

A COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION OF THE ARTS AT APPALACHIAN:
MOVING TOWARDS AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

A Thesis
by
SHAUNA CALDWELL

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APPROVED BY:

Julie Shepherd-Powell, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

Brooke A. Hofsess, Ph.D.
Member, Thesis Committee

Cara Hagan, MFA.
Member, Thesis Committee

Ann Kaplan, MFA.
Member, Thesis Committee

Mark Nunes, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

Mike McKenzie, Ph.D.
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

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Shauna Caldwell

B.F.A., Art Education (K-12), Appalachian State University

B.F.A., Studio Art, Appalachian State University

M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Julie Shepherd-Powell

This thesis argues that a holistic approach to social justice is essential to the work of arts institutions in Appalachia, a region that has consistently been home to some of the most progressive thinkers and organizers in the country. Developed out of a sense of urgency, I have documented how the Turchin Center for Visual Arts and the Office of Arts and Cultural Programs are equally as crucial in the movement for social justice as other notable arts and civically engaged centers throughout the Appalachian region and beyond. Research for this project included conducting interviews and creating artwork with women leaders in these arts organizations as well as compiling demographic data and demands for change emerging from contemporary dialogue in the visual and performing arts. Exploring documentary and collaborative artmaking in Appalachia, as well as my own artmaking practice, as an extension of the ways we represent and perceive the region, allowed me to situate the importance of photography as a way to connect to a greater sense of belonging and radical change. With this, I created a proposal for changes that embody what it means to work toward equitable futures in the Appalachian region. As a way to maintain accountability, I built upon previous research to expand our understanding of love as an essential tool for

social change. Though I recognize many of the issues present in university arts organizations will not be solved through one thesis project, I am hopeful that this effort will initiate changes that will make great strides toward creating a more equitable organization and situate us as part of a radical Appalachian future by intentionally providing a platform where artists can share their own visions for that future.

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Foreword

Dear Appalachia,

As I write this, I'm rocking in a chair on the porch of my great-great aunt and uncle's house--an old sawmill shack-turned-cottage nestled into the elbow of the mountain I call home. The constant sound of Laurel Creek reminds me of all of the other beings present in this little corner of our temperate rainforest.

*So do my horses in the field beside me,
foraging the branch lettuce and other wild greens I'll eat for supper
& the mourning doves cooing
alongside the peep frogs singing to the sunset
& the lightning bugs slowly introducing themselves to their dance partners for the evening,
& echoing the glitter of the stars and the Milky Way I'll see later tonight--*

I am grounded and affirmed in my decision to stay.

After 23 years of believing I had to leave to be successful, I found myself in grad school attempting to untangle the web of misguided thinking that had nearly persuaded me that I couldn't be an artist with a radical vision for the future and continue to stay in my hometown--I was beginning to believe that you, Appalachia, simply could not be a part of that future. "Radical simply means grasping things at the root" says Angela Davis, a fellow Appalachian (2006). And now I believe that. By taking the time to understand the intricate roots that hold up the structures of power that maintain dominance over Appalachians, I have gained a clearer view of creative ways to collectively work toward a radical future. I've

found ways to reconsider that foundation and recognize spaces where we can nourish our own abilities to envision those new futures, full of love and creative possibilities, spaces where we control our own narratives, visually and otherwise, in ways that have been consistently denied to us in the past.

As I eat my supper of branch lettuce and dandelion greens kilt with ghee, infused with rosemary and garlic, rather than the “traditional” bacon grease, I am reminded of the complexities of my existence as a contemporary Appalachian woman, a woman who was raised by her grandparents in a small community where no one goes hungry thanks to vast networks of mutual aid (though we might not call it that). These pieces of my experience in this region have rarely, if ever, been reflected back to me in the media and the dominant visual portrayals that so proudly define a white-washed, male-dominated, homogenous Appalachian culture. While there are elements of our perceptions that overlap, my lived experiences are not analogous to those of other Appalachians and vice versa. This said, it is imperative that we continue to find ways to create spaces where all Appalachians can share their full, messy, complicated stories and learn to hold those spaces in loving community that supports and uplifts a more just future.

While the project to follow is informed by, and exists in hopes of expanding opportunities for, artists who don’t look like me and who don’t benefit from my undeserved privileges of being a white, cisgender woman-- I do embed my own artistic practice and philosophies of placemaking as a way to assert that I am an active participant in this community and that my intentionality and actions matter. In learning to wield my power in ways that support my community in a holistic way, while maintaining loving ethics, I take note from bell hooks, who calls for the need to be honest and truthful in order to actively

participate in the movement for social justice-- all the while recognizing that I am but one facet among a sea of intricately cut gems (2001). As such, I lay bare my own creative process, inspired by my love of the land, the people who raised me, and the ability of light to honor them through the alternative photographic process of lumen printing.

Photography is a powerful tool for shaping narratives. Being intentional about each aspect of the creative process gives me greater control over that narrative. As someone who is consistently entranced by the notion that all we see is light--I often ponder the significance of actively engaging with an artistic process that is so literally and uniquely transformed by light as a conduit for continuously altering our perception. My use of the lumen printing process intimately connects to the conceptual process of intentionally making and holding space for the creative energy of these mountains and your people, Appalachia, to dream and design our own radical futures. In essence, this thesis is my love letter to art and artists creating within your embrace, honoring all you have been and all you can be, while simultaneously attempting to situate you in a radical present.

*By making use of the water that seeps from the heart of the mountain I live with
& the plants that grew from the soil I walk upon each day
& the familial roots that tether me to their practical magic and lore
& the sunlight it took to grow your plants and people, including myself,
into the lush and intensely poetic beings we are,*

*I share with you a palpable declaration of love, gratitude, and
dedication.*

With all of my heart,

Shauna



Plantain, lumen print made by Shauna Caldwell. Often growing in compacted, heavily walked upon soil, plantain is a signifier of where we are as well as what we are used to and comfortable with. Used as a poultice on stings and wounds, macerated plantain mixed with saliva is an effective remedy to draw the venom (or stinger) out.

Introduction

When I began the Appalachian studies program, I wanted to gain a better understanding of *why* I wanted to be here so badly. I knew that I was connected to the land in a deep and visceral way. I knew the way my community worked was special. I knew the way my grandparents talk about molasses as if they are a group of beings rather than simply a sugary syrup was unique. But I didn't know why I knew these things. I wanted to know why I lost my accent around the same time I discovered "Appalachian" was a cultural identity I could claim.

With this, and in a stubborn and somewhat selfish act of defiance against everyone who ever told me, "You have to leave to find a job," or "You have to leave to get your graduate degree," or "You have to leave in order to really appreciate it here," I set out to justify my radical decision to stay and to truly belong and began making my way through the Appalachian Studies Master's program. On this journey, I have not only found answers to these questions, but I have also found my place in a region with a rich history, a deeply engaging present, and a prolific vision for a future that is driven by forward-thinking creatives.

Throughout my college career, I have been influenced by various social justice movements that have informed my perspective as an artist and educator as well as the way I understand the systems at play in the various communities, academically and otherwise, of which I am a part. In 2014, when I began college at Appalachian State, I became aware of the Black Lives Matter movement, founded the year prior as a "response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer" (Black Lives Matter, 2020, n.p.). I attended a series of discussions hosted by the Reich College of Education for a cohort of preservice teachers that

was meant to unpack the injustice in that situation and break down the function of racism in our society. I remember coming away from that space feeling as though I was only just beginning to understand the inequities that are continually perpetuated by the current dominant systems of power in this country. Of course, though these ideas were new to me, as Patrisse Cullers (2020, 6 Years Strong section) stated in an open letter on the Black Lives Matter website, “For more than 500 years, Black people have been fighting for our freedom.”

Fast forward to 2020, when Black people are still being murdered, and their perpetrators are still facing no consequences. Ignited by the stories of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Ma’Khia Bryant, and so many others who have been killed at the hands of police, I began to deeply reflect on my undeserved privilege and how I could actively support Black, Indigenous, and all People of Color in the spaces I occupy. Halfway through my Master’s program, in 2019, I had been hired as a full-time arts educator in the Office of Arts and Cultural Programs, working at both the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts and the Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts. As it turns out, the Office of Arts and Cultural Programs and the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts are a couple of those spaces where I can be an active participant in critical dialogue and in initiating change that will directly affect and support artists of color. It is through the arts that culture is both created and documented. Artists have been tasked with the cultural responsibility to envision new futures, and if the majority of the artists we support are white, cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual men, then it is their vision for the future we are condoning. As part of my own consideration of and commitment to this place—Watauga County / Southern Appalachia / “Appalachia”—and in an effort to shift the pervasive dominant narrative of a great number of

arts institutions, I am dedicated to using my privilege to contribute to a thriving and equitable arts community that uplifts the visions of artists who occupy every facet of our society.

In contemplating my own interests in the arts and the community I am a part of, I will examine how the Turchin Center for Visual Arts and the Schaefer Center for Performing Arts are equally as crucial in the movement for social justice as other notable arts and civically engaged centers throughout the region and beyond. Appalachia has consistently been home to some of the most progressive thinkers and organizers in the country. In this thesis, I have delved into what it means to be working toward equitable futures in the Appalachian region and how people in Appalachia have been at the forefront of these conversations.

In an effort to create something that will be useful and actually utilized to promote equity in this region I am a part of and care so deeply about, I have researched an extensive collection of demands for arts institutions created by Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), dis/abled, and queer-led groups and organizations. Alongside these demands, I have utilized suggestions from a variety of consultants in order to inform a plan that the Office of Arts and Cultural Programs can follow and implement moving forward. In the words of Sumaya Kassim (2017, para. 2), “Decolonising is deeper than just being represented. When projects and institutions proclaim a commitment to ‘diversity,’ ‘inclusion’ or ‘decoloniality’ we need to attend to these claims with a critical eye.” Guided by a critical eye, this project attempts to initiate a greater representation of BIPOC, dis/abled, and queer artists in our programming, as well as identifies shifts that need to be made structurally to uphold those broader claims of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Anabel Roque Rodriguez (2017, para. 6) writes, “If museums, who deal with history and the contemporary, choose neutrality they choose silence and as history has shown us in

many examples: Silence means complicity with the demons of their times,” and “There should be no doubt that commemorative culture is highly political. Which narrative gets valued in our historical thinking? Who gets publicly commemorated and space to enforce that narrative?” Driven by questions like these, I have critically examined the way the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts and the Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts situate themselves within these conversations and within our community.

With the support of my supervisors and colleagues, I have worked to address the complicated history of art museums and performing arts spaces as well as work with and learn from consultants, arts professionals, and scholars in these realms to evaluate our current operations. I have researched the work of and collaborated with queer, dis/abled, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in the field in order to identify goals and document policies that will hopefully ensure equitable and anti-racist practices moving forward. I have shared these findings with my colleagues along the way and hope to use this knowledge to work toward collaboratively implementing those goals as part of a team committed to employing equitable arts practices.

All of this to say, I am a white woman who has been afforded many opportunities and undeserved privileges that got me to this place. In situating myself, I want to be upfront about the fact that I am only scratching the surface of a system deeply embedded in violent, colonial, racist, ableist, cis-gendered, and heteronormative ideologies. I am also a white woman working mostly with other white women in a predominately white institution and understand that there will be critical information I am not privy to and will miss as I’m not an expert in social justice work or museum studies, nor do I have the lived experiences of a person of color to inform this work. However, I do believe it is important to start somewhere

and to be critical within each lane you occupy which is why I attempt to bring these conversations forward in all of the work I do. I want to acknowledge that this document will have a life beyond the boundaries of its publication. The action items required to dismantle oppressive barriers will certainly grow and change as we move toward a more equitable future. This thesis is simply a documentation of the guidance of current social justice movements within the arts and my own understanding of how their demands can be incorporated into our organizational goals and operations at this time. I understand that this work and the practice of allyship is just that—a practice—and I am continually welcoming of any critical feedback.

In the chapters that follow, I will dig deeply into my relationship to Appalachia and my personal grounding within an Appalachian Studies discourse through both historical analysis, contemporary studies, and artistic interventions. Through an examination of contemporary artists and collectives working to resituate the dominant narrative of Appalachia, as well as a critical reflection of the photographically-based documentary arts that have influenced that narrative, I will articulate the importance of creating space for folks to tell their own stories in order to dismantle the pervasive portrayal of a homogenous Appalachia. You will notice, interspersed throughout the chapters within this thesis, a series of lumen prints. These alternative process photographs are an integral part of my personal practice rooted in my own sense of place and portray a deeply intentional reflection about a body of work that represents my own philosophy regarding art, Appalachia, and activism.

Throughout the paper, I will incorporate my own relationship to and reasoning for pursuing this research, as well as the shift in my own personal practice regarding the cultivation of loving community, in hopes of inspiring accountability as well as a passion for

this work. In an effort to demonstrate the ideals of approaching this arts-based social justice work in a holistic way, I will detail my own experience of working through these concepts through artmaking and connecting to my community in a meaningful way. To bolster this, I incorporate facets of bell hooks' ideologies regarding communities of care and loving ethics from *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *All About Love* (2001) alongside Shiree Teng and Sammy Nunez's (2019) thoughtful work infusing social justice with love, *Measuring Love in the Journey for Justice*. By creating a structure for self-growth and reevaluation in which we can examine our effectiveness in actualizing the goals presented in this thesis, I am hopeful that the impact of this work will extend beyond my small sphere of influence and into the careers of future artists, arts administrators, and educators working to enact change and envision possible futures within our robust Appalachian community.

Beyond this, I have separate chapters for both the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts and the Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts. In the Turchin Center's chapter, I will give a brief history of museums and visual arts centers, situating our university museum space within that history. Though I know there is extensive scholarship unpacking this history, for the purpose of this project I will reference this history in mostly general terms with contemporary examples of museums that are reckoning with their complicated pasts. I have looked the Turchin Center's past exhibitions, curatorial practices, and the racial demographics of that programming in order to gain a better understanding of our current practices. I have included a section on an exhibition I am collaboratively curating, with a working title of $\rho J \cap^{\alpha} \cup \triangleleft^c \sigma \wedge \cap \rho L \triangleleft$: *Bridge*, which utilizes an intentional selection from the substantial collection of Inuit artwork gifted to the Turchin Center by H.G. Jones. This section gives specific examples of my attempts to decolonize the curatorial process as well as

provide transparency about my limitations within that. In this section, I have also included related research, such as scholarly sources, interviews with colleagues, and suggestions from consultants and other important constituents, that details the process arts institutions should be employing to move toward more equitable practices and futures while being transparent about their pasts. Based on this research, and in collaboration with my colleagues, I have included an in-depth plan complete with policy changes, organizational goals, and action items to propel us forward.

Next, I provide a similarly brief history of performing arts centers and spaces and examine the Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts' relationship to that history. Again, I know there is a plethora of critical scholarship in this field that explores the history of performing arts centers but have employed generalized knowledge alongside contemporary events that actively engage with that problematic history for the purpose of this thesis. I have created an overview of previous showcases at the Schaefer Center, the racial demographics of performers we have presented, and other relevant information. Unlike what you will find in the Turchin Center's section, there have been fewer documented shifts in the practices of the Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts over the course of this year, likely due to the pandemic and the ways in which the booking process works that I am not privy to. Though I have less extensive historical knowledge and expertise in the field of performing arts, I have included research from scholarly sources, colleagues, consultants, and other valued perspectives to document the current discourse in the field as well as observations and new organizational goals rooted in equitable, anti-racist practice collaboratively created with my colleagues.

Because I do not approach this work alone, and because it is important to acknowledge our histories and the work and contributions that came before us, I will conduct interviews with two of the women I work with who have made significant contributions to equitable access to the arts in our community. Through these conversations, I will assert that taking the time to understand the various ways in which we, collectively, approach this work of being committed to arts access and the power of the arts to transform is crucial. Through a firm grounding in my personal artistic practice of co-facilitating creative spaces that recognize women and their significant contributions to our communities, I find it essential to hold space to honor these women and the work they have done as well as their dreams for the future. You will also find their artistic contributions within the series of lumen prints presented throughout the thesis.

Figure 1

Ironweed



Note. Made by Shauna Caldwell. The deep, interlocking roots of ironweed and the vivid purple blooms serve as a brilliant reminder of our strong foundation as part of social justice movements within Appalachia.

Chapter One: Grounding in Appalachian Studies

There is no doubt that Appalachia has been blessed with a plethora of diverse artists and creative thinkers, despite what popular media would lead people to believe. For many, Appalachia is defined using the map provided by the Appalachian Regional Commission (2021, About the Appalachian Regional Commission section, para. 1), which, according to their website, is an “economic development partnership agency of the federal government.” Naturally, the parameters of this map are dictated by certain poverty levels and various other quantifiable types of evidence where the government claims we are ‘lagging’ so they can simply throw money at the region in hopes of fixing issues that are symptomatic of the deeply embedded systemic dysfunction at the government level (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2021, About the Appalachian Region section, para. 3). However, there are a multitude of ways to define the region by way of geography, culture, and socioeconomics. I, for one, believe that Appalachia extends beyond any imaginary boundary superimposed by capitalism and the subsequent patriarchy. Though the region, according to the Appalachian Regional Commission, reaches its arms from New York all the way down into Alabama and Mississippi, its impacts are seen and felt in the lives of many folks outside of that imaginary federal border, who have moved either by choice or by societal pressures that forced them elsewhere.

While those who document and write about Appalachia and its people for popular media more often than not portray it as an uneducated, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male-centered place, the region has been home to some of the country’s most radical and creative thinkers, including Angela Davis, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Nina Simone, and more recently Clarissa Sligh, among many others. Through the Highlander Center in East

Tennessee, we have seen over eighty years of effective community organizing and radical justice programming. According to their website, “Workshops and training sessions at Highlander helped lay the groundwork for many of the [Civil Rights] movement’s most important initiatives, including the Montgomery bus boycott, the Citizenship Schools, and the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,” with the leadership of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. (Highlander Center, 2021, Our History section, para. 9). This work lives on today through their continued action and organizing for the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) (2021).

In an effort to acknowledge the many contributions of Black Appalachians and to create a greater sense of visibility for those who are so often ignored in the mainstream, stereotypical depictions of Appalachian communities, Kentucky’s own Frank X Walker (2012) coined the term “Affrilachian” to describe Appalachians of the African diaspora who live and contribute to what makes Appalachia distinctive. Inspired by this term, artist Marie Cochran united a collective of makers through the Affrilachian Artist Project, which includes folks like painter LaKeisha Blount “from Texana, a historically African American community West of Murphy, North Carolina,” visual artist and writer Victoria Casey-McDonald, who “collected and wrote about the history of the African American communities in Jackson County,” and Rahkie Mateen, who “has Cherokee connections which she explores in her paintings” (Knoepp, 2020, para. 6). Cochran, who is from Toccoa, Georgia, consistently speaks of the importance of “highlight[ing] the complex heritage of Appalachians” (Knoepp, 2020, para. 8). The group exhibits their work throughout the country to share and celebrate their stories while bringing awareness to the many ways of living and being an Appalachian. Diversifying the Appalachian experience by uplifting and

showcasing visual and performing arts from folks with a wide range of lived experiences does the work of decentering the ever-present cis het, white, male narrative.

On Documentaries, Collaborative Projects, and Photography

While all visual, written, musical, and performing arts work together to document and re-present culture, my personal expertise lies within the realm of historic and contemporary photographic art and documentary projects and how those shape ideas about the culture of a place. In order to look at contemporary documentary projects, I find it critically important to examine the sordid history of documentary film and photography as it contributes to the present discourse and current efforts to reconcile the medium.

Through the general assertion that Robert Flaherty is one of the “founding fathers” of documentary filmmaking and photography, we hoist his career and contributions onto a pedestal without acknowledging his overt and violent contributions to colonialism, imperialism, racism, and the extractive practices he employed through his filmmaking in Inukjuak, as well as the harm he caused to the Inuit community over whom he exercised his power. In Melanie McGrath’s (2007, p. ix) *The Long Exile*, we learn that Robert Flaherty took many liberties with his film, changing folks’ names, directing unrealistic scenarios, and encouraging life-threatening situations, all of which contributed to a vision that colored how Inuit people are perceived even to this day. We also learn that after creating his absurd film, “Flaherty never returned to the Arctic, but he left a son there, who grew up Inuit.” Flaherty never took responsibility for his actions. Instead, he abandoned the community that had made him famous, leaving them to be brutally and forcefully relocated by the Royal Mountain

Canadian Police, after which they were left to fend for themselves, devoid of resources and the connection to place on which they depended (Flaherty, 2011).

After being forcefully relocated by the Canadian government and after the Royal Mounted Canadian Police shot and killed her dog sled team, which was her means for hunting and survival, Rynee Flaherty, who married Josephie (Robert Flaherty's son), began creating textiles as a means to support herself and her family (*Rynee Flaherty*, 2021). Interestingly, the Turchin Center holds one of Rynee's weavings in its permanent collection, which I will discuss in further detail later on. Robert Flaherty's (1922) *Nanook of the North* is a shameful example of how to create a documentary film, and it is not entirely dissimilar from the local color writings of Appalachia, which acted, collectively, as a documentary of sorts, depicting the region and influencing the perception "outsiders" had, and still have, about the region and its people.

Another visual representation or documentation of the region that was met with a similar reception are the images produced to illustrate Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, which created a dominant narrative without the input of the people who were the subject of that narrative (Simmons & Lovins, 2014). We see the effects of that extractive, authoritarian practice through the perpetuation of stereotypes in various popular media. An example of work clearly influenced by the invasive stereotypical perception of Appalachia is that of Shelby Lee Adams, who created some of the most widely produced and highly visible images claiming to portray the Appalachian experience. While the images themselves perpetuate harmful stereotypes, the rhetoric surrounding the work is, perhaps, worse. Even Adams' publishers at Candela Books publicly claim he is documenting a vanishing culture (Stettinius, 2019). All of these projects by white men contribute to an irresponsible past

within the realm of documentary filmmaking and photography that is entirely extractive and not beneficial to the communities they are exploiting.

Due to the harmful effects of these “foundational” works, I find it necessary to unpack the use of the camera as a tool to perpetuate violence and uphold dominant structures of power as well as its use to enforce those power dynamics both physically and conceptually. In order to reconcile the use of these tools, we must engage with their historical uses. No artist has taken on this task—and successfully revolutionized the reclamation of documentary photography—better than Carrie Mae Weems. Through her project “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” she rephotographed daguerreotypes taken by Joseph Zealy, which were commissioned to support theories of eugenics, thus institutionalizing white supremacy and justifying the inhumane treatment of Black people in America (Weems, 1995). As Claire Raymond (2017) asserts in *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics*, Weems’ series “impose[s] verbal text with rephotographed images to create kaleidoscope critiques of earlier ways of seeing race” (p. 143). Radical activist and feminist scholar bell hooks (1998) writes on “Being the Subject of Art” and the implications of being bound to a narrative you did not choose:

The body is the boundary most of us are unable to move against to recover the dimensions of self lost in the process by which we are made to behold to fixed locations, by which we are bound in conformity against our will in many facets of our daily lives.... To transgress we must return to the body.... Writing about art, making art, is not the same as being the subject of art. (p. 133)

In Weems' (2021) attempt to "[give] a voice to a subject that historically has had no voice," she presents the work as intimate portraits of individuals, not subjects of a scientific study meant to support the justification of their own oppression.

As part of this critical examination of these tools used so freely to perpetuate violence, I look to Susan Sontag (1978), who writes, "Photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe...to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" and claims that the act of photographing is "putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power" (p. 1). She goes on to argue that, "There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera," even noting the rhetoric of the machine as a form of violence, such as the implications of the words "shoot" and "take" that accompany almost every photographer on their missions to document and the connections one can easily draw between a camera and a gun (Sontag, 1978, p. 4). Perhaps these arguments can partially explain the implications of the pervasiveness of the harm caused by the previously mentioned documentary film and photo projects.

Expanding on these claims, Ariela Azoulay (2014) ponders the effects of the photograph as "a field of evasive presences, loaded with details that escape consciousness and knowledge," leaving the viewer to create their own assumptions in perpetuity based on the understanding that the function the photograph will serve, indeed, "lacks any predictable end" (p. 328). All of these ideas together—implicit violence contributing to the creation of an endless bearer of subject matter left up, almost entirely, to creative interpretation, which will then work seamlessly to uphold certain ideals—create the perfect storm for white, cisgender, heteronormative, patriarchal, colonial structures to flourish, especially since those with the

most consistent access to the tools used to create documentary film and photographic work are the same who benefit from those dominant power structures. Considering the impact of this history, which is rife with less-than-savory intent and implications, one must wonder, in the spirit of “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” Audre Lorde (2019): Can the master’s tools dismantle the master’s house? If we are to attempt to contradict the very foundation of the discipline and the formulaic nature of documentary filmmaking and photography, must we not entirely decentralize the rhetoric, the techniques, and the structures they bring to bear?

The idea of co-creating starts to get at a radically different kind of documentary work—one that Winston writes about in *The Act of Documenting*, and one that is perhaps not quite “participatory,” as it still acts as a function of an unwillingness of an individual artist and/or researcher to relinquish control and authorship. Though, “[e]mpowerment involves more than teaching people how to use” the media (Winston, Vanstone, & Chi, 2017, Empowerment section, para. 3), the release of editorial control, as well as ongoing and evolving consensual collaborations through the production and dissemination of documentary work, is not always taken to heart. However, there are instances of collaborative projects and techniques being utilized that do the work of destabilizing stereotypes. The notion of ‘giving voice’ is far less exciting to me—due to the embedded context of those relational power dynamics—than that of a project working to uplift voices and expand the perception of the region by creating places where folks are given the space and resources to speak for themselves, on equal ground, in all of their vast multiplicities.

To expand on this idea of giving voice to the voiceless, another type of documentary that works to shake things up is the photovoice methodology, in which research participants document their stories/realities/experiences with photographs. Shannon Bell’s (2016)

Fighting King Coal deals specifically with folks who are impacted by the coal industry and provides a platform for them to speak back about the harm that has been done to them by corporations through image-making. Though it is credited as a photovoice project, the work is mainly written in an essay format with the first image not showing up until over one hundred pages into the publication, and all of the images are in black and white (which, given the historical significance of the ever-present black and white photographs that flood the minds of many when they are asked to recall images of Appalachia, is not necessarily doing the work of dismantling stereotypes). I believe it is significant, if not crucial, for images that showcase Appalachia in the present to be reproduced in color if that is indicative of the technology used to create them.

Some have credited Bell's project as one of the first photovoice projects within the region, but I look to Wendy Ewald's work, which began in the 1970s and was an earlier and less formal type of photovoice work. *Portraits and Dreams* is the culmination of a longer, more encompassing project facilitated by Wendy Ewald, who arrived to Letcher County, Kentucky in 1975 and found herself being called to teach photography to students in the area. Through this work as an art educator, Ewald exchanged skills, stories, and lessons that could be carried through the young photographers' lives. At a time when there were no published books of children's photography, the work the students created was quite revolutionary. The images they created are provocative and raw and show many facets of the lives, dreams, and imaginations of the young students. Perhaps because the artist and director of the image is actually a part of the scene and the experience they are depicting through these images transcend stereotypes and offer a distinct portrait of an individual exploring their own personal experience and development. Another crucial element of this work is the inclusion

of writing from the young artists. This gives a tangible voice to the work and offers yet another space where the students can contextualize their work by speaking for themselves (Ewald, 1985).

On Personal Artistic Practice and Expanding Visual Representation

Informed by all of these documentary projects, I explore my own work and practice, which attempts to decentralize the notion of the documentary from its patriarchal foundation even further. Guided by Nane Jordan's (2017) radical "placental thinking," which posits a movement from "birth practice to maternal social theory and activism," as a way to situate women at the center of their own creative process, I engage a type of collaborative making and relational design that positions me as an active co-creator with and caregiver of others while scaffolding their own process from start to finish and beyond—a kind of creative midwifery (p. 142). Utilizing scholar Amy Stenzel's (2017) assertion that "the placenta, as a literal and metaphorical site of connection, must be reconceptualized... to build healthier communities" and the reclamation of the placenta as a site of power, I approach my collaborative community work as a site of connection and collective empowerment (p. 30). Though these theories focus on women with birthing bodies, I am hopeful that this anti-patriarchal notion of reconceptualizing sites of connection, strength, and power can be extended to all women, non-binary, and trans people in our community. With this in mind, I work to create spaces where Appalachian women, non-binary, and trans individuals can be active and equal contributors to work made by us and for us—birthed into the world of and by our own design.

