

ABSTRACT

Re-Creating Outdoor Recreation: An Exploration of the Wilderness Within and Around

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The purpose of this thesis is to reflect on outdoor recreation through the creative process of the author and a collection of theory that explores a range of topics, including de-coloniality, wilderness, and auto-ethnography. The author's story is intended to demonstrate how our stories can create a map and path to show others how to engage more wholeheartedly, while the theory frames this project in a larger network of work and provides opportunities for application. The motivation behind this project was a desire to create more authentic, organic, and transformative experiences within the outdoors for both the author and future outdoor recreationists. The questions that guided this thesis were focused on whether it is possible for there to be a multitude of experiences represented within outdoor recreation, and if one individual's experience and story could help facilitate that. This thesis is centered around the author's own creative writing and landscape paintings which tell her experience within outdoor recreation before moving into theory on auto-ethnography, wilderness as an ideology, empathetic and reciprocal relationships with the land, and de-coloniality.

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'RE-CREATING' OUTDOOR RECREATION:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE WILDERNESS WITHIN AND AROUND

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**'Re-Creating' Outdoor Recreation:
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Figure 1: "Paria no. 1," Acrylic on Canvas, 2019

CHAPTER ONE

We wake up to ice crystals covering the ceiling of our tent, glimmering down at us as we shine our headlamps around, collecting our gear, clothes, sleeping bags, mumbling into the dark about how cold it was. I'm with my closest friends from freshman year, Cat and Kara, who I'd met in our dorm, one down the hall to the left, the other down the hall to the right. We had spent the night in a tent together, surrounded by other tents full of Baylor students and staff, the big white vans sandwiching us in the small dirt parking lot in New Mexico. We had signed up for this trip with Baylor Outdoor Adventure, mostly inspired by the pictures in the advertisements and the low cost. The group was full of strangers; besides the student guides who had helped plan the trip, and the three of us, everyone else had signed up as singles, willing to be put in a group to go out into the wilderness for their spring break.

We drove on that day, out of the purple haze of New Mexico, the traditional land of the Jicarilla Apache and Pueblos, into the red, red, red. Through Flagstaff, past the pines and snow, slowly and so quickly, moving into the canyon walls, on roads paved across an impassable landscape. It felt like an instant that we moved from one landscape to another, even after the hours we spent in traffic before Flagstaff, staring down the long, straight

highway, towards the snowcapped mountains that held the town. Maybe it was the rush of highway passing under our tires or the early start we got before the sun while we moved in the dark dawn, or maybe it was just the influx of new fauna, the flat ranchland of Texas turning towards the pale grasslands of New Mexico that melded into rolling hills that grew into the towering mountains of Arizona which fell into the cliffs we'd soon be walking through. It was so much for my eyes to take in and I remember the feeling of it all moving towards me so quickly.

I didn't really know what I was doing. I actually had no idea what I was doing, and I can't trace back my thoughts that had led me to sign up for a week-long backpacking trip through the longest slot canyon "in the universe."

We pulled into a black tar parking lot, surrounded by a littering of burnt, rusty red shelters. I stumbled out of the 15-passenger van, my eyes catching up with my brain, taking in the view I was seeing, the view that would become my first painting in this series. We set up our tent again, this time on the sandy gravel of the established campground. It looked like another planet, rusty cliffs rising around us, the edge sharp against the blue sky as it turned a dull shade, pinpointed by the stars rising. The bottom of the cliffs was indescribable against the beginning of the ground we slept on,

like a snow globe for an orange world. Once we had all set up our shelters for the night, we began pulling on layers, Kara putting on an olive-green long sleeve and my black sweatshirt pulling tight against my skin. The group slowly gathered around the creaky, wooden picnic table under the rusted, tin shelter, headlamps illuminating the stove that held a pot of boiling water. Once the water started rolling, we poured it into our Ziploc bags full of dehydrated pasta primavera, and held it close to our core, the hot water warming our cold fingers and heating up our jackets. Finally, after filling our stomachs and eating fun size snickers, we moved towards our sleeping bags, bundling up and drifting asleep, full of anticipation for the next day.

The following days of the trip took on a similar pattern. We were only there for a week, but we fell into our routine quickly. We woke up early, pulled on dirty, sandy socks and shoes as we crawled out of our warm tents, filled with a night of breath and warmth. Our guides boiled water and we would huddle around the small, ultralight camp stove, mimicking a kitchen. After a warm meal and drink, we would find a sleeping pad or rock to crouch on while pulling cold, wet socks back onto our feet, shoes hardened from the chilly night, our muscles sore from climbing the previous day and from the continual movement of our feet, one in front of the other. We were moving through the canyons, following the river, our daily motions dictated solely by the sun in the sky and the hunger in our stomachs.

The trip wasn't easy.

I felt unqualified and weak, my legs barely carrying me up each boulder and pass. But that wasn't really the prevailing feeling. The main feeling I had was a beautiful emptiness - not truly considering my weakness, or pain, or incompetence but placing my feet before the other, sandwiched between others, covering ground, and simply doing what was set before me. The canyon walls seemed to rise before me like a postcard, painted into the foreground, a prank played on us, even though I knew they were real. I could run all the way to the base of the canyon, where the red walls meet the dry dirt, and I could place my hands on the wall and breathe, feel, smell, become.



Figure 2: "Paria no. 2", Acrylic on Canvas, 2019

Introduction

Within this project, I am attempting to decolonize the wilderness within myself and attempting to examine the wilderness around myself with empathy and authenticity in order to increase the wholeness of experiences in outdoor recreation. The lived experiences that I have been through in the past three years have shaped the premise of this project. The echoes of footsteps and voices in the canyons, forests, mountains, and snow-covered spaces I've traveled through have guided the objectives of this project and given both my paintings and writings form.

The questions that guided this thesis included:

How can we increase the multitude of experiences within outdoor recreation?

How can we create organic, authentic, and wholly transformative experiences in the outdoors within a societal structure that places individuals in limiting boxes and asks us to limit our unique experiences as human beings?

How can we intentionally spend time in the wilderness around us and engage with the stories of those before us, the landscape we see, and the wilderness within ourselves to become more?

These are some of the questions I explored throughout this project to help introduce the purpose of this thesis.

Following a week-long backpacking trip in the Spring of 2019, I began painting landscape scenes of Paria Canyon in Arizona. This was the site of my first backpacking trip with Baylor University and became the primary focus of my paintings for the following two years. During this trip, I spent five days and four nights hiking and camping with a group of ten other students from Baylor University. This trip altered my interaction with the natural world and impacted the trajectory of my studies and extracurricular work at college. Over the course of my time as an undergraduate, I have participated in outdoor recreation in a variety of locations across the United States. Some of the trips I've participated in have been through Baylor's Outdoor Adventure program while others have been through other organizations and personal trips. Each trip has been deeply impactful and has informed my art, shaping and changing my practice and shaping and changing my inner world. The paintings that I have created in the past two years represent the personal journey I have experienced as an undergraduate student at a Baptist university in the South, as a former evangelical Christian, as an outdoor recreationist, as a woman, as a white individual, and as a living being in a changing world.

In this project, I will use my series of landscape paintings, a collection of written reflections on both my lived experiences in the outdoors and my artistic process, and a dialogue between my professor and myself to examine the connection to theory and place this project in a larger context. I aim to use my paintings to explore the wilderness within me, examining the emotional, situational, and cultural context that these paintings and my outdoor experiences emerged from. The land that we walk, live, and recreate on carries the stories of all those that came before, and these stories emerge as we interact with the land. Examining the context of the land we recreate on allows us to have an increased respect for and appreciation of the land and the experiences we have in these locations. The first section of this thesis is built on my paintings and creative writing pieces that have emerged over the last three years during my time at Baylor University and through my experiences in outdoor recreation. I will explore the process of creation that I engaged in as I created these paintings and I will explore my inner wilderness that has been highlighted through my experiences outside. The painting process is a deeply personal experience that illuminates the wilderness within myself as I process my outdoor trips. In connection with the paintings, I have included personal pieces of reflective writing that are centered on my time spent outside and help fully shape the context for this thesis and my paintings. In the second chapter of the thesis, my thesis

advisor, Dr. Spitzer-Hanks, and I recorded a series of conversations based on the texts that guided the development of this project. The transcription of these conversations brought to life the purpose of this project and allowed us to connect the creative aspects of the thesis with the texts and theories that we were most focused on. In the final chapter of the thesis, I will use decolonization theories, defined later in the project, to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this section and offer applicable solutions to create new outdoor recreation experiences. Outdoor recreation has continually been tied to colonial ways of thinking that limit the human experience and lack empathy. If we can imagine a world where individuals are able to have whole, authentic experiences outside of the confines of colonial thought, we can reshape outdoor recreation into a new reality with opportunity for more lived experiences and stories.



Figure 3: Map of Paria

Paria

I walked toward the Student Life Center, sandwiched between my two friends, evening ascending on us, the air cool, daylight savings time still coming. We'd seen an advertisement for the trip on one of the TVs in the SLC, or maybe on an email from Baylor, pictures of tall red walls and long muddy rivers and small people in the middle. I'm more than halfway through my freshman year and I spend my days creating art I don't understand and in lectures I don't understand. I keep going to church with the same girls, sweet girls who don't seem to have the same questions I do, and I keep calling my long-distance boyfriend, a sweet boy who I know that I don't love but who

brings me a safety that is almost suffocating. I'm still caught up in the beliefs I held throughout high school, big ideas of a god who might not really like me, who needs me to help save people, who listens and hears and loves but why doesn't he respond? Why do I keep thinking he is he? Who said? I find myself thinking about Hawaii a lot, where I spent three months living when I was 16 and again when I was 18, and about my high school boyfriend, and about Brazil, where I lived as a missionary for a couple months, sometimes the people I was with, sometimes the things I saw, mostly the way I felt, wondering when I'll feel it again.

The girl on my left, Catherine, was the first person I met in college who I felt like I could really know. She intimidated me, like most people do, giving off the energy that she was cooler than me and then we sat next to each other on a bus to Temple, Texas, mostly because we knew each other from the same floor of the dorm, and all of a sudden, the stories of divorce and pain and loss poured out, and she wasn't so intimidating, she was entrancing and honest and she asked to know me. The girl on my right, Kara, slipped into my life after I sat in her room without introducing myself, talking to her roommate for an hour. We didn't know each other, and, in my self-defense, I acted like I didn't want to. She saw the world in black and white, full of opportunity and reasons to be happy, every problem appearing with a simple solution. I didn't understand it and I don't know if she ever really

understood me, but she kept inviting me in and so somehow, I was there, walking to the first meeting for a spring break trip to Arizona.

I don't remember our conversations leading up to the trip. I think we all had to convince our parents, and ask them for money, and now, I can easily imagine Catherine shouting something about how exciting and awesome it would be.

We sat around a table in the lounge, a collection of unknown faces, a pile of papers, and a backpack full of gear. The student leaders, two girls who seemed decades older but were really only a couple years older, handed out a packing list and health forms, and started describing the trip to us.

"Longest slot canyon in the universe!"

"We have to cross the river about 300 times over the entire week... It's going to be cold, so your shoes might freeze overnight, and we'll be putting on cold, wet socks."

One of the leaders pulled out the shoes she had used on the trip previously and a stream of sand followed, leaking onto the carpeted floor.

Our guides changed the week before we left. We'd had two girls, students, but one of them got switched around because there were no boys signed up for our trip, and there were only male pro-staff, so we had to have a male student guide. Sienna, the female guide, was a senior, and one of the first things I noticed was the ring on her finger, because I was always

noticing that kind of thing, and I still am. I didn't ask about it but someone else did and so Sienna told us how she was married and had been since the summer after her junior year. I listened mostly with disbelief, I'm not sure why, because I was dating a boy at that point who'd given me three different rings and who I knew wanted to marry me. But I already knew then I didn't love him, and I wouldn't marry him, but I hadn't figured out I could tell him. So really, I think I listened to Sienna's story in disbelief because she had the courage and agency to choose what she wanted.

My chest was tight, or maybe my stomach, or something in between, with excitement, and fear, anticipation, but mostly fear. I've learned since, that feeling, it's something I run to, that tells me when growth might happen, when I might just get beyond myself, become something new, something stronger. This is the feeling that led me to move to Hawaii in high school, enrolling in a Christian missions school, that encouraged me to sign up for a three week wilderness course in North Carolina at the end of my freshman year, that pushed me to go backcountry skiing for two weeks in the wilderness of Idaho even though I'd never really stepped foot on snow, that led me to break up with every boy I've loved, in pursuit of a deeper version of myself, trying to understand who I was without the labels I'd assigned, and the characteristics I'd been given from a young age, yearning to know and

love and hold myself, inching closer and closer to the realest, truest version of myself.

That feeling lasted most of the trip, my chest tight as we stepped further into the canyon, as I watched the walls move closer, as I realized no matter what, I would have to walk myself back out of this place. In the years since, I've described it as claustrophobia, but I'm not really sure that's what it is. It happens on every trail, a moment of reckoning, the release of the safety and control I pretend to have, or really a reckoning that all of a sudden, I actually am in control. It's a stark contrast to the typical relationship I have with my own being, the inner wild I explore in my paintings and life taunting me to feel out of control, simply a bystander to the wilderness of my inner world, watching with eager, anxious eyes to see what will happen next. Instead, I found myself outside that week, immersed in a landscape I couldn't control, couldn't fully understand and know, similar to how I view the landscape of myself, and realized that I was actually more in control than I'd thought, each step and breath a conscious decision to continue forward, each thought in my mind my own and simply part of the experience.

I hadn't really considered what this place would be like, besides the photos I'd seen and the few blog posts I'd found when I typed "paria" into my search bar. It did nothing to prepare me, make my mind or soul or heart ready for the overwhelming awe I felt in that landscape. I'd seen the red

rocks from the images, and I'd seen the maps, outlining a long walk following the river, weaving from one side to the next, always staying between the two walls of the canyon. And the trip leaders had made sure we knew what we had signed up for and we'd sat with them, on the floor of the SLC basketball courts, the door to the gear room open so they could easily retrieve what we needed. The floor was hard and slick, and I had to keep readjusting my legs to stay comfortable, my clothes spread out around me, ziplocks and duct tape in the middle of the group, ready for us to make bathroom bags to hide our toilet paper in while on the trip.

Sienna passed me a rain jacket and pants, and a puffy jacket, and a mug, and I'm sure more because I really had nothing at that point. I got a new pair of shoes for the trip, pink and green merrells, light little things, trail runners, barely hiking shoes, but on clearance. And I bought new shorts and a new shirt on a late-night run to Walmart with Catherine and Kara. I've lost the shirt since then and I finally let the shoes go after one last trip to the sandy canyons of Southern Texas, but I still have the shorts, like a souvenir, memorabilia of a different moment in time when I was new and fresh and scared.



Figure 4: "Paria No. 3," Acrylic on Canvas, April 2020



Figure 5: "Paria No. 5," Acrylic on Canvas, Fall 2020

Process

I sit with my canvas before me, a large, blank, echoing space in front of me. I have a red cup filled with water on my right and my old linen scraps on my left leg. I have a handful of brushes, some from Walmart, some from the local art store. I only use five paint tubes: yellow, red, blue, a tub of white, and black. This is a practice that carried over from my freshman year design courses. During this class, I had to complete a variety of assignments utilizing only the primary colors with black and white. The aim of these assignments was to fully understand color theory and become confident in creating any color needed. By habit, or possibly because of some inner rebellion or need to prove myself as a true artist, I keep making my colors out of only the same primary hues, mixing what I need, creating a different hue every time, trying to keep them connected, filling in the canvas. Some months I have two different yellow shades and it feels like a luxury, a gift to myself to make it easier to create the colors I need.

I have a handful of trash bags cut open and spread out around the floor, trying (and failing) to catch the paint splatters before they hit the carpet or the wall. I have my laptop open near me, not too close after I learned last year how quickly my spilled water cup will ruin my laptop. The laptop has my Spotify open, a variety of songs blasting over the speakers; a photo open on the other screen, itching to be painted onto the canvas.

Spotify is a music streaming application, a constant thread of music usually playing over the app through my phone or computer. I listen to a variety of music, usually brought on by a certain mood or feeling; Taylor Swift is a frequent artist, her lyrics touching on the heartache I often feel in my own life; after I started dating one boy, Led Zeppelin made its way into my frequently played, alongside Fleetwood Mac and ZZ Top, the Beach Boys, and Dave Matthews Band, artists I used to consider too cool or too pretentious for me to listen to, their rock 'n roll music a new genre for me. Sometimes it's a weird combination of indie, folk, bluegrass music that reminds me of how I feel in the mountains. The hum of the mandolin reminding me of the hum of cicadas in the trees and the steady kick of a drum bringing up memories of sunsets when I'm camping, the rocks around me puncturing my spot on the ground. Here, I sit on the floor, my canvas propped against the wall, sometimes 'crisscross applesauce', other times on my knees, kneeling before the painting, as if praying for some miracle to occur. I turn my overhead lights on, and the lamps in each corner, and I open the blinds, hoping to let in enough light to see the shadows and highlights in the paint as I place it on the canvas. The setup is amateur, crude, and when my mother sees it, she exclaims in disgust, questioning how I can make art like this. A more professional set-up would have extensive lighting, enough to accurately illuminate the highlights and shadows of the paintings. Furthermore, there

would be an easel to prop up my canvases, creating an upright angle so that I could stand while painting, the most professional position for painting. I suppose that better lighting and a more appropriate painting position would improve the quality of my art, but I lean towards the informal routine of my process. It feels natural, letting the paintings pour out of me, whatever way they need to, bursting at the seams of my being out into the world.

I begin my paintings with big, long brushstrokes full of thick white paint. Placing something on the canvas removes the pressure I feel building up within me to paint something incredible. On many of the paintings shown in this project, there is at least one layer of under paintings, sketches or paintings or markings underneath the final painting that depict the emotions, stories, and bones held within the painting. Sometimes this goes on with the white paint, other times before or after. These underpaintings mark the stories of my experiences and provided me the opportunity to explore the depths of my feelings before I created a visual presentation of my experience through my paintings that the world could experience.

Following this first layer, I begin mixing the colors I will use in the painting. Almost all the colors I used in the Paria series begin with large globs of yellow, spread out on my palette. In each clump, I squeeze out a smaller amount of red, sometimes blue, white and black. I mix each one with an old, stiff bristled brush, how I was taught in my first college art course. I make

enough of each color so that I can lay it on thickly, intrigued by the texture of the paint as it hits the canvas. I like the way that this texture matches the landscapes I moved through, mimicking the roughness, the edges and contours of the environment, the movement of the river against the banks, the tumultuousness of a changing, never-still world. I frequently have to remake the colors, adding more and more paint, the hues changing as I layer on the palette, each layer slightly different, building up like the years of weather and erosion, beyond my short experiences.

From here, the process changes for each painting, shifting based on the landscape I am painting or the wildernesses I am navigating in those moments, both beyond and within myself. These differences in the process still center around the same main routine of my creative process but mold and grow, similar to each experience I have in the outdoors.



Figure 6: “Paria no. 4,” Acrylic on Canvas, July 2020

This piece emerged following the first major lockdown of COVID-19, in the spring of 2020. Following five weeks at my mother’s apartment, I returned to my college town and apartment and decided to try my largest painting yet. This first quarantine was marked by daily uncertainty, huge changes and news coming each day, everyone around me holding their breath for the next announcement, holding hope for a return to the normal semester while carrying the looming dread that the near constant scrolling on Twitter and the news led to. I was thrown from my routine of school where I was surrounded by friends, constant interaction, classes and the stress of homework, a job I enjoyed, into a shell of my high school life, a space

I hadn't inhabited in a couple years, and not since I had been through deep, personal changes, a change in major and future career aspirations, a loss of religion and the personal beliefs I'd shaped my life on. I spent my days similarly to the entire country, trying and failing to continue the work we were assigned, taking short trips to the grocery store, and wiping down the groceries, going for walks with my mom and brother, downloading an app called TikTok and spending my never-ending free time scrolling through video after video, interspersed with checking Twitter for updates on the global COVID situation. Despite the clear reality that I was spending my days so similarly to millions around the world, there was an inescapable sense of loneliness and fatigue, and an increasingly inescapable anxiety that moved from my mind into my body, bringing cold hands and feet, a constant battle with nausea and brain foggiess, tears, and the guilt of not being a better person for my mother and brother. My mom eventually realized how far I was spiraling, and I think she hoped giving me the option of going back to my college town would provide me some semblance of relief. I returned to my now completely empty bedroom in my apartment that I shared with my best friend, Catherine, and started to look for ways to fill the physical and emotional space in my life, painting becoming one of the main ways I carried myself through those first weeks back in Waco.

The size of this piece is 30 inches by 48 inches and is the largest piece I have completed to date, shown below on my TV stand.



Figure 7: "Paria No. 4" on TV Stand

On the following pages, I have a collection of pictures that visually depict the process I went through with this piece. The palette for this piece began with a variety of brown, orange, and red hues which I mixed in small

plastic palettes that I could cover with plastic wrap at the end of each day, which can be seen in the following images.

I was still building off what I learned in my design classes and attempting to apply the principles of color theory and perspective to this larger piece. I moved into the living room to have enough room to create this painting. This painting took me ten days to complete. I began with a pencil sketch of the picture, depicting the outline of the mountains, clouds, and foreground.



Figure 8: Creation of "Paria No.4"

Following the sketch, I began layering the shades of the canyons and the ground. This process started with larger swatches of one color before I added in different hues to accentuate the differences between sections of the canyon and the path I was painting.



Figure 9: Creation of "Paria No.4" with Feet

This painting was loosely inspired by and based on a couple of pictures from my time in Paria Canyon. This painting intimidated me, the size and scale scaring me, making me doubt my capabilities. Yet at the same time, I was painting it towards the end of the first major quarantine that took place during the pandemic, my psyche shaken by the abrupt changes that had occurred from March up until the moment I sat down to coat this canvas with paint. I'd painted one other piece during the lockdown, while still at my mother's apartment, but I'd also run a half marathon, I'd run every day really, and I'd cried and become numb and taken videos for friends and so when I got back to my own apartment in Waco, it was really just the most natural next step to spend ten days painting this large canvas. It felt like a way to

place myself back within the world I lived, and a reminder of what I had done, walking through those canyons, and what I would do again, my hope growing for what the future could hold, even with the fear of the pandemic still within my inner wilderness.

