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A PERSONAL APPROACH TO LANDSCAPE: EMPATHY, SENTIMENT, AND THE ENVIRONMENT'S REPRESENTATION IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES

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A PERSONAL APPROACH TO LANDSCAPE: EMPATHY, SENTIMENT, AND THE ENVIRONMENT’S REPRESENTATION IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES

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

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ABSTRACT

A PERSONAL APPROACH TO LANDSCAPE: EMPATHY, SENTIMENT, AND THE ENVIRONMENT’S REPRESENTATION IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES

By Lauren Hensens, 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, 2018

Major Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

My work approaches the multitude of personal experience within the landscape, considering its cultural representation, aiming to give the environment agency within these tumultuous times. The following text is a personal narrative, realizing the many lenses through which a landscape can be experienced, including analyses of artists, writers, and musicians who have represented landscape through their own individuality.
Introduction: Within the Vastness

Although I can literally balance myself here against the river’s current, I know that, unaided, I see very little, no matter how clear the water may be. So I keep trying on different lenses, each a fact, an experience, or a perception of the river. Individually each bears unique colors and distortions. The trick has been to mount the lenses together, after eliminating in each as much cloudiness as possible, in hope that eventually much of the subjective astigmatism will be corrected and the colors merged to create a distinctly focused picture. In the process of focusing, somehow the picture that emerges is also a mirror. It is not just the river I am seeing.¹

- Ann Woodlief

Looking into the distance, past the Richmond skyline, I want to feel small. I watch the low clouds drift, imagining that below them the earth folds into peaks and valleys, interrupting the deliberately placed boxes lying flat on concrete beds. I envision being back in Colorado, where the mountains tell you which direction you are facing; massive landmarks providing a sense of direction. My body in relation to the land felt so apparent there, each motion felt significant; the landscape served as a reminder that I am a small component of a grand whole. I wondered if I would become numb to the privilege of being near the mountains, seeing them every day. I couldn't imagine that the feeling of amazement would recede into the distance, buried in the panoramic view.

I believe that becoming acquainted with landscape and observing it through many

different vantage points can yield a sharper conscious of oneself and one's position in the world. A sensory experience in the landscape can encourage emotional release, elicit empathetic responses, and establish a greater appreciation for the environment. When one is in a state of awe, awareness is heightened, the world suddenly becomes larger, curiosity is piqued, and questions begin to form, resulting in a visceral, transformative experience. Piff et al. analyze the experience of awe as a collective emotion, explaining:

“...experiences of awe are unified by a core theme: perceptions of vastness that dramatically expand the observer’s usual frame of reference in some dimension or domain,” and that “… awe directs attention to entities vaster than the self and more collective dimensions of personal identity, and reduces the significance the individual attaches to personal concerns and goals.”

There are many reasons that I and others experience awe when amidst the landscape. Recognizing a diverse, abundant, true life force, that is both microscopic and infinite in size—an entity that proceeds regardless of the attention it receives, and remains indifferent to person-awareness of it—presents respectful, fascinating and terrifying questions of the unknown. This mindfulness and unbiased awareness of landscape can heighten a sense of oneness with the environment.

This union that I feel with the landscape has presented me with the question:

*How is it that I feel mindfully connected to an entity that is mindless to my mindfulness?*

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My lifetime is an insignificant fraction of our 4.5 billion-year-old planet, where my body takes the space of a mere speck on its surface and makes observations through a very specific, biased, limited point of view that is both instinctual and shaped by human culture. I have witnessed innumerable injustices against the environment, and my perspective is bound by individual limitations, situated within the full grasp of human existence. The bulk of information I receive is through human-invented media, in which people have defined environmental decline and acceleration through bias. This, along with the impossibility of knowing everything, without the language and means of engagement to fully understand the environment and its inhabitants, can inevitably cause a distorted, narrow perspective of the environment.

It is crucial to acknowledge, understand, and expand this narrow perspective to promote appreciation for fragile, exploited ecosystems, and ultimately, the well-being of our earth as a whole. The mistreatment of the environment and the domineering, human-centric presence of capitalist control is rooted deep in the western, cultural relationship to land. Therefore, this dominance which often controls land use and ownership must be dismantled through the very ways in which humans engage with and relate to the landscape.

In my work, I explore ways one can observe a landscape and feel unified with it, acknowledging that this natural entity is one that humans cannot assume to understand fully. It has an existence outside of human cultural implications and observations, that cannot be controlled, and ultimately, that encompasses our very being. Through the
experience of awe and through recognizing my personal position within the whole, I have further realized that I am connected to the environment. Developing a personal relationship with the landscape has allowed me to feel an empathetic alliance with the environment. Recognizing that records of the environment exist beyond human historical artifacts and their linguistic and textual definitions has challenged my epistemological connotations with the landscape. Acknowledging that both the environment and I exist within a domineering, patriarchal society that positions the landscape and I as inferior, has granted me the agency to empathize with the landscape in solidarity. The process of embracing a landscape/mindscape dualism through emotional connectedness with the land, while simultaneously pulling emotional responses from the landscape has enabled me to feel unified with the environment. The landscape has become my involuntary, indifferent lover. Our union emboldens my motives to challenge traditional representation of landscape and to amplify the landscape’s agency.
In Inauguration of the Rampant Rally, a painting of an imagined landscape whirling with turbulent life, I explore resilience of natural forces as resistance to passivity, the landscape reclaiming its vigor. The point of view is low and positioned as if the viewer is atop a jagged, slippery boulder, potentially vulnerable to falling into the throbbing, blood red river. The viscous water splashes fiercely around the boulder, seeming to boil as raindrops hit the river's surface. There is a vastness of space in the frame, where
stacked landforms recede into the horizon. Treetops peek from behind curtains of fog, firmly planted and still. They are in various stages of life; young, small trees are nourished by fallen decomposing logs, returning to the soil, referencing an enduring cycle of life and death. In the foreground, encased in deteriorating, scarred bark, a tree’s gnarled roots hold on to the sediment while in a state of collapse.

There is a paralyzing stillness in the image, yet allusions to activity are present. Depicted is a bustling force of life: storm clouds, rain drops and splashes are frozen in their representation to the viewer, but perhaps suggest that once the observer would turn their back, everything would resume in full action. I consider the animism and consciousness that potentially exist in the environment, extending beyond human knowledge.
The red river evokes a bleeding wound; perhaps it is the bloodshed of the environment and its inhabitants of the past, present, and future, both nonhuman and human. Though damaged and scarred from strife, the landscape is in a state of upheaval, resisting acquiescence.

This reference to blood brings to mind Ana Mendieta’s “Silueta sangrieta” (1975), in
which Mendieta inserts her body into the landscape, constructing a surrogate of herself, and representing her displacement from her home in Cuba, thus serving as a physical manifestation of her yearning for a Motherland. Her impression is filled with blood-like liquid that is absorbed into the soil, physically uniting the rudimental elements that reference the human body and the earth body.

