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Hollers, Hills, and Buckshot : Anthologies of Appalachia

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Abstract

The works and thesis I present are in the spirit of reclaiming what it means to be a Hillbilly. Within this thesis I examine and demonstrate how decades of stereotypes play a role into how people and environments of Appalachia are devalued for the benefit of extractive industries. Showcasing that these industries are in direct opposition to the traditions of life in the area. Appalachia, being traditionally a land based economy and way of living, presents unique folkways demonstrated with worldviews that correlate life and land treatment. Crafts, folkways, and folk arts of the area highlight these views and history. My work seeks to continue to preserve and use these folkways while integrating scientific curiosity in the form of positioning the natural world and its inhabitants as collaborator and backdrop. Together we talk about what it is to live collaboratively and speak to the history of people and land entanglement.

Hollers, Hills, and Buckshot :

Anthologies of Appalachia

By:

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Thesis

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Acknowledgments

I want to thank the kin I came into this world with, and the ones I found along the way.

For the folks who've always supported me.

For the mountains and hollers that shaped me.

To the rivers and lakes that cradle me.

To the forests that have always sustained me.

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Spring

The first rains had just started to come signaling that spring was here; that winter had finally broken. It wasn't quite warm yet, but you didn't need much clothes on to be outside and content. The rain was just enough to get you wet, but under the protection of the forest canopy it became a haze shrouding you. An occasional drop finding its mark to remind you that it was indeed raining out there. This was just one of the many days Grandmaw took me out into the woods to teach me about the trees, the flowers, and leaves. What could be ate, what was medicine, and what to feed a man if ever he gave me trouble.

Summer

With a brick in one hand and mine in the other my Dad asked the man moving towards us, " Are you a scab? Don't make me keep you on the other side of this line." Those resolute words uttered while glancing back down at me and my small hand. We all stood in the heat of the sun together with the mountains behind us. Like big green giants towering above us all daring to be confronted while offering their embrace. The river running parallel to us seemed to echo the resolve of the words being chanted. Knowing that deep down we cared for them even if we didn't always show it.

Fall

That fall we marched into the woods just as the sun had peeked over the mountains. Hidden by clothes that resembled leaves slathered in the scent of doe, we found a place and waited. The previous days had been filled with hikes through the forest looking for the ruts and tracks. Following paths the deer use as highways to speed between the trees. While we waited, in hushed tones we had talked about where we wanted to be in the coming years. How one day we'd make it out of that holler together. The shallow silence broken by the sudden snap of twigs ,and then a breath, and a shot. There in the place where the deer once stood we took care of what needed to be done. We were thankful for the food we were given.

Winter

With the snow blanketing the ground the softness of winter silence engulfed everything. Slow mornings feeding the fire with wood, huddled nearby waiting for the warmth to creep into the beams and bones. On a whim with bare feet I ran outside with a pot, scooped up a heaping portion of snow, and filled the pot with sweet cream and sugar. I Stirred it together adding some sprinkles I had stashed from last Easter's cookies. There I sat again, filling my stomach with the poor man's ice cream passed down to me.

Marking Time

This is the backdrop of my research; a place, a people, a type of living. The work I make is rooted in the stories of me and mine; of the kin I came into this world with, and the ones I found along the way. A homage to the footsteps in which I run. I see myself as a storyteller. Recounting tales of the folks and places inaccurately portrayed through single noted assumptions, and who doesn't love a story with a redemption arc?

The sculptures I create offer moments of whimsy, investigation, and resolve. Cultivated from a life lived in tandem with nature. Marking time by seasons, stars, and events. Where it's not just people who are kin, but everybody else that we live with regardless of status or classification. Through research, scientific curiosity, and traditional modes of working I create sculptures composed of clay, paper, wool, coal, cotton, and hemp, while occasionally collaborating with fungi. These works investigate not only the impact that we have on the land and other organisms , but its impact on us. The collaborative relationships that I've been able to cultivate with other organisms takes time; operating in a fashion akin to seasons. Teaching me to slow down and be a more thoughtful listener. Together in our collaborative, and my own personal work themes about working class people, our connections to the lands we inhabit, and its destruction are explored; celebrating the fumbles and successes of community.

Walking into my studio you can see all the fruits of my research occupying space in a cacophony of materials, ideas, and organisms. While this research and art is heavily entrenched in a personal vernacular of place, there are moments that are synonymous with living. I'm searching for the singular moments that speak to more than words, imparting those experiences into physical structure.

