Art in Them Mountains: Critical Discussions on Appalachia, Identity, and Abolition

VIVIAN SWAYNE AND MICHELLE BROWN – WITH JAKELI SWIMMER AND LACY HALE

In this article, we explore the work of three Appalachian artists: Jakeli Swimmer (*Qualla Boundary, North Carolina*), Lacy Hale (*Whitesburg, Kentucky*) and Vivian Swayne (*East Tennessee*). In subversive stories, each artist reveals contradictions in the Mountain South through political art that counters violence, hate, vitriol, and ongoing settler intrusions in the region. They challenge how we think about the diversity of land and people, and their work deepens how we understand and relate to mountains, community, and safety. In this way, their art reflects Appalachia's oldest demands: self-determination, autonomy, and sovereignty in our bodies, our land, and our Peoples. These discussions are part of a larger digital archival project, *Abolition Now: Images for Study and Struggle,* that features interviews with artists, organizers, and curators about the production and contexts of their work.

Introduction

In this article, we engage the work of three artists whose work resists, through political intervention and creative praxis, harmful systems and stereotypes grounded in settler and carceral formations of Appalachia. We profile exemplary work from each artist before putting their art and experiences in discussion with one another. First, we consider the work of Jakeli Swimmer, of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, whose creative platform *Around the Boundary, Inc*. amplifies art, critique, and stories about land, relationships, and sovereignty for his people. We then highlight the proliferation of Lacy Hale's work *No Hate in My Holler* from its birth as an anti-racist demand, to an expression of solidarity with queer and trans people, and finally as a growing slogan around the world. Third, we introduce the work of one of the authors, Vivian Swayne, whose piece *Queer Southern Contexts* juxtaposes the environmental harms of coal mining, mountaintop removal, and prison growth in the region against Southern queer beauty, joy, and solidarity.[1] The art of these three artists reflects an irresistible "queer and decolonial revolution against ecological destruction" that is dedicated to the land and people of the region: "our collective beloved" (Cloe 2024, 224). We

conclude the article with a discussion about the limits and potential power of art in "them mountains," where the colloquial reference is re-envisioned as precisely why Appalachia needs abolition *now*.[2]

This article is drawn from a larger collaborative project, *Abolition Now: Images for Study and Struggle (AN)*, a digitally curated, searchable, and open-source database that documents an unprecedented flow of social movement art in the era of "new abolition," which spans from the birth of the Movement for Black Lives (circa 2012), through the George Floyd uprisings, and into the present.[3] The platform builds from over 1000 art pieces across a range of media: political graphics and posters, digital art and screen prints, protest signs, graffiti, murals, and more. It features key works from the collection by pairing them with documentary interviews in which the artist describes why they made the piece, its themes, their goals, and popular response and re-uses, as these artists have done with us. *AN* holds space for the labor of movement artists who are otherwise disappeared from or intentionally misinterpreted by mainstream media, official archives, and politics. It is a space of study where people, whether new to or familiar with abolition, can make connections between movements; witness symbols of beauty, hope, disgust, and rage; and explore visions for alternative paths to justice. The hope is that every time you arrive at the portals of *Abolition Now*, you will encounter abolition as its images exist now, which is to say past in present, prefiguring the future, and on the move. In what follows, we put artists, previously isolated from one another's work, in conversation around intersecting systems of oppression and movement building in Appalachia.

Around the Boundary, Inc.: Cherokee Storytelling, Tribal Police, and Uktena

We begin with the work of Jakeli Swimmer, a Cherokee artist who engages the deep resurgent beauty, struggles, and contestations of tribal life in Appalachia's settler colonial context. Swimmer's work reminds us of the ancient practice of art in the mountains by its first people, the Anikituwah, and their continuing presence in the land they have inhabited for over ten thousand years, for which the term "Appalachia" only came much later (Walls 1977).[4] The term itself is grounded in appropriation: it emerged after Spanish conquistadors began to map and colonize the region in the 1500s and took the name from the Apalachee tribe who lived in the Southeastern woodlands. In liberal epistemologies, we rarely conceptualize Appalachia as Native space but rather as one anchored in the legacies of coal, class, and poverty overwhelmingly reflected in movement art spaces. In the language of the land, however, Kituwah, the life source of the Cherokee people, is a place rich with resources, communities, and strategies for flourishing lifeways, violently interrupted by, but ongoing against, colonization and the dispossessions and removals that followed. Appalachia itself as a term erases this history and asks scholars and organizers in the region to think more deeply about the internal contradictions

of settler-colonialism and how to connect with anti-colonial struggles, including in discussions of absentee land ownership, reclamation, labor organizing, and other regional movements (Pearson 2013).