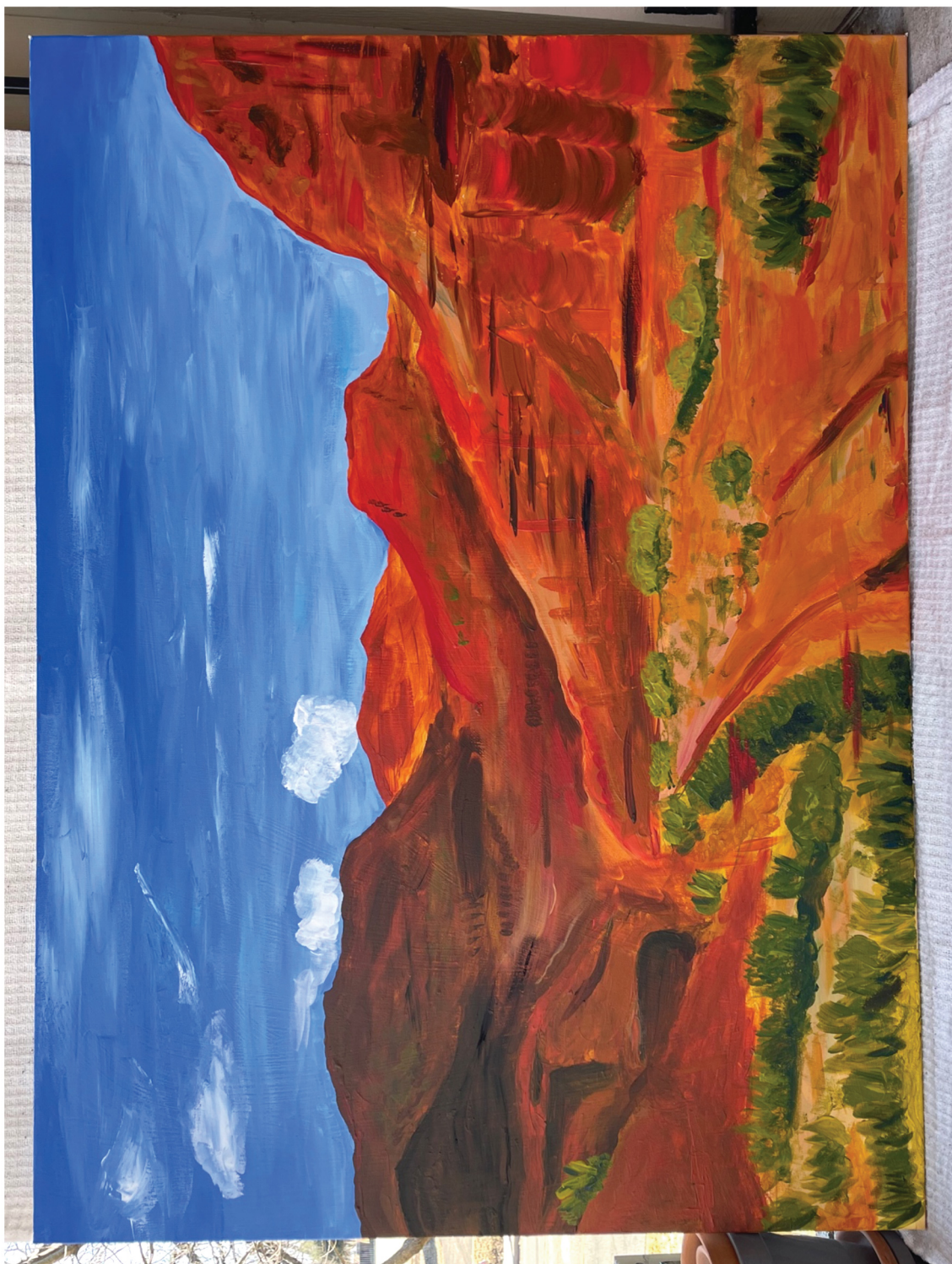


Figure 10: "Paria No.4," Acrylic on Canvas, Summer 2020



Figure 11: "Abstract no. 2," Acrylic on Canvas, February 2021

In contrast to my abstracted landscapes of Paria and other locations I've recreated, I also began painting pieces that reflected my inner landscape. These pieces emerged in moments of deep emotional stress and intense personal reflection. While all of my paintings depict the wilderness within me, these abstract pieces more deeply touch on the chaos and wildness that I feel within my own being. In contrast to the landscapes which finish with a controlled object that viewers can understand; a canyon or a mountain, a piece they can recognize and contain, my abstract paintings only allow the viewer to face the turmoil of my emotions and hopefully, the turmoil of their own wilderness. Frequently, these pieces have underpaintings that hint more at the impetus of the painting than the finished product itself. Lyrics that more accurately articulate the words inside my head, figures that represent the anxiety I feel towards my own body and the pain it brings me and the journeys it carries me through, crosses that depict my former relationship with the church and religion.



Figure 12: Close up of "Abstract Paria No. 2"

This piece took shape following an intense break-up, my first solo camping trip, and during the winter storm in Texas in 2021. I was in a deeply intense and dependent relationship during the second half of 2020, one that isolated me, deprived me of joy and comfort, and asked more of me than I could really give. I didn't realize fully until it was over, and I began painting, how reduced I had become.



Figure 13: Map of Caprock Canyons

Caprock Canyons

Following the break-up, I spent a weekend in Northwest Texas camping by myself in the closest canyons I could find. I fled to Caprock Canyons State Park, a six-hour drive from Waco, following the flat highways of Texas, until suddenly, right after I passed through the park entrance, the ground opened up before me into a ghost of the canyons I had carried myself through Freshman year. The park was more known for the Goodnight Buffalo Herd, one of the oldest bison herds in the country, and as I drove through the winding park roads, I had to pause at different points to let the great animals move across the pavement, taking their time, unaware of my

presence, even in my blue chevy. There were colonies of Prairie Dogs too, popping up to stare at me as I rolled by, but my eyes were fixed on the red rocks ahead of me, smaller than the ones I'd fallen in love with but the same dark, raw that captured me and drew me in. I didn't know what I was looking for, maybe just the red that I kept painting, or that feeling of losing control, but I drove up and set up my tent, and cooked myself a meal, and went walking and got lost, and felt the tension in my heart rise.

I had a map of the trails in the park downloaded on my phone and it usually showed my location, even if I lost reception, and I'd picked out a couple of trails that would form a loop from my campsite, across the cliffs, and back. Even though it was late in the afternoon, only a few hours until the sun would start setting, I set off on my own, back down the path I'd walked from my car to my campsite, and then to the right, up, quickly setting my feet on switchbacks leading me higher towards the plateau of the cliff above. My breath got caught in my chest as I ascended, from the steep incline, from the nerves in my soul at being on my own, from the soaring view when I reached the summit, my adoration for the world and this life and even my body swelling with the view. But then I came to an intersection, three trails peeling off from the one I had been walking down and I thought I knew which one I needed, I was confident in fact, and carried on, slowly picking my way through a changing landscape, the trail following the side of a hill and

turning with the curve of the land, beginning to tilt downwards until I was suddenly scrambling down a muddy slit in the land, pausing to check the map on my phone, eyeing the red line of the trail against the blue dot of my location. I shoved my phone back into the side pocket of my backpack and used my hands to shuffle myself down, continuing forward on through a clearing in the shrubs that I suspected was the trail. I kept going, getting more unsure with each step, losing faith in my phone, and my wilderness knowledge, and my idea of camping alone. I turned and backtracked 20, 30 paces, my eyes scanning the ground and the trees for a path that someone else had walked. I kept going further back, until I reached the muddy slope I'd just crawled down. I tried one more time, eager to finish the loop I'd set for myself, but then I found myself on a steep section of the cliff, holding onto a tree as my feet compressed the dark fresh dirt.

I'm not sure if I cried at that moment, but I was so frustrated with myself, unsure what to do as the sun descended in the sky, a wilderness ahead of me, the canyon floor stocked full of trees, and the path I'd already traveled behind me. Even though I wanted to finish the loop so badly, the 12-miles a goal I had set in my mind, a push I'd wanted to get my body through, and achievement I could hold myself to in the future, I knew I had to turn around to avoid the risk of injury and a night spent in the dark with no shelter. I didn't compare that moment or that trip to what I'd been through in

my relationship, but when I consider it, I see the parallels, my attempts to achieve what I set out for myself, whether it was a trail or a love full of laughter and life. And I held on, drawing out the last moments in both, clinging tightly to what I had hoped for, but recognizing in some deeper part of myself the moment it was no longer safe.

I arrived back at my campsite before the sun fell beneath the horizon and set about boiling water for my mac and cheese dinner and a hot drink, sitting with myself, considering the orange banded fin of rock that rose out of the ground ahead of me. I didn't make it through the night, waking up to the wind at 4am and packing my things in the dark and hurrying back to my car, falling asleep on my folded down seats, scared of the unknown that surrounded me.

The next week, snow and ice descended on Waco, and school was canceled. Life paused for a week. I painted numerous pieces during that week, while locked inside, part of me thinking about the last time I'd been in the cold like that, in Idaho, other parts of me considering the pain in

my heart. The underpainting of this piece demonstrates the emotional turmoil I felt within my inner world. In the picture below, the white paint beginning to cover the canvas demonstrates the thickness of the paint that I strive to use, mimicking the landscapes that I traverse. Part of the underpainting of this piece is a collection of song lyrics that touched my

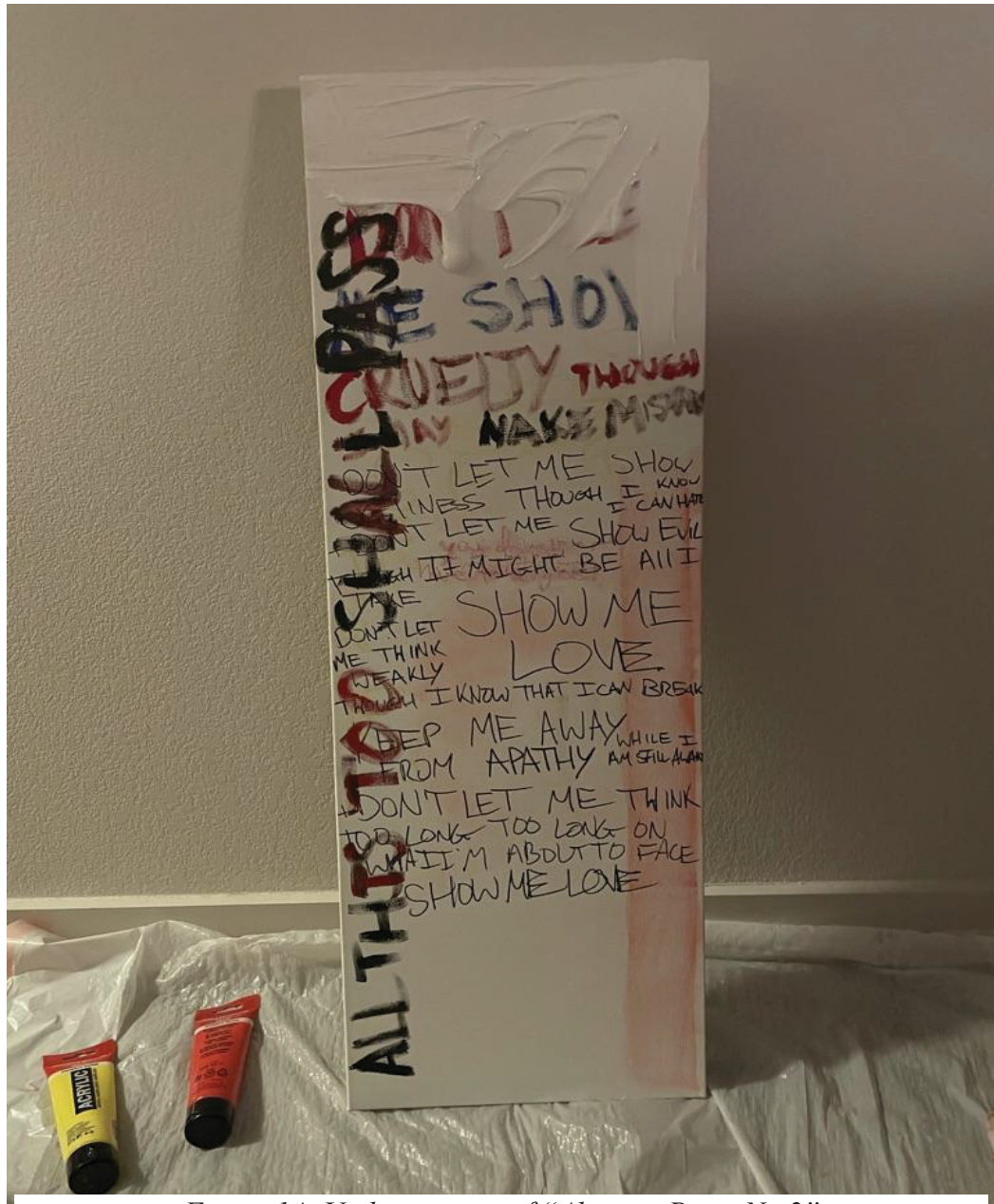


Figure 14: Underpainting of "Abstract Paria No.2"

inner world while I was painting. The words are written in sharpie as well as paint and are as equally guided by emotions as the landscape paintings I do and the large swaths of paint that cover my canvases.

Written below are a collection of these lyrics, some of which ended up covered by paint, and others which remain visible in the final piece.

*"So, give me hope in the darkness that I will see the light
'Cause oh that gave me such a fright
But I will hold on as long as you like
Just promise me that we'll be alright"
(Mumford and Sons, "Ghosts That We Knew")*

*"Don't let me show cruelty though I may make mistakes
Don't let me show ugliness though I know I can hate
And don't let me show evil, though it might be all I take
Show me love, show me love, show me love
Don't let me think weakly though I know that I can break
Keep me away from apathy while I am still awake
And don't let me think too long of the one I'm 'bout to face
Show me love, show me love, show me love"
(Big Wild, "Show Me")*

*"In the halfway light
You said 'baby I'd choose you twice'
'I'd choose you twice'
You said 'baby I'd choose you twice'
You said 'if we had one more night
I'd be spending it by your side'
I'd choose you twice
You know baby I'd choose you twice"
(Ben Zaidi, "Choose You Twice")*

*“And oh, this too shall pass
This loneliness won't last for long
I wasn't there to take his place
I was ten thousand miles away”
(The Lumineers, “Gale Song)*

Beyond the song lyrics, there are a collection of other components within the painting which represent the growth, change, and discomfort I was feeling at the time of painting. At the very bottom of the painting, I used a dark red paint alongside black paint that I used to write “FOREVER”. The red paint is both under the word and beginning to cover the bottom of the word, suggesting that forever doesn’t exist. In the center of the painting, under a layer of paint, just visible still, are three crosses, similar to depictions of the three crosses that are described in stories of the crucifixion.



Figure 15: Close up of "Abstract Paria No. 2"



Figure 16: Close up of "Abstract Paria No. 2"

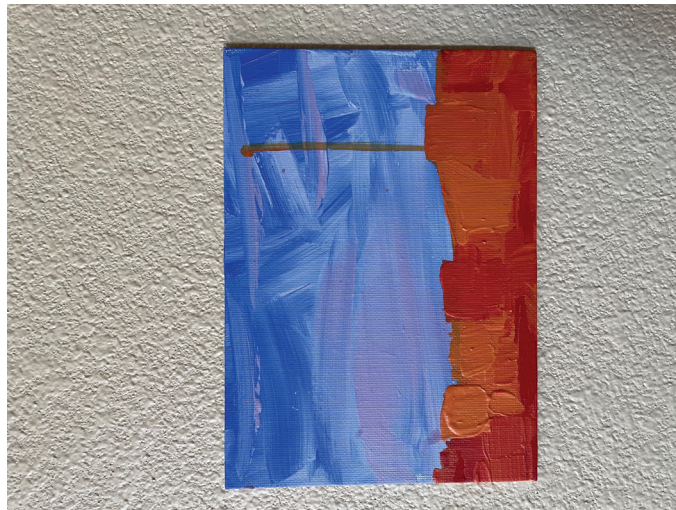
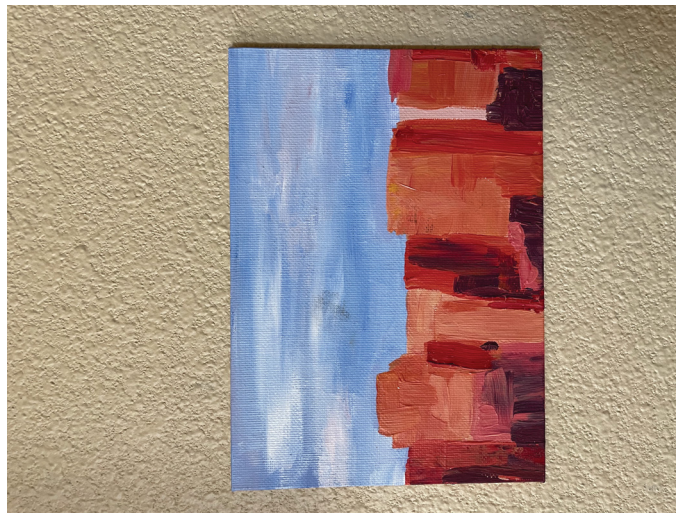


Figure 17: "Mini Paria Series," Acrylic on Canvas Board, Spring 2021



Figure 18: Map of North Carolina

North Carolina

I've never sat down to write about North Carolina. Really, I've never tried to write about it, on paper, computer, my notes app, whatever. There's no real reason, except how do you write down the moment you felt your soul switch on and how do you put into words the circumstances which caused your life to change and how do you say what happened that so clearly caused the last few years of your life to unfold the way it has?

The word I always come back to is magic - what happened was magic and what continues to happen is magic.

I remember the moment it happened, but I didn't know what it was about that moment. It was in the middle of the trip, the canoeing and climbing portions over, trail the only thing ahead of us. I felt like I was being baptized in green those weeks. Everywhere I turned seemed to be erupting in it, neon and wet, green and warm. There was life everywhere too, small creatures and big ones, and energy flooding out of the ground and the air. And there were people around me always, the same nine people, who'd been strangers and who really still were, but in the way you're a stranger to yourself, known so well with so much still hidden.

And so here we were, in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains, in the middle of North Carolina, walking, all day, through all this green and life, and I felt like I was walking through myself too, when all of a sudden, we got down this big, long hill, and found ourselves in the sunlight, on a flat, sandy road overgrown with grass. It was after lunch, midafternoon and the sun felt like syrup and the breeze felt like childhood and we all took our packs off. My professor, Kelli, moved to the middle of the road and laid down on her back, the breeze stirring her hair as she sighed and looked up at the clouds. Savannah and I went over and laid down next to her, all of us mostly silent, our backs flat against the ground. I can't remember exactly what Kelli said but it was something about doing this forever, and the feeling of the ground, and the way it could fix everything. And I didn't know it then, but it was like

my soul squeezed and then released and finally began to settle into itself,
into me.



Figure 19: "Smokies," Acrylic on Canvas Board, Summer 2019



Figure 20: Map of Idaho

Idaho

It was quiet out there in the cold. It was a deafening quiet though, that surrounded you and filled you up, covering your ears, filling them with the cold, white, stillness. We were back at the pass on highway 31. We had come out here on the second day of the trip, with our shovels and tents and cooking gear, bundled up but still warm from the cabins we were staying in. That afternoon, we had learned how to set up our green tents, digging out a two-foot-deep square, long enough and wide enough for three of us to lie down to rest, our sleeping mats spread out with our thick sleeping bags

spread on top. The sleeping bags were different from ones I'd used in the past; thick, puffy, filling up more than half the duffel I set on my sled to pull along. The puffy jacket they gave me matched - red, thick, swallowing me whole, even with my wool long sleeve, my pullover, my smaller orange puffy, and my shell underneath. We were a shock to the environment, bright reds and blues and greens. Even when we were at our quietest - moving in silence in a single line, following tracks left before us, breathing heavily, focused on the ache in our muscles to move forward, pushing our skis through the snow and pulling our sleds behind us - we were still foreigners to that great white world.

That first afternoon, we started digging, each group practicing setting up their tent. We had to set those shelters up for more than half the nights that we were in the backcountry. We would get to 'camp', which was really just a latter section in the mountains, off the trail, surrounded by trees, and we'd unclip our sled waist belts, leaving our skis on so that we could pack down the base of the shelter after we had dug it out. It wasn't easy, in fact, it was really awkward. While we dug, we'd kneel, our boots popped out of our bindings, balancing on the thin wood, trying not to fall into the snow, where our knees would sink, our hands trying to keep us afloat above the powder. Once we had dug out the square we would click back into our skis and negotiate the small space, tripping over our own skis, the middle of the

shelter a clump of snow we'd left to prop our tent pole on. We would stretch out the dark green fabric, tying it off on all four corners, pulling it taut so snow would fall off easily throughout the night. Finally, once that was all done, we'd unclick and prop our skis up, pulling the skins off to keep them dry. Switching from our ski boots into our dry socks, and two layers of puffy boots, less worried about post holing after our skis had packed down routes between our shelters and camp.

And then in the morning, we did it all in reverse, tearing down the tents and stomping down the sides of our shelters, pushing the snow back into the cleared space, our presence so evident but hoping the falling snow would cover our tracks, returning our site to the still beauty of before. We knew we weren't permanent, migratory figures moving through this space, hovering on the edge of uninvited, recognizing how changed the environment became even after the short time we'd spent there.



Figure 21: "Last Evening in the Snow," Acrylic on Canvas, October 2021

The other activity we practiced that first afternoon was setting up our kitchen. We only really needed one kitchen area, but we had four small groups cooking together each meal and we wanted enough space for each group to prepare and cook their meals. The instructors talked us through the steps to set up the kitchen, first choosing the spot, then packing down the snow and using our shovels to mold and shape counters, benches, a stove area, and our insulating “fridges”. They encouraged us to be creative,

“This can become the kitchen you’ve always dreamed of!” and so, we grabbed our shovels and one of the boys got on top of our kitchen, stomping his skis above us, while we carved out counters and slapped the snow with our shovels. I want to say we got better at building our kitchens but I’m not sure it’s true. We’d set up our shelters and then build the kitchen and it was always what we needed. Usually we all gathered close, drawn in by the WhisperLite stoves and the couple of lanterns we set up, probably hoping for warmth.

In the morning, we would crawl out of our shelters and walk the short 50 or so steps to the kitchen, our puffy jackets zipped tight, pulling on our hats and gloves. It felt like it never stopped snowing that trip so we would have to brush off the bags of food and the stoves, snowflakes falling into our pots as we cleared the snow from the night before. We’d stand at the counters, our gloves still on as we pulled out the stoves, the metal

threatening immediate frostbite if our bare skin touched it. Because of the cold, we would have to pump the fuel canister at least 50-60 times before lighting it, each of us taking turns, turning the fuel into gas. We would finally pull our gloves off for a brief moment to trace our thumb on the lighter, bending forward, catching the gas and then soon our frozen eggs, potatoes, and bacon were sizzling, steam rising and inviting the rest of the group closer.

We had to build one more structure on the trip, but we didn't practice until we were four days in, already deep in the backcountry and finally in the routine of setting up our shelters. On the third day, we arrived in a large opening, two main slopes above us and a small indent in the hill ahead of us. The snow had been pouring down the whole morning and the wind had picked up in the last few hours. The last hill we'd gotten through had been difficult, with most of us getting our sleds stuck and all of us struggling to keep moving. We all sat down in the clearing, waiting while our instructors stood talking. Looking back now, I realize they had intended for us to go further, but every step we took was a push through a few feet of snow, the person at the front struggling to make a path through the deep powder, all of us squinting against the falling snow, cold, wet, sore. We started snacking, or maybe eating lunch, starting to get cold. The instructors finally came back

over and told us that we were going to set up camp and stay there for the next few days, a basecamp of sorts, where we would build our snow shelters and skin up higher to ski without our sleds.

