Trajectory 1 – Phenomenology of Appalachia

One intended path for my project at Berea was to begin to construct a preliminary phenomenological study of Appalachian performance through critical engagement with the diverse performance collections, including but not limited to the Lomax Collection, housed at Berea College. The research draws from specifically from an ongoing line of philosophical work (Merleau-Ponty; Butler; Noë) focused on the body as a means of knowing and being in the world. The documentation of “body schema” is present throughout the archives at Berea College, from dance-related sources, such as: Susan Spalding’s field films of dance halls and Peter Roger’s folk dance oral histories to more complex references in song texts, like those captured in eastern Kentucky by Alan Lomax. The primary question for this research trajectory is: what do Appalachian bodies, movement, and gesture reveal about being of Appalachia? The project aims to reveal embodied Appalachia, both differences and continuities across time, from heavily prescribed movement such as dance to the ways we interact in our daily lives. While this report begins to trace a picture of that work, it remains in process though heavily shaped by the research undertaken as a result of the fellowship.

My theoretical grounding is primarily informed by the philosophical work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who first introduced scholarship on mapping what he called a “body schema” (113). Our physical presence is our primary mechanism for
knowing the world around us, and Merleau-Ponty provides a framework for understanding how we know from being physically in the world. And that understanding begins with acknowledging that “our body is not primarily in space: it is of it” (170). The project asks, what can the performing arts archive reveal to us about the Appalachian body as a mechanism of knowing Appalachian-ness? I believe that there is a lot to learn. As Merleau-Ponty would note, “our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings” (175). My goal is to better identify those meanings and how we come to know them through performance and its residue captured in the Archive.

Philosopher Alva Noë further builds on these ideas in his current research when he notes “The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction . . . all perception is touch-like in this way: Perceptual experience acquires content thanks to our possession of bodily skills. What we perceive is determined by what we do (or what we know how to do); it is determined by what we are ready to do . . . . we enact our perceptual experience; we act out” (Noë 1). Noë has been particularly outspoken about dance performance itself as a form of scholarly research and has observed that “dance is modeling our behavior towards one another” (Solano).

It is equally important to note the limitations of this particular project with regard to the major strains of thought currently forming around bodies, movement, and gesture. Notably, I have not sought to engage directly with very important work
concerning sex, gender, and race. But, I will note here that these are absolutely crucial avenues for exploration and engagement with Appalachian embodiment. As Butler notes, “The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a ‘one’ who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today” (2011). And, Berea’s very own bell hooks reminded the audience captivated by her keynote lecture at the 2015 Appalachia Symposium to “think about how the reality of racism affected touch.”

This current project proposes to explore a multi-modal approach through several frames of inquiry:

- Dance (including calling), movement, gesture, and space negotiation
- Lyrical evidence of physicality
- Musical performance as micro-dance
- Bodies in Appalachian literature

Audiovisual documentation contained in the archives at Berea reveals much about how dance is physically realized (through the visual record) and described textually. Alan Lomax himself was a primary contributor (with Bartenieff and Pauley) to the concept of “Choreometrics,” which provides methods for studying dance as a “culturally constructed communicative behavior.” (It is important to note that after decades of neglect, Choreometrics is seeing a re-emergence as new technologies and tools of the digital environment are finally catching up with its theoretical concepts and intellectual promise. See: [http://www.reimaginechoreometrics.com/](http://www.reimaginechoreometrics.com/)). The avid
researcher is therefore enthralled to see the documentary film footage captured in 1937 by Alan Lomax in eastern Kentucky, especially square dancing seen in the Pine Mountain Settlement School. Though the footage is brief, much is revealed about approaches to dancing at that time and in that place, including but not limited to the caller participating in the dance; step styles and pacing; and the apparent likelihood that there was only clapping (and not music) to accompany the dancers.