Swimmer has been making art for as long as he can remember. He comes from a family whose art practices cross generations and are grounded in daily life. From kitchen utensils to hairbrushes, art for Swimmer is made from the ordinary things around you, as he was taught by his grandmother and father, and is simply "a functional way of being."[5] His family's work in traditional pottery, basket weaving, and painting links the inseparability of art and practical tools to lineage, relationality, and family. Swimmer's work creatively and provocatively follows what Indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor (1999) names as modes of survivance. The term blends "survival" and "resistance," signifying an active and ongoing presence rooted in Indigenous traditions, agency, and cultural expression. Swimmer extends traditional cultural forms and values in new cultural spaces and innovative mediums. In the form of digital art, cartoons, and illustrations, his drawings span prints, clothing, stickers, and social media through his popular brand Around the Boundary, Inc. (and associated *Instagram* account, referencing the Qualla Boundary (the lands held in trust with the US and the larger Cherokee traditional lands) and the local area code.[6] His work does not shy away from the political contestations and forms of settler colonialism internal and external to the tribe. Settler colonialist intrusions in the lifeways of the Cherokee are complicated by deep histories of racial capitalism.[7] The extractive function of racial capitalism is evidenced, for instance, by a tourism industry anchored in racial stereotypes along the main streets of Cherokee, NC and the forms governance takes, including tribal justice systems. Swimmer employs graphic art and social media as a space to make his artistic and political presence apparent in a way that is generative for his people.

Settler colonialist intrusions in the lifeways of the Cherokee are complicated by deep histories of racial capitalism.

One of Swimmer's core abolitionist pieces follows a deep critique of policing as violence. Here, we survey a series of Swimmer's images that critique tribal police and the imprint of settler colonial justice systems. The series builds from Swimmer's contemporary style modeled after the animation of the satiric sitcom *The Simpsons*. In one piece, Swimmer caricatures a hiring poster: an ad, framed with a white border, reads "Tribal Police is Now Hiring" "all types" "all sizes" "anyone really" above an image of a Native officer with long braids in a blue uniform—gun in holster, baton on belt, holding a frybread doughnut in one hand and a can of soda in the other. A similar image portrays a cop with thumbs up and a frybread doughnut below the quote: "Don't be a shit ass," popularized on Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi's FX show *Reservation Dogs*. In

another, against a purple backdrop, a tribal police officer looks backward to find a tribal youth spray painting "Shi'Qua" on his rear (Figure 1). Black title text against a neon yellow backdrop reads: "How do you say pig in Chur'kee?" Swimmer made a series of this image, each with "pig" in different Native languages, including "ᏏᏆ" – Shi'Qua in the Cherokee syllabary. Swimmer engages what Wall and McClanahan (2024) identify as "intellects of insult," which take seriously the cultural fortitude of insurgent critiques and a political philosophy of refusal. These authors situate this kind of political art within the long durée of a historic, transnational, and ongoing "aesthetic arsenal of vitriol and insult aimed at the police institution and the cops which constitute it" (Wall and McClanahan 6).

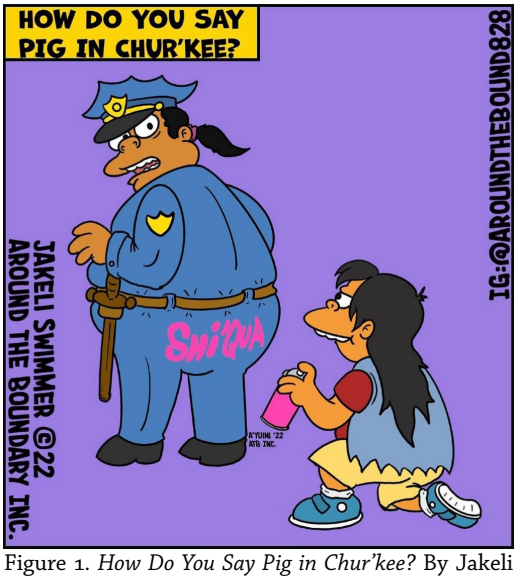

Figure 1. *How Do You Say Pig in Chur'kee?* By Jakeli Swimmer (2022)

Swimmer's work follows a long "critique of workaday cops" whose "rude repertoires of rebellion seek to delegitimize the 'legitimate' authority of police and their monotonous monopoly of violence, including the fantasy of the 'good cop'" (Wall and McClanahan 2024, 6). For instance, Swimmer talks compellingly of how he too wanted to be a tribal police officer, like his father, but how the job of policing itself, as a seductive Blue Lives "savior" space, eroded and discredited the community's long-standing role in more effective and sustainable ways of maintaining order and protecting each other. Racial capitalism, he notes, has made policing one of the last good employment options, and one with lasting mental health effects. Reflecting on his father's experience as a cop, he articulates a fundamental absence: in policing there is "a lot that isn't really spoken about," requiring "a deeper dive into community love and community understanding." In Swimmer's vision, safety is created through association, not "disassociation," with community, where people truly listen and understand the circumstances of people's lives—from those who truly *know* them.

