

A Rooted Reflection

*A Cultural Report on A Vintage Open House:
A Weekend for Community*

A Capstone Project Reflection Paper
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Introduction

How does one define success? I am sure this was asked of me time and again by my advisory committee for my final project working towards my Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability degree from Goucher College. How does the answer to this question affect the concept of cultural sustainability and the practices learned through obtaining this degree? Can I look at my experience in producing *A Vintage Open House: A Weekend for Community*, as a successful template for generating new avenues for bringing diverse groups of people together? Did I have clear and obtainable project goals and objectives that were met? Where did I fail? How do we evaluate failure and measure for this in balance with our successes, those planned for and those that are generated in the process of completing and working towards a goal or project?

When I look specifically at this degree and the outcomes I hope to achieve through this project as a completion of my learning in this program, I can honestly say, there are strong benefits and negatives to creating a multitude of experiences for my final project. The first benefit is that with each experience, there were strong wins and there were clear failures. This is knowledge that, had I not endeavored in the production and execution of this project, I could not have obtained. Through the combined knowledge of these failures and successes, along with that of the coursework throughout the program, I have a solid place for finding my footing working towards the practice of cultural sustainability, as it relates to the legacy of my family and the culture of community that I endeavor to sustain in an effort towards sustaining the democratic ideals I grew up learning about from my parents, both raised as military brats.



Figure 1: My husband manning the grill at Nature Roots Fire, Alpha Ridge Pavilion, April 23, 2022

Part One: A Seed Planted

Choices; as a trained actor, choices are the meat and potatoes of your work. It is more than how you decide to recite the playwright's words. When you are in the moments of receiving, interpreting meaning, here, in these small unlit moments, exchanges are made, gestures, responses- these choices speak to the character one is portraying and, more often, speak to defining the motivational life forces that have brought this moment into existence. It is from this starting point that I began my exploration into the choices I've made through an auto-ethnographic examination of my life.

"Through the give and take of play—particularly through the complex symbolic replications of life made possible through dramatic play—we learn how to share, compromise, listen to, and respect each other. We can open up and honestly be ourselves, because we feel we will be accepted. As a result, we get to know ourselves better, we get to know our playmates deeply, and our playmates get to know us."

(Lobman 2011, location 3863-3864)

As kids, we learn a lot through the act of play. We discover our feelings- pain, embarrassment, joy, anger, and frustration. In addition to learning where these sit within our bodies, we also discover how to manage them according to a set of social norms that are dependent on the era and community where those games were regulated and supported. In *Making Sense: The Child's Construction of the World* (2010), edited by Jerome S. Bruner and Helen Haste, we discover how much of our understanding of community and social networks begins at home and with our family. "The behaviour of these very young children in their fights, play and conversations suggests that within the family context children are beginning to show much more advanced social understanding than we would have expected on the basis of their performance in more formal experimental tasks. As 2-year-olds, their essays into discussion of motives and feelings—both their own and those of other people—have hardly begun, but the interest and attention they show in why and how people behave in the way that they do is already evident" (Bruner & Haste 2010, 24)



Figure 2: Images from the Baltimore Sun of The Little Theater on The Corner

As a child, one of my early memories of acting and theater was at the Little Theater on the Corner in Old Ellicott City, MD. Little Theater on the Corner was a magical black box experience tucked away off Main Street in the historic district known as Old Ellicott City. My great-grandfather was born in a cabin just up the road from this little theater and the trips from Columbia to Ellicott City when I was a kid felt like a trip back in time. Often these performance experiences were interactive with young performers moving throughout the theater, encouraging audience engagement. Throughout this project, these early memories of beings coming together, transforming a space and environment, and bringing the audience, outsiders, along for the journey, in a place deeply rooted in history, fueled much of my vision for the roots of this weekend of experiences.

From this standpoint, however, the very act of creating a "performance" experience removes the element of common and everyday. So how does one write an autoethnographic participatory performance piece to speak to a general audience that knows nothing about the auto-ethnographer? This is a question that I struggled to address, as the framing of one's life as they're living it is best for someone who has accomplished something that could more universally satisfy the qualification of a "successful" life. I am grateful for every job and role I have taken in my life. I can say this honestly, because I was afforded a home life that allowed for me to have options that many others did not.

As I look at the choices I did make professionally, I cannot say that they stood as any remarkable or hard-fought choice towards pursuing a larger calling or higher level of professional status. Indeed, quite the opposite, one might even suspect I have played a very safe game, not striving towards much more than a paycheck or a job that allowed me to engage in recreationally creative pursuits. This is indeed true, and yet, I also believe that I have strived to provide a high quality of service that yields an experience of being seen, heard, and a genuine attempt at being understood in whatever the mission of my role and task. I cannot say I have succeeded with every person I worked with or for, however, on whole, the memory of me is more likely positive than negative, at least, I deeply hope this to be true.

As a little girl, I benefited from being the youngest of three girls. I benefited from being born into a family that stemmed from the love and endurance of my parents. I come from generations of individuals who gave their lives in service- as nurses, as Army and Air Force veterans, as government employees, as charwomen, as caretakers, as slaves. I am privileged to continue to live and learn from my mistakes. I have lived, loved, lost, and I continue to strive every day to grow in the image of the service and love that I learned from as I watched my parents and elders live their lives.

The lives we live, the stories we tell by the choices we make, and the way we respond to the options we are given, speak to my fundamental understanding and belief in a shared humanity. Is there a shared cultural root for understanding life as humans? If so, how does the nature and concept of community in one's life shape the trajectory of this understanding? Are there avenues for playing with strangers that can bring about a larger network and understanding for community in one's life? Lastly, in a world where we are challenged to grow our social networks and find the communities that we want to follow online, and in person, how do we make space and time for challenging the stimulating and satisfying comforts of these communities? Is there a place that brings diverse groups together in ways that breakdown the often hidden walls we all walk behind? If so, how does *A Vintage Open House: A Weekend for Community*, shed new light and hold future possibility for finding new pathways for documenting and sharing in the cultivation of this larger shared narrative of our cultural life as humans?

A Vintage Open House: A Weekend for Community was a series of autoethnographic participatory performance experiences, which sought to uncover the cultural understandings of community in Howard County, MD and throughout the world today. Through a deep exploration of my cultural roots, I aimed to create an experience that both invited the audience into my cultural understanding of community, while exploring their own through a series of interactive participatory moments. Within this framework, I hoped to speak to a larger narrative of cultural identity. Through creating a dialogic experience, I hoped to highlight the complex nature of our humanity and celebrate the shared and varied cultural ways we navigate life through a variety of roles, expectations, and often traumas that go unspoken and often unhealed. How can we find a way to hold a little more space for others in our lives? What shifts in the world and the environments we inhabit could a little more patience and understanding bring to a broader respect for the role we allow others to play in our lives? Through these performance experiences, I hoped to discover where and how we might find more opportunities to come together and celebrate, not hate, the differences amongst us as a human race.

Today, when I look at theater through the lens of a folklorist, I find myself not featured as an actor portraying a character, but as a host to a new platform for cultural understanding and discovery. Utilizing Norman Denzin's *Performance Autoethnography Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (2018), I aimed to frame my narrative into a larger quilt of narratives. Through these experiences, I hope to establish a space for holding and documenting meaningful conversations and exchanges that can begin to yield a larger framework for a broader environment of cultural understanding. I am less afraid of being a performer, as I now see

performance, as an opportunity to utilize my training to engage with the audience, thus public, in a new dynamic way that potentially will reset the stage for how we understand culture and participate in the world. Acting has always been a tool for shining light on our common humanity and reimagining my role as an actor ethnographer allows me to reclaim a missing piece of my identity. I love theater; and bringing people together and creating community through a shared sense of understanding for the ways in which we are all different and the same is the motivation for me to continue avenues for pursuing more opportunities inspired from this first, *Vintage Open House*.

A Vintage Open House: A Weekend for Community

Part Two: Location, Location, Location

Last winter, I finalized a plan that was going to help me move from the mere thought of this autoethnographic experience into the actual implementation. As I approached, bringing this vision to life, I had to find a place that would satisfy the character and nature of the experience I wanted to provide. Warm and inviting, intimate, and yet, connected to something more expansive, more- vast. This was my first task because I knew at the end of the day, each moment that I asked of someone's time was going to be a moment for me to begin to tell my own cultural narrative surrounding an open house.

For the first twenty-five years of my life, my parents hosted an annual Christmas Eve Open House. Friends and family from school and sports to work and church gatherings, stopped by for food and friendly conversation with people who could start out as strangers and over the years became old friends. Short of one year, when there was a shortage on chicken wings, there was always a bounty of food and drink options, and there was always a family member or old friend to welcome newcomers at the door. Over the years, I witnessed my parents create a space that brought a sense of community for those in attendance. Despite the number of chores that went into this production, I always remember the experience as a moment at the end of the year, where the house I called home, buzzed with warmth and spirit.

There was an energy that could evoke a smile on one's face, even if you were not engaged in conversation. I believe my parents created a gathering governed by a desire to create a space, where all people were seen and welcomed. I cannot say everyone who visited my parent's home experienced the same buzz and warmth. In fact, I can think of a few family members that probably have varied opinions, and sure, some guests most likely showed up out of obligation, but that's the beauty of family and community. The act of showing up and being present, contributing to a positive experience for everyone even if it is not where you are or what you're expecting. In life, showing up is often all that is needed to turn negative or low expectations into positive outcomes.

I believe, a large part of allowing for low or negative expectations to be turned, is feeling safe in one's environment. Not only did I have characteristics that I hoped the location would inspire,

but I also had to think about concerns related to COVID-19 and the global pandemic that is still plaguing our world. I knew, to alleviate a large part of my concerns relating to the later, being outdoors would generate a sense of freedom from being inside with strangers that might or might not be vaccinated, masked, not masked, etc. I was also already aware at this stage in the planning that my human resources would be slim day of, so manning vaccination records would not be realistic.

Now, when looking at the creation of my performance experience, I wanted it to be interactive, so the space needed to lend itself to movement. One of the things I always loved about how my parent's transformed our house during their annual open houses, was the way people moved through the house. Whether to see people, move to different nibbles, or get a drink, the house became a space to explore and move about, which allowed for the odd guest or friend to meander without feeling awkward. I knew for me, a person, who anxiously enjoys strangers gathering, the ability to move with cause through a space is not only a valuable use of space, as was the case for my parent's first house, it also allows for guest to have chance encounters which can further endear guests to each other and create a deeper sense of place amongst attendants.

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Have you tried the crab dip?"

Random conversations are driven by random encounters, which often require a space that allows for these random encounters to be evoked with authentic curiosity and wonder.

In Howard County, MD we have an incredible park system. As a newly returned local, it is a thrill to share with my husband and son. The amount of playgrounds and recreational facilities is truly astounding and the push to hold an experience outdoors with the potential for amplified music became a fun challenge to share as a family, albeit in winter. Throughout the process, we discovered a vast array of locations that we want to return to and explore for future communal gatherings, but also for picnics as a family, and recreation for our very active two year old. As we navigated throughout winter, it was hard to imagine turning an outdoor public space into a place that was warm and inviting. When I looked at a location venue, there were also several key logistical factors that were needed.