I want to introduce my research the same way that H. Byron Ballard introduces her book Staubs and Ditchwater. She begins the book with, " It's the same journey many people make as they age – they leave the past behind and then come back to embrace the parts of it that still have grace and power. And love, of course. That's the big part of all of it." (H Byron Ballard, 2017)

The Feet

I remember being told the stars were like the body and each one had a part.
I was born in the throat, but my favorite was the feet.
That's when we burned the fields down for sowing later in the year.

The flames were so wild and free. I wanted to be like them. Keeping everybody at a distance. Burning everything down.

I was taught the best things always grew out of the ashes.

HYBRIDITY

In my personal definition of art, there is no separating the art that I make from myself; it's an extension of me. It's physical creation that pours from my hands and into the world imbued with my love, hate, trials and tribulations; all the bits and pieces that I've sewn together making up who I've become. All the pieces passed down to me, hidden in my bones. While not all art is a direct prose of the artist and their life, for me and my work, I'm unable to divorce the two.

We only need to look at contemporary art and the strong hold that the classification of identity plays into the way western art currently arranges itself. The identity of the artist seems to be atop the hierarchy, while the physical art comes into consideration

second. I subscribe to the ideas of hybridity where the ramifications of colonization and encroachment of a globalized world create a confluence and mixing of cultures, ideas, and ways of living. That a person can be a mixture of identities, not just one specific classification of what identity is deemed to look or be like. I look to the work of Rohini Malik and Gavin Jantjes defining hybridity as, " a state of being, arrived at through innovative mixing and borrowing of ideas, languages and modes of practice."

Throughout history we find that very rarely is it the case that any group of peoples is squarely from a single region or place. If we are to follow the paths of humanity we find that groups of what are now modern humans have always been traveling. Traversing the globe to new lands. Displaced and forced by conquest to make home in unfamiliar places. I think that the question becomes where do people settle, and how does the geography of these places influence culture? What becomes the bits and bobs of knowledge deemed most important for subsequent generations to know?

While tracing my own familial roots I quickly run up against a wall. My fathers family were exiles from Ireland for opposing British rule, who settled in Appalachia. They've been there since roughly the 1900's; intermixing with all of the peoples that have called this area home. My mothers family however, are of Basque heritage; fleeing Spain to escape persecution. They landed in Australia where my mother became a 1st generation child to Spanish parents. My Parents met, had me, and I have lived in

Southern West Virginia most of my life; torn between identities spanning 3 different countries. This intermingling that happened, mostly due to my mothers own identity and culture, has deeply ingrained in me the reality of a hybrid background. Leading me to ask what it means to be a person who spans several cultures at once; especially in a place where that is uncommon? Some of these ideas of Hybridity are newly evolving in my practice, and I imagine more concrete ideas of this split identity coming through in later work.

I feel that this idea of hybridity makes itself most apparent in the research I've conducted with fungi. Together we explore the Intersection of scientific curiosity juxtapositioned against traditional Appalachian folkways. In this piece A Study of Bodies I have recreated a portion of my own body through ceramic and casted the other half in Fungi using the language of clay. Exploring a shared existence, interrogating historical ideas of art, art making, and what it means to have a collaborative practice.

Fig. 1 *Bodies* , material experiment

Robin Kimmerer is a scientist and writer that I look up to in regards to the intersections of art, land, and science. While she is not Appalachian, and is a person of Indigenous heritage there are overlaps between our respective worldviews. The way that I was taught to treat the land and other organisms I live with is similar. Her book was the first time I heard the three sisters talked about outside of my home. It quickly became a foundation upon which I could build personal experience and generational knowledge as theory for my work. She asks her audience to consider the organisms that we live with as more than its, but rather living breathing citizens in a shared space. She tells us that the trees, rivers, and bees are all kin to us.

HILLBILLIES

In my practice, Appalachian identity forms one of the pillars I build my work and its context. By utilizing traditional folkways of the area, I'm guided by principles of design and aesthetic values tied to the histories of my land. Such a lens, offers an opportunity to challenge my audiences' conceptions of what an Appalachian identity can hold.

A cornerstone piece that informs my work is my Paw Paw Jessie's crazy quilt; as well as others like it. For the majority of my life I was tenderly cradled beneath it. This piece of homegrown art kept me safe on every journey except for this one. After a 2 hour mediated discussion with my dad we divided up the family quilts according to a series of deals and coin flips.

Fig. 2 *Paw Paw Jessie's Crazy Quilt* , Detail Shot I

Fig. 3 *Paw Paw Jessie's Crazy Quilt* , Detail Shot II

This quilt has become a near mythical object to me, maybe because of my forced separation from it. To me, this object becomes more than a quilt or craft object, rather a true form of art. However, I would be tempted to argue that such a cleavage is a bit sterile and should be dismissed altogether.

