Molly Mooching on Bradley Mountain
The Aesthetic Ecology of Appalachian Morels

Columbine: Pierrot, I’m growing tired of caviar and peacock’s liver. Isn’t there something else that people eat? Some humble vegetable that grows in the ground?

Pierrot: Well, there are mushrooms.

Columbine: Mushrooms! I had forgotten!

—From Aria da Capo, by Edna St. Vincent Millay

You could just go on and on about the molly moochers. There are so many ways to fix them.

—Laffon Pettry, Drew’s Creek, West Virginia

At sixteen, assigned to the role of Columbine in a high school play, I had no idea what I was talking about when I said I had forgotten about mushrooms. For me there was nothing to forget. Button mushrooms were filler material for salads and Campbell’s soups. Even though I attended high school in southwestern Pennsylvania’s Allegheny foothills, within the range of the world’s most diverse temperate-zone hardwood forest, I had never hunted mushrooms, not even morels, the most unmistakable of the edible wild fungi. Decades would pass before, in the 1990s, I would encounter the premier conditions for rearing ardent mycophagists (mushroom eaters): the community forest of the southern West Virginia coalfields.

By “community forest” I mean a forest that has been cultivated as a social medium through generations of collectively held ideas and related practices. The portion of community forest that I have returned to again and again in southern West Virginia drains the headwaters of the Marsh and Clear Forks of the Big Coal River. Geologically, the “mountains” of central Appalachia are actually the weathered remnants of an ancient sandstone plateau. Never glaciated, this plateau has eroded over millions of years into the present terrain of ridges, coves, hollows, and valleys. Rich deposits of humus formed in the hollows came to support the world’s richest temperate-zone hardwood system: the mixed mesophytic forest. There are more than 40 dominant canopy species, 40 woody understory species, and more than 1,200 herbaceous species in this forest system, which reaches across Central Appalachia from northern Alabama into southeastern Ohio and southwestern Pennsylvania. Interacting with this diversity over many generations, mountain communities have developed a richly variegated seasonal round, from digging ramps (wild leeks) and gathering wild greens in the spring to gardening and berry picking throughout the summer; digging ginseng, goldenseal, and other medicinal and edible roots; harvesting fall fruits and nuts; and hunting and fishing through most seasons. A high point in this annual round is the springtime hunt for morels, known throughout southern West Virginia as “molly moochers.” Hunting molly moochers, or “molly mooching,” people travel throughout the hills, checking their secret places just after the first warm spring rains.

The community forest rests on a concept of the commons that persists in this region, ironically, because roughly 90 percent of the land has been controlled by absentee owners since the late eighteenth century. The corn-woodland-pastureland economy of the early settlers depended on access to large tracts of forested land. Absentee owners tended to grant these fructuary rights because it was in their interest to have tenants watching over their timber and minerals until they could get them to market. The mountains, then, live a double life as both commodity and commons. The commons is writ large in the names for streams, settlements, mountains, gaps, hollows, ridges, flats, and knobs that have arisen out of generations of talk among neighbors. In public places like Sybil’s Restaurant, the Sundial Tavern, and the Ramp House, I heard people talking continually about the resources of the commons the way that people elsewhere might talk about stock market fluctuations or real estate.

At the head of Drew’s Creek, on a late April evening in 1998, I was processing ramps with members of the Delbert
Freewill Baptist Church. Ramps, wild cousins of the leek and the first of the wild edibles to appear in the spring, are featured at community celebrations throughout the mountains. These ramps would be consumed the next day at the Pine Knob Ramp Supper, an annual fundraiser that supports the community center known throughout the valley as the Ramp House. As we chopped off the rootlets and peeled away the slippery outer membrane (jokingly referred to as the “slimer”) for the next day’s feast, we were already caught up in the time of molly moochers.

“I found one today,” said Jenny Bonds, “a little tiny one.”

Laffon Pettry reported that a neighbor of theirs had found fifty-six of them already.

“Where’d he find them at?” Jenny wanted to know.

“Behind our house used to be an old apple orchard,” Laffon answered. “He found thirty-seven yesterday.”

“Gladys was finding them out there,” volunteered Delores Workman.

