

# GRADUATE HUMANITIES

A multidisciplinary program bringing together students and faculty from a variety of backgrounds to collaboratively explore the interdisciplinary intersections of the arts, historical, cultural and literary studies within an open, exploratory, and experimental graduate-level educational environment.

## *Everyone has a story*

This issue spotlights the depth, diversity, and dimensions characteristic of our program. (Sixteen pages worth, which is the longest newsletter we've ever published.)

You'll read herein stories of substance abuse and recovery; distillations of the humanities; authors, race, place, and history;

Affrilachians, hope, progress; DIY bands, music genres, and love;

artists-in-residence in a repurposed factory;

and ... hmm, what have I forgotten? Oh, yes, the stories of the folks behind the scenes who listen & notice, discuss & initiate, carry out and document.

And as you read these stories, consider Howard Thurman's advice: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

– Trish

## *Recovery Appalachia and the Art of Recovery* **Hope and Healing**



Besides having an MA in Humanities, Mikhaela Young ('20) has an MA in Psychology and works as a clinical supervisor for Braley & Thompson WV's youth residential program. She is a proud foster parent, has a passion for people, and she plans to continue her education to address the unique needs of youth in West Virginia.

With her final project, "Recovery Appalachia and the Art of Recovery: Representations of Hope and Healing in West Virginia," Mikhaela gifted us the rare opportunity to approach the field of psychology and its many dimensions through the lens of the humanities. One of the strengths of the Graduate Humanities program is that students have the freedom to choose the topic and methodology of their final project.

Knowing that there is little [research] "addressing how the community aspect affects recovery in rural areas," her final project used personal art and storytelling "to increase understanding of the recovery community."

**The following excerpts, lightly edited for this newsletter, are used with permission from each author.**

< **When I [Mikhaela] first entered The Ark**, a long-term, faith-based addiction recovery program, I thought I knew what to expect: I would come in, let women paint some pictures, listen to their stories, type them out, compare different recovery treatment programs and their efficacy, and make a coffee table book with the stories and paintings side by side....

My brother Joe and I both went through medical trauma as children. Having a severe immunity deficiency and asthma, I was in and out of the

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hospital often as a child. Joe, four years older, had leukemia at a young age and went through cancer treatments for over two years....We both made it out alive, but we did not have the coping skills and resiliency to handle everyday life. Joe was popular; everyone loved him. ... I was classified as a nerd and bullied throughout elementary and middle school. I had very few friends, and those that I had were not very close. I wanted to be just like Joe....

It was the summer before I turned fourteen; actually, it was the day before I turned 14: August 16, 1999. We had recently found out that my parents were getting a divorce. Joe had surgery on his knee the year before, and he had started to become addicted to pain pills. ... But wanting to be like him, I wanted to partake in everything he did. On this particular evening, Joe and I were walking to the Foodland down the street. Some of his friends pulled up in their car and found out it was my birthday; it was time to party. That night, I got my first taste of alcohol and marijuana, and I realized what it was like not to feel emotions that I wanted to forget. I also learned what it was like to be a part of a group of people that did not make fun of me. I never looked back.

I continued to drink throughout high school and college. I was able to maintain a 3.75 GPA but was drunk

throughout. When I was 21, I stopped drinking for a short time because I got pregnant, but after I miscarried, I hit what most would have thought was rock bottom. I dropped down to one class, lost my scholarship, and continued drinking, mostly alone. I barely kept a job, lost most of my friends, couldn't keep my house or myself clean, and I stayed home when others wanted me to be a part of things I normally would have enjoyed. I even went to Europe for the Atlantis program, thinking getting out of town and doing something amazing would help. It didn't; I was still the same person running from the same problems.

It was last October 2019 that I first met the women of The Ark,.... Again, I thought I was just doing a graduate project, but it became so much more than that. It was at The Ark that I found family, a sisterhood of women to which I now belong....

When we pray, we are searching, asking for peace, serenity, wisdom, courage. When we meditate, we are listening for the answers. And with the community that we have created, we get to guide one another in our journey. These are the stories that get to touch others through this drug epidemic. These are the stories that show there is more than just hell in these hills; there is hope and healing. >

< The first assignment I [Mikhaela] ever got from The Ark was to write a letter to my grandmother. ... The one person with whom I needed to make amends was my grandmother....

I'm not going to share this letter because it was deeply personal to me. But writing the letter, as well as subsequent letters to my grandfather and mother, who will also never read these letters, made me realize why the writing is so important.

Putting pen to paper gives you a tangible placement for thoughts that often get jumbled in our minds. Normal people tend to have racing thoughts and an inner

monologue that won't shut up, but we (addicts) have it tenfold. At least from a personal perspective, drinking quieted my mind in the unhealthiest way.

Sometimes. Sometimes, it made the chaos reign.

Sometimes, it shut my mind up just enough to sink into the depression and waste away.

Sometimes, it just made everything else louder so my mind was empty of meaning, or at least void of philosophizing and worrying about my latest existential crisis.

Pen on paper is a way of sorting through the chaos and

learning to find the quiet in the absence of substances.

It is a coping skill we often talk about in my line of work, but it is something I hadn't done in my own suffering until I went to The Ark.

It is also intensely cathartic. We are given an amount of words to write, and by writing them, we are releasing ourselves from the power the actions and thoughts had on us.

We are taking back control of our thoughts, our actions, our character defects. We are finding new ways of coping with things that we cannot control and seeking ways to change what we can. >

On the next two pages are two of twelve drawings and story excerpts made by Mikhaela's "sisters" at The ARK.

