THE POWER OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL: REIMAGINING THE NATURE NARRATIVE THROUGH AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF MULTICULTURAL WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY

PAMELA WHITE WOLSEY, B.A., M.A.

DENTON, TEXAS

MAY 2020

DEDICATION

For Earle

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Mom, Dad, Tina, Maxine, and Reba, your unconditional love and continued support does not go unnoticed, and I am so fortunate to have each of you in my life.

To Medeski, Edie, and VL, as well as the rhodies, mountain chickens, and wood thrush, thank you for sharing your spirit and teaching me the joys of interspecies relationships.

I cannot express enough gratitude to my committee and committee chair, AnaLouise Keating, for her guidance and inspiration. You made a profound impact on my personal and professional growth.

My heartfelt appreciation is for my husband and hiking companion, Josh. Thank you for the tears, beers, and encouragement both on and off the trail. The AT and the dissertation were both incredible journeys, and I look forward to our next adventure together.

ABSTRACT

PAMELA WHITE WOLSEY

THE POWER OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL: REIMAGINING THE NATURE NARRATIVE THROUGH AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA

MAY 2020

This study situates the Appalachian Trail (AT) as a powerful place connecting multiple communities with varying identities, abilities, and personalities, a place where we can consider our radical interconnectedness in a way that moves beyond wilderness ideology and settler colonialism through the construction of an inclusive narrative about experiences in nature. I engage in this work as a rejection of the oppressive ideologies that shape our wilderness narratives, and as a critical examination of the ways I perpetuate these ideologies through my actions as thru-hiker/scholar. The procedure for this study included the enactment of autohistoria-teoría, a method developed by Gloria E. Anzaldúa to process and theorize the divisions that mold our experiences. Out of this enactment developed (and continues) a deep understanding of how the spirit of nonhumans contributes to the language of place. Every place has a story to tell, one that includes the perspectives of all who have inhabited it, human and nonhuman. Like many stories, however, often, only one side is presented. The story of the AT is no exception. To enact decolonial transformation, I give you a magical account of my thru-hiker experience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL: REIMAGINING THE NATURE NARRATIVE THROUGH AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA

> The AT, like so much in this world, is a story. It is a story that has been repeated so often, so vividly, and so convincingly that we have almost forgotten that it is a story.
>
> Benjamin J. Prince[1]

Narratives about the Appalachian Trail (AT) typically describe its vastness, significance, origins, and timelessness. The trail spans 2,190 miles through 14 states, passing through remote forests in some places and skirting the country's most populated cities in others. Millions of people are drawn to the trail each year, where they find opportunities to experience encounters both with nature and with fellow foot travelers. Visits to the trail also provide the opportunity to learn more about those that hike the AT from end to end, known as thru-hikers.[2] Their narratives are "repeated so often, so vividly," as one attentive observer, Prince, describes and these stories are easily accessible in that they can be found in bookstores throughout Appalachia (192). Thru-hiker stories motivate and inspire others to attempt thru-hikes themselves.[3] I was one of

---

[1] *An Appalachian Trail: A Critical Geographic Study in Visual Representation and Landscape Production* 192.

[2] The spelling of *thru* (instead of through) is typical in hiking culture.

[3] Thru-hikers travel by foot, carrying on their backs everything they need to survive (typically for seven days before a resupply) as they follow 165,000 white blazes marked on trees, bridges, fences, boulders, and rocks through the Appalachian Mountains. According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), only

those people back in 2010 when, along with my husband, Josh, we picked up a copy of David Miller's *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail* (see fig. 1). Within three years, we had quit our jobs, sold our home, and moved across the country to thru-hike the AT. We completed our hike, in exactly six months, on September 15, 2013. Had it not been for our random stop at the Amicalola Falls bookstore, where we purchased the book, we would not have hiked the trail.

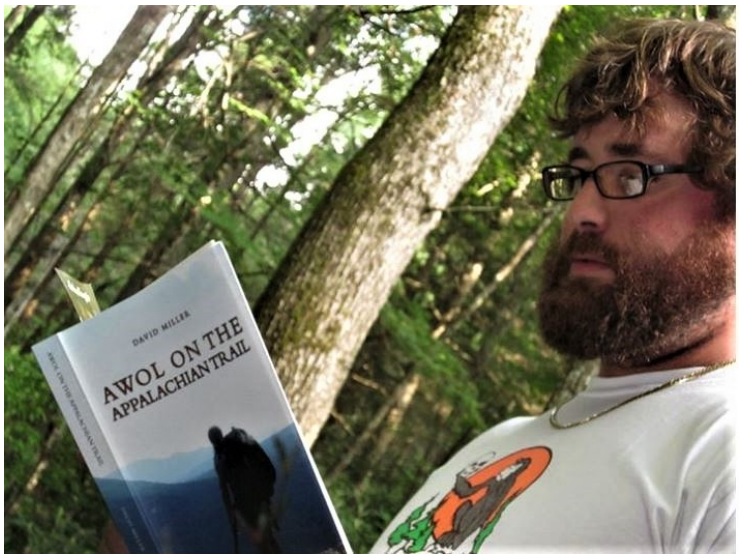

Fig. 1. First thru-hiker narrative, 2010.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. Personal collection. May 2010.

Thru-hiker narratives are widely accessible and influential. Their stories, predominantly found in shelter logs, popular novels, online journals, motion pictures, or

one in four thru-hikers successfully complete the journey. Hikers can either head northbound starting in Georgia or southbound beginning in Maine. Thru-hikers also have the option of a flip-flop at mid-point to avoid bad weather at either end. The average thru-hike takes six months to complete. Along the journey, hikers also leave their identities behind as they typically adopt new names that further helps to disassociate them from their "modern" lifestyle pre-trail. Earl Shaffer was the first documented person to thru-hike the trail, doing so after World War I as an attempt to "walk the Army out of [his] system" (8). (Myron Avery hiked the entire trail prior to Shaffer during the formation of the trail but Shaffer's journey is known as the first documented thru-hike.) Since Shaffer's thru-hike to walk off the war, the popularity of "Warrior Expeditions" continues, with groups of former soldiers walking for the same purpose each year.

YouTube videos, also appear in 23 dissertations about the AT, with most (15) conducted over the past decade.[4] Thru-hiker stories contribute to many multidisciplinary topics, as their descriptions of hiking the trail cross fields of study, from ecocriticism (Marshall); land management (Minteer; Comis; Hermann and Carpentier; Dümplemann; Zhao et al.); history (Mittlefehld; Joyner; Ratiu); higher education (Arnold); psychology (Spyker; Coburn; Ketterer); environmental studies (Bratton); environmental geography (Seal; Prince); sociology (Fondren); recreation and leisure studies (Zealand); environmental protection (Wood et al.; Dourson; Erb; Clark et al.; J. Miller); archaeology (Barnes); social and behavioral sciences (Robinson); adventure education (Williams); parks, recreation, and tourism management (Freed); education, health and human services (Klein); and, in the instance of this dissertation, multicultural women's and gender studies (Wolsey). Given the accessibility and influence of these stories in public and academic spheres, thru-hiker stories serve as a form of knowledge describing experiences with nonhuman nature.

For many Americans, the AT has come to represent the communion of humans and nature—an affinity at the heart of the original vision for the trail. Meant as an antidote to growing industrialization, the AT was first proposed by forester Benton MacKaye in 1921 in an article titled "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning," that he submitted to the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*. MacKaye envisioned the trail as a space in which to escape from civilized living and find

[4] For most of the scholars who seek to make meaning of this nature experience, they have thru-hiked the trail themselves, had family members who thru-hiked, or have section hiked the AT.

a renewed sense of community with other sojourners within the wilderness. Although many scholars of the AT, and outdoor enthusiasts themselves, often do not acknowledge it, the space of the AT has its own layered and complicated history. As Susan Bratton notes, "The AT is a conversation about colonization, settlement, capitalism, and industrialization, as well as about American identity" (*Spirit* 6). Long before Benton MacKaye was born, the land the AT traverses was inhabited by a number of human communities. Cherokee, Monacan, Algonquian, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Shawnee peoples are just a few of the Indigenous peoples that lived in the area. [5] Many of these people were forcibly driven out of their homelands or killed. Nonhuman communities also suffered (eastern elk, American chestnut, passenger pigeons, eastern bison, and Carolina parakeet) to the point of extinction permanently altering the landscape (Nolt). European settlers ruptured the relationships cultivated within these mountains by displacing the many human and nonhuman communities indigenous to the area and by altering the landscape. Also, as a result of the settler invasion, the trail served as a battlefield during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, endured destruction by logging and fire, and witnessed the enslavement of Africans as well as the paths to freedom along the Underground Railroad, which runs parallel to the trail.

The land of Appalachia contains the spirit of these events as well as the spirits of the human and nonhuman communities that continue to exist along this footpath. In the epigraph to this introduction, Benjamin J. Prince remarks on how the stories humans

[5] *See Appalachian American Indians of West Virginia.* There are still some populations of these peoples in the Appalachia Mountains, but the populations have declined drastically.

construct shape their experience of nature. Those stories are often problematic. Prince characterizes the narrative of the AT as one deeply ingrained in American culture, and that reinforces the inequalities and injustices on which that culture depends. A story as much as a place, the AT has become a sort of "American myth entrained in a landscape:"

> Like all myths, it functions symbolically to help us make the world meaningful. But through this process, the AT has become a landscape that privileges some types of people, performances, and environments over others. The story has directed particular manifestations of power and has been appropriated by others to reinforce their power. (Prince 192)

As Prince notes, the story of the AT is an extension of American culture itself, and as such, it enacts and enforces the power structures that exclude some groups of people. Narratives of nature become colonized, subject to the same ruling forces as civilization itself. The AT literature reinforces these power structures through two interrelated ideologies: *wilderness ideology* (a term coined by William Cronon to explain how wilderness is not simply nature or the absence of civilization, but in fact is itself a cultural construction) and *settler colonialism* (an ideology that situates the exploration of frontier/wilderness as something only those with dominant identities do, thus keeping all but elite whites out of nature narratives). Wilderness ideology has supported the rationale for the AT from its inception, and settler colonialism has continued to shape how the trail is understood, written about, and used over the decades. Those ideologies continue to thrive in the troubling humancentrism of thru-hiker narratives.

While the personal accounts of thru-hikers can be helpful in the ways that they inspire reciprocity and share basic information related to logistics such as gear, terrain, and resupply as well as describe the impact of the trail community on their journey, they also reflect an anthropocentric bias in their descriptions of the experience by overlooking the contributions of nonhuman communities. Through most of these narratives, the separation of humans from nature is normalized. This disconnection, based on colonial knowledges and practices, is premised on commodification of the landscape and ignores Native knowledges and practices rooted in a connection to the landscape. Because these are stories "repeated so often," we do forget that these descriptions are not factual accounts of absolute truth; rather, they are stories presenting a perspective that has been influenced by the dominant culture. Those points of view outside the status quo typically fail to be passed along within stories. Such exclusion contributes to the erasure of perspectives and the molding of worldviews. To provide a greater understanding of the multispecies engagements that occur during a thru-hike, the inclusion of the nonhuman within these narratives is essential.

My experience of thru-hiking the trail was life-changing, to say the least. It altered my worldview in ways that I could never have anticipated, but what I noticed most was that my thru-hiker narrative was very dissimilar to the narratives I read to prepare for the hike and the narratives I researched for this dissertation. Unlike the majority of thru-hikers, who favored the companionship of other hikers while immersed in the trail, I found that the nonhuman communities inhabiting the landscape sustained

me. This difference caused me to investigate why I saw things so differently from those who shared those 5 million steps of the AT with me.

Recognizing the colonizing forces at work in AT narratives did not come naturally; it was a process of coming to know through questioning what I have been trained to believe about experiences in nature versus what I actually experienced while hiking the trail. The results of this progression are detailed in each chapter, beginning with Chapter Two, where I contextualize and challenge the humancentric AT narratives that serve as the status quo in thru-hiker stories. Through this examination, I look at the evolution of stories along the trail, beginning with cultures Native to the area and then recognizing the shift that occurs with the arrival of the settlers. I demonstrate how the ways that nature experiences were described changed drastically with the influence of settler colonialism.

In Chapter Three, I describe the conceptual framework used for this dissertation, *autohistoria-teoría*, developed by Gloria Anzaldúa as a tool for dismantling oppressive ideologies. Anzaldúa's method of autohistoria-teoría provides a multi-layered approach to understanding the ideological mechanisms that sustain oppression through the inclusion of autobiographical, historical, theoretical, and spiritual forms of knowledge. My particular use of autohistoria-teoría draws on key themes and assumptions from Indigenous knowledges, including the belief that spirit exists in all entities and that the perspectives of places provide knowledge to dissect exclusionary nature narratives and reimagine new ones. This reimagining challenges both the storyteller and the reader to

confront the complications and advantages that arise from intentionally interacting with the history and spirituality of nonhumans.

In Chapter Four, I describe an alternative to typical descriptions of nature experiences along the trail using trail magic, a cultural event common with all thru-hikers on the AT. Through trail magic, I provide an example of how AT narratives may be told differently through a recognition of the spirit that exists within nonhumans. This spirit allows for greater recognition of the nonhuman agency contributing to trail magic, often seen in the form of communication. Lastly, in Chapter Five, I describe how nonhuman communication, as expressed through trail magic, contributes to the language of place and what can be learned from this collective of knowledges.

This dissertation situates the AT as a powerful place connecting multiple communities with varying identities, abilities, and personalities, a place where we can consider our radical interconnectedness in a way that moves beyond wilderness ideology and settler colonialism. This is the story of a white-footed deer mouse, a lifetime of rhododendrons, a billion cicadas, 48 gray squirrels, surprises on mountain tops, and more—one that speaks of the magic that occurs among communities of humans and nonhumans as they encounter one another along the Appalachian Trail.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE PROBLEM WITH APPALACHIAN TRAIL NARRATIVES: HOW SETTLER COLONIALISM INFLUENCS EXPERIENCES IN NATURE

> The Appalachian Trail is a state of being—a merger of ancient mountains, flowing rivers, caring companions, human endeavor, and individual growth and change. Nothing is merely human, and nothing is merely natural. The essence of both intertwines in a long thread, woven north to south, and back again.
>
> Susan Power Bratton[6]

The AT is one of the most magical places in the United States. The privilege to thru-hike the entire length of the trail is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, providing individuals with the chance to spend their days and nights in the company of the natural world. As Susan Power Bratton explains in the above epigraph, the AT "is a state of being," where "nothing is merely human, and nothing is merely natural" (22). Because thru-hiking the trail is such a unique endeavor, many thru-hikers feel inclined to share the experiences with others preparing to embark on the same adventure. Thru-hiker stories tend to focus on the plight of the individuals, their encounters socializing with human communities, or the ways that this escape in nature has helped them overcome an

[6] *Spirit* 22.

obstacle. Settler colonialism is threaded through most of these stories and implicated in the colonization of nature narratives where a humancentric perspective provides no references to the agency of nature other than as obstacles--how plants, animals, insects, and/or weather hinder the journey.

The hierarchies and delineations in settler colonialism conceal the interconnections that exist between humans and nature, as they existed before colonization and in the present. They also erase accountability for destructive practices that have led to our warming climate, water, and air pollution, mountaintop removal, and unnecessary violence towards plants and nonhuman animals. If the root of these destructive actions lies in problematic humancentric ideologies, then perhaps the remedy (or part of the remedy) lies in the construction of a new, more inclusive ideology of nature. As we now exist in a geological period that those concerned about the climate refer to as the Anthropocene,[7] where human actions affect the world more than any other force, it is imperative that we reconsider the ways we have been doing things. Our stories about nature are a great place to start since many of these narratives mold the experiences of generations to come.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the implications of settler colonialism on the AT as depicted through stories on the AT and to offer an alternative retelling. In this chapter, I will contextualize and challenge humancentric thru-hiker narratives through an examination of settler colonialism's influence on these narratives. I will explain what

[7] This term gained popularity in 2000 when used by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugen Stoermer in their discussion of "The Anthropocene," located in the *Global Change Newsletter*.

settler colonialism is, how it pertains to nature, how it is maintained, and how it affects nature experiences. I engage in this work as a departure from settler colonialism, a rejection of the oppressive ideologies that shape our wilderness narratives, and as a critical examination of the ways I perpetuate these ideologies through my actions as thru-hiker/scholar. This confrontation, though uncomfortable, does not make me want to avoid the trail and stop hiking altogether. Rather, the deep connections I made with nonhuman nature as a part of this journey compel me to reshape my narrative in reverence to the plants, animals, insects, and mountains, which gave meaning to my experience.

Settler Colonialism Defined

Settler colonialism refers to the actions of an imperialist society taking over land for commodification. Within this hostile takeover, everything indigenous to an area—the peoples and their philosophies, worldviews, and lifestyles, also nonhuman entities—are destroyed or stolen and replaced with the settler's culture and ways of thinking. Fig. 2 shows graffiti along the trail that references this takeover. The invasive species known as colonists of what is now the United States saw commodities in the land and removed Indigenous peoples so that the land could be conquered or *settled*, the preferred term of the colonist. Enslaved peoples of African descent were then forced into these areas to perform manual labor. Acknowledging the perpetuation of settler colonization is important because it often works unnoticed and habitually through narrative. Settler colonialist ideology is so engrained in U.S. society that most people do not even realize how this type of thinking and the actions it promotes mold our experiences, and in the instance of this project, the experience of thru-hiking the trail.

Fig. 2. The "Stolen Land" graffiti in Unicoi County, Tennessee, serves as a historical reminder of settler colonialism.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. Personal collection. May 2013.

Settler colonialism operates through binary opposition. That is, to justify settlers' violent attacks on Native peoples, their worldviews, and their livelihoods, it is essential for the settler to present Indigenous peoples (as well as nonhumans) as less-than when compared to themselves. Binary opposition, or dualism, molds Western society to make assumptions based on difference, not similarity. For example, within this mindset, white settlers were portrayed by each other as superior to the Natives; the same white humans were also portrayed as superior to nature, justifying the commodification of nature as a resource. This belief regarding nature's inferiority coincided with the religious/biblical view that man has dominion over nature as well as the white Christian idea of manifest destiny. This dualism supported the ways that nature was conquered, consumed, managed, and protected. Within dualistic thinking, there are only two possibilities: one is

right, and the other is wrong; there is no in-between.[8] Therefore, when compared to humans, nature always falls short. In "Decolonizing Relationships with Nature," Val Plumwood refers to this dynamic as a "hyper-separation" that incorporates "defining the dominant identity emphatically against, or in opposition to, the subordinated identity, by exclusion of their real or supposed qualities" (54). Within this type of thinking, there is no room for commonality or connection. It is a process of power over the other based on false representations.

Binary thinking has become so ingrained within Western society that we often enact it unconsciously. That is the way that settler colonialism works; through becoming so naturalized, we do not even realize we are perpetuating the actions. Patrick Wolfe describes this staying power in "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," as "a structure not an event" (53).[9] Wolfe's discussion of the ongoing ways that settler colonialism continues has inspired academics in some disciplines to dedicate their work to decolonial processes. These scholars theorize how to unsettle these oppressive ideologies by creating awareness for the ways that they operate and by providing alternatives to the status quo.

---

[8] Val Plumwood talks about how dualism is practiced (radical exclusion, stereotyping, polarization, backgrounding, denial, assimilation, and instrumentation; 54-59).

[9] Wolfe actually said this earlier, in 1999's *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, but I more often see his 2006 "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" credited with this quote. He does say it in both these works.

Settler Colonialism and Nature

Settler colonialism pertains to nature in the ways that it normalizes the separation of humans from the natural world, replacing Native knowledges and practices premised on a connection to the landscape with a way of thinking that isolates humans from nature through technology, construction, language, and dualistic worldviews. Before colonization, storytelling about Appalachia began with the original Americans; Chickasaw, Cherokee, Moneton, Haudenosauneega, Monacan, Susquehannock, Lenape, Mohican, Wabanaki, Abenaki/Abénaquis, and Penobscot were just a few of the peoples that inhabited these mountains. Like stories told today, these narratives served the purpose of establishing a worldview. Leroy Little Bear explains in his foreword to *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*: "Storytelling is a very important aspect of Native America. It is not just the words and the listening but the actual living of the story…The Native American paradigm comes to life as the author weaves through ecology, relational networks of plants, animals, the land, and the cosmos" (xii). For most Native peoples, the weaving of subjects that Little Bear describes represents the ways that everything (all entities that share the planet) are related. Beginning with creation stories and continuing with narratives that detail personal experience, historical facts, life lessons, cultural knowledge, or medicinal information, all these accounts reflect a participatory kinship with nature.