In a current collaborative project, *Say*, I chose to work with women who know me well and have been in my community for much longer than I have. I am constantly reflecting on those relationships and am guided by hooks' (2009) inquiries: "How do we create community? When can we say that we truly belong?" (Back matter). I find solace in her statement: "I write here about family, creating a textual album where I recall the folk who raised me, who nurtured my spirit" (hooks, 2009, p. 4). With this ongoing project, I am making photographs in tandem with my collaborators in order to support the stories *we* wish to tell. As Appalachian and women's rights social activist Helen Lewis (2007) states, I believe it is prudent to "start by telling stories, understanding the past, and sharing memories" (p. 318). With such a long history of being documented by outsiders to suit preconceived notions of what an Appalachian woman is and having that documentation extracted, exploited, and widely disseminated to others outside of the region, our *Say* project serves as a breath of fresh air in the realm of photographic image-making in Appalachia. Collectively, we have decided to embark on a bookmaking journey in which each woman will include stories, family photos, and other relevant, meaningful materials alongside a series of narrative and documentary images conceptualized and created by each woman to spark conversation around their unique experiences.

By performing this collaborative image-making process in a world that is so eager to "take" pictures and "shoot" scenarios of women and Appalachians alike for the consumption of others, I plan to shift the traditional role of "artist" and "subject" to create a space where each participant becomes an active creator of her content and, therefore, controls the destiny of her work. To do this, we are bringing everyone's stories into a physical space that is occupied and commanded by each woman through acts of "aesthetic wit(h)nessing" (Fisher

& Bickel, 2015). While there is no way for my small community to represent the experiences of all women in Appalachia, especially considering that the concept of Appalachia is far more complex than it appears at first glance, it is my hope that we will generate media that is both made by and representative of us as a very small group of Appalachian women. Informed by so many projects that do not explicitly define their intentions and process of creation, I have determined that detailed transparency is at the root of my written documentation of the work in order to offer a holistic view into what a truly radical collaborative documentary project might look like. This idea of transparency and a holistic view of “truth” reaches toward bell hooks’ (2001) assertion that “[t]he heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be” (p. 33). In an attempt to align myself with the justice work I am documenting related to my job at Appalachian State, I believe it is important to lay bare the entirety of my work as an Appalachian woman, artist, and scholar, as each thread of my life is braided together, sharing the “truth” of the way I exist and work in the world and providing a deeper understanding of the essence of this thesis and, subsequently, my time in the Appalachian Studies program.

Again, in looking toward the idea of opening space for everyone to share their stories in order to decenter the dominant narrative of Appalachia, I will share examples of contemporary photographic projects that I believe are doing just that. Often, we see collections of Appalachian photography gathered and spearheaded by cisgender, straight, white men, but I think the real collective voice of the region emerges when we recognize the breath and fullness of many photographic series working together and on equal footing to successfully tell the complex stories of the Appalachian experience. No single project can successfully speak for an entire region, but when we view and uplift the work of many from

various facets of that experience, we are able to shine a collective light on what the essence of being Appalachian might be and perhaps on the fact that it is far more complicated than most think.

For instance, Clarissa Sligh lives and creates work in Appalachia. A queer Black artist who is photographically rooted and whose work is included in hundreds of collections across the country and shown at the MoMA, the Smithsonian, and the National Museum for Women in the Arts, she is making work about her connection to the land right here in Asheville. Another queer Black woman making work in Asheville, Liz Williams creates photographic installations featuring queer activists interacting with prominent and problematic landmarks in the city. She also photographs her queer community in various stages of dreaming and visioning for new futures—a very exciting and welcome Appalachian perspective.

Peyton Fulford's (2021) honest and intimate series, "Infinite Tenderness," looks at her own queer experience and the difficulties of navigating "the space [she] was growing up in because [she] could not relate to it or understand my place within it" (Infinite Tenderness section, para. 2). Through portraits of others in her community, we are given permission to appreciate and marvel at the beauty and strength of rural queer folk—another crucial perspective. Similarly, Julie Rae Powers extends a provocative look at their own queer experience through figurative portraits that slowly wane into abstraction in their series, "Salt." Other works by Powers, "Out of Hiding" and "Once More, Gently," provide a fresh take on the Appalachian experience through portraits of queer joy, connection, and euphoria. Powers also has a series of wet plate still life portraits of miner's hardhats (perhaps from their

family members, as one hat reads “POWERS” on the side), which visualizes another facet of their Appalachian identity.

Another queer woman making work about the Appalachian experience through contemporary storytelling and mythology is Corn Wagon Thunder. In the series “Wonder,” Thunder (2021) explores “the theme of identity in relation to American cultural iconography and myth-making within the context of Appalachia” (Wonder section, para. 1). This work provides a humorous, yet exciting and totally badass vision of being a Wonder woman in the Appalachian landscape. Another of her series, “Vessel of Absence,” is a tasteful collection of self-portraits and still life images exploring loss and grief alongside classic Appalachian symbols, such as the quilt. Megan King also deals with the subject of Appalachian women in her artwork, though with more direct commentary on gender, labor, and societal expectations. In her installations “Like A Woman” and “Women’s Clothes,” King explores the tensions between what she feels is expected of her as an Appalachian woman and the reality of the life she leads in Syracuse, NY. By engaging with archival materials and spanning mediums to engage with the expansive history of fibers work, King offers a refreshing take on contemporary Appalachian womanhood.

Exploring Appalachian folklore and mythologies, Kelsey Dillow’s (2021) work, “Reality is known by its traces,” looks to her experiences in the southern Baptist church as a kind of foundation for her current witchcraft practice (Reality is known by its traces section, para. 1). Utilizing the gum bichromate process, Dillow (2021) replaces the traditional watercolor pigment with “organic materials including herbs, blood, earth, and ash” as a nod to the ritualistic nature of both spiritual spaces (Reality is known by its traces section, para. 3). This work complicates the stereotypical narrative of fundamentalist Christian experiences

in Appalachia. Also working with folkloric traditions, Bear Allison's "Booger Portraits" series cinematically presents traditional Cherokee booger masks animated in the sacred spaces where their legends take place. Another young photographer working in Cherokee is Madison Hye Long, who traverses the fields of social activism and editorial/documentary photography with ease. Long has a series of performative images protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline as well as an expansive portfolio documenting Cherokee artisans and craftspeople working with traditional practices alongside contemporary Cherokee artists utilizing new forms of artistic expression. These works assert that Indigenous experience is just as much a part of the Appalachian narrative as any other.

Recently featured in the *New York Times* and *CNN*, Rich-Joseph Facun (2021), of Indigenous Mexican and Filipino descent, works to document his "'home' in the Appalachian Foothills of southeast Ohio" (Contact + info section, para. 4). In his series, *Black Diamonds: Appalachia*, we are shown an expansive view of Facun's community through poetic landscapes and thoughtful portraits. The work, as a whole, offers quiet moments of reflection devoid of the stereotypical tropes that often define the visual narrative of our region. Unfortunately, many of the publishers who are recognizing the significance of his work, and whose best interests lie in the profitability of the stories they tell, tend to erase that immensely valuable aspect of the series by publishing only the images that play into the stereotypes that sell—those of trailers, overgrown and falling down homes, and a crying person with multiple face piercings and a tattoo of the word "Damaged" on their forehead. Though this is a common occurrence when Appalachian creatives are noticed in the media, Facun's work, in its entirety, is a beautifully significant contribution to Appalachian photography.

Another Appalachian photographer whose work complicates that ever-present dominant narrative is that of Byron Tenesaca. Tenesaca (Tenesaca) beautifully melds aspects of his Andean and Appalachian heritage through collaged images of figures interacting with the landscape in his series “Human Mounds,” as well as through his documentary work, which creates an expansive portrait of “Maria Francisca Guamán Morocho (Mami Pancha) an immigrant with rich Andean heritage who now resides in NC” (Remendando la Llachapa Vida section, para. 1). According to an excerpt about his work in the catalog for the 2019-2020 *Appalachia Now!* Exhibition at the Asheville Art Museum written by Jason Andrew (2019), “Tenesaca has rediscovered photography as an art of inclusion by digitally overlaying scanned images of found photographs that reflect his own personal dreams, memories, and experiences of growing up in the Ecuadorian Andes Mountains and in North Carolina” (p. 4). This incredibly valuable artistic contribution to Appalachian photography is certainly one to be celebrated.

Related to the notion of working with found images and archival materials to expand upon the experiences of folks who are not traditionally thought of within the popular definition of Appalachia, documentary filmmakers and photographers Marie Cochran and Raymond Thompson Jr. have made significant contributions toward that expansion. Marie Cochran’s work “Testify, Beyond Place”, as described in Andrew’s 2019 catalog, “pays homage to the 120th anniversary of the Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, whose sanctuary was demolished, graves unearthed, and building entirely relocated to make way for the expansion of the Western North Carolina University Campus” (p. 17). This acute work, alongside her founding of the Affrilachian Artists Project, is a much-needed voice in the conversations about contemporary Appalachian photography. Similarly, in his series

“Appalachian Ghosts,” Raymond Thompson Jr. employs the photographic archives of mining companies to recreate the experiences of migrant workers and recontextualize the found images, created simply as documentation of construction, as portraits of individuals outside of the colonial gaze, similar to Carrie Mae Weems’ (1995) “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried”.

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of every Appalachian photographer working to document or artistically interpret their version of the Appalachian experience. Thus, this gathering of voices portrays only a small portion of artists living and making work in and about the region and should function as the briefest of introductions to the vastness of the genre. Hopefully, though, the outline I’ve provided has made a case for the need to elevate and amplify the voices of folks who experience Appalachia in a multitude of ways as opposed to one person taking on the work of collecting and re-presenting the voices of a few as their own.

Considering Place Through Photography

Expanding upon this idea of a multi-vocal representation of the region in order to eventually approach some semblance of ‘truth’ through a full photographic understanding of place, I look to Mary Anne Redding’s (2008) essay “Imaging Place” from her and Krista Elrick’s book *Through the Lens: Creating Santa Fe*, where she writes, “Representation is an interactive process. Memory and imagination are both important components in developing a sense of place, and photography, related as a palimpsest to both, perpetuates and disseminates the meaning of place in a particular cultural landscape” (p. 46). Though this work relates directly to Santa Fe, New Mexico, we can look to their collaborative effort to

bring the voices of the entire community into the conversation about how photography creates a sense of place and belonging as inspiration for our own visual representations and understanding of Appalachia. This idea of an enmeshed and interactive understanding of place through photography is elemental and must be acknowledged as we work to complicate the narrative that so many cling to in hopes of understanding just what and who Appalachia is. Redding (2008) goes on to say:

Most of the time, we experience place unself-consciously. Existing in time and space as part of our everyday world, we pay scant attention to the tangible manifestations of place that surround us. Viewing photographs asks us to do otherwise—to focus our attention, for a moment, on what is physically manifest in the image and to consider what the scene might mean for ourselves, our cultural identities, our relationships with others, and the places we co-inhabit. (p. 45)

Considering this, the unique opportunity facilitated by the act of viewing photographs, and arguably by the act of photographing as well, allows for a rich connection to place—whether you are physically connected to that place or not. This physical disconnect is important to acknowledge, as many folks do view Appalachia from outside the geographic location, and those photographs have a significant impact on shaping the way they connect to and understand this place. With these understandings, alongside Lucy Lippard's (2008) assertion that, "'Senses of places' is a more democratic way to look at a location than a homogenized 'sense of place,'" I bring attention to the importance of plurality as we begin to collectively shape a path toward a lush and complicated visioning of infinite Appalachian futures (p. 26). By clinging to the power of photographs to "elicit empathy and imagination, create bonds of imaginative understanding between us and people we will never know, places

we will never see,” I am hopeful that my own artistic practice, as well as my role as an arts educator, will inspire others to take control of the narrative that so often precedes us and to make visible our own dynamic experiences of placemaking in the region (Sandweiss, 2002, p. 340).

Taking a step further inward, I look intently into my own practice as an artist and how my understanding of art and Appalachia has expanded and become more rooted in conceptual underpinnings directly related to certain photographic processes, namely lumen printing. The lumen printing process is deceptively simple, and while it can produce beautiful results, it is frequently overlooked by the photographic community, as it is often perceived as simply an easy, fun, introductory activity in most photography courses. While it certainly does perform this function in many spaces, I attempt to expand this pervasive narrative of the humble lumen print with my use of the process. By employing a process that is given such minimal admiration and is so often disregarded by leading photographers, I connect it to Appalachia and the way the region is often perceived in a negative light by folks who do not understand it or have a connection to it or who accept the mainstream, stereotypical view as an honest representation.

In short, the lumen process utilizes a light-sensitive substrate, usually silver gelatin paper, a subject (in my case, mostly plants), and sunlight. First, I take a piece of silver gelatin paper, place a plant on top of it, and sandwich the two inside a contact printing frame, which is essentially a very tight-fitting picture frame. Next, the frame lays in the sun for anywhere from a couple of minutes to a few days (or, occasionally, weeks if you like to push technical boundaries like I do). This process will create a brightly colored silhouette of the subject matter on the silver gelatin paper. The artists then has the option to “fix” the print, which will

remove unhardened silver from the paper and stabilize the print, stopping it from darkening and eventually fading away, but I typically do not fix the images I make, as I prefer for the transience of the piece to become entangled in its meaning. There are, of course, endless variations of this process, but I will focus on the way I utilize it.

When I first began working with this process, my mentor, Joshua White, mentioned the magic of making a lumen print of a plant with, in theory, the same sunlight that actually grew that plant. Connecting conceptually and physically to the light in a place that contributes to the ecology of the land that grew the plant that is the subject of the image of does, indeed, seem quite magical. To augment this poetic conceptualization of light, I often consider the fact that we can never truly see another person or being that we love; we can only see the light that echoes from them. All we see is light. Photography utilizes that exact same light to physically alter the chemical makeup of a substrate in order to capture that moment and the same essence of ‘seeing’ that we experience in our own bodies, making it the closest way to truly honor a being’s existence. This elemental understanding of light and the ability to imbue an artwork with the truest essence of a place captured my attention and has greatly impacted the way I approach making pictures.

In an effort to engage with Mary Anne Redding’s (2008) insistence on “tangible manifestations of place,” I attempt to saturate my work with a deep and multi-faceted sense of place (p. 45), beginning with where these images are physically created. I use the sunlight of my home, which has warmed my skin for over 25 years, to bring an essence of place into the process of documenting or, as I like to say, making portraits of the plants that grow here and hold both medicinal and folkloric significance. This produces a unique artwork that is not only a record of the time and space that I occupy but is one that connects me to my own

familial Appalachian history of working with local and native plants to nourish, remedy, and provide for one another.

By elevating the metaphorical capabilities within the ethnobotanical properties of each plant to stitch together a multi-faceted, layered story about my dreams for Appalachia, and by understanding the physical photographic process as an analog to the conceptual process of utilizing the intellectual and communal resources from within Appalachia to continue cultivating our own evolving, radical future in the arts, I employ artmaking as a form of creative visioning for the future. The prints' ongoing sensitivity to light makes them subject to change, and they are consistently evolving, shifting, and deepening in hue as new light shines on each piece—not unlike the practice of moving toward a socially just society. This work, as a whole, attempts to outline a holistic approach to thinking about art, artists, and arts spaces in Appalachia as well as their potential to harness the elements of radical Appalachia's creative force in order to amplify its provocative ability to build and sustain diverse, compassionate communities that are deeply rooted in place and connected to the Earth in a meaningful way.

Employing my philosophy of collaborative creative community, I offered the opportunity to create lumen prints to the women I interviewed as part of this project. It was my hope to create space for them to share about the work they've done over the years to extend access to the arts in our community as well as for them to conceptually transform and artistically interpret that wisdom by choosing subjects that connect them to their own inspirations and visions for the future. Each of their contributions extends their voice, both spoken and artistic, and emphasizes that this work exists beyond myself and my personal

philosophy, entwining with the work and philosophies of the many folks living and working in this incredible community.

Figure 2

Poke



Note. Made by Shauna Caldwell. Though it is simultaneously poisonous and beneficial, this plant can be utilized to support healthy circulation and to defend the body against infections when one listens to the seasons and the cycles. The brilliant magenta of its carefully harvested juice is also worth celebrating.

Chapter Two: In Loving Community

“Are we loving bravely enough? How much am I loving? What else can I do to be in community from a place of love? How am I wielding power fused with love?”

Shiree Teng & Sammy Nunez

In an effort to synthesize the work we are doing at both the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts and the Schaefer Center for Performing Arts in such a way that it can be utilized in the future to uphold accountability through reevaluation and continuous examination of our effectiveness in actualizing these goals, I propose a framework of inspiration that incorporates facets of bell hooks’ ideas regarding communities of care and loving ethics, in *Teaching to Transgress* (1998) and *All About Love* (2001), alongside Shiree Teng and Sammy Nunez’s (2019) *Measuring Love in the Journey for Justice*, which situates love as a powerful tool for moving social justice forward. I also attempt to entangle threads of my personal teaching philosophy in an effort to make visible my own approaches to this process. Together, these philosophical groundings offer a way to inspire accountability as well as a sustained passion for the work of moving toward equitable and socially just arts spaces and communities.

Building Loving Communities as an Act of Resistance

It is of note that both the Turchin Center and the Schaefer Center are situated on the campus of Appalachian State University in the small, mountain town of Boone, North Carolina. While there are often tensions that arise between the university and the

“community,” I assert that this false dichotomy is unrealistic and harmful, as are most binaries. Many of the “community” members visit, attend, and work for the university, and many faculty members, students, and staff also find themselves as active members of our community whether it is through a second job, family members who are in the public school system, or through extracurricular activities and hobbies. While it is hard for universities, like Appalachian State, to distance themselves from insider/outsider rhetoric, I do think there are many spaces where these dichotomies are combatted. The Turchin Center and the Schaefer Center, both entities of the university, act as centers to bridge this false divide. They are spaces where large gatherings of our community come together to be inspired by and collectively envision new futures through art and artmaking. By strengthening the arts programming offered by these centers, and by nourishing communities of care that center love and social justice, we can better support the bridge between this divide.

With this in mind, I look at Teng and Nunez’s (2019) critical message that posits the foundation of a loving community as a radical act of resistance:

Love is the most powerful force in the universe if we understand and learn to wield it. To authentically love yourself and others around you: that is the sign of the true revolutionary in a society that teaches us to hate ourselves; where we are bombarded with pain and shame, stripping us of our power and traumatizing us; and where, as a result, we carry this baggage into every relationship, perpetuating further injustice. (p. 5)

This declaration alongside bell hooks’ (2001) affirmation that, “To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication,” shows us that love is not a mysterious

noun shared explicitly within intimate relationships, but is a verb we must choose to activate each day if we are to truly work toward a better future (p. 5). Imagine what would happen in a community if everyone truly loved themselves and those around them, was able to be safely open about their experiences and learn from others', and was held accountable to their commitments in a tangible way. While there are many facets of this conversation, there are a few key components that are most relevant to encouraging a prolonged commitment to social justice and growth in arts organizations: creating communities of care through open and honest dialogue, collective accountability and transparency, and commitment to visioning new futures that acknowledge interconnection and collaboration.

Drawing upon my experience as an educator and my personal feminist and abolitionist teaching philosophy, I come to this work with an understanding of the intersections of identities within oppressive structures and of communicative practices that enhance learning as well as communities of care that support a critical expansion of knowledge and practices. Using Betty Chamberlain's (1979) assertion (later reiterated by Lucy Lippard) that "Art is communication" as a pedagogical foundation, I work to ensure that my teaching is rooted in healthy communicative practices and believe this similarly applies to participating in generative conversations among colleagues (p. 223). In noting the importance of employing empathetic communication methods and bell hooks' (2001) idea that, "The heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be," I highlight engaging with open and honest dialogue and "truth telling" as a principle of love as well as equity (p. 33).

Dovetailing this theory is the observation that "[f]eminist classrooms were, on the whole, one location where...professors striv[ed] to create participatory spaces for the sharing

of knowledge” (hooks, 1994, p. 15). Through hooks’ (1994) suggestion that transformative education stems from an embrace of catalytic imagining and growth, we do the work of opening up the space of learning so it can be more inclusive (pp. 21-22). In creating spaces where these imaginative dialogues can take place, I am also inspired by hook’s (1994) assertion of the importance of taking risks in conversations to, “show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding” (p. 21). While this can be difficult for some, I find that the openness and participatory nature of these kinds of discussions offers a vast and embodied understanding of community and accountability to one another. As hooks (1994) goes on to say, conversation is “one of the simplest ways we can begin... to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences” (p. 130). Willful participation generates respectful and creative environments where all can learn and grow alongside one another. This way of thinking is not dissimilar to that of hooks’ contemporary, and fellow Appalachian, Helen Lewis’s theoretical foundation of community-oriented projects as being most effective if we get folks talking and telling stories as a means of connection. Through the facilitation of conversations where we can collectively share knowledge, as well as impart our commitment to creating socially responsible arts spaces, we manifest a shared sense of dedication to working toward an equitable future.

While I situate myself within a feminist framework, I believe in the continual acknowledgment that white feminism must be critiqued and replaced with a holistic feminist comprehension that includes the perspectives and contributions of all women and centers those who are situated furthest from the dominant systems of power. As Angela Davis (1990) poignantly writes, “Art has emerged from the history of labor militancy and the struggles of

Afro-Americans, women, and peace activists. It is important that we explore that tradition [and] understand it...with the purpose of defining the role art can play in hastening social progress” (p. 199). Related to this effort toward social progress, Maxine Greene (2000) claims we must “seek out ways in which the arts...can release the imagination to open new perspectives, to identify alternatives.... To call for imaginative capacity is to work for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 18), though it is important to note Davis’s (1990) warning that “[w]e must do more than engage in such flights of imagination. All of us...must stand up, speak out, and fight for a better world” (p. 177).

Guided by this critical lens of acknowledging injustice and creating feminist conversational spaces, we can do the work of “imagin[ing] a more humane future—a future of justice, equality, and peace” (Davis, 1990, p. 172). By utilizing the arts as an impetus for transformative social justice, we as artists, arts educators, and arts administrators are direct conduits of the visioning process required to abolish injustice. As Reilly (2018) writes in her evocative call to action, *Curatorial Activism*, “All of this offers up not only hope but also new opportunities” (p. 215). I ascribe to her belief that “the decision to participate in such initiatives is, in essence, a political act” and is one I am proud to posit through the various lanes I occupy in the arts (Reilly, 2018, p. 215).

In an attempt to participate fully in these initiatives, it is essential to continually assess the power we wield in the spaces we occupy in order to understand how much of an impact we can really have. Equally as essential to this assessment is the need to be honest and transparent. Looking again to Teng and Nunez’s (2019) message, which says that “[l]ove when fused with power is like a sword, with a sharp, able blade, to get to our purpose,” we can imagine utilizing our power to contribute to a greater sense of justice within our

community (p. 6). In learning and implementing the practice of creating loving communities, as an active participant within institutions situated in positions of power, as well as engaging with the “critical analysis of our own thoughts and behaviors” to initiate positive change with that power, we can view love as a revolutionary act (Teng & Nunez, 2019, p. 10). A holistic view of love, on the basis of honesty, justice, and commitment to our community, leads us to listen deeply and engage through lenses of compassion and understanding. These institutionally embodied ways of loving as a community practice that supports the organization and development of future leaders in the field and “spread[s] vision and hope” in order to “fight for material change” are a monumental step toward justice (Teng & Nunez, 2019, p. 10). This multifaceted way of creating communities of care allows us, collectively, to “own and materialize our power,” share power with others, and “build power for collective liberation. By infusing our work in the social justice movement with love, we give it value. We reclaim the act of loving as an antidote to colonization and structural racism” (Teng & Nunez, 2019, p. 18). Re-emphasizing the importance of creating a strong foundation of love and empathy, situated in our interconnectedness, in order to achieve just communities, I find solace in Teng and Nunez’s (2019) assurance that “Love permeates in all directions, is decentralized, and—even when it’s underground and can’t be quantified—is always a channel for connection,” and acts as “an antidote to systems and institutions that rely on disconnection” (p. 3). Recognizing and appreciating this connection and understanding our interconnections contribute to anti-hierarchical ways of being and making decisions that allow individuals to feel empowered by their own visions of the future and how they might lend themselves to those visions is essential in moving forward toward justice. These ways of working together and equally incorporating the expertise and experiences that each person

brings to the table, alongside a shared passion for accessible art that is representative of everyone in our communities, is what it is going to take to sustain this lifelong effort.

Maintaining Accountability

From a practical standpoint, emphasizing transparency, I also want to bring attention to the MASS Action toolkit, a project facilitated by the Minneapolis Institute of Art (2020) and created by “a network of people, individuals committed to seeing the museum field change, connecting in solidarity, recognizing there is strength in numbers. That, like fractals, if we all individually commit to do our part on a small scale, we will start to see change on a large scale” (p. 7). Composed by a diverse group of museum curators, educators, scholars, and organizers, this 230-page document holds an incredible amount of useful information to help organizations “toward internal transformation” with deep dives into topics such as “awareness, acceptance, action, inclusive leadership, sharing authority, and change-making through pedagogy” (Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2020, pp. 1-17). The toolkit also offers an extensive series of worksheets and reading guides to stimulate conversations and guide arts organizations through change. Centering institutional identity and relationships, both internal and external, through factors such as “civic vision,” “institutional body language,” and “community resonance,” the toolkit emphasizes the importance of understanding arts centers’ roles in their community as well as how they can evaluate their offerings and improve their capacity to “be in touch with and responsive to [their] community” (Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2020). Because this toolkit was created by folks who are far more qualified than I am to guide this work, I recommend consulting this resource directly as an aid to measure progress and maintain accountability to the goals we have established.

In continuing to echo the words of Shiree Teng and Sammy Nunez (2019), “This is not a formal...finished product of the traditional type. It comes from the heart and is meant to be used—like love. It is meant to spark dialogue and provoke” (p. 2). If we are to truly move toward a future where everyone’s voice is at the table, is heard, and where they are able to see themselves in the artistic representations of the Appalachian experience, a sense of loving community is crucial. Recognizing that disconnected communities are directly related to dominant systems of power that fragment and alienate folks in order to more efficiently assert themselves, bell hooks (2001) combats these structures by stating, “There is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community” (p. 129). Through creating space for open dialogue and creative exploration of ideas, while honoring the hard work that has been done by those before and around us, I hope that we will continue cultivating a connection to one another and to the place we live with each day in a way that allows for generative and radical change. By embedding the understanding of a loving community as a revolutionary space into the fabric of the organization, we allow for exponential growth toward a just community steeped in and transformed by the arts. By consistently utilizing the ideologies of bell hooks, I exemplify a commitment to Black feminist and Appalachian place-based ways of being in community.

Thinking back into the metaphors inherently present in the use of light in the photographic medium I’ve employed throughout this project, I adore the notion that “Love cracks us open. Cracks are how the light gets in” (Teng & Nunez, 2019, p. 3). If we are to truly honor and see the light in the work we do and allow new sources of light to pierce and inform us, we must approach it from a place of trust and loving community. By separating and fragmenting our relationships to others and the work we do, we reinforce colonial

structures, and we must work to combat such vicious dominance. Dominant structures operate by valuing only what can be seen and quantified; thus, we must ask, “How many ways can we perceive the value in our world beyond seeing?” (Teng & Nunez, 2019, p. 3). I wonder if the connection between physically seeing—embodying the notion that light brings new ways of knowing—and the revolutionary creation of loving communities through open dialogue and honest conversations might be fertile ground for decentering and rebuilding collaborative, equitable structures of arts-based communities? By learning to approach our work, be it artistic or administrative, with intention upheld by a holistic, anti-racist, equitable, loving, and feminist framework, we can come to organizationally appreciate the vast multiplicities that exist in our communities and provide programming that supports and uplifts them. In the captivating words of adrienne maree brown (2019), “Let us love each other into the light” (para. 10).

