

## Communities and the Poetic Imaginary: A Folklore Essay on the *Poetry of the Wild* Project

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Poetry of the Wild is an ongoing artistic and literary project that according to originator Ana Flores' conception, invites the public "out for a walk" to freshly experience their world through word, sound, and image. Inspired by birdhouse design, these unique configurations of "poetry boxes", combining art and poetry are located in various communal open spaces. Each new project solicits a public response from us all to become catalysts for exploring our environs and questioning how a sense of place informs our consciousness. A folkloristic perspective shapes this discussion about the many variations of this collaborative and public project of poetry boxes, installed on trails, in parks, along rivers, and in library stacks over the past ten years. The primary concerns of folklore interpretation such as tradition, identity, cultural creativity, performance, and narrative analysis, are just a few of the dynamics that can be teased out from investigating a project with such interesting cultural parameters. In this context, cultural sustainability and poetic sensibility deepen our understanding of sense of place, environmental aesthetics, shrine markers, and the scope of individual and communal creative action.

*Keywords:* poetry, art, aesthetics, folklore, shrines, sense of place

... Poetry of the Wild gave me a refreshing perspective on how poetry and art can come together without boundaries. The poetry boxes are really stuff of museums yet this project turned that idea upside down and brought the art to the outdoors where the people were.

—José Gonzales (Poet)  
(27 June 2013)

The thing I really like about Poetry of the Wild is that it is really inclusive. Not exclusive. It invites everybody to participate. It is not a project making art to be judged and held up to the world. It is art for poetry. For life.

—Tia Ballantine (Painter and Poet)  
(24 March 2015)

### Introduction: Origins of Poetry of the Wild

Over a decade ago in 2003, activist, artist, and poet, Ana Flores, conceived Poetry of the Wild (POW) when she was an artist-in-residence at the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed in Rhode Island. Flores' art making often defies specific or conventional categorization. She is usually regarded as an environmental artist, activist, and masterful collaborator. POW is an ongoing artistic and literary project that according to Ana Flores' original conception invites the public "out for a walk" to freshly experience their world through word, sound, and image. Inspired by prototypical birdhouse designs, these unique configurations of "poetry boxes,"

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combining art and poetry are located in communal open spaces. Each new installation solicits a public response from us all to become catalysts for exploring our environs and questioning how a sense of place informs our consciousness. Akin to a treasure hunt, hikers and walkers encounter poetry boxes in unexpected places. The presence of poetry boxes in the landscape fosters a kind of intentionality—a purpose—to walking. In essence, the boxes sited within a particular locale materialize a way for us to experience the poetic and aesthetic dynamics of a certain place, which is temporarily enlivened and transformed by the results of creative action.

Many variations of this collaborative public poetry and art project have occurred over the last ten years or more. At the heart of each iteration of the project are the poetry boxes (manifest as literary bird houses) installed on trails, in parks, along rivers as well as “shelved” in bookstores and library stacks (e.g., one box was installed in the library stacks under its Dewey Decimal address: English poetry 811). In terms of construction, one of the rules for creating boxes is that they must be composed of recycled material. On the one hand, using found objects poses a challenge to participants, and basically requires greater ingenuity and creativity than if the box were made from freshly manufactured new materials. On the other hand, collaborators on a single box or sculpture placed in public space are cautious about including objects, which are personally dear to them because they fear theft or vandalism. According to artist and poet, Tia Ballantine,

You have to say “it’s okay for others to engage with it.” That’s the whole purpose of art for them to become engaged. And if it means the piece disappears, you don’t get upset about that, you know. That’s a part of the engagement. (Ballantine, 24 March 2015)

Nevertheless, the overall impression of *Poetry in the Wild* as a whole is that within the arena of public display and collective action, cultural sustainability in the guise of artistic recycling along with poetic sensibility deepen our understanding of sense of place, environmental aesthetics, the power of shrine markers, and the breadth of individual and communal creative and performative action (see Figure 1). These are all powerful folkloristic tropes. The next section addresses communal traditions and how they relate to the concept and enactment of POW.