Quilts making relies on a theoretical framework, enlisting the elements of art the same way that artists of the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements had in the past, they are imbued with a pedagogy from a disciplined study in a particular medium.

I didn't always see this quilt that way though. This only just started to root into my mind in the summer of 2017. I was working for The Contemporary American Theater festival on a play called Byhalia, Mississippi by Evan Linder. A story following a pregnant woman and her husband living a complicated life out of a trailer, giving birth to a baby of mixed race because she cheated on him. They worked through this moment of

betrayal, ending with an unstable acceptance. I made some comments about being trailer trash that summer, how that was almost my life; that it still very well might be. All coming from a mouth of broken and missing teeth. One of the actors, Jason Babinsky, stopped me. He told me that I was more than trash, that life is complicated. It's fine to poke fun at hard things, but I had to stop internalizing it.

I visited the National Art museum in DC, where they had a whole exhibition on Appalachian art. I cried. I'm still crying about it. I had never realized that I was allowed to be proud of myself. That the Appalachian identity was indeed culture; having something more to offer than stereotypes of poverty in the mountains.

For better or worse, my identity is one of the more distinguishing aspects of who I am. At least the most readily available one. I have an accent that is difficult for me to hide, and I shouldn't have to neither. When I talk about my upbringing and my life, its trailer parks, forested hollers, cliff jumping in jewel toned waters; biker clubs, hunting, foraging, farming, and coal. At home, in the mountains I don't feel like a novelty. I'm one of the holler people, sure. Outside of those hills though, I found I stick out more like a sore thumb. I don't want to diminish the shining moments where people tell me about how beautiful they think West Virginia is, or how they've never met kinder folks. Those are the moments I feel seen and heard. I find I'm subject to a different sort of

discourse more often though. I thought it was bullshit when I was told I'd be treated differently when I left.

> "You all run around shoeless, right?" This was the introduction I got when I was accepted to Syracuse University. "Wow! You're not racist. I figured you would have been." the first date I had in Syracuse. " Well the people there deserve what they get. They vote against their interests." This one tends to come up at some point in any conversation about my home, especially with other academics "Everybody is inbred in West Virginia" My student. " You're more intelligent than you sound" My second date in Syracuse. "I'm so glad you made it out of there. You're better than that." This is the one I hate the most, like I'm not supposed to be proud of who I am or where I'm from. Acting like I'm happy to be gone. Im not.

All of these comments and assumptions come from long standing propaganda about Appalachia. When the welfare system was created West Virginia was its testing grounds. The legislation that created it was propelled through Congress and done so with videos and pictures of shoeless kids living in shanty houses. In 2018 the United Nations released a report in which they say that the Appalachian region has "Third World conditions of absolute poverty." (Alston & United Nations , 2018)

Fig. 4 Children of coal miner at Scott's Run, West Virginia (Johnson & Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress), 1935)

The term synonymous with me and people like me is Hillbilly. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines hillbilly as,

DEROGATORY•INFORMAL

1. an unsophisticated country person, associated originally with the remote regions of the Appalachians.

The term was coined in 1881 according to Merriam Webster, but I was taught something a bit different. The South gave it to the mountain regions that would later be known officially as the Appalachians, because we were rife with Abolitionists. They needed a way to other this region to keep control of the area. This didn't work for what would later become West Virginia though. We seceded from Virginia in 1863 solidifying our hillbilly abolitionist views in our state motto; Montani Semper Liberi, Mountaineers are Always Free. I want to be clear and without any interpretation; West Virginia is not without the racism that is present in this country. We have not escaped the systemic oppression that has been placed on folks of color.

In Barbara Kingsoliver's book Demon Copperhead, the main character talks about how somebody he knows has a hillbilly sticker on his truck. That it's a bad word given to people like him. (Like me) That he's reclaiming the word because he's proud of where he's from. This body of work is in the spirit of the reclamation of the term hillbilly.

Fig. 5 *Love Letters to Appalachia , Installation View*

Fig. 6 *Love Letters to Appalachia / "They wore red Bandanas to show they were union"*

IDENTITY

Inherently my work has become rooted in an activism against perceived ideas of what identity is considered to be. This idea of identity in my work was originally a pitch to get me in the door. I got to play it up or juxtaposition it against other aspects of myself to create novelty. I never meant for it to stay that way. I wanted my work to become the intersection of art and science, something that I thought would make me and my research more sophisticated. To address climate change and the relationship we have to the lands we inhabit. I think for a moment I tried to run away from the parts of myself that were the most genuine in lue of what I thought I should be. I was concerned about creating work that might be viewed as nothing more than Appalachian art. My research and art was at times painful to pursue, challenging me to reckon with aspects of my home and self that are problematic.