The arrival of the colonialists introduced themes that differed widely from the stories told by Natives and instilled a separateness between humans and nature for the purpose of commodification. Plants, animals, rivers, and mountains went from being

members of the greater community to entities (or, too often, as things) designed for human use. It was important for the colonialists to portray Natives as well as nature as the opposite of themselves to justify their violent actions. Descriptors such as *savage*, *brute*, *untamed*, *wild*, and *dangerous* were all commonly used to establish opposition and the need for control.[10] Such descriptions are still commonly used when describing the Other, even though as time has passed and industrialism has developed, wild spaces have become less common. As such, additional themes were constructed to describe the natural world through a concept known as *wilderness ideology*. Wilderness ideology posits nature as separate from humans, an escape from the modern world, and the last frontier. It worked collectively along with whiteness to naturalize Western thinking about nature. These themes supported the ideology of separateness through literature, art, photography,[11] and propaganda.[12]

Born out of settler colonialism, wilderness ideology has been used to support the literal and metaphorical colonization of the American frontier. Through wilderness, an image was created dictating who belonged in these remote spaces and who did not. William Cronon's critique in "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," is one of the most commonly cited. He declares that wilderness is not a

---

[10] Roderick Frazier Nash traces these changes in how nature is described in *Wilderness and the American Mind.* Nature, once known as related, powerful, and knowing changed to being "howling," dismal," and "terrible" (26).

[11] According to Nash, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Gifford Pinchot's ideas about nature worked in conjunction with visual forms of media (paintings, photography) to mold people's opinions about nature, with an emphasis on the beauty of flowers, birds, bodies of water, and picturesque scenes (Nash 67). These new nature stories made an impression, and "by the 1890s," Nash found, "the average citizen could approach wilderness with the viewpoint of the vacationer rather than the conqueror" (143).

[12] Prince discusses propaganda materials used to promote the trail throughout his entire dissertation.

place, but a concept, so normalized within American culture that it works undetected, feeding the desires and fears of white settlers and sustaining their behavior. Cronon explains:

> The more one knows of its peculiar history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems. Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation-indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. (7)

The wilderness concept facilitated and naturalized white elitist human desires by dictating who belongs in these spaces and eliminating those who do not. Doing so, limited who could enjoy and feel welcome in these spaces.

Benton MacKaye's proposal for the AT coincided with the beginning stages of the wilderness movement within the United States. In 1921, MacKaye, often referred to as the father of the AT, presented the idea of preserving land for recreation in "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning." MacKaye's proposal consisted of a continuous footpath along the ridgeline of the Appalachian Mountains. Because of the growing industrialization within the cities along the east coast, his idea to conserve the wild areas that still existed made sense to many. Gerald Broughton Lowery details this fortunate timing of MacKaye's in *Benton MacKaye's Appalachian Trail as a Cultural Symbol*. Lowery explains:

> When it became clear that the frontier had ended, many Americans searched for ways to preserve the wilderness influence in modern America. Because there was a transition from farming to industry also occurring at this time, one approach was

> to set aside wilderness areas to replenish the nature deficit that modern lifestyles had created. (15)

The trail was completed in 1937 with Myron Avery becoming the very first 2000 miler or thru-hiker. [13] Enthusiasm for preserving "pristine" places of nature resulted in the swift approval of land allocation for the footpath, an initial phase of the decades-long movement establishing national and state parks and forests that culminated in the Wilderness Act (1964) and National Trails System Act (1968). Today, the AT passes through two national parks, eight national forests, and many state parks. Hidden from the millions of visitors that frequent the trail each year are the political struggles behind the acquisition of land for the trail. Sarah Mittlefehldt reveals the path of these struggles in *The Appalachian Trail and American Environmental Politics*: "Each of these places along the trail—and every step of the way in between—was built on tangled roots" (196). As political struggles underpinned the acquisition of land from the people inhabiting the area, the nonhuman communities that also called the Appalachian Mountains home were not even considered, since the idea of land as a commodity prevailed.

Wilderness is not simply a space absent of cultural intention, but a place based on the idea that nature is separate from humans, which makes nature available for a distinct form of commodification, tourism. As a site of wilderness tourism, the AT offers an escape from civilized living, a place to unwind and relax. Then, after visitors have been rejuvenated by everything it has to offer, the AT is a place to leave. Sociologist John Urry

[13] 2000 miler is also a term used to describe a thru-hiker. At the completion of the trail, thru-hikers are encouraged to submit their "2000 miler application" that lists them in a registry with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

coined the phrase "the tourist gaze" to describe what happens when places are objectified and commodified for tourism in this type of way. Binary opposition is central, as "such gazes are constructed through difference" (Urry 1). The commodification of nature as recreational tourism resembles wilderness ideology in the ways that places are conceived to fulfill certain expectations. Urry explains, "Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures" (3). Along the AT, for instance, thru-hiker narratives build anticipation of points of interest such as Springer Mountain, Harpers Ferry, Mount Washington, and Mount Katahdin, which are just a few of the popular landmarks that narratives highlight.

Furthermore, not only does tourism present nature as the Other but it also "involves the notion of 'departure,' of a limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life and allowing one's senses to engage with a set of stimuli that contrast with the everyday and the mundane" (Urry 2). Coinciding with wilderness ideology, the tourist gaze represents natural spaces as so separate from human lives that they are meant to be experienced only temporarily. In addition to molding experiences, the tourist gaze also limits perception. Mountains, for example, typically included in the background of souvenir-type photos, are seen as conglomerates with each mountain blending into the other, absent of signs of individuality or vitality within the mountains themselves. (Fig. 3 provides just one example of the uniqueness of each mountain).

Fig. 3. One of our first mountains to encounter, Blood Mountain, with its large rock formations covering the top.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. Personal collection. May 2013.

How Settler Colonialism is Maintained

In the context of the AT, thru-hiker narratives help maintain settler colonialism. Thru-hikers tend to see the landscape as the backdrop to their own experience, as a commodity to be conquered and utilized, lacking a history or spirit of its own. There are many examples in such narratives of settler colonialism and wilderness ideology justifying the removal of indigenous cultures to create a space for elite whites to enjoy. Indeed, the majority of the thru-hiker population consists of white males who are privileged financially to take six months out of their year to hike and can afford the expensive gear that will sustain the journey. As Karen D. Arnold notes in "Education on the Appalachian Trail: What 2,000 Miles Can Teach Us About Learning," "80% of thru-hikers are male" (2), and as Greg Williams revealed in *An Investigation of Hiker Diversity and Inclusivity on the Appalachian Trail*, "90% of thru-hikers are Caucasian"

(iv). It is essential to note the privileges that whiteness grants thru-hikers in the ways that they roam freely through the landscape, enter into small rural towns without question, hitchhike the highways when a break from the trail is needed, and camp almost anywhere they like without being harassed. The descriptions of nature found within thru-hiker narratives embody all aspects of wilderness ideology, with stories typically highlighting scenic attractions, wildlife sightings, and human self-perseverance within these "wild" spaces. The idea of nature as an escape is also a common theme with hikers fleeing to the trail to avoid the stress of divorce, death, family, and employment.

The theme of whiteness is maintained through visual images representing who belongs and who does not belong on the trail. For instance, in his evaluation of visual material used to promote the AT from 1921-2014, *An Appalachian Trail: A Critical Geographic Study in Visual Representation and Landscape Production*, Benjamin Prince found that "racial disproportionality is a hallmark of these images" (60). Of one of the publications examined, *The National Geographic Society*, Prince notes that in reference to the trail "one of the most prominent themes projected by the NGS (National Geographic Society) images is that the users are largely white, male, and youthful…designed as yet another landscape for white able-bodied men to perform the role of wilderness adventurer" (59). Prince explains how many of these representations typically go unnoticed. He attributes this invisibility to the narratives that "train us to see some things and to not see others" (Prince 29). Hikers (white men especially) are drawn into the idea of wilderness adventure through these representations without thinking of

the many layers of history and ideology embedded within the words and images.[14] Similarly, in *Toward a Discourse on Recreational Colonialism: Critically Engaging the Haunted Spaces of Outdoor Recreation on the Colorado Plateau*, Kyle G. Boggs asserts that wilderness adventurists share in the privilege of white spatial imaginary, which allows them to take part in their journeys. "Whiteness," claims Boggs, "isn't just an identity, but an imaginary with a privileged status that translates to unearned racial advantages" (54). Boggs goes on to explicate how whiteness allows for the unquestioned performance of settler colonialism in wilderness recreational spaces; this "unearned racial advantage" also prevents the outdoor enthusiast from seeing the layers of settler colonialism embedded in their practices:

> The constructed self, in settler societies, is forged across "a shifting set of relations" between peoples and landscapes, histories and knowledges, and is dependent upon how white settlers orient themselves inside and outside of the rhetorical productions of inclusion and exclusion, privilege and oppression; white settlers move in and out of these relations, often without reflection, and in subtle—sometimes unexamined—ways, white settler subjectivity can leave scars, unknowingly reinforcing that which we as academics and activists claim to critique. (31)

[14] In "Imagining Nature and Erasing Class and Race: Carleton Watkins, John Muir, and the Construction of Wilderness," Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo also call attention to the ways that the concept of white wilderness worked to separate out those that did not belong in their created environment (550).

With white privilege so prominent in the public's participation in wilderness activities, settler colonialism is advanced and then entrenched. The attendant commodification of the land for recreation serves to perpetuate oppressive ideologies about nature, and the behavioral patterns of outdoor enthusiasts maintain wilderness ideology. Boggs discusses these enthusiasts' participatory actions as "rhetorical production" and "recreational colonialism" (31), seeing rhetorical production as the space where recreational colonialism is performed. He surmises, "Implicated by both language and physical reality, these material-discursive spaces produce and are produced by an often-unacknowledged investment in white settler colonialism" (Boggs 31). Moreover, as Boggs notes, the naivete of white settler subjectivity, grounded in such forms of rhetorical production, is reflected in scholarly research on the trail.

Settler colonialism on the AT is maintained in another way: through how research about the trail is conducted. The omission of Indigenous scholars from the literature and the general lack of attention to spirituality or nonhumans as dimensions of the AT attests to this problem. In fact, the word *research* stems from colonial thinking, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith elucidates in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, noting that it is "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (1). Research has not always followed an ethical path, presenting "a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other" (Smith 2). This struggle is evident in AT scholarship, where Western human perspectives are typically the only points of view

represented. For example, descriptions of the trail typically begin with MacKaye, not with the humans and nonhumans indigenous to the area. There is limited consideration of how other peoples interacted with nature, apart from the current culture.

The settler colonialism inherent in existing AT narratives is perhaps most evident at the level of language. Discussions of the trail's power and vitality rarely include references to spirit, plants, nonhuman animals, sacred places, or the landscape's history. AT narratives instead generally focus on the plight of the individuals, their efforts to socialize with human communities, or their experiences of nature as a hindrance to their journey. Such points of view shape hikers' common use of the pejorative term *PUDs*, an abbreviation for "pointless ups and downs," denoting intervals of the trek that fail to offer 'rewards' of scenic views or notable mountaintops. Such memorialists register a disappointment that the trail fails to provide consistent moments of enjoyment to be consumed. At the same time, however, thru-hikers confront throughout the trail vastly more shocking—but perhaps faintly related—evidence of the human imperative to exploit the landscape and its communities. The trail navigates above a superfund site,[15] over a hydroelectric dam,[16] in front of a cellulose acetate factory (see fig. 4),[17]through a zoo,[18] along fields transmitting agricultural methane omissions and laced with pesticides,[19] and adjacent to poisoned lakes.[20] Implicit in these human actions is the

[15] Palmerton Zinc Pile Site, Palmerton, Pennsylvania.
[16] Fontana Dam, North Carolina, where an entire former community lies underneath the Little Tennessee River at this location and plants and animals were forced to separate from one another.
[17] Celanese Corporation, Narrows, Virginia.
[18] Trailside Zoo at Bear Mountain State Park, New York, which houses many of the animals that live along the trail.
[19] The trail passes by many areas related to agribusiness.
[20] One is the location of a plutonium spill at Nuclear Lake, Pawling, New York.

conviction that land is not sentient and exists merely for human use — an attitude starkly different from Indigenous belief; as Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill explain in "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy." Arvin et al. add, “Within the Indigenous context land is not property, as in settler colonialism, but rather land is knowing and knowledge” (21). Visualizing and experiencing the trail solely through the lens of settler colonialism deforms any and all experiences of nature, from PUDs to industrial runoff.

Fig. 4. In 2014, one year after this photo was taken, Celanese corporation agreed to donate a 2.5-mile easement to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy in order to provide an alternative and “safer” route around the manufacturing plant.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. Personal collection. May 2013.

How Settler Colonialism Affects Experiences With Nature

The phenomenon of settler colonialism instills such a separation between human and the nonhuman that humans fail to notice the nonhuman nature that surrounds them. Scholarship on thru-hiker experiences reveals that even after a six-month immersion,

hikers feel separate from nature in some way. Research shows that the concept of wilderness sets unrealistic expectations about nature and causes thru-hikers to lack concern for the setting, history, and inhabitants of place. Further, the literature attests that the notion that wilderness spaces were created as a space for white elites lingers to this day, causing only some populations to experience nature in these settings. Most important, the AT scholarship shows that the majority of thru-hikers feel that their social engagements with other humans on the trail were the most important aspects of the hike.

The most powerful analysis of the division between humans and nature was most evident in Vanessa Ann Klein's *The Nature of Nature: Space, Place, and Identity on the Appalachian Trail.* Klein asked participants if they "were a part of nature, a visitor in nature, or separate from nature" (211). The majority of thru-hikers felt detached from nature in some way. Klein describes her interactions with three thru-hikers:

> Freebird, Hundchen, and Darjeeling all saw themselves as being separate from nature. In each case there was some element that the participant felt kept them separate from nature. For Darjeeling, his beliefs about creation divide him from nature. Hundchen's sense of awe created a barrier between her and nature. Freebird's reliance on things that are not from nature in order to survive separate him from nature. (212)

Klein's findings are not unique. Merry Coburn reports similar results in *Walking Home: Women's Transformative Experiences in the Wilderness of the Appalachian Trail.* The participants of her study reflect thru-hiker Hundchen's perspective in that nature is powerful, but there are no similarities between humans and nonhumans (97).

Settler colonialism affects experiences in nature through the creation of wilderness as a space separate and untouched by humans. If spaces did not meet the wilderness test (as one thru-hiker put it),[21] then the experience was not as meaningful. Adam Edwin Regula writes, "Participants were keenly aware of instances where the physical environment failed to match the identity of the AT as a wilderness/escape and were inevitably displeased with these shortcomings" (126). The stories presenting wilderness in this particular way mold the expectations: "Whether intentional or not, representations contribute to preconceptions people have of places and channel what people expect, notice, and ignore during direct experience" (Regula 13). Similarly, Prince claims in *An Appalachian Trail* that "Compelling discursive regimes of tourist media train us to see some things and to not see others" (29). Thru-hikers "become so completely engulfed by their mental image or the conceptualization of what the landscape should look like, that they become blind to the actual place" (Prince 31).

Furthermore, Clark T.W. Zealand found in *Decolonizing Experiences: An Ecophenomenological Investigation of the Lived-Experience of Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers*, that "without considering the influential flux of historical and cultural frameworks, many meaningful experiences are marginalized, even discarded, because they do not fit within the framework of a dominant wilderness experience" (183). As a result, as indicated in Regula's research, rarely was the physical setting mentioned in describing the trail (60) and that the history of the trail was not important either (65).

[21] Klein (224-229). As one thru-hiker explains, "I read Bill Cronon's essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness' and then was like oh my god, so mind blowing. But, um, but I— so like I always think like oh yeah, the AT it's not real wilderness it's like super close to development and like farms" (221). Coburn's participants also mentioned the AT not meeting the wilderness test (97).

Wilderness ideology creates unrealistic expectations that, when not delivered prevents hikers from truly understanding the history of the land and the nonhuman communities that surround them.

Settler colonialism affects experiences in nature by forestalling the ability of some populations to experience an immersion with plants, animals, mountains, and rivers because wilderness areas such as the AT were originally designed as places for elite whites to enjoy. These places still carry with them the separations imposed through colonialism. Boggs explains:

> Within these spaces, not only is there a particular way of being in the wilderness, but also a specific American subjectivity that characterizes who belongs there…[I]n this way, American subjectivity, imaginative geographies, and whiteness merge to form a logic in which wilderness experiences are narrated. (115)

Moreover, the memories of these intentional separations cause some people to refrain from engaging in nature experiences, thus affecting any form of participatory relationship with nature. Greg Williams documents the demographics of AT hikers in *An Investigation*, revealing that "more than two-thirds are male, and greater than 90% are Caucasian" (iv). Williams's study uncovers how oppressive acts of the past remain present in many minds, with the effect of limiting who interacts in spaces of nature (27). Williams explains:

> These subpopulations carried historically traumatic memories very distinct from Caucasians (e.g., slavery, lynchings, subordination into lumber and turpentine

> industries, murderous and land-stealing Native American introductions of a strange race of people, disadvantaged treatment, because of immigration status, and Japanese Americans gathered into concentration camps for no just cause). Certainly, the notion of recreation in backwoods and wildlands might present emotional or historical barriers for some racial and ethnic groups. (59-60)

The concept of wilderness differs for every individual, and spaces for recreation present far different implications for people of color. Their painful experiences remain active through the passing down of stories, and while adventure tales of wilderness portray a specific image of the wild for whites, stories of our history present different accounts for those oppressed within settler colonialism. Jodi A. Barnes elaborates in *From Farms to Forests: The Material Life of an Appalachian Landscape*, "Wilderness became a place people went to visit," and "it did not include all people, particularly not poor or black people" (182). The power of wilderness ideology in presenting a space specifically designed for elite whites was and remains effective. This exclusion was central during the creation of these spaces, and it persists today.

One final aspect of settler colonialism's effects appears in studies on the experience of AT thru-hikers, in which scholars have found that the social aspect of the journey (interacting with fellow humans on the trail) was the most important factor for hikers. In his research on the trail's identity in "*It's Just Walking,"* Regula revealed, "One of the things that struck me most about the Trail is the human element of it….it's a place of human interaction and a place that brings out the best in that" (58); as one hiker put it, it was the "defining element of the trail" (58). Zealand documented similar results

in his series of interviews, finding that "the trail community of thru-hikers, formed through close social bonding, was of particular importance to many participants" (155); "engaging with other humans was more significant than interactions with nature" (155). In fact, hikers who were intentionally seeking a connection with nature "comprise[d] the minority of thru-hikers" (Zealand 144). William Ketterer's *Psychological Change Among Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, bears out such findings, as attested by a response from one thru-hiker that summarizes the opinions of hikers in his exchanges with them: "it's the people that you meet. I think that's the most important part, the people that you meet and the trail magic that you see. And like how good so many people can be" (67). Klein, too, revealed that "social interactions were a main component of many participants" (153), and Coburn, in investigating the experiences of women along the trail concluded, "I am surprised at how infrequent have been the references to nature in the women's stories and how common their references to people" (190). For many of these thru-hikers, an experience this long and of this magnitude with nonhuman nature was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. To come away from this journey with the most important aspect being the fellow humans along the trail is troubling, as are the unrealistic expectations that the concept of wilderness imposes.

Offering an Alternative: Inclusive Possibilities For Trail Narratives

When something works covertly to mold the way we think, it is important to understand not only its logic but its mode of operation. In this chapter, I have explained what settler colonialism is, how it pertains to nature, how it is maintained, and how it

affects nature experiences, specifically on the AT. The overriding purpose of this dissertation is to examine the ramifications of thru-hiker narratives that exclude nonhuman communities and to imagine other, more inclusive possibilities for trail narratives. I engaged in this research because my experiences with nonhuman nature were different than those typically described in thru-hiker stories. Rather than seeing plants, animals, mountains, and rivers as the background or hindrance to my journey, I experienced a spirit-infused collective of knowledge within nonhuman communities in places all along the trail. These experiences allowed me to feel connected with nonhuman nature rather than separate. As a result, unlike most AT narrators, my most treasured memories consist of the relationships I formed with human *and* nonhuman communities.

