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Artificial Dissemination

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ARTIFICIAL DISSEMINATION

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

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# Table of Contents

List of Figures ............................................................................................................. iii

Abstract ........................................................................................................................... iv

Chapter I: Prelude .......................................................................................................... 1

Chapter II: Making and Knowing ................................................................................. 5

Chapter III: On Jewelry .................................................................................................. 9

Chapter IV: Fictive Anatomies ....................................................................................... 12

Chapter IV: Postscript .................................................................................................... 17

Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 21
List of Figures

Figure 1: Spider Toy ..................................................................................................................3
Figure 2: My Stickball Sticks ......................................................................................................6
Figure 3: Artificial Dissemination: Medianulum Largificos ......................................................8
Figure 4: Prima Systematis: Progenitor ..................................................................................11
Figure 5: Prima Systematis: Unknown sp. ...............................................................................11
Figure 6: Detail: Artificial Dissemination ..............................................................................14
Figure 7: Artificial Dissemination: piger herbaconum ............................................................15
Figure 8: Artificial Dissemination: flavovasculum consecesporum .......................................16
Figure 9: Artificial Dissemination: flavovasculum consecesporum .......................................16
Abstract

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By Brian Fleetwood, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major Director: Susie Ganch, Associate Professor Craft Material Studies

This writing is an experiment in combining the two most important frameworks through which I understand the world, the storytelling traditions of my people, the Mvskoke(Creek), and the rational tradition that began with European Enlightenment era thinking. By weaving allegorical narrative (much of it personal) into theoretical speculation, I draw connections between recollection, truth, and the act of making. This examination of the gaps and connections between seemingly disparate worldviews, runs in parallel to the purpose of my work, wherein I
construct fictive symbiotic and parasitic relationships between jewelry and wearer. This work takes advantage of the wearer as environment, resource, and propagator. By abstracting from real-world biological structures, this work conflates genetic and memetic dissemination. I am creating systems and models of systems using individual jewelry pieces for specific wearers that reflect the structure of arrangements that are repeated throughout nature. Ultimately I am raising questions about the hard lines that we draw between things in nature—including ourselves—and our place in biological, cultural, and personal systems.
I. Prelude

Most everything has a beginning.

This is a story the Mvskoke tell about the beginning of things. It is true and it is about truth, but that does not mean I think it happened. It is not the only such story—nor is it the only way to tell it—but it is the one I remember most clearly my grandmother telling. It is a very good story, I think.

The Creek people say they were created when the Earth was young, when a drop of blood fell from Hvrēsse, the Moon, when she was in her cycle. It mixed with the clay and Hvse, the sun baked this mud into the first Mvskokvlkle, the first people. But there was still no life in them, so Hesaketvmese, who is the wind, gave these people life, and that is why his name is giver of breath.

The first people rose from the clay in the west, near the backbone of the world. But they were afraid of the night, and it was not long before they became restless. So the people decide to seek the creator, the sun, in his home in the east, from whence he comes each morning.

The Mvskoke people journeyed East in a great migration to find the sun, but soon a great fog rose up so they could not see. It was not long before the people became lost and separated, and they cried out for help. The creator, having mercy on them, sent
Hvakatemese to blow away the fog, and guides to lead the Mvskoke back to one another. To some he sent Bear. To some he sent Deer, some Turtle, some Tiger, and so on. These people were so grateful to these guides that they cried out in thanks, “You shall be my family now! You shall be my brother!” And this is where the clans come from.

Undaunted, the people continued traveling East, each day coming closer to Hvse, the source of light and warmth. After some time, they came to the end of the earth, and a great stretch of water lie in between them and the sun. The Mvskoke settled here, unable to go on. Still unsatisfied, they thought of how they might still reach the sun. The nights were still cold and dark, full of unknown danger.