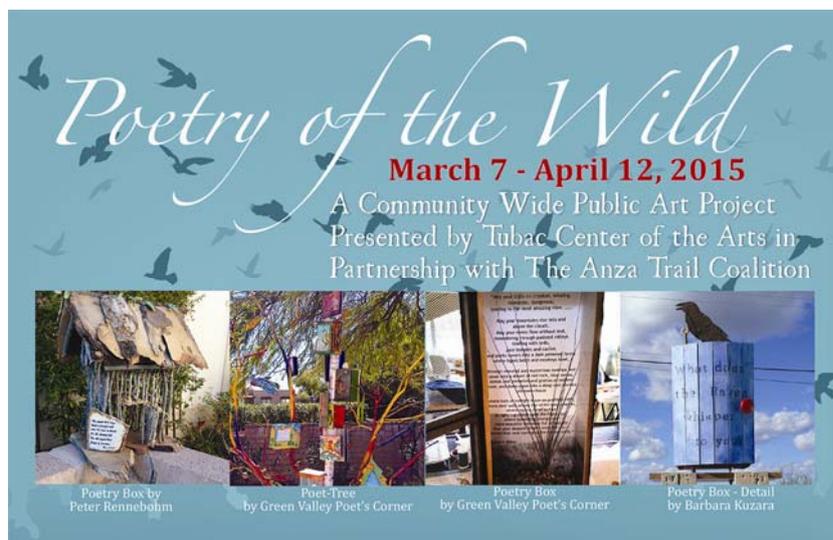


Figure 1. Poetry of the Wild postcard announcing Tubac, Arizona events, March 2015.

### **Folklore and Poetry of the Wild**

This essay draws its inspiration and vitality from the field of folklore, in particular, the work of Victor Turner with his interest in ritual, cultural performance, and *communitas* (genuine mutuality among a group). Performance studies also offer a mode for analyzing cultural performance, which melds the routine and the extraordinary. An appraisal of Poetry of the Wild through the application of the aesthetics of experience adds a particular *color* and depth in terms of sensory awareness, affect (feelings), style, and meaning. Aesthetics of experience is a field of inquiry associated with the anthropology of experience. This particular orientation allows us to attend to local or indigenous meanings of various cultural and aesthetic expressions. The advantage of this approach is that the fundamental aspects of analysis are created by the people we study or with whom we collaborate rather than solely through the perspective of the observer-outsider, i.e., the visiting anthropologist or folklorist (Bruner, 1986, p. 9). Thus, a critique of POW based on an emic (internal) view arises organically from interactions between individual participants within communities associated with the project and the outsider scholar-writer.

The concept behind Poetry of the Wild, graphically illustrates the essence of one of the meanings of folklore and its application as summed up years ago by folklorist Dan Ben-Amos as “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos, 1971, p. 13). The human mosaic of Poetry in the Wild is composed of “small groups” interacting on a variety of social, environmental, and aesthetic levels. This lends itself to a fertile analysis of intersections both in terms of group dynamics but also relevant to ecological factors, political elements, collaborations, community partnerships, and creative responses overall. The primary concerns of folklore interpretation such as tradition, authenticity, identity (individual, group, and community), cultural creativity, performance, and narrative analysis, are just a few of the dynamics that can be teased from investigating a project with such rich and interesting cultural parameters as Poetry of the Wild. Taking our cues from recent scholarship on the *folkloresque* (composite folkloristic elements aligned with “popular culture’s perception and performance of folklore”), we are less interested in an absolute definition of authenticity. Rather our concern lies with the term’s perception and application in a vernacular context such as POW (Foster, 2016, pp. 5, 12).

Not only does this essay examine relationships among individual and collective creative impulses, but also interrogates the perceived communal ethos, environmental politics, and poetics vis-à-vis a folkloristic interpretation of how these different spheres of action and imagination are conceptualized on all levels of participation and either corroborated or rejected. Poetry of the Wild is pluralistic with multiple strata composed of expressive action, reflection, and interpretation. To do justice to this project, this essay encompasses a combined descriptive analysis of “sense of place”, embodiment, and performance. In addition with reference to material culture, it offers an interpretation of some poetry boxes as shrine markers in their physical and metaphoric function as indicators of ceremonial or sacred space.

### **Walking and Encountering**

David Madasci, physicist and artist as well as POW participant, speaking of the installation of boxes at Avery Point on the University of Connecticut Groton campus, believes that the presence of the boxes at that site on the edge of Long Island Sound “refocuses your being here, being in this environment. Refocusing happens with each pause—each stop. That is the function of this group of boxes. [They] keep the initial impetus for walking alive” (Madasci, 2013). Thus poetry boxes become the focal point of discovery and destination. Tia

Ballantine, who organized the Green Valley Poets' Corner installation, POET-TREE for Flores' 2015 Poetry of the Wild in Tubac, Arizona, also feels that the position of boxes is important whether they are located in an urban or wild setting. "Placement depends on looking for the right spots ... determines the positioning to keep people going—not too far and not too close together" (Ballantine, 2015). Thus, the rhythm of walking and stopping aligns with the rhythm of the spacing and placement of the poetry boxes within the landscape (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Tia Ballantine, poetry box along the Anza Trail near the Tumacacori Mission, Tubac, Arizona, 2015.