We still had to set up our tents that afternoon, creating a row of shelters further down the slope, practicing the same routine we'd become accustomed to. But then, instead of making dinner and going to bed, we had hours of light left and we pulled our shovels out to start on the snow shelters. We did the first snow pile as a group, all of us circled up around one of our avalanche probes, and then shoveling snow from behind us into a growing pile around the probe. I hadn't ever shoveled like that, my muscles burning and my hands freezing. We kept waiting for our instructors to say it was enough, but instead we just kept shoveling, watching the snow pile up until we couldn't see each other on the other side, higher still until only a foot of the probe was visible. Halfway through, I was so cold I started singing "Girl on Fire" to warm myself up, or maybe as a psychotic response to the chaos that I had somehow found myself in, a group of twenty somethings flinging snow into a pile, while big snowflakes fell onto us, our feet and hands freezing and our only options to stay or hike all the way back out. Singing didn't really make me warmer, but it did something for my mind and kept me going that afternoon. Once we had made that first pile big enough, our instructors told us to each work on our own, the groups that had been

sleeping in shelters together splitting away and setting up the probe and then once again, shoveling until the snow was piled high above us. When we were all done, we moved toward our kitchen area, setting it up so we could start cooking as the sun moved lower in the sky, down towards the hill across from us. We had to leave the snow piles overnight to solidify, packing down so they would be stable enough for us to clear out. So we slept in the tent one more night and after breakfast the next morning, we started another long day of shoveling, this time taking turns carving out a tunnel into the snow pile, creating an uphill ramp and then slowly shoveling a room for us to fill. We took turns digging into the snow and sitting at the opening we'd created pushing the snow away. I felt claustrophobic when we were digging into the pile, the space starting out just small enough for my shovel and growing until I could actually sit up and then slowly emerging into a full room - but I still felt claustrophobic, the heavy snow right above my head, the only light coming in from the low entrance that we had to slide down to get out. But these snow shelters, called Quinzhees, were warm and slowly began to feel like a real shelter.

The night before we finished the quinzhees was one of the hardest of the trip. We were nearing the halfway point of the trip and we were setting more permanent shelters, reminding me of how far into the wilderness we

had gone. I remember thinking about pressing the red emergency alert on my instructor's satellite device, knowing it would call someone for help, maybe even a helicopter that would take us back. Sometimes I thought about getting a minor injury, twisting, or rolling something, or getting dehydrated so they would have to take me back - an accident, of course, but one that would rescue me from the cold. Those were the thoughts I was having that night as I went to bed, freezing cold, sore, still scared, but of what I wasn't sure. Then I woke up around 4am, shivering and wondering if I had started my period. I didn't want to believe it so I stayed in my sleeping bag, trying to fall back asleep for another 30 minutes, and then another hour, until finally, I knew I had to get up and take care of myself. I was so frustrated, the feeling building up in my chest, heavy and thick, angry at my body for forcing me through this each month, upset that it was happening now, incredulous that it was still so, so, so cold. And then I stepped out of the tent, and tears filled my eyes, uncontrollably, spilling out as I looked up at the clear sky, the stars and moon illuminating the snow, like I had stepped into a glass ball, a perfect picture, the goodness of the world close enough for me to touch. And I cried. I stood there for a moment, staring in disbelief and awe and letting the wonder fill my chest, even as the tears spilled out. And then I cried as I found a tampon and as I postholed my way down the slope away from the shelters, not even wearing my headlamp because the night was bright enough, and I

cried as I squatted in the freezing cold, feeling my heart split at the devastating beauty of the world and the inescapable pain of living here.



Figure 22: "Parking Lot in Driggs," Acrylic on Canvas, October 2021



Figure 23: "Heading North," Acrylic on Canvas Board, Fall 2021



Figure 24: "Approach to Mt Massive," Acrylic on Canvas, Fall 2021



Figure 25: "Last Pass Wildflower," Acrylic on Canvas, Fall 2021

14ers

A boy I dated once didn't understand why I hiked 14ers.

"It's not like you're actually hiking 14,000 feet. So many other hikes are harder."

I didn't have an answer for him. I didn't have an answer for myself either. I don't spend much time at the top of each summit, usually less than 20 minutes, the wind and soaring views, and steep drop offs enough to make me practice breathing slowly and unclenching my fists. I don't like the view very much either, the muted colors where life can't quite live. I usually just want to get back to my car, desperate for comfort, sturdy steel and plastic, maybe afraid I'll get blown away up there. The world is a little more frail, caught up there above the trees for miles, and I feel less sturdy up there, nothing above me holding me down. The hike is fun in that weird, twisted way that you can only find outside, uncomfortable, sometimes painful, a steady march up and down, an endless ascent and then descent. So I just smiled at him and shrugged, suggesting an easier hike nearby.

My first 14er was with a group of older women who I'd spent a week with on the trail. My professor, Kelli, had brought us all together, suggesting a route through the Colorado Rockies. She'd become one of my biggest role models in the past year, independent, accomplished, educated, free, even in her 50s. She'd hiked hundreds of miles before and I felt so excited that she

would invite me along for 100 more. The other two women were strangers to me, both in their late 30s, and living in different states. I felt out of place most of the week, quiet and not entirely myself, scared I wouldn't keep up if I didn't keep moving or that I wouldn't fit in if I didn't keep quiet. I soaked in their words and their stories and their opinions like I'd soaked my bandana in one of the cold mountain streams that crossed our path. I couldn't get over the world emerging around me, the wildflowers blooming in each valley, the sandy dirt mixing with the small rocks on the trail, the heavy ponderosa pines mixing with those clumps of aspens that shimmered in the wind. I was walking with them, my footsteps matching their own, but sometimes falling behind or running ahead, but I felt far displaced, a fragile unhinging within me as I listened to their stories and didn't recognize a future I wanted for myself, uncomfortable with the thought of returning to Texas or to school or to my boyfriend. uncomfortable with how deeply I was falling in love with the trail and that natural landscape of the Rockies.

A few days in, altitude and sunburn and dehydration got to me, and I had to get off the trail. My professor's friend, Amy, met us at a trailhead off of spending a few days in Leadville in a stranger's home recovering. I held onto the comfort I felt in that home, a piece of summer pie surrounded by hummingbirds and the absolute quiet of the mountains, each day heating up but unable to penetrate the dark pines.

When I was finally able, I joined the group at Cottonwood Pass, sitting and waiting on the continental divide until I saw them coming down over the trail. I drove out early that morning, in Amy's blue Subaru, early enough that she could get back to work. There wasn't service up on the pass, but I knew people would be passing and I knew that eventually Kelli would have to come over the ridge to my left. I found a boulder and laid out my orange foam sleeping pad, the gray side against the tan dirt, my backpack next to me stuffed full of food and my sleeping bag, a water filter and a bathroom bag, the sun slowly warming up as the morning went on. I finally saw the three of them coming down the trail, between the short bushes that lined the rocks carrying them down to the dirt parking lot of the overlook. We took a picture in front of the sign and then we continued walking for days, pausing at every cold mountain stream to fill our bottles, and wet our bandanas to cool us down. The sky turned red over the hours on the trail, smoke filling the sky from wildfires nearby, the sun turning deep red as we walked.

We didn't know if we wanted to hike further on the Colorado Trail or pause and hike one of the 14ers that cut off up the trail. We planned it at Amy's kitchen table, a map spread out across the wood, the sun heating up the deck outside and the pine trees casting a shadow on the window. I didn't push too hard for it, but I felt a growing excitement that we might hike one.



Figure 26: "Lake Ann Pass," Acrylic on Canvas, February 2021

What It Means

You have to consider what it means to you, those nights spent under the stars with the rocks pressed against your back even with the foam sleeping mat laid out across the tent floor. Those days spent walking up the long mountain passes, the august sun beating down on your calves, the weight of your pack pressing down on your shoulders and hips, each step pushing your muscles, the dry dirt kicked up to your lungs, but aren't they still so alive, pressing hard against your ribs, breathing in that shallow mountain air.

Those evenings spent crouched over an MSR stove, a packet of freeze dried pasta and chicken prepped on a piece of plastic, ants crawling in the dirt next to you while the steady hum of insects increases in pitch, their eager calls filling the sky, and the sun sets, pale from your view on the forest floor, the pines and aspens and the contours of the hills around you pulling at the seams of the sky, keeping its secrets from you, hiding the wildest colors that you know exist. Those mornings when you wake up cold and tired, sweaty from your 20-degree bag but chilled by every hint and blow of cold air that comes in, air that's still holding onto the stillness of the night, not yet heavy with the circumstances of the day.

You have to consider what it means to you, the strain and the push, the challenge after another night of restless sleep, turning in your sleeping

bag, tossing your head against the inflatable pillow that hints at comfort.

After the thousandth foot of incline when you aren't sure that you can keep stepping forward, but the side of the mountain is still looking down at you, sternly questioning whether you'll continue up,

“Are you going to make it? Will you join me up here?”

And then when you're on the top, looking down on that mountain, what does it mean to you? The air is colder than anything up there, even on the sunniest of days, and it cuts by you, undeterred by trees or hills or buildings, alone up there until you came up. The whole world looks different, not as magnificent as you expect, especially in august when the snow has all melted and all you see are the shades of alpine dirt and rock, years of weathering bearing down on the land.

What does it mean to you when you know you have traveled all that way, only to continue down, tired and worn out, telling yourself that you will never do it again, and yet knowing in your core that you'll be back, knowing as the sun sets that night and you crawl into your tent, zipping it shut against the dark and the wild, your headlamp illuminating the small space, that you are already planning your next trail?



Figure 27: "Abstract on Love," Acrylic on Canvas, Spring 2022



Figure 28: "Paria Abstract," Acrylic on Canvas, Spring 2021



Figure 29: "Jasmine," Acrylic on Canvas, Fall 2020



Figure 30: "This Too Shall Pass," Acrylic on Canvas, Spring 2021

Solo

I find myself on another trail, a thin track in the woods, the dry, pale dirt covered in pine needles, and shadows of the footsteps of people who have walked it before. My legs carry me forward, moving over the occasional log or root or rock that crossed the path. The sun filters through the pine needles above me, fresh and green, and ever alive, the most dead in the heat of an August day, the dry air pulling all the vitality out of the needles. It takes the day most of my hike to warm up, my early alpine starts carrying me to tree line in the cold dark, the early morning air cutting into my chest and the dark of the night still pulling around me, enclosing, holding tight.

I leave early for my solo hikes, my alarm set for 4 am, the apartment silent as I flip on the stove top light, illuminating the world around me in a warm yellow glow. The coffee maker whirs and sputters while I pull on my wool leggings and long sleeve, my ankle socks and trail runners, and my backpack packed the night before. I leave quickly, breakfast wrapped in a paper towel and my hot coffee filling a mug.

The road is empty as I drive to the trail head, the occasional flash of head lights puncturing the sky and lighting up the dark road before me. Sometimes, when I first get out of the car and start walking, the dark scares me. I think it's the contrast between the overhead light glowing yellow and my bright headlamp against the natural depth of the dark around me. The

light strengthens the edges of the dark and makes the unknown more intimidating. I'm not scared of wild animals or wild people really but just the possibility that something, anything will jump out at me, a by-product of being the fourth child in a family of five, siblings always ready to scare me. My anxiety doesn't last long, because once I'm out on the trail, my mind focuses on the spotlight before me, single minded on the single track. I love the hour or two before the sun rises, when you're still in the forest and the space seems to pass by you quickly. I don't like to make it a habit to rush through things but god, sometimes those early miles are just the ones you want to get through, push past, the surprise of the morning sky, the view of how far you've come inviting you further.

Big Bend

My hands itch to write, to draw, to somehow capture the deep longing swimming inside of me. To somehow get back to the wilderness that I was in. It isn't a new longing; Every time I leave the wilderness, I feel it. The hard lines of reality creeping back in, the space in my mind closing back down around my thoughts, the peace that I first discovered in the Appalachians and continue to discover every time I step back out slowly whirling away.

I think about the way the dirt collected on my skin. You don't even notice at first, even days in, but it begins immediately, the first step from the car into the sandy lot overlooking the river. The dust rises up when you set your weight down onto the ground. It jumps up into the air filling the space around your leg, and even though you don't notice it then, it settles into your socks and shoes and skin. I wandered around stepping between the array of blue, yellow, red, green, black dry bags scattered around the group but it wasn't just the dry bags. All of our duffels were laying in the sandy dirt, the beige dust settling into the teal osprey, the yellow north face, the campus recreation pack, my own gray gossamer. We were each pulling all of our belongings out of our packs - that frank reckoning of what you own that only happens when you decide what you will have and what you won't have, what is actually necessary and what really isn't, what you can survive with for days or weeks. For us, it was only days we were concerned with.

I slipped away past our circle of evidence into the tall reeds and short grass that surrounded us, my shorts in my hand, already sweating from the ten minutes I'd spent in my leggings. Stumbling, trying not to scratch my face, I found a small opening and quickly peeled the gray fabric from my legs, trying to land my feet back on my trail runners and not the prickly living things that tickled my bare legs. I pulled the shorts on, pulled my shoes back on, and hurried back to our circle.

It's hours later before we actually let our boats into the river. We line up the snacks on a folding table,

"Two bars, two stingers, three fruit snacks, take a bag of trail mix, you'll want to grab some hot drinks!"

We start filling up the float bags, slowly at first, one pump in Parker's hands working, and then more quickly when Ryan plugs the second pump into the car. We fill them and then let some air out to get them into the bow of the canoe and then fill them again.

We pile our empty duffels into the back of the van, everyone grabs a paddle, an extra paddle, a PFD; we find boat partners and start dragging whatever we can fit to our canoes. Tie it in with NRS straps, painter's lines, anything to keep it down if we flip. We don't know yet, but we'll only have one flip between Rio Grande Village and the 33 miles to Heath Canyon, but we still tie our bags, boxes, and every loose item down with a determined seriousness.

The sun is steadily beating down on us as we shift from the land to the water. It shines down, strong even through the layer of clouds that teased at hiding the heat from us. I looked downriver, following the current's lazy movement with my eyes, seeing the reeds that hugged the shore and the mesquites peeking above them and even further, a glimpse of what was coming, the sturdy mountains rising high above the desert grasses.

On Friday, after we had emerged from the wilderness surrounding the river, we went for a hike through the park. I had argued for it.

“The students need to be distracted right now.”

We gathered together outside the camp bathrooms and small store, everything a beige color that both contrasted and seamlessly slid into the colors of the mountains surrounding us. We were all shaking inside from the events of the past 12 hours, our minds and muscles still in the rhythm we'd learned in our canoes but jolted into the reality that awaited us outside of the basin. Short phone calls left us each drained in a different way, filled with dread, yet still hoping, hoping that it was a dream, a prank, not as bad as the what-ifs that filled our brains.

As we left from the trailhead, we quickly and easily dropped into single file, some quietly drifting into their thoughts, and others breaking the silence in the middle, words lifting above us and taking flight against the canyon. We were in a blissful few hours, a gift I wouldn't know I needed until days later,

alone in the house, longing more than I ever have for anything, even for love, longing for the sun and the dirt and the ache of my muscles pushing, straining, joining the land.

On the way back, David, behind me, and I drifted in and out of conversation. I remember now discussing the pandemic with him. We still didn't know but spoke as though it was still far off, but letting some of our what-ifs slip in. I asked him, "Is it weird to you, to teach students who don't remember 9/11?" He said it was. "Wait, I guess you don't remember?" I told him I didn't. I talked about how there seemed to be such big, key events for each generation that shaped them, formed them for years to come and how growing up, I had always wondered if my generation would have one. "What about the school shootings?" He asked. They've come and gone, each one ripping into us but a reminder of the brokenness that seemed to surround us, like the walls of the basin we were in, I replied. Growing up, it seemed like there was always a tragedy that could be the one event that shaped us, formed us, but never did.

Now home, sitting on my bed, days into endless news and sadness, it seems the event that will shape us, form us, seems to be upon us.

Chapter Two

History of the Thesis

TSH: What I'd like to do is to break this up into at least two parts. Because I'm curious about the pre-history of this project before I got involved. And then I think really there's like three phases, because there's the dream, there's us together, but not really sure what we're doing, then the oh, that's what we're doing part. Tell me about the pre-me part first.

CGS: This project goes back extremely far actually. When I sat down to write a timeline, I started in January of 2018 - which is when I packed my bags and flew to Hawaii to be a missionary for six months.

TSH: And you've written about this a little bit in your journal entries.

CGS: Yeah, a little bit, but I've hardly touched into the meat of it. And I'm not sure why that feels like the start because my entire life has had big moments and big journeys that I've been on, such as living in South Africa or living in Hawaii the first time for three months in 2016. But something about 2018, maybe it was because it was a new year and because college was in the forefront of my mind, it felt like the start of a big journey and that six months that I spent with YWAM - which stands for Youth With A Mission, which is an international mission organization - throughout the entire 6 months, I was

pretending that I felt super confident and sure of what I was doing as a missionary. But I was actually having these major undercurrents of doubt and questioning, and the beginning of thoughts of ‘wait a second, who really am I? What am I doing? What really is this big wide world that I’m experiencing and what am I doing in it?’ But I just didn’t have the space or words to ask any of those questions at that point.

But that’s where I started this timeline. I spent three months in Hawaii and then I spent three months in Brazil. May (2018) is when I accepted my admittance to Baylor University, which was in itself a spastic whirlwind moment, coming out of the Amazon jungle and seeing an email from my mom saying, ‘hey you have to let one of these schools know.’ My other option was the University of Hawaii and she had somehow gotten them to give me an extension. But by the time I got to my emails I had about 24 hours to decide between Baylor and the University of Hawaii. It was going to be the same price, pretty much the exact same thing at that point, I was a psychology student and so I ended up deciding on Baylor.

And then, in June, I started thinking ‘I’m not going to go to school,’ and I was back in Hawaii for a few days thinking, ‘I’m going to stay here and be a missionary long term,’ but I could never say those words to my mom when I called her. And I said, ‘if I can’t do that then I guess I’m going to school.’ The whole lead up to college was kind of all over the place, and not really a firm ‘I

know where I'm going exactly, I'm confident, I'm ready.' I was filled with a lot of questions that entire year.

Then I was in Austin living at home for a few months. I don't really remember those months; I think I was prepping for college buying stuff. School started, and I came in as an art major, and the questions kept going and they kept getting bigger. I was at a Christian university, going to Chapel, going to church with people, but all those questions were still rumbling around inside of me. Then, more questions started like 'why am I an art major?' because I changed my major from psychology to art. I started wondering, 'where's my place in the world, and why am I making all this stuff and what's the point?' I wasn't really making much art for myself, I was making art for design classes and drawing classes and completing huge assignments, and I was doing really well but that's where my focus was. Until March of that year when very randomly, I went into the Student Life Center and saw on the TV pictures of Paria Canyon with the advertisement 'Spring Break Trips \$550' and my two closest friends and I didn't know what else we were doing for spring break, so we signed up. I went on this trip, and it felt like my whole life kind of shifted in that week in Utah and Arizona.

TSH: So, my question is okay - you said that you were on this big trip. You were on this big Christian mission trip, having all of these internal questions, not only about whether you wanted to stay on that path, or to go

on this other path which felt like Baylor. My question is – was YWAM leaving the path that you had been on in your childhood or was Baylor leaving that path?

CGS: Both. YWAM was the path that I set myself on in middle school or high school. My mom always put us in church, and in positions where we were surrounded by Christian communities. Mostly because we were homeschooled and she needed us to have friends, but a lot of the homeschool groups in Austin were on the crazier side and she wanted us to have some contrast to that and something more grounded. I don't know if it is actually more grounded, but it's grounded in something. Music has always been the focus for my mom. Music, math, and journal, which is actually just English, but we called it journal. Church always gave us opportunities to practice music because we could be in the bands. My dad, when they were together, could be in the church bands. At the same time, my mom always told us we were going to college. That wasn't really ever an option, it was just a fact that we would go to college.

At that point I'd had two siblings go to college at Baylor which almost made me not want to go there. It didn't really play too much of a factor into that because at the time, one of the siblings had moved on to Yale and one was there [Baylor], but I thought it would just be fun to have a brother who was at college with me. So yeah, it was kind of both.

TSH: How do you, how are you making these decisions? Like this decision to go to YWAM, the decision to leave, the decision to be a psychology major, and the decision to be an art major.

CGS: I don't know. Sometimes I look back and wonder what the heck I was doing.

TSH: So, it was kind of more intuitive.

CGS: I mean at the time when I applied to school to be a psychology major, the decision was very premeditated and very intentional and very focused on achieving big stuff and having a career. With psychology I thought I could be a counselor or therapist one day. I had full intentions and thoughts that I could do that. The first time I ever went to YWAM was so random because I got a letter in the mail in 2016 inviting me to be part of the United States of America Honors Choir. It's a random organization that sends letters to the top choir students throughout the country inviting them to come sing with them for a week in Hawaii and my mom told me I could go if I found a way to spend the rest of the summer there. Her thought was that it would make up for the cost of the tickets to Hawaii and make it more worthwhile. She threw out the name YWAM because my grandparents had applied for YWAM in the 60s. They never ended up going so they didn't actually know anything about the organization, but they knew that it was in

Hawaii because that's where they applied. So, I applied and spent a summer with them volunteering in Honolulu, Hawaii.

TSH: You've described it to me as a little bit culty.

CGS: YWAM itself is very culty. That first summer was a lot of yard work and cleaning and there was a lot of tension between the house of girls I was living with. But I heard about YWAM's discipleship schools, which is what they're called, from this first location. Because I was homeschooled in high school, I could do something that was in the middle of the school year. A new discipleship school started in January, and I guess at the time that was what my mind was focused on, Hawaii, church. I got very wrapped up in it, and some of the decisions I made got less and less sound or less researched. So, I went for it. It was an easy application process, they'll take anyone. I had to raise a bunch of money to do it. Like \$10,000 which I raised in donations from people at my church in Austin.

And then deciding to go to Baylor. Looking back on it now, I know it's because I had a boyfriend who was at a school in Texas. But, at the time, I blamed it on having a mom and brother who were in Texas, it was a good school, I was closer to family. There was one girl who I was traveling with in Brazil, whose boyfriend was from Texas, and she started describing fall to me and football games and started painting this beautiful picture of fall in Texas, wearing scarves at football games. I thought that sounded pretty good, which

was also probably just because I was hot because we'd been living in Brazil for two months. We were sweating, we had spent weeks, in the jungle sweating, so I was hot, and I thought, fall in Texas? That sounds really good right now.

TSH: And so, then you got here, you went through your first year and then Paria. Tell me about that.

CGS: It was my first backpacking trip. I don't know anything, I'm there as a participant, watching in amazement the student guides and the adult leaders, getting all this gear thrown at me, reading the packing list, going to Walmart to try and find a T-shirt that would fit their fabric requirements. I really have no idea what I'm doing but I'm with my two best friends and the whole group itself was really great. It was all girls, except for one of the student guides and the adult leader. The rest of us were all girls. We all got in a van at 5am Saturday morning outside of the Student Life Center and started driving and drove West and then kept driving West. I don't know how to describe the feeling I had because it wasn't really awe or anything. I mean there was a lot of awe for sure, especially when we got to Paria Canyon but the whole drive there, it was just like a wonderful unraveling. Like there was a spool in front of me, and we were just pulling ourselves closer and closer to something good. And I knew it was good, the whole time looking out the window in New Mexico, looking at the train passing, looking at the land

started to rise finally. It felt really good and then we got to the Canyon, and we camped one night at Lee's Ferry, before we started backpacking, and we got all our stuff ready and I'm just doing whatever they tell me, packing my bag the way they told me to and taking out the stuff I don't need, which was basically everything that I brought that I thought I would need.

