

Evergreens and bourbon: Intersectionality and ecoculture in family stories

Mariko Thomas

Abstract

This performative autoethnography uses oral history, memory, and reflection to unpack the delicate intricacies of marginalized ecocultural voices. I show how oral histories can help access ecocultural identity by highlighting ways that race, class, gender, ability, and orientations to the more-than-human world are multiple, layered, and performed in interlocking webs of privileges and disadvantages. This chapter also exhibits ways auto/ethnographic methodology can help make sense of ways certain orientations to the more-than-human world are disseminated through narratives and experiences that take place within families. I propose that studies in ecoculture could benefit from increased attention to stories that interrogate previous generations' environmental conceptualizations, and present unique, historically marginalized voices. Additionally, I posit that the reflective act of working through one's own family stories helps make sense of ways ecocultural identity is formed, performed, and accepted or rejected within imbrications of other cultural identities.

Keywords: Intersectionality, oral history, performative auto-ethnography family stories, environmental identity, ecoculture.

Biography: Mariko Oyama Thomas is a PhD candidate at University of New Mexico. She completed an M.S. in communication and research at Portland State University in Oregon, where she studied family storytelling and mixed-race identity. Since then, her research has focused on environmental communication, storytelling, more-than-human communication, critical race issues, and plant studies. Other interests include herbalism, camping, and attempting to learn the banjo.

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ORCID ID Number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0876-8001>

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Here is what I remember. I remember perching on a squeaking plastic hospital stool and hearing the mellow rhythmic beep of a mass of IV tubes winding their way into my father's veins, pumping him full of toxic yet necessary chemicals. Cancer is an aggressive animate force that seems to barge its way into most people's life stories in one way or another and, during that unbearably cold and snowy winter, my family was no exception. I can still see the precise tilt of my father's chin when he turned his head gently to me and smiled, the lines in his face curling into comforting patterns of concentric moons. In juxtaposition with the heavily muscled and agile form I had watched cross rivers and summit mountains countless times, the change in his physical state was dramatic. I fixed my gaze on the row of sockets above his bed, recalling a scene from a film¹ we had watched together, where a girl-child wanders around a refugee hospital looking for her father. The frame zooms in on her, passing rows of hospital beds, and she notes in a loud whisper, "When animals get sick out here, they plug them into the wall." Somehow, my kin and I were in a time where my beautiful animal father was plugged into an undulating, whirring mess of chords.

Later that morning, bright winter light streamed through the hospital windows and my father and I began to speak rather pragmatically about the potential that he might die from this untimely disease. Since I was six or seven, I had known of his staunch refusal to waste away under

fluorescent lights. By age nine, I was almost bored of repeating back to him, “I know I know, if you ever get too sick, I’m supposed to leave you in the evergreens in the snow with a bottle of good bourbon, *I know* Dad.” As I was no longer following him around the backyard barefoot and rolling my eyes over our seemingly redundant death conversations, his request was starting to be painfully relevant. On that otherwise ordinary morning of his sickness, I realized I already had a deep-set understanding of how life, death, and place in our more-than-human environments are interrelated topics. I was also beginning to understand that our consistent story-sharing over his life had radically constructed how I perceive both the more-than-human world and the cycles of life.

“Mariko,” he said. His voice was warm and commanding as it had ever been.

I snapped my head up from my reflective stupor and he said, “Don’t worry girl, you’ll always be able to find me in the mountains. Remember, evergreens.”

“Bourbon,” I responded.

“Yes.” He rolled onto his side to press the nurse call button, and I noticed his long brown finger still moved with an overwhelming grace. He smiled again. “But none of that cheap plastic bottle stuff your friends drink.”

Diversifying Environmental Identity and History

As a half Black and half Japanese man raised in the experiences of poverty and racism that 1950s Los Angeles provided, environmental awareness and enjoyment was not a public priority in his community. Even so, I am positive that engagement with “nature” was desired by many poor minorities, but I am also skeptical whether history books have properly captured and reflected on

the diverse experiences and ways of connecting with the more-than-human world that different cultural groups and individuals lived.