In the way of exploration, the public becomes engaged through discovery, by reading the poems in the boxes, experiencing the locations, and writing a poem or a response in a journal or notebook kept inside each box. For the length of each project, poetry "stewards" collect these public writings weekly. Some communities such as Colorado Springs collated the poems, and published these collections in small chapbooks. Every Poetry of the Wild project has an official opening event or gathering where spectators (poets, artists, audience) process from box to box and experience artists and poets talking about their collaboration as well as listen to the recitation of poems. As if to underscore philosopher Merleau-Ponty's understanding that the material world is endlessly relational and ongoing, participants and performers not only relate to each other, they relate to the design of the boxes and the meaning of poetry with an embodied sense of the aesthetic and affective environment, the sights, smells, texture, and sounds surrounding them (Macfarlane, 2015, p. 74).

### Participation

Poetry of the Wild is a radical project about aesthetic democracy or the democratization of art and poetry. For more than a decade, it has involved poets, poet laureates, students, interested citizen-artists, professional artists, librarians, actors, teachers, professors, corporate executives, and retired professionals, etc. According to non-profit administrator, Lori Urso, "This project is ageless. It is interesting and inspiring to young people as much as it is to a ninety year old. It could work anywhere, any way with any people" (Urso, 2013). Different locations include areas in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Colorado, Missouri, England, and, recently, Arizona's borderlands. Community partners range from public libraries, galleries, art centers, universities, environmental

groups, and city councils. The universal appeal of the boxes lies in their unpretentious creativity and intimacy as well as in their public accessibility.

Ana Flores writes, “Walking is the way I get to know a place. The Poetry of the Wild project has given me the opportunity to discover new terrains and communities” (Flores, personal communication, 10 September 2015). Her attitude toward respecting a sense of place in the placement of boxes also acknowledges that an encounter with each box offers individuals time for solitude and contemplation. Boxes become private repositories in the wild of personal responses to nature and the environment. Diane Barcelo, an artist and veteran of two POW projects, wonders about the dynamic of curiosity and interaction with regard to spectators and objects? How do the boxes affect people out in the wild as they discover them? She wants to savor the experience of the moment imagining strangers taking the risk of touching the artwork and the box, opening the door, reading the poem, and, possibly writing a poem or statement in response. At that moment in time there is no one else. “The box is made for them!” (Barcelo, 2013). Randall Paterson, sculptor and creator of a box, which was actually a tree poised on the edge of Avery Point, echoes Barcelo’s thoughts when he describes the special relationship between person and art object, “the viewer is one-on-one with the object in the moment” (Paterson, 2013).

Poetry of the Wild not only inspires and elicits individual and communal creative expressiveness, but also gives people agency. Artists, poets, and spectators are the agents that make things happen. This is a fundamental premise of the anthropology of experience—that people are active agents, who construct their own world. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff expressed this as “we are the authors of ourselves” (Bruner, 1986, p. 12). Everything about Poetry of the Wild is predicated on the transitory nature of emergent social connections where creativity, artistic and cultural ties, collaboration, and continuity simultaneously ebb and flow. This project is concretely manifest within a certain time frame and setting. When all is over, it becomes a fleeting afterimage upon the landscape and in people’s memories.

### **Senses of Place**

Recalling David Madacsi’s earlier statement about knowing a place through walking and being attentive to the moment of one’s sensuous presence in the world, a sense of place according to Edward Casey is “the most fundamental form of embodied experience” (Feld & Basso, 1996, p. 9). In the instance of the poetry boxes, consciousness deepens as the observer moves from looking and reading to dialogic interaction with the boxes by commenting in the notebook kept within each box or composing or recording a poem in response. To expand Casey’s thoughts, not only is the experience of a particular site a “powerful fusion of self, [place] and time,” but it is also enhanced by an aesthetic and creative engagement unique to experiencing Poetry of the Wild (Feld & Basso, 1996, p. 9).

Poetry of the Wild with its kinetic elements (walking and stopping) as well as the solitary contemplative components (gazing and pondering) could be considered in light of architect James Rojas’s concept of the “enacted environment” (Hayden, 1997, p. 35). In this case the installation of poetry boxes in proximity to each other or at least within a specific vicinity, is an ephemeral version of “enacted environment”. The constellation of boxes is a temporary intrusion on the natural or urban landscape but its presence coupled with the performative actions of people interacting with the boxes creates an emergent experiential stage space where people, place, and performance meld into an active environment in flux.

At other times clusters of poetry boxes are material markers of deeper geological and *emotional* strata existing in the landscape similar to a palimpsest with its layers of overwritten history and erasure. In southern Arizona, the poetry boxes were positioned along the Anza Trail where Juan Bautista de Anza, an eighteenth century Spanish explorer and soldier, traveled when he arrived in that region more than two hundred years ago. The trail borders the banks of the Santa Cruz River, which is an artery of connection (and disconnection) for centuries of migrants moving between Mexico and the United States. These journeys have always been arduous and dangerous. Last spring Tia Ballantine and I were wandering around a cluster of boxes near the Anza trail. Tia had stopped to repair her box when a group of hikers walked by admiring the various patterns of light and shadow on the path. Tia's response was, "I think it's a place of shadows because of its history". She was alluding to the past and present tragedies experienced by migrants crossing into the United States along this contested border. The Arizona installation of Poetry of the Wild could possibly be considered the most political of all because of the themes of illegal migration, borderlands, and environmental water issues, which weave in-and-out of many of the poems and artwork of the boxes.

