



*Don't Call
This World
Adorable
& Other
Salvaged
Stories*

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Don't Call This World Adorable & Other Salvaged Stories

A Precarious Stance

Sometimes common entanglements emerge not from human plans, but despite them.

- Tsing (2015), p. 267

Atop an angular rock, Meg's¹ bare feet and balance work to steady her body

1 With the exceptions of my research assistant, Shauna Caldwell, and my colleague, Laura England—the names of Ecologies of Girlhood participants have been changed to pseudonyms.

despite frigid rushes of water and slick, mossy patches. The creek bed is much too shallow to submerge her head. She bends, pushing a GoPro beneath the rushing surface. Photographer Dorthea Lange believed the camera to be a tool for seeing without a camera. Lange's viewpoint produces, for me, attunement with "common entanglements" (Tsing, 2015, p. 267)—what is happening above and below the waterline, with and without the camera; ripples breaking over rocks, garbled upstream voices, trees conversing, fish nibbling tender raindrops, raindrops starting a human



Figure 1. GoPro footage (carefully exploring the creek bed)

ear, damselflies preying on gnats, toes numbly gripping against the force of water and cold, rocks being built upon by cad-disflies. Meg (age 9) and a freshly charged GoPro collaborate in "dedicated apprenticeship" (Taylor, 2017, p. 1455) with this lively creek.

Meg and her mother participated in a week-long summer immersion, *Kindred Light*, for girls ages 9-12 and a significant woman in their life. The immersion contemplated ideas of light and girlhood in Southern Appalachia through photographic and poetic ways of attending. This essay evokes the concept of *salvage* after extreme weather conditions uprooted this community arts program located within a rural town in Western North Carolina. *Kindred Light* was part of *Ecologies of Girlhood*, an on-going arts-based research project supported by an intergenerational, intersectional, and interdisciplinary trellis. *Ecologies* arose from a wonder and curiosity about ways of being and becoming in Southern Appalachia (Hofsess et al., 2019)

For me, Meg's precarious stance evoked a sense of the "patchiness of the world" (Tsing, 2015, p. viii) where I found myself building salvaged stories. (Re)viewing Meg's footage (along with other GoPro data from *Kindred Light*), I recalled British anthropologist, Tim Ingold (2011) who remarked,

Rather than thinking of ourselves only as observers, picking our way around the objects lying about on the ground of a ready-formed world, we must imagine ourselves... immersed with the whole of our being in the currents of a world-in-formation: in the sunlight we see in, the rain we hear in and the wind we feel in. (p. 29).

Meg's precarious stance, as documented by her GoPro footage, embodies the kind of immersion and imagination Ingold framed. As I wrote my way with and through the pedagogical rubble of *Kindred Light*, Meg's image and other GoPro documentation by the participants coalesced in the creative essay that follows. Here, I aim to contribute to this special issue by touching ecological precariousities amidst the currents of place-based discourses within art education.

Don't Call This World Adorable

Poet Mary Oliver (2004) cautioned,

*Don't call this world adorable, or useful,
that's not it.*

*It's frisky, and a theater for more than fair
winds.*

*The eyelash of lightning is neither good nor
evil.*

The struck tree burns like a pillar of gold...

*... Don't call this world an explanation, or
even an education. (p. 33)*



Figure 2. GoPro footage (feeling with trees and clouds)

Thinking/living/writing with the concept of salvage stirred up layers of sustainability circulating in the *Ecologies* project. Across the past few decades, sustainability has been a prevailing interpretation of environmentalism (Alaimo, 2012; Alaimo, 2016) and environmental education (Taylor, 2017). However, broadly speaking, the concept of sustainability carries with it a sense of intergenerational ethics and equity with regard to ways of being in the world that preexist the word itself in many cultures and traditions (see Braidotti, 2013; Nolet, 2009). While a comprehensive review of the multiple and varied interpretations and practices of sustainability are well beyond the scope of this creative essay, I focus on

how sustainability permeates *Ecologies of Girlhood*, part of my ongoing research pertaining to issues of renewal. Specifically, after severe local weather conditions intervened with *Ecologies* programming, a space opened for wondering: What work does thinking art education and sustainability alongside one another do? And, how might this work be lived with “an appreciation of current precarity as an earthwide condition that allows us to notice... the situation of our world” (Tsing, 2015, p. 4)? These salvaged stories artfully attempt to do that work. These stories do not necessarily generate answers, but rather illustrate potential ways of dwelling with the complexity of such questions.