Indigenous scholars have deepened the literature on the violence of police and carceral systems and their intersection with Indigenous and tribal forms of sovereignty, jurisdiction, and criminalization (Rocha Beardall 2024; Dhillon 2015; Razack 2013, 2015, 2020; Million 2013). As Rocha Beardall (2024) argues, "imperialism without imperialists" persists through the "ways that settler-colonial logics of social control, carcerality, and elimination remain permanent fixtures in the lives of contemporary Indigenous Peoples living in the U.S." (48). She writes in a manner that reflects key elements of Swimmer's work:

> I take stock of the fact that increasingly, tribal policing and jails have Native faces on both sides of the encounter (e.g., the police and residents they surveil and arrest are both Native) to show that settler-colonial goals

> of extraction and subordination can operate from within without "settler faces"… The increase in the use of tribal jails and prisons and subsequent deaths of Native Peoples in these facilities further motivates the need to consider how the settler-state structures disproportionate carceral practices in Indian Country. (51, 58)

Swimmer's art operates against the militarization and modeling of the tribal police (which, in Swimmer's community, also serves as the local SWAT team for surrounding non-tribal counties) after US criminal legal systems. Amid the rise of "cop cities" across the region, Swimmer insists that we return to the cultural values of an Indigenous community-based approach, "where people are loved, not weapons in oppression." As a matriarchal society, where collective life predominated historically, Cherokee systems—families led by women and organized around the origin point and ongoing sacred center of Cherokee peoples, known as the "Mothertown," or Kituwah—have been preempted by policing as a patriarchal, individuating, settler colonial presence. Kituwah is "where our strength comes from," Swimmer states, as he speaks a world for his children—his daughters, specifically—and the next seven generations. Art, Swimmer says, helps him express this vision—a worlding of something different, an occupation of space in order to disrupt the repetitive crisis of ongoing settler colonialism, and its massive indifference to ongoing violence, murder, disappearance. This indictment of carceral and policing worlds flows with Swimmer's larger body of work that centers sovereignty through land back demands and jurisdictional engagements. At the core of his commitments is a love of the beauty of the land, and the relationships that flow out of it—a love for his people.

Figure 2. *Uktena Tuesday* by Jakeli Swimmer (2024)

This land/love relationship is perhaps most clearly articulated in our interview with Swimmer about the apocryphal Uktena, the massive horned green scaly serpent of Cherokee culture. With a diamond-shaped red crystal on its forehead, the Uktena moves from the deep pools of the mountain rivers and floods of the region, often appearing in the dark, stormy passages of "them mountains." Its arrival brings a fierce punishing presence but also a powerful divining one in the form of its crystal, the ulunsu'ti/ulvshada, which acts as a talisman. Swimmer has generated a prolific set of Uktena images through his "Uktena Tuesday" series on *Instagram*, from beautiful portraiture, including a self-portrait with the Uktena encircling the EBCI seal (Figure 2), to neon signage and other vibrant adaptations. As Swimmer tells it,

> An Uktena was created during a time as we were suffering as a people (having been punished by the sun)…Uktena was formed to be massive, to be intimidating…to do the job, given extra abilities to ensure our survival and our survivance. Unfortunately, he didn't get the chance to fulfill that prophecy, that creation, and he became very angry about that, very dangerous and was put away into our sky vault…[8]

In Swimmer's analysis, Uktena is a point of reclamation and self-determination. Indeed, in some accounts, Uktena arises to fight off settler colonialism while at other times, Uktena signals settler arrival (Horton 2017). For Swimmer, the autonomy and power that Uktena wields is fundamental:

You can make your own vision—with honor and respect for these things. Because if we don't respect them, they go away.

> Not only is it a very telling story of a creation… it was made to help us out…but the beauty is that it's doing what it's always supposed to do: to utilize its powers…The strongest thing in our lives is not some weapon; it's the crystal… the Uktena protects…only a strong person can succeed in getting it. For me, I wanted to capture that ancestral idea but in a way that is very contemporary.

Swimmer's discussion of the strength embodied in the ulunsu'ti/ulvshada is beautifully depicted in a portrait of Nex Benedict, a Choctaw gender nonconforming student whose death was linked in national media to school bullying and anti-2SLGBTQ+ policies in Oklahoma/Indian Country (Figure 3). Swimmer states that there is only one warrior who ever defeated Uktena and obtained the ulunsu'ti/ulvshada, and that person was nonbinary, which indicates a wider cultural space and queer horizon in Cherokee culture. Swimmer carefully explains his wariness of sharing deep and intimate details about Uktena's importance even as he seeks to cultivate a love for Uktena among his people through the creative lifeblood Uktena carries:

Figure 3. *Nex Benedict* by Jakeli Swimmer (2024)

> This is how we created things. You can make your own vision—with honor and respect for these things. Because if we don't respect them, they go away. In a way where I'm not going to be the curious researcher, I'm not going to exploit it for clicks and views….This is my healing, this is my appreciation, this is my break away from the monotony and the constant struggle to create proper representation for our people and fight for proper representation…it is my solace for every week.

Swimmer's declaration that "You can make your own vision" highlights the superpower of art to envision and innovate. He positions art as both a political refuge and as a political practice of sociocultural reproduction that refuses the exploitative practices of research, which is the kind of protection needed in communities still surviving the ongoing logics and structures of settler colonialism. As our next featured artist's work makes apparent, these internal contradictions continue to take shape as the boundaries of art and belonging have intensified in the hollers of Appalachia.