In addition to a comprehensive sense of place, many aspects of Poetry of the Wild are wonderfully sensory. All the senses are engaged. The aesthetic sense admires the boxes as art objects during a POW event. The aural sense is ascendant when listening to poetry recited in between murmurs of conversation as the crowd walks from site to site. Through this sonic awareness, poetry boxes become intensified receptors of ambient sound where one hears planes overhead, birdsongs, sounds of tractors in the distance, dry leaves scraping underfoot and foot steps amplified on the sidewalk. Simultaneously, one is also aware of the heat, the changes in light, smells, the tactility of a box's surface decoration or the aftertaste of a recent treat lingering under the tongue. All these sensations constitute embodied experience where the "body incarnates our subjectivity" (the full sense of being), and trigger a complex sensory perception, which underlies "our understanding of the (phenomenological) world as well as our reception of it" (Merleau-Ponty, as cited in Macfarlane, 2015, p. 73).

One box stands out as exemplary of a work dominated by smell (see Figure 3). For the Arizona Anza Trail installation, Ana Flores collaborated on a box with Ed Wood, an active supporter of POW and participant in its many variations throughout the years. Ed Wood was responsible for interesting Ana in bringing the project to Tubac, Arizona. Their box was situated on the banks of the Santa Cruz River along a trail frequented by migrants on their way to Tucson—usually with only their possessions on their back. When the door to their box is closed, a painting is visible of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe appearing in the desert similar in style and intent to an *ex-voto* offering commonly seen on mission walls in this area. When the box is opened there is a clear view through it to the river. Hanging from the support post is a backpack, which Ed found nearby—its presence poignantly representing the abandoned "life support system" of an illegal migrant. Ed also found a shirt along the trail and put it in the box. Later Ana told him that when she opened their box it really smelled. Ed went to check and was surprised by the intensity of the odor. However, when he looked into the box to investigate further, he found a javelina jawbone from a small wild native pig. Ed did not discard the jawbone, but placed it outside the box near the pedestal so it could remain as part of the piece. A few weeks later when I viewed the box, the jawbone was gone. Throughout the history of Poetry of the Wild there have been other instances of the impulse of a passer-by to add some kind of found object to the already constructed composition. This then becomes another form of engagement between spectator and artwork. Poetry of the Wild seems to especially invite this kind of invisible participation, and assimilates such gestures as part of its *raison d'être*.



Figure 3. Ana Flores and Ed Wood. Poetry box installed on the banks of the Santa Cruz River near Tubac, Arizona, 2015.



Figure 4. Ana Flores. Box in Audubon Society Refuge, Smithfield, Rhode Island, poem by Robert Penn Warren. One of the first installations of Poetry of the Wild, 2003.

As noted, the setting for an installation is especially important. The artwork and the choice of poems reflect a direct sensitivity to place. The POET-TREE created by Tia Ballantine in conjunction with members of the Green Valley Poets' Corner was an artistic and poetic assemblage of diverse found objects and multiple voices. One poem among many was a *haiku* by Richard Chamberlain, which particularly encapsulates the aridity and water shortage of this southwestern desert area:

A river with no water  
flows through the desert  
quenching the mind.

Standing in contrast to poetic images inspired by a waterless desert is one of the first poetry boxes created by Ana Flores installed in the wetlands of the Audubon Society Refuge, Smithfield, Rhode Island in 2003 (see Figure 4). Her box is a tribute to her father-in-law, Robert Penn Warren, and uses one of his poems, *Love and Knowledge*.

#### Love and Knowledge

Their footless dance  
 Is of the beautiful liability of their nature.  
 Their eyes are round, boldly convex, bright as a jewel.  
 And merciless. They do not know  
 Compassion, and if they did,

We should not be worthy of it. They fly  
 In air that glitters like fluent crystal  
 And is hard as perfectly transparent iron, they cleave it  
 With no effort. They cry  
 In a tongue multitudinous, often like music.

He slew them. At surprising distances, with his gun.  
 Over a body held in his hands, his head was bowed low  
 But not in grief.

He put them where they are, and where we see them:  
 In our imagination.

What is love?

One name for it is knowledge.