As enmeshed political, economic, environmental, and educational crises proliferate, interdisciplinary Anthropocene debates provoke shifts in the paradigms through which the concept of sustainability circulates (Alaimo, 2012; Derby, 2015; Taylor, 2017). International encounters with sustainability in art education have aggregated as critical, cultural place-based approaches (see, Bequette, 2015; Bertling, 2015; Bertling & Rearden, 2019; Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Conkey & Green, 2018; Graham, 2007; Inwood, 2008a) eco-art and ecological awareness pedagogies (see, Inwood, 2008b; Inwood, 2015; Inwood & Sharpe, 2018; Sams & Sams, 2017; Song, 2009; Vasko, 2016), as well as relational, participatory, and performative engagements with sustainability (see, Garoian, 2015; Gradle, 2007; Illeris, 2012; Illeris, 2017). Although, in some cases, these categorizations become blurred. My thinking drifts across these aggregates and beyond.

For example, eco-poet Linda Russo (2015) flagged place-based approaches that “[pre-determine] what is meant by “place,” what is encountered in/as “place,” and with that, the agency of that which encounters/ is encountered” (para. 3). Writing about a community research project to (re)story Chicago as Indigenous lands, Bang et al. (2014) reframe place-based education this way,

... we might imagine that ontology of place-based paradigms is something like ‘I am, therefore place is,’ in contrast, the ontology of land-based pedagogies might be summarized as ‘Land is, therefore we are.’ This reframing in our view carries considerable weight in relation to the way we think about, study, and live culture, learning and development with land. (p. 45).

Furthermore, Affrica Taylor (2017), member of Commonworlds Research Collective, theorized pedagogies of “learning with rather than individual (human) thinking and learning about” (p. 1458). Infused with these ideas and others, *Ecologies of Girlhood* opts instead to enact “lines of inventive connection” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1) that explores how art education becomes through place-relations of creeks, fields, stories, caregivers, reptiles, flora, learners, folklore, photographing, insects, walking, histories, and dancing.

Due to my location in Southern Appalachia, I have been compelled to linger where sustainability entangles with what writer and historian Elizabeth Catte (2018) deemed a *fictation of politics* in her book, *What you are getting wrong about Appalachia*. Namely, perceptions about rural living, poverty, politics, and faith that have long been in place and yet have been inflamed after the election of Trump. Thinking with and through a feminist new materialist and intersectional framework for the past few years (see Ahmed, 2017; Alaimo, 2012; 2016; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Kimmerer, 2013), I have led collaborations with colleagues and community members to create annual summer immersions for local girls and their families.¹

¹ Ecologies would not be possible without the significant contributions of others. In particular, Shauna Caldwell has been integral to the unfolding of this project, working closely with me through all three Ecologies summer immersions, and in the spaces between. From 2018-2020, I received a Graduate Research Assistant Mentoring award through the Graduate School at Appalachian State University. This award funded two graduate students to support Ecologies: Shauna Caldwell, a graduate student in Appalachian Studies whose roots in Appalachia and relationship with the environment shape her creative work, and AJ Schlaff a graduate student in Political Science whose research examines corrupt redistricting powers in order to generate informed, effective redistricting intended to facilitate our democracy. I am immensely grateful for the

Ecologies is rooted in “inter-theoretic conversations” (Rosiek et al., 2019, p. 334) between feminist new materialist and Indigenous scholarship that vitally attune to matter and place; conversations that attempt “new conceptual understandings about the play of difference in complex ecologies, and how human values (including values related to the nonhuman world) can sometimes be shared across cultures” (Bignall & Rigney, 2019, p. 177).²

