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The Activism of Dance Performance in Appalachia:
Utilizing the Arts to Address Social and Environmental Crisis
and Injustice in the Mountains

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Abstract

For well over a century, the human and more-than-human of Central Appalachia have endured oppression and exploitation, primarily due to natural resource extraction. In spring 2008, the author led a dark tourⁱ to a mountaintop removal coalmining site in Southern West Virginia for colleagues, which included Dance Professor Deborah McLaughlin. As a result, the two collaborated on three evening-length dance/theater works highlighting social and environmental crises and injustices in the region. The performances incorporated contemporary dance, poetry, the spoken word, and the visual arts, as well as contemporary and traditional music. The first, *Eating Appalachia: Selling Out to the Hungry Ghost*, focused on mountaintop removal coalmining and its environmental and cultural destruction. With *Sounds of Stories Dancing*, the duo paid homage to millions of mountain residents forced to leave the region to find stable employment, despite longing to remain. In the final piece, *The Shadow Waltz*, they honored the lives of coalminers with black lung disease, as well as their families. This essay discusses the challenges of creating art that critiques socially constructed messages portrayed as given truths, as well as the educational and social successes of daring to dance truth to power.

Keywords: Central Appalachia, dance/theater, social crisis, environmental crisis, single-industry domination, mountaintop removal coalmining, outmigration, black lung disease

“Many folks feel no sense of place. What they know, what they have is a sense of crisis, of impending doom.” (hooks, *Belonging* 1)

Introduction/ Context

I am Appalachian, born and raised in this beautiful mountain region that contains a long, rich, and complex cultural and environmental history. During my youth and into my teens, I spent countless hours hiking and exploring the forests surrounding my homeplace. Snakes and snails, maples and sycamores, all provided delight and fueled my curiosity. So, too, dance was an important part of my life as I took ballet lessons from the time I was three and a half until I was thirteen. Dancing as a parrot while a young child in the Arabian dance of Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker* was my first performance on stage. While some may view these activities as incongruent, they are vital threads of my identity and continue to shape my personal and professional lives. The arts, whether visual or performing, have held me captive with their great possibilities to communicate in ways conventional language fails. The more-than-human world, those lives and natural wonders beyond the anthropocentric, claim a hold on my soul and imagination. I acknowledge their oppression under humans and actively work to eradicate it. Thus, I was primed to explore and critique crises of my native Appalachia through the arts.

In his 1975 essay “Appalachian Values,” Loyal Jones identifies “love of place” as a key characteristic of mountain inhabitants. He notes, “We are oriented around places. We never forget our native places, and we go back as often as possible. . . . Our place is always close on our minds” (510). Fellow Kentuckian bell hooks, however, begins her 2009 collection of essays, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, with a lamentation that “[m]any folks feel no sense of place. What they know, what they have is a sense of crisis, of impending doom” (1). This tension, and seeming contradiction, about Appalachians is central to many in the region as they navigate the increasingly deleterious fallout of capitalism and neoliberalism. For well over a century, the human and more-than-human of Central Appalachia have endured oppression and exploitation, primarily due to natural resource extraction. Entrenched negative

Appalachian stereotypes, dating back centuries, have exacerbated prejudices against the region held by many, and not only outsiders. Such stereotypes serve as justification for mistreatment and abuse stemming from corruption and greed. The result is a land and people in crisis, perpetual crisis.

In fact, Central Appalachia fits the paradigm suggested by Nassim Winnie Balestrini, Leopold Lippert, and Maria Löschnigg in their introduction to a 2020 *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* special issue, "Theater of Crisis: Contemporary Aesthetic Responses to a Cross-Sectional Condition." The authors explain:

Recent critical theory concerned with the global ascendancy of neoliberal biopolitics (since the late 1970s) has emphasized the numerous ways in which crisis has become an ordinary condition for many people and has tried to come to terms with the structural dimensions of the neoliberal management of populations through technologies of crisis, precarity, insecurity, or austerity. (3)

As exemplified in the Appalachian Regional Commission's "Interactive Map of County Economic Status and Distressed Areas, FY 2023," the greatest cluster of economically distressed counties lies in Central Appalachia ("Classifying Economic Distress"). Primarily dominated by single industries, this region and its inhabitants have faced and continue to face "crisis, precarity, insecurity, [and] austerity."