I began to realize that I'm unable to separate my identity from the idea of land, because for me and this region, the land and relationship to identity are intrinsically intertwined. John C Campbell's work exemplifies this dialogue between identity inseparable from geography. His writing of the people of this region are most prominently described by their shared geography being the main catalyst for culture. He presents the argument that every aspect of life is dictated by how the mountains affect people thus creating a shared set of customs that rely on interactions between people and land.

Newer iterations of my practice have started to hit this hybridity of art, science, and the impending climate collapse. In the following piece Coal I have casted cicada shells injected with reclaimed porcelain, and pinned them to the wall with insect pins. They bleed coal slurry onto a bed of their charred dead that have become interned into the coal. I love the language of the cicadas and feel akin to them. Creatures that live their lives underground, waiting for their time to be served to come above ground. When they do, they scream a beautiful song that is just for themselves.

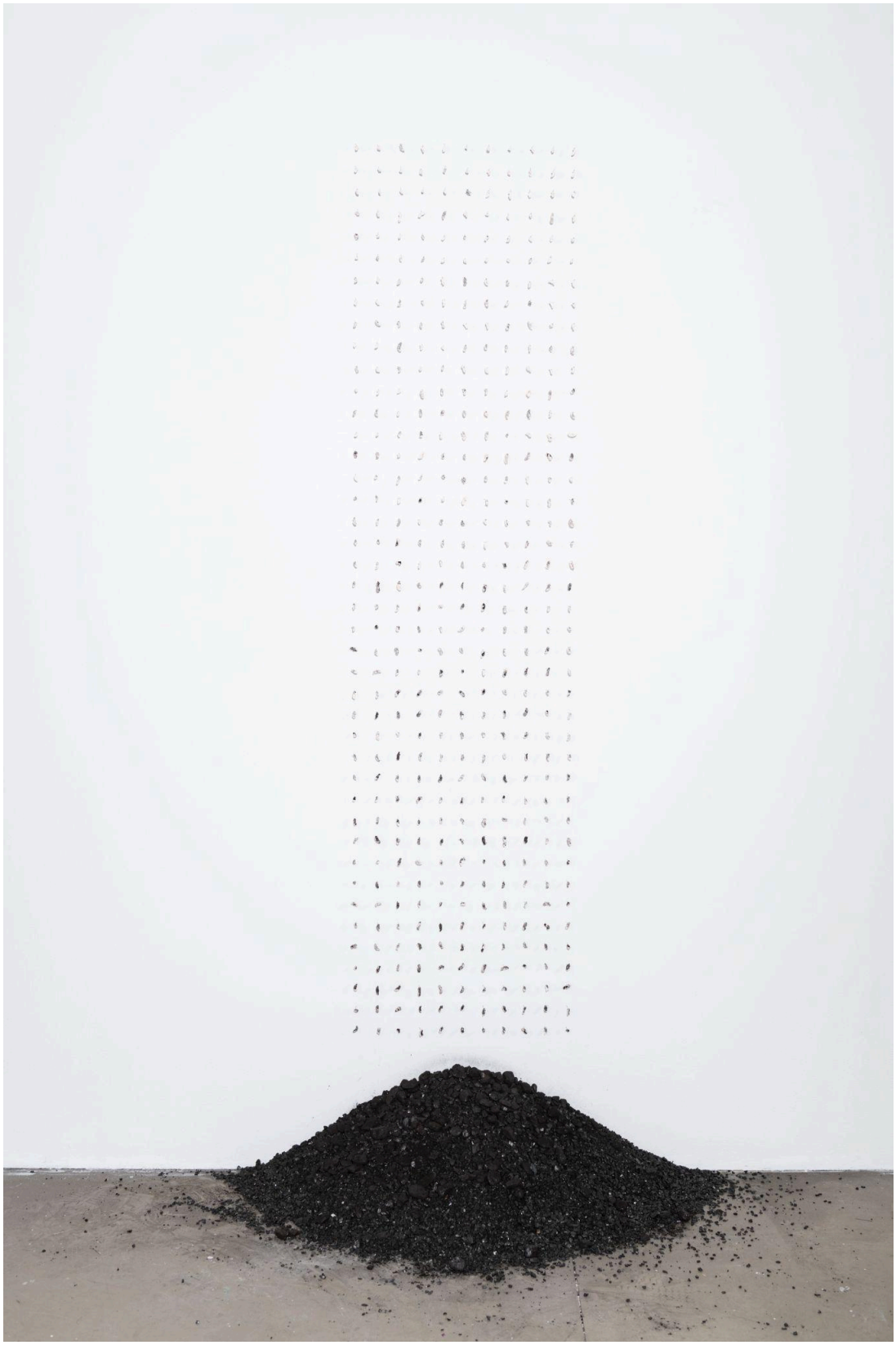

Fig. 7 *Do you see what our blood is? , Installation View*

Fig. 8 *Do you see what our blood is? , Detail View*

This intersection only became successful when I stopped hiding though. Embracing the joy and pain felt from living in Appalachia and talking about it. Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes “If you want to create a life or work of art tell the truth, embrace your burs, the zits, everything.” (Clarissa Pinkola Estés, 1997)

I seek to understand history, place, and identity through my hands; mixing folkways, ideas, and experiences. The research I’ve conducted over the past 3 years is deeply rooted in Appalachia. I integrate my own personal journeys through academic and scientific inquiry, juxtapositioning them against Appalachian traditions. At times all of

this mixing regardless of discipline somehow feels inherently at odds with each other, a contentious bundle I'm trying to unwind and thread through the eye of a needle . I think this is the beauty of hybridity though; moments where a confluence of ideas, experiences, and thoughts coalesce to create something uniquely my own. While I occasionally reference more ingrained ideas of identity such as gender and class, I look more to how a geographical place impacts the formation of some of these identities. I'm using the natural world and its inhabitants as collaborator and backdrop. These are aspects of my work that not all people will cling to, becoming a cultural and personal vernacular.

Reading through Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur I'm reminded of the validity of work that is deeply personal, cemented in identity and lived experience. There's power in stories that don't need to be accessible to everybody all of the time. They can be for me and I can share that with the world being content in that not everybody will understand or care. This moment of reckoning solidified in some of their final words, "Your art is not about how many people like your work. It is about how much your soul likes your work, how your heart likes your work. You must never trade honesty for relatability." (Kaur, 2015)

King Coal

Coal was my king.
He still is I guess.