This chapter uses layers of narrative that offer sentimental and sometimes startling examples as to how environmental orientations are wound into all other forms of cultural identity to create an ecocultural identity. My memories work as a reflexive lens as to how environmental identity moves through generations, but binds itself to other cultural identities, creating different experiences for members of even the same family. Between my father's stories and my own, I paint a multi-layered, multi-cultural fresco of how ecocultural identity happens. To do this, I use a hybrid methodology of oral history and performative auto-ethnography to analyze stories and memories from both my father and myself to untangle both of our gendered, raced, and classed relationships with the more-than-human world. Additionally, I aim to provide an example of how oral histories can work to reveal multiple cultural identities intersectionally (regarding race, gender, class, age, and other cultural identities simultaneously, *see* Crenshaw, 1989) without isolating them from environmental orientations or access to the more-than-human world. With this style of analysis, I demonstrate a webbed, interconnected understanding of ecocultural identity, and show that every identity is, and can be understood as, ecocultural.

Family Stories and Ecoculture

Stories are our world-making toolkits. We use them to make sense of race and ethnic identity (Joseph & Hunter, 2013), gender performance (Fivush & Haden, 2003). And we use them for building group or family identity (Mishler, 2006) and understanding the more-than-human world

(Milstein, Thomas, Hoffmann, 2018; Haraway, 2003). As Somers (1994) writes, “We come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making” (p. 606). If we understand orientations to the more-than-human world as co-constructed alongside other cultural identities, then social narratives ranging from broader histories to more personal family stories can be understood as teaching not only social but ecological orientations, as well. Families are often the first story-sharing arenas for people, making reflection and analysis of narratives told within families an important site for observing the formation and performance of ecocultural identity.

Analyzing oral histories of people who have lived through eras of overt marginalization and oppression with an ecocultural lens offers detailed accounts of how different generations fostered or strayed from relationships with the more-than-human world. Oral histories hold political power, as those about environmental matters have the potential to aid in remediating environmental racism and exclusion (Endres, 2011). They also combine well, as both oral history and autoethnographic methods are more concerned with how something was experienced than in empirical truths (Ritchie, 2006; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). Interweaving these methods provides a multifaceted toolkit to unpack the complicated interplay of ecocultural identities that are absorbed and performed in families.

Intersectionality and the More-than-Human World

In order to enter my discussion of my father and my intersectional relationships with the more-than-human world, a review of structural hindrances and stereotypes of relationships with the

more-than-human world is necessary. Non-urban wilderness spaces, green spaces, and places that are constructed as “naturally beautiful” are often much less accessible to minority groups, with barriers of public zoning and planning (Sze, 2006), hegemonic constructions of who belongs in or deserves green spaces (Byrne, 2012), fear of physical aggression from other humans (Evans, 2002), and lack of leisure time and access to transportation (Tierney, Dahl, & Chavez, 2001). Additionally, narratives about relationships between marginalized groups and the more-than-human world are rare in dominant cultural constructions of environmental discourse, and often are founded on historical tropes built by dominant groups or unceremoniously erased from accounts. For example, cartoonish accounts of U.S. American black farmer Washington Carver’s peanut cultivation seem to infiltrate many elementary school classrooms (Finney, 2014), and often serve as a singular trope for Black people in nature.

Many films also foster the continuous propagation of stereotypes by portraying Indigenous peoples as earthy spirit-guides (Sturgeon, 2009) or providing discordant stereotypes of people of color in wild spaces where they are simultaneously exoticized as ‘more natural’ beings (Outka, 2008). At the same time, people of color are rarely included in advertisements featuring outdoor recreation or leisure (Martin, 2004). Instead, the savvy outdoorsperson image is generally reserved for white heterosexual men (Evans, 2002; Finney, 2013). This representation is reflected in the real life demographics of United States National Parks visitors, as those who identify as Black make up only 1.2% of visitors on the continental US, while Asians make up 2.6%, compared to overall respective national populations of 13.2% and 5.3%. Meanwhile, white people make up 94.6% of park visitors yet are only 62.6% of the US population (Flores, Falco,

Roberts, & Valenzuela, 2018). Additionally, a study done in California showed that even urban parks tend to have disproportionately higher numbers of white visitors (Byrne, 2012). This creates issues of representation for many minority groups, as it is difficult to picture oneself experiencing outdoor spaces when media and practice can show the opposite.