Then we started walking and it was actually really, really difficult. I forgot how difficult it was until just this last week talking about it with my best friend who was on that trip with me. We were both talking about how great it was, and then as we started recounting memories, we started to remember it was really hard, it was really challenging. My legs hurt a lot, pretty much the entire time and my back hurt a lot, because I was carrying probably 40 pounds. I had all my own stuff, and we were carrying each other's food and our snacks, some group gear, tents, and water. We have to carry water because it was a desert canyon with minimal water sources. We're walking in a river, but the river is a silty gray color so we can't drink it. So, my legs hurt, my back hurts and I got sick towards the end of it, a head cold or something. I was taking ibuprofen and blowing my nose and I remember on the drive back, we stopped at a gas station, and I bought nasal spray because I needed relief.

There was one night when there were 50 mile per hour winds. We could barely sleep because our tent was shaking. We didn't know how fast

the wind was until we got out and one of the other groups told us how fast it was. It was also cold, really cold. There was one morning that I could not stop shivering and one of the leaders had to come up and hug me. So, it was really hard, really challenging.

TSH: You loved it.

CGS: I loved it and I think that there was something about how there were no questions out there. There was nothing. There was nothing to do but walk. And then take care of yourself, by making some food and water.

TSH: Were there answers?

CGS: No, because there were no questions. There didn't need to be any questions and those questions that I'd been asking all this time, they left the moment my foot hit the trail. I didn't have to think about them, which was such a relief and not something I really even noticed at the moment. That's something I've realized now, looking back at it three years later, and that's what I've found that I keep going back on trails for is that relief and that freedom of no questions, no answers, nothing to do, nothing to prove. I remember there were a few times, where I was like oh man, I really gotta make sure I can keep up with the group and my legs really hurt right now but I gotta keep going but it wasn't to prove anything, it was just because that's what we were doing, we were moving forward, and we were continuing on the trail. We weren't talking about God. He might have come up a few times,

but we weren't talking about it. And I wasn't really thinking about what I was studying or whether I needed to make art.

I was just existing, and I was existing with a group of people, and I guess it felt really good. The core of it was good, there was no bad there.

TSH: It sounds like so much of your life has been spent in groups. Even when you were homeschooling, you were taking part in a lot of church activities, you were taking part in college classes, but all the time, there was always this doubt, always this sort of silent apartness that you felt from what was going on around you. Once you got to Paria that was gone. So what does that have to do with this project?

CGS: Well, following that trip, I started painting. I started painting for myself. They just started coming out of me, these paintings that were about Paria and about that landscape.

When you're in that Canyon, there's one thing around you and it's red canyon walls. It's not like forests or mountains, it's not like Waco, Texas. There might be a few shrubs, there might be some trees, but everything is the same color with different shades. And you're just soaking it in, it got into me. It got in my head, in my heart, and my soul and then, when I got back it just started coming out in paintings.

Following the trip, it was a slow progression into my major change. I first just added a minor in Outdoor Leadership because it sounded cool. One

of the leaders on the trip, he majored in Outdoor Recreation, and he had done this mini-mester that we have every year. He had talked a little bit about it with me and I thought, maybe I should do that because I could get all these credits out of the way for the minor, and then I would only have a few classes and then I would have a minor and that would be good, because I always have been about success, and I thought a minor would help with that, even though it's in the outdoors.

So, in May, I went on this mini-mester which was three weeks in North Carolina where we backpacked, canoed, and rock climbed. It was like Paria was just like somebody put a wet napkin on my forehead and then the mini-mester was like I was baptized into, just fully dunked myself into the river bath and took hold. I changed my major after that.

I think that's when the initial seedling of what a thesis could be really started. I don't think I really thought about a thesis at all my freshman year, even though I knew it would come at some point. But with my major change, I started taking a lot of interest in what I was studying, and I started thinking about what a thesis could be on, what I could write about or what I could paint about even.

TSH: So, your whole first year was this year of massive change and growth, but also you didn't really know what direction you were growing. To use the seedling metaphor, you were planted, and it turned out to be the

right ground. But at first you didn't know that, and you actually had to go really far away to realize how you were supposed to be growing here.

CGS: People asked me a lot if I could go back, would I change where I went to school, which is such a hard question because there are other schools that have great outdoor recreation programs that are in great locations and if I had known, I would have gone to one of those, but I didn't know. I applied as a psychology major, and Hawaii doesn't have any of this stuff. I could have done some form of recreation there, but I couldn't have studied it.

And Hawaii's a liberal non-religious institution, who knows, maybe I would have clung to my faith and desperately tried to keep it going for all four years versus being at a religious institution, where it was all around me just like it had always been. Because it was all around me, it didn't have to be in me anymore. I could think about whether I actually wanted it or not. I broke up with my long-term high school boyfriend at the end of the semester too, so really that May in 2019, I let it all come down. I think that summer I stopped calling myself a Christian. It wasn't really as big of a part of my identity.

Then I started painting more Paria paintings. The painting is a big deal because I had stopped because I was worried about whether there was a purpose to my art and whether I was putting more stuff into the world that didn't need to be in the world. I was thinking about the environment and how

much I was growing to love it and I didn't want to add to harming it. And so, to paint just because I couldn't not paint was really good. It was coming out and it needed to come back out of me.

TSH: Kind of like Paria, you didn't have to think about it. So then, in the next year, that's when you really began to think more concretely, about like okay, I like this major I'm going to do something with it, that has to do with my thesis.

CGS: It's kind of funny to look back on my notes from that time because my thesis at that point was nowhere close to what it is right now. At that point in time too I was feeling, and I think a lot of people feel this way about the time right before COVID hit, which maybe is just our nostalgia, and I think a lot of people in their sophomore year of college feel a lot of energy and drive and gusto and I was feeling that. I came back to school, and I remember I would spend hours in the library on the computer searching for jobs on the Internet with the Federal Government and the Department of the Interior. Or I would look at these other organizations and I would spend hours looking at trails, long trails across the United States, just looking at them and looking at people's reports of them and reading packing lists and reading about different gear. I spent so much time thinking about all this and then that research morphed into questions about where these trails came from. Why are they here, how long have they been here? Then that morphed

into thinking about and considering the history of Indigenous tribes in America. I guess actually that didn't come first, what really came first was me noticing that there was no diversity in this new field that I had found myself in. There were no people of color within it, there were very limited females that I could look to. And I was increasingly noticing this problem, how we just had all these stories from the same type of person. I was thinking about this in terms of Baylor University. I was noticing that around me there weren't many people of color and there weren't many people that were different from me. I don't know if my mind was more focused on this because I did spend a lot of my formative years in a location [South Africa] where I was the minority and where there were a lot of different people, and so I was more attuned to noticing it. But my focus in that bout of research really became about Indigenous people and what their story of the land. Because I noticed I was just painting my own stories of the land. That's all they are you know, it's just my story of the places I've been.

Oh, and here's the other thing, in Paria Canyon there's petroglyphs. You wander by these rocks and all of a sudden, you're looking at pictures and paintings that people did thousands of years ago, and I was so fascinated by them. When I tried to Google them, there was next to nothing. Nobody's gone into Paria Canyon to figure out what these petroglyphs are telling us. We have a general idea of what tribe because there's a main tribe in the area,

but we don't know. I don't know if anyone else has asked. It didn't seem like anyone really cared. So that really got me wondering about who was traveling through this Canyon? I'm being told it's one of the top 10 deadliest canyons in the world and it's the longest slot Canyon in the world and it's just smack dab in the middle of the America. But who else was walking here? Why were they in here? What were they doing? That year, sophomore year, I was really interested in that and started thinking I could write a thesis about it, to try and tell the stories about who was on this land. I also enrolled in classes in Environmental Studies which I felt tied in.

I was also interested in the sediment. At one point I thought my thesis could be that I would create paintings using paint that I made from the rocks in Paria Canyon. I think what really killed that idea was COVID because I didn't think I was going to get to go back for a long time. Then I started thinking about Leave No Trace principles which are really important in outdoor recreation and thinking about whether taking rocks from this Canyon was really even ethical. I think that is where the whole painting idea came back in. I thought 'Oh, I could tell the story of the land by making paintings using the land.' I also thought could write about the geological history of the land and then I could write about the indigenous history of the land. That was the overarching idea for quite a while. And then COVID hit.

And all sorts of tumultuous stuff happened in all our lives that we weren't expecting.

Before COVID, I did a few more outdoor trips that are slowly coming into the thesis. My NOLS trip, where I went back country skiing for two weeks, in the winter of 2019/2020, which was a really difficult trip. It was really, really hard. Then I went into Big Bend, canoeing for a week right before COVID.

TSH: Was that the spring?

CGS: Spring break. We found out about COVID the Friday we were still in Big Bend. I went home for a few weeks, like everyone after that. I remember painting a few more times, while I was there, but it was hard for me, and then I came back to Waco. I painted a really big piece, my biggest piece. I started working a job. And we were all just bumbling our way through. I started a relationship and we kept rambling our way through.

TSH: And what were you thinking about the thesis at this time?

CGS: I don't know if I was that summer.

TSH: I mean you were pretty distracted by a global pandemic.

CGS: Distracted and I think I was just desperately making paintings during that time. We were meeting that fall, but even that felt like a big question mark. Because that's how every day was. We didn't really know; it was solid that we were going to be online.

But a lot of the events on campus and a lot of my outdoor trips were always up in the air about whether they would happen or not

TSH: I remember when you first asked me to be your advisor, I was like 'Do you really want to do this?' because I was really concerned about your motivation and whether you were doing it for external reasons or because you truly felt inspired.

CGS: I think that there was some outer motivation. I wanted the thesis, and I wanted the honors, in the same way that I wanted my two minors and my major and I wanted to be a 4.0 student and I've slowly released some of that. I still get excited thinking about all of those topics from sophomore year and think it would be cool to research someday, but where I was and even still where I am, there wasn't going to be enough internal motivation for that project. While it's super interesting and I do get excited about it, it's not what needed to come out of me at that moment.

TSH: It's something you'd like to read, but not write.

CGS: And really, I don't think I knew what I needed to write until last spring. Because last spring, the art really started to just pour out, like majorly.

TSH: That was about the same time that we first read, and we'll talk about this in later sessions, but that's when we first read Cronon. That's when we first started thinking about the question of de-coloniality. Because at first, we were asking what we were going to do. And so, I just started

throwing some readings out because you weren't convinced that there was anything academic in your idea. The funny thing that we haven't really mentioned is that you've been in a class with me pretty much every semester of your Baylor experience. So, I've been working with you this whole time and enjoyed it and always found you this totally fascinating colleague, who was sort of stubbornly unwilling to be fake but not always sure how to be real.

CGS: Freshman year when I was having all of these huge questions, I would come to your office hours. I would just sit and ask you not even the questions because I don't think I could even get them out.

Now I have a bunch of art on my walls. It's strange and I don't know what I'm going to do with it after this thesis and when I graduate but, I don't ask too many questions about it, those questions of 'Why did I even make that, what's the point?' Because each painting was coming out. In the same way, I think a lot of the stories that I've told in this thesis are stories that I needed to get out, to write about the mini-mester and Paria and Idaho and let it live on its own.

TSH: It's almost like you're locating the wilderness within and not taking it out of you, but expressing it in an object that you can look at that's almost a mirror. It helps you see more clearly what's going on.

I remember, at one point, you were not worried exactly but, I think this has always been part of your relationship with art, you don't want to be

wasteful and use materials that don't need to be used. Because you started out as an art major, you're aware that for some people, the value of a work of art is its perfection. Part of what you've had to let go or move away from or act against is that perfection.

CGS: In the same way, I don't think my art really comes close to the natural beauty of the places I've been because they're very different. The natural beauty is this living thing that we get to be part of. But those spaces exist out there, just as they are. I'm not sure how they got there, how they were created, but they're there and that's what they are, and we experience them as what they are. Often my art feels like it just comes out and then I have to let it just exist as it is.

TSH: What it does, your art is not asking questions but it's also not offering answers. And that thingness, I mean we could go into like art historical here, but the thingness of what you're doing here doesn't have to do with the typical tenets of evaluative art.

If you wanted an exact representation, you could be like Ansel Adams and just take a picture. But one of the reasons that you don't do that is because part of what Adams was doing was mastering and controlling its representation. And, in a way, I think that's exactly what you're trying not to do.

CGS: And there's a lot of feeling in my paintings. Especially the abstract ones that are all feeling, but even the landscapes. They might be based on moments in time at certain locations, but they're very much based on how I was feeling in certain locations at certain times and how I'm feeling while I'm painting them.

That's the story they're telling as much as the landscape. That's the landscape of myself.

TSH: You also create the art in this really intimate landscape of your home which is actually a really important place for you right? So, there's this wilderness, this outdoor area that you love to go to but there's also this very sealed off, safe, controlled area that you like to go back to, to reflect on those experiences. And I mean, I wouldn't necessarily call the thesis controlled.

CGS: I think it's somewhere in between. It's a liminal space, a contact zone between my wilderness and the wilderness out there.

TSH: And it's a contact zone that you construct in order to observe it.

CGS: and for it to be observed.

TSH: Right because this isn't just about you.

CGS: It really isn't, and I think that's the reason we keep reading the stuff we're reading and why we're going to go talk about all of it is because both of us can tell this can't just be a self-reflective piece. We both see the necessity for this to be a discussion. Going back to the fall of 2019 when I was

asking questions about why there isn't more diversity and why aren't there different stories out there, why there aren't more stories in general, why aren't we sharing our experiences. I think we are hopeful that this thesis can provide that experience of a story.

TSH: A re-creation.

CGS: A re-creation that can help facilitate that and help people recognize it within themselves.

Auto-Ethnography

TSH: So we discussed the genesis of this project in this incubation period. Honestly, I think this project has been part of who you are for a really long time. Probably before college, but definitely once you got here and more and more so after you went to Paria. I think this project has been calling out for you to let it out, so we're going to talk a little bit about auto-ethnography because to both of us, that's kind of the natural next step. Once we figured out what we were trying to do, we had to figure out how to do it and also kind of how to make sure it was okay for us to do. So, what is auto ethnography anyway?

CGS: I had no idea what auto ethnography was until you brought it up in the fall of 2020. From what we read, it is this way of putting the researcher in their research and kind of creating this relationship between the writer and what they're writing about. Do you have more to add to that?

TSH: It's creating a relationship between the writer and their subject, but I would say that it's also allowing that relationship to be part of what you're writing about.

CGS: That first semester, I kept having this recurring doubt that this project was actually something that could legitimately take place. I had a lot of good ideas for things I could research but I didn't have that inner motivation and passion to do them. But I kept going back to one of them

because they felt more legitimate. I was painting all these paintings and then, in conjunction with that I started writing more creative pieces.

There's just so much emotion in all of my paintings and a lot of emotion about the land and about the landscape and about these experiences I have had that I thought couldn't be told in an academic setting. I thought it was too emotional or too spiritual, too woo-woo. Because I have this deep connection that I can't really explain to this landscape and to a lot of the landscapes I've traveled in now. I thought it was too woo-woo, and I kept going back to that. You initially brought up this idea of auto-ethnography to help affirm the formation of this project in being legitimate. I don't even know if we thought that auto ethnography would be included, but you were trying to show me the world of academic literature out there that's totally different.

I was thinking earlier about my experience at Baylor and how we met, which was within the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core. I really enjoyed the courses that I took within this program, and I think it was a valuable part of my experience, but I also have to say that while I was in it, there was a certain style and format of writing that I had to do. Once I figured it out, if I did it, I knew I could do well. If I wrote the way that they asked me to write and research, then it would be fine, I could make it through these very

difficult classes. I was just very unsure at the beginning of this thesis if this very creative thing I wanted to do and create could be something.

TSH: It's not just creative, it's also personal, deeply, deeply personal. This thesis isn't just going to have your name on it, this thesis is about you. When we were learning together in the rhetoric sequence, the writing is somewhat impersonal. The essays are never about your feelings, they're more about a high-level rhetorical analysis of this extremely complicated reading.

CGS: And frequently, even if we could write about our opinions, we couldn't tell anyone it was our opinion as we wrote.

TSH: I remember this conversation really clearly. You were saying you weren't sure that this is academic. My response was basically that there's a way to turn anything academic. I mentioned this essay where Derrida writes about being naked in front of his cat and that's this really famous post-structuralist essay but that's literally what it's about. That's where it starts from so anything can be academic, but we had to figure out how we could create a sense of academic legitimacy, because we really do want that, while still preserving the incredibly personal aspect of this project.

I think there was also some legitimacy in terms of identity. I remember you saying at one point, 'as a white person I'm not sure I can write about this stuff.' And my response was that that is coloniality trying to keep you from

doing the work. Part of what an auto-ethnography is is this way of connecting who you are, how you feel, and the interiority of your identity with these more abstract concepts and theories by more or less using yourself and your own experience as an example of the theory.

CGS: We've talked about how the history of outdoor recreation is very masculine and I remember in one conversation we were talking about conquering messages, masculine messages and then we started talking about how we need this feminine side as well. But really how we can't just swing to that because that would create this duality that would still hold us in these colonial structures. I think that conversation and the conversations about auto-ethnography really shaped how I internally viewed this thesis. I really started thinking about how valuable me telling my personal authentic experiences is. We can't change the overall overarching narrative of outdoor recreation instantly and we don't want to change it from an over masculine one to an over feminine one. But we really want this infinite number of experiences to be held in outdoor recreation. We want any experience to be valuable and valid. And so, telling my experience and sharing it in this deeply personal way could be valuable and could be this really wonderful thing. It's in the title, this re-creation of outdoor recreation. Me adding just my own small experience to the narrative can in some way help shape and help open other people's experiences.

TSH: Because showing the legitimacy of your experience enables us to think about the legitimacy of all experiences. On the one hand, you're just one person and this is just one project, but on the other hand, if we accept the idea that we are all interconnected but not in a hierarchical manner, then suddenly auto-ethnography becomes a tool for talking about everything.

When you're talking about your own experience, if you're critical enough about it, you can figure out how it connects to all of these other things, including ideologies of gender, of race and ethnicity. So, when you recreate it's kind of this almost biblical thing where you're re-creating creation by looking at it without hierarchies. Instead of starting from the assumption of dislocation and disunity and isolation, you begin from the assumption that what I have to say is important because it will be important to other people because we are important to each other.

CGS: And I think a really big part of it for me is that recognizing. I can't recognize that another person's story is valuable and important if I can't recognize that my own is. If I'm not acknowledging that the story that I have been living and will continue to live is a deeply valuable and influential thing, then how can I believe that my neighbor or someone on my trip also has a deeply influential and valuable story? Recognizing that was taking ownership of it and ownership of the art I was creating and the stories I was writing and making them public. I've taken ownership and it makes it easier to share

them. That was another part that the auto-ethnography touched on. We've had a lot of conversations about the public nature of my art, especially in the technology that I spend a lot of my time on. We've had conversations about social media and how I share or don't share my art, and about how people at Baylor the entire time I've been here have had no idea that I paint. This is a huge part of my identity. But I think there was a long time spent in incubation. In conjunction with this thesis moving along, I was also incubating and keeping it private and making these creations that I wasn't telling the world about or showing in any way.

TSH: It's partly a feeling that what you're doing could seem to other people to lack legitimacy. Because, your art, it doesn't fit within the traditional art historical criteria for good or bad art. That's not even an applicable question. That's not the point. We're also reading some high theoretical stuff and then we're going to apply it to outdoor recreation. For a lot of people that also lacks legitimacy. You've told me before that people doubt you because you're an outdoor recreation person with a minor in studio art, none of those are real.

CGS: Even some of my closest friends who studied pre-med or hard sciences would sometimes see what I was reading about -which sometimes I spend an entire semester reading about play or leisure - and they would ask, what is the point of that, if people are dying? It would hit really close to

somewhere inside of me and hurt because this is what I'm spending all my time doing. I started asking, what is the point of healing all of those people with your medicine if they don't have a good, enjoyable, leisure-filled life? If you're just healing them so they can keep working and grinding to whatever millstone there is of their life? That's terrible.

TSH: Because it's colonial.

CGS: There's a huge debate which we're not going to get into in this thesis of whether people need food more or money or some sort of help. But if I can't provide them food and money within my own resources, but if I can find a way to bring enjoyment and play into somebody's life, then I've still done a valuable thing.

TSH: There are these classical sociologists like Weber or Durkheim who would say that you can give people food all you want, but if they have no reason to eat it, then they won't. I think it would be easy for somebody to think of leisure and play like you know, whatever, an Xbox but that's not what you're talking about. Those are forms of distraction from the meaninglessness of capitalism, but you're not talking about giving people a better toy. You're talking about changing the way they see life, such that it becomes truly meaningful.

I want to talk a little more about both your whiteness and your femininity because I feel like those were things that we gradually realized

were really major parts of this. This is a project that is about de-colonizing outdoor recreation, so how is outdoor recreation colonized? You've talked a little bit about this kind of domination mindset but say a little more about that.

CGS: Well, I think we talked about it last time. The lack of diversity that I saw which was really part of the genesis of this project. I was noticing that there was this huge lack of representation of different people, different experiences, different cultures within outdoor recreation. It's super noticeable just visually. I think the first way I noticed it is in advertisements, in textbooks, in movies that are being made about outdoor recreation, in the athletes that are sponsored by different outdoor brands, it's hugely dominated by white individuals.

TSH: And mostly men right.

CGS: Yeah, mostly men. There's such a long history of these stories of white men going into wilderness settings and dominating the landscapes around them, from the frontier domination of the American West to even before that, coming from Europe and dominating the east coast. There has continually been this pervasive idea of conquering the world around us that followed when outdoor recreation actually became a thing. Outdoor Recreation, as we know it today, first began with the start of Outward Bound, which is one of the oldest organizations in outdoor recreation. It was

originally founded for boys who lived in cities, who were not getting the rugged experiences of war (following the World Wars). Outward Bound teaches these principles or pillars, which include, “physical fitness, craftsmanship, self-reliance, and compassion¹.” It’s hard because I think that Outward Bound is a really great organization and has done great things for outdoor education. But their purpose was to teach boys how to survive in really rugged, rough, terrible conditions. That was the view of the outdoors that we had, that it was something that you had to overcome and conquer.

TSH: That would make you powerful.

CGS: Yeah, spending time outside will make you more powerful, better, more able to survive in anything.

TSH: More masculine. Was Teddy Roosevelt involved?

CGS: He wasn’t involved in Outward Bound, as far as I know, but he was the person who really pushed for our national parks and the preservation of natural spaces across the country. But this idea of wilderness that started in Britain and then came over, it still holds true. There are so many organizations out there that do these wilderness programs that draw people who feel like they don't have survival skills and have been weakened by modern life. I think there is definitely some value to that because there is

¹Educational Approach.” *Outward Bound Methodology and Educational Approach* | North Carolina Outward Bound, <https://www.ncobs.org/about/educational-approach/>.

a complacency and apathy that arises in modern life. I think a lot of people who haven't been through very difficult life circumstances do really benefit from going outside and putting themselves through difficult outdoor experiences. But at the same time there's many people out there who have been through very traumatic events in their life and going outside to conquer it doesn't feel great. It just feels like 'Why am I doing this?' Like, I just want to be comfortable because I've already been uncomfortable in my life. But it's still a pervasive idea, and if we look at mountaineering around the world it's frequently just people, men specifically and white men, specifically, who are set on this intense conquering of the world around them.

