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Slow Activism and the Cultivation of Environmental Stewardship in Rural Spaces

Abstract

Activist scholarship can take a variety of forms depending on the contextual situation within which a researcher operates. Drawing on the archives of the Ohio Field School, I suggest we look for research models in the slow activism of rural citizen scientists who are working to transform area residents into stewards of their own forests and watersheds. What lessons might ethnographers learn about engaging people across ideological difference for a common good from those who have been working on behalf of nature for the last quarter century? Taking up Maribel Alvarez's recent call to imagine ourselves as Citizen-Folklorists (Alvarez and Nabhan 2018), I ponder the role of the folklorist in documenting groups who are already adept at telling and sharing their own stories.

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> People have a way of responding creatively to the circumstances they face. That is the bottom line of citizen folklore and citizen science: a fundamental appreciation that people observe their surroundings, interact with other species, negotiate changes in their environments, and adapt to variable circumstances, and that in doing all these practical living routines they accumulate bodies of knowledge that scientists and folklorists living outside those same predicaments may easily miss.
> Maribel Alvarez (with Gary Paul Nabhan 2018, 37)

In recent engagements with environmental issues, folklorists have tended to focus on natural or technological disasters—forest loss, Mountaintop Removal and chemical spills in West Virginia (Hufford 2011; Lassiter, Hoey and Campbell 2020), Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Lindahl 2012, Horrigan 2018), floods in rural Missouri (Lawrence and Lawless 2018; Lawrence 2015). Advocacy is central to these projects. The ethnographer bears witness and amplifies local voices emphasizing the suffering and resilience, the marginalized knowledge and the basic humanity of those affected. Yet Steve Striffler (2019) points to the limits of solidarity activism forged in reaction to crisis, as it cannot build political power or introduce the kind of structural change that would shift the order of the world. Paul Routledge and Kate Driscoll Derrickson (2015) suggest the term 'situated solidarities' to underscore the important work a scholar-activist might do in supporting a social movement before, during and after a crisis, such as climate-change induced cyclones.

When we turn out attention to environmental repair, however, the folklorist's focus of advocacy appears to shift. Instead of exposing the effects of an *absence* of industrial regulation, state protections or relief on people and landscapes, this work often centers on the ways that government policies protecting nature negatively impact human communities whose traditional livelihoods depend on harvesting it: fishers, farmers, loggers, indigenous communities (Frandy and Cederström 2017; Scott 2020; Sonck-Rautio 2019). This approach can support more inclusive and just forms of governance. However, it tends to depict groups in conflict. Following geographer Sarah Wakefield (2007), I contend that many forms of activist research, or *praxis*, exist, ranging from policy interventions, to teaching, to community-based research, to direct action and more. The question is not, as Elliott Oring (2004) has defined it, whether to be activists or scholars: rather, we must consider the kind of activism appropriate for a given research situation. In this essay, I consider a research paradigm that emerges from the post-industrial landscape of South-

eastern Ohio in search of alternative future-natures, one that I am provisionally labeling slow activism.[1]

Slow activism recognizes that processes of natural and cultural recuperation and repair require patience and commitment. It posits that ordinary people can organize themselves into networks to achieve a particular set of goals without giving up important differences—of education, of experience, or of values. And it affirms a plurality of conceptual paradigms under the term environmentalisms (Newfont 2014; McDowell, Borland, Dirksen and Tuohy 2021). The *Friends of Scioto Brush Creek* (FOSBC) and related conservation initiatives in Southern Ohio demonstrate the important role that naturalists and rural residents play in the ongoing transformation of their landscape. These groups may sometimes be at odds, they may imagine different future-natures (Mansfield, Biermann, McSweeney, Law, Gallemore, Horner and Munroe 2015), but they also cooperate to foster and protect the landscape they value.[2] Most important, they work to shift a paradigm that views rural spaces as empty and abandoned to one that recognizes in them a long history of environmental advocacy. In this way, they challenge the notion that protecting the natural environment is a concern only for well-educated, progressive, urban actors and government agents. Like many other citizen-science initiatives, FOSBC asks us to look to local actors for sustained community transformation (see, for example Sánchez, Flores and Vargas 1995). But local actors, especially in impoverished areas, cannot carry the stewardship burden alone. What role might an outsider research team play in this ongoing place-specific work of cultural and environmental repair?

In their recently published dialogue, Maribel Alvarez and Gary Nabhan (2018) discuss the various ways that a citizen-science/citizen-folklore model can disrupt existing knowledge hierarchies and create powerful participatory research models. The prototypical citizen-science model involves crowdsourcing data collection, and though Alvarez and Nabhan acknowledge the value of this approach, they point out that such projects continue to locate the authority to define the problem with the experts. They argue for a more expansive understanding of citizen-science/citizen-folklore, one that dissolves the

1 The term is one that my PhD advisee, Jordan Lovejoy, and I are currently theorizing in the context of climate change and rural climate change denial. In a politically polarized context in which the very words environmental activism are subject to ideological distortion, how might our research cultivate unified action to protect both human and natural homeplaces?

2 This part of Southern Ohio was the territory of the Shawnee prior to forcible white settlement in the late 1700s and Indian removal after 1830 (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Many of the current population are descended from settler colonialists, who arrived in the 1700s and 1800s and, over the next century, cut down the forests.

barrier between expert and folk knowledge and fosters collaboration among a team of knower-learners. In this model nonexpert community members participate in the research from project design to collecting and analysis. The Ohio field school aspires to this way of working with communities while also recognizing the limitations of our ability as university-based researchers to fully embed with our partner communities. As an illustration of what this approach can reveal, I offer an account of our five plus year relationship with the organizers and volunteers of FOSBC.