Four stills from Ana Mendieta, *Silueta sangrienta*, 1975, Super 8, color, silent. 1:51 min.

Mendieta’s earthworks, unlike those of predominantly recognized male land artists, “did not make claims to immortality or attempts to conquer nature. Instead, they focused on
woman’s often literal attempts to find her breath under the weight of time and history.”

The dualism of the female body within the land and their shared anguish suggests a relationship between all oppressed bodies and the oppressed landscape, and perhaps underscores that the landscape itself has an identity to be regarded.

_Inauguration of the Rampant Rally_ displays my connection to and stewardship of the landscape. An attention to detail mandated a slowness in the painting process that allowed me to get lost in the making of this work, similar to the way that I lose myself when hiking a trail. The repetitive motion of creating various textures of landscape-forms through paint on a plane feels psychologically akin to the repetitive motion of footsteps hiking a trail.

References and research for a painting are a trail map, a guide for a journey. This painting was guided by my past experiences in public parks across North America, particularly my time in the Northwest, where the damp, humid earth sustains mossy and slick surfaces. The first steps on a trail are often highly attentive and investigative, as you feel the tread of the terrain under foot. With painting, I determine how I will represent a texture through initial paint applications and soon become aware of the surroundings and enter a flow, each step a response to the environment and the last motion. That motion then becomes subconscious and automatic. There are obstacles to

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be encountered; navigating around a flowing stream interrupting a trail feels similar to resolving how the edge of one painted form meets another.

*Ventral to the Verdant Void*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 72” x 1.5” x 72”
Ventral to the Verdant Void (2018), confronts the viewer with a gaping lesion on the earth’s surface. The void suggests a vacancy— that something has been exploited and removed, leaving an exposed placeholder. The void carves a large, approximate circle in the ground, situated central in the frame. Directly facing the center of the void, the downward perspective positions the viewer above the void. This paired with the circular, inward progression of the painting, become disorienting, evoking a sense of falling or floating towards the gravitational center.

I employ the central composition within the square, alluding to focus and mindful centering; summoning an inward journey into the dark abyss that denies full access. The dark space is flat and devoid of any information that suggests that anything absolute is within the depth. It is something that cannot be known or certain; the viewer can form their own subjective inferences of what could lie within the obscurity, if anything at all.

The grotesque edges of the void represented in Ventral to the Verdant Void are painted in a loose, rough manner in warm neutral hues, alluding to both the mud of the earth and the flesh of the human body. Damage inflicted on landscape is akin to a wound of the body. By articulating a wounded landscape, I aim to evoke not only an empathetic response, but I am also asking the viewer to contemplate their personal responsibility to the environment.
Ventral to the Verdant Void, detail
While present in the cutovers of the northwestern Wisconsin landscape, an environment destructed by logging, Jan Zita Grover contemplates her personal associations with the damaged land. In her thoughtful narrative, “Cutover,” she questions her urges to metaphorize the landscape’s physicality, reflecting on her time as an HIV/AIDS worker, where she witnessed immense suffering as friends’ bodies slowly deteriorated. I will refer to her empathetic accounts throughout this text, as I feel that her thoughts are important. Throughout her text, she stresses her experience as her own, acknowledging there is much more within the environment than its cultural “reads” and her own meanings. Just as Grover has recognized this, I must reiterate the very specific lens through which I engage with the landscape, just as any experience is customized for one. As I represent a wounded landscape in my paintings, I am reminded of Grover’s experience. In this passage, Grover considers her own mortality, finding beauty in her experiences of damaged bodies:

I ask myself why I find a landscape this damaged so beautiful, or at any rate so touching. Answering this question brings me to the lip of the abyss, to the six years I chose to live under the whip of aids. I no longer believe there will be time enough for what I want to do. That I can control many events. That my culture’s standards of beauty are attainable or even desirable. How easy it is to stand outside my own body and watch it strain toward feeling, any feeling, at any cost! I have learned to find beauty in places where I never would have searched for or found it before- an edematous face, a lesioned and smelly body, a mind rubbed numb by pain. Pain. A burned-over district. Mortal lessons: the beauty of a ravished landscape. Now middle-aged, I find mortality doubly my possession, keeper and kept. The diminishment of this landscape mortifies and therefore disciplines me. Its scars will outlast me, bearing witness for decades beyond my death of the damage done here. (20)

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Chapter Two: Roots of Tumult

I grew up in the heart of suburbia in North Texas, where neighborhood sprawl never seemed to halt. I found escape in nearby ponds that remained on the outskirts of the manicured lawns, most being human-made. I went to these locations for solitude and clear thinking. I found the beauty of a less altered environment filled with life – both obvious and camouflaged – revitalizing for my conscience. Revisiting these places regularly allowed me to become familiar with them, and to observe their changes as seasons passed.

My family home was a middle-class residence located on Lake Sharon. A trail encircled the small lake; half of it was a paved sidewalk encased in plush, emerald lawn grass, and the other half was a neglected dirt path blanketed in acorn caps and the previous winter’s crushed fallen oak leaves. Tucked on the less-maintained side of the lake was one of the few, sparse pine forests located in my town, Denton, TX. I fell in love with this small plot of unkempt land, where a flowing creek nourished the flora and fauna. I was captivated by the majesty of evening gold sunlight peeking through the silhouettes of loblolly pines that towered over multi-storied homes and onto a copper carpet of pine needles. Alive with the songs of birds and rustling of leaves, I could sometimes hear cars passing on the nearby highway, subtle reminders that I was indeed still in a sprawl-town. During my last year living in this house, purple streaks of paint started to decorate the trees. I soon heard of a new development plan and that the city would be extending the highway near the neighborhood; it seemed that this environment that I so deeply
cared for would be destroyed and transformed into another slab of concrete. Trees that had existed for nearly a century would be severed and removed. The flowing creek would be bulldozed, interrupting the ecological processes that nourished its small, quiet inhabitants. The dominance over these limited, valuable ecosystems infuriated me.

In November of 2014, a vote took place; along with a majority of voters, I voted to ban fracking in Denton, TX. Fracking is a form of land rape; oil companies drill deeper than a mile into the earth before injecting a massive amount of liquid directed at the shale rock, forcing a discharge of oil.\(^5\) Texas Governor Greg Abbott supported by big oil money, repealed the ban seven months later. Fracking wells would begin drilling in close proximity to neighborhoods, well water would become contaminated, and pollutants would be released into the air. This would pose many health risks for the environment and the community.\(^6\) The rage and powerlessness that I felt learning all of this has continued. Capitalism and greed almost always seem to win over ethical, empathetic regard for environment and community.

I, like many, fear for the future of natural ecosystems and the environment. There is urgency in speaking to environmental issues, in defense of a living entity that does not knowingly, immediately defend itself. The war on the environment has escalated increasingly in America; shores are open to drilling, national parks protections are being

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lifted, sprawls are expanding, culturally sacred lands are being desecrated, water sources are being contaminated, among many other devastations. Though ongoing efforts are being made to increase sustainability of the environment and natural resources, the pushback from capitalist corporations persists. Globally, the climate is responding with harsh seasons and natural disasters affecting communities without means of restoration or governmental support for rehabilitation.

