



The Journey of the Spores: Mycoblastus study
Oil on birch panel

Feeling disparaged about the ineffectiveness of art for social change, I wandered through the arching boughs of live oak in the coastal plain of South Carolina, looking for any lichens that were withstanding the polluted suburban air. Heat and humidity baked me, and I dreamed of being in the high elevation forests of the Southern Appalachians, with firs and spruces and chilly clouds. The lichen *Mycoblastus sanguinarius* appeared in my imagination, pulling me into the shade. Its bleeding heart, which is one of *Mycoblastus's* common names, at the base of the apothecia (the fungal fruiting body) called to my own bleeding heart, urging me to focus on creating one spore at a time, regardless of whether the spore will grow into a lichen (most don't).

NASTASSJA NOELL

Field Artist Protocol

A praxis for holding a dialogue with the more-than-human world

Over the past 14 years as a lichenologist, my understanding of imagination and consciousness has shifted radically. Lichens have pulled me away from biodiversity data methods, towards a method for engaging with the consciousnesses of the more-than-human world through imagination – what I call a ‘field artist protocol.’ The pivot between the two domains is the concept of emergence: a framework shared by lichenology, philosophy and complexity theory, which lays the foundations for understanding complex systems, such as plants and ecosystems, as conscious and sentient.

Exploring emergent properties and consciousness

What is emergence? The concept is notoriously hard to define without examples, so let’s put the Appalachian Toadsong lichen (*Tuckermanopsis ciliaris*), into the palm of our hands to give us a model of emergence. This leafy brownish-green bark-dwelling lichen is an emergent organism. This little individual is composed of algae and fungi, but looks and acts in ways that are so dissimilar from either part that lichens were considered an odd kind of



The Wind Doesn't Make Mistakes

Oil on birch panel

This conversation was with the wind, and was about the series of mistakes I had been making that were paralysing me with regret. The wind blew across a pond, amongst the trees, around me sitting with my notebook. As I drew the movement of the wind, it seemed as though the wind was showing me how to move despite these blue circle mistakes: around, between, amongst.

plant until the early 1900s. But the most puzzling conundrum is that although there is no cell or DNA for this lichen itself, Appalachian Toadsong functions and responds to its environment as an individual, not as its parts.

Another example of emergence is our consciousness. Emotions, thoughts and memory are more than the simple summation of our cells, organs and nervous systems; the experience of consciousness is so profound that it often feels as though it controls our bodies (heart rate, breathing patterns, physical movement) while at the same time being controlled by our bodies (mind-gut axis, biochemical influences on emotional and mental health). The interrelationship of our consciousness and our bodies typifies a primary characteristic of emergence: that each level has effects on the other level, top-down from the whole to the parts, and bottom-up from the parts to the whole. The concept of emergence philosophically approaches the mind-body 'split' not by diminishing the body or the mind, but rather by elevating both simultaneously.

Since many of us already know this in our bones, let's push the analogy just a little bit further. If our experience of consciousness is the emergent result of our complex system of cells, organs, and experiences, then it's not much of a leap to propose that consciousness is the subjective experience of all complex emergent systems. This Toadsong lichen we are holding has its own individual consciousness – qualitatively different from human consciousness, but just as rich as yours and mine. And if this is the case, how do we listen and communicate with this Appalachian Toadsong?

The field artist protocol is based on the hypothesis that the dialogue with the more-than-human world is happening all the time through our imaginations, as is visible through our art, our writing, our creative pursuits. As you hold this lichen, does your imagination shift in tone, rhythm or form? As a field artist, our work is observation of our imagination. The translation tool that our imagination uses is our body, our pen, our paintbrush, our fingers, our voice. A conversation is a process and its documentation is our art.

Walking the talk

Come with me into the high elevation forests of the Southern Appalachians.

Breathe. Walk. Move. A conversation with the more-than-human starts with an activation of your body – if you cannot move a limb, lift your breath with your eyes. Something. Anything. Activation of the body comes first.

It might take two hours of walking, and then on that last uphill trek, your imagination finally opens up and conversations with the wild rush in, changing the quality of your imagination from a stagnant pond to a gust of wind, a rushing river. That's when you stop and vigorously write, or draw, or let your body be moved. A song is singing through you. Sometimes sweet, sometimes harsh. This is the beginning of the conversation.

When this flow pauses, as it often does, let yourself come to a still point, noting the feeling of the wind, the buzz of a bee, the trill of a warbler and wait. Conversations with the wild often ebb and flow. Time is different depending on which beings you are connecting with: each creature, plant, mountain, or river, has their own rhythm.

Conversations with a sugar maple are quite slow, and differ from the quick flashes of bird song. To match the sugar maple's slow moving sap, slow your breath and observe your imagination as it transforms into a raft, flowing up the vertical rivers of her trunk. Let your raft follow the current, feel her pulse moving your imagination. Notice how the rivers branch as they reach the leaves, and your raft is pushed out into the estuary at the top of the canopy. Feel the drop in temperature as the water shifts from liquid to gas and lifts your raft into the ocean of the sky.

When you feel the pulse of a place, you sometimes have to sit down; the slower pulses are so strong that roots can pull your bones to rest. But don't forget to continue your observations of what is happening in your imagination and body as you lean deeper into the conversations of place. It can be easy to forget your body as your imagination drifts into the forest, but it is your body that translates the dialogue onto the page, into a sculpture, or choreographed score.

For field artists, like field biologists, our work involves the observation of imagination in different places, with different beings – our data sets are paintings, sculptures, movement scores and photographs. They are conversations that emerge from the engagement of our imagination and the imaginations of the beings and ecosystems around us. Our bodies are the anchor to our imagination. The imagination needs the body to make itself manifest, and the body needs the imagination to engage in the world.

At some point, it will feel like a door has closed. There is a sense of completion. The conversation that wove through your imagination will come to a close. Sometimes unexpectedly, like the calm after a deluge of rain. Or the muddy tracks of a coyote that suddenly disappear into nothing.

The ending may feel abrupt, but you haven't been abandoned. You haven't done anything wrong. That is the way of things in the ecosystem of wild imagination: a cycle begins and then ends and you find yourself enlivened – an ancient friend just shared with you their meditations on living and relationships and transformation, sometimes also the depths of their trauma and abuse and nightmares, and you remember again what it is to be a trusted member, a connecting thread within the pulsing weaving filaments of life.