Dance calling (as mediation of music and dance) is particularly interesting because it is a prescription of intentional physical activity that is essentially a constructed relationship between the caller and dancers (Spalding 2014, 54). Dance calling itself is built upon taxonomies of modes of movement (e.g. “Swing that girl from Arkansas”; “Lady 'Round the Gent, Gent Don't Go”; “Lady Falls Through the Old Side Door, Side Couple Swings”; “Back to the Right and Around Old Crazy” [Napier]; “Walk the Highway” [Laufman]). But, even further, dance calling clearly imposes physical relationships and determines the arrangement of bodies in space, as Napier notes, “I find that to call from the floor gives you a much better control of the dance. You can keep up with the movements and you yourself can get a better ‘feeling’ of the dance” (6).

Among those resources at Berea College Archives that were most revealing with regard to the idiosyncrasies of dance calling were the oral histories collected by Spalding (SC VD 225) and Rogers (SAA 116). Not only were these resources exhaustively descriptive in providing detailed taxonomies of dance calling
terminology, they revealed layers of meaning otherwise hidden from the plain view of simply hearing the calls at a dance.

Of particular note in this aspect of the research remains the dynamic between dance as an activity accomplished in the body and the perception of tension with prevailing religious sentiment. Informant Helen Baker (SC VD 225-005) notes, “It was a sin to dance. I was raised believing that. I've done it and I see nothing wrong with it. It's good exercise.” In the same video, Pauline and Emmett Cassell recall, “There were always some people who thought it was wrong . . . even some people now, but I don’t worry about it.” Ruth Allen Jenkins (SC CD 152-008) tells Spalding that, “Daddy was almost clapped out of the church.” This subject raised the most discussion from my spoken presentation, where issues of historicity, authenticity, and authority seem to intersect rather forcefully. Even stopping in for a cup of coffee on a visit to Lynch, KY, this author noted that a patron in 2015 still needed to mitigate the potential religious threat of enjoying dance by more vocally stating its advantages for good health rather than its potential for personal expression. The record is littered with such statements here at Berea and elsewhere. And, as Loyal Jones aptly noted from the presentation’s audience on September 30, 2015, it was not without good reason historically, as some song lyrics below reveal.

Lyrical and narrative content in songs reveal much about physicality and embodiment in Appalachia. When we sing, we say a lot about what happens to our physical beings and how we interact with one another in space. Every topic, from
romantic relationships to labor movements, provides a forensic opportunity for a better understanding of an Appalachian phenomenology. And the implications of knowing more about being of Appalachia stretch beyond the stage into what Herbert and Reid have called the “body~place~commons” (39), a complex net of interdependencies of culture, economy, and politics.

Along this line of inquiry, the Lomax recordings were particularly helpful and fruitful in content. One easily finds reference to consumption of alcohol, often in contexts of dance and “frolics.” In her performance of “Uncle Joe” (1937-10-21), Nancy Stacy of Hazard, KY sings, “The hill’s so steep, and the road’s so muddy, and I’m so drunk, and I can’t stand steady. And you won’t to get to heaven, Uncle Joe, Uncle Joe, you won’t get to heaven, Uncle Joe.” Likewise, in their rendition of “Hot Corn” (1937-10-23), Pauline Fannin, Gladys Wilder, and Dawn Leda Lewis intone, “Hot corn cold corn bring along the demijohn. Farewell, baby, I’ll meet you in the morning, yes sir. Upstairs downstairs down in the kitchen a-rarin and a-pitchin, yes sir. Preacher is a-comin and the children are a-cryin, chickens are a running and the toenails are a-flyin, yes sir.”

And one relishes the acknowledgement of religious conflict as a transition point here back to the lovelorn relationships of youth, their potential interference with cultivated religious character, and song as a means of communicating what is spoke with greater difficulty. In “Jenny Get Around” (1937-10-26), JM Mullins of Lacy Creek, KY declares, “My true love in the sugar tree, shaking love down. My J-bird up
in the aching tree, shaking aching down.” Though, many songs need not be so guarded with metaphor. In fact, several songs were very direct about the dangers of love in the dance hall. Clay Begley of Leslie County, KY, in “CCC Blues” (1937-10-01) paints a vivid picture, “It was at the ball he asked me for a dance . . . It was in my father’s hallway where I was led astray . . . young girls, young girls, go on take this warning from me. Never let a CCC boy one inch above your knee.”