Settler colonialism has influenced narratives for centuries, but that does not mean oppressive ideologies must continue. A challenge recognized by several of the scholars discussed is that we critique these spaces, but at the same time, we use them and are implicated in the discursive practices of settler colonialism shaping them. How do we best reconcile these actions without maintaining the status quo? To visualize the landscape as something other than a commodity and to learn new ways to talk about the land are possible. The goal of this dissertation is to provide alternatives by presenting a perspective informed by Indigenous, animist, and spiritual-activist theorizing. These points of view are interwoven throughout with my self-reflection, my fieldwork, and my desire to reimagine the narrative of the AT experience. Chapter Three describes how the objective is accomplished, enacting Gloria Anzaldúa's method of autohistoria-teoría, which is similar to autoethnography but differs in that the former is specifically designed

to dismantle oppressive frameworks and create alternative paths. Through autohistoria-teoría, I can use the collective knowledge received from the spirits of plants, nonhuman animals, sacred places, mountains, and rivers, not typically considered in traditional research methods. Autohistoria-teoría allows for the trail's power and vitality to be an included perspective in this alternative thru-hiker narrative.

Opening to the perspectives of nonhumans allows for a more thorough understanding of nature experiences. One way this can occur is through the recognition of the spirit that exists within all entities, human and nonhuman. The spirit works as a tool that enables us to recognize our commonalities rather than focus on differences. It also provides a way to acknowledge acts of nonhuman agency, develop empathy, and receive knowledge. Chapter Four explores the implications of how the spirit can alter perceptions while one hikes the trail, through a discussion of trail magic, the special gifts that thru-hikers received to help sustain their journey. Trail magic, seen through the inclusion of the spirit, provides a means for experiencing the language of place by revealing the many ways that nonhuman entities communicate. Chapter Five extends the discussion of language of place by focusing on how the perspective of the land contributes to our understanding of places, our experiences in nature, and the descriptions of these experiences in narratives. Millions of people visit the AT each year, and I hope to influence the experience of this powerful trail outside of a settler colonialist lens.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY: ENACTING AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA: FOLLOWING ANZALDÚA'S PATH OF CONOCIMIENTO[22] ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

> Often nature provokes un "aja," or "conocimiento," one that guides your feet along the path, gives you el animo to dedicate yourself to transforming perceptions of reality, and thus the conditions of life.
>
> Gloria Anzaldúa [23]

It is common to receive creative or mental inspiration from spending time immersed in nature. Whether it is a short walk by the sea or a six-month sabbatical on the AT, Western culture teaches the belief that nature escapes promote mental, physical, and spiritual clarity. Atypical is to credit nonhuman nature as the agent that provides the knowledge gained in the presence of trees, mountains, rivers, and animals. Instead, we credit the human mind for achieving its own knowledge, with nature merely as the background to each learning experience. What Anzaldúa calls *conocimiento*, however, is a different way of knowing: "Conocimiento questions conventional knowledges, current categories, classifications, and contents" (119). That is, conocimiento naturally

---

[22] The Spanish word for knowing.

[23] "now let us shift…the path of conocimiento…inner work, public acts" 117. The citations of this essay are from the anthology edited by AnaLouise Keating *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* 117-159. "now let us shift" also appears in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* 540-578.

recognizes the knowledge received from nature in the "ajas" Anzaldúa describes. For me personally, nature provided un aja, many of them, in fact, which taught me that nonhumans contributed greatly to my collective knowledge formation while I hiked the trail and afterward. Nature was the powerful *animo* (or motivation) that inspired me to create new narratives about thru-hiking the trail. Because of autohistoria-teoría's focus on collective knowledge, rather than binary opposition, enacting this method for my dissertation provided the path to understanding and describing this life-changing experience outside of a settler colonialist lens.

Developed by Anzaldúa, autohistoria-teoría is a method of knowledge production that evolves through a critical examination of personal experience, collective knowledge, and cultural influences. Grounded in relatedness to all that exists, the method of autohistoria-teoría is a practice especially cognizant of the knowledge that nature and the spirit provides. Through this incorporation of learning from a collective, autohistoria-teoría provides a means of transforming a problem and the self through creative acts. Anzaldúa defined autohistoria-teoría in *Light in the Dark/ Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* as a way of connecting and theorizing about personal experiences with social realities (6). Growing up on the border of Texas and Mexico, Anzaldúa learned early on about the effects of dualistic frameworks. She experienced these divisions geographically, culturally, and physically as she lived between the worlds of American/Mexican, lesbian/hetero, Chicana/white, healthy/sick, academic/non-academic, and so on. Anzaldúa developed autohistoria-teoría as a way to process and theorize about the divisions that affected her personal and professional experiences, a

research method that is inclusive of multiple forms of knowledge and multiple ways of knowing, otherwise suppressed by binary opposition.

Research methods typically provide a strategy or plan to attain new information, greater understanding, or an alternative solution to a specific topic or problem. Autohistoria-teoría works in the same way but through a more inclusive approach. While the forms of data deemed acceptable within traditional academic methods differ depending on disciplines, often academic ways of knowing ignore Indigenous philosophies, the spirit, intuition, dreams, plants, animals, or diverse registers of consciousness.[24] Anzaldúa created autohistoria-teoría because she experienced knowledge production as a collective to include all of these things, which she saw as contributing to her knowledge formation. She explains this in "Turning Points: An Interview with Linda Smuckler" included in *Interviews/Entrevistas*:

> There is no such thing as objective truth. It's similar to how I create a story or poem. The universe is created jointly by all the human minds and the universal intelligence in the trees, the deer, the snakes, and so on. By jointly, I mean all forms of consciousness, not just human. Even the rocks have a certain kind of consciousness, the trees, everything. I see the world as a text created by this collective consciousness. (Keating 20).

Through the inclusion of multiple forms of knowledge, Anzaldúa achieved a more comprehensive understanding of the problems she faced— more precisely, the legacies of

[24]Keating talks about how Anzaldúa moves beyond "Enlightenment based frameworks," in "Re-envisioning Coyolxauhqui," stating that "Anzaldúa does not simply write about "suppressed knowledges and marginalized subjectivities," she writes within them (xxix).

colonization. At the same time, by including multiple forms of knowledge, she recognized that other research methods fell short. Through the creation of autohistoria-teoría, Anzaldúa contributes to transdisciplinary research by transcending the boundaries established not only within oppressive ideologies but within disciplines. As a result, theorizing enacted as a part of autohistoria-teoría provides greater accessibility because it does not exclude any way of knowing or privilege one over another. Moreover, the incorporation of collective knowledge combined with personal experience allows research to reach wider audiences, therefore making it a more effective tool for transformation.

Anzaldúa enacted autohistoria-teoría through creative acts such as stories, poetry, drawings, essays, and children's books. Other scholars have followed, incorporating the method in research. In "Expanding Beyond Public and Private Realities: Evoking Anzaldúan Autohistoria-teoría in Two Voices," Kakali Bhattacharya and AnaLouise Keating enact autohistoria-teoría as they work through oppressive ideologies. The authors explain, "Autohistoria-teoría offers decolonial processes … Writing from within spaces of oppression we have experienced ourselves or to which we have borne witness, we constantly interrogate how we situate and resist our ontoepistemological orientation in relation to Enlightenment-based frameworks" (1). Andrea J. Pitts engages in autohistoria-teoría in "Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Autohistoria-teoría* as an Epistemology of Self Knowledge/Ignorance," as a way to better understand self-knowledge practices amongst women of color. Pitts found that the use of collective knowledge allowed for greater accessibility than traditional forms of theorizing. Pitts notes, "Anzaldúa provides an

account of how to theorize collaboratively with others via one's articulation of the embodied experiences of one's own life. Because readers imagine or associate their own embodied experiences and vulnerabilities with the narrator's, this serves as a collective form of meaning-making" (358). Furthermore, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation" exemplifies the incorporation into scholarly research of ways of knowing that are not typically employed in the academy. Her method bears similarities with Anzaldúa's incorporation of mythical figures, the spirit, and experiences with nature.

The usefulness of autohistoria-teoría extends far beyond its role as a method because autohistoria-teoría also functions as a practice in self-growth. The process of theorizing about personal experiences reveals an awareness of our individual and collective connections to the research problems we pursue. Anzaldúa refers to the process of confronting one's participation in systems of oppression as confronting the shadow beast.[25] My own experience with this project confirms and illustrates the process Anzaldúa describes. As a result of researching why other thru-hikers experienced the trail differently than myself, I was able to learn about settler colonialism. Through this awareness, I was also able to see the ways that I maintain and perpetuate colonial ideologies through my actions on the trail. These connections are not always visible unless we explore the areas of our consciousness that we choose to ignore. Bhattacharya and Keating explain: "autohistoria-teoría not only creates new narratives, but it also

[25] In *Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Anzaldúa discusses dealing with "(desconocimientos): numbness, anger, and disillusionment. Besides dealing with my own personal shadow," she explains, "I must contend with the collective shadow in the psyches of my culture and nation—we always inherit past problems of family, community, and nation" (10).

includes using one's life to develop new theories, tools, and strategies. It involves 'risking the personal' diving so deeply into oneself (engaging in self-exposure in the process) that we arrive at collective insights that can connect with others" (9), or as Pitts describes, "autohistoria-teoría demonstrates that self-knowledge practices, like all knowledge practices, are social and relational" (352). Incorporating the self, provides a way that we can learn from our experiences, and through this process of sharing, we can help others as well.

Autohistoria-teoría has the potential to radically transform the way that we research because it provides a path to inquiry enabling researchers to move partially outside of the colonialist lens. The nonlinear journey that Anzaldúa describes in "now let us shift…the path of conocimiento…inner work, public acts," the final chapter of *Light in the Dark*, envisions a decolonial path of knowledge that is experienced through *conocimiento*, the Spanish word for "knowing." Through the enactment of autohistoria-teoría, there is a constant consideration of the colonizer's role in knowledge formation. Anzaldúa explains this need for an alternative to traditional colonialist thinking in *Light in the Dark*:

> I cannot use the old critical language to describe, address, or contain the new subjectivities. Using primary methods of presentation (autohistoria) rather than secondary methods (interpreting other people's conceptions), I reflect on the psychological/mythological aspects of my own expression. I scrutinize my wounds, touch the scars, map the nature of my conflicts, croon to las musas (the

> muses) that I coax to inspire me, crawl into the shapes the shadow takes, and try to speak up to them. (4)

Anzaldúa encapsulates here what sets autohistoria-teoría apart from other methods of research. She characterizes decolonization as a necessary component because of the unavoidable (and often unnoticed) influence that settler colonialism has on the Western worldview: "We are collectively conditioned not to know that every comfort of our lives is acquired with the blood of conquered, subjugated, enslaved, or exterminated people, an exploitation that continues to this day" (Anzaldúa 118). To enact decolonial transformation, which is what autohistoria-teoría does, means to confront embedded settler colonialism within our stories, our experiences, and our worldview. It also means to include those silenced knowledges as part of the process.

The inclusion of the spirit as a way of knowing is a critical asset of autohistoria-teoría because the spirit serves as a tool for recognizing the agency in nonhumans. Anzaldúa explains, “Those carrying conocimiento refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge, and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality” (119). I define *the spirit* as the life force that exists within all entities. It is the personality that makes us unique and what inspires our actions and reactions. In “now,” Anzaldúa defines the spirit as “infus[ing] all that exists—organic and inorganic—transcending the categories and concepts that govern your perception of material reality” (137). It is relatively easy to recognize the spirit within other humans, and in our own society many of us also naturally interact with the spirits of dogs, cats, or horses;

however, extending recognition of vitality to mountains, rivers, bears, salamanders, and ferns, is not a common practice.

In the academy, the spirit is also not commonly considered a form of knowledge, but then again, neither are the perspectives of nonhumans. Spirituality, however, may be cultivated and enlarged through awareness. Anzaldúa defines her spirituality as "a symbology system, a philosophy, a worldview, a perspective, and a perception. Spirituality is a different kind and way of knowing. It aims to expand perception; to become conscious, even in sleep; to become aware of the interconnections between all things by attaining a grand perspective" (*Light* 38). An acknowledgment of the spirit that flows through humans and nonhumans provides an alternative to Western ways of knowing because it creates a way to recognize our similarities rather than focus on the differences that binary thinking imposes.

Spirituality was not only a way of knowing that Anzaldúa incorporated, but it was a way of functioning, similar to the way that breathing is necessary for living, that inspired her work. She called the incorporation of the spirit within her research spiritual activism, which she defined as "spirituality for social change, spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses this holistic worldview to transform one's self and one's worlds" (*Light* 54). Imagining is the existence of a shared spirit within all life forms provides a path for not only understanding nonhuman actions but also for realizing our interconnectedness. This awareness contributes to instilling empathy and respect, which then works to inspire transformation. Transformation is the heart of autohistoria-teoría,

and Anzaldúa believed it emerged through creative acts. As I seek to rewrite experiences in nature along the AT, this dissertation is my practice of spiritual activism.

The Path of Conocimiento

In 2004, during my first class in the Department of Multicultural Women's and Gender Studies at Texas Woman's University, I was introduced to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa just months after she passed away. Like Andrea Pitts, I found her work extremely relatable because of her incorporation of personal experiences within her theorizing. Before long, Anzaldúa's essay "now let us shift…the path of conocimiento…inner work, public acts," which I first read in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, became a favorite of mine, and I have found myself returning to this essay every year since that first read. "now let us shift" serves as an example of Anzaldúa enacting autohistoria-teoría through a process of seven nonconsecutive stages that she refers to as the "path of conocimiento."[26] In the section below, I follow Anzaldúa's path of conocimiento as I explain the methodological process that unfolded during my dissertation work. I began this process simply with the desire to know nature better. As I started the thru-hike, my mind was open to new possibilities and prepared to include a collective of knowledge, as Anzaldúa's writings had shown me.

[26] This path has seven stages: 1. "el arrebato…rupture, fragmentation…an ending, a beginning," (124-126); 2. "nepantla…torn between ways," (126-128); 3. "the Coatlicue state…desconcimiento and the cost of knowing," (128-134); 4. "the call…el compromise…the crossing and the conversion," (134-138); 5. "putting Coyolxauhqui together…new personal and collective "stories"," (138-143); 6. "the blow up…a clash of realities," (143-149); and 7. "shifting realities…acting out the vision or spiritual activism," (149-156). Just as the method of autohistoria-teoría is fluid, so too, are the seven stages of conocimiento.

For Anzaldúa, the process of coming to know draws from the collective knowledges contributing to her worldview, which include Indigenous, Mestizo, and European cultures, along with ancestors, nature, mythical figures, dreams, and various registers of consciousness. At the same time, she connects each source of collective knowledge to her own struggles and experiences. This path to conocimiento demonstrates how autohistoria-teoría operates like a trail guide to transforming the status quo. In "The Editor's Introduction, Re-envisioning Coyolxauhqui, Decolonizing Reality: Anzaldúa's Twenty-First-Century Imperative," AnaLouise Keating examines the usefulness of conocimiento, specifically for decolonial transformation. "Anzaldúa's theory of conocimiento," Keating declares, "queers conventional ways of knowing and offers readers a holistic, activist-inflected onto-epistemology designed to effect change on multiple interlocking levels" (xxvii). "now let us shift" provides an example of how Anzaldúa's journey of conocimiento is motivational, relatable, and a call to action.

"now let us shift" is motivational, in that, like self-help books that inspire the reader to keep going during difficult times, the piece provides a pathway out of despair. It is relational because through the incorporation of her personal experiences, the reader can empathize and see herself within the pages. "now let us shift" is a call to action because no matter how sick Anzaldúa was with diabetes and other ailments; how frustrated she was with the effects of colonialism; or how fearful she was based on her experiences of muggings, 9/11, and having no medical insurance, the spiritual activist in her sought transformation of herself and others. Through writing and through her actions, Anzaldúa

was able to work through problems, learn new alternatives, and inspire others.[27] Many years have passed since that first reading of "now let us shift," and I continue to be moved by its applicability. Bhattacharya and Keating relate similar experiences, "As so often what happens when I plunge into depression, I turn to Anzaldúa for wisdom. Her experiences linking physical, imaginal, and spiritual realities have consistently emboldened and inspired me" (352). Through Anzaldúa 's vulnerability of theorizing about personal experiences, she creates connections, and it is through these connections that transformation is formed. In what follows, I use Anzaldúa's nonlinear seven stages to retrace the steps that occurred after hiking the trail.

Stage One: El Arrebato

Although my hike had ended, it was the beginning of a new way of thinking. Anzaldúa describes this first stage in the path of conocimiento as "an event el arrebato…rupture, fragmentation…an ending, a beginning" (124). Convinced that I would achieve my path of conocimiento on the actual path of the trail, I found that, instead, the real learning did not even begin until a month after the hike had finished. I was visiting my sister Tina, an interpretive park ranger for the Blue Ridge Parkway, exploring her selection of guidebooks when I was drawn to one in particular on the plant and animal species of Appalachia (Simpson and Simpson). As I flipped through the pages, I saw so many familiar faces—jack-in-the-pulpit, fire pink, mayapple, red-spotted eft, ruffed grouse, and black bear. Seeing them filled me with joy and sadness at the same

[27] Tara Lockhart's "Writing the Self: Gloria Anzaldúa, Textual Form, and Feminist Epistemology" explains Anzaldúa's "writing as she learns" process.

time. I realized within those few moments the intensity of the relationships I had formed with nature while on trail. These were the "people" that I missed, not the fellow thru-hikers, trail maintainers, or volunteers along the way. They were instead the plants, animals, mountains, and rivers that I had met as part of my journey. My dawning recognition of these relationships began to shift how I thought about the natural world. Anzaldúa offers an explanation that resonates with what I experienced during this first stage: "You are no longer who you used to be. As you move from past pre-suppositions and frames of reference, letting go of former positions, you feel like an orphan, abandoned by all that's familiar" (125). I had experienced a relationship with nonhuman nature and was witness to the agency within these communities through their acts of communication, which I perceived as trail magic, but I had no idea what to do with this experience.

Stage Two: Nepantla

Possessing the knowledge that I had developed relationships with nonhumans while on the trail positioned me in a state of flux. Anzaldúa refers to the second stage of conocimiento as "nepantla…torn between ways" (126-128). *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word meaning "in-between." Nature had inspired my aja moment, and as I looked through those guidebooks, realizing relationships I had formed with nonhuman nature on the trail, I wanted to learn why other thru-hikers did not feel as I did about their experience. My dissertation chair, AnaLouise Keating, especially talented at planting seeds of knowledge within her students, suggested that I read more about settler colonialism. As I researched, I soon realized my ignorance of settler colonialism resulted from my privilege, yet as I

read more about the topic from an Indigenous perspective, I began to see how intertwined the trail was with the oppressive ideologies of settler colonialism, specifically about Native peoples and nature.

I was torn between loving the trail and hating everything it represented. Anzaldúa describes these feelings as typical for nepantla, in which "you are exposed," meaning you are considering new alternatives while still hanging on to old ways of knowing. Anzaldúa writes, "Nepantla is the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets and identities inherited from your family, your education and your different cultures" (127). I had bought into every theme about nature that settler colonialism instilled. I saw it as an escape from my stressful lifestyle. I saw it as separate from the town in which I lived. I longed for wilderness spaces untouched by humans, to be moved by scenic views as well as the sounds of birds. I felt the excitement of reaching notable locations along the trail and meeting trail icons. All the themes of wilderness ideology were what drew me to hike the trail in the first place. In this stage of nepantla, I experienced a dawning awareness but also a desire to cling to the past. Anzaldúa's words lingered in my head, "You can't stand living according to the old terms—yesterday's mode of consciousness pinches like an outgrown shoe" (128). I needed to understand how I could reconcile my actions yet move forward with what I had learned.

Stage Three: Coatlicue

The cost of knowing that the trail, built during the wilderness movement, was designed as a place for elite whites to enjoy, not welcoming others, and therefore destroying the homes of people, animals, and plants, weighed on me more than my backpack ever did. Anzaldúa describes the third stage of conocimiento as "the 'Coatlicue' state…desconocimento and the cost of knowing" (550-554). Coatlicue refers to the Aztec deity that represents both life and death. Because Coatlicue signifies two things typically opposed to one another, for Anzaldúa, Coatlicue serves as a metaphor of potentially healing the fragmentations binary opposition has opposed on her, her culture, and others. For me, this stage was a time to deal with the "cost of knowing," that settler colonialism had infiltrated the trail, the thru-hikers, and the way nature is experienced. Never before had the tired cliché "Ignorance is bliss" rung so true. It was much easier when I was hiking ignorant of the ways my privilege contributed to and maintained an oppressive ontology.

