

# There are Stories in the Drawings: The Cultural Watershed An Activity for Multicultural Environmental Education

**Running Grass**

Executive Director Three Circles Center, Bainbridge Island

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**Abstract:** This article describes a Multicultural Environmental Education activity that assists students in identifying the salient factors comprising their own cultural identities and those of others in the context or matrix of a real or imagined geography and process, the watershed and the water cycle. The *Cultural Watershed* activity is informed and guided by the pedagogical approaches and conceptual frameworks of Gloria E. Anzaldúa. In the process of developing the activity, we discovered that her notions of Autohistoria/Autohistoria-teoría, her rich conceptual insights on intersectionality, identity, and processes such as Conocimiento, and Borderlands, as related to identity formation and relational politics, are inspirational guides for the activity. (Keating 77)

**Keywords:** multi-cultural, environmental, education, Anzaldúa, watershed, identity

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## Introduction

“Our bodies are geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering, and overlapping ‘countries’.” (Anzaldúa 66)

University level environmental studies programs have long been recognized as lacking in racial and cultural diversity. (O’Reilly, Deegan, and Colombo 56) This systemic exclusion is replicated in and reflected throughout the environmental sectors of advocacy, business, higher education, philanthropy, and other environmental professions. (Johnson 2) Though there is currently heightened interest in environmental issues, recreation, and professional opportunities by racially diverse populations, it is unclear that environmental studies programs are serving these people by fostering or amplifying more multiracial and multicultural approaches in their curricula.

Enhancing the foundation of racially and culturally inclusive environmental studies would call for new curricular approaches to correct the pernicious continuing divide between environmental knowledge on the one hand and cultural knowledge and identities on the other. That division is an often-hidden mechanism that replicates exclusionary structures throughout environmental fields of thought and action. Multicultural Environmental Education is a curricular effort to bridge that divide. The Environmental Justice Movement is another positive effort to bring culture and identity, among other factors—race being the most notable, into a central place in environmental discourse. (Taylor 1)

Developed in an iterative fashion over several years, the Cultural Watershed activity was enacted with students at the start of the Multicultural Environmental Education seminar in the Antioch University Urban Environmental Education MA program in Seattle (2017-2024). The resulting critical discussions, reflections on each student's work, and group dialogue were referred to frequently as the seminar proceeded and as insights matured and found connections to related topics of learning. The seminar's reading of Anzaldúa and the unfolding of the activity's impact enabled its further development over time.

The activity is intended to generate insight into the relationship between landscape and cultural identity through a biographical reflection. The power and value of the activity expand after a period of independent reflection and an hour of solitary drawing. The deeper benefit of this exploration in relation to watersheds and the water cycle is in the debrief: the practice of dialogue and active and empathetic listening to the identity formation stories of others, and the opportunity to critically evaluate the broader systemic conditions of race, class, and gender that

are involved in the formation of each student's cultural identity. Such often vulnerable sharing leads to new forms of collective identity and solidarities.

### **Context: What is Multicultural Environmental Education?**

The idea of a Multicultural Environmental Education arose in the mid-1980s and developed in the 1990s with the insight that traditional environmental education and environmental learning did not reflect the cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, stories, and identities of students, their families and communities (Grass, "Towards a Multicultural Environmental Education" 1). Instead, environmental education at the time focused heavily on science and other approaches to environmental issues, environmental awareness, and action as though these other considerations were not salient or did not exist. This pedagogical and ideological exclusion or erasure revealed the racial and class bias of environmental education, its mothership environmental studies, and the environmental movement generally. (Grass, "Towards a Multicultural Environmental Education" 1; Taylor 35; Finney 93)

Multicultural Environmental Education continues to be an effort to challenge those class, race, gender and other ideological strictures in environmental learning. Its core insight is that there is inherent knowledge, expression, meaning, and value in the environmental histories, stories, experiences, aspirations, and the political interests of diverse and marginalized people and communities. (Grass, "Four Streams of Multicultural Environmental Education " 1-6; Finney 1). To achieve the transformational valuing and deepening relationship of people to the natural world and to expand the demographic profile of the environmental domain of learning and action, this insight needs to be the central foundation of environmental pedagogy. The concurrent emergence of the Environmental Justice Movement was another positive response, specifically to

the failure of environmental protection policymaking to address the detrimental impacts of pollution on low income and people of color communities. (Principles of Environmental Justice 1)

### **The Cultural Watershed**

In shaping pedagogy and curriculum for a Multicultural Environmental Education, new approaches aligned with these core insights needed to be developed. An activity my colleagues and I developed, and which I have used with hundreds of students over the years in academic and informal educational workshop settings, is the Cultural Watershed. The abridged version of the Cultural Watershed, which I am sharing here, illustrates, with the use of metaphor, the shaping power of place on personal and community identities. More deeply, it suggests a fundamental biological and cultural connection with the essential ecological building blocks of the watershed and the water cycle. The activity provides the students a space to associate the water cycle and geographical watershed features with traits, experiences, and conditions central to their personal cultural identities. The development of the curriculum and its enactment in the classroom is heavily informed by and tracks the pedagogical approaches and conceptual frameworks of Gloria Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa).

