Through the Trials of Grief and 'Becoming With' the Cottonwood Tree:

An Earth Story

By

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Section 1: Prologue

My fascination with cottonwood trees has been two decades in the making. I grew up in Parker, Colorado, in a neighborhood called Cottonwood. Many developments in Colorado are named for this native tree that grows along Cherry Creek and other bodies of water. Where I grew up, Cherry Creek flowed through the cottonwood forest which separated my neighborhood from others (figure 1). These trees provided much-needed shade in the summer, contributed to large leaf piles in the fall, became skeletal in the winter and each spring the trees would release their cotton bundles filled with seeds. In the back of the neighborhood, there was a walking trail entrance that created a liminal space between developed land and undeveloped "wild" land. My mom would walk with me to the park or creek; it was important to her that I had a connection with the environment around me. I have many stories of small wonders we would find along this trail from 'fairy rocks' to 'deceptive bouncy balls'; the relevant story I will share is about the 'star stick'. My mom taught me to look for cottonwood branches and twigs that had fallen from the tree, which are prone to breakage in the fall and winter. These twigs hold a magical secret: if you break the twig in just the right spot, there will be a dark brown star inside. She encouraged me to make a wish as I snapped the twig, the wish would only come true if I could reveal the whole star (which is harder than it sounds). I never believed in wishes coming true as a child, though the 'star stick' was remarkable enough without it holding some magical power; its existence was enough.

Later I learned through my deconstruction of the tree *why* the star is visible within the twigs. Unlike learning how a magic trick works, knowing why the star exists does not subtract from its existence. The star represents the dormancy or death of the cottonwood tree; this star is essentially the channel in which water travels through the tree from the roots to the leaves.

The thickness of the branches and twigs varies depending on the water content; as the water is utilized, the tree will shrink and the star will become a dark brown. When the tree is in a state of growth the twigs bend instead of break and the star inside is a light green, almost imperceptible. The ‘star stick’ exists as an indication of the death of the twig after it fell from the tree, or the dormancy of the tree itself. I realized that the spark of joy I felt when I broke the twig trying to get the star is, in reality, a representation of death. It became an intervention that begged for more meaning, and I found myself asking “What would the tree wish for?”.

Two years ago, I knew I wanted to use cottonwood as a material in a sculpture; I had a few sketches of installations that justified growing my collection of ‘star sticks’. At the same time, I was struggling with a difficult decision – I wanted to seriously pursue both a naturalistic spirituality and a career as a working artist. These choices have made me the happiest I have ever been, but they also had a great cost. These decisions would not be accepted by my father and his family, who, up till this point, neglected any emotional expression and directly criticized any attempt at that expression. It is difficult to explain the emotional experiences of living with a narcissist who entrapped his family; they defend him despite his hatred for them and the world. Maybe that is enough of an explanation. It became clear to me that I would never be able to live my life with them in it. So, I had to put myself first and commit to living a life free from the oppression of these toxic family members. When I needed space to contemplate these relationships, I visited the park from my childhood and walked the same trails, collecting twigs as I went. Once I gathered a decent amount, I found a quiet spot to sit and break all of the sticks; tossing back the ones that I didn’t get a star. Finally, without the critical weight of people who refuse

to see the world beyond their manipulated view, I was free to explore my spirituality and hone my artistic practice.

Over the next two years, I was haunted by my grief and I started to realize that my grief ran deeper than family issues – I was also deeply grieving for the environment. I began to explore themes of nature within my practice, asking questions like, "What is nature/natural," and "How can we find a better balance with nature?" I started creating artwork in response to these questions and developed a practice of research to provide a foundation for the work. Through this initial investigation, I learned that there was much to talk about within this arena and that everyone is affected by the climate crisis. It was finally time to target my research toward the cottonwood tree.