As mentioned, I hoped to have music and the ability to be amplified depending on the size of crowd, so this limited which venues within the Howard County Parks and Recreation system I could utilize. This allowed for two pavilion options at Centennial Park, which out of these- one was already booked and the other out of my budget and scale. Then there was Western Regional, which although it offered a plethora of great options with newly built facilities and a community center close by, it was difficult to get to from Columbia, MD. If I wanted any of my audience to come from Columbia, I wanted Google, Waze, or whatever your navigational tool of choice to make it convenient for one to locate. Of the final two options, Alpha Ridge Pavilions in Marriottsville, MD or Rockburn Park Pavilion in Elkridge, MD, both geographic locations felt

relevant for my narrative. The first is in western Howard County near my parents' home, the second is close to my old elementary and middle school, while also not far from my great grandfather's cabin.

Now, when it came down to selecting my final venues two things spoke to me loudest. First, I knew in addition to having a location outdoors at a park, I also wanted one that would allow for a more connected sense of place, such as The Other Barn in the Oakland Mills Village Center, where I used to attend children's programs as a kid or another venue in a community building or village center. I was going to need to determine where this other experience could be held before finalizing on the park option. It was truly pure luck that while walking back to the main parking lot after viewing The Howard County Fire & Rescue Train Garden displays throughout the storefronts in Old Ellicott City, that I came across a sign that looked inviting and intriguing, "Patio on the Tiber... call to rent." Upon further investigation, this became the perfect location for hosting the smaller intimate outdoor experiences I was hoping to host. In addition to providing outdoor venues, having some experiences that were designed to have a limited number of guests, also allowed for me to provide for a multitude of opportunities for people to show up as it related to their comfort and concerns for public gatherings in the time of COVID-19.



Figure 4: First discovery of the Patio on the Tiber



Figure 3: Aiden in awe of the train gardens Dec. 2021

I believe in the power of space and place. The journey to a destination is often as much a part of the experience, as the place that you arrive to for a gathering. The location in Old Ellicott City brought about excitement when I first discovered it. It was also only blocks from the location of my first introduction to theater, the Little Theater on the Corner. Additionally, it was blocks south of the cabin, where my great-grandfather was born and where my great aunt still lives today. It is across the street from where my father had his first job and just up the road from my first job outside of working in childcare with my mom or at summer camps. Finally, I met my husband working at a fine dining restaurant that is long since gone, but

once was located across the street from 8098 Main St. Ellicott City, MD 21043, the location where I first worked and where my great-grandfather also worked, when it was the Patapsco National Bank. I worked in Old Ellicott City long before the exodus of many businesses that have now come and gone since both floods of 2016 and 2018 and it is due to these thoughts and the lingering empty store fronts that I did have some trepidation about planning a gathering on the banks of the very same river that flooded. However, I was nervous about the weather writ large given it was spring In the Mid-Atlantic Region of the United States and that was the calculated risk I was taking with an outdoor event.

This location had two patio areas. An upper area, which I immediately started designing and a lower decked patio that overlooked the river. There were two points of entrance, one that had stairs, but one that was not ADA compliant, but far more accessible from the main parking lot.

Bathrooms were not convenient, but they were available within a short walk across the bridge to the other side of the river. The space was charming, and the location was perfect. Finally, the price was in scale and went to a local business that has been in business since I was a little girl. I'm almost certain one of my first pair of earrings came from Hi Ho Silver Co., which is the shop that owns and rents the Patio on the Tiber. This was the place that feels connected to a larger network- Main Street, Old Ellicott City. It also feels private- you must open a gate to enter. Yup, this was the place! I called back shortly after visiting, nervous in the height of wedding season and booked the whole patio for two different days during my planned weekend of events.

Now, while I had one location secured, I needed to determine my final outdoor venue. Although I was raised as a suburban girl with roots in the ever-growing city of Columbia, MD, both of my parents historically have roots in lands that are more readily described as rural. In America, when you think of rural America, do you think of Blacks? Growing up, attending high school in western Howard County, I traveled across the same rural lands that my slave ancestors once travelled. At the time, I felt a sense of terror as I traveled past Doughoregan Manor towards my private nondenominational country school tucked away in Glenelg, MD. I attributed these feelings as a



Figure 5: Spring visit to Alpha Ridge Park

young black girl, who carried a slight fear of traveling into the country, which belies my weak cultural awareness to place and the more popular notions that blacks aren't safe out in the country.

It wasn't until I was a young adult, that my father discovered and tracked our slave ancestors to the same land that I once had uneasy feelings crossing so many years ago. As it relates to my father's roots, our Catholic heritage began in the chapel at Doughoregan Manor, where a slave ancestor's baptismal records are tracked. (Greene 2021, 9) This felt like another moment in my life, like working in the same building as my great-grandfather in Old Ellicott City, where I did not know my roots and bearings were much stronger than my position or role might warrant me to own. This feels significant to me and for this reason, part of the culture that I want to sustain through this project is that of my families' narrative to the land and particularly, this portion of land, Western Howard County.

Finally, as I traveled to Alpha Ridge Park from our home in Columbia, MD today, I traveled once again past Doughoregan Manor and as I looked up to that old plantation house, I knew I was on my way to my final location for my weekend of events. Whether listening to my great-uncle or grandmother share their stories of growing up in Southeast Washington, D.C. in the early 1900's or reading my paternal great grandmother share her oral history with my Aunt Debbie in *Remembering Ellicott City: Stories from the Patapsco River Valley* (Kusterer and Goeller 2009), subsisting off the land is part of the lifeline of my family. Despite my initial fear and discomfort in rural communities, growing up, even Columbia, MD was studded with farms and barns. Howard County is positioned in the central region of Maryland and with it a strong culture of agriculture, self-reliance, and independence thrive. When arriving at Alpha Ridge Park, that same sense of discovery that I enjoyed when finding the Patio on the Tiber, was evoked. Additionally, sitting in the pavilion, looking up at the ridgeline, that sense of being disconnected, and yet, rejuvenatingly connected to the land locked in this space as my final place to transform. I visited the other park, but it was just to make certain the contest was over. As I headed to the final park to confirm, I was already rethinking how I could transform the pavilions. The venue hunt was done. Now, I could build out my performances and let the real fun begin!

Part Three: "On Your Mark, Get Set, Go!"

This was by far the most fun part of the project, creating an experience and designing a space to play it out. I will say, this was also the part of the project that caused me to fall the furthest off track. Alas, in the process of building and creating a project that has long since lived in one's head, you stumble upon a lot of crevices and corners that only become clear in the process of bringing your vision into reality.

First, how does one look at one's life and write an autoethnography? How does any writer write any piece on a deadline, let alone a novice like me? How do I step into the role of auto-ethnographer? How do I return to the role of actor? Who am I to imagine myself as an auto-ethnographic performer? Even after reading the literature and sourcing the foundation for

writing an autoethnography, where does one begin? It is hard for me to answer any of these questions or say that I have even begun to understand the depths of knowledge they seek. I will say, the endeavor of creating a series of experiences, allowed for me to provide for a thorough examination of my life since I was not looking at being limited to only one, two hour window of time. Breaking the weekend up into a series of five events gave me five different autoethnographic narratives to unfold. Now, returning to the process of where I began, I began looking at my life, as I did the lives of so many throughout the Mid-Atlantic Region, when I worked as an estate specialist for an online auction house, Everything but the House. From the John Deere family home to a family heir of the Baltimore Stieff silver company, the objects that we hold on to often hold more than dust, they also share connections to different moments in life, connections to shared memories and shared history.

I went back to my youth and started, as I did when I entered the Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability program, and I pulled out my PLAYMOBIL® collection. Returning to my containers of treasured broken and misfit toys, I begin to uncover my narrative in play. As I looked at building out my performance experiences, I knew I wanted to bring guests with me through various points of the day, during different stages of life and that I wanted to do this through playful encounters with others in attendance. Beginning back in my center of play, allowed me to focus my autoethnography in a tangible reality. I was not only discovering points of activity and moments of history that I wanted to explore, but I was also uncovering objects that I could introduce into the spaces I was creating.

If I were to bring this weekend back to life on an annual basis, I would begin to capture and collect a living narrative of not only how I move and shift in life, but also how those who gather do, as their navigation and interaction with my belongings would hopefully elicit an offering of something similar from their own. This is one of the fundamental elements that I aim to capture through hosting these series of autoethnographic performance experiences. In working in the tangible history of the objects of my life, I began to investigate my life as an outsider, putting my life in context to a larger historical record. What did these objects say about me? What stories and histories did they represent?

From my favorite childhood book, Eloise, to the most worn play on my bookshelf, I began to pull and collect the objects that created a personal response and triggered a clear and attainable memory. From here, I looked to see where the objects spoke to larger contexts. Dael Orlandersmith, *The Gimmick: And Other Plays* (2003), I read and rehearsed through pieces in this play in undergraduate acting classes time and time again. Was it because Orlandersmith was a black female playwright? Or was it because her writing took me out of myself and easily into a life that I emotionally connected with but was far from my own? Was this because she was a black female playwright? In looking at the objects that kept being pulled, as I went through my old belongings, I found myself continually guided by words passed on through books, in lessons, through journals, by way of gifts and awards, calendars, old wallets and technology,

photos and trinkets taken to remember a place, a memory, a trip, a person. Here in my personal ruin of belongings, I found my autoethnography.

Moving from the key moments that now anchored the experiences I was endeavoring upon, I needed to return to the spaces and address both logistical concerns- light, sound, weather, etc., but also the creative experience that I wanted to take shape. I knew I very much wanted to create experiences that were anchored in the environments in which they were held. I know it might seem counterintuitive to build around locations that might not be guaranteed in the future, but these gave me anchoring points to build from, so I knew not only my limitations, but also the realms of possibility for participatory play.

Now, it was time to turn these outdoor park pavilions and patios into performance spaces. I began with framing out each experience based on the scale and capacity of the space, not the quantity of people I would guarantee in attendance. I was creating based on space and the potential for creating a meaningful experience. When I broke down my experiences, Saturday, April 23rd, was going to be the largest scaled event, as I was going to have both pavilions rented for the purposes of following rules related to sound and amplified music. I knew I wanted to have an experience that brought guests into the pavilion with their curiosity. I grew up watching a fair number of Agatha Christie murder mysteries on public television and was always fascinated in how a village green could be transformed by a fête, where a variety of tents highlighted the valued purpose of this shared open space. Having two pavilions, allowed for this vision to begin to really unfold in my mind, as I could create multiple locations between these two structured spaces. Additionally, I knew in looking at creating this fete-inspired experience, I wanted to turn the pavilions into structures that felt more like the fête tents that inspired this vision, albeit not red and white vertical striped.

In America, the image of a red and white vertical striped tent will most likely elicit the idea of a circus visiting than a community gathering being held. Growing up, I have vivid memories of driving in the car with my mom, grandmother, great grandmother and playing "what do you see?" in the clouds. This simple measure for passing the time, continues to inspire my love of looking up into the sky, beyond the clouds, into my imagination. With this as the imagery I hoped to inspire, I kept coming back to a technique inspired by watching a brief video of a Japanese indigo dyer, lifting fabric out of a large tub of freshly made indigo dye. I was not going to attempt to begin to make my own indigo dye, but I was inspired to return to the world of arts and craft and with my limited budget, begin to take known items like drop cloths and transform them into something new with acrylic paint, textile medium, and water, lots of water.

