

Tater Eyes and 'Possum Houses:
A New Role for Storytelling in Place-based Pedagogy

Rosann Kent, Mary Lipold, Avery Alexander, Elizabeth Guzman, and Kaitlyn Brackett
University of North Georgia

Author's Note

Rosann Kent, Director, Appalachian Studies Center, University of North Georgia
Mary Lipold, Avery Alexander, Elizabeth Guzman, and Kaitlyn Brackett are undergraduates
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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rosann Kent, Director,
Appalachian Studies Center, Vickery House, 82 College Circle, Dahlonega, GA 30597.

Contact rkent@ung.edu

Abstract

The storytelling tradition is as ancient as these mountains. Whether it's folktales about trickster animals, ghost stories, or personal narratives, tellers and listeners mutually create a story space, a shared internal world that exists only in the memory of the teller and mind of the listener. This reader's theater was co-created with faculty and undergraduate researchers in the Saving Appalachian Seeds and Stories, (SAGAS), an initiative that preserves and promotes agrobiodiversity in the Southern Appalachians in which students collect, grow, bank, and share heirloom seeds and related ethnocultural knowledge, or memory banking. By documenting traditional foodways practices, listening deeply and intentionally, students bridged the gap between old and young, academia and wisdom. Such is the power of story.

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All: We're building bridges in the North Georgia Mountains.

Avery: They are not made of structured steel or compressed concrete, felled timber or river stones, wrought iron or hemp rope.

All: NO.

Mary: They cannot be named beam or truss, cantilever or suspension, covered or cable stayed.

All: NO.

Kaitlin: These bridges are forged with hearty heirloom seeds and powerful recounted stories.

Elizabeth: We, the students of the Appalachian Studies Center at the University of North Georgia, build these bridges with the help and guidance of our professors, community volunteers, and seed keepers.

Kaitlin: With the seeds donated by our community elders, we save the germplasm in our university's seed bank and multiply the seeds through our own tended garden. We record the seed keepers' stories with keen ears and patient listening, recorder and phone, computer and pen.

Mary: Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I will remember. Involve me, and I will understand.

Elizabeth: Saving Appalachian Gardens and Stories invites such involvement from students in disparate disciplines ranging from art to biology. Students collect, bank, grow, and share heirloom seeds of Southern Appalachia as well as the associated memories (Winskie and Murray, 2013). Then, using arts based research, we identify visual and narrative metaphors that not only reflect but direct the gathering of data and the drawing of conclusions. Our scholarly understanding is rooted in the creation of an art piece (Dockery, 2014). As we explore

Appalachian foodways, we collect the stories contained in seeds. We believe these stories have the power to captivate --- to convince --- to convert.

Rosann: Yes, we believe in stories. Stories in the community. Stories in the classroom. When we listen to each other -- to those like and unlike ourselves -- we learn valuable lessons not just in a subject area but about life. To illustrate how foodways change over time, I created this story from a memory about my own father's story.

Rosann: My grandma had a 'possum house. Yes, she did. I know because I helped her build it. Every fall, when the leaves began to turn, it was my job to dig back into that old bank of red clay. We would scrounge around for pieces of wood to make a little house with a roof and sides and a floor. It had to be just right. I would ask, "Mama, why are we going to so much trouble?" She would answer, "Because 'possums are special."

Then, after we had built the 'possum house, we had to catch the 'possum. Now, 'possums are not the happiest of creatures on a good day and they are even unhappier when being caught. I'd bait the trap with a half-rotten squash or apple...whatever I could find...but getting a 'possum in the trap is considerably easier than getting him out of it. And that's how I discovered that 'possums secrete a smelly green slime from their, uh, anal glands.

And I would say, "Mawmaw! This is so gross. Why do I have to do this?"

And she would say, "Because 'possums are special."

Then, after we built the 'possum house, and caught the 'possum, we had to do what my grandma called "feeding the 'possum out." This meant I had to pick up pecans and walnuts, shell them,

pick out the hulls, and feed the nuts to the 'possum. Day after day. The 'possum did not get any happier. I would ask again, "Mawmaw. This sure is a lot of work. Are you sure it's worth it?"

"Yes," she would answer, "because 'possums are special."