The Ohio Field School: A Different Research Model

In 2016, the staff of the Center for Folklore Studies at the Ohio State University received funding to develop a series of field schools in Appalachian Ohio that would accomplish several overlapping objectives. To better model the kinds of work students might do in the public sphere, the field schools provided team-based ethnographic training. As service-learning initiatives, the field schools centered the goals and perspectives of community partners. We developed a broad question that accommodates varied and shifting partners' goals on the one hand, but important to us, addresses the negative stereotype of the region as a stagnating, diseased and emptied out rural space. We asked, "How do Ohians develop a sense of place in a changing environment?" Southeastern Ohio, like much of the Appalachian region, continues to suffer from stereotypes of social backwardness, economic stagnation, and cultural and political conservatism. The area has been a site of extractive scholarship as well as of industrial-era extraction, a "sacrifice zone" that fueled modernization elsewhere (Hufford 2002b, Barry 2012). Cognizant of the ways that research and representation has negatively impacted Appalachians in the past (Batteau 1990, Billings, Norman and Ledford 1999), our work focused less on specific research outcomes and more on developing broad and varied relationships with individuals and groups—black and white, young and old, urban and rural, old-timers and newcomers—currently living and working in Scioto County, Ohio. We wanted our research to support existing projects for community survival , self-definition and flourishing.

Ideally, in the model of collaborative ethnography we were attempting to enact, a community partner shows up at one's university office with a problem or objective, seeking the researcher's assistance (Campbell and Lassiter 2015). Some excellent examples of this happy circumstance exist (see for example Lassiter, Goodall, Campbell and Johnson 2004; Hufford 2016; Cederström, Frandy and Connors, 2018). More frequently, however, grants enable research, and university-based teams, having received funds, must insert themselves into a community process. Our anonymous donor allowed

us a rare opportunity to develop the project in an open-ended manner over time. This approach directly conflicted with the academic environment in which we found ourselves, where one's research questions are designed before amassing evidence, and where swift and steady publication is a mark of scholarly productivity. For this reason, we emphasized the way that the research project enabled a valuable, immersive teaching and learning opportunity for student-ethnographers (Borland, Patterson and Waugh-Quasebarth 2020; Borland 2017).

By anchoring our work in the folklore archives, we were able to transcend the limitations of the typical fourteen-week class, making it possible for successive groups of students to build on the work of previous groups and for faculty and staff to follow up on student leads in addition to providing them with contacts to pursue. In addition to offering ethnographic training, our overarching goal was to make our documentation available to partners and community members. We developed an accessible archival database, in which materials were labeled by date, county, interviewer initials, interviewee name, and document type. Interviews and transcriptions were returned to interviewees for review before they were accessioned into the public record. To increase accessibility, we provided copies of the collection to several local repositories. In other words, the archive we created was freely shared with community members—anyone could access the interviews and identify who said what about whom. For this reason, some interviewees retracted or redacted their interviews on review, because they did not want things they had said to an interview-team to become public record.

Reflecting now on my role as a single author of this case study intended for an international academic audience, I recognize an inherent tension in producing research that emerges from a collaborative teaching and learning process. The ideal of collaborative research that incorporates community partners in all facets of the research—from developing the research question to writing and publishing findings—conflicts with the practicalities of scholarly publishing. Although my principal community partners, Jody and Martin McAllister, read and commented on a first draft of this essay, and although I incorporated their thoughts and corrections into a subsequent draft, not everyone quoted herein participated in writing this article. Moreover, in revising to accommodate editors' and reviewers' many suggestions and concerns, I have made considerable changes to both form and content, changes that Jody and Martin have not reviewed. I have done my best to represent people fairly in a scholarly venue distant from local knowledge production and sharing. Refusing to try would mean that local actors in a local field remain invisible, and

their lessons in praxis do not reach a wider audience.[3] In this paper, I use the full names of community participants who occupy public roles in the work I describe, the initials of student researchers, and descriptive titles for all other research participants. Providing full anonymity is not possible, however, due to our archival labeling system.

A Watershed Worth Protecting

The 1972 Clean Water Act laid the groundwork for a massive, ongoing effort to eliminate point source pollution in United States waterways, especially in urban areas.[4] Martin McAllister and his wife Jody Newton McAllister remark that in rural Southern Ohio, being "environmentally conscious" did not really become mainstream until the late 1980s. The couple, who founded the FOSBC in 1997, remember being disparaged as "tree huggers." Sometimes they still are. Yet concern for the environment has increased substantially in their area, as measured by the frequency of coverage in the local news outlets. Those of us living in cities are sometimes surprised to learn that things have changed in Southern Ohio and in other rural areas of the country before and despite the era of Trump. Jody and Martin can take some credit for that. Their strategy, however, does not involve "breaking the rules." Instead, they have managed to deepen and widen an incipient local environmental consciousness through a process of slow activism that relies on both science and storytelling.[5]

The Scioto-Brush Creek is one of countless watersheds in the Ohio River Basin that flow to the Mississippi and ultimately, the Gulf of Mexico. As Jody and Martin recall, the FOSBC began as a subcommittee of the Shawnee Nature Club, which met at the lodge in Shawnee State Park. Our research team

3 See J.K. Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) for a wide-ranging discussion of the importance of looking to local solutions to economic and environmental problems as a means of challenging the omnipotence of a capitalist system. See P. Routledge and K.D. Derrickson (2015) for a more extended discussion of the ways that academic institutions discourage activist engagements in favor of reproducing the status quo.

4 Point source pollution refers to pollution that can be traced to a single large emitter, such as a factory discharging wastewater into a river or the overflow from a public wastewater treatment facility. Nonpoint source pollution regulations (for pollutants that seep into watersheds in small amounts from many places) were not incorporated into the Clean Water Act until 1987. In 2020 President Trump significantly weakened those regulations with his "Navigable Waters Protection Rule." It will take current President Joe Biden some time to restore protections to rural areas (Davenport 2020).

5 Slow activism draws on a number of already existing terms: Carlo Petrini founded the 1980s-era"slow food" movement to combat the alienating and unhealthy consequences of modern food systems; Rob Nixon (2011) coined "slow violence" to draw attention to the ongoing effects of environmental damage to marginalized communities; Isabelle Stengers (2018) has called for a "slow science" that cultivates nonexpert connoisseurs, capable of determining the value to society of scientific research.

later learned that watershed groups had proliferated across Ohio in the late 1990s and early 2000s, suggesting to us that some state organization, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) perhaps, or the Soil and Water Conservation District office, had promoted the idea.[6] Recognizing a strong local antipathy to perceived government overreach, the founding members of FOSBC intentionally opted not to pursue a scenic river designation. While business owners may ally with environmentalists to back projects that promise an influx of outsiders, such projects may negatively impact local life. For Scioto-Brush Creek, Martin and Jody decided to honor ordinary residents' perspectives and put their energy into building an educational program that would remind them of the value of what was in their own backyards.[7]