Gender also persists as a powerful factor in determining access to out-of-doors spaces. Massey's (2013) work acknowledges the gendered divide between public and private spaces, where women are often relegated to the private or home spheres. Female-bodied children are often raised to be fearful of isolated outside spaces and places. For example, Wesley and Gaarder (2004) found that women who wished to engage in outdoor recreation must often negotiate between perceptions of vulnerability and fear and the reward of being on an outdoors adventure.

Many of these oppressive stereotypes are intersectional, meaning that a person's multiple cultural identities work in a web of privileges and disadvantages. For example, research has demonstrated clearly how gender and class are factors that co-construct children's access to free play. Mackett, Brown, Gong, Kitazawa, and Paskin (2004) found that, while many children were allowed outdoors without supervision, girls were more likely to be only allowed outside playtime when other children were present. Additionally, not only gender, but access to financially related artifacts like cars (Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990) and phones or computers (Louv, 2008), alter ways that children come to explore and understand outside spaces. While financial affluence traditionally supports increased access to some outside experiences, upper middle class neighborhoods often exhibit higher levels of parental surveillance, rapid disappearance of

suburban play spaces (Louv, 2008), and reduced free time due to children's increased pace of life (Pooley, Turnbull, & Adams, 2005). Class and gender can simultaneously serve as passports or impediments to environmental knowledge depending on the context.

At the same time, minority voices often are excluded from membership, decisions, and meaning-making about public environmental decision-making. This results in a lack of attention paid to how different cultural identities can change experiences of more-than-human spaces (Evans, 2002). Lastly, there is a lack of conversation (scholarly or otherwise) about including environmental identity in the meshing of cultural identities from which most scholars analyze intersectionality, even though intersectionality is a methodological tool and theory that braids easily with multilayered conceptualizations of ecoculture because, at its root, it acknowledges complexity (McCall, 2005). Additionally, intersectionality works to unpack how layers of social identities work together (and against one another) to construct the social experiences of multiple dialectics of oppression and privilege in identities simultaneously, something entirely necessary for understanding ecocultural identity.

The ubiquitous and effervescent term "environment" has historically been utilized to demarcate a backdrop for anthropocentric conflicts of humanist cultural identities, and is rarely framed as an active agent in the formation of cultural identities. Even extremely generative works on cultural identity neglect to acknowledge the importance of the more-than-human world in identity work (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2016), or recognize the privilege of environmental knowledge and access when studying intersections of race, class, gender, and ability (Slack & Whitt, 2002).

Orientation and relationship with the more-than-human world should be given special intersectional attention in spectrums of identities. We exist in a time when even some of our most radical moves for social justice and equality fail to include the quickly shifting planet where we reside. Framing every identity as inherently ecocultural – and therefore bound in our bodily existences in the more-than-human world – is more crucial now than perhaps it has ever been.

Performing Ecoculture

In the remainder of this essay, I analyze my own memories and excerpts of my father's oral history I recorded during the long hours he received chemotherapy treatment. The narratives give evidence of experiences with the more-than-human world that provide insight as to how all cultural identities are inherently ecocultural. Additionally, because I weave my own stories and memories throughout his, I show how dependent ecocultural identities can be on the experiences of older generations. The writing method of performative autoethnography allows for the nuanced interweaving of both the writer and the subject of the writing, illuminating the complex process in which a story is absorbed through the lens of the listener (Madison, 2009; 2012). This performative autoethnography, therefore, aims to portray both my father's and my own experiences of sociocultural environmental relations in a single and multifaceted story. Through warm trails of memories, I highlight my father's embodied experiences of racial heritage and relative poverty and my gendered though fairly affluent experiences to bring more scholarly attention to the intersectional intricacies of environmental access.