“Gladys,” Laffon chuckled, thinking of her niece’s passion for morels, “the Queen of the Molly Moochers!”

Within days of this conversation, molly moochers were simmering in skillets throughout the hills and hollows surrounding the headwaters of the Big Coal River. Calling at the homes of friends on Drew’s Creek and in Sundial and Stickney, I had multiple invitations to eat molly moochers in the space of an afternoon. Jenny Bonds, who had molly moochers soaking in salt water, urged me to come back. Just up the hollow Judy and Wayne Griffy were eating theirs already, rolled in flour and fried in butter. “Have you ever had molly moochers?” Judy asked. “Try one!” I popped one into my mouth, not quite prepared for the sensations that followed. There was the familiar texture of the butter-flavored coating, the wrapping for delicacies I knew well, such as zucchini, squash blossoms, and oysters, and the satisfying release of juices as I began to chew. But the flavor spreading over my palate was not the flavor of any of those foods. It was a series of hints, of the tenderest, choicest cut of beef, marinated to perfection in hazelnut oil or liqueur. Intensely but ethereally earthy, it gathered the juices into a taste like no other, leaving me startled and eager for more. In Sundial, Randy and Debbie Sprouse offered me molly moochers that had been dipped in beer batter and sautéed in butter. I tried again to identify the salient flavor, nutty, light, savory, but ultimately elusive. An hour later, in Stickney, I was facing another plateful in the home of Dave and Glenna Bailey.

Here, hog this!” Dave invited me. I obliged.

I began asking questions about molly moochers, where and when to get them, what to do with them. I asked everyone I talked to over the next few weeks. Two things stood out: the collective passion for molly moochers and an abundance of theories about where and how to hunt them. Molly moocher discourse opens a window onto the region’s
history of settlement, by Germans, Italians, and Irish. “Some people call them ‘merkles,’” Mae Bongalis told me. “They look like a corncob.” “Some people call them ‘sponges,’” said Elsie Rich, a descendant of Floyd Williams, an English pioneer. She had married an Italian immigrant, who referred to morels as spugna, a term used by the classical Roman gourmand Apicius. “How did they get the name ‘molly moochers?’” I often asked.

“Old timey people called them that,” explained Mary Allen, an older woman herself, who grew up on Peachtree Creek. “Maybe that’s from the Irish,” suggested a man who lived over on New River.

In every public establishment I heard talk about where they grow and how hard they are to find, unless you know the local history and ecology. “Buddy, I’ll tell you,” said Kay Miller, one evening in the Sundial Tavern, “if you come home with some mushrooms, man, you have been on a hunt.”

“I love them,” agreed Randy Sprouse. “Deep fry them in beer batter.”

“They say there’s a real good place up in Peachtree,” said Kay Miller.

“Up on Molly Daniel’s place,” began Randy, referring to a stand of old growth in Jarrold’s Valley at the confluence of the Marsh and Clear Forks. “They say up in Peachtree there’s a real good bunch,” reiterated Kay.

“They say there’s a lot back on Molly Daniel’s place,” Randy finished.

“But I’ve never hunted up there,” said Kay. “I’ve only been up in Dry Creek and Rock Creek.”

“Is there more than one kind of molly moocher?” I asked. “Oh yeah,” replied Kay. “It depends on what kind of tree you find them under. Your avid mushroom hunter does not look at the ground but up at the trees. If you find them under apple trees, they’re white. If you find them under sycamore trees they’re yellow.”

“Some of them are cone shaped, some of them are round,” supplied Randy.

“If you find them on the top of the mountain,” continued Kay, “they’re brown, or black. They’re not as good as the ones you find down low.”

**Taxonomy and Desire**

Among mycologists morel taxonomy is unresolved. “A mess,” mycologist Tom Volk called it. Current thinking tends to lump together species that were thought to be distinct. Thus, for instance, the yellow morels, *Morchella esculenta*
(found around orchards, elms, tulips, and ash trees), *Morchella deliciosa* (white morels found in association with tulip and hickory trees), and *Morchella crassipes* (the biggest morel found near sycamores) could be ecotypes of the same species, as could the black varieties, *M. angusticeps*, *M. elata*, and *M. conica*. A third distinct species, *M. semilibera*, the “half-free” morel, is the only morel with the cap margin not attached to the stalk at the base of the head. It favors grassy woods and is often found near tulip poplars.