It is very difficult for people looking from the outside in and not seeing any representation. That was something especially impactful for me on that mini-mester in North Carolina. I had representation, and I think it's one of the reasons that I was able to see that I could change my major and I could do this. There was a woman, a white woman who looked very similar to me, who was leading it. She was fully in charge of the trip. She had a male coworker, but he was looking to her for all final decisions, and so, for three weeks, I was watching a woman lead. In the year after that I really started thinking about how that was such a foundational experience for me, to see somebody who looks like me doing something that I want to do and when I look around there's so few options. Then I really started looking around, and

if I was a person of color, I'd have so few options, even less than I have right now, and if I was a woman of color, I don't think I would have even one. Looking around, maybe I could find one or two, but it's so hard to find and I would really have to go searching for them.

With the original formation of this project, I was thinking about writing about indigenous people groups, and then we talked about the Black Lives Matter movement. But I think from the get-go I knew I couldn't tackle that. But there were a lot of things happening in the world around us that were really contributing to this, this is such a big issue. Not just for recreation, but the whole world is noticing this. Especially at Baylor University, which is a largely White university and historically filled with men.

But as you said, I was really worried about writing about any of this. I did not feel like I could write about it, especially as the Black Lives Matter movement gained prominence, in the summer of 2020, right before we really started meeting a lot. I am just a white woman who has so much privilege. I'm at a university, I have the opportunity to get a four-year degree, I have the opportunity to be researching all of this. I'm not a rich individual, but I don't have many financial worries in my life. I have contacts and opportunities; I've had jobs in the field that I want to work in. I grew up with the predominant

religion in this country. I'm able bodied, like what privilege to just be able to go out on a trail.

TSH: I think that's part of what is troubling about the history of outdoor recreation and the typical representation of it. Because, even when people are going out to eat bugs and live on nothing for weeks, they're doing that because they're so privileged that they're actually looking for a challenge. So, to some degree, I think you were really cautious about playing into that. Both you and I do have certain forms of privilege that most of the world does not have. We didn't want this thesis to become your typical, let's go conquer K2.

CGS: Or to become preachy in any way or become savioristic.

But then, at the same time, you said that shying away from the conversation and feeling like you cannot take part in it is colonialism taking hold and holding you fast. It's creating that push for apathy and that sense of removal from the system that is holding us. I remember realizing that my story could be a piece. It's not a whole story and it never will be, and it shouldn't be, but my story is a piece and me telling my story or taking part in this conversation, even with my privilege, is me inviting myself into empathy and away from apathy. It's inviting myself to look hard at the structures that have shaped the field that I love and try to actively dismantle them.

TSH: I think we are trying to dismantle them because those are the same forms of privilege that have shaped us. That's part of why it's not just okay, but necessary that there be this auto-ethnographic component. Without it we lose the opportunity to talk about the ways the privilege that we see outside is also inside us.

CGS: One of the pieces that we read that was central to the auto-ethnography discussion was the one titled "I Don't Want to be Seen²," the performance art piece, which is by a young artist who's a woman, living in Canada. It's been a long time since we read it, but she performed some more provocative art in which her womanhood was very central.

TSH: So, we're thinking of these performances where she's nude and the performances are not supposed to be sexual. But one of the things that she writes about in that piece is that everybody sexualized it.

CGS: What happened with a man after one of them was that he basically sexually assaulted her.

I don't want to say that I stopped thinking about my whiteness because I did not, in any way, but I think, as I moved more towards the art and creative

²Lauren Fournier, 'I (Don't) Want to Be Seen: A Performative Auto-Ethnography of the Young Feminist Artist in Public,' (TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies) vol. 40, 2019, pp. 112-132

writing aspect, more towards talking about my personal experiences in the outdoors, the idea of my gender really became the biggest point of tension. Her stories made me feel like I could tell my stories about gender. I think that feeling of permission helped shape some of my stories. The concepts of who I am as a woman, and what my womanhood means underpin the majority of my paintings and literally are under many of my paintings in the under paintings and in the figures that I draw and the shapes that take form on my canvases. Me being a woman has also altered how I interact with myself and others in the outdoors.

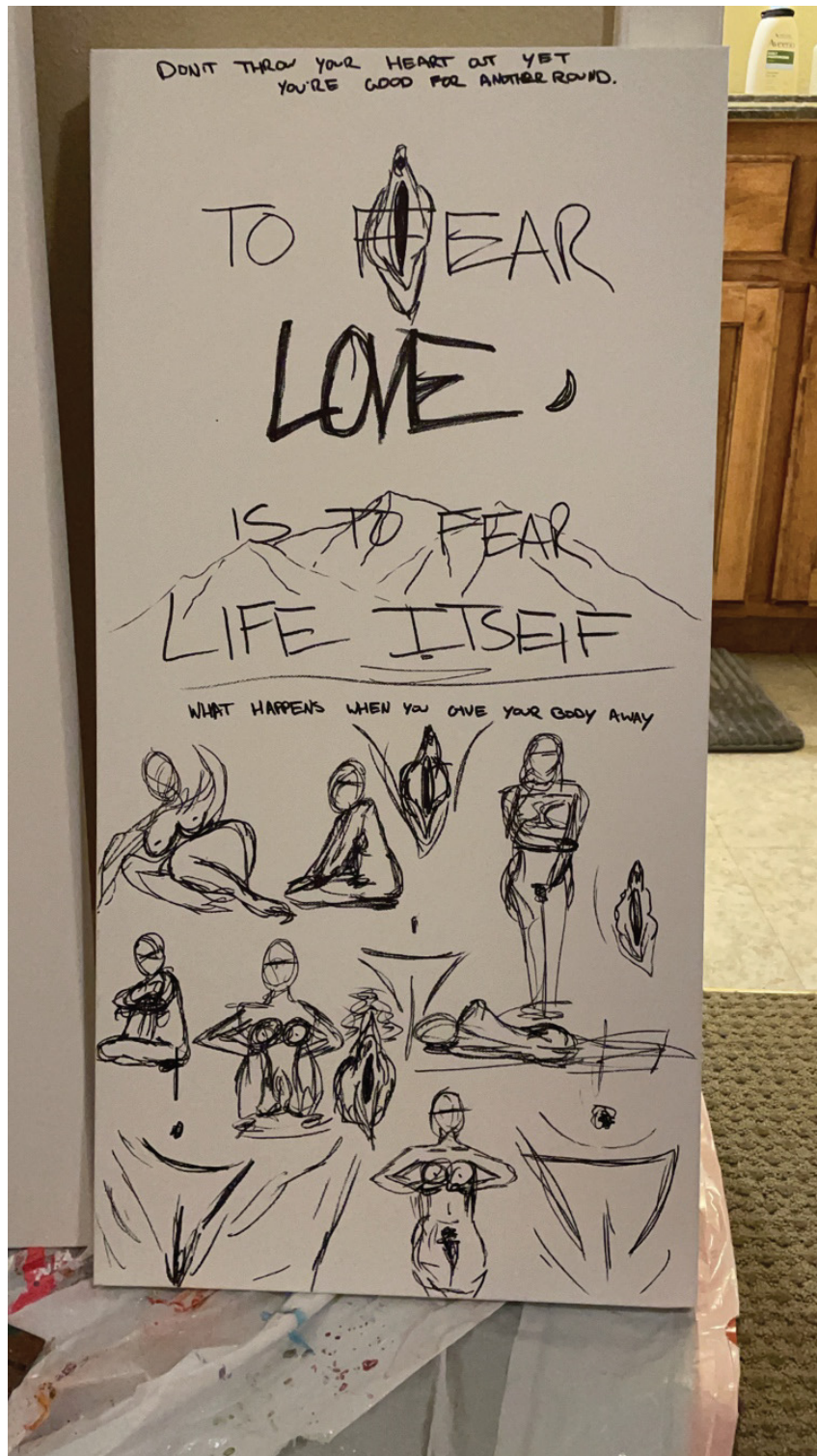


Figure 31: Underpainting, Sketches of A Woman, Sharpie on Canvas, Spring 2022

TSH: It's been such a big part of your life. We've talked a little bit about how part of your upbringing was receiving really strong messages about how God has specific expectations for you, because you are a female human being. Some of them were quite restrictive like the idea that you need to look a certain way, you need to act a certain way at all times because there's this divine being who's checking to see whether you're sitting with your knees together.

CGS: And that a middle school girl isn't being too enticing to men in the congregation. That only women in my church growing up could work in childcare, because you were the safer, maternal individual, compared to the men. Or the idea that I had to protect parts of myself and my experiences so that I would be valuable and worth anything to a future spouse. And that my worth is going to eventually come from having a kid. That the potential of life-giving is almost my greatest value as a woman.

TSH: So basically, become a walking uterus. Act right so that somebody will eventually see fit to give you your ability to act out your purpose.

CGS: It's a really crazy idea for a 12-year-old to have and then a 15-year-old who's falling in love for the first time, or an 18-year-old who's going to college and trying to figure out who they are.

TSH: or honestly, a woman who's going on an outdoor recreation trip.

CGS: It's interesting because on that first Paria trip, it was an all-girl group, minus the two male leaders. I noticed a few things about the female leader. She didn't drive, she may have driven once in the whole 20-hour car ride, which I don't know, maybe it was her choice, maybe not. I noticed that frequently on the hike, she would hang out with all of us, while the two male leaders looked at the map, and I remember noticing it on the trip. I thought it was interesting and wondered why it was happening, was it because she's a girl? But at the same time, there was again that thing of there being no questions out there. There weren't any of these hierarchical expectations. I really didn't feel like my identity as a woman was in question, because we were all girls and we were all doing the same hike and the male leaders were sometimes in front, but sometimes they were in the back. I didn't necessarily notice them carrying more or being stronger and it wasn't really talked about.

Even on the mini-mester, I slept under a tarp with men on that Baylor trip, but there was never a question of separation... which I think was part of why these experiences were so transformational. For once, my identity as a woman wasn't a big question mark and it wasn't a problem, whereas in the past it's always been a problem. I really love that I'm a woman, you know. I love those parts of myself, even though I have frequently fought with that biological part of me.

It wasn't really until later when I started taking on some leadership roles in my outdoor recreation jobs, where I started getting some pushback for being a girl and some comments started coming up. Some of my friends and coworkers who were men would question my decisions, because I was a girl, or would make sexist comments about me or about my friends while we were climbing. My reaction was always surprise and calling them out because you can't make that comment about a woman climbing. That's so inappropriate and you wouldn't do that to your male friends.

TSH: Because it's objectifying.

CGS: I think that's why I keep going on these trips because there's this release of those hierarchal expectations that happens, naturally, but also that we have to push for. I think the leaders that I've had on trips have helped create that atmosphere.

TSH: And that's what you're trying to do both in your studies, but also in this thesis.

That's why the Canadian woman's auto-ethnography - to me that's why it was so interesting and meaningful because in some ways she's just describing, sadly, experiences that I would guess most women have had. Some creeper coming up to you at the coffee shop and interrupting you while you're working and sexually harassing you because he thinks he can. She's an actress, she's an artist, she's involved in doing this performance and

she's being objectified. Even in the newspaper reviews of the performance, she is objectified. On the one hand, so what? That happens to everybody, but on the other hand, that's precisely the so what - that it happens so frequently and so commonly that it's not just a personal thing, it's a pattern.

That takes me back to this idea of underpainting. It's not something that everybody can see but it's there. If you know how to look, you're more likely to see it then if you don't. I think in some ways, this is the under painting, for your paintings. Just in terms of the way that this is put together.

One of the reasons that you wanted to put the paintings and the journals first is because they confront people with a re-created self that they have to take on its own terms. Now we're engaged in explaining what those terms are.

I'm thinking about some of the things we've read in terms of the concept of contact zones. In some ways it feels like you are creating an opportunity for your own self to be in contact with it. What I love about this project is that I really do think you're being very careful to stay in your own lane. But at the same time, you're recognizing that we're all on the same road.

Can you talk a little bit about the concept of the contact zone?

CGS: The contact zone ³is the idea of social spaces where different cultures come in contact with one another in a context where they have to really grasp and grapple with each other.

TSH: Because there are these asymmetrical relations of power. Pratt brings this up in talking about new world colonialism. Basically, saying that South and Central America became a contact zone where Spanish colonizers and Indigenous people had to clash and grapple with each other. In this context, where there's one person with horses and armor, lots of diseases and guns and then there's this other group of people who doesn't have any of that.

How does that apply to you as an identity? Is it your whiteness and your femininity coming into clashing and grappling contact?

CGS: I think that's one aspect of it. There's multiple, though. I would argue that the more structured and academic side of myself was grappling with that very creative side from childhood, the little artsy woo-woo hippie girl. I would also argue that my upbringing of religion and that identity I had, as a Christian mission-oriented individual, versus now as an extremely unsure questioning, spiritual individual.

³Mary Louise Pratt, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, (Profession, Modern Language Association, 1991) pp. 33-40

My identity of being a woman is a huge one because that's one that frequently plays out in the world. Operating in a world where, because of my identity as a woman, I'm daily encountered with push back and subtle small aggression.

TSH: Just the fact that you're probably scared to go for a walk by yourself outside after dark. Thinking about being an outdoor recreation person but feeling like you need protection to go outdoors if it's dark.

CGS: Or the fact that all of my bosses are male. All my bosses have been male in the past three years of work in outdoor recreation that I've done. I really respect the supervisors I've had, and I've loved the time I've spent in most of my jobs and with the people I've worked with, but I don't think there's ever been a time where I've been 100% comfortable going into a meeting with one of my male coworkers or bosses by myself.

TSH: Because then you're in a contact zone and you don't know what's going to happen. I remember one of the conversations we had early on in your time here, we talked about the ever-present danger of harassment, even by male professors. Frankly, even though I've spent so much time around the academy, and I know intellectually that it's true, to hear you say this is something that female undergraduates talk about, this is a discourse.

We're talking about all these male bosses you've had, and here I am your male thesis advisor. I think one of the things that I found so valuable

about this project is having the opportunity to also experience myself as a contact zone and to experience this process. Because you're a student, I'm a professor. You're a female person, I'm a male person, there are all of these opportunities for privilege to be toxic. But I think one of the things that we have been pretty successful at is really sort of centering our unwillingness to have that become the case.

CGS: And for coloniality to keep us in the structures of that and keep our dialogue within that. Even reading that piece by the Canadian artist was challenging at first, to start sharing my under paintings and to discuss these aspects of my experiences a woman was a challenge at first, because this is a contact zone where we have to grapple for a moment. I think it's provided us that context from which a lot of vulnerability, empathy, authenticity emerged. All these things I think are really central to what we're looking for in outdoor recreation going forward.

TSH: I'm thinking about what we were talking about earlier about how the roots of outdoor recreation are white privileged men, usually quite rich, looking for opportunities to challenge themselves. What we've basically done is we've said we're looking for opportunities to challenge ourselves that don't then return us to where we came from. That where we actually end up after is in a new place. Not literally, I'm still in my office, you're in your apartment.

One of the weird things to me about the traditional norms of recreation is how say you go climb Everest, but then you go back to your normal life. Why did you do that? Because the idea is to go out into the wilderness, and take some sort of inner value, put it in yourself and then go back to civilization. But that's not at all what your experience has been I don't think.

CGS: You've asked me throughout the years, a few times, you've asked me similar questions like, why are you going backpacking and why Paria versus just Cameron Park? I frequently struggle to come up with an answer, but the more and more that we've talked about it, I think the answer is emerging. This experience of having this space where these really confining structures of my life are not so apparent and where my existence is simply enough.

I think that still is different than the pervasive idea that you're talking about. I have no interest in hiking Everest, but I have friends who do, but I like to hike 14-ers a lot. Just a few months ago, I was dating a boy and I kept asking him if he wanted to do a 14-er with me and he had no interest. He asked me, 'Why would you do that? You're not actually hiking 14,000 feet, you're only really hiking like 3000,' because usually they start at 10 or 11,000 feet. I didn't have an answer because I don't really know, but I really want to.

TSH: Posing that question makes it seem like the criteria for value is how hard it is.

CGS: Yeah, and 14-ers are difficult. I find all of them difficult, even just those 3000 feet. But I love it, I love to challenge myself in that way. I love long hikes. I have a weird enjoyment of carrying 40 pounds on my back. I'm not going to pretend that the physical conquering aspect of outdoor recreation doesn't have a hold on me. I think it's okay. There is something about these physical challenges that is healthy. But at the root of it, for me, it still comes back to that simple existence. Just this experience of the world and of myself.

TSH: I'm thinking about this experience of yourself that you're talking about, and I think it's the experience of yourself that we've been looking for this whole time. We've done a lot of hard work, we've had a lot of long, in-depth conversations, some very challenging stuff. It's a lot like carrying 40 pounds on your back. But I'm not sure that it is about conquering something outside of you. I think it's about something inside of you becoming unconquered. When you do a 14-er, you're demonstrating to yourself that you can and that you actually like the challenge. But that doesn't necessarily have to translate into you mastering something or becoming the dominating settler at the top of some mountain. It's about you becoming less conquered by something.

CGS: At the challenge course here, and in a lot of areas of facilitation, we have this activity we do. Normally we do this more with the people who

are going to facilitate groups. You can do it with hula hoops or ropes, but to set it up, you make a few different circles on the ground. You create one huge circle and then one other circle inside and then you divide the inner circle into four parts. One part is physical, one part is mental, one part is social, and one part is spiritual and then you ask everybody to stand in the circle.

That inner circle is where you're super comfortable, you're confident, you feel great, it's like when you've aced a test and you walk out knowing I knew everything on it, or you go for a two-mile run and it's easy or whatever would be easy for you in that physical sense. Then the outer circle, on the other side of it is where you are not comfortable and that's what we refer to as people's breaking point. We'll ask a bunch of different questions, like running a marathon, where is that for you on scale of super comfortable versus past your breaking point and everyone goes and stands where it is for them. We ask a bunch of questions and it's kind of an icebreaker activity, because then you can see where different people are, and you can laugh about different things. But really what it comes down to is this idea that where we want to get people in experiences outdoors and in challenge courses is between the outer circle and the inner circle. That spot in the middle of the two is exactly where we people to be because it pushes them past that comfort zone, so that in the future when they look back on that experience they could say,

well, if I did that and it was really hard, just like this is really hard, then that means I can do this. But without getting them beyond that point of breaking because when we get past there then we don't actually learn anything.

I think about my trip back country skiing as an example. I spent an entire day in a snow shelter literally made out of snow eating mint m&ms, counting down the hours till I was going to be back in civilization. I was right on the edge of my comfort zone, about to hit my breaking point but, in the year since, there were many times where I would look back on that experience, and I was like okay well you know what, I did get through that. I had 94 hours left and I survived all 94 hours. I was counting them down, and I was still eating my mint m&ms, but I did survive it.

This is what outdoor organizations are trying to do. They're trying to get these people out of city life or out of their modern comforts and push them. But I think if we're not emphasizing the human experience and this equal need to just exist and be authentic people having experiences and creating stories, then that conquering really takes hold. We lose that aspect of what is happening in the inner wilderness.

TSH: If we're not willing to take on the possibility of change.

CGS: If we don't take on that change, it isn't re-creation that we're talking about, it is just recreation.

TSH: If you're not willing to recognize that the wilderness outside is also connected to the wilderness within you then you remain within a colonial mindset and you allow yourself to tell lies about who you are and what your function is in the world. When you stay within that dominating mindset, you bring it back home with you, and then you try to dominate the people in your life. Somebody who brings that dominating mindset back home with them is the kind of person who's going to objectify women who are on the rock wall climbing. That's why this is all interconnected and that's why I think it's always been appropriate for us to approach this through the lens of your own experience, because how else would we see it at all?

Cronon

TSH: We're going to be talking about William Cronon, the reading that we did that's called "The Trouble With Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature"⁴ and it comes from his 1995 book "Uncommon Ground Rethinking the Human Place In Nature." One of the things I always think about when I reread this piece, and when I think about our conversations, is the way you talk about going outside. I notice that that's kind of your phrase. Tell me more about that.

CGS: I think so many of our conversations have been this tug of war between us. I remember when I first read this I felt really called out, a little like sandpaper against my brain asking, 'how do I view wildernesses?' I recognized that I actually have a lot of feelings about wilderness that are tied to all these long historic traditional ideology about wilderness. You have continually asked me, 'well, what about Waco? What about Cameron Park, what about the tree outside, what about the birds?' It is interesting to hear you say that I always bring up going outside and going out because these places do feel wild.

⁴Cronon, William. *The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*. Norton, 1995.

It's about the action of embarking and putting on my trail runners and stepping onto a trail. When I go for a trail run in Cameron Park, it is very similar to many of the other places that I've recreated outside. At the same time, I've been asked multiple times in the past couple months by other students, what my favorite National Park is or which national parks I go to the most. But I don't really go to National Parks. I've been to four or five, I think, really not many compared to some avid outdoor enthusiasts. But I don't love National Parks because I think they feel controlled. I imagine a boundary around them, and I don't like the roads inside of them. A lot of the places I recreate are off roads, found by going down dirt roads and found because I've hiked to them. When we first read Cronon, there was a constant question afterwards of whether I valued one place over another, or if I valued something because of its remoteness from humans. It's been a very almost unenjoyable process of coming to terms with my own bias and prejudice against certain landscapes that are out there.

TSH: Because it's de-colonizing. I'm thinking about what you said about how I've always kind of pushed you towards a different view of the outside and I'm asking myself why that might be. I think part of the reason that this phrase going outside really sticks to my mind is because, when I was an early childhood educator, that's what we called it. There's no such thing as recess when you're an infant. You just go outside. One of the things that I

learned from really small children is precisely how to see the wilderness in really unexpected places. When you hang out with a kid outside, you begin to see it through their eyes. They don't have any of the traditional ideologies that you were referring to yet. To them, that bug crawling across the concrete is wilderness. The bark of a tree is. Their scale is so small. Everything is so big to a little kid that I think I took some of that on, and it has surprisingly, become part of this project. In some ways I think that's what we're trying to do, and maybe that's what the colonial thinking is. It's just losing some of the socialization that divorces you from what's actually happening.

CGS: I had one of those moments over the summer. I remember there was one day when I was with a group of campers, and we were supposed to be mountain biking. But it was a Friday afternoon, and they were all exhausted from a week of mountain biking and didn't really want to anymore, so I let us park our bikes at the picnic table in the park. There's a small, wooded area right next to that picnic table and right next to the bike park. About two thirds of the kids slowly ended up in this little wooded area. I was watching from the picnic table, and I just watched their world, that small little area, become huge. It became their entire world. One of the kids ran up and said, 'I'm having so much fun! We're playing zombies vs knights and we're fighting each other,' and then he just immediately ran back off and re-

immersed himself so fully and wholeheartedly. I was watching in amazement, remembering I used to do that when I was a kid. There's something about that imagination and play, beyond just being outside in nature. Part of why some of the landscapes I love so much are the ones I love is because in those landscapes I'm able to get back to that fully immersive place. It's such a shame that it requires such a long journey and such a remote space.

TSH: But at the same time, don't you recreate that space whenever you make the paintings? I think that's your little wooded area and it's just right there in the middle of your normal life. But that is where you can go to play.

CGS: It's that same state of just becoming fully immersed. When I go out there, the questions and the answers stop and in the same way, when I'm painting, it's this fully immersive process that captures me and carries me for that amount of time.

TSH: This really reminds me of the concept of the wilderness within. One of the things about being a little kid, one of the things I think about decolonizing yourself, is that you realize that you don't know what's going on inside you all the time. I remember very clearly as a little kid wondering, 'why am I feeling this way, what in the world is happening here?'

