

“I Fixed Up the Trees to Give Them Some New Life:” Queer Desire, Affect, and Ecology
in the Work of Two LGBTQ+ Appalachian Artists/The Wildcrafting Our Queerness
Project/The Queer Appalachia Preservation Project

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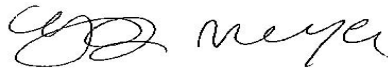
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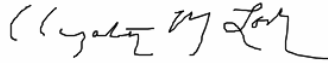
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ABSTRACT

The following essay and digital projects each engage both with a unique aspect of contemporary queer Appalachian art and culture as well as the ways in which oral history and digital humanities methodologies can be used to generate collaborative research possibilities. The first essay is an exploration of two LGBTQ+ Appalachian artists, Dustin Hall and Charles Williams, and the ways in which their work uses Donna Haraway's "naturecultures" and Jose Muñoz' understanding of queer futurity to rethink human relationships with non-human nature. The first digital project is an online exhibition of queer Appalachian artists and their work, bolstered by oral history interviews, that provides a platform for these artists to connect with one another and reach a wider audience. The second digital project is a digital archive of the Queer Appalachia Project's Instagram account, serving as a means to hold the Project accountable for their numerous scandals and provide a resource for Appalachian Studies researchers to access the account in a way which is more easily navigable than the social media site. Together, these three projects embody an interdisciplinary intervention into the fields of Appalachian Studies, rural queer studies, oral history, and the digital humanities.

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This portfolio is dedicated to the queer Appalachians building a new future every day.

Introduction

March 2020: as I packed my car with enough clothes, posterboard, and books to last a weekend, I received an email from the Appalachian Studies Association. The first case of COVID-19 had hit Lexington, Kentucky, the site of that year's Appalachian Studies Association annual conference, meaning that the conference had to be called off for everyone's health and safety. The theme was "Appalachian Understories," focusing on precarious communities in the mountain region. With that email, the handful of queer Appalachian scholars, artists, and activists planning to meet up and discuss their work were separated. At the same time, numerous queer artist meetups in and around Lexington were similarly cancelled with no plans to reschedule. More than a year later, after a mass reckoning with systemic violence against Black people, the messy and public collapse of a prominent queer Appalachian art collective, and continued shelter-in-place orders, the landscape of Appalachian life (and American life in general) has been fundamentally altered. Life still went on, however. Queer Appalachian people continued to make art, write, post online, do what they could to process the pandemic and the seemingly unending stream of conflict in 2020. The three projects contained in this portfolio are almost entirely, for better or for worse, products of the COVID-19 pandemic. Devised, researched, and published all during mass quarantine, these projects are as much reflections of how queer Appalachians responded to the previous year as they are records of these Appalachians themselves.

While writing my undergraduate honors thesis, *Wildcrafting Our Queerness: LGBTQ+ Art, Archiving, and Activism in Contemporary Appalachia*, I commented on the dearth of queer Appalachian scholarship in the landscape of queer and Appalachian

Studies. Though the field has done well, I argued, to better include the perspectives of predominantly straight people of color and white women in the region, I noted that “the discipline has done little to incorporate the voices and history of the region’s queer population,” with only a handful of long form works (mainly a few books, dissertations, and the occasional digital project) discussing LGBTQ+ Appalachians.¹ In the year following this assessment, multiple projects have been published, launched, or announced which explicitly center queer Appalachian voices—including a 2020 anthology on queer storytelling in the region,² a 2021 anthology about LGBTQ+ networks in the region more generally,³ and an announced book series by the University of Kentucky Press.⁴ With the exception of a small group of noteworthy digital projects,⁵ however, a majority of the scholarship on LGBTQ+ people in Appalachia remains contained within academic archives, books, and journals. The public-facing pieces which do reflect the region’s queer networks primarily center on the controversial Queer Appalachia Project, whose controversy I address later in this portfolio. As such, this portfolio project represents an additional set of texts in the growing body of queer Appalachian scholarship while also serving as an interdisciplinary intervention in the public understanding of the work being done in the field. By employing digital

¹ Cloe, Maxwell, "Wildcrafting Our Queerness: LGBTQ+ Art, Archiving, and Activism in Contemporary Appalachia" (2020). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 1516. 51

² Glasby, Hillery, Sherrie Gradin, and Rachael Ryerson. *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other* (Morgantown WV: WVU Press).

³ McNeill, Z. Zane, ed. *Y'all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia* (Oakland CA: PM Press).

⁴ In March of 2021, the University of Kentucky Press announced “Appalachian Futures: Black, Native, and Queer Voices,” a book series centering on marginalized experiences of those in Appalachia.

⁵ The two most prominent of these public facing digital projects are *The Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project*—which is a collaboration between Roanoke College, the Roanoke Public Library, and the Roanoke LGBTQ+ Community Center—and *Country Queers*—a pan-rural LGBTQ+ oral history project directed by Rae Garringer and the Appalshop Cultural Center in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

humanities, oral history, art history, queer theory, and social ecology methodologies, I aim to highlight the depth of queer Appalachians, their networks, and their cultures.

The body of this portfolio is in three parts, each reflecting a unique research endeavor that all center around queer Appalachian art and cultures, often emphasizing digital humanities and oral history work. The individual projects are as follows:

“I Fixed Up the Trees to Give Them Some New Life:” Queer Desire, Affect, and Ecology in the Work of Two LGBTQ+ Appalachian Artists – This project began as my final paper for Professor Alan Braddock’s course, “Art and Environmental Justice.” The paper relies primarily on three ecological theories—Rob Nixon’s “Slow Violence,” Donna Haraway’s “Naturecultures,” and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands’ “queer ecology”—to highlight the similar treatments of Appalachian LGBTQ+ people and Appalachian non-human nature by interlocking structures of industrial capitalism, metronormativity, and numerous forms of intersecting systemic oppressions. In response to various injustices throughout Appalachian queerness and ecology, I analyze three artists whose work challenges conventional understandings of “humans” and “nature” as being separate. Pulling from the aforementioned ecological theories as well as Jose Muñoz’ understanding of queer futurity, I explore the work of Appalachian painter Dustin Hall and sculptor Charles Williams, particularly the ways in which these artists envision and construct a queer ecological future where humans and non-human nature can interact in a manner which foregrounds affect and emotions contrary to capitalist understandings of production.

The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project – Beginning as the final project for Professor Elizabeth Losh’s “Digital Humanities” class, *The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project* is

an ongoing digital archive and exhibition of LGBTQ+ Appalachian artists and their work. Central to my presentation of these artists' work are oral histories in which the artists discuss the history and motivations of specific pieces, their methods, and the philosophical underpinnings that they observe in their work. In addition to these artists, *The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project* contains a "theory blog"—in which I write small essays about different ideas in Appalachian studies, queer theory, and art history—and a reading list of different primary sources, secondary sources, and organizations which center queer Appalachian and queer rural networks. Powered by the Scalar platform, this exhibition allows for non-linear engagement of art and scholarship in which visitors can explore the art on the site by artist, by theme, or by viewing the entire gallery at once. Unlike conventional presentations of research, such as articles or dissertations, this digital format allows me to continually expand the project's scope while reaching a wide audience of people who may not be able to engage with written work behind an institutional paywall.