A global passion for morel mushrooms, which seeps into the scientific names for species *esculenta* and *deliciosa*, also informs the variety of common names for morels. These names are brimming with search images and contextual clues for locating an object of desire: sponge, honeycomb, pinecone, snake head, haystack, corncob, brains, tulip morels, hickory mushrooms, orchard mushrooms. The Cherokee, who rolled them in cornmeal and fried them, knew them as *Ahawi sayoniyusti*, meaning “like a deer antler.” Etymology reveals a European search image within the name for the genus as well. Early German terms included *morus*, alluding to the morel’s likeness to a mulberry (*morus rubra*). In their book *The Romance of the Fungus World* (1925), R.T. and F.W. Rolfe note that the word *morchella* first appeared in the scientific literature in 1719. European names for the morel are quite similar: *morchella* (Bulgarian), *morkel* (Danish), *morille* (French), and *morchel* (German). The Old High German *morna*, which meant “carrot” or “parsnip,” was diminutitized to *morhila* in reference to the mushroom, from which *morchel* derives. The diminutive conveys the affection with which the morel was regarded in Europe.

The term “molly moocher” appears to be unique to central Appalachia. Perhaps “molly,” the Irish nickname for Mary, is a play on the French *morilla*, which might have sounded like “Maria” to the ears of the Irish who came to the region in the 1840s to work on the railroad. But that is, of course, sheer speculation. To the question of what it could mean to “mooch” mollies, we will return shortly.

**Etiology and Taste**

Morels are also alluded to as “dryland fish,” as pleasing to the gourmet palate as choice seafood. “Aren’t they the best things you’ve ever eaten in your life?” exclaimed a young woman from Rock Creek. “You fry them up like oysters. I’ve eaten them until I was sick.” The distinctive look of the fleshy fungus is accounted for in a Silesian tale of how the devil, once in a rage, tore an old woman to shreds and scattered her parts all over the forest. Wherever a part landed, a mushroom grew, as wrinkled as the skin of the wizened dame herself. Though this tale is not told in West Virginia, it resonates with the interdependence of molly mooching and the commons as an institution that frames membership in a larger social body.

The metaphor of the body has long been applied to the collective, and it finds continuing expression in our terms for landscape, which we inhabit as a set of giant body parts: the head and mouth of the hollow, the spine of the ridge, the neck of the woods, the gorge of the river. The metaphor helps to incorporate the individual into something collective that transcends mortal time and space. In this we glimpse a commensality of the mountains that goes beyond the celebration and reinforcement of social ties by eating out of the same bowl. This is a commensality of sharing in the life of the forested hills, which is verified through talk and the circulation of forest gifts through the community, especially to members who cannot get into the mountains themselves.

The Silesian tale also bears on the etiology of the craving for morels, which, like tomatoes, Parmesan cheese, meats, fish, and other mushrooms, stimulate what was officially recognized in the 1980s as a fifth taste: umami. In 1908 a Japanese scientist, Kikunai Ikeda, of Tokyo Imperial University, sought to understand the essence of deliciousness. Investigating *konbu* (Japanese kelp), Ikeda isolated glutamate as the deliciousness trigger and coined the term *umami* to describe the taste. Interestingly, our first encounter with *umami* is in breast milk, which is rich in glutamates. *Umami* signals to us that a particular food contains vital nutrients. Morels are particularly nutritious, containing more protein than most vegetables, along with vitamins A, B, D, and K. Morels also possess a chemical compound not found in any other food. In a May 2005 article in the *Journal of Agricultural Food Chemistry*, Rotzoll, Dunkel, and Hofmann found that morels not only possess the well-known *umami*-like taste contributors (L-glutamic acid, L-aspartic acid, and succinic acid) but also contain a unique glycoside, which they named S-morelid.

Thus, morels may look like many things, but they taste only like themselves. The flavor of morels is so difficult to describe because it is the flavor of morels. The only way to communicate the flavor is by sharing the mushrooms.