Following this win of the oil industry in Denton, TX, these concerns are regularly on my mind. I reflected on this conflict in a passage written in February 2017:
Magnolia blossoms flutter in the breeze on a warm winter day, they have bloomed too early. I watch them as they subtly flicker in the sun— their graceful petals waving, a waking elation to the cold, harsh burdens of the last few months.

While I enjoy their presence and feel relieved to have the sun hot on my skin, the true explanation of their early blooming causes me a greater, harrowing concern. This February marked the second highest temperatures on record in the U.S., a glaring indicator of climate change. Confused by the warming temperatures, flora bloomed, becoming vulnerable to later spring freezes.

I am conflicted with my sensitive connection to the landscape and the way that we as humans use and take advantage of natural resources. We have provoked a climate crisis and my mere existence has contributed to such a catastrophe. I wistfully yearn for the unreturnable—a pre-industrial nature. How contradictory—the pleasure of enjoying a beautiful day that is evidence of a consequential future.
Realizing my geographical limitations in Texas, as life began to yield more personal flexibility and as roads lengthened, I started to explore other states. I was in search of a more dynamic landscape, with fewer interferences and human modifications – lands that rolled with mountains and boulders. These new landscapes differed so greatly to the familiar flat, expansive plains that I was accustomed to. I had the privilege and means to take multiple trips a year to the closest mountain regions, still several hours away, where conservative politics also dominated. These visits had me reflecting on the intersections between my personal identity and land exploitation.

On many occasions, I drove to Arkansas, “coined ‘The Natural State’ in 1995,” visiting Buffalo National River in the Ozarks, where grounds tangled in un-tamed foliage sit atop sharp cliffs alongside the winding river. There is a sense of mysticism in the Ozark landscape, where the rising autumn Sun gently lifts the fog collected in valleys overnight, sifting through the fall-toned leaves as flute-like elk calls echo in the distance.

Growing up in Texas, as a queer person, where the textbooks once said that homosexuality is unnatural, I was adapted to socially guarding myself in highly conservative states. The majority ideology in these areas exclusively acknowledges the binary: cis-man and cis-woman identities and heterosexual relationships are viewed as “natural”, implying that queerness is the opposite of nature, furthering oppressions of LGBTQIA individuals. Nicole Seymour addresses the cultural adaptation of the terms

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“nature” and “natural” in relation to the “othering” of queerness. According to Seymour, this cultural adaptation of the term “nature”, “thus starts to look like something that can only function oppressively- or at best, naively; it is rendered monolithic, even as it is decried for being farcical.”

This use of language, and defining of “nature” had me questioning the relationship between individual conservatism and environmental concern; if oppressions against humans (including people of color along with queer individuals) exist in these areas, it is likely that non-humans (exploited landscapes, threatened natural resources and species) share oppressions, “as they are deeply interconnected and they promote politicized advocacy on behalf of both.” (1) A great deal of this oppressive, American conservatism is rooted in Christianity, and reason natural disasters as “acts of God”, denying the existence of climate change and implying that many of the disasters actually escalated by the human release of greenhouse gas emissions are a false concern, perpetuating environmental exploitation.

In a religious landscape study, conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014 on “Importance of religion in one’s life by state”, 86% of Arkansas participants in the survey selected that religion is very important. In a corresponding survey, “Views about

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homosexuality by state,” ranking acceptance of homosexuality, Arkansas stood at the 4th homophobic state in the U.S., where only 45% of participants said that homosexuality should be accepted.\(^{10}\)

These regional correlations imply a linkage between social oppressions and land exploitation. Sure, these oppressive mentalities exist and vary everywhere, regardless of the red-ness or blue-ness of a state. I also have my doubts when it comes to the notion of “safe-spaces”, but in these regions, I have a heightened sense of reservation about my queerness, and withhold from revealing my true, “natural” self. And so, I am brought back to the question of “nature” and the “natural”. They are convoluted terms, that are both a component of culture, and a physicality existing outside of culture. There are dangers when using “nature” as argument in association with the social, as opposed to the individual, as this asserts definitive limitations onto culture. Previously I have stressed the individualized experience of landscape for one, and now I must emphasize that there is no specific definition of nature, if it can be defined at all.

Seymour underscores this importance when she says, “to acknowledge that the terms have multiple meanings, not all of which apply to the human or the social; or to acknowledge what the rejections thereof might mean for nature qua the non-human world,”\(^{11}\) in regards to this under acknowledged recognition.


\(^{11}\) Seymour, Strange Natures, 4.
I also frequented the Wichita Mountains, a wildlife refuge located in Oklahoma, where the lyrics, “Oh give me a home, where the buffalo roam,”\(^\text{12}\) from the colonial-idealized, unofficial anthem of the American West, “Home on the Range” rings true. At the time I was reading, “The Last Season,” by Eric Blehm, the true-life story of Randy Morgenson, a celebrated Backcountry Ranger of Yosemite National Park, who after approximately 30 seasons of experience, went missing for years before his drowned body was found. Morgenson was described as knowing Yosemite geographically like the back of his hand, and his colleagues were dumbfounded to learn he had gone missing, as it was an absolute anomaly that he of all people would get lost in Yosemite.\(^\text{13}\) Though his death is a chilling reminder of the landscape’s dangers, I was inspired by the accounts of his experience, familiarizing oneself so intimately with a landscape.

While hiking on a ridge in the Wichita Mountains, overlooking a large creek below, my curiosity was piqued and I yearned to understand more from the landscape. I imagined having more time in isolation with a landscape that I could return to regularly. Reflecting on Randy Morgenson’s devotion for Yosemite, I decided that I wanted to really familiarize myself with a park, and thus pursued a backcountry park ranger position. The thought of actively protecting the land, writing tickets for littering and enforcing rules that were to the advantage of the landscape, exhilarated me. To an extent, I could become a voice for the environment.


Chapter 3: Strata

The summer following my last hike in Wichita Mountains, I began my position as a seasonal State Park Ranger in Pueblo, Colorado. Lake Pueblo State Park sits between the Wet Mountains, a sub-range of the Sangre De Cristo Mountains, and the edge of town. This mountain range lines the southwest horizon and to the north is a view of the iconic, snow-capped, Pike’s Peak. The Pueblo Reservoir is central to the park, which intersects the Arkansas River, divided by a dam to the east. Ospreys survey for fish over the speed boats and jet skis. The waves lap the cliffs of pale, rigid buttes, which cut into rocky canyons. Atop the buttes is the high desert, a vast view of pastel colors, sprinkled with bright pink and yellow cactus blooms. The air is scented with sage, and you are guaranteed to breathe in arid dust without a bandana placed over your mouth.

The park is freckled with stubby juniper trees that age centuries, except at the river’s mouth, upon which thick cottonwoods form a canopy bordering the shore where perfectly rounded pebbles sparkle.