The Queer Appalachia Preservation Project – Emerging out of the scandal surrounding the Queer Appalachia Project, this project is an effort to digitally preserve every post on the Queer Appalachia Instagram, making the account more searchable and providing a backup in the event that the account (or Instagram) experiences a mass shutdown of some variety. This project uses the Omeka platform, making the archive easily navigable and searchable while also allowing me to include a depth of metadata and accessibility descriptions. Though the most straightforward and linear of my projects included in this portfolio, I nevertheless aim for this archive to be a helpful resource for future scholars of Appalachian, queer, or digital studies.

In all three of these projects, I rely on an interdisciplinary array of texts to inform my methods and theoretical foundation. Along with secondary literature on LGBTQ+ history, queer theory, environmental activism, ecological art, digital humanities, and theories of the archive, I primarily consider primary sources such as works of art, the voices of their artists, and social media accounts. When possible, this inclusion of artists' voices takes the form of oral history interviews—particularly within the tradition of “queer oral history”—which appear in block quotes throughout “I Fixed Up the Trees...” and in audio recordings in *The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project*.

LGBTQ+ historians Nan Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramirez argue in their methodological anthology *Bodies of Evidence* that queer oral history distinguishes itself from non-queer forms of oral history by centering “the role of the body” and the inherent intimacy which emerges from intense discussions of bodies, sex, desire, and trauma.⁶ Due to this “intimacy-as-trust” which undergirds many queer oral histories, various commitments—whether emotional, romantic, and/or political—often form between the narrator and the researcher (especially if they share similar gender and sexual identities).⁷ Journalist and professor Steven Thrasher further elaborates on the intimacy and empathy which upholds queer oral history to also explicitly consider the inextricable dimension of race alongside gender and sexuality. In his essay “Discursive Hustling and Queer of Color Interviewing,” Thrasher highlights the specific practice of “queer of color interviewing,” in which a queer person of color (specifically a Black queer person, in Thrasher’s example) interviews another queer person of color for an presumed

⁶ Boyd, Nan A and Horacio Roque Ramirez, “Close Encounters.” in *Bodies of Evidence*, ed. Nan A. Boyd and Horacio R. Ramirez. (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012). 2

⁷ *Ibid.* 9

audience of queer people of color.⁸ This “empathetic, embodied knowledge” which can only emerge from shared identities is the foundation of “queer of color interviewing” and, in many cases, the foundation of all queer practices of oral history.⁹ In this way, queer oral history and similar practices are not only “queer” in the sense that they eschew conventional barriers of gender and sexuality but also in the sense that they transcend barriers between academic interviewer and narrator by explicitly incorporating the body and communal emotions.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, serious obstacles have appeared in the practice of queer oral history. Like other various forms of LGBTQ+ physical interaction, from queer meetups to clubbing to sex to activist work, physically sitting with someone to record an oral history has become far more fraught and even dangerous, as a misjudgment in testing or proper safety precautions can potentially lead to someone becoming very ill. Certainly, in pre-pandemic times, I have met narrators in drag bars, art gallery openings, and concerts—all of which have been seriously restricted or completely closed due to the virus. Moreover, my narrators and I conducted our sessions in-person at homes, restaurants, and other public venues, which pose similar risks of infection. How, then, is a queer oral historian to conduct their research? For a practice so rooted in “the intimacy created in the physical encounter between narrator and researcher,” wouldn’t the inability to meet in person seriously undermine queer oral history altogether?¹⁰

⁸ Thrasher, Steven W. “Discursive Hustling and Queer of Color Interviewing.” *Imagining Queer Methods* (2019). 237

⁹ *Ibid.* 236

¹⁰ Boyd and Ramirez, “Introduction: Close Encounters.” 9

While in-person interactions are undoubtedly ideal for conducting queer oral histories, the oral histories that I have conducted for this piece have illustrated the immense potential for digital forms of communication in such interviews. Digital oral history is far from a new practice and it has been around in some capacity since the advent of digital forms of communication via the Internet. Discussing specifically the role of digital communication in rural queer oral history, historian John Howard argues that digital forms of communication enable “rural narrators—on their own, at their computer—to participate in far-flung queer historical projects.”¹¹ Working beyond simple email exchanges, Howard relies on digital interactions in gay chatroom websites. Similarly, Thrasher explains that, to conduct queer of color interviews, he “realized I needed to use or create accounts for every queer hookup app that I knew Michael [Thrasher’s narrator] had used” in order to glean more information about his narrator through engaging with his past sexual partners on these apps.¹² While I’m not currently going through queer dating apps and looking for narrators, I have certainly begun engaging with much more online and digital forms of communication with narrators since the outbreak of the pandemic. The first encounters that I have with many of narrators are through social media, most commonly Instagram (since many of these narrators are artists and can post their work on the site), where I can direct message them or email them through their personal websites linked in their Instagram bio. I’ve found that contacting narrators through these conventionally informal means, especially when we have numerous mutual followers, has led to more frank and friendly discussion

¹¹ Howard, John. “Digital Oral History and the Limits of Gay Sex,” in *Queering the Countryside*, ed. Mary L. Gray et al. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 310.

¹² Thrasher, “Discursive Hustling.” 234

than narrators who I've met through less casual means like academic emails or through organization websites. In this way, digital interactions are essential for generating the "increased candor" from both the narrator and the interviewer that Howard notes.¹³

Along with the initial encounter occurring digitally, I have also begun conducting the oral histories themselves digitally. Under normal circumstances, I would take a trip to the region to conduct oral histories in person. Since staying in hotels or people's homes isn't the safest option during the pandemic, I've instead opted to conduct virtual interviews over the video-calling platform, Zoom. This platform, though not allowing for the same kind of physical embodiment as an in-person interview, nevertheless enables me and the narrator to speak in ways that would otherwise be difficult in person. First and foremost, video calls are accessible. So long as the narrator has a fairly reliable Internet connection, I am able to speak with them regardless of our locations, physical ability, or any awkward rescheduling. Moreover, some narrators no longer live in Appalachia full-time—such as Beth Stephens in California—meaning that physical meetings would be difficult and costly regardless of any pandemics. Digital communication thus provides access for the *interviewer* as well as the narrator, demonstrating the potential for "far-flung queer historical projects" that Howard describes.

In addition to this increased accessibility, the Zoom platform has enabled multifaceted forms of communication that were not as convenient in person. Though certain dimensions of physical interviews, such as the constant reading of body

¹³ Howard, "Digital Oral History and the Limits of Gay Sex." 325

language, are more difficult in digital settings, new dimensions unique to the format emerge in ways not possible in face-to-face interactions. For example, when speaking with artists, I am able to pull up images of their art through Zoom's "Share Screen" feature so that we can talk about specific aspects of the piece with the piece in front of us. While this makes talking about sculptures and other three-dimensional forms of art slightly trickier, it makes discussing paintings, digital art, and photographs much easier, especially with pieces that are no longer in the narrator's possession. Moreover, through Zoom's chat feature, the narrator and I can send each other links to relevant websites or social media pages, which we can then explore real-time. In these ways, digital communication through Zoom enables a discussion which has multiple levels and avenues of content, rather than the conventional back-and-forth of an in-person interview. While I hesitate to call this hypertextual depth "queer" in the same sense as conventional queer oral history, digital queer oral histories nevertheless provide unique opportunities to express a narrator's connections, networks, and emotions that are not as easy with in-person oral history.