Through this quest of salvaging (explored further in the next section), I keep close at hand the work of Stacy Alaimo (2012) and her awareness that when it comes to sustainability, often “people and their activities are animated, but the material world is rendered as abstract space, not living places, biodiverse habitats, or ravaged ecologies” (p. 562). Alaimo’s writings cascade upon my thinking about *Ecologies of Girlhood*, and how this project theoretically and pedagogically brings to bear the concept of sustainability. In the generativity of Alaimo’s work, and other writings within the trajectory of feminist new materialisms that also call to question human exceptionalism, I recognize that “(o)nce we take indigenous worldviews into account, the ‘newmaterialisms’ are no longer new” (Horton & Berlo, 2013, p. 18; see Rosiek et al., 2019; Truman, 2019). There exists “... long and vibrant trajectories of Indigenous practice and theory that understand land as encompassing all of the earth, including the urban, and as much more than just the material” (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 8).

contributions of Shauna and AJ, and for the support of the Graduate School.

2 I pause here to recognize the complications of my engagement with Indigenous perspectives and knowledges as a white, Western scholar, I proceed with respect and humility through these inter-theoretic conversations as I aspire towards inclusive citational practices and collaborations.

Ecologies explores living feminist lives co-creatively with place (Ahmed, 2017). “Places produce and teach particular ways of thinking about and being in the world” (Bang et al., 2014, p. 44), and *Ecologies* evokes arts-based approaches to teaching, learning, and inquiring about those ways. To date, these annual programs have included, *Ecologies of Girlhood* (2017), *Becoming Wildspaces* (2018), and *Kindred Light* (2019). Each workshop explored the visual, material, affective ecologies of girlhood in Southern Appalachia, although the thematic focus changed with each summer immersion. This creative essay dwells with the 2019 program, *Kindred Light*, which explored the interconnectedness of physics, photography, poetry, ecology, feminism, performance art, and place in the hours leading up to sunset during one summer week.

During these summer immersions, girls engaged with their family and community members through creative modes of exploration, documentation, and curation. The girls and women participated in various visual, oral, and mobile research methods, including photography (GoPros and alternative photographic processes), walking interviews on local trails, and storytelling. Again, this creative essay includes the GoPro images, which I use to elongate the salvaged stories I crafted from my encounters during the *Kindred Light* program.

In her work bridging Indigenous and scientific knowledges in sustainability wisdom, plant ecologist, writer, and distinguished professor, Robin Wall-Kimmerer (2013) emphasizes gratitude and reciprocity as vital tenants. Relatedly, teacher, researcher, and poet Michael Derby (2015) advocated that education functions best “when organized around ideas of interrelatedness, generativity, ancestry, kinship, humility,



Figure 3. GoPro footage (thinking with gardens)

and wonder" (p. 3). These qualities sustain the pedagogical ethos of *Ecologies* programming--programming that traverses disciplinary boundaries and burgeons across lakes, gardens, studios, and exhibition spaces alike. These places become ephemeral field stations for inquiring with participants self-identifying as women and girls.

Salvaged Stories

What follows are three salvaged stories; simply told and cultivated from everyday practices that explore a craftsmanship of attention with the world. Salvage can be understood as rubbish extracted to become valuable and useful (Merriam-Webster). Years ago, I experienced an artist's residency in the home studio of an established papermaker. One morning she noted a strip of abaca in the wastebasket at the foot of my work station,

pulled it up, and snapped it back upon the desk—"Never throw away handmade paper. Too much goes into making it." I have never forgotten that exchange and what I learned about salvaging as a way of thinking differently about the potential to interrupt the—at times—careless urge to clear away our scraps, messes, excesses, and missteps. What can be salvaged from discarded paper? Perhaps a recognition and reverence for how plant fiber, fire, water, labor, time, creativity are all brought to bear in the life of paper. When a significant portion of the *Ecologies* annual programming was canceled due to extreme weather conditions, my thoughts returned to this lesson of salvage, and I began to rethink what transpired-- alongside the concept of sustainability-- with the hope of finding new recognition, reverence, and perspective.