**Notes from the Mycelial Underground**

**A Brief Foray into Morel Physiology**

The worldwide popularity of morels has stimulated research into cultivating the fungus for commerce, but the morel has steadfastly resisted domestication. Historically, aficionados have found limited ways to encourage morels. Peasants in eighteenth-century Germany prized morels so much that
they set fire to the woods each year to stimulate morel production, until the government banned the practice. Mycologist Tom Volk, who in 1992 mapped out the life cycle of the morel, argues that the reason morels are so difficult to cultivate is that there is a stage in the morel life cycle not present in cultivated mushrooms: the sclerotium. The main part of the fungus is an underground microscopic structure called a mycelium, which feeds on dead and dying organisms (if it is saprobic) or forms symbiotic relationships with trees (if it is mycorrhizal—from the Greek mykes, meaning “fungus,” and rhiza, meaning “root”). Forest soils are teeming with mycelia, which are the most massive living component of soils. Rosanne Healy, a mycologist at Iowa State University, explained to me that a mycelium can clone itself repeatedly to form identical cells that lengthen the strand. “The mycelium not only branches out,” she pointed out, “It also connects and fuses with its own branches to create a network of mycelia.” Each network may eventually weigh several tons, forming, if one is willing to count such networks as individuals, the largest organisms on earth: “Larger than baleen whales or sequoia trees,” writes David White.

Mycorrhizal associations are fundamental to forest health. Attaching themselves to the roots of trees, fungi obtain from trees the carbohydrates they need but cannot produce themselves. In exchange, they enhance the tree’s access to water and nutrients in the soil. Recent research has shown that morels form mycorrhizal associations with apples, elms, and pine trees. Morels can also function as saprobes, digesting dead matter through exuded enzymes that act as tiny external stomachs, converting it into the rich humus on which hardwood forests depend.

As long as there is a source of nutrition, the morel mycelium seems able to grow indefinitely underground through cloning. It gets through hard winters by forming the underground walnut-sized sclerotium and can start up again in the spring either by forming new mycelia or by sending up a fruiting body. While it is easy to get the sclerotium to produce mycelia under controlled conditions, it is extremely difficult to get it to produce a fruiting body. In the wild the sclerotium appears to produce the fruiting body in response to habitat disruption—a forest fire or the death of a plant partner. This is why morels are so often found on burned ground and around old orchards and dying elms.

The primacy of apple orchards in molly mooching invites the investigation, if you will, of homomycorrhizal associations, the interactions of humans with fungi and trees within the context of the community forest system. How do fungi interact with collectively held values that govern the planting and harvesting of trees? What is the role of mycophilia in the continuing health of the community forest? In this part of West Virginia, the practice of alternating newgrounds with forest fallow forms a historic backdrop to molly mooching. Through the first half of the twentieth century, farmers grew their “heavy vegetables” (corn, beans, and winter squash) on rich “benches” of soil high in the mountains. When these newgrounds “wore out” after a number of years, a farmer would plant an apple orchard and let the field go into forest fallowing. Tom Volk found that both elm and apple trees (which can live for fifty years or more on steep slopes) form mycorrhizal associations with morels. Apple trees were once as ubiquitous as newgrounds in the mountains. “I’ve seen a thousand bushels of apples come out of that hollow in one season,” related Dennis Dickens, an octogenarian living on William’s Branch of Peachtree Creek in the 1990s. The orchards that matured with the woods were pruned and harvested for decades by people hunting and gathering in those areas. As the orchards have aged and declined, they have become premier spots for molly mooching. “Once the apple trees lose their spurs,” cautioned Kay Miller, “the molly moochers stop coming.”

**Molly Mooching on Bradley Mountain**

Whether farmers planted orchards with morels in mind or not, morels are one reason people remember where the old orchards are, and the reason I went molly mooching on Bradley Mountain one spring afternoon with Dave Bailey; his son, Terry; and their friend Woody Boggs. We met at the mouth of Hazy Creek, near a tiny settlement that was known as Launa before the Raleigh-Wyoming Coal Company renamed it Edwright. Descendants of people who settled Launa still live there. Dave and Terry climbed into the back of Woody’s pick-up truck, while I rode along in the cab, with the tape recorder running. It was the morning after a warm spring rain. “It has to be a warm rain,” Dave Bailey said. “It can’t be the cold May rains. Those are different.” It had to be the kind of rain, as Woody put it, where you could hear the molly moochers pop out of the ground. “You can hear them pop up in a thunderstorm,” he insisted. So off we drove, in pursuit of the cacophonous toadstools.