Deeper into their introduction, Balestrini, Lippert and Löschnigg cite cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, who "uses the notion of 'slow death' to describe a continuous process of bodily and psychological attrition that gradually incapacitates the political agency of individuals and communities" (4). Throughout Central Appalachia one can witness such incapacitation, coupled with Australian Professor of Environmental Studies Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia. In a 2020 *American Imago* article, Albrecht explains: "I created the concept of solastalgia in 2003 in order to give conceptual clarification to the experience of people whose home environment was being changed in unwelcome ways" (9). He dives deeper into the definition, and his effort to invent a word to capture

the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation. . . . In short, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home.' (10-11)

Thus, we circle back to the tension noted above between Jones's "love of place" and hooks's "no sense of place."

Solastalgia was first used in an Appalachian context by Paige Cordial in her dissertation and subsequent *Ecopsychology* article, "The Effects of Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining on Mental Health, Well-Being, and Community Health in Central Appalachia." Through focus group interviews in Southwest Virginia, Southern West Virginia, and Eastern Kentucky, Cordial documented the psychological trauma the inhabitants experienced as their home and land were being destroyed in their midst and at the hands of humans, including some in the focus groups. As the late, fierce West Virginia environmental activist Judy Bonds asked rhetorically when I spoke with her in 2008, "What kind of choice is it to blow up the mountains you love or put food on your table?" (Bonds).

A long tradition of resistance and defiance characterizes the region. Appalachians have countered various forms of social and environmental crisis through nonviolent protest, direct social action, grassroots outreach, policy work, and, importantly, the arts. Whether penning protest songs in the fervor of a coal strike or creating community theater to spark dialogue and change, Appalachians have responded. In fact, a rich tradition of community theater exists in the region with place taking center stage and aligning with Appalachians' deep, abiding love thereof. As Jan Cohen-Cruz explains, "primacy of place" is a main feature of this theatrical format (4). Danny Miller and colleagues provide an historical overview of drama and theater in their chapter, "Appalachian Literature," in the edited collection *A Handbook to Appalachia: An Introduction to the Region*. The authors cite origins from the 1930s, noting, "James Taylor Adams, a WPA writer and creator of Big Laurel Press, collected stories which have become a source for many contemporary Appalachia playwrights" (209).

They go on to chronicle the burgeoning outdoor theater of the 1950s and 1960s, explaining the influence of the Civil Rights Movement on mountain drama. In recounting the creation and work of the Highlander Center's Alternate ROOTS arts organization, also supported by Roadside Theater, they quote former director Ruby Lerner, who describes the group's work as "'a grass roots cultural movement, peculiar to the South, whose aim is to be part of the transformation of the region – by acknowledging and critically assessing its past, particularly with regard to race, uncovering its buried history and untold stories, and celebrating its heroes'" (210). Such overt critical arts work counters the reductive, derogatory caricatures of Appalachians held by many outside the mountains. It demonstrates a striving for social justice and evidences a drive to include neglected voices.

Next, Miller and colleagues document the 1975 founding of Appalshop's Roadside Theater, based in Whitesburg (Letcher County), Kentucky. This group serves as a strong example of Appalachians' dedication to community-theater storytelling that defies long-lived and enduring stereotypes of the region and its residents. Actors are from the community, speak in and celebrate distinct Appalachian dialects, and convey cherished mountain cultural heritages. As noted on the Roadside Theater website, the group:

- Creates and presents an indigenous body of plays richly reflective of the lives of Appalachian people;
- Collaborates with other professional ensemble theaters to create intercultural plays that explore issues of race, place, and class;
- Strives for artistic excellence and a vital relationship with its mostly economically poor, working class, and middle class audiences;
- Serves as a resource to communities regionally and nationally that desire to explore and stage their local life. ("Roadside Theater")

Of particular importance is the troupe's commitment to host theatrical productions in the communities where the stories are gathered and on which the storytelling and drama are focused. In her article about Roadside Theater, Sharon Hatfield quotes director Dudley Cocke: "'Grassroots art is trying to have people not only be moved esthetically by the quality of art presented, but to encourage people to work from their

own resources. . . . It encourages people to do something with their lives and communities. That transformation is an important part of art” (44). Community theater *for* community inspires, nurtures, and supports individual and collective agency, both of which are critical in historically oppressed areas.