Following mass vaccinations and the return of in-person travel and oral history work, I am excited to travel across Appalachia and meet new people to talk with in their homes, their local towns, or wherever else the interview takes me. That being said, certain aspects of digital oral history will not, or should not, disappear from other forms of oral history. First, the collapse of geographic distance in digital oral history will certainly be useful for narrators who are incredibly far away or otherwise physically inaccessible. Second, oral historians would be remiss to not try and bring the hypertextuality of digital conversation into the real world. Our casual conversations

outside of oral history often take this multi-layered structure; we pull up images on our phones, look up the name of a half-forgotten actor, or send a quick text to ask about a family trip. Such conversations are all the richer for this quick access to seemingly limitless texts. In the same way, modern oral historians must also consider how to incorporate such textual depth in our methodologies.

A final note of my use of language; throughout these collected projects, I refer to people and their networks as being “queer” or “LGBTQ+” interchangeably. This is not a perfect system. For many, especially older people, “queer” is unequivocally a slur, used to wound and to marginalize. Referring to a wide group of people as “queer” thus runs the risk of referring to people using the same language as their oppressor. “LGBTQ+” thus provides a means of communal solidarity between people of similarly marginalized, though unique gender and sexual identities.

At the same time, however, “LGBTQ+” and related acronyms are seen by many to be assimilationist and not reflective of the radical history that characterizes many queer political movements. “Queer,” as evidenced by radical groups like “Queer Nation” or slogans like “Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you,” thus reflects the radical reclamation of a once harmful word that now embodies a similarly radical rejection of the heteronormative structures of modern society.

Along with reflecting a concrete political history, “queer” also embodies an established trend in academic thought on gender and sexual norms, embodied in fields like “queer theory” and “queer studies.” In this sense of the word, I rely on two different, though complementary definitions of “queer.” The first, coming from cultural theorist Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*, centers the spatial and temporal aspects

of queerness—Halberstam argues that “queer refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment and activity in space and time.”¹⁴ Per this conception, queer networks and people create times and spaces outside of the dominant heteronormative society where they can express themselves and collectively work towards their own liberation. My artistic and cultural analysis of queer Appalachian art thus often investigates how this art perceives and (re)creates Appalachia as a queer space and time.

Performance theorist Jose Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, expands on Halberstam’s understanding of queerness by theorizing specifically on how queer people, networks, and art structure time. Muñoz argues that queerness “is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.”¹⁵ Queerness, for Muñoz, constantly looks to the future, a forward-facing optimism towards a possible vision of society which no longer conforms to the standards of heteronormativity and other related forms of oppression. The future of Appalachia, as it appears in dominant national narratives about the region, is often incredibly bleak. Bigotry and oppression appear to be an eternal and inescapable fact about the region. My analyses of queerness, art, ecology, and digital culture seek to address how these aesthetic pieces work to reorient understandings of the future of Appalachia and beyond.

¹⁴ Halberstam, Jack, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York City NY: New York University Press, 2005), 6

¹⁵ Muñoz, Jose, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City NY: New York University Press, 2009). 1

Political scientist and activist Cathy Cohen additionally raises an essential intervention in the academic conceptualization of queerness in her essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens.” Lamenting the overuse of solely queerness in political organizing and theorizing in leftist circles, Cohen (echoing legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw) argues that “identities and communities, while important to this strategy, must be complicated and destabilized through a recognition of the multiple social positions and relations to dominant power found within anyone category or identity.”¹⁶ This destabilization of social categories, an essential feature of queer politics and theory, means that discussions of gender and sexuality must necessarily include discussions of race, class, disability, and geography. My understanding of queer Appalachian people and cultures, while not always touching on every aspect of identity, is nevertheless indebted to this intersectional understanding of queerness. Moreover, all present and future research and political work in Appalachia, in order to be ethical and precise, must similarly include such intersectional analyses. By using “queer” and “LGBTQ+” interchangeably and with an understanding of their intersectionality, I hope to reflect the slipperiness of all such umbrella designations and open the rhetorical space for complex identities to emerge.

As scholarship on queer Appalachian cultures and networks continues to expand, the centering of queer Appalachian voices will remain of the utmost importance for ethical and responsible research. Though I am a queer person from a partly rural area, I am not Appalachian. Moreover, though I am the writer and organizer of these papers, essays, and digital projects, I do not want to suggest that I am the sole arbiter of

¹⁶ Cohen, Cathy. “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* (1997), 459

content and representation. Along each step of my research project—from selecting pieces to discuss, devising oral history questions, to presenting artists and their work—I strive to incorporate the input of the narrator and other queer Appalachian people, making alterations where necessary to present the narrator in a dignified and accurate manner. The history of research in Appalachia is characterized by singular outsider scholars coming into the region to, as Appalachian historian Elizabeth Catte argues, “remake Appalachia in one’s own image.”¹⁷ By working *with* queer Appalachians to construct a highly fluid and constantly malleable image of the region and its myriad cultures, I aim to set an example for outsider scholars of the region, an example which prioritizes listening and collaboration.

¹⁷ Catte 15

“I Fixed Up the Trees to Give Them Some New Life:” Queer Desire, Affect, and Ecology in the Work of Two LGBTQ+ Appalachian Artists

Introduction: Queer Appalachian Slow Violence

Coal dust blacks out the rivers and trees. The blank rocky skull of a mountain sits bleaching in the sun. Pipelines snake their way up and down the hills, clearing trees in their paths. Appalachia is, in the national imagination, a site solely dedicated to capitalist and imperialist resource extraction for the sake of the urban metropolises. Beginning with the colonization of numerous Indigenous nations and proceeding into the seemingly insatiable quest for coal, the history of Appalachia is one that can be read as a series of ongoing instances of mass ecological injustice.

At the same time, however, Appalachia is a region of incredible beauty, both in the natural world and the people who inhabit it. Just as the history of Appalachia can be read as one of environmental injustice, so too can it be read as a unique history of people coming together to combat injustice through a diversity of tactics—including massive strikes, years-long protests, rich oral traditions, and, of course, artmaking of all varieties.

My initial aim for this project was to explore the ways in which LGBTQ+ Appalachian artists process and depict specific instances of environmental injustice in the region—whether that be related to the fossil fuel industry, climate change, deforestation, or other related problems. While these issues certainly sparked a wide range of emotions in the artists that I’ve encountered for this project, I was surprised to find that such issues did not appear explicitly in much of their work. Nature and natural

imagery nevertheless appear prominently in their works, however; plants and animals, trash and trees, mountains and humans all appear with equal likelihood throughout the pieces of art that I analyze, as do overt expressions of sex, desire, and queer identities.