I found myself investing in the time of learning new techniques in hopes of generating a multitude of design effects that evoked the color and energy I wanted to inspire. Growing up in a childcare program, I have a fond love for arts and crafts and the ability to transform spaces by celebrating simple traditions and creating most elements with my own hands. I was also gifted with time, as I am at a rare moment in my life, when I am home with my two year old. When he naps, I can mix paints and turn them into dyes, dipping each end of over sixteen 6 x 9 panels. This project took the course of several weeks, as it takes time for each side to dry before I could feasibly flip it over and begin to dye the other half. Additionally, I found myself making dyes that would evoke the colors found in a beautiful sunrise and sunset, which was a fun balance to try and create. Early on in this project, my body reminded me of my age and that muscle that once was strong, as I approach what I hope will be the greatest half of my living life, has long since escaped from my physical frame. As my body eventually made possible, this project was scaled back significantly. Initially, I was going to create something for both pavilions and then I was going to also hand paint additional colors to bring more fully to life the sunrise and sunset imagery. However, I could not dedicate any more time to this project, as I needed to keep moving forward and begin to focus on marketing materials. Also, the curtains were one part of a multi-part curtain system including beams that my husband would help latch to the pavilion with rope and bungees. From here we ran a long aircraft wire, which was cut to the length of the pavilion and fitted with hardware that would secure to other hardware fitted on the beams. We then draped the curtains along each side of the wire curtain structure, which ran along each side of the lower pavilion. It was a pretty remarkable feat to create, which now, after implementing is really exciting to reimagine all of the new locations we have at our disposal to transform with this structural element.



Figure 6: Curtains mid dip, March 2022

In addition to creating an experience that was warm and inviting by creating an intimate experience with these skyline inspired curtain panels, I also knew that bringing color and nature back inside the tent was going to be necessary for bringing the harmony of space that I wanted to achieve and honor with this location. This started with tissue paper, which upon



Figure 7: Curtains completed April 2022

Googling I discovered could turn into impressive large-scaled flowers with a few simple tools, wire, and time. Time to measure, time to cut, and time to assemble, this was the biggest ingredient in my design scheme- time.

Time is certainly the biggest element to any handicraft, and it is the element that has a scale based on experience. In addition to hanging the large tissue paper flowers, I also wanted to have paper flowers for my centerpieces. All the floral elements that I created, I planned to utilize throughout the weekend. Barring any rain, my flowers would remain the same from Friday through Sunday. This allowed for me to not have to pay a florist or purchase a variety of fresh flowers that I would then need to arrange day of with water and nervously maintain throughout the weekend. I found a great deal for dried flowers online and new that avoiding the hassle of water allowed for me to avoid the logistical hassle of dealing with fresh flowers. Which, as a woman, who once worked in a flower shop and grew up watching My Fair Lady, broke my heart, but as a graduate student, it did not break my budget, which although inspired by local farms like Hill Crest Flower Farm and Studio in Fulton, MD, I needed to stick within and not break.



Figure 8: Mixed Images from February and March of Paper Flower Making

Crêpe paper flowers allowed me to prepare in advance, so that day of, I could focus on other concerns. I could also have control of what I would have on display, as opposed to waiting to see what would be fresh at the time of my event at local grocery stores or flower shops or trying to navigate working with florists or local farms to ensure I could have specific colors throughout the pavilion, crêpe paper flowers gave me a lot of creative freedom and logistical control. Unlike the experimenting I was doing with the curtains, these flowers had tutorials and step by step directions. Although it took time to fully appreciate and understand how to stretch the various thicknesses of paper, cut a pattern to easily cover a foam ball, create a sepal from fringe, the art

of building each flower was a highlight that I could not have known I would have received when I began the journey of bringing this performance experience to life.

Finally, food and beverage. Each event was in the image of my parent's annual open house, so food and beverages were a part of the experience I envisioned. From a financial standpoint, but also from a time perspective, this aspect of the event needed to run tightly. I needed to have food that people could easily enjoy without causing too much of a fuss. I also wanted each experience to feel casual, so I did not want people to feel rushed to eat or like they had to show up before the food ran out.

For Friday, I decided to go back to my roots and do a classic pizza party. This led to tightening in on my programing for Friday's autoethnographic themes to be reminiscent of the nineties and this phase of my life. Next, Saturday, we had grills and we had picnic tables. I had the pavilions all day, so I decided to make the most of my reservation and staggered two events across the day, doing pancakes and picnic themed food in the morning and a light barbecue of just burgers and hot dogs in the afternoon. I loved pancakes on Saturday mornings and my mother was famous for hosting Teddy Bear Picnics in the parks during the summer and my dad often manned the grill at family cookouts, so this food spread felt consistent with theme and achievable in scale and budget. Now, Sunday, like Saturday, I was staggering over two events-morning and afternoon. I needed to keep the food simple and in budget, so I decided Sunday mornings would be perfect for bagels and juice and Sunday afternoon would be inspired by my favorite food- cheese plates & platters for gatherings. Cheese is my guilty pleasure and Sunday afternoon is about checking back in on our darker moments in life and finding space to let go, so cheese brings both a guilty pleasure and a known comfort. Bagels and juice harken back to gatherings after church, so given that Sunday morning aims to inspire the spirit within us, after church bites feel appropriate.

Finally, I have a strong shape for the auto-ethnographic narrative I hope to uncover and a real tangible world where these performance experiences can unfold. Now, I must market it. Now, all my anxious terrors set in.

Part Four: "Say, Say, Oh, Playmate..."



Figure 9: Facebook & Nextdoor Online Flyers

I cannot express how grateful I am for being the youngest in my family. When it comes to play and the concept of community, coming into a family where traditions are already formed and where terrain has already been tested is a gift. I have so much respect for my oldest sister because, in so many ways, she had to forge a path for herself as often one of few Black females succeeding at her level. And where my oldest sister shined a bright path educationally and recreationally in sports and theater, my older sister forged her own avenue for success by showing how fortitude and a fighting belief in oneself can make anything possible. Beyond these personal characteristics, I also had two live-in playmates. From creating dance videos to hosting our sisters' news program, KKM News, which stands for Kimberly, Karla, Mallorie, my sisters gave me protection at school and recreation at home.

My sisters were the first to have play dates with friends, so naturally, when they allowed me to join in, I was also beginning to shape and understand my beginning dynamics for community. This comes with unique benefits, but also challenges. My sisters, like myself, like all of us, are unique. How they respond to situations is not necessarily how I would naturally. We are all wired based on our unique designs. As mentioned previously, my parents hosted an annual Christmas Eve open house, which when looking at the effort they endeavored upon year after year, they

did not receive anything back beyond great memories and the legacy they created for so many of my friends and family. One of the things I loved most about this event, was the navigation of so many different personalities and backgrounds. My parent's opened their doors, like they guided me and my sisters, with open hearts.

As I began the process of marketing this experience to the public and my community, I wrestled with personal dark truths. First, in life, I am terrible with responding to invitations of my attendance. Second, even when I do, I have gone through terrible phases of social anxiety, which have caused me to both show up and leave without proper goodbyes or not show up despite replying to the contrary. Additionally, as I prepared to send out marketing materials, we received word that our dog was in his final weeks to months of life. I am a dog person, and our dog is family. I slept with him on the floor when he had a leg injury and found myself again, lying with him, as he struggled to move and walk. My dog's life became my focus, as his end of life was my new most pressing fear. I knew this time would come, he is a larger dog, but in the reality of life, it is hard to figure out how you cope through the grief of living out a loved one's last moments. A few weeks after learning our new normal in this final phase of our dog's life, my uncle and godfather passed away. Again, it is hard to prepare for death even when you know it is coming.

From the time my uncle was born, he was a miracle story. I can still clearly see my grandmother cup her hands to reflect how tiny he was as a premature baby. We had learned years ago that he was suffering from a rare cancer and that there were limited treatments, but there were still treatments. As he did as a baby, he continued to defy the odds of science and lived on to see both of his daughters get married and his oldest have two additional little men join our family. All the same, he was one of the few people that I knew my mother shared certain lived history with and that his loss, on top of the loss of her mother just over a year prior, and her best friend from high school only months earlier, this loss was going to hit differently, and it did. My mother is my person. She is also a huge resource for helping me to maintain sanity as a graduate student and stay at home mom to a very active two year old. I needed my mom to focus on herself and this moment, so I decided to pack my little family up and go on our final road trip with Rock.

I needed to market my Capstone Project, I wish I found a way to manage doing both, but I did not. I packed up my family and spent time mourning my uncle



Figure 10: Rock and Aiden at Dewey Beach, DE March 2022

and celebrating the life we still had with Rock on the shores of Dewey Beach, DE. It only took three days, but like a lot of moments in life- it does not take long for three days to turn into a week, and so on. Additionally, I relied too much on the previously known comforts of the word of mouth of my family and friends. There is a bit of a community tax that one gives, and my uncles funeral took a good bit out of my families' portion of community tax as it relates to my mother's family. As for the rest of my family and friends, I found myself in tight competition with trips planned months in advance and the exhaustion of Easter and Passover holidays, with Mother's Day just around the corner. Lastly, I had genuine fear. Fear of "performing" for family and friends and supposing something of myself, that I did not mean to imply in marketing this experience as a performance event. I am still connected to many professional actors, who dedicate their lives to the arts, music, and performance. This was not me, and yet, here I stood, endeavoring upon a performance experience. I allowed my fearful ego to get in my way, which did not allow for those who would have happily attended, to have had the fair chance to show up and be a part of the experience.

But alas, I endeavored and began to market publicly on Facebook Groups like Things to Do In Maryland and Play & Connect- Howard County. I posted on the Nextdoor App and I had the benefit of my father posting printed flyers at all of the local Starbucks. As my older sister stated, when I was confiding in her that I feared my outcomes, but "que sera, sera..."

She replied, "It's not whatever will be, will be. It's whatever you make happen, will happen." And she is not wrong.



Figure 11: Instagram Post for Weekend of Events

Part Five: Lights, Camera, Action!

Friday, April 22nd, 2022: Earth Day, Night One- An Old School Friday Night- 90's Style

Auto-ethnographic Background: I turned 10 years old in '94, so the nineties were a formidable time, as I went from a child with wide-eyed optimism to a teen with angst, insecurities, and a new range of talents and assets that I still struggle to learn to embrace. From sleepovers to partying without parents, I know I made a lot of stupid mistakes, this night is not about any of these specific moments in my life. This night is an opportunity to celebrate the cultural world of this decade in my life, while hopefully uncovering a bit more of an understanding around the benefits and misgivings of this phase of life.

No one signed up for this event. I prepared a backup plan, as this was the Friday after my ninth wedding anniversary, so we would make it a party and do our best to pull people from Main Street or as they passed along Old Annapolis Rd. I would not present the full autoethnographic experience, but I would provide for people to join me at my event as they might at an "old-school" open house and set up displays that could encourage the "ethnographic" narrative of my journey into community and cultural life in the nineties, when I went through middle school and young adulthood.

We get lucky and find parking in the main lot just in front of the patio we have rented for my smaller events in Old Ellicott City, MD. Parking was not in all honesty thought about. Old Ellicott City is notorious for having difficult parking, so it was truly a lucky spot. I wish I took a picture of it because it really made me feel like this night was going to be more than I anticipated. Even though we did not have anyone guaranteed in attendance, after much consternation, it was decided that I needed to be there in the event anyone assumed they could just show up as a typical open house would imply. And so, I set up as if anyone could arrive, although, I mentally was already just sort of looking forward to getting a chance to be with my husband in this moment, just blocks from where we had our first kiss.