Significantly, Roadside has partnered with other national and international community theater groups over the decades, testifying to Appalachians’ awareness of and solidarity with other marginalized populations, from the Caribbean to Southern Alabama, inner-city Baltimore to rural Wisconsin (Fink). In his enlightening, provocative article, “Secular Communion in the Coalfields: The Populist Aesthetic and Practice of Roadside Theater,” Ben Fink situates Roadside Theater’s productions within a true populist framework, “a tradition of politics and culture that is neither left nor right, based in building a commonwealth – whole communities making things together and owning what they make” (17). Throughout the article, Fink reveals Roadside’s processes to defy politically-motivated culture wars that pit people against people to deflect attention from those in power. Using Roadside’s collaboration with the Latin American theater group Pregones to produce *Betsy!*, he explains:

Roadside and Pregones were doing something different: not administering a service to a community external to themselves, but reflecting their own communities’ complicated stories and traditions back to their neighbors. . . . The whole play was grounded in call and response – not only onstage among players, but also between performers and audiences – as the two ensembles performed the coming-together of their communities that Roadside sometimes calls ‘secular communion’ (Brooks, Cocke, and Dower 2018). (Fink 20)

In such communal moves, audience members become integral participants in the production, breaking down the artificial barriers that exist between performers and audiences, and reflecting a broader effort to level the barriers erected to prevent collective organizing and action.

Higher Ground, founded in 2001 and also located in Eastern Kentucky in Harlan County, builds on the Roadside Theater tradition. Originating as a multidisciplinary community outreach program through Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKCT), the

theater component developed as the group of students, faculty, and staff sought to engage in difficult conversations with diverse community members (“Higher Ground”). Jo Carson, well-known and beloved Appalachian storyteller and community theater producer, was called in to gather the oral histories collected from inhabitants in Harlan by the SKCT students and weave the themes into Higher Ground’s first community play, titled *Higher Ground*. The play confronted the dual flood challenges of water and opioids in the mountains. Focusing on the ravaged landscape from strip mining, performers shared residents’ stories about flooded homeplaces as denuded lands could not absorb intense rainstorms. Similarly, they documented the intentional flooding of Oxy-Contin by Purdue Pharma into Eastern Kentucky and its tragic consequences. Each subsequent play addressed equally devastating community issues, continuing to draw from resident voices and utilizing resident cast members.

In the 2009 *Playing with Fire*, the performers continued the focus on drugs in the coalfields, but also included coalminer stories. In an intentionally ironically-titled monologue, “Education Pays,” by Carl, a husband and father with a master’s degree, the audience learns that an education does not in fact pay, despite his family’s assertion, “Use your head, not your back” (Ledford 722). Carl explains while at the unemployment office:

So I’m a man with a master’s degree and a family mucking the beltline in a coal mine. It is a back job if ever there was one. My wife worries from the time I leave in the morning till the time I get back in the door because it is a dangerous job. But it is a thinking job. I’m thinking about what I could do that might earn \$52,000 doing something that doesn’t ruin your back and leave tears in your wife’s eyes every morning. (Ledford 722-723)

In a region dominated by single industry, residents are at the mercy of that industry, no matter the educational level attained. As Carl recounts, even a master’s degree does not protect a man from the dangerous work of coalmining.

As with Roadside Theater and Higher Ground, the Appalachian Women’s Alliance’s performance group Appalachian Women Rising provided poignant social and environmental commentary in their plays

("Mountain Women Rising"). Appalachian Women Rising collected community histories and individual mountain women's stories, while using mountain residents as performers. Before their tenure ended, Appalachian Women Rising performed in such diverse venues as the United Nations, community development centers, colleges and universities, as well as for a variety of conferences and convenings ("Mountain Women Rising"). Although the group no longer performs today, I was fortunate to host one of their performances on Radford University's campus in the spring of 2009. The women revealed their own and other mountain women's stories through poetry, prose, and song, recounting triumphs over domestic violence and documenting familial trials when "coming out" as gay, among other issues. After the performance, many of my Appalachian Studies undergraduate students shared their profound reactions to the performance, noting the compelling way in which the stories were conveyed on stage. A few, however, denounced the lesbian "coming out" story as the performer talked of her Southern Baptist church and religious beliefs. These few students proclaimed that this was a mockery of their religion. Thus, it was incumbent upon me as educator to facilitate critical, intense dialogue about this controversial topic in a nonthreatening way to all my students, while stressing the importance of acceptance and empathy.

This anecdote reveals the power of the arts, community theater in this case, to introduce ideas and provoke conversations in which audiences may not otherwise engage. Though uncomfortable and at times contentious, such dialogue is necessary for healthy, inclusive communities. We must attempt to achieve understanding through language, however insufficient it may be at times. Albrecht identified the inadequacies in our current languages, the failure of seemingly simple words, to reflect the full scope and scale of environmental and social crises and humans' responses to them. Many contemporary Appalachians are overcoming these limitations by innovating creative responses through the arts, while Albrecht responded with neologisms and memes. For example, *soliphilia* is "the love of the totality of our place relationships, and a willingness to accept the political responsibility for protecting and conserving them at all scales" (20). His *Symbiocene* is "the period in the

history of humanity on this Earth, [which] will be characterized by human intelligence and praxis that replicate the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing life-reproducing forms and processes found in living systems” (21-22).

