

Healing Far Afield

By

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Healing Far Afield

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Abstract:

What is the result of learning from place? After spending over a year visiting the KU Field Station, I consider our current relationship as humans with nature and propose the means for reframing it. My arts research studies our material entanglements with more-than-human others. Connection is fostered by attention, and connection contains the seeds of healing.

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And thank you, of course, to the place, the Field Station. To the plants and animals that live within and through you. To the big bluestem, goldenrods, milkweeds, silver washed fritillaries, white tailed deer, to the Osage orange, to the falling ash, honey locust, and limestone boulders, to the red-tailed hawks and the Kaw River.

This is for you.

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Two hawks are flying low over a winter field. The sun is traveling toward the horizon. A slight chill hangs in the air. The hawks dip and rise, up and down. The grasses they fly over, look darker and darker in the fading light. As a graduate student I probably shouldn't be here watching two hawks circling each other in the late afternoon. I probably have other things to do. But I'm here. Breathing in and out until the chill seeps in through my gloves and jacket and sends me home.

Driving home in a fossil fueled car to a fossil fuel warmed house, to plastic bags and single use cotton rounds and plastic jugs of cleaner or soda. Where trees and concrete cover forgotten prairie hills. As Anna Tsing says, we are the survivors of violent history, of war, imperialism, and greed. But how do survivors heal? How do we move forward in a way that remembers the past but allows us to move into the future?

My two cats greet me at the door, tails up in the air with the telltale bend at the top. I know this tail is a happy tail. I offer my fingers to each in turn for the sniff that constitutes our hellos. I think of Timothy Morton's "Being Ecological". He uses petting a cat as an example of a non-exploitative relationship with another creature (Morton 128.) Living with cats, I know that they are easy this way. They tell you what they want and what they need. Cats have a different history of domestication than many other animals. Their existence with humans was mutually beneficial. Cats kept mice and other rodents from pillaging grain stores. Proximity bred a familiarity that turned a need into a want, at least on the side of humans and possibly on the side of cats if the gregarious nature of neighborhood cats is considered. But how do you have a non-exploitative relationship with a milkweed plant, a stand of sumac, wild deer, or a remnant

prairie? Perhaps getting started requires going back. Going back to find the root of this problem.

* * *



Figure 1 Winter at the KU Field Station

There has been a shift in the scientific community to rename the epoch we are currently in, to the Anthropocene. This move is an attempt to bring attention to human driven climate change, to draw a distinction between the recent shift in climate from changes that have happened in the distant past. When trying to pin down the beginning of the so-called Anthropocene different arguments have arisen as to where we should think of its beginning. It is an attempt to find the root of our current predicament, to clearly see the damage. Different points in time which have been identified are industrialization, colonization, and the development of agricultural societies. They all have their detractors, and the point of my paper is not to declare a

superior argument. Rather, I think it is important to see how these points can be connected to moments of change in the story.

As agrarian societies developed some (not all) began telling stories of separation from nature through religion and legend. I will focus on those traditions that become the basis for Western and Euro-American society. A clear difference between humans and nature is seen in Judeo-Christian contexts and Greek myths. In the Judeo-Christian framework Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden of Eden after eating a fruit of forbidden knowledge. The associations of danger and plants is rife in this example. Also, it is interesting to consider the implications of paradise as a place enclosed and separate that humans cannot be inside of anymore. Nature in Greek myths is the realm of the gods and almost every bad interaction humans have with gods occurs in these “wild” settings. A line is being established between “developed” agricultural land and “wild” nature. Ownership of land clearly drives and feeds into these delineating tendencies. Fences and other methods of determining property lines develop. Laws are passed to codify these property rights, including the rights of rulers to levy taxes on the production of properties. Ownership leads to lineage. Parents understandably want to pass on land they own to children. The need to establish lineage creates other modes of ownership, owning a wife and her reproductive abilities. Then children are owned with males being workers and future owners and trading female children for allies and accumulation.

Greek thinkers starting with Aristotle began to draw distinctions between plants and animals. Because of the perceived motionlessness of plants, they were classified as less alive and inferior. Thinkers before Aristotle did not categorize plants this way and used animated language to describe their functions. Greek thought laid the basis in many ways for Western science and the specter of this distinction haunts us to present day.