In the canyons, acrobatic cliff swallows dive in and out of their mud nests, resembling barnacles crusted within the crevices of the bluffs. Bulbous, gray, perfect spheres, some wider than three feet in diameter, protrude out of the canyon walls. A local resident told me that they are amethyst geodes. I admired that though they had a rumored value, they remained tightly encased in the rock; they seem impenetrable. The strata of the buttes, striped with sandstone, limestone, and shale are described to be a
geologist’s dream. Throughout the park, visible rock layers tell the history of one of the most complete geological time scales in the world.

View from Skull Canyon Trail in Lake Pueblo State Park, 2015

In a cultural sense, the strata of the rocks are chapters of history, “natural” history. This is a reminder of the life and language that exists outside of the cultural realm. There are records within the rock’s very being; its elemental components, minerals, all stacked in
an order, a chronology which culture reads as time. Grover challenges the decided ways in which humans “read” landscape as document:

> Land is not only a representation. It is also a physical palimpsest upon which complex human, animal, and geologic acts, most of which are not primarily symbolic, have been written in flesh and tree and rock. While most landscapes are unquestionably cultural, it does not follow that theories devised for analyzing cultural representations are particularly applicable to read them.  

It is not only the ways in which a landscape is examined that should be in question, but also its definition, its representation, and its symbolism. To use landscape as symbol, as metaphor, inherently implies a hierarchy: human as god, determiner of meaning, definer. Humans observe the landscape, mentally filter the experience of it, forming observations into a language, and then represent it in an inescapable human form. When humans use language to describe landscape, it inevitably risks putting an anthropocentric perspective on an entity that has no concern as to how a human feels and thinks about it.

Many earth artists have dodged this definitive approach by reducing the landscape’s representation to the elemental, “which precludes any such ‘reading’ and instead unlimits the senses.” Basia Irland directly confronts this in her *Ice Receding/Books*

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Reseeding projects, in which Irland creates book-shaped, ice sculptures imbedded with lines of native seeds, a form of elemental text.


These works are composed of water collected by participants who live near the bodies of water, in which she releases the ice books. They drift away, melting, delivering the water and native seeds back to the land. Amanda Boetzkes states that Irland, “conceived of this work as the release of an ‘ecological language’ as the ice sculptures melted back into the creek, carrying with it the seeds, which would collect along the banks and then grow, helping to sequester carbon to purify the water and fortify the
Nature as allegory is deeply rooted in many cultures. Rain as earth’s tears, sunshine related to happiness, ocean waves as a force of change, whispers in the wind, storms as embodiment of conflict, etc. This symbolic personal insertion of self into the landscape is potentially one way to embrace a connection with the environment, however it still presents an issue: the true existence of the landscape greatly exceeds the symbolism used to constitute it.


*Who Loves the Sun?* 2018, Video documentation and collected audio. 13:37 min., still at 3:21

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This video is a collection of song lyrics that use nature allegories, removed from their original contexts and placed together in a sequence that acts as a cyclical, poetic narrative. In this collection of tracks, musicians have used common symbolism of landscape and natural elements. I emphasize the variety of symbolic, personalized representations of landscape in this video to show broadness in interpretations while simultaneously bringing to attention, the landscape’s metaphorical reduction. The video is both critical and supportive of these notions; while I feel that these associations of landscape and natural elements are valid and at times relatable, I criticize their triteness, overuse, and their human-centric notions. The result is a cramped, chop-up of overplayed hits and selections from my music library that can be viewed as both ridiculous and emotionally poetic when paired with my video components, which use my interpretation of the language as literal representation.
As I consistently started to recognize these nature metaphors in song, I began to mentally visualize the language, categorizing the lyrics into lists related to the subjects: Sun, stars, Moon, sky, foliage, Earth, weather, water, vast landscape, time, etc. I then shot footage of these elemental literalizations, documenting natural phenomena in Virginia, in Shenandoah National Park, Virginia Beach, and the James River. These poetics can be a sensitive, emotional, metaphorization that uses the landscape to represent personal existence and experience, while at the same time its redundancy brings attention to the reduction of nature/culture dualism.

I find it interesting that this collection of many voices of people who I don’t know can feel personalized to me, that I feel connected to symbolism that is specific to the musicians’ lived experience. In a sense this video feels like a self-portrait to me; many of these
tracks are songs that have felt relatable to my personal experiences. I embrace this sensitivity while also mocking myself, acknowledging that some of this symbolism is ridiculous and at times, this animism and anthropomorphism is problematic. In both the songs used in this video and the landscape itself, I see a reflection of myself. Questioning this narcissistic connection to landscape, and all of its potential anthropocentricism, is the crux of this project.

After collecting these nature-metaphor lyrics, I realized when gendered pronouns were specified while relating the landscape to a person, “she”, “her”, and “woman” were used numerous times, while there were zero lyrics that used “he”, “him”. This dualism portrayed in the video casts female as delicate, emotional, and as a type of curative grace who serves to restore the musician:

“She was there in the meadow, where the creek used to rise,”17 “She lay beside me, like a branch from a tender willow tree,”18 “She brought sunshine where winter winds had blown”19, “And the sky was a woman’s arm,”20 “But I’m not afraid of autumn or her sorrow,”21 “Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone.”22

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Colonialism has shaped much of Western culture, including the symbolic associations of nature and the female body. With the arrival of European colonists onto “virgin” land, “Mother Nature” became personified. Stacy Alaimo articulates this through ecofeminist thought, “Sexualizing conquest and colonialism naturalizes those processes while depicting women, the land, and indigenous peoples as mysterious zones that invite their own violation.” 23 This symbolism and fetishization of the feminized nature as an “untamed,” “fertile” ground to be dominated has been perpetuated through patriarchal domestication in America today. There is much feminist debate on whether or not to embrace these associations: on the one hand the preservation of these dualisms, nature/culture and female/male, conserves these exploitative relations without any room

to navigate between these binaries. Paradoxically, this presents an ally-ship between woman and landscape. I will elaborate more on this rich substance later.

Another observation worth noting is that most of the nature metaphors employed in the video are associated with love, heartbreak, and romance. These sentimental tendencies seem to come instinctually when amongst the landscape for some. Other common associations include: sorrow, longing, notions of personal existence, and associations with strength/delicacy, perhaps this comes with the feeling of diminishment within the vastness. Physical movement of self within the landscape, notions of grandiosity in dialogue with the monumental scale of landscape, and inaccessibility within the landscape, are other common metaphors used in these lyrics.
While *Who Loves the Sun?* demonstrates multiple perspectives that affirm the redundant, specific sentimentality that occurs in relation to the landscape through poetics, I attempt to bring a more open interpretation for the viewer in another video, *Accustomed Darkness*. This video similarly uses nature as metaphor and shows breadth in interpretation, while also demonstrating the impermanence of the fleeting moment, displaying the environment’s agency to move the textual shadow. The result is an ephemeral, physical distortion of text whereas the previous video is distorted in visual-literalizing of the metaphor.