For the purpose of this article, I focus on my rebellious and innovative collaboration with Radford University Department of Dance Professor Deborah McLaughlin as we documented and defied several Appalachian crises through three choreographed dance/theater productions. Just as healthy, thriving living systems rely on “mutually reinforcing life-reproducing forms,” the arts in their fullness, their interdisciplinarity and interdependence, serve as antidote to crises and tragedies. I discuss the challenges of creating art that critiques socially constructed messages portrayed as given truths, particularly in areas with single-industry domination, as well as the educational and social successes of daring to dance truth to power.

Eating Appalachia: Selling Out to the Hungry Ghost

For almost two decades, I have led dark tours to Southern West Virginia and Southwest Virginia to observe the effects of mountaintop removal coalmining on humans and the more-than-human. This extreme form of strip mining involves blowing up the tops of mountains to obtain thin layers of coal, with the spoil or overburden being dumped in valley fills. Additionally, the toxic concoction left after “cleaning” the coal is pumped either above the mountains behind earthen dams or down into abandoned deep mines, with historically horrid consequences. The tours included students and colleagues not only from Radford University but other national and international institutions. During the spring 2008 tour to Kayford Mountain in West Virginia, home of the late Larry Gibson, McLaughlin joined our group and became so heartsick over what she witnessed that she knew she had to respond. As a choreographer, McLaughlin had composed dance/theater pieces in the past to address a variety of issues. Because of our tour, mountaintop removal became the crisis catalyst to motivate her artistic output. As we focused on this extreme form of coal extraction, we sought to celebrate the beauty of

Appalachian cultures and natural environments, while highlighting the necessity of personal responsibility in our consumer-driven society.



Slurry Impoundment & Valley, Fill, Southern WV (photo by the author)

For *Eating Appalachia: Selling Out to the Hungry Ghost* McLaughlin drew from Far East spiritual principles, the hungry ghost representing the evils of greed and avarice. According to Heaphy, “[d]efined by a fusion of rage and desire, tormented by unfulfilled cravings and insatiably demanding impossible satisfactions, hungry ghosts are condemned to inhabit shadowy and dismal places in the realm of the living.” Mountaintop removal coalmining not only serves as a metaphorical but also a literal reflection of “eating Appalachia.” In different Buddhist traditions, the hungry ghost is a former human who withheld food from someone in need solely out of spite and malice, instead eating that food themselves. McLaughlin saw this concept as artistically fitting, and it clearly aligns with the late West Virginia environmental activist Judy Bonds’s condemnation of forcing residents to choose between either putting food on their family tables or blowing up

the mountains they love. In his *Appalachian Voice* review of the production, Bill Kovarik notes:

The problem of technology and greed is at the heart of mountaintop removal mining, McLaughlin says, and it is a major theme in the dance. At one point, dancers are caught in a web of electronics and cables. At another point, dancer Whitney Isaacs wanders around the stage, screeching with greed: 'That. I've always wanted that. It's perfect. And that . . .' But, like a hungry ghost, the dancer can never be satisfied. (para 6)

Through contemporary dance, traditional and original music, paintings, photography, video, and the spoken word, *Eating Appalachia* addresses Ana Fernández-Caparrós and Anna Brígido-Corachán's claims that crisis narratives "provide poignant accounts of our current state of affairs, aim at raising questions (many of which are unanswered), stir collective reflection . . . and ultimately, hope to foster collective responsibility and civic mobilization" (viii). The beginning two scenes of the performance contrast starkly, with dancers undulating with long blue fabric to mimic a gentle stream flow that is violently and loudly interrupted with video footage of explosives erupting atop a mountain. Inviting viewers to question their own contributions to such violence, McLaughlin choreographed the dancers tangled in a hulking mass of wires and cables that appears to take on a monstrous life of its own. Viewers and performers alike are confronted with our complicity stemming from our addiction to technology, which is literally fueled by coal-fired power plants with coal from this national sacrifice zone. When McLaughlin attempted to secure venues to present the performance in Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky coal communities, she was unsuccessful due to residents' fear of political and economic retribution. One of our goals was to encourage dialogue between disparate groups in a politically neutral environment because the work presented the issues in a metaphorical, nonthreatening way. We learned, however, that the very title proved contentious in certain situations. While we were able to present the piece in non-coal mining communities in Appalachia, most of the audience members' commentary focused on the artistry and their deep emotional responses to it. A few responded to the specific issue of mountaintop removal and possible alternatives to energy consumption and