Affluence and Girlhood/Poverty and Boyhood

I can recall so vividly the sensation of sitting on my father's lap in his biology classroom at the high school where he taught. I don't even have to close my eyes to remember the warm familiarity of the incubator filled with pheasant eggs humming, and the moist, verdant scent that the aquariums filled with piranhas gave off. I can see the plastic baggie of live goldfish we had recently bought to feed the piranhas that day, the ebbs and flows of life being a relatively early lesson in my family. In my palm lay several rocks that I clenched the way some people grasp rosaries, rolling them through my fingers, sliding them along my then un-calloused palms. These stones were insignificant except for the fact that my father had just helped me meticulously label them with location and type in the ungainly scrawl of a child's hand wielding a permanent marker. In traditional fashion I was begging him to tell me stories about being a child, as I was completely entranced at the simple reality that he had ever been my age before. His stories of juvenile adventures offered a universe of delectable mischief, as his childhood stories seemed to be devoid of the adults I was constantly supervised by, and were dotted with comedic incidents that took place in abandoned concrete lots and hidden urban riverbanks.

My father, Franke Thomas, was born as the third of seven children to a tall charismatic African American man named Charles Thomas and a tiny Japanese woman named Sachiyo Oyama on April 23, 1954. His birth certificate was printed with the phrase "Thomas baby" where most people's names are written, and, in the racial ignorance of the time, the hospital erroneously listed his races as "Negro" and "Mongolian." In 1950, Charles and Sachi started their young family in a predominately Black community in Los Angeles, with Sachi as the solitary Japanese woman for miles around. As a woman who already had been familiar with the geographic

displacement of being sent to an internment camp a few years prior, and the emotional displacement of her Japanese family's refusal to accept Charles, she persisted in exercising astounding grace in raising mixed-race children in low-income circumstances. This feat was especially noteworthy in a time when federal miscegenation laws still technically outlawed the creation of her children.

While Charles worked long hours at a medical testing lab – hours that increased out of necessity with every Thomas baby birth – Sachi ran a household with at least two infants at a time clasped to her hips, her long black braid swinging down her back. She sewed clothes for the children from discount bolts of fabric and kept everyone fed on a steady diet of rice, eggs, and soy sauce. She painstakingly created order in a house filled with her children, their neighborhood friends, and a menagerie of rejected animal creatures (including dogs, rabbits, and an especially antagonistic spider monkey named Mitzie who had her own pet cat) that Charles brought home from his work at the laboratory.

Between the lack of money, the frequency of baby arrivals, and the absence of Charles, the Thomas children (and especially the Thomas boys) were left with unparalleled amounts of unsupervised time, a phenomenon common for their social class at that time in history particularly. As the story goes, absence of pocket money and seemingly endless hours to fill (after chores, of course) made exploring pockets of more-than-human nature in their city a daily ritual. There were stories about stealing five-gallon ice-cream tubs from the ice-cream truck, then eating every last bite to hide the evidence, henceforth causing me to postulate that my own

lactose intolerance is a product of intergenerational karmic backlash. Or tender moments when the crew of children was so rowdy that Sachi made them sit in a dark room around a single candle until the energy level in the house had returned to a manageable level. Many of these stories were deeply seated in his knowledge and wonderment of the urban environment where he lived, and some I had never heard before they emerged in my oral history work with my father.

For example, in one recording session he told me:

There was an open field and we used to just walk out and we would go in the arroyo. There was water there, so we'd just go out there and fish for bullhead catfish, collect snakes, we let them go, and guppies in these gallon pickle jars and I'd keep them all lined up in my bedroom. When we moved, there was a little more outdoors, and we'd walk. We walked everywhere those days. We would walk to Brookside park and there was an arroyo there too. The water was overflow of Pasadena coming from the San Gabriel mountains. So we'd just go out and spend all day there, we'd explore, and then I was interested in pigeons at the time so I'd crawl up under the bridge and catch some. A lot of boys in the inner city kept pigeons.