Ya see as a kid I hated it,

I hated coal .

I hated the smell that coated my dad, I hated the way it stuck to me when I hugged him, I hated the deep blackness of it ; It just seems to eat everything up. I hated how no matter what you do it don't come off you.

So I ran away from his kingdom to start off clean.

But that's the problem with running
Once you stop, what you're running from; it gets the chance to catch back up to you.

The history of this place is as rich and as deep as the seams of coal that have been ever present in the history and growth of this place. Growing up we're taught that coal is king. That he rules over the land saying there's only one real way to make a living; working for him or his heirs. King Coal owns you, and your soul. He's an expert in propaganda; at gaslighting. To the point that in school we were taught that coal is indeed a renewable resource, because one day it'll be replenished through geologic processes (just not in our lifetime). He told us that it'll never run out as long as we were sparing with it. I took that education with me to a graduate level class in mycology where I uttered his gospels out loud. My first performance work was about his teachings. They always say there's a fine line between love and hate, and this work is

where I discovered that duality.

Fig. 9 *King Coal, Performance Still*

I never realized how much I missed the glint of that black gold. That the smell of it was buried so deep into my psyche, that when its acrid smell punched me in the face, it felt like home. I came into this work with anger. I smashed ceramics filled with slurry that exploded across the audience and room. I tried to filter the slurry with a natural filter that poured black stained water across the floor. The floor had been covered with coal so that wherever you stepped there was no escaping it, no safe place to exist. I

covered the walls in his name, and the views of his kingdom from outside its borders. During this work I realized I was in a toxic relationship.

To understand this relationship you need a view into it. I feel like its a misunderstood story, not widely talked about. We have always been expendable for the machinations of capitalism feeding it, perpetuating it. We are what keeps the lights on, fueling the exponential need for growth and convenience. I grew up surrounded by the endless forests and coalfields that are scattered throughout Southern West Virginia in the Chemical Valley. The Bayer, DOW, and Union Carbide Chemical plants were right beside my home and schools. There's an abandoned Monsanto plant that sits down the road rife with asbestos and poisoned land. The abandoned coal mines litter the landscape leaving behind scarred mountains filled with toxic gasses and putrid water that slowly seeps through the surrounding ground.

I was given lessons from Wally the Turtle, to be Wally Wise. When the sirens sound, hide in my shell. This was code for the chemical plants are leaching toxic fumes into the air. Shelter in place. NOW! What they don't tell you about a shelter in place is that it makes it easier for rescue teams to find your dead body if they're all in one place. Taping the cracks and vents that lead into the room you're in doesn't do much for you other than give you false hope. After 3 years I'm still scared of the sirens that pour from the fire stations here. They're the same sound as the ones back home.