economic diversification. One audience member noted the dark, creative way McLaughlin choreographed human dancers representing the very unhuman act of strip mining. The corporeal essence of dance stood in juxtaposition to the ruin of the physical earth. Yet another audience member commented on, and took ownership of, society's general communal apathy and its ignorance of, or unwillingness to acknowledge, the cost of a comfortable life, in other words, the unaccounted-for externalities.

McLaughlin's intentional use of both humor and beauty juxtaposed to the environmental destruction provides viewers a reminder that other ways of being, of living in harmony and coexisting peacefully, are possible if we mobilize and act collectively. Some of that beauty entailed original music composed by our Radford University colleagues, Bud Bennett and Don Hall. While Bennett picked the banjo and played guitar, Hall utilized an electronic keyboard and various percussion instruments to accompany the dancers. Other forms of beauty included paintings of Appalachian flora and fauna by visual artist Suzanne Stryk, which were projected onto a screen behind the dancers. In one image, a lone salamander coils gracefully and regally, signaling this amphibian's importance as an indicator species. In fact, Southern Appalachia hosts more salamanders than anywhere else in the world (Ritland). As the performance's storyteller, I sat on stage in a front corner, reciting sobering statistics of mountaintop removal environmental destruction but also reading lists of medicinal herbs and native plants.

Kovarik concludes his article by quoting McLaughlin: "People end up feeling hopeless and helpless . . . and just go out and shop. . . . We entertain ourselves to death. So, I was trying to figure out how to do a piece that would be compelling and provide some hope." Thus is the nature of effective crisis theater, where audiences are drawn into the intensity of the crisis through artistry yet emerge both challenged and inspired to act.



Angst-ridden Dancers in *Eating Appalachia* (photo by Lora Gordan)

Sounds of Stories Dancing

In the second performance, *Sounds of Stories Dancing*, McLaughlin drew inspiration from forty oral histories of Appalachian women activists I conducted over several years. Funded by a Virginia Humanities grant, I traveled throughout the Appalachian region interviewing strong, brave women from Ohio to Georgia for my project, *Women of Change, Women of Courage: Appalachian Activists*. While many conformed to traditional notions of activists, such as Judy Bonds and Terry Blanton, both of whom rallied, protested, and marched against environmental destruction, others embodied activism through their poetry, prose, songs, and visual art. For

this specific performance piece, I conducted additional interviews with Appalachian youth and elders, seeking to elicit their relationship to the region. Several themes emerged from the interviews, with the enduring attachment to home and land surfacing yet again. Indeed, for all, the mountains themselves were revered as ancient ancestors, nurturing mind, body, and spirit. In the multidisciplinary piece, McLaughlin explored the deep connections between humans and their lived places and the fallout that occurs when those connections are severed. Her choreography tapped into the women activists' determination to protect and care for the land, even when under threat by various forces. It honored the young people's understanding of their place in and connection to the mountains.



Dancers Longing for Home in *Sounds of Stories Dancing* (photo by Lora Gordan)

A crisis of the spirit pervaded the beginning of the performance with a solitary dancer darting back and forth across the stage with a single suitcase in hand as a train whistle hauntingly blows. Representing the many mountain residents forced to leave the region for work and livelihood, products of outmigration due to single-industry domination

and boom/bust cycles, the dancer embodied leaving, longing, and hope in equal parts, which set the tone for the remainder of the performance.

McLaughlin choreographed the entire piece using Radford University student dancers, some of whom performed in *Eating Appalachia*, and who interpreted through movement and dance the oral histories and interviews. Though not a verbatim transcription, the individuals' words were extrapolated to create poetic riffs interspersed with musical compositions. The oral histories and interviews served three main goals of the piece. First, we wanted to represent the importance of inter-generational dialogue, how elder and child alike can learn from one another. Second, we wished to convey the necessity and obligation to care for the Earth that Appalachians expressed. As noted in the Introduction above, love of place, according to Appalachian scholar Loyal Jones of Kentucky, serves as one of the most distinguishing characteristics of Appalachians. And to care for that place is vital in the love of it. Lastly, we sought to present visions of real possibilities for sustainable communities and environments, where all that/who make up that place are cared for and valued. Because we focused on Appalachia, the region's residents, and its natural surroundings, we purposely gave voice to a traditionally disenfranchised and marginalized people and area of the country.