Ashley G., 34, sobriety birthday: March 29th, 2015



< So, my painting is kind of like a before and after. I've got an eyeball here that is red. My drug of choice was meth so my eyes were normally red after staying up for a while, then these are red and blue teardrops are my blood, sweat, and tears.

These little stick men are my two children that I lost, and I pretty much felt like I gave them up for money, meth, and a needle. I was consumed by money, and this is a light bulb with meth smoke, but I was consumed right here, and I was very, very depressed.

I wanted to die. I hated myself; I hated the people around me.

There was a lot of hate in my

heart. I came to detox and then a 28-day program and then went on to a long-term program, was there for 11 months, and that's where I found God, well, God found me. And I've been on a love lock ever since. I've never been this happy in my whole entire life. He restored me times 100 times 1000. Even on my rough days, there is still sunshine.

I [Ashley] started The Ark as a business back in 2016. I went to the Secretary of State and got all that dealt with, and I'm always posting about it. At first, I had all these girly names picked out like Recovery Girls and just stupid stuff that I would pick, and God was like *No, girl. You're going to call it The Ark because I'm trying to save these women, and you're going to say "saving women from drowning in addiction."*

What worked:

Structure: I couldn't have went to a place where I can do what I wanted. I could not have went to a place and they be like, "Hey, get your job, you do what you want, have people over. I just couldn't have gotten clean like that. I had to have structure. When I wasn't at work, I had to be at home or a meeting. That taught me how to be a mother; that taught me that. I've had my fun. One

of the worst things is when people come to our program and are like "We need more freedom. We don't have enough freedom." They feel like they need freedom but a couple weeks later they're high, so how much freedom did you need?

Accountability: Accountability is huge. I had to have accountability. There is something about writing words and putting pen-to-paper that helped me grow each time. I needed that, and I feel like everyone needs that.

Stability: I see a lot of people that come into recovery, then they switch jobs four different times. That shouldn't be allowed. We can't let them think that's okay. Commitment is important.

Waiting on a relationship: I didn't get into a relationship for the first 3 years of sobriety. I didn't want or need to have anything to do with that. > Ashley

## Texas, 36 years, sobriety birthday: 04/15/2019

*< My painting is like what the inside of my mind was like. All the important things were jumbled up and scrambled. I couldn't keep them straight, and they drove me crazy. As I worked the Steps and got my mind clean and got all the substances out, I was able to take those things and wind them up.*

*It is still a little quirky because that's how I am, but everything that bothered me and everything that I couldn't have control over then, I've learned how to give them to God.*

*They're all still in my mind because you can't forget things, but you can put them in order and work with them.*

*This person, the jumbled up and scrambled person, was the daughter of a single mother who is a narcissist and a manipulator and a control freak and also had been a user for as long as I can remember, and she kind of taught me to be that way. >*



< I [Texas] never had any issues until I was already married, already had a whole career—I was a supervisor of an in-home health company for eight years. I was going to be the administrator and take over. I was on call all the time, I was married, I had my daughter. I was a Sunday school teacher—and then I got hurt at work lifting people. That was my job, and I was tiny, but I could do it. But I ended up hurt, and they were like, here are Percocets and more Percocets. No, you can't be off work. I'll give you a shot on your lunch break, and you'll go back. It just got to where they'll give you 200 pills in a month; pills that are chemically created to be addictive, but also it gets to where they numb your feelings.... It just became a habit that really got out of control....

The biggest problem I have with it still, trying to get over it, even though I finished this program, is that a lot of these girls have been using since they were kids, and they've never had any other life than that.

I had a whole normal, regular life and ruined it. So, that's kind of hard for me to deal with, and I struggle to relate because I never used any needles, or I've never been as far as they have, but I can hear their stories, and I am very empathetic. So maybe it's an ego thing, but I do still feel myself as different because I chose it.

For a long time, when I was this person, I thought about how much I wanted to go back and be who I was, but those issues are what caused me to get here.

So, now I am finally the person who, even though I still have issues, I am able to identify them. I was able to work through most of them that caused them and I know the tools and resources to use when the issues still crop up.

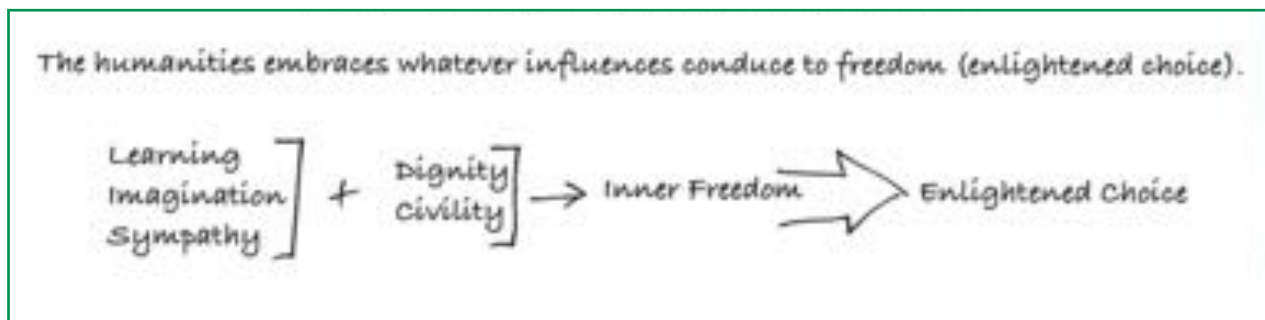
The good that I am doing right now is helping these girls take the first step when they get here. That is everything to me right now. And I know that it is misplaced motherly instincts that I don't get to "Mom" right now but it is working, and it is working for me, too. It is not going to my baby right now, but it is going to all these babies, and they need it. Even though it is really hard that a lot of them run away, a lot of them aren't ready, a lot of them relapse; when you see them make a breakthrough; when you see them make that connection with God; when you see them get their kids back (even though I don't have my kid back) I get to see them with their kids; when you see them talking to a new girl and saying the same things that you said to them, which somebody else said to me, that is everything to me. > Texas