Indeed, Scioto-Brush Creek supports several rare species of freshwater mussels and fish, as well as the "charismatic" Eastern Hellbender, a giant salamander. Martin hypothesizes that the stream's close-to-pristine water quality is a consequence of its location:

> It's on the western front of the plateau, which means it's too far east and too hilly and rugged to be great farmland, you know? The only place you can farm around here are in the creek bottoms and the ridge tops because all the hillsides are too steep. And they're too steep for development, so they're mostly forested. And forests are really good for creeks. And it's too far west. It's on the edge of the escarpment, so it's too far west for it to have coal and natural gas. So, there's no energy development here. [- -] So that combined with the fact that since there's no industry here, not many people live here. [laughs] Not much of the forest has been cleared, and if you want healthy streams, you have to have forest. And 81% of this watershed is still forested. That's, that's amazing. 81% of 270,000 acres is still forested. Some of that thanks to ODNR.[8] Because it's designated state forest. Shawnee State Forest and Brush Creek State Forest both overlap into the watershed.[9]

All these factors make western Scioto County and eastern Adams County an area of high biodiversity. The number of rare and endangered plants and animals is impressive, and it provides a migratory corridor for birds and butter-

6 See the Ohio EPA Publication, 1997.

7 After a long career managing state parks and nature preserves, Martin retired. He now works part-time as the Appalachian Forests Project Manager at the Nature Conservancy in Adams County. He was born in Rarden, Ohio, one of three villages on the Scioto-Brush Creek, and, as he puts it, was lucky to be able to attend college. Like many families in the area, his had arrived in the 1790s and stayed. Jody, whose family has resided almost as long in a neighboring county, worked as a naturalist in Florida and Ohio parks until she married Martin and became a homemaker.

8 Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

9 Interview. OFS(S)20161213KBCP_McAllister, Jody and Martin (3 of 3)_transcription.

flies as well. Although the nearby Shawnee State Park has tried to capitalize on these facts, it remains one of the least visited of the Ohio State Parks. The resident naturalist explained this as a consequence of the park's relative distance from major metropolitan centers in the state compared to other state parks.

In spite of its high biodiversity, creek health is compromised by three potential sources of pollution: sewage leaks from faulty septic systems, erosion where trees have been removed from the creek banks either for farming or lawns, and illegal dumping. Martin emphasizes that the first of these is largely a problem of poverty, and it is neither practical nor moral to insist that people fix their septic systems, if you cannot also provide funds to help them with the repairs. Jody explained that county health departments are stretched thin and will not inspect private septic systems unless they receive a complaint.

Education for Stewardship

Instead of focusing on nonpoint source pollution, the FOSBC partnered with the Northwest School District to offer a full day, hands-on, Creek Day each September, for every sixth grader in the district. The village of Otway has preserved a covered bridge that crosses the Scioto-Brush Creek about halfway along its 60-mile course. It is an ideal spot to launch a hands-on science program. The children put on waders, take water samples, collect macroinvertebrates from under the rocks, and shock, count and identify fish. Over the years, Creek Day programming has grown to six stations, including a food chain game and an exercise in which children use anti-erosion principles to design their own creek-side homes. The FOSBC attracted environmental professionals living in the area, and Jody explains that those members drew on their networks for programming, experimenting over time to find the most engaging content and presenters. By their 19th year, the FOSBC was beginning to see former sixth graders returning as parents of current sixth graders, and the group could tentatively claim a generational impact. For Jody, the point was to get the kids to look in places they would not normally look, and to allow them to see what was in the stream that was not easily observable.[10] In this way they would be able to better appreciate the diversity of living things that depend on a clean stream habitat. She adds, however, that Creek Day is designed to encourage kids and their families to use the stream in order to strengthen their embodied, affective attachment to their environment. She adds:

> And if they want to continue to, you know, have this resource or this, this recreational activity, you know, this place of fish, whatever it is they do. Swim. Then they need to

10 For more on this strategy for environmental protection, see Episode 3: The Owl of *Timber Wars.* NPR Podcast https://www.npr.org/podcasts/906829608/timber-wars

> take ownership of it and start being a part of the solution to those major, uh, top three threats that we talked about earlier that are there for the stream. And so, the kids get that. You know? They get that.
>
> And then we always encourage them to take one piece of that knowledge back to their family. You know, Martin always asks at the end of the program if you'll do one thing, and that is go back and tell somebody in your family, your neighbor, your grandma, your grandpa, whoever, and share with them one thing that you learned today about the stream that you didn't know. And so hopefully that's disseminating that information to the families, and then we, again, start to see them coming back and using the stream.[11]

In this way science education becomes a lesson in stewardship that young people share with their families. The model recognizes an ecosystem that includes people living in ways that do not harm the environment for other species.[12]

Martin, Jody and other naturalists who live and work in Scioto and Adams Counties, champion the unusual diversity of the mixed-mesophytic forest, which is characterized by over seventy different tree species, and its ability to support numerous rare and endangered species. (Braun 2001, Loucks, 1998). By 2017, FOSBC had become well enough established in the area that the power company donated 300 acres of unimproved land along the creek to the group as part of an arrangement to mitigate construction happening elsewhere. The FOSBC actively manages this land to encourage prairie restoration and riparian corridors, which entails mowing, planting, and removing invasive species, all on a volunteer basis. They also maintain a newly established Arc of Appalachia nature preserve just outside of Otway, located on the adjacent farms of two former Otway elementary school teachers. Most recently, they paid for the construction of a gravel pathway under a highway bridge in order to connect the Otway community park on one side of the highway to the covered bridge on the other. All these transformations of the landscape increase public access.