Figure 3

Wild rose



Note. Made by Shauna Caldwell. Loving community personified, the good-for-your-heart wild rose is excellent at sharing space with others and setting healthy boundaries for itself.

Chapter Three: Turchin Center for the Visual Arts

To further demonstrate my holistic approach to my research and practice, I turn to the arts spaces I occupy and work within, first looking at The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts. In order to illustrate The Turchin Center's commitment to equitably serving our community and fostering critical dialogue, I will show how these goals are woven throughout our public-facing materials. After highlighting some of the materials that inform our programming, I will look at how we live up to those goals and identify areas for improvement. The Turchin Center is a contemporary visual arts center on the campus of Appalachian State University. Founded in 2003 and "named for university benefactors Robert and Lillian Turchin... The [Turchin Center] became the largest visual arts center in Northwestern North Carolina, Eastern Tennessee, and Southwest Virginia" (Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, 2021, n.p.). According to the Turchin Center's (2021) website:

Now more than ever, the challenges of the future will require great minds; and that means thinking creatively as well as critically. The Turchin Center is a dynamic, living, breathing presence in the Appalachian Community... Building upon its early successes, the Center is poised to move forward in making a difference within the campus and community through the visual arts... Since opening in 2003, the Center has built upon Appalachian's longstanding belief that access and interaction with great arts programming is an important part of a great university education. This is supported by the belief that sharing these opportunities with residents and visitors is important service to the cultural, educational, economic, and healthful life of our community and region (History section, para. 3)

The Turchin Center features six gallery spaces, a flex gallery space, a new media gallery, a lecture hall, and an education wing where visual education workshops and university classes take place. In regards to programming:

The Center's exhibits focus on contemporary art and feature work by nationally and internationally renowned artists, as well as many of the finest artists of the region.

The center presents a challenging and exciting schedule of year-round exhibitions, providing a diverse look at the visual arts... A focus on arts education contextualizes exhibition programs through study guides, which are available for each featured exhibition. Lectures by exhibiting artists are scheduled throughout the year, and tours for university students, students in grades K-12, and community groups are scheduled upon request. The center's dynamic outreach programs encompass workshops in art forms such as painting, drawing, photography, mixed media, and collage, among other areas—and are offered for participants of all ages and skill levels. Outreach activities designed to engage underserved groups are offered at the center, and a colorful outreach van travels to all areas across the region, bringing visual arts activities to schools, libraries, community centers, and public parks. Rather than a 'marble-floored museum' devoted solely to the viewing of art, the Turchin Center is a living, breathing presence in the community, creating opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to directly participate in the visual arts. (Access to Arts section, para. 1)

According to the Turchin Center's (2021) vision statement, also on our website, the center "will continue to be an engaging and accessible resource responding to diverse educational, social and cultural needs of individuals and communities, and by providing them

with opportunities to access the power of the arts to help learn, grow, flourish, and be inspired” (Vision section, para. 1). Following this are the Turchin Center’s (2021) “core beliefs” as stated on our website:

- Interaction with the arts enriches participants’ lives through experiences that are both educational & therapeutic, and encourages recognition of the personal and societal importance of the arts.
- The arts play vital roles in the development of creative and critical potential, and in experiencing, interpreting, understanding, recording and shaping culture.
- The arts have important educational, cultural, health and economic roles in communities.
- The center should be accessible to the community and offer opportunities to personally discover and engage in the arts in ways that empower ownership.
- The center is stronger by building partnerships within the university and with key local education, social service, and economic agencies.
- The center’s programs should reflect global diversity.
- The center’s unique model of campus and community interaction leads to a program that enhances the regional, national and international reputation of Appalachian State University. (Core beliefs section, para. 1)

On the Complicated History of Visual Art Museums

While the Turchin Center’s (2020) mission centers access to contemporary artwork that invites patrons/community members to “expand their perspectives through creative and critical thinking,” among many other progressive aims, it is important to understand the

history of visual arts centers and to engage critically with our own past in order to continue moving forward toward a more equitable future (Mission section para. 1). Museum spaces, including arts centers, have a deeply rooted history in the oppressive systems of colonialism, racism, capitalism, and the patriarchal/heteronormative framework upon which many Western countries are founded. This can be seen through the origins of museums as curiosity cabinets of the hyper-wealthy, who often stole artifacts to engorge their collections as an extension of their own personal and familial power. This aggressive desire to discover, pillage, and exert authority over others, often folks of color and other marginalized groups, is the very basis of the institutional museum structure that the Turchin Center operates within. Outside of Indigenous reservations and sovereign nations, all museums in the United States are founded, built, and accessed on stolen, unceded Indigenous land. This institutional realization, among others, is crucial in prioritizing the call for decolonial practices.

In her essay, “Museums Could be Powerful, Liberatory Spaces if They Let Go of Their Colonial Practices,” Jamara Wakefield (2019) writes,

Every time I visit a curated space, I am reminded that museums are not currently designed as safe spaces for me. I want to let my guard down and enjoy art for art-sake. I am envious of those with the privilege to do so. As for me every exhibit and interaction all feels political to my brown body. My adult discomfort in public art spaces is a razor-sharp reminder that there is more liberation work to be done in the art world. (para. 3)

This statement about Wakefield’s experiences in museum spaces exemplifies the ongoing blatant colonial residue informing almost every curatorial and organizational decision within an art museum. While privileged folks making those decisions and walking

into those “curated space[s]” do not necessarily have to take the time to unpack the political undercurrents inherent in an artwork, Wakefield’s explanation reveals the embodied discomfort that inhibits, or at least presents a significant barrier to, meaningful connection to “art for art-sake.” Her call to action for liberation within the art world does not necessarily provide ideas for how to make artwork that is steeped in disregard for the pain it may cause to folks accessing it from a different point of view more digestible. Rather, it encourages a decentering of colonial, white, heteronormative ways of seeing and presenting art. She goes on to ask the following provocative question: “What would a world look like where our art and culture institutions are our greatest liberation movement allies because they model decolonial practices?” (Wakefield, 2019, para. 9).

As an extension of this thought, Wakefield (2019) claims that arts institutions “have the physical space, the means, and the public confidence to partake in a large-scale social movement against colonial powers” (para. 12). In her writings, she muses about the impact of a hypothetical museum that refused “donations from individuals, families or businesses with ties to crimes of humanity and systemic oppression,” “abandoned tokenism,” “rejected neoliberalism,” “curated histories that debunked the mythologies Western culture religiously clings to,” and “did not believe their silence protects them” (Wakefield, 2019, para.11). The acceptance of each dimension of this vision for decolonizing arts institutions is critical in determining whether or not an institution is comfortable being complicit with both historical and contemporary problematic behaviors.

A Look at Ourselves

As an arts educator who is deeply committed to working toward ensuring equal access to arts resources for all, I cannot, in good faith, find comfort in being complicit in these behaviors. When I began considering this thesis, I found myself asking these questions of the Turchin Center (and of the Schaefer Center):

- + What do we need to be thinking about, and how can we spend time really reflecting as we embark on this journey?
- + What does our organization *look* like?
- + How do we operate?
- + What systems do we benefit from, and how can we be transparent about that?
- + Are we willing to engage with how we exist within a colonial, imperialist, white supremacist, and patriarchal institution and benefit from each of those forces daily?
- + Why have we only implemented land acknowledgments in the presence of Indigenous folks (whose stolen land we are on)?
- + We take money from racist organizations... What does that mean for us? How do we address that? Are we willing to publish and engage with that information?
- + Are we willing to address relationships with BIPOC artists in our collection, and are we prepared to enact repatriation / reparations for communities we have benefitted from?
- + Are we willing to move beyond performative solidarity and optic allyship to create and enact policies that structurally prevent the oppression of BIPOC voices and creativity and make sure that our values and mission align with our actions?

Ultimately, what are we willing to change? Are we willing to accept criticism and implement solutions from the guidance of BIPOC folks?

- + Are we willing to continue to have these hard conversations, followed by actions, knowing that we will mess up and that we will have to revisit and continuously transform our practice?
- + If we are not willing to do these things, are we aware that our own silence, comfort, and complacency inflicts violence? Are we okay with that?

During the summer of 2020, I brought these questions to my colleagues as part of a collective process of reflection and evaluation of the work we do and how we can improve our practices and better serve our community. Though I was nervous to speak up in this capacity, as I had not done so before in a professional setting, I was deeply encouraged by the reception of these questions and by the effort we were willing to put into learning and un-learning our own systemic biases and considering how those affect our daily operations and overall programming.

Learning from the guidance of scholars and artists involved in #ForTheCulture's "Open Letter to New York City's Cultural Institutions," North Carolina Black Artists for Liberation, and Museums as Sites for Social Action, we found there was a lot of room to grow, to learn, and to address some of these issues within our own organization. We each attended webinars offered by the Southeastern Museums Conference, South Arts, Association of Performing Arts Professionals, Arts Midwest, International Performing Arts for Youth, North Carolina Museums Council, Asheville Art Museum's "Diversity in Small/Midsize Museums" symposium, and more. By doing so, we learned how important it would be to touch base with

our community members who are from marginalized communities and are already actively engaging with our programming in various ways to get a better understanding of how we currently serve those folks and how we might do better.

Taking points from organizations such as Museums & Race: Transformation and Justice, The Inluseum, and American Alliance of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums, we asked ourselves these critical questions like: What policy changes will directly impact the museum experience? How often do we engage in conversation or action around race, diversity, inclusion, or representation? While many of our exhibitions address social justice issues and create spaces where conversations can be safely and openly explored, there is a lot of room to grow in sustaining those conversations and truly incorporating them into the operations of the organization. Hinging on the fact that "Museums do not just describe or collect cultural knowledge; they create it," it is safe to say that it is paramount to ensure that the creation and dissemination of cultural knowledge is inclusive of diverse experiences and perspectives (Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2020, p. 12). In sitting with this knowledge and the insistence that "[m]useums are not neutral" (Autry, 2017), I find myself considering the ways in which the Turchin Center situates itself within this framework.

We embarked on a series of required readings and trainings that included, but were not limited to, the following: the "Whiteness at Work" training module created by The Adaway Group; a resource list centered on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion created by the American Alliance of Museums; "Activating Diversity and Inclusion: A Blueprint for Museum Educators as Allies and Changemakers" published in the *Journal of Museum Education*; and a deep dive into the Change the Museum Instagram account. Then, we

engaged in weekly self-reflective conversations that led us to further develop a plan for tackling our anti-racism policy and practice, as outlined below:

Anti-Racism Policy and Practice: *Starting the Conversation* – Fall, 2020

STEP ONE: *Reading, listening, learning, and thinking*

- 1) Whiteness at Work - one hour training module:

<https://adawaygroup.com/rework-recording/>

- 2) American Alliance of Museums (AAM) Resource List:

<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/resource-library/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion-resources/>

- 3) Ng, W., Ware, S. M. & Greenberg, A. (2017) Activating Diversity and Inclusion: A Blueprint for Museum Educators as Allies and Change Makers, *Journal of Museum Education*, (42):2, 142-154, DOI: 10.1080/10598650.2017.1306664

- 4) Anti-Racism Working Folder developed by Shauna (on Google Drive)

- 5) Change the Museum Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/changethemuseum/>

- 6) For those who registered:

Southeastern Museums Conference:

Sessions on Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion (Sept. 8-9)

STEP TWO: *Honest evaluation and analysis of our organization*

- 1) Who comprises our staff and board?
- 2) Are our visitors, supporters, and stakeholders diverse?
- 3) Have our artists, up to this point, been culturally diverse?
- 4) What current practices are moving us in a positive direction and contributing to anti-racist operating practices?
- 5) What current practices perpetuate a racist/colonial perspective and need to be challenged?

STEP THREE: *Setting short and long-term goals*

- 1) What is our ultimate vision for the future?
- 2) What can we do in the short term that is real and genuine and that sets us on this path?

- 3) What are the long-term goals that need to be part of our strategic vision moving forward?

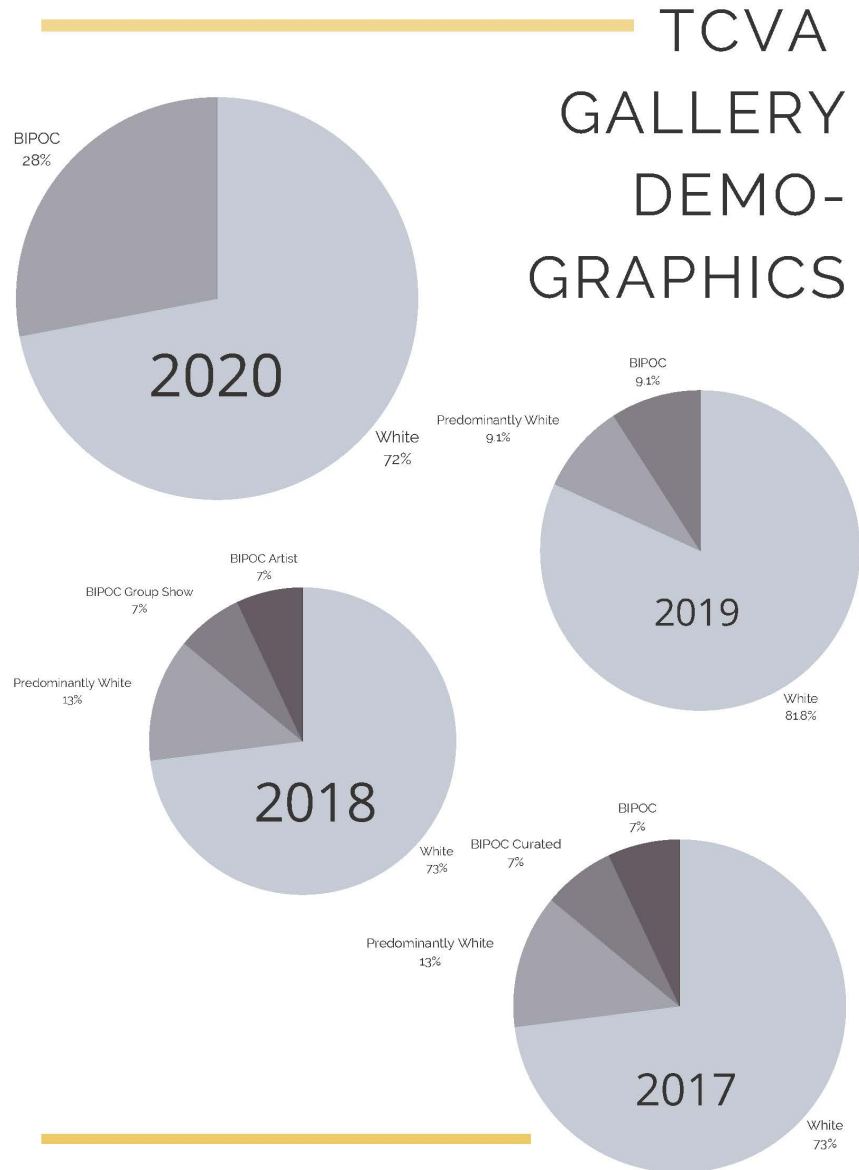
STEP FOUR: *Action plan*

- 1) What is the action plan that will operationalize the goals above?
- 2) Can we identify BIPOC partners/allies with whom we have a current relationship and ask for their assistance?
- 3) What is the timeline associated with each part of this plan?
- 4) Who on our staff will be responsible for implementing the various parts of this plan?
- 5) What structures will be in place to ensure accountability and follow-through with this effort?

In an effort to honestly evaluate and understand our exhibition demographics, I created graphs to visualize the last four years of exhibition programming at the Turchin Center. I broke the data into groups that acknowledged both solo exhibitions by BIPOC artists as well as group exhibitions that included or were curated by BIPOC artists. In doing this, I found that the majority of BIPOC artists were not given solo exhibitions and were most often part of predominately white group shows.

Figure 4

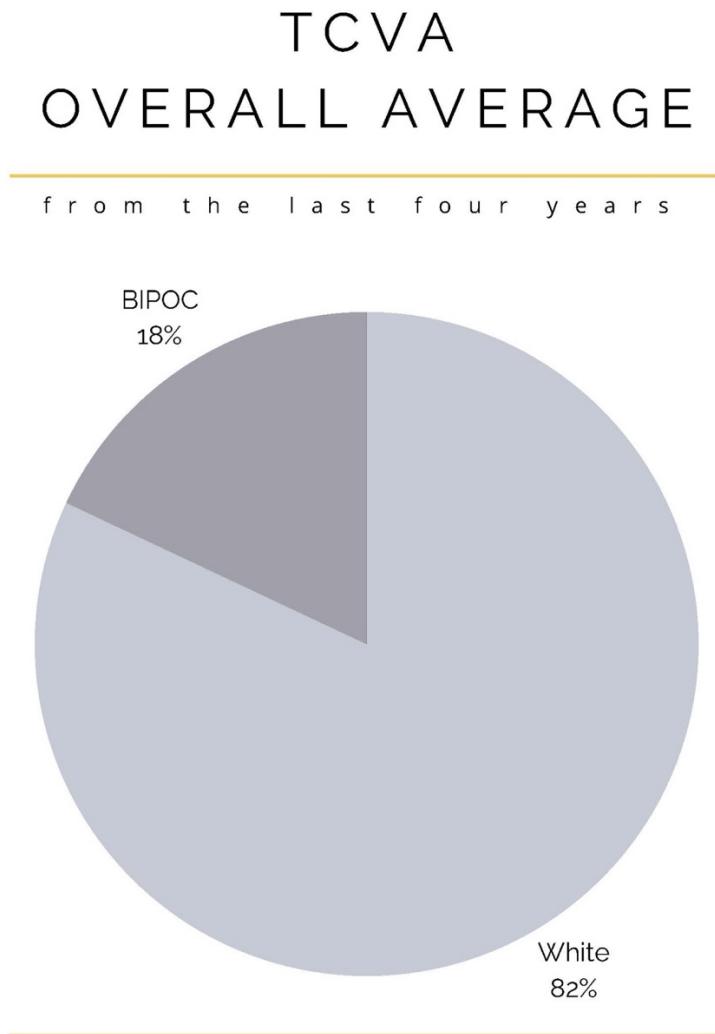
TCVA Gallery Demographics



Note. Pie charts depicting the demographics of exhibiting artists at the Turchin Center from 2017-2020, differentiating between solo exhibitions and group shows featuring BIPOC artists' work, shows curated by BIPOC curators, and exhibitions of predominately white artists' work

Figure 5

TCVA Overall Average from the Last Four Years



Note. Pie chart depicting overall average of the demographics of exhibiting artists at the Turchin Center from 2017-2020. In this chart, exhibitions by predominately white artists’ work have been included in the “white” demographic category, and solo exhibitions and group shows featuring BIPOC artists’ work, as well as shows curated by BIPOC curators, have all been included in the “BIPOC” category.

As we continued our research and worked through finding answers to these questions, we identified folks in our community and on our board who were willing to share their experiences with us. In “Activating Diversity and Inclusion: A Blueprint for Museum Educators as Allies and Changemakers,” the authors insist that “a museum’s ability to understand and share the feelings of its communities helps to develop a deeper, more profound purpose to the work of museums,” a sentiment that greatly informs the way we are approaching this work (Ng, Ware, & Greenberg, 2017, para. 6). We found that if we are to move toward a more radically equitable museum practice, we must be active listeners, engage in deep self-reflection, and continue to educate ourselves on these issues and the contemporary dialogue surrounding them.

After internally situating our intent, we connected with those community members, board members, and other colleagues who were willing to engage with us in this capacity. Taking direction from them and supplementing the knowledge they shared with ongoing research about best practices in the field, we collaboratively developed a list of anti-racist policies, practices, and goals for the year ahead as well as ways we can continue to assess our operations moving forward. These goals are accompanied by descriptive action plans that address how we plan to work toward them:

1. Mission and values: Revisit these statements and update them with language reflecting our goals and aspirations for the future, as these are related to anti-racism work. According to one of our board members, who is a woman of color: *Visibility of this mission is a critical component in sending a strong message to the BIPOC “public” that the TCVA is a welcoming and inclusive environment.*

NEXT STEPS:

- To revise mission and values statement additions.
- To identify plans for marketing and communicating these changes.
- To find opportunities for communicating mission, values, etc. via articles and other press opportunities.
- Incorporate into e-blasts, as the target audience for those messages are our closest stakeholders. Commit to multiple ways of communicating this information!
- Remind ourselves of this information to keep us grounded and focused on the big picture.
- Think about a visible spot in our building to post the statement (with a land acknowledgment as well). Possible locations: Moskowitz Gallery, front vestibule?) Possible monitor with this information and other background on TCVA.
- Mission statement link to Instagram (and other social media?)

2. Guiding principle: Avoid becoming complacent and assuming we are “there” simply because we are talking about these issues. Important to recognize that we have much work to do and that it is a complex process.

3. Guiding principle: Adopt a long-term perspective, based on advice by several of the leaders in this field—that this is a marathon, not a sprint. Avoid knee-jerk reactions and short-term solutions in favor of a long-term, authentic, and well-thought-out approach to

change.

4. Seek out allies and ask for their advice across a broad range of issues. In these conversations, share our goals and ask for their thoughts, along with this more general question: *Given their current and former relationships with the TCVA, are there changes we can adopt that would make BIPOC staff, board members, artists, or visitors more welcome and comfortable while fostering increased engagement with the TCVA?*

5. Take steps to change the composition of our staff and board:

- Staffing: For openings among permanent staff, non-student temp positions, and student positions: adopt changes to our hiring procedures to ensure that we are attracting a more diverse applicant pool for open positions (using networks and communication strategies that will lead us to these candidates).

NEXT STEPS: TCVA commits to adopting these approaches for future position searches.

- A previous staff member and close TCVA friend offered to assist us in getting the word out to WSSU faculty and contacts in the Triad region regarding future positions at the TCVA.
- Our Director of Visitors Services will reach out to Student Clubs and to Student Employment for ideas about seeking more diverse candidates for Gallery Ambassador positions in the future.

- A board member suggested that we include the faculty and staff in this process; they will be great allies for us.
 - Education and Outreach Team commits to reaching out to faculty and targeted clubs with an interest in arts education to share possible roles in leading workshops and educational activities, allowing for longer advance time to conduct this outreach.
 - We will not rely solely on “internal networks,” which tend to be more homogenous.
 - Approach faculty collaborators to help identify potential candidates for positions. Let our student staff know that we are seeking a diverse candidate pool.
- Board Membership: Begin working with our existing network to identify board candidates who represent the relationships we enjoy, on campus or in the community, to ensure that these connections are meaningful and authentic.

NEXT STEPS:

- We will work to identify other potential board members as we widen our base of contacts and expand our reach into the BIPOC community over the coming year.

6. Indigenous exhibitions: Promote learning and understanding about how colonialism informs and affects curatorial practice and collecting; delve into the cultures and stories of

Indigenous communities, providing accurate contextualization for exhibitions. Commit to offering land acknowledgments at all public events.

NEXT STEPS:

- Commit to incorporating land acknowledgments into public events presented by the TCVA. Find new ways to communicate this information via our website and other avenues. Make sure our staff is comfortable doing these in a real and genuine way. Invite our workshop leaders to participate as well.
- Create equitable gallery space for Indigenous work; actively program exhibitions of Indigenous collections, and think consciously about where we exhibit this work (e.g., Have we relegated it to smaller, less visible spaces?).
- Use these exhibitions as opportunities to raise awareness about the ways in which Indigenous work has been part of a broader system of “colonizing culture” by museums and galleries.
- Provide proper documentation of Indigenous work/provenance.
- Establish and maintain relationships with Indigenous artists whose work we are presenting.
- Exhibition vs. “showcase”

7. Review history of exhibitions featuring BIPOC artists, using this information to re-connect with those artists to learn more about their recent work, ask for their thoughts on future exhibitions, and seek their assistance in connecting with other artists.

NEXT STEPS:

- The Curatorial Team is looking back to previous exhibitions with an eye toward re-connecting with the BIPOC artists we've featured in the past, and learning about the work they're doing now, as well as their ideas about other artists they feel we should contact.

8. Develop an artist submission process that results in an increased number of proposals from BIPOC artists by re-examining the way in which we seek and promote submissions.

NEXT STEPS:

- The Curatorial Team is currently engaged in re-working the artist submission packet to reflect our interest in featuring work by BIPOC artists. They will seek outlets for proactively sharing this information, rather than assuming a more passive approach and waiting for the artists to "find us."
- At the conclusion of exhibitions, we will send a packet to artists with information about their show (numbers, press coverage, etc.) while asking them for ideas about other artists we can engage.

9. Develop a list of BIPOC artists and exhibitions, building on the list we have begun to assemble, while making additions to the list based on staff research and input and artists identified by BIPOC artists familiar with the TCVA (from #8, above).

NEXT STEPS:

- The list we have developed with almost 100 BIPOC artists is a wonderful start to this effort.
- A previous employee and close friend of the TCVA suggested two names: Endia Beale, Kevin Cole
- Suggestion from board member: Reach out to BIPOC allies on campus (faculty/staff) for their thoughts and input. They will be a tremendous source of ideas and support.

10. Develop specific exhibition plans and timelines, based on #9 above. Questions to be answered: *What are our specific goals for this area? Do we wish to set a percentage target related to how many BIPOC artists we exhibit? Does it make sense to present a “star artist” from the BIPOC community?* Important consideration here: avoid “labeling” BIPOC artists by assuming their work will focus on race rather than the same range of topics and themes explored by white artists.

NEXT STEPS:

- Comment from board member: Continue doing what we have always done: Use our exhibitions by BIPOC artists to truly engage campus and community in the exhibition themes. This will encourage continued dialogue about issues of race and social justice.

11. Building on our exhibition plans and goals, how can we incorporate anti-racism practice into the education and outreach activities we present in connection with BIPOC exhibitions?

NEXT STEPS:

- See above for ideas about hiring students to plan and facilitate arts education work.
- When creating education materials, use examples to illustrate points that are based on a diversity of BIPOC voices.
- Look into providing a Spanish translation of materials.
- Market materials toward BIPOC students and cast a wider net when reaching out to students about workshops. International students are a great audience for these programs already. Expand this reach by sharing opportunities with student clubs, etc.

12. Marketing and communication: How can we effectively reach diverse populations? What are the communication networks in the BIPOC community that we may not be aware of? How do we familiarize ourselves with those networks and begin using them to share information about the TCVA?

While we are continuing to work through these goals, I consistently create space to reflect on how they could be expanded or improved upon. Though these goals focus on the critically important task of creating a museum that better serves Black, Indigenous, and

People of Color in our community, greater care could be taken to ensure that we are addressing the intersectionality of marginalized identities, including those of disabled, queer, trans, and low-income folks. On the whole, though, we have made great strides by incorporating these new understandings and ways of thinking critically into the way we approach our daily operations and programming.

As a non-profit, everything we do revolves around our mission statement, so it is important that these values are reflected at the true base of our organization in order for all operations to revolve around a central goal. In October 2020, we updated our mission statement to include our commitment to equitable arts practices and generative dialogue around social justice issues. Our previous mission statement was as follows:

The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts at Appalachian State University engages visitors from the university, community, nation and beyond in creating unique experiences through dynamic and accessible exhibition, education, outreach and collection programs. These programs inspire and support a lifelong engagement with the visual arts and create opportunities for participants to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

With careful consideration, we updated our mission statement to the following:

The Turchin Center engages visitors from the university, community, nation and beyond in unique and meaningful experiences with the visual arts, by offering a wide array of dynamic and accessible exhibition, education, outreach and collection programs. These programs support the university's teaching mission, inspire lifelong engagement with the visual arts, and create opportunities for participants to learn more about themselves and the world around them. The center is committed to

building a diverse and inclusive community of arts supporters, while presenting exhibition and education programming that fosters dialogue around important issues facing today's world, including social, racial and economic justice.