As you become an adult, to some degree, you get insight, but to some degree, you just learn stories to tell yourself about those things. Part of what

we're doing in this project is trying to figure out a different way of engaging with who we are and where we are that is more childlike.

So, how did these traditional ideologies that Cronon is criticizing, how did they take us out of that space?

CGS: It really separates us from our environment. It changes to us viewing and observing, not even really interacting, but just being the observers of the world that's around us. It shuts us off from recognizing what's going on inside of us. We take a passive, apathetic role. We're caring about this wild remote spot and we're going to protect that because it doesn't have this mark of humanity on it. But if you're viewing the mark of humanity as an evil, awful thing, the only way to respond is to turn off any emotions about it.

You have to be very apathetic about it and not engaged with the wilderness within you. Because if you're thinking humanity is bad because I'm protecting this beautiful pristine landscape from humanity, their humanity has got to be bad over here.

TSH: It's a form of self-hatred and that is why we detach. The idea of treading lightly; You shouldn't leave trash places, but you probably shouldn't leave trash in city streets either. But that's different. This detachment when you get on the top of a mountain, you have somebody take a picture of you,

and you look at it for a minute, but then you leave, because in your heart you think you're not supposed to be there. The reason it's beautiful is because humans aren't there.

CGS: I'm thinking about how you were describing that moment of getting somewhere, taking a picture, and leaving. It's very different from a lot of the trips I've done. Once you spend more than two nights somewhere you start getting really comfortable being dirty, but you also start finding ways to not be dirty such as taking a bath in a river. That's such a primal way of connecting with the environment around you. Taking off your clothes and getting into a stream surrounded by nothing, how vulnerable are you? You have to do that on these trips. You get really comfortable eating the dirt that's on your spoon. I hadn't really considered that, but something about these trips I've done is that once you get out there it's almost like the landscape around you and that immersive experience strips away that distance and that perceived feeling of needing to be separate from it.

TSH: I'm thinking about the difference between nature and culture, nature with a capital N and humanity. Particularly during the Enlightenment, the idea became really popular that humans are somehow separate from and above nature, like that Cartesian split.

CGS: There were a lot of different, competing ideas. I'm learning in one of my classes about the progressive versus the tragic story. This was

more dominant in Europe where they had a lot of farms and pastureland and their cities. It was about how humanity is great because it can conquer this scary, wild outdoors. It's called wilderness for a reason because it was viewed as wild and scary. That's what the progressive view is, that humans need to be the conquerors. We conquer it, we take over. Then there was this other narrative, the tragic view, that kept emerging as we kept going West, but it's the idea that we lose something in the cities. The more time we spend in civilization, the worse we're going to become. We need to keep and protect these wild spaces, so that we have places to go back to as civilization brings about our detriment. Those ideas were both competing for a really long time and it's interesting to see which one emerged.

TSH: This reminds me of FDR and this idea that there's some sort of magical masculine energy that is connected to this. Because the other thing that I hear you saying is that there is this enlightenment idea that we should rationalize nature, we should use it, we should reap its fruits. That fits in with the idea that we're stewards of the earth, depending on how you understand stewardship. I think there is also a really important concept on the other side, which is this more romantic concept of nature as the place where our last humanity has fled to. So, we have to go and hang out on some picturesque crag somewhere so that we can recharge our soul batteries. Honestly, I'm not sure that either idea has overcome the other

I'm interested in the connection to westward expansion here. I feel like the piece that we haven't mentioned yet is the role of indigenous peoples in all this. You mentioned national parks earlier. My understanding is that a lot of national parks, and all of North America, used to be land that was understood from an indigenous point of view. Part of the natural progress of national parks is that indigenous people don't live there anymore.

CGS: It's weird to think that a large majority of northern America had people on it and people using the land. When you really think about that, it gets very strange that we have these chunks of land that have no one on it. It's interesting to think about those tragic and progressive stories in terms of how they viewed indigenous people. In both stories Native Americans were viewed as savages and wild people that needed to be controlled.

TSH: Because they were doing the nature/culture split wrong.

CGS: When you really, really think about it, they don't work in both stories, but both stories did use them.

TSH: Because there's the savage who is associated with wild and scary, angry wildness. We see this because this is not just a European thing, think about Little House in the Big Woods for example, have you ever read that book?

CGS: I've read a lot of the books in the series.

TSH: There's this one part where ma is walking the two kids home and a bear starts following them. They really carefully and slowly get in the house and close the door because it's so terrifying in the big woods. Even in the title, the wilderness is this big threatening thing. But there's also a part in that book where indigenous people come and Pa is away and so everybody's scared that they're going to do something, but they just borrow a cup of sugar and leave. It's that ideology of nature, being dangerous and indigenous people being part of the dangerousness of nature.

CGS: It's interesting because there's a lot of countries now that are starting to use indigenous knowledge to create different farming practices, to be more sustainable and America hasn't really caught up to that yet. We'll see if we ever do. But indigenous people use the land. They have centuries of knowledge that've been passed down continually about how to use the land that they live on. Even the tribes that are now in Oklahoma, a lot of what they knew was lost in their forced move because they knew about the trees on the east coast, and they knew how to use those and that was deeply ingrained in their culture. That's one example of something that's happened all over. I think about Canada and Washington, that upper Northwest corner of North America. There's so much less salmon in recent years than there was in the past. They've disappeared, and a lot of indigenous people are furious about

that, rightfully so, because they were farming salmon sustainably for centuries.

TSH: millennia, probably.

CGS: We don't really know because we've never taken the time to fully ask.

TSH: This connects to what we were talking about earlier about control of the land because one of the big reasons the salmon are gone is because of the way streams and rivers have been dammed up and control and been made useful to humans in a way that destroys them.

CGS: It really goes back to Cronon's ideas of this separation we've tried to develop from nature. One of the first books I read for this thesis, and it wasn't even really for this thesis, but it ended up really guiding it, but it's titled "Braiding Sweetgrass." The author, Robin Wall Kimmerer, talks about a lot of these things, fishing, and the trees. One of the farming practices she talked about was how certain indigenous groups grow corn, beans, and squash altogether. Each one dramatically helps the other one. I can't imagine America ever farming like that.

TSH: We have whole fields that are just corn.

CGS: Millions of acres. Kimmerer talks how she's an indigenous woman and how she would go on camping trips with her family growing up.

Every morning her dad would throw the first used coffee beans in a certain spot. He would dig a hole and give them back to the land before anybody else got to have their coffee and it was this idea that was passed down; she talks about how long people in her tribe had been doing this. It was a recognition of the reciprocal relationship that they were in with the environment around them. This idea that we moved West and we were fighting these two different storylines and really intent on taking the land. That is what we were doing, whether it was for gold or for national parks or just space, we were taking land. We wanted to take land and in modern American history we don't have any ideology that connects us back to the land. We don't see it as something that we are actively engaging in a relationship with. Because why engage?

TSH: Look at the way we organize urban space. We pave everything. It's so impermeable that it's literally hotter. It's really interesting and troubling.

CGS: it's very troubling. It so easily can be drawn back to ourselves. I think about our conversation on gender. Because a lot of me being a woman has been fighting being a woman and hating it.

TSH: One of the ways that women are asked to engage with their body is very, very similar to the ways that we try to engage with nature. We want to control it, we want to modify it, we want to make it look pretty, we don't

want it to do its own thing. I think menstruation is a perfect example. We are so uncomfortable talking about menstruation because it is something that some female bodies do, but it is not really in anybody's conscious control. It is this spontaneous upwelling of nature.

CGS: Society asks women to perform. We talked about it last week, but that is where my worth comes, but we don't want to talk about the pain and the turmoil with it. There was a really long time of me hating and fighting with my body about my menstrual cycle, especially when I started going outside.

TSH: That's a whole discourse, right? Women shouldn't go hiking because with them menstruating, the bears will come eat them or something.

CGS: Thankfully I'm on the tail end of that. I've heard that before but it's not really as much a thing anymore. That's been a common thought and argument and it makes me think about this reciprocal relationship. I know we've talked in one of our classes about the mind body connection. I still am in this disconnect which I think mimics the way for generations we've dealt with our environment. This is the colonial ideas that we started the thesis with, like imagine if we had these reciprocal relationships with the environment around us, how much it would change every individual, if we were representing that, how much it would strip our apathy away.

TSH: And some of that self-hatred. I'm thinking about what you said about your femininity, understood as your ability to reproduce, and, of which menstruation is the sign. It's both the location of your worth and the location of your danger to society. If we are supposed to be civilized, if we are supposed to be part of civilization, which is understood through this Cartesian split between body and mind, if mind is culture and body is nature, then mind and culture are better than body and nature.

They should be in control of and in some sense antagonistic to. And so, now we have national parks, and we have the body positivity movement, but we don't actually love our bodies or the world we live in, in ways that would be way healthier and way more fun.

CGS: It really is. It is very similar to how we portray stuff on social media. Some of the appeal of the places I go to is in their beauty. But a lot of places you go nowadays, a lot of the national parks, are full of people taking pictures that they're going to post online and share in a similar way to how so many people take pictures of themselves and post them online.

That isn't real appreciation, it's not real care.

TSH: It's commodification. It's creating something that can be consumed by others in order to prove the worth of the experience.

CGS: It's not a real experience. It's not real immersion into that location. It's honestly heartbreaking that at a time when we can travel and see the number of places we can, that we're throwing it away for that.

I believe deeply, this is my little woo-woo coming out, that there are spiritual forces in these spots and in that land. In the same way that there are everywhere. There's a reason that all the national parks were given that destination. People have gone there in the past and had deeply life changing moments.

TSH: Like Bears Ears for sure.

CGS: Or, like the Florida Everglades. I haven't been there yet, but I'm excited to go because that place really impacted people. Now it's a national park. And the Everglades are a place of resistance too.

TSH: The Seminoles were able to stay there for a long time because they understood the land and white folks didn't.

CGS: But we're throwing away the opportunity to experience that. We're so focused on the commodification of it or showing that we saw this beautiful thing. Because maybe it'll make us more valuable or maybe it'll make our life more valuable that we saw it.

And again, I think it's that apathy, because *if you let yourself start feeling that deep connection to a place, it's really hard to not grapple with what's happening inside of you.*

Those moments outside, those moments invite us in deeper to ourselves. I think that's what I've seen in my paintings. I go out there and I spend a week outside in a Canyon or hiking somewhere and I come back and it's this nudging invitation to go further.

TSH: This feels like a natural moment to introduce the idea of the wilderness inside. We've been talking about the wilderness outside, both literally and figuratively. But also, the wilderness that happens outside humanity and culture.

One of the things that I really love about Cronon is that he invites us to, and we're really getting there in a beautiful way in this conversation, he invites us to identify with the outside in a new way because the outside is within us already.

CGS: He talks about the duality that we have to teeter between of recognizing that we are fully part of the Wilderness around us. But we have no control or say. We didn't create it. And because of that, I think that's where it emerges that we shouldn't be viewing it as something we can control, similarly to women's lived experience.

TSH: Much of what society asks women to do is to control their unruly bodies. Mask the fact that you menstruate. It's supposed to be this really private thing that you might tell other female people about. If I asked one of

my students in class before we started, how are you doing and they're like I'm menstruating, I would be surprised. I would be unsure how to respond, like that's great or I'm sorry to hear it. I have never had that experience and I doubt I ever will.

CGS: In the same way, I myself have said that to certain people before and I've had friends say it to me in that exact way actually. Or in my close friendships, myself, or someone else will be complaining and angry and the other person will ask if we're going to start our period soon because it's a natural dialogue in those close relationships. Behind the screen of perfection that we have to demonstrate to the world.

TSH: And most specifically to men. Because in some ways, I would say that women are seen as the body while man is the mind so we're right back to Descartes.

How do you celebrate the wilderness within? How do you even locate it?

CGS: I think, for me, a large part of it has been going outside and stripping away those societal factors that we just discussed, that need for commodification, the need for presentability.

I think once I stop considering how this experience will look to another person or what its value is going to be in my life, once those

questions get pushed to the side, it becomes a lot easier to find that wilderness. It starts welling up quickly.

TSH: What replaces those questions?

CGS: I think it's different for everyone.

TSH: What is it for you?

CGS: For me it's a lot of deeply emotional thoughts. A lot of deep emotional feelings, and a lot of deep spiritual thoughts and which is weird because I grew up really religious and I always thought it was God that was out there, and nowadays I sometimes, mostly just call it magic.

I spend a little time eating some mac and cheese from a bag in a valley somewhere at sunset, there's some magic.

And there's some magic in me too.

A lot of the thoughts come back to an interconnectedness.

And I don't know, I grapple with love a lot.

And that's okay.

TSH: Love is such a loaded word.

CGS: It's such a loaded word and all aspects of it because it's part of this real human experience that I'm living.

TSH: At its best it's a word for connection. But at its worst it's a tool for domination. And you've experienced both.

CGS: I've experienced both coming to me and going from me. I think sometimes that's the wilderness within, recognizing the worst parts of you. Wilderness is scary.

I get scared at night when I'm in my tent in the dark. I have my flashlight right there at all times but some of the times I've slept alone outside I've been really scared, so scared that I woke up at 4am and went back to the car.

In the same way that the dark is scary, and bears are scary and the things in wilderness are scary, the things in my wilderness are scary.

The potential that I can hurt somebody is terrifying. I don't want to be somebody that can do that, and in the same way, the potential that I could love somebody as deeply as I have is terrifying.

I think that is part of the wilderness, and I think that is why we veer towards apathy, because those are such hard, big things to consider.

TSH: Well, and part of the scariness I think of the wilderness within comes from the idea of, if I give up this duality, if I give up the idea that I am somehow separate, am I going to be invaded? Am I going to lose control?

CGS: Because that's what we've done. It's literally the opposite of connectedness.

TSH: That's one part about the romantic vision of wilderness that I do still feel some attachment to. Because I disagree that you have to have a

human free landscape to have wilderness. But one of the things I like about the picture of the sublime is the idea that there is something terrifying there, something that is so radically, I'm tempted to say radically different and that's not right.

CGS: I think it's radically unknown. Because it is, I would argue, it's in there, and all of us. There's a lot of dark depth to people. But it's unknown and we don't really like to spend a lot of time picking at it and fighting it. It's interesting that you bring that up because that's what the definition of outdoor adventure is. It's an outdoor activity that involves some form of risk. Without that risk it's just a recreational leisure activity that you're doing outside. There has to be an actual risk. Usually it's inherent to an activity, like rock climbing there's just inherent risk there. But backpacking, there's a lot of perceived risk and with backpacking there might not actually be a huge threat or a lot of risk out there in the wilderness, but we perceive it as such. I think that perceiving the risk, and then those moments when you glimpse past it, are when those deep connections form. When you had that moment of, 'oh crap, can I make it through this night?' and there's skittering sounds outside your tent but you wake up the next morning, and you have your coffee, and you watch the sunlight start hitting the trees. You can't have one without the other.

TSH: In a lot of ways this reminds me of therapy. The point of therapy is to go into the wilderness within and accept the risk as the price of acceptance and beauty and growth. Because if you try to dam it up, just like with the salmon, it'll die.

CGS: I think that's really how we have an authentic human life. However we find our way to do that, that's what an authentic human life is. One that has truly sought to wrestle with the unknown and the darker side of themselves and in that has been able to glimpse the really good.

TSH: This reminds me of when we talk about Rogers in Rhetoric 1⁵. He talks about empathy being a tool for teaching people that the darker parts of their selves are okay. You travel into somebody's inner wilderness, and you look at everything as though it were beautiful, even if it's dangerous and frightening. There's also worth and companionship there. That's when self-actualization, self-directed growth occurs.

CGS: That's what I'm trying to do with my paintings and writings. Not really consciously, but now that I'm talking about it, it is.

TSH: And this whole thesis.

⁵Carl Rogers was a psychologist who developed multiple theories surrounding empathy, personality, and human-centered therapeutic approaches. His work is included in the BIC World of Rhetoric 1 course load for freshman students.

CGS: I'm demonstrating it to invite others to do it. Especially with my under paintings. Here are some of the emotions I'm feeling when I'm painting this, deep feelings about love and pain that I'm thinking about before I start putting globs of paint on here.

In some of the paintings I'm inviting you to look at that.

TSH: Does that feel risky? Because part of the reason to have them be under the paint is to have them still be there but for you.

CGS: It's not super conscious. I sit with a canvas in front of me and I pull out a sharpie and I'm listening to a song, and it just hits and I'm like I have to write that down or I have to draw a naked woman. And it's not that I want it to be covered up later, but it's part of the process. But then when it is exposed and visible it feels way riskier.

TSH: Think about this pair of terms that you just used, exposed and visible. Frankly, that is a good way of summarizing a lot of things, but I would say that some of them are your art, this thesis, your life, the way you try to live as a human being, also the way you try to live as a woman.

The more visible you are, the more exposed you are. But you have to be visible and exposed in order to create community.

CGS: And in order to remove myself from the apathy. To be more authentic and to have that risk, that possibility of good.

TSH: One of the things that Cronon says is that one of the ways that we think about wilderness enables us to engage in oppression back here in civilization. He says that one of the patterns that grows out of the way we treat wilderness as other is that we treat others as exemplars of wilderness. This is true of indigenous people, this is true of women, but this is also true of poor people.

I'm thinking about some of the areas of Waco that I'm familiar with. The sidewalks are cracked, the yards don't have any grass, the streets are potholed and broken up, and there's just this general air of like disintegration. There's a sense that poor people are somehow less civilized. The places that they live are less civilized. And we're okay with that because of this wilderness ideology that we have. It seems natural, right, and good that poor neighborhoods should be rundown looking because that's a natural part of poverty.

CGS: When you consider where our national parks are, where our more treasured national landscapes are, they are far removed from lower socio-economic groups. It's like the chicken and the egg, but I don't know if we care less about those neighborhoods because they're farther from our most treasured land or if we've continually pushed people with lower resources towards those places because we don't value those places as much, and we don't value those people as much.

TSH: It's so common for lower socio-economic status areas to be placed right next to the city dump or next to a superfund site or next to the airport where there's all sorts of noise pollution. One of the ways that we organize civilized space is in relation to the kinds of wilderness we don't like.

CGS: All those things you just mentioned are basically the sloppier parts of our civilization that we can't control quite as well. The airports are control because we're controlling where we're going, how we're getting there, but we can't really control how noisy, it is. We haven't figured out yet how to make it need less space, we haven't figured out how to reduce the carbon waste.

I think about prisons too frequently, on the outskirts and surrounded by some poor neighborhoods. We're trying to control people, the wilder side of society. But we can't really because it requires space and resources.

TSH: One of the things about prisons is that they're frequently situated in open country. The idea is that if somebody were to escape, they couldn't immediately hide out in some urban area. But in that way, they actually become more similar to national parks than we ever consider. They're located in less attractive places conventionally speaking, but they're located far away and that creates some of the same problems for people of low socio-economic status that want to visit them. Because if you don't have a car, you can't go visit a loved one in prison, but you also can't visit a national

park. There are these patterns of control and domination of the wilderness within that map almost perfectly on to the control and domination of the wilderness without.

CGS: it's like those invisible walls I was talking about at the beginning, I don't really like parks, because I go in and something's not right there.

TSH: To get back to art, it's the difference between what is conventionally conceived of as museum art and nontraditional forms of art, that for me are typically a little more moving and certainly more arresting. The art that we have here on campus that is outside, the way it plays with form and shape is so much more meaningful to me because the sun is shining on it, rain is dripping from it. It organizes space around it. Are you familiar with the Wallace Stevens poem about a jar in Tennessee? I've got to read it. Here it is, "Anecdote of the Jar" by Wallace Stevens.

"I placed a jar in Tennessee and round it was upon a hill it made the slovenly wilderness surround that hill. The wilderness rose up to it and sprawled around no longer wild. The jar was round upon the ground and tall and have a port in air. It took dominion everywhere; the jar was gray and bear it did not give a bird or Bush like nothing else in Tennessee."

I love that poem because it's so ambiguous. Is placing a jar on a hill in Tennessee such that the wilderness rose up to it and it's no longer wild, is that a good thing? I don't care if the problem is that it is. But the poem is pointing out that it is totally a thing that we do.

CGS: But it's also not bad. We have to find a way to balance. We have to. We can't remove ourselves from it entirely because it just leads to this domination that you're talking about. We are humans, we don't need to start wandering around naked and burning down on our houses. The domination, it goes back to that reciprocity and that communion with the world around us. That's not what domination is. It's like we are putting up a stern stonewall that we are not in ourselves and that we're not going across.

TSH: I love the use of the word communion. For me, communion is always this really strange ritual where I mean I'm not Catholic, so I don't think it's actually part of the body of God, and I don't get into all the theological questions. But when you take sustenance into your body during a church service and that sustenance is somehow associated with divinity, there is something about that act that retains a radical edge, no matter where or when I've done it and no matter where I was on my faith journey. Communion has always been this really radical thing that has so many stories told around it. Some of which I think are really wrongheaded, but it retains the magic like you were saying earlier.

CGS: It's community. No matter where you are doing it, you know other people have done it. It's the intentionality of this action that I'm doing. That's what Kimmerer's dad was doing with the coffee grounds. Other people have done it as well. He was engaging in this sacred act.

TSH: Because it's reciprocal.

CGS: In the same way that me putting on my shoes and tying the shoelaces on my trail runner as I step on a trail is a sacred act.

TSH: Because you are choosing a communion that can't help but be radical.

CGS: no matter if it's here in Cameron Park or across the country in a National Park.

TSH: And then the question becomes, how do we do that within our homes? We have to make a home in nature, but we also have to make nature in our homes. I think honestly that's why this thesis starts out with the paintings and the reflections. We're only realizing more and more that that was the correct order.

Because first you do it, and then you think about what happened. You can't plan it out. Like you said, you don't go in order to get rid of the questions and answers. But now we're engaged and trying to understand it.

Simpson

TSH: Today, we're talking about Leann Betasamosake Simpson's, "As We Have Always Done." One of the things that I really love about the Simpson piece is that she talks about the wilderness, well, that's not really the right term, especially after our conversation, she talks about being on the land, as an indigenous person, as a woman, as a mother, as a First Nations person living in what is now Canada. For a settler the land is capital, it's something that can do work. Whereas for an indigenous person, or at least my impression, is that is the wrong frame.

CGS: This connects to what we previously discussed about the relationship we have with the land. As a white individual, our relationship with and story about land has always been control and coercion. The indigenous approach to their relationship with land, from what we've read, has been more about this reciprocal, true, loving relationship between a person and the land that they reside on and take from.

TSH: Because they reside on and they take from the land, but they also give back to it. Stewardship is a very complicated concept, particularly if you're Christian, but there seems to be a sense of stewardship there.

CGS: Simpson had an example of how they went to the elders to talk about whether they should do this project and how to do it best⁶. She discusses throughout the book this idea of community and using the knowledge of people, sharing it and creating future generations who do that. The frontier mentality and the pioneer/westward expansion mentality was very independent from the beginning. Coming from Europe, it was all about getting individual freedom and that's been the story since then. America is still very individualistic. With this project, the trips that I go on and that have been the most meaningful to me, I'm not alone.

Part of the wonderfulness of these trips is that I am dependent on other people in a very real way. It's just, 'here we are, you're going to depend on me because I'm carrying the stakes for our tent and I'm going to depend on you, because you're carrying the pot that we're going to boil water in later and we're both depending on that guy because he's got our water filter.'