Then, the weather turned cold and the last of the leaves had fallen. I got up to go feed the 'possum and I saw my grandma already out there....a fire built under her old wash pot...she was sharpening my grandfather's skinning knife. Well, I knew what happened to deer when there that was happening, so I ran outside and screamed, "Mawmaw! What are you doing? We built the 'possum house, 'caught the possum, fed the 'possum and now you are going to kill and EAT the 'possum! Why?"

"Because," my grandma said, "I am special too."

Mary: The people in Appalachia are a very natural people, surrounded by a land so rich in resources, it's nearly impossible to find a story from a native Appalachian that isn't deeply rooted to the land.

Elizabeth: For example, Sharon Mauney is a fifth-generation Appalachian who owns Loganberry Heritage Farm and focuses on growing Southern Appalachian foods from heirloom seeds. Sharon expresses a deep spiritual connection to her seeds and believes in the spirits of the plants themselves. Avery wrote this story to mirror Sharon's philosophy on planting by the signs.

Avery: The elephant garlic isn't really a garlic; he's a leek. But, he is still fat and round with many pungent bulbs. A little more mild tasting than garlic, elephant garlic has been a part of the Cain family's heirloom collection for at least a century.

Like many other underground growing crops, Garlic loves the descending moon. You wouldn't know it given Moon's public affection for the tides, but Moon loves Garlic too. She has watched Garlic for many years. She pulled his elephant roots down- down -down and grew his bulbs full of water while she was in Taurus, Cancer, and Scorpio.

Last fall this lunar body watched as Garlic's aged and elephantine bulbs were passed from the Cain family's hands into the unsteady, young student fingers.

Garlic was nervous. Would descending Moon find him in his new home?

Garlic needed his Lune, so he was planted in the sandy soil on October 23, 2013 just as Moon was traversing, south-bound, around the world and into her watery star sign of Cancer. She laid her moon beams on Garlic that night with the promise that she would always find him. Garlic felt safe in this new, unfamiliar student garden, and he grew with the support of water, minerals, sun, and his Moon.

You should see him now.

Mary: Bonelle Davis is another seedkeeper from north Georgia who gave us the first heirloom potatoes as well as explicit planting instructions. Bonelle's friendly persona made This hour of conversation truly captivates the wisdom that can be lost through modern technology and industrialized agriculture.

Kaitlin: Everybody needs an almanac. This right here will give you an idea about all the signs.

Now right here it says: “full moon to last quarter moon: during the 3rd quarter of the moon, plant the following: artichokes, beets, carrots, and potatoes.” Y’all know how to plant potatoes?

Elizabeth: No Ma’am, can you teach us?

Kaitlin: Yeah, that’s what I’m going to do right here. When you get your seed potatoes, you look for the eye. A lot of them won’t be out this much. But you got to cut ‘em. Like that. Every piece.... see there’s an eye.....there’s an eye... There will be four pieces of potatoes and you plant them. If you have one that don’t have an eye on it, it won’t come up. Ain’t nothing to come up with.

I’ll tell you a little joke too. Some people tell you when you’re planting potatoes, you wrap them in paper. And then you say, “Why you wrap them in paper?” To keep the dirt out of their eyes!

But you want to put about three of them to a hill. Skip about 8 to 10 inches apart, and start another hill. When they come up, you want to side dress them. Put some fertilizer on it, and rake up the dirt with a hoe, and make a mound on top. If you plant them whole, they probably won’t even come up because they have to rot.

See this one right here, I’ll give it to you. You’ve got a lot of eyes. If you go by that, you’ll have good luck.

Avery: For Archie Gilreath, old timey seeds provided a sense of security in a world of few constants. After surviving the horrors of Vietnam, he made his own luck when he farmed, saved heirloom seeds, and ran a seed co-op. However, as he comes to realize, luck can be a little tricky.

Mary: I bet you're wondering where I got these scars? In 1952, Dahlonega, Georgia got its first couple ambulances -- but forgot to get someone to drive them. So they just sat there. Me and my cousin, we were prepping a corn order over by the Ranger Camp and decided to pack the truck by hand, as to not damage the corn. Soon as I approached the corn.....Out of nowhere a big ol' mountain viper popped out and bit me right on my hand!

So I slung, beat and eventually slung my hand free from the snake. As you can imagine, I was a little shocked so my cousin said, "Come on, I'll drive you down to the doctor's office."

Let me tell you, I thought that I was going to die -- more so from the car ride down the mountain than from the actual snake bite. He was slinging me every which way around the road, and he even ran a couple of stop signs.