We have also followed through on our commitment to implement land acknowledgments at our public events and are working toward creating signage that is visible to patrons as they enter our space. An example of the language I utilize when opening a Turchin Center event is as follows (noting that each staff member has committed to finding their own ways to give a land acknowledgment):

Before we get started, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that I am tuning in from the traditional territory of the Cherokee people, currently known as Boone, NC. It is important for me to note that the Turchin Center, along with every other arts center and museum in the United States that is not on a reservation or within an Indigenous sovereign nation, is on stolen land. I want to honor and stand in solidarity with the Cherokee people who still exist and are a valuable part of our community and are the traditional caretakers of this land. It is critical to be aware of where we are and consistently be reminded of the story, or the history, of the land we're on. The end goal of land acknowledgment initiatives is to get land back to those folks it was taken from, making this a lifelong commitment to continuing this conversation, asking questions, and standing up with Indigenous communities. A few organizations to look to for more information about this are Seeding Sovereignty, The Native Governance Center, and Native Land.

While the above land acknowledgment is a statement that I have crafted to say at the beginning of ARTtalks and other educational programming we do, the following is potential language we came up with to use for our website and signage as folks enter the building:

The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts acknowledges that we exist and operate on traditional Cherokee territory, which is currently known as Boone, NC. We pay tribute to and stand in solidarity with the Cherokee people who are a valuable part of our community. In an effort to continuously recognize the history of the land we're on and the important cultural and artistic contributions of the Cherokee people, we are committed to continuing this conversation by asking questions, promoting learning and awareness, and demonstrating our support for Indigenous communities.

On the Curatorial Experience and Decolonizing Museum Practices

As another facet of this work that is connected to our goal related to Indigenous exhibitions, I was asked to guest curate an exhibition from our collection of Inuit artwork within our Permanent Collection. In this curatorial process, I found myself actively attempting to center anti-racist and decolonial museum practices. Being acutely aware of my incompetence as a white woman who has no previous ties to the Inuit community, I immediately started looking at options to expand ownership of this endeavor. Knowing that Indigenous cultures are not interchangeable and that our disconnect from the Inuit community creates a massive hurdle to overcome, we needed to approach this barrier gently by deepening our own understanding of the context of the artwork we have in the collection as well as of the history, acquisition, and provenance of the work. My dear friend and colleague, Raven Moffett, (2021) has worked with this collection in the past, embodies

Indigenous ways of knowing “as a third culture, biracial and diasporic ᐱᐣᐣᐣ/ white queer artist,” and is currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts with a critical focus on Indigenous Museum Studies (About section, para. 1). As she has worked for the Turchin Center before and is familiar with this collection of work, I immediately advocated to bring her on as a paid co-curator. Raven has been instrumental in facilitating the research behind this exhibition and in contextualizing and uncovering the provenance of many of the works in the collection.

So far, we have spent close to a year researching the history of the collection as a whole, as well as the contextual history of Inuit artwork in Canada, and have done a deep dive into the lives of several artists whose work is in our care. While there are well over 200 pieces in the collection, we decided to focus on a smaller number of artists who live(d) and work(ed) in Nunavut in an attempt to spend more time learning about their lives as individuals to be able to better understand and exhibit their work in a holistic way.

For instance, as mentioned previously, one of the artists whose work is in the collection is Rynee Flaherty. The work is a gorgeous woven belt purchased by H.G. Jones on a trip to Grise Fiord in 1992. As we know, Rynee is the daughter-in-law of Robert Flaherty, who so destructively benefitted from the Inuit community with his documentary film extraction. The Qikiqtani Inuit Association is an Inuit-sponsored and Inuit-led initiative that conducted interviews with Rynee and her daughters in which they shared their stories about their relocation and the hardships placed upon them by the Canadian government. Rynee and her husband, Josephie, Robert Flaherty’s son, were forcefully relocated from Inukjuak to Grise Ford by the Canadian government in 1955. Once in Grise Ford, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police shot and killed their dog sled team, leaving them no means for hunting or survival other than on foot in a strange place where they were unfamiliar with the land. After

Rynee’s husband passed, she learned to weave textiles to support herself and her young children—until they were stolen from her and forced into residential schools (Qikiqtani Inuit Association, 2010, n.p.). This is just one of the many difficult truths of many of the artists represented in the collection at the Turchin Center and in collections at many institutions across the globe. While it is easy to marvel at the beautiful textiles Rynee created, it is just as important to understand why she was forced to make that work and to make sure her voice is heard as much as her work is appreciated.

Through our research, we have learned about Inuit curators and scholars who are engaging with these topics and finding equitable ways to exhibit Inuit artwork and share stories that expand diverse narratives about the Inuit experience and that create space for artists to create innovative, contemporary works outside of what might be considered traditional. I find inspiration in the Winnipeg Art Gallery’s recent initiatives regarding a new wing of their institution dedicated solely to Inuit art. The wing is named *Qaumajuq*, meaning “it is bright, it is lit” in Inuktitut as a reference to the architectural design of the space, which features large skylights and an open design (*Qaumajuq*, 2021, Indigenous Naming section, para. 1). In planning for and opening this new center, the Winnipeg Art Gallery is directly and transparently engaging with the institution’s colonial history and placing Inuit voices at the forefront of the conversation and decision-making processes. One of those leading voices is Heather Igloliorte, an Inuk curator who, alongside Krista Ulujuk Zawadski, Kablusiak, and Asinnajaq, put together an exhibition for the opening of this new space entitled *INUA*, meaning “life” or “spirit” that “is also an acronym for Inuit Nunangat Ungammuaqtut Atautikkut (Inuit Moving Forward Together)” (Michelin, 2021, para. 3). According to an article from *Canadian Art* that suggests that this exhibition may be the most openly queer

Inuit art exhibition in history, the curators “looked for forward-thinking artists who use mediums not often represented in the Inuit art canon” (Michelin, 2021, para. 5). Their inclusive approach enables an expansive representation of Inuit art and encourages conversations around what is possible when folks are not forced into stereotypical ways of being perceived.

Inspired by the incredible work being done by Dr. Igloliorte and others, I hope to connect with a contemporary Inuk artist/curator to lead in the curation process of this exhibition and bring in younger, more diverse artistic voices. I was grateful to be able to get in touch with Dr. Igloliorte, who offered some advice to work with an Inuktitut language speaker as we work toward a concept for the exhibition, as it is not as simple as choosing a word or phrase in our Western-centric language and translating it to Inuktitut because not all concepts translate directly. She also pointed me toward the director of the Inuit Art Foundation, Alysa Procida, who provided some incredibly helpful information about language speakers as well as ways I might connect with the artists who have work in our collection. As I work toward making these connections and facilitating the process in a way that ensures Inuit voices are the ones making the decisions about the exhibition, I do hope these connections can be sustained and expanded upon.

Clearly, there is still extensive work to do to achieve all of the goals outlined above, but I am heartened by how much has already shifted toward these practices. The willingness and ability to make a commitment to these goals and to actually implement them seems far more attainable than I originally thought. It is scary to initiate hard conversations, especially within an institutional structure that is so deeply embedded in systems that enforce harmful power dynamics. Despite that, or maybe because of it, I feel grateful that I work with a team

of people who are able to have open and honest conversations about these issues and who are willing to support one another as we each embark on a journey to being more inclusive and representative, both collectively and within our own areas of expertise.

Figure 6

Columbine



Note. Made by Shauna Caldwell. A native wildflower resembling the talon of an eagle, its Latin namesake, this complex plant evolved to cater to the specific needs of the ecological community it was a part of.

Chapter Four: Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts

Working on two teams makes my job incredibly interesting, and, since my background is so heavily situated in the visual arts, it means I am always learning something new. It also means I have two separate staff meetings each week and work with two separate groups of colleagues, though there are five of us who work on both teams. Because of this, we are engaging in conversations around equitable practices in two places and in two slightly different contexts at the same time. Obviously, this work is prudent and necessary, but it does require twice the amount of research and critical dialogue to understand the nuances of best and socially just practices in both performing arts presenting and visual arts exhibition. While I have worked hard to learn about the history of performing arts in this country as well as contemporary dialogues surrounding social justice and best practices in the field, I am still a very new member of this community whose ability to connect and grow has been dramatically stunted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, through this chapter, I will attempt to briefly discuss some of this history, as well as facets of those conversations currently taking place among artists and other professionals in the field. Alongside this, I will pull in information about the Schaefer Center and document some of the commitments we have made to creating more equitable programming and space.

The History of Performing Arts Spaces and Contemporary Issues

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the racist, colonial structure of visual art museums. It is also prudent to acknowledge that theatres and performing arts centers are tethered to a history that is just as problematic and worthy of critical examination. Theater and performing arts in America have a deeply racist history of employing characters

costumed in blackface, of wide-ranging problematic cultural appropriation, and of minstrelsy shows that re-enforced harmful stereotypes, among other practices. These damaging tactics worked together to shape the popular narrative, and, while various aspects of these blatantly obvious and toxic forms of representation are generally avoided in the present, some of this history lives on through the use of BIPOC artists and performers as tropes within artistic works, as well as through their continual mistreatment by arts organizations. While there is much more to be said about this history and its influence on contemporary performing arts, I will focus my attention to the effects of current events in the field.

In a conversation with *The Boston Globe* in which she addresses the pervasiveness of racism in American theater, Kristen Greenidge, playwright and assistant professor of theater at Boston University, speaks to the fact that mainstream audiences are predominately white. This harsh reality makes playwrights and actors feel forced to write to and perform for the white gaze in order to be successful. She goes on to explain how this affects the whole creative process. Looking at another element of racism present in American theater, Michael Bobbitt, artistic director of the New Repertory Theatre in Watertown, discusses the racist structures embedded in the subscription and tiered ticketing system. Specifically, he asks, “Who has the money to buy their seats a year and a half in advance?... Are they leaving brown and Black and poor and young people sitting in the back and the sides?” (Aucoin, 2020, para. 8) These questions are a haunting reminder of the segregated theaters of America’s not-so-distant past. Greenidge goes on to critique the representational implications of “believ[ing] that we live in a world of scarcity, and that there’s not enough room at the table for all the stories” (Aucoin, 2020, para. 17). These racist and capitalism-based ways of looking at the arts take away so many opportunities, which I explored earlier in the context of

Appalachian representation. By not providing opportunities for artists outside of the dominant culture to create and share their own stories, on their own terms, we are further silencing their voices and perpetuating oppressive violence against them.

I would also like to draw attention directly to a “Yup’ik womxn and artist” who is fighting back and calling for systemic change after being harassed and exploited by a university performing arts center (Johnson, 2021, About section, para. 1). Emily Johnson, choreographer and director of Catalyst Dance, “who is known for creating performances that foreground Indigenous voices and fuse dance with public gatherings, storytelling, and craft,” was commissioned by Montclair State University to take part in a residency where she would create new dance work for their series, Peak Performances (Weber, 2021, para. 2). After agreeing to commit to her creative process, which openly outlines thoughtful and sustained decoloniality, the Executive Director changed his mind and revoked her commission, only after verbally and emotionally harassing her. Last year, I attended a virtual session, *Decolonizing Performing Arts Practice*, during the Arts Midwest + Western Arts Alliance Virtual Conference. In this session, Emily Johnson spoke about her dance company and their commitment to decolonial practices, which involves everything from requiring land acknowledgements at their performances and a proven commitment to equitable practices from arts organizations to their implementation of decolonial practice riders. I was deeply inspired by what she shared during that session and realized just how impactful it is for artists to demand equitable treatment and demonstrated decolonial, anti-racist practices from arts institutions. Just a couple of months later, she released a letter outlining her experience with Montclair State University, and I was reminded, yet again, that there is so much work to be done to create socially just cultural institutions. While this story is an upsetting reality,

Johnson (2021) remains hopeful in her letter and nudges us all to do better with her affirmation that, “performance institutions... have a particular relationship with audiences, with potential, and that given the right attention, can really drive change” (Johnson, 2021, para. 42).

A Look at Ourselves

Based on this brief background of the present and historic cultural impacts of performing arts centers, I will now explore the breadth of the Schaefer Center’s programming and offerings to our community and beyond in an effort to document where we are now in hopes of being able to evaluate our progress in the future. To contextualize where this programming is actually taking place, The Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts (2021) is “a 1,673-seat multi-use auditorium located on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. The Center features orchestra and balcony level seating and a proscenium stage. The Schaefer Center is also home to the Smith Gallery” (About section, para. 1).

Like other non-profits, we are driven by a mission, and our mission statement is as follows:

“The Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts is dedicated to enhancing the artistic and cultural landscape of Appalachian State University and the surrounding region by providing a venue devoted to the year-round presentation of campus and community events that enrich, educate, inspire, and promote quality of life.” (Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts, 2021, Mission statement section, para. 1)

Events presented by the Office of Arts and Cultural Programs are funneled into three series: The Schaefer Center Presents, An Appalachian Summer Festival, and the APPlause! Series. The Schaefer Center Presents is the series that happens during the academic year:

“The Schaefer Center Presents supports Appalachian State University’s teaching mission by presenting world-class performances that bring classroom learning to life, while contributing in a significant way to quality of life for residents across our region and the cultural landscape of the High Country and beyond. Offering a diverse array of music, dance and theatre programming for audiences of all ages, this dynamic series creates memorable performance experiences and related educational and outreach activities designed to promote the power and excitement of the live performance experience; provide a “window on the world” through the artistry of nationally and internationally renowned artists; and showcase some of the finest artists of our nation and our region. Musical events range from symphony orchestra and chamber music performances to jazz, blues, folk, popular and international artists. Theatre productions run the gamut from serious drama to musical comedy. Dance performances offer an equally wide array of styles, from ballet and modern dance to international companies representing cultural traditions from around the world” (Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts, 2021, The Schaefer Center Presents section, para. 1).

The APPlause! Series, in particular, is the series that I work most closely with:

“Every season, affordable music, dance, film, and theatre events are offered to students and their teachers from K-12 classrooms across the region. Students

experience everything from high-energy acrobatics and Appalachian music to international dance and literary classics brought to life through theatrical productions... Study guide materials connect every performance to the classroom curriculum... In recent seasons, more than 8,000 students across our region have attended APPlause! Series events” (Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts, 2021, APPlause! section, para. 2).

In direct relation to the APPlause! Series programming, our mission for Arts Education and Outreach, according to the Schaefer Center’s website, is as follows:

“Arts education and outreach programming at Appalachian is committed to connecting university arts resources to a diverse audience of community arts patrons, teachers and learners in the campus community, and in the public, private and home school network across our region. In doing so, the series strives to broaden and deepen arts experiences for audiences of all ages, while ensuring access to the arts for young audiences, building future audiences for the arts, and inspiring a love of learning through the arts” (Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts, 2021, Appalachian State University’s Arts Education and Outreach Mission Statement section, para. 1).

An Appalachian Summer Festival (2021) is an “annual celebration of the performing and visual arts held every July in venues across the university campus, and features an eclectic, diverse mix of music, dance, theatre, visual arts and film programming,” (About An

Appalachian Summer Festival section, para. 1). According to An Appalachian Summer Festival website:

“An Appalachian Summer Festival began in 1984 as a chamber music series, and retains strong roots in classical music, combined with a variety of other programming geared to almost every artistic taste and preference. Celebrating its 37th season in 2021, the festival has risen in stature to become one of the nation’s most highly respected summer festivals, acclaimed for the breadth and quality of its artistic programming. In recent years, the festival has been selected as one of the “Top 20 Events in the Southeast” by the Southeast Tourism Society. For many years, *The New York Times* has included An Appalachian Summer Festival in its “Summer Stages” issue, which profiles the nation’s most prominent and interesting summer arts festivals” (2021, About An Appalachian Summer Festival section, para. 1).

The festival also has its own mission statement:

“An Appalachian Summer Festival is an annual arts festival presenting and producing programs in music, theatre, dance, film and visual arts. The festival forges a unique national identity through artistic excellence, innovative programming, commissioning new works, educational opportunities, and by bringing the most accomplished and respected creative and performing artists from around the world to the Appalachian State University community. Founded on the principle of promoting young American artists, the festival supports the overall university mission, enhances the cultural life of the Appalachian community through affordable access to its programs, serves as an

important gateway onto the campus, and promotes the economic development of our region” (An Appalachian Summer Festival, 2021, Festival Mission section, para. 1).

It also has its own vision statement regarding “artistic excellence, innovation, and engagement”:

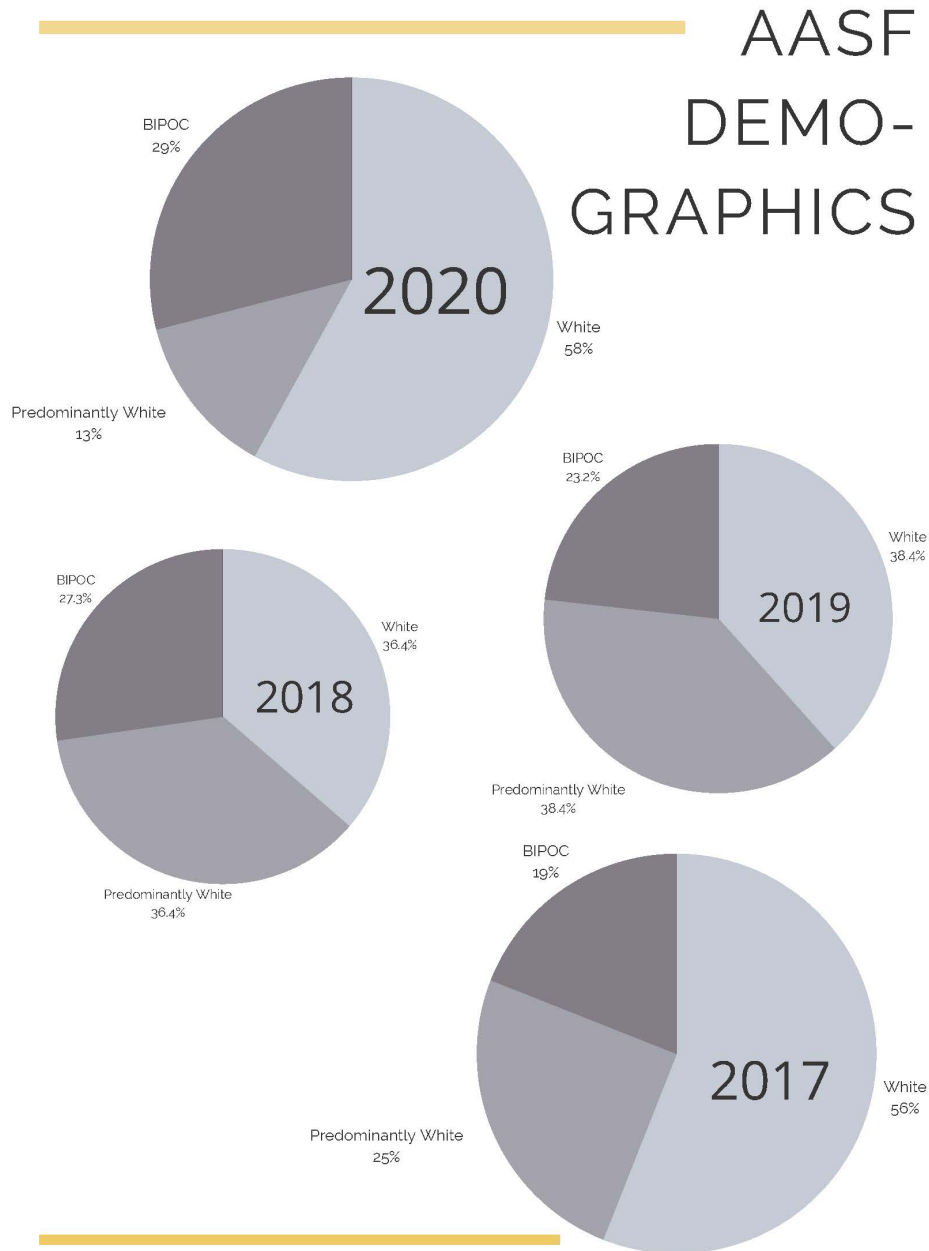
“In keeping with its status as a university-based arts program, the festival continually seeks to enlighten and educate—a focus reflected in such initiatives as the festival’s discounts for children’s tickets, school coupons and ticket prices that are typically 30-40% lower than prices for comparable events in other venues. A rich variety of educational opportunities is part of the festival schedule each summer, including exhibitions, lectures, tours, workshops, student internships and employment opportunities for young people seeking experience in arts presenting. These experiences offer opportunities for lifelong learning and meaningful engagement with the arts. The festival holds central the belief that access to a strong and dynamic program of artistic excellence in the performing and visual arts is an important component of a vital and healthy community” (An Appalachian Summer Festival, 2021, Festival Vision section, para. 1).

In an effort to continue to better understand our programming and the racial demographics of the artists whose work we present, I took a look at the three performing arts series presented by the Schaefer Center (An Appalachian Summer Festival, The Schaefer Center Presents, and the APPlause! Series) and compiled data from the last four years to quantify the percentages of BIPOC, predominately white, and white performances. While I

recognize there are many equally valuable cultural identities being placed under the BIPOC umbrella, I wanted to visualize how predominately white our programming is. Below are visual representations of the results of those findings:

Figure 7

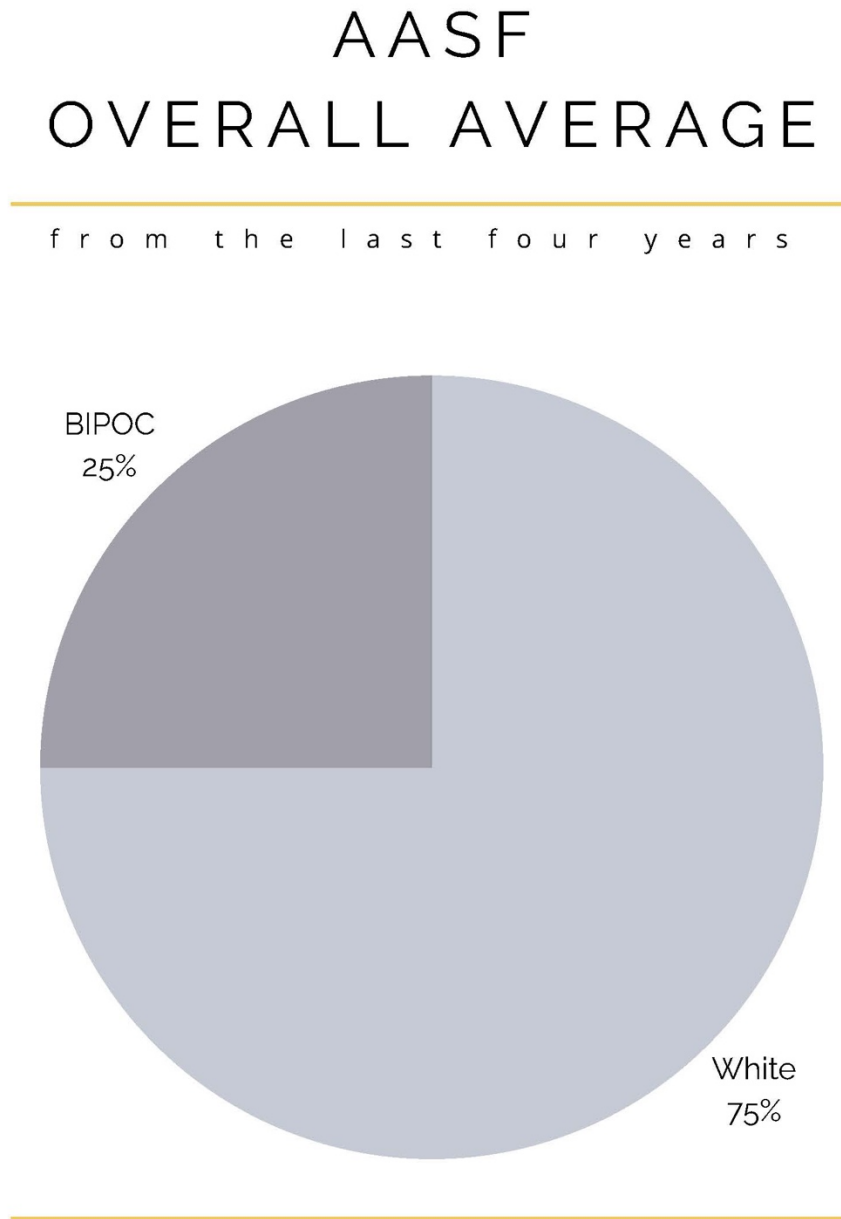
An Appalachian Summer Festival Demographics



Note. Pie charts depicting the demographics of performers for An Appalachian Summer Festival from 2017-2020. In the category “predominately white,” I included performances that may have featured BIPOC artists and want to acknowledge their contributions.

Figure 8

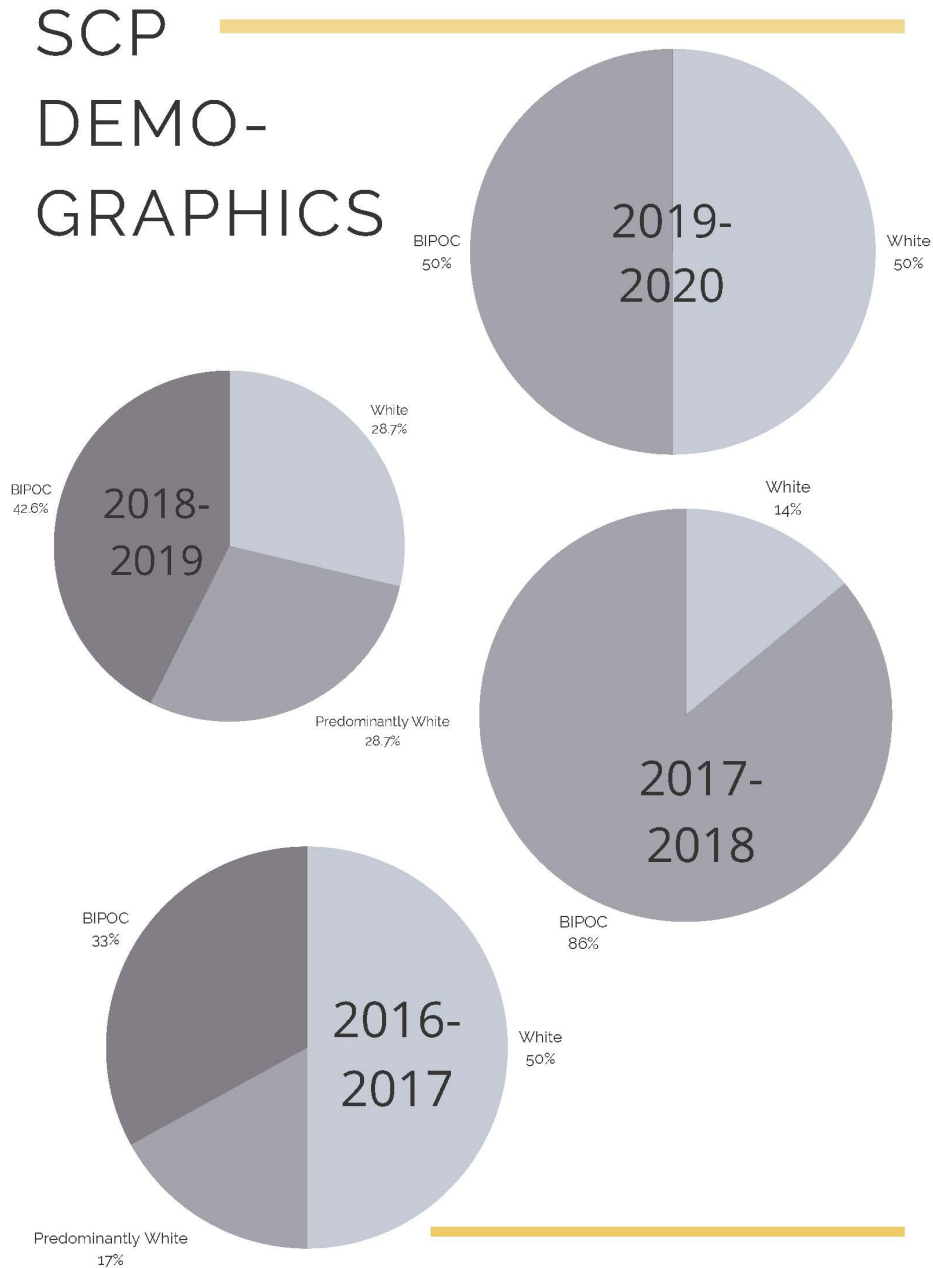
An Appalachian Summer Festival Overall Average from the Last Four Years



Note. Pie chart depicting the overall average of demographics of performers for An Appalachian Summer Festival from 2017-2020. In this chart, performances by predominately white artists' work have been included in the "white" demographic category.