< **Our stories are not over**; they are only beginning. We were victims of trauma searching to cure the loneliness. We were hopeless, homeless, empty echoes of humans who felt we were worthless and told we were nothing more than junkies. Society discarded us.

But remnants rise. We share our stories to show that recovery really is possible, not just sobriety, not just abstinence, but real recovery, in a diverse community and culture of shared experiences and values, a culture defined by worthiness, hope, healing, grace, and love. And we are worth every bit of it. > —Mikhaela Young, December 7, 2020

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Dr. Lassiter's shorthand of Ralph Perry's definition of the humanities scribbled on a whiteboard during a seminar discussion.

**While writing an essay for Dr. Lassiter's "Introduction to Study in the Humanities," at the beginning of her coursework,** Mikhaela shared her analysis of American philosopher Ralph Perry's definition of the humanities in his classic 1956 work, *The Humanity of Man*:

< Perry talks about freedom in terms of learning, the inner freedom of individuals, imagination, sympathy, dignity, and civility. We are free to be ethnocentric, but that is not real freedom.

*Inner freedom is an escape from ethnocentrism. It is ridding ourselves of apathy and ego, letting go of subjectivity and the notion that others are either obstacles or aids, and instead seeing others as human beings working towards their own freedoms.*

*It is setting aside divisions and instead unifying ourselves with others in a global kind of kinship. We are all family because we are all human.*

*I think the lack of imagination and the lack of knowledge is what really hinders us from reaching our potential to become a global family. This all may sound like liberal poppycock or a utopian ideal that can never be reached, but this is what the humanities are to me. It is not a happy, perfect thing.*

*Humanities embraces the sorrows of humanity as well as the joys, the mistakes and the victories, the essence of the human spirit.*

*The humanities "deals with man's physical and social environment, and ... the works of physical and social sciences are manifestations of his spiritual existence."*

*We all are capable of enlightened choice. >*

Mikhaela Young



## *Memoir in Appalachia*

In the fall of 2021 Anna Osborne had the privilege of taking a *Memoir in Appalachia* seminar with Professor Cat Pleska. Over the course of the semester their class developed criteria for Appalachian memoir and considered various texts for inclusion within a canon.

"For my final project I explored and compared the memoirs of Nikki Giovanni and bell hooks, then researched topics related to those memoirs—the Black Power movement, and school integration ... with specific focus on these forces within Appalachia. This project led to more questions than answers."

Editor's Note: Anna's paper is longer than is expected for a seminar, however, its length grew appropriately extensive because of the complexity of her subjects. For this newsletter, she let us edit it for brevity.



## Nikki Giovanni, bell hooks, and Our Appalachia

< Nikki Giovanni and bell hooks are iconic Black female writers, born ten years apart in the United States. They are both highly respected academics, and have achieved significant literary acclaim. Both women are true individuals, who also associate their identity closely with their experience of being Black.

Each wrote a memoir at a relatively young age, and well before the heyday of the modern American Memoir.

And both are arguably Appalachian—Giovanni by birth, hooks through heritage, geographical adjacency in childhood, and relocation in adulthood.

### *Overview of Memoirs*



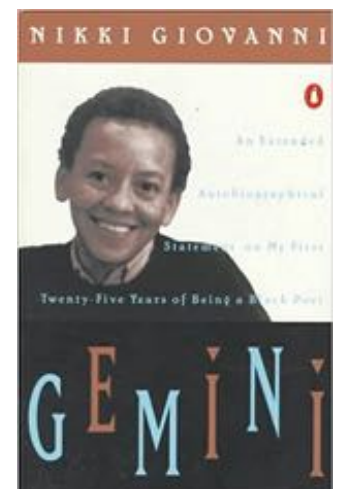
### Nikki Giovanni

*Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet* by Nikki Giovanni is a collection of essays, some previously printed, on various topics personal and political.

Giovanni opens with an essay about her grandmother, the passage of time, and the gentrification of Knoxville. ("Mulvaney Street is gone.... Assassinated along with the old people who made it live.")

She shares stories about the birth of her son, her conflicted decision to return to grad school as opposed to joining the Black Power movement completely, her relationships with various family members, criticism of certain trends within the movement, various conspiracies, and more, all covering the first quarter century of her life.

Her style is direct, conversational, sometimes confrontational, and singularly hers. Some of her views and language may prove challenging to certain readers. She unapologetically espouses militant pro Black Power views, and uses language that some may find dated or offensive. She is also just hilarious. Talking about her likable



teacher in a scene from her childhood, she states, "You could really go to kindergarten with a lady like that." She describes her mother as "four eleven, ninety pounds after Christmas Dinner."