In both the archives (Spalding and Rogers) as well as personal conversation around Berea College campus (Deborah Thompson, Samuel Gleaves, Deborah Payne), there were many references to the unique technique of playing musical instruments in the Appalachian style. This was perhaps the least explored territory of my project (surprising in a sense, given my musical background). But, I believe this area to be one worth extensive exploration. Aspects of musical performance absolutely reveal an Appalachian identity and phenomenology of performance, from engagement with the instrument to particular techniques. I will make note of one particular interview from among those collected by Rogers (interview with Lee Sexton, SC CT 852-009) in which idiosyncrasies of Kentucky banjo playing were discussed in great detail, including percussive techniques on the instrument itself, and in contrast to banjo playing from Virginia. In essence, the richness of embodiment in playing musical instruments in Appalachia is rich enough to support noticeable variation even across relatively small distances within the region.
I close my report on this research trajectory by highlighting one other aspect of the project that was less pronounced in my original conception but ultimately no less important. Appalachian literature is rich in physical descriptions of both self-awareness and interactions. I draw on two works of fiction here as illustration of a much larger repertoire deserving of phenomenological exploration. In *Tampoline*, a grandfather figure describes an early religious experience, “One May I thought I was possessed by the devil. I wasn’t of course. It was just a kidney infection. But her preacher uncle convinced me it was the devil. He hollered and mashed my head between his hands til the spirit flew out in the yard and holed up in a Chrysler. Her preacher uncle dumped gas on that car and set it blazing. To get that devil out of it” (Gipe 2015). Robert Gipe is particularly gifted in turning humor out of Appalachian bodies. But he paints equally compelling and emotional visions from those same down-home sensibilities when lead character Dawn Jewell states, “When I looked at Keith Kelly my stomach tightened, like there was somebody standing on a tire iron screwing down the lug nuts of my guts.” Or as she describes an admired female character, “Her eyes were two humming outboard motors pushing a boat across summer waters. I water-skied behind her outboard motor eyes, rope tight pulling me across a rough glass lake under a paste-gray sky.”

Silas House, different in approach though no less compelling in vision, also offers perspective on Appalachian bodies in his narrative work. Consider a young boy’s perspective on his environment, “We sat there in silence for a time. I watched her face, waiting for her to tell me more. “Close your eyes, and feel,” she said. I did. I shut
my eyes and listened to the birds. Her hand remained on my wrist for what seemed a long while, but she eased it away. Then the birdcall faded and there was a big silence that made me notice only the sensation in my palm, where my skin was tingling from contact with the old willow. . . . Suddenly there was a faint, building buzz in my hand, as if the tree was humming beneath my palm. The willow was sending me some kind of reassuring message. I was sure of it. The trees were a part of me. I jerked my hand away, like someone who has gotten too close to the flame” (House 2011). And later, as that same young boy watches his parents lovingly interact with one another, “His hands were stained by work but she pulled them up to her face and kissed them although they were grimy with oil and gasoline. ‘I love it when you come home dirty,’ she said in a Mae West voice, and put her lips to his knuckles.” Such descriptions lend themselves to knowing bodies of Appalachia deeply.

*Trajectory 2 – Archives As Performance and Archivist As Performer*

The research project was also driven by an awareness of itself, a kind of meta-narrative of discovery. Working in an archive aggregated around a unifying theme of “performance in Appalachia” is a performance of Appalachian-ness and therefore a practice deserving of focused description itself. As Hecht notes, “. . . archival storying as a methodological tool is a relative newcomer to the academic field of performing arts research. . . . a small but growing number of researchers have documented their experience of working with performing arts material, thus creating a specific niche among archival discourse” (62). Hecht challenges us to “. . .
recognize the archives not as a repository of historical information, but as a site in which the development of new knowledge about possible histories comes to life” (186). I would further expand those notions to include the acknowledgement that archival research is a phenomenologically rich act; and, in this case, one that would reveal much about being of Appalachia.