### **Pedagogies and Conceptual Frameworks of Gloria Anzaldúa Informing the Cultural Watershed Activity**

Nature is my solace; it allows my imagination to stir. Sea, wind, trees evoke images, feelings, thoughts that I acknowledge as sacred. If I'm receptive, a new *conocimiento*/insight will flash up through the cracks of the unconscious... a subterranean reservoir of personal and collective knowledge. Its surge provokes a new clarity inspiring me to formulate ideas that may transform my daily existence. (Anzaldúa 65)

Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942-2004) was a Chicana cultural activist, writer, theorist of queer identity, and teacher. Her philosophy was deeply formed by her social experiences living in the deeply contested Rio Grande Valley in south Texas. (Cantu-Sanchez, de Leon-Zepeda, and Cantu 3). While her identity was rooted culturally and ecologically in the Rio Grande Valley, Anzaldúa's perspective on belonging and connection touched the planetary level. (Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro 35) Additionally, her introspection on identity and social life often modeled on ecological systems and nature imagery. (Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro 65) There are numerous points of contact between the Cultural Watershed activity and the conceptual frameworks and theorizing of Anzaldúa. However, the initial development of the Cultural Watershed activity did not start out with an Anzaldúan framework. Anzaldúa was discovered along the way. The activity evolved through dialogue with students and with Anzaldúa's theories and approaches. Sections of Anzaldúa's Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro were assigned and provided a theoretical foundation and informed students' thinking for the activity. Even as I have struggled with understanding her thought and activism, I have sought to find its application in the activity and to test and bring the benefit of its self-reflective and transformative potential to the students. My own Anzaldúan learning journey, beyond interactions with students on the Cultural Watershed, continues with the formulation and writing of this paper, inasmuch as it is a consciously undertaken creative process that engages multiple levels of self and identity, and opens new possibilities for action. The act of writing, engaging the mental, physical, and other aspects of my identity, is the space of *conocimiento* (Keating 113).

It is difficult to sort out the interconnections and development within Anzaldúa's frameworks and philosophies, which evolved over time (Keating 78-79). For the purpose of this paper, I focus briefly on three interrelated concepts to illustrate how Anzaldúa's theories of culture: processes

of identity formation, and cross-boundary political work inform the Cultural Watershed activity. In particular the ideas of autohistoria/autohistoria-teoria, conocimiento and Borderlands (Anzaldúa) were important guideposts during the conceptualizing and conducting of the activity.

#### *Autohistoria/Autohistoria-teoria*

Autohistoria is a biographical exposition and social change project that can take many forms including literary such as fiction, prose, poetry, journaling, and also visual forms which in the case of the cultural watershed, the mural making drawings of the students and their spoken and written narratives. Autohistorias can be multiple genres and typical genre conventions can be fluid or malleable by the author. Autohistorias can focus on the many meaningful or even transformative events in a person's life which will likely generate images, dreams, imaginings or unusual states of consciousness. (Keating 82-83)

While composing them is a valuable act in itself, autohistorias find their depth of meaning in their extension through reflection as the autohistoria-teoria, "theoretical self-reflection and application" to the task of transforming (ourselves, the work we produce, and reality itself)." (Keating 83)

For Anzaldúa, the move from the autohistoria to the autohistoria-teoria is a qualitative transformation that is enlivened by "engagement with creative and spiritual processes and their ritualistic aspects". The result is "a new discursive mode" or genre that produces new insight and identity. (Anzaldúa quoted in Keating 81-82).

In terms of the Cultural Watershed, the student drawings, their oral presentations, the dialogue and the post-dialogue written narratives were forms of autohistorias/autohistoria-teoria; these

forms and process articulated not only biographical information that marked key moments in the formation of student identities, but in broad terms opened to critical theoretical reflection and assessment of the factors, systems and forces which were central to those individualized and collective formations of identity.

The autohistorias/teoria process of reflection and bringing to awareness the confluence of shaping influences and forces in the context of an imagined geographical space—the watershed and water cycle—is a kind of coming to consciousness of the intersectionalities, fracturing and recomposing of an individual’s identities, even as the landscape itself fractures, erodes, decomposes, recomposes, and reveals itself continuously and uniquely.

### *Conocimiento*

Conocimiento is the conscious reflection in the creative process that leads to transformative action. Keating states,

...conocimiento is profoundly relational, enabling those who employ it to make connections between apparently disparate events, persons, experiences, and realities; these connections, in turn, lead to new knowledge expressed through transformational action, innovative art, and much more. (109)

The pedagogy of the Cultural Watershed, a curricular device, drives the *conocimiento* process, a kind of super-reflection that reveals new personal and interpersonal connections and enlarges the capacity for responsive action.

Anzaldúa herself describes the path of *conocimiento* holistically as ‘a form of spiritual inquiry/activism is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing,

teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity). Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself. To understand the greater reality that lies behind your personal perceptions, you view these struggles as spiritual undertakings.’ (qtd in Cantú-Sánchez, de León-Zepeda, and Cantú 91)

### *Borderlands*

Anzaldúa’s concept of Borderland had two meanings. First in a geographical sense referring specifically to the region between the U.S. and Mexico. In that geographic sense specifically, Anzaldúa used the term “borderlands”. The second sense of the term refers to “psychological or sexual or spiritual space”. Anzaldúa refers to this space as “Borderlands.” (Keating 91)

Borderlands is grounded in a geographical metaphor which adds an element of physicality to the contact of differing cultural identities as in spaces where individuals of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds coexist within a specific, shared place. Borderlands could also refer to sites of contact between different social classes and, more intimately, the relational space between two or more individuals. (Keating 91).

The Antioch Urban Environmental Education Program largely achieved its goal to attract students of color into an environmental MA program. The presence of the racial, class, gender, and other diversities in each cohort created a rich mix of experiences, perspectives, and energetic interactions to draw from and reflect on. There were ample Borderlands in each cohort and the Cultural Watershed dialogues—the listening and discussing of each student’s work—lent themselves well to delineating, dissolving, and reformulating Borderlands.