Most of the men in my family have all worked for the chemical plants or mines, dying of excotic cancers. In 2008 there was an explosion killing 2 people that came feet away from igniting a container of methyl isocyanate. If ignited it would have killed anybody in the valley for 10 miles; this happened in Bhopal, India in 1984. In 2012 Freedom industries, a company that contains chemicals for cleaning coal, dumped 4-methylcyclohexane methanol (MCHM) into the Elk and Kanawha rivers. Effectively poisoning our drinking water. It smelt like licorice and we weren't told we had been poisoned until well after the initial spill. Enough people called the local news station and they're the ones that alerted the proper authorities. Not the facility whose job it was to contain these materials. This chemical binds to any porous surface, never truely leaving it. We still don't know what will be the effects of ingesting water ladened with this chemical. There's never been human testing until us. The water companies gave every resident about 200 dollars, and made us sign a document saying we'd never sue. If you didn't take the money they refused to turn your water back on.

Most recently the national EPA issued a report that places the Kanawha Valley, or as it's better known the Chemical Valley, under an advisory notice because of the amount of Ethylene Oxide (EtO) in our air. EtO is a known as human carcinogen, people in this area are at much greater odds of developing cancer than most populations because of the long term exposure to this chemical as well as others. We have one of the newest high tech cancer centers in the country now. On windy days with the windows open my Dads air purifier turns red saying that the air isn't clean. There's an allowable rate of emission even given the risks associated with small levels. This place is allowed to be

sacrificed because it always has been. This is a place that can be othered so that it can be more easily pillaged.

> *Coal may be King, but every throne has to be passed onto an heir ; chemicals, they're his heir apparent.*

In search of solace my family has always gone to our land in the Monongahela National Forest deep within the Greenbank Radio dead zone. My Paw Paw Jessie bought the land and it has been passed down to the subsequent generation since. We stand right inside Watoga State Park. My family sold part of our land to them. This is a place where time has stood still. No cellphones, limited electricity, a place where folks still get their water from a pipe that trickles spring water from the mountains. As a kid we'd ride the four wheelers through the forests and fish for natural Trout eating fresh cranberries out of the bogs. Every year we went to pioneer days bombarded by bluegrass music, dancing, food, tractor pulls, and Appalchian crafts made by the people who still practiced those disciplines. This was the first time I saw those lil old ladies beat away on their looms like they were drums in tune with the banjos.

Fig. 10 *Monongahela National Forest*

My family and the forests we live in have given me an education of changing leaves, cycling of plants, and stars who dance across the night sky as the true demarcation of time. That those minutes, hours, days are tied to the land and food. These values still ingrained into mountain communities dictate that having land is equal to the ability to live, and without it you die. Even now as I live in a city I get spooked that I no longer have earth to till, seeds to sow, or weeds to burn to sustain myself. I miss winnowing the seed in fall, saving them for next year's planting. I lay in bed on restless nights and anguish over not having plants to feed me, or stores of food at the ready. Instead I make sure to eat extra food so that my body itself acts as storage for leaner times.

Growing up in those hollers taught me that culture, geography and economy interact in horizontal dialogues with one another. The people there are treated the same way as the land is, and there's no separating the two of us. Lands are for profit either vehemently protected to ensure tourism or carelessly destroyed by industry. That the riches found beneath the ground are akin to gold, and whatever land can't be mined will be used for storage of unscrupulous materials. Anything that can't be taken advantage of should be sold to provide entertainment in the form of natural or adventure tourism. Within these hollers crafts and foraged food are still highly sought after commodities that are sold to fill bellies. There's a disconnect between the extractive nature of the economy that has been built around West Virginia and the folkways of this place. They call us wild and wonderful, but I'm reminded that it's a visceral, harsh beauty. This solidified to me in not only my experiences, but in the writings of a West Virginia native Breece D'J Pancake. I feel compelled to quote an excerpt from Hollow, a story about hunger.

> "He bit off a piece of the cool raw liver and as it juiced between his teeth, watched the final throes of the fawn in the steamy snow. He could not wait to dump the water at the mine tomorrow, and laughed as he imagined the look on Curt's face. "Strike," he muttered over and over.
>
> On a knoll in the ridge, run there by dogs, the bobcat watched, waiting for the man to leave" (Breece D'J Pancake, 2013)

I don't need shoes…

I used rip my shoes off like they was fire on my feet.
I was convinced that I couldn't talk to the grass when I had em on, and I always wanted it to know how much I loved it.
I felt bad squashing it with my hard shoes.
Stepping on it with bare feet felt softer, like we were connected.

