

MEANS AND MEANING

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by

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To my parents, for supporting my wildest dreams.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the impact of class identity on American culture - and the many political and sociological issues that intersect therein - in an effort to magnify the ironic mundanity of the many falsities/failures/shortcomings of the American Dream. Comprised of various short essays, personal addages, and collected cultural detritus, this accumulation of writing is complemented with photographic documentation of an art practice that seeks to do the same.

INTRODUCTION

Most “rags-to-riches” stories emphasize not the obviously implied advantage of wealth, but rather the triumphant departure from rags. Class, in turn, should be approached not as a mere matter of economy, but as a matter of identity.

A somewhat intangible construct with very tangible side effects, class operates like many other aspects of intersectional identity in America: a structural determinant in our social order. What distinguishes class from other aspects of identity - like gender, race, sexuality, etc. - is our collective normalization of systemic failure, and general acceptance of the extent to which socioeconomic status shapes our lived experiences.

Class consciousness, then, acts as a lens through which every facet of contemporary life can be filtered for clarity. To know where one fits into the fabric of American society, one must come to know the mechanics of status within late capitalism.

In these pages, I'll retrace my own steps down the path towards class consciousness, rendering a roadmap to what some might call radicalization. Included are some notable catalysts - people, places, histories, and experiences - that have enriched my understanding of struggle, survival, and success in America. This book is as much a tribute to these influences as it is an examination of them.

Ruminations on class and culture have become the framework for an art practice that transposes inquiry into physical manifestations of material and metaphor. In essence, my sculptural work remixes familiar relationships between form, scale, and material to create visual metaphors that reflect the task of reconciling American mythos with reality.

Materiality is central to these investigations; from acquisition at the edge of the capital market to the hyper-specificity of material dialogues and economies within the work, my practice operates in a way that regards material as a distillate of reality. I consider the cultural contexts and individual histories of my chosen materials to be especially relevant in this respect, as they inform my navigation of concept.

Another example of cultural output influenced by class identity, these sculptures are a direct byproduct of working class labor, both physical and intellectual. The task of conventional research in my practice has been to find the language necessary to articulate the class-related phenomena that I've long been aware of, but have never been able to verbalize.



Richey family Fourth of July celebration, Kings Mountain NC, 2020.
Photo courtesy of Donna Richey.

Part I

American Myth

“While greed has always been a part of American capitalism, it is only recently that it has set the standard for how we live and interact in everyday life...yet there is no organized class struggle, no daily in-your-face critique of capitalist greed that stimulates thought and action—critique, reform, and revolution.”

- bell hooks, *Class Matters*

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Of the many designations used in reference to the United States, “the land of opportunity” remains one of the most common. Branded as a shining beacon of liberty and social mobility, the realities of hierarchical power structures and flawed systems interrupt confidence that this nation is all that it claims to be. More than just an inconsequential label, America’s national identity hinges on upholding belief in the American Dream, positing that anyone and everyone can rise to the top if they’d just work hard enough. Disillusionment, therefore, is simply part of the American experience, and patriotism requires some level of voluntarily suspended disbelief.

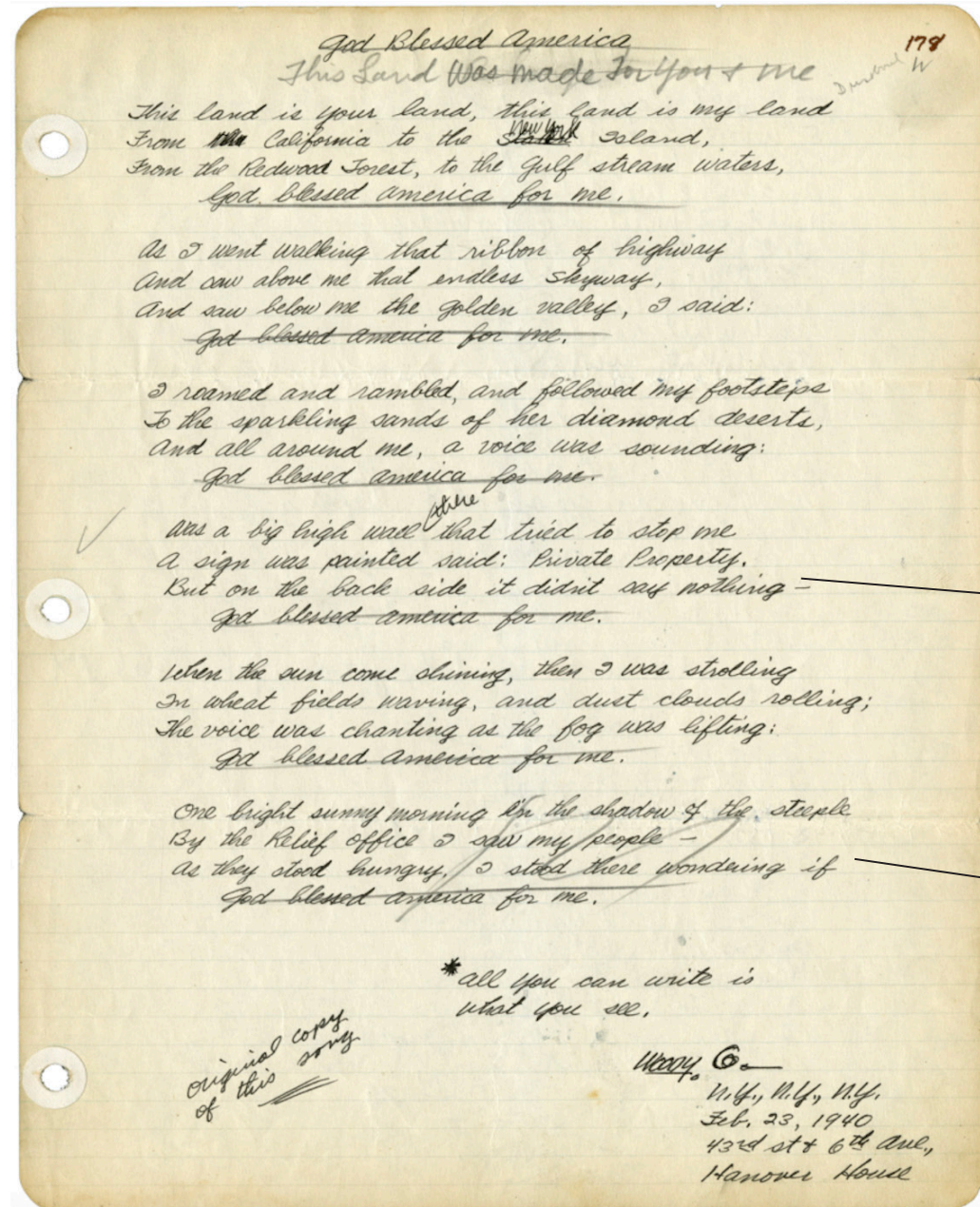
The canons of meritocracy place blame on the lower class for their own predicament. Grounded in principles of perseverance and willpower, the American Dream urges the less fortunate to give their bootstraps a tug. A long misinterpreted refrain, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” was originally intended to illustrate an impossible task. Coined in a physics textbook just before the turn of the 20th century, the phrase referred to a situation in which effort was futile. When it later began being used in a socioeconomic context, it was meant as a sarcastic recommendation. The descent to literalism is a slippery slope, and now the phrase is commonly understood to be a lesson that while achieving social mobility is difficult, it is strictly a personal responsibility. This insinuates that each individual has total control over their own status; that everyone has an equal shot at prosperity. The ones that don’t make it? They must not have worked hard enough.

