by working at Green Shoots, they also left the experience feeling “an adults disrespect of youth.”



Many service learning programs claim to focus on youth empowerment as an important part of educating youth (Bringle and Hatcher 1999; [author] 2012; Delgado and Staples 2008; Skinner and Chapman 2000). However, the process of letting youth become empowered, in a pervasive culture of adult control over youth, is impossible without addressing the power inequality behind adult-youth interactions (Bell 1995). This paper demonstrates the limits of such a social justice education if it doesn't seriously address adultism. Organizations and activities such as service learning programs must engage in actions that are supportive of their voiced goal of youth empowerment if they are to be as effective as possible. Since educational settings are the primary place where youth are taught to be submissive to authority, this issue is essential for addressing the nature of education for our country's youth. If we as educators are truly interested in creating a world where youth are active members of our society and capable of tackling difficult issues, we must examine the adultist assumptions we regularly engage in that may limit the successfulness of our efforts (Brett 2011a). This will mean engaging in greater reflexivity, putting ourselves in the position of youth and asking how we would like to be treated. It will mean listening to youth and taking their opinions and ideas seriously when planning our own actions. Finally, "unlearning adultism" also means reexamining our own past and recovering from the adultist treatment we endured as youth, engaging in reparative actions to open ourselves up to new challenges and experiences (Brett 2011b).

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## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Toward the goal of a citizenry capable of tackling the world's environmental problems, environmental sociology has examined the role of activism and the promotion of proenvironmental behavior as central goals of study (Cole and Foster 2001; Hug 1977; Shellenburger and Nordhaus 2004). Environmental education has furthered this aim by centering its pedagogy on promoting active student involvement in understanding environmental issues and generating actions that will create real meaningful change (Chawla and Cushing 2007; Hines, Hungerford and Tomera 1986/1987; Hungerford and Volk 1990; Short 2010). In developing this goal, environmental education has expanded both its focus and its methods. It has gone from nature study and models which avoid taking a stance on issues to a more socially critical environmental education that embraces social injustice within environmental activism (Gough and Robottom 1993; Kyburz Graber 1999; Simmons 1991). In this process environmental education has deepened our understanding of how environmental attitudes are shaped and maintained, developing models that increasingly demonstrate the relationship between one's environmentalism and overall sense of identity (Clayton and Opatow 2003; Stets and Biga 2003; Weigert 1991, 1997).

Two pedagogical tools stand as pinnacles of this shift within environmental education: Critical Environmental Education approaches and Significant Life Experiences research. Critical environmental education addresses action through praxis, or a holistic combination of critique, reflection, and action (Kyburz-Graber 1999; Walker 1997). By engaging students in praxis, they learn to become aware of knowledge distortion, producing a self-conscious awareness or enlightenment of environmental issues. This process empowers students by linking their new found knowledge with the creative ability to think about what other possibilities exist and to develop concrete steps for achieving desired goals. In this sense, critical approaches to environmental education deepen student's proenvironmental attitudes and behaviors through a deeper concern for social justice and self-empowerment. Significant Life Experiences (SLE) research examines what important experiences shape people formative understandings of the environment and environmentalism. This allows researchers to see how significant embodied experiences with the social and environmental worlds interact in ways that motivate people toward greater environmental activism (Chawla 1998a; Tanner 1980). In both research traditions, scholars are examining how significant experiences, either from the past or cultivated through critical praxis, shape or alter people's sense of identity.

While environmental education has been praised for becoming more socially critical, critics still argue that it exists in a "monoculture" (Russell, Bell and Fawcett 2000). While notable studies can be pointed to that examine environmental education in other cultures and among minorities within the US, the majority of environmental education research still focuses on and operates under the assumptions of white, middle class, male perspectives and the privileges accompanying that position (Gough 1999b). These assumptions weaken the potential of any pedagogical tools for embracing a diversity of people and experiences and invigorating an inclusive environmental activist movement. This is all the more startling since the rise of the environmental justice movement, which is a movement centered on disadvantaged groups fighting social and environmental inequalities (Bullard 1994a). While the environmental justice

movement is precisely the type of movement that environmental education has been promoting as a socially critical way for the environmentalist movement to move forward, environmental education has largely ignored the significance of environmental justice as a pedagogical tool for breaking free of “monocultural” notions of the society/nature interaction.

This dissertation advances the traditional goals of environmental education and embraces a diversity of voices by generating environmental justice pedagogy through an examination of the critical education approaches and significant life experiences of a youth school that considers itself a part of the environmental justice movement. Each of the studies in this dissertation offer a particular insight into how an environmental justice orientation strengthens environmental awareness, sharpens an environmental critique, and puts the issue of power dynamics front and center, especially within educational settings. These studies demonstrate the power of utilizing personal experiences as a pedagogic tool for promoting responsible environmental citizenship.