Now one of my good buddies was a deputy at the time and caught him when he ran one of those stop signs. So he pulled us over and my cousin got real angry and started cursing and cussing at the deputy. And I had to calm him down and explain that I just got bitten and we were going to the doctor.

My deputy friend kind of laughed and then said, "You ain't going to make it to the doctor with him driving; come on get in the car with me."

So we started down the mountain and got to the little doctor's office right by the drugstore. They didn't have any anti-venom. They got the bright idea to go across the street and go get a Boy Scout snakebite kit. So they give me a shot right in my bite and it started swelling even faster. Now my hand is about this big.

We finally we got hold of one of the men who kind of knew how to drive the ambulance. This is four or five hours after the bite, and so my arm is turning black, and I can't hardly move it.

Finally, we get to the hospital over in Hall County. By then, the swelling had spread up my arm across my shoulders and down my other arm.

They were waiting for me over there, dressed all in their white -- a surgeon and his nurse -- and they just started cutting my arm with a scalpel. Over and over again! Look you can see the marks now! They kept telling me that I may lose my arm -- but I didn't. With all that venom in me, I felt intoxicated, and I wasn't. But, anyway, they kept me in the hospital for six days, and it took a little longer for me to be able to use my arm again.

But, as you can see, I still have my arm! And I still use it to process corn every season. But, since that snakebite, I now use a shovel.

Elizabeth: Mr. Archie, who is going to process the seeds after you're gone?

Kaitlin and Avery: I reckon we will.

Kaitlin: We found Estelle Jarrard through a follow-up interview with a relative, Lorreta Grizzle, and what a find she was. This 98 year old woman keeps "old timey" seeds in Tums bottles because they are "better for her than any medicine'." She works hard -- works her large farm by herself -- to protect her crops and seeds, and nothing is going to get in her way.

Elizabeth: I've had animal problems lately; y'all may not know about these things but I've been having a bunch of bears, deer, raccoons, and groundhogs eating up my broccoli and cabbage. They're trying to destroy my farm!

Last year, I had a cub up in my apple tree and the mama bear down on the ground and they were just eating up all my apples. So I called up the game warden that I've been using for years and

told him about these bears who were eating up all my food and he sent out his boss. He brought what looked like a little pistol and rolled up shot gun shells... do you know what a shotgun shell looks like?

Elizabeth: You put it in this pistol and pull the trigger, and I reckon there's enough force it stuns the bear. Imagine that -- a 98 year old woman trying to go up against this big old bear and the game warden expected me to just stun it!

He told me he can't bring the trap and catch the bear because the little baby bear wouldn't know where to go. I can't understand why I own the land and pay taxes on it but I can't take care of what's destroying my crops. Let them eat up my vegetables and let me starve, but feed the bears!

Not even a week later those bears came out and tore up all my chicken pellets and ate them up. The bear had pulled it 30 feet out front of the chicken coop, tore it up, and then dragged the remaining part of it out to the edge of the woods.

I said to the game warden, "Now had that been a man that I caught stealing, I could have prosecuted him, have him put in jail and made him pay for it, but with ya'll, I can't do anything. Are ya'll going to pay me for my sack?"

He just shook his head no.

One of these days -- one day soon -- these bears are going to get hungry and attack someone because all the land is gone. The game warden needs to do something about this problem because I'm too old to go running around my property with a gun trying to scare these bears away all on my own!

Kaitlin: Through this project, we learned about heirloom seeds.

Avery: And through these stories we have developed as people, our minds filled with the best of stories.

Mary: about snakes.

Elizabeth: bears,

Kaitlin: potatoes,

Avery: and the true love of Garlic and Moon.

Mary: These stories give us wisdom that we can carry on for the rest of our life.

Elizabeth: I learned independence from a 98 year old woman.

Kaitlin: I learned that the latest and greatest doesn't always compare to the tried and true.

Avery: I learned that the natural energy that grows from the earth contributes to the energy of humanity.

Mary: I learned that seeds are worth saving, even in life-threatening situations.

All: And we all learned that we are special.

Bio: Rosann Kent is the Director of the Appalachian Studies Center at the University of North Georgia in Dahlonega, Georgia. She has a Masters in storytelling from East Tennessee State University. Mary Lipold, Avery Alexander, Elizabeth Guzman, and Kaitlyn Brackett are students minoring in Appalachian Studies and team leaders for its [Appalachian Teaching Project](#).

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