I set everything up for my nineties themed experience and was ready to go. We just had to order and pick up a pizza and this themed event would be ready for guests! We call in a pizza order to Maple Hill Tavern, which is located just across the road from the rented patio. We sit back and enjoy our nibbles. We talked. We danced. My husband TikTok'd and whatnot on his phone. I did not pull people in off the street because, unlike in my youthful days, I kept running into couples out on date nights. In hindsight, I really wish I pursued this and made a comparison to the very elaborate date night I had on for my husband and myself in this privately rented



Figure 12: Image of Truth, Dare, or Spin the Bottle Spinner

patio. We did talk to a few people, but never for long, and mainly about renting the space and not anything about my experience.



Figure 13: 90's Display & Food Tables

We packed up and returned home. Although things did not go as planned, I knew we had a big day planned for tomorrow. We picked up Aiden from my parents', went home, unloaded the perishables, and got everyone to bed. Day one was done, though I needed to better prepare for the morning, I gave in to my confidence in my prior plan and went to sleep.

Saturday, April 23nd, 2022: Day Two- Part One: Pancakes & Picnic Baskets

Auto-ethnographic Background: Childhood is complicated, and I say that knowing I've had a good one. I spent most of my youth at the side of my mother, whether traveling with her to take my sisters to their various activities or as she finished her degree to become the director of the after-school program at our elementary and middle school, I've lived my life with a woman who treasures the everyday and celebrates the big and small moments 365 days a year. This is a morning dedicated to celebrating turning little things into something new. How? Like a child! I hope we can all be inspired to walk in this world with a bit more wonder and curiosity for the spaces we inhabit and the people we are privileged to meet from all walks of life.

I was behind from the moment I woke up at five in the morning. I knew I had a ton to prepare, and I really needed to get my husband into motion, but it was his birthday. I knew this was going to be a challenge to navigate and yet, the morning of, I had not figured out the right balance of respectful gratitude for his help and participation (*let's move!!!*), while also ensuring he knew I celebrated his birthday and the life he lives. (*PLEASE- get moving!!!*) Given he was such a help the night prior, I allowed him to navigate the morning a little too loosely and needed to better rein in the sequence of events as this was how tightly I had it planned. I know I was risking my outcomes on familial assistance, but this was the nature of my project, and I was working within these given constraints.

By the time we had everything loaded, we did not have time to put everything up on site. Here, I began to unravel as the notion of hours spent creating and building out a vision was all going for naught. I also knew, as I proceeded to drive across the old fields where I once had slave ancestors in servitude, I had guests that were strangers and that this was my most pressing care and concern. The hours I spent on curtains meant nothing to them. Their time and their experience were mine to honor, mine to serve.

As my husband began to unload, I stopped him and told him we needed to regroup. He was an integral part in the creation of our curtain structure. He cared for it and was ready to get this up, however, he was not recognizing the precarious nature of time that I was sitting in as it related to the most pressing concerns for the people arriving upon us within an hours' time. We regrouped and focused on getting tables setup for food and my ethnographic conversation displays. When all else came down to it, having a clean and welcoming environment for people to sit down with a plate and activities and a host to help navigate their experience, these were our focus.

This was my event, but my husband became my project partner. He listened and bit his tongue when I know it was hard for him to do so, but my husband has also spent decades in the food and service industry, so if anyone was to be with me on this journey of hosting, it was him. I knew he was committed when he asked to purchase a chef shirt for his grilling duties. He knew his role; he was ready to commit and my events on Saturday were all the better for it. If you did not know, you would have assumed my husband was a professional chef, he is not. He is just a great host and a fellow human, who loves getting into the various roles that life presents.



Figure 14: Pancakes & Picnic Baskets 4/23/2022

Our first guests arrive, and I welcome them to our gathering. We greet each other and exchange names. I requested people to reserve tickets, so this provided me with a chance to learn the names of participants before they arrived, so I was just placing names to faces. However, I forgot how terrifying the challenge is for maintaining names in a group. This is a host's opportunity to see their guests and let them know they value their presence, and yet, this is also a known horror for many

intelligent people, so I tried not to be too hard when I awkwardly failed to remember or misremember as it might have happened.

As I welcomed guests, I introduced them to my ethnographic display table and let them know that the items were available for young children to touch and ask questions. If any of the items might elicit parents to share their own stories, I asked guest to please feel free to use the items as a cultural reference to anything in their own lives. I then introduced them to my husband, Chef Erik for the day, and invited them to help themselves to any of the food or beverages. I quickly discovered that we forgot an extra cooler, which would have allowed for two separate stations of chilled items.

Luckily, our gathering for the morning was for only two families and then my own, so we were able to make do and go with the flow for small missteps like this. Additionally, no one knew we did not have curtains or lights up. These were not advertised, so no one knew they were missing but me and Erik. I advertised this experience as running from 11:00 o'clock in the morning until 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon. I advised participants that we would be having a hunt with maps drawn at 11:45 AM, which allowed for guests to arrive, have a bite to eat, and then get ready for something planned and structured. Due to a slight confusion with one of the families that RSVP'd being sick, I asked those that did arrive if they were okay to wait a few more minutes and then we began closer to 11:55 AM. I handed out the **Common Curiosity Exploration** maps and explained the rules to the families. I let them know that this was a chance to get outside and explore the outdoors, but also to be with each other and learn something new. I set a time parameter and said for everyone to meet back at the lower pavilion, as opposed to what the map detailed, which was to meet at the upper pavilion. The map was created with thoughts that we would use both pavilions, but due to day-of constraints and the laid back nature of the

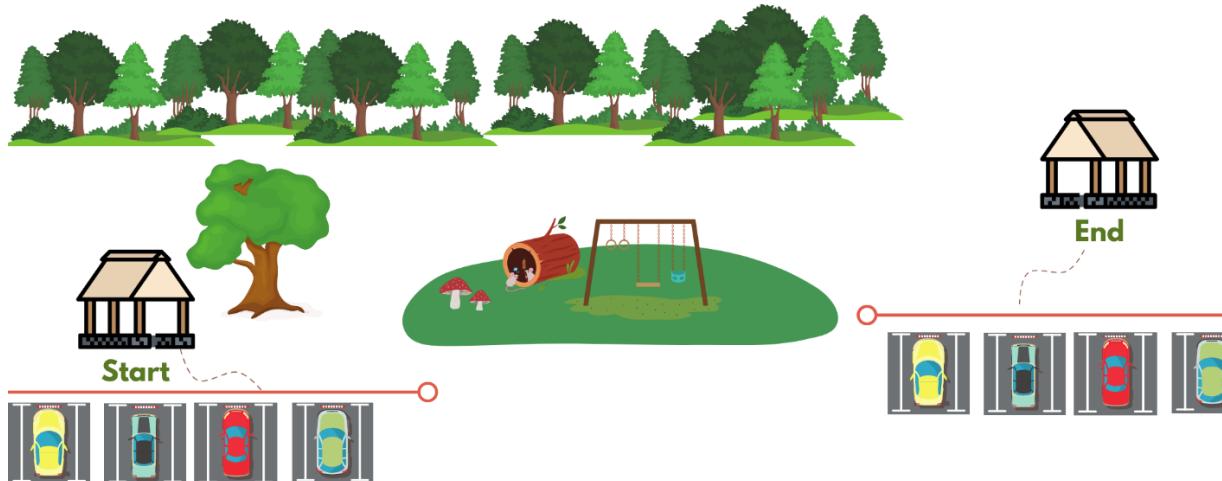
group, we decided to keep things simple and just return to where we were already naturally gathering.

A Common Curiosity Exploration

Please use this map to discover common curiosities with others. How does this work?

Search for the items/objects listed on the back of this map anywhere between the two pavilions.

Do not cross the street or go into the small forest as detailed on this map and red lines. Once you've checked off your items, meet us at the **End** to discover what curiosities we have in common!



This map is not designed to scale. Please use this map as an anchor to play between the **Start** & **End**.
For the safety of your exploration, please do not go into forest or cross into parking lots. Have fun!

Figure 15: A Common Curiosity Exploration Map, which was provided to participants

Thankfully, the group in attendance on Saturday morning was a dream. Both families mentioned their love of theater in one way or another, so I knew I was in community with people who were willing to engage in a playful encounter with their children and family. In the end, when you look at what was advertised, this was a free morning or afternoon meal outside, with an activity for young ones. My advertising on Play and Connect- Howard County is where I discovered my new cohort for this experience, and it is consistently a driving force for new places of community for young families looking to keep little ones active and older one's stimulated. It is also an incredibly supportive group, so again, the families that showed up from this source came from this place and spirit of community. It is an online community and one that clearly is vital in building real world communities, as well.

We return to the lower pavilion and share our discoveries. As we go through the list of things to find, I share brief ethnographic interludes into the prompt and my personal connection that I am sharing with each clue listed. From here, we begin to share naturally, weaving in and out of each other with our responses and my additional insights and points of curiosity.

I grew up as the youngest of three girls, I was often lovingly referred to as the "Last" or "Third Greene girl." This is a role that led me to sitting on the bleachers of many a soccer fields, discovering new things to explore that were not where the ball was moving back and forth. I went years wearing nothing but green in love with the range of this color, but also as a badge of honor for the family I represented. This role, being a Greene girl, is vital to me today and connected me to Kermit the Frog and his classic statement, "it's not easy being green." And so, who can share with us, something green that they discovered today! Did anyone see Kermit?!

Leaves, grass, and a gecko, were provided as the initial responses to the beginning prompt of something green. In response to our group's curiosity as to where the gecko was discovered, the oldest son of the couple with two children, began running to a cut out "log" structure that is a part of the playground. Here, along the interior of the log's wall were several small, sculpted creatures, including the gecko. We all cheered with excitement for the discovery and our young collaborator bowed with gleeful pride. And thus ensued this morning's activity of sharing, running about and discovering.

As we moved along, I disclosed my husband's love for survival programs and our shared experience as scouts, him as a boy scout, and myself as both a brownie and girl scout. I talked about being outside and how often ordinary things can be more than we might imagine if you look at the world from a survival standpoint. We followed the same pattern as we did previously, beginning back with our smaller family of three, who given they had a seven month old, participated as adults sharing with other families. Dandelions were the provided response for a survival tool and this came with a beautiful memory of Sarah growing up in the Bronx and knowing spring was in season because you would see women lining the streets picking dandelions for soups and salads.

Now, excited by this response, I asked what else we discovered! The next family encourages their oldest to share what they found. We learn about how they found sticks in the park and would use those sticks for roasting hot dogs on camping trips. This prompts my mother to mention how she could see using sticks for roasting marshmallows and making s'mores, but that she would not have thought to use them for hot dogs. She then admitted that my father was her

A Common Curiosity Exploration Search List

- Something green
- A survival tool
- A creature that flies
- An object that's out of place
- Something new to you

Once you've completed the search, don't forget to bring your list of discoveries to the END!

Figure 16: Back of Exploration Map- A Common Curiosity Exploration Search List

survival tool, which prompted everyone to politely laugh. I shook my head smiling, "sounds about right." I love my mother. She loves being outdoors, but for walks and picnics at lakes and parks, not so much for hikes and overnights without guarantees of a shower. While we all sat under the pavilion with a light breeze in the air, the two youngest amongst us, my son, Aiden, and the youngest daughter of the family of four, ran about distracted by each other and attempting to share one of the lawn chairs that Aiden brought into the pavilion earlier. I was giddy with excitement, as the afternoon was beginning to become richer with shared memories, both of past life experiences, but also being made new in the moment we were all making together.