In the 16th century, the enclosure of common spaces in England, a reflection of land expropriation globally, were all a part of a shift from feudal societies to capital accumulation (Federici 69). A phenomenon of more tightly enclosing land ownership results in the loss of commonly held land and rights of the poor to beg or receive portions of the harvest. Silvia Federici draws the connection between these political enclosures and the social and criminal proceedings of witch hunts. Women were most often to benefit from these common lands and had fewer options than men to join the army or become vagabonds in search of work. Consequently, they became the target of most of these witch hunts since capitalist forces needed to control women and their reproductive capacity for growth and accumulation. To achieve this goal women's connection to plant and traditions was exploited and cast in an evil light. Midwives were targeted as the state sought to bring women's reproductive abilities under their control (Federici 89). Knowledge of plant remedies, animal familiars and the connection to celestial events were all twisted to mark a woman as a witch. I argue that this is another point at which separation from nature was enforced in European history. To be too knowledgeable of plant remedies or spend even too much time in nature was dangerous to one's reputation.

Witch hunting followed Europeans to other lands as they begin colonizing other parts of the world along with the same land expropriation. This expansion brings Europeans in contact with other cultures who they immediately denigrate with beliefs of primitivity and continue establishing hierarchies of advancement and intelligence. Once again connection to nature is evidence of inferiority with even the foods eaten by indigenous people denigrated as inferior to European crops. Though it also contains religious overtones, the result and driving force had less to do with morality and more to do with capitalist accumulation. More and more land and resources needed to be acquired to feed burgeoning markets in Europe. A new story of separation

now separates humans from other humans creating a false story of different races which are considered inferior. This separation has terrible consequences, allowing for both subjugation and genocide of entire populations. On a larger scale than the separation of European women from nature knowledge, entire cultures are uprooted and displaced from their homelands, left reeling to hold onto what traditions they can.

Centuries later capitalist markets pushed inventors to create means of production that outpaced anything before. Fossil fuels gave these inventions their terrible power. Slaves had already been the victims of the greed of capitalist markets. Industrialization helped to spread this violence to other groups European immigrants, women, children, and lower-class men, all becoming disposable, interchangeable worker units. Forced to work in dangerous conditions for little pay, workers eventually banded together to create unions. Met with state violence and suppressed with tactics that encouraged racism, unionizing efforts had various impacts. Since the beginning of industrialization, I would argue that American culture has grown more and more individualistic. The result is weakened community ties and lessened social movements. This individualism, I think, also has its roots in the misunderstanding of evolution. By the time Darwin came around Western civilization already organized the world in terms of competition and aggression. Hebert Spencer coined the phrase, “survival of the fittest” as a shorthand for Darwin’s theory of evolution (Spencer 444, 445). Though Darwin by all accounts accepted this shortened version, when considered carefully its flaws become clear. Fitness only means being strong now after a century of understanding “fittest” as being based on aggression and strength. However there many examples in nature of “fittest,” being most fit for your environment, as being about traits such as conservation of water, seasonal adaptations, community organization, sharing resources and filling in local niches. Because of this emphasis on the individual survivor

and winner I believe society began its most recent phase of separation which was the isolation of the individual.

Separating human from nature, man from woman, races of men separated from each other and the emphasis on the individual, a separation of the mind from the body. And all this separation leads us to a deep isolation. Never seeing the plants or animals making up the food we eat, arriving in plastic packages produced by faceless workers exploited by a non-person corporation, ordering products online to be sent to our door by a nameless person we rarely see and never touch. The current zeitgeist of self-care makes sense in this context. As an individual consumer the only way to feel better is to provide yourself with care usually by consuming more products.

We are left with the weight of this history. With this in mind, how can we be a different kind of human? I take heart from the fact that this is a relatively new way of being a human and is not universal. And recognizing the separation from nature as part of the root cause suggests connection as the antidote. One approach is look to nature as inspiration. Writers such as adrienne maree brown think with mycorrhizal networks and flocks of migrating birds to find wisdom about other ways of being. How to be a community minded individual is compared to geese flying together, who must be aware of their own bodies enough to not collide into each other but aware of the group enough to move together (brown 13).