Figure 9

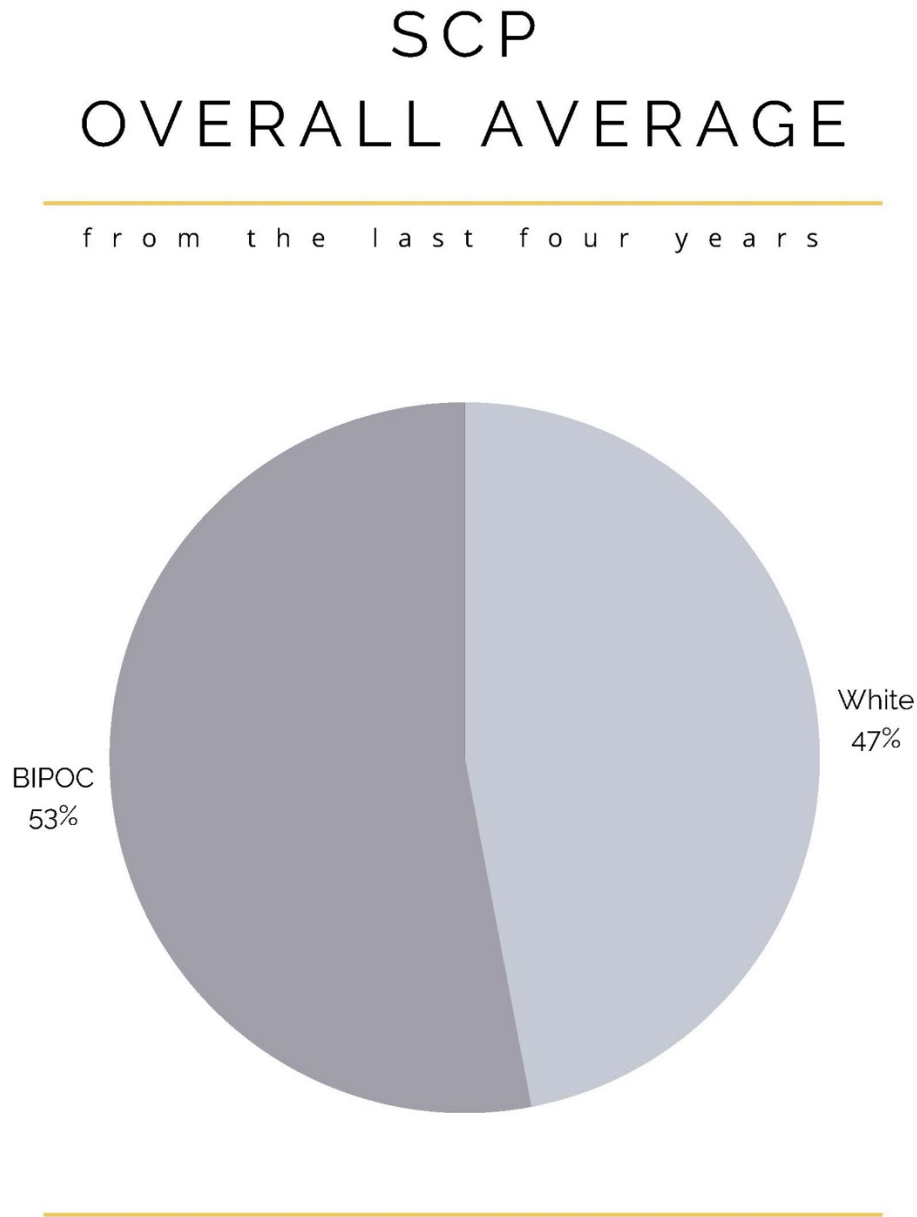
Schaefer Center Presents Demographics



Note. Pie charts depicting the demographics of performers for The Schaefer Center Presents from 2017-2020. In the category “predominately white,” I included performances that may have featured BIPOC artists and want to acknowledge their contributions.

Figure 10

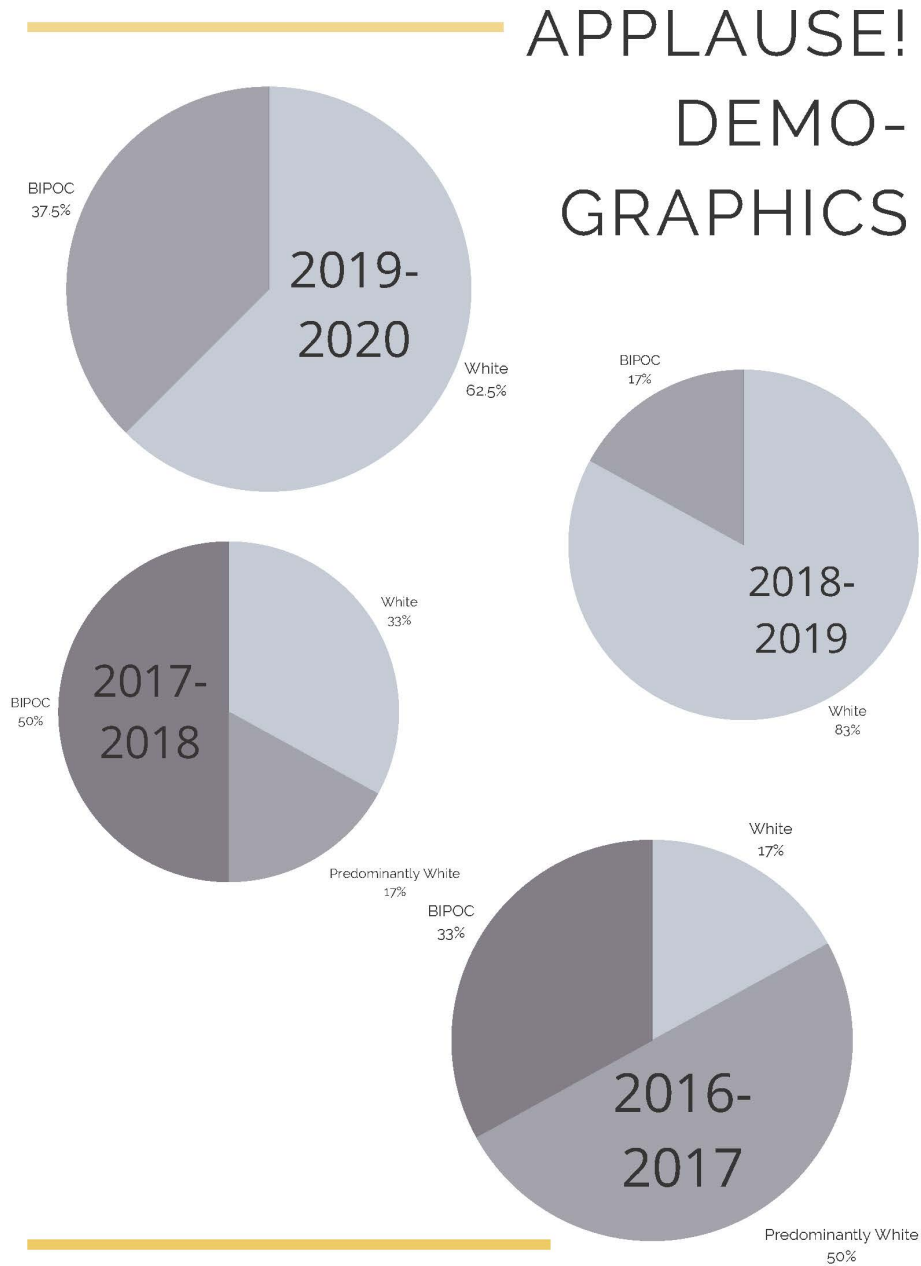
Schaefer Center Presents Overall Average from the Last Four Years



Note. Pie chart depicting the overall average of demographics of performers for The Schaefer Center Presents from 2017-2020. In this chart, performances by predominately white artists' work have been included in the "white" demographic category.

Figure 11

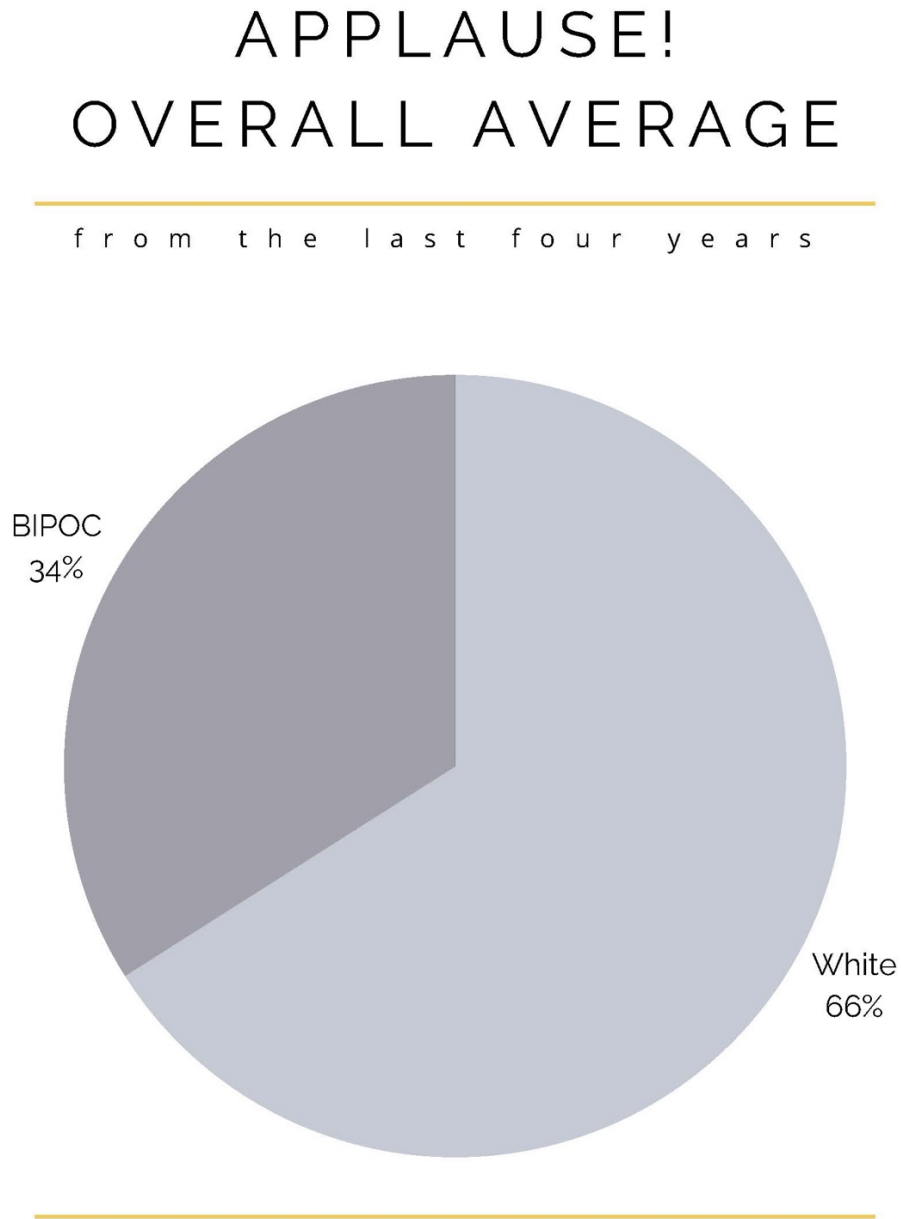
APPlause! Demographics



Note. Pie charts depicting the demographics of performers for the APPlause! Series from 2017-2020. In the category “predominately white,” I included performances that may have featured BIPOC artists and want to acknowledge their contributions.

Figure 12

APPlause! Overall Average from the Last Four Years



Note. Pie chart depicting the overall average of demographics of performers for the APPlause! Series from 2017-2020. In this chart, performances by predominately white artists’ work have been included in the “white” demographic category.

Efforts Toward Growth and Social Justice

Though the Turchin Center staff began conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusive practices several months earlier, a few of us on the Schaefer Center team had been doing research individually and spending time unpacking the ways we personally benefit from or are affected by white supremacy and other systemic oppressive forces. Therefore, by the time we were engaging with this work collectively in relation to our work as an arts organization, we were really ready to dig in. In order to further understand the current dialogue about racial inequities upheld by performing arts centers, we read the following resources and spent several staff meetings discussing what we learned as well as how the issues presented appeared in our organization: a list of demands from the Cultural New Deal, We See You White American Theater's open letter and list of demands, *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla Saad, a panel presented by Theater for Young Audiences entitled "Decentering Whiteness in Touring & Presenting," and a panel hosted by the North Carolina Presenters Consortium called "Anti-Racism in the Arts."

As a staff, we gained extensive insight from We See You White American Theater (2021), who "formed a collective of multi-generational, multi-disciplinary, early career, emerging and established artists, theater managers, executives, students, dramaturges and producers to address the scope and pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and racism in the American theater" (About section, para. 1). This collective of over 300 arts professionals published a list of demands calling for substantive change, which was then digitally signed by over 100,000 supporters. By reading their call to action, we learned about the widespread low percentages of BIPOC representation in both programming and personnel within American theater, which is, unfortunately, not shocking and not dissimilar to visual arts

centers in America (and Appalachia). We learned about the negative impact of not having BIPOC critics, marketing reps, and other PR professionals as producers of reviews, which stifles creativity and limits audience's capacity to understand the nuances of a performance. We were also reminded of the fact that BIPOC community relationships should not only be remembered and cultivated during times when BIPOC artists are featured on stage but also should be a priority for every programmatic offering.

We See You White American Theater (2021) also writes that it is essential to showcase performances that “resist paradigms of competition and scarcity, or the fallacy that [BIPOC] narratives must center on trauma” (Code of Conduct section, para. 4). How many performances have you seen that address the hardships of enslaved Black people? Of the forced removal, relocation, or extermination of Indigenous people? Of the harm inflicted upon Japanese-Americans in internment camps? Of the brutal reality faced by immigrant families forcibly separated from one another by our country's deportation policies? Of the institutionalization of disabled people by dominant systems of power? Of queer people being vilified or murdered? Now, how many stories have you seen that concentrate on the joys and successes within these communities? There are so many ways these trauma-filled histories are reinforced through the stories that are popularized by our current institutions. Because of this, we must put in the work to celebrate and uplift a diversity of experiences, including those of joyful, loving stories with happy endings. Through this call to action, we are also reminded of the theft and extraction experienced by BIPOC artists, among many other traumatic experiences faced by BIPOC theater professionals. In response to their demands, over 100 theaters and performing arts centers around the country have published an anti-racist statement and cited the group as their source of inspiration. Let's hope these statements

expand into decision-making processes regarding programming and policy and find ways to be sustained and built upon in future organizations.

In addition to considering and incorporating We See You White American Theater's demands, many performing arts organizations are adopting the *Racial Equity Principles* (2021) developed by the National Arts Strategies, which "were created to help the arts and culture field advance racial equity and are the product of a year-long effort of listening, writing, and refining" (*Racial Equity Principles*, 2021, para. 2). One of these principles is to create space for "brave conversations where individuals are invited to bring their whole, vulnerable selves," which is significant as a tool for radical change (*Racial Equity Principles*, 2021, para. 3). The principles of "with us, not for us" and "power sharing" demonstrate a cohesive philosophy that supports a holistic approach to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access initiatives through community collaboration and a non-hierarchical approach to working with artists who have been marginalized by predominately white arts organizations (*Racial Equity Principles*, 2021, para. 4). The National Arts Strategies also poignantly reminds us that, "Diversity is complicated, multifaceted, inelegant and iterative, but pursuing inclusive and equitable practices is critical to building organizations that connect with their communities in authentic, responsible, and sustainable ways" (*Racial Equity Principles*, 2021, With Us Not For Us section, para. 1). While the Schaefer Center has not formally adopted either of these organization's principles, I do think we have embraced many of the ideals and efforts demanded by both, and I will illustrate our alignment with those commitments below.

Focusing on the area of programming I work with most directly, our performing arts education team has spent a significant amount of time over the past year reflecting on and

thinking through how we can make our offerings more accessible as we continue to grow and serve our community in a more equitable fashion. After a year of finding ways to bring content to schools and going all virtual, as well as spending time reflecting on and reimagining our programming as a whole, we have committed to diversifying performances and, therefore, the artists we support with the resources we are given. While the next APPlause! Series season has not been announced yet, our virtual offerings will feature 67% BIPOC artists, a significant increase from the previous season's 38%. We know that this will require a sustained effort and must become deeply ingrained into all of our decision-making processes, and we have committed to continuing to unpack our biases and to learning how to better support everyone in our community through the work we do. As part of this effort, we are utilizing learning tools from organizations like Arts Access (2021), whose "mission is to enable children and adults with disabilities to have full access to and participate in the arts and cultural life of our community" (Mission Statement section, para. 1). Through workshops and speaking engagements that are led by artists and arts patrons with disabilities, Arts Access (2021) "operates with inclusion as a core value [to] provide programs and events that are barrier free and provide equal access to people with disabilities (About Us section, para. 2).

While some of the staff in our organization have attended Arts Access workshops and webinars and have been in conversation with them about ways in which we can make our materials more accessible through captioning and audio/visual descriptions, we are working to bring them to campus to conduct a workshop about accessibility in the arts. Through this, we are paying for professional development (led by disabled artists and patrons) for performing artists and presenters to learn about virtual and in-person accessibility

requirements. This will ensure that everyone involved in presenting a performance will understand what needs to be provided to make sure that we provide what patrons with diverse abilities need to be able to participate and fully enjoy the experience of a performance.

In continuing to think about how the education and outreach team I am a part of can create more diverse programming, I look to Maura Reilly's (2018) *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, which situates itself in the visual art world, though many of her poignant thoughts translate very easily to the realm of performing arts. She writes about shifting the stereotype of "curator-as-explorer" and argues for turning to specialists outside of the field to help make decisions and contextualize works (p. 105). Thinking of ourselves as curators as we book our series each season could be a helpful way to open dialogue and create opportunities to seek input from a wide range of perspectives. One area that is open to these kinds of collaborations is our Educator Series, which features workshops often taught by the performing (or visual) artists themselves, creating an avenue for them to directly engage with their viewers and have a greater impact on how their work is perceived. As an arts educator, I am inspired by the assertion that "the critical dialogue of exchange that ensues with these advisors will add the necessary breadth to the project as a whole, and allow for an ensemble of perspectives to emerge," and I will employ this idea of thoughtful collaborations to extend conceptual and cultural access in my own education practice (Reilly, 2018, p. 105).

Though there is extensive work to be done in the realm of transparency, policy change, and commitment to equitable practices at the Schaefer Center, our internal dialogue regarding decision-making processes has been open and honest, in alignment with the *Racial*

Equity Principles’ (2021) call for “brave conversations,” and it has been informed by extensive research surrounding equitable practices. In February of 2021, the Office of Arts and Cultural Programs staff collaboratively developed the following list of thoughts and goals related to this work:

In becoming more diverse, equitable, and inclusive, below are some important takeaways and some things we have learned...

- Set clear goals for artist residencies. Relatedly, learn from our successes as well as our mistakes (e.g., the AIM residency, in which our staff did not fully participate but sat on the sidelines and did not communicate adequately with the students or artists participating in the event). It is important to forgive ourselves and learn from our shortcomings and mistakes rather than let these experiences make us fearful about moving forward.

- Understand the difference between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation.

Cultural appreciation is when we seek to understand and learn about another culture in an effort to broaden our perspective and connect with others cross-culturally. Appropriation is taking one aspect of a culture that is not our own and using it for our personal interest and benefit.

- When presenting multicultural programming, look not only to traditional art forms but also to contemporary work that represents a more “current” depiction of

culture. Stretch the boundaries of the art forms we present rather than presenting what is familiar and expected.

- Adhere to equitable practice by expecting to pay for what we get rather than letting the practice of negotiating for reduced fees cloud our judgment about what is fair and right.
- When forming partnerships, remember that we must be willing to give up control and be open to new ideas and ways of working that may not be familiar; we don't need to always call all the shots.
- Messaging and communications: Be clear about why we're doing what we do. Make it clear that we're presenting artists because of their artistry and the value they bring to our series—not because they check off a box for us (i.e., tokenism).
- Think carefully not only about WHAT we do (i.e., our programming) but also about HOW we do it (i.e., our organizational culture and whether we are creating an open and inclusive environment where all feel welcome and valued).
- Think carefully about our staff composition and becoming more diverse. When we have staff openings, how do we advertise them? Are we sharing our job openings with the same homogenous network, or are we reaching out to allies

who can help us advertise these opportunities to broader and more diverse networks?

- Work with allies to make our advisory boards more diverse and inclusive. Build on the meaningful relationships we already enjoy to help broaden our base of support among the constituencies that are important to us. Out of this process, great board candidates will emerge.
- Recognize that we are doing a lot already in terms of presenting a diverse array of multicultural performing artists, many of whom have created our most memorable performance experiences over the years. Continue building on that strong foundation and drawing upon the genuine relationships that we have formed.

While I am inspired by our willingness to identify and commit to these goals and have seen a definite shift in perspectives and efforts toward equitable practices during our staff meetings, I am less privy to the conversations and decision-making processes surrounding operations that do not involve the APPlause! Series. Though the booking processes for most of this year's performances were already set in motion before the pandemic and our reflection and goal-setting sessions, I am hopeful that our future series and festivals will showcase artists from more diverse backgrounds and communities. I am also hopeful that we can continue to expand our collaborative approach to community members

and groups on campus who are also interested in using the performing arts as a catalyst for social justice work.

Figure 13

Sage



Note. Made by Denise Ringler. Picked from the garden outside the education wing of the Turchin Center while thinking of the women who planted and tended to it.

Chapter Five: A Closer Look at Us

In reflecting on my personal contributions to this work and coming to understand its importance in my life, I wanted to find a way to incorporate the voices of a couple of the women I work with who cultivate a beautifully generative environment each and every day and who consistently work toward their own visions for the future of the arts in our community. Though the three of us are white women, we are dedicated to creating greater access to a more diverse series of programming for our entire community, and I think it is crucial to examine who we are and where we are coming from as we position ourselves to make these changes in our practice. In my role, I work most closely with Christy Chenausky, our Director of Arts Education and Outreach. I wanted to use this as an opportunity to hear her perspective about the work we do and how she came to work in the arts, as well as about the creation of the APPlause! Series she so lovingly organizes. I also wanted to include the insight of Denise Ringler, our Director of Arts Engagement, as I have been immensely inspired by her thoughts about feminism and social justice, as well as her background in community organizing, and I wanted to know how her work in those areas impacts her leadership of our organization. I attempted to gain these insights through fairly informal Zoom interviews.

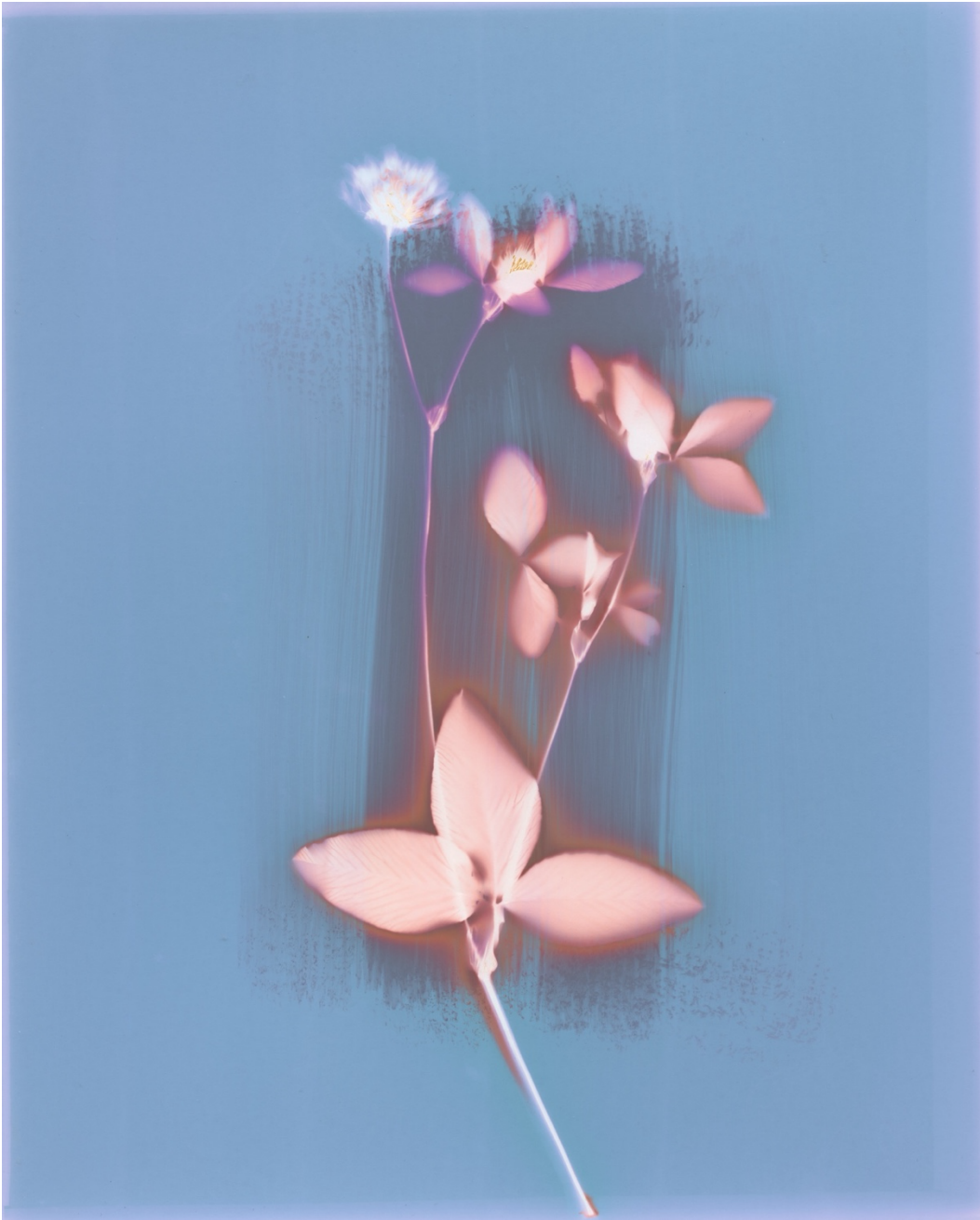
Inspired by the collaborative, multi-vocal writing and research style of sociologist Karida Brown, as exemplified in *Gone Home: Race and Roots Through Appalachia*, I plan to utilize as many original quotes as possible to re-tell and shape the stories gleaned through my interviews with both Denise and Christy. I will also utilize Judith Brodsky and Ferris Olin's *Junctures in Women's Leadership: The Arts* (2018) as a framework for organizing the interviews based on similarities between both Denise and Christy related to arts exposure,

their career trajectory, and reasons for working in the arts. Positioned alongside my collaborative approach to artmaking and representation, which I outlined in the first chapter, I intend to let Denise and Christy speak for themselves as much as possible. This practice supports my assertion that women in Appalachia (and in general) should be in control of their own narratives. Moreover, their words are equally as valuable as mine in the context of this project. As such, they have both reviewed and approved the transcripts and quotes included in this thesis, as well as the use of their artworks.