Spider saw their fear and suffering and took pity, thinking, “I may not be able to help them reach the Sun, but I might be able to do something.” In the night Spider climbed a single silk thread into the sky and waited there while she wove a little silk purse. When the morning came and the sun passed near, she cast the pouch she had made out, and caught in it a single hot ember. She climbed back down to the earth, and showed the people how to kindle it into flame. Then she showed them how to use the fire to light the night and keep themselves warm. She showed them how to use it to make tools and prepare food. With the fire, their lives became a measure easier.

But Hvse, the creator and the sun, saw this and was furious. He cried out, “Why have you done this, Spider? They will use it to hurt one another, and they will hurt themselves with it in their ignorance!”

Spider argued back, “Fire is dangerous, true, but without it, the malicious would still manage to be cruel, and the ignorant still find ways to hurt themselves. But the fire will keep them safe and warm, and with it the wise will make many useful and beautiful
things. The world will be better for it.”

The Creator was moved by spider’s plea, but still very angry. He asked her whether she felt strongly enough to give something up so that the people might keep the fire. Spider agreed, and so the creator took her voice.

And we tell this story so that we remember the power, the danger, the beauty, and the price of knowledge.

The truth is, I don’t know why I’m here. I don’t know why I think the way I think or make the work I make. I believe that the events and decisions that leads each of us to
our own ends and conclusions are a complex web of causes and effects so tangled up in itself as to be impossible to unweave. But, man, do I love trying.
II. Making and Knowing

I’m in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It’s late in the fall, the Sangre de Cristos are already
dusted with snow and the wind is beginning to bite. A thousand miles from my home, and
twice that or more from the home of my people, I sprawl, heels kicked out and hands
behind my head, on a cheap metal folding chair. Opposite me, past a dented up 10 gallon
pot resting on an old propane burner is my best friend Blue. I’ve known him most of my
life and he’s as much family as anyone else I know. The water in the pot is boiling,
tossing around the wooden poles floating there so they tap out a familiar rhythm against
the rim of the pot. I listen in on a conversation Blue is having with an older man, stout
with bright white hair. They’re talking about the sticks in the pot—or at least what the
sticks will become. We’re making tokonhe—ballgame sticks.

“How did you learn this?” Blue asks the elder. “How do you learn it so well?”

There is a long pregnant pause before the old man responds. “You have to find out what
the sticks are telling you, what the sticks are asking of you,” he says.

“How do you do that?” my buddy asks.

The stout man chuckles, “Well...I made a lot of sticks.”

I shift my gaze from the boiling sticks to the conversation, and Blue looks unconvinced.

“So what do they say?”

The man responds, pulling his jacket closer around himself. “No way for me to know
what they tell you.”

Blue asks back, “But what do they say to you?”

“Test my strength,” he says.
In a way I was born into making. Part of this is a result of being a member of the Mvskoke culture. If a Creek person needs a particular cultural object—turtle shell shakers, a bandolier bag, or ball game equipment—they have to know how to make it (or at least be on good terms with someone who does). The use of these objects informs their making, and vice versa. I play stickball with a brutishness and inelegance, and my long, heavy sticks reflect this.

But I come by making another way, as well. I’ve always felt more comfortable understanding the world through my hands, than any other way. I think this is due to my predisposition for thinking in texture. I can’t trust the garbled images of my dyslexic
eyes, and I feel everything I hear as texture and sensation that rolls up my face, over my scalp, and down my neck and shoulders. My internal system of symbols is based in texture and form. When I want to understand a thing I instinctually reach out for it. To work out abstract ideas and other intangibles, I have to make textural representations of my thinking. Making is my way of reaching out to these immaterial things and understanding them. It is the way I connect my past, my people, and my present. Making reconciles my mind with my body, my inner world with the external.