I [Anna Osborn] had the privilege of hearing her speak at a literary festival in Lewisburg a few years ago, and had the sound of her voice in my mind as I read this

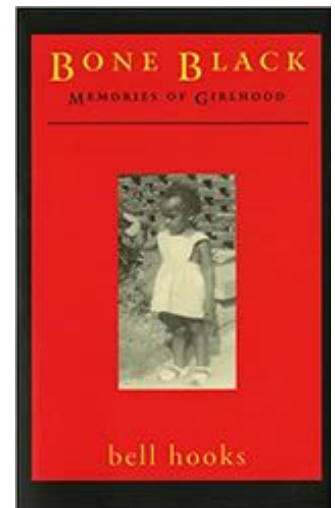


## bell hooks

*Bone Black* is a telling of bell hook's childhood, from earliest memories, to the end of high school. The book is comprised of short chapters (about three pages each) covering various memories, ideas, and struggles.

Written alternately in first and third person, it is almost as if we are learning about hooks from different angles, as she takes different approaches to conveying stories of varying emotional heft.

Her tone is direct, impressionistic, humanistic, and often makes reference to matters of the soul and heart. It is honest and gentle, describing childhood suffering with pain but seemingly not with bitterness.



## *Themes the Books Share*

Both authors write about the meaning they made through reading and writing in their youth. Both loved books from early on, and seemed naturally positioned for writing careers.

Both acknowledge issues of race within their own respective Black communities and in the larger context of America. Giovanni shares the story of how her family ended up in Appalachia, basically escaping a particular threat of violence after a lifetime of oppression. Of her grandfather, Giovanni says, "I think when he reached Knoxville he was just tired of running."

Both write extensively about their families, and specifically their grandparents and great-grandparents. hooks describes her grandmother:

Saru does not read or write. It is not that she does not think these things are important. It is that she has never had the time. She has always been busy.

memoir. Funny, self-assured, but also with so much heart. Hearing her in my mind complemented some of the militant aspects of her writing. In terms of her written tone and language, it's crucial to consider both her lived experience as a Black person in this county and the time and context in which she wrote this memoir.

She lives in the old ways. She does not buy everything from the store. When you go to her house anything may be happening. They may be making lye soap, butter, or wine. They may be wringing the necks of chickens.

Both authors write about identity in relation to their families and to our greater society. Giovanni also writes a good deal about her son, including childbirth, and the desire to pass on her heritage to him. About a trip back to Knoxville, she writes, "I thought Tommy, my son, must know about this. He must know we come from somewhere. That we belong."

As mentioned earlier, both write about the first part of their lives. In hook's case, she writes about her girlhood, leaving off at the end of high school. In Giovanni's case she writes about her first twenty five years. Both memoirs are, in a sense, coming of age tales.

One difference between the two is that hooks was 44 when hers was published, and Giovanni was about 27 when hers was published. As we discussed in our class, it's tempting to consider how different the books would have been if they had been written at later stages in the women's lives.

Both women write frankly about sexuality, and other writers/artists that inspired them. They both describe the racial injustice they experience and witness. Giovanni's observations tend to be in the form of

systemic criticism. For example, describing music appropriation by white folk, she says, "The music was born of our treatment by others, and the more they steal it the more they prove how little regard they have for us."

hooks frequently illustrates such injustice through personal anecdotes, such as the colorism she faced in her family. Both writers seem to explore writing as an act of revolution and in hooks' case, self-preservation (though perhaps they are one and the same).

## Appalachian Memoirs?

Now to the question central to our class: Are these books Appalachian memoirs? Both writers employ memoir methodology. Giovanni frequently uses tools of creative nonfiction, such as snappy dialogue. She refers to the work as "fictionalized autobiography." As opposed to a biography, her form is not a litany of achievements, but rather a non-linear exploration of ideas; she writes with a highly developed sense of voice.

hooks, too, employs writing techniques in keeping with the memoir craft. Her subject matter and style are highly personal, and she depicts her girlhood (as opposed to the entire story of her life). She writes with particular awareness or recall of her emotions, She describes her memories in vivid sensory detail, such as when describing her grandfather, saying "His voice wrinkled like paper."

When comparing these books regarding their inclusion of Appalachia themes, I'll just get it out of the way and say that both

writers mention that good ol' Appalachian trope: their outhouses from childhood.

Appalachian themes running through hooks' book include: family, gender expectations, grandparents/grannies, poverty, food and religion. Giovanni's book

All this makes me consider the possible racial/cultural bias of my own list of Appalachian criteria. It brings attention to one of the challenges I believe inherent in the field of Appalachian Studies: attempting to define Appalachian culture without perpetuating the stereotypes about Appalachians, and while promoting diversity within Appalachia.

My Appalachia is not bell hooks's Appalachia is not Nikki Giovanni's Appalachia. Who gets to define our Appalachia?

—Anna Osborne

as a whole does not touch strongly on Appalachian themes, though the subject of family is prevalent. One notable exception is the opening essay, which fits easily in the category of Appalachian memoir (and it was

included on the syllabus in another Appalachian Studies class offered through Marshall).

This particular essay not only could, but should be included in the Appalachian memoir cannon. In a deep and moving way Giovanni talks about her grandmother, Knoxville and...the death of a place....

On a surface and most literal level, *Bone Black* is the more Appalachian of these two memoirs. But this leads me to more questions. While *Bone Black* fulfills far more of our class's criteria for Appalachian memoir, I wonder about the set of criteria itself.