Bud Bennett and Don Hall, who provided music for our previous collaborative performance piece, created a soundtrack, utilizing elements of the storytelling, as well as sounds of the natural world. Water, with its various melodies and cacophonies, served as a constant sound thread throughout the piece, symbolizing the interconnectedness of life, the march of time, and the continuity of the generations. Bennett and Hall used a combination of original and traditional music played on a variety of instruments to illustrate the richness and complexity of the Appalachian region and how the culture interacts with progress. At times the music was highly textured, boasting layers of traditional instruments and electronic ones, while at other times the sound was pure, simple, and raw. Bennett even served as cast member, offering a live, and therefore unpredictable and impromptu, performance as he picked the banjo on stage in certain scenes. Moreover, the composers drew from the voices of the oral history

informants, weaving their words into the composition and thereby adding yet another layer to the timbre.

Suzanne Stryk, naturalist and visual artist from Bristol, Virginia, who contributed to the set of *Eating Appalachia*, provided the whole set design for this second performance. A quick review of Stryk's oeuvre will reveal that her paintings and drawings exhibit the beauty of the natural world through surrealistic interpretations, thus defamiliarizing the familiar for viewers in provocative ways (Stryk). The lives of Appalachian bugs, animals, and plants serve as the subject of much of her compositions, which were incorporated into the performance piece as both static stage backgrounds and fluid props.

As with the first piece, I served as cultural consultant and Appalachian griot in the performance. Like a front-porch storyteller, I symbolized the longstanding oral tradition of Appalachians and demonstrated storytelling's entertainment and educational value. Reciting poems by Jim Wayne Miller, I conjured this beloved Appalachian bard's spirit, his words capturing the essence of the performance. In "Shapes," Miller set the tone for McLaughlin's choreography:

When he saw people flowing out of the mountains,
leaving like a line of clanking coal cars,
his life grew damp and heavy in his flesh,
turned dark and cold
as charred wood in a rained-out fire.

The smallest thing, though, still could fire his spirit –
a chopping ax far off in the woods,
foxhounds running on the ridge at night,
the cries of children playing in the creek,
a dog lapping water in the dark.

When he found deer tracks on the logging roads
his life grew light and dry.
Near the weathered silver of old barns
his life caught fire
and he studied shapes in the flame of his own spirit. (*The Brier Poems* 52)

As technology drives society faster and farther away from sensitivity toward the natural world, *Sounds of Stories Dancing* explored

the threads of connectivity of generations in conversation, of responsibility to the Earth, and of visions of sustainable communities. In what may be deemed a surrealist, ecocritical turn, Nature and a few of its representatives had their say as well. With collage as the guiding metaphor, this multi-genre performance piece layered collected oral histories that were transformed into mediums of original dance, music, poetry, and painting. The resultant montage offered audiences an alternative social mirror to view themselves and to view the real possibility for a healthy and just future. Drawing inspiration from the hopefulness of the young interviewees, as well as the seasoned women activists, the dancers illustrated symbiotic, nourishing relationships between generations and between human and the more-than-human. They embodied both hope and action to address oppression and exploitation, as manifested in the interviews and expressed in scenes where agency and intentionality prevail over surrender and defeat. As Brígido-Corachán and Fernández-Caparrós assert, “Crises disrupt our routines, plans, and practices, they give us the chance to rethink the world we live in, to reflect on and reconsider who we are as communities, as societies, as individuals” (viii). Unsettling the status quo, where lethargy often takes up residence, crises offer opportunities to question and critique what we have accepted as normal yet is socially constructed typically to serve those in power. Theater serves as creative venue where such questioning and reflection can occur.

The Shadow Waltz

Lawmakers created the federal Black Lung Program in 1969 to address the financial medical burdens of coalminers contracting this deadly, preventable disease (Szymendera and Sherlock). The creation of the Mine Safety and Health Administration followed almost a decade later in 1978 and came under the purview of the Department of Labor (Marshall). After years of decline in the number of black lung cases as a result of the program, tragically, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health began documenting a resurgence in the 2000s (Stevens). Not only

were longtime miners succumbing to the disease, but young miners who had worked less than ten years also presented extreme cases, known as complicated black lung or progressive massive fibrosis. In addition to breathing in coal dust, miners inhale silica from rock blasting. A combination of increased mechanization, longer work hours, thinner seams of coal, and intentional misreporting of coal dust by companies led to the resurgence.