TSH: It goes back to a form of community. Because on these recreation trips there is a leader but at the same time, I have never heard you talk about these trips in a way that indicated that it felt like a military exploration where there's a commander that wants soldiers who follow orders. It's a much more horizontal structure.

⁶Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 12

CGS: There are people on the trips that are the leaders, that know the full plan. Freshman year when I first went, I was not that person. I had no idea what was happening and was just along for the ride. But this year I'm the one that's planning it and I will be driving the cars and I'll be carrying the map. But still, it's a form of trust that I don't experience ever in the rest of my life. When you go into these backcountry trips, it's the most elemental form of trust. You're going into a slot canyon with strangers and you're trusting that they will help take care of you, in the same way that you're going to help take care of them. You're trusting that they are going to do the best thing for the group and get you out at the end.

TSH: And that's a shared unspoken goal.

CGS: At Baylor we sign a code of conduct, but that's like I'm not bringing a gun or explosives on this trip, and I won't curse people out every day. There is an exchange of money, but as the leader I'm not really seeing any of that.

TSH: and all that stuff happens before you leave right?

CGS: Yeah, but then there is something in the moment you put that backpack on and start walking. There is this unspoken commitment to what's going to happen.

TSH: That's also the moment where you release the questions. This sort of radical individualism that comes from our history of engagement with

the concept of the frontier creates all of these questions and answers that get in the way of producing the unity that we desperately need.

TSH: We started by talking about Simpson and how her relationship to the land is very different from a settler colonial relation and how that shapes her polity. Now we're talking about how this is similar to what you experience on these recreation trips. So why do they need to be recreated?

CGS: I think it gets lost in the structures that we live in that remove us from ourselves and our humanity. In our day to day lives, we're very removed from ourselves. Social media drastically removes us from ourselves. I even think about the confines of what we call the academy and academia. I'm really grateful for the schooling I've received, and I have to remind myself a lot that this is a huge blessing to get a four-year degree, but also, it was a big struggle for me to start doing this thesis because I thought this isn't what I'm supposed to do, I'm supposed to write a really great, wonderfully researched academic thesis.

TSH: And all of that is extrinsic, comes from outside and operates on you. You become the frontier, you have to be overcome and dammed up, and you've always resisted that.

CGS: It's an internal rebellion. When we first read this that's what I was most struck by, and I kept going back to it. Because we started reading this right after the Black Lives Matter movement really took off. We were also

reading some different articles about Native Tribes in America and their interactions with the land, some stuff about national parks, some really heartbreaking pieces and I remember reading this and I was struck by how not angry she was. She didn't have this bitterness, there was no FU to everyone who had hurt her. It was the opposite. There was this internal feeling of *'I want to be so embodied by who I am authentically and by the love that I know I can possess that I will change this narrative and change the world around me.'*

TSH: She uses the phrase 'radical resurgence'⁷. I love that, because I was really thinking about this piece last January when we had an insurgence, and how this is so different. When Simpson's talking about radical resistance, she is not being reactive. It's not an eye for an eye. Her comment would be that an eye for an eye leaves us all blind.

CGS: Well, it goes back to the elders and connecting with them. In the introduction, I have it pulled up because it's just such a beautiful section, I have it highlighted, and I have a star next to it. She says,

⁷Radical resurgence is the idea of creating non-hierarchical relationships between land and our physicality and intellectual practices, reattaching our minds, bodies, and spirits to the world around us and dismantling settler colonialism.

“We need to join together in a rebellion of love, persistence, commitment, and profound caring, and create constellations of co-resistance working together toward a radical alternative present based on deep reciprocity and the gorgeous generative refusal of colonial recognition”⁸.

TSH: The colonial gives us a way of understanding who we are that really goes back to not only to this dammed up and controlled concept of the frontier, but also the wilderness within us that has to be tamed and made into capital. That idea works against unity. Not only does this divorce us from the wilderness within us, but it also divorces us from the land we could be on, land we have been going on, and each other, even in a town or city.

CGS: I really like the part about the constellations of co-resistance. I like that idea that we're a unified resistance and the use of this idea of a constellation. We've discussed whether this was something I could talk about as a part of the colonial problem. Can I really share my experience? Thinking about it, with that picture of a constellation, we're all connected, but not the same, just different branches of it, and without one part of the story, it's not a full picture and it can't be a full refusal of colonialism.

⁸Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 9

If I wasn't recognizing it, if I was having a refusal of colonial recognition over here, that would be an entire arm of the constellation that's missing.

TSH: The image of a constellation implies narrative because constellations are stories that we tell about natural phenomena that create a connection between the human and the non-human. When we think of ourselves as being within a constellation of co-resistance, we're retelling the story of our own connection to each other through that resistance. And not resistance, understood as a reaction against but as a reaction with, or a response.

CGS: It's very grounded in what you would be doing without the controls of colonialism. It's not a reaction. You're just returning to the right actions that you would do without those controls.

The part about profound caring is really applicable to that unspoken trust and care for each other in outdoor recreation and that's what we model. All these outdoor recreation trips have this trust that's not spoken and not something you have to do. I've watched it happen.

On these trips, because people are paying for them, the leaders will end up doing most of the harder work. We'll talk through how to set up the tents and then people do their own shelters, but often we're cooking, we're filtering water, we're making sure everybody's taken care of, but on my fall

break trip, which was backpacking in Arkansas, our participants started coming over and asking if they could help, if we could show them how to do stuff so they could do it. It was almost this natural response that they had when they were removed from all of these external constraints.

TSH: Think about that word natural. Because it's such an overburdened word, but when we use it in this particular context it feels intuitive. It's like colonialism is creating situations in which we act, not in accordance with our impulses and intuitions.

CGS: Which is super strange to say at our university and with the upbringing I have.

TSH: in the country we live in.

CGS: because that goes against everything I was ever taught. I was taught from the get-go about original sin. This idea that actually, we're bad. If we are left to our own devices, we are bad little people that will do bad things, no matter what. My entire life, I've been like are you sure, are we really positive about that? I'm not sure if that's true and I still don't know if I have an answer.

TSH: I do. It's not true. I've worked with too many babies.

CGS: I know, I'm thinking about the kids that we raise in love and the person who come over and says, let me help you. Or just the people that do bad things and who never get another shot because we put them in prison.

Maybe this trust on outdoor trips is because we give people this opportunity to release the fake control that they have and to be cared for. What good can come from that? Clearly a lot, a lot of good.

TSH: The idea of original sin has always troubled me because I didn't do anything wrong. Maybe this is one of the ways that we're taught to dam up the wilderness within, is by being taught that you can't trust other people. It's this idea that we're all out for what we can get. This state of nature is a state of war against all.

But the conversation that we're having right now suggests to me that we need to say that in order to convince ourselves and each other that it's true because it doesn't have to be true. This whole de-colonial notion is just saying no.

CGS: It's not just that we can't trust other people, it's really telling us we can't trust ourselves. It's creating this cycle of mistrust because you don't know what you could do. I have had to grapple with the pain that I could cause people and the pain that people have caused me and the dark side of being a human, because we hurt each other, we do.

But this idea of original sin, and these other ideas of colonial structures that we're discussing, it argues that we're terrible. We remove

ourselves from this idea of the wilderness that Cronon⁹ was talking about because we're going to destroy it. It's telling us that we cannot trust ourselves in any real way and we can't trust others, because if we can't trust ourselves, how can we trust them to be good? Without that full recognition of our wilderness and who we are, we can't have the good side of it.

TSH: One of the interesting things that Cronon talks about is that at first, the wilderness is understood as threatening because it's full of things that will kill you. Then, once we take it within us, I think we retain that threatening aspect. The good wilderness becomes the one that we are absent from, and the bad wilderness is the one within us that we have to somehow overcome and repudiate.

The thing about the wild is part of it is unpredictable and chaotic but part of it is just complex in its potential reality. There's more than one possibility in any wilderness. Simpson shows us a way of accepting that. She's not 100% positive and hopeful. There are problems and she recognizes them and says we have to respond. But not by becoming part of the problem.

CGS: She's very cognizant of how the current way we interact with the world around us is a problem. Things that are bad, right now, will continue to

⁹William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69-90

get worse without a change. But for her that *change can happen within every individual*.

TSH: Because that's a radical resurgence. What does this have to do with the concept of Kwe?

CGS: We have to have an intimate relationship with the land, and we have to have a spiritual connection to it. Simpson moves into this idea that action is the theory. Our actions and our methods, that's what generates the theory. She talks first about the normative grounding¹⁰ before Kwe and then she comes to this idea that it's about the actions¹¹.

TSH: And that's what we're doing here. You did the paintings first because well, honestly, we didn't know why you did.

CGS: It just happened.

TSH: And it continues to. To a degree, we're trying to follow that and allow your inner wilderness to teach us how to write this thesis.

¹⁰Grounded normativity is the idea that land-based practices and knowledge, specifically indigenous, can inform our engagement with the world around us, by creating a compassionate web of interdependent relationships, despite differences.

¹¹"Kwe as method is about refusal of colonial domination, heteropatriarchy, and being tamed by whiteness and the academy. This is an appropriate response to oppression, and it is a generative process and the living alternative. We can "use kwe as method to refuse and to analyze colonialism as a *structure of processes*" in order to center radical resurgence. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), Chapter 2

CGS: Most of my trips came before any of the theories. I did the trips and then I changed to a recreation major and then I started learning about the theory.

TSH: Your life has been continuous resistance to theory. We've talked about your struggles with the stories that you were told about God and that's deeply intertwined with the stories you were told about what it means to be a woman, to be a female person in this world.

What have you learned about what it means to be white? Because the stories that you were told about God and the stories about being a woman were pretty explicit. I don't get the sense that you come from a really racist family or anything like that. You've lived in other countries.

What is the theory of whiteness that you were given?

CGS: I didn't come from a racist family, but I also didn't come from a not racist family. My grandparents made racist remarks when I was growing up. I think the majority of people who grew up in the south did. My grandparents are from the Northeast, so it was a less than a lot of people I go to school with now who grew up in the south. My mom grew up in a town where there was one black family. I've thought about the time I spent in Austin when I was growing up. Austin is so segregated, by a river and a highway. I didn't really realize it until I was older, and I started going back to

Austin and realized there's a whole different side that I never went to which now is getting overrun by white individuals.

TSH: It's being colonized all over again.

CGS: It's interesting because in South Africa my whiteness was super obvious. In America, it's not really something I notice, because as a white person in the circles I live in, I'm frequently the majority. It's not really something I have to consider every day, but in South Africa, we were not the majority at all. I was really young, but I noticed. It was not safe in a lot of parts of South Africa, but I didn't know why. I knew that we couldn't really go out and about. But I didn't really know why besides that it wasn't safe, but since then I've realized it was because my mom, who's a white woman, can't go walking down the streets by herself in South Africa, because people will assume she's rich or that she has some sort of resources, and they'll try and rob her. Those are weird ideas of race to grow up with.

TSH: Because it becomes a source of threat in one setting, whereas in the other setting it becomes a kind of safety. In the United States if you're in a majority white space, you're the norm. In South Africa you're never going to be the norm. You were there after apartheid so there was also this big question mark about what form of polity, what sort of social system are we making here, and how does this white person fit into that?

CGS: My whiteness is so frequently tied to the socio-economic status I have. In South Africa, I recognize that we were of higher socioeconomic status. We lived in big houses there and we went to dance classes at a private place and art classes at a private place. We had a maid in our first house. She came with the house. We were renting from a family who were spending a year somewhere. I don't know where, but they left their maid with their house.

TSH: Talk about a colonial relationship.

CGS: But I loved her, I adored her. She and my mom had problems because my mom, she got married at 23 and she spent her life homeschooling kids and being basically a housewife. It was very hard for her to transition to having somebody taking care of the house. We also lived in a gated community. The people who were the security guards were all black. The people that were living in the community were pretty much all white, I think there were maybe one or two families that were black. But they held themselves apart from the security guards. Most people did but my mom would pick up all the security guards when they got off shift and she would buy them a bucket of KFC chicken and drive them home. While we were driving them home, she would try and learn their songs and their language.

Again, I'm eight years old, and I have no idea what's happening, I'm just along for the ride, because we were homeschooled. We had three walls

around our neighborhood, but I don't know what we were really getting protected from.

TSH: Because if you dam it up, then you can control the commodification of that space. And here, part of the dam was human. But I guess it always is. Simpson's not just talking about the removal of the body from the land it's also the removal of the self from a community.

Whenever you build these walls, whenever you try to demarcate a space as belonging to a particular group, you're also telling a story about how it doesn't belong to another group. I suspect that part of the point of those walls was also to keep out unruly nature which I guess in South Africa would be about as important as in most places in the US, where there's still plenty of interesting wildlife.

CGS: We had little parks in the enclosed neighborhood. Every couple blocks, there was a different little park. Every spring, right outside the gates, they would burn the fields. I'm guessing it was wildfire mediation because they didn't farm those fields. They would just light them on fire and for like a week, they would just smolder. And then you would get into the gates, and it would be a nice green space.

TSH: wow. These little parks were probably very carefully maintained, probably fairly European looking. I'm so glad we're talking about this because

it feels like a total microcosm. South Africa and the US, in some ways, have such a similar history.

CGS: They are the same distance from the equator, just in different directions. I remember when we got there thinking how similar it was to America. All these parks are well maintained, and then you have sidewalks everywhere, but even there, we found ways around those controlled spaces.

Between the park, there's the sidewalk and then there was a little clump of trees and once, my friend and I found a snail in the trees. We spent an entire day playing with our new pet snail in the trees. When I imagine it, I can close my eyes and I'm transported back. You still find wildness wherever.

TSH: Do you remember the story you told last week about those kids playing in the clumps of trees?

CGS: Oh, my gosh yeah, that's what it was.

TSH: I think it's a recreation of play kids can do because they're not socialized yet in the ways that we have to act. That's why we need radical resurgence, is to get back to it. I'm looking at a particular passage in Simpson that states,

"I understand colonialism as an overwhelmingly dominating force in my family life that continually attacks my freedom and well-being as kwe. Colonialism tries very hard to keep me off my land. It tries very hard to ensure I cannot speak my language, think as my Ancestors did,

find comfort in elders or the river or the lake of rice. It tries very hard to get me to think in a particular way. It tries very hard to get me to resist in a particular way. It tries very hard to get me to move about my territory in a particular way” (Simpson)¹².

I feel like that's what we're talking about today. Colonialism as an ideology becomes a lens that we can't get off, that we can't help but see through. One of the reasons that you love outdoor recreation is that, for some reason, the lens doesn't come with you. It comes off and you can go play in the clumps of trees again.

CGS: One of my goals for this year, I have it written down in all caps, was to be sillier. It's my goal every year because from a very young age, I've struggled to play, and I haven't been able to be very silly.

My best friend and I talked about it recently, how I just want to be silly. And she just said, “you always want to be sillier.” I can't and I think what you're saying is very true. When I go outside, it's the only time that I can seem to shake the seriousness of the world and life and be silly. Even if that silliness is just having dirt on my legs.

TSH: I get what you mean. On the one hand, I agree that you are not someone who is easily silly. That sort of effervescent joyfulness that we

¹²Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 44

associate with a little kid, that's just a little too much candy or something. But at the same time, everything that I have seen you do since I met you has been oriented towards the goal of integrating more play into your life. You were an art major, now you're an outdoor rec major. There's a significant amount of what other people would call silliness involved there because it's not very capitalist. You're not going to become rich doing these things, but I'm also thinking about the sense of the word play. We typically use that word to mean little kids making mud pies, but part of what's happening in that moment is the other meaning of play, which is like when the rope has a little play to it, it's not tight, it has some flexibility, it can move around and it's not necessarily predictable where it's going to move.

When you go out, when you go outside, your mind has more play in it than when you feel constrained by the idea that you have to write the perfect thesis, or you have to be the perfect Christian woman, or you have to go lead the Department of the Interior one day. Because those are taught, those are straight line ropes to a particular height that you're supposed to climb because somebody else told you so, because colonialism told you so.

CGS: We talked about the mind-body connection and how we really break it and lose it. A lot of what Simpson says about Kwe is this idea that through our relationship with land we get a little more connected between the mind and the body. Kwe is about the combination of body and intellect,

and that's where the theory comes from – our actions, as well as our feelings and emotions. When I go outside, I think there's an increased connection between how I'm moving my body and what I'm doing with it.

TSH: And when you paint. I think that was part of the impulse that we had early on, about using natural materials in the art and I think part of the reason that you dropped that idea was because you realized it was not necessary. The natural materials were already there within you.

How come the painting is not a walled garden, how come the painting is not that compound in South Africa? How do you avoid that? Do you even know?

CGS: No idea. I think there's a few things that I've done to try to keep it from that. When I first started doing the Paria paintings and started to paint again after freshman year, it was very slow. Because I only painted when I felt like it. It wasn't an obligation and it's never been about skill.

I don't have to think about whether it's good or bad. I just feel like painting so I'm going to paint.

And it's always emotional. When I paint, it is an emotional process.

TSH: And I think that's part of that flight from the technique. The technique would take you out of the feeling and it would estrange you from what you're trying to do.

CGS: To stick with the metaphor, when I paint when I'm feeling all my deep feelings, I'm experiencing my wilderness.

If I were to paint for technique and because I want to create the perfect picture, that would be a colonial garden that I created that has a nice safe playground.

TSH: I think that's also why you're resistant to sharing your art. You only show some of your paintings to some people, sometimes in some ways. You don't Instagram every picture trying to get all the likes, that's not the point.

CGS: There was a really long time where I wasn't telling anyone aside from my mom and my best friend that I was painting. Unless somebody starts the conversation, unless they ask, I don't say anything about the meaning of my paintings.

TSH: But that's because it's not for somebody else.

CGS: If somebody wants to know what it's about, I'll tell them, but so frequently, and I think this is just a product of the colonial structures that we live in, but people don't really want to know.

I'm looking at one of my paintings. It has these sketches of women's bodies on it, it has some crosses under red paint, it has 'forever' covered up with red paint. It says, 'this too shall pass' with other song lyrics that are

partially visible. And it's has a bunch of colors that remind me of Paria. That painting is about my wilderness¹³.

If other people are not actively engaging in their own wilderness, they're not going to want to know about my wilderness. I've recognized that with my paintings over the past few years. The people that are recognizing their wilderness and are taking the time to walk through the depths of their inner world, they'll be the ones that can walk through the depths of my inner world.

When I'm talking to somebody else, what we're doing right now, it's not about our personal inner worlds at this point, it's about the wilderness around us. Because we're two people together, that's what it is and, on these trips, it's not just about a bunch of people. It's about the people always, but we're creating that constellation.

TSH: We both recognize our status as burning balls of fire in a vast blackness and we're willing to own that. That's always been a really fascinating thing about our relationship as scholars, as human beings, as learners, because most of the time that we've had together, we have been looking together at some third thing. But what we've so consistently done and one of the reasons that I've always loved learning with you, and honestly,

¹³Figure 10: "Abstract no. 2," Acrylic on Canvas, February 2021

one of the reasons that I wanted to make sure that this thesis was being done for the right reasons was because that third thing that we've been looking at has been a mirror that helps us see each other and ourselves.

I think this goes back to what you're saying about how as you become more and more comfortable with your own wilderness, you have begun to require that of others. I think that must be really complicated.

Here's another quote from Simpson,

“I understand settler colonialism’s present structure as one that is formed and maintained by a series of processes for the purposes of dispossessing that create a scaffolding within which my relationship to the state is contained¹⁴.”

Settler colonialism is constantly engaged in these processes of containment and dispossession. We're constantly being filled in with something foreign in order to keep us from living there ourselves.

CGS: and to keep us as a product for others.

TSH: to consume. And you resist that.

I'm thinking back to this story that you told in one of our earlier conversations. I feel like it might have been at church, and you were told you must always keep your knees together. There was this idea that not only

¹⁴Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 44

God, but the older men around you needed you to do that, so that your inner wilderness wouldn't distract them.

Just as a male person living in this world, I don't know how you survived. It's heartbreaking.

CGS: That's going back to the mind body disconnect. Because it's not about my inner wilderness at all. They weren't seeing the possibilities of an inner wilderness within me; I was just this vessel that who knows what it holds but the outside is distracting.

TSH: Think about that language of vessel. You need to be dammed up so that you can be that vessel. That's toxic.

And then the question becomes how we get away from that and I think *Simpson teaches that relationality and reciprocity is where you have to start.*

*On De-Coloniality*¹⁵

TSH: So, finally we're going to be talking about *On De-Coloniality* by Katherine E Walsh and Walter D Mignolo from Duke University Press. For me, this was one of the biggest texts that we read. We didn't read the whole thing, but for me, it was one of these texts that every time I sat down to read it before one of our meetings, there was some kind of perspective shifting moment that happened. I'm curious to ask you whether you had the same experience. What was your experience reading this book before we even started talking about the concept?

CGS: I think my experience was a little different than yours. This book was really difficult to read and understand. Every time I picked it up, I was met with big words and concepts that I didn't fully understand. Throughout each section, I would grasp at a few paragraphs where I could understand the concept. It felt very big and above me, the most academic work we read which was just difficult to process.

TSH: This is a work of theory, this is the work of de-colonial theory which neither of us were that familiar with. Especially in comparison to the Simpson book that we read, the tone is very different. It's more conceptual,

¹⁵Decoloniality is defined within this project as the physical and political shift of power from colonizing powers and their subjects that leads to cultural, social, psychological, and economic freedom for individuals.

more abstract so I understand why you would feel that way. We talked about whether we could turn what you had been thinking about and feeling into something academic. This text to me was where we sort of proved that this is definitely an academic project because we're reading this big honking book.

CGS: I think this might have been the first one we read that showed us what we were doing. I think there's a reason we only read the first third because that's when it talks about this idea of practice¹⁶.

TSH: A lot of what we read in the first third was sort of an overview of what other people have said and the basics of decolonial thought, as it existed before this book.

Do you remember what the purpose of starting out with what people are doing was, before getting into the theory stuff?

CGS: They said in the book that that's how it goes. That is what decoloniality and their idea of insurgency is¹⁷. That's how it naturally occurs. Most of these people weren't studying theory, they were just actively responding to the controls of colonialism in their life.

¹⁶Practice was the focus of the first section of *On Decoloniality* because decoloniality is contextual, relational, practice based, and lived. Experiences are how we create theory. As such, theory in this project is viewed not just as an intellectual pursuit, but also the action that spurs on intellectual pursuits.

¹⁷Insurgency is defined in this text as the “act-action of creation, construction and intervention” that puts forth a renewal, restoration, or revival of knowledges, life practices, and re-existence. In short, insurgency is an active uprising against colonial structures. Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, (Duke University Press, 2018), 34

TSH: A lot of the resistance movements or insurgent movements that Mignolo¹⁸ and Walsh describe, the theory comes after the action.

I wouldn't necessarily say they react to colonial domination, but they respond first and then theorize about that response. Why do the one first and then the other later?

CGS: This is one of the sections I've highlighted. But they said, "without practice no pathways are made¹⁹."

It's the action against colonialism that shows us what we're theorizing about and what we need to be considering. They describe how the path can't be made without points of reference that permit one to traverse topography and labyrinths unknown. This book, for us, was that, showing us the ways it's already been done.

Those stories open the pathway for others, and they also become those waypoints so that others can continue that work of practice to continue making the path.