Bradley Mountain, in the late twentieth century, was both devastated and bursting with life. People had moved away decades ago but returned year after year to harvest Lige Bradley’s Wolf River apples and prune the trees. The scars of logging roads and strip mines visible on the mountain slopes were mitigated by the color slowly bursting into view around them: the green buds of soft maples, the orange russet blooms of hard maples, the white blossoms of dogwoods,
and the fuchsias of redbuds. Along the road, here and there, a forsythia (known locally as “shower of gold”) or a quince (known as “fire on the mountain”) marked the sites of former homes. “Before we go any farther, I want to tell you something,” Woody Boggs announced. Waving at the mountain to our left, he continued, “All the trees on this side of the mountain are made of wood.” He paused for effect. “And the trees on the other side are too.”

Turning left into the Irene Hollow, we began a steep ascent, lurching and creaking along the rutted, unpaved route to the top of Bradley Mountain. “You should have seen this road before they fixed it!” Woody commented seriously. He downshifted again, and we bounced our way around and through a terrain of overwhelming contrast, in view of scalloped and serrated ridgelines, sheer drops into deep crevasses, and the softer cleavages of hills and hollows in an earlier stage of spring. Our first stop was at the charred remains of a campfire, beside a bowl-shaped cove.

Even with an arsenal of search images, molly moochers are hard to recognize. Is that dark spot across the hollow a husk of a nut or one of the black morels? Is the bulge beneath the nearby leaves a yellow morel or a mayapple? In the time it took my companions to fill their sacks, I found three molly moochers. We stopped at several other sites, including the Wayne Place, where an old spring and orchard had been. Once, while the others hunted for molly moochers, I succumbed to the urge to write down the names of all the wildflowers I saw: white and pink trillium (also called “mountain lilies” and “whippoorwills”); red trillium (“stinking Benjamin”); the yellow blooms of trout lily, spice bush, and colt’s foot; the blue blooms of stagger; the purple-hued leaves of red fern; the white blooms of blood root (“red puccoon”) and Dutchman’s-breeches; and the silver-dappled leaves of sprouting cow parsnip (“woolen britches”). I saw Jack-in-the-pulpit (“Indian cucumber”), cohosh (“seng pointer”), wild ginger, and an abundance of putty root (“Adam-and-eve-root”), an orchid that, like many of the spring ephemerals there, gets the nutrients it needs from the canopy through the work of endomycorrhizae. I stooped to inspect a suspicious bulge, peeling away leaf litter that cloaked an unfurling mayapple. The undersides of the dead leaves were laced with white filaments, mycelia caught in the act of digesting future habitat for hardwoods, spring ephemerals, and molly moochers.
At the end of the hunt, we placed our open bags on
the ground to assess the day’s take. I showed Dave my meager
findings. His eyes twinkled. “You know what I’m going to
do? Give me the address of where you work, and I’m going
to send these to somebody there, with a note that says,
‘Look what Mary found.’” At my look of chagrin, he threw
his head back and filled the air around us with the gener-
ous, contagious guffaw that is his trademark.

Molly Moochers in the Gift Economy
of the Community Forest

What distinguishes morels in southern West Virginia from
morels everywhere else is their name. Perhaps, the term
itself is a way of tracking the reach of the community forest
in West Virginia, an indicator of something that Gregory
Bateson calls “the thinking system.” The minimal unit for
survival, he argues, is the organism plus its environment.
As an integral unit, the organism plus its environment form
the thinking system. In southern West Virginia’s community
forest, molly moochers would be an expression of a thinking
system in which, for instance, nut trees are highly valued.
As it happens, nut trees such as hickory, oak, walnuts, and
chestnuts are all associated with morels in the literature.
They are valued because they function as particular species
within a system that incorporates humans. “We were taught
never to cut down the nut trees,” Virgil Jarrell of Sylvester
commented. “Because they’re good for the animals.” Another
man told of a coworker who refused to cut down hickories.
“The boss had to go along behind him and cut down the
hickories,” said the man. For the same reason older residents
counsel against destroying den trees and bee trees, which
happen also to be large enough and old enough to provide
the dead matter on which saprobic mycelia depend. From
the perspective of such a thinking system, the practice of
harvesting biomass forms the grave error that one sawmill
operator called “robbing the land.” Land in this sense is part
of the community. One can only rob it by placing oneself
outside of the community.