Stories like this illuminate ecocultural identity subtly. In one small utterance, my father told me something about a historical era, gender, class, and his awareness of the more-than-human world. For example, the Pasadena of his memories is filled with exciting green spaces hidden in-between the busy highways and street-corners. Bridges held the ecological intrigue of pigeons in their crevices, and he and his friends specialized in finding water sources, knowing that where water existed other animals did, too.

This short excerpt also says something about class and gender. It is unclear from this tale whether catching pigeons was a prized activity for girls, as well, but from other stories, I know my eldest auntie was home more often helping cook and change diapers. My father was often

free to roam the neighborhood with other boys as long as he was home for dinner, and the chances of his parents knowing what he was up to were slim due to the lack of technology in the era and the multiple more pressing activities his parents were already dealing with. As a male child, he was afforded privileges connected to assumptions of physical ability, independence, and safety, with fewer responsibilities of childcare toward his youngest siblings. Additionally, the 1950s era was one that unquestionably accepted the sentiments of “boys-will-be-boys,” making mischief, wandering, and physical play more possible and certainly more socially acceptable. Still, while his gender afforded him relative independence, his race (unmentioned in this story but ever-present) curtailed the areas where he and his other racially ambiguous brothers could wander with the other boys from their neighborhood.

What a beautiful crew they must have been, the Thomas boys with their silky black Japanese hair or fluffy curls depending on the child, their Mexican and African American friends strutting beside them, all of them simply looking for ways to pass hot summer days. But then again, how dangerous those miniature excursions could have been during times of errant racism, where larger systems of oppression worked to form certain arroyos and streets where they were safe to be themselves, and some where they were aggressively unwelcome.

In my own childhood, I found romance in the images his stories painted of pickle jars full of tiny gulping guppies and cooing pigeons in handmade wire huts. Through these tales, I absorbed Los Angeles as a magical city where bright lights and burrito stands were layered on snakes and be-furred red bottlebrush trees. All of these scenes were swathed in history, nostalgia, and plant-

life's insistence on existing in the center of concrete chaos. Because of this, I was gifted with a taken-for-granted perspective that cities were bursting full of characters from the more-than-human world. However, my own urban experiences were remarkably different than his seemingly endless tales of wandering the cracked sidewalks in freedom.

My father encouraged my exploration of the middle-class suburban spaces where we lived, and never hesitated to help me raise tadpoles he drove me to the creek to collect. He and my mother began camping when I was an infant, and I was carted on many hikes peeking out of a giant backpack. He also supported my insurmountable cravings to fill my pockets with rocks everywhere we went (often to the point where I had to clench my pants in balled fists so they wouldn't slip to my ankles from the weight), and he helped me build houses for fairies and butterflies in the field at the end of the cul-de sac. Despite this privileged and supported access to more-than-human nature, a combination of my gendered identity, our middle class suburban lifestyle, and an era rife with over-publicized kidnappings of girl-children, constructed my access to the more-than-human world divergently from his experience.

My social position as a young female made me appear vulnerable both in his eyes and in U.S. American society's construction of abduction in the early '90s, meaning that playtime without adults present was virtually unheard of. It was a point of pride for my father that he had the leisure time to escort me on most outdoor adventures, and that he knew the girls I played with and constantly terrified the boys I wanted to. Aiding this surveillance was our family's privileged income level, allowing my fair-skinned blue-eyed mother to work part-time when I was small,

staying home with my younger brother and me most afternoons. Not only was her supervision constantly available, but several other stay-at-home mothers constantly peeped out their windows with lurid plaid print curtains, ready to bark at us little girls the minute we laid our grubby hands on a fence with an instinct toward hopping it, or lifted a dirt clod to join the boys' muddy nameless game. Those women, all meaning so well, all working from an interconnected child-rearing mentality found in some lucky suburbs, effectively and unknowingly began to curtail their daughters' instincts toward the edge of the park and the tops of gnarled oak trees, as well as their physical faith in their own little bodies and the safety of the out-of-doors world.