We are all aware of the Sun, the greatest source of light from a perspective on terra. From the grounded perspective of a specifically positioned body on a slow moving planet, it appears that the Sun is moving from horizon to horizon. However, it is not the Sun, but the body that is rotating with the Earth. With eyes ill-equipped to observe the Sun directly, we do not slow to watch this deceptive, perceived rotation. Instead, we construct notions of time, manifested in the movements of shadows. However customary its presence, as the Sun approaches the horizon twice a day, the sky can unintentionally become an awe-inspiring spectacle of florescent colors.

Darkness is the absence of light, it is the concealed position of the Sun. Darkness references the unknown, it references grief, it references phenomena, it references the mundane, it references ignorance, it references the times we live in. To have darkness illuminated, brings this momentary, mundane experience to attention, which holds broad meanings, differing for everyone. I explore my own interpretations in a passage:
Darkness -

It is the sorrow of love's absence
It is the desolate valley of hurt rocks, clouded
It is the damp ground beckoning the wounded heart

It is vitamin D deficiency -
It is depression
It is the obscuring obstacles that withhold the traveler

It is the untrekked desire lines that lead to Truth
It is that which tempts the curious
It is the shadow casted beneath the illuminated surface

It is the depths of the unknown
It is waves of invalidations
It is the reveal of what is wasted alone
It is Earth's veins, ripped, bleeding out
It is the charred remains provoked by
the tyrant's fire
It is the smog that fills the destitute's
lungs, gasping

It is the innards of the eyelid
It is the dilated pupil that chooses to
believe
It is the ink that spills the order

It is the unwillingness of a hateful
society
It is their malicious histories
It is the untold stories of the original
dweller tucked under the trampled topsoil

It is the coal that ignites the flame
It is decay, it is the foundation of life
It is the gloom of the day that
warms the seed
It is the veil of the mourner who disguises their unrest
It is the numbness of our own protections
It is an accustomed way of existence
It is resolving a day and anticipating another

It is something we aren’t prepared for
In the video accompaniment to this text, I document a ten-hour shift of daylight during a cold, winter day, capturing sunlight as it projects through a stencil suspended in trees along the James River. The text reading, “Accustomed Darkness,” is distorted, moving in and out of the frame in a 180-degree motion, a movement with the Earth.

Accustomed Darkness, 2017, Video Documentation of Installation near James River, 5:54 min., still at 1:09

The Earth’s rotation has a power to bring human language in and out of legibility. The text becomes legible only part of the duration, an impermanence that mirrors the land’s natural progression and cyclicality. That moment of harmony, clarity and alignment between my insertion of culture within nature is fleeting.
Accustomed Darkness, still at 3:43
Chapter Four: Elemental Agency

This power and agency of the elemental force is similarly demonstrated in Guido van der Werve’s time-lapse video documentation, “The day I didn’t turn with the world,” in which van der Werve stood on the north pole facing his shadow during the summer solstice for 24 hours.

Guido van der Werve, *Nummer negen (The day I didn’t turn with the world)*, 2007, Video, 08:36 min.

This is possibly one of the most extreme planetary experiences on Earth, as van der Werve endured exhausting and harsh conditions in defiance of the elements. With his body in dialogue with the Sun, he turns opposite to the Earth’s rotation. In an interview with Marc Christoph-Wagner in 2014, van der Werve states, “I’m always looking for
simplicity, and I think that’s where the sublime lies. His work is in response to his emotions and state of mind, and manifests in his body’s participation within extremes. This sublime grandiosity is heightened with inclusion of his own cinematic piano composition. While he experiences the fluctuating, mundane presence of the Sun, his participation is audacious; it is extraordinary to experience the Sun at its fullest earthy potential. However, I am skeptical of this masculine resistance to earthly forces.

The landscape automatically proves its resistance to human control and expectation. I am regularly reminded of this as I learn how to manage my physical position working with the landscape: natural elements are not to be controlled, they are to be learned. Over the year I have attempted to document certain conditions, while: waiting for rain, waiting for a clear day, adjusting to snowy conditions, looking for a specific placement of trees, following the Earth’s position to the Sun. My practice has changed dramatically after working site-specifically; I have had to adapt to these uncontrolled conditions in the work with an open mind, one with no expectation. I find this fieldwork so striking and rewarding; there is empowerment in the landscapes’ resistance to interferences.

While patiently waiting for rain to document a work, I reflect on this respectful frustration:

I AM WAITING FOR RAIN —

NATURE IS AN UNPREDICTABLE, UNCONTROLLABLE FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH. THE NATURAL ELEMENTS TEST MY PATIENCE. WAITING FOR RAIN, STUNG BY NETTLES, BRUISED & TORN BY BOULDERS. AM I HEARING A ROAR OF THUNDER OR ANOTHER PLANE OVERHEAD? WILL THIS GUST OF WIND BRING THE START OF A SHOWER? DID I HEAR RAIN TAPPING ON THE LEAVES ABOVE? ARE THE MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE CLOUING WITH A GREY-BLUE? WAS THAT A FLASH OF LIGHTNING OR ARE MY EYES PLAYING TRICKS ON ME? EACH TIME I THINK I FEEL A SPRINKLE ON MY NECK, I CHECK MY RAINCOAT FOR A DROP OR TWO. THIS LOG ON WHICH I AM PLANTED HAS BECOME A SUPPORT FOR MY WILTING HEART. IF I YEARN HARD ENOUGH, WILL I CONVINCE THE RAIN TO FALL? FOCUS + FEEL.

WILL FORGETTING ABOUT IT MOMENTARILY CAUSE IT TO POUR UNEXPECTEDLY? WISHFUL THINKING - PHANTOM RAIN. THE CRICKETS SING LOUDER & THE OWL HOOTS GOODNIGHT. DISTRAUGHT & FRUSTRATED I START TO CRY - I LOOK UP ABOVE, & DID NOT THE SKY.
There are no doubts of the dangers that exist in the landscape. Our bodies are adapted to specific comfortable conditions and we have invented utilitarian objects that aid tolerance of the elements, however the body remains vulnerable to these greater forces. The allure of the landscape’s beauty entices access while simultaneously this susceptibility repels it. Our existence must rely on this respect or face the consequences.

I am reminded of these dangers as I recollect on a fatality that occurred during my season at Lake Pueblo State Park. The rapids of the river were the biggest environmental danger of the park. That summer, my colleague found the body of a young man in the river. The man’s foot was tangled in rope, the other end having grabbed hold of a river boulder. The victim appeared to have been rafting alone during a high water warning. While public parks often serve as a playground for visitors, precaution and bodily limitations must be accounted for in environmental interactions. Instead, I was warned by my colleagues that the biggest concern for my safety would be in my interactions with visitors.
Chapter Five: Identity and Intersectional Environmentalism

My colleagues largely consisted of brawny, white, male retired police officers with licenses to carry. I became increasingly aware of my insecurities, as a young, small, female-bodied individual taking a position of authority. During training I became aware of my insecurities, reaffirming that I would have to prove my authority. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be taken as seriously due to my femininity, and this could endanger me during my encounters with park visitors. Here I was again guarded, but in a position of authority. I would ultimately be a white law enforcement officer, encouraged to identify suspicious behavior among the predominantly lower-class locals that frequented the park, of which many are Latin-American. I never suspected malicious behavior from anyone I encountered, yet was frequently instructed by my supervisors to approach visitors with distrust, and questions.