MY FIRST FRIEND WAS A TREE

I'm often reminded of the works of the transcendentalists when I think of my home. That there is a divinity in Nature, and that anything that has been hard won is worth its weight. I often think of Alexander Langlands book Cræft, and while not a transcendentalist because of the time of his work, he squarely fits in with the works of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. He talks of straw, of how he grew the crop and harvested it by sickle. That he let it sit in the sun to ripen and stacked it, then dried it in the barn for use later. During this time he talks of the longevity of the process and the care and steps that must be followed to have a successful crop. That the planting, growing, harvesting, and processing are all equally important. Instilling that the lands and its inhabitants are equals. For there to be collaboration we must take the time to understand our partner.

John Muir describes his own journeys through often perilous wildernesses in search of the Sublime. Writing stories of harrowing adventures that proved to produce spoils so rich and deep that it helped propel Teddy Roosevelt's national Park system.

In my art I strive to find the same sense of wonder in the sublime nature of growth, and collaboration with other beings unlike myself. That I have the resolve and fortitude to not just speak of my romantic ideals of relationship, but truly follow through with them, showing up everyday. I look to the trees and Fungi as not things, but other folks who I can be in conversation with. I find support in these ideas by folks like Wendall Berry who moved from being a professor in New York back to his home of Kentucky to farm his land and bring it back to life. One day I hope that I am this lucky. Simone Adolphine Weil teaches me that I must be relentless in my resolve, that it is easy to say things about the injustice of the world, but it's another to challenge them. Her short but well lived life as evidence of this exchange.

The Chestnut was How I found Home

I came to Syracuse University with a love for trees. My portfolio was littered with netted structures with plants growing through them. Reminiscent of mycorrhizal networks of fungi, tree roots, and other plants. The epitome of interspecies cooperation. In one of the initial zoom meetings I had in preparation of going there I went on a rant about how the Black Walnut was my favorite tree. How it had a chambered pith that helped it maintain water pressure within the xylem. That I was in awe of how they defied gravity; that their wood was the prettiest I ever saw. That their nut was my favorite smell and taste in the whole world. Within my first few weeks I started to weasel my way into the SUNY Environmental School of Forestry. I was lucky enough to work with the American

Chestnut trees via the American Chestnut Foundation. I assisted in harvesting their nuts to transplant genetics from Chinese Chestnut trees to help in the creation of transgenic trees able to resist the fungus that has wiped them out. Over the past 3 years these trees' lives and history has simmered inside of me. They have grown to become my favorite trees now.

Fig. 11 *American Chestnut Eco-Print, detail shot*

Fig. 12 *“ Till death do us part, forever I’ll be intertwined with this tree “ Detail view*

Fig. 13 *“ Till death do us part, forever I’ll be intertwined with this tree “ Installation view*

I began to research these trees and found that their story and mine were inextricably intertwined. I found moments of resonance in using scientific processes to change their DNA to make them more resilient to a world that had changed before them. The

Chestnut had always been a major crop for the regions of Appalachia. Their wood was highly prized for its resilience while its delicate and hearty nuts were culinary gold. When the Blight came for them, the United States Government ordered them to be all felled. This was to ensure the timber would at least be usable. Another example of extractive modes of living being the most prominent forces of power within this region. When I see the prints I have made using their leaves it is not lost on me how few people have seen their color in the last 100 years. That I am fortunate that my path has crossed the path of theirs.

MYCOLOGICAL MADNESS

It started out as a wish to make sculptures with orchids. I listened to a podcast called "In Defence of Plants" with an episode called, *" Orchids and Fungi "*. They felt like the perfect analogous to humans. Parasitic. Numerous. Beautiful. I was learning about a particular Epiphytic orchid that parasitizes the mycorrhizal networks it relies on to live . It's an orchid that lives on the top of another plant drawing its moisture and nutrients from its host organism and utilizing the fungal network present there. What was really remarkable to me about this orchid though is that it kind of farmed the fungi. It had to have it to reproduce, and in ways it held onto it even after it didn't necessarily need it any more.

I was much more interested in the fungi and the mycorrhizal networks they created though. These elusive organisms who created highways of information and nutrition

that fueled the underbelly of the forest. They're like the internet of the natural world, and at my core I'm a millennial who loves the internet. Through research for a plant propagation class I learned I could cast with these most intriguing of creatures.