Just Say No: No Hate in My Holler, No Letcher Prison

Born and raised in southeastern Kentucky, Lacy Hale knew she wanted to be an artist by the time she was five years old. In 2017, after she learned that white supremacist organizations had planned a rally in Pikeville, Kentucky near her hometown, Hale helped plan an art workshop in rapid response. With others, Hale hosted a day of art making at the local youth center to protest the rally, which is where she first screen printed *No Hate in My Holler* (Figure 4). The original design features a blue sky, green hills, and white etchings where she carved out the rubber. A road in black ink leads into the homes and hills, or, alternatively, emerges from a vantage point in what is known in Appalachia as a holler, which is regional slang for a community, neighborhood, or home. Hale's use of *holler*, the Appalachian version of "hollow," signifies particular relevance to her regional audience. In big white block letters, the center of the composition exclaims in all capital letters NO HATE IN MY HOLLER. Hale underlined the word "my" for emphasis. Below this demand, in smaller black capital letters, reads #GOHOMENAZISCUM. About the piece, Hale told *The Daily Yonder*:

Figure 4. *No Hate in My Holler,* Original by Lacy Hale (2017)

> This piece just came to me. I feel very rooted to this place and the land I grew up on. I'm very proud to be from the holler. It just popped in my head—"no hate in my holler." Don't bring that here. Don't try to bring that fear and lie to us under the guise of helping poor white families. You're bringing hatred and trying to fool people into supporting your cause…Some people…see the "go home nazi scum" [hashtag] at the bottom. They say it says, "no hate," but this bottom piece is pretty hateful. I was pretty angry and I don't sympathize with Nazis. I wanted to make the point that they're not welcome here. Normally I don't use curse words. That was the strongest language I used to convey, "We don't want you here, go home." (Adams 2017)

Hale described her frustration with people who argued her piece was hypocritical because her use of the phrase "Nazi scum" was a hateful choice, and she critiques their both-sides argument that falsely portrays Nazis as victims rather than as white supremacists. Hale's experience highlights how

images do work that is complex, contested, and irreconcilable within political and ideological frames. Hale told interviewers [the authors of this article] how another group remixed the slogan to read *Only Jesus in My Holler*, importing a singularly Christian vision of Appalachia. The fusion of particular forms of religious thought and practice to the image extends the Euro-Christian settler colonialism that wreaked genocidal havoc in the region and laid the foundations for key formations in the contemporary moment's evangelical racial carceral militarization (Krinks 2024).

Although Hale describes some resistance to the piece, she also recounts its proliferation in several interviews since its conception seven years ago. Hale tells the story of how people requested *No Hate in My Holler* merchandise for the Pikeville rally. Her emotional investment in the life of her art is evident throughout the years of press, research, and interviews that have followed *No Hate in My Holler*. She describes her disappointment for the necessity of the slogan's revival as a response to another white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where an anti-racist protestor and two police officers died.

> This is very upsetting. I thought I'd made this piece of artwork for a specific period of time in this part of the country. I thought it had died down, but after Charlottesville, I started seeing this come back, and people started messaging me to ask for artwork. I changed my cover photos to that artwork. People were really wanting to get T-shirts to give to their friends and to use this [artwork]. Someone tagged me in a post and said, "Thank you for your kickass war cry." (Adams 2017)

In the quote above, Hale identifies the insidious trap of teleological assumptions about racial progress, or claims founded in Enlightenment discourse that suggest societies naturally improve over time (Seamster and Ray 2018). We also hear settler colonialist legacies in the "war cry" invocation, which as a term itself which carries the colonial imprint in the region. The art extends as a politics of refusal—"no hate"—but one which can be lifted onto multiple positionalities, as with Charlottesville where a multicoalitional set of actors sought to condemn Unite the Right's anti-Black, antisemitic, homophobic, transphobic, and other forms of hate.

People recycle demands that resonate with their experiences, and diverse hollers adopted No Hate In My Holler into their lexical arsenal to combat racism.

Hale also explains how the personal mantra became a movement slogan that circulated through locales, multimedia, and personal contexts.[9] People recycle demands that resonate with their experiences, and diverse hollers adopted *No Hate in My Holler* into their lexical arsenal to combat racism. *No Hate in My Holler* grew even further after the events in Charlottesville gained coverage. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the police killing of George Floyd, Hale donated a portion of her proceeds to Black Lives Matter groups. She has

also donated *No Hate in My Holler* proceeds to Hurricane Helene relief efforts and LGBTQ+ groups. Hale said the following:

> Yeah, I mean, it was pretty incredible the amount of money I got to raise… And it [*No Hate in My Holler*] kinda grew into allyship for LGBTQ communities… It's grown in ways that I didn't imagine it would, and I have received so many comments from people. Like just the other day [someone changing their name] messaged me and said "I finally got to change my name"… [and] he sent me a picture with his certificate of name change and you know he had his *No Hate in My Holler* shirt on. So that just was really meaningful story…It's been pretty incredible. Just what a piece of art can do just in general.