Race, Space, and Ambiguity

Unlike me, my father did not camp as a young child. As he or any of his siblings would tell you, people of color did not camp in those days, especially if they were below the poverty line and from an urban area. However, he was fortunate in that in middle school he joined a backpacking club that soon turned into a non-profit called Outward Bound Adventures² (OBA) that spanned generations and still exists in Los Angeles presently. The non-profit spent its minimal budget on orchestrating trips to bring inner-city young people of color into the mountains, a progressive goal for the time. It took exactly one hike up to the twisted lodge-pole pines and cool dry winds of the high Sierras for my father's soul to relocate to the mountains. I can remember him speaking so emotively about the dusty trails and trickling glacial streams that the Sierras took on a mythical aura. Long before I set foot at Trout Creek where he preferred to basecamp,³ I would whisper the word *Si-err-as* to myself, touching my tongue on each syllable and conjuring up the scent of ponderosa sap and dusty puff of hiking boots on the earth created by his tales.

Unlike many children read as White, I was lucky to be raised highly conscious of race and its relation to space. With my mother's fair skin yet my father's darker coloring, I possessed a certain phenotypic ambiguity that made people consistently ask where I had my tans done but people rarely guessed my racial background or punished me for it. While I moved fairly smoothly through all environments, my father was often stopped at airports. I spent years loitering beside him as he was pulled aside at yet another TSA point, his bags disemboweled with confusion as they pulled out rocks, bones, and plant seeds from wherever we had just visited. It seemed beyond many people that this brown-skinned body could ever actually be a biology teacher, or possess truly innocent intentions for carrying vials of sand and leaf samples.

I was confused by the waves of stereotypes I heard as I grew older, ignorant slurs about Black people not liking to camp, or ski, or swim. Because my first entry to the woods was through my multiracial family and the members of OBA, it never occurred to me that the tall Black boy kings and Mexican girl queens of backpacking would not be people of color. My whole life, the people who were best at camping and hiking generally had been those who identified as people of color, and this kind of exposure created a small rip in the fabric of outdoor racial stereotypes. It was enough to have been raised with this counter-narrative for me to see its grand potential.

I can remember asking my auntie about the ecocultural identities they were raised with, and her saying, "They [their community] didn't know what to do with us, we weren't really Black we weren't really Japanese, and, to make matters worse, we all liked to hike." I do not think my

father and his siblings ever had ambiguity work as an advantage like I did, as being mixed-race became interesting and popular to parts of dominant culture during my lifetime and not his. In the sociopolitical era of his youth, he was a mixed-race man who did not fit in binary delineations of people of color and whiteness, or urban and non-urban, and who also held a non-dualistic worldview of humankind and nature. His amorphous ambiguity and blending of several cultural identities allowed me to comprehend the world in spectrums as opposed to binaries at a young and impressionable age.

In many ways, more-than-human spaces not only allowed a space away from the chaos of racial stereotypes and poverty, but also a doctrine of spirituality. Backpacking trips in the Sierras offered him a space of belongingness, a place to challenge the dominant norms that controlled the poverty, judgment, and more oppressive forms of religion he experienced in his youth. In another segment of his oral history he said:

I can remember hearing one of my [backpacking] leaders saying that this was his church, this is where he prays, this is where he comes to rest in solitude, and I factored that into my thinking. At that time, we were raised to think we were separate, particularly for people of color in the '50s, it wasn't a thing to do. You didn't have families going on vacation, going out climbing, going to Yosemite where you could get into nature and find out things.