A creature that flies was the next prompt, which brought us back up to the playground and a sculpted owl that was sneakily hanging out in a taller tree like structure. We again, cheered for our fellow participant, who to our amusement and encouragement follows with another round of bows. I wish I could remember what our other family mentioned, but I want to be fair and acknowledge that this is where I wish the videographer was scheduled for the morning. I did not do a good job at documenting the morning, both from a field note standpoint, but also from the perspective of capturing the morning visually. Alas, the final prompt responses if memory serves, were shared by both families. The sign by Howard County Parks and Recreation that mentioned they were hiring was out of place to everyone and the park itself was something new.

As we finished this activity, I thanked everyone for participating and reminded them of the food and beverages still available and to please just continue to enjoy being outdoors. Everyone moved freely from the food tables, grabbing chips, cookies, apples periodically. As we moved into the afternoon, sandwiches were had. As we were approaching 12:30PM and the program ended at 1:00PM, I thanked everyone again for joining me. The kid's amusement waned away from the playground, and they began to play with the objects I brought in from my childhood. One of the stuffed animal dogs reminded one of the parents of Pound Puppies, which were a popular stuffed animal toy that went on to inspire a cartoon program I watched as a kid. I admitted that I got the stuffed animals in high school, during the TY beanie baby craze, but that I was happy that Pound Puppies were mentioned because that is what drew me to the TY stuffed animal in the first place. We all shared polite laughs about the changes in technology, as our oldest kid of the day asked about my parent's old camera's, particularly confused by the Polaroid. We then talked about how the Polaroid is still relevant for instant photos, but also obsolete with our phones and Instagram.

We moved on to a conversation about Christmas movies. One of our participants has a spreadsheet that breaks down, sorts, and ranks various Christmas movies, ranking from a Christmas movie all about Christmas, to a movie that takes place during Christmas, to a movie that has a Christmas scene, but has absolutely nothing to do with Christmas. We then began to try and name movies to fit in each bucket. Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street was a hardcore Christmas movie. Die Hard was not a Christmas movie but takes place at Christmas time. This

became a fun game amongst several of the adults, while the children continued to roam about freely, which everyone described as a highlight of the experience because the park was so quiet and remote; it felt safe.

The first portion of the day was coming to an end. I could feel my heart begin to relax, as this was the experience, I feared most. This was my first, and only, opportunity to work with people I did not know. This was a huge gift and a huge responsibility, but as I listened to those in attendance describe how pleasant their experience was, I felt comforted knowing I provided this experience for new friends, and despite all the things I feared at the outset of this morning, this was a success. I asked the parents if they would like to invite their children to select an item from the goody bag as a thank you for their time and participation. I thanked the parents and offered them to take extra cookies, fruit, juice anything they could grab. I reminded families where the restrooms were located and again if there was anything in the future to feel free to connect with me online via my website. I also suggested that I might reach out to them, and no one seemed to mind, though I could feel a sense of- don't start hounding me, so I'll tread lightly.

Day Two- Part Two: Nature, Roots, Fire

Auto-ethnographic Background: Both of my parents were military brats; I grew up learning about service from a very young age, as I witnessed my father dress in his blues once a month and return home from travels in his camos and combat boots. I learned about the legacy of my great-grandfather fighting in WWI and my grandfather bravely giving his life on the battlefield of Vietnam, both fighting for rights still barely received at home. Alpha Ridge is within miles from the plantation my father has dated our ancestors in servitude to and miles from where they began their journey to freedom in Daisy, MD. America is not perfect. America is a country made up of humans and humans, in our nature, are flawed to the fullest. I'm not only a Black female, I'm also a Catholic. This evening is in service to the legacy of all of those who came before me. I do not stand as an image of greatness; I shine in the shadows and will keep fighting for a world that is better and more just for all.

Cars begin to line the parking lot in front of the lower pavilion, where we are still wrapping up from earlier. I can see one of the cars is my sister's, arriving with my great aunt Gwen and the other car has my Aunt Nina and Uncle George, both pair arriving for my second event. I am still talking with guests from our morning session, so I am doing my best to find the right balance of being a gracious host to all in attendance- both those on their way back into their cars, and those arriving for the afternoon session.

As my family all get out of their respective cars, I begin to pull myself away from my earlier guests to make way for welcoming the new arrivals. This is a clear failure on my part from a timing perspective. I did not include enough time for the layover transition to unfold, however, I did allow all participants to know that I had events scheduled accordingly. It is still a missed opportunity, as I had time within my reservation at the park to start and end the second portion later in the afternoon. It is hard for me not to start this afternoon with all the negative reports first, as this is what I feel about this portion of my weekend of experiences. I really see this

reflecting a larger narrative that I know I am not alone in telling, we often underestimate and under-appreciate our family until it's too late. Why is this a narrative I keep on repeating?

I count myself lucky to come from the family I do and more so am grateful to have the knowledge of this gift to keep striving to live up to even though I fail repeatedly. Now, I am hitting myself with a nice smattering of Catholic shame for all the ways that I failed my family that made special arrangements to attend and ended up working and not getting any sort of performance but that of me as a disappointed graduate student. This is the appropriate response for my Nature, Roots, Fire experience. If I'm looking at this experience in its totality as an auto-ethnographic research project, this response also reflects a narrative I am repeating due to the choices I make and the narratives I allow myself to tell based on the roles that are evoked. Given I had no one initially at this event that was not already known to one another, we all showed up with roles that were well rehearsed.

To explain the ways I failed my family, it is important to disclose the ways I feel they missed out. First, I did not have the experience set up and took advantage of my family in asking them to help me put up my curtain project. I did not control the music, which would have allowed for me to continue to maintain a sense of holding their experience with my care and attention. I got lost in the realigning of afternoon goals and shifted to that of niece, sister, graduate student, who wanted to visually experience the work of her design vision. If this were not my family, I would not have made this switch. I am grateful for making this switch because I was not prepared to host the experience with this small intimate group of my family. The game that I developed could've been done, but my great Aunt would've struggled with her arthritis and caused a deficit to her team, which was not fair to anyone, who would've participated.

I come from a competitive family, so playing a game with only them in attendance would've surely switched the mood from that of a supportive family gathering to one with potentially bruised egos. Additionally, with recent life events in my family, I just wanted to keep things light. My great aunt is my grandmother's sister, so she is still mourning her sister and now recently her nephew. My great aunt is truly one of the most amazing humans in this world. I grew up listening to her tell me stories about aunts, uncles, cousins upon cousins, a whole world and extension of family I will never meet, but better know because I've been told about them my whole life. My family was not wealthy on either side, but they were rich in all the ways that mattered- faith, family, and a healthy dose of can do individualism with a social service spirit.

The second portion of the day's events began around 2:00PM. I completely forgot, in one of the last minute arrangements that my father helped make, a videographer was scheduled to arrive at 3:30PM. As discussed, somewhere around 2:30PM my family encouraged me to move forward with setting up my design. I knew based on my online registrations that the only other people who could potentially arrive would be my cousin and a friend. I put a lot of time into transforming this space and I wanted to complete this vision and so, we began to get everything set up. My Uncle George and Erik worked on getting the beams and wire up. My Aunt Nina and Aunt Gwen helped me get the curtains up. My sister played music and sometimes went and



Figure 17: My Uncle George in conversation at Nature, Roots, Fire

hung out in her car. She had an upset stomach, a symptom of a recent bug plaguing many parts of the county. Additionally, she changed flights to be here and not on a trip for work, so I just wanted her to do whatever she wanted and not feel put out any further than she probably already did.

As 3:30PM arrived, a car pulled into a parking space in front of the pavilion, where we were all now involved with the swagging of lights across the interior of the pavilion. We all paused at the arrival of a new car that is unfamiliar. It's not my cousin. I begin to freak out. I was prepared on Friday for anyone to show up, but I was not thinking about this on Saturday afternoon. My open house mentality was gone and the joke of the evening, that will surely continue for months to come in my family, was my response to this late arrival.

A man pops out quickly from his car, waving, asking, "Are you Mallorie?"

I promptly reply, "Yes, did you RSVP?" He continues to tell me his name. My mind races through the list of names for the afternoon, there was no one unaccounted for, I respond again, "Did you RSVP for the Open House?" The mere question is laughable in hindsight, but here we all stood, paused with confusion, my family bracing for me and my fear of what this outsider's expectation was for the afternoon. He continued completely unphased, gets out of his car, begins to unload objects from his trunk. We all continue to stand around confused, smiling, looking questioning at each other. He repeats his name and I begin to recognize his gear, the videographer- the videographer was here! I was not prepared and feel terrible for how I greeted our special guest of the second experience on Saturday. Additionally, I completely checked out on having to think through hosting in this way, so when he began rolling, I found myself at a loss for what to say on camera.

From the relay dinner table game to the portion of my grandmother's oral history; this evening's events called for a broader audience. I had my great-Aunt, who was my grandmother's sister. Additionally, I had my sister, who's grandmother's voice she has not heard in this way, and my mother, who's mother it was. Next to these three, I had my father's sister and her husband, along with a videographer my father knows through church. My great-aunt and grandmother had a dependently close relationship, they were best friends and most likely each other's first foe. I was not prepared for navigating my grandmother's oral history, while my great-aunt potentially sat with records needing to be straightened. If the crowd was larger, she would not engage in this behavior. If the crowd was larger, it would not have as much power to steer the experience as it would with this small intimate group. I thought on my feet and decided, I am going to try again. I failed in a lot of ways, but I will try again. I will send proper invites and do so

in more time, so family and friends can better plan for attending, and I can better prepare for hosting an event, no matter who is in attendance.

We ended up getting the curtains up. Erik made hot dogs and hamburgers. We ate. We listened to music. My great-aunt shared stories about her youth in Washington, D.C. with my Uncle George, and the videographer, who both spent time growing up in the District of Columbia. Although the planned structure I envisioned did not get produced, the afternoon with my family and newcomer videographer, was filled with unanticipated dialogue and conversations that will surely be remembered. My great aunt shared her feelings about the relationship she believed most blacks were forced to have with their slave masters. John, the videographer, listened with genuine intrigue. My father was introduced to John through his role as a Deacon with the Catholic church.

John did not know what to expect and had received a copy of one of the flyers from my dad. I could sense the disappointment for the lack of performance, but I was also encouraged by the group's shared desire to make something out of what I did do. With the capturing of the video of this afternoon, more than just my lack of preparation was displayed. My family and their love and support that is what is captured. Known for purchasing the latest in designer clothes and home lifestyle trends, when my sister tells me I should sell something I created, I know I have invested some measure of my time in something of value.

Finally, this afternoon was capped by one of the moment's I will cherish the most, seeing my son looking back at me, surrounded in the clutter of the event, with a smile on his face for the excitement of the day he had running around meeting new friends and hanging out with family. Again, I know I did not succeed in all the ways I had hoped at the outset of this day, but the greatest reward was one I was not planning, and that was witnessing my son, witnessing me working and reaching for my dreams.



Figure 18: My family from left to right at Nature, Roots, Fire- my great Aunt Gwen, my sister Karla, my Uncle George, my Aunt Nina, my mother Lynda, my husband Erik holding our son Aiden, next to me, Mallorie



Figure 19: The shadow of our car returning home against the backdrop of Doughregan Manor

Sunday, April 24th, 2022: Day Three- Part One: A Secret Garden (Kid-Friendly)

Auto-ethnographic Background: David the Gnome, Tinkerbell, Trolls- they're all here! (Not really- sorry) I grew up in Columbia, MD and spent many of my summer days as a kid lying in our backyard smelling honeysuckle and daydreaming. This morning is about creating a space that brings out the spirit in all of us. Not all spirits are free, not all are good, some are mischievous little sprites, either way you shake it, we all need a place to be and that's what this morning and my narrative aim to inspire. A place that breathes space for each other and our innermost selves.