I was once excited that my dissertation would focus on my trail experience, but now I felt ashamed, guilty, and foolish. I started reflecting on nature as a commodity and the many examples along the trail. How ironic it seemed that there was a zoo that held animals captive right on the trail where so many had run free. I could always hear sounds of shotguns piercing the air as hunters engaged in what they believed was a sport. I recalled the signs indicating pesticide treatments along farmland with little regard to the nonhumans living there that could not read the signs. I thought of the local in Maine that told me his Friday night entertainment was watching the bears dig through the landfill.

And I had witnessed all the hungry hikers around me gorging on meat. How could these nonchalant actions occur when we were so connected to nonhuman nature?

The cost of knowing, aptly included by Anzaldúa in the title of this stage, refers to the depression that follows the realization that not only is there a problem, but that I am part of that problem as well. Although the stage that I was experiencing was uncomfortable, Anzaldúa describes it as a useful progression in coming to know. "Depression is useful—it signals that you need to make changes in your life, it challenges your tendency to withdraw, it reminds you to take action" (132). Anzaldúa also explains that these feelings are a normal part of coming to know, that "during the Coatlicue phase you thought you'd wandered off the path of conocimiento, but this detour is part of the path. The shift must be more than intellectual" (133). The combination of knowing intellectually and feeling empathetically became overwhelming.

The sense of relatedness that I gained through my experiences with nonhuman nature affected me greatly, and my participation in their oppression filled me with guilt. These feelings are all too common within this type of work, as Alysha Tylynn Jones and David Sean Segal, explain in "Unsettling Ecopsychology: Addressing Settler Colonialism in Ecopsychology." They note, "Learning about the history of settler colonialism and its ongoing nature can result in a variety of responses such as shame about benefitting from injustice, anger, fear about loss of privilege, denial, or guilt about not doing more to redress the situation" (133). These emotions are a natural part of the process of acknowledging one's role within a problem and that it is important "to name oneself … within the unjust and ongoing phenomenon of settler colonialism" (Jones and Segal 128),

rather than deny participation. Anzaldúa says, "You can't change the reality, but you can change your attitude toward it, your interpretation of it" (131). Discomfort is a natural and necessary part of the process. It is an emotion that drives change.

Stage Four: El Compromise

As I struggled with my participation in the problem, my intuition kept guiding me to continue in this project. Anzaldúa names this fourth stage as "the call…el compromise…the crossing and conversion" (134-38), describing this stage of coming to know as the time when "a call to action pulls you out of your depression" (123). It is here that I learned to listen to my intuition and to trust that the relationships that I had developed with nature had provided me with more than enough knowledge to offer an alternative narrative. Anzaldúa describes, "Your inner voice reveals your core passion, which will point to your sense of purpose, urging you to seek a vision, devise a plan" (136). I planned to focus on the spirit that I saw within every plant, animal, river, and mountain that I encountered. It was the spirit that contributed to making up their personalities, suffused their varying forms of communication, and impelled them to engage in a relationship with me. Although I did not intentionally begin the trail with the spirit in mind, I did believe that I would be able to communicate with all entities in nature if I tried. Over time, the spirits of plants, animals, rivers, and mountains were revealed, and trusting my intuition allowed me to develop relationships. Anzaldúa explains that the "spirit speaks through your mouth, listens though your ears, sees through your eyes, touches with your hands. At times the sacred takes you unaware; the desire to change prompts it, and then discipline allows it to happen" (138).

The spirit allowed me to understand that there were no separations between humans and nature and that we were all connected by the spirits within us. I realized that the spirit is typically not a methodological tool used in academia, but I knew this project required something more, something unconventional. Anzaldúa explains, "Loosening your grip on the known and reaching for the future requires that you stretch beyond self- and culturally-imposed limits" (136). I was convinced that the spirit was my way to transform AT narratives, myself, and the world, and then AnaLouise suggested that I learn more about animism. Inspired by Indigenous philosophies, animists felt as I did, and the writers that identified their own philosophies as animist, helped me articulate my previously undeveloped feelings.[28] I believed that I had crossed over into familiar territory.

Before the hike, I had fully expected a transformation in myself. My father's best friend, David, had asked to see Josh and me before starting our hike. He reasoned that we would not be the same people when we returned. He was right, but I could not have foreseen the way the journey challenged and destabilized my identity. Anzaldúa explains, "Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition, always in nepantla. Like the river downstream, you're not the same person you were upstream. You begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been" (136). The hike began a period of "crossing thresholds" (137), a state of becoming that persisted in my reflections after the hike and my dissertation work. Once I had acknowledged the

[28] Graham Harvey, David Abram, Emma Restall Orr, Matthew Hall, and Priscilla Stukey greatly contributed to my understandings of animism.

spirit, there was no turning back. David was right; I had become a different person. The guilt that I felt within the Coatlicue state was still there, as was the shadow beast that tried to halt my progress, but it was the spirit and my intuition to believe in it that drove me forward.

Stage Five: Coyolxauhqui

It was now time to put my experience, the research I conducted on and after the trail, and the revelations about nonhuman agency together. The fifth step in the path of conocimiento is characterized by Anzaldúa as "putting Coyolxauhqui together…new personal and collective 'stories' (138-43). As with the Coatlicue stage, Anzaldúa draws again from the Aztec deities as a metaphorical tool. She points to the stories of Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue's daughter, dismembered by her brother. Anzaldúa's retelling of these narratives piece Coyolxauhqui back together. At the same time, this stage symbolizes how the creation of new narratives can work to piece back together those fragmented by colonialism. The important lesson in this stage of conocimiento is that a solution to the problem must be devised. Anzaldúa explains, "You must provide new narratives embodying alternative potentials" (140). So, as I piece it all together, I turn to the research I conducted during and after the trail.

Each day that we hiked, I asked myself the same questions: What nonhuman communication did I notice today? What was the communication? Did I initiate communication or respond to communication? Every evening after we had finished our hiking for the day, Josh and I would set up our tent, and then he would take off to gather our water and prepare dinner. Unlike typical thru-hikers, we purposefully distanced

ourselves from other hikers. We were what Zealand referred to as "sequestered hikers," those rare individuals that "avoided most interaction with others hikers [and]…sought interaction with their natural environs" (144). I appreciated this time alone, affording me with the opportunity to complete my field notes and audio recordings detailing the day's experiences. Most days, we adhered to a strict regimen with my research time as part of our daily routine, although on occasion, exhaustion, weather, and people interfered with my diligence. In research time (see fig. 5), I noted that during every day on the trail, I experienced multiple forms of communication with nonhumans. Sometimes it was directed at me; most times, though, it was not. Regardless of whether I was the object of nature's agency, I had witnessed and documented many examples of what I later understood to be nonhuman trail magic.

Fig. 5. Research Time.
Source: Wolsey, Josh. Personal Collection. August 2013.

Through rereading the notes, listening to the recordings, remembering through the pictures, and ultimately revisiting the trail, the pieces did start coming together, and I was

able to begin working through ways I could offer a new trail narrative. This process did not occur until at least two years after the hike. I read numerous articles, books, and novels that all contributed greatly to my knowledge formation, which is why my works consulted is included in my list of references along with the works cited. Before this, I had avoided this research, not knowing what to do with it until I finally listened to my intuition in the fourth stage.

I examined scholarly work on the trail and found examples of the ways that settler colonialism emerged within thru-hiker narratives, master's theses, dissertations, and books. Along the way, I felt comfort in the fact that some scholars were offering critiques of the ways settler colonialism impacted the trail experience[29] as well as other forms of outdoor recreation.[30] Through free writing, reviewing notes, and coding, I arrived at my first set of themes that seemed to sum up the feelings of thru-hikers regarding their experiences with nature:

Nature as an escape/separate from humans

Nature as a hinderance

Nature to be conquered

Nature as backdrop

Nature as a form of entertainment

[29] Barnes, Ketterer, Regula, Prince, Williams, Zealand
[30] Boggs, Cooke

Also, I found themes related to how thru-hikers felt after their hikes:

Depression

Unable to describe experiences with nature

Reciprocity due to trail magic

Trail magic experienced by all thru-hikers

Social engagements with people were the most important

These themes led me to explore interpretations of nature within the United States through Indigenous and animist theorizing, as well as Steinberg, Nash, and others. As I worked through the research, I conducted free writes, a practice of brainstorming introduced to me by AnaLouise. Like Anzaldúa, I learned to learn, as I wrote. Keating describes "Anzaldúa's complex recursive writing and revision process" (x) in "Re-envisioning Coyolxauhqui," where she explains, "Anzaldúa's approach to writing was dialogic, recursive, democratic, spirit-inflected, and only partially within her conscious control. She relied extensively on intuition, imagination, and what she describes in this book as her 'naguala'" (xi).[31] Over time, I found a writing method of my own that allowed me to begin a way to offer new narratives.

There were, however, persistent limitations. In addition to the difficult stage of Coatlicue, and the cost of knowing, unlearning the dominant ontology was tough, and I struggled with finding the words to express experiences that I had not read about in typical AT narratives. I had to keep reminding myself that even Anzaldúa, who I consider

[31] *Naguala* translates as "guiding spirit" (*Light* xii)

a creative genius, learned through the process of writing. Then, there was the shadow self that taunted me with questions such as "Why do I have to look so deep into this, why can't I enjoy the hike for what it is? Why couldn't I accept the fact I enjoy wilderness spaces and move on?" I had not blue-blazed once while on the trail, and I was not about to start now.[32]

Stage Six: Blow-Up

I felt confident in my dissertation topic and was ready to present my material for the first time to the public. Anzaldúa refers to the sixth stage of conocimiento as "the blow-up…a clash of realities" (143-49). My "blow-up" occurred at the National Women's Studies Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. The topic of my presentation was nonhuman trail magic (the subject of Chapter Four) and how typical descriptions of trail magic characterize it as a human event. It was my goal to express the ways that trail magic also includes gifts from nature and to share stories relating to my experiences. Before the presentation, in the makeshift bookstore on the third floor, I browsed the tables displaying academic publications in my field, and I was disheartened by the lack of attention paid to species in the myriad conversations of oppression. The anger from the Coatlicue state presented itself all over again as I grew frustrated at the failure of scholars within Women's Studies to see the connections shared with plants and animals.

Inside the presentation room, it was time for me to speak. I began, as practiced, by detailing my experience with Brood II cicada, and how their emergence (only once every

[32] Blue-blazing is to cheat, to not follow the white blazes that mark the trail. Often blue blazes indicate short cuts or side trail with fewer switchbacks and climbs.

seventeen years) occurred during my time on the trail. The contagious energy of the cicada and their companionship for several days served as just one experience of nonhuman trail magic that happened during my hike. Once I had completed my presentation, it was time for the question and answer session, and to my surprise, it generated some responses to my topic. I was asked to detail more experiences with magic while on the trail. I began relaying some instances, and it was not until I reached my hotel room after the session that I realized that every example that had come out of my mouth referenced human trail magic. Within a matter of minutes, I had reverted to the old knowledge. The struggles, the process of coming to know, the drive to better understand my experience so that I could offer new narratives, new alternatives to the status quo stories— all fell short. I was disappointed at how soon my Western worldview appeared within the presentation. It was not the first time, nor was it the last. That is why these stages of conocimiento are not linear. Anzaldúa knew from experience that this process of dismantling oppressive ideologies takes time.

Stage Seven: Shifting Realities

I always find myself representing the perspective of animals, plants, insects, rivers, and trees when discussions of nature arise. It is as if I can naturally see their side of the story when others cannot. The seventh step of conocimiento Anzaldúa calls, "shifting realities…acting out the vision or spiritual activism" (149-56). Through this process of coming to understand my experience in nature, my reality shifted. The relationships that I developed with nonhuman nature while on the trail and afterward altered my interpretation of nature. I saw how their spirits motivated their agency and

contributed to their personalities. In addition, seeing the spirit that exists within nonhuman entities allowed me to understand the connectedness between humans and nonhumans that colonial ideologies work so hard to hide. This experience and the path of conocimiento that it inspired gave me the vision to develop new narratives. The lessons learned along this journey I carry with me on the trail and off. Near the end of "now let us shift," Anzaldúa says, "[c]hange requires more than words on a page—it takes perseverance, creative ingenuity and acts of love" (156). This quote so aptly describes the process of this dissertation. If it were not for the relationships that I had developed with nonhuman nature, my experiences would have just been words on a page. Instead, this project reflects the "perseverance, creative ingenuity, and acts of love" it took to get here.

Conclusion

> Tu autohistoria-teoría is not carved in stone but drawn on sand and subject to shifting winds. Forced to rework your story, you invent new notions of yourself and reality—increasingly multidimensional versions where body, mind, and spirit interpenetrate in more complex ways.
>
> Gloria Anzaldúa [33]

The type of work I set out to accomplish would not have been possible with any other method. The enactment of autohistoria-teoría and the seven stages of conocimiento provided me with a decolonial path to understanding my experiences with nature while thru-hiking the AT. The process was difficult, as it was "not carved in stone." Instead, it was a process of understanding that required untraditional sources. Unlearning the

[33] *"now"* 142-43.

dominant ontology and understanding that learning happens through writing was a constant limitation as I struggled with the shadow beast throughout the process. At the same time, enacting this method was a painful but liberating experience. It allowed me to realize that my thru-hike experience was different because I was open to the possibilities of nonhuman communication. Through this awareness, I was able to develop relationships with nonhuman nature and gain an understanding of these perspectives. Because of these experiences, the knowledge I gained from the collective, and the influence of spiritual activism as depicted by Anzaldúa, I was inspired to engage in the creative act of rewriting the AT narrative, which I attempt in the next two chapters. Being able to include the spirit as a way to emphasize our interconnectedness and to recognize the agency within nonhumans was crucial for this project. What developed out of this enactment of autohistoria-teoría was (and continues to be) a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all that exists on this planet and an awareness that the path of understanding includes more than human perspectives.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS: SPIRITED ACTS OF AGENCY: RECOGNIZING NONHUMAN TRAIL MAGIC ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

> There is a phenomenon called Trail Magic, known and spoken of with reverence by everyone who hikes the trail, which holds that often when things look darkest some little piece of serendipity comes along to put you back on a heavenly plane.
>
> Bill Bryson[34]

> It's at this stage that the true magic and beauty of the Appalachian Trail shines through, manifested not in its sweeping vistas or blooming mountain laurel, but in the tight-knit community that surrounds it. Hostel owners, trail angels, former thru-hikers…it is through these sometimes premeditated, often chance encounters within the Appalachian Trail community at large that a bad day for a thru-hiker can turn into the best one.
>
> Jess Daddio[35]

No thru-hiker narrative is complete without a description of trail magic, the often-unexpected, perfectly-timed gifts that hikers receive throughout their journey. These gifts are referred to as magic because, as Bill Bryson and Jess Daddio explain in the above epigraphs, they can instantaneously alter a hiker's mental or physical state. The gifts

---

[34] *Walk in the Woods* 59.
[35] "Guardians of the White Blaze"(1).

given and the givers that give vary. Gifts typically come by way of food (fig. 6), drink, transportation, encouragement, medical assistance, or information. Thru-hikers call the gift-givers *trail angels*, and these angels work in mysterious ways. Sometimes their offerings appear with no visible sign of an angel or angels around, and then other times, trail magic is a community event with multiple angels working together. Gifts are randomly bestowed, leaving hikers to feel blessed by the generosity of trail angels and inspired by feelings of reciprocity. The mysterious exchanges that occur during trail magic have lasting effects on thru-hikers long after the completion of the journey.

Fig. 6. Apple Butter receives blueberry trail magic.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. Personal collection. June 2013.

Although trail angels can come in nonhuman form, most AT narratives portray these givers of magic as human, typified by Daddio's epigraph to this chapter. When hiker narratives include only humans as members of this community and as capable of giving trail magic, they omit the flora and fauna, and the avian and fungal communities

that also live along the trail and contribute to the thru-hike experience. Trail narratives' centering of humans and concomitant elision of nonhuman inhabitants of the trail and nature itself are striking when one considers that the abundant communities of nonhuman inhabitants outnumber their human visitors. The humancentrism of thru-hiker narratives is significant because it replicates the belief that humans and nature are separate, an idea instilled through settler colonialism. Further, such narratives mold perceptions about the ways that the trail is experienced and set future hikers' expectations for the journey. In this chapter, I show how plants, animals, mountains, and rivers do give trail magic by sharing my personal experiences while thru-hiking the trail. By viewing trail magic more expansively and to include the nonhuman, I am enacting an alternative to the discourse I critiqued in Chapter One: the influence of settler colonialism on thru-hiker narratives and experiences.

Defining Trail Magic

Trail magic is an event or series of events that function to stimulate a hiker's journey over long distances. It is rare to find an AT thru-hiker who has not experienced a moment of trail magic, as Kathleen D. Seal's research on thru-hikers' lived experiences revealed in *Value, Meaning, and Therapeutic Notions of the Appalachian Trail*. Seal found that out of all 160 participants in her study, each person had experienced trail magic (146). Seal refers to the lasting effect: "The fascinating thing about trail magic is that it perpetuates good. When asked about the significance of trail magic, there was an overwhelming response to pay it forward" (108). In addition to instilling feelings of reciprocity, Seal also reveals, "trail magic made hikers feel part of a special community"

(146). The importance of trail magic is enormous for the reasons Seal mentions, in addition to the fact that trail magic provides a respite from the mental and physical difficulties thru-hikers endure because of limited food, lack of sleep, severe weather, and bodily pain. Other scholars define trail magic similarly. For example, Kristi M. Fondren explains that trail magic is "both an event and a cultural tradition," that "comes when least expected and most needed," in *Walking on the Wild Side: Long-Distance Hiking on the Appalachian Trail*. (42). Merry J. Coburn, in *Walking Home: Women's Transformative Experiences in the Wilderness of the Appalachian Trail*, portrays trail magic as "the synchronicities that take place when something needed appears on the path" (29), while Clark T.W. Zealand calls trail magic a gift "received with openness [that] usually appears serendipitously timed" in *Decolonizing Experiences: An Ecophenomenological Investigation of the Lived-Experience of Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers* (147). Thru-hikers' narratives agree that trail magic seems to happen just at the right moment. Having experienced more than my share of trail magic while thru-hiking, I treasured most how these events presented such unexpected emotions of joy and wonder. My field note titled "particularly difficult passage" offers this example:

> We had reached the top of the mountain overlooking Lehigh Gap. It was one of our most difficult and scary climbs so far because of our inability to maintain our footing with the mountainside consisting of nothing but big boulders and loose rocks. Apple Butter, our hiking companion, called it "stupid steep," and she was right. Our eyes had to remain looking forward because looking behind at the dramatic descent was just too much to handle. At the top, we were exhausted and

> shaken from the climb. Hanging on a tree, just steps from the summit, was a cloth sack full of sugary snacks. There was no note and no sight of the person who had hiked the stupid steep mountain to leave it. We were so excited to experience this anonymous generosity and found ourselves talking about the trail angel responsible for the gift for years to come.

My experiences with trail magic were not always as obvious. Sometimes the realization that magic occurred would not come until days, even months after the gifts were given. Although I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the typical trail magic — jugs of clean water strategically placed near dried-up streams, home-cooked meals after months of eating Pop-Tarts, the offer of transportation when entering a new town, or the simple high fives and admiration offered by people as they watched us hike through their campsites — it was the trail magic that made me think that affected my hike the most: the trail magic given by nonhumans.