Yes, bell hooks talks about quilts, grandparents, church and food. But Giovanni talks about defiance, resistance and self-sufficiency. Her spirit reminds me of Katherine

Manley, transcending the pain of poverty. Her determination to become a writer recalls Lee Smith from *Dimestore: A Writer's Life*. >



# *Black Power and School Desegregation in Appalachia*

As I read both memoirs I became increasingly curious about the Black Power movement and school desegregation within Appalachia. Giovanni wrote about the former, and hooks wrote about the latter, causing me to realize I'd never considered the role of these forces in our region.

I embarked on research (which also contributed to growing curiosity about the Text Book Wars in our own Charleston, West Virginia). Despite the significance of both these topics in history, I found little record of their role in Appalachia.

As Kristan McCullum explains, "Due to both the "invisibility" of Black Appalachians beyond the early twentieth century as well as the myth of Whiteness and racial innocence, Appalachia has often been largely ignored within the civil rights historiography. Because of this dearth in scholarship, little is known about how Black Appalachians experienced and participated in the Black freedom struggle for full citizenship and educational equity."

Just as we must ask ourselves who gets to define present day Appalachia, we must also consider who recorded our past.

We know that Brown vs. Board of Education impacted Appalachia, and have the Text Book Wars in West Virginia to prove it. However I was unable to find much documentation, especially from the perspective of Black students impacted by school desegregation in the region. One of the only documents I found was an article by scholar Anna Lund, who refers

heavily to the book *Gone Home: Race and Roots through Appalachia*, by Karida L. Brown. In describing the experience of desegregation for Black students, she states, "The

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desegregation process meant that the black students went to the white schools, leaving teachers, classrooms, hallways and school emblems behind them. At these new schools, they encountered teachers who did not understand their history or truly care about their future life chances (with the exception of talented black male athletes)."

I did find more information about Black Power than school desegregation in the region, but what I found in my research is that to better understand the story of Black Power in Appalachia, one must travel outside of Appalachia.

Cecilia Menjivar describes the cycles of migration that took place in relation to the racism of the deep South and the opportunities of the Civil Rights Movement: "The first generation escaped the Deep South in search of liberty and citizenship. Their children grew up in Kentucky but this generation in turn moved elsewhere as they reached adulthood, as soon as

they finished high school. This migration out of Kentucky took place in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, a key moment when new opportunities had opened for African Americans across the country. As Brown observes, this generation moved out of Kentucky in search of the liberty and citizenship that their parents had sought when they escaped from Alabama and moved to Kentucky in the first place."

Martin Krzywy writes that another part of this story takes us to Chicago, 1968, where the self-proclaimed Young Patriots, expats from Appalachia joined forces with the Black Panthers in class solidarity to form the Rainbow Coalition.

The podcast, "Black in Appalachia," invites us to travel not out of Appalachia, but rather, back in time, to better understand the Movement. In their episode entitled *Power and the West Virginia Coalfields*, the hosts of the podcast make connections between the Black power building of coal miners in unions during the Coal Wars era in West Virginia and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements decades later. Yunina Barbour-Payne refers to another antecedent in describing the role of Black churches in the region during the Civil Rights Movement, saying, "In Appalachia, black ministers were often the organizing agents of civil and political protests."

I am hopeful that continued efforts will lead to more information centered on Black Appalachian experiences.

## Toward a More Inclusive Canon

While acknowledging that Gemini is truly not a conventional Appalachian memoir, it's worth considering how our conventions might prevent us from hearing valuable stories and history from non-dominant voices in our communities. We can identify common characteristics of traditional Appalachian memoir while also considering memoir that satisfy a different set of criteria—perhaps less traditional but no less Appalachian. In this

way we can work toward building an inclusive canon that best represents the diversity too often denied or ignored in this region. >

Anna Osborne is a fourth generation teacher and an eighth generation Appalachian. She lives in the Greenbrier Valley, where she teaches, coordinates music for the Alderson Community Market, and works with both the WV ACLU and her local teachers union. After 18 years in early childhood education, she's shifting to

a new position this fall, working with English language learners in Greenbrier County.

Anna is also working toward her Appalachian Studies Graduate Certificate, and hopes to pursue a Masters in Humanities as well. Her interests include the intersection of history, schools, race, power, and representation. She's excited about opportunities to elevate voices of Appalachian students and teachers, past and present, through scholarship.



In 2019, Cat Pleska, author, editor, and faculty member, published an anthology of stories written by “women knowing they have a longer road to walk and how they got to where they needed to be. They made changes. Or they were changed. Forever.” The anthology, *Fearless: Women's Journeys to Self-Empowerment* is published by Mountain State Press. Sheila Coleman-Castells's story is a perfect follow-up to Anna Osborne's paper printed above. Sheila gave permission to include these extracts in our newsletter.



Sheila Coleman-Castells is a former professor, researcher, current consultant to governments and industry, and advocate for the underserved in the fields of Education, Workforce Development and Labor. She writes as a new Affrilachian who is the mother of a beloved twenty-something son, and she chose West Virginia as a new family home over a decade ago, and hasn't looked back.