I must also acknowledge, that I was in this position on a conquered land, once inhabited by Muache Ute people, who after enduring oftentimes violent conflicts with U.S. authorities for a number of years, were massacred, having received “gifted” smallpox-infested coats from the governor of the Territory of New Mexico. Surviving Ute people were forced out, and were later brutally tortured and murdered by colonists.25 Contending with this authoritative position of privilege within this landscape is puzzling to me today.

The American landscape is a site of power dynamics, as manifested by the dominance and intrusion of colonialism that victimize the other. Toxic colonialist ideals are imbedded in American culture which has historically used western expansion and landscape control to justify an assertion of racist, homophobic, and sexist dominion. Oppressive societal structures exist because of this dominion, and thus, there is a lack of empathy for the most basic human and environmental rights in the U.S. today. With this in mind, I acknowledge that my environmentalism must house all forms of oppressed life and non-life; *my environmentalism will be intersectional.*

If environmentalism’s main concern is protecting the *environment*, which is the surroundings that contain living beings (humans, animals, plants, micro-organisms) and non-living materials and physical conditions, and ecologies are the complex relationships of living organisms to one another and to their environment, environmentalism then suggests that it is not just the “container” that should be protected. Because living beings are a part of the environment, through progressive environmentalism all oppressed life must equally be accounted for, and intersectionality must be employed.

Environmentalism along with all other activist movements must hold this responsibility and awareness, as Adam Ramsay suggests in his thoughtful manifesto, *My environmentalism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit*, “if you seek to attack one power structure but do so by treading on other oppressed groups, then you are still
perpetuating oppression.” Ramsay goes on to point out that “before the word ‘intersectional’ was used to describe how power systems interlock, there was another term often employed to describe this web of different dynamics: ‘ecology’.”

Thinking ecologically, I must touch on the landscape’s historical representation in 19th century Romanticism in America in which landscapes were represented through a predominantly white male perspective. Romanticists, who expressed concern that “untouched nature” be preserved, were emotionally affected by being present in the landscape, and used sensitive poetics that were guided by “escape into the wilderness” and self-searching. Through their own cathartic expeditions into unindustrialized nature, they directly confronted the environment, visualizing their work en plein-air. They advocated for close observation of nature, which subsequently is represented in their paintings, often being rendered in extreme detail; specifying minute details of vast spaces. Their landscape paintings embodied personal feeling, embracing affections for the environment, while humbly reflecting on their own mortality. They captured mindscape, through notions of awe, terror, and the sublime, in dramatic representations of light, expansiveness, and elemental forces.

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Albert Bierstadt, Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California, 1868, Oil on canvas, 72” x 120 1/8”. Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington DC.

As previously mentioned, the diminishment of self within vastness, feelings of awe, and other personal sensitivities through experience can emotionally connect one to a landscape. Romantic landscape painting has been important for my artistic practice as I believe there is value in the movement’s emotional grasp of landscape and carefully rendered paintings. Albert Bierdstadt (American, b. 1830) for example, in his painting, “Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California,” demonstrates this attention to detail, by vividly capturing the intricacies of reflected light, bouncing off of the complex, surfaces of the monumental bluffs. Each leaf, blade of grass, and ripple in the water, is individually transcribed with care, giving every component of this California landscape thoughtful introspection. This consideration to every represented surface of the environment is evidence of close observation, emotional sensitivity, and empathy for the landscape.
Though Romanticists were considered first-wave environmentalists, their history is criticized by contemporary environmentalists for naïve idealism and sentimentalism, without enough attention to social oppressions. In fact, some members of the Hudson River School, an American art movement of the mid-19th century, perpetuated social oppressions through their representations of the colonizer and the Indigenous American, which often justified concepts of Manifest Destiny. “Such ideology was supported by the riverscapes of the Hudson River School that perpetuated the imagining of the brave Christian explorer/settler and the ‘savage’ nation.”27 Namely, Thomas Cole, in one of his most famous paintings, “Indian Sacrifice,” depicted an Indigenous American attacking a woman in a white gown, who seems to plead for her life as she kneels at the edge of a cliff with her arms raised. This painting acted as a form of fearmongering and propaganda, arising from the prevalent racism of the “new country,” which “debarred women from full citizenship, enslaved black people, and allowed ‘the genocidal clearance of [indigenous] tribes from their lands.’” (42) This symbolic marginalization of Indigenous Americans is indicative of the lack of ecological thinking within Romanticism’s perceived environmentalism.

Given the ultra-oppressive environment in 19th century America, it is no surprise that along with most every other professional field in America at this time, there was sufficient lack of female representation and exclusion of people of color within the Hudson River School. “Although women were educated in the arts, being a professional

artist in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was the province of men. Most academies didn't admit women, and neither did the clubs that link artists with patrons.\textsuperscript{28} It is easy to recall the "boy's club" of the Hudson River School; notable white male perspectives that are recognized today include: Thomas Cole (English, b. 1801), Frederic Edwin Church (American, b. 1826), Albert Bierstadt (American, b. 1830), Asher Brown Durand (American, b. 1886), etc. However, within the male shadows, were female artists of the Hudson River School, who received some long-overdue light in a 2010 exhibition at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site titled, "Remember the Ladies: Women of the Hudson River School," which "displays work that reflects the same romantic sensibility, respect for balance, luminosity and love of picturesque landscapes as [their male counterparts]" (Dobrzynski).

Artists of this exhibition included Harriet Cany Peale (American, b. 1799), Eliza Pratt Greatorex (Irish, b. 1819), Sarah Cole (American, b. 1805) and Susie M. Barstow (American, b. 1836). Though their paintings could easily be mistaken for their male colleagues' paintings, as they equally demonstrate technical expertise; there is a noticeably less dramatic, less subliminal representation of landscape in their work. This exhibition catalog displays a more simplistic approach to landscape painting, than Thomas Cole and Church, for example, whose paintings possessed heightened drama, often depicting cinematic stormy skies and sunsets/sunrises, representing more of a fanciful depiction of the Catskill Mountain region.

Frederic Edwin Church, *Above the Clouds at Sunrise*, 1849, Oil on canvas, 27 ¼” x 40 ¼". Westervelt Warner Museum of American Art in Tuscaloosa, AL.

Susie M. Barstow, *Landscape*, 1865, Oil on Canvas, 30” x 22”. Collection of Elizabeth and Alfred Scott.
It is possible that some of the Hudson River School women would identify more with soon-to-come American Realism, as these paintings, though still picturesque, seemingly represented landscape more realistic to the everyday which avoided fetishizing nature’s splendor. By no means am I suggesting that a female identity is inherently less oppressive, but this is perhaps a different demonstration of empathy. Susie M. Barstow, along with many other women of the Hudson River School, visualized more enveloping, shallow spaces, often through perspective positioned lower to the ground, as opposed to a more domineering point of view that overlooks below. Along with many of these women, Barstow was an avid hiker, traveling up to 25 miles a day to reach the vistas that she would paint.29 These strenuous journeys are evidence of her commitment and affection for the landscape.

