

## Roots and rhizomes: On dichotomies false and formative

*Amy Whitcomb*

On my first day, of twenty five, as an Artist-in-Residence in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, I am introduced around headquarters as a ranger and an artist. I shake hands and eagerly offer that the Volunteer-In-Parks shirt is somehow *more* stiff and scratchy than the employee shirt. And I should know. For five summers in my early twenties, I worked as a Parkie, specifically as a “weed warrior” in California’s forests. That is, I was a gardener in double-weight canvas jeans and polyester button-down shirt, toting a specialized shovel to slice through soil and neatly pop unwanted stems up from their bed among native plants. Which is to say that I’m ruined for summer: I have to spend it outside. Nothing less than the Earth’s orbit and tilt has determined my career trajectory, but it’s an elliptical track, of course, and I have no career.

After HQ, I make my way to the backcountry office where I bond with a proper ranger (he wears a taser) over our abilities to cope with sinister frontcountry trappings, like basic hygiene. Indeed, the park housing that is my home and studio for the month came with no shower curtain. This my supervisor had marked on the checklist of semi-endearing deficiencies, including a set of window blinds missing several slats and permanent sap stains on the kitchen linoleum, while I thought, *Oh well*. I plan to use the tub mostly to drain wastewater from my art-making.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the record, art suffers no scrub, rinse, or drain: it develops radically, anchors and absorbs, exists necessarily dirty. I dig that.

As a biological technician ten years ago, I pulled weeds to preserve ecosystem functioning within the bounds of Anglo-historical accuracy. As an Artist-In-Residence now, I pull weeds to make handmade paper. I can't remember how my interest in paper arts began, but it was recent and precipitous. It involved online and coffeeshop conversations with advanced practitioners and hours browsing wood fiber and pulp chemistry textbooks at the local college library. Soon I submitted an A-I-R application to this park and the couple others that mentioned in their calls for proposals plant ecology and a small stipend. I wrote something about inverting my perspective: returning to a park setting as an artist using plant material after my long stint in a park as a plant person sneaking away in the evenings to write.

The first inversion, or shift anyway, of perspective comes when my supervisor leaves my cabin and I meet the previous artists-in-residence, through their artwork. Canon and Kodak prints. Milky blue wash in a stack of cyanotype cards. Bruise-mottled barn wall and black-skinned tomato sky of a watercolor collection. A giant canvas of a pond scene with FILL THIS SPACE written where the water would be. The artwork moves in on me like the humidity—*whole books!* I lament in my journal that night. Other artists have contributed whole books to the park upon completion of their residencies. I momentarily despair and wither; I can't imagine filling the space with anything but blue.<sup>2</sup>

My second eye-opening shift comes the next day during a pre-scheduled tour of the gateway town and nearby artist colony. I meet a few of the artists, who come out of their studios for light conversation and to swap business cards. The jolt is somewhat that their business cards

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<sup>2</sup> When we say “the root of a word,” we mean morpheme: “any minimal grammatical unit or meaningful part of a word that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts, as *the*, *write*, or the *-ed* in *waited*.” I’m reading into it, I know, but *the write waited* taps into something charged for me. It becomes a puzzle. One can, without changing roots, change meaning: *my writing waits*. May one, without uprooting, plunge deeply: *my writing waits why?*

have script signatures on them, not simple Word doc font, but mostly that the artists have business cards, period. One woman with so heavy a Southern accent I can hardly follow our chat demonstrates how she's creating molds as proof of concept for her ceramic show. Pouring the gray goop into basins in a tray, like an ice cube tray, then flipping the tray to extract what look like tiny pitchers. She uses a special knife to scrape away the excess lip, and the clay is so smooth, her motions so smooth, that it becomes clear to me that she's not casting a confidence but exhibiting one. I wonder what I'm proving, ever, with my flimsy concepts on a page. We part saying that we'll meet up for a campfire some night<sup>3</sup>, but we never do even though I send a follow-up email.