This is not to say, of course, that the art of the LGBTQ+ Appalachians I explore is ideologically neutral or politically useless. Quite the opposite, rather; by sidestepping the (perhaps futile) effort required to accurately represent complex ecological problems in a single work of art, these queer Appalachian artists can more fully interrogate the base psychological and affective relationships, or the lack thereof, that characterize human conceptions of and interactions with other inhabitants of the natural world. Though not as obvious a culprit of ecological destruction as polluting corporations and militaries driven by the hunger of capitalist imperialism, the degree of human affect and care towards the environment still plays a significant role in shaping how much harm occurs and how the harm can be stopped. Environmental scholar Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands argues in “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies” that “the fetishization and commodification of a lost, romanticized nature,” constituting and constituted by an imperialist desire to profit off the natural world, has prevented nature from being properly cared for and worthy of grieving.¹⁸ The “seductive fantasy” of a “pristine nature” drives public attention towards the beautiful aspects of the natural world as well as their occasional spectacular destruction.¹⁹ Nature exists, per this capitalist fiction, separate from humanity as a commodity solely to be consumed by the human gaze and industrial eco-tourism. Moreover, this preoccupation with natural spectacle leaves already

¹⁸ Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona. “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies.” In *Queer Ecologies*, 331. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 337

¹⁹ Ibid.

destroyed elements and inhabitants of the environment left to rot while hegemonic attention simply shifts to a new spectacle. This rapid moving-on renders any longstanding grieving of ecological destruction (or in-depth appreciation of ecological flourishing) socially unacceptable and often impossible—a removal of non-commodified affect that helps to enable the continual destruction of the natural world.

In the case of Appalachia in the public imagination, one of the more spectacular forms of environmental injustice, especially in the last few decades, is Mountaintop Removal Mining (MTR). A highly destructive form of coal mining, MTR uses explosive charges and massive machines to destroy and reduce an entire mountain—a complex ecosystem—into little more than a pile of rock. The explosive and visible nature of MTR (despite efforts from coal companies to hide the destroyed mountains) has led to massive public attention and outcry against the practice, from regional, national, and international audiences. Countless national news articles, documentaries, novels, and scholarly writings from the last two decades have tackled the topic of MTR, bringing the issue into the public light.²⁰ This widespread attention has dealt some small blows to the MTR industry, particularly a 2019 Congressional bill (yet to be passed) that would require thorough proof that a proposed MTR site “does not present any health risk to individuals in the surrounding communities.”²¹

²⁰ Documentary films about MTR include Catharine Pancake’s *Black Diamonds: Mountaintop Removal and the Search for Coalfield Justice* (2006), Bill Haney’s *The Last Mountain* (2011), and Beth Stephen’s and Annie Sprinkle’s *Goodbye Gauley Mountain* (2014). Non-fiction books concerning MTR include Dr. Shirley Burns’ *Bringing Down the Mountains* (2007) and Jeff Biggers’ *The United States of Appalachia* (2007). Novels about MTR include Ann Pancake’s *Strange as this Weather has Been* (2007) and John Grisham’s *Gray Mountain* (2014).

²¹ Yarmuth, John A. “H.R.2050 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): ACHE Act.” Congress.gov, April 9, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2050>.

The national and international attention that MTR receives, however, dwarfs the comparatively miniscule attention to other issues of environmental injustice in the region, such as countless instances of groundwater contamination. As journalist Jan Pytalski notes in the Appalachian news magazine *100 Days in Appalachia*, despite increasing levels of groundwater toxicity due to poorly regulated coal and chemical companies, many Appalachians do not speak out against this form of environmental injustice due to the “extreme pay offs” that these companies issue to both workers in the region and environmental regulatory boards.²² As a result of these pay offs and silences, water toxicity often goes relatively unnoticed (especially compared to MTR) and organizations like the Environmental Protection Agency have been “seemingly unable to set new standards for numerous contaminants found in drinking water.”²³ Such a stark gap in attention between MTR and water toxicity in Appalachia illustrates environmental scholar Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence,” in which the non-spectacular creep of certain kinds of environmental harm appears to be so mundane that it is “typically not viewed as violence at all” and goes relatively unnoticed by anyone not immediately affected.²⁴ In this way, the ecological violence that “occurs gradually and out of sight” that Nixon describes is not only the poisonous water which goes largely ignored by the national media and non-Appalachian public.²⁵ Rather, such “slow violence” can also describe the psychic toxicity which contemporary capitalism releases onto the minds of this public, preventing them from properly recognizing humanity’s

²² Pytalski, Jan. “Water In Appalachia Needs a Trillion Dollar Solution,” July 9, 2018. <https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/2018/07/appalachia-water-quality-problems-part-one/>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Nixon, Rob. “Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.” In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). 2

²⁵ *Ibid.*

reciprocal relationship with the Earth and properly acknowledging the grief of ecological destruction. The slowness of ecological and psychological violence thus prevents any relationship with the natural world that is not on a highly visible and explosively brief scale.

In many ways, this violent commodification of spectacular ecology and erasure of non-commodified affect mirrors the erasure of LGBTQ+ rural and Appalachian people (particularly those who are Black and Indigenous) from queer and straight national imaginations. In his book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, critical theorist Jack Halberstam refers to the hegemonic narrative that the rural and the queer are incompatible as “metronormativity.”²⁶ Metronormative narratives, Halberstam asserts, conflate the queer to the urban, meaning that rural LGBTQ+ people are not living with the “full expression of the sexual self” and are functionally non-existent.²⁷ Such narratives are succinctly illustrated by a quote from Kentucky state representative Lonnie Napier, who once infamously remarked (as recorded by sociologist Mary Gray in her book, *Out in the Country*), that “there aren’t any gays living in Berea!”²⁸ Moreover, much like the only ecological destruction which receives much attention is the highly explosive variety, rural queer people often only receive attention when on the receiving end of incredible violence. In his book, Halberstam recounts the story of Brandon Teena, a young transgender teen from rural Nebraska who was brutally raped and murdered—a crime which was later depicted in the award-winning 1999 film, *Boys Don’t Cry*. Halberstam

²⁶ Halberstam, Jack, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York City NY: New York University Press, 2005), 36

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Gray, Mary L. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2

asserts that this story, which garnered national attention, shaped the public perception of small-town and rural life as inherently anti-queer. Instead of relying on “the queer people who live quietly, if not comfortably, in isolated areas and small towns,” we instead focus on acts of spectacular violence against queer people to shape our understanding of rural America.²⁹ This focus on brutality subsequently distracts from the “slow violence” against rural queer people through systemic homophobia and transphobia, as well as the ecological violence which does not discriminate based on sexuality.

Contrary to this commodified spectacle of environmental violence and erasure of queer Appalachians is the work of the two artists who I discuss in this piece: Kentucky painter Dustin Hall and late Kentucky sculptor Charles Williams.³⁰ Though distinct in their mediums and disciplines, these artists—through their work—nevertheless share two fundamental theoretical outlooks in common. The first of these outlooks is performance theorist Jose Muñoz’ concept of queer futurity. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz famously remarks that “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”³¹ Per this understanding, queerness serves as way to use desire and affect to envision and work towards a new future free from the bounds of heteronormativity and related oppressive cultural norms. Furthermore, Muñoz argues that these queer futures, while

²⁹ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p. 44.

³⁰ It is important to note that Charles Williams’ gender and sexual identity were never publicly disclosed. Though often a patron at gay bars throughout Lexington, it is possible that his sex with other men was strictly financial in motivation. As such, the label of “queer” or “LGBTQ+” may not be accurate. Nevertheless, as I later discuss, his art and his influence on those around him certainly reflect a deviation from standards of heteronormativity and cisnormativity that, at the very least, gesture towards queerness.