Calls for extra determination and renewed tenacity fall flat in the face of systemic negligence. Where is the equity in allowing an already disadvantaged demographic’s path to success to be littered with obstacles? Faith in the perpetuated fiction of equal opportunity has already begun to disintegrate, likening this supposed American Dream to nothing more than a myth.



Richey family Fourth of July celebration, Kings Mountain NC, 2020.
Photo courtesy of Donna Richey.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE



Folk music has long served as a zeitgeist for America's lower class. Reflecting the cultural undercurrents of often disregarded populations, this genre of music is a true expression of the constitutional refrain "of the people, by the people, for the people." The folk music of Woody Guthrie was exactly that; blending artistic liberty with sentiments of civil discontent, Guthrie's songs gave voice to the underprivileged and shed light on the shortcomings of the American establishment. Advocacy for labor rights and anti-facism became defining characteristics of Guthrie's musical career and public persona. However, his engagement in critical political discourse came with a caveat. Guthrie became a subject of red-baiting, and was heavily surveilled by the US government for his association with the Communist Party.

Guthrie's best known song, "This Land is Your Land," was originally titled "God Blessed America." Written in 1940, this ballad was a response to Irving Berlin's song "God Bless America." Berlin's patriotic romanticisation frustrated

Guthrie, as it glossed over the asymmetrical distribution of land and wealth that he had been observing throughout his life. "God Blessed America" was meant as a counter-argument.

While the original version of the song was never recorded, an edited iteration renamed "This Land is Your Land" was in 1944. In the process of readying the song for the public, much of Guthrie's radical language was removed. Verse four was included in the 1944 recording, but was later omitted when the song was officially released in 1951. Verse six never made it into any official recordings. The quiet censorship of these two lost verses effectively dampened Guthrie's fiery critique and made the song more palatable for moderate America. The lost verses are largely unknown to the public today.

I was taught the censored version of "This Land is Your Land" in preschool.

VERSE 4

"Was a big high wall there that tried to stop me
 a sign was painted said: Private Property
 But on the back side it didn't say nothing
 God-blessed America for me"

VERSE SIX

"One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple
 By the relief office I saw my people
 As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if
 God-blessed America for me"

Original manuscript for "This Land is Your Land." All works by Woody Guthrie © Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc.



One evening, as the sun went down
the jungle fire was burning
Down the track came a hobo hiking
And he said, "Boys, I'm not turning
I'm headed for a land that's far away
Beside the crystal fountains
So come with me, we'll go and see
The Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
There's a land that's fair and bright
Where the handouts grow on bushes
And you sleep out every night
Where the boxcars all are empty
And the sun shines every day
On the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees
The lemonade springs, where the bluebird sings
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
All the cops have wooden legs
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth
And the hens lay soft-boiled eggs
The farmers' trees are full of fruit
And the barns are full of hay
Oh, I'm bound to go where there ain't no snow
Where the rain don't fall, the wind don't blow
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
You never change your socks
And the little streams of alcohol
Come a-trickling down the rocks
The brakemen have to tip their hats
And the railway bulls are blind
There's a lake of stew, and of whiskey too
You can paddle all around 'em in a big canoe
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
The jails are made of tin
And you can walk right out again
As soon as you are in
There ain't no short-handled shovels
No axes, saws nor picks
I'm a-goin' to stay where you sleep all day
Where they hung the jerk that invented work
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
I'll see you all this comin' fall
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains"

BIG ROCK CANDY MOUNTAIN
HARRY McCLINTOCK

Mountain in the Making (detail)

Glass aquarium, sugar syrup, crystalized sugar, sunlight

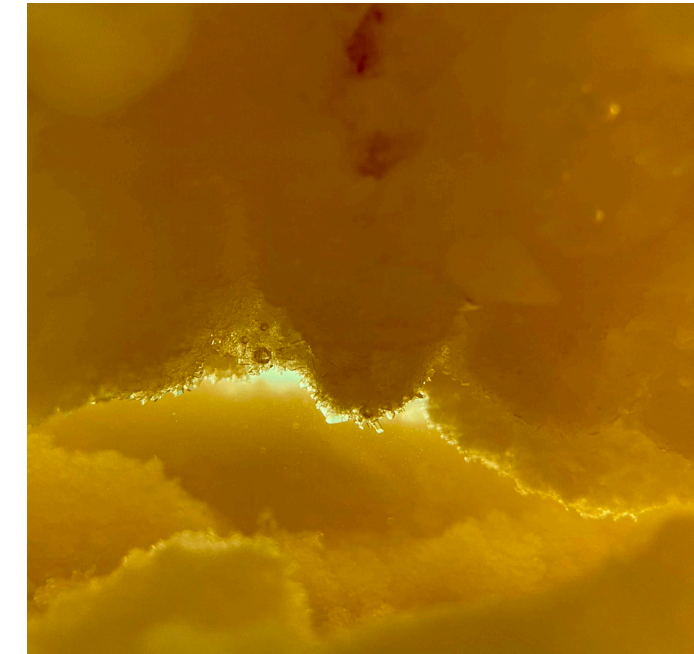
2023

IMAGINED FUTURES

The practice of imagining paradise appears to be one of humanity's oldest coping mechanisms. In the face of despair, a fabricated escape of the mind leaves space for hope. From the plight of the oppressed, there emerges a culture of radical futurism and visions of justice-to-come. Whether dreaming up new utopias or clinging to existing religious projections of a heavenly afterlife, the sting of struggle is soothed by the belief that it will all be worth it in the end.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain belongs to this lineage of radical futurisms. Chronicling a "hobo's" fantasy of a life of plenty, this American folk ballad continues the human custom of solace-searching. Permeable prisons and streams of alcohol conjure imagery of promised lands flowing with milk and honey, softening the reality of a bleaker existence. Blurring the lines between concrete and abstract, this cultural response to strife helps dreamers find comfort in a substituted reality.

An earlier example of invented nirvana comes to us from the peasants of medieval Europe. First emerging in the 12th century, the famed Land of Cockaigne was a figment of oral story-telling traditions. A mythological realm of leisure and bounty, Cockaigne was described as a place where one's only responsibilities were to eat, sleep, and seek pleasure. 13th century French poetry described the fictional land using sensorial appeals, depicting houses "made of barley sugar and cakes" and streets "paved with pastry." These whimsical descriptors were adopted as lyrical inspiration for the Big Rock Candy Mountain, which uses similar illustrative tools.



Mountain in the Making (detail)