Figure 4. (writing creatively with light and lake)

Salvaged from pedagogical rubble after local flooding affected the course of *Kindred Light*, I composed these stories to explore the uncertainty and vulnerability of thinking/living/writing with place relations. As multispecies feminist theorist Donna Haraway (2016) articulated "(e)ach time a story helps me remember what I thought I knew, or introduces me to new knowledge, a muscle critical for caring about flourishing gets some aerobic exercise. Such exercise enhances collective thinking and movement in complexity" (p. 29). These stories attempt to unplug the concept of sustainability from an eco-humanist paradigm, where stewardship

and other well-meaning varieties of "our-centeredness" (Derby, 2015, p. 57) thrive, and open it to becoming "something else-with" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.11) relations of place. Put in the words of Anna Tsing (2015), "(t)he time has come for new ways of telling true stories beyond civilizational first principles" (p. vii).

Strange Hesitation

A swift 1.7 miles of gravel and asphalt roads connect my home and campus office. Both the steady rain and the need to load materials compel me to navigate this short distance by car. I am not overly concerned

by this rainfall as it is expected that rain will affect the flow of *Ecologies* workshops at some point in the week of *Kindred Light*. Our town is saturated with about 50 inches of rainfall each year, with 35 inches more in snowfall. The previous year was our wettest on record with over 93 inches. Yet, returning home, my foot strangely hesitates over the last step before landing at the bottom of the staircase. My skin reads cool water which has breached the foundation of our home, swelling from the western edge of the house across the first floor.

Intensities of rain caused washed out roads and mudslides, wind snapped

poles, damaged electrical systems, runoff seeping up through foundations of homes and schools, and 5,556 reported power outages as loosened trees collapsed on power lines. How do we practice art education with attention for "the extreme intimacy of ecological entanglement, via the air, water, and matter we take in and continually re-become" (Reed & Russo, 2018, p. 39)? I phone a colleague who lives near Crab Orchard Falls, where our workshop is scheduled to occur the following day. She sends a photograph of the trail that her neighbor posted to social media. A blur of rushing water, silt, and foggy mist overwhelms the bank and nearby walking structure.



Figure 5. GoPro footage (noticing with running creekwater)

How many inches of rainfall, how fast the inches arrive: "The differences matter—in ecologies, economies, species, lives" (Haraway, 2016, p. 29).

Beyond Our Wanting-Doing

By mid-week the waters receded enough to safely enter the creek. My arm extended, bracing to support the movement of Rachel whose feet unprotected by water shoes are sensitively learning the skill of walking a creek bed. It is equally sharp and slick—craggy rock and decaying leaves. "Rooted but in flow" (Woolf cited in Braidotti & Regan, 2017, p. 174) I think—live art education with relation to where I dwell—a small mountain town located at 3,333 above sea level within the North Carolina Blue Ridge; A ridge created sometime between 1.1 billion to 250 million years ago, when an uplifting of the Earth's tectonic plates shaped this wedge of mountain range.

About an hour before, several daughters, alongside their mothers, met me at Hardin Creek. This creek flushed with about nine inches of new rainfall and runoff, alternates as the loudest voice among our small group. Our meeting location moved 13 miles east due to recent flooding. It can take a while for flood waters to recede here in these mountains. This particular summer evening felt more like October with its chilly gusts of wind. It was raining lightly as we gathered for "off-the-beaten path practices" (Haraway, 2016, p. 127). Not far down Boone Fork Trail, which tucks behind a local church with its plentiful edible garden and zippy play structures, Hardin Creek drains about 200 acres of forest. With mature trees estimated to produce and release between 200,000 and 1,000,000 leaves annually, the decomposition of these fallen leaves is

integral to stream ecosystems like this one. The forest feeds the creek with its decay, while the canopy protects the bank from heavy rains that provoke erosion. Creek bodies operate with a pulse that continually modulates their composition of sunlight, leaf litter, stones, aquatic insects, algae, rain, fish (England, personal communication, June 12, 2019).