Steeped in a strong desire to create spaces to honor the contributions of women in my community, I ascribe to Brodsky and Olin's (2018) "belief in the importance of the arts and a commitment to feminist principles of social justice" to create positive change (p. xv). Through their case studies and my own experiences with phenomenal women leaders in the arts, I can certainly see the potential of "women leaders to transform global cultures by dedicating their lives and careers to abolishing the misconception that white men are the only worthy cultural creators and providing access to the arts for diverse audiences" (Brodsky & Olin, 2018, p. xv). While the *Junctures* series asserts that it does not aim to reinforce reductionist thinking about women as biologically or inherently better leaders, it does hypothesize the importance of examining "questions that are fundamental to understanding the values and practices of women leaders who, against the odds, have risen to shape the worlds in which we live" (Brodsky & Olin, 2018, p. x). Because I find this perspective intriguing, I aim to utilize this framework to better understand those values and practices that inform the women leaders who have shaped the community in which I live.

Figure 14

Red Clover



Note. Made by Shauna Caldwell. Red clover is soothing medicine for the skin, powerful cough relief, and rich in a chemical compound that promotes a healthy balance for people who have estrogen-producing endocrine systems.

On Arts Exposure and Career Trajectory

As a way to examine the similarities and differences between Christy and Denise's backgrounds, I begin with Brodsky and Olin's (2018) finding that the women in their case studies, "all had childhood experiences in which parents or other close family or friends believed in causes beyond themselves, treasured creativity, pushed independent thinking and action, and were aware of racism and sexism" (p. xx).

My [Denise's] childhood is so much of who I am—and I can really trace so much back to my parents.... They taught us to have lives of relevance, and it was always assumed that we would be very career driven, even though my mother wasn't able to achieve her career dreams.... We had a wonderful childhood because of the family life my parents created for us. They exposed us to the arts at a very early age, and they were very progressive. My mother was from a conservative family but rejected many of those ideas, and my father was from a very liberal background. My parents were very much opposed to the war in Vietnam—and were passionate about their opposition. They were also very supportive of the protest movements of the 60s and 70s. They didn't shelter us from difficult ideas, and we talked about them in lively dinner conversations. My sister and I often disagreed with my father, especially on Israel, because he was kind of wired to think that Israel could do no wrong, and we were always talking about the Palestinians and Israel, but it was okay to have a debate with my parents about that. They encouraged us to think independently.

Despite her traditional role as a housewife, my mother embraced feminist ideology way before her time. She wouldn't let my sister and I play with Barbie dolls

because she felt they objectified women. At the time, my sister and I felt our mother was narrow-minded about that, but we later realized that she was way ahead of her time. (Our friends ended up giving us Barbies for our birthdays because they felt sorry for us). It was really wonderful being raised by parents like that. They also encouraged my sister and I to leave St. Petersburg, Florida, which we did when we went to school. It was all of this that shaped my perspective and gave me confidence to follow my own dreams in life. There was always the sense that I could do whatever I wanted, as long as I was willing to work hard.

My parents' interest in the arts was very traditional, however. We grew up attending symphony, as well as opera, ballet, and the theatre. My mother was strictly a classical musician, and when I wanted to play Led Zeppelin as a teenager, she did not approve. She hated it so much that my sister and I never even put on the radio to listen to rock and roll when my parents were anywhere nearby because they had such a strong reaction to it. We went to museums but didn't have much exposure to contemporary visual art. (*Denise Ringler*)

I didn't necessarily want to grow up and be an actor. I just always really liked it. I liked being involved. I guess it started as dancing. My sister was taking dance classes. She's two years older than me, and they didn't allow children younger than five to take dance classes, and I was three. So, I got taken to the dance classes because I was just there with my mom, and I would stand in the waiting room, which was basically in the doorway of the dance studio, beside the ballet bar and just mirror what everybody in the class was doing. One day after class, Miss Linda, my dance teacher,

said to my mom, “If you don't tell anybody that she's not five, you may as well let her come into the studio.” So, I danced with those girls for the next 10 years, but I was always the littlest one. So, I got pushed to the front a lot because I was shortest. I think that I figured out how to sort of do my thing on my own and in the front like that.

From there, I was interested in learning how to act and even did a ridiculous stint of beauty pageants. I wanted to be in commercials, and because I grew up so close to DC and Baltimore, there were a lot of places that I could go. I just had a mom that was willing to drive me to dance classes, acting classes, and voice lessons. She found some woman who was a former opera singer who would teach me singing lessons in her little apartment over a storefront there now. I sang almost exclusively Joni Mitchell songs. My sister and I did a few silly Gershwin duets, but overall, I was exposed to a lot of art. Also, growing up where I did, we went to the Smithsonian for field trips probably three times a year beginning in early elementary school. And what we did with my grandma was go see plays. I can remember almost every time we went to DC, we would check out what was happening at the Ford theater. We went to New York City every year and saw a Broadway show. We were just interested in doing that kind of thing. And then probably by the time I was in high school, I wanted to go see concerts and that kind of thing, but I never really thought about the people that worked there like how I'm thinking about it now.

My parents were not totally progressive, but they were totally loving, and they wanted to support me and my sister in whatever way they could. They would say to us really often, “As long as you're happy, then that's the goal in life. If you have a

great job, but you're miserable, that is not the goal. So, do what makes you happy and you'll find a way to make a living at it.” And that's the thing my parents said to me... my whole life. (*Christy Chenausky*)

Though there are definite dissimilarities between Christy's and Denise's upbringings, there are easily distinguishable commonalities in regards to arts exposure and familial support. Another interesting connection found between women leaders in the arts, identified by Brodsky and Olin (2018) through their case studies, is that “the impetus to leadership came from altruism inspired by social movements rather than selfish motivation,” which certainly shines through Denise's background as a social worker and community organizer (p. xxiii).

I wanted to be in the mountains, so I chose Western Carolina because it was the North Carolina school that was the most remote—deeply steeped in the mountains. For me, it was all about just wanting to experience the mountain culture and understand it better. As a social work major...I ended up working for the CAP agency, an anti-poverty agency based in Waynesville and [was] able to work with people who lived in the most remote areas of the region. The one that was most memorable to me was called Little Canada. Many of the older residents lived in extreme poverty—in tar paper shacks that were freezing in winter. The agency would bring in work teams to help insulate their houses and would assist them in applying for programs like SSI and Food Stamps.... I spent time with them, got to know them, and ended up going to dances on Saturday nights that were sponsored by the

community. I remember cake walks, which were very popular. It was like stepping back in time 100 years. I was totally enamored by how independent and proud they were, despite the hardship of their lives. I felt honored to have a glimpse of what it meant to live in a community like that. The experience of being in that culture and immersing myself in it was really rewarding to me.

Immediately after [working as a community organizer for ACORN], I went to grad school at Florida State and got my master's in social work with a concentration in non-profit management and community organizing.... Although my parents were lifelong Liberal Democrats, I also saw that the two-party system and a lot of the social policies were not impacting low-income communities or changing the basic economic system. They were still basically embedded in a corporate capitalist structure that didn't seem to allow for a system of economic justice. So, I was really enamored with independent politics and ended up applying for a position as the State Organizer for the New York Citizens Party, based in Albany, NY. They ran a fellow named Barry Commoner for president on a straight environmental ticket. He was a professor at Queens College in New York. I ended up going to Queens College for my interview and after getting the job, moved to Albany. My job was to travel around to all the different chapters of the Citizens Party, across the state, and provide support for them. I slept on a lot of couches in those days, and it was most definitely a grassroots organization.... I remember one really bizarre meeting where the people on the board thought that the Citizens Party group should meet with the Socialist Party of America to see where our platforms intersected. I remember sitting in some loft in New York City with a bunch of the Socialist Party leaders, talking about who we

might want to nominate to run for president, and thinking, “Oh my god, this could just not be more bizarre. My parents would freak out.” You know, there were tons of parties like that in those days. There was a Communist Party, there was a Communist Workers Party, there was a Socialist Party, plus several others, and none of them could get along with each other. There was always fighting, and the leaders, who were mostly male, were pretty unyielding. Women in the organization were not really a part of this. They would often be in the background, in the kitchen making coffee and having their own side conversations, and I quickly discovered I was so much more comfortable being with them than with the men who were vying to be the loudest voices in the room.

After leaving the Citizens Party, I moved to western Massachusetts and took a job with the Women's Services Center in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in the Berkshires. I served as the coordinator of their domestic violence program and worked with a team of crisis counselors. We served women who were victims of abuse and connected them with lawyers, if they wanted to fight their cases, as well as safe housing, counseling, and support. During those years, there was no battered women's shelter in that part of the state, and some of the batterers were police officers, so it was a scary situation for women who fought back with restraining orders or who chose to prosecute their husbands or partners. I was there during the early years of the effort to build a battered women's shelter, which is now called the Elizabeth Freeman House.

After that, I moved further east and got a job in Boston working for a group called Project Bread, which raised money for the network of soup kitchens around Boston. I worked for the advocacy arm of the organization, which connected low-income

families to food and nutrition programs and worked to change policy at the statewide level. A lot of the soup kitchens were run by churches, and many of them were based in the Black communities of Boston, mostly Dorchester and Roxbury. We ran a hotline for those seeking help, and it was heartbreaking to talk with women who were feeding their kids popcorn just to fill their stomachs or who lived in “welfare hotels” with their kids, and no refrigerator to even keep cold milk on hand for their kids. But it was gratifying to be able to work on that policy level, too, so I wasn't just feeling like I was putting band-aids on problems. (*Denise Ringler*)

While Denise’s unique experiences as an organizer and policy advocate are clearly rooted in social movements, Christy’s altruistic pathway to arts administration stems from her own artistic and education practice, as well as her dedication to local arts and faith-based organizations:

I guess I grew up just being interested in the arts, and by the end of high school, I thought I'd like to be a drama teacher. So, I ended up at Lees McRae because it was one of the few schools that offered a joint major in theater arts and education.... The only play I really remember writing, beginning to end, and casting it and directing it and bringing it around, was about women in the Bible...telling their real stories because a lot of times, the women in the Bible, they're some of the most important figures, but their stories are only told as “wife of this person,” even though they were the spiritual anchor for an entire town, but then they’re remembered as wife of whoever. So, I was interested in just imagining who they were as real people and telling their story—just basically showing that it wasn't just somebody's wife but that

the networks of women in the Bible are really the ones that get the story told, that make the story happen. We went to a few churches that were nice enough to have us, and we performed a few scenes from it. Honestly, I feel like that's a big foundation of my approach to all of my work is not feeling like I can only do this one thing, you know? I honestly think that the work that I do and making the thing happen is the same for me. And that's the part that I've always really liked. I like helping make things happen.... I did end up teaching theater at a few elementary schools, and that's how I really got involved in understanding arts integration in a way that I hadn't before.... And, at the same time, I was working part time at my church doing youth ministry. At the end of that school year, the person doing children's ministry left. So, the elders said, "we can make you a full-time staff person, and if you want to go to seminary, we will pay for that." So, I did that because the school [I worked for]... said they might be able to do one more year of me... working.... And it was like both part-time jobs were double full-time jobs anyway. So, I opted to go with just the church, and I worked at the church for about eight years. I don't have my M. Div., but I could have. I got just a certificate in youth and family ministry, which was really interesting in a lot of ways, and it was a really fantastic experience, so I'm glad I did that... At the same time [as I moved back to Boone], a position opened up at the Arts Council for a Community Arts Education Coordinator. When I read the position description, it was basically to collaborate between the Arts Council, the school district, and the university to make programs happen for K-12 students in Watauga County and then to manage these different kinds of programs like a residency program, a touring arts program.... It was working as the connector between these

three organizations and making these programs happen, and I was like, “Bingo! I'm your girl!” I had never read a description that was more suited for me. (*Christy Chenausky*)

A few years later, the university brought Christy on to continue her work with the Touring Arts Program, which is now the APPlause! Series:

The APPlause! Series grew out of what we called the Touring Arts Program, which was only for Watauga County students. I always sort of thought while I was administering the Touring Arts Program—I think mainly because I was living in Avery County, and I knew some of the people that ran the Arts Council—that there really wasn't a lot of programming that was accessible to kids that lived in Avery County. So, I just assumed that in surrounding counties, there were similar situations.... So, I guess I thought if we could make it closer and easier, then maybe it wouldn't be an either/or-type decision for teachers and principals, but they would feel like they have more flexibility to choose the arts as a field trip.... When we first started doing the APPlause! Series, we did make a real push for getting students from neighboring counties, as well as Watauga County students, and helping them understand that it was something they could take part in. And it was really important to me to give that resource to those folks.... My favorite things about the APPlause! Series are introducing kids, of whatever age, to the idea of live performance and giving them that experience of feeling the energy that's in the room with a live performance, which I feel like is not really something you can have on a screen....

Making and allowing that experience for kids who maybe wouldn't have had the opportunity to have that experience for any other reason, and just helping them feel like they can do that, too...just making the campus feel like an approachable place is an important part of doing the APPlause! Series...helping people feel comfortable coming into a room full of velvet seats. (*Christy Chenauský*)

On Transformative Mentorship and Leadership

Coincidentally, my own first experience on campus was through the Touring Arts Program in elementary school. Additionally, my favorite art project in high school, which was a large, collaborative mosaic mural in the commons area that I even skipped several of my other classes to work on, was an initiative of Christy's through the Arts Council. While I didn't know then that she was the force behind the programming that contributed to my own arts exposure and sense of placemaking through art, I certainly consider her one of my biggest mentors today. Interestingly enough, all of the women in Brodsky and Olin's (2018) case studies emphasized "the transformative nature of mentorship in arts leadership," and, though entirely unprompted, my findings were similar (p. xxii):

We spent the day there [Lees McRae], and it was nice and friendly. I met with the department chairs in theater and in education. When I got home, I had a voicemail from a woman, who ended up being my mentor in college, just following up to see if I had any questions about my tour. These were the people that I would be having the most classes with, and they were also in charge of a lot of things going on, but they

still took time to sit down with me and learn about who I was and how I might fit into their program. So, I went to Lees McRae. (*Christy Chenausky*)

The director of that [Project Bread] was amazing, a woman I greatly admired. She was a public health expert, and she really understood childhood nutrition programs and policies. Her expertise earned credibility for our work with policy-makers at the statewide level, which was wonderful to be a part of. (*Denise Ringler*)

While considering the foundation from which these leaders emerge, it is also quite interesting to consider the “impact of theorists of race, gender, and identity on their leadership” (Brodsky & Olin, 2018, p. xxii).

Right after college, I wanted to focus on community organizing and ended up joining ACORN, which is a network of community organizers that has been discredited in recent years because of corruption within the organization. But, back in those days when it was first started, it was a Saul Alinsky-type community organizing model focused on sending organizers into low-income communities and empowering communities to speak for themselves and to develop leadership within their own communities. It was all about facilitating the development of leadership in low-income communities so that people could take control of their own lives.... You know, I think we as women tend to not be as reluctant to jump into the trenches and get our hands dirty. We're accustomed to doing work of all kinds, and we understand the value of work and the value that all tasks are important. So, I think there's a view

of equality that kind of comes from women's experience of work and valuing all kinds of work, which means (hopefully) that we value every position on our team, whether it's someone who's an entry-level person who's just out of college starting a new job or someone who's been here for 30 years. I also think that women tend to value the balance with other things in their lives and understand the demands that come from caregiving in our families, whether it's for children or older family members. Women tend to have an innate sense of egalitarian structure that makes them more accepting of non-hierarchical organizational structure. I think they tend to think in a more circular than linear fashion about things, which provides them with a different kind of worldview. And, I think women are used to thanking each other more and expressing appreciation for each other. *(Denise Ringler)*

That definitely makes sense, and that kind of ties into something that I've been thinking about with bell hooks and her work with feminist educative spaces and communities of care and the idea of love being embedded into that—and the idea of love as not this weird thing that exists only in romantic relationships but as a way of truth and as a way of being transparent and recognizing a whole person. It sounds kind of similar to what you're saying about that holistic way of looking at things. *(Shauna Caldwell)*

I think that's a really beautiful idea. She's amazing. I mean when you look at Gloria Steinem, too, you know—even in that biopic that you and I watched about her—it was so interesting to me to see how she was a reluctant leader in many ways. She

didn't want to be on the cover of *Newsweek*, and she didn't want to be the voice of the "movement." She wanted to create a community of women—and she certainly did—but there was always such tremendous pressure on her to be the public "face." So, I do think we have many great feminist role models who have worked that way and really wanted to be part of something much larger than themselves. It's wonderful to be able to turn to their examples in thinking about how to approach our work lives.

(Denise Ringler)

Looking more in-depth at the influence of Denise's background in community organizing and social work on her personal philosophy as a director of a non-profit arts organization:

Obviously, it has some to do with the fact that art is a tool for social change, but I think beyond that, it really has to do with power and control and how decision-making happens. I've always been inspired by an empowerment model in which multiple people on a team can be "leaders" in their own way and have a voice in building a strong team. The collective knowledge, judgment, and wisdom of the group builds a much stronger team than relying on one all-powerful "leader." We live in a world where people want one boss: one "strong leader," whether it's a man or a woman, who acts decisively. I think we do better when we break away from those structures and rely more on collective structures and consensus decision-making. And we have so much work to get done that, I feel like sometimes in the interest of time, I do storm ahead, and I go back into that traditional model, but in the end, I believe

decisions are better when they're made collectively. I also think that shared leadership is so much more sustainable, in that new leaders are continuously being cultivated for the future. (*Denise Ringler*)

Something I deeply appreciate about working with Denise and Christy is their sense of dedication to our community, as well as their collaborative nature and their subversive “ability to make use of circumstances and connections” (Brotsky & Olin, 2018, p. xxiv). Their lifelong commitment to making a difference through mission-driven work with non-profit organizations is inspirational, as is their respective dissent against competitiveness and hierarchical systems of power:

I've never chosen to work in a for-profit realm because the “why” of what I do has always been just as important, or more important, than the “what.” For me, it's about working in an arts organization where the patrons who support it care as much about other people having access to it as they do and who understand that the arts need to be for everyone and that they can't be tied to economic status. And here at Appalachian I feel like we've had the ability to live that mission and present our programs that way. That's very much part of the narrative of what we do, and it's why people support us financially. When you talk to most donors who give to the arts, they will tell you that they give to it because they want it to be accessible to everyone and they want young people to enjoy access to the arts from a young age. So, that's probably the biggest thing for me. I also think that the arts have the ability to make us think and to support social movements and change by inspiring dialogue and by tapping into something

deep within us that we all have in common.... I also love working in a team setting with staff who share a common purpose. I enjoy seeing people become part of a team and find their voices within a team. I strive to create and promote non-hierarchical systems and to promote a sense of equality and collegiality. I also find it rewarding to work in settings where people care for each other and help each other meet goals that are important to them. And I must admit that I also love raising money when it's for a cause I'm passionate about. I always stayed away from fundraising in my "former life," but in my later career, I've seen the impact it has on the work we're able to accomplish. If we are successful financially, then we will be able to have that freedom to do work that's really important. *(Denise Ringler)*

I have never really concerned myself with making the most money or being the best or being real competitive in a way. On the contrary, I think, in our field, the less competitive and the more collaborative, the more successful.... Finding a niche and following your mission is key.... And if you don't know how to do a thing, or you see something you like and you're curious about how they do it, you could call whoever is doing the thing and ask them to just talk to you about it. I've done that a lot of times—just kind of awkwardly call somebody up and say, "I'm doing this thing, and I saw what you were doing something similar, and I like what you're doing. I'm not under any kind of deadline, but I would really like to talk to you about it." Most of the time, people are really happy to talk to you. And then it's kind of nice because it's a little bit of a lonely field. I mean, we're kind of the only ones who are doing it around here. It's nice to get to know people that are doing things and to learn how they are

doing them. When I first started working with the university, every couple of weeks, I called the education director at the State Arts Council and asked if she had any leftover money I could use for some projects I was thinking about. And, eventually, she said yes. But I would just toss ideas to her about things I was thinking. I think doing that kind of thing is important, too, just knowing the people that are the funders for the things that you might be able to do. (*Christy Chenausky*)

Figure 15

Jewelweed



Note. Made by Christy Chenausky. Unassuming, prepared, and helpful, Jewelweed can be self-pollinating when it needs to be, grows easily in disturbed soil, and often grows beside potentially harmful plants like poison ivy and stinging nettle, which it acts as a remedy for. Though easily overlooked, this powerful plant knows exactly what its community needs and has figured out the best way to serve it.

On Anti-Racist Work and Equitable Futures

Stimulated by the *Junctures* series which “aims to capture women’s leadership in action and at pivotal junctures or moments of decision-making,” I find it exciting to use this space to document a time in which women leaders are making significant strides toward social justice and equity in the arts organizations that serve the community I care so deeply about (Brodsky & Olin, 2018, p. xii). As I began exploring this idea, I found very little about women leading arts organizations. Of course, there is scholarship about women in the arts as subjects of blanketed, generalized historical analysis, but the introspective, biographical information about those women and what inspires and informs their practice is seriously lacking significant documentation. According to Brodsky and Olin (2018), “The literature on leadership has yet to describe the complex leadership exhibited by women leaders in the arts” which is not surprising considering we do not even have a decent record of who those women are (p. xvii). As they go on to state, “the documentation of these women is important in itself.... women’s accomplishments and strategies too often go unrecorded or are denigrated” (2018, p. xvii). While I do find it extraordinarily important to acknowledge the accomplishments of women, it is also important to be realistic about where we are and the future of the work we are doing. When asked more explicitly about whether or not she finds that her background in organizing and social work plays a role in informing our collective anti-racist work and the equitable practices we are moving toward, Denise exclaims:

It does, but I also feel like there's a huge barrier there, and it's the fact that we are a predominately white organization and simply cannot do this work effectively until we become more diverse. The challenge for us is to change from within and, until we

achieve that change, to form connections with people who can partner with us to do this work—i.e., building allies and knowing what the limits of our abilities are as a predominately white organization. So, while I feel like we're not making progress as quickly as I would hope, I also wouldn't want to see us storming ahead with a vision that doesn't include those allies. I think we're getting there. I think it starts by hiring a more diverse staff, working with diverse artists, which I believe we're starting to do, but it will require continued growth. And, of course, continuing to serve audiences who represent diverse constituencies. That will happen if we do a good job on the programming side. Audience-building will eventually spawn leadership from the communities we're serving, and then things can really begin to change. It's a long process that doesn't happen overnight. (*Denise Ringler*)

When asked about the interconnection of education and outreach and equitable practices, accessibility, and anti-racist work, Christy said:

I feel like... we have the responsibility of hosting the platform from which artists can share their work and their lives, and, as an organization, our interest is in letting all people have a voice and helping people to see beyond their own lenses that they were born into the world with. From the perspective of education and outreach, we maybe have even more of an obligation to do that because our audience is a true cross section of our community.... I think that the audience that can afford tickets to the evening series maybe it isn't a true cross section of our community, so they might see themselves reflected back from the stage.... in a way that our [APPlause!] audience is

not going to. If all we show are people who look like me, then that's not reflecting back to our audience what they look like and what their voices are. The best way that we can educate is always by example and by modeling, and if we can't do that from our corner of the world, or the university, then I don't know who can. I feel like it starts with us. So, to me personally, I feel like it's really important and exciting to show students that their world is bigger than what they've been exposed to. And for those kids that might look different, or talk different, or feel different, that they can see that they're not alone in feeling those ways and having those experiences, but feeling like they are part of something that is bigger than what they can see around them. I feel like that's an important thing that we can put out there. (*Christy Chenausky*)

While it is easy to become overwhelmed at the amount of work that must be done to actualize truly just communities with arts programming that radically serves those communities, “the stories of these women leaders show how the arts inspire and how crucial they are to social change” (Brodsky & Olin, 2018, p. xix). Drawing upon Lucy Lippard’s (1984) insistence that “[f]eminism’s contribution to the evolution of art reveals itself not in shapes but in structures. Only new structures bear the possibility of changing the vehicle itself, the meaning of art in society,” I find solace in both Denise’s and Christy’s contributions to these evolving structures as well as in their visions for the future of our organization (p. 151):

After this year that we've had, it's been a little bit difficult to think about having the momentum that we had prior to March 2020. Some of the groups that we serve, we're going to have to be rethinking some of the ways we serve them. Not so much the kind of art that we expose them to, but I just feel like we're all kind of different now. I do have a lot of ideas of what I think about for my vision for the future of all the arts education aspects of the arts at Appalachian, and, in really basic general terms that you already know, it's just the involvement of our university students and helping to enrich our programs by offering them more practical experiences. I really want university students to be able to visit classrooms prior to an APPlause! Series performance and teach lessons from the study guide to help prepare students to come to campus and for what they are going to see. Especially with elementary school kids and middle school kids, they're going to enjoy something a lot more if they know what's going to happen and they have time to think about what comes next. And for the Turchin Center, I really feel like the best thing we can do is have all of our outreach programs taught in such a way that it gives practical experience to the instructor but also serves the group that it is intended to serve. And I feel like the students we've had work with us over the years say the most impactful learning experience they had was teaching workshops at the Turchin Center, and that they learned about themselves as educators. They also developed a concept of time management in a classroom setting. They'll say things like, "I thought this was going to take 20 minutes, and it took five." Those kinds of things are really important to learn before you're in a classroom with 20-some kids all day long.... So, in general terms, that's my vision for the future. Honestly, I would like to see education and

outreach be front of mind for everybody on staff and not necessarily just for a couple of people that straddle two staff groups, but I do feel like we've made some pretty serious headway on all of that in the last nine years. (*Christy Chenauský*)

It has several different elements. Certainly, being strong, independent, and self-sustaining. Being able to take artistic risks and not avoid difficult or challenging ideas, content, or art forms. Continuing to build trust with our audiences and supporters, which means a continued focus on relationship-building and *listening* to them (i.e., not losing touch with our constituents and supporters). Building community by supporting arts programming that brings people together, not just physically but to explore ideas and discover common ground. Continued audience-building among children and young people. (The APPlause! Series and other arts education programming is so perfectly poised to do this, given its enormous success in recent years!) Connecting the arts to higher values such as social, racial, and economic justice. Becoming more diverse as a staff and continuing to empower our staff and value their unique accomplishments. Continuing to value a non-hierarchical work structure and collective decision-making. And a really critical one: inspiring young leadership and potential in our office, so the “next generation” of arts leaders can achieve goals and dreams that weren’t necessarily within the reach of those who preceded them! (*Denise Ringler*)

On Art as Activism

As is probably painfully obvious by now, my greatest passion lies in connecting with others through artmaking, so I knew I wanted to tie these conversations back to lumen printing somehow. After sharing my own way of thinking about the process as radically connected to place and the cultivation of just futures, I asked if there were any plants or objects that resonated with Denise and Christy and connected to their own contributions to these visioning processes and the work we are collectively doing to employ equitable arts practices. Not surprisingly, they put as much thought into this provocation as they do into every other way that I have witnessed them work. As someone who has been using this process as a means to open up space for women to ruminate on what we think are some of the most important facets of ourselves, our stories, and our dreams, I am always stunned at the depth that emerges from making these images.

Employing Gill Park's (2020) concept "feministing photography," which utilizes photography as a "site of critical inquiry" and as "a means to describe a particular artistic focus on a critical analysis of, and activism within, the realm of representation," I align this process of making lumens to a form of activism and a physical manifestation of our visions for the future of the arts at Appalachian (p. 291). Denise's lumen print of a mushroom beautifully illustrates her understanding of the circular ways in which women and teams think and work together to achieve a common goal. It is also representative of her commitment to non-hierarchical and collaborative decision-making processes through the details of the gills as separate but equally valuable parts of the mushroom.