Glass aquarium, sugar syrup, crystalized sugar, sunlight
2023

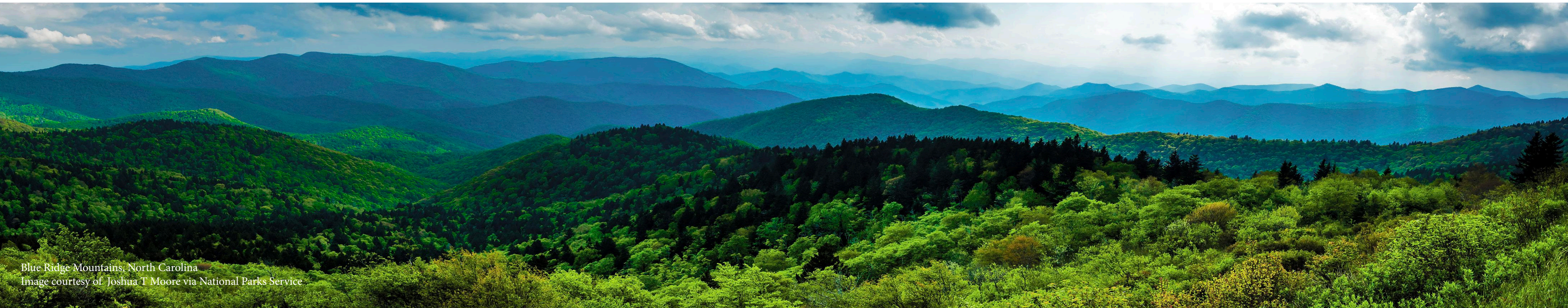
Part II

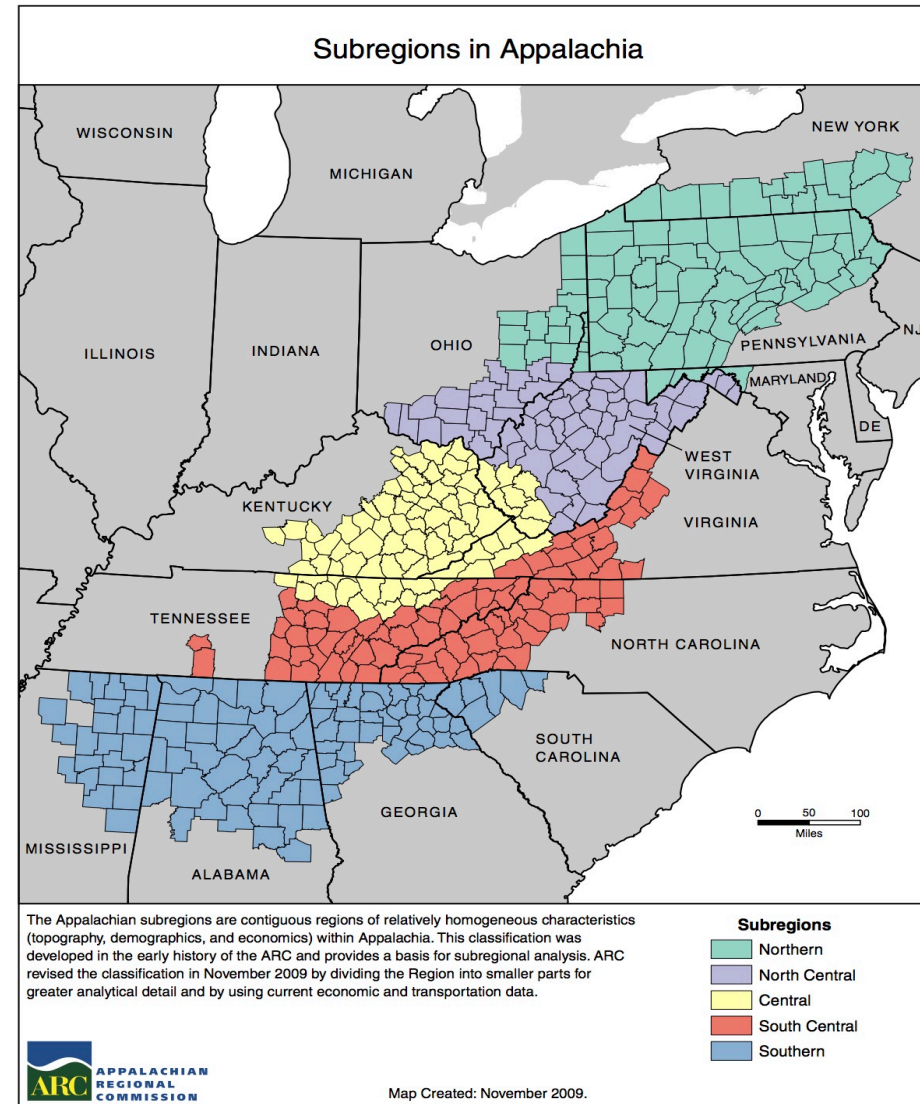
Appalachian Memory

(a · puh · LATCH · uhn)

“Far from being monolithic, helpless, and degraded, this image of Appalachia is radical and diverse. This image of Appalachia does not deflect the problems of the region but simply recognizes the voices and actions of those who have struggled against them, often sacrificing their health, comfort, and even their lives.”

- Elizabeth Catte, *WHAT YOU ARE GETTING WRONG ABOUT APPALACHIA*





Appalachian Regional Commission's 2009 map of the Subregions of Appalachia. The ARC was established as a facet of the War on Poverty in 1965.

A THIN PLACE

My ancestral roots stretch across south central Appalachia, deep into the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. I grew up at the foot of these mountains, and have spent a sizable portion of my life venturing into, out of, and through them. Each summer when I was growing up, our church group retreated into the mountains for a week-long Presbyterian conference that was held in a little town called Montreat. This was Billy Graham's neck of the woods; he and his wife were married in the Montreat chapel, and lived there in their family home on one the mountaintops. He died up there, too.

Of all that I remember about these conferences, little has to do with God, but there is one sermon in particular that stuck with me through the years. The preacher was telling us about 'thin places; geographical phenomena where the veil between heaven and Earth is supposed to be thinnest, and communication with God the easiest. He supposed that Montreat was one of those locations, positing that the elevation let us be closer to God's doorstep. By this logic (or, perhaps, a child's misunderstanding of poetics), I imagined that a more adequate altitude would bring us all the way to the very threshold of His Kingdom. I was perplexed by the spatiality of this. People had been up as high as the moon, and still hadn't found a spot thinner than the rest? Montreat must be a far cry.

Religious prescriptions aside, everyone in the congregation knew those hills were sacred even before the preacher told us so. There's a certain feeling of reverence in the Appalachian forests akin to none of the manufactured, artificial sanctity that I ever witnessed in a church. Even as a child, before I understood the agedness of the mountains and their vastness, I felt it. I imagine the Cherokee people must have felt something similar; their connection to these traditional homelands was deeply spiritual before the institution of God even made it to America. They didn't need a preacher to tell them, the mountains speak for themselves.

I believe in thin places.

¹ I recently had a professor mention the same concept to me, in this instance referring to the peat bogs in Northern Europe where the famed "bog bodies" have been unearthed. Hypothesized by modern scholars to be examples of ritualistic human sacrifice, the bog bodies are impeccably preserved despite being thousands of years old. One, called the Tollund Man, still has stubble on his chin. To the ancient peoples who deposited these sacrificial bodies, the bogs were likely considered sacred grounds - distinguished from the heavily canopied forests of the surrounding landscape, the bogs stretched out bare under the open sky. A thin place.

LAYERED REALITIES

No where else in America are the implications of class on cultural identity understood as intimately as they are in Appalachia. Reckoning with both the persistence of poverty in the region and with the perpetuation of false narratives about rurality and class struggle, the Appalachian population is - by necessity - well versed in the mechanics of status and finding strength in solidarity.

Throughout history, oversimplifications of the complex issues faced by Appalachia have created a general misunderstanding of its people. Deemed a region of focus for President Lyndon B. Johnson's infamous War on Poverty, subsequent media portrayals painted the people of Appalachia with class-based stereotypes; unintelligent, incestuous, and crude. More recently, the region has been used as political fodder during the Trumpian crusade. Mischaracterized as a monolithic congregation of the white working-class, Appalachia became the poster child for "forgotten Americans" and was wielded as a tool for MAGA rhetoric. This further denied the complexity of the region's demographics and the issues they face.

Poverty still persists in Appalachia, its history rooted in economic exploitation and extractive capitalism. Lesser known are the antecedents of organized resistance and class solidarity that have shaped the region as a collective. To echo some of my earlier sentiments; class is a matter of culture, not just economics. Thus, poverty (or, at least, mass misconceptions of what poverty looks like) will unavoidably continue to be associated with Appalachian-ness, regardless of socioeconomic advancements or changes in social mobility.