## **Cultural Watershed Activity Directions**

### *Introduction*

To introduce the activity, we discuss notions and language of cultural identities, unpacking terminology and sharing stories of our own identity formation. This warm-up to the activity allows me as the instructor to assess the students' levels of conceptual understanding and comfort in discussing the personal aspects of their identities. From there we discuss the cultural watershed activity, its purpose, how the murals would be presented, and our group process. In short, students are asked to sketch an imaginary or real watershed, using dynamic geographical features as symbols in their own identities. Further, they are asked to identify as many forms of water in their murals as they could, similarly using those forms symbolically as aspects of their own identity. An example I would often use from a previous class: a student drew a mist above a glacier on a mountain with small creeks flowing down its side. When asked about the meaning, she stated that the mist shrouding the mountaintop was her spirituality, generally unknown to her but suggested by the rich glacial melt that came down the surface of the mountain, enriching her daily life below. Given this example, and after reflection, students work on their murals for about an hour.

### *Reflection*

Students are asked to take ten minutes to simply reflect on how they will approach the task of drawing, visualizing the water cycle, a watershed and how they might portray it, and what they might share about their histories and identities.

### *Drawing*

After the informal period of reflection, students, when ready, began their sketching.

### *The Mural Walk*

After everyone is done with their work, their drawings are displayed as a gallery, often strung across the wall on a cord, held in place with small clothes pins. When all are displayed, we hold a silent walk around the display with the instruction to simply observe the works, their diversity, and the clues to the stories within. A prompt for this gallery walk might be, “notice what the sketches have in common with your own, and what is different”

### *Presentations*

When the gallery walk concludes, each student makes an oral presentation of their drawing, the features and how and why they infuse the meanings as they did. We use active, non-judgmental, and empathetic listening. Clarifying questions are acceptable at the conclusion of each student’s presentation, which elicits further articulations of the meanings of the drawings.

### *Dialogue*

When all the presentations are complete, we have a whole group discussion with a prompt to draw out observations on the process, feelings about doing the drawings and sharing the details with the group, and impacts both of sharing and receiving often intimate details about the experiences, struggles, vulnerabilities and unresolved issues of forming cultural identities. The post-presentation phase of the activity is also a time to layer into the discussion additional concepts and critical analysis of the structural socioeconomic, political, and cultural forces that shape identity. This phase of the discussion closely tracks Anzaldúa’s autohistoria-teoría, distinguishing the murals from limited biographical narratives, elevating them to platforms for critical analysis. “In the autohistorias-teoría [sic] the self-reflective theorizing and analysis takes

precedence over the anecdotal, personal narrative. It theorizes about the autobiographical essay and its process in an attempt to determine or explore identity and other issues.” (Keating 83-85)

### *Final Direction*

The final direction in the activity, following the presentations and the dialogue, is for the students to take their drawings home to refine them and to write a short narrative delving further into the meanings they intended and gleaned from the discussion.

These identity categories—categories based primarily on history, biology, nationality—are important aspects of personal and collective identity; however, they don’t contain our entirety, and we can’t base our whole identidad on them. It’s not ‘race,’ gender, class, or any single attribute but the interaction of all of these aspects (as well as others) that creates identity. (Anzaldúa 64)

### **Student Examples of Cultural Watersheds**

The following images are samples of student drawings from the Antioch program, and a few images are from workshop participants. Though I have written a sentence or two under each work, as you scroll through the pictures, consider it as your participation in the silent mural walk described above. As you view them, consider the variety of student responses, their expressions of personal identity, references to systemic factors, and other notable significations.



Fig. 1 Note the placement of facial image and the influences framing it.