In “Our School at Blair Grocery”, we learn about the potentials as well as the limitations of critical environmental education. By working within a group of peers and being situated within an area in need of social and environmental justice activism, students had an experience that made them more aware of the problems of disadvantaged people and the interconnectedness between social and environmental issues. Because they dealt with this situation within an egalitarian, empowering teaching learning culture, this only strengthened their determination to develop solutions to combating these problems. However, positioned with less authority than teachers and staff, students also learned the ‘hidden curriculum’ of obeying those in power. Teachers limited students’ ability to exercise their own ideas and autonomy first by giving them menial tasks, then by creating a different set of standards in terms of work and conversational expectations for themselves which allowed them to do less work at students’ expense. Finally, adult concerns over student safety in a dangerous neighborhood further limited student’s grounded experience with the Lower Ninth Ward. This led student’s to conceive of ideas and implement actions that had a mixed record of success in terms of promoting environmentalism within the neighborhood. Notably, when projects failed, such as Sunday church service farmer’s market, it was largely due to the idea not being contextualized to the actual concerns of the residents of the Lower Ninth than any other reason. This demonstrates the importance of linking ideas to real life situations and for allowing greater freedom for student action and decision making within critical models.

In “Significant Life Experiences and Environmental Justice” I demonstrate how negative environmental experiences combine with negative social experiences to produce one’s social/environmental positionality, and how such a position can be a source of mobilization for creating change. This work is also significant for introducing the environmental justice movement as a source of environmental pedagogy within SLE research. Those in environmental justice communities have significant experiences related to disasters, both natural and social. Lacking the privileges that would allow them safe neighborhoods and healthy environments, they must contend with dangers and what could be called a toxic environment. Since social and environmental worlds intersect, we can examine the toxic social/environmental relationships that develop among these groups. From studying cancer rates and birth defects in their own communities, from worrying about the lives of those they love around them and themselves, these residents develop an embodied sense of their social/environmental marginality. Realizing that “if I don’t fight, who else will”, they use their position as a source to build coalitions around

notions of inclusion in the larger fight for equal rights, both environmentally and socially. These life experiences mark environmental justice communities and disadvantaged groups generally, with a different set of social/environmental conceptions. This is evident in “Why I came to OSBG”, where notably differences can be discerned between the SLE descriptions of white students, which often involve access to wild nature and generalized notions of equality, and those of students of color, who describe personal experiences with health hazards, poverty, as well as an embrace of their unique cultural/food heritage. This demonstrates just how ingrained race and class differences are in the US, and how they lead to significantly different environmental experiences and situations, supporting the needs for such theory regarding SLEs and social/environmental marginalization.

By focusing on the environmental justice movement, and grounding our understanding of this movement using feminist theory and the sociology of disasters, this dissertation advances a new way to transform environmental education pedagogy for new areas of study and a wider variety of people and situations. In many ways, the trend of environmental education research toward social critique and embodied experiences could be considered the “feminist turn” in environmental education, although it is not yet acknowledged as such. Feminist theory is rooted in both social critique and the recognition of embodied experiences as a phenomenological basis for knowledge construction (Collins 1991; Haraway 1991). By rooting feminist theory in the realization of negative social and environmental experiences, theory such as social/environmental marginality embraces the realization that multiple, intersecting, and mutually constitutive forms of discrimination take place among disadvantaged groups. It not only acknowledges an environmental component to social locations, but admits that such a component is a fundamental part of how social power and inequality operate (Harvey 1996; hooks 2009; Freudenburg and Jones 1991). While scholars such as Collins rarely referenced the environment specifically in generating black feminist theory, the applicability of their work for understanding social/environmental problems and its effects on marginalized people demonstrates just how accurate these women were in diagnosing and revealing the daily reality of such situations. This orientation is very successfully for producing new ways of seeing old problems and developing new tactics for resistance, as is evinced from the environmental justice movement itself.

Finally, the success of these efforts depends strongly on whether we as educators can address the power dynamics that lie in the classroom and with our engagement with youth. Young people are in the process of developing themselves as they engage in activism (Harre 2007). They have their own thoughts about what is needed to address social/environmental problems and they need the support of adults who will empower them to enact their own ideas. The process of adults “unlearning adultism” (Brett 2011b) requires examining how we as adults construct the youth-adult binary, challenging our assumptions about youth and how we interact with them. It involves looking back at how we were treated as young people, asking ourselves to reconstruct an embodied sense of right and wrong regarding adults and youth, so that we can be allies to youth as they take their place as responsible environmental citizens (Checkoway 1996; Hungerford, Peyton, and Wilke 1980)

Educating for environmental justice means embracing the experiences of disadvantaged groups from a variety of social locations (Warren 1996). Race, class, gender, and age are all importance areas that must be openly discussed because behind them all lay power dynamics that

can be used to either create radical alternatives or reproduce the status quo. If we are truly interested in creating a world that is greener for all, we must be as open as possible to the perspectives of those who have suffered the worst. It is from their position that a world with greater social/environmental justice is most needed.

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## **APPENDIX: PERMISSION FOR PUBLISHED MATERIAL**

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## VITA

Donovon Ceaser is a guy who went from not liking dirt or having pets, to someone who owns a cat, raises chickens, ducks, and geese, and wants to grow as much of his own food as possible. He has earned a Bachelor of Arts in Music after being a self-taught pianist, a Master of Arts in Cognitive Psychology, and finally his masters and doctorate in Sociology. During his time earning his doctorate, he has specialized in Environmental Sociology and earned a minor in Women and Gender Studies. His future plans are to get an academic job, write a few books, finally pay off his student loan debt, do a lot more traveling, and win a few classical piano competitions.