* * *

Though under a gray overcast sky, the heat and humidity still hung around like a cloak. Dark storm clouds peer over the northwestern horizon and a slight wind picks up. The prairie is green, heavy with life. Rising above the green are the purple spires of blazing star. I hold one of the dense blooms in my hands. They will be full of maturing seeds by the time sunflowers unfurl

to higher heights. They have replaced the blossoms of slender mountain mint and gray headed coneflowers. Bumble bees crisscross between blossoms, their big, pale-yellow bodies make the blazing star dance as they land and leave. As I have watched this summer, flowering forbs and grasses have risen together with the flowering plants each taking their turn often blooming in a purple and yellow pairing. It feels as though they are taking their turn in height and blossom like dancers. And the bumble bees and beetles are benefitting too from the ever-changing feast of flowers and nectar.

* * *



Figure 2 Prairie Blazing Star and bumble bees

Lichens proved difficult to categorize for the scientist children of Darwin and Spencer. For one this individual was not really an individual but two entities living so closely together as to be indistinguishable. Secondly there needed to be a parasite and a victim. It was assumed that one of the entities must be the beneficiary in the relationship. Care could not flow both ways. Lichens were talked about as a fungus that had “enslaved” and algae. The scientist unthinkingly placed their bias on nature unable to see a different reality. They were unprepared to handle the nuance of multispecies persons and the relationships between their parts. Even so lichens necessitated scientists coining new terms such as symbiosis to talk about them. Now the field is inundated with studies that demonstrate the pervasiveness of these kinds of relationships (i.e. humans and their entanglement with their own gut bacteria).

Finally Western science is grappling with the multifaceted ways in which ecosystems and individuals are interconnected. These ideas bring me to place, which is the way that ecosystems can be understood on the personal level. When I read Soren Larsen and Jay Johnson’s *Being Together in Place*, I was struck by the chapter on the Wakarusa Wetlands. They were speaking about a place I had been. Their words contextualized off-hand comments I heard and graffiti I had seen sprayed on an underpass. There was a history here hinted at but not explained. A proposed highway cutting through the wetlands that people had fought and protested for decades before it was finally pushed through. During the years of protest KU and Haskell students participated in a class to learn from the wetlands. Larsen and Johnson described how for KU students taking part in the class, learning from a landscape was unfamiliar and at times uneasy. Without clear assignments and learning objectives, how do you learn from place? How do you get started on something that’s so mysterious? It’s the same with healing. How do we heal? Anyone who’s dealt with trauma, whether their own or someone else’s, feels the desperation and

frustration this question can bring about. If learning from place is any indication, it's something that you make space for and then trust it to happen. As I have made this work it has occurred to me that this practice of learning from nature, of knowing a place, is about healing. Healing our separation from nature and land, healing our society is so desperately in need of.

The antidote for separation is connection. I took on the exercise of learning from place as an opportunity for connection and healing. Anna Tsing uses the word contamination to describe the ways in which all beings are connected and effected by each other. The word contamination has negative connotations, but I think she uses it to describe the almost invisible but nonetheless inescapable ways in which we come in to contact with each other.

“The problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong. Precarity is a state of acknowledgment of our vulnerability to others. In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent.”

(Tsing 29)

This contamination happens regardless of our intention, we only to come into contact. So just as with learning from place as soon as we think we've started its already begun. For my thesis research, I chose KU Field Station as my teacher for many reasons. It was a place I had already been visiting, already learning from. As part of the KU system, gaining access was a matter of applying to conduct research. I was also interested in the specific history of Field Station and its status as a site of learning for so many other students, its longstanding prairie study and its history as a post-agricultural site. I used methods of embodied learning as my guide. I spent time observing and being quiet in the field station, listening to both place and my experience of it.

Though initially I tried to write while at the station I found this was too distracting and created too much of an expectation. Instead, I leaned into gathering practices that demanded I be present and pay attention.