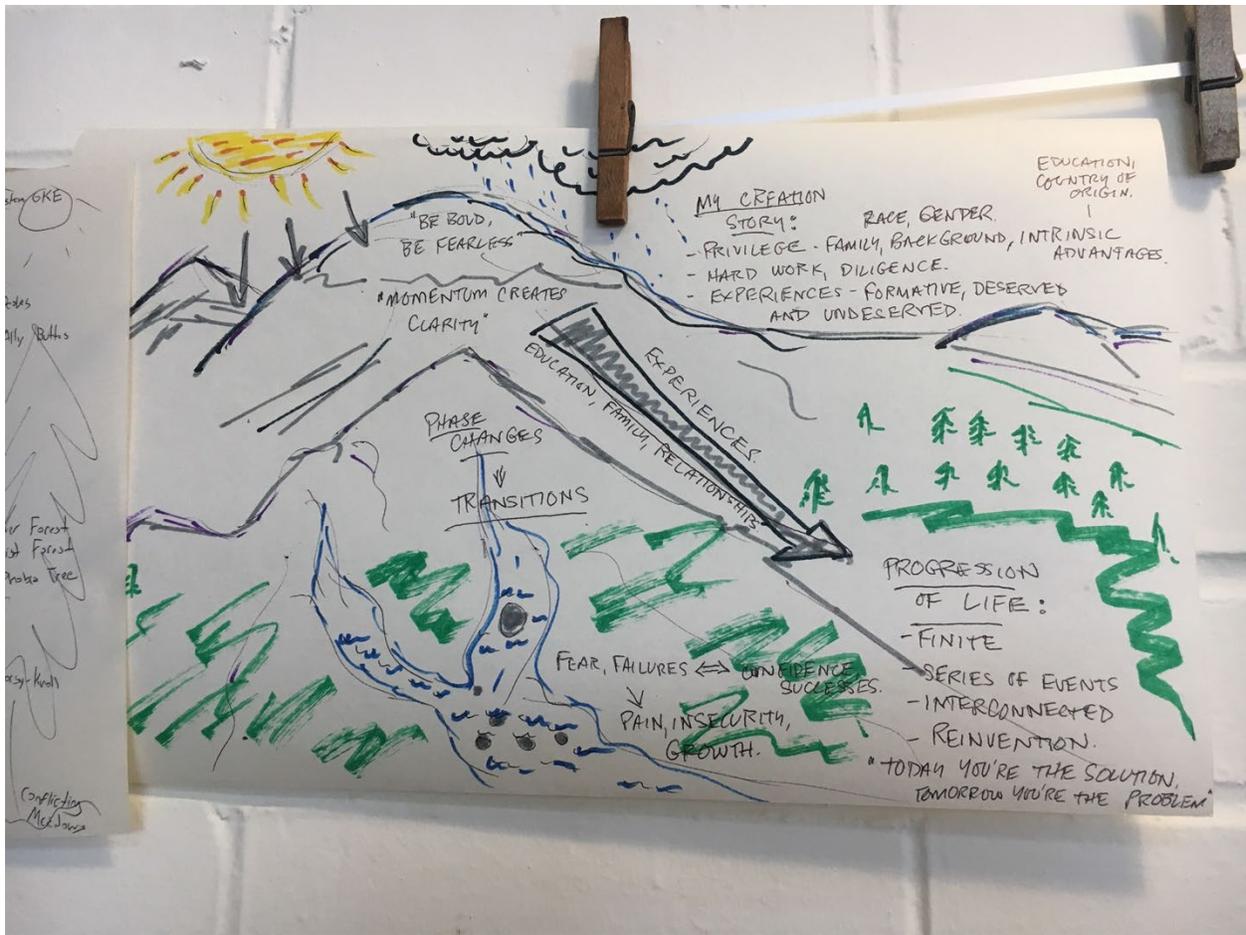
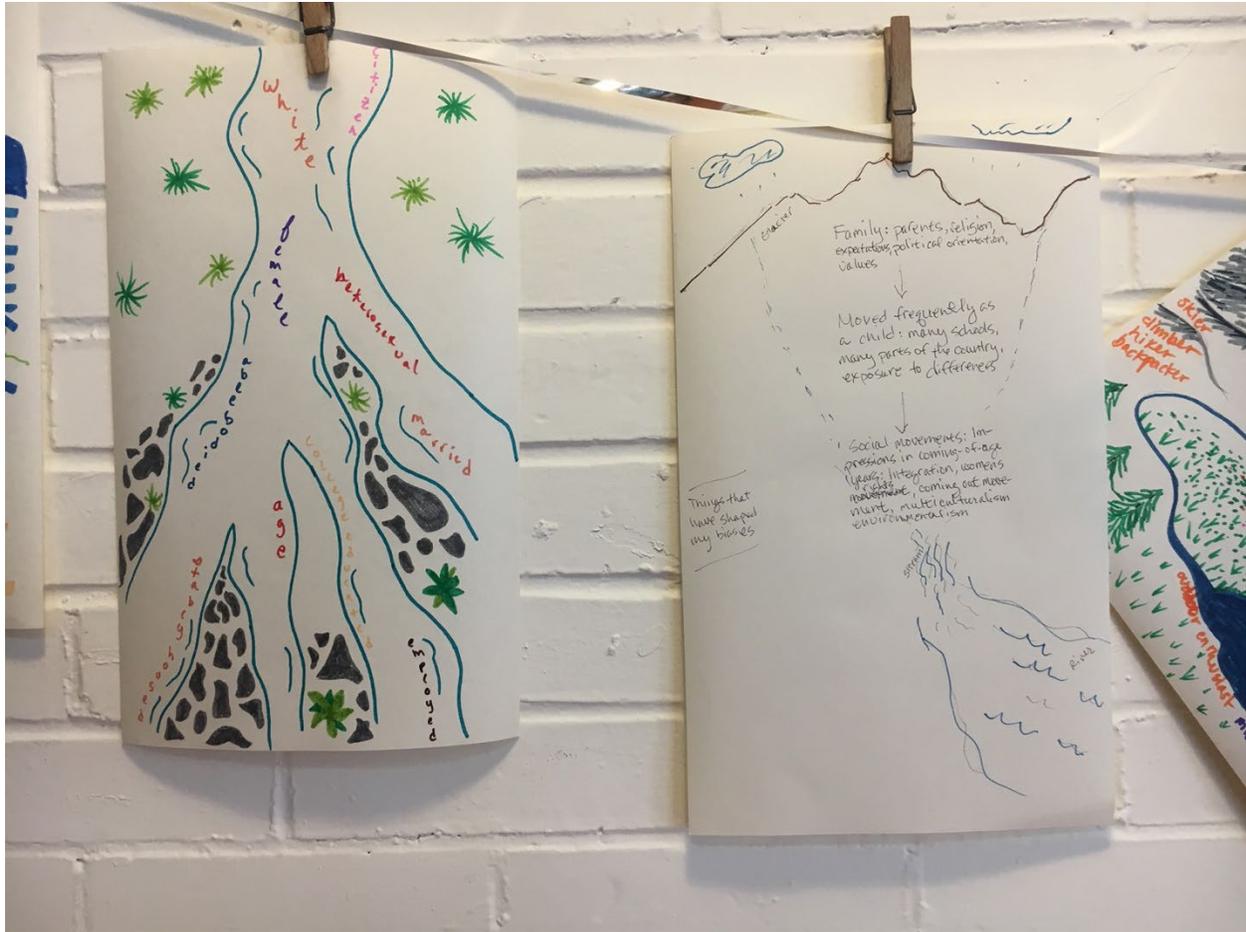


Fig. 2 Note the "Creation Story" framing and the reference to privilege.



**Fig. 3** Display of the drawings from a non-profit conservation group before the silent mural walk



**Fig. 4** Close-up of the students' work displayed for the mural walk. On the drawing on the right, note the reference to the impact of social movements on this student's identity.