The watery ambience of the Audubon Society bird refuge is the opposite of the arid Arizona desert environment. One is suffused with water while the other is clear and dry. Here by this small pond in Rhode Island, the array of senses is deep and rich with their complement of touch (moist air against one's skin and the texture of leaves and scratchy branches), sight (the reflection of light upon water and the myriad hues of green), smell (a place of redolent odors), and the aural sensation of clamorous bird song. What we hear and experience is a range of audible sound in contradistinction to the silenced image in the poem, *Love and Knowledge*, symbolizing the consequences of the scientific pursuit of knowledge without regard for the soul of a songbird or a raptor.

#### Community

When a Poetry of the Wild group gathers together to view boxes and listen to poetry, there is an instantaneous feeling of mutuality and camaraderie. On a hot summer day in 2013 at a gathering in Mystic, Connecticut, the POW group transformed itself into a temporary community by association, distinct from the hordes of tourists streaming through the streets seeking ice cream or beer. All afternoon the poetry group moved against the flow of tourists and pleasure-seekers as it followed various poets and artists to different locations of enchanted poetry boxes. These were placed around the town and along its outskirts. The tangible aspects of poetry boxes are the visual elements, the poetic words, and the materiality whereas the intangible

aspects are spontaneous community formation with individuals lauding each other's creative efforts and pleased to be in each other's company. In other words, these moments of shared communion represent the essence of Victor Turner's notion of *communitas*. His interpretation of the experience of *communitas* encompasses quality and deep mutuality, which is distinguished by what anthropologist James Fernandez refers to as the "undifferentiated experience of communion, [and] openness to the other that recognizes an essential human bond" (Fernandez, 1986, p. 179). Essentially, "*communitas* is an experience spontaneous and elementally existential" (Fernandez, 1986, p. 179). Poetry of the Wild gatherings offer some intense moments of solidarity when we feel that we are not alone within an impervious group of strangers.

Every iteration of a different POW community emerges and coalesces around aesthetic expressiveness and performative action where the culture in common is re-experienced, re-created, reconstructed, and reshaped according to circumstance. Tia Ballantine mobilized her poetry group around aspects of their shared social-cultural life. The POET-TREE collaboration generated creative and symbolic objects and texts that celebrated the diversity of the group as well as the creative identity of each participant. This "box" was literally a tree with multiple box-like elements hanging from its branches. Tia's vision for the tree matched the ecumenical and universal attitude behind collaboration. "The whole idea was to have fun! I wanted the tree to be open with open arms" (Ballantine, 2015). Amidst the plethora of crafted and found objects adorning the tree was a souvenir with an ancient Maya image from Guatemala copied on it. Within this context, I interpreted this object to symbolize a mestizo heritage as a tribute to the Latino migrants travelling through these borders in search of work. Tia agreed, but went on to say,

Yes, and also a tribute to the fact that art and poetry have traveled through the ages and continue to do so. All these ideas—it's not just about these fourteen poets on the tree, it's also about *deep history*. We're allowing ourselves to connect into that. That was the whole point. (Ballantine, 2015)

When POW poetry recitations are viewed and understood as occurring within performance frames, it further emphasizes the notion of a temporary sense of community immersed in the richness of a specific moment in time and space. The spaces where performance and communion intersect can be seen as "spaces of sociality," which applies anthropologist Michael Jackson's interpretation of intersections of voluntary social action together with prescribed moral behavior to the more ludic or playful sites of poetry performance and audience participation associated with POW.

Poetry of the Wild's performative events are subject to the "same human impulse to intensify time and space within the community and to reveal mysteries while being engaged in revels" (Abrahams, 1987, p. 177). Folklorist Roger Abrahams writes of "revels" while Tia Ballantine applauds the element of playfulness and fun when one encounters the unexpected through the discovery of boxes in the middle of a network of trails or in a copse of trees along a river, "It's really fun! It's really, really fun" (Ballantine, 2015). Highly crafted cultural artifacts like the poetry boxes with their poetic texts encapsulate the deepest values of a community, which are "simultaneously revealed and made mysterious" (Abrahams, 1987, p. 177). The fun and the profound, the traditional and improvisatory are characteristic of the gamut of celebratory events from time immemorial, and accentuate the individual and communal impulses behind Poetry of the Wild's enduring success. Openness and receptivity to the way events progress within a certain space-time framework also condition the mood of the crowd and reinforce the shared sense of community-in-the-moment.