Moreover, they describe their work as continuing a local legacy of ecological research and activism. Over a career that spanned the first half of the 20th century, the botanist-professor E. Lucy Braun, her entomologist-sister Annette, and a cohort of University of Cincinnati graduate students meticulously cat-

11 Interview. OFS(S)20161213KBCP_McAllister, Jody and Martin (3 of 3)_transcription.

12 Jody also maintains an FOSBC Facebook page where she posts notices of the group's various service projects. People who visit the creek post pictures of wildlife they have encountered. Former area residents have, on occasion, also posted childhood memories. Jody says she sometimes does not know who the posters are, but she appreciates the sharing.

aloged and described the trees, plants and, especially, wildflowers that occupy the border region between the sandstone substrate of the Appalachian hill country and the limestone-fed prairie. In 1924 Braun founded the Cincinnati Chapter of the Wildflower Preservation Society, and she edited the society's journal from 1928 to 1933. In her larger work on the woodlands of the Eastern United States, Braun theorized that during successive ice ages, the steep, narrow valleys of the Appalachian region offered protective warmth to forest plants that elsewhere went extinct (Braun 2001). Throughout her career, Braun, lobbied tirelessly for nature preserves, and ultimately succeeded in saving a 22-acre limestone prairie in Adams County not far from the Scioto-Brush Creek watershed. That campaign led to the establishment of the 13,000-acre Edge of Appalachia Preserve, and to the creation of the Nature Conservancy, the largest environmental nonprofit supported by U.S. membership. (Hanrahan 2019) By telling and retelling this story, the FOSBC offers an alternative narrative to that of industrial abandonment that encourages planning for a greener economy in the future.

Forest Return

All this emphasis on rare plants and animals, however, and the felicity of Scioto Brush Creek's course through sparsely populated, forested land, ignores the historical nature of the existing landscape. Martin admits, "If you look at any photos of the forests around southern Ohio in like the late 1800s and early 1900s, it looks like a nuclear bomb went off. They're horrible. They were just abused, stripped, the soil washed away. It was terrible."[13] Indeed, by the early 1900s, the forests that had once covered ninety-five percent of Ohio, had been almost entirely cut down. In Southeastern Ohio, the wood had been harvested to fuel numerous small iron furnaces. After the land was cleared, erosion quickly rendered the steep hillsides worthless for farming. In 1916, realizing that the state had lost both its source of lumber and the wildlife the forests had once supported, forward-thinking Ohio legislators began purchasing land at fire-sale prices and establishing state parks and forests. With 5,000 acres purchased in 1922, the Theodore Roosevelt State Game Preserve was the earliest and largest of these newly public lands. It later became Shawnee State Park and was substantially improved during the Great Depression by Civilian Conservation Corps teams. ODNR, established in 1949, bought thousands of additional acres of wasteland around the park in order to convert them back to forest. After 1975, with public demand for conservation increasing nationally, ODNR's Division of Forestry designated a portion of that forestland southwest of the Park as a preserve. South of Scioto Brush Creek,

13 Interview. OFS(S)20161213KBCP_McAllister, Jody and Martin (1 of 3)_transcription.

then, a 65,000-acre state forest that is regularly harvested for timber encircles a state park, and an adjacent state forest preserve. Like slow activism, the reparative effects of reforestation manifest slowly over time: whitetail deer, beaver, and most recently, bobcats have returned to the area.[14]

Over the past 120 years, the forested land across the state of Ohio has grown from 10 to 33 percent, mostly within the Appalachian foothills of the Southeastern quadrant. Rural Ohio's forest land is characterized neither by vast swaths of public land, as in the Western states, nor by vast private holdings by nonlocal corporations, as is true of the forests of Maine, for example. Instead, numerous private smallholders have allowed their lands to grow back as forest. With public land ownership in the state a mere 4.2 percent of the total, clearly, the reforesting story that ODNR likes to tell centered on forward thinking state legislators and land managers needs to be amended to include other actors. (See, for example, Andrews and Fetsch 2005) As Law and McSweeney (2013) argue, the prevailing government doctrine regarding reforestation regards rural smallholders not as partners but as pesky holdovers from an earlier era who cannot be trusted to properly steward their land. And yet, these smallholders have played a significant role in forest recovery.

Indeed, the folks living in and around the returning forest, have engaged in fractionated livelihoods, as Katherine Roberts terms the combination of wage labor, farming, trading, and resource extraction required of those who "stay put" across much of the Appalachian region (2013). Rustbelt decline began as early as the 1960s in the nearby city of Portsmouth. After the Piketon Weapons Grade Nuclear Plant shut down in 2001, residents of this area had to commute further and further to find work (Connolly 2010; Patterson 2019). The stores and businesses that once dotted the main streets of Rarden, Otway, and McDermott gradually shuttered as local economies foundered. By the mid-1990s Otway's local school had shut down, and the children were bussed to the consolidated Northwest Schools outside McDermott. Today, a motorist driving through Otway would find only The Depot, a gas station that doubles as a pizza parlor, and a Dollar Store that is struggling to keep its doors open. 67 homes constitute the village, housing perhaps 150 people. In many ways, Otway epitomizes the plight of small towns and villages across the Southeast

14 The large size of deer in the area has attracted hunters from across the country, which has in turn led to the enclosure of private lands that are bought up by nonlocal hunters or hunter associations. Outsider hunters also pay local landowners for exclusive rights to hunt on their properties. Although private property rights are strongly supported in this area, these new forms of privatization conflict with a local ethos of commoning, where private owners grant access to both wildlife and hunters on their lands. In exchange, neighbors who hunt will report back to landowners about downed trees, broken fences or other issues that may be of concern.

Ohio region. Framed photos of more prosperous times, when local timber was harvested for railroad ties, line the walls of the eponymous gas station.

Nevertheless, the FOSBC recognizes Otway residents as crucial partners in their project to protect the stream, and, in addition to their Creek Day, they host highway clean-ups four times a year and an annual canoe float to pull trash out of the creek. At their annual meetings they offer wildlife programs that attract residents from across the county. They regard these efforts as important to cultivating camaraderie among their members and generating goodwill among local people. Local government is too poor to provide financial support for environmental restoration, but, Jody recalls, “We asked permission to erect the Bluebird Trail in their parks, and they’ve been, always been supportive of, of that…They don’t tell us, ‘No.’ But if we do all the work.”[15] Even though Jody and Martin live nearby, they remain unsure about the degree of local support for their project. After sending their 2016 newsletter to all residents of the watershed their official membership jumped from 90 to 160, indicating significant support. Still, Jody and Martin wanted to know more about people’s affective attachment to the creek. For the first year of the Ohio Field School, we decided that student ethnographers would interview some FOSBC members to get a sense of why they value the creek and how they see their landscape changing. This constituted our starting point. Over the years, faculty, staff and students have slowly made our way into the homes and meeting spaces of folks living in the watershed to learn more about how voluntary stewardship works.