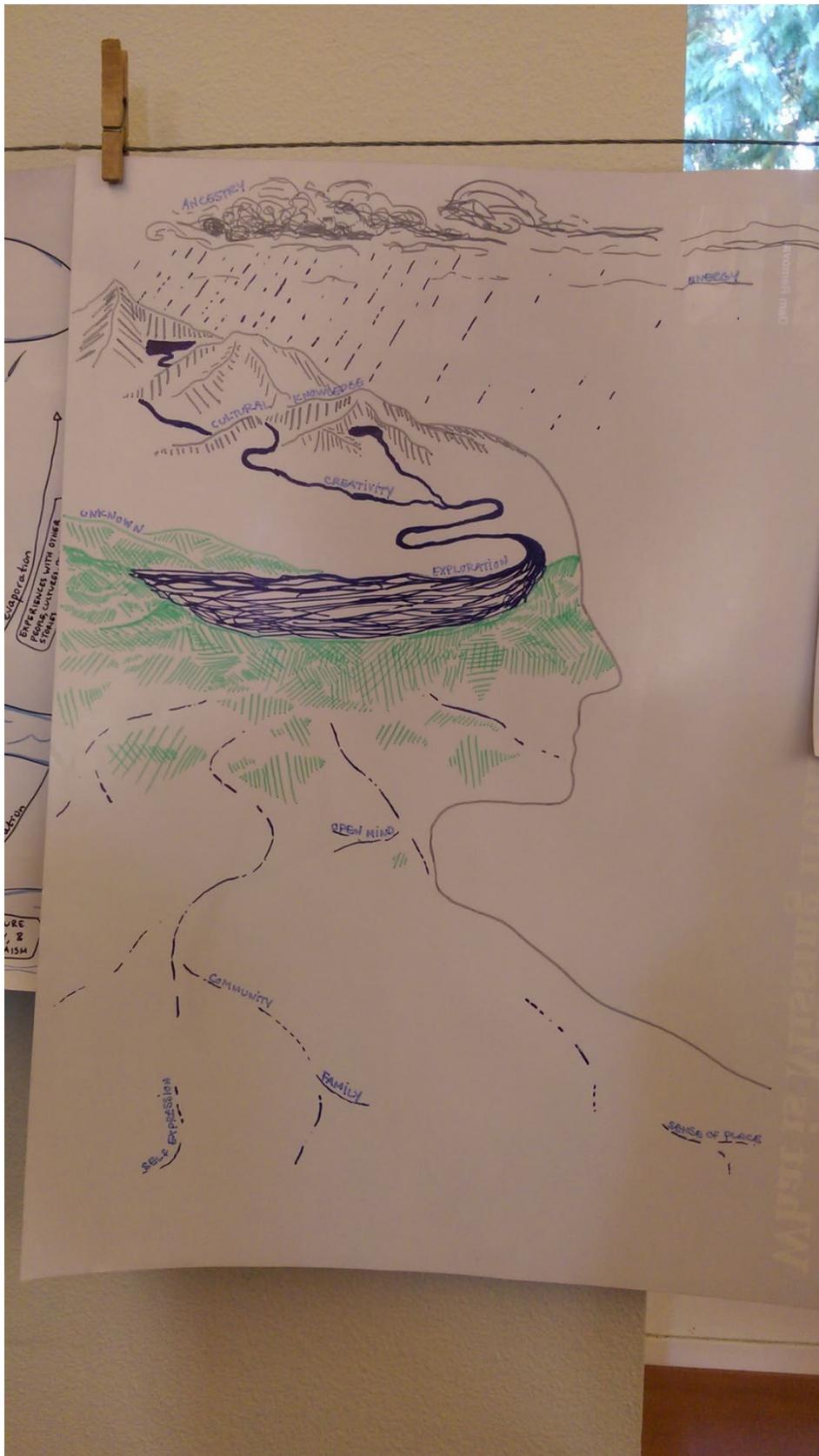
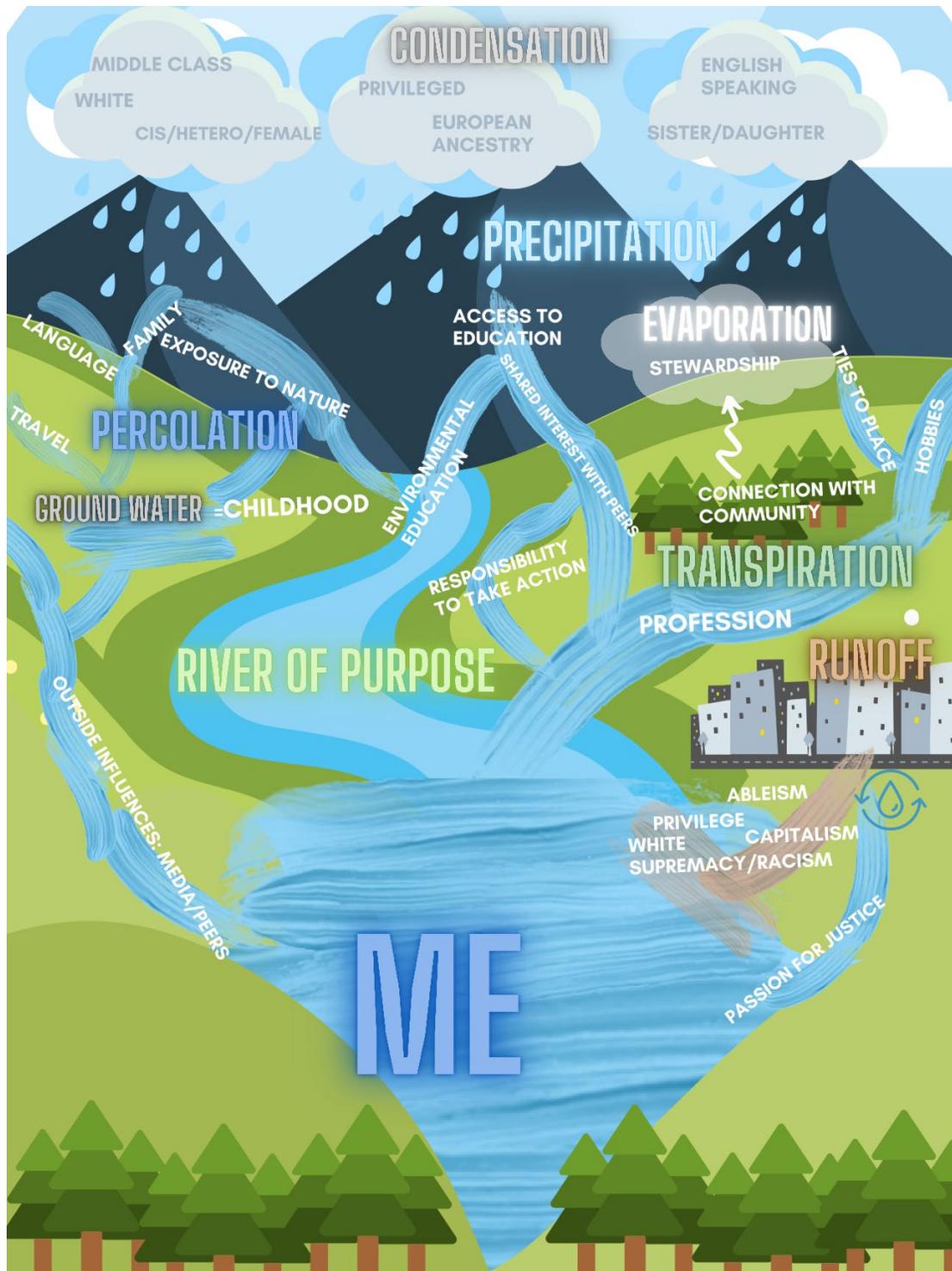