Let us return then to the notion of mooching. Mooching
suggests the appropriation of goods that others have earned:
a free and undeserved ride at someone else’s expense.
But what exactly is being mooched, and who is doing the
mooching? In one sense the fungi are moochers, availing
themselves of carbohydrates produced by trees that are the
property of absentee owners, though of course they benefit
the tree as well. Are those who hunt for molly moochers
mooching? If they are, it is not the property of the landlords,
for molly moochers are not merchantable timber, nor are
they minerals. Neither animal nor vegetable nor mineral,
molly moochers are anomalous. “Fungi are rule breakers,”
Rosanne Healy observed.

Anomalous, uncontrollable, and immensely productive,
fungi call to mind the tricksters of world mythologies, whose
antics give rise to landforms, cultures, and constellations.
Molly moochers are like the empty bowl that Lewis Hyde,
in his study The Gift, says is the ticket to entering the economy
gift exchange. “A gift,” he writes, “is a thing we do not get
by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it
through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us.”

As gifts, molly moochers are bestowed in the moment
of recognition, a moment that issues an imperative to molly
mooch, no matter when the recognition strikes. “It’s hard to
let them get big.” confessed Laffon Pettry, “because you’re
afraid someone else will beat you to them.” In the moment
of recognition, the time of molly mooching trumps ordinary
time. One woman recalled coming upon molly moochers
while retrieving a golf ball that had gone across the creek
when she was practicing. She dropped her club, forgot about
the ball, and “brought back a shiftful of molly moochers.”

Dave Bailey recounted a similar feat of recognition:
“Coming up the road in the car last spring, down at the Dairy
Queen, me and my son. He was driving. I was setting there
just looking out the window. And on the bank, I seen a
molly moocher. In the car, going!
I said, ‘I seen a molly moocher.’
‘No you didn’t!’
I said, ‘Turn the car around.’
‘You didn’t!’
I said, ‘Turn around!’
He turned around, went back. And there it was! That
thing was that tall, that big around.”
“You should have seen it,” verified Glenna. “It was huge!”
“And I went back down there,” resumed Dave, “and got
a sackful. Boy they were great!”

The following spring, Dave met me at his door with
another trophy: a “boss” molly moocher from Hazy Creek.
Measuring about eleven inches, it was the biggest I’ve ever
seen. Later, when it came up in conversation, I couldn’t
help myself. “How many pounds of meal did it take to coat
that molly moocher? Fifteen?”

He paused and grinned. “No, twenty-five. It took twenty-
five pounds of meal to coat it. We had to use a pick-up truck
to winch it out of the ground! It took two men to get it onto
the picnic table, and the top hung over one end. We had to
slice it with a chainsaw! It fed the whole community!”

Molly moochers are the effect, not the purpose, of living
well. Community life is the habitat for molly moochers,
which molly moochers help to renew. “We give them to our friends,” said Laffon Pettry. “We’ve got lots that can’t get out….Gladys found fifty-one on Friday, and she sent them to her friends that were sick and couldn’t get out and get any. I didn’t find but twenty-five, but I gave mine to my friends too. We both feel that if we give them to our friends and things that we’ll find more. It’s just our belief. If we give away what we find today, next time we’ll find more.”

“Our gift may leave us empty,” writes Lewis Hyde, “but our emptiness then pulls gently on the whole until the thing in motion returns to replenish us.” The circulation of both emptiness and gifts are essential to community life. Molly moochers, humble esculents, spring into view when their nutrients have run out and become gifts that must be kept in motion lest they be wasted, renewing habitat for the community forest.

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REFERENCES