Modern science tells us that the act of making and the abilities to reason and imagine would likely not exist without one another. As human beings, our ability to make and our ability to reason and imagine are inextricable from one another. Tools allow us to reshape the world and their use informs us of the world’s limitations. Tool use and thinking inform one another, in a co-evolutionary feedback loop that always informs the increasing complexity of both. In *The co-evolution of tools and minds: Cognition and Material Culture in the Hominin Lineage*, Ben Jeffares makes a case for how this complex abstract thinking evolved. Jeffares argues that as soon as a tool is made and used, it also begins to undergo selection for other functions aside from its primary purposes. Ultimately this leads to the object becoming available as a “cognitive primer,” essentially acting as a vessel for complex and abstract mental constructs. It does not, I think, take a large leap in thinking to assume *homo sapiens* took the impetus to create an entire category of tools with the specific purpose of acting as these metaphorical vessels—in a word, art.

My creative practice is centered on using my personal formal and textural signifiers to create specific instances of Jeffares’ cognitive primers. Through the act of
making, I subvert and reify the positions I hold, and the finished work is intended to gently suggest alternate ways of thinking about the frameworks through which people understand the world.
III. On Jewelry

I’m not sure how old I am—first grade, maybe second. It has been a good day at school. We have been spending our mornings all week learning about dinosaurs. I already know so much about dinosaurs—I have all the books. The teacher, a substitute who is young and pretty, asks the class what we know about them. I correct one of my classmates who blurts out that dinosaurs are big lizards. Everybody knows that dinosaurs aren’t lizards. The young pretty substitute tells me very good. I almost feel sick with excitement as she plants a sticker, a star or an apple—I’m not sure, the memory is hazy—on my collar. She tells me that I’m smart.

It’s early afternoon, at recess. I sit atop the jungle gym rocking back and forth, still beaming. My classmate from earlier climbs up beside me and asks me why I think I’m so smart. I tell him teacher told me so.

My classmate grabs my collar and pushes me hard in the chest. I fall. And even though the ground is padded with soft sand I hit hard. I look up as I try to catch the breath that has been knocked out of me, and see him placing the sticker—maybe it was a rainbow, or a smiling sun?—on his own shirt.

“Faggot,” He says.

Jewelry is at least as old as humanity. The earliest bits of human material culture include shell beads and pigments used for adorning the body. Burial sites that include
bones stained with yellow ochre and red iron oxide, and ornamented braids of flowers indicate that pre-homo sapiens humans adorned their dead, and I do not think it a stretch to imagine they might have adorned themselves as well. As one of the oldest forms of artistic expression, personal adornment is structurally encoded in the way we think. It seems inseparable from who we are and how we exist. The ability of people to instinctively and naturally analyze and interpret jewelry is underutilized, or at the very least underestimated.

I have a particular sympathy with jewelry as a medium. I am compelled by the potential for unexpected relationships to develop between jewelry and wearer, and I am intrigued by the power of jewelry’s history as a signifier for status, allegiance, victory, and identity. But I am most inspired by the ability of jewelry to move through the world. Jewelry creates a system in miniature: jewelry and wearer. And like any other, as that system moves through the world it has the potential to create unexpected influences. It pulls and pushes, creating eddies and currents in the lives of the people through which it passes.

Because I am exploring the relationships between people and the world around them, Jewelry is the most uniquely appropriate form for my work to take. The ability of Jewelry to signal, reinforce, and create relationships—sometimes in wholly unexpected ways—is something that I have a vested interested in taking advantage of.
IV. Fictive Anatomies

During the summer after finishing my first bachelor’s degree I begin working for the Kaw Nation environmental department. The Kaw Reservation floats in a great golden sea that sits astride the Kansas-Oklahoma border. A vast expanse of waist high yellow grass stretches from horizon to horizon—maybe a bit greener in the spring, and grey-brown in the fall. This is only broken up by the crisscrossing black asphalt of state highways and the white gravel of county roads. It is, at first glance, an uninviting landscape. And you can trust me when I say that I know why the first white men to look upon that overwhelming stretch of undulating yellow, originally called these plains the Great American Desert.