We clustered in conversation for only for a very few minutes. A plastic Tupperware containing a few GoPros and flip cameras was circulated for those interested. I shared a story about Hazel Larson Archer, a female photographer who lived and worked at Black Mountain College—about 70 miles away from where we stood. Seventy years ago Archer became the first photography instructor at the experimental college. Her colleagues saw her as someone who "saw what we who hurry never have the time to see. She saw the life processes. She saw the tree photo-converting the sun radiation; she saw the tree breathing" (R. Buckminster Fuller, quoted in Archer, 2006). Raindrops and wind trickle across leaves overhead as I gently proposed: If you take a camera, how can it become a tool for seeing with the creek, seeing with life processes?

My friend Laura, a stream ecologist, threads another story about life processes through the cameras, creek, women, and girls: *Sunlight feeds everything in the creek except rocks. Bugs in the creek eat concentrated sunlight in the form of algae; fish eat bugs, some of us eat fish. Everything alive, including us, is made of sunlight* (England, personal communication, June 12, 2019). She pulls up out of the water a sweep net encouraging water to rush through its fabric shell. Clear of water—snails and mayflies crawled along the curves of canvas.

Derby (2015) "calls upon educators in a time of ecological emergency to not only impart the rhetoric of sustainability but to find ways to both read and be read by the world" (p. 10). Listening with this random sampling of macroinvertebrates tells more stories about the health of the water in this creek. We find a bunch of gilled snails that rely on clean water with high levels of dissolved oxygen in order to breathe. Finding these creatures is a sign that clean, oxygenated water flows here. If there was a lot of sediment, the snails' gills would clog and they would die out (England, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Overturned rocks reveal an array of small homes built by caddisflies. Caddisflies design intricate, protective structures using

leaves, small pebbles, and other matter. Laura tells us a story of one particular ecologist who raises caddisflies in order to harvest their structures into jewelry to sell at professional conferences, offering the insects construction materials such as opals, crystals, and gold pieces.

Some minutes later Meg and I are hovered over a small clear tupperware container partly full of creek water and a few small aquatic insects. Laura has a few plastic spoons and magnifying lens to share, along with a selection of field notebooks and guidebooks. Her daughter is cold from immersing herself in the water while Laura had set up these materials ahead of time, and rocks her body inside a small



Figure 6. GoPro footage (reading with creekwater, pebbles, macroinvertebrates, sand)

fleece jacket. In a few minutes she will ask Laura for her car keys to escape the cooling winds. Meg is opposite the picnic table from me, holding a magnifying lens. I gently attempt to navigate a spoon under a small stonefly to pass her way. Immediately its body stiffens and appears lifeless. I move the spoon away quickly, hoping I had not somehow inflicted harm. The disappearing spoon reanimates the stonefly almost as quickly. I try again, with ever more tenderness and respect. The critter stiffens and I am humbled “to listen to what the world means above and beyond our wanting and doing” (p. 39).

Reading snail lungs and a creek’s pulse; being read by cold water and stoneflies; our learning becomes with the “resonant structures of the world” (Abram, 1996, p. 140). The threads of sustainability interwoven through *Ecologies* are not the photographic or poetic modes of practice themselves—but the relations that, like our footsteps along creek beds, temporarily disturb, unsettle, and fall into new configurations of clarity. As Horton and Berlo (2013) explain,

The ecological promise of these 'new materialisms' is to invite a dialogue among a wider host of agents, imaging



Figure 7. GoPro footage (listening with macroinvertebrates)

a profoundly relational world in which humans interact with, rather than act upon, others. Indeed, we maintain that grasping multiple forms of liveliness has implications for questions of global environmental justice in raising the possibility of an ethics that binds not only affluent and poor, colonizer and colonized, but also the material entities upon which all our livelihoods depend. (pp. 17-18)

The threads cast with and through sustainability and its practices never merely touch the ecological.