About her choice of jewelweed as the subject of her lumen, Christy says:

I guess I like the way that jewelweed is kind of unassuming. You won't necessarily notice it, but there will be a whole bunch of it around. It grows anywhere but really likes to grow in places where you wouldn't necessarily expect things to—in shady, wet places. One thing that I read said it likes disturbed soil, so if you cut in a road, jewelweed will probably grow there. And it has two different kinds of flowers. So, the kind that gets pollinated is the one that's orange, and that's really prolific, but just in case it doesn't get pollinated that way, it's got a backup plan of being self-pollinated-- which isn't as prolific, but it would be enough to sustain it for another year, which I like.... It grows right in there with stinging nettle, so if you get stung with stinging nettle, then you crumple up the jewelweed and rub the sap on it, and it helps a lot. And I feel like that is nice—it's helpful, good, and useful. It's easy to overlook, though, it because it's just always kind of there. (*Christy Chenauský*)

I, like Christy resonating with the job description at the Arts Council, never imagined my dream job would exist in my hometown. I really didn't know this kind of work was an option for me, even as a college graduate with degrees in both art education and studio art. I stumbled upon the job posting on social media on my way to a lecture for a graduate course in library science and immediately knew it was what I wanted to do and that it would be a way to connect my artistic and educative practices to the change I wished to see in my community. Being able to be surrounded by artwork, collaborate with other passionate arts professionals, and continue to learn in and through the arts each day is a true gift and is a role I do not take lightly. I am consistently reminded of the value that the arts play in life and in the collective effort toward radical futures and just communities, and I am committed to

continuing the work of the incredible folks who came before and who do the work alongside me. I have been deeply transformed by knowing these women and feel honored to learn from them and to facilitate a space that credits the importance of their contributions. Emerging from this dialogue, I find hope in the myriad ways we can continue to inspire accountability to sustain these efforts in loving community.

Figure 16

Mushroom



Note. Made by Denise Ringler. Chosen for its circular form, representing the way women and teams connected by a common vision work together, involving separate but equally valuable parts (gills)

Figure 17

Mugwort



Note. Made by Shauna Caldwell. An expert in enhancing our dreaming capabilities, mugwort is one of our greatest allies in visioning new futures.

Conclusion

Though this past year has been unsettling in more ways than one, I am grateful for the opportunity I have had to be with myself in such a meaningful and intentional way. It has allowed me the space to reflect on what I have learned during my time in the Appalachian studies program over the past three years. However, I do recognize that I am incredibly privileged in my ability to isolate myself and to work from home during the pandemic. Being at home, on the land I grew up with, has meant so much to me and has empowered me to articulate my sense of place in a way that profoundly informs my lush understanding of what it means to belong.

Through my concentrated exploration of documentary and collaborative artmaking in Appalachia, as an extension of the ways we represent and perceive the region, I attempted to situate the importance of photography in this conversation as well as tie it to my preferred process of lumen printing as a way to connect to my sense of belonging and radical change. Using my personal artistic practice as a space to explore these ideas and attaching them to my passion for collaborative artmaking to inspire just communities brought me to the inquiries presented in this thesis. As I continued to unearth my own understanding of place and belonging, I found it necessary to unpack the undeserved privileges that got me to where I am today. Through this, I became more aware of the spaces I occupy and the ways in which I could use my power in those spaces to initiate and advocate for change.

As a young arts professional, who spent the last couple of years deep within the academic caverns of visual representation and art (specifically photography) in Appalachia, I wanted to better understand the organization I worked for and to find ways to connect that work to my broader sense of placemaking and belonging through art. Knowing that

Appalachia has long been an incubator for social movements and radical justice work, I have attempted to situate both the Turchin Center for Visual Arts and the Office of Arts and Cultural Programs at Appalachian State University as spaces for radical change and the visioning of new futures. In acknowledging the role of these organizations within a broader Appalachian context, I posit the importance of their commitment to equitable practices and their role in expanding the existing narrative of who and what Appalachia is.

To brace this claim, in the same way I found it prudent to understand my own history and place in my community, I explored the historical significance and contemporary dialogues surrounding visual and performing arts institutions. Through this, I acquired a greater awareness of the potentially problematic practices within these arts organizations and discerned areas for improvement. In addressing this complicated history as well as the current discourse, I came to understand just how crucial it would be to continue to learn about the systems at play and about ways to subvert and decenter those that do not equitably serve our communities. Alongside my colleagues, and informed by allies and scholars in the field, we collectively constructed paths forward that center equitable and anti-racist practices. Through this thesis, I have attempted to unpack the implications of this work and have tried to be open about the limitations I face in that.

Part of the significance of this contribution lies within its incorporation of multifaceted, holistic narratives that integrate all of the ways that I, and some of the women I work with, exist in and engage with this work. By expanding upon my own artistic practice and way of seeing the interconnections of all of these lanes I occupy, I assert the importance of truth as it is connected to bell hooks' understanding of love as an essential tool for social change. You cannot be in a loving community without being truthful about all of the ways

you contribute to it. As such, I found it necessary to conduct interviews with two of the women who have contributed significantly to our arts community and who have an expansive understanding of the role we play as an arts organization. By examining their roles as leaders in our arts community, and in documenting their unique trajectories and philosophies, I seek to acknowledge and honor the impacts they have made on both me and the greater Appalachian community. As an extension of this inquiry, I invited them to create lumen prints to visualize and mediate their own visions for the future. I am grateful for their willingness to participate in that process with me, as I believe it effectively embodies the essence of this thesis: to thoughtfully consider one's impact, contributions to their community, and visions toward a just future.

In addition to these elements, I found it crucial to outline a framework for accountability as we move forward in continually activating these conversations and practices. As a foundation for that sense of accountability, I utilized bell hooks' and Shiree Teng and Sammy Nunez's concepts of love as an elemental dimension of creating communities of care. The ongoing act of open and honest dialogue allows us to keep the conversation alive and, in turn, allows us to consistently evaluate and modify our practices to ensure those practices remain equitable. To extend the possibilities of this notion, I brought in the philosophical grounding of bell hooks as an anchor which tethers us to a more expansive comprehension of love. As Teng and Nunez (2019) so poignantly write, "If we're not about love in our social and racial justice work—and holding ourselves accountable in and to that love—then we might as well be doing something else" (p. 6).

As both an analysis of the present and in looking toward the future, I will take a moment to outline my perceived shortcomings with this thesis as well as areas where I

believe I can further develop and lengthen the reach of this work. First and foremost, I wish time would have allowed for us to hire more consultants and for me to conduct more interviews. While I was able to compensate Raven for her contributions to the curatorial process and we were able to have meaningful conversations with several of our close constituents, I do believe in the importance of paying professionals who are already committed to this work of diversifying the narratives that get documented and shared. When I began this project, I did not quite have a practical understanding of the time and money required to organize and bring in outside voices or external contributors. Because of this, there are be gaps in this creative inquiry that I could not fill on my own. I have attempted to be honest and transparent about those limitations and will continue to work toward that goal. I will also continue interviewing and, hopefully, making lumen prints with folks who are interested in sharing their stories, contributions, and commitment to better futures for all. I would love to see a more polished publication of women visioning and working toward those futures, specifically in Appalachia. It would be powerful to collaboratively deliver a work outside the bounds of academic expectations and to create something that is more representative of the actual work being done—allowing for more equitable space where each woman can contribute and truly share authorship of the work.

Selfishly, I wish I had asked Denise, on the record, about what it was like to meet Gloria Steinem. I also would love to have been interviewed in such a way that allowed for my own voice to be entwined with that of Denise's and Christy's, as I think it is valuable to require the same vulnerability of yourself that you ask of those included in your projects. Related to that, I believe I could have engaged more deeply with the feminist frameworks and social justice movements that have informed me and my practice. For the sake of clarity

and creating a concise and informed vision, I did not delve into all facets of the arts organizations I work with, such as our permanent collections, overarching curatorial practices, booking processes, etc., though there is extensive research and generative dialogue surrounding those essential aspects of our operations. There are endless inspirations for this work, and, unfortunately, some of them exceed what I was able to accomplish within this thesis and in the Appalachian Studies program.

Though I recognize many of the issues present in university arts organizations will not be solved through one thesis project, I am hopeful that this effort will initiate changes that will make great strides toward creating a more equitable organization and situate us as part of a radical Appalachian future by intentionally providing a platform where artists can share their own visions for that future. Artists play a significant role in documenting and advancing the way these conversations can lead to actions that create new realities, as perfectly described by Angela Davis during a conversation with photographer Isaac Julien:

Art helps to create new terrains, interior terrains. Art makes us more susceptible to thinking about issues about which we don't necessarily have the best conceptual grasp. Art is about changing, producing something, making something out of nothing, and in a sense, that's what we're trying to do in terms of social reality. We're trying to generate new ways of experiencing our worlds and new futures. Art is the evidence that it is possible to produce something new, to create something new (Davis, 2020, 73:36).

In envisioning an organization with more equitable programming and a more thoughtful structure that considers its own position in this work, it is my hope that these “new futures” can become a reality. According to Teng and Nunez (2019), “To be sovereign and free, our people need policies made of love, forgiveness, and connections,” and as an Appalachian artist and educator who finds “love, forgiveness, and connections” in the work I do each day as a part of this organization and who intends to work hard to follow through with these initiatives in the years to come, I feel grateful for the opportunity to contribute to my community in this way (p. 2).

Figure 18

Peony



Note. Made by Shauna Caldwell. While gorgeously fragrant, peonies are also edible, can be used to alleviate pain, and often outlive the people who plant them.

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Appendix A: Interview with Denise Ringer, Director of Arts Engagement and Cultural Resources

This interview took place between Denise Ringler and Shauna Caldwell on May 26, 2021 via Zoom.

Shauna: Tell me a little bit about yourself-- who you are and how you got to where you are today.

Denise: Sure. My childhood is so much of who I am-- and I can really trace so much back to my parents. I was born in New York but did most of my growing up in Florida, and my sister and I were sometimes bored throughout our childhood with our suburban setting, but I think what gave us a wonderful childhood was my parents, because they just had such interesting paths that got them to where they were, and they both tried to break out of the structure that was set for their lives. They taught us to have lives of relevance, and it was always assumed that we would be very career driven, even though my mother wasn't able to achieve her career dreams.

My mother grew up playing the piano, and after college, at age 21, she went to New York City to study music. Her music teacher in Florida had lined up a teacher for her, a Czechoslovakian classical pianist, who was one of the best. This was during the 50s, and when my mother abruptly moved to New York, my grandmother and our whole family was mortified. They were all New Yorkers before they had moved to Florida during the Depression, so it's not as if New York was a strange place to them, but they were just really afraid about my mother being there on her own. So, my grandmother got on a train and went after her and tried to convince her to come back. And she refused but what they agreed on was that my mother would live in a boarding house run by one of my grandmother's friends, an older Jewish woman. She knew my father, who had also just moved to New York, and she ended up taking him under her wing as well. His father committed suicide at a young age, and the family kind of fell apart. He grew up in a Catholic orphanage in Canton, Ohio and

was Jewish but was never exposed to the religious traditions and never really observed, so my sister and I were not brought up with any kind of Jewish upbringing either. Despite the fact that my mother was NOT Jewish, the woman who owned the boarding house ended up serving as the matchmaker for my parents, who married pretty quickly after they met. My mother ultimately gave up her career aspirations and chose marriage and family over career, as happened so often for women in the 50s. My father got a job in Rome, New York, where I was born, and after that, we moved to Florida.

We had a wonderful childhood because of the family life my parents created for us. They exposed us to the arts at a very early age, and they were very progressive. My mother was from a conservative family but rejected many of those ideas, and my father was from a very liberal background. My parents were very much opposed to the war in Vietnam--- and were passionate about their opposition. They were also very supportive of the protest movements of the 60s and 70s. They didn't shelter us from difficult ideas, and we talked about them in lively dinner conversations. My sister and I often disagreed with my father, especially on Israel, because he was kind of wired to think that Israel could do no wrong, and we were always talking about the Palestinians and Israel, but it was okay to have a debate with my parents about that. They encouraged us to think independently.

Despite her traditional role as a housewife, my mother embraced feminist ideology way before her time. She wouldn't let my sister and I play with Barbie dolls because she felt they objectified women. At the time, my sister and I felt our mother was narrow-minded about that, but we later realized that she was way ahead of her time. (Our friends ended up giving us Barbies for our birthdays because they felt sorry for us). It was really wonderful being raised by parents like that. They also encouraged my sister and I to leave St.

Petersburg, Florida, which we did when we went to school. It was all of this that shaped my perspective and gave me confidence to follow my own dreams in life. There was always the sense that I could do whatever I wanted, as long as I was willing to work hard.

Shauna: So, obviously your mother was really artistic and talented-- is that what inspired your passion for the arts?

Denise: Yes, I'm sure it did. My parents' interest in the arts was very traditional, however. We grew up attending symphony, as well as opera, ballet and the theatre. My mother was strictly a classical musician and when I wanted to play Led Zeppelin as a teenager, she did not approve. She hated it so much that my sister and I never even put on the radio to listen to rock and roll when my parents were anywhere nearby because they had such a strong reaction to it. We went to museums, but didn't have much exposure to contemporary visual art. They weren't as focused on the visual arts, so I really didn't have that strong foundation in it. When I was on my own, and especially because I ended up living in New York and Boston, I had access to wonderful museums, and I felt like I started my visual arts education at that point. So, I was a late bloomer when it came to that area of my arts education, and I really regret that. After my (husband-to-be) William and I met, even though we were living in different cities we would often get together on the weekends, and we spent a lot of time in museums. We also loved the art film houses in Boston and Cambridge. Near the Harvard campus, they were extremely popular in the 80s. There was a huge Indian community living in Cambridge, around Central Square, and at Harvard, and they would present free classical Indian concerts on the weekends that would go on for three hours, where people would just

go into a room, and you would just kind of become entranced by the music. It was an amazing experience to sit for that long, listening to Eastern music and being completely hypnotized by it. I loved this exposure to the Eastern arts and to independent and foreign film.

Shauna: So, what did you do when you left Florida? How did you get to the work you were doing in New York?

Denise: So, the pathway began with college, which I chose based on my desire for a completely different physical environment. I wanted to be in the mountains, so I chose Western Carolina because it was the North Carolina school that was the most remote-- deeply steeped in the mountains. I thought about Appalachian State, but it was a little bit bigger than Western, and I wanted a smaller school. For me, it was all about just wanting to experience the mountain culture and understand it better. As a social work major, I ended up being able to do two different internships, one of which took me into remote rural communities. I ended up working for the CAP agency, an anti-poverty agency based in Waynesville, and ended up being able to work with people who lived in the most remote areas of the region.

The one that was most memorable to me was called Little Canada. Many of the older residents lived in extreme poverty, in tar paper shacks that were freezing in winter. The agency would bring in work teams to help insulate their houses and would assist them in applying for programs like SSI and Food Stamps. I spent time with them, got to know them, and ended up going to dances on Saturday nights that were sponsored by the community. I remember cake walks, which were very popular. It was like stepping back in time 100 years.

I was totally enamored by how independent and proud they were, despite the hardship of their lives. I felt honored to have a glimpse of what it meant to live in a community like that. The experience of being in that culture and immersing myself in it was really rewarding to me.

Right after college, I wanted to focus on community organizing and ended up joining ACORN, which is a network of community organizers that has been discredited in recent years because of corruption within the organization. But back in those days when it was first started it was a Saul Alinsky-type community organizing model focused on sending organizers into low-income communities and empowering communities to speak for themselves and to develop leadership within their own communities. It was all about facilitating the development of leadership in low-income communities so that people could take control of their own lives. The communities where I was assigned were in Denver, CO and Davenport, IA.

Shauna: What happened next? What did you move on to after Acorn?

Denise: Immediately after that I went to grad school at Florida State and got my master's in social work, with a concentration in non-profit management and community organizing. During those years, the work that led to the formation of the Green Party was just getting going, and it was based in Vermont. Bernie Sanders was involved in the movement, and they were running candidates for State Assembly in Vermont, and they were getting people elected, and I thought it was really exciting. Although my parents were lifelong Liberal Democrats, I also saw that the two-party system and a lot of the social policies were not

impacting low-income communities or changing the basic economic system. They were still basically embedded in a corporate capitalist structure that didn't seem to allow for a system of economic justice. So, I was really enamored with independent politics and ended up applying for a position as the State Organizer for the New York Citizens Party, based in Albany, NY. They ran a fellow named Barry Commoner for president on a straight environmental ticket. He was a professor at Queens College in New York. I ended up going to Queens College for my interview and after getting the job, moved to Albany. My job was to travel around to all the different chapters of the Citizens Party, across the state, and provide support for them. I slept on a lot of couches in those days and it was most definitely a grassroots organization. I remember telling my parents that my first job after grad school came with a salary (stipend) of \$3,000. Fortunately, they helped me financially! It was a really interesting time. I remember one really bizarre meeting where the people on the board thought that the Citizens Party group should meet with the Socialist Party of America to see where our platforms intersected. So, I remember sitting in some loft in New York City with a bunch of the Socialist Party leaders, talking about who we might want to nominate to run for president, and thinking, "Oh my god, this could just not be more bizarre. My parents would freak out." You know, there were tons of parties like that in those days. There was a Communist Party, there was a Communist Workers Party, there was a Socialist Party, plus several others, and none of them could get along with each other. There was always fighting, and the leaders, who were mostly male, were pretty unyielding. Women in the organization were not really a part of this. They would often be in the background, in the kitchen making coffee and having their own side conversations, and I quickly discovered I was so much more

comfortable being with them, than with the men who were vying to be the loudest voices in the room.

But it was an interesting exercise for me about one of your questions which is how men and women work differently. Even when they're passionate about causes, they have different ways of working with that passion, and for the women, their politics were often personal. Some of them, for instance, were really struggling with the pro-choice position, given their religious upbringings. They were often put down by the men for having those feelings, and it was very eye-opening for me to see how unforgiving they were, and how inconsistent this behavior seemed for a group that claimed to be about humanism and compassion.

After leaving the Citizens Party, I moved to western Massachusetts and took a job with the Women's Services Center in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in the Berkshires. I served as the coordinator of their domestic violence program and worked with a team of crisis counselors. We served women who were victims of abuse and connected them with lawyers, if they wanted to fight their cases, as well as safe housing, counseling and support. During those years there was no battered women's shelter in that part of the state and some of the batterers were police officers, so it was a scary situation for women who fought back with restraining orders or who chose to prosecute their husbands or partners. I was there during the early years of the effort to build a battered women's shelter, which is now called the Elizabeth Freeman House.

After that I moved further east and got a job in Boston working for a group called Project Bread, which raised money for the network of soup kitchens around Boston. I worked for the advocacy arm of the organization which connected low-income families to food and

nutrition programs, and worked to change policy at the statewide level. A lot of the soup kitchens were run by churches, and many of them were based in the Black communities of Boston-- mostly Dorchester and Roxbury. The director of that program was amazing, a woman I greatly admired. She was a public health expert, and she really understood childhood nutrition programs and policies. Her expertise earned credibility for our work with policy-makers at the statewide level, which was wonderful to be a part of. We ran a hotline for those seeking help, and it was heart-breaking to talk with women who were feeding their kids popcorn just to fill their stomachs, or who lived in “welfare hotels” with their kids, and no refrigerator to even keep cold milk on hand for their kids. But it was gratifying to be able to work on that policy level, too, so I wasn't just feeling like I was putting band-aids on problems. That organization ended up dissolving. Project Bread went on, but the work that we were doing as policy advocates was no longer supported. The board became very conservative, and they felt that the organization’s funds should be directed solely to fundraising and to the charitable arm of the organization, rather than the policy end of things.

The director I admired so much ended up quitting, and I didn't stay much longer after that because I felt the steam had gone out of why I was there. After that, I ended up working for a few years at a place called Sherrill House which was a long-term care facility that was run by the Episcopal church. I worked there for a few years, in a development job doing fundraising for them. I was at a transition point-- not sure what was next.

At that point, I was still in Boston, and William was working in Albany. We had met in college, but for about 15 years we lived in different places because our career paths never intersected, but we were close enough that we could drive a few hours and see each other, so we remained closely connected. At that point, we were both ready to leave big city life.

William's family was in North Carolina. My father spent the last 5 years of his career with USAID, working in Kenya and Liberia, but was getting ready to retire and move to the mountains of NC. We were in our mid 30s by that point. My biological clock was ticking, and we wanted to have children. We decided to move back to North Carolina, get married and chose Ashe County, where we bought a little farm and changed up our lives, becoming back-to-landers for a few years. William built greenhouses and we grew basil and tomatoes and trucked them down to Greensboro. We loved the challenges and life-style of farming but it was clearly NOT financially sustainable! We had my daughter Emma by then, and wanted to be in a slightly larger place. We moved to Boone, where I was lucky enough to get a job in arts marketing at App State. William built the house in Valle Crucis that we're living in now, and soon after, Jeremy was born. So, obviously, you know the rest.

Shauna: Did you ever make art? Do you consider yourself an artist?

Denise: I do not. The closest I came to even thinking about it that way would have been playing the piano through college, and studying dance, which I've always loved. I have always been someone who loves supporting artists and arts programming, but do not identify as an artist myself.

Shauna: What do you love about directing a nonprofit organization?

Denise: Well, I think probably first and foremost, that nonprofit organizations are driven by a mission and not a marketing drive. If we were a for-profit organization, our priorities would,

by necessity, be much different. And so, I've never chosen to work in a for-profit realm because the “why” of what I do has always been just as important, or more important, than the “what.” For me it’s about working in an arts organization where the patrons who support it care as much about other people having access to it as they do, and who understand that the arts need to be for everyone and that they can't be tied to economic status. And here at Appalachian I feel like we've had the ability to live that mission and present our programs that way. That’s very much part of the narrative of what we do, and it's why people support us financially. When you talk to most donors who give to the arts, they will tell you that they give to it because they want it to be accessible to everyone and they want young people to enjoy access to the arts from a young age. So, that's probably the biggest thing for me. I also think that the arts have the ability to make us think, and to support social movements and change, by inspiring dialog and by tapping into something deep within us that we all have in common. There’s also an emotional element that is generated by the arts. I think of the photograph of the young girl in the early 70s escaping her village after the aerial napalm attack in Vietnam. That piece of photojournalism was one of the things that changed American’s thinking about the war. There's such tremendous power in that. But I think all of the arts have that ability. We see it with artists like Anna Deavere Smith, who uses her voice as an artist to get us thinking in a different way.

I also love working in a team setting with staff who share a common purpose. I enjoy seeing people become part of a team and finding their voices within a team. I strive to create and promote non-hierarchical systems and to promote a sense of equality and collegiality. I also find it rewarding to work in settings where people care for each other and help each other meet goals that are important to them. And I must admit that I also love raising money

when it's for a cause I'm passionate about. I always stayed away from fundraising in my "former life," but in my later career, I've seen the impact it has on the work we're able to accomplish. If we are successful financially, then we will be able to have that freedom to do work that's really important.

Shauna: Can you talk about how your background in community organizing and social work has influenced the way that you approach your work as a director?

Denise: I think, obviously, it has some to do with the fact that art is a tool for social change, but I think beyond that, it really has to do with power and control and how decision-making happens. I've always been inspired by an empowerment model in which multiple people on a team can be "leaders" in their own way, and have a voice in building a strong team. The collective knowledge, judgment and wisdom of the group builds a much stronger team than relying on one all-powerful "leader." We live in a world where people want one boss: one "strong leader," whether it's a man or a woman, who acts decisively. I think we do better when we break away from those structures and rely more on collective structures and consensus decision-making. And we have so much work to get done that, I feel like sometimes in the interest of time, I do storm ahead, and I go back into that traditional model - but in the end, I believe decisions are better when they're made collectively. I also think that shared leadership is so much more sustainable, in that new leaders are continuously being cultivated for the future.

Shauna: Looking back at how you approach your work and being informed by your career in organizing and social work, do you see those things informing the way we're approaching anti-racist work and the equitable practices that we're moving towards?

Denise: It does, but I also feel like there's a huge barrier there, and it's the fact that we are a predominately white organization and simply cannot do this work effectively until we become more diverse. The challenge for us is to change from within and until we achieve that change, to form connections with people who can partner with us to do this work-- i.e., building allies and knowing what the limits of our abilities are as a predominately white organization. So, while I feel like we're not making progress as quickly as I would hope, I also wouldn't want to see us storming ahead with a vision that doesn't include those allies. I think we're getting there. I think it starts by hiring a more diverse staff, working with diverse artists, which I believe we're starting to do but it will require continued growth. And of course, continuing to serve audiences who represent diverse constituencies. That will happen if we do a good job on the programming side. Audience-building will eventually spawn leadership from the communities we're serving, and then things can really begin to change. It's a long process that doesn't happen overnight.

Shauna: In that same vein, how do you consider the sustainability of that process and the practices we're moving towards? What inspires you to keep going when it is going to take a long time to get there?

Denise: That's a really good point. We DO know it's not going to happen overnight. But I do think that until we can become more diverse, we can hire the right people and the right leaders: those who have the passion and vision to get us there. And those who are not driven by ego, but by values and vision. I hope that the arts can continue to value collective decision-making, because I believe that this is a model where diversity will thrive and in which all voices will be heard and appreciated. It won't matter if we hire a diverse staff and operate with a top-down organizational structure.

Shauna: Do you think being a woman has impacted the way you approach your work?

Denise: You know, I think we as women tend to not be as reluctant to jump into the trenches and get our hands dirty. We're accustomed to doing work of all kinds, and we understand the value of work and the value that all tasks are important. So, I think there's a view of equality that kind of comes from the women's experience of work-- and valuing all kinds of work which means (hopefully) that we value every position on our team-- whether it's someone who's an entry-level person who's just out of college starting a new job or someone who's been here for 30 years. I also think that women tend to value the balance with other things in their lives, and understand the demands that come from caregiving in our families, whether it's for children or older family members. Women tend to have an innate sense of egalitarian structure that makes them more accepting of non-hierarchical organizational structure. I think they tend to think in a more circular than linear fashion about things, which provides them with a different kind of world-view. And I think women are used to thanking each other more and expressing appreciation for each other.

Shauna: That definitely makes sense, and that kind of ties into something that I've been thinking about with bell hooks and her work with feminist educative spaces and communities of care and the idea of love being embedded into that-- and the idea of love as not this weird thing that exists only in romantic relationships but as a way of truth and as a way of being transparent and recognizing a whole person. It sounds kind of similar to what you're saying about that holistic way of looking at things.

Denise: I think that's a really beautiful idea. She's amazing. I mean when you look at Gloria Steinem, too, you know-- even in that biopic that you and I watched about her-- it was so interesting to me to see how she was a reluctant leader, in many ways. She didn't want to be on the cover of Newsweek, and she didn't want to be the voice of the "movement." She wanted to create a community of women--- and she certainly did, but there was always such tremendous pressure on her to be the public "face." So, I do think we have many great feminist role models who have worked that way and really wanted to be part of something much larger than themselves. It's wonderful to be able to turn to their examples, in thinking about how to approach our work lives.

Shauna: Is there anything else about your experience as an arts administrator that you'd like to say-- anything that you've learned or just advice for those of us who are just coming into the field?

Denise: I think when I first came into this work, I didn't think as much about the financial independence part of it, and I think being at the university and seeing how the arts have earned more respect because we've raised money is very interesting to me. The work we've done in the arts here at the university has always been intrinsically valuable, but I remember 30 years ago, we were really struggling financially, and we weren't sure that we were going to have a balanced budget. For a lot of years, we didn't-- and the university kind of carried us along. I do think that one of the things I've learned is that sometimes if you're successful in the way that people expect you to be, then it gives you kind of a ticket to then be successful in the ways you want to be. And it's also wonderful NOT to be as dependent on the university, and to know that we can raise money for the work we care about, from people who share our values and vision. The key thing is to remember that we're raising money as a means to an end: the mission that is at the heart of what we do in the arts and that it's the mission that drives everything else.

Shauna: Do you have a vision for the future of the arts at Appalachian? What does that look like?