Student Interviews

In March 2017, two field school students, DR and MS, visited two science teachers and the principal of Northwest Middle School and three sets of creekside property owners, FOSBC 1 and 2, FOSBC 3, 4 and 5, and FOSBC 6 and 7.[16] Student impressions, as reflected in their fieldnotes, underscore the diversity of perspectives and experiences of those who support the FOSBC. For instance, MS and DR were immediately impressed by FOSBC 1 and 2’s professional landscaping and elegant house, which sits close to the confluence of Scioto Brush Creek and the Scioto River. They learned that although FOSBC 1 had grown up nearby in West Portsmouth, she had left the area to pursue a nursing degree and had made her career in Seattle, Washington as a psychotherapist with her Oregon-born husband, also a psychotherapist. Capitalizing on the lower cost of living, the couple had returned as early retirees to Scio-

15 Interview. OFS(S)20161213KBCP_McAllister, Jody and Martin (1 of 3)_transcription.

16 Jody had suggested they also speak with a family of loggers, but the student ethnographers were unable to make contact during their week in the field.

to County in 2000. Although they appreciate the watershed's natural beauty, opportunities to kayak, and the slower pace of life, they confessed they had difficulty fitting in socially. FOSBC 1 was dismissive of the attitudes and perspectives of many of her less well-off neighbors, arguing that their voting habits undercut their own interests.[17] She characterized the people of the area, including her own family, as hyper-conformist and risk averse. The couple discovered the FOSBC shortly after their move to Scioto County in their search for like-minded people. The student ethnographers DR and MS identified an elitism in FOSBC 1's remarks that contradicted earlier conversations they had had with the Northwest Middle School teachers and principal, who had suggested area residents embraced an egalitarian ethos, born of widespread poverty. This led them to wonder whether the environmental activism of groups like FOSBC was tied to class privilege.

Their interview with FOSBC 3, 4, and 5, however, offered a somewhat different perspective. This family included a high school student, FOSBC 5, who has been an active member ever since she attended the sixth grade Scioto-Brush Creek Day. A year later, the FOSBC sponsored a vernal pool event that she urged her family to attend, and thus began their active volunteering with the group. In addition, FOSBC 5 was completing a Future Farmers of America (FFA) project centered around periodic water quality sampling at the Otway covered bridge. Several other FOSBC members helpfully introduced her to training opportunities at the Soil and Water Conservation District offices and ODNR that have helped her with her project. She planned to attend college to study chemistry or environmental science.

The high schooler had not successfully convinced her peers to join the FOSBC, yet children and teens do participate as a minority of those who volunteer with the group. Instead, she had inspired her parents to become active members and leaders in the group. At the time of the interview her father, FOSBC 3, was serving on the Board of Trustees. Both FOSBC 3 and 4 are from Ohio, and although they had not lived all their lives in Scioto County, both had grandparents in the area, whom they visited during their childhoods. They enjoy camping and fishing, so they have always valued clean water. FOSBC 3 works in construction as a materials tester. He mentioned that he had become aware of environmental issues through that work. FOSBC 4, had been a professional housepainter until an injury led her to become a homemaker instead. When MS asked about how the environment had changed, FOSBC

17 The intensity of these remarks may be explained partly as a consequence of the extreme polarization that occurred nationwide after the surprise election of Donald Trump in 2016. FOSBC 1 is politically progressive; Scioto County is overwhelmingly conservative in its voting habits.

3 stated emphatically, “It’s pristine to what it used to be,” recalling the red clouds over Portsmouth in the 1970s, when the steel mill was in operation.[18]

When MS asked about cultural change, FOSBC 3 echoed FOSBC 1’s comments in a more hesitant, less pejorative register.

> Don’t see a lot of change in this area. It’s been—I don’t want to say a closed area. But it’s just—it’s an Appalachian area and it’s still… There’s no work in this area, so you don’t get an influx of people like you do into the cities. So it’s still pretty—pretty laid back. Pretty—oh what’s the word—cliquish.[19]

FOSBC 3 identified two very different attitudes toward environmental stewardship among the population at large: hunters and fishers adopt a “leave no trace” mentality; others who ride four-wheelers tear things up, leave a lot of trash, and do not seem to respect other people’s property. Speaking of the value of FOSBC’s work, FOSBC 4 remarked, “Anytime you get anybody to pick up anything is never a failure.” The family is convinced that small actions and more educational programs can lead to better and broader local stewardship.

DR and MS’s most rewarding interview experience was at the home of FOSBC 6 and 7. There the students were delighted to discover a host of decorative objects the retired couple had fashioned from things they had found in the woods—dried flower arrangements and wreaths, a chandelier made of antlers. FOSBC 6 and 7 describe themselves as homebodies. They met in grade school in the 1960s, and after a brief stint in Ohio’s capital city after high school, when FOSBC 6 got a job with her sister at an insurance office and FOSBC 7 worked as a janitor for the city newspaper, they returned to their beloved watershed. FOSBC 6’s father, a pharmacist, had raised his nine children on a farm. The couple continued that tradition with the four they eventually had. They raised turkeys until the market dried up in the 1980s, then tobacco for thirty years. FOSBC 7 drove a school bus, FOSBC 6 sold produce from her home garden at the local farmers’ market, and they say that pretty much paid their bills. They currently own a couple of parcels of land along and nearby Scioto-Brush Creek. FOSBC 6 repeatedly mentioned her organic vegetable garden as a legacy from her health-conscious father. They are quiet people, not too involved in the FOSBC.

Like others my students interviewed who had grown up along the creek, Friend 6 had fond memories of swimming in the summer and skating when it used to freeze during wintertime. But FOSBC 7 remembers it being polluted in the 1970s from people dumping and letting their cattle wander unattend-

18 OFS(S)20170318DRMS_Browning, Tim, Lisa, and Shannon.wav
19 OFS(S)20170318DRMS_Browning, Tim, Lisa, and Shannon.wav

ed into the creek. The couple agree the stream is much cleaner now. FOSBC 6 offered this affective appreciation of Scioto-Brush Creek:

> FOSBC 6: We have a little run, Thompson's Run, that runs into Scioto Brush Creek, so we use that as water for the greenhouse. So, we haven't had to use the Scioto Brush Creek. But yeh, we always knew it was there, and I always like walking, taking a walk down to it in the mornings. I walk down there just to see the birds, or that—sometimes there's different birds, muskrats or
> FOSBC 7: beavers
> FOSBC 6: Just different animals down there. I enjoy looking and going down visiting it.