Borggreen notes, “‘Performing archives’ refers to a process in which human beings create and handle the archives, but it also alludes to how archives are formative in shaping history and thus perform human beings, structure and give form to our thoughts and ideas” (10). She further elaborates that, “The relationship between performance and archive is neither sequential nor binarily constructed, but interacts in intrinsic patterns of exchange and expansion” (15). And, in a subsequent chapter, Roms brings these notions together nicely for my purposes here in stating, “practices blur the boundaries between archival and scholarly and artistic work as distinct activities and reconsiders them as mutual sites of collaboration” (38).

In an effort to reveal as much as possible not only about the archives with which I was interacting but also the ways in which my own personal practice as an archivist (and artist) were driving those interactions, I completed the project by leaving as much material behind as possible as both a new collection and a living resonance of the work itself. This was manifest in several ways. First, Berea College now has a new archival collection bearing my name and this project into which I deposited not only my research notes but also annotations upon those notes as I reflected and
wrote. Secondly, I have created small artistic projects as drafts of larger projects I hope to develop as I grow from this project. Some evidence of that work has also been left behind, such as two animated GIF art projects focused on public art around campus, a handful of soundwalk field audio recordings, and a new draft of a short story in development. Finally, I have arranged to return to Berea College in April 2016 as a guest artist at which time two collaborators and I will set a dance work on community members culled from the archival work I have completed as a part of this project. And, in that way, the fellowship is not only of the archives and of Appalachia but also potentially regenerative of both.

I close this section with a particularly embodied section of that short story, “Do the Sigogglin’ Shuffle”:

Isadora’s fingers hovered across the polyurethaned burly walnut of her carefully uncrafted desk tapping the rhythms of the day’s mantra and catching on the angled bark of an exposed knot perfectly placed by nature amongst her brackery as she resurrected some piece of choreography from the physiological memories of her scapula, T11 in her thoracic, and S4 of her sacral, which in all honesty was experiencing some resonant interference from Hodge’s more recent delivery of a divinely executed cunnilingual monologue reminiscent of Henry the Fifth’s Canterbury (to hold in right and title of the female, indeeeeeeed), but then floundered back to the present task of setting on the homeplace’s mechanic what Isadora knew in her body to be the tilt and twirl, the lean and laze, the grunted diaphragmic heave of a reach for the carburetor of an ’85 Chevy truck just slightly angled upward by the weight of a bed full of feed, alfalfa, and hay; hey, that re-minded her orientation towards a task promised that day and snapped the energy cord that traversed her midline through her cerebellum and brought her eyes back into focus on the mud room door. (Miller)


Trajectory 3 - Publications

In following with both the spirit of the proposed project and my own current intellectual trajectories, I would anticipate three final outputs resulting from the work. First, I will compose a scholarly article to be presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the Appalachian Studies Association and for subsequent submission to a relevant academic journal (TBD from journals such as: *Journal of Appalachian Studies, Appalachian Journal, Journal of Dance Research, Ethnomusicology*, etc.). Secondly, I would continue to develop a series of fictional short stories based on my phenomenological research (such as “Do the Sigogglin’ Shuffle”). I have noted and celebrate the openness with which Appalachian Studies as a field wholeheartedly accepts creative output as a mode of scholarly inquiry. There is ample reason, in the case of a performing arts archive, to expand the audience benefiting from my work to those who are more inclined to read fiction. Indeed, I have suggested a timeline that would also allow for me to attend the Appalachian Symposium at Berea as a means of sharing my work with that collection of authors. Finally, I intend to answer Hecht’s call to the performativity of archives with the regeneration of theatrical events. In creative conversation with colleagues (a dancer, a digital media artist, and a dramaturge), I will develop a new theatrical work inspired by the archival content with which I interact at Berea. Collectively, these three outcomes may be seen as first steps towards a theory and repository of Appalachian physicality, movement, and gesture.
Berea College Archival Resources


Project Bibliography