Foraging Relations

A spray of glittering light thrown across still water is dulled only by islands of rhizomatous aquatic herbs. A mother duck and ducklings stroke by as Joy wonders out loud to her mother if the water lilies multiplied across the lake's surface are

strong enough to hold the weight of a human body or how a cyanotype might be made without removing a water lily from its cemented root and stalk. Shauna gathers a few strands of yarrow as we walk around the trail looping the artificial lake and plunges it into a thermos of blistering hot water to "co-craft" (Derby, 2015, p. 33) a wild tea toner. Cyanotypes are often toned with tea, coffee, wine tannin, borax and soda ash in darkrooms; Shauna and I remark how long it took us to see how toners could be foraged and made with light, plant, and other place relations. In the distance, a white mansion overlooks a patch of gravel where we are clustered, working—not long ago this public land a private family estate. Gravel bits and exposed toes lapped by wind-swept water as the sun becomes heavy in the sky.

The movements of wondering and foraging open conversations of sharing, possession, boundaries, vulnerabilities,



Figure 8. GoPro video still (wondering with water lilies)

and climate. Foraging is not sustainable in the singular action of taking-- becoming reciprocal requires giving back seeds, caring for soil, planting anew. The complicated relationship of giving and taking between humans and plants becomes exposed alongside the cyanotypes. As Indigenous scholar, writer, and artist, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) articulated in her writings on land as pedagogy, "Meaning then is derived not through content or data, or even theory in a western context, which by nature is decontextualized knowledge, but through a compassionate web of interdependent

relationships that are different and valuable because of that difference" (p. 11). How does participation in *Ecologies* invite attending to such a web of relations so our footsteps, or our foraging, come to matter differently within that web?

Lake water becomes image through the wet cyanotype process, wild yarrow tea slowly muddies the paper's hue to a deep black-brown. These are small, collaborative gestures, but as Taylor (2017) affirmed, "It is a low-key, ordinary, everyday kind of response that values and trusts the generative and recuperative powers of



Figure 9. GoPro footage (shadows with wet cyanotypes laying on darkroom trays and gravel)

small and seemingly insignificant wordly relations infinitely more than it does the heroic tropes of human rescue and salvation narratives" (p. 1458). Just a few yards away a cluster of bees weave in and through a field of unplucked yarrow, wild carrot, grass, and chickweed. Yarrow nectar and pollen feeds hoverflies, ladybugs, and other insects, and becomes wildcrafted by humans for soap, salve, and tea due to its medicinal properties. My thoughts flutter towards the work of contemporary artist collaborative, Artist As Family, and their idea of "social warming" that categorizes modes of art that make relationships (Brown, 2014, p. 242). Yarrow and tea, tea and photograph, photograph and girl, girl and waterlily, waterlily and lake, lake and sunlight, sunlight and mother, mother and time. Multiplying relations, precarities, and potential stories—what makes one story folklore and another a future?

Coda

Poet laureate Joy Harpo (1983) encouraged,

*Remember the plants, trees, animal life who
all have their tribes,*

their families, their histories, too.

Talk to them,

listen to them. They are alive poems...

*... Remember all is in motion, is growing, is
you. (p. 35)*

I think of Harpo's encouragement often in my quests with arts-based research broadly, and throughout my work with *Ecologies*. In my thinking/living/writing,

listening for "alive poems" (Harpo, 1983, p. 35) is a practice that develops the quality of my attention.

I began this essay with a broad question, "What work does thinking art education and sustainability alongside one another do?" As I kneaded these salvaged stories again and again into this question, I listened for learnings to take back into my practices of artmaking, teaching, inquiring, and remembering. My hope was that by kneading together the concepts of salvage and sustainability through an arts-based approach, this essay might offer other art educators the opportunity to work on their own questions related to sustainability, place, and precarity. To generate some momentum in that direction, I close with a few working questions:

What kinds of pedagogical practices explore a craftsmanship of attention with the world?

What relationships does art education make with place? Who and what is excluded?

How might practicing "inclusive citations and collaborations... address some internal challenges emerging in new materialist scholarship and build more respect for the relevance of Indigenous philosophies to the practice of social science" (Rosiek et al., 2019, p. 334)?

What other concepts (in addition to salvage) invite art educators to rethink place-based approaches?

How do time and place become predetermined as "certainties" (rather than precarities) in art education?

How do perceived boundaries between human and other-than-human entities affect art education concerned with place, particularly in precarious ecological times?

And, how might our practices, our relationships, our certainties, our boundaries be opened up through the lens of precarity for renewed attention?

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