FOSBC 6 quietly voices an aesthetic attachment to the creek above and beyond its use to her as a water source for her greenhouse. As she continues, however, she surfaces a countervailing threat to the story of an improved and recuperated watershed.

> FOSBC 6: And the wildflowers. I always thought—this area used to have a lot of wildflowers. We'd just go looking up the hill there, looking at the wildflowers, back up the run, we'd always—we'd see a lot of wildflowers.
> MS: Has that changed? There aren't as many?
> FOSBC 7: Trilliums are not as plentiful as they used to be. Cause that's all—we had a lot of Trilliums. Virginia Bluebells, I think are thicker than—I don't remember when I was a kid seeing them along Brush Creek.
> FOSBC 6: The Poppies and the Petticoats and the little Iris there. You don't hardly see them anymore. They cut all that back there. After they logged, it has not come back for years and years.
> DR: Who owns that land that they--?
> FOSBC 6: State does now, but before they owned it, it got logged.
> FOSBC 7: It was clear cut.
> FOSBC 6: So there was a lot of flowers back up in there, used to go when I was a kid.

In interviews other students and I had with older residents of the area, wildflowers came up repeatedly as an aspect of the environment that people value. The retired postmaster of Friendship, Ohio, a little town at the southern base of Shawnee State Park, reminisced about driving through the state forest each spring with his wife to locate and appreciate patches of wood flowers that clearcutting has since destroyed. And a retired copy repairman from Portsmouth told me that he had discovered a parcel marked for clearcutting in the state forest at the top of Rock Run while hunting for a rare wildflow-

er.[20] Perhaps this concern for flowers derives from E. Lucy Braun's influence, her narrative of the area's special value. To notice wildflowers, where and when they come up and where and when they have disappeared, implies an intimate attachment to one's local environment, a special way of walking (or driving) in the woods.

In addition to visiting with members of the FOSBC, in 2017 DR and MS were interviewing more militant members of another offshoot of the Shawnee Nature Club, Save Our Shawnee Forest. That group was lobbying to stop a twenty-year program of extensive clearcutting in the state forests that had been brought on by a combination of natural crises—an ice storm in 2003 and a fire in 2009, both of which weakened the timber stock--and shrinking state allocations to the Department of Forestry, which some argued, was pressuring them to harvest more timber to make their budget whole.

MS: How do you feel about the clearcutting? Cause I heard about that.
FOSBC 6: I don't like it.
FOSBC 7: You know, private property, or to me, property, I don't think it's too much of our business, but state property, I don't think should be clear cut.
MS: Yeh.
FOSBC 7: And they were cutting a lot of it.
FOSBC 6: It's sad. I don't like it.
FOSBC 7: Southern Ohio. I don't know about other areas of the state, but I'm sure around Chillicothe, the forest there, has been cut hard.[21] Shawnee Forest is really cut hard.
MS: Do you think there's a lot of people around here against it?
FOSBC 7: I'd say probably half and half.
FOSBC 6: We just keep our mouths shut, though, because that's the state, so.
FOSBC 7: Well, it's logging.
FOSBC 6: Some people make their living that way, and (long pause) just like we made our living raising tobacco, but a lot of people were against that too. Depends on--everybody's different.
FOSBC 7: It won't affect the State of Ohio that much, cause they're going to be around in 200 years. You know, we're just going to be here a lifetime, and where they've cut in Shawnee Forest and Brush Creek Forest. You know, we're never going to see it grow

20 The copy repairman is a volunteer steward for the Rock Run Preserve, which is part of the preserve system of the Arc of Appalachia, a private nonprofit that has been buying land in Southern Ohio since 1995. By discovering and alerting the Arc of the impending clear cut at the top of the Rock Run Watershed, he set in motion a series of negotiations and investigations by a host of allies that led, ultimately, to Ohio Forestry cancelling their plans.

21 The clear cuts around Chillicothe are on private land owned by the Gladfelter Company.

> up. But the hillsides here were cut in the 80s, early 80s. And they're grown back up different kind of wood than what was there initially. Soft wood's come back.
> FOSBC 6: And a lot of brush, brambles.

The couple encapsulate a great deal in this brief exchange. They tell us that the state operates beyond their control. Martin and Jody would agree. They have tried to interest State-level representatives in their work, and while they have had good success locally, with township trustees, for example, they have gotten no response from legislators. Though Scioto Brush Creek has not been directly affected by the clearcutting, many of the older residents we interviewed echo FOSBC 7's lament that he will not live to see the forest restored. Many also felt that the state should withdraw from the lumber business now that private forestland for timber harvesting exists. Moreover, when they describe the new forest as softwood, brush and brambles, the couple directly contradict the state foresters' rationale for clearcutting—that it provides a preferential environment for the economically more valuable and environmentally more beneficent oak to grow. Clearing presents opportunities for oak seedlings but also for invasive species, like multiflora rose. From the perspective of these local smallholders, the state is no longer working as the engine of forest return. Instead, longtime residents are the ones looking out for the beaver and muskrats, the trillium and petticoats.

At the same time, the couple recognize the harvesting of timber as a cyclical process that provides a livelihood for numerous loggers in the area. Like FOSBC 3, 4, and 5, they believe area residents are about equally divided between those who see themselves as environmental stewards and those for whom habitat destruction is not a concern. However, they refrain from judging neighbors, recognizing that people have to make a living. After a week of intensive fieldwork, the student ethnographers concluded that though destructive behaviors persisted in some quarters, and though State Forestry practices of clear cutting were concerning, the Creek, the watershed, and the county environment had all significantly improved since the 1970s. The economically diverse residents they spoke with all recognized, appreciated, and wanted to solidify these improvements through their voluntary labor.

