

# Scatter These Hills With Beauty: Queer Appalachian Art



Written by Kelsey Sucena

*“The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.”*

*- David Graeber,  
The Utopia of Rules*



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#### GIRL WEEKEND UP-DATE

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#### POLO CLUB

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In his last book *The Dawn of Everything*, published posthumously, David Graeber argues that much, perhaps most, of the development of human culture emerges directly from a phenomenon called “schismogenesis”, meaning something like “to create from division.” In this telling the calm democracy of ancient Athens was enabled in part by their fascistic neighbors in Sparta whom they defined themselves against. The same might be true of Appalachia, defining its cultural landscape against its neighbors and perceived enemies, as in Colin Woodard’s account of its history in his book *American Nations*. There, Appalachia is made out as the bastard child of North America, its history defined primarily by opposition. While, of course, Appalachian history and culture extends far beyond its violent colonization by white settlers, Woodard cites waves of settlement by a variety of dissidents — Scots/Irish colonizers, fugitive slaves, and indigenous holdouts — as the foundation of its contemporary drama. The hills seem to call for rebellion, but direct it with little regard for ideology. Thus, in the North, Appalachia sides with the Confederates and in the South, Appalachia throws down for the Union.

The same might be true of Queerness which too sees itself defined, though not necessarily formulated, by oppositions. Queerness, which is generally alienated and isolated from a culture that considers carnal pleasure, sexual and gendered fluidity, love, connection, self-realization, and individual agency as being improper, thus extends itself in oppositions.

It would seem natural then to assume that Appalachia is a Queer place, and while the *Mountain Lace* archive exhumed by Dr. Jacob Kopcienski would seem to support that case, we rarely associate the landscape with Queer people. Much of this might be because of its relative hostility, being oppositional and rebellious, sure, but also being broadly conservative, thoroughly colonized, and moralistically Christian. The Queers who live here tend to flee.

But of course, Appalachia *is* Queer, as are all landscapes to a certain degree. Here, we are presented with an archive of that queerness, both historical and contemporary. With subjects, with artists, who insist, however contradictorily, on both Queer *and* Appalachian identity. Rooted as this work is in a long lineage of foothill fags, we might celebrate and take to heart the resiliency of the Queer Appalachian who makes and remakes the world in their image.

AUGUST 1991

## MOUNTAIN LACE

THE NEWSLETTER OF TRANS - WEST VIRGINIA  
TRANS-WEST VIRGINIA\*\*P.O. BOX 2322\*\*HUNTINGTON\*\*WEST VIRGINIA 25724  
EDITED BY: BEVERLY WILLIAMS

**JULY MEETING HIGHLIGHTS**

- > More Information On MAGC To Be Requested.
- > National Gender Survey Forms Completed.
- > New Promotional Flyers Distributed.
- > Trip To Polo Club Planned.
- > Halloween And Christmas Parties Under Consideration.
- > Prototype Logo To Be Ready For August Meeting.

**LIBRARY MEDIA GROWING**

Renee, Princess of the library, reports that the T-WV inventory of media continues to grow. Several new video tapes and magazines are now available for members to check out.

**POLO CLUB BEAUTIES!**

*This reporter has learned that the Polo Club had a visit by two of T-WV's finest. Tabatha and Kay turned more than a few heads when their mere presence elevated the entire atmosphere of the place. Patrons of the club now know what real elegance and grace are. Nice going girls!*

**ROLL CALL!**

Present for the July meeting were: Susan, Tabatha, Beverly, Alona, Letha, Bridgette, Kay, Jenny, Renee, and Mary. Next meeting on 8/16/91.

**I.D. CARDS AVAILABLE**

Alona shared the address with us where we can acquire a special I.D. Card for members of our community. To get information on the card write to:

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The cost of the card is \$10.00.

**ALL - GIRL WEEKEND UP-DATE**

Beverly has reported that cabins at Canaan Valley and several other desirable areas are booked until the end of the season. Alona suggested

that we contact Greenbrier State Forest or Watoga State Park. Bev said that she would do so and report to the group at the next meeting.

Let's look for instance at Marcus Morris, curator and artist, whose work here is illustriously shaped by an intimacy with land rarely regarded as spectacular. Here, the jagged cliffs and towering pines of Appalachias ancient range call out for the bodies' contention, begging with the raspy breath of a proper bottom, for contact and penetration. The landscape, painted for Marcus by deep and pervasive trauma, is here reimagined as a tool for self-reflection and for liberation. In the tent I imagine Marcus alive with the land from which he has been alienated by centuries of colonization, racist segregation, and the inaccurate image of nature as a feminine to be conquered by the rough, cis hetero white masculine. The ghosts of this place are alive and well in Marcus's image, dancing between the shale and the rough roots of a place often disregarded.



Or there we could peek at Julie Rae's vision of Appalachia as a place full of people. We look and are met with the gaze of other Queer Appalachians, themselves occasionally looking back at us through Julie Rae's lens. The bodies, of both people and of pups, are rendered in stark contrast, as though God's light has been shed through the cracks of a canyon for the very first time only to reveal the contoured forms of people who have long taken refuge from the light of a terrifying and fascistic visibility. Despite the visible, we are also left with spectors who turn away, spirits of spirited people, proudly living out their lives with agency and independence.

Together these portfolios constitute a vision of place and people that is ambiguously but affirmatively free. Here, the Appalachians' penchant for rebellion, for independence, for boldness and bravery comes forth, reminding us that pride can mean and be so many things. In the *Mountain Lace* archive we see that this Queerness is not new, but is a least as old our modern conceptions of transgender identity, formulated as they were during *Mountain Lace's* tenure as a chief public forum for trans Appalachians before the proliferation of the internet which today cradles our discourse.

In all of this we might witness opposition, the Appalachian against the outsider, the Queer against the 'phobe, as an act of creation. As light sheds down into the deep shale crevices of this place, we see its highlights painted by the thick black shadow of the Earth. This comes as a revelation for many, as rapture and as prophecy, a vision of a planet so saturated with Queers that even here we make our worlds. Queerness is not the city, it is not New York, but the very ground from which we spring. Queer Appalachians, of course, have known this all along.



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