TSH: You need to pay attention to the path that other people have walked before you in order to understand how a compass might help you go further. The compass is this abstract theoretical orientation. I feel like that

¹⁸Some examples include the Zapatistas, the Ecuador Indigenous movements, movements of African descendants, and First Nation movements.

¹⁹Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, (Duke University Press, 2018), 19

translates really well into the way we have approached this thesis. You were engaged in the practice before we even formally began. That's what we've been talking about this whole time. The imagery of a pathway, I don't know if you meant to do that, but that's literally what you did. You started walking the path and feeling its meaningfulness before you had a conceptual framework in which to explain it.

CGS: And, before I really knew where it would lead and before I knew how it would impact what I would do in the future. I think it's impacted you. I was responding to the world around me and the world within me. But I didn't know what it was going to lead to, and I wasn't really thinking about that.

TSH: You're absolutely right that this project has affected me, because I am in this interesting position as your thesis advisor where I'm theoretically supposed to be guiding you. But I think we both understood from the beginning that was not how this project was going to go because that's never how our relationship has been. I've always been your professor, but I've facilitated your learning process.

If resurgence begins with practice, and if you have been engaged in resurgence, before we get into what they say in *On De-Coloniality*, what were you resurging against and how was it colonial?

CGS: When I started, I was really revolting against the confines I put on my own life; that I was going to get married to a boy, that I was going to

be a good Christian, more and more my whiteness became part of it, not being able to express myself the way that I chose.

I think about those early classes, in freshman year, that were not creative in any way. When I first started making these paintings, it was just like well, I'm just going to make them.

TSH: It was all these abstract theoretical mappings. You had a path that you were supposed to walk that you could tell wasn't going to lead you to a place you wanted to be. That is why this has been such an organic, fairly nonlinear thesis process, because we've been trying to figure out how you can lead the way here. I think that's why the first chapter of the thesis is your art and your words. We're following the organization of de-colonial thought in that way. Neither of us are really in charge of these conversations, that's not the point.

I'm looking at the very first page of the introduction,

“In our conception of practice, our conception and practice of de-coloniality in this book and series, we do not pretend to provide global answers or sketch global designs for liberation, even less to propose new abstract universals. We are interested instead in relationality²⁰.”

²⁰Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, (Duke University Press, 2018), 2

For me, that is what we're doing. We are using our relationship as human beings but also our relationship to various abstractions that both of us are dubious about and frankly unwilling to participate in, to reflect. We're using this opportunity to think about our own resurgence.

So why is relationality so important? What do you think about that?

CGS: I love how it connects everything we've been discussing. Every text we've read has talked about this idea of relationality. In *On De-Coloniality*, it discusses how colonial wisdom is very linked to modernity²¹, which emerged when Europeans came over. It creates this hierarchical relationship between everything. It rejects that relationality, and it creates dehumanization and in-authenticity.

Part of the importance of this idea of de-coloniality is that it's about practice. It's a lived thing. We can't have it without relationships and community. Our practice is not in a void, it's here and it's in me and my coworkers that I'm going to guide a trip with, it's between you and your family that you live with. Referencing back to Simpson, when we were talking about how they would go to the elders for support in what they were doing.

²¹Discussed in Part One of *On Decoloniality*, most indigenous groups have ancient knowledge and wisdom that was destroyed when Europeans arrived. Additionally, Europeans brought a colonial mindset and knowledge that was new to everyone.

That's what we keep coming back to, that's why this project is important because we're doing that.

This lived story and this lived practice is built in relationships and that brings about humanization of myself.

TSH: Because it's not hierarchical. So, there's something about hierarchy, that is abstract and universalist and anti-practice. Honestly that's a lot of what you and I have been resurging against.

But from different standpoints because you've been taught that as a female human being, you should be subordinate in a number of very complex ways and I've been taught that, particularly as a white male professor at a university, I'm supposed to be superior in a number of abstract complex ways. For me that's always a massive challenge because I don't actually think I'm any smarter than my students. I really don't live with that conviction. I have to figure out, how can it be ethical for me to be up here teaching and professing, when I am not actually superior to the people I'm professing to. What I generally try to do is to create relationships that are as horizontal as possible within the confines of the framework that we have.

One of the other relationships, one of the other ways in which relationality matters is not just you and me or us to our circumstances but also us to ourselves in those circumstances.

CGS: The hierarchy works when both people let it. We're taking an active stance against it and removing ourselves from it, in any way we can.

TSH: To the degree that we can because part of the relationality that we're engaging in, it is a relationship precisely to our resurgence in relation to colonial assumptions.

CGS: This makes me think about the section about how America was named, how America, as we know it today, used to be called Abya Yala²². When the colonists came, they changed its name. Walsh talks about how this was a form of control and power. The name America is a feminine name; they didn't name America Americo, which would have been the masculine. This naming was a way of processing and taking over the narrative and the stories that were being told of this land and I remember when we first read this, and it's funny because now that I read it, I'm not feeling the same way, but I remember it feeling super personal, almost like she was writing about something that had happened to me.

TSH: I'm thinking about this particular quote that states,

“The European baptizing of the continent drastically modified the here to for history plurality and social, cultural, economic, spiritual territorial and existential foundation of these lands,

²²Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, (Duke University Press, 2018), 21, 22

making it by naming it a singular unit seen and defined from the European gaze²³.”

I’m thinking about why that would feel personal to you and that’s a similar story to your young life, even down to the baptizing. A lot of what you were told early on in your life was intended to name your experiences such that you could no longer name them yourself. To map out a path for you that you didn’t get to map out yourself.

CGS: I think especially throughout high school and really that first year of college as well. Still, with my male coworkers, I don’t frequently feel any harassment from most of them, but there have been times when the difference between me and them has been apparent. It feels like they’re taking the narrative and the story away from what I know is true or what I inherently know about myself and about the other women in my life.

TSH: Like the European gaze, it’s the male gaze. It’s still colonial.

CGS: As a female, I don’t really feel that it’s a hierarchical relationship, but I think many of the men in my life just subconsciously have a superiority over me. It gets the most difficult when I find myself engaging in their narrative and their stories. When I find myself subconsciously telling myself that I can’t do something, because I’m weak or because I’m not strong

enough or when I start thinking that having the emotions and feelings I have is a bad thing and it's making me a bad leader or a bad rock wall instructor. That's just me participating in that story because of what I've been told, when it's not in any way true. I submit myself to that hierarchical relationship.

TSH: That's the thing, why is that wrong if it's still a relationship? Because if we're so excited about relationality, isn't hierarchy a form of relationship?

CGS: It is, but only because it's between two entities. I think there is an element that both are choosing it, whether it's a conscious choice or not, which is a weird idea. But that's why insurgency can happen. I am an individual with active choice, agency, I guess is what it's called.

Yesterday, for my creative writing class, we read a short story. It was written in 2020, so it's about a lot of things, climate change and forest fires and the presidential election and North Korea, all these big things but really the whole story was that a woman was being cheated on. She only came to that conclusion or found out the truth, at the very end. But there's all these moments in the story where you, as a reader, know she's being cheated on. Even throughout the story, I think she knows she's been cheated on.

In the class yesterday, people were just tearing this character apart, they said that she had no agency, she was so passive. I almost stood up and walked out because I was going to start crying but one of the girls said,

“Can you imagine what kind of girl would know that her boyfriend is cheating on her and then keep dating him?”

And everyone in the class was just like I know, can you imagine that, who would do that. I was just sitting there but I really wanted to raise my hand and say hold up, this story is so real. This is such a human thing. Why are we ripping it to shreds? I’m only thinking about it because of this whole thing about agency. She was still participating in that relationship, she was still actively part of it, but she didn't have agency of her own actions, because she was still caught in this passivity. It keeps coming back to the idea of dehumanization and being authentic. It’s two completely different things, the hierarchical controls of the colonial world we live in, and a girl being cheated on by her boyfriend.

TSH: At the same time, it's not.

CGS: It's not at all. We allow ourselves to be dehumanized, to have our feelings, what we need, as humans be negated. To tell ourselves a different narrative then is really authentic and true before us.

I think there's lots of different reasons we might enter that passivity. This idea of apathy keeps coming up when we can't grapple with the darkness that might be around us or before us or within us. It becomes really easy to be apathetic and take a passive route.

We're talking about a colonial structure that has been around for the past 800-ish years in America. We're talking about our land and our history. That's a really long time and the hierarchical structures can become comfortable, in the same way that when you've been dating somebody and love them, it becomes comfortable. You don't want to leave, even if you know that there's something bad. I think that's why we're back to practice, that's why this practice can be so important.

I'm thinking about Idaho and my winter trip there. Normally the trails that I go on already exist. There are two places where they're not, one is Paria actually because you're following a river. You're never actually making a trail; you're just walking through a river and it's a canyon so if you go too far one direction, you're hitting a wall.

The other place that I didn't have a trail was Idaho because the trail that's normally there in summer was covered by four feet of snow. It was snowing while we were there, so we all had to take turns in our skis with our sleds stomping down the four feet of snow in front of us. It was exhausting. Some of us could only do it for about, I want to say 30 minutes but, honestly, I don't even know if I was at the front for that long. It might have been shorter than that, but it felt like forever.

I didn't want to give up, but eventually, it was so tiring, I couldn't continue making the trail. You're pushing through, in this situation, it was heavy snow that had been falling and resting and accumulating for the whole winter season. It's difficult work to do.

TSH: This is a perfect image for why it's so hard and why it's so important.

CGS: It comes back to the idea of constellations too, how we each have a branch of this story. It's so important that they wrote this book for us to read, because I would never have been in Mexico, instead of reading about the Zapatistas²⁴. They were a huge insurgent movement. I remember reading about them and it was inspiring²⁵. Each of these stories of people pushing against the colonial structures is somebody taking the turn at the front and stomping down the snow. This thesis hasn't been easy. It's been hard emotional work, hard theoretical reading, a lot of time spent in my apartment, a lot of time spent outside. But I'm stomping down the snow. I'm creating that pathway for somebody else.

TSH: And that's why it doesn't feel the same. That's why it doesn't feel the same to read it again. Because you remember. The snow is stomped

²⁴The Zapatistas is a group in southern Mexico that has been fighting since the early 1990s for independence from the country of Mexico.

²⁵Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, (Duke University Press, 2018), 16

down now, we've seen this constellation and now we're returning to it and considering it more carefully. It's not a whole new sky anymore.

I want to get back to this discussion of cheating. Because I really do think it's connected. One of the reasons that this character in this story doesn't bring to consciousness her own experience of being cheated is because it's easier. That, in a de-colonial sense, is a lack of agency. But one of the things that I keep thinking is a Marxist framework and Marx is all about false consciousness.

A lot of the forms of relation that we are given under a colonial system create, sustain, maintain a false consciousness about who we are and how we relate to each other. When you're talking to a male coworker at the rock wall and he comments on the attractiveness of some female person, he is engaging in false consciousness, because it's easy and pleasurable. But it's creating a false relationship between him and this other person, between him and you, but also potentially between you and yourself and that's a moment where you have to stomp down that snow. What's scary about it is that sometimes other people's false consciousness are part of the snow. At which point it begins to feel antagonistic even though that's not the intent. But sometimes in order to stomp down the snow, you have to say that was a sexist comment and you shouldn't say that and here's why. Because truly being in relation to that male coworker requires you to make a new path,

rather than follow this hierarchical relationship between men and women in which women just smile and nod, even if they disagree.

I think that's totally connected and honestly, I think that the response of your class was part of that hierarchical relationship. That's why you wanted to get up and leave because that was the wrong path.

CGS: Simpson spoke so much about empathy, and this shared human existence. *On-Decoloniality* doesn't touch on it as much but to me it comes back to how each story that's being told has to be looked at through a really loving, caring framework. That is the way we exit that hierarchy. It's all empathy; that response to a coworker when they say that is me engaging in loving care because I care so deeply that one, I'm caring for myself in that moment to try and remove one narrative but it's also inviting them to step out of that hierarchical framework because it's not good for anyone.

TSH: you're stretching out your hand to him and saying come walk on the right path because that one's not going to take you anywhere you actually want to go.

What does it mean to remember? I'm thinking about this image of the land as feminine. There's a lot to unpack there, some of which is very problematic, because if you figure the land is feminine and the masculine conqueror is engaged in some sort of relation to the feminized land, you can get very colonial very quickly.

But I don't think that's what Mignolo and Walsh were trying to do. I almost wonder if there's yet another connection to this discussion about cheating. By engaging in colonial thought, you're cheating on the land. You're engaging in a damaging relationship with coloniality rather than with Abya Yala. When you do that, when you leave the path of de-colonial practices, you get lost.

CGS: I don't think it is that it's a female name that's the problem necessarily. If we look at indigenous stories about the conceptualization of the world, it's frequently a feminine character that creates the world. Greek and Roman stories are always centered around one of the men that's born from the mom.

But a lot of the indigenous stories are very centered on a feminine figure that creates all life around us, which is interesting because we keep going back to this idea that the womb is where women get their worth. It's this thing of power and control. But it's really interesting to look at stories and histories, where that component of being a woman is just good. It's not used for control, and it's not used as their whole worth. It's good. When we look at it like that, I can get super woo-woo about the land, but when it's just a gift that the land is freely giving us and we take the time to consider that relationship, it can be a really beautiful, reciprocal, humanizing relationship.

When we enter back into colonial forms of power, it will always lead to us hurting the land and removing ourselves from that reciprocal relationship. When you're in a relationship with somebody, it's good, because there's a mutual understanding and connection and there's reciprocity. What hurts when people cheat is that they remove themselves from that.

TSH: Our reciprocal relation to the land is partly a tool for teaching us about our relation to ourselves. It's entirely possible to cheat on yourself, through false consciousness, through taking on this colonial framework and saying I matter because of my place in this abstract universalism hierarchy. But that's the opposite of why you matter. That is, in fact, taking away your ability to matter because it takes away your relationship to literal matter, the earth on which you walk. If this is just the place where your shoes go, that's a mess. If you see yourself as just a meat envelope carrying around what really matters, which is your brain or your soul, then you're not going to treat yourself well. You're going to have a different relationship to yourself and it's going to be a colonial relationship.

CGS: It makes me think about the ways that religion makes us cheat on ourselves and on the land. Religion almost makes it like we're married to heaven, the whole spiritual realm, and we're cheating on it with earth. We're spiritual beings, we're heavenly beings, who will one day be reunited with this long-distance love affair that we are married to.

TSH: And we have to stay faithful to.

CGS: We have to stay faithful to it and we can't partake in this world. There are parts of it that I'm like sure, don't kill people, and don't cheat on your spouse in Vegas and have sex with people while you're married to somebody else.

TSH: It's the story of human imperfection. I agree that humans are imperfect. The idea that we've fallen.

CGS: And that we're constantly in this struggle to get out of the sticky goo of Earth. We're just trying to stay here until one day when we get rescued. And it's so weird because there's a lot of good things down here. There are a lot of great things. This goes back to original sin, where us bad people should not partake but there are some great places to go, there are some great things to see, there's really good food to eat.

That's part of our relationship with earth, to fully partake in it and fully enjoy it. This goes back to these hierarchical relationships that we find ourselves in, these power dynamics where in the subordinate position you don't get to enjoy any of it. It removes you from it and it removes the people in power from it, because they're just enjoying things because they're in power not because of this real authentic enjoyment of it. Because that source of pleasure is extrinsic to the actual experience.

TSH: It's an abstraction that's put on it that says this is why you should be happy. What's odd to me is that there is another story to be told within a religious framework about creation. Because when you call it creation, you are naming a reciprocal relationship to the divine. There's this massive tension and I feel it particularly here at Baylor, where there is a large number of Christian people.

There are some people who see our relationship to creation in what could potentially be that colonial way, but then there are other people who really do see the wilderness within as our version of original sin, our version of the Garden of Eden blasted by human presence.

This is ancient history, but in the Reagan White House, there were a lot of apocalyptic thinkers. A lot of the religious conservatives that worked in the Reagan White House truly thought that the end times were coming. So, they made a lot of environmental policies that were incredibly damaging because they thought it wasn't going to be around. This is also where the really odd, troubled relationship to Israel comes from. For a significant number of religious Conservatives, the end times will come when particular things happen politically in Israel, so we need to make those things happen as part of the Christian story. Which means that we support, I mean what some people would call an apartheid state, what is certainly a troubling political phenomenon.

This is not just some whoo-who, we need to love Gaia kind of thing. This has massive political effects that you can point to and say like these people engaged in colonial abstract universalism thinking about the world and it had bad effects. For me, that is at once what is so liberating and so hard about what we're doing. It works on every single level, it's about interdependence, it's about inter-relationships, but it's also about my relationship to myself. It's about the United States' relationship to the world. It's about our political process. There's nothing outside the frame. That makes it powerful but that also makes it terrifying.

CGS: We're looking at the scary, what makes the wilderness, the wilderness. And it's horrible. This leads well to this quote,

“Busta con hacerle una grieta²⁶”

It means ‘it is enough to make a crack in it,’ and I remember, we read this quote in connection with his other quote,

“When enough houses are built, the hegemony of the Masters house, and in fact mastery itself, will cease to maintain its imperial status²⁷.”

²⁶Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, (Duke University Press, 2018), 7, 82.

I remember reading both of those and feeling hopeful. We're looking at the wilderness in so many different places. We're looking at the ways that colonialism has taken hold. It's placed really terrible controls over us. Yet what we're doing, what people are doing all over the world, is just making cracks and that's enough. Once you crack open your door, if the light is on in the other room, the light is going to get in.

TSH: That image of making more houses. One of the things that I really appreciated about de-colonial theory is that it's not reactive, in the sense that it does not seek to replace one hierarchical relation with another. The idea that you can't tear down the master's house with the master's tools always troubled me precisely because, why are we so concerned about the master's house?

Nuts to the master's house, let's build a different house and live there. Maybe we need more houses, let's have a neighborhood. Because if we're always focused on tearing down the master's house, then we're always focused on mastery and mastery as a concept. Whereas if we build multiple houses, it creates relationality. It creates multiplied potential realities for those relations; there's not just one, there's not even just two or three. There's this endlessly multiplying potential for new relationships. That is hopeful because if there's one thing humans are, it's chaotic. Part of the point of colonial hierarchy is to tame the chaos that ensued after the Columbian

Exchange. Because that chaos was understood to be bad. In fact, indigenous forms of sociality were not even recognized as forms of social reality, they were just seen as chaotic. But what we're doing is changing the way we see chaos as something destructive and instead treating it as something generative. Instead of trying to minimize it, we're just saying there it is.

This is why I like the language of resurgence, rather than insurgency. This is not a project where we are reacting against your past or the way outdoor recreation works now or our placement in an academic institution, we are responding to it, using a creative practice to simply say yes and, here's another way, an alternative, not necessarily better or worse just different.

CGS: And just the natural response.

Chapter Three

Concluding the Theory

As I finished transcribing the conversations above, I was stuck with how I could apply the theory that has been discussed throughout this project to outdoor recreation as a whole, beyond just my own experience. When I read through those conversations, I am continually struck by the need for a deep, whole-hearted empathy for oneself and the world in which we live. In order to create a more authentic and inclusive experience of outdoor recreation, we need to first extend empathy and loving care to ourselves, exploring the wilderness that we each contain within ourselves. When we extend this love to ourselves, we learn how to extend that love to the wilderness that surrounds us.

Beyond this internal empathy, we have to take steps to create long-term relationships with the land around us, relationships that are deeper than what the land can give us and what success we can gain from the land. We need to enter reciprocal relationships with the land we recreate on, living with thankfulness and giving back with whatever means we have. As we increase our connection to the land we live on and recreate on, we will naturally become more kind to the people we encounter.

And that is the natural next step of creating more authentic experiences in the outdoors; telling our own stories and listening intently when we have the opportunity to hear others. I can imagine the beauty of the constellation that will come into creation when we invite those around us to hear our story, to take a look at our wilderness, when we sit around the campfire under the stars, when we welcome vulnerability to take hold in our lives and create space for others to do the same.

In the end, this is how we will create the caring, whole-bodied, authentic experience of outdoor recreation that can instill deep, long-lasting change for those involved, and that will invite real change into our daily lives.

Conclusion

This spring, I traveled back out West, along the same path that I had taken three years earlier. I woke up before the sun and carried by bags to the SLC, pulled myself into the van filled with quiet whispers and excited murmurs, and followed Highway 6 out through the Texas countryside, the flat stretches of golden plains leading us past cattle fields and small towns, till we finally joined the train that runs alongside the highway for miles and found ourselves in New Mexico, and then on the never-ending stretch of I-40 that brought us through Albuquerque and Flagstaff, passing the Whole Foods I'd stopped in Freshman year, camping at the same BLM site in Grants, New Mexico, watching the sunset on the same hills, the tall pines emerging as we approached the peaks above Flagstaff, until finally, my feet were back in the Paria River and I was once again following the curves of the canyon, the deep red, the salmon orange, the burnt brick, and the magenta black mixing before my eyes, the river murky and silty like chocolate mud, the sun lighting up one side and casting the other into a dark shadow, the moon rising above the contours of the rock, and the canyon walls holding me as I fell asleep.

My route was the same but so many other things were different on this trip. As I walked, carrying the weight of my food, water, and shelter on my back, I reflected on what had changed, within myself, within the world,

and within this canyon that had first introduced me to the outdoors and had altered my life in such undeniable ways. I was the guide for this trip, fully in charge of a group of 7 participants, co-leading with two other students. I had planned, prepped, and prepared for this week in Arizona, packing the food and gear, running over the itinerary until I had it memorized, considering what could go wrong and planning for each misstep, and I felt the responsibility of it all. I also felt stronger, my body carrying me further each day than it had freshman year, the soreness from each day only slight compared to that first trip, and I felt like I could handle whatever came at us, the cold feet, the heavy packs, even an evacuation if we needed to. And I didn't feel that same connection with the canyon I once had; it felt more like an old friend that I knew well but who wasn't mine anymore. Like I know I'll see it again someday, but it isn't my true love anymore, the way it has occupied my mind never-endingly since that first trip. Like a breakup you can't get over until you see them again, until you see how much else you've been loving in their absence. Like that canyon had given me a gift and on this second trip I was returning that gift by helping another group fall in love with what it had to offer.

The magic that is found outside is undeniable. The stillness, confidence, kindness, and the deep deep deep trueness that arises when we spend time outside alters us when we allow it, bringing us to a more

authentic place within ourselves, showing us an empathy and compassion for ourselves, those around us, and this beautiful and tragic world we live within.

As I reflect on the past three years, I can see now that my life has followed the rhythms of the landscapes, I've continually found myself in. I've experienced beautiful mountain peaks, from deep deep friendships, falling in love fully and wholeheartedly, sunrises that have reminded me what it means to be alive, and yet, I've also found myself within the struggles of life that reflect the deep valleys between mountain peaks and the canyons walls of the southwest. I've experienced heartache upon heartache during this project, some of which I thought would keep me from finishing.

When I look back on my 18-year-old self, the girl who first set foot in Paria Canyon and set off to backpack that week, I'm struck by how limited my existence was. I was so intent on performing and succeeding and being the Christian, selfless, successful, girlfriend, daughter, and friend that I thought was wanted of me. What I'm most thankful for over the past three years, is the continual empathy I've been given from the land I've spent time on and from the people I've met who have invited me deeper into the authenticity of my human experience. I'm most thankful for the magic that exists in the wilderness before me, around me, and within me, the magic that invites us to know ourselves more intimately and to extend our hand to those behind us.

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