Trail magic from nonhumans lingered in my thoughts longer because it was something I was not prepared to experience. In the countless thru-hiker narratives in novels, guidebooks, and journal entries that I read in preparation for the hike, not one made mention that trail magic came from anything other than humans. After the completion of the hike, I examined other scholarly research on thru-hikers and found only one academic text, Fondren's *Walking on the Wild Side,* that referenced nonhuman trail magic. Fondren relates:

> At one point, I was having difficulty staying motivated and just wanted to quit my hike and go home. Sweat was pouring off of me as I walked alone, climbing what

> seemed like a mountain that had no summit. I had not had a shower or meal other than dehydrated noodles and cold oatmeal for probably a week. I was literally near tears. Right about then, I glanced to my left and saw a flowering plant, lily of the valley to be exact. At that moment I knew I was not alone out there. I could feel myself almost being carried up the rest of the mountain, as the hymn "The Lily of the Valley" played over and over in my head. At this point, my whole demeanor changed, and a smile began to form as I continued up the mountain. (46)

Fondren's treatment of trail magic is unusual in that she does not limit trail magic's acts of generosity solely to humans. Rather, she outright acknowledges that her motivation to continue hiking was because of the lily. Similar to my personal experiences with nonhuman trail magic, Fondren also seems to be moved more by these acts of generosity from nonhumans when she writes, "Whereas trail magic in the form of 'hiker feeds' strengthens camaraderie among the hiking community, it is this type of trail magic, magic found through hiking the trail itself, that creates strong attachments to the physical geography of the trail, reinforcing trail identity" (46). Fondren's comments, along with my personal experience, provoked me to imagine how perceptions of nature would alter if we acknowledge the ability of nonhumans to give trail magic. Could this expanded understanding of trail magic to include nonhumans spark the same feelings of reciprocity towards nature that human trail magic inspires towards humans?

Agency of Nature

Humans receive gifts from nature all the time; sadly, though, these gifts are viewed as commodities, exchangeable resources, that often include timber, agriculture, medicine or entertainment. The commodification of nonhuman nature through settler colonialism has prevented the ability to see agency within the nonhuman world. By agency, I mean the capacity to act, react, affect, or reason. When compared to humans through a binary lens, the agency of nonhumans is not completely identical to that of humans. The fact that nonhuman agency is different does not make it less than or nonexistent; it just makes it different and sometimes not as recognizable as human forms of agency. Because their worldview includes a participatory relationship with nature, for most Indigenous cultures, the recognition of agency within nonhumans has been naturalized. Plants, animals, rivers, and mountains are viewed more as co-workers on a job site, with each entity having their responsibility and contribution to a project.

The agency of nonhumans is not only recognized within this inclusive worldview but also respected. The gifts received from nature through nonhuman acts of agency include knowledge regarding weather, horticulture, medicine, and astronomy, as well as the sacrifice of nonhuman bodies for food, clothing, shelter, or decoration. In "Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)," Vanessa Watts reiterates how through settler colonialism, "agency has erroneously become exclusive to humans, thereby removing non-human agency from what constitutes a society" (20). This removal of nonhuman agency from the Western worldview, Watts believes, "is accomplished through

purposeful and ignorant misrepresentation of Indigenous cosmologies" (22). Because an important part of settler colonialism is the commodification of land, removing all signs of nonhuman agency within the current ideology is important. To do so means using binary opposition to present Indigenous ways of knowing as inferior. To elucidate the ways that settler colonialism has contributed towards society's beliefs about nature, Ted Steinberg, in *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American Histor*y, traces the role of nature from cohabiter to commodity. The shift is problematic not only because nonhuman agency is ignored through the process but because this works to erase any accountability for species other than humans. Steinberg notes, "Commodities have a special ability to hide from view, not just the work, sweat and blood that went into making them, but also the natural capital, the soil, water, and trees, without which they would not exist" (71). Settler colonialism deeply impoverishes our understandings of the universe when nonhuman agency goes unacknowledged.

One way that nature expresses agency is through communication. When I started this hike, my primary goal was to experience communication with nature. I wanted to observe it, engage with it, and learn from it. Even though I had read that nonhumans can communicate in varying ways, it took a while to overcome my mind's training to recognize only some forms of communication as worthy of attention. As a result, I was impatient and frustrated during the first month of hiking. It was still winter; the trees and the mountains were bare, and at times it seemed as if the only nonhuman communicating was a red-bellied woodpecker that appeared to follow me around every switchback. I had imagined that I would experience conversations with birds, bears, and deer similar to the

ones that Snow White had in the Disney movie. That did not happen. Instead, it was days on end with the woodpecker drumming in my head. Was it trying to knock some sense into me, I wondered? Perhaps so, because what I failed to realize in that first month was that not all communication is like humans'.

For humans, agency is expressed through language in multiple ways: verbal, physical, written, or sign. For nonhumans, their ways to communicate can also differ. In *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, David Abram elaborates on the assortment of agentic actions that exist within nature:

> Here in the forest, all is body language. Tall spruces, orb-weaving spiders, a chipmunk poised on a fallen trunk rapidly gnawing something held in its forepaws, even the Jackson Pollock out-break of bright lichens on a rock outcropping—all of these breathing beings are bodies, distant variants of my own flesh, as indeed my body is a distant echo of theirs. (193)

Unlike me that first month, Abram visualizes agency everywhere in the forest. Influenced by Indigenous philosophies on nature, Abram's animist perspective allows him to utilize his senses to recognize the various forms of communication.

Similarly, Gregory Cajete describes the ways his Tewa upbringing taught him to distinguish agency within nature in *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Cajete reveals that he learned to witness dialogue amongst nonhumans through "signs, qualities, cycles, and patterns" (306). Other indigenous and animist theorists reveal that nonhuman agency can also appear through color change, smells, re-routing of growth

patterns to avoid or join other entities,[36] intuitive messages,[37] offerings,[38] rock pictures,[39] dreams,[40] stories,[41] visions, stones,[42] power boards,[43] observation,[44] and shapeshifting.[45] In addition to the messages of animal and vegetal entities along the trail, the landscape itself speaks.

Developing a dialogue with places and, in a sense, activating the language of a place requires sensory observation. This conscious attention to the natural world is enhanced through the senses. "If we are to awaken our senses," instructs Abram, "we are enabled to notice the sounds, the perspectives, the air, and the layers of our intertwined histories around us. By having this awareness, we are able to become fully human" (*Spell* 22). Abram describes how limiting our senses and incorporating only human perspectives and agency prevents self-growth about the world in which we live. On the trail, thru-hikers are in contact with what is not human for most of their journeys. Yet, often their senses are closed, as they recognize only those interactions that are familiar. While rethinking the differences imposed through binary opposition, it is necessary to visualize something that links humans and nonhumans to build familiarity. For this purpose, for nonhuman trail magic to be recognized, thinking of humans and nonhumans as connected

---

[36] Hall
[37] Taylor, Stuckey
[38] Sillar
[39] Hill 40-45; Deloria *The World* 150-153
[40]McGregor, 388; Deloria, *The World* 1-42; Cajete 71;
[41] Deloria *The World* 107-153
[42] Deloria *The World* 67-72
[43] Deloria *The World* 72-75
[44] Abram, Hall, Dillard
[45] Cordova, Cajete, Deloria

by spirit is required for developing relatedness and visualizing the nonhuman agency that exists in the world.

Spirit

An acknowledgment that the berries of bushes, healing powers of quartz, shelter from trees, rock paths over water crossings, and encounters with moose are forms of trail magic is possible through a recognition of the spirit. Watts explains, "if we think of agency as being tied to spirit, and spirit exists in all things, then all things possess agency" (30). The spirit is that personality that lives within all of us, from humans to dogs to trees to owls. Spirit is the life force that makes us unique while, at the same time, connects. Emma Restall Orr provides an animist view of the spirit in *The Wakeful World: Animism, Mind and the Self in Nature*, stating that the spirit "refers to that particular quality of energy that animates, quickens, or vitalizes" (51). Incorporation of the spirit sets out a path to resituate oppressive frameworks that center one being over all others. Through spirit, we are related, and it is through relatedness that we see the world as our larger community. Orr elaborates, "Nature's soul comprises every moment that has been and every relationship it has known, for nature is both itself soul and comprised of every individual soul. As such, there is a comprehensive interconnectedness in every moment's interaction" (179). Rather than only view the trail community as consisting of trail volunteers, maintainers, townsfolk, and former hikers, acknowledging the spirit within all entities allows for an expansion of the definition of *community*. Recognizing that plants, nonhuman animals, mountains, rivers, and places, contain the life force that similarly exists within humans also helps us to confront our beliefs that humans are superior.

Although the spirit is not a conventional source of knowledge within the academy currently, as scholars engage in decolonial work, I anticipate that the incorporation of the spirit will become more normalized. Many Indigenous scholars believe that each entity is connected through spirit and capable of affecting one another as well as all others. For Native cultures, learning is always part of a worldview suffused with the knowledge of such a connection. Cajete describes this process of coming to know as "Native science." "The guiding thoughts of Native science are simple yet profound, and subtle yet encompassing. Everything is considered to be 'alive' or animate and imbued with 'spirit' or energy" (Cajete 75). A crucial part of unsettling includes listening to and incorporating knowledges suppressed by the colonizers. Through the incorporation of Indigenous philosophies, a more inclusive understanding of nature is gained. Specifically, for this dissertation, thinking of the spirit that exists within the assemblages of rivers, forests, woodland, and granite dome communities could help hikers articulate their experiences that they have difficulty describing.

Because of our society's little contact with the natural world and ingrained secular ideologies, interactions with the spirits in nature are not typical practices for most, and when these encounters do happen, many are unable to describe these events. Fondren found in her research that hikers often chose to return to the trail after completion of their thru-hike because of "a feeling or longing that they find difficult to express" and that when attempting to explain these feelings hikers were "filled with intense emotion" (127). Recognizing how the dominant ontology has hindered the ability to recognize and describe nonhuman agency could allow more thru-hikers to credit nonhuman trail magic

for contributing to their feelings during and after hiking the trail. For instance, Coburn describes a personal experience when she injured her leg on the trail. The assistance she received could have easily been nonhuman trail magic, yet it does not seem to enter her mind to describe it as such:

> The calf instantly turned purple from knee to ankle but no one was around to help…Lying there in the cold rain, I glanced upward at clouds rushing across the sky. I was conscious of their power and my place in the grand scheme of the universe. Slowly my fear dissolved, and a sense of peacefulness took its place. The rocks supported me. I experienced a sense of gratitude and wonder for the embrace of the earth and the sky. Wiping the blood from my leg, I slowly struggled to my feet and headed carefully back down the mountain. Something inside me had shifted. (xi-xiii)

Coburn credits this experience as coming from within, a form of self-perseverance, rather than an intuitive communication from nonhumans. Because nonhuman agency is not typically recognized within Western cultures, acknowledging that something other than humans possess the capacity to act is uncommon. When such encounters happen, many thru-hikers appear to be hesitant to share their experiences. Zealand's exchange with thru-hiker, Greyfox, demonstrates this hesitancy:

> You might think this sounds crazy but I feel like everything inanimate talks to me — not literally— but in a way, I don't know because it's the little things like when the flowers started to bloom and like that totally changed my mood

> like…Songbirds in the morning. Yeah, hearing birds and stuff like that is what—the Owls are so cool. [Starts enacting]. (152)

The fact that Greyfox prefaced her comment with "You might think this sounds crazy," shows that she lacked confidence in the communication that she was engaging in because of our unfamiliarity with nonhuman agency. Although Greyfox did reveal that something in her shifted as a result of these interactions with nature, she was still unable to express what had happened (Zealand 152).

One AT narrator, however, does stand out for his near articulation of nonhuman communication as trail magic. Ian Marshall, in *Story Line: Exploring the Literature of the Appalachian Trail*, describes a variety of offerings he has received from nonhuman communication: learning to heed warnings and take shade from rhododendron (20, 22); arriving at new understandings of their vitality (21); communicating with the sparrows (202); developing a deeper understanding of coyotes (177), cicadas (97) and porcupines (166-167); the ability to enjoy chance encounters with a spruce grouse (201); and lessons about interconnection from approaching storms (236). Even Mount Katahdin, the terminus of the AT for northbound hikers, Marshall referred to as a gift from nature, "something freely given to those who have prepared themselves" (242). Nevertheless, even though Marshall entertains the possibility of animism in various ways throughout his narrative, in the end, nonhuman agency remains for him one of the many possible modes of comprehending our relationship to nature, in a work that seeks to elucidate possibilities than to embrace any particular one (132). In this way, Marshall's articulation

of his experiences mirror Klein's and Zealand's participants' diffidence in the face of trail magic generated by nonhuman communication.

Because of the belief that only humans possess the agency to act as givers, the gift of nonhuman agency through communication goes unnamed. Reflecting on my thru-hike and my study of AT narratives, I learned to recognize diverse ways hikers tried but failed to articulate their experiences with nonhuman communication. In my own narrative, then, I worked diligently to avoid such diversions, to uncover and retain my own knowledge that everything in nature is alive (and agentic) through spirit and that trail magic is the common work of humans and nonhumans.

Nonhuman Trail Magic

I was privileged to receive endless amounts of trail magic from nature. The gifts from nonhumans began as early as our first night on the trail. Josh and I were only twelve miles into the AT and had set up our tent within the eyesight of the shelter (fig. 7). We wanted to keep our distance from other hikers, yet we were not confident enough to stray too far. We were also self-conscious that other hikers knowing of our novice status, so we did not even hang a bear bag that evening for fear that someone would see us doing it incorrectly.[46] Once we got in the tent, voice recording done, food in our bellies, and sleeping bags arranged, Josh broke down. He divulged that everything had just hit him, the fact that he had left a good job; his family; and Texas, the only home he had ever known. He was overwhelmed by the weight of responsibility for our safety from

[46] Bear bags are containers for storing food during overnight. They are typically hung from trees to avoid bears gaining access to their contents. Since bears can climb trees, however, these containers must be made of durable material.

rednecks, bears, weather, blisters, poison ivy, tainted water, snakes—you name it—as all of his fears he had previously kept inside came rushing out and the tears rolled down his face. Adding to the anguish of the moment was a constant rustling outside of our tent. I tried my best to reassure him that everything would be just fine, while at the back of my mind I kept wondering what could be causing the noise. After Josh calmed down and quickly fell asleep, the sounds persisted, but I believed acknowledging it would show my fear. So, I ignored the noises and fell asleep also. The following morning, we had holes in our backpacks.

Fig. 7. The first campsite of the journey.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. Personal Collection. March 2013.

Deer mice, *Peromyscus*, which are commonly known as a rodent, a name that jeopardizes their existence from the start due to the stigma associated with gnawing mammals—with adorable big brown eyes, small little pink noses, white underbellies, and tiny white feet—had shared our tent spot through the entire night as they enjoyed the packets of peanut butter we left in our packs. The first lesson our tentmate taught us was

that we should empty all food from our packs and secure it in our bear bags before going to sleep. The second lesson was that we were not alone. Although we had felt that we were the only two in the world as we aired our misgivings the night before, we had no awareness for all the other entities privy to our conversation. The third lesson was that the deer mouse lightened our load, not referring to the consumed peanut butter, but to the emotional weight, the nighttime raid relieved. That little mouse changed Josh's outlook completely. He began thinking of the mouse's life in comparison to his own, so vulnerable, as deer mice are protein for their predators. They run through their entire lifespan in barely one year, making that night outside our tent, not only a night to remember for us, but the little deer mouse as well.

There were other surprises from nonhumans that we thought of as trail magic and that were revealed through various methods of communication. The most surprising gift came from poison ivy, to which I have an allergy so severe that earlier, I had almost chosen to forego the hike. My goal was to make friends with the plant. I had no other choice. As I hiked endless miles with the oils of the ivy brushing up across my legs, arms, and face, I kept thinking, intuitively, that this plant was my friend and that if I presented myself in this way, it would not affect me as it normally did. As a result, I did not break out the entire 2190 miles, despite being unable to bathe for days at a time to wash off the oils. I was given a gift by the ivy, to say the least. A month after the hike, my intuitive messaging with the plant had ceased; I no longer needed its protection, so I stopped communicating. The abrupt end to my relationship with this plant did not go unnoticed as I was helping my father haul some wood. Within days, I had received from the poison ivy

my most severe reaction yet; blisters and bumps that I dreamed of scraping with sandpaper covered my body.

Trail magic also came to me from trees extending their limbs as I prepared to fall or the ways they emitted heavenly scents as we were about to reach the tree line. The pine needles of trees cushioned my feet after weeks of walking on rocks. Trees provided shade on hot days, fruits when I had run out of snacks, and displays of artwork when uprooted by storms. Their root systems exposed a natural wonder I had never experienced before, and it was inspiring to see that even when it appeared their life cycle had ended, trees continued to give back.[47] There were serviceberry, flowering dogwood, American beech, tulip trees, red spruce, and balsam fir. They were deciduous, evergreen, fragrant, young, old, dead, and alive. Their roots challenged me to watch where I hiked, while their trunks beckoned hugs as I passed by. I witnessed the agency of trees, through the ways they communicated with me and the entire forest. Trees provided endless amounts of trail magic as I was continually surprised by their abilities and the assistance they offered.

Further, I received guidance from red-spotted efts and box turtles when their presence on the trail signaled rain, while eastern tiger swallowtails and dragonflies heralded an end to the rain. A ruffled grouse stood guard, communicating warnings to anyone that came too close to her young, while deer mice were always the ones to rat out hikers when the latter left food behind. One time, a rattlesnake posted-up right in the middle of the trail and showed us all who was boss by not allowing any hikers to pass. In

[47] Hurricane Sandy left many trees uprooted along the trail that remained the following year of my thru-hike. The hardest hit area was near Newfound Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

addition to witnessing agency through communication, trail magic was also evident in wilderness sightings. White-tailed deer, eastern gray squirrels, moose, bullfrogs, pine martens, scarlet tanagers, and black bears all gave me the opportunity to make their acquaintance. Goodness knows they heard me coming as I grunted and groaned with each step, clicking my hiking sticks as I forged across the soil and rock. With that, combined with the swooshing noise that my pack made as it struggled to hang on to my back, I could easily be heard coming miles away. Yet, these animals and birds still chose to reveal themselves magically. Then there was the time in Pennsylvania when we had stopped to warm ourselves in the sun on one of the boulders that scattered the mountainside. Out of all the places that we had the opportunity to rest, we happened to pick the same boulder as a bed of snakes, also enjoying the warmth of the sun. Although for most, sharing a boulder with a bed of snakes may not serve as an example of trail magic, for me, it was yet another lesson. Because the bed consisted of copperhead and rattlesnake peacefully intertwined with one another (see fig. 8), I could witness a calm coexistence between the two species of snakes—connection despite differences.

Fig. 8. A peaceful co-existence in Pennsylvania.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. Personal collection. June 2013.

Also revealed were the spirits of flowers in blooms, flowers red, orange, yellow, purple, and white; red columbine; azaleas; daffodils; jacks-in-the-pulpit; and trilliums. These experiences never dull, and each time a new flower appeared, it was as enjoyable as the first. Ferns also revealed the depth of their communities as I was overwhelmed at the diversity of species; the nettled chain fern, hairy lip fern, wood fern, and cliff fern are only a few of the hundreds of ferns that we came to know. There were the songs of birds that would stop us in our tracks, wood thrush especially, as their calls stood out from all the rest, soft, watery, flute-like songs that, for me, are the sound of summer. In Maine, it was the common loons that sang harmony as our friend Kokopelli played along on his flute. One time in Tennessee, I was able to listen in on the conversation of two barred owls that went on late into the night, only to be woken up in the morning by a deer snorting at my tent to let me know that I was in her spot. The agency of nonhumans was everywhere, and the gifts that they gave us through their many methods of

communication continued day after day as they chose to interact and provide inspiration, assistance, knowledge, and joy.

Conclusion

The spirit of nonhumans became easier to identify through the varying forms of agency expressed. It allowed me to understand the ways that acts of trail magic also come from the natural world. The human presence is palpable all along the AT, and this helps explain why hikers' trail narratives and stories of trail magic typically focus on the members of the trail community and sources of trail magic that are human. Indeed, the trail is known as the footpath for the people, and the millions drawn to the trail find opportunities to convene not only with nature but also with their fellow foot travelers, but their experiences are far from entirely human. In this chapter, I have enacted an alternative to what I have critiqued earlier in the dissertation: the influence of settler colonialism on nature narratives. Through this discussion, I have provided an example of how hikers may recognize the agency in nature through an acknowledgment of the spirit that lives within all existence. The spirit works in two ways. First, it provides a path to understanding the interconnectedness that those living on the planet share. Second, it contributes to a way of recognizing agency within nonhumans. The spirit is what energizes humans and nonhumans. Our spirits are what cause us to act and react, and in the instance of this chapter, it was the spirit that motivated poison ivy, trees, deer mice, loons, black bears, rattlesnakes, copperheads, and ruffed grouse to gift hikers with endless amounts of trail magic. This call to recognize the gifts of nonhumans does not diminish the value of those gifts provided by humans; instead, it is proposed to alleviate

the separation of humans and nonhumans instilled through settler colonialism. Redefining the concepts of trail magic and trail angels to include flora, fauna, avian, and fungi communities enhance the trail experience for those hiking the trail now and those to come.