Hale's work speaks to a long complex history of overlooked resistance in a region mischaracterized as monolithically white, helpless in its poverty, and degraded by its fear of outsiders.

At this point in the interview, Hale began to softly cry. When interviewers asked her about the multiple color schemes and how the piece evolved over time, Hale said:

> I did get a request for you know, different colors like the rainbow color scheme and stuff. And I was like, you know, if people want this and they identify with it, then I want to provide that for them. And it really has kind of—it's got a life of its own like. It's grown beyond me—and I think, you know, that's, I think, what most artists, like, dream of creating a piece that could do that in some way, you know. (Figure 5)

The fact that queer Appalachians requested a rainbow version of *No Hate in My Holler* from Hale offers a glimpse of the region's queerness, which is often obscured by blanket statements and stereotypes that erase radical formations of queer caretaking networks, mutual aid, and safe sober spaces. To its queer viewers, *No Hate in My Holler* targeted racism, transphobia, homophobia, and sexism that have historically plagued the region. In the rainbow version, Hale removed the Nazi scum hashtag, perhaps so the message more neatly reflected the popular Love Is Love narrative. By removing the explicitly anti-fascist language, Hale's work speaks to the ideological challenges of creating varied and contested versions of an image, and how those processes can diffuse and defuse the original intent through more palatable forms of liberalism.

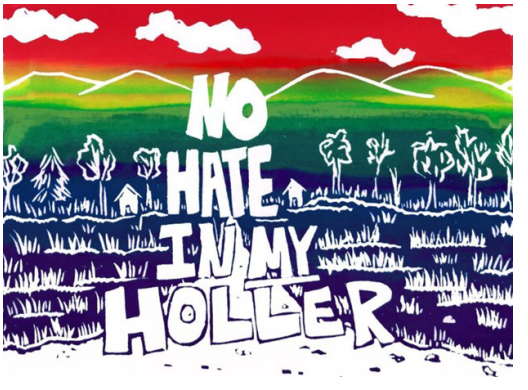

Figure 5. *Rainbow No Hate in My Holler* by Lacy Hale (2017)

Hale's work speaks to a long complex history of overlooked resistance in a region mischaracterized in its racial constituencies as monolithically white,

helpless in its poverty, and degraded by its fear of outsiders (Catte 2018; Harkins and McCarroll 2019). She has continually released new versions of her design to diverse hollers. Indeed, graphic designers worked with Hale to create a heat map that documented the growth of *No Hate in My Holler* since its conception in 2017. Through local organizations including Appalshop, Hale organized an exhibition to reveal the heat map. She explains that

> It [*No Hate in My Holler*] started out very centralized in eastern Kentucky, and a little bit in Tennessee and Virginia, and then from there it just spread…I've even sent it to Germany and Japan, and I think all these are like holler transplants, you know, in different places… I'm not exactly sure why they identify with it in some other way. I'm not sure but just to see the growth and to see where it's gone. And to think that it matters to people and gives them something to get behind. And so, I think I started talking about [the exhibition] shortly after the protest…
>
> [*About the exhibition*] I had this idea of that heat map being on a loop in the center of the room, and then just I installed, you know, several. Whatever prints I had of the *No Hate In My Holler* and different colors on the wall… The interactive piece was quilt squares that people could come in and paint with paint markers like what reminded them of their holler. What made them happy to live here. What made them proud, you know…And then we tied the corners together and made like a community quilt out of it.

For holler transplants, queer communities, and anti-racist organizers, *No Hate in My Holler* encompasses the demands of our time for life-saving institutions rather than death dealing structures. *AN* connected with Hale at a Building Community Not Prisons (BCNP) event before a public hearing about the federal prison proposed for Letcher County, in Eastern Kentucky.[10] Since 2014, BCNP organizers have mobilized against the $500 million federal prison proposed by the Bureau of Prisons to be built on a mountaintop removal site one mile away from an existing mine and coal slurry pond (Schept 2022). Sylvia Ryerson, BCNP organizer and director of *Calls From Home*, asked Hale to design a shirt for the movement (Figure 6).[11] Hale told *AN*:

Figure 6. *Build Community Not Prisons* by Lacy Hale (2024)

> Sylvia asked me to do the T-shirt and asked me to come to this [Pizza Not Prisons event]. So, it's like, yeah, that aligns with what I believe because *No Hate in My Holler* that covers a plethora of hollers. And I think, you know, the prison complex is very greedy [and racist]… I think *No Hate in My Holler* fits into that so well.
>
> [Artists] fit the time period that they're in, and they make work about that. And I think that you know, making the T-shirt for that. I mean you know what better way to protest and help that movement, then to create work that's about no prisons here…Definitely *No Hate in My Holler* is definitely *No Letcher Prison*…

> I feel like [the prison] is a Hal Rogers-like ego booster, you know. I mean, we don't need a prison here. We need other things, like, that is not going to benefit the land. The people. It's kind of mortifying to think about [the prison] being considered for this county…We don't need more prisons. We need to rethink sentences…it's such a mess. It's so again about greed and racism, you know. I mean, I think those two things are two of the posts that are holding the prison complex.…You know prisons have nothing to do with loving your neighbor or loving anyone.