This is where the story of me and the mycelium starts. All I took from those 3 months of initial study was how to propagate plants, graft trees, and make things grow from a scientific perspective. I had been raised growing my food, but had never been taught a quantitative way of addressing it. I utilized everything I learned from that class and applied it to my mycelium. Then I started to think about the fact that they're alive. Living, breathing, eating things that require care and nourishment. We were the same, so when I had a strawberry they had a strawberry. I gave them different types of "food". That was a process that took some narrowing down. If I'm honest, my research made me a menace to anybody that had any capacity of contact with me or the spaces they were growing in.

I'm a bit remiss to say that I don't have data sheets that tracked the millimeters of growth over time that correlate to the growth mediums and substrates from that early research. I kept it all in my head unsure of if it would all work. Worried that if the data didn't show success but failure, then my work would be the same. Looking back I realize that was silly.

So, here's my retelling of the data. I ripped up mushrooms, I bought liquid cultures, and I bought a ready made inoculated substrate. I fed them flour, spent grain from the local brewery, nutritional yeast, and offerings of every food I ate. It was a stinky venture. It still is. I began to learn what good and bad smells were. If there was a sweetness to the decay then the mushrooms were happy and healthy. If it were a stink that lingered with the deep heaviness of what I can only describe as blackness then it was bad. Their favorite food had been nutritional yeast. However, it was the foulest sweetest smell, and if you were a human in any vicinity then it was the worst. I can only describe it as fermented gym socks having a repulsive grainy sweetness. After all of this I landed on flour as being the catalyzing food source most suited to a shared environment.

Continuing on with this research I wanted to know what I could make it grow on and through. I grew Mycelium through various different substrates. Through corrugated cardboard, regular cardboard, fabric, textile based weavings, unfired clay, bisque clay, fully vitrified clay, straw, hemp, hemp paper, and different recycled papers. Through later experiments with Mycelium I now have an assemblance of data recording mycelium growth corresponding to my joint effort with Kirstin Dunlap to develop a hemp based paper that promotes this growth

In the most recent iterations of this work I have created a weavings solely for housing a mycelial body. I wish I could have you share in the smells of growth and decay. That there's a sweetness to the life being born from the countless hours spent on creating a

home that I always knew would degrade. I wove a shroud for a coyote that was killed in the name of protection. I spun a thread of hemp specially crafted to promote the growth of fungi that I built in the form of this coyote. There's a Tenderness in death and honoring a life.

Fig. 14 *Tenderness in Death, Installation Shot*

Fig. 15 *Tenderness in Death, detail Shot (starting growth)*

Fig. 16 *Tenderness in Death, detail Shot (full growth)*

Talk Pretty

> *I had been skipping school for awhile. The black mold was seeping into my lungs with every breath I took and my bones broke with every word. At that age words hurt more than wounds, but I had decided to go to school that day. I goofed off for most of it, and in the last minutes of class I wrote down some poetry that I thought was bullshit. The prompt was to use as many prepositions as we could. I wrote something about a wish made on a dandelion. How it traveled through a meadow, and under a bridge, over a creek bed. That it took a journey that carried my hopes and dreams to the heavens for the angels to hear. While my anonymous words were read out for the whole class's ears, I felt a nauseating heat flush onto my cheeks. My most desperate inner thoughts aired out into the world. After class he asked me if I liked writing. I told him I didn't talk pretty enough for that sorta thing.*

My research has come to revolve around the gravitational pull between life and death, ecology, the question of what is Appalachia and the culture of those mountains. I'm striving to create a practice that incorporates modes of working that have applications in engaging conversations that speak to how we can live sustainably, more cognizant of all our neighbors. Being so entrenched in the Appalachian mountains with a raising that heavily relied on the land for sustenance, and economic stability requires a consciousness of place. It brings to the forefront that life and death are directly tied to the relationships you have to more than just your human kin but everything and everybody you live with. I was always told growing up, "If you're ugly to your kin and your land they're not going to take care of you anymore."

While following these ideas I've discovered that I'm lucky that my hands have many things in them. Lucky to find weaving and spinning thread was hidden deep within my fingers. Reminding me of time spent sitting on the porches of the old women in Marlinton, watching them spin'n thread and working away on their floor looms. I found a path back into printmaking, and film photography. Integrating the knowledge I had, just had forgotten about. I circled around clay, always searching for the right time to create with it. Sitting in my studio making pots while I thought about the world, my life, and what I was inspired by; I've always found that I think best through clay. Looking at my studio practice and all of the varied practices I think of a quote in my weaving sketchbook. It reads, " people do their crafts to gather their bones, to find the pieces of themselves, to understand themselves." This is what my work is, a gathering of bones. Digging up processes weathered by time, passed down, old, and beloved.

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