Denise: It has several different elements. Certainly, being strong, independent and self-sustaining. Being able to take artistic risks and not avoid difficult or challenging ideas, content or art forms. Continuing to build trust with our audiences and supporters, which means a continued focus on relationship-building and *listening* to them (i.e., not losing touch with our constituents and supporters). Building community by supporting arts programming that brings people together, not just physically but to explore ideas and discover common

ground. Continued audience-building among children and young people. (The APPlause Program and other arts education programming is so perfectly poised to do this, given its enormous success in recent years!) Connecting the arts to higher values such as social, racial, economic justice. Becoming more diverse as a staff and continuing to empower our staff and value their unique accomplishments. Continuing to value a non-hierarchical work structure and collective decision-making. And a really critical one: inspiring young leadership and potential in our office, so the “next generation” of arts leaders can achieve goals and dreams that weren’t necessarily within the reach of those who preceded them!

Appendix B: Interview with Christy Chenausky, Director of Arts Education and Outreach

This interview took place between Christy Chenausky and Shauna Caldwell on June 8, 2021 via Zoom.

Shauna: Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and how you got to where you are today?

Christy: Sure, although I feel like it's been a winding road and not necessarily a direct path. I think about it a lot-- that I didn't even know jobs like this existed, really. I didn't necessarily want to grow up and be an actor, I just always really liked it-- I liked being involved. I guess it started as dancing. My sister was taking dance classes. She's two years older than me, and they didn't allow children younger than five to take dance classes, and I was three. So, I got taken to the dance classes because I was just there with my mom, and I would stand in the waiting room, which was basically in the doorway of the dance studio, beside the ballet bar and just mirrored what everybody in the class was doing. One day after class, Miss Linda, my dance teacher, said to my mom, "If you don't tell anybody that she's not five, you may as well let her come into the studio." So, I danced with those girls for the next 10 years, but I was always the littlest one. So, I got pushed to the front a lot because I was shortest. I think that I figured out how to sort of do my thing on my own and in the front like that.

From there, I was interested in learning how to act and even did a ridiculous stint of beauty pageants. I wanted to be in commercials, and because I grew up so close to DC and Baltimore, there were a lot of places that I could go. I just had a mom that was willing to drive me to dance classes, acting classes, and voice lessons. She found some woman who was a former opera singer who would teach me singing lessons in her little apartment over a storefront there now. I sang almost exclusively Joni Mitchell songs. My sister and I did a few silly Gershwin duets, but overall, I was exposed to a lot of art. Also, growing up where I did, we went to the Smithsonian for field trips probably three times a year beginning in early elementary school. And what we did with my grandma was go see plays. I can remember almost every time we went to DC, we would check out what was happening at the Ford

theater. We went to New York City every year and saw a Broadway show. We were just interested in doing that kind of thing. And then probably by the time I was in high school, I wanted to go see concerts and that kind of thing but I never really thought about the people that worked there like how I'm thinking about it now.

I guess I grew up just being interested in the arts, and by the end of high school I thought I'd like to be a drama teacher. So, I ended up at Lees McRae because it was one of the few schools that offered a joint major in theater arts and education. And back in those days, the Barron's book of colleges was how you could search what the majors were. My mom had gone through the whole thing and had called the people at Lees McRae to ask about the program, and instead of giving away promotional material, they sent her the course catalog. So, we could see what the whole plan was, and I wasn't really that interested because the course catalog had this stock photo-- that I'm sure you've seen on the side of grandfather mountain where there are two very small people on the side of a mountain and the clouds are a good bit below them, and they're just on the side of this rock-- I was like, "No, there are like two people there. I do not want to go there." But I, for whatever reason, thought North Carolina would be a good place to go to college. So, when we were coming to see a couple of other schools, my mom said, "If we're going there, we've got to see Lees McRae." So, we spent the day there, and it was nice and friendly, and I met with the department chairs in theater and in education.

When I got home, I had a voicemail from a woman, who ended up being my mentor in college, just following up to see if I had any questions about my tour. These were the people that I would be having the most classes with, and they were also in charge of a lot of things going on, but they still took time to sit down with me and learn about who I was and

how I might fit into their program. So anyway, I went to Lees McRae. And that was super great except that it was a very realistic experience of what it would be like to work in theater-- which is, basically, never seeing the daylight and never having evenings off. We just worked all the time and double majoring was even like a bigger dose of that. So, by the time I was finished and had done my student teaching and did everything I came there to do, I just kind of wanted to take a break from it.

I did end up teaching theater at a few elementary schools, and that's how I really got involved in understanding arts integration in a way that I hadn't before. I was able to work with two different teams of teachers and principals-- because I worked at two different schools-- and the ways that they worked on integrating the arts into the classroom every single day. One school was a model for how you do that very well, and at the other school, the principal would just say, "I don't know what you're doing, but everybody loves it so good job," and I don't think it had the same impact as the other school where we were able to build a really meaningful classroom time where the kids would be like, "How did you know that we're studying that and social studies!" And then, I would ask them some vocabulary words that they were learning in their other classes and then we built that into what we were doing. I can remember the fourth graders especially being really into it because that was when they had to prepare for a serious writing test, probably the first time that they would have been tested like that, and so we were practicing writing scripts, and that was all part of them practicing writing and thinking of different ways that you can write. And those kids were so creative. So, anyway, it was really exciting.

But it was also part-time work. I was working in two schools. I saw every child in two schools in two and a half days a week. And at the same time, I was working part time at

my church doing youth ministry. At the end of that school year, the person doing children's ministry left. So, the elders said we can make you a full-time staff person, and if you want to go to seminary, we will pay for that. So, I did that because the school basically said they might be able to do one more year of me just working my tail off. And it was like both part time jobs were double full-time jobs anyway. So, I opted to go with just the church, and I worked at the church for about eight years. I don't have my M. Div. but I could have. I got just a certificate in youth and family ministry, which was really interesting in a lot of ways, and it was a really fantastic experience, so I'm glad I did that.

So anyway, when Brad and I got married, we thought we would live in Charlotte. So, we tried it, and it was awful. I mean, living there was kind of fun, but he was burned out at his job, and I wasn't having any luck finding work there. We got married in the middle of 2007, so the economy was starting to tank. I wanted to work for an arts organization, and arts organizations were kind of tightening their belt at that point, in preparation for what they knew was coming. At the end of the day, we moved back to the mountains because this is where we had connections and friends and it seemed like it would be easier for us. At the same time, a position opened up at the Arts Council for a Community Arts Education Coordinator. When I read the position description, it was basically to collaborate between the Arts Council, the school district, and the university to make programs happen for K-12 students in Watauga County, and then to manage these different kinds of programs like a residency program, a touring arts program... It was working as the connector between these three organizations and making these programs happen, and I was like, "Bingo! I'm your girl!" I had never read a description that was more suited for me. That job was really good for me, I feel like, in helping me put to use all of the skills that are just kind of born in me,

and also skills that I think I've worked hard to gain. So, it helped position me so that when the Arts Council was changing its vision of where it was prioritizing its programs, they weren't going to do the programs that I felt most passionate about. At that point, the university was like, "Well, we would like to keep doing this." So, that's sort of where that transition happened. In 2012, I came to the university and some of the programs that we do now at the university were started in almost like an incubator for Watauga County Schools and arts programming.

After working at the university for a while, I started seeing a bigger and better vision for how all of what we're working on now might come down to, and even though I felt like I had a lot of good experience in doing all of it, I know that working for a university means having an advanced degree. So, in 2016 and 17, I did a really intensive master's program in arts administration. It was really good for me, and I was able to use my class time to do some strategic planning for the Turchin Center's programs because at that time I was newly getting involved in the Turchin Center's programming. When I first started working at the university, my main focus was just on performing arts, then that grew into what it is now which I feel like is like equally huge parts—performing arts and visual arts. For a long time, it was just me doing it.

At the same time, I'm moving to town and having Clara. And it's all about continuing to learn, honestly, different aspects of the community that I work in. And because of being Clara's parent, I'm now involved in communications with groups that I have always heard about but didn't know a lot about. And I was just thinking this weekend-- I got a newsletter from one of the groups that acts as a support group to parents with kids with disabilities with some of the things they do that are so nice-- I was thinking that I had a concept of what those

groups did, but really being invited to be involved in what they're doing just helps me see the depth of the reach that they have in our community. Anyway, that's something that I feel like, the more you learn, the more you find you need to learn.

Shauna: I would love to hear you talk about when you wrote plays and made work—what was that about and do you still find time to be creative or make art?

Christy: I don't even know to be honest with you. When I was in college, I acted and I sang and I danced and I did all that stuff. I directed and I wrote plays and I was the stage manager and I helped hang the lights and I ran the soundboard, and that's just part of being a student at Lees McRae. When I was there, there were about 60 students in the theater and dance department, but we called it Performing Arts. And that was one of the biggest departments on campus at that time. It was maybe a fifth of the school. I think I remember one semester we did eight shows—and we did all of that for each show. The only play I really remember writing in detail-- I know I wrote more than just like one play-- but the only one I can really think of writing, beginning to end, and casting it and directing it and bringing it around, was about women in the Bible... telling their real stories because a lot of times, the women in the Bible, they're some of the most important figures, but their stories are only told as “wife of this person”, even though they were the spiritual anchor for an entire town, but then they’re remembered as wife of whoever. So, I was interested in just imagining who they were as real people and telling their story-- just basically showing that it wasn't just somebody's wife but that the networks of women in the Bible are really the ones that get the story told, that make

the story happen. We went to a few churches that were nice enough to have us, and we performed a few scenes from it.

Honestly, I feel like that's a big foundation of my approach to all of my work is not feeling like I can only do this one thing, you know? I honestly think that the work that I do and making the thing happen is the same for me. And that's the part that I've always really liked. I like helping make things happen. So, that's the part that has always been exciting to me.

Shauna: Do you think that being a woman is impacted the work you do?

Christy: I guess so. I hadn't really ever thought about it but my parents were supportive, and I think that, for as many opportunities as they offered, we were definitely working class. Actually, my next-door neighbor growing up said to me at some point during college, "I always thought until I got to college that we were upper-middle class because of where we came from, but then when I got to college, I realized, like oh, we're definitely lower-middle class at best. Maybe even upper-lower class if that's a thing." So, I think like that has always sort of stuck with me as a really funny because it's true kind of thing. My parents were super supportive, though. They didn't fully understand the arts world-- that was kind of a funky concept to them, but they were open to it. My parents were not totally progressive, but they were totally loving and they wanted to support me and my sister in whatever way they could. They would say to us really often, "As long as you're happy, then that's the goal in life. If you have a great job, but you're miserable, that is not the goal. So, do what makes you happy and you'll find a way to make a living at it." And that's the thing my parents said to me and my

whole life. And I don't know if I had been born a boy, if I would have been presented with the opportunities that I had, or if they would have been as open to me pursuing any kind of dancing or singing or acting.

And I, honestly, feel like my whole life has just been building on itself. So that's kind of where it starts for me. It's the things I exposed myself to as a young person and the things I continued to be interested in as I grew up. I feel like it maybe would have been a completely different trajectory if I hadn't been female. You know, most of my favorite artists growing up were always women. I liked the concept of Lilith Fair because it was like sticking it to the man, in a way. I don't think I would have thought about that if I were just like, some dude.

And just the whole scope of arts administrators-- I mean we're mostly white ladies from mostly a middle-class background. I've thought this a lot about a lot in the past couple of years-- like, why is that? I mean, why aren't there more people of color? Why aren't there more men in our field? I think it's because it's easier for middle class parents to say to their little girls, "Do what makes you happy and you'll find a way." You know, and we can believe that. I believed my parents when they said, "Just do whatever makes you happy because you can be happy and eat beans and rice. That's fine. You'll figure that out, and then a door will open for you, and you'll walk through it. You'll be ready." I think that's maybe easier for people to believe when they come from my part of the world. I have never really concerned myself with making the most money or being the best or being real competitive in a way-- on the contrary, I think, in our field, the less competitive, and the more collaborative, the more successful. But I do know a lot of men that work in the arts that are incredibly hard working and are not afraid to sweep the theater.

Shauna: Can you talk a little bit about the APPlause! Series, and how it's changed and grown over the years?

Christy: The APPlause! Series grew out of what we called the Touring Arts Program which was only for Watauga County students. And I always sort of thought while I was administering the Touring Arts Program, I think mainly because I was living in Avery County and I knew some of the people that ran the Arts Council, I knew that there really wasn't a lot of programming that was accessible to kids that lived in Avery County. So, I just assumed that in surrounding counties, there were similar situations where, sure they could go see a play, but it would be a two-hour bus ride. And then, it's like, if you're a teacher and you're going to go to Greensboro, are you really just going to go see the symphony or would you rather hit up a science museum? It's a hard choice. So, I guess I thought if we could make it closer and easier, then maybe it wouldn't be an either/or-type decision for teachers and principals, but they would feel like they have more flexibility to choose the arts as a field trip. So, we took that year that the Schaefer Center was making its transition from Farthing Auditorium, and we did a lot of planning. We connected with the College of Ed and when I'm saying "we," it was me and Denise, basically. We met with the Dean of the College of Ed, and he was the one who had written the multi-million-dollar grant that started the arts integrated A+ schools in western North Carolina. His background was in Elementary Ed, and he was close, personal friends with Eric Carle, and his whole way of thinking was that the arts were a tool for teaching, and that every kid should have had access to those tools. He led a group of superintendents from districts all over and really encouraged us and gave us a

platform to talk to those superintendents about what we were thinking. So, they helped us form when we offered it, how we offered it, and how much we charged. Out of that group, several of those superintendents asked me to come and speak to their leadership at their County District meetings. And I think that was really what made the start of the APPlause! Series successful-- and we actually thought it was super successful to have as many people as were there in the first year or two. And now, you know, it's so many more students and teachers that come. It's really hard to believe, but it's been like nine years since we started having those conversations.

When we first started doing the APPlause! Series, we did make a real push for getting students from neighboring counties, as well as Watauga County students, and helping them understand that it was something they could take part in. And it was really important to me to give that resource to those folks. So, the APPlause! Series has always been a mix of theater, dance, and music, and has been performances that are appropriate for kindergarten through 12th grade but with a with a serious focus on K-8 and kind of a mix of performances that we would feature on the evening series, the Schaefer Center Presents, but also performances that are just professional performers for young audiences.

And then, I feel like it's important for the university's sake to kind of talk some about what's happening on our university campus. Looking at academic arts areas at the university, giving them a place to showcase the work that they're doing in the academic areas.

Shauna: What are some of your favorite things about the APPlause! Series and what it accomplishes?

Christy: My favorite things about the APPlause! Sereies are introducing kids, of whatever age, to the idea of live performance and giving them that experience of feeling the energy that's in the room with a live performance which I feel like is not really something you can have on a screen. Making and allowing that experience for kids who maybe wouldn't have had the opportunity to have that experience for any other reason, and just helping them feel like they can do that, too. They can be a part of that, too.

In 2014, we had a dance company come and do a performance and a residency. And it was in January, and it snowed on the morning of the performance. We had a bunch of schools that were on too-many-hour delays to actually make it to the performance, so we had a bunch of cancellations that morning. We decided to just seat everybody in the order that they came. We usually have these really in-depth seating charts and we've got it all planned out, but this time we knew we were going to have just a small group of people. So, we seated them in the center section down front. There was a big group that came from a school that was part of a juvenile detention center, so everybody who went to that school was state mandated to go to there, and they had never been to a performance before. And they were all 13 to 17 year old boys. They were seated in the front few rows, and Tracy Tardiff, who I work with really closely, and who does a lot of tours following performances and that sort of thing, she was doing that with them in the afternoon and came to meet them because she likes watching the show with the group that she's going to be doing the tour with. She said she's sitting next to these young guys, and they were just squirming in their chairs and acting really nervous. And she couldn't figure out why they would be so nervous. So, she said to them, "You seem like you're nervous. Why are you so nervous?" And they said, "We don't really know what's going to happen. We've never done this before. Are the people going to be

standing right there? And what are we supposed to do?” They were so afraid that they were going to do the wrong thing, and they'd be sitting there right in front of everyone, and then they would look silly because they're sitting in the front so the people behind them could see them. They just didn't want to do it the wrong way. So, letting them have that kind of experience is the kind of thing I really love. She said when they left that they were like, “That was so cool!”

And then she took them on a tour where she starts and ends with, “How many of you thought about going to college?” and she ends the tour the same way. When she started that tour, she said no one raised their hand, and she's never had a tour where no one raised their hand. By the end of the tour, three of those kids asked her for campus map, so that when their parents came to visit them, they could share it with them and show them where they wanted to go to college. So, those kinds of things, I feel like, make it really worthwhile. You know, just making the campus feel like an approachable place is an important part of doing the APPlause! Series--

helping people feel comfortable coming into a room full of velvet seats.

Shauna: Yeah, I think it's so cool that I came to it when it was through the Arts Council when I was little, and that was the only time I was ever on campus.

Christy: And that's true for a lot of kids.

Shauna: Yeah, and you sometimes tell the story about seeing Peter Pan... I feel like that kind of experience, to know that those things happen and is something you can do is so powerful.

Christy: Yeah, and I think that Peter Pan moment was really important because it was like magic that happened, but I understood that it wasn't actual magic even though I was only five or six, and I understood that it was a woman dressed as Peter Pan on a little rope pulley. I understood all of that, but it was just the magic of seeing Sandy Duncan fly over the audience and onto the stage and that surprise. It's just that kind of thing like, "Yes!" I want to make people go, "Wow! She just flew in here." I mean I understood she didn't really fly, but I think it was just the experience of seeing it happen and the collective response of the room. It was exciting. It was just that kind of magic that happens in a performance.

Shauna: You talked a little bit about this with the APPlause! Series, but how do the arts at Appalachian, specifically arts education and outreach, compare to when you first started working here? What has changed?

Christy: So, honestly when we first started doing education and outreach to the K 12 community, not everybody was on board. I don't think it's really a question anymore, though. I feel like everybody feels pretty confident that it is a good thing to do and an important thing and like we should be the ones to do it. But when we first started doing it, there was a lot of, "Should we really be doing this?" And there were a lot of conversations of, "Is this really something we can talk about, or is this something we know is the right thing to do and so we're just going to do it?" I think that's probably the biggest difference.

Erskine Bowles, who was the president of the University of North Carolina schools in, I guess, the mid 2000s—he wrote, I don't know if it was a strategic planning, or strategic

goals vision-type thing, but in that he mentioned that one of the main jobs, one of the most important jobs of the university system is outreach to K 12 schools-- basically introducing the concept of the university through the public school system. And I think that was the beginning of changing the tides on how comfortable we were about sort of talking about what we were doing. And not just doing it because it seemed like the right thing to do.

Shauna: How do you see the work that we're doing towards equitable practices and accessibility intertwined with the work that we do in education and outreach?

Christy: I guess I don't really see it as separate at all. I feel like if we have the responsibility of

hosting the platform from which artists can share their work and their lives, and, as an organization, our interest is in letting all people have a voice and helping people to see beyond their own lenses that they were born into the world with. From the perspective of education and outreach, we maybe have even more of an obligation to do that because our audience is a true cross section of our community. And I think that the audience that can afford tickets to the evening series maybe it isn't a true cross section of our community, so they might see themselves reflected back from the stage a vision of who they are, in a way that our audience is not going to if all we show are people who look like me, then that's not reflecting back to our audience what they look like and what their voices are. The best way that we can educate is always by example and by modeling and if we can't do that from our corner of the world, or the university, then I don't know who can. I feel like it starts with us. So, to me personally, I feel like it's really important and exciting to show students that their

world is bigger than what they've been exposed to. And for those kids that might look different, or talk different, or feel different, that they can see that they're not alone in feeling those ways and having those experiences, but feeling like they are part of something that is bigger than what they can see around them. I feel like that's an important thing that we can put out there.

Shauna: Do you have a vision for the future of arts education and outreach at Appalachian? What does that look like?

Christy: Yeah, I do actually. After this year that we've had, it's been a little bit difficult to think about having the momentum that we had prior to March 2020. Some of the groups that we serve, we're going to have to be rethinking some of the ways we serve them. Not so much the kind of art that we expose them to, but I just feel like we're all kind of different now. I do have a lot of ideas of what I think about for my vision for the future of all the arts education aspects of the arts at Appalachian, and, in really basic general terms that you already know, is just the involvement of our university students and helping to enrich our programs by offering them more practical experiences. And I think we're probably closer to doing that than we ever have been before, but it still feels like kind of a far reach.

Some of the things that have happened over the last however many months have put up some roadblocks that wouldn't have been there if we hadn't just been through this crisis. I do feel like the pandemic may have set us back some from being able to easily access schools or feel really comfortable sending university students to schools, or having those K-8 children come to campus. So, all of that has made things a lot more difficult than it would

have been if we hadn't had this happen. But, I really want university students to be able to visit classrooms prior to an APPlause! Series performance and teach lessons from the study guide to help prepare students to come to campus and for what they are going to see. Especially with elementary school kids and middle school kids, they're going to enjoy something a lot more if they know what's going to happen and they have time to think about what comes next. All of Clara's favorite shows have good little catchphrases-- there's a cartoon that she watches where the main character is going to do something that he's never done before. So, the mom comes up with a little song, and the gist of it is, "When you're going to do something new, let's talk about what we'll do." And I feel like, honestly, kids in general just really want to understand what's happening.

I talked with a guy who does a program similar to the APPlause! Series but in San Francisco. He works for one of the state universities in California, and they have a performing arts venue, but 75% of their audience walks to their performances. So, they're just in a place where stuff is a lot closer, and they have a program that is really robust with students that go into the schools and teach the performance's study guide. They have certain lessons that they practice, and then they have this real, practical experience of being in a school, working with kids, and a basic understanding of classroom management, in a way that they really wouldn't have otherwise. The other side of that is that they students are better prepared for the performance when they come, and they're talking about coming to the performance for a period of time leading up to it, and sometimes they have a follow up visit afterwards. So anyway, I would like to see that kind of thing happen for the APPlause! Series

And for the Turchin Center, I really feel like the best thing we can do is have all of our outreach programs taught in such a way that gives practical experience to the instructor

but also serve the group that it is intended to serve. And I feel like the students we've had work with us over the years say the most impactful learning experience they had was teaching workshops at the Turchin Center, and that they learned about themselves as educators. They also developed a concept of time management in a classroom setting. They'll say things like, "I thought this was going to take 20 minutes, and it took five." Those kinds of things which are really important to learn before you're in a classroom with 20-some kids all day long.

So, in general terms, that's my vision for the future. Honestly, I would like to see education and outreach be front of mind for everybody on staff and not necessarily just for a couple of people that straddle two staff groups. But I do feel like we've made some pretty serious headway on all of that and the last nine years.

Shauna: Is there anything else about your experience as an arts administrator that you'd like to say-- anything you've learned or advice for those of us who are just coming into the field?

Christy: I guess my advice is really just to be collaborative. And if you don't know how to do a thing, or you see something you like and you're curious about how they do it, that you could call whoever is doing the thing and ask them to just talk to you about it. I've done that a lot of times—just kind of awkwardly call somebody up and say, "I'm doing this thing, and I saw what you were doing something similar, and I like what you're doing. I'm not under any kind of deadline, but I would really like to talk to you about it." Most of the time people are really happy to talk to you. And then it's kind of nice because it's a little bit of a lonely field. I mean we're kind of the only ones who are doing it around here. It's nice to get to know

people that are doing things and to learn from them on how they do things. Like the whole bit about sending students into schools to prepare people for coming to see the performances. You know, I don't know exactly why I called that man in San Francisco, but I think he had had a performer that I was curious about.

Sometimes we'll have performances that are coming for the evening series and they say, "If you want, we'll do a school show." And I think, is it really a school show or is it just a short something that I'm going to have to cross my fingers and toes and hope that they don't swear? It might not really be a kids show. Sometimes when stuff like that comes along, I'll look back and see where the company has performed, then call the people who are the education people for the series they came on and just say, "What do you think?" But I feel like finding a niche and following your mission is key-- and being collaborative. But I do feel like it's good to just call people. It has worked for me, I'll say. I've done it a lot. And people are great—I mean, you would answer the phone if somebody called and asked you about something, you know? It's the same.

When I first started working with the university, every couple of weeks, I called the education director at the State Arts Council and asked if she had any leftover money I could use for some projects I was thinking about. And eventually, she said yes. But I would just toss ideas to her about things I was thinking. I think doing that kind of thing is important, too, just knowing the people that are the funders for the things that you might be able to do.

That's how I got involved in the Pre-service Arts Integration Network. It was basically teaching the professors that teach pre-service education students about what arts integration is so they can be fulfilling the law that every teacher should teach in and through the arts. They wanted to do a study, so we pulled together a whole panel of people and did

presentations all over the state and pulled all of this data together, and then figured out that they needed professional development. It was really good, though. It was me and a director from the Arts Council and the DPI arts curriculum people and the person that makes sure that all the universities that give teachers licenses are doing all the things they're supposed to do-- like offering all the classes that are required for them to be offering to actually give the teacher certifications had to be all checked off by her.

At the end of it, we had Kennedy Center teaching artists come and do the Kennedy Center's explanation of arts integration in the morning. Then in the afternoon, we had breakout sessions with A+ arts integration teaching artists. We had one that did math and dance, one that did storytelling and art... We had four different teaching artists, so you could bounce around and go to four different things. At the end, when we asked everyone for feedback, they were all like, "Whoa, I would come to this every year!" But of course, we didn't have the funding really, except that one year, and the Arts Council person changed, and then I started my master's program and had Clara... And here we are.

Shauna: Oh, cool. So, is that how the Educator Series emerged?

Christy: Well, in a way. So, I've always felt like I wanted to, and needed to, provide free or cheap ways for teachers to get the certification that they need in the field they're teaching in. Every teacher has to reapply for their certification every certain number of years, and they need to have a certain number of continuing ed credits in their specific field. A lot of the arts teachers that I have known over the years will give up a month of their summer, and they'll go somewhere and do a thing to get those credits. And I just felt like that was unfair, you

know? There aren't that many of them, and their counties aren't offering that professional development. So, [the Pre-service Arts Integration Network] really wasn't exactly where the Educator Series came from because those educators were mostly university professors.

When we first started the APPlause! Series-- up until the last couple of years, I didn't really have a budget. It was just part of the performing arts series budget. All of our ticket sales went back into that same general fund, and all of our artists fees were paid out of that same fund. I just tried to spend as little as possible basically and try to make it as nice as I could with almost nothing. And we had a few people who stepped forward and wanted to be donors, and it seemed like maybe this should have its own budget. So, that's only been happening in the last couple of years that we've had our own budget to do the APPlause! Series. It really wasn't until then that I felt like I could parse out some of that money to do a teacher workshop.

Primarily, I like doing the teacher workshops because I like for teachers to not have to spend a lot of money to go somewhere and get their credits when we're doing a lot of things that they could take credit for. One thing I wish we were better at communicating about is giving teachers access to the Turchin Center's ARTtalks as a way to get continuing education credits. I feel like a lot of those workshops are pretty applicable for educators. A lot of times, our artists are really great educators themselves, so I feel like it's a good mix. And as long as a teacher's central office will sign off on it, it can be counted as continuing ed, and all of the folks that I've talked to about that series, in particular, have said that they would honor it.

Shauna: Tell me about your jewelweed idea!

Christy: I guess I like the way that jewelweed is kind of unassuming. You won't necessarily notice it, but there will be a whole bunch of it around. It grows anywhere but really likes to grow in places where you wouldn't necessarily expect things to—in shady, wet places. One thing that I read about it said it likes disturbed soil, so if you cut in a road, jewelweed will probably grow there. And it has two different kinds of flowers. So, the kind that gets pollinated is the one that's orange, and that's really prolific, but just in case it doesn't get pollinated like that, it's got a backup plan of being self-pollinated which isn't as prolific but it would be enough to sustain it for another year, which I like. It's pretty and it's fun but it also grows with other things. It grows right in there with stinging nettle, so if you get stung with stinging nettle then you crumple up the jewelweed and rub the sap on it and it helps a lot. And I feel like that is nice-- it's helpful, good, and it's useful. It's easy to overlook, though, it because it's just always kind of there.

Vita

Shauna Caldwell (she/her) is an artist and educator rooted in her hometown of Boone, North Carolina. She uses multimedia and photographic processes to honor land, familial connections, sacred relationships, and transformation.