I consider how dramatic it must have been for him to realize he could attend to his soul in the mountains, and how powerful it must have felt to be in a space where his other sociocultural identities took on new meaning. More than any other aspect, my youthful and ignorant prejudice against religion made it hard to accept as an important part of ecoculture. Later in life, when my

father remarked that the wild was his place of worship, I better understood that his form of religion worked from a place of love for all things on this planet, something many religions preach though in different terms. Religion or spirituality can be another point of accessing ecocultural awareness and identity, and many of us find our spirituality in learning about the natural cycles of life and death, belongingness on this Earth, and the responsibilities that living beings have toward one another.

During his last years on his planet, my father learned to work with the different stages of his health and its multiple intersections with his other cultural identities to find how he could interact with outdoor spaces. What was once a muscular and sure-footed body had to find different ways of moving through the more-than-human world, adding hiking poles and a slower cadence to his walk. This weight of being chronically ill added another intersectional layer to his ecocultural identity. By the time he had been sick for a year, the thick calluses and lines of dirt from constant outdoor exposure had melted away from his palms. Chemotherapy made him exhausted, and he caught chills easily, meaning his time outside became limited in the winter and his previous freedoms of roaming became short walks with special attention paid to insulated clothing and the clock, an all powerful dictator of his medication schedule. Even the germs and bacteria that he had once ignored by kissing children, wrapping near-strangers' blistered trail feet, and picking up ill or wounded animals became a threat to his newly delicate immune system, making the world of tiny microbes he had once interacted with in peace a perilous universe of possible infections. Additionally, his skin turned to a more pale shade than I had ever seen it, shifting his perceivable racial identity. Perhaps even his cultural identity of growing up poor with few doctors

contributed to how long his cancer remained unchecked, as he would often wait for his body to heal itself as opposed to visiting hospitals.

Throughout my life, my father's stories made me envious and I fantasized about roaming streets, parks, and mountainsides alone, unconstrained by the vulnerabilities of my female body or the surveillance of his protective eye. Just as my father's brown skin solicited stereotyping in the mountains or certain parts of the city, my female form seems to invite in a different kind of stereotyping and control, whether in forests or cities. Not only did my gender seem to curtail my freedom in moving through more-than-human spaces, my relative affluence also did. Though higher social class can allow children more access to summer camps, national park vacations, and leisure time, my experience made it a barrier between my body and unsupervised more-than-human exploration. In an effort to rise above the rampant racism and lack of access to activities that cost money in his own childhood, my father and mother insisted I play sports, take music lessons, and maintain adequate grades, resulting in the incredible advantage of music literacy and college preparation but few of the open hours for whimsical observation of the outdoors.

However, despite my inability to make verbatim facsimiles of his wandering, I at least knew there was unadulterated value in finding wonder in ditches and overgrown building lots.

Hierarchical separation between human and more-than-human, city and wilderness space, or different races was fuzzy in my upbringing, and, though I had not realized it at the time, I was raised with the privilege of considering the more-than-human environment as something that did not actually belong in any way only to heterosexual white men. I was brought up in a world of

stories and experiences that indelibly built the base for my ecocultural identity and allowed the space to find links between my life and my father's, his ecocultural identity and my own.

Not too long after I began writing this, my father passed through the veil and toward what I can only imagine was the forest wonderland of his imagination. My mother, brothers, and I were fortunate enough to bring him back to the farm where he and my mother lived in the midst of the most dramatic blizzard that northwest valley had experienced in years. The storm blanketed us in in heaps of soft white snow and kept us from coming or going, as if the whole world had decided we were supposed to remain still. When his last breath whistled through his teeth, Motown hits were blasting from the corner of the bedroom; I think it was The Temptations but it may have been Smoky Robinson. I had asked him a few days earlier if I really did need to lean him up against a tree in the snow and he had laughed and told me not to worry about it because it was extremely illegal. Still, he could see the evergreens through the window. After he passed, we bathed him in river water and anointed him with sage. We slid hawk feathers into all his pockets and dabbed whiskey on his lips. We, the mixed-culture family, had no rituals handed down to us so we invented our own out of what he loved about living in this environment and the array of ecocultural identities he embodied here on Earth.