After learning about this occupational health crisis, I applied for an internal university grant to fund my travels to interview coalminers with black lung disease. I knew it was critical for the miners to speak, to tell their own stories in their own words. Thus, I adhered to tenets of feminist and postcolonial theories that advocate one should never speak *for* someone else but instead allow the individual to speak for him or herself. Oral histories accomplish this beautifully as noted by the contributors to Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai's edited collection, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, although interviewers must remain vigilant in their methods and methodologies to avoid, or at the very least curtail, exploitative power dynamics. The value of this primary research collection is described succinctly by Anna Green in her essay, "'Unpacking' the Stories," from Green and Megan Hutching's collection, *Remembering: Writing Oral History*: "Through oral history we discover hidden aspects of the past from the perspective of those often excluded from conventional histories" (21). Oral histories are the people's histories. With interviewer intentionality, marginalized people become the center of attention and focus. Their life stories are collected because their lives are important and valuable in contributing to society's narrative.

On one trip to Southern West Virginia, McLaughlin accompanied me to conduct interviews with four retired miners diagnosed with black lung disease. The miners' stories, which revealed the powerful pull of this occupation, became a pivotal point in the performance's creation and in McLaughlin's choreography. Each miner clearly conveyed great pride in his career, noting their importance to the industrial development and fueling of our nation. With brotherhood as an overarching theme, the miners discussed their interdependence, their reliance on each other for their safety and well-being. Significantly, all four coalminers stated

unequivocally that they would go back in time and still mine coal, even knowing they would contract black lung disease. Such miner loyalty and pride served coal executives well over the decades as many took advantage of their workers. One man I interviewed talked about his father and brother, both miners, and their extreme dedication to their occupation. His father started mining when he was only 12 years old. During one section of the performance, I, serving as storyteller again, recited an excerpt from Benny's interview:

Pete had his back broke three times in the mines [from roof falls]. Now, I mean they MADE him quit. He would NOT. He was one of them who loved mining more than his wife. He DID. There was just something about coalmining and it was with Dad, too. Pete always said back here he found most of his comfort, that was his purpose in life, he felt like, was coalmining—and that was where he found all of his comfort, was down, he worked in a deep shaft. He went 30 some hundred feet straight down. He worked on Island Creek #1 and #3 in Buchanan County, Virginia. (Penley)

The opening scene, “A Wing and A Prayer,” conjured Western and Eastern Europeans leaving their ancestral lands in search of opportunity in the New World. Originally inhabited by various Native American tribes forced off their lands by unjust treaties and outright deception, Appalachia was eventually occupied by European immigrants pushed to the nation's interior by established colonists of the East. Squatters inhabited the land without land title or deed as many Revolutionary soldiers did not pursue the land grants awarded them upon the conclusion of the war (Shapiro). Early twentieth-century Library of Congress photographs of coalminers, men and children alike, were projected onto a screen behind the Radford University student dancers as they brought the stories to life.

In a press release for *The Shadow Waltz*, McLaughlin shared:

‘The stories that really surprised me were about the coal miners’ love for the mountains and for underground mining, in spite of the hardships and often subsequent illness. I found the miners’ daily confrontation with the possibility of death from explosions or mine collapses heroic.’ . . . While developing the piece, McLaughlin said, she was reminded of the Sirens in Greek mythology. She decided to layer mythology with reality to tell the story of Appalachian coal country. (Waidelich)

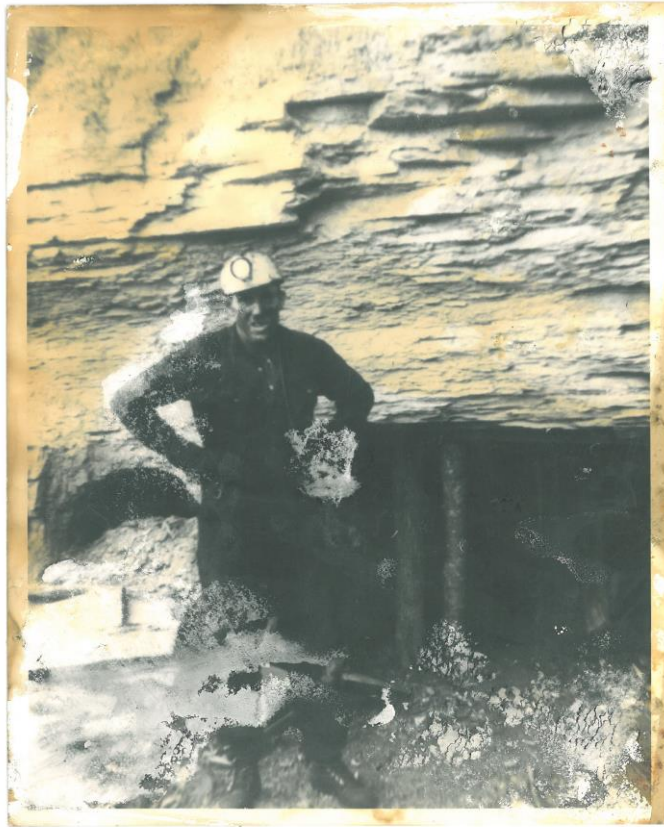
About halfway through the performance, we played Natalie Merchant's rendition of the famous Florence Reece song, "Which Side are You On?," with photographs of United Mine Workers Association strikes shown behind the dancers. As the dancers glided off stage, I walked to the center and stared at the audience, narrating James B. Goode's poem, "Poets of Darkness":