³¹ Muñoz, Jose, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City NY: New York University Press, 2009). 1

created through concrete action, can often be “glimpsed” through “the realm of the aesthetic,” such as art, literature, and performance.³² Similarly, the art which appears in this piece envisions queer *ecological* futures, specifically within Appalachia, by reimagining humanity’s relationship with non-human nature through affect and desire.

The second of these theoretical underpinnings is critical theorist Donna Haraway’s concept of “natureculture.” First appearing in her 2003 “The Companion Species Manifesto,” “natureculture,” loosely refers to the myriad ways in which nature (plants, non-human animals, rocks, water) and culture (art, politics, humans, technology) intersect and overlap. While she purposefully leaves the definition of the term open, Haraway gestures towards a few applications of it in her essay. She explains that naturecultures include the joining of “flesh and signifier, bodies and words, stories and worlds,” an inextricable combination of the discursive aspects of human culture and the physical aspects of the natural world.³³ As queer theorist David Bell argues, this combination of the linguistic and the natural world “reminds us that the very idea of nature itself is not natural,” but rather a cultural understanding of the non-human; the boundaries between nature and culture, with further investigation, are nonexistent.³⁴ Bell employs Haraway’s theory within the realm of queer theory to propose the existence of “queernaturecultures.” Queernaturecultures, per Bell, demonstrate that neither nature nor culture can fully encompass sexuality and gender and that attempts to limit these concepts into either category. Queerness is a natureculture. Thorough

³² Ibid.

³³ Haraway, Donna. “The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness.” (Chicago IL: Prickly Paradigm Press 2003). 20

³⁴ Bell, David. “Queernaturecultures.” In *Queer Ecologies*. (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press 2010).143

understandings of queerness must reject both the “scientific imperative to get to the real truth of the nature of sex” as well as cultural essentialist ideas of gender and sexuality as immutable.³⁵ Appalachia is a natureculture. Queernaturecultures run throughout the art of the Appalachian people that I discuss in this piece. In each and every work, humans interact with non-human nature, LGBTQ+ identities, and Appalachian cultures, creating a similarly inextricable assemblage of Appalachian naturecultures and queernaturecultures (I hesitate to say “queerappalachiannaturecultures”). These queernaturecultures share not just blend the beautiful aspects of Appalachian naturecultures but also the traumatic ones. Shared and interlocking systems of dismissal, slow violence, and environmental racism and classism are not separable from one another and are essential in forming “naturalcultural” responses by those affected.

So, though not always addressing issues of environmental injustice specifically, the queer Appalachian art that I examine nevertheless offers nuanced perspectives on humanity’s relationship to the rest of the natural world, specifically by exploring the similar lack of affect towards both queer people and the environment which helps to drive various forms of injustice and slow violence. The art of Dustin Hall and Charles Williams, through highly personal, emotional, and often erotic depictions of the natural world, deconstruct and reevaluate humanity’s affective relationships to this world. Instead of relying on the hegemonic spectacle of commodified awe and mourning, these artists instead construct relationships with nature which are highly reciprocal and interpersonal. In this way, the art of these queer Appalachians is not only “queer” in the

³⁵ Ibid. 139

sense that it deviates from dominant norms of gender and sexuality—it is additionally “queer” in the sense that it uses novel structures of desire to imagine a new and future-facing human relationship with the natural world.

“A truer version of yourself on a tree:” Queer Ecology in the Work of Dustin Hall and Charles Williams

The first of these artists, Dustin Hall, is a painter working out of the small town of Neon, Kentucky. Though a small town, Neon and the neighboring town of Whitesburg are nevertheless surrounded by instances of the kind of environmental slow violence that goes unnoticed, namely deforestation for timber. In a 2019 interview with Hall, the artist laments this destruction, stating that “my mountain has been logged and stripped so there's nothing there but black snakes and weeds,”³⁶ the use of the word “my” illustrating his personal relationship to his natural surroundings. Unlike MTR, this kind of mountain destruction does not receive multiple write-ups and national media attention. The trees and wildlife being destroyed are not destroyed in a spectacular fashion; they are simply bland commodities to be extracted.

³⁶ Cloe, Maxwell. “Dustin Hall Oral History,” transcript of an oral history conducted 2019 by Maxwell Cloe, Monroe Summer Research Project College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, 2019



Figure 1: Dustin Hall – *A woman alone in the woods sees her own reflection*, Neon, Kentucky (2020), acrylic and housepaint on canvas, image courtesy of Hall (@birdsdeadbutshesnot on Instagram)

Contrary to this sterile relationship to the natural world is Hall's art, particularly his 2020 painting *A woman alone in the woods sees her own reflection* (Figure 1). Discussing this work in particular, Hall remarks that it emerged from his own youthful experiences in the forests around Neon. This work—though widely applicable in its exploration of queerness and nature—is nevertheless incredibly specific in its Appalachian origins. From a 2020 interview with Hall:

when I was a kid, I would go in the woods alone and just sit. A naturally fallen tree oftentimes will land halfway on the, you know, stump still in the ground so you have a natural bench and you would just sit there in the heat or like lay down and look at things. It's very dangerous in retrospect, you don't want to do that. Snakes climb a lot to eat birds so being on a tree for hours at a time in a forest is not advisable, actually, come to find out. But I would do it anyway. And so, I never really had epiphanies when I did this - until more recently when I thought about actual things. As a kid, I don't know what I was thinking about, you know? Actually, probably I was masturbating or something, you know when I was twelve. I was, like, you know, bird watching as a kid or whatever you do. So, my idea then was what I do now

in the woods is go and sort of gather things and think about, you know, my myriad problems, you know there are so many. So varied, so twisted and disturbing [laughs]. And then I thought it'd be really nice to portray this figure doing that.³⁷

A woman alone in the woods sees her own reflection contains two distinct halves. On the left, a cloaked woman reclines against a bed of leaves and cherries, her arms slightly gesturing towards the right half of the canvas. Opposite her is an abstract figure which Hall states is the woman “seeing a truer version of yourself on a tree in the woods in the middle of summer.”³⁸ Along with representing the tree in which the woman sees her “truer self,” the abstract figure also contains a cross and a circular outline, reminiscent of a mirror. In the composition for both the two figures and the entire scene, Hall establishes multiple binary borders which he subsequently disrupts. Though the title indicates that the figure on the left is a woman, the figure herself is ambiguous in both sex and gender. Her billowing, formless cloak reveals no clues as to her gender presentation. Her bald head and abstracted face similarly reinforce this uncertainty. Moreover, the figure on the right—her “truer self”—is hardly comprehensible as any known object, let alone a human with a gender. The audience must thus construct the figure’s gender not through any sort of essential signifiers, as conventional understandings of gender assert, but rather through reading the title and applying the label of “woman” onto both figures, an increasingly absurd act when considering the level of abstraction of the rightward figure. In this way, Hall proposes the binary category of “woman” in the title to subsequently demonstrate that such categories, constructed through language, are often unreliable for accurately describing a human

³⁷ Cloe, Maxwell. “Dustin Hall Ecology Oral History,” transcript of an oral history conducted 2020 by Maxwell Cloe, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, 2020

³⁸ *Ibid.*

and their “truer self,” as both they see it and the audience sees it. This decidedly queer presentation of gender and bodies works to disentangle gender from both the audience’s understanding of the woman and the woman’s understanding of herself.