Above, Hale formulates an anti-capitalist and anti-racist structural critique of the prison industrial complex. Her T-shirt design demands *Build Communities Not Prisons* and depicts a city skyline that overlaps with the mountains. Four endemic species frame the image. Per the Federal Bureau of Prisons' required Environmental Impact Statement, the four species that stand to be negatively impacted by the construction of the prison include the American Kestrel Falcon, the Indiana Bat, the Yellow-Spotted Woodland Salamander, and the Painted Trillium Flower. Through her art, Hale rejects the prison as a hateful apparatus in her holler, imbued in the same histories and systems of racism and transphobia that informed her Nazi scum hashtag. From 2017 to 2024, and into the present, the legacy of *No Hate in My Holler* continues to grow, and art in solidarity with BCNP supports healthy communities and ecosystems for all.[12]

Them Mountains Over There and Queer Southern Contexts

Swayne's piece was inspired by a research project that focused on queer Southern identity, separate from *AN*, in which they participated as a subject. Researchers asked the participants to create art that reflected their experiences as queer Southerners and then interviewed artists about what they made. Swayne created two pieces, both using oil pastels: one was a self-portrait that reflected personal embodiment and the other represented the larger context of the Appalachian Mountain South. When the interviewer asked Swayne about the material separation of self and context, the artist explained they were present in both pieces as their creator, but that they wanted each to stand on its own. We focus on the latter piece, *Queer Southern Contexts*, which is an 8x8 drawing of mountains done in oil pastels with two stark color palettes that represent the contradictions of being Southern and queer (Figure 7). The left is in greyscale and depicts four flat mountains, a mountain range without its tops. Light emerges from the bottom left corner. On the right side, which is about 2/3 of the composition, are three round, plump, and blue mountains backdropped by a pink sky.

Figure 7. *Queer Southern Contexts* by Vivian Swayne (2022)

A bright light shines down from the top right corner while the darkest blue mountain is foregrounded and blends into green at the bottom. At its core, the piece grapples with the contradictions of living an authentic, autonomous life, and participating in and under intersecting systems of oppression.

The pink sky does, in fact, accurately reflect the beauty of the land, brings forth a legacy of queer and trans ancestors, and signals semiotic relevance to queer and trans viewers. .

We contextualize *Queer Southern Contexts* within a burgeoning literature on queer Appalachian ecologies (Cloe 2024; Long and McNeill 2024; Schwartzman 2024). In Swayne's mind, the mountains are always queer. When asked to explain how the mountains are queer, Swayne remarked that sexual diversity is the most natural thing in the world and that the Appalachian mountains are incredibly biodiverse. Indeed, researchers have documented same sex behaviors, tools for masturbation, polyamory, pleasure, and sexual transitions in non-human groups (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010). To Swayne, biodiversity in the Appalachian mountains reflects beautiful gender and sexually diverse people in the region. They lament:

> Sexual diversity is the most natural thing. These mountains are the oldest mountains in the world. [Think of] the amount of biodiversity we have lost in our area. I think there is something very, very intimate about queerness and nature generally. People and politics are like, no, homosexuality is a sin against nature. When you are talking about mountains being queer, it's *them* mountains, not his or her mountains…There's a time component, a history component, and a biodiversity component. Like actually being queer is the *most* natural thing. Strict constructions of gender and sexuality binaries constrain us. …And there's something just so mysterious about the Blue Ridge Mountains, I think of, like, the fog and just like the rollingness of it all. It keeps going, and that to me also reads queer because, in queer theory, queerness is a horizon.[13]

Beyond bodies, behaviors, and binaries, Swayne situates their piece in a queer temporality that conceives of queerness as never fully in the present and oriented towards radical futures that eradicate cisheteropatriarchy, environmental and social extraction, and racial capitalism (Schwartzman 2024). Indeed, they reference José Muñoz's (2009) work in which he explains queerness steps beyond the "linearity of straight time," which is "a self-naturalizing temporality" (25). Swayne explains that they added a hint of green to symbolize new growth, building from Muñoz's framework for queerness as an "ecstatic and horizontal temporality" that acts as "a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" (25). Radical possibilities are also represented in the color scheme on the right, which reflects the colors of trans pride: pink, white, and blue. This color palette is thematic for Swayne, especially the use of pink skies that resist normative, and false, assumptions that the sky is only and

always blue. Swayne often queers the sky in their work by choosing colors reminiscent of identity flags familiar to queer audiences. They use queer as a verb in their work, questioning and challenging cisheteronormative constructions of what is "natural" (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010). The pink sky *does,* in fact, accurately reflect the beauty of the land, brings forth a legacy of queer and trans ancestors, and signals semiotic relevance to queer and trans viewers. The colors and plump roundness represent self-acceptance, the joy of feeling safe and cared for, the passion of our community, and the potential for transformation.[14]

The interviewer brought Swayne's attention to the light source, where the pink fades into white. Until that moment in the interview, Swayne had not realized that the light source switches between the highly contrasted scenes. On the left, the light emerges from the bottom corner, and on the right, from the top.