Harriet Cany Peale’s, “Kaaterskill Clove,” grounds the viewer amongst the boulders of the Kaaterskill Falls. The space depicted is densely layered with obscuring, overlapping landforms. Within the foreground, boulders appear to be in close proximity to the viewer, alluding to intimate engagement with the landscape. Because the large cliff on the right side of the painting obscures the suggested distance, there is a sense of enticing secrecy as to what the view around the bend of the creek might entail.

There are also distinguishably different, gendered portrayals of the environment in historical Romantic literature. Nandita Batra analyzed Romantic poetry of the late 18th century and early 19th century in relation to gendered representation of nature, specifically animals, discovering that female perspectives ultimately “emphasized
rationality rather than mysticism as the foundation of benevolent compassion." Male perspectives often delineated animals and natural environment as "other," inferior to themselves. In her findings, it is highlighted that female Romanticists related to animals more empathetically, counter to more domineering perspectives of male Romanticists (101-120).

Anna Laetitia Barbauld (English, b. 1743), a notable poet of the period, who in addition to her poetry is recognized for her political pamphlets against slavery, wrote “The Mouse’s Petition”, provoked by the sight of a “caged mouse destined for a respiratory experiment with brewery gases” (108). “Positing the possibility of a pantheistic link between humanity and the animal world, the poem through the use of its animal speaker simultaneously emphasizes pantheism and the need for anthropocentric compassion” (109). Imagined from the perspective of the mouse, in the first stanza of the poem, the mouse pleads for its freedom:

O hear a pensive captive’s prayer,
For liberty that sighs;
And never let thine heart be shut
Against the prisoner’s cries!  

The poem was attached to the cage and the mouse was released. The poem reveals a


sensitive, empathetic regard for the mouse, while avoiding human centric, masculine, and Eurocentric notions that were so prevalent in Romanticism.

This is one example of individual empathy, that perhaps is a result of Barbauld sympathizing through her own oppressions and experiences as a woman living amongst the hyper-patriarchy. Two living beings share oppressions through domination, Barbauld was an ally to the mouse, and the mouse was released from it’s cruel capture.

Romanticists depicted the landscape as the aesthetical ideal and often characterized notions of the sublime, which risked fetishizing the indifferent entity, but it is all too easy to associate the landscape with “beauty and terror.” Too easy. I think that it is this simplicity that is problematic; finding the landscape beautiful is less problematic when it is appreciated more thoughtfully outside of the aesthetical realm. To do this, the spectator must become a participant, they must think ecologically; they must be empathetic; they must respect all of the landscape’s complexities; they must become an ally.

I have listed a few of my concerns within Romanticism, but I believe that there are things to be considered within empathetic, Romantic thought. I will argue that with ecological awareness, the revival of a sensitive connection with the landscape is useful today to heighten personal environmental appreciation and compassion, but it is imperative that this relationship is respectful, symbiotic, and not domineering, otherwise the environment’s oppressions will be perpetuated. I consider myself a modern day
Romantic and represent landscape through my personal, emotional connectedness with the environment. By acknowledging the environment as an independent power and empathizing with its exploitation, I intend to represent the landscape differently in these tumultuous times; from a perspective that understands that I am part of nature and that we (as humans) are indeed oppressing nature.

Barbauld may have considered herself as an ecofeminist if she were living today. Ecofeminism is one ideology that considers this ecological awareness through empathy and identity allyship with the landscape. Both humans and nature exist within the patriarchy. Equating the oppressions of non-cis white male identities to environmental exploitation has served as the foundation for ecofeminist thought.

There has been skepticism from non-inclusive feminist thought, fearing that feminized nature perpetuates the female body’s separatism from culture, insisting that she must assimilate. However, this leaves queer bodies in the dark, as this thought is in regard to biological sex. “...feminists have countered the claim that women’s inferiority is ‘natural’ by insisting that women are socially constructed. On the other hand, feminists have identified the pervasive association of woman with nature as itself the root cause of misogyny and have advocated a feminist flight from this troublesome terrain.”32 The nature/culture, female/male binaries are inherently problematic, as they suggest that there is no queering between these bounds; no gray areas within the black and white. It also contrasts the dichotomies, constraining them in opposition to one another. This

32 Alaimo, Undomesticated Ground: recasting nature as feminist space, 3.
inescapably binds biology to “nature,” rendering queer identity invisible and culture as unnatural. Many claims following this are outdated, transphobic and fail to remember the colonial genocide that took place, which subsequently erases people of color.

Che Gossett wrote an homage to the recently diseased Laura Aguilar, whose photographs confront “what it meant to be queer in a Latinx and Chicanx community and how that community is portrayed and also absented from dominant depictions of the queer community in Los Angeles ... [Aguilar’s work asks,] what does it mean to share ground and Earth?”

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Gosset describes that Aguilar’s work represents, “what queer brown and Black and fat embodiment does to shift, gently and powerfully like an undercurrent, how we think about the parameter of the natural and unnatural subject and object, human and non-human.” In Aguilar’s “Motion #56”, three bodies are curled amongst a rocky landscape. The curves of their bodies act as camouflage, a mimicry to the organic surface of the Earth within the black and white photograph. This photograph also unifies their marginalized identities with the land, presenting their invisible displacement within

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34 Gosset, “Photography Marks Me Look Within’: a Tribute to Laura Aguilar (1959-2018).”
It is imperative that ecofeminism’s central ideology is intersectional, that it is not only the female who suffers from exploitation, in the patriarchal shadows cast on the “undomesticated ground”, but also people of color, LGBTQIA individuals, immigrants, the lower class, and essentially any other identity that has been trampled over by white patriarchal privilege. As I represent landscape through Romantic and ecofeminist thought, it is critical that I proceed acknowledging this dynamic terrain as a site of oppressive dominion, being accountable for my white privilege. I intend to maintain this responsibility through intersectional environmental empathy.
Chapter 6: The Landscape as a Lover

I was the only ranger patrolling a forty-mile trail system. The trails on the south shore were a tangled web of medium to high grade trails, a joy for mountain bikers, except for the overgrown sunflowers that would seize the path and claw at bare legs in late summer. On the north shore, long trails, slippery with loose sheets of shale, were carved atop cliffs and meandered to the bank, a fisher’s haven. Along with enforcing rules to visitors, I was to analyze both human-constructed trails and natural structures to assess human accessibility; a goal of the parks, that others, too, could share this experience with the landscape. I had the responsibility of responding to any emergency on the trails. My state-issued walkie-talkie, always audible while on the clock, caused my stomach to drop each time a voice from dispatch echoed in the canyons. I rarely came across anyone while on patrol, only the occasional mountain biker who would ask me about trail grades, or lone hikers that I would ask, to leash their dog. Though I was confronted with anxieties of authority in this position, those moments of quiet between dispatch calls would remind me of my aspirations being there. To become acutely familiar with a land that I could never fully understand to the best of my ability, one that I was in the position to protect from minor human destructions, was a form of intimacy that was unlike anything I had experienced.
“I want a place I can explore slowly, slowly, like a lover’s body, like a body I will tend - what, after all has become more familiar? - but that will last longer than any body.”  