* * *

September is rushing in like a wave, over this wind-blown prairie. I'm standing in the 10 o'clock heat with the humidity of the day sticky on my skin before another breeze sweeps past me. The gravel crunches as I walk up to a row of plants so green and refreshing, the leaves look cool to the touch. Topped by pink flowers that spire upwards. Knobby stems with sections ending at each leaf. The thunk of my empty orange bucket thuds against my shins and I place it on the grass, glowing as it catches the sun inside. I bring out my clippers to get to work, harvesting. I breathe in with each snip, the clipper's two halves sliding together easily before a small crunch, like the sound of spinach ripping. I exhale as the stems fall into the bucket, a little thank you escapes. The bucket fills quickly and one bright green leaf flutters down onto the grass. I pick it up examining the vein patterns and I can almost see the blue inside. With the tips of my fingers, I roll up the leaf and place it between palm and thumb. I press purposefully and twist. I repeat this until a green cast stains my skin, a green that fades into blue in the drying wind. It is the oxygen that makes the blue. As though what is left of the plant on my skin is now inhaling too.

* * *



Figure 3 Indigo stains on a hand

I grew up on the Blackland Prairie of North Texas. My parents had twelve acres of grass and cedar trees bordered by a creek at the western edge. I remember drawing maps of our property. Crude birds eye view guesses of the lay of land. I was inspired in part by fiction books that mapped out some imaginary country or wilderness area at the beginning of a text. I would refer to it as I read excited to have a sense of the characters movements. Drawing a map of my parents' property was about doing the same for myself. Trying to understand how I was moving across landscape. Then when my grandmother and grandfather moved out of the house I had always known them to live in, I drew floorplans. This was a way of remembering. Now I realize landscape is always about memory. In *Glacial Drift* (fig. 5) the memory of the landscape is

contained in its bluffs and valleys, its plains, and cuestas. *Glacial Drift* is as much as about placing ourselves in the landscape physically as it is about placing ourselves in it temporally. The landscape's form reveals the long history as does the physically material of the local clay used in the tiles. The catalpa wood contains a more recent memory of tree grain and rings. The memory of prairie changing to forest. Therefore, mapping Lawrence and the field station is about mapping the place I find myself in, to create connection and understanding, to hold onto memory. Mapping the place and understanding the memory it contains is part of the practice of making a home, making a place. I realized when I wrote the following poem that knowing a place is being home. That being in a place and learning from it is letting it shape you. And in shaping you the landscape, the place learns about you. To know and be known.