Photo courtesy of Jared Hamilton, *That What Was* series

THE REDNECK ARMY

Driven by capitalist expansion, efforts to industrialize the natural resources of rural Appalachia resulted in the construction of “company towns” throughout the region. These residential townships, complete with stores and churches, were created to house miners and their families in concentrated areas near workable coal mines.

All aspects of life in company towns were controlled by the mining companies. Workers were often paid in “scrip;” company money that, because it was not recognized as legal US currency, was valid only at establishments within the company town. A total monopoly on all town resources meant that the mining companies could upcharge even basic necessities like groceries. In many cases, miners accrued burdensome debt trying to sustain their families here, and were then forced to stay with the company until their debts were paid. With workers financially dependent on the existence of the company towns, remoteness and lack of transportation were additional factors that kept them from simply leaving. Advertised as utopian communities, the folks that lived in company towns found themselves in the grip of the mining companies.

The Battle of Blair Mountain occurred during a period of unrest in the Appalachian region known as the Coal Wars, which is characterized by the decades-long conflict between unionized miners and the mining companies. This particular dispute took place from August 25 - September 3, 1921 in Logan County, West Virginia.

Under the rule of their employers, miners had long endured perilous work conditions, squalid housing, and painfully low wages. Fed up, an estimated 10,000 West Virginian miners resolved to march in protest to Mingo County where tensions had begun to boil over in the year prior, leading to the imprisonment of many union organizers and miners.

The governor had already declared a state of martial law in Mingo County. Anticipating a heated confrontation, the protesters armed themselves with shotguns, pistols, and various military-issue weapons that some had acquired while serving in World War I. The route to Mingo County would take them through Logan County, where anti-union sheriff Don Chafin had long been paid by the Logan Coal Association to uphold com-

pany order. Having been informed of the approaching multitude, Chafin assembled a militia of 3,000 state police, deputies, and deputized citizens to intercept the marching miners. Together, they staged a brigade of machine gun nests and trenches around Blair Mountain, a peak chosen specifically for its position directly in the path of the march. As Chafin declared, “No armed mob will cross the Logan County line.”

By August 28, the mob of marching miners amassed at the Logan County border and were met with Chafin’s defense. They began an exchange of gunfire that lasted for five days amid the thick woods of Blair Mountain. To distinguish friend from foe, the miners wore red bandanas around their necks; they soon became known as the “red neck army.” This is believed by many to be the origin of the term “redneck.”

The violent clash intensified when President Warren G. Harding ordered an airstrike on the miners, deploying bombs from above. This was the first time in the history of the United States of America that bombs were dropped on the heads of its citizens. The siege was ended on September 3 upon the arrival

of US troops, by order of President Harding. An official death toll was never confirmed; reports list fatalities ranging from 16 to 100.

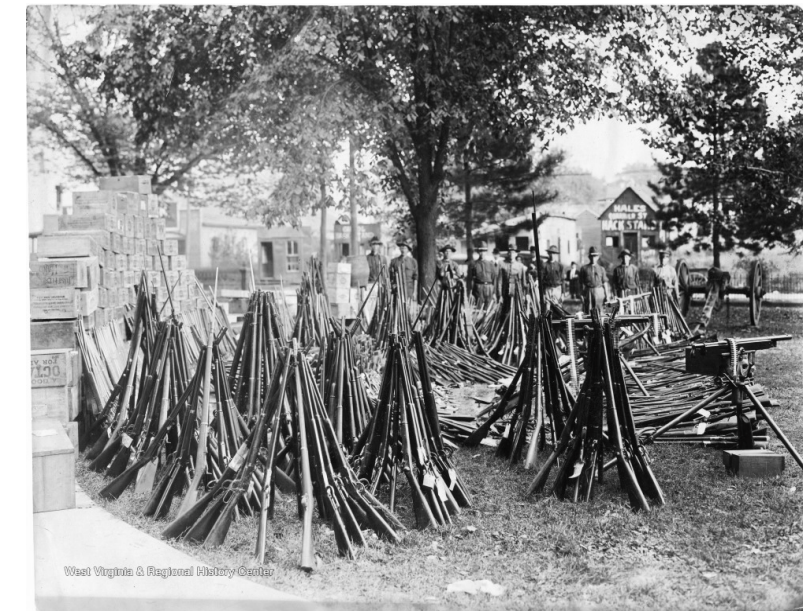


UMW officials and members of the “miner’s army” pose with a bomb dropped on them during the Battle of Blair Mountain. Photo courtesy of West Virginia State Archives.

The Battle of Blair Mountain was the largest labor uprising in United States history, and the largest armed uprising since the American Civil War.



Mother Jones speaks before an assembled crowd in Montgomery, WV in 1912 ahead of the Paint Creek Miners Strike. Photo courtesy of West Virginia University Archives



Arms confiscated from pro-union miners by the National Guard during the Paint Creek Cabin Creek Strike of 1912. Photo courtesy of West Virginia & Regional History Center

RESISTANCE, OR OUR MOST WORTHY HABITS

Richard Hague

When anywhere, even in Rome,
we did as mountaineers would do.
When told to stay inside the lines,
we organized the strike.
When instructed to take our medicine,
we dug ginseng, ran naked in a blizzard.
When told to strighten up and fly right,
we crouched, veered left,
slid on our asses down the holler.
When told to listen up,
we clawhammered, fast,
and sang them down.
When counseled to lighten up,
we hoarded scrap iron and bullet lead.
When told to get real,
we remembered Jack and Old Fire Dragaman
and dreamed up wilder worlds.

When ordered to chill,
we stoked interior fires.
When threatened with arrest,
we clogged beyond their reach.

At prayer, we profaned.
In profanity, we blessed.
In silence, we exhorted.
In poverty, we grew rich.

When silenced,
we became mountain streams
announcing imminent danger.
When nailed down,
we erupted like exploding stills.

Despite breif collaring and cuffing,
we slip our bonds and occupy lost days -
quoting Bible and Mother Jones,
and become gagging, hair-balling cats on
Matewan bloody pillows, mean dogs
gnawing Blankenship-guilty bones.

Writing in direct response to J. D. Vance's "Hillbilly Elegy" and Scott McClanahan's dismissal of "the Appalachia Minstrel Show," Appalachian poet Richard Hague celebrates the region's spirit of defiance.



Prohibition Unit (Cow Shoes) 06/28/1924.
Photo courtesy of Library of Congress

ARTIFACTS OF RESISTANCE

During America's alcohol prohibition (1919-1933), illicit distillation and distribution of alcohol became a national means of rebeling against the law. This wasn't new to the moonshiners of Appalachia, who had long been brewing hooch in secret to evade tax collectors. "Moonshine" refers to the conditions of manufacturing for these illegal liquors; to maintain discretion, moonshiners hid their stills in remote locations and worked only at night. These "cow shoes" are an example of the utilitarian paraphernalia invented by moonshiners to prevent law enforcement from tracking them as they traversed fields and forrests to maintain their stills.

Part III

Parables of Granny

I used to think granny was magic. She gave root to one of my core memories when I was about 5 years old; I remember watching in skepticism as she snapped a scrawny twig from a tree in her yard, stuck it in a pot of dirt, and promised me that she could turn it into a new tree. Weeks of doubt turned to incredulity the day it sprouted its first leaves.

We planted the sapling near its mama.

It felt as though I had witnessed a miracle.



Chloe, Bailey, and Granny in the pool. Mount Holly, NC. 2004.

IN MEMORY

My granny was a school librarian and an avid reader. She was passionate about public education and believed deeply in the power that knowledge holds. Her heavily used multivolume encyclopedia set is a fixture of my memory - we called it “granny google.”