In the space left by reducing the prominence of gender in identity formation, *A woman alone in the woods sees her own reflection* instead proposes the Appalachian natural world as an important category for understanding the figure’s “truer self.” Much like how Hall sets up a binary opposition between the unambiguous gender in the title and the ambiguity of the woman, his painting sets up a binary between the human and the natural world, illustrated by the divide between the left figure and the right figure which, though close, never touch. Each respective side and the overall composition of the painting, however, breaks down this binary to suggest a closer relationship between human identity and the natural world than the commodified affect that Mortimer-Sandilands describes would indicate. The right side of the painting displays humans and nature as distinct from one another, with the woman distinctly reclining on the bed of greenery. Nevertheless, the woman possesses numerous similarities to the plants, such as the formless wrinkles of her cloak and the peculiar shape of her hands mirroring the leaves which surround her—a suggestion that her long stay in the forest is slowly transforming her into one of these plants. In the figure on the right, which Hall explains embodies the tree that the woman on the left is observing, natural and human imagery combine to the point where neither are truly recognizable.

This abstract version of the tree-woman is not a simple, romanticized vision of humans as a part of nature, however. The inclusion of the crude crucifix evokes the image of a small rural church, commonplace throughout Appalachia. Another important

component of human identity is not just the human relationship with the natural world, but the interrelationship between humans, the natural world, *and* the human institutions which shape the discourses and ideologies that help define our identities. This tapestry of human and non-human constructions illustrates the kind of queernaturecultures that appear throughout Haraway and Bell's work; the end of the "human" and the beginning of the "natural" are not easily, and likely cannot be, discerned. Thus, a human's "truer self"—a more accurate and whole representation of their identity—is one which necessarily acknowledges their relationship to the natural world and human institutions beyond the simple process of a spectacular gaze. The painting itself additionally recognizes this folly of relying solely on a human gaze of nature. The woman's eyes and head, her most recognizably "human" features and the origin of her gaze, are those which are farthest away from her "truer self." Her hand, reaching towards the gap between the left and right as if to touch the abstract figure, more closely resembles a pinecone or magnolia fruit, suggesting that her transformation into the human-nature-institution assemblage on the right is underway as she moves beyond a gaze and takes concrete action to reach her "truer self." The anticipation of this transformation, which has not yet happened in the painting, fills the work with the future-facing potentiality of an oncoming and novel relationship between humans and the natural world.

Where Dustin Hall's painting lays out the possibilities for new understandings of humanity and nature, the work of the late Kentucky artist Charles Williams embodies an exploration and execution of these possibilities. Williams was born in the small coal-mining town of Blue Diamond, Kentucky, later moving to Lexington to work as a janitor for IBM. When not working as a janitor, Williams constructed fantastical assemblage

sculptures which surrounded and often entered his house. Though he died of AIDS complications in 1999 in relative obscurity, one of his few interviews with art historian William Arnett reveals some of the ecological underpinnings of Williams' work. Per Williams:

I got me this place here [in Lexington] and decided to do something with it. I have always had art on my mind and wanted to do something out front there that I hadn't heard of no other person doing. I fixed up the trees to give them some new life, some color, one idea got another idea and so on down the line, each idea kept building into another idea. I put the comic people up in the trees after that, which were the ones I remembered from my comic book drawing days, and would use a circular saw and a reciprocating saw, would draw on the plywood, paint them on, have to drill a hole in the wood with a screwdriver bit to get the saw in, then I can cut certain curves with one saw and use another saw for certain curves and vice versa. I did Superman and Batman and Captain Marvel and Mighty Mouse. Superman and Batman were all cut out of wood doors that I found.³⁹

By imbuing the natural world around him with "new life," through complex assemblage sculptures, Williams embraces and transforms nature into his own queer vision through art and affect. One such sculpture is an untitled piece from the 1980s (Figure 2).

³⁹ Arnett, William. "Charles Williams Interview," transcript of interviews and correspondence conducted 1995 by William Arnett, Lexington, 1995



Figure 2: Charles Williams – *Untitled*, Lexington, Kentucky (1980s), tree branch and industrial plastic, image courtesy of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation

Charles Williams' *Untitled* is a small sculpture consisting of a multitude of commonplace materials. The sculpture is built around a slender end of a tree branch, with multiple forked twigs going in various directions. Blobs of multicolored, seemingly fluid melted plastic surround the base and higher levels of the branch, holding it upright. Along with the branch, these puddles of paint and industrial plastic contain a few small objects, the most recognizable of which are two small painted leaves towards the front of the sculpture and a discarded bike reflector towards the rear. Such a sculpture would be commonplace in both Williams' house and yard, which were filled with similar creations. In both the sculpture as a discrete object and as one of many objects in Williams' larger built environment, *Untitled* embodies the assemblage of Williams' gender and sexual identities and the ways in which these identities further intersect with the natural world and human institutions. The sculpture itself is quite literally a

assemblage of natural and human objects—a “natureculture”—combined in such a way that neither are the centerpiece. Certainly, the natural tree branch is an integral element to the sculpture, but the melted plastic that hangs in the branch and holds it upright is equally integral. Melted plastic and paint even cover certain sections of the branch, making it a “human” object as much as a “natural” one. The process of melting the plastic over the branch until it pools around the base creates a new object in which the human components and natural components are inseparable from one another, barring the complete destruction of the object. Moreover, the seeming equality of the found objects within the plastic—the two painted leaves and bicycle reflector—also suggest that both man-made and natural objects are part of the environment which surrounds Williams, to the point where both are fair game for his artistic scavenging. Like the abstract, formless figure on the right of Hall’s painting, then, *Untitled* depicts an object which is neither fully natural nor fully human but rather some queer combination of the two, an object which is simultaneously recognizable and alien, aesthetically repulsive and strangely enticing.



Figure 3: Photograph of Charles Williams Outside his home in Lexington, Kentucky (1980s), photo courtesy of Bob Morgan



Figure 4: Photograph of Charles Williams' house and yard in Lexington, Kentucky (1980s), photo courtesy of the Atlanta Contemporary

The queer boundary-blurring of *Untitled* appears even more prominently when considering the sculpture's place in Williams' environment, which he constructed for himself in his house and yard in Lexington (Figures 3 and 4, respectively). Prior to his death, Williams' yard was filled entirely with such sculptures, including painted tree stumps shot through with pieces of metal debris, large contraptions resembling rockets and wheeled vehicles, and paintings of comic book heroes made from old doors and hung from the branches of trees. Nature and culture appeared with equal likelihood throughout Williams' yard. Williams did not just contain his art in the exterior of his house, however. As Bob Morgan, a fellow Kentucky artist who occasionally visited Williams, recounts, the inside of his house was equally as filled with both art experiments and other people.