### Performance

Traditionally, performance is sensitive to context whether it is influenced by the wind whipping through one's hair and snatching at spoken words or the physical discomfort and disturbing presence of mosquitoes. During the 2013 anniversary of Poetry of the Wild, young Lily Kane's recitation of her long poem was impressive despite the assaults of clouds of biting mosquitoes (see Figure 5). Folklorists were among the first scholars to discover that by experiencing performances in context—"all tradition is change," a familiar folkloric epithet. Poetry of the Wild readings demonstrate the vitality of recitation as a communicative and reciprocal action—a point in time that links the venerable bardic tradition to the in-the-moment vernacular. These events involve the still moments of listening, registering sounds and silences, and being attuned to the group settling into each experience. In urban contexts, there is an awareness of the crush of a different type of crowd moving in various directions along the periphery of the POW gathering. During a poetry event group participation is also dynamic and perambulatory as people walk from box to box. In an interview cited earlier, Diane Barcelo described her fascination with the *cadence* of walking as a group in motion while heading to the next spot totally immersed in the experience of participation as performance (Barcelo, 2013).



Figure 5. Lily Kane reciting her poem in front of her poetry box, Haley Farm State Park, Connecticut, 2013.

Intensity of the moment enacted through collective performance appears to be one of Poetry of the Wild's dominant themes vis-à-vis poetry events. It suggests that the meaning of performance is created during the very experience of the performance. According to the philosopher, Derrida, "performance itself is constitutive" (cited in Bruner, 1986, p. 11). There is no pre-existing meaning nor is the outcome of performance predetermined. Meaning is emergent in the experience of performance. Poetry readings are both performances of individual artistic expressions and collaborative experiences of performance inclusive of participants and spectators' feelings, thoughts, responses, and actions. The overall trajectory of a performance's lively and active effects is what Victor Turner referred to as "putting experience into circulation" (cited in Bruner, 1986, p. 12). In this way the pleasure is passed on.

Probably one of the most chaotic yet focused poetry readings was performed by Michael Gore on the edge of a bridge in Mystic, Connecticut, during the tenth anniversary celebration of Poetry of the Wild in the summer of 2013. Michael stood by the edge of the bridge amidst scores of tourists flowing along in both directions while his POW audience tried hard to gather within earshot so they could hear his words above the competing sounds of traffic, boat horns, conversations of passers-by, shouts, gusts of wind, and all the din of a crowded port city and popular tourist destination. In this instance, there was the vulnerability of a poet reciting his poetry being buffeted by every physical and sonic obstacle in the vicinity. At the same time the attentive presence of the Poetry of the Wild group temporarily shielded him with their support. By creating a small area of stage space in the middle of disorder, both audience and performer countered that sense of being alone in an indifferent crowd. Under the most challenging circumstances, feelings of mutuality through shared experience temporarily transformed poet/performer and audience bridging all the unease and discomfort inherent in such a situation.

Dual consciousness is another dimension of performance—the awareness of oneself at the same time one is performing a role as an actor or as reciter of poetry. Thus the reader is simultaneously conscious of the act of reading as well as the act of reflecting on that performance. In other words, while we take part in the action, we also privately and internally report or reflect on it. While Michael Gore stood reading his poem at the entrance to the bridge, he was absorbed in the act of reading but also conscious of the vibrant life surging around him. Unlike other readings that day, which either clustered around a tree or were adjacent to a fence bordering a lawn on a quiet street, the vague and indistinct edges of Michael’s performative space were poorly defined and always in flux as streams of people wove in and out of the POW group’s shifting boundaries.

### **Poetics, Aesthetics and Design**

As noted earlier, the boxes are objects of discovery and surprise situated throughout a particular landscape. They are design oriented and publicly accessible in both a physical and conceptual sense. Apart from the scheduled poetry events, poetry boxes were either deliberately sought out by individuals or came as a surprise to hikers and birdwatchers walking through the area. These casual encounters were unscripted and most of the time not witnessed by anyone. An important aspect of the boxes’ appearance is the enjoyment of seeing the results of an aesthetically inspired collaboration between local artists and poets (inclusive of timeless poetic voices from the past). Some artists not only worked with poets, but others chose poems, which they loved but were not necessarily created specifically for the box. In the case of actual collaboration, the process and final result must be meaningful to both collaborators. Poet Laureate, Jose Gonzalez characterizes this melding of verbal and non-verbal genres in these words about the Avery Point installation, “This Poetry of the Wild gave me a refreshing perspective on how poetry and art can come together without boundaries. The poetry boxes are really *stuff* of museums yet this project turned that idea upside down and brought the art to the outdoors where the people were”. Aaron Anstett, a Colorado poet, echoes Jose’s thoughts in these words describing the concept of POW, “... and there’s the lovely idea of the outdoors being a temporary gallery space”.