## From Whence Cometh My Help: How Black Girl Magic Can Change Appalachia

< My life began in earnest when I moved to West Virginia twelve years ago. I know that sounds strange, given that I was at that time forty-four years old, a mature woman, a divorced single mother of an eight-year-old son, and a seasoned professional. And yet, moving to this mountain in Preston County,

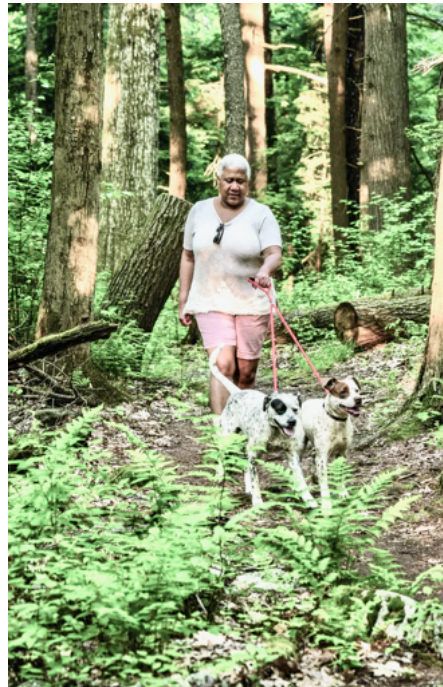
West Virginia, felt to me like a re-birth and a homecoming, all at the same time. I found that the social and cultural mores of dedication to family, reverence for hard work, and loyalty to community values were right at home with how I had been raised in urban Washington, D.C. by Southern parents who came from

small African-American communities in Virginia and North Carolina...

I cannot say that it has always been easy to be here in the Mountain State, but I can say that never in my life have I felt like my skills and talents have been used in such an important way as they are here in

West Virginia. Contrary to what many have said to me, and how many people believe, being an African American woman in Appalachia is not a deficit ... if anything it is an astounding asset, gold in the pocket regarding understanding how and why we are in the social situation in which we find ourselves here, and so too the insight as to how to break out of the prison of expectation, stigmas, and inertia that can (but doesn't have to) define our lives....

Many people assume that they know what your life is like, and that it is defined by cultural disenfranchisement, stagnation, and blockage by the "powers that be." It would be correct to say that for many Black Appalachians, called "Affrilachian" by the poet Frank X Walker, the feeling and the reality of being socially entrapped in poverty and lack of access in these hills is very real. The hurdles that most White Appalachians have to climb to escape this miasma of lack, while steep, does pale in comparison to what the Affrilachian has to endure, especially if she is female. After all, in less than a generation, any white Appalachian can shed their culture and take on another in the urban centers of our country, looking back from the foliage-covered balconies of the Ivy League to recount an elegy of their hillbilly days. But the Affrilachian woman cannot shed her Blackness, as the mountains cannot become the shore. So it is true that these barriers are tangible and while the Appalachian culture can often be strict and unyielding in its need to confine the intellectual and spiritual gifts of people of color, Black women who wish to emerge from the imposed confines of race and class and redefine themselves and their talents in a larger world are compelled to use their many gifts to change straw into gold where they find themselves, in these storied hills of green....



I have seen that the answers to our social and economic problems are actually all around us, in the intellect and the fortitude of our own people. No group is more maligned and excluded than is my own, the African American woman. Yet with her own strength and ability to take nothing and make it into something, her own special alchemy, she is indeed the prestidigitator, the magician that we need to change our way of life.

As Black women, or indeed ANY Appalachian women, we have a huge advantage in a hide-bound patriarchal culture that suffers from a terminal lack of new inspiration, because we are forced every day to change and innovate in order to survive and ensure the success of our children. We have the experience of doing what we do: Making do using improvisation, innovation, and invention to change things for the better. The only thing stopping us is US. The only thing we don't have is our own voice, spoken to power, that demands better investment in our own people and

their own innovation to solve their problems....

The Black woman in history has long held her daughters and sons while they died as cannon fodder in this culture war, young men who have a one-in-three chance of making it to age 35, only to be incarcerated on petty charges. She has raised her daughter's babies while their Mother chased a paycheck in a far-away city, or ran after a man who she hoped would give her a stable life with the proverbial picket fence and the two-car garage which hardly ever comes. She has nursed her own man through his struggles as he has fought with the cultural demons. She has held two jobs, paid the bills, sent her children to college, worked in her church, taken in her sister's children, enrolled in community college and gotten her GED, then her Bachelor's or her Master's degree, only to be denied a raise in her job while younger White men and women have sped past her....

I want to get to her before she is trapped ... I have to show her, while young, that she has no need to adhere to outmoded cultural ways of being that require her to get "permission" from anyone to be her authentic self. No one who ever asked permission from others would be allowed to let their talents roam free. I say to her that she must take her liberties and adopt a "can do" spirit, not waiting for anyone or anything to give her permission to create and innovate. She needs to speak her truth, from her youth, and allow her voice to be heard in this land, in these hills. I know that the young Black woman is one of many champions of Appalachia, and she must start in her own space, her own block, or her own town, with the men in power, and force them to listen to her voice. She needs to charm, wheedle, manipulate, cajole, pressure, undermine, or blast her way out, and eventually topple the structures that keep all of us from

trying new ideas and new measures to change our lives. No tool in her toolbox must go unused. She must know that this is the only way to sweep out the old, putrefied ways and that we cannot and should not tiptoe around the need, in fact the duty, to do this right now....

I have seen that the answers to our social and economic problems are

actually all around us, in the intellect and the fortitude of our own people. No group is more maligned and excluded than is my own, the African American woman. Yet with her own strength and ability to take nothing and make it into something, her own special alchemy, she is indeed the prestidigitator, the magician that we need to change our way of life.