Following my time in Colorado, Shenandoah National Park, a 300 square mile arm of the Blue Ridge Mountains, would become the next landscape I would familiarize myself with. The park is bound to the east by the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Ridge-and-Valley Appalachians to the west. Hemmed in the valley are local towns, farms, and orchards that peek around the ridge. Skyline Drive, the only public road in the park, stretches 105 miles through the park. Though the park has many trails throughout it, I ultimately spent my time on one 3.4-mile trail, Doyles River Trail, returning to it around 30 times over this past year. Doyles River, a moderate grade trail, starts off of the drive, descending under a canopy of tall chestnut oak trees. Its trail winds from soft soil into rocky textures as it approaches Doyles River, which subtly trickles on the west edge of the trail, water gliding over and around river boulders cradled by a slope on each side, eventually making its cascade over a series of sharp cliffs.

The falls manifestation is dependent on the seasonal rainfall, with varying water flow, usually bountiful from spring through fall, whereas in winter the water freezes into menacing, jagged icicles. All four seasons are fully apparent in the Shenandoah landscape. Springtime yields abundant, lush, young greenery and misty mornings. In

the summer, butterflies make their appearance, bouncing from bloom to bloom, and the occasional black bear reveals itself, rummaging around the massive boulders flecked with emerald and amber moss. Leaves shift from deep greens into a captivating vista of strikingly bright reds, oranges, and yellows in the Autumn. In colder months, bare red oak tree limbs clouded with the atmosphere give the distant mountains a purple hue and snarled branches of pale, gray trees reach over the trail, adorned with lichen so vibrant it seems their bodies would glow in the dark.

For me, this trail holds the significance of personal loss, it is a place of personal conclusion, and became a place for me to revisit my grief. Recoiling back to this site allowed me to tend to my emotional wounds and process the past while also absorbing the present moment. There is shame that exists in American society: of sensitivity, sentimentality, nostalgia, romantic notions, and displaying grief. However debilitating these very real emotions can be, I think that there is beautiful melancholy in this common and normal way of functioning. This sobering and thoughtful state of mind can be revealing for one; it is a form of personal honesty. It takes emotional strength to endure these struggles, and that is empowering. However, it is often encouraged to overcome these notions as it is assumed to be a journey with an end. I commend those who come to an emotional resolve, but I wonder where this leaves us who experience chronic sentimentality and melancholy. Feeling is a privilege and I yearn for it to be embraced.
Perhaps my tendencies to become overwhelmed with emotion within the landscape function in relation to the feeling of sublimity and awe within the landscape. Through personal diminishment in the landscape, I confront my most grounding and familiar soft affections; I feel that I am in a wholesome state of mind. As I continuously have this experience within the landscape, it becomes more apparent to me that this associative tenderness is imbedded in the core of who I was, who I am, and who I will be. Being within the landscape almost seems to encourage and support these emotional responses, as I confront this isolating consciousness; and so, the landscape has become my lover.
Ode to Romance, 2017, video stills.
“Radical Softness as a Weapon” as a term was coined by queer poet Lora Mathis, which embraces, “accepting your vulnerability in a society that considers it a weakness [as] a radical act.”36 I tightly clutch this vulnerability, in an isolated performance, Ode to Romance, in which I sang the lyrics, “Loving so deeply I’m in over my head,”37 from the Alabama Shakes song, Over My Head, repetitively off of the Doyles River Trail. This performance acted as a declaration of my overwhelming love for the landscape emboldened by personal connotations and associations. This expressive serenade confronts what are often considered trite and saccharin sensitivities in the mundane human experience, which I use as a form of personal affirmation within these tumultuous times. Embracing my absorbed, emotional state, mirrored by the misty landscape, empowered my softness.

I began several planting projects off of this trail, which consisted of various native grass seeds arranged in text forms planted into the soil. The initial layout of seeds is legible, something readable by English-speaking people. Over time, “nature takes its course”, so to speak, manifesting its own language which is rendered illegible to people. After exposure to natural elements, the landscape reclaims control as definer and determiner of meaning. There is a human-influenced gesture of control in clearing the ground’s surface for seeding, and after planting the control is left up to environmental elements. I


37 Brittany Howard, Over My Head, 2015. ATO Records, mp3.
believe that this loss of control, and the subsequent loss of legibility and concealment of
language, speaks more than the text itself.

Love Letter (day one), 2017, Panicum Virgatum seed planted in Shenandoah National Park photo
documented over 8 weeks. approximately 15” x 48”.

One planting, Love Letter, with seeds arranged into text forms reading, “Take Care,”
implies a farewell. In this context, the good wish was imbedded in the soil by my hands,
as an elemental memento of my personal experiences there and a love letter to the
landscape, left alone to grow and evolve as nature “intends”. It is almost as if the
landscape replies to this farewell; the elements respond, with their own farewell, letting
go of the text's legibility.
Love Letter (week two)

As the grass grew, the message slowly re-formed. After three weeks, the text had totally become a barely legible patch of greenery, and new buds of plant life began to sprout in the exposed, nutrient-rich soil. Letting my plantings undergo weather patterns and exposure to organisms leads to unpredictable outcomes: weak grass dies too soon because of an improper germination period or lack of rain, legibility is lost due to the trampling of deer hooves, and autumn leaves cover parts of the text, both withholding growth and promoting new life.
After eight weeks, my gestures in the soil yielded an invitation for other local plant species to inhabit the cleared soil and my original planting became camouflaged. When I document these processes, I am extending impermanent moments which allow for deeper introspection of the fleeting phenomena. Romantic impermanence is ever present in a landscape; it is a manifestation of existence and mortality through the slow, cyclical rotation of seasons bringing, maintaining, and ending life. The progression of day is held within a flicker of sunlight, a drop of rain, a quivering leaf—these fleeting moments are a wholly unique thing to experience. Landscape is a real life presence, a source of sustainability and a vision of the future; it is always becoming; impermanent yet never completed.
The multitude of personal experiences I have had with the landscape; my diminishment within its vastness and acknowledging that this entity has an existence outside of human cultural implications, allow me to empathize with the environment in solidarity, recognizing it as a complicated ground of power dynamics. By embracing my personal sentiments and compassions toward the landscape; the landscape is my involuntary, indifferent lover.


Howard, Brittany. Over My Head. 2015. ATO Records, mp3.


Ramsay, Adam. “My environmentalism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit.” Open Democracy UK. March 25, 2014. https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/adam-ramsay/my-environmentalism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit.