Environmental Justice

Because our interviews were structured as a service project for FOSBC, students working in 2017 noted that they had not spoken with residents who were not members of the environmentalist group. The following year, however, I was able to search for broader signs of environmental stewardship in the watershed while a new group of student-ethnographers were engaged in service

projects with other groups. I contacted Denise Rose, Mayor of Otway, to learn more about how local leaders view the FOSBC. Echoing the school-teachers that DR and MS had interviewed in 2017, Denise described area residents as being equal in the sense that no one was well-off, but then she qualified her statement by pointing to the loggers and sawmill owners living around Otway, "Yeah they're making money. If anybody's making money, it's them. We'll drive out 348, and I'll show you one of them's house."[22] Denise later introduced me to a logger father and son, so that I could get the loggers' perspective on the clearcutting controversy.

Logger 2 owns The Depot, where Denise works as a cashier, and he serves as Pastor of her church. He emphasizes that the area has an active logger's association that offers oversight on logging operations in addition to that provided by the state. He also points out that several local loggers have been recognized at the state and national levels for their skill and reputation for safe, sustainable logging. From Logger 2's perspective loggers are environmentalists too, but they are conservationists, rather than preservationists.[23] Although he prefaced his remarks by saying that in theory, he opposes government regulation, he approves of the way that the Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts now regulate loggers. To illustrate a generational shift in thinking, Logger 2 recounted that when his father, Logger 1, was logging in the 1950s and 60s, if the crew came across a rattlesnake (endangered in Ohio), they would kill it. Logger 2 says he prefers to live and let live, even when that means suspending operations around a rattlesnake den, and even though, in his experience, places like Beech Fork Hollow are teeming with rattlesnakes.[24] Moreover, he described in detail the loggers' construction of bridges and other protections to prevent stream siltification and soil erosion.

In fact, Logger 2 spoke much as ODNR Chief Bob Boyle had when I had spoken with him at his Columbus headquarters some months earlier: Clearcutting may look bad, but it is a sustainable harvesting practice and is necessary to maintaining a healthy Oak-Hickory dominated forest. Logger 2 was not against the growing number of nature preserves in the area, but he cautioned that hands-off management might lead to fires, which would negatively im-

22 OFS(S)20180314KB_Rose, Denise_transcription.doc

23 FOSBC 7 also made this distinction between his own and Martin McAllister's environmentalisms. A preservationist, according to this perspective, let's nature manage itself, whereas a conservationist manages nature in ways that promote their own objectives (farming or logging) but do not damage the resource.

24 Beech Fork Hollow is a private woodland owned by the Gladfelter Company, one of the larger clients for loggers in the area.

pact adjacent lands (see Chase, 1987).[25] He did, however, resent the stereotypes that he believes outsiders hold about working loggers:

> I think one misconception is that loggers, a lot of times are perceived as just barbarians that are out here. And with no education. And I do have a bachelor's degree from Ohio Christian University, and I don't know of any dumb loggers in the face of the state. If they make it into the logging business, they got to be a pretty good businessman, they got to be able to manage people, they got to be able to manage their money and their-- they got to be a good maintenance, have a good maintenance program of some type, if they're able to sustain that logging lifestyle, because it requires all those things, you know.[26]

As someone who occasionally bids for logging jobs in the state forest and who regularly attends state-supported trainings on everything from logger safety to sustainable practices, Logger 2 knows his environment. On his own land, he participates in a state program that compensates farmers for maintaining a forested riparian corridor along Scioto-Brush Creek. Like other multi-generational families in and around Otway, he values a healthy watershed.

I turn now to consider one final story in watershed stewardship, the Otway public sewer project, that offers something of a cautionary tale. Denise Rose had big plans for sprucing up the town when she ran unopposed for Mayor in 2017. She needed to get the road fixed, she wanted a cell tower, and she needed to demolish the old asbestos-filled, flood-damaged school, so the village council could better take advantage of the still structurally sound gym. But without money, she laments, it is hard to get anything done: "I go to meetings and see other mayors, and I said, "I can't wait til Trump has all the mayor's come to the White House. I want to meet him. [laughs] I would love to get him down here to our little town, I sure-- now he could help me tear down that school with just a few dollars! [laughs]"[27] Needless to say, Denise did not get to the White House, and Trump did not solve Otway's school demolition problem, but for those who admired him, he seemed like a man of grand gestures. In fact, however, one of Trump's parting gifts to the nation was to weaken regulations that protect the water quality of smaller rivers and streams, such as the Scioto-Brush Creek (Davenport 2020).

25 Of course, preservationists, like conservationists, manage their lands, encouraging some species and eradicating others, in accordance with the type of forest they wish to create.

26 OFS(S)20180315KB_Brown, Ralph and Tom_transcription.doc

27 OFS(S)20180314KB_Rose, Denise_transcription.doc

Denise's biggest project, however, was a new public wastewater treatment plant. When she took me down to see it in 2018, a team from Hunt Engineering had gathered for the test run. There I met the engineer, a short, intense man who spoke very quickly, inundating me with expert knowledge. As a former EPA employee, he knew about state grants that could underwrite the installation costs of a public sewer for small municipalities like Otway. He pitched the idea to the Otway town counsel in 2015, explaining that his company would write the grant for them. Denise was convinced, but she faced stiff resistance from some quarters. After all, why would anyone want to pay a monthly sewer bill when they had a working septic system? The FOSBC became an important ally:

> Mayor Rose: Yeah, it just-- Yeah, it's really kind of weird, you know, that-- I mean, I know. I've known Marty and
>
> KB: Jody
>
> Mayor Rose: Jody for years. I used to work up by where they lived, and--but I never knew that they were into all this other stuff, you know, with the watershed and all that. But it just— and they were on board. They're one of our biggest supporters to come to the meetings and tell the people you know, "This is a good thing. This is a very good thing." You know, so they've always been there to support us, which helps.[28]

Ultimately, of the sixty-seven households in Otway, only seven declined to get hooked up to the public sewer system.

The engineer from Hunt Engineering told me that eighty poor municipalities across the state do not have public sewage systems, and he has committed himself to rectifying that. He showed me the open sewage drainage pipes on Rocky Fork stream, a tributary that runs through Otway and right into Scioto-Brush Creek. Clearly, the existing setup was environmentally hazardous to young swimmers as well as aquatic species. But the engineer had an economic argument for a public system. Because the standard lots in old towns like Otway are not big enough to provide proper drainage for private septic systems, anyone trying to buy property cannot get a mortgage. Businesses cannot move in. Denise confirmed this, noting that they had recently tried to attract a carwash, but without a public sewer, it would not locate in Otway. The engineer argued to avoid blight on main street, you need to have waste infrastructure. Otway was the last village to receive a grant before the EPA redirected the program to larger municipalities.