Describing the ways that the landscape speaks through agency serves as a way to decolonize experiences in nature. If trail magic of nonhumans is included in trail narratives, then others hiking the trail will be able to recognize these acts of agency when experienced. Since trail magic has been proven to inspire reciprocity towards fellow humans, I hope that awareness for nonhuman trail magic will inspire hikers to think of nonhuman communities when returning to the trail to give back. Providing examples of nonhuman agency alongside the actions of humans makes it easier to see how the trail community consists of both humans and nonhumans. These acts of assistance, guidance, and offerings all contribute to the language of place that makes the trail so unique. In this next chapter, I explain how the use of these languages of place provide a more thorough understanding of the places we love.

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS: LESSONS FROM THE COLLECTIVE: GAINING KNOWLEDGE FROM THE LANGUAGES OF PLACE

> Everything is viewed as having energy and its own unique intelligence and creative process, not only obviously animate entities, such as plants, animals, and microorganisms, but also rocks, mountains, rivers, and places large and small. Everything in nature has something to teach humans.
>
> Gregory Cajete[48]

> Small wonder that rivers and forests no longer compel our focus or our fierce devotion. For we talk about such entities only behind their backs, as though they were not participant in our lives.
>
> David Abram[49]

Every place has a story to tell, one that includes the perspectives of all who have inhabited it, human and nonhuman. Like many stories, though, often, only one side is presented. The story of the AT is no exception. Because of the humancentric ways that most AT stories are told, the perspectives of the plants, animals, mountains, and rivers are often not included or even considered. This exclusion is often unintentional, a product of settler colonialism passed from generation to generation, in which the perspectives of

---

[48] *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* 21
[49] *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* 175

humans are valued over nonhumans. For those interested enough in the AT to pick up a novel or watch a documentary detailing a thru-hiker's experience, the stories customarily maintain the theme of human exceptionalism as the hiker perseveres through familiar locations such as Springer Mountain, Harpers Ferry, Mount Washington or Mount Katahdin, interacting along the way with fellow hikers, trail icons, and trail volunteers. The perspectives of and interactions with the salamanders, wood thrushes, rhododendrons, or cicada are ignored unless they have added to the difficulty of the hike in some way. Thus, understandings of the AT are based solely on human points of view, rather than the collective of humans and nonhumans that make up the trail. How could nonhuman perspectives contribute to a better understanding of the trail experience? To answer, this chapter, like the others in this dissertation, draws from Indigenous and animist theorizing for guidance, exploring the languages of place.

The language of place is a way of communicating with, learning from, and passing on knowledge received from places.[50] Engaging with the language of place is a way of decentering the human from places and attending to how the place itself speaks. It is a process of unlearning interpretations of nature grounded in philosophical, religious, and familial attachments. The language of place is also a collective of perspectives, ones often ignored, that contribute to knowledge formation. The language of place provides lessons from plants, animals, insects, dirt, trees, rivers, and mountains that make up a particular locale. Human knowledge formation comes in part from the memories of

[50] Throughout the dissertation I use both singular and plural versions of language/languages of place/places depending on context.

places, the ancestors that once inhabited them, and the weather that rules it all. Every place has a unique personality expressed through the humans and nonhumans that live there. Inspired by the premise that Cajete states in the epigraph above from *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence,* that "everything in nature has something to teach humans," the AT may be seen as just one place that we customarily do not notice where nonhuman perspectives are present but rarely heard. Thru-hikers speak of the natural world, as David Abram describes in *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, "behind their backs, as though they were not participants in our lives" (175), even though thru-hikers share the company of nonhuman communities on trail. There is much more to learn from the language of place during interactions with nature. The knowledge received through the collective of voices can be passed forward through stories that, in turn, promote a greater understanding of place.

Indigenous and animist cultures are more apt to incorporate the language of place in their theorizing because of their beliefs in relatedness. In this worldview, everything is interconnected—the birds, the trees, the people, and the insects—and therefore, care and respect become natural. All entities inhabiting a place are viewed as kin, and their displays of agency, just as those actions by humans, may be seen to affect the collective. Cajete defines the language of place:

> Native peoples, through long experience and participation with their landscapes, have come to know the language of their places. In learning this language of the subtle signs, qualities, cycles, and patterns of their immediate environments and

> communicating with their landscapes, Native people also come to know intimately the "nature" of the places which they inhabit. (284)

Intimately knowing the "nature" of a place, as Cajete describes, and acknowledging relatedness is possible through relinquishment of human superiority and acceptance of nonhuman agency. Through this surrender, the ability to see the connections to nonhumans becomes more apparent. Like Cajete in his explications of the ways that Native peoples visualize the land, Tim Ingold describes an animist perspective in "Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought." He explores "the relational constitution of being," an alternative to Western conceptions of nature in which there is no separation between humans and the natural world. Ingold explains:

> Every such trail traces a relation. But the relation is not between one thing and another…it is rather a trail *along* which life is lived: one strand in a tissue of trails that together make up the texture of the lifeworld. That texture is what I mean when I speak of organisms being constituted within a relational field. It is a field not of interconnected points but of interwoven lines, not a network but a meshwork. (13)

Thinking of relatedness among humans and nonhumans as a meshwork provides a way to visualize the collective at work and to comprehend that our experiences are not solely human. Each experience is linked and impacted by entities that surround us.

Many thru-hikers miss the connections they share with nonhumans, even though humans constitute the minority species as they hike through forests, wetland, and granite dome communities. Focused on meeting deadlines, hikers hurriedly move through

sections of the trail, often with their heads down to avoid stumbling over roots or tripping on rocks, all the while missing many of the visual signs of communication around them.[51] Because hikers typically wear headphones blaring music, podcasts, or audiobooks into their ears as they hike, they miss any forms of audible nonhuman communication. For many hikers, the trail is something to conquer rather than a place of connection. Worries about food, shelter, and water manipulate hikers' thoughts, surpassing a hiker's desire to seek connections with anything other than humans, even though those nonhumans surrounding them share similar concerns. So, the birds, coyotes, and squirrels continue their chatter; galax, skunk cabbage, and balsam fir emit their aromas; and kudzu, Russian olive, and multi-floral rose stake their territory. Amid such ceaseless activity, many hikers fail to comprehend the full vitality of places that lack rewards of scenic views or iconic locations— PUDs, switchbacks, and green tunnels—are deemed irrelevant.

Nevertheless, the personalities of places are as distinct as those of the humans that inhabit them. Abram argues that "each land has its own psyche, its own style of sentience," and "[t]raveling on foot makes those variations most evident" (137). Some places immediately feel welcoming while others do not. Mountains, for instance, tend to all look alike from a distance, as one mountain range blends into another. Yet, one of the biggest surprises during my hike was the unique nature of every mountain I hiked. Abram explains the power mountains possess: "To step into the shadow of this mountain is to step directly under the mountain's influence, letting it untangle your senses as the rhythm

[51] Hikers traveling northbound typically have until mid-October to reach the terminus Mount Kathdin, located in Baxter State Park. It is common for Baxter to close during the winter months and not reopen until early spring if weather is bad.

of your breath adjusts to *its* breathing, to the style of its weather. To step into its shadow is to become a part, if only for this moment, of the mountain's life" (21). Thru-hikers' descriptions of experiences with mountains do not typically include becoming part of the mountain's life. Instead, hikers will detail their difficulties with strenuous climbs, false summits, or dangerous descents. Rarely do thru-hiker descriptions detail the mountain as an agentic entity. The AT consists of some of the oldest mountains in the world, dating back hundreds of millions of years as this range served as the center of Pangea. The Appalachian Mountains contain a collective that speaks of our past. Observing the ways that the mountains have communicated with their ever-changing environments provides lessons of human accountability and nonhuman resilience. The process of learning from this collective, like the formation of the mountains, takes time.

Since we are taught to privilege human perspectives, when we do decide to give voice to nonhumans, we anthropomorphize them, turning their voices into human ones. We portray them in movies, cartoons, and even restaurant advertisements as speaking and rationalizing just as we would. Sometimes, that method serves as a starting point for building relatedness but thinking only in human terms limits our understanding. Aubrey Milatz examines the effects of this human supremacy in "Influences of Human Exceptionalism on Humans' Concern for and Perception of Nonhuman-Animals." Focusing specifically on language, Milatz addresses how human exceptionalism shapes our relationships with animals. For Milatz, it is through language that we separate ourselves from nonhumans, suggesting that "language may also be used to affect more positive attitudes toward nonhuman animals" (85). Milatz elaborates on this point,

maintaining that because animals do not share the same language as humans, we dismiss anything they have to say (87). Paying attention to their perspective, she claims, and including this outlook in our worldview (even though we do not share the same language) could create accountability for many human actions. Furthermore, Milatz explains, "To empathize with other animals would mean admitting to ourselves that there are serious issues with the way we treat them" (94). Listening to the languages of place can teach us not only about nonhumans themselves but how humans have affected their lives.

The language of place can be difficult because it can reveal things that make us uncomfortable. Many times, while I hiked the trail, it was disheartening to witness how the presence of humans had so severely disrupted nonhuman nature. As the AT traverses the human-built environment, crossing over interstates and a hydroelectric dam; under highways; through small towns; and across superfund sites, a university campus, acres of farmland, and a zoo, it becomes clear why humans would want to avoid listening to the feedback that nonhumans have to offer. Listening to the language of place means to accept accountability, experience guilt, and desire to make a difference. The landscape along the AT spoke of our consumption problem. It reminded me of the trash we discard, the piles of human waste that hikers leave behind, and the remnants of food laced with chemicals and preservatives that hikers unknowingly drop during each meal. The language of the AT also expressed its grief for the human and nonhuman communities that are no longer there. It spoke of the fear felt by humans and nonhumans as they were hunted, kidnapped, and murdered. It reflected the shift that occurred when settlers

proclaimed a separation from nature, and the relationships that existed within the land were severed.

Describing experiences with the language of place is important because it contributes to knowledge formation through the development of one's awareness, empathy, accountability, and reciprocity. "If we speak of things as inert or inanimate objects," Abram warns, "we deny their ability to engage actively and interact with us—we foreclose their capacity to reciprocate our attention, to draw us into silent dialogue, to inform and instruct us" (71). Stories that highlight agency within nature and decenter the human can alter worldviews in the ways that Native stories impacted Indigenous ways of knowing. Cajete explains that these descriptions should be "predominately verb-based… filled with metaphors about nature that celebrate and remember participation and relationship" (306). Descriptions of experiences with language of place can reflect strength, knowledge, generosity, participation, personality, and even trickery. Passing forward stories of agentic nonhumans helps us to recognize our relatedness. Cajete describes how participation with the natural world rather than the commodification of nature offers these life lessons (26). For thru-hikers, it is important to share these engagements with nature within our narratives. If we only talk about the relationships fostered with fellow hikers, townsfolk, or trail volunteers, we create the expectation for future hikers that only human relationships can develop. In the following section, I describe my experiences communicating with language of place. This was a process that I worked through during the hike, and years afterward, as I enacted autohistoria-teoría.

This path of conocimiento provided me with a unique understanding of how the trail community extends far beyond human interaction.

A Lifetime of Rhododendrons

A month after the completion of my hike, I was fully aware that I had developed relationships within nature. As with relationships with people, some stood out more than others. Cajete notes that relationships with plants develop slowly: "'coming to know,' or understanding the essence of a plant, derives from intuition, feeling, and relationship, and evolves over extensive experience and participation with green nature" (110). One of my most treasured friendships was with rhododendrons, or "rhodies" as I amicably call them. For years—far too long— I was a bad friend, often not even noticing their existence. However, my connection with rhodies flourished throughout my thru-hike. I was familiar with the plant before hiking because it is so common in my home state.[52] When I would see the white blooms of mountain laurel, which run along the banks of Second Creek, I would instantly get feelings of homesickness. [53] For many years, I had convinced myself that these feelings were because I missed the people of West Virginia and that the rhodies reminded me of those times I had with family and friends walking along the creek, the flowers serving as a backdrop for these memorable experiences. What I did not realize was that rhodies were more to me than plants in the background; our families had grown up together. We suffered severe drought, heavy snows, and numerous floods. We

[52] Rhododendron is the state flower of West Virginia.
[53] Mountain laurel and rhododendron are both members of the same family. Second Creek, West Virginia was my hometown until my adult years.

breathed the same air and depended on the creek to survive. Rhodies were my neighbors within this rural environment, just like the Elmores, the Boggses, and the Lephews.

Rhodies encompass more than a thousand different species. Typical along the trail are Catawba *Rhododendron catawbiense* (see fig. 9*)*, Carolina *Rhododendron carolinianum*, Flame Azalea *Rhododendron calendulaceum*, and Mountain Laurel *Kalmia latifolia*. Each species communicates through their blooms, with some bright orange, another bright pink, and my favorite, the laurel, white with tiny splashes of pink inside. Rhodies have superhero communication powers. They can make themselves as tall as ninety-eight feet or as short as a couple of inches. Rhodies can appear in the form of a tree, a bush, or a small flower. Their roots can grow underground like those of trees or in the air, and they are both evergreen and deciduous. Rhodies will tell you when the ground is frozen by curling their leaves into tight little cigars, and when the weather is warm, the leaves flatten out into oblong shapes that feel both smooth and thick to the touch. When the soil is inadequate, rhodies speak out by turning their dark green leaves bright yellow. They prefer solitude and creek banks, and they communicate this desire to be alone through the poisons they emit through their roots and nectar. Their contributions to the languages of place, especially along southern Appalachia, where they are in heavy population, are undeniable.

Fig. 9. The welcoming blooms of the Catawba Rhododendron.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. Personal collection. May 2013.

Rhodies communicate intuitively, in addition to the ways that they send messages through their various manifestations. Within the first eight miles of the approach trail, the rhodies welcomed me, and I had never felt more at home.[54] I had a sense of calmness that eluded Josh, and it certainly was not because I was in better shape or better prepared for our six-month journey. As we hiked, this calmness continued as the rhodies stood by me through the scariest of rainstorms and heaviest of snows. Enveloped in their canopies, I was comforted as well as protected against the elements. It was a feeling of being among family or close friends. Someone or something had my back, and I was exactly where I needed to be.

[54] There is an eight-mile approach trail to the AT's starting point at Springer Mountain.

Billions of Cicada

It all started one morning deep in the forest along the North Carolina-Tennessee border, where we had snuggled in for the night in a secluded spot under pine and oak. The soothing sounds of a creek nearby lulled us to sleep, and we felt safe within this environment, mainly because no other humans were around. The following morning, we were abruptly awakened by what sounded like a parking lot full of car alarms. Immediately, I became grouchy at the loud noises before even peering outside of the tent. I assumed that the noise pollution must be human-made, even though I knew we were nowhere near a town. I began speculating that the sounds were from a generator, a manufacturing plant, or perhaps a band of motorcycles, all noise pollution we had experienced before. Instead, it was Brood II *Magicicada*, the males with a mating call so incredibly loud that they can reach up to ninety decibels.[55] They centered themselves within this forest as their communication filled the air. Males and females were in search of a mate.

They were not speaking my language, but that did not matter. I could feel their words, their excitement, and their determination. As I imagined their situation, admittedly in an often-anthropomorphic way, I envisioned that Brood II had so much to say because they had remained quiet underground for the past seventeen years, where they had lived most of their lives amongst the roots of trees. Of course, they were loud; they were competing for mates, and perhaps females were attracted to volume if nothing else. Their energy was contagious. Their determination to mate was heard in their voices and seen as

[55] Males typically make the loud sounds heard by cicadas. Females respond by flicking their wings.

they actively went buzzing and darting in front and behind us, hitching rides on our backs (Fig. 10), camping out on our heads, and circling the trail in search for a partner. Their companionship along the trail was the ultimate trail magic, definitive because it was so rare, a gift that only comes every seventeen years, as the brood would not emerge again until 2030.

Fig. 10. Cicada Resting Spot.
Source: White Wolsey, Pamela. May 2013.

Not until years after this experience, did I begin to consider their history. My familiarity with the insect before hiking this trail was limited to identifying them by sight and sound, nothing else. I had received and read an email from Josh's uncle Randy that included *New York Times* articles about the seventeen-year cicadas emerging along the trail, but I had no idea how their contributions to the language of place would impact our

experience.[56] As I researched, I soon found out that even though their presence was not typically visible for most hikers along the AT, their role and importance within this community dates back to the early eighteenth century, long before the conception of the trail. Brood II makes most of the trail their home as they reside in eight of the fourteen states.[57] They have endured the impact of settler colonialism and wilderness ideology, with each emergence. For Brood II, each time they came above ground, something has changed, and the changes were never for the benefit of their species.

Typically dismissed as nuisances are the insects that buzz in ears, fly into homes, and nibble on necks. Hikers especially tend to view cicadas and most insects in general as pests, typically swatting them away or spraying them with insect repellant. Not only do hikers usually not consider the perspectives and influence of these insects, they certainly do not think of the ones that live underground, ones that we cannot see regularly, and who rely on the trees for nourishment and a place to lay their eggs. Cicadas' contributions to the ecosystem are invisible, even though practically all species benefit from their emergence and contain the spirit of cicada. Long after their mating sounds have ceased, birds, other insects, fish, mammals, humans, and fungi consume the bodies of cicadas. Their language of place not only lives on through these species and further continues as their eggs turn into nymphs and travel below ground to prepare for the next emergence in another seventeen years.

---

[56] Carl Zimmer's "Seventeen Years to Hatch an Invasion." *New York Times.* May 9, 2013, and Craig Gibbs "Here Comes the Buzz." *The New York Times*, 1 May 2013

[57] The earliest mentioning of Brood II was in *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book* edited by Edwin Morris Betts. This edited version includes Jefferson's writings from 1766-1824.

I could not help but wonder what the trail would be like when they returned the next time and whether their emergence would even happen, given the manner in which humans treat the natural environment as secondary to human needs. I had never imagined the way that the communication of cicadas could inspire such deep reflection. Hikers typically do not think of the lessons that cicadas have to offer, the company they give, or their purpose in the cycle of life. Yet I am reminded of Cajete, who says, "Everything in nature has something to teach humans" (21). Brood II granted us with trail magic in the form of knowledge about the world as a larger community, the passing of time, and the everlasting spirit of nature. The new awareness that I gained from them became a new source of knowledge, similar to the messages from Rhodies. This was communication from the collective, which then made my ability to think about research and history in a deeper way. In the cicadas' voices, something of the history and personality of the AT is expressed, as well as the contributions of the cicada themselves.

Forty-eight Gray Squirrels

Hiking through the Shenandoah National Park was intended to be a celebration. We were to arrive at my friend Kanille's home on Memorial Day weekend. Kanille lived in the trail town of Waynesboro, Virginia. Josh and I were both excited for the opportunity to spend time with her. We had met years prior in the Army while we were both stationed in Texas. Immediately, we shared the connection of both being from Appalachia, and this sustained our relationship for many years (fig. 11). On the night of April 20, 2013, as Josh and I were hiking miles away in Tennessee, nearly 250 miles away from Kanille's hometown, I received word that she had been in a car accident that

had left her brain-damaged. Upon receiving the news, I continued hiking, carrying her with me over each mountain. I believed that I could somehow make her better through magical thinking. It was torturous.

Fig. 11. Kanille's spirit (left) shining bright as always during our last visit. Source: Cochran, Kellie Reed. Personal collection. July 2012.

A month later, her husband left me a voicemail. Kanille had not improved. I left the trail, only to reach the hospital the very day her family made the difficult decision to remove her feeding tube. Sitting with her alone in that hospital room, I knew her spirit was still alive. Even though Kanille was severely injured from the accident, she was still Kanille, even smiling when I nervously told her a joke. I was convinced that because I still felt her spirit, there was still hope for her mind to survive. I left the hospital, angry with her family, for their decision. I felt they had given up on her. I returned to the trail despairing and despising her family for the decision they made.