Both poets liked the ekphrastic aspect of the project. Following our interview Aaron Anstett elaborated on this element in an email message, “As I walked back to our house, I realized I forgot to mention my liking the ekphrastic aspect of the project, the poets having artists create works in response to their poems (and the additional ekphrasis of people seeing the poetry boxes and writing—in some cases drawing—responses)” (Anstett, personal communication, 6 October 2013). Jose Gonzales spoke about how POW projects “made me see poetry in a different light” and also mentioned the effect of ekphrasis combines the notion that art can be

inspired by poetry and that poetry in turn is expanded and enhanced by visualization (Gonzales, 2013). Every round of artistic or poetic exchange consequently reinforces and deepens the aesthetic dialogue between the visual and the verbal. Through the aesthetic effects of inspiration or translation into another mode of creative practice, the artistry of each genre (visual art and poetry) is intensified. Anstett also includes the public in their capacity as commentators and “poets-at-will” within this circle of call and response. Because there are so many opportunities for involvement at the creative and receptive levels of experiencing the boxes, the inclusivity and accessibility of Poetry of the Wild creates a domain of engagement, thus broadening and extending the audience for art and poetry locally.

Folklore and material culture inquiries also focus on modes of human behavior around cultural objects. The privileging of a behavioral approach has long been at the core of Michael Owen Jones’s analysis of folk art. Owen Jones believes it is essential to focus on specific circumstances and to incorporate “principles of psychological, communicative and interactional processes” in the study of material culture (Owen Jones 1993, p. 194). His notion of engaging behavior interacting with objects is certainly transferable to Poetry of the Wild, POW offers the ideal arena for tracking a range of expression catalyzed by process and performance—spontaneous, inquisitive, critically involved, emotionally responsive.

When the 2012 storm hit the east coast, David Madasci’s coastal home was inundated by Hurricane Sandy and sustained extensive damage. In the aftermath during clean up, he kept returning to the notion of “tenuous” referring to life and fate. This became a kind of mantra for David and its meaning transformed into his haiku poem for Poetry of the Wild. It also inspired the name for the “metaphoric” vessel, which he imaginatively associated with his poetry box made from a mooring buoy once attached to a ship (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. David Madasci opening his buoy box “Tenuous”, Avery Point, Connecticut, 2013.

Rising waters churn,  
Tenuous moorings straining ...  
Oblivious Storm

After installing his piece at Avery Point, David Madasci wrote a description of how he came to see that he could use the detritus from the disaster and destruction of Hurricane Sandy as a way to fashion a poetry box and, thus, tell his story visually and through his haiku poem.

I had evacuated my house for the hurricane, and I returned the next day to find the high-water line indicating two-and-a-half feet of flood-water had inundated the entire first floor of my house. During the weeks of cleanup that followed, the word “tenuous” frequently entered my mind as I imagined the state of the house and of moorings in the harbor during the storm and flooding. “TENUOUS” became the title of my haiku as well as the name of the metaphoric vessel I imprinted on the mooring buoy. (Madasci, interview, 27 June 2013)

Madasci’s narrative is reminiscent of the narratives collected from an important Louisiana project led by folklorist Carl Lindahl in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina where survivors interviewed each other and valorized their experiences through the power of telling their stories to compassionate, empathetic people who understood them because they all had these experiences in common (Lindahl, 2012, p. 154). The recovery of Madasci’s mooring buoy from a pile of trash in his yard, and its transformation into an artwork also achieved a similar kind of recognition and valorization of his experience by symbolizing life’s unpredictability and tenuousness within the context of art, poetry, and story.

### Shrines

Shrines are a material and spiritual means of channeling the forces of human will against fate and unpredictability. They are also sites of commemoration and prayer. Susan Schultz’s shell-encrusted box is reminiscent of shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary and placed along Italian shores (see Figure 7). In Schultz’s creation there is a fine line between the sacred memorializing character of her box and allusions to hobbies of shellwork where every available surface is covered with shell mosaics. Shell artifacts are popular souvenirs and comprise an entire genre of domestic decoration targeting tourists and visitors to seaside locales. However, the careful application, artistic patterns, and evocative tactility of the shell collages, distinguish Susan’s poetry box from shell-adorned lamps, mirrors, and end tables commonly associated with the tourist trade. The shape of the box with its peaked roof resembles the classic niche, which housed devotional imagery such as figures of the Virgin and different Catholic saints. The association of sacred practices and the sanctification of space with poetry have ancient roots. Concomitant to ritualizing objects, poetry has traditionally been associated with sacredness, perhaps due to the mysteries of conception and creation resulting from the ancient relationship between poet and muse.



Figure 7. Susan Schultz reading in front of her poetry box at Avery Point, Connecticut, 2013.

Marnie Lacouture, who participated in the first Poetry of the Wild project, sees poetry boxes as a medium through which one communicates with those who have departed. She views them “as memorials where one can leave a message to a beloved loved one, who has died” (Lacouture, 2013). This is another parallel with shrines where people commemorate the dead and light candles or leave offerings in their name.

Shrines can also memorialize the spirits of unknown people, who have passed through certain areas and suffered hardship. In Arizona, the places where many of the boxes were installed were also mute sites of desperation and suffering endured by illegal migrants crossing into the United States. When Ana Flores arrived in Arizona, she was intrigued with the number of *ex-voto* paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which she found hanging in the Presidio Museum at the Tumacacori Mission in Tubac, Arizona.