> Oh, my God! I did not even notice that, but it does make for such an interesting read. Oh, my gosh! Now that I'm looking at it, I think it makes perfect sense, I think. Like the juxtaposition for the light to come one way…What could it mean? That the light is coming from different places like I feel like that's kind of what this project is all about. What are we illuminating?

As the quote above indicates, the interview became a space to unpack subliminal decisions in Swayne's work. It reflects how art is open to interpretation, takes on a life of its own, and how conversations spark new relations. Swayne redirected the conversation to talk about a core symbol in the piece:

> I did want to talk a little bit to you about the mountaintop removal. I have a lot of emotions about it. I have a lot of anger. It has connections to prison expansion in Appalachia. I found abolition through art and through my friend being incarcerated, and that we chop mountains off … people feel like we have the entitlement to do that. It's very much about control, power, and choices, or the lack thereof. And I think that's also why *Character* [self-portrait that Swayne also submitted] is sad, you know. Because I think about it a lot just driving through the city and the mountains, not even necessarily mountaintop removal, but like even roads, and the way that we've cut through our mountains to make roads, not to mention like the people we've displaced for white people to settle here. There is so much history in this space that, to talk about myself in the here and now as Southern and queer, wouldn't make sense without putting it in context. And I think this was my way to put it in context, but that the context isn't one thing.

Swayne draws from the work of Schept (2022) and others who organize against prison expansion, discussed in Hale's work above. The topless mountain range in their piece speaks to the extractive history of coal mining, the violence of mountaintop removal, and the transition from regional coal economies to prison expansion. Swayne critiques settler colonialism, which contrasts the "self-indigenization" claimed by many that depict white Appalachians as colonized (rather than as colonizers) and erase Indigenous people (Long and McNeill 2024). When the interviewer asked if Swayne thought there was a

parallel between the way people have destroyed the mountains and the land, and the way that society destroys queerness, Swayne replied:

> Yeah, yeah, destroying or even extracting. Because the mountain base is still there. Yes, definitely the parallel between destroying nature and destroying queer beauty. I think it's tied up with race too, because when you talk about gender and sexuality, it's always going to be tied up with race and especially in the Southern context with histories of settler colonialism and slavery. Like, those are real systems that have left behind schemas for how people treat each other, and it's gross racism. It is gross and mountaintop removal is gross…
>
> And I'm not trying to be reductive by making it black and white versus color, like, because it's not progress. I've been intentional by saying the colored portion does not represent progress. Moreso, it's just resistance and existence and community under something else. And that's why [the colorful side] is bigger, like, it's pushing back. It's not because we're more powerful. It's not because we are more progressive. No, we're under, but we're stronger together. Yeah. So, I definitely see the parallel and understand it in terms of power dynamics, whether it's nature or the sexual diversity…
>
> And then, just from my criminology background, like, knowing there are our prisons hidden in those mountains, you know, like, I know what goes on. They need flat land for prisons, and they know where to find it. And that's why the mountains on the colored side are *so* round.

The artist describes their disgust by the realities of racial capitalism and environmental degradation, and at the same time, they acknowledge the beauty of queer formations of community, mutual aid, and protection.

> We are community first, you know, and I really hold that, and it means a lot to me, and I think it motivates me. That's, like, the thing I wake up for. I'm very happy, have a very full life and meaningful relationships. And that's kind of part of what it means to be queer in the South, too, right? We have to build these meaningful relationships. Even though sometimes it can take us a while to find the pockets.

The pockets Swayne references are everywhere in Appalachia, from queer sober spaces, protests against the genocide in Gaza, battles against cop cities in the South, and mutual aid in the wake of natural disasters and infrastructural absences. The work of all three artists featured in the article speak to these pockets of resistance, in the forms of sovereignty, solidarity, and community resilience.

Final Thoughts: Difference, Identity, Accountability, and Envisioning

When considering these pieces in relation to one another—as a piece or part of something designated as Appalachia—a number of things are striking. Their artworks dissolve rigid categories of place and identity and demonstrate the extent to which Appalachia is not a monolith. Writing across artists' works brings into focus a politics of solidarity not always considered when viewed

in isolation from one another. The work of each artist is deeply relational—to the land and people—but in distinctive ways. From their unique positionalities, each artist illuminates the common thread of creative resistance to contemporary forms of oppression and fascism in the region, which includes right-wing neo-Nazi organizations, the prison industrial regime, anti-trans legislation, environmental harms, and colonial occupation (Herzing, Kirby, and Norton 2024). Examples from Hale and Swimmer purposefully deploy provocative language that, when taken together, connect ongoing colonial formations of whiteness and gender, Nazi scum, and tribal police in the South. Swayne's insistence on radical formations of gender and anti-prison organizing compliments Swimmer's critique of ongoing colonial occupation and the appropriation of Indigenous cultures and traditions. Swayne's analysis positions queerness as the use of "novel structures of desire to imagine a new and futurefacing human relationship with the Appalachian natural world" that "ultimately points toward the deconstruction of settler colonial powers, both within Appalachia and beyond" (Cloe 2024, 208). In their own ways, each artist denounces toxic masculinity and cisheteronormativity, while envisioning otherwise, from Cherokee Mothertowns and hateless hollers to prison abolition.