As the weeks passed, thoughts of Kanille continued to race through my head, and the tears never stopped. I was on the trail towards Waynesboro, but I had decided I could

not stop in her hometown. I could not bear to experience all she had told me over the years about her mountain oasis. I did not want to see the raptors that circled over Rockfish Gap, cool my feet in South River, or sleep beneath the Shenandoah Mountains that Kanille had missed so much while we were in Texas. I wanted to avoid the pain of remembering and witnessing the things she had loved about the landscape, even though this denial was smothering me the closer I got to her hometown. "No matter what," I told Josh, "we are not stopping in Waynesboro." I just wanted to get through these mountains as fast as I could. I was terrified to feel their vitality because my traumatized response to the nature around me was already breaking me down.

Several miles outside of Waynesboro, I was not able to control my crying as I hiked. My nose was constantly running, head pounding, and my eyes were swelling shut. Besides, we were desperately dehydrated and rationing our water supply. The heat was unbearable, and all of the water sources had dried up. Instead of thinking about the plants and animals that were also suffering from this drought, I remained sequestered in my own grief. Flashbacks of times spent with Kanille controlled my thoughts. I was thinking of her two children left behind and her love of everything Appalachia—blue mountains, creek beds, gardening, canning, moonshine, and dancing barefoot. She was my mountain sister; we both shared such a love for this land, and now I was miserable in it, mired in my sorrow.

In between my sobs, I started to notice a flurry of little gray squirrels off to the side of the trail, not quite babies, but not fully grown. They were making all kinds of chatter and seemed to be having so much fun. Hobbled from reaching out of my own

pain, I attempted to ignore these squirrels. But they were oblivious. First, there was one, then five, and before I knew it, over just a couple of miles, I had counted forty-eight squirrels in the area directly approaching Kanille's town. They were everywhere, talking with their voices and with their tails, swinging off branches, darting on and off the trail, and not at all bothered by my presence. Instead of their being invisible to me, as squirrels often are, I was invisible to them. Despite my confused and stricken emotional state, this sudden encounter with the squirrels' ebullience broke through my inward focus for a moment. I could only smile and shake my head at the trail magic I was receiving. Their contribution to the language of place reminded me that life goes on, that we are all connected by spirit, and that many times humans are not the center of this world.

During this difficult time I engaged with the language of place even though my connection to the squirrels' communication was tenuous. Kanille had told me how vital the land was—her descriptions about home centered the landscape. Even though I tried to push it away, the spirit of this area and its inhabitants were difficult to ignore. Reflection on this story has allowed me to better understand the vitality of the natural community in the Shenandoah Mountains. Contained within this section of the trail, as with many other parts, was the spirit of the plants, animals, and people that live there full-time. This story exemplifies nonhuman trail magic. By acknowledging the spirit within not only the land, but also within the gray squirrels, I was able to witness their excitement, their communication, and the message of hope that they gave.

Surprises on Mountain Tops

Mountains hold memories of human and nonhuman events, and with each ascent and descent, I felt the mountains, and the beings inhabiting them, communicate with me. Although mountains that make up a range look the same from a distance, each mountain is unique, with its weather patterns, smells, dialect, populations, and appearance. Each mountain I hiked offered a variety of surprises; some were bald, some had granite tops, some exposed boulders, cascades, or lakes. Others had tree canopies, fern forests, spongy bogs, or moss carpets. The smells on mountains contained the scents of balsam, galax, skunk cabbage, and honeysuckle, and the dialects of mountains differed with the songs of cardinals, southern drawls, turkey gobbles, and deer snorts. Hiking the trail, I never knew what I was going to experience as each climb began. Peter's Mountain was the greatest revelation. The ascent started with the manufacturing plant Celanese at the base of the mountain. Flowing around the plant is the New River, considered one of the oldest rivers in the world.[58] The waters that flow from Peter's Mountain, along with sewage, agricultural runoff, road salt, and industrial discharge, deeply connect the human and nonhuman communities. The river, unlike most others flowing south, follows a path headed north as it curves around the Appalachian Mountains. It seemed unstoppable that day; yet, because of my familiarity with the region, I knew it had already been dammed five times before it caught my sight.[59] This was not the typical introduction to a mountain

[58] Located in Giles County, Virginia, along the New River, Celanese produces cellulose acetate. The trail travels directly in front of the plant and then ascends up to Peter's Mountain.
[59]According to the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, there are five dams that prevent the continual flow of the New River, Fields Dam, Fries Dam, Byllesby Dam, Buck Dam, and Claytor Dam. This is just where the New River is dammed in Virginia. The river encounters more dams as it travels through each state.

on the trail, with the smokestacks of Celanese billowing emissions and the sadness of the New River, contained and contaminated. I felt rather depressed then that humans and nature are not separable.

Peter's Mountain connects Virginia and West Virginia (see fig. 12). I had traveled it numerous times by car, and the hike brought back memories of car sickness as I attempted to manage the twists and turns from the backseat of my parents' Ford Fiesta. As a teenager, hiking to the fire tower atop Peter's Mountain on the West Virginia side was a rite of passage and the perfect place to skip school, drink beer and smoke cigarettes.[60] Like rhodies, Peter's Mountain was the backdrop of my life. Always there, but never really noticed. My ancestors navigated both sides of this mountain for over a century, and most of my family continues to live within sight of its peak. After beginning the climb in a depressed state, I figured I would make it to the top and continue to the next summit since I had already "been there and done that" with this one. Yet as I reached the summit, I was overwhelmed with emotion. It was as if I could feel energy rising through the body of the mountain into my own.

[60] The structure known by locals as the "fire tower," because it was used as an old watch tower in the past, is in fact Hanging Rock Raptor Observatory.

Fig. 12. Looking towards the West Virginia side from Peter's Mountain.
Source: Wolsey, Josh. Personal collection. May 2013.

My hands began to shake, tears were rolling from my eyes, and I had no words to express to Josh what was happening. The place was speaking directly to me. I had never been welcomed home quite like this before. At this moment, I was nearly overwhelmed by my connection to the place I stood upon. The spirits of my ancestors, along with the communities of hemlocks, yellow poplars, groundhogs, limestone rocks, rhododendrons, ferry diddles, and hickory, all spoke at once. They were my family, just as the people living in the valleys along both sides of the mountain, and at that moment, I understood the sacredness of mountains.

Sometimes, we can live in a spot, spend our entire lives there, and not experience the language of the place. We have connections and feelings that draw us back home, which often we attribute to the humans that live there. My experience with the language of place on Peter's Mountain taught me that it was not only my Mom and Dad calling me back home but my entire family.

Conclusion

The stories I tell illustrate how I worked through the stages of conocimiento. Those four distinct experiences contributed to my overall autohistoria as well as the encounters with nonhuman trail magic. My thru-hiker narrative could have easily been like all the others I read in preparation for this hike and the dissertation, but the Indigenous and animist philosophies I learned about both before and after the hike challenged my existing worldview. Not only was I able to question why it was so difficult to adopt a relationship with nature as Native peoples did, but I began learning to participate with nature rather than define myself against it. Being open to the possibility of communication and relationship with the nonhuman communities along the trail allowed me to create and maintain relationships outside of the human realm. It was, then, understandable that I felt so lonely and lost after leaving their company. Their comfort, guidance, and comradery taught me what it truly means to be human in this world. The words of Abram rang true, "We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human" (22). After interacting with and learning from the language of place along the AT, I felt impelled to include them in my narrative so that others preparing for this journey may know the possibilities that can occur along this magical trail.

Visualizing the landscape as something other than a commodity and learning new ways to talk with and about the land through the languages of place can be challenging, but it is also a practice that offers great rewards. Listening to and learning from the language of place allows for a greater understanding of places we love, admire, or long to visit. For the Western thinker, listening to the languages of place begins by letting go of a

type of enclosed individualism and opening to the world as a collective of knowledge. It means abandoning the creed of human superiority, acknowledging that entities other-than-human have perspectives, and opening up to their many forms of communication. Learning from the languages of place and articulating community interactions becomes an ongoing practice of fieldwork that engages all the senses, improves with time, and provides a much-needed perspective.

Chapter Two revealed that thru-hikers feel depressed once the hike is completed. Often credited for this depression is the longingness for the trail community—the trail volunteers, trail maintainers, fellow hikers, and townsfolk that hikers meet along the way. Incorporation of the language of place within our stories provides a greater understanding of that longing. For months on end, hikers are surrounded by multiple varieties of trees, ferns, mushrooms, salamanders, snakes, and bird communities. To then shut oneself off completely from these interactions is painful. In the months after the hike, the absence of the nonhuman trail communities from my daily life caused me to spend many hours just staring out the window. But the realization of the source of my discontent yet comforted me. I knew that I had truly developed relationships through my encounters with the language of place.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION: MY THRU-HIKER NARRATIVE: TAKING THE DECOLONIAL PATH ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

> Some moments on the trail were awe-inspiring. Many days were full of picturesque moments: the path lined with blue wildflowers, areas overrun by blooming pink rhododendron and white mountain laurel, the beckoning trail weaving through trees and boulders, the smell of the firs, exposed summits showing limitless horizons of mountain, rolling fields of hay and corn with an old barn in the backdrop. My mind is saturated with these memories.
>
> David "AWOL" Miller

The power of thru-hiker narratives is like the power of the AT. Both can draw you in, change your mind, and leave you never quite the same. David Miller's story was the first thru-hiker memoir I read, and it influenced my husband and me so greatly that we left our town, our jobs, and our family to pursue the life he had described. Miller spoke of self-perseverance, of trail icons, trail magic, and popular attractions along the way. Like AWOL, we were privileged to leave our jobs for an outdoor adventure, but it was not until years later that I truly understood its significance.

Not detailed in AWOL's story, or any of the others that I read in preparation for the hike, were the kinds of relationships I would develop with the rhododendron, trees, boulders, fields, and mountains. Neither did I find anything like a clear rendering of the contributions

such nonhuman entities would make to my own awe-inspiring moments. Indeed, Miller's oversight of the importance of nonhuman nature is common in AT narratives.

Thru-hiker narratives reveal a striking separation from natural elements, despite the narrators spending up to six months in the company of nonhumans. Their accounts express unrealistic expectations about nature imposed by wilderness ideology, which instills an unexamined belief in separation between humans and nonhumans. Wilderness ideology not only shapes our understanding of the natural world but it also materially prevents some populations from enjoying these spaces. Most shocking in my research was the persistent sense that for thru-hikers, social interactions with fellow humans were the most important experiences of the hike. As I investigated why these narratives were so different from mine, I found that settler colonialism has instilled a way of thinking about nature that makes no room for interspecies relationships. This worldview has shaped the ways the trail, and the experience of hiking it has been understood and written about for decades.

Taking the decolonial path along the AT involved a departure from colonialist themes of separation in order to better understand the connections between humans and nature. This path, I did not travel on my own. A collective of humans and nonhumans contributed to my knowledge, or conocimiento, Anzaldúa calls it, and I worked to enact autohistoria-teoría, moving toward unlearning and interrogating dominant ideology and, crucially, my role within it. In Chapter Two, I explored the history of settler colonialism in the United States and its many strata, how it pertains to nature, how it is maintained, how it affects nature experiences, and how thru-hikers like me contribute to the cycle.

In Chapter Three, to create new narratives about thru-hiking the trail, that is, to see experiences in nature outside of a colonialist lens, I advocated for autohistoria-teoría as my research method because it centers decolonial practices. Through autohistoria-teoría, I was able to use my personal experience. But I was also able to integrate into my worldview Indigenous, animist, and spiritual theorizing, as well as the perspectives of nonhumans. My enlarged perspective, now interwoven with the contributions of an expanded collective of nonhuman communities, allowed me to understand and describe the trail experience in a new way. I traced my progression through the seven stages of Anzaldúa's conocimiento, and I learned how to describe and learn from the messages I received from nature.

In Chapter Four, I explored how I was gifted by the agency in nature that I experienced as trail magic, the often-unexpected, perfectly-timed gifts that hikers receive throughout their journey. Without acknowledging the spirit that connects us all, I would not have recognized such acts of agency as trail magic. These nonhuman voices, smells, and displays of communication now felt strangely familiar, inspiring the feelings of belonging and reciprocity that most hikers experienced with other humans.

In Chapter Five, I explained how the multiple perspectives I learned through nonhuman communication gave me a better understanding of nature's contributions to the language of place. The language of place is a way of communicating with, learning from, and passing on knowledge received from places. Engaging with the language of place is a way to decenter the human and attend to how the place itself speaks. While the

language of place can reveal things that make us uncomfortable as it holds us accountable for our actions, it also creates awareness and empathy.

Stories mold experiences, and since mine was unlike any I had encountered before, I desired to offer another perspective about the thru-hike experience. Inspired by Anzaldúa to engage in creative acts as a form of resistance to the status quo, I have offered my narrative through a dissertation that centers the actions of a white-footed deer mouse, a lifetime of rhododendrons, billions of cicadas, surprises on mountain tops, and forty-eight gray squirrels, along with many other gifts of trail magic, as the defining moments of this experience. Unlearning Western beliefs about nonhuman is still a work in progress, but one I embrace both on and off the trail.

WORKS CITED

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage, 1997.

---. *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. Pantheon, 2010.

Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, edited by AnaLouise Keating, Duke University Press, 2015.

Appalachian American Indians of West Virginia, www.aaiwvani.org. "Appalachian American Indians—A Timeline of the Historic Period." Accessed 10 Oct. 2017.

Arnold, Karen D. "Education on the Appalachian Trail: What 2,000 Miles Can Teach Us About Learning." *About Campus*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2007, pp. 2-9.

Arvin, M., Tuck, E. and Morrill, A. "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 8-34.

Barnes, Jodi A. *From Farms to Forests: The Material Life of an Appalachian Landscape*. 2008. American University, PhD dissertation.

Betts, Edwin Morris, editor. *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*. Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1991.

Bhattacharya, Kakali, and AnaLouise Keating. "Expanding Beyond Public and Private Realities: Evoking Anzaldúan Autohistoria-teoría in Two Voices."*Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2017, pp. 345-354.

Boggs, Kyle G. *Toward a Discourse on Recreational Colonialism: Critically Engaging the Haunted Spaces of Outdoor Recreation on the Colorado Plateau*. 2016. University of Arizona, PhD dissertation.

Bratton, Susan Power. *Spirit of the Appalachian Trail: Community, Environment, and Belief on a Long-Distance Walking Path*. University of Tennessee Press, 2012.

Bryson, Bill. *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*. Broadway Books, 1998.

Cajete, Gregory A. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Clear Light, 2000.

Clark, John, et al. "Assessing Current and Projected Suitable Habitats for Tree-Of-Heaven Along the Appalachian Trail." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, vol. 369, no. 1643, 2014, pp. 1-20.

Coburn, Merry J. *Walking Home: Women's Transformative Experiences in the Wilderness of the Appalachian Trail*. 2006. Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, PhD dissertation.

Comis, Don. "Grass-Fed Cattle Follow The Appalachian Trail." *Agricultural Research*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2004, pp. 14-15.

Cooke, Lisa. "Carving "Turns" and Unsettling the Ground Under our Feet (and Skis): A Reading of Sun Peaks Resort as a Settler Colonial Moral Terrain." *Tourist Studies*, vol. 17, no.1, 2017, pp. 36-53.

Cordova, V. F. "Ethics: The We and the I." *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 173-181.

Cronon, William, ed. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1995, pp. 69-90.

Crutzen, Paul J. and Eugene F. Stoermer. The "Anthropocene." *Global Change Newsletter*, vol. 4, 2000, pp. 17–18.

Daddio, Jess. "Guardians of the White Blaze." *Blue Ridge Outdoors*, 5 Dec. 2014, /www.blueridgeoutdoors.com/go-outside/hiking/guardians-white-blaze/

Deloria, Vine, Jr. *The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of the Medicine Men*. Fulcrum, 2006.

DeLuca, Kevin and Anne Demo. "Imagining Nature and Erasing Class and Race: Carleton Watkins, John Muir, and the Construction of Wilderness." *Environmental History*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2001, pp. 541-560.

Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. "New River." https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/waterbody/new-river/

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Harper & Row, 1985.

Dourson, Daniel C. "Four New Land Snail Species from the Southern Appalachian Mountains." *Journal of the North Carolina Academy of Science*, vol. 128, no.1, 2012, pp.1-10.

Dümpelmann, Sonja. "Review Essay: Three Men In Search of A Modern Arcadia: Landscape Architecture, Planning, and Conservation Between Tradition And Modernism." *Journal of Planning History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2007, pp.166-186.

Erb, Peter L., et al. "Anthropogenic Influences On Macro-Level Mammal Occupancy in the Appalachian Trail Corridor." *PLOS ONE, vol.* 7, no. 8, 2012, pp. 1-10.

Fondren, Kristi M. *Walking on the Wild Side: Long-Distance Hiking on the Appalachian Trail*. Rutgers University Press, 2016.

Freed, Jason Eric. *Creating the Appalachian Trail: Technological Influences on Symbolic Production*. 2004. Clemson University, PhD dissertation.

Gibbs, Craig. "Here Comes the Buzz." *The New York Times*, 1 May 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/05/02/opinion/here-comes-the-cicadas-buzz.html.

Hall, Matthew. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. SUNY Press, 2011.

Hermann, Michael and Eugene Carpentier III. "Cartographic Design on Maine's Appalachian Trail." *Cartographic Perspectives*, vol. 53, 2006, pp. 51-56.

Hill, Don. "Listening to Stones. Learning in Leroy Little Bear's Laboratory: Dialogue in the World Outside." *Alberta Views,* vol. 11, no. 7, 2008, pp. 40-45.

Ingold, Tim. "Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought." *Ethnos,* vol. 71, no. 1, 2006, pp. 9-20.

Jones, Alysha Tylynn and David Sean Segal. "Unsettling Ecopsychology: Addressing Settler Colonialism in Ecopsychology." *Ecophysiology*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2018, pp. 127-136.

Joyner, Leanna. *Hiking Through History: Civil War Sites on the Appalachian Trail*. Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2015.

Keating, AnaLouise, editor. *Interviews/Entrevistas: Gloria E. Anzaldúa*. Routledge, 2000.

Ketterer, William. *Psychological Change Among Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*. 2010. Antioch University, PhD dissertation.

Klein, Vanessa Ann. "The Nature of Nature: Space, Place, and Identity on the Appalachian Trail." 2015. Kent State University, PhD dissertation.

Little Bear, Leroy. Foreword. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence,* by Gregory Cajete, Clear Light Publishers, 2000, pp. ix-xii.

Lockhart, Tara. "Writing the Self: Gloria Anzaldúa, Textual Form, and Feminist Epistemology." *Michigan Feminist Studies*, vol. 20, 2007, pp. 19-31.

Lowery, Gerald Broughton. *Benton MacKaye's Appalachian Trail as a Cultural Symbol*. 1981. Emory University, PhD dissertation.

MacKaye, Benton. "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning." *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, vol. 9, 1921, pp. 325-330.

Marshall, Ian. *Story Line: Exploring the Literature of the Appalachian Trail*. University of Virginia Press, 1998.

McGregor, Deborah. "Coming Full Circle: Indigenous Knowledge, Environment and Our Future." *The American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 28, no.3&4, pp. 385-410.

Milatz, Aubrey. "Influences of Human Exceptionalism on Humans' Concern for and Perception of Nonhuman-Animals." *FERNS*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018, pp. 84-100.

Miller, David. *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail*. Amazon Encore, 2010.

Miller, Jason D. "Backpacked Architecture: The Appalachian Trail and Its "Primitive Huts." *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2015, pp. 247-262.

Minteer, Ben A. "Wilderness and the Wise Province: Benton MacKaye's Pragmatic Vision." *Philosophy & Geography*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2001, pp.185-202.

Mittlefehldt, Sarah. *The Appalachian Trail and American Environmental Politics*. University of Washington Press, 2013.

Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 5th ed, Yale University Press, 2014.

Nolt, John. "Lost Species of Southern Appalachia." *Thoughts on Philosophy and the Environment*, WUTK FM 90.3, Knoxville, 22 Oct. 2000.

Orr, Emma Restall. *The Wakeful World: Animism, Mind and the Self in Nature*. Moon Books, 2012.

Pitts, Andrea. "Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Autohistoria-teoría* as an Epistemology of Self Knowledge/Ignorance." *Hypatia*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 352-369.

Plumwood, Val. "Decolonizing Relationships with Nature." *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, edited by William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan, Routledge, 2002, pp. 51-74.

Prince, Benjamin J. "An Appalachian Trail: A Critical Geographic Study in Visual Representation and Landscape Production." 2016. Texas State University, PhD dissertation.