Make them poets of the darkness,
For they speak from black faces
Lapping the sounds like red tongued dogs
Hurried after water.
We have seen them
Hunkered in the guts of steal
And we have seen their mantrips of segmented rusting cars
Being sucked and swallowed by long black holes.

Yes, make them poets
Make them hands of fossil ferns,
Give them grips on black diamond pens,
Have them speak Paleozoic languages
Decoded from Rosettas made of coal.

Make them tell us
What it means to see into aeons
Where no man has seen. (22)

As I exited the stage, I grabbed a mid-twentieth-century methane gas tester I had placed on a table at the start of the performance. Then, the dancers emerged from the wings to pay final homage to all coalminers in "Waltz for Underground Warriors."



Benny Penley's Father (photo provided by Benny Penley)

Conclusion

At the end of each of the three performances, McLaughlin and I, along with the student dancers, engaged in “talk-backs” with the audience, whereby we sought deep dialogue, probing questions, and motivation for action, all triggered by artistic provocation. Fernández-Caparrós and Brígido-Corachán cite Josep Maria Equirol and his concept of “la resistencia íntima”—an intimate resistance to crisis based on building empathy and on questioning binary reasoning through everyday practices that are subversive simply because they lead to dialogue, community-building, contemplation and reflection” (xviii). Kentucky-born Black/feminist/postmodern theorist and scholar bell hooks proclaims in

her essay, "Narratives of Struggle," that literature enabled her to break loose the chains created by oppression that had shackled her mind. She asserts that, "if the mind was to be the site of resistance, only the imagination can make it so" (55). Art, along with the imagination needed to create it, has the power to overcome oppression and crisis of all forms and enables those marginalized by various power structures to speak and tell their own story, to dare to imagine another way of being in the world.

Appalachian poet Jim Wayne Miller further qualifies what must occur, however, before such a complete decolonization of the mind can take place. In "A Mirror for Appalachia," Miller claims that "[a] mirror for Appalachia is needed, which will help Appalachians to become 'aware of who we are and why, and be at ease with this knowledge.' The record of the past suggests that Appalachians cannot expect others to provide that mirror. It must be a mirror of our own making" (448). Cherokee Appalachian author Marilou Awiakta also serves as witness to the life force of the mountains pulsing within its residents no matter where they may travel. Eavesdropping at an East Tennessee truck stop on one of her speaking tours, Awiakta relays the conversation between two truck drivers, one a mountain native, who shares with the other, "'You know, I drive cross-country, but I'm from the mountains. Everywhere I go, I got the mountains inside of me; they help hold me steady. . .'" (34).

Indeed, the redolent Appalachian Mountains inhabit our very bodies, steadying both our corporeality and spirituality, especially as we continue to confront repeated crises. Using dance/theater performances to defy the master narratives of the patriarchy, capitalism, and neoliberalism, McLaughlin and I collaborated to bring attention to intentional manmade crises of environments, cultures, and communities. In this sense, we met Balestrini, Lippert, and Löschnigg's notion of "how a sense of ongoing crisis has led to aesthetic innovation" (6). *Eating Appalachia: Selling Out to the Hungry Ghost*, *Sounds of Stories Dancing*, and *The Shadow Waltz* each highlight various crises in Appalachia, summon audience members to reflect on their complicity in the crises, whether intentional or not, and invite us all to imagine different, life-affirming ways of being.

Note:

ⁱ Tourism involving travels to locations known for death and/or tragedy for humans and the more-than-human.

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