I barely unpacked the car from Friday, so the only things that really needed prepping were the food and juices, as well as my ethnographic displays. I get my crêpe paper and dried flower arrangements together and finish packing my containers for unloading and loading my final two events. I am again behind schedule, but am forever grateful for my mom, who not only assists with watching Aiden so I can do the busy work of loading and hosting, also picks up bagels, as my timing got lost, yet again. My husband follows me in his car, so we use both vehicles to unload tables, and accessories. He then takes a break, but barely because I also forgot to get all the platters together for the afternoon, so he will need to finish putting those together per the honey-do-list left for him on the kitchen counter.

I arrive to the Patio on the Tiber with time to comfortably prepare for my morning's guests. This event was sold out with all reservations booked. I had three adults and five children, along with my mom and two year old son. This put the lovely little patio at its capacity. As I watched my poor mother, shuffle along the stone patio paths, it also soon became quickly noticeable how terrible this location was for children five years and under. I would've realized this had I sat more properly in the space for each event, but I did not. I set up tables based on the surroundings and then switched the design of the tables for each event. If I sat more in the patio, I would've seen that there were a lot of large gaps for tiny frames to fall through and go horrifyingly down to the now peaceful Tiber River below. All the same, the kids grabbed blankets and pillows and we camped out on the upper pavilion away from the more dangerous elements of the charming secret garden. The children ate and I invited them to play with the toys I brought in my son's activity table.

As the kids began to scatter and break out into little games in the more treacherous areas, I gathered everyone back to the upper patio and began our coloring activity. I passed out boards for each of the children to use as a drawing surface. I then invited them to select three crayons and a colorful piece of paper. I then instructed the kids to fold their paper into four sections. We then each took time drawing in each corner- something beautiful, something stinky, something funny, and something we love. After we all had something to share, I passed out bubble wands to each of the children. I then told the kids that we were going to go through and share our drawings, but instead of clapping for each other, we were going to use our bubble wands to create a magical celebratory experience. We did a practice run and I was quickly reminded of the precarious nature of any wand like element in the hands of a child.



Figure 20: Secret Garden 4/24 , Kid Event- bagels, juice, mingle photo credit: Christian Venuto

The kids ranged in age from two to twelve. We had four girls, they were our oldest and youngest, and then we had two, who became fast friends closer in age. I think one was five years old and the other six. Additionally, we had two boys, another two year old, my son, and a three year old. It was a fun mix of ages and experiences as we moved along and shared our picture responses. The youngest two girls pretty much just colored free-style, which was encouraged given their age. The oldest two girls provided more clear pictures, sharing cows and the thought of her grandfather's farm, which although stinky she also loved. She drew a unicorn for something beautiful. She drew a picture of her family for something she loved and wrote Moolatta for something funny. I wish I could properly remember the family story and movie that evoked this as a response to something funny, but I can still hear her excited voice enthusiastically giggling as she said, "Mooo-Laatah!" This alone made me understand the humor in the word.

While the boys did not really share, our oldest did, providing us with a beautiful flower for something beautiful and her family for something she loved. In my honesty, I cannot fully recall her final two response, but believe she drew a picture of her dad for something funny, and blue cheese for something stinky. Though I remember giving blue cheese as an example of something that can be stinky, but also something you might love, so I am not certain if it was her, who drew this or one of the younger two girls, who followed the prompt. I thanked everyone for sharing and encouraged the kids to make lots of bubbles in celebration. They giggled and wafted their wands around. The parent's started to arm themselves with paper towels as the kids began spilling liquid as they excitedly refilled their wands and waved their arms and hands wildly about for bubble making. I was encouraged to sing a song, so I sang a quick run through of "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*.

We took pictures of the kids on the stairs and then they continued to run around and play. The parents and grandparents chatted, it was another moment where I felt proud to create an experience, where my son saw me in this role. Can I clearly define what this role was? I am not certain if at the end of this project I can, but I know for certain, as each event ended, I found myself more fully embracing the potential for whatever was to follow. The steps I was taking throughout this weekend felt sustainable not only for my life, but for the future of the community I want to sustain for my family. Inspired by my parents, my husband and I were creating a new vision for an open house for our son.



Figure 21: Instructing kids in coloring activity 4/24, photo credit: Christian Venuto

Day Three- Part Two: A Secret Garden (Adult Oriented)

Auto-ethnographic Background: It's Sunday afternoon, the weekend is coming to an end and the week ahead is close upon us. This portion of the weekend's autoethnographic experiences will uncover those more quiet and reserved times in life. The moments in our lives when we reflect on where we've been and where we're going, when we give in to the wallow and question ourselves and the bigger picture- how do you get out? That's what this afternoon is about- falling, giving in, resetting, and getting back up and sharing in what that looks like for oneself and for others.

In the morning, as guests arrived, there was a slight confusion surrounding the location for the morning's events. Luckily, given that everyone was in connection with either me or my mother, the confusion was shortly lived. Though I had a familial connection with everyone in the afternoon, our communication was not better established, so when my second set of guests were set to arrive, they were arriving to the wrong destination. Here again, I failed my guests. I did not set them up for a positive experience from the beginning and relied too heavily on the details in the ticketing system, Eventbrite. If I had sent along my marketing materials for better inspection and written comments, I would have received the critique that I was missing relevant time and location details. I had added a location, where you could get this information, but this was again a lesson learned, as I could've implemented a better communication plan to send out a "get ready for this weekend" email with clarity on details prior to the event and a means of communicating with me should there be any issues or questions.

Through Facebook video messages with my cousin and text messages with my mother, I eventually was able to confirm the address for my pair of participant partners. For my Sunday afternoon event I had a cousin from both sides of my parental tree, and each brought with them their partners. I will note, my cousin on my father's side is partners with my best friend, so she made the reservation for the two of them. She also oddly did not want to make me feel bad and went to my mom as opposed to me for clarity of the address for Sunday afternoon. She did not want to make me feel bad for not having it clearer, which is sweet, but also a reflection of how I show up in her life. Later in the afternoon, we all laughed about my marketing failure, and I told them how grateful I was for their perseverance. Both couples went to the wrong address for Sunday. Somehow, my advertising lead them both to Alpha Ridge, not realizing there were different addresses for different days. Given their time difference in arriving on Sunday, they missed each other when arriving at Alpha Ridge, but both initially traveled an additional twenty minutes out of their way. I have so much gratitude that they did not decide to go back home after this first fumble on my part as an event host.



Figure 22: Secret Garden 4/24- Adult Event Display

Justin and Megan arrived first. I welcomed them with hugs and sorrow for their travels. I invited them into the event by showing them the various ethnographic displays, offering to answer any questions they might have, and let them know about the only scheduled activity, a space to reflect and a space to let go. I then made certain to offer food and beverages and showed them where the handwashing station was for quick rinses during the evening. My final cousin arrives and informs me of the struggle her husband is having with parking.

When I saw that I was going to have this pair of partners in attendance, I was excited. My cousin Justin and I have spent many a Sunday evening in Old Ellicott City together, as we used to partake in dollar beer nights at Ellicott Mills Brewing Company in our early twenties. Those nights are long since gone for us both, but the connection and memories have bonded us for a lifetime. Additionally, he is the partner in life to a woman, who I lovingly refer to as my mirror. We met working for Geppi's Entertainment Museum in downtown Baltimore and fell in love with each other. We could sit and share stories for hours, constantly astounded by how our lives, though different and unique, mirrored each other in eerily similar ways. If I was not raised Catholic, I might believe in a coven, and she would certainly be a leading member.

I welcomed my cousin Aleana, and thanked her for her perseverance, apologizing for the parking on top of the wrong location. As I welcomed her, Justin and Megan meandered through the patio, looking at my displays. I offered Aleana something to eat or drink and told her who else was here, as they had traveled now out of view. She enthusiastically replied, "Oh, your cute cousin on Uncle Allen's side!" Which I had no clue is how she had seen my cousin Justin after all

of these years attending shared family gatherings. Given the bonds established amongst Justin, Megan, and myself, this was likely going to evoke a sense of welcome and connection for my other cousin. First, this is both Megan and Justin's energy: caring, passionate, curious. Also, Aleana knows them as Megan and Justin have been together since Erik and I got married, so we have nine years of shared family gatherings. My cousin Aleana recently lost her father, my Uncle Vic. I was so happy she showed up and happy she selected this event.

I had disclosed that this event was about letting go and I know from posts my cousin has made on Facebook that she has a lot on her plate and values her therapy. Her husband, who she was married to for a year in secret, arrives after finally finding parking at the courthouse, where they eloped. I was hoping to hear more about their secret first year as a married couple and the unfortunate turn of events for parking lead to a wonderful segue into this disclosure during our circle share.

I tell Brian, Aleana's husband, to try and get comfortable, have a drink, grab some food. I hug and thank him for his journey. As Brian and Aleana get settled, I check back in with Megan and Justin, who ask me questions about my broken star that I had on my makeshift spirited altar display. I tell them that I haven't fixed it because I like to keep it as a reminder of my broken dreams and that I believe it's okay to hold on to them. I joke about how it also reflects my tendency to be a hoarder. I believe we often let go of things that still hold value. In life, we sometimes just need to change how we look and define that value.

I knew I wanted to create a space for people to sit and be with their thoughts. Where they could write and let go of anything they might be holding on to, as this is a treasured gift, I feel I often must force myself to enjoy. The clarity of this experience was shaky, but the outcome was rich and beautiful. I invited my guests to write down anything they wanted to put out into the evening, the atmosphere, the universe. I invited them to burn it if they did not want to hold on to it or place it in the jewelry box if they wanted to let it out during a circle share. I invited everyone to feel free to move around the space and enjoy the sounds of the river rambling. I played music, we nibbled, people participated in the activity in pairs, visiting the table, leaving their notes. We naturally all ended up sitting in a circle on the lower deck and instead of passing around a microphone, I asked if they wanted me to share the messages or intentions or if



Figure 23: Secret Circle Share Display Table

they wanted to do so on their own. They all gestured that they were good, suggesting for me to read them aloud.



Figure 24: Circle Share- A Secret Garden Adult Event

as cousin and friend. This more dominant role caused my guests on Sunday afternoon to protect me and show up differently than they might had I been any other amateur autoethnographic performer.

Part Six: Putting Myself and Project in Context

"A talented gatherer doesn't hope for disparate people to become a group. She makes them a group." (Parker 2018, 181) I believe we need more spaces and opportunities that yield meaningful gatherings and, although, the breadth of my reach for this weekend of experiences was narrow, and I definitely need practice on many of the aspects that Parker explores from "passageways to heat maps, safe spaces, and ground rules" (Parker 2018, 164, 236) my skills are somewhere between rusty and naive, but thanks in large part to the fullness of endeavoring my project to production, I know these lessons and am only more poised to keep facilitating their development. At the end of the day, when I look at the culture of the community that I hope to sustain, it begins with a space that allows people to be seen and held in an environment that comfortably challenges all in attendance to live with openness and accountability to the messiness of our individual and collective humanities.

As we went around, I thanked each member for their contribution. We met eyes. We smiled with each other. We shared breath with each other. I know that this evening was one hundred percent what it was, as was each experience of this weekend, because of the people who showed up and how they chose to do so. In trying to recall what we discussed in the circle, I feel like a visitor to an AA meeting, these disclosures are best kept in that circle. I do wish I had better experience navigating the flow, but on whole, if the beginning of this weekend made me have any hesitation for how this project would manifest, Sunday evening's gathering gave me hope for any future project I might endeavor upon.