He [Williams] was wildly sexually active and had all kinds of people visiting from all over. Now that must've been a little shocking to people who had gotten letters back and forth from Charlie and they show up at his house and it's like - it looks like - I mean, it was rough, for sure. Nothing worked the way it was supposed to work and there was piles of debris everywhere, in the house and outside the house. He had big, old fashioned refrigerators that weighed a ton and he had five of them in his house. He used them to store stuff in. Of course, they weighed a ton already. You'd open the door and all the drawers were filled with industrial refuse and jars of nuts and bolts and stuff. It looked like a refrigerator for robot people and he had five of them filled with stuff taking up one whole room. It was just the refrigerator room. So it was pretty crazy.⁴⁰

Williams' environment was thus not simply the natural world surrounding his home. Nor was it the combination of this world and his art. Rather, Williams' artistic, natural, human, and sexual identities transcended lines of private and public, natural and domestic, to flow unceasingly in and around his home. This combination of care for the people, art objects, and natural elements of his environment place Williams' body of work within the loose category of the "queer garden" that Mortimer-Sandilands describes.⁴¹ Discussing the literary work of gay writer Derek Jarman, Mortimer-Sandilands argues that his novel *Modern Nature*, combined with the many physical gardens that Jarman tended to during his life, create a sort of queer garden which "cultivates an ethical practice of remembering as part of a queer ecological response to loss" and other emotions tied to the natural world.⁴² In the same way that Jarman used inextricable combinations of art, ecology, and queer desire to understand the affective elements of his natural and domestic spaces, so too did Williams use his house and yard to complicate lines between public and private, creating a natural-domestic space for other queer people to physically and emotionally engage with himself, his art, and

⁴⁰ Cloe, Maxwell. "Bob Morgan Ecology Oral History," transcript of an oral history conducted 2020 by Maxwell Cloe, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, 2020

⁴¹Mortimer-Sandilands, *Queer Ecologies*, p. 351.

⁴² *Ibid.* 352

his environment. By filling his yard and house with transformed garbage and natural debris, the opposite of the commodifiable spectacle of capitalist nature, Williams proposes that human interrelationships with nature can and must avoid a mere gaze and must instead consider the full range of human desire, actions, and emotions.

Muñoz writes that queer aesthetics frequently contain “blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity.”⁴³ By depicting Appalachian people, communities, cultures, and the non-human natural world as a constantly moving and overlapping interchange, Dustin Hall and Charles Williams reconfigure popular understandings of Appalachian queerness and ecology. Destroyed mountaintops, pipelines, and endless coal mines do not fill Hall’s canvases or Williams’ house. However, these works crucially engage not only with the natural world of Appalachia, but the myriad queer emotions and structures of desire that characterize their own current and potential relationships with the natural world. Seemingly rigid categories of “humans” or “nature,” “male” or “female,” “private” or “public” do not appear quite as stable in these artists’ lives and works. Rather, by depicting human interactions with the rest of the natural world on interpersonal, fluid, highly affective levels, Hall and Williams propose and demonstrate a new future for humans in the environment. For both Appalachian and non-Appalachian environments, this new future is one distinct from a commodified cycle of spectacle, sterility, and violence.

⁴³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1

Conclusion: Ecossexual Futures

Dustin Hall and Charles Williams gesture to a new Appalachian ecological future. Their art illustrates that human relationships to non-human nature often require many similar forms of affect, desire, and binary-blurring that constitute queer relationships, including those in Appalachia. The “natural” extension of these artists’ complication of boundaries is the embrace of a deep and profound love for the natural world that defies characterization by heteronormative and cisnormative standards. Explicitly representing this kind of relationship are the Ecossexuals, an artistic and identity movement championed by Appalachia-California artist Beth Stephens and her partner, Annie Sprinkle.

Ecossexuality—simultaneously an ethos, an art movement, and a sexual identity—focuses on the reorientation of human relationships to the Earth to emphasize reciprocity, care, and playfulness. As Stephens and Sprinkle explain in their “Ecossex Manifesto,” “the Earth is our lover. We are madly, passionately, and fiercely in love.”⁴⁴ Stephens and Sprinkle manifest their relationship to non-human nature and one another through sex in/with rivers and forests as well as elaborate wedding performances to facets of the natural world, such as their 2010 wedding to the Appalachian Mountains (Figure 5).

⁴⁴ Stephens, Beth and Sprinkle, Annie. “Ecossex Manifesto.” (2005)



Figure 5: Beth Stephens (left) and Annie Sprinkle (right) at the altar of their Wedding to the Appalachian Mountains in Athens, Ohio (2010), Photo Courtesy of Beth Stephens

Though Stephens and Sprinkle are recent practitioners of Ecosexuality, anthropologists Kim TallBear and Angela Willey connect the movement to the long history of Indigenous “eco-erotics,” explaining that the combination of Indigenous understandings of ecology and Ecosexuality can provide a wholistic view both within and beyond “the notion of erotic relations to sex.”⁴⁵ TallBear and Willey specifically cite the research of Indigenous Studies scholar Melissa Nelson, who investigates these eco-erotics in her essay “Getting Dirty.”⁴⁶ In this essay, Nelson explains that Indigenous eco-erotics, illustrated through countless oral traditions of people engaging in trans-species relationships, evoke an “intimate ecological encounter in which we are momentarily and simultaneously taken outside of ourselves by the beauty, or sometimes the horror, of the more-than-human natural world.”⁴⁷ In this way, the explicitly queer actions of

⁴⁵ TallBear, Kim, and Angela Willey. “Introduction: Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging Beyond Settler Sex & Nature.” *Imaginations*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2019.

⁴⁶ A chapter in the anthology *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, edited by Joanne Barker

⁴⁷ Nelson, Melissa. “Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures” (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). 230

Ecosexuality alongside the anti-colonial praxis of Indigenous eco-erotics⁴⁸ further develop a portrait of the new future that Hall and Williams similarly depict in their work.

The complex abstraction of Hall and Williams' art along with the radical openness of eco-erotic practices like Beth Stephens, Annie Sprinkle, and the numerous Indigenous networks that Nelson describes often pose a dilemma to their audiences. "What am I to do," someone may ask, "with these paintings or these sculptures or these people having sex in the woods?" "Am I supposed to have sex in the woods?" "What good do all of these works of art do in the face of a global climate catastrophe?" I'm reminded of the quote (often attributed to Kurt Vonnegut) which argues that the entire force of anti-Vietnam War art amounted to a custard pie dropped from a low ladder. At the same time, however, I'm reminded of Toni Cade Bambara's declaration that "as a cultural worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible."⁴⁹ The intimacy, desire, affect, sex, ecology, and embodiment which appear throughout the work of these queer Appalachians make specific reference to Appalachian ecologies and queerness, but their application extends far beyond the mountains. As Nelson remarks, in reference to the Indigenous eco-erotic systems she discusses, "sex is a symbol for intimate, visceral, embodied kinship relations with other species and with natural phenomenon."⁵⁰ The naturalcultural world, the revolution against slow violence, and the fate of both are all to be rendered irresistible: our collective beloved. And just as we so often risk everything to protect our beloved, so too

⁴⁸ This Indigenous perspective could be applied even more explicitly to Appalachian lives and cultures through the centering of voices of Indigenous groups throughout the region.

⁴⁹ Bambara, Toni Cade, and Thabiti Lewis. "An Interview with Toni Cade Bambara: Kay Bonetti." In *Conversations with Toni Cade Bambara*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). 35.

⁵⁰ Nelson, "Getting Dirty," 252

must put our bodies and our futures on the line to work towards a new ecological horizon.

The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project

[\(link\)](#)

In my undergraduate honors thesis, I dedicated a significant amount of space to discuss the ways in which queer Appalachian archives and archivists operate outside the walls of conventionally institutional archives (such as those hosted by museums or universities) which rarely document the lives of the region's LGBTQ+ people. Relying on Ann Cvetkovich's concept of queer archives being "an archive of feelings," I argue that Instagram accounts, renegade collections of discarded personal belongings, and even complex assemblage sculptures create archives which document queer affects, relationships, and ephemerality in ways which conventional archives do not.