Fig. 5 Example of a Cultural Watershed that places the water cycle in the student's mind-body.



**Fig. 6** This student used a computer app to design her watershed. The template lends a commercial feel to the drawing but is subverted by the notations of systemic ideologies in the lower righthand side of the image.



**Fig. 7** This student's drawing, suggestive of the landscape painters of ancient Japan and China, is an abstract rendition of straightforward directions, reinforcing the idea that the best directions are a guidepost to the creative expression of the student.

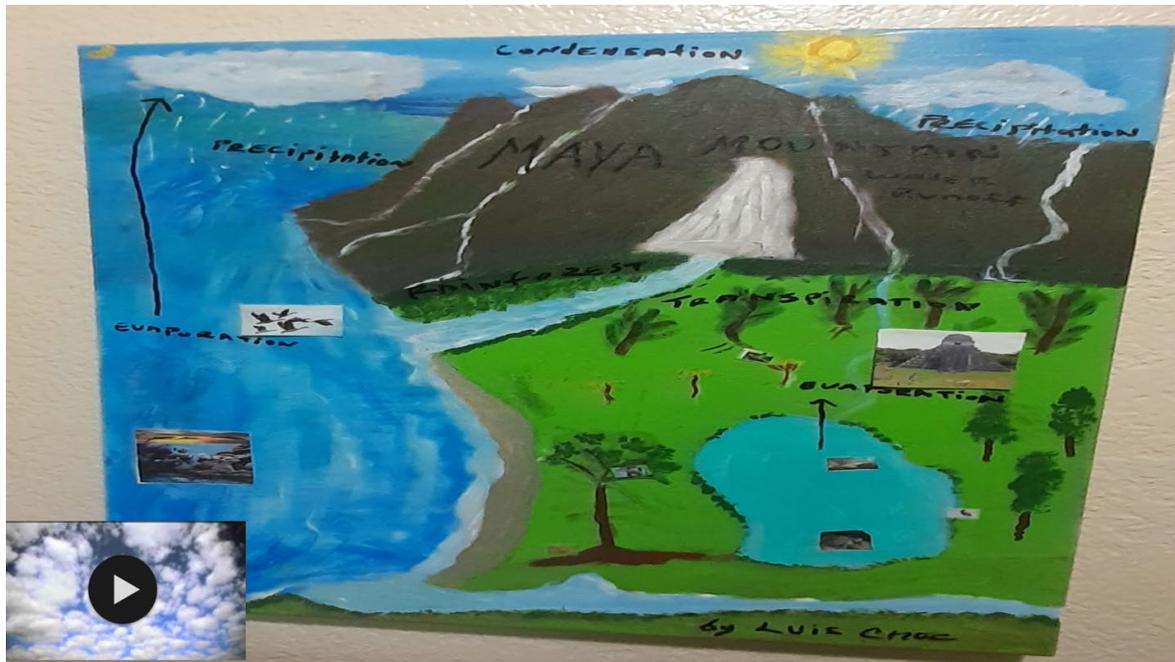
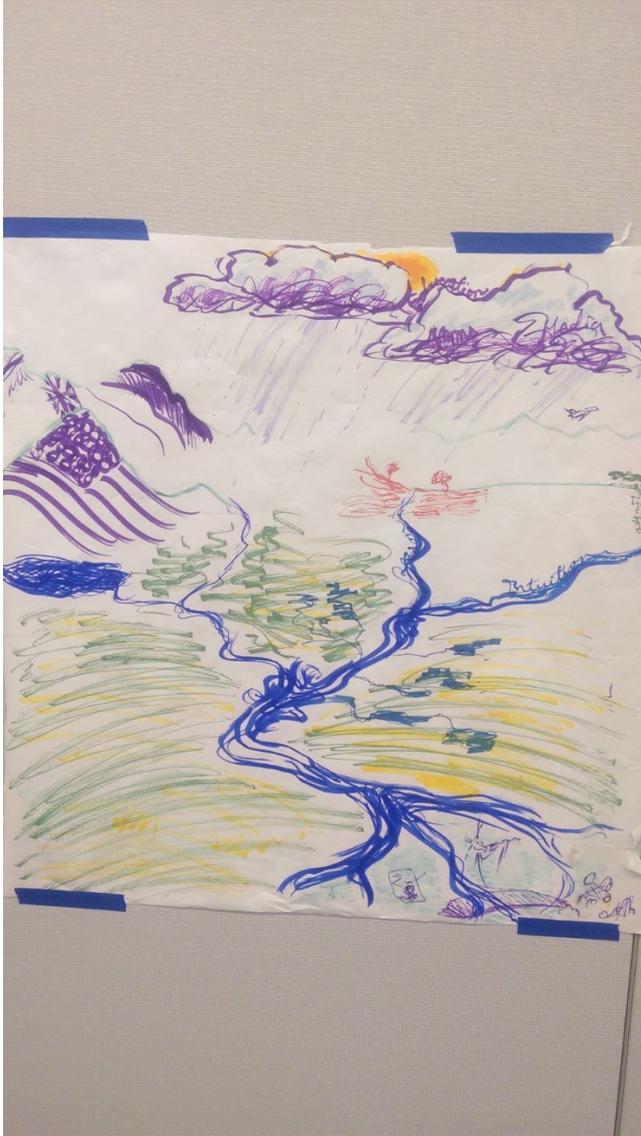