When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change. It is time for us to use our Black Girl magic to make these mountains our own, and to change the face of Appalachia with the beauty of our own distinct intellect. If Appalachia is wise, it will allow her to wave her wand and help create a new culture, suitable for us all, in these beautiful green hills. >



## Cat Pleska, Artist-in-Residence at The Corbin Museum

It's hard to keep up with all the projects of the [Graduate Humanities Program](#) faculty member, Cat Pleska. Most projects originate with her, such as her memoir, *Riding on Comets*, and five anthologies: *Fed From the Blade: Tales and Poems from the Mountains*;

*One Foot in the Gravy—Hooked on the Sauce*; *Voices of Unity: Coming Together, Falling Apart* and *Fearless: Women's Journeys to Self-Empowerment*.



Cat's not about to abandon writing, editing, and teaching but this last year, she embraced a new opportunity: Artist-in-Residence at West Edge, the Corbin LTD building, a former garment

manufacturer in the Westmoreland area of Huntington. It's now owned by [Coalfield Development](#), which is restoring the 96,000 square feet of space for job training and workforce development center, and a hub for local artists. Joining her are two Artist-in-Residence friends, Sassa Wilkes and Lauren Kempe.

As part of a National Endowment for the Arts Our Town Grant awarded to Coalfield Development in 2021, Pleska, along with Wilkes, and Kempe, are creating art, a museum, and community projects to support the area in the West of Huntington. Their goal is to provide cultural projects, interact with the local community, and honor the working-class individuals who, along with the founding Corbin family members, produced a powerful economic impact on the region.

Corbin Limited Garment Factory, known as the West

Edge Factory, manufactured men's and women's quality clothing for over 47 years until it closed in 2002. Ninety percent of their employees were women.

One of Cat's responsibilities is to conduct oral history interviews with former workers (a skill she learned from Program Director Eric Lassiter while writing the book *I'm Afraid of That Water: A Collaborative Ethnography of a West Virginia Water Crisis*). Those oral histories will be included in CLIO, "a mobile app that connects a nationwide network of contributors who know local history and share it with the world." (<https://www.marshall.edu/history/clio/>)

The Corbin Museum, in the refurbished Corbin building on Vernon street, will contain interactive displays the public can enjoy. It is scheduled to be open by June 2023.



Corbin Ltd. Machine Operators Linda Collins and Becky Chaffin sewing front pockets on trousers, Huntington, West Virginia. Source: <https://www.theclio.com/entry/28509>

# Appalachian Music



*Rachael Fortune is a ninth grade English teacher at Logan High School and is beginning her fourth year in the fall. She has an undergraduate degree in Secondary English Education from West Virginia State University. "Knowing I wanted to get my Master's, I began communicating with Dr. Eric Lassiter at Marshall University and quickly enrolled in the Appalachian Studies Program."*

For this issue of Graduate Humanities, Rachel let us edit for brevity sections of her final paper for Dr. Lassiter's Fall 2021 seminar on "Appalachian Music."

## What Constitutes "Appalachian Music"?

When you think of music categorized as Appalachian, you are probably imagining a wooden porch with a rocking chair, banjo pickin' men, and women playing the very washboard they use to clean their children's clothes. It is a typical way of thinking that all music classified as "Appalachian" must be banjo heavy country music. This is the furthest from the truth. In fact, I think this misinterpretation of Appalachian music is like the common misinterpretation that all Appalachians are barefoot, backwards hillbillies. To categorize any aspect of Appalachia as homogenous is to disservice the whole place. Contrary to popular belief, Appalachia could not be more diverse and richer in culture; in fact, our culture is deep-rooted in struggle, growth, pain, resiliency, and shared experiences. This culture feeds the diversity of Appalachian music.

When I think about what Appalachian music is to me, I think sweaty basements and DIY punk shows. I ran a house venue on the West side of Charleston during my years in undergrad, and my goal was to embrace West Virginia bands.

I served as a "starter" venue for many bands—especially those made up of a member or two that were not quite twenty-one (something that keeps your music career nonexistent in Charleston is as simple as being underage). What started off as punk bands booked through mutual friends moved all over the grid of genres. We hosted spoken word, acoustic, heavy metal, grunge, classic country, and everything in between.

This experience really opened my eyes to music that represented my sense of place, music I was not familiar with before. I worked to change my view of these performers as "purveyors of something different" to see them as part of Appalachia as a whole. I found a love for Appalachian music in this basement. Growing up in Logan, I always shocked a crowd when I told them I had no taste for country music. I was doing myself a disfavor, pigeonholing the country genre into something I despised, when all along, it was Appalachian outlaw country that inspired most of the bands that played on my "stage". My years running a show house took my own background in music and shattered everything I thought I knew. I was pretentious about genre and only liking those in genres I thought I liked. This selection of what I knew I liked came from the music I heard when I was younger. My childhood was filled with music, but not the typical Appalachian experience of gospel and bluegrass;



Out-of-town punk band



Taken in a basement, this photo has been overly lightened so we can see the non-traditional instruments in the middle and right accompanied by guitar and banjo pictured on the left. The musician in the middle is likely to be tapping or scraping the ribbed metal surface of a washboard. The musician behind her is strumming a plastic version of a washtub bass.

my parents were fans of Led Zeppelin, The Stones, and Tom Petty.

In our house, we worshipped Bruce Springsteen. His nickname, "The Boss," was all too realistic in our home. (Earning the nickname by playing the game that is the music industry his own way, it became a well-known moniker for Springsteen.) Whatever The Boss says, goes. The taste I developed from my parents is what originally assisted in my classifications of what was good and what was not. This was not helpful because there were still all these genres I was ignoring; Appalachia itself being one. Even with Mom and Dad's vast knowledge of music (I still to this day whole heartedly believe I got the coolest combination for parents as far as music taste goes), I was missing a huge part of my culture while it was moving on without me. It was not until my days in the show house (the house venue) that this changed.