Raţiu, Iuliu. "Surveying the Interval: Henry David Thoreau's Climb of Saddle-Back Mountain in a Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers." *Bulletin of the Transylvania University of Brasov, Series IV: Philology & Cultural Studies,* vol. 9, no.1, 2016, pp. 67-80.

Regula, Adam Edwin. *"It's Just Walking, What's the Big Deal?": Experience and Place on the Appalachian Trail*. 2011. University of Wyoming, Thesis.

Robinson, Ryan A. *Described Experiences of Long-Distance Thru-Hiking: A Qualitative Content Analysis Dissertation*. 2013, Capella University, PhD dissertation.

Seal, Kathleen D. *Value, Meaning, and Therapeutic Notions of the Appalachian Trail*. 2014. Texas State University, PhD dissertation.

Shaffer, Earl V. *Walking With Spring: The Story That Inspired Thousands of Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers*. Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 1983.

Sillar, Bill. "The Social Agency of Things? Animism and Materiality in the Andes." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal,* vol. 19, no.3, 2009, pp. 367-77.

Simpson, Ann and Rob Simpson. *Nature Guide to the Blue Ridge Parkway*. Falcon, 2013.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2014, pp. 1-25.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Palgrave, 1999.

Spyker, Stephen Kenneth. "Spirituality and Technology on the Appalachian Trail: A Study in Frontiers." 2004. Ball State University, PhD dissertation.

Steinberg, Ted. *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*. 3rd ed, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Stuckey, Priscilla. "Being Known by a Birch Tree: Animist Refigurings of Western Epistemology." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture,* vol. 4, no. 3, 2010, pp. 182-205.

Taylor, Brian Anthony. "Birds, Liminality, and Human Transformation: An Animist Perspective on New Animism." *The Pomegranate,* vol. 14, no. 1, 2012, pp. 108-127.

Urry, John. *The Tourist Gaze*. Sage Publications, 1990.

Watts, Vanessa. "Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)" *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,* vol. 3, no. 3, 2014, pp. 20-34.

Williams, Greg. *An Investigation of Hiker Diversity and Inclusivity on the Appalachian Trail*. 2014. Prescott College, PhD dissertation.

Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, pp. 387-409.

Wood, Kerry T., et al. Marion, Jeffery L. "Assessing Recreation Impacts to Cliffs in Shenandoah National Park: Integrating Visitor Observation with Trail And Recreation Site Measurements." *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2006, pp. 86-110.

Zealand, Clark, T.W. "Decolonizing Experiences: An Ecophenomenological Investigation of the Lived-Experience of Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers." 2007. University of Waterloo, PhD dissertation.

Zhao, Jianjun, et al. "The Variation of Land Surface Phenology from 1982 to 2006 Along The Appalachian Trail." *IEEE Transactions on Geoscience & Remote Sensing*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2013, pp. 2087-2095.

Zimmer, Carl. “17 Years to Hatch an Invasion.” *New York Times*, 9 May 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/05/14/science/marvels-and-a-few-mysteries-in-cicadas-17-years.html.

WORKS CONSULTED

"A Life-Changing Trail with Life-Changing Opportunities." *Appalachian Trail Conservancy*, http://www.appalachiantrail.org/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2017.

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, 2005.

"Appalachian Trail Information and Hiking Articles." *Whiteblaze: A Community of Appalachian Trail Enthusiasts*, 2018, whiteblaze.net. Accessed 3 Mar 2018.

Appalachian Trail Trees & Wildflowers: A Waterproof Pocket Guide to Familiar Species. Waterford Press, 2012.

Appalachian Trail Wildlife: A Waterproof Pocket Guide to Familiar Species. Waterford Press, 2012.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute, 1987.

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Bartram, William and Doren M. Van. *The Travels of William Bartram*. Macy-Masius, 1928.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Bhattacharya, Kakali and Rachél Payne. “Mixing Mediums, Mixing Selves: Arts-Based Contemplative Approaches to Border Crossings.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1100-1117.

Bird-David, Nurit. “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology.” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. S1, 1999, pp. S67-S91.

Bochner, Arthur and Carolyn Ellis. *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*. Routledge, 2016.

Boulware, David R. "Influence of Hygiene on Gastrointestinal Illness Among Wilderness Backpackers." *Journal of Travel Medicine*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2004, pp. 27-33.

… et al. "Medical Risks of Wilderness Hiking." *American Journal of Medicine*, vol. 114, no. 4, 2003, pp. 288-293.

Burkhart, Brian Yazzie. “What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us: An Outline of American Indian Epistemology.” *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 15-26.

Bratton, Susan Power. “Finding Spirituality on the Appalachian Trail.” *CNN*, 31 May 2016, www.cnn.com/travel/article/appalachian-trail-spirituality/index.html.

Cajete, Gregory A. “American Indian Epistemologies.” *New Directions for Student Services*, vol. 2005, no. 109, pp. 69-78.

---. “Philosophy of Native Science.” *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 45-57.

Calderon, Dolores. "Anticolonial Methodologies in Education: Embodying Land and Indigenity in Chicana Feminisms." *Journal of Latino/Latin American Studies*, vol 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 81-96.

Chang, Heewon. *Autoethnography as Method*. Routledge, 2008.

Cohen, Eliot. *Plant, Spirit, Medicine.* Swan, Raven & Co, 1995.

Cole, Alyson. "Precarious Politics: Anzaldúa's Reparative Reworking." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3&4, 2017, pp. 77-93.

Cordova, V. F., and Kathleen Dean Moore. *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova*. University of Arizona, 2007.

Crowley, Karlyn. "Secularity." *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies,* edited by Catherine M. Orr, Ann Braithwaite & Diane Lichtenstein, Routledge, 2012, pp. 240-57.

Davis, Keith M. and Sally S. Atkins. "Ecotherapy: Tribalism in the Mountains and Forest." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, vol. 4, 2009, pp. 273-282.

Davis, Zach. *Appalachian Trials: A Psychological and Emotional Guide to Successfully Thru-Hiking the Appalachian Trail*. 2012.

Deloria, Vine, Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion.* 3rd ed., Fulcrum, 2003.

---. "Philosophy and the Tribal Peoples." *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 3-11.

---, and Daniel Wildcat. *Power and Place: Indian Education in America.* Fulcrum, 2001.

Denzin, Norma K., Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, editors. *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. Sage, 2008.

Dietrich, Zachary Clayborne, et al. "Natural Medicine." *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2015, pp. 394-406.

Dorwart, Catherine E., et al. "Visitors' Perceptions of a Trail Environment and Effects on Experiences: A Model for Nature-Based Recreation Experiences." *Leisure Sciences*, vol. 32, no.1, 2009, pp. 33-54.

"Explore the Trail." *Appalachian Trail Conservancy*, 2 Nov. 2016, www.appalachiantrail.org/home/explorethetrail.

"Environmental Factors." *National Park Service*, 2017, https://www.nps.gov/neri/learn/nature/environmentalfactors.htm.

Fernandes, Leela. *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice, and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*. Aunt Lute, 2003.

Gaard, Greta. "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2011, pp. 26-53.

Gerard, Kyle, et al. "An Examination of the Relationship Between Leisure Activity Involvement and Place Attachment Among Hikers Along the Appalachian Trail." *Journal of Leisure Research*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2003, pp. 249-273.

---, et al. "An Examination of Recreationists' Relationships with Activities and Settings." *Leisure Sciences*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2004, pp. 123-142.

---, et al. "Attached Recreationist, Who Are They?" *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 65-84.

---, et al. "Predictors of Behavioral Loyalty Among Hikers Along the Appalachian Trail." *Leisure Sciences*, vol. 26, no.1, 2004, pp. 99-118.

---, et al. "Testing the Dimensionality Of Place Attachment In Recreational Settings." *Environment & Behavior*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2005, pp.153-177.

Godfrey-Smith, William. "The Value of Wilderness." *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 1, 1979, pp. 309-319.

Goldenberg, Marni, et al. "Why Individuals Hike the Appalachian Trail: A Qualitative Approach to Benefits." *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2008, pp. 277-281.

Gómez, Edwin, et al. "Perceived Health Outcomes of Recreation Scale (PHORS): Reliability, Validity and Invariance." *Measurement in Physical Education & Exercise Science*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2016, pp. 27-37.

Hahn, Thich Nhat. *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*. Parallax 2008.

Hallowell, Irving. "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View." *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, edited by Stanley Diamond, Octagon Books, 1960, pp. 18-49.

Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

---. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.

Harlos, Karen P. "Toward A Spiritual Pedagogy: Meaning, Practice, and Applications in Management Education." *Journal of Management Education*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2000, pp. 612-627.

Hart, Jane. “Prescribing Nature Therapy for Improved Mental Health.” *Alternative and Complimentary Therapies*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2016, pp. 161-163.

Harvey, Graham. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. Columbia University Press, 2006.

---. “An Animist Manifesto.” *Philosophy, Activism, Nature,* no. 9, 2012, pp. 2-4.

“History of the Grassy Balds in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.” *National Park Service*, 2008, nps.gov.

Hornborg, Alf. “Animism, Fetishism, and Objectivism as Strategies for Knowing (or not Knowing) the World.” *Ethnos,* vol. 71, no. 1, 2006, pp. 21-32.

Irwin, Bill. *Blind Courage*. Appalachian Trail Conference, 1997.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Garden Book*. Edwin Morris Betts, Editor. Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1999.

Jinhee, Jun, et al. "An Identity-Based Conceptualization of Recreation Specialization." *Journal of Leisure Research*, vol. 4, no. 47, 2015, pp. 425-443.

Johnson, Jay T. and Brian Murton. “Re/placing Native Science: Indigenous Voices in Contemporary Constructions of Nature.” *Geographical Research,* vol. 45, no.2, 2007, pp. 121-129.

Keating, AnaLouise. “‘I’m a Citizen of the Universe’: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1/2, 2008, pp. 53-69.

---, and Gloria González-Lopez, editors. *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa’s Life and Work Transformed Our Own.* University of Texas Press, 2011.

---, editor. *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Duke University Press, 2009.

Knapp, Clifford E. “Developing a Sense of Place Through Native Science Activities.” *Green Teacher*, vol. 88, 2010, pp. 36-44.

Kobal, Stephanie A. "Blue Mountain Preservation Association V. Township Of Eldred: Development Versus the Environment." *Widener Law Journal*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2007, pp. 617-632.

Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. University of California Press, 2013.

Krochmal, Arnold, et al. *A Guide to Medicinal Plants of Appalachia*. Pathfinder, 2017.

Letcher, Lucy and Susan. *The Barefoot Sisters Southbound (Adventures on the Appalachian Trail).* Stackpole Books, 2009.

Lillard, David Edwin. *Appalachian Trail Names: Origins of Place Names Along the AT*. Stackpole Books, 2002.

Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place*. Temple, 2011.

Littlefield, Jon and Robert A. Siudzinski. "‘Hike Your Own Hike’: Equipment and Serious Leisure along the Appalachian Trail." *Leisure Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2012, pp. 465-486.

Maparyan, Layli. “Feminism.” *Rethinking Women’s and Gender Studies*, edited by Catherine M. Orr, Ann Braithwaite & Diane Lichtenstein, Routledge, 2012, pp. 17-33.

Marder, Michael. *Plant-thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia, 2013.

Mills, Allan S. and Thomas S. Butler. “Flow Experience Among Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers.” *Proceedings of the 2005 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium, April 10-12, 2005, Bolton Landing, NY*, edited by John G. Peden and Rudy M. Schuster, U.S. Forest Service, Northeastern Research Station, 2006.

Montgomery, Ben. *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk: The Inspiring Story of the Woman Who Saved the Appalachian Trail*. Chicago Review Press, 2014.

Mooney, James. *Cherokee History, Myths and Sacred Formulas*. Bright Mountain Books, 1992.

Murfree, Mary N. *The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*. Houghton Mifflin, 1910.

Peipins, Lucy A., et al. "A Norwalk-Like Virus Outbreak on the Appalachian Trail." *Journal of Environmental Health*, vol. 64, no. 9, 2002, pp. 18.

“Peter’s Mountain Wilderness.” *Virginia Wilderness Committee*, www.vawilderness.org/peters-mountain-wilderness.html. Accessed 12 Dec. 2019.

Plato. *The Republic*, edited by Francis McDonald Cornford, Clarendon, 1941.

Pratt, Mary Louise. “Arts of the Contact Zone.” *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, edited by David Bartholomau and Anthony Petrosky, 8th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008.

Rodman, Margaret. “Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality.” *American Anthropological Association*, vol. 94, no. 3, 1992, pp. 640-656.

Rose, Deborah. “Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism: Attentive Inter-Actions in the Sentient World.” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 3, 2013, pp. 93-109.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *New Woman, New Earth*. Beacon Press, 1995.

Russell, Todd T. "Weighing the Risks in Physical Activity." *JOPERD: The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, vol. 76, no. 3, 2005, pp. 4-14.

Shiva, Vandana. *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. South End Press, 2005.

Sifferlin, Alexandra. "The Healing Power of Nature." *TIME*, 14 July 2016.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination." *At Home on the Earth: Becoming Native to Our Place*, edited by David Landis Barnhill, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 31-42.

Sium, Aman and Eric Ritskes. "Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. i-x.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Spira, Timothy P. *Wildflowers and Plant Communities of the Southern Appalachian Mountains & Piedmont*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Starhawk. *The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature*. Harper One, 2004.

TallBear, Kim. "An Indigenous Reflection on Working Beyond the Human/Not Human." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 21, nos. 2-3, 2015, pp. 209-21.

Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planet*. University of California Press, 2010.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Ktaadn*. Tanam, 1980.

Trail Journals: *Backpacking Journals and Photos from Long Distance Hikers*, 2018, www.trailjournals.com/. Accessed 3 Mar. 2018.

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol 1.1, 2012, pp. 1-40.

Tuana, Nancy. "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina." *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Heckman, Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 188-213.

Tylor, Edward. *Primitive Cultures*. London: John Murray, 1913.

VanPool, Christine and Elizabeth Newsome. "The Spirit in the Material: A Case Study of Animism in the American Southwest." *American Antiquity,* vol. 77, no. 2, 2012, pp. 243-262.

Vaughan-Lee, Llewellyn, editor. *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth.* 2nd ed., Golden Sufi Center, 2016.

Walia, Harsha. "Decolonizing together: Moving Beyond a Politics of Solidarity Toward a Practice of Decolonization," *Briarpatch*, www.briarpatchmagazine.com/. Accessed October 2. 2018.

Waters, Anne. "Language Matters: Nondiscrete Nonbinary Dualism." *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 97-115.

"What to Expect." *Appalachian Trail Conservancy*, www.appalachiantrail.org/. Accessed

9 Nov. 2017.

Whitt, Laurie Anne. “Biocolonialism and the Commodification of Knowledge.” *American Indian Thought,* edited by Anne Waters, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 133-139.

Wildcat, Matthew, et al. "Learning from the Land: Indigenous Land Based Pedagogy and Decolonization.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,* vol. 3, no. 3, 2014, pp. I-XV.

---. *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge.* Fulcrum, 2009.

Williams, Florence. *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*. W.W. Norton & Co, New York, 2017.

Zarnoch, Stanley J., et al... “A Mixed-Modes Approach for Estimating Hiking on Trails through Diverse Forest Landscapes: The Case Of the Appalachian Trail.” *Canadian Journal of Forest Research*, vol. 41, no.12, 2011, pp. 2346-2358.

APPENDIX A.

APPALACHIAN TRAIL GLOSSARY

GLOSSARY

Amicalola Falls, Georgia. Entry point on the approach trail of the AT for northbound hikers. For purists, this is the official start of the AT and thru-hikers register at the Amicalola bookstore.

Appalachia. Pronounced "app-a-LATCH-a," not "app-a-LAISH-a."

AT. The abbreviation the trail is referred to in casual conversation. Pronounced as the two letters.

ATC. Appalachian Trail Conservancy, with main headquarters in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

Avery, Myron. The first person to thru-hike the trail. Avery helped transform Benton MacKay's vision of the AT into reality.

AWOL. The trail name for David Miller, author of *AWOL on the Appalachian Trail*. Miller also authors an annual guidebook that includes maps, water and camping sites, and lists of amenities at each town. AWOL's guidebook is the bible of AT hikers.

Aqua blaze. A verb that refers to taking a short cut via water. A popular section to aqua blaze the AT is via the Shenandoah River by canoe through Shenandoah National Park.

Bladder. A container for storing water.

Bear bag. A receptacle for storing hikers' food while they sleep.

Blue blaze. To cheat, a blue rectangular mark indicating a short cut. Shortcut trails are marked with one single blue blaze 2 inches wide by 6 inches in height painted on trees, boulders, rocks, highway crossings, roads, or signs.

Bubble. A grouping of the same handful of people a hiker sees throughout the day or at nightly stops. If a hiker takes a few days off, or "zeros," he or she will subsequently join a new bubble.

False summit. The phenomenon of hikers' believing that they see the top of a mountain only to reach that point and realize there is yet another hill to climb.

Green tunnel. Section of the trail where views are obscured by heavy tree growth.

Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The "unofficial" half-way point and location of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) headquarters. When hikers reach the ATC, an ATC staff member takes their photograph outside of the headquarters building. This photo is then stored in the thru-hiker annuals located in the ATC reference room.

Hiker box. A receptacle located in many stores in trail towns containing items that hikers no longer need and wish to donate to other hikers, such as food, hiking gear, or reading materials. All the items in a hiker box are free.

Hiker midnight. The time when most hikers are in their sleeping bags, shelters, or hammocks for the night. This is typically by 9 pm, since hikers hike throughout the daylight hours.

MacKaye, Benton. The originator of the Appalachian Trail. MacKaye (pronounced "McKye") proposed the idea of the trail in 1921 in his article "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning."

Mount Katahdin. The terminus of the AT if traveling north and the beginning of the AT if traveling south, located in Baxter State Park in Millinocket, Maine. The last day to summit Katahdin before winter is in mid-October, as the state park often closes for the winter because of weather conditions.

Mount Washington. The highest point of the White Mountains and known for its erratic weather.

NOBO. A hiker traveling north starting the trail at either the approach trail or Springer Mountain. From the word *northbound*.

PUDs. Acronym for "pointless ups and downs," periods of the trail that include many ascents and descents without a hiker's ever reaching an actual summit.

Purist. A hiker who follows white blazes the entire trail and thus takes no short cuts.

Privy. A toilet with a small roof over the top of it. Also known as an outhouse.

Section hiker. A person who covers only part of the trail at a time. Many section hikers complete the entire 2,190 miles, but for them this process could take as long as a lifetime to accomplish.

Shelter. A covered space along the AT that hikers can sleep in, and that often includes a picnic table, water source, and privy. Such spaces often have only three walls, a roof, and a floor.

Shelter log. A notebook that is commonly found inside shelters. Hikers use this log to write about their experiences on the trail or as a way to communicate with other hikers.

SOBO. A hiker traveling south who begins his or her hike at Mount Katahdin. From the word *southbound*.

Springer Mountain. The official starting point for NOBO hikers, located in northern Georgia. Purist hikers argue that the approach trail to Springer Mountain located in Amicalola Falls, Georgia is the actual starting point.

Summit. The top of a mountain. Also, to reach a mountaintop.

Switchback. A path that travels up and down the mountain with sharp curves.

Trail angel. Giver of trail magic.

Trail community. A group of humans or nonhumans that inhabit areas along the AT.

Trail icon. A person long associated with the Appalachian Trail, to the point that he or she has celebrity status. Trail icons, whose contributions to the AT vary, include such characters as Miss Janet, Bob Peoples, Bill Ackerly, Jennifer Pharr Davis, Buddy Backpacker, George "Billy Goat" Woodard, and Warren Doyle.

Trail magic. Random blessings in the form of food, knowledge, encouragement, medicine, money, or transportation, given to thru-hikers by the trail community.

Trail maintainer. A volunteer who works to keep the path clear of fallen trees or build new routes to avoid erosion in existing sections.

Trail name. The sobriquet a hiker adopts while hiking the trail. Many hikers do not know the "real names" of hikers with such nicknames.

Thru-hiker. An individual who hikes the entire Appalachian Trail in one session.

Yellow blaze. To cheat, derived from the yellow lines on a highway. Hikers yellow blaze when they opt to drive sections of the trail rather than hike.

White blaze. A rectangular white mark, two inches wide by six inches high, that appears on a tree, boulder, rock, highway crossing, road, or sign and marks the path of the AT.

Zero. A day off from hiking.