In traditional family fashion, everyone helped me load my car and pack up from the experience. I failed my family in the beginning and the end of this experience, as the role of host was lessened by that of my traditional role

For me, success is knowing that in some degree this purpose was known and felt in all experiences where we had people in attendance. I believe it is in this space that we have the power to reconstruct our notions of others and begin to reset our trust in strangers by fostering more space for different narratives through a shared experience and am grateful for those who participated throughout the weekend because it was studded with an incredible kaleidoscope of personal narratives. Looking back, Saturday morning, though started with upset and frustration for missed timing and coordination with my day of help, my husband Erik, it ended up being the experience that I think he would even note, spoke to bringing people of unknown backgrounds together in a beautifully simple way.

A nutritionist with a spouse in tech joined us with their two young children, and a teacher with a spouse in finance joined with their seven month old. I did not get the lights, curtains, trunks, I had packed set up, but I did have the tables, food, and front entrance set up for the children to play with my old toys and stuffed animals, along with vintage cameras and collages that I had setup with other childhood mementos. Throughout the afternoon, both families commented on the rare occasion it was and genuinely seemed grateful for the opportunity to discover Alpha Ridge Park, which is located just miles from the plantation fields where my slave ancestors were once in servitude. The weather was gorgeous, which held for all three days of events. For a weekend in April, I truly could not have received better days to be outside.

From the smell of the charcoal grill to the warm pancakes and table full of fruits, sandwich fixes, and cookies, the atmosphere of sharing my childhood favorites of picnics at parks, and pancakes on Saturday mornings was in full effect. I say this even though the pancakes were not my mom's, they were camping style, which brings back its own warm sense of nostalgia. The kids played on the playground that was conveniently located between the two pavilions, the park was near empty, so it was safe and free of much traffic. You could hear the birds, and feel the breeze, while sitting in moments of comfortable silence with people only met minutes ago.

The low moments for this weekend, unfortunately, fell on my family's experience. I did not successfully prepare myself to share only Saturday's experience with a few limited people, and although I should have pushed through on this front, I got caught up in ensuring that the physical experience that I had hoped to achieve for both Saturday events was mounted. In taking this time, I took away from the purpose of the event and made the evening on Saturday more of a family picnic than a structured experience of participatory play, songs, and autoethnographic monologues. On whole, when I look at each of the events that I was able to produce, the "performance" experience is most certainly the part that was least in attendance for guests. I am sure those who showed up, might have gone home wondering, "what was the performance part of this experience?" Despite this, I feel the platform was set for more fully engaging in this art of play as I look to continue building out the concept of *A Vintage Open House* for myself and for my family and community.

I often wonder if the negative stories I tell about myself in life are true. It's impossible to measure and perhaps also a small part of the root cause for this personal endeavor to create an autoethnographic account of my life and then perform it for others. How am I holding myself accountable to the places and spaces that I show up? Where do I feel I am allowed to have the expectation of forgiveness? Where do I feel I am allowed to have the expectation of

consideration? How do these aspects of our emotional and mental lives shape our shared humanity? Is there a place for this? Who benefits more from these spaces in society and who does not? We are currently a global society of humans living and surrounded by the deathly glow of global pandemic. We are moving into a new state of shared being. Will we grasp the power of this moment? Or will we let it subside back into the shadowy histories in our lives?

How do the stories of our lives shape the history of our experiences with others in the present? Who do we believe ourselves accountable to other than ourselves? Like Lynne Burkhart asks about my hometown Columbia, MD, "What are the behavioral clues that allow individuals to place themselves inside or outside another's social space?" (Burkhart 1981, 6) As we fought, as a global body of individuals to wear or not wear masks, we discover how intricately we are all woven into the fabric of a shared society, and yet, we also discover that we are all simply alone in this life. What a beautifully messy experience to share with others and to recognize as a mirror reflecting at us the bigger pandemic we face here on earth- sharing limited space and resources with others, known and unknown.

This spring, I aimed to not only create, but produce a weekend of autoethnographic participatory performance experiences. I have never endeavored to create a full day event outside of my wedding and baby or wedding showers for family. I have hosted special occasion events through the craft and floral event studios that I have worked for, I have even helped to manage and market large scale enrollment events for large national accounts, while working in the insurance industry. Outside of these experiences, I know theater from the position of an actor and have the training of that of a designer. I have studied the business of theater production, but since leaving college, I have very limited experience and exposure to the local arts scene. Throughout my time in the Master of Arts program, I have reached out to several leaders and professionals working in a variety of nonprofit and cultural institutions locally, some of which are theater connections, but none that I successfully nurtured to bear any connection to help broaden the reach of this, the largest scaled production I have ever created.

"The first [observation] is that there's individual learning and group or community learning, and their interaction is essential to individual growth and cultural wellbeing." (Little 2011, 1) The outcomes of each event over the weekend of April 22nd through the 24th of 2022 inspire me to continue to follow Ruth Little's sentiment to work towards creating more everyday activities for people to gather and play together. On Sunday morning, we had playful pillow fights amongst new friends, who only just met, and in the afternoon, I found one of my closest friends comforting my younger cousin in life after the loss of a father. I created Sunday to be a day of spiritual connection, silly and free with kids in the morning, and hopefully restoratively freeing with adults in the afternoon. Although none of the participants on Sunday were strangers to me, again, like my parent's annual open house, because of me, new strangers could become friends and because of the nature of Sunday afternoon being with my cousins and their partners, perhaps even closer to family. In *Stewardship, Connections and Ecology: Contexts for the Development of Talent*, Ruth Little sheds light on her experience of connection and stewardship while investigating our cultural response's impact on science change and its environmental impacts on earth. This paper gives me structure and bearings for bringing varied groups together to solve the erosion that is happening amongst ourselves as a society of people.

"We live and work between the realms of gravity and grace: the physical and the spiritual. Our ideas have to be grounded – humble – and embodied to be meaningful to us, and at the same time they have to resist this inevitability, and strain towards the edge of possibility and hope. We work best when we work with resistance – politically, intellectually and materially. But working with resistance is a craft – a subtle art. It needs to be practiced – learned, repeated, lived – until it fully occupies the continuous present." (Little 2011, 9)

My numbers for each experience varied and one had no one in attendance. I have proved a lot of lessons to myself as it relates to the creation of a weekend of experiences. I now know, I am really good at engaging people in the role of a host. I love learning and meeting new people. I like bringing people together. I have work to do as a small group facilitator. If I am to create anything that is larger scaled, over 10, I will need to hire help. People really like discovering locations they did not know existed, both the patio I rented in Old Ellicott City, which was just blocks from my great-grandfather's log cabin and the park located in western Howard County, MD were new to most of my participants, and they disclosed how much that added to the thrill of their experience. I will need someone who can help me lift the experience into the world, out of my head, so that more people can participate and as I type these words, I am ashamed I did not include a girlfriend because I could not pay, her for her valuable time. More so, I believe this has something to do with my fear of asking others for help and then disappointing them.

Of all the nights that I had no one in attendance, it was the one night I had requested free time from my friends to assist me in this project, and they really delivered, but I did not. We're now working towards scheduling a virtual event and will potentially even spin this into a part-time thing that we host for family, friends, and online communities of strangers. When I look back on it, Friday and Saturday afternoons were the experiences that had the most autoethnographic performance content and I was not ready to perform in the way that I imagined I was. When it came to Saturday, I did not have the day of nimbleness that I believed I could access within myself. From the marketing, budgeting, purchasing, designing, securing venues and equipment for sound and lights, the project has given me a genuine sense of growth and accomplishment, that although not perfectly executed, was fully executed, and I still can't really believe it.

By examining my own autoethnographic narrative, I wanted to create more context to the ownership of space I hope to achieve in this broader context within each weekend experience. The act of showing up and being with others in a shared cultural space, this is the heart of the opportunity I wanted to create for those in attendance. Discovering how we can hold more ownership to the complex nature of our individual strengths, vulnerabilities, and energies that we bring to our communities and the cultures that sustain us, this is the underlying narrative I really wanted to explore and at the end of the day, I think was the autoethnographic performance that played out- a graduate student trying something new and putting herself out into her community like a little kid asking- who will play with me?

Debra Kodish unveils a field of folklore that drives its power from the people in a way that yields to a greater sense of accountability and responsibility to the people folklorists serve. In *Envisioning Folklore Activism*, I find myself introduced to the field of folklore and begin to find a place, where I situate myself as a theater major. Kodish's exploration of the field yields a deeper

understanding of the possibilities available through the practice of ethnography and the work of a folklorist. Diving deeper into the field of folklore, I find myself immersed in the work of ethnographic research through Bonnie Sustein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater's instructive ethnographic field guide, *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*. "As a fieldworker, you will conduct an internal dialogue between your subjective and objective selves, listening to both, questioning both. You combine the viewpoints of an outsider stepping in and an insider stepping out of the culture you study." (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, 7-8) Here, specific guidelines and tools are provided for conducting field research that is moral, ethical, and sets up a fieldworker to achieve the goals and visions set forth by Debra Kodish.

Within this weekend of experiences, there were great moments of being inside my culture of community and outside it at the same time. I made new connections with new people, like I once experienced during my parent's annual open houses. There were also times, when I felt deeply exposed and disappointed in the experience I provided for the family and community that showed up and perhaps did not get the full performance experience they were envisioning due to the nature of the guests in attendance and the materials that were going to be shared and disclosed.

When I look at the work I want to do in this world, I know it has to do with actively engaging and being in community with the public. Looking to David A. Westbrook's *Navigators of the Contemporary: Why Ethnography Matters*, I find my bearings for setting my long-term goals for my career and specifically my performance within a community of people as an ethnographer. I recently moved back to my hometown, Columbia, MD, and despite my familial roots to the local area, I currently still feel as though I reside as an outsider to the community with only a year as a current resident. "The outsider is ignorant. But the outsider does not have to pretend to knowledge or compete for expert status. The outsider is free to be a fool (and hence to become wiser). Even in the course of conversation, ignorance can be turned into an advantage- people often want to talk about their worlds, and talking to an outsider forces them to step back and try to think clearly about what is important." (Westbrook 2008, 63) As I set out to create a performance centered around community, I sat in the current outsider position with historical roots that propel my investigation. Westbrook provides me with clarity of this role and my position within the process of establishing, "ethnography that addresses our worlds." (76)

William Westerman sets the focus for my work as a folklorist in "Wild Grasses and New Arks: Transformative Potential in Applied and Public Folklore." Here, Westerman gives voice to the seeds I hope to plant in establishing an autoethnographic performance piece that explores the current cultural identity of residents of Maryland and surrounding communities. The passion and disappointment Westerman shares in his struggle for creating projects to sustain the craft of basketry continues to nourish me, as I wrestle and face my own fears of creating meaningful work to sustain my belief in theater for community.