She was clever and sturdy and resourceful and tender and playful and spontaneous and tough and witty and curious and creative and careful.

She was one of twelve children. She raised six of her own, my mother being one. She was a second mother to many of her grandchildren.

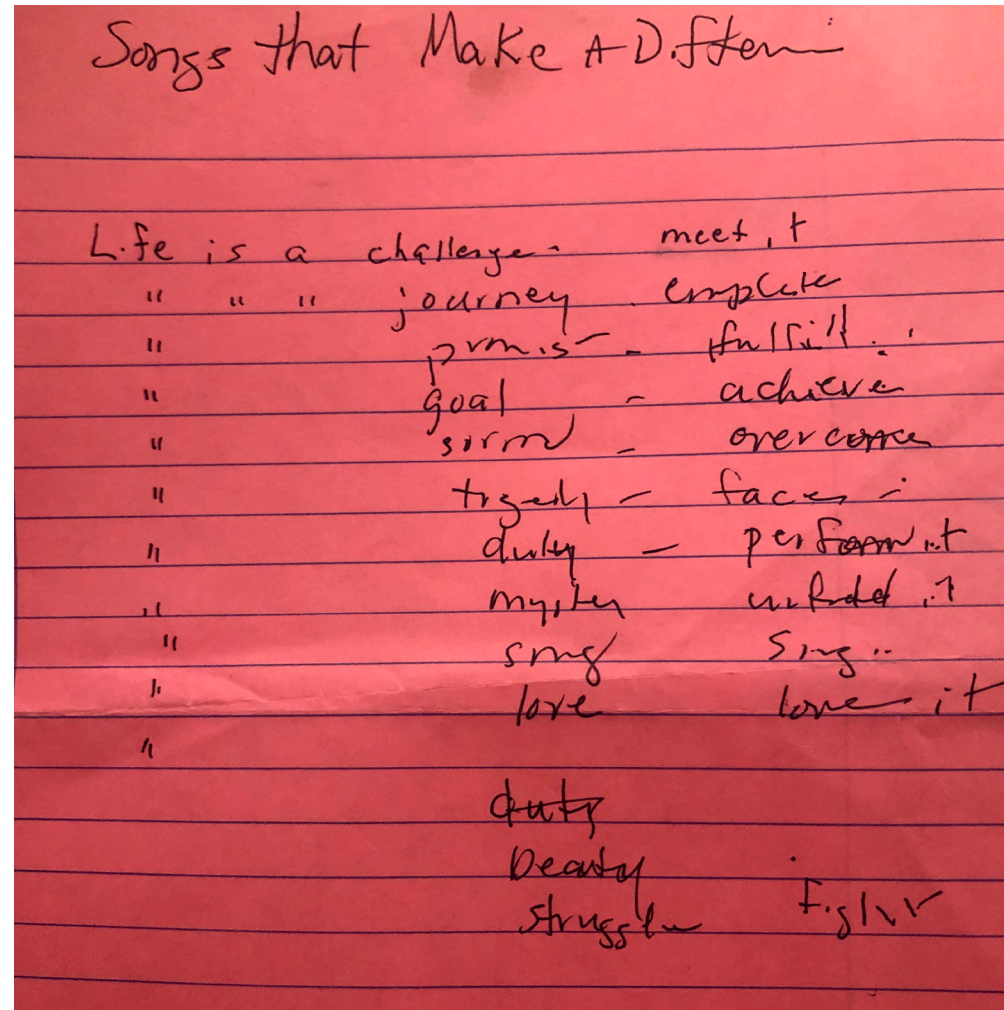
For our family, granny was a safety net and damn if we weren't lucky to have her. She was an agent of security; the top name on every emergency contact list, a fail-safe when things went awry. We lived with her for a while when we were in between homes.

For some that don't have that sort of support system, what would otherwise be minor inconveniences have the power to seal fate. A dead car battery, a sick day, a tiny lapse in judgment can become the deciding factor in many folks' survival. When you don't have anyone to fall back on, you just hit the floor.

Granny's voice guided some of my first inquiries about the world around me, and shaped the way my eyes perceive. The days I spent under her wing fostered my earliest curiosities.



Granny in her kitchen. Photo courtesy of Cathy Hester.



A page from one of Granny's notebooks.

Granny Noodles

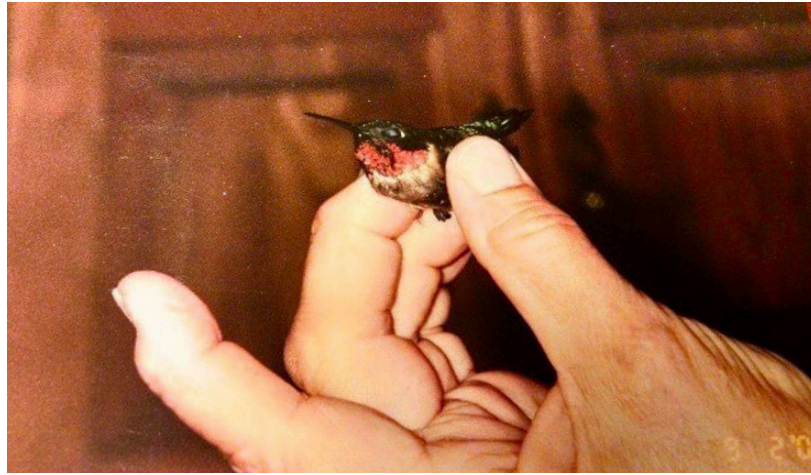
Ingredients

- 1 Package Maruchan Ramen Noodle Soup (Chicken Flavor)
- 2 cups water

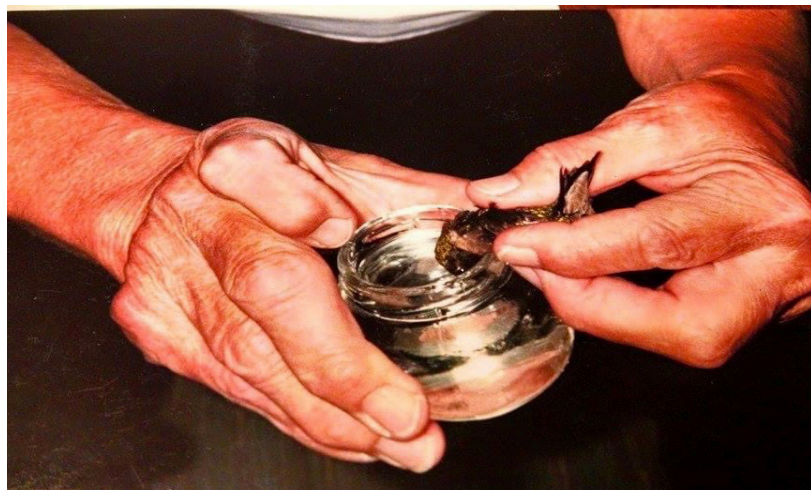
Directions

1. While sealed, thoroughly crush contents of package using the blunt end of a butter knife.
2. Open package and remove seasoning packet. Set aside.
3. Add water to a small pot, bring to a boil
4. Add crushed noodles
5. Boil 3-5 minutes
6. Drain
7. Add seasoning packet
8. Serve and enjoy!

This was granny's specialty. Chicken noodle soup had nothing on granny noodles; it was the ultimate comfort food. I was in the 6th grade when I learned that our beloved granny noodles (instant ramen) were generally considered a low-teir meal.



An injured hummingbird in granny's hand.
Photo courtesy of Cathy Hester



Hummingbird drinking sugarwater.
Photo courtesy of Cathy Hester

HUMAN / NATURE

Granny believed that you could learn a lot about a person in the way they treat animals; the capacity to empathize with the innocent and vulnerable, whether or not their sentience can be voiced, is indeed a measure of character. As the purported “ones in charge” on this planet, compassionate cohabitation is certainly the most responsible way of being. After all, the term “humanity” is used interchangeably with “benevolence.”