As I got into the DIY scene, Appalachian music was not just a genre anymore, it was the kids in my living room pickin' on their guitars before the show, the boy from up

the holler who is unknown because he's never played in the city, it was every one of these performers I met along with all their stories. It seemed like during those three years my house collected the oral history we were playing a part in. The sound of oppressed youth, the rustic ballads of activism pumped us up with hope, the acoustic songs about a love gone awry made us sob with relatability oozed from those walls.

During this time, two other events played a role in my understanding of Appalachian music: learning about Mountain Stage and my job at Budget Tapes and Records.

I had never felt more Appalachian than I did sitting in the Cultural Center's theater, playing a part in a real-life old-time radio show that featured all these people singing and playing in a way I had never really heard.

The music I heard in my first few Mountain Stage visits made me want to know more. My job at Budget made that want a reality. I could go to Budget to work a

Monday shift after catching Mountain Stage Sunday night, and any questions I had, I took to my manager and adopted father figure: John. John could tell me anything I wanted to know about music in general, and anything that focused on Appalachia held a particular interest for him. He would close his eyes and snap his fingers while he tried to relay all the information, he had in his vast brain to me before he lost his words. John often lost his words amid his ritual of remembering and recollecting, but when he didn't, I always got the answer to my questions.

My time in undergrad gave me many great things (my degree being the biggest), but my favorite knowledge gained during this time was that of "Appalachian Music" and what it meant to me. It became the tie that bound my punk/ grunge tastes with my grandma's bluegrass favoritism.

With my recent involvement in the Marshall University Appalachian Studies Certificate Program and the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame, I continue to branch out and try new things.

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Similar to my lack of knowledge on how vast the category of Appalachian music is, an article titled "Appalachian Music" from the Library of Congress explores the scholarly idea that Appalachian music is not diverse. This study represents the outside view of our home: we are a unit, a cookie cutter place of hillbillies, churches, and banjoes. Like many early studies of any group of people, these pieces of writing incorporate the values of the writer rather than that of the musician. People on the outside looking in often report back with little consideration for their subjects. These subjects are far more interesting than the information many thought to be true.

Without all the different influences of so many different walks of life, I can't imagine what Appalachia today might be like. Our Appalachia is the creation of millions of individual ways of life; those differences make us whole. Like the place itself, the more diversity present,



### The mission of the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame:

- **Recognition** – inducting important West Virginians. The nominating process for the first round of inductees began in spring, 2007.
- **Education** – offering themed displays, curriculum and speakers to schools around the state.
- **Preserving** – collecting and preserving existing sound recordings.
- **Collection** – collecting and displaying memorabilia.

### Objectives include:

- Educating people about state artists and reinforcing that a career in the arts is both viable and valuable.
- Presenting lectures, workshops and performances.
- Creating a catalog of LPs and tapes from West Virginia artists and archiving them in a format that will be easily accessible to the public.
- Establishing a building fund for a permanent facility which will include a museum and performance hall, a sidewalk of "stars" around the facility and a shop that will feature CDs by state musicians.

the harder our music is to define or classify as a single entity. In the Library of Congress article, this difficulty is made clear in the following statement: "In truth, the more Appalachians are able to represent themselves, the harder it becomes to define "Appalachian" music or culture in any meaningful way." This lack of homogeneity is something Appalachians should accept as a blessing; we are so Appalachian, so accepting of ourselves and our neighbors that our melting pot of culture, people, and music becomes more and more impossible to define. The diversity of Appalachia makes it our home because it creates space for us all. >

*Rachael manages the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame under the director, Michael Lipton. She also has a short story coming out in an anthology collected during Cat Pleska's seminar, "Mountain State Press: Publishing Appalachia." Rachael is continuing her studies at Marshall University with seminars in "Expository Writing for Research" and "Oral History and Ethnography."*

*Rachael enjoys traveling, dancing with friends, and giving her students new experiences; most recently she took a group of students to the Music Museum and this summer led a small group of students on a trip across Europe.*



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## Director Named President of Historic Glenwood Foundation

Adapted from WE ARE MARSHALL, June 14, 2022



Dr. Luke Eric Lassiter, Director of Marshall's Graduate Humanities Program, jointly appointed in the College of Liberal Arts and the doctoral program of the College of Education and Professional Development has accepted the position of president of the [Historic Glenwood Foundation](#).

"I am honored that the board would entrust me with this responsibility," Lassiter said. "Over the past decade, I've had the great pleasure of learning from an accomplished and dedicated group of community leaders, and I look forward to our continued work together."

Current Glenwood Foundation President Pamela Tarr of Jackson Kelly PLLC in Charleston says Lassiter is a great choice to lead the foundation.... "We believe Dr. Lassiter brings a unique set of skills and insights to the mission of this foundation. His dedication to scholarship and bringing students to a hands-on learning experience with a historic property and hundreds of historic documents holds great promise for the Glenwood mission and the educational experience of those students involved."

For more information, visit the [Glenwood Center for Scholarship in the Humanities](#).

*Spring*

### 2023 SCHEDULE

See [Upcoming Seminars](#) on the Graduate Humanities Program website.

### Recent GRADUATE

*Jennifer Henning '22*

Cultural Studies  
 Certificate in Appalachian Studies

Project Title: "Articulating Appalachia"



Students examining historic documents during a seminar in the main house of the Glenwood Estate.