After speaking with multiple narrators from this first thesis project about how they would like to see their work and voices represented, I began *The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project*, an online archive and exhibition of art by LGBTQ+ Appalachian people. Taking inspiration from digital queer history and community projects such as *The Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project* and the ONE Archive's *Safer at Home* exhibition, I've designed *The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project* to showcase research and art to a wider audience beyond the walls of academia. The archive is largely divided into three sections: art and artist interviews, a theory blog of brief essays, and a reading list of relevant written and digital work. I maintain the project on the Scalar platform, which enables me to present content in non-linear and layered format, unlike more straightforward articles or dissertations. The multiple avenues for exploring art (by artist, by theme, or all at once) embodies this non-linearity. Such an approach allows the

audience to explore queer Appalachian art much like I do in my research methods—at their own pace, following unexpected connections, and centering the voices of the narrators.

The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project, like many queer archives, is an “archive of feelings.” In her book *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich asserts that gay and lesbian history “demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism,” all of which are factors which “are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive.”⁵¹ In the same way that queer history is a history of trauma and triumph, affect and desire, so too does Appalachian history often contain this multitude of complex emotions and communities. Moreover, the process of queer oral history, as I mention in my introduction, frequently includes the shared expression of emotional and bodily affect. As such, an archive which centers on queer Appalachian oral histories, especially oral histories regarding highly subjective and personal artistic processes, inherently documents the feelings of the narrators who appear on the site as well as their personal histories and ideologies bound up in their work. These oral histories are also direct results of my ongoing relationships with these narrators and the mutual interest we have in each other’s lives and work. Though I write most of the text on the site and organize the site’s structure, the art and oral histories which appear are a product of collaborative discussions with the artists about their favorite pieces and themes they wish to discuss. The archive, though not completely collaborative, is

⁵¹ Cvetkovich, Ann, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 241

nevertheless a group effort which emerges from my personal relationships with the narrators that extend beyond scholarly contexts.

By virtue of the project's digital platform, I am able to constantly expand and alter the project by adding new artists, themes, theory essays, and even entire sections. For the future of this project, I am constantly speaking with new artists in the region, who connect me to various other artists, groups, and institutions who are interesting in showing their work on the site. Additionally, I plan to revisit many of the artists already on the site every year, engaging in new oral histories where they have the space to reflect on their recent work, their lives, and their changing ideas and attitudes towards art, queerness, and Appalachia. I am also in the process of transcribing every oral history that I've conducted with queer Appalachian people and upload these oral histories (with permission) to the site in a dedicated section, expanding the project from solely an artistic archive to an archive which also includes oral histories that scholars, writers, artists, and other people can access to learn more about LGBTQ+ networks in Appalachia. In this way, I aim to make *The Wildcrafting Our Queerness Project* a platform primarily for Appalachian artists to discuss and broadcast their work and secondarily a resource for those seeking to learn more about Appalachia and the numerous people who disrupt dominant narratives about the region.

The Queer Appalachia Preservation Project

[\(link\)](#)

In August of 2020, a small digital explosion rippled through numerous queer Appalachian communities, online and offline. An article in the *Washington Post* by Appalachian journalist Emma Copley Eisenberg convincingly alleged that the Queer Appalachia Project (@queerappalachia), noted Instagram account and harm reduction collective, mishandled harm reduction funds, failed to credit artists, and censored critical voices.⁵² What followed was a series of half-hearted apologies, further criticisms, an alleged takeover by radical Appalachian activists, a subsequent regaining of control by the original directors of the account, and complete account silence since August of 2020. As an apparent paragon of queer liberation, Appalachian cultures, and rejection of oppressive hierarchies, the revelation of Queer Appalachia's misconduct served as a notable loss for many people in networks throughout the region and the country at large.

This Instagram account, while ultimately controversial, is nevertheless an invaluable archive of queer Appalachian cultures, networks, and affects. As the many deleted posts have already shown, no post is permanent and any post can be quickly deleted. Furthermore, there is no guarantee of Instagram's longevity. Changes in the market, digital censorship laws, or future technology could render the entire site and its contents completely inaccessible. These sorts of precarious digital projects are far from uncommon. In her essay "Recovering the Recovered Text," digital humanities scholar Amy Earhart explains that many digital humanities projects, especially those concerned

⁵² Eisenberg, Emma Copley. "The Tale of Queer Appalachia." (Washington DC: The Washington Post, 2020)

with marginalized groups' perspectives and histories, are "living dead and have not been updated for years," are incredibly inaccessible, or are completely gone—erased by technological obsolescence, neglect, or a lack of resources (Earhart 2012). The disappearance of numerous posts and comments, as well as the potential disappearance of countless others pose a stark contradiction to Queer Appalachia's aim of preserving the LGBTQ+ history of the region. The loss of these archives is a loss of invaluable historical texts. However, as information studies scholar Travis Wagner argues in "Reeling Backward: The Haptics of a Medium and the Queerness of Obsolescence," "the latent failings of obsolescence spur an awareness of what new and modern technologies should be doing, while also denoting what any respective format did not do"—lost exhibitions should not be a point of despair, but rather a reminder of the ephemerality of queer artifacts and the care that must go into preserving these artifacts (Wagner 2018, 73). At the same time, the loss of these posts and comments could also be a predictor of the loss of more substantial documents and collections, such as the entirety of the digital social media archive, without the proper care. A potential project would thus be, as Earhart suggests, to "focus on acquiring artifacts" such as previously lost posts and comments and to "work with short term preservation strategies to stop immediate loss" of current texts currently on the Instagram account (Earhart 2012).

The Queer Appalachia Preservation Project is my attempt at the kind of project Earhart suggests. This project relies on the Omeka platform, which provides intuitive features for both me—such as a multitude of metadata options—and the audience—such as allowing for image descriptions and a built-in search bar. This ability to

meticulously document metadata and enable search results makes this archive, in many ways, more easily navigable than Instagram, which currently does not have any robust features for searching individual posts by keywords or the ability to immediately jump to a post on a specific date.

The project is not without its difficulties, however. Firstly, the Queer Appalachia Instagram account is sizeable, with over 4,000 posts dating back to 2016. I currently have no means of automatically uploading these images and videos while also retaining image descriptions and necessary metadata, meaning that my archiving of these posts is done manually, one post at a time, which is an incredibly lengthy process. Additionally, I am still working to find a way to document every aspect of the Instagram post in the Omeka platform. As I write in “Myths and Electricity,” the comment section and tagging feature “is a critical space for preserving and documenting responses to the content within the post,” allowing for a more collaborative and communal facet of the Instagram account as an archive.⁵³ As it currently stands, I do not yet have the capacity to document the comments on every Instagram post nor the content of every account linked to Queer Appalachia through tags, meaning a critical component of the affect and networks embodied by the Instagram archive is absent. As my preservation project continues, I aim to find novel ways of documenting the more intricate details of Instagram as fully as possible.

⁵³ Cloe, Maxwell. “Myths and Electricity: The Queer Appalachia Project and Unconventional Queer Archives” in *Y’all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia*. (Oakland CA: PM Press 2021). 74

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