28 OFS(S)20180314KB_Rose, Denise_transcription.doc

When I returned a year and half later to find out how things were going, the reason for the EPA's switch in focus became clear. The Otway public sewer was costing more than had been projected, exacting an unanticipated financial burden on already struggling households. Martin shook his head when he told me that the project was absolutely the right thing to do for water quality. However, in this case, the financial burden of watershed stewardship was being born by those who could least afford it. Joining a long line of interventionist do-gooders, the engineer had enacted his vision but had failed to fulfill his promises to Otway residents. I did not notice new businesses on Main Street either. Perhaps a few other things had to fall in place in the cash-strapped village before the sewer could become the engine of economic recovery.

Conclusion

At the grand opening of the Gladys Riley Goldenstar Lily Nature Preserve, just east of the Otway covered bridge, a crowd of volunteers from the FOSBC and the Arc of Appalachia joined the families of those who had once owned the property, some of whom had come from as far away as Massachusetts and others who lived right down the road. Martin McAllister addressed the crowd, sharing a reminiscence that tied his own drive to make a place for nature to the work of previous generations:

> If a person is lucky in their life, they're touched by some really special people, and you can usually count those people on probably one hand. And mine was touched by a couple people on each end of my education. Like one, as a first-grader, Gladys Riley was my first-grade teacher [laughs]. She taught for over fifty years, and I know there's a lot of local people here. Who had Gladys as their teacher? I know some hands are going up. Yeh. So right over here in Otway School. And even though she was a classroom teacher, she really tried to show us a lot about nature. I have a lot of really vivid memories. Like even though I was only six, I distinctly remember the first time I ever saw evening grosbeaks. (Oh, imagine that!) And, it was a snowy day, and they were across route 73 in the neighbor's lawn, and she got all the kids out of their seats so we could come to the window and look down across the road and see evening grossbeaks.
>
> And oddly enough, the last time I ever saw Gladys was another bird story. She called me at home. I'm trying to think how old I was. I was an adult. I was out working. She called me, said, "Have you ever seen a Cape May warbler?" And I said, "No." And she said, "There's one right outside my living room window right now. Why don't you come down and see it?" So, I drove six miles to her house. Bird was still there. We

sat in the living room and we watched this Cape May warbler. So, a really special lady. But, uh, she touched my life in regards to nature.[29]

Through anecdotal storytelling, Martin establishes his place in an intergenerational legacy of Otway area naturalists and nature educators.

After five years of irregular visiting, the Ohio Field School research team has been touched and educated in regard to nature by our FOSBC collaborators. My students and I worked in short annual spurts, and I followed up when I could on their suggestions for research, taking advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves. Now that I have made special treks to Scioto County to catch the snow trillium and the goldenstar lily in bloom, I am beginning to see the landscape as my friends and collaborators see it. I am much more aware of the way nature in western Scioto County is changing, of how and why property is changing or not changing hands. Far from being emptied-out, the rural appears teeming with life and possibility.

The FOSBC' slow activism provides a model for the Ohio Field School, an outsider research group working to understand communities that have been historically misunderstood and misrepresented. The FOSBC looks for places where interests overlap; they ask permission to organize a creek day or build a trail in the town park. And they show up when the local Mayor needs someone to speak for nature. At the same time, they weave together stories of naturalists from an earlier era who worked to preserve and spread an appreciation for this special place. Gradually, over time and in connection with other local groups, they have transformed the landscape in and around Otway and strengthened an incipient ethic of environmental stewardship among residents. Although Jody and Martin certainly have expertise as naturalist and land manager, they invite others to join them under the umbrella of citizen science to steward the watershed together.

In a similar fashion, The Ohio Field School structures its service-learning projects in ways that mutually benefit students and community partners, but at base, we work to establish and strengthen our networks in Scioto County and Southeastern Ohio more generally in order to become part of the local conversations that are already underway. Folklorist Jim Leary has recently argued that public folklore works this way too. Though the fieldwork may be "shallow in the short run" over time one's understanding of histories, traditions and future designs of myriad groups occupying a particular territory deepens and broadens. Indeed, Leary argues for an open-ended, inductive approach:

29 OFS(S)20170401KB_GladysRileyOpeningCeremony_transcription.doc

> We need to do fieldwork with a lot of individuals and cultural groups over extended periods in particular places; listen deeply to what they have to say; share our findings with them; learn as much as we can about historical forces bearing upon their lives and traditional practices; and ponder meanings with comparativist circumspection. (2020, 478.)

Leary believes that ordinary people will recognize their solidarity with different others when they are reminded of their own group's once marginalized status and its struggle for rights and dignity.

As Jody, Martin and others assert, their project to forge a place for nature in a state that has been heavily impacted by European settlement, industrialization, and subsequent industrial collapse is at least a century old. Their challenge remains one of finding ways to advance that project that also benefit the human residents who prefer to stay. As outsider-ethnographers, we take note of this dilemma without jumping to offer solutions or endeavoring to speak for those who already speak eloquently for themselves. As citizen-folklorists, we cultivate conversations, not only between ourselves and local actors but among local actors who do not usually address each other. Our long-term, if somewhat intermittent commitment, allows us to follow the emergent, unfolding aspects of community life. The drawback of this approach, of course, is that the resulting archival collection is less focused than it might be if we had begun our project with a specific research problem in mind.

Drive just a few hours north of Scioto County and the projects of its people become virtually invisible. This is where the outsider-ethnographer might have an additional role to play by spreading an awareness not only of what lies beneath the rocks in Scioto-Brush Creek, but also of those who would protect the abundant biodiversity of which few outside the region are aware. Moreover, we can pass along the lessons we have learned over the past five years, encouraging our conversation partners to share what they know about their own landscapes, their own patches of nature, and how they came to be as they are. Ultimately, thinking like a watershed means recognizing that people of diverse perspectives may have overlapping areas of interest that allow them to collaboratively and cooperatively make an environment we all may one day want to live in. The work is necessarily slow, requires persistence, and eschews expert interventions in favor of distributing knowledge, decision-making and responsibility for stewardship broadly among differently situated actors. It does not solve climate change or prevent the next flood. Still, something is accomplished.

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