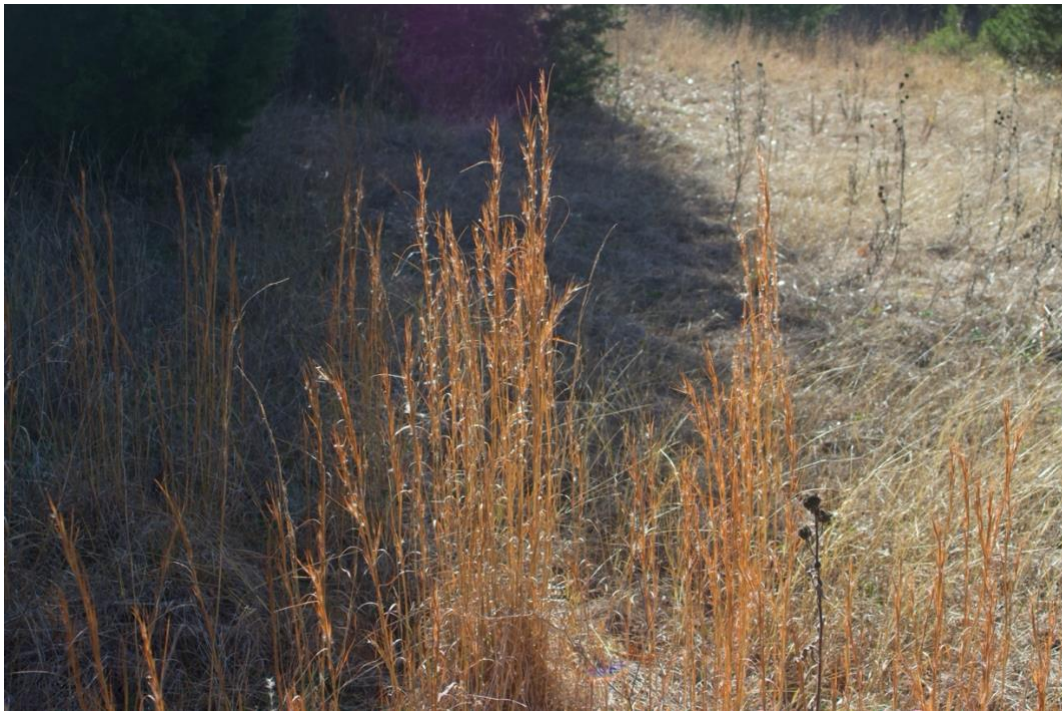


Figure 4 The Blackland Prairie.



Figure 5 Glacial Drift, 2023, Locally sourced fired clay, catalpa wood.

* * *

The curve of road

The name on my tongue

To know and be known

The feel in my bones

Of the air at sunrise

The sound of a place

Bluebirds and katydids

Bluestem and hickory

Rattle of wind through

Grass and leaves

Slow rise of faint memory
Something like childhood
Like waking up to discover dew
For the first time
Like dust on swirls of air
In front of east facing windows
And the feeling of facing east
Of greeting day
and finding peace

In the comfort of a place
Cradled by the bend of the river
Held by the rich black earth
Pulled deep into tallgrasses
To listen to the song
The end of summer is singing

* * *

Mapping exists in my thesis work in other forms such as *Map of Reciprocity* (fig. 6) which maps in an abstract manner the entangled relationships of plants, animals, humans, weather patterns and more. An exercise in asking friends and strangers for access to dye plants, it demanded coexistence and collaboration. I was surprised by the enthusiasm and generosity of strangers and acquaintances, who most often were happy to help. One of the plants I first started

asking to harvest was pokeberry. Pokeberries are often found along fence lines and people usually didn't mind me taking as many as I wanted. It quickly became obvious that people did not want pokeberry plants, even considering them a nuisance. Instead it was being planted by birds who would eat the berries and unceremoniously plant them as they perch on a fence. I was in league with the birds and pokeberry plants as I knocked off a berry here and there (without ceremony as well) as a snipped bunch after bunch. Mapping is the landscape taken as a whole at a bird's eye view. However, to know, really know, is all about the details. It's the subtle things, almost unnoticed in the moment that evoke the true feeling of a place when remembered.



Figure 6 Map of reciprocity, 2023, Hand dyed silk organza, hand dyed silk scarf, linen, thread.

When I met goldenrod, it was *solidago canadensis* that greeted me. For a while I assumed that this was “the” goldenrod in the area. However, I soon began to see other goldenrods. I noticed their subtle differences, the shape of the flower clusters and the leaves. After a year of observing I started to recognize goldenrods that at first, I would not have assumed were

goldenrods. It was like standing still for a moment in a forest and suddenly see that you are surrounded by birds moving and flitting about. Goldenrod was everywhere, *solidago nemoralis*, *solidago rigada* and *solidago speciosa*. *Goldenrod* (fig.9) pays homage to the diversity of *solidago*. The weaving gains it's shifting shades of yellow and green from the usage of various natural fibers and the combination of mordanting and overdyeing techniques. Placed in the swirl of the dye bath each yarn takes on a different hue affected differently by the same compounds. The flow from yellows to greens evokes a beam of light falling on a landscape and the horizon.



Figure 7 Goldenrod, 2023, Cotton, hemp, linen, silk and wool yarn hand dyed with goldenrod, indigo and iron, porcelain, honey locust wood

As I visited the Field Station over time, I noticed not only the biodiversity of the prairie but the shifting colors and textures of plants throughout the season. I harvested prairie grasses at various points from late July to early October. At these different points the grasses were shifting in color and the seed heads were emerging and changing. *Shades of Grass* (fig 10) is a weaving

of these grasses. Taken together the read as a timeline fading from green to red purples and finally golden yellows and tans. The delicate open warp allows the viewer to see more of the grass and reflects the ephemerality of catching the colors of the grass at a moment in time.