It’s early August and the days are hot and steamy, but maybe not so hot and not so steamy as in previous weeks. I am told that the environmental department will be conducting diversity surveys. A diversity survey is a tool ecologists use to measure the health of an ecosystem by determining how many different types of living things that the environment can support. These surveys are conducted by taping off squares at regular intervals and then counting how many different species are within the designated area. Upon hearing this I am incredulous. How many types of waist high yellow grass could there be?

After arriving at the survey site and taping off the grids to be counted, my supervisor, an ecology grad student, hands me a clip board and says, “Get to work.”
I look down at the first square of grass and then up at my supervisor, unsure of how to proceed. “Well, there’s switchgrass,” I say, “and bluegrass. And buffalo grass.”

He sighs, smiles, and tells me, “you’re going to have to get under the grass.”

So I kneel and part the tall stems with my hands. I lean in and cannot help but draw a quick, startled breath at what I see. There, under the grass might as well be a different world. I take my pencil and begin to tally. All in all, there are over a hundred different species in this single square foot of earth. But that is beside the point. What I see is beautiful. I thrill at a circle of tiny pink mushrooms shooting up from the black soil like rockets. I marvel at an intricate tapestry woven from morning glory and wild rye, blue flowers springing from the warp and weft. I mourn a poor dead luna moth, as it’s slowly dragged away by a horde of ants. A hundred or more stories are being played out in miniature at my feet, and a hundred more, and hundred more, all in their own patches of dirt. And I sit there, face smeared with mud, thorns in my hair, wondering how my story might play out in my own patch of dirt and whether it, too, would be lost amidst some roiling sea, or another.

• • •

I am investigating, through the act of making, epistemology—ways of knowing and organizing knowledge. The fruits of this investigation most often manifest as references to science, in particular evolutionary biology and ecology, embodied in objects
that speak in my formal and textural language.

Through jewelry, I abstract components of biological structures from a number of sources, creating new, fictive anatomies. When worn, the combination of jewelry and human anatomy is designed to suggest a kind of symbiosis or parasitism. I create systems and models of systems using individual jewelry pieces in conjunction with their hosts, that reflect the structure of arrangements that are repeated throughout nature. I am using the wearer as an environment, vector, or resource for this work with the purpose of gently suggesting alternative views of our relationships with the world around us. Through this process I am raising questions about the hard lines that we draw between things in nature—including ourselves—and our place in biological, cultural, and personal systems.

My thesis exhibition is the consists of of a number of works arranged in a composition designed to mimic organic communities such as those found in rainforest canopies, coral reefs, and even in our homes and bodies.
Among the individual pieces that comprise the larger Composition, are three that were worn and performed during the opening reception. These works contained within them smaller components that were removed and given to audience members to wear according to a combination of a pre-determined and piece specific rubric, and the wearer’s own decisions. This action mimics the dissemination patterns of various polyps, spores, and budding members of a variety of infectious organisms and symbiotes.

This body of work is an act of abstract phylogeny. Each piece has a literal formal relationship with at least one other piece in a way that begs a viewer to place the works in a sequence. But, in the making, the phylogenetic sequence is intentionally muddied. By creating confusion in an otherwise intuitive network of relationships I am calling into
question all of the taxonomies we overlay onto nature.

I further confuse things by introducing people, serving as host and vector, to the work. The work becomes a placeholder for genetic or memetic information, and wearers become the resources through which that information propagates. In some of this work, the host carries the piece through the world, and the dissemination happens exclusively in the minds of external viewers. Some of the work however, spreads itself, through the intervention of its host, by literally casting off components of itself onto other hosts. By using the notion of gift giving as a lure to convince people to serve as vector for the work, I confuse our taxonomies even further by creating select groups of people that host and disseminate my parasitic jewelry. These groups, each representing a different mutual relationship with a different kind of parasite, become a sub-species defined by the particular spore or polyp they host—*homo sapiens flavorasculum, homo sapieins herbaconum*, and so on.
V. Postscript