"Each person can be changed by the experience of creating a work of art or witnessing one. The creation of a work of art often involves a substantial degree of self-knowledge or can increase self-consciousness. One of the profound psychological effects of being an audience member is that, in addition to being emotionally moved by a work of art, there is always the potential to be permanently changed intellectually or spiritually by

the experience. One is fortunate to have the experience of feeling like a different person on the way out of a theater, concert hall, museum, or community cultural event or gathering than one was on the way in." (Westerman 2006, 120)

In *Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States*, Doug Borwick maps out the potential for artists and arts organizations to create work that is meaningful to the social welfare of the greater communities in which they reside. He says, "the tools discussed here by which the arts can address concerns of importance to all people represent a powerful means of rallying an 'apathetic suburbia' and a 'disaffected middle class' to the value of the arts." (Borwick 2012, 28) Here, I will say, the use of "performance" in the description of the weekend experiences allowed for those who made the decision to show up, to be prepared for being present and engaging with others in a creative encounter. I wonder, however, who did this prevent from showing up? In this weekend, I discovered people love to be outdoors and people are looking for something different. In a lot of ways, these experiences were parties for strangers. I think this is why Saturday morning's experience was truly magical because it was just that- my family was there, but the guests were mainly strangers, so the connections brought with them the excitement of all doing something new together.

"The arts are not a product delivery industry. They are a personal relationship industry. Those whose heart and soul is their art must remember what it is that drew them to the profession. It had something to do with the effect that the arts had upon them as individuals and the connections it allowed them to make with others. If a means must be found to grow in order to survive, that growth can only take place by re-imagining what it is artists and arts organizations can do and for whom they do it. The personnel of the arts industry need to engage not an undifferentiated "audience" but a collection of individuals in community with them." (Borwick 2012, 26)

In addition to the community, I fell in love with theater because it presented an opportunity for me to connect my inner most worlds under the cover of another character in a different time and place. I found this confounding experience to be all at once exhilarating and exposing, which as I entered my early adult years became an untenable balance to achieve. I found myself wanting to hide away and turn down opportunity because I did not know how this could shape my overall identity in the world. When you are challenged by those most dear to you for your authenticity in crucial moments in life, the value of the stage and performance becomes lost and conflated with a deep need for knowing and being in this world that is safe and grounded in a self that is separate from the false powers of a stage performer.

Now, as I returned to the act of performing, I have found a new place for challenging my own notions of what theater and performance offer. As humans, we are all of us performing roles and identities daily, as uncovered and explored in Steph Lawler's *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (2014). In this book, I discover a sociological viewpoint on how we as humans walk in this world, specifically focusing on the United States. Examining "contemporary troubles," such as, "a concern with memory, history, and storytelling; a concern with sameness and difference in relation to others; a concern with the government of private life and the maintenance of a moral order; a concern with the limits of agency; a concern with authenticity; and a concern with who is like and unlike us," Lawler allows for a broader vantage point for how I live no differently than

any other. (Lawler 2014, 19) We are all of us making choices that we are consciously and unconsciously aware of that shape and define how we and other's see who we are in this world.

Turning to the *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies* edited by D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, I uncover a deep look at the current work exploring the performative nature of our identities. Here, I find the grounding for how I want to engage and enlighten the audience to the everyday ways in which we are performing our lives and give value and hold responsibility to our choices in how we show up to the spaces we inhabit. "Performance is a contested concept because when we understand performance beyond theatrics and recognize it as fundamental and inherent to life and culture we are confronted with the ambiguities of different spaces and places that are foreign, contentious, and often under siege. We enter the everyday and the ordinary and interpret its symbolic universe to discover the complexity of its extraordinary meanings and practices." (Madison and Hamera, 2006, xii) Additionally, this handbook provides a vast landscape for recognizing the work of performance studies to build towards broader social goals that can yield a new understanding of community.

Call me Pollyannish, but I want to elevate all narratives, so we can create a space that looks to foster a world with more kindness and less conflict and strife. Saturday morning, while we shared our answers to the playful prompts, I painted beautiful landscapes in my head of women picking dandelions all over the Bronx, where one of the participants spent most of her youth and shared how once spring hit, dandelions were prized for use in salads and soups in her community. I heard fire logs crackling, as the other family shared stories of camping and using sticks to roast marshmallows and hot dogs over a campfire, while the wind slowly breezes through the pavilion. How many tables hold similar conversations in America today with strangers? If we had more tables with strangers, where we shared stories of our lives, we create spaces for breaking down the fears and often, automated blindness, we have to those we do not know in our everyday lives. How many of us walk in fear? How many of us carry around shame and regret? Where do we find space for being in this world that is forgiving, welcoming, and inspiring? We are all of us in some way or another, living in this world as a community of strangers and I want to foster spaces and places where we can begin to find more internal space for understanding, compassion, and kindness.

As an African American female, who spent almost the past ten years of her life living in Baltimore City, MD, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) felt close to home and yet, was a narrative of a life unfamiliar to the one I lived. Coates describes a life untouched by the narrative of black success and American pride that I grew up with just miles away in Howard County, MD. With this said, his narrative influences my own assumptions and challenges my beliefs in the possibilities for a more united United States of America. However, differently Bess Lomax Hawes describes a life that is similarly unfamiliar to mine in *Sing It Pretty*, she reflects on a sense of pride and service to the ideals of America that feel more familiar to the framework that I come to for looking at community.

At the end of the day, both narratives reflect the deep value for the people and places of our lives and how this impacts our identity and speaks to the real value of community. When I began this project, I found these two narratives as an arc to my story, but rather it is the arc I hope to one day reach with the audience of participants I want to engage in my life. Through

both of these personal narratives, I interrogate my own life and the goals and journey I hope to tell with the choices I make- both big and small, but also the range of personalities and communities that I hope to gather around a table to uncover more broadly the narrative of community and what this means depending on how you also frame the concept of culture in America.

"We don't always choose what is relevant to us. We don't always choose what doors we see. The world chooses—in ways both beautiful and hideous, based on circumstance as much as individual will." (Simon 2016, 59) When I get into the heart of my work, I am called back to Nina Simon's *The Art of Relevance*. In this book, I find the literal fuel for building and breathing life into this experience for my local community. "We have to be willing to expose our passion and try—however we can—to make it attractive and relevant to others. We have to be curious and humble as we learn more about the people on the outside. We have to be willing to build doors and renovate rooms despite our prior attachments. We have to accept failures and keep pushing and dreaming forward." (Simon 2016, 181)

I love making paper flowers. I love bringing color into a room. I have a flare for the dramatic, but within a world of natural colors as embodied in sunrises and sunsets. I am still terrible with time management and yet, I know, I really love making plans that have many moving parts. This weekend reflected places where I can better use my time by having others help, which will allow me to meet all deadlines set for deliverables and actions. I fully own where I can get better and will work towards this goal. I will continue to call myself to make better choices and let go of things that are not essential to my purpose. As a person, who wants to invite people to attend experiences that are dependent on contact and prior communication, I am also not the best or ideal candidate to request a commitment. I have a difficult time with my belief in the value of what I am offering.

Upon reading *Getting in on the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation*, I found myself excited and instantly inspired. The mission set forth by the James Irvine Foundation and laid out in this document by Alan Brown and Jennifer Novak-Leonard, encourages arts organizations, and the funders that help steer their path, towards engaging with their cultural constituents in a new and more participatory way. Providing solid research, case studies, and thorough experience and expertise in the field for California, Brown and Novak-Leonard give me strategies and tools to put in practice locally throughout Howard County, MD. In addition to helping frame the creation of a production, this document encourages artists to further hone and nurture a reflective criticism to gauge future opportunities to move participants from witnesses to collaborators and contributors.

Part Seven: Next Steps

Through my Capstone Project I hoped to create an experience that helped people live with a fuller appreciation for the spaces they create in their everyday lives. I hoped through attendance and participation to shine a light on the differences that exist within all of us. In bringing attention to the way we relate to people based on personal preferences, preconceived notions, and basic human instincts I believe we can begin to untangle the many motivations that create a chain of reactions that generate unacknowledged stereotypes, beliefs, and a hierarchy of others.

If challenged and pursued, could we develop a new understanding for how we relate with strangers and friends- generating a deeper understanding for the responsibility we all carry to the environments we inhabit?

In the United States, we are living in a unique time. We have divides and polarization unlike any time known to most. Though, many people believe we will get through, and I believe this too, I also believe like a family handling a divorce, death, or separation, as a nation and community of people, we have a lot of work to do. It is for this reason, I want to get us, everyday people, the people the media talk about, the people elections fight over, in a room to rediscover what it means to be an us. Not a left or a right, but a group of people that all associate with the label, American-made. What does it mean to be made in America? What does it mean to be American? Are these one in the same?

As I look to further develop this knowledge, what community partners, religious organizations, or life and health practitioners can help me to work with a diverse community of people to bring this to light? A large portion of American popular culture surrounds a trendy lifestyle, one that is filled with purpose and meaning and where we feel a need, through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and the like, to showcase a life lived- the good, the bad, the real. How does this translate to the way we relate to the people we experience in our everyday lives?

"In order to play whole-heartedly students need to feel they are in a safe space where they can succeed, where they will be welcomed, accepted, and respected by the leader and the other participants, and where they will have the freedom to express themselves within clear boundaries so they can share their ideas without offending or being offended by others. When these criteria are achieved, a play community forms and co-creates a transitional space in which they are able to play." (Lobman 2011, Location 3917)

As I look at the success of this project and my time working towards a Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability degree, it is hard not to recognize the value I have gained in finding my roots- historically and professionally. I have gained valuable tools for shaping educational experiences and creating safe spaces for dialogue and connection. During my time in this program, I have witnessed the need for sustaining a broader sense of community. Whether losing belief in the sanctity of the American democratic right to vote or a failing understanding of the roots of our history as a people on earth, we are living in dire times for future generations. Looking back, over the weekend of experiences, there were moments of deep listening amongst strangers and family. As an autoethnographic performance project, it serves to stand as a beginning in my journey. Through this weekend, I have gained necessary tools and lessons that will make me sharper at crafting my role in this space and as an image of the service I call upon from generations before me.

"Our genes may bias the way we act, but the systems responsible for much of what we do and how we do it are shaped by learning." (Ledoux 2011, 9) I discovered I love making paper flowers. I would love to invite small groups over to create small gardens together. Additionally, as I

pursue more structured professional pursuits, I will also look to participate in craft shows this fall, selling arrangements and vintage homewares. While I do this, I will set up similar ethnographic displays and create signage to continue exploring the themes and mission of my first *A Vintage Open House: A Weekend for Community*. I will also look to host my second event, *A Vintage Open House: Welcome to Our Place*. This will be a small gathering at our new home, where I will provide the experience I created for Saturday for those who I feel missed out during my initial weekend of experiences. Through reshaping my grandmother's oral history, along with my mindset for providing *Nature, Roots, Fire* for a small family gathering, I will regain the possible knowledge lost in not fully providing this experience during my weekend of events. Additionally, I will look to provide my full range of auto-ethnographic performance experiences, allowing myself to revisit this portion of the weekend that I feel did not get its full attention. At this time, I am not certain how I will do this, but I can see myself reimagining the monologue segments into a more formal performance experience, where all monologues and activities are mixed into one or more two hour events. In so doing, I hope to continue to shape my knowledge in this field of participatory performance auto-ethnography.

Finally, although my friend's 90's trivia was not able to garner much attention from this initial weekend, we are in talks for hosting online trivia nights for our old college friends and perhaps opening it up to a broader online community. Additionally, we are looking to create a podcast, I'm not sure if either of these will take off, but it again keeps the momentum of building community, so I hope we do!

Appendix A:

Final Schedule & Script:



A Vintage Open
House- Weekend Sc

Appendix B:

Project Website:

<https://www.thewaywerelate.com/avintageopenhouse>

Appendix C:

Project Video: [A Vintage Open House- A Weekend for Community \(4.22-4.24.22\)](#)

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