The featured artists believe that the land exists in relation to those who are its stewards and caretakers, not its owners or those who would bring with them destruction and vitriol as protectors (police) or fascists. Swayne's art makes clear that "them mountains" are capacious, brimming with diversity, rolling and holding, filled with color, against an image of policing, prisons, binaries, and racial capitalism that renders mountains and psyches void of color. Their decision to subtract their self-portrait from the contextual piece we analyze mirrors the fractions and vertigo felt under structural oppression, internal contradictions, and a feeling of powerlessness—a perpetual sense of "out of place"-ness. Whereas Swimmer foregrounds land as a life source—owned by no one, revered by all, Hale, in a moment of crisis, uses the possessive, no hate in *my* holler. In these convergences, we see the limits on categories of place and the contradictions that are structured into the landscape and its representations. What does it mean for Hale to deploy the possessive as political resistance as opposed to Swimmer's emphasis on rematriation of the land? Are there ways for new, more specific demands to materialize and for the possibilities of coalitional politics to take shape (such as No Prison in ANY Holler!)? How far can art take us in that pursuit—and if not all the way, what is the work art can do to support imaginations throttled by settler colonialism, extraction, carcerality, and racial capitalism?

For us, making and sharing art comes with political possibility, and envisioning for these artists is a form of reckoning and accountability. In Swimmer's work, Uktena ascends from the depths in order to issue a powerful demand for sovereignty that is grounded in cultural values, not anchored in militarized forms of security, weaponization, and the seductions of policing; Hale envisions a holler without hate—a holler she is willing to defend; and Swayne

gives us queer mountains, with their tops intact, that hold us all and orient us to the queer horizon of abolition. And yet, accountability in Appalachia is not homogenous. It is experienced internally in community and beyond in complex forms layered into region and relationships (Stewart 2020). In the art here, we see internal accountability to one's people in Swimmer's work of love, land, and relationships and a defiant stand against colonialist extraction. We see accountability as a reckoning with a white settler colonial past writ large in Hale's politics of refusal and efforts at remuneration in support of solidarity groups. And finally, we see accountability as a refusal of queer erasure in Swayne's work, a reclamation of them mountains as always already foundationally queer and here. Accountability is not, nor will be, a cohesive process. It is messy and capable of bringing both the violence of the carceral and the joy of queerness and Indigeneity, of ᏙᏯ/Tohi (in Cherokee, a sense of being in balance or at peace) into one piece, one view. That dissonance is part of what it is to be in and of this place called Appalachia.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that Southern and Appalachian are not interchangeable. In the context for this article, Swayne identifies as both, and their Southern context is also an Appalachian one.

2."Them mountains" (rather than "those mountains") uses the gender-neutral pronoun and the presumed Appalachian grammar to combat the erasure of gender diverse Appalachian histories and people.

3. See the full database at its website: abolitionimages.org

4. According to Walls (1977), Diego Gutierrez mapped the first appearance of the "Apalchen" mountain region, published in 1562 (57).

5. Personal communication with authors generated the bulk of knowledge about Swimmer's background and worldviews.

6. Learn more about Swimmer and his work here: https://www.aroundthebound828.com/

7. The emergence and continuation of a global capitalist economic system depends on the concept of a racial hierarchy to justify slavery, colonization, imperialism, and violence (Robinson 1983).

8. Interview transcripts were slightly abbreviated when necessary, indicated by an ellipsis.

9. In addition to outside sources, much of the content in this section is based on the authors' interview with Hale.

10. www.buildingcommunitynotprisons.com

11. The film *Calls from Home* is based upon the community radio program with the same name that is located at the Appalshop media arts center in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Learn more about *Calls From Home* at the film website: https://www.callsfromhomefilm.com/

12. After significant growth in organizing and hundreds of petition signatures to oppose prison construction, in December 2024, The Appalachian Rekindling Project purchased the land targeted for the prison site. In response, Congressman Hal Rogers stated that a "small contingency of individuals [opposed] the proposed

Letcher County federal prison from day one… [and] intends to… stop good paying jobs from being created in a rural area where they're needed the most… If the prison isn't built in Roxana, Kentucky, it will be built somewhere else… This land purchase will not stop construction of BOP's next prison" (Rogers in Bennett 2025).

13. For further discussion of queerness and temporality, see Muñoz.

14. Drawing from Mondrian's method of "abstracting the curve," Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) write that squareness does not exist in nature, and people generally associate curvature with the organic world. They explain that "people who think in terms of organic growth rather than mechanical construction" tend to choose curved forms, which is sometimes called "biomorphic abstractionalism" (53).

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