Fig. 8 Example of a blended collage Cultural Watershed

This student from Honduras blended collage with paint and created a short video; in his written narrative he wrote about his felt impact of indigenous perspectives of land and water.



Fig. 9 This native Hawaiian student created natural and cultural icons that surrounded a flower native to the area of her childhood.



**Fig. 10** The American Flag in this student’s mural provides a space to discuss Anzaldua’s notions of the varied layers of identity and their interactions within the individual and socially.

**Personal Analysis**

In this section I will draw out some of the salient aspects of the student murals as they relate to Anzaldua’s conceptualizations of the processes influencing and shaping their identities: The narratives embedded in each student’s mural (Autohistorias-teoria), the possibilities for expansive communication and coalitions across boundaries (Borderlands), and the formation of

new avenues for collaborative social action (Conocimiento). My personal analysis is made possible because I was present for their presentations, facilitated the class discussion, and read student concluding narratives. The layering of non-judgmental observation and conversations on the murals allowed their deeper meanings to emerge.

*Autohistoria-teoria:*

The ecological constructions of the watershed and the water cycle, framed as metaphors for the formation of self-identity, assisted the student to transition from a limited biographical statement to the identification of the dynamic socio-ecological processes at work—not just once, but continually shaping identity. The result is not just “this is who I am” but rather “this is what I am becoming.” Each student mural in the selection above reflects action, movement, and the dynamic flux of a watershed and their personal identities. This aligns well with Anzaldúa’s reflections on the confluences of her own intersectional identities. (Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro 66-67). Two students (figures 1 and 5) made a line drawing of their facial profiles into the drawing, integrating or merging their physical identities with the landscape itself. In figure 1, I had never really seen that picture of a face until someone with fresher eyes pointed it out to me. I have not been able to unsee it since.

*Borderlands:*

The students in each cohort in the program over the years were racially diverse, with varied gendered identities, and varied class backgrounds. In the individual presentations and the whole group discussions, I observed great interest from the students in one another’s stories and further, because of the often-difficult experiences they shared, an active empathy for one another’s identity journeys. One shared aspect resulting from the dialogue was the common experience of

oppression on their self-identities as well as their strategies of resistance as individuals pressed on to become their more authentic selves. Note in the murals the frequent references to forms of oppression and in one mural, the impact of social movements in their identity formation. All of these references were material for deep and robust discussion in the classes. I observed the vulnerable moments of some students (including occasional tears) revealing how racism or sexism impacted them and shaped their identities and their strategies of mitigation, avoidance, or resistance. I also observed how students not impacted by those specific oppressions were nonetheless able to see how those oppressions were constructed and how they worked across social and cultural boundaries to restrict their own identity and social action. The class discussion on that point created space to layer in resources that spoke to diversity, equity, and inclusion while introducing analytical tools helpful in sorting out and understanding the impact of socio-cultural forces shaping identity.

*Conocimiento:*

Through the process of reflection, presentation, dialogue, the activation of empathy and the insights of commonality of experience, I observed closer relationships in the student cohort that were reflected in mutual support in the class assignments and practicum. Joint presentations by students reflected an ease of collaboration and strengthened purpose. I suggest that where barriers to consider or take action together across boundaries were reduced, new solidarities were formed and activated, and new ways of working together emerged.

As the semester progressed, other course readings and discussions fueled and extended the *conocimiento* process giving us opportunity to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the cultural watershed work. For example, Lee Anne Bell's "Story Telling Project Model" in *Storytelling for Social Justice* gave us another framework for analyzing our stories embedded in

the watershed murals. We found Toni Morrison's *The Site of Memory* quite consistent with Anzaldúa's work on creative process, and it helped us focus on the role of imagination in our narrative work. Another useful work we read early and wrote about in the course was Audre Lorde's *The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* which provided perspectives on power and personal agency. Because each cohort was different in student demographic, and as the course evolved over the years, we didn't always read the same works each time. We did, however, use whatever we read to further glean understanding from the cultural watershed work and Anzaldúa's framework.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

"...all water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was." Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory" (Morrison 99)

The cultural watershed activity is a discovery process guided, in this case, by Anzaldúa's theoretical formulations and supported by other critical thinkers read for the course. The activity gives educators the ability to consider topics, typically seen as separate, relationally. The creation of the murals by students and the subsequent presentations, discussions, and reflection opened new insights on the societal factors influencing their identities, while bringing into view the impact ecological forms and processes have on their sense of self. Thus, seeing environment and identity in relation to one another, rather than siloed, to be considered separately, and not fundamentally connected. Such is a small step in transforming or healing our relationship with the natural world. The critical lens guiding the discussions of each student's work likewise revealed the hidden interconnections below the surface of our everyday and purposeful activities with others. These vital and energetic relationalities are subverted by social forms—

oppressions—which when critically evaluated are seen for what they are: constructions that can be undermined, opening the way for new solidarities and realms of social action. Borderlands can be crossed. autohistorias-teorias can be inscribed, conocimiento can be engaged to fuel transformation.