These paintings were small in scale and often done on tin. The images illustrate a miraculous recovery or rescue and often include a personal thank you to the Virgin or another saint who may have interceded. After seeing these *ex-votos*, I felt it would be a good format for any poetry box design I wanted to create, which addressed the border crossing and related to the [dangerous] journey of the migrants. (Flores, personal communication, 10 September 2015)

Ana Flores and Ed Wood’s box on its pedestal with its abandoned backpack perched on the banks of the Santa Cruz River resembles a traditional shrine on a pilgrimage route—except this particular route with its sad history as a beacon for migrants equates to a tragic pathway—a different kind of “Trail of Tears”. Tia Ballantine commented about the box,

That is just so... It hurts to see that pack. Because you really don’t know what happened to the person. It could be this was where the journey ended. It could be they just couldn’t go any further. [It’s positioned] right there where the guides lead - and the hope of running water. The water is coming and going and supporting life! (Ballantine, interview, 24 March 2015)

Once a poetry box is installed in a public space, its meaning is open to interpretation by anyone stopping by just like any artwork or poem. Sometimes these boxes are momentarily “possessed” or appropriated by viewers. Randall Paterson, sculptor, created a box out of a tree positioned on the bluffs at Avery Point looking over Long Island Sound. Alex Waid, poet, contributed his poem, *Raven Night Love*, to Randall’s “box” (see Figure 8):



Figure 8. A visitor stopping by Randall Paterson’s tree sculpture poetry box with Alex Waid’s poem, Avery Point Connecticut, 2013.

We embraced on the shore  
with no more walls to close us in  
than the sea and the sky.

Randall and Alex relate the story about a sailor who wrote to his wife in the poetry notebook inside Randall's tree box before he went to sea so that she could think of him in this spot after he was gone. Unfortunately, the poetry notebook was stolen and was replaced with one from another poetry box nearby. Before the theft, the poetry box functioned as a living shrine or memorial to a couple's love for each other through the words written by the sailor to his wife inscribed in the poetry notebook.

In addition to the correlation with shrines along pilgrimage routes, Poetry of the Wild shrine/boxes evoke a solitary physical presence like cairns marking the spot as well as marking the way for long distance travelers. Elements of surprise, discovery and curiosity also figure into the experience of unexpectedly encountering shrines in out of the way places, which is similar to finding poetry boxes in unanticipated settings. Folklore has a long history of investigating sacredness, ritual, commemorative action, and the affecting essence of art. The interpretation of poetry boxes as shrines represents the confluence of several folkloristic *leit-motifs* such as sacred space, ritual, sense of place, traditional memorials and markers, acts of commemoration, and the creative expressiveness found in folk art and folklife.

As mentioned earlier, Diane Barcelo and Michael Bradford, speak of the radical nature of Poetry of the Wild. The premise underscoring POW could be the democratization of art and poetry. Like the roots of folklore, this project with its many iterations and modifications over time and space challenges the boundaries of genres, and champion's inclusivity. Above all in the words of Ana Flores, it "invites the public out for a walk".

### Conclusion

The premise of this discussion is to explore the ways in which multiple folkloristic perspectives enrich our understanding of a public art project such as Poetry of the Wild. Several elements of the folklore canon were applied to the overall experience of this communal artistic endeavor. Folkloristic tropes ranged from investigations of tradition and transmission to ritual and performance. These analyses focused on the primacy of process as well as the artistic creation of physical objects, i.e., poetry boxes. Significantly, folkloristic applications highlight the essence of this poetry project by identifying that it is dynamic, centered on process, in flux, and constantly evolving.

The notion of folk groups also enriches the interpretation of collaborative projects. In the context of POW, this concept is most productive when it defines folk groups as people temporarily sharing moments and experiences together in informal settings and gatherings. Within the framework of a constantly changing project such as Poetry of the Wild, these temporary groups are perceived as a vital yet impermanent type of unofficial culture. Thus, over time and space different iterations of POW spawn temporary formations of folk groups, which appear to coalesce and then fade away. Moreover, the transient nature of Poetry of the Wild projects inspires a unique community engagement that is not conditioned by a reusable template. Instead it incites as well as honors the localization of creative responses from each group. Folklore as a discipline promotes inclusivity, which aligns with Tia Ballantine's appraisal of the egalitarian nature of Poetry of the Wild. In her words, "[It] invites everybody to participate and is not exclusive. It is art for poetry. For life." Similar to folklore, Poetry of the Wild inspires communities to seek their roots through a collaborative and creative enterprise, and in so doing, to celebrate their sense of self fashioned from a shared sense of place.

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