Soon I meet the Park Forester, who my supervisor feared would nix my bid for residency because, I think, of issues with site safety. Seated across from her, I ask for maps that outline weed infestations for me to target. Her crew leader enters the room and prints aerial photographs for us so saturated with dark green and cobalt blue that they fall wavy and cold in my palms. Out the window, a downpour begins and ends with a raucous vitality only I seem to notice.<sup>4</sup> The forester invites me to a workday with her crew in the coming week, to collect invasive kudzu, privet, and bittersweet. On the predetermined date, I enter the office to see my participation announced on the whiteboard calendar as "Art Therapy."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One haunts herself by square-rooting: what if the girl did not decamp from a creative writing program at a prestigious college in the publishing powerhouse of New York City, what if she did not wander off toward an ivory tower of science, what if she did not live like she could make love to a dogwood?

<sup>4</sup> If there is (and from *root, n.*, I read) "a fundamental tone of a compound musical tone in a series of harmonies," it's *precipitation* against *tall monopodal phanerophyte*. In other words, I can tell myself that not all scientizing is desecration: sing the wet syllables *phanerophyte!* Then try to say that "rain on tree" is as pleasing an arrangement.

<sup>5</sup> It's not as if I'm trying to get paid to sit in the woods and write poems, though—here is where I speak dryly to let it sink in—this is not too much to ask.

I pull weeds at trailheads, along the edges of parking lots, in the housing area. I strip the bark on my cabin's front stoop, dropping the scraps into separate buckets for inner bark, outer bark, and stem. I cook the inner bark in a caustic solution in a giant stainless steel pot on the cabin's miniature stovetop with the overhead fan on full blast. I beat the cooked fibers out back on a picnic table using a thick, smooth stick. I dilute the pulped fibers in a busser's plastic basin, then I strain them through a 4x6-inch screen stapled to an empty photo frame. The slurry dries in sheet form overnight on my lingerie rack under the ceiling fan. Paper, Parkie-style.

But I pass several afternoons reclined on the cabin's chocolate-brown couch, sapped of the energy to hike and the resolve to process fibers. Number of stems denuded is to sheets of finished paper as amount of anxiety is to writing output—a grossly uneven pairing that leaves me mostly empty. If I am a bridge between epistemologies, between parks for ecology and for aesthetics, let the bridge be the one that spans a creek near where I'm staying: short and unassuming. It is on this arc that I linger early one morning during my third week of residency without obvious intent, eliciting the concern of a father with his young son.

“This ain't no place to be lost, hun,” he says.

Neverminding the *hun*, I can't deny him that I do look disheveled, if not dislocated, in my yoga pants and pajama tunic with flip-flops on my feet.

“I'm not lost,” I snap so surely that this becomes a third jolt. Where does such certainty come from, and where in my subconscious has it been dwelling?

I realize the hints haven't been entirely elusive. It took me less than a week to appreciate the particular incline of my upper lip: it catches sweat well. I landed in the most humid part of the country in the hottest part of the year not because I missed the deadlines for residencies in

Glacier, Denali, Yosemite, Rocky Mountains, as I'd told friends out west, but because mention of fireflies and sassafras rouse delicate memoires from my youth in New England and Virginia. The smell of rain and humus, too, the smell and sound of water (really, so much water, in the soil and clouds and rivers, which have to my delight “prongs” instead of the uninspired “branches” and “forks” where I live in California) have drawn me outside every day of my residency. To what end? I want to make paper as much as I, evidently, want to something sensitive to surface.

On the bridge, I can see how Great Smoky reflects the greening I needed—not from any of its 1,500 tree species or countless rowdy vines, but from its incredible bounty of mushrooms. A staggering array of shapes and colors and sizes on every trail I've hiked, not green but sustaining all the same, they sprout seemingly haphazard not so unlike my life decisions as an adult.<sup>6</sup>

Two teenage girls are walking barefoot in the river. One girl is art. The other is science. They either know nothing of the biting critters and sharp stones beneath their feet, or they know everything about the dangers and how to sidestep them.

It's 2000. It's 2007. It's 2017. Meanwhile I sit bankside, pulling weeds.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rhizotomous, to me: the softer, paler, perfectly fine pseudo-synonym. *Root-like in function or position*. Maybe it's okay to *-like* how you describe yourself.

<sup>7</sup> Here is where I fill the space in my heart with words: I'm not lost. I'm exotic. Foreign. Nonnative invasive *me*. Naturalized. Fully realized? Let me grow into this.