After the Stories

I understand my own ecocultural identity is inevitably connected to my father's and that his narratives worked to influence and build my ecocultural orientations. In acknowledging my own emotional proximity to these stories, I find intergenerational storytelling is crucial for the

formation and critical understanding of ecocultural identity, but acknowledge how the range of identities we each experience within our lives will always work to create different experiences for us than our previous familial generations. My father and I had different oppressions and privileges, but they make the most sense when analyzed simultaneously. While his stories are important for remembering minority resistance to stereotypes about outdoorspeople, mine are relevant in showing how ecoculture moves between generations. I am uncompromisingly and outwardly mixed-race, but have also been afforded the privileges of being read as White my whole life. Despite this, when one is also handed stories of slavery, racism, and internment camps, or of having your aunts and uncles be the first Black folk their community had ever seen going to National Forests, it is impossible to relinquish embodiment of minority heritage stories. Few people would ever be able to see from the surface how my embodied existence is a legacy of historical resistance and a diverse ecocultural identity, or think to question my presence on hiking trails or ski resorts or riverbanks. However, my multi-faceted, ecocultural body is a holding vessel for these stories and those histories.

When I consider my father's stories and perspectives, it becomes clear how fiercely interwoven relationships with the more-than-human world are in every area of social identity and also astounding that we humans ever perceived our raveled, luminous, dynamic, and permeable identities as something isolated from the more-than-human world or vice versa. No matter how distant some of us might feel from the more-than-human world, or how little our families' stories outwardly reflect ecocultural orientations, we are all here living, breathing, and performing identity today because somewhere down the line in our ancestry someone was innately

ecocentric. A grandmother or grandfather of ours had intimate understanding of their own place in an ecosystem, whether that was where to seek shelter, a relationship with one grain versus another, what animals were kept close, or how to navigate through places and spaces. As much as humans tend to pose the environment as a storied site for our history, we are also a storied site for the more-than-human world. We can see this in our personal and cultural affinities toward deserts, oceans, cities, or mountains, fears of certain environments, eating habits, and our choices or realities of living in certain areas.

A family story that is not ecocultural is an impossibility. Everything to do with us, our histories, and our bodies, has to happen somewhere (*see* Casey, 1993) and every “somewhere,” even city sidewalks and high-rise buildings, is part of and in intimate relationships with the more-than-human world. The cultural identities of our predecessors controlled the norms of our genders and ethnicities and where we chose or were forced to dwell. Stories helped us build practices and taught us how to understand our placement in society and on the Earth. Practices of our older generations in turn become preserved in stories about them, and family stories provide a space for the creation, remembrance, and development of ecoculture.

My father’s tales are ones I wear proudly in my bones, in my gait up a mountainside and in my ability to pick through discount clothing, in the tilt of my eyes and the olive of my skin. Our stories combined are what make me encourage children to take their shoes off in the dirt, and also to convince little girls to try and climb old oaks faster than their brothers. Those narratives whisper in my ears when I start to curse the concrete of the cities, and provoke me into noticing

the spray of green persisting through a crack in the sidewalk or the cicadas singing loudly in the middle of a suburb, because, if he could find magic in Los Angeles, I can certainly at least try to see it in the small town in Northern New Mexico where I now live. Those stories about moments of victory he had, opportunities lining up perfectly to get him out of the projects and into the woods, make me tear up when I see people of color at campsites, or running forestry divisions, or teaching at outdoor schools, all of whom I live in a privileged enough time to encounter. He is gone now, but I task myself with being the keeper and the guardian of his stories here, and with honoring his ecocultural identity and all it has taught me.

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¹ *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) is an independent film that tells the story of a little girl, her father, and the flooding of a remote delta community in U.S. America’s deep South.

² Outward Bound Adventures is a Pasadena-based outdoors nonprofit that began in 1960 focusing getting urban low-income kids of color into the mountains. Not to be confused with Outward Bound, an international outdoor recreation company.

³ Basecamp is generally a set-up camp area where backpackers might go to acclimate before they summit or continue hiking a mountain.