Even still, it was granny who taught us to tie sewing thread around the legs of June bugs and watch them fly tirelessly in circles while we held the opposite end of the leash. A game, of sorts. There always seems to be a boundary, a point at which a being's distance from human-ness disqualifies them from humane treatment. From what I can tell, everyone draws that line differently. Whether the distinction is made using categorical biology, intelligence level, or just cute factor, a life that can be othered becomes inherently less valuable to us. Exercised empathy tends to take a nosedive when we no longer see ourselves in the other; animals are not the only victims of this.

Dehumanization is a common practice of oppression. It is crucial to reckon with the unconscious and societally-enforced positioning of lines between what we consider to be human and nonhuman. Who gets to decide which beings qualify as equals, and which are beyond the scope of dignity?



Opossum joey in woman's hands. Catawba, SC. 2020.

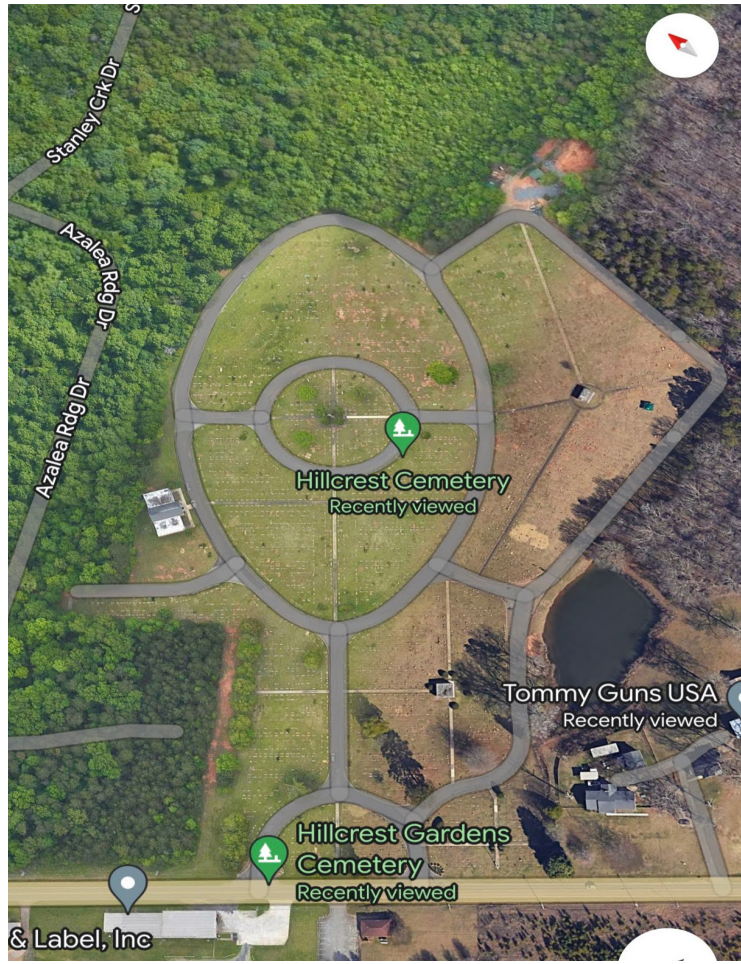
See FIGURE 8, FIGURE 9, and FIGURE 10 on page 64-65 and 66.

“THERE’S WORSE THINGS THAN DYING.” SHE’D SAY.

On days that we had bread scraps or stale crackers to spare, granny would fill an empty bread bag with them. We’d take the bag and go rambling through the woods by her house, enjoying shade among the trees until they spit us out at the edge of a sprawling clearing: Hillcrest Gardens cemetery.

As to be expected, the cemetery was a quiet place - there wasn’t much around to begin with. Surrounded by woods on all sides except where the manicured lawn met the highway, it was very still aside from the occasional passing car. The land was barren and understated, with mostly flat grave-markers and an absence of landscaping aside from scattered sprigs of plastic flowers. Tilled red clay made obvious the fresher of the graves. We would take care not to walk on top of anybody as we made our way across the lawns to the small pond on the far side of the cemetery. There, the ducks and geese gathered for a feeding. They made their seasonal home along the banks of the pond, nesting and raising their young in the very same spot year after year. We’d sling crumbs into the water until our bag was empty, then retrace our steps back across the graveyard.

Granny talked to the ducks, and she talked to the dead. With each visit, she bade them all hello and a pleasant farewell. The thought of death never appeared to concern her, and she seemed sure of what awaited. In defense of her Do-Not-Resuscitate order, she offered her usual refrain; “when it’s my time, it’s my time.” In a mortal world where expiration is the ultimate anxiety, peace of mind is a radical act.



Google Maps satellite image of Hillcrest Gardens Cemetery, 2023.



Big Rock on the day we spread granny’s ashes. May 2015. Photo courtesy of Cathy Hester.

We spread granny’s ashes in the woods behind the Hillcrest Gardens cemetery, around a big rock we call Big Rock.



Giant Legs by Ricky Pearce. Earthcast concrete. 2005. Henderson, NC.
Photo taken on my way to Rhode Island in 2021.

Part IV

Observations

The social role of the artist as a cultural navigator begins with thoughtful examination of the world. Practicing attentive observation allows one to parse the ways in which the many fibers of society - like aesthetics, social systems, and historical lineages - entwine, tangle, and sometimes fray. Those who learn to heed their eye might notice what others fail to see. The following chapter contains some miscellaneous observations that have informed my perspective.



High Heels by Ricky Pearce. Earthcast concrete. 2005. Henderson, NC.
Photo taken on my way to Rhode Island in 2021.



NC Mountain State Fair, 2018. Asheville, NC.

Culture is a mirror. It reflects us; our collective identities, our way of life, and our means of survival.

Uncle Luther used to sing
to the owls
that appeared in his trees
each evening
“Swing low, sweet chariot.
Coming for to carry me home”



Dismembered bird wing, 2023. Providence, RI.



Noah on trash heap, 2022.
Kings Mountain, NC.



Ozzy playing in a puddle, 2022.
Kings Mountain, NC. Photo
courtesy of Donna Richey.

Country songs have a habit of romanticizing dirt roads, and I am susceptiblely nostalgic. I miss winding meanders covered in tire tracks and patched with gravel, with softly uncertain edges that seep into their surroundings. They lay in stark contrast against the rigidity of urban asphalts and pavements that stick like scabs on the earth. I've been walking by the same dried vomit on the sidewalk outside of my apartment for weeks. I long for permeable surfaces and unfixed, everchanging landscapes.

There are, of course, two sides to the coin of rural infrastructure.

There are still places in the United States where the the postal service won't deliver, where the water runs brown, where internet providers either refuse or fail to service adequately, and where folks are stranded when the creek rises too high.

See FIGURE 6 and FIGURE 7 on page 62-63.



Chloe and dad doing porch repairs, 2011. Fayette County, WV.

Observations

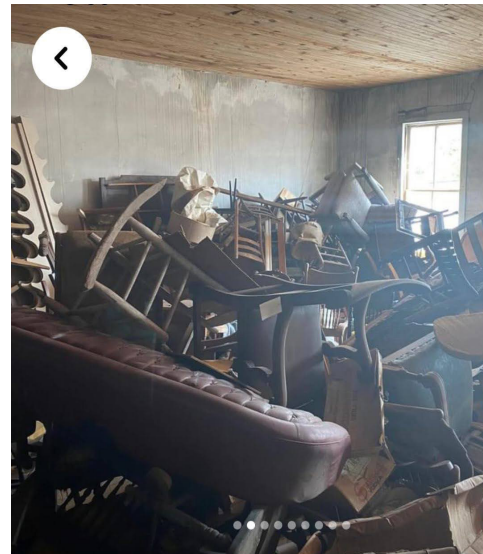
My father is a near-personification of Protestant work ethic. A living example of diligence and frugality, he hardly ever idles.