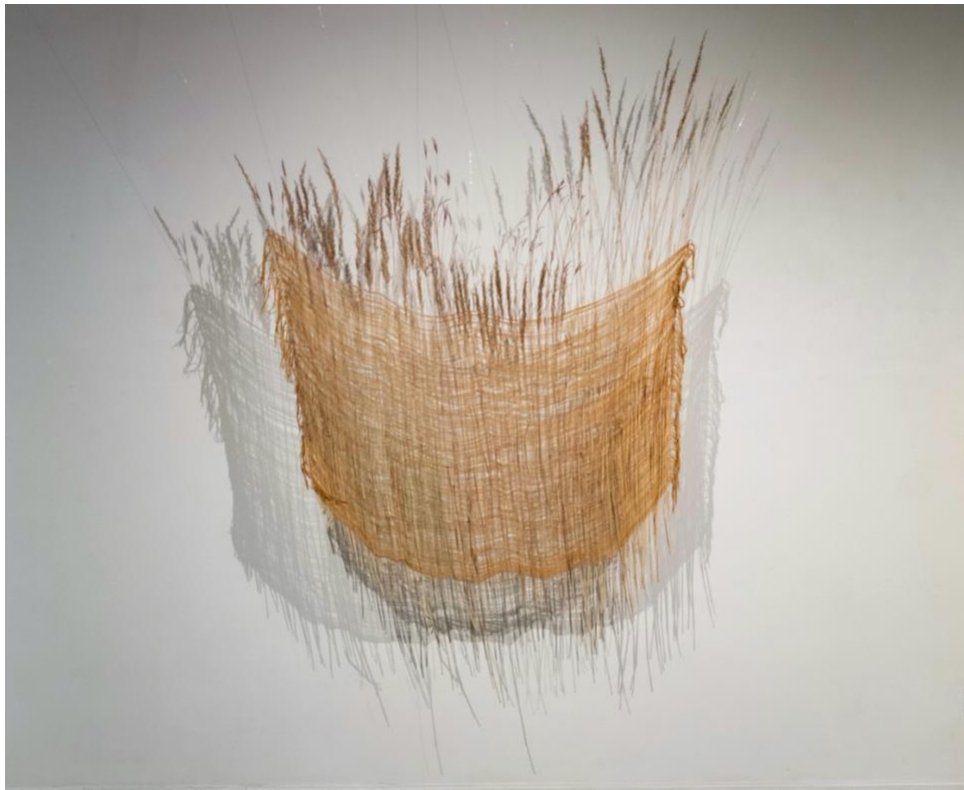


Figure 8 Shades of Grass, 2023, Locally harvested prairie grass, hand dyed warp yarn

When I asked Alexis Pauline Gumbs about her thoughts on coexistence. It wasn't a fully formed question at the time. I was looking at her thoughtful expression on the computer screen as she paused for a moment to consider. My classmates' faces lined the side of the screen, fidgeting. Alexis was visiting our Writing and Ecology class, generously answering whatever questions we asked. I had been fumbling around in the dark trying to understand what it means to coexist with others and what it would look like for humans to do a better job of it. She told me that as humans we want to feel that we can know one another. "I want to feel like I can know who you are when I look at you. But I have to hold space for you to be different than I can

imagine.” Western academia often seems to think itself entitled to knowledge. How else can it justify the desecration and pillaging of gravesites in the name of it? *Prairie depths* (fig. 11) is about the mystery of roots in soil, with the understanding that it something I can never really know. I cannot experience or see what roots like look in the soil, how they grow, how it feels to be roots. Cloaked in the dark earth, working, sharing with, or defending against microbes, roots live in a world different from ours. I’m holding space for roots to be more than I can ever imagine.



Figure 9 Prairie Depths, 2023, Locally sourced fired clay, walnut wood, sisal rope

* * *

Walking through the grass, lightly sweating under my long pants under the summer rays. I make noise as I go encouraging snakes to give up their unseen positions in dense foliage. My eyes scan for different plants, whorled milkweed, narrowleaf mountain mint. Suddenly in front of me I see areas of grass laid down in whorl. Invisible from a few feet before I see several now, clustered together. I recognize them instantly. "Deer," I say under my breath. I imagine their tawny bodies camouflaging perfecting in the grass, a spotted fawn or two nestled next to the doe. It's tall enough now to hide them laying down, providing them rest.