In thinking of the kinds of changes I envision as a result of unsettling environmental studies, I think of a field that aims to transform the student's and society's fundamental sense of relationship and identity with the natural world and other human beings. Environmental Studies programs need to challenge the racial, gender and other regimes that reproduce environmental professions and movements with those exclusions, to create those transformations. Otherwise, those Borderlands appear static and are not engaged or crossed. The exclusive “objectivity” of the sciences can make it difficult to understand or feel in a bodily way, the possibility and quality of a transformed relationship with nature and the implications for human relationships.

Programs that engage and cross those Borderlands, that invite the subjectivities of students would be those that ripple out from the personal, social and cultural experiences of students in concentric circles permeating social and cultural ecosystems at deep transformative levels.

Multicultural frameworks and approaches to environmental education and environmental studies broadly work on those deeper cultural levels by inviting and honoring the histories, knowledges, cultures, and aspirations of students into the curriculum, pedagogies, faculties, and settings of higher education.

With an exercise such as the cultural watershed, enacted with adequate time and care, it's possible to cultivate a sense of the socially constructed self in the context of the rock, soil, water and air of an ecological place. Metaphor and memory, enacted with imagination, bring us to the places of personal and societal transformation that Anzaldúa pointed to. We should make haste.

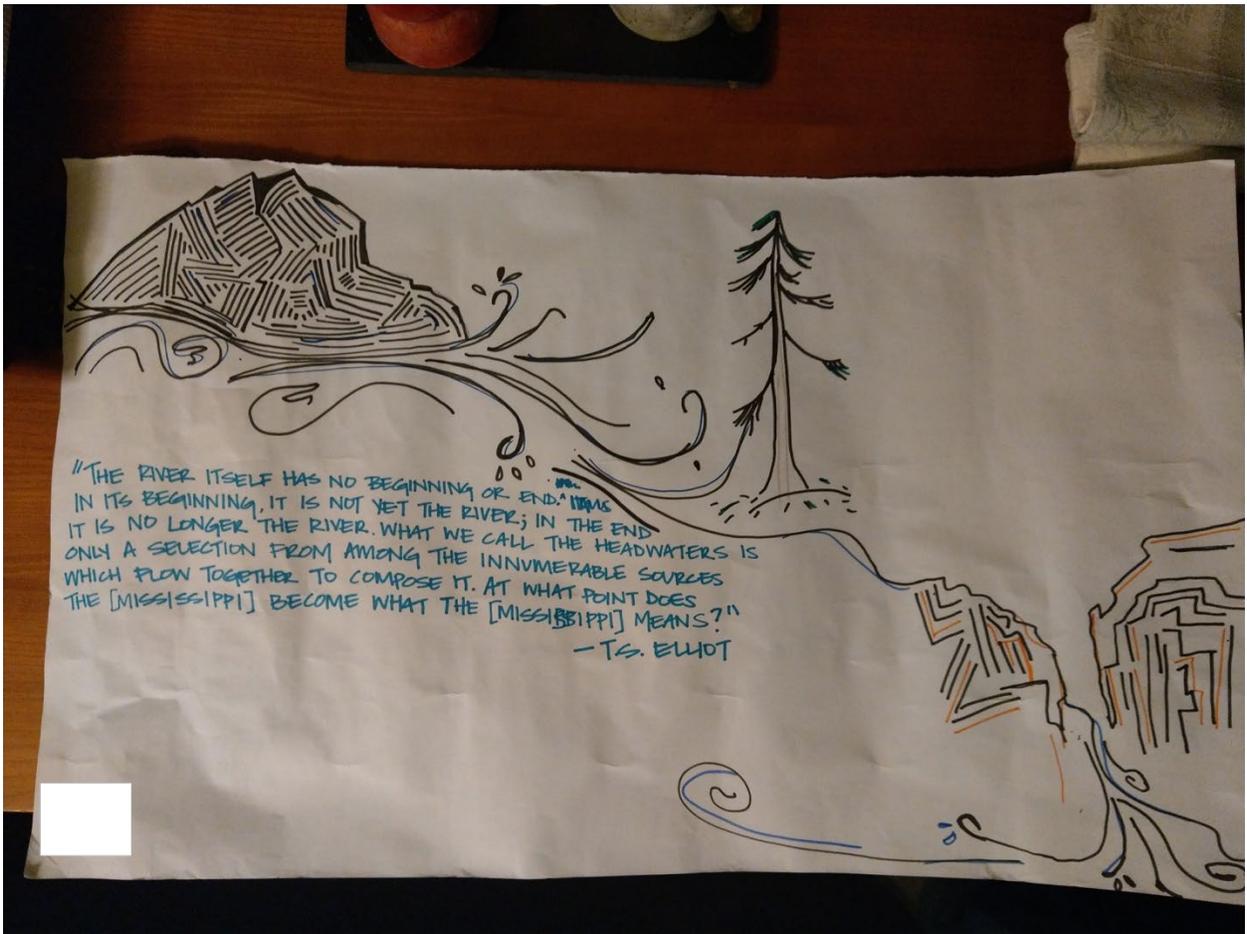


Fig.12

**Running-Grass** directs the work of Three Circles Center, a consultancy that introduces, encourages, and cultivates multicultural perspectives and values in environmental and outdoor education, recreation, and interpretation. [www.threecircles.org](http://www.threecircles.org) He teaches and collaborates with universities, school districts, nonprofit organizations and government agencies internationally.

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