Protestant work ethic is a sociological theory in which value is attached to hard work and thrift in one's worldly calling, with success and prosperity serving as proof of eternal salvation. In his book "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," Max Weber connects this religious inclination for labor to the acceleration of capitalism in America. Rejecting hedonism in favor of discipline and restraint, early Protestants modeled their values with influence from Calvinist doctrines of predestination and asceticism which maintain that to be favorable in the eyes of God, one must be a hard worker. This proved to be a cultural factor that contributed not only to the expansion of capitalism, but also our widespread acceptance of it.

What are the consequences of tying labor to virtue?

MATERIAL ECONOMIES

In a capitalist economy, the primary market is driven by the pursuit of profit, with companies and corporations seeking to maximize their gains through the inflated sale of goods and services. This often results in the exclusion of certain individuals and communities who don't have the resources to participate fully in the primary market. The system, by design, is exclusionary.



Free
FREE

Listed 8 minutes ago in Rockingham, NC



Metal spools
\$40 ~~\$50~~

Listed over a week ago in Monroe, NC



T5 8 Bulb Fluorescent Lights
\$50 · Sold

Message sent to seller

Various screenshots of Facebook Marketplace listings of objects purchased for sculptural applications, 2021-23.

Founded to fill the need for an alternative to the capital market, secondary marketplaces like Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, and flea markets play an essential role in the lives of those that might not otherwise be able to afford certain goods and services. Bartering systems can also be especially useful in areas where traditional currency is scarce or where people prefer to rely on direct exchange. These entities allow people to trade directly with one another, without the need for an intermediary or profit motive. For individuals who are struggling to make ends meet or who may have limited access to traditional forms of income, these systems serve as a lifeline.

These systems can also manifest as expressions of class solidarity, as they provide a means for people to support one another outside of the traditional economic framework. By participating in secondary markets and bartering systems, individuals can form relationships and networks of support that transcend the boundaries of class.

Matching low-income demographics with discarded goods - both of which have fallen to the bottom of the social value hierarchy created by the capital market - alternative economies are an intrinsic part of survival in late capitalism and play a vital role in building community.

Free trailer and house

Trailer most take it all at ones

House can be taking apart



Screenshot of online yardsale listing, 2022. Charlotte, NC.

Part V

Outcomes

The social role of the artist as a cultural navigator culminates in creation. Having thoroughly observed and absorbed, the artist contributes another layer to the preexisting cultural amalgamation. The following chapter contains documentation of my own cultural contributions; the outcomes of a practice embedded in labor politics and social critique, and objects materialized as a result of ongoing research around class and status.

BREAD AND ROSES

James Oppenheim, *The American Magazine*, December 1911.

As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
 A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
 Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
 For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!
 As we go marching, marching, we battle too for men,
 For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
 Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
 Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.
 As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
 Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.
 Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
 Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.
 As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,
 The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
 No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
 But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses.
 Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
 Hearts starve as well as bodies; bread and roses, bread and roses.

FIGURE 1



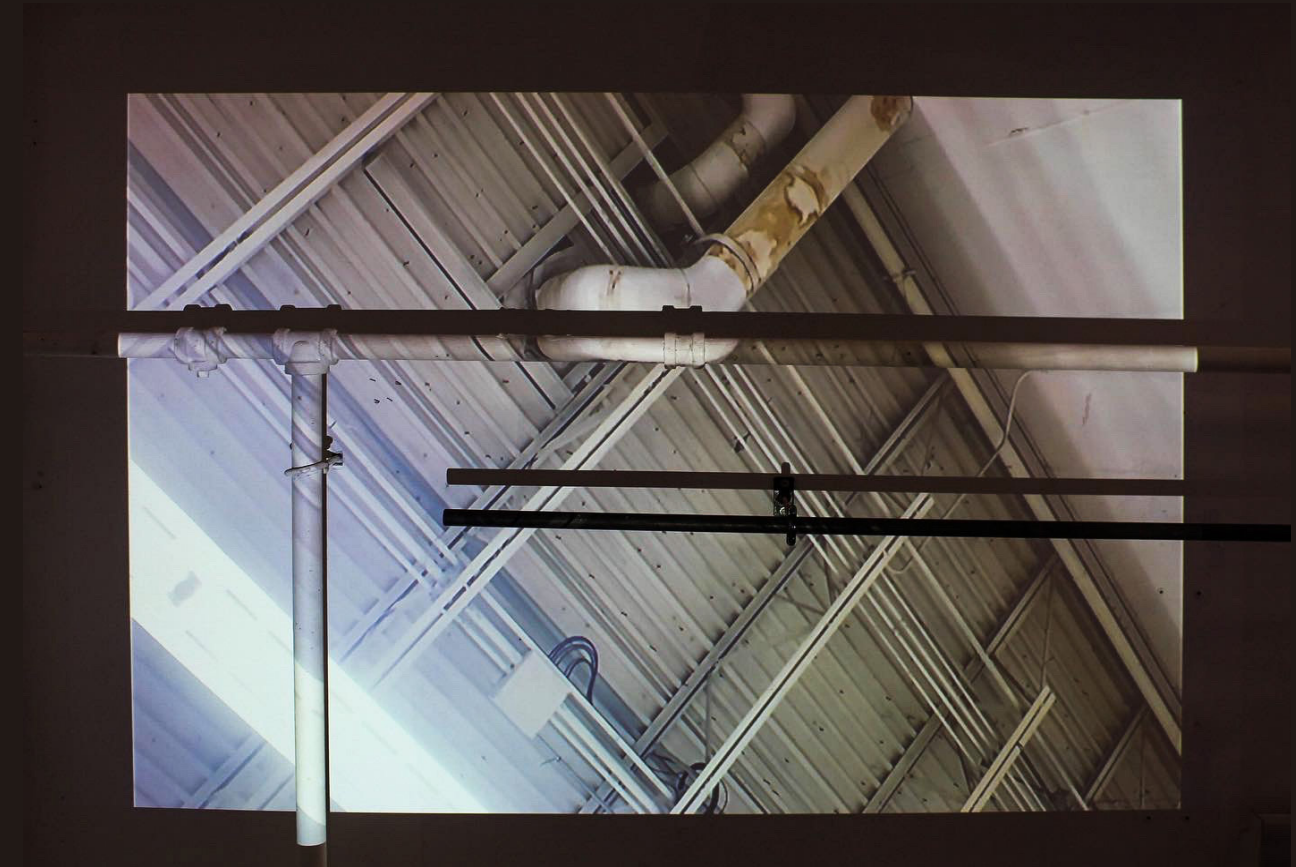
Muscle Memory
 Conveyer, thread, excerpt
 of *Bread and Roses* by
 James Oppenheim.
 2022

FIGURE 2



Muscle Memory
 Conveyer, thread, excerpt of *Bread and Roses* by James Oppenheim.
 2022

FIGURE 3



Links to an Amazonian Bird (video projection still)
 Anchor, chains, fabric, thread, and video projection
 2021



FIGURE 4

Links to an Amazonian Bird
Anchor, chains, fabric, thread,
and video projection
2021

Links to an Amazonian Bird (detail)
Anchor, chains, fabric, thread,
and video projection
2021