* * *

In *Berth* I sculptured deer hooves laying on a bed of prairie grass. *Berth* is a word that means allocated place or a sleeping space. As I visited the Field Station, I would notice places in the grass that been had bedded down by deer. The handmade paper hung on the wall as part of this sculpture are impressions of deer tracks taken from the Field Station. Deer populations have become denser as they have been pushed into smaller and smaller green spaces and lack natural predators. During my artist residency at Shawnee Mission Park, I spoke with the Natural Resources team about the necessity of hunting programs to manage their deer population. Many people especially when talking to those concerned about the environment or animal rights do not want hunting programs. What is missing is the understanding that deer are still dying in the absence of these programs instead from causes such as disease and vehicle strikes. Also missing from the equation are discussion about species that are being stressed by dense populations of deer. *Berth* is my way of asking how we make space for other creatures with the understanding that their living and dying is inevitable. We cannot live neutral lives with no impact, we can only lessen our impact and at times make thoughtful decisions about how that impact manifests. Coexistence is about making space for others.



Figure 10 Berth, 2023, *Locally sourced fired clay, locally sourced native prairie grass, cedar, wood, handmade cast paper*

My art practice is not without its impact, some of the clay materials used are the result of large mining operations, the natural dyeing requires a lot of water, much of which is wastewater after use. The impact of just being in nature spaces is sometimes contentious. My approach is to source what materials I can locally and engage in the processing of materials to the extent I can. In doing so I place the negative impacts in sight so that I can take ownership of them and mitigate them where possible. Even still my working and living is not without these impacts and not matter what I do I must still consume calories, water, and air to live. As I grapple with this reality, I think of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s discussion of debt in *The Undercommons*. They describe “debt as a means of socialization” (Moten & Harney 61) and they speak of it being mutual and unrepayable (Moten & Harney 67). We cannot repay the debt to the chicken

whose death sustains us anymore than we can repay trees for making oxygen. But we can raise chickens and plant trees, we can even do so without any intent to extract oxygen or calories from them. This leaves us in debt together. If we hold ourselves in debt, I think we can begin to see it as a kind of care. Perhaps not always intended by the individual but within a system that can provide for our needs, human and more-than-human. As Anna Tsing points out this reality of care, contamination, and diversity is messy and complex.

“One reason is that contaminated diversity is complicated, often ugly, and humbling. Contaminated diversity implicates survivors in histories of greed, violence, and environmental destruction. The tangled landscape grown up from corporate logging reminds us of the irreplaceable graceful giants that came before. The survivors of war remind us of the bodies they climbed over or shot-to get to us. We don't know whether to love or hate these survivors. Simple moral judgments don't come to hand.” (Tsing 33)



Figure 11 Harvesting local iron rich clay

We are already entangled within ecologies of care for which there can be no reductive accounting. It's an uncomfortable story at first because debt places us in relationship with each other and relationships are messy. It complicates our decisions by asking us to think holistically and at the individual level. But if we let go of hierarchies of human above nature and the separation narrative, we can step out into the world ready to learn from place, from plants and animals. Perhaps this is the lesson of place that, in order to belong we must pay attention even to the difficult and sometimes ugly realities of coexistence. That non exploitative relationships are hard work requiring compromise and pain on both sides of the equation. But what waits for us who journey afield to find connection despite the history of separation? I think it is healing or at least its beginning.

* * *

I stand on the gravel looking at a crust of plants, black and ashen gray spreading out across the field. Clumps of bluestem or Indian grass are left behind singed and sharp. The smoke is long gone. A brisk wind blows across the charcoal field. Little stems mark up my boots and crunch as I walk. From the road I couldn't see it yet. Pale green blades of grass are cresting, peeking out of sooty earth, weaving their way between the ashes of last year's growth. Now standing in their midst I see they are all around. The black is giving way to green.



Figure 12 Clump of burned little bluestem grass sprouting green growth



Figure 13 Installation view of Afield



Figure 14 Installation view of Afield



Figure 15 Installation view of Afield

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