All things must end, but from every ending comes the budding possibility for any number of new beginnings. I came to graduate school thinking I knew what work I would make and what I would learn. This was foolish of course, but it took me the better part of two years to correct this thinking. Though at times I fought it tooth and nail, and at others it was won only through sheer, pig-headed stubbornness, I am astonished to find that I have come out ahead. I cannot help but marvel at the depth, and breadth, and sheer variety of what I’ve learned in my time here—and all in spite of myself. And so I keep trying to recall a story that reflects the idea that it’s what we learn when we’re looking the other way that hits us the hardest. This is all I can think of.

. . .

Once, Turtle was making his way through the forest when he came upon a family of baby skunks. Sensing the opportunity to make a little mischief, he asked them, “Hey, little babies. Did your mother ever say what clan you are?”

“She always said we're Skunk clan”, they said.

“That seems right”, he said. “Because a little before I came this way I ran into her, and we skunked around some before she went on her way.” And as he left he chuckled to himself, as the baby skunks cried.
Before long, turtle stumbled upon some little raccoons. And he asked them, too, “Did your mother tell you what clan you are?”

“She always said we're Raccoon clan”, they said.

“It must be so,” Turtle said to them, too. “She was walking over yonder when I met her, and I cooned around with her and came this way.” And as he left, they, too, sat and cried.

After walking a ways, he came to where some little opossums lived. And he asked them, too, “Did your mother say to you what your clan is?”

“She says we're Opossum clan”, they said.

“I believe it”, he said. “I met her walking not too far from here, and after she possumed me pretty good, she went on her way and I came this way.”

And the little opossums, too, sat and cried.

After a while Mother Skunk returned and found her children crying like that. Seeing this she asked, “Why are you crying?”

“Turtle came by and asked whether our mother said what clan we are,” the little skunks replied through their tears. “She says we're Skunk clan’, we said, and he said, ‘It must be so. Because you were walking over there, and after he skunked around with you, you went on your way and he came this way,’ and that's why we are crying.”

She became furious, and going in the direction Turtle went, she came upon some little raccoons with their mother, and they, too, were crying.

“Why are the babies crying?” Mother Skunk asked.

“Well, Turtle is going around saying things and he made them cry,” Mother Racoon said.
“That's who I'm chasing after,” Skunk told her.

Mother Raccoon replied, “Well, then, I'll go with you”, and they started out. And as they went they came to where the little opossums lived, they were crying, too. Their mother was there, so Skunk and Raccoon asked, what had happened. Mother Opossum told them and Mother Skunk replied, “That is the very same thing he said about me. I went to Raccoon's and Mother Raccoon had the same thing happen to her, and now we've come looking for that turtle. Wherever he is we want to find him.”

“Well, then, I will come with you,” Opossum said.

After some time they caught up with him, sitting, unable to cross a log. These three mothers meant business, and they asked him about what had happened.

Turtle chuckled as he replied, “Well I figured you'd be flattered. Everyone knows Turtle is very wise, and has strong medicine.” The three mothers were so angry at him that they beat him and kept beating him until he was just pulp. And he crawled home and sat there like that.

As he sat, he sang for his shell. He sang:

“Cvte-lih-lih, ca-ti-léyh-léyh
Cvte-lih-lih, ca-ti-léyh-léyh
Cvte-sokoso, ca-ti-sokosô
Cvte-lih-lih, ca-ti-léyh-léyh

I come-come together,
I come-come together,
and as he sat and sang, his shell slowly came back and knitted itself together.

That's how it is. Turtle was badly beaten, and when you see how Turtle’s shell looks like it has been smashed into pieces, it was Skunk and Raccoon and Opossum who beat him. And even though Turtle is wise and knew the medicine and mended himself, I can tell you, he learned something that day.
Bibliography