FIGURE 5

FIGURE 6



A Walk In The Park II
Gravel, felt, aluminum
2022

FIGURE 7



A Walk In The Park II (detail)
Gravel, felt, aluminum
2022

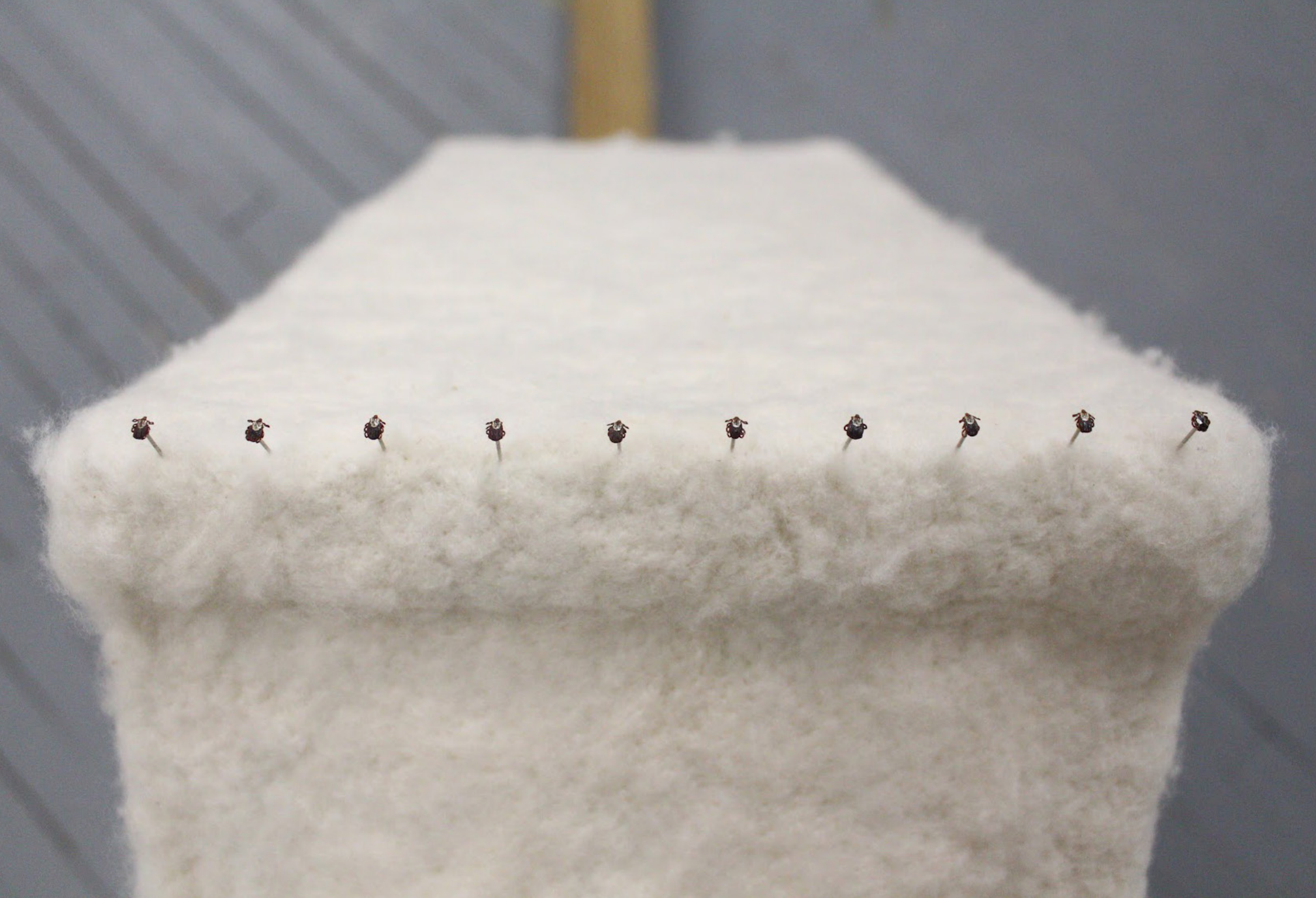


FIGURE 8

Suckers (details)
Pine mailbox post, wool, iron, American Dog Ticks
2022

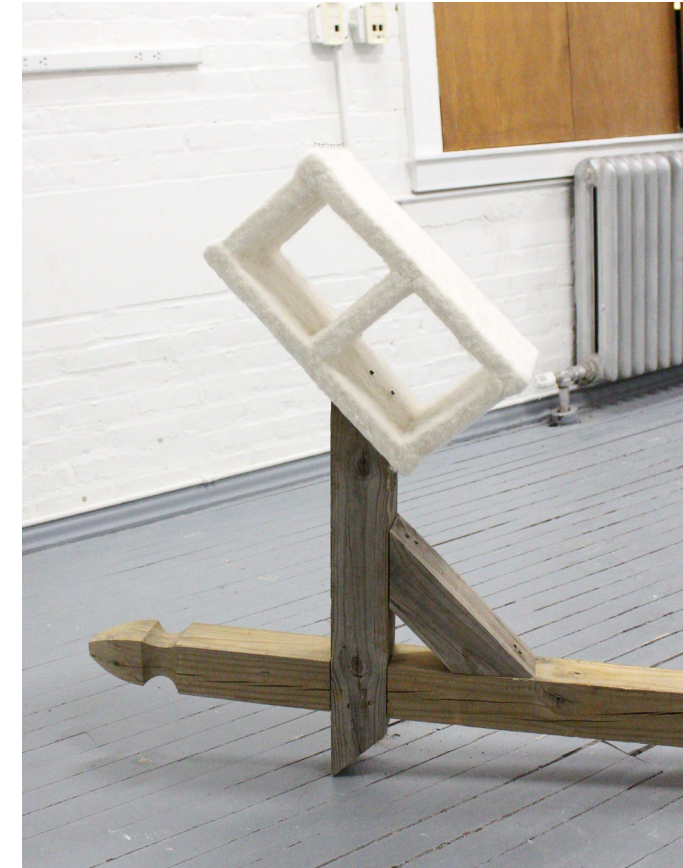


FIGURE 9

FIGURE 10



Suckers
Pine mailbox post, wool, iron, American Dog Ticks
2022



FIGURE II

Appetite (video still)
Gravel, cinder blocks, table cloths, bronze,
ice cream sundaes, performance video.
2022.

FIGURE 12



Eagle Flag Topper (pre-melt)
Butter
2022



FIGURE 13

Eagle Flag Topper (post-melt)
Butter
2022

CONCLUSION - MEANING REFLECTING MEANS

The marrow of my conceptual interest derives from my experiences navigating the structures of late capitalism and the subsequent realities of everyday life. Through crafted visual metaphors, I seek to examine the complex sociological implications of class identity, white supremacy, nationalism, and patriotism. These complexities are distilled into digestible sculptural entities that aim to challenge established perspectives and preconceptions. As a product of the American South, I feel a certain urgency to investigate how cultural perspectives develop and shape the ways in which people relate to one another.

As is true of my lived experience, my practice operates only within my own means and usually by my own hand. I favor processes rooted in DIY sensibilities and accessible modes of making, often using fabrication techniques inspired by Appalachian craft traditions. These gestures of handcraft utilize repetitive manual labor in ways that mirror the blue-collar work of my background as an Amazon warehouse worker, a sanitation technician, and a farmhand. This labor-conscious methodology resulted not out of mere necessity, but rather for the sake of authenticity. The presence of my hand in the work acts as resistance to increasing industrialization and automated fabrication. In a world of manufactured objects, the handmade remains quintessentially human. In this regard, I classify my own labor as a medium that is crucial to the integrity of my practice.

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