Section 2: Populus Deltoides subsp. Monilifera

My preliminary search yielded results from landscapers who offered services to cut down cottonwoods due to their invasive roots and fragile branches often leading to damaged foundations and roofs. I didn't understand why people would plant populus deltoides so close to their homes given how costly it could be. Of course, these trees don't have a vendetta against homes and people. Populus Deltoides subsp. Monilifera are native to Colorado and western plains habitats, primarily growing in riparian ecosystems that source water from mountain snowmelt.[1] They have an annual growth cycle and the tree rings reflect this, making populus deltoides a great source for researchers to investigate the history of a river.[2] The tree has not changed, but our culture and infrastructure around it has. "Cottonwoods are considered the tree of life in traditional stories, are used in the Sundance as the center

[1] Kanuckel and Stuever, "Quick Guide Series - Cottonwood Management: Ecology, Rehabilitation, Wildfire and Other Considerations." (page 1)
[2] McNeeley et al., "Cottonwoods, Water, and People-Integrating Analysis of Tree Rings with Observations of Elders from the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Tribes of the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming." (page 5)

pole, and are a central component of other religious and spiritual practices including sweat lodges."[3] Colonizers also found significance in this tree, calling it the 'Pioneer Tree' as it would indicate to them that there was a source of water and resources.[4] This tree is of great historical significance and has many associations which is essential to recognize, but there is more information about their ecology that I needed to learn.

Starting with the roots, populus deltoides grow lateral roots that expand further horizontally than they do vertically. This is a detriment if you are planting the tree near a home as the roots will eventually meet with underground pipes and foundations. In riparian ecosystems, however, this characteristic of the tree is essential in supporting other plants and riverways. As the roots grow along the river/creek they absorb water from the topsoil and receive the most water in spring when snowmelt from the mountains causes flooding. The soil in these ecosystems is usually sandy and loose, the tree's roots create a stable structure underground for other vegetation to root into[5]. As other plants root vertically downwards, they will absorb deeper water sources which minimizes the competition for water between the various plants, creating a natural system in which many species can flourish.

Moving up the trunk, it is common for the trunk to split, and large branches grow upwards instead of outwards; this creates a tall slender appearance with branches high off the ground (not good for climbing). These trees have a tall canopy which is also essential to riparian ecosystems as it provides the maximum amount of shade compared to other trees. This shade, especially in the hot months of summer, allows fruit-bearing plants to hold onto their

[3] McNeeley et al., "Cottonwoods, Water, and People-Integrating Analysis of Tree Rings with Observations of Elders from the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Tribes of the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming." (page 1)
[4] "Old Main Cottonwood Finds New Life through Cloning."
[5] Kanuckel and Stuever, "Quick Guide Series - Cottonwood Management: Ecology, Rehabilitation, Wildfire and Other Considerations." (page 2)

yield longer as the rate of dehydration/withering decreases. It also keeps the temperature of the river more consistent, which supports aquatic life and prevents extreme evaporation.[6] Finally, the large canopy supports a vast range of avian wildlife including birds of prey which prefer tall nesting options.

The seeds are surrounded by a fibrous white material akin to cotton and are released each spring; this is the source of the tree's common name Cottonwood. The early spring wind carries the cotton-covered seeds to nearby point bars (the bends and curves of a naturally forming river) where they settle and start to root. Snowmelt flooding is a crucial component of the water cycle for both mature trees and their offspring. Flooding is the primary water source in a dry plains habitat and is needed for the offspring to get enough water to survive until the next snowmelt.[7] This wall of water serves other purposes as well, like clearing out plant debris, and contributes to natural river migration.

My research expanded beyond the tree's ecology to better understand the threats the trees face, most noticeably, the worsening drought. While these trees are drought-resistant, no plant can survive without water. Colorado has seen periods of drought since the 1930s but has been facing severe drought since 2000, which has dried up many rivers and creek beds in the state[8]. High Line Canal, for example, in the lifetime of my parents it went from a beloved creek and stream through South Denver to a dried bed. I currently live a stone's throw from a trail entrance to High Line Canal (figure 2), but this portion of the creek is dried. I walk along the bottom of the sandy dry soil and collect branches, bark, and twigs as I go. As I walk along the bed, I can

[6] McNeeley et al., "Cottonwoods, Water, and People-Integrating Analysis of Tree Rings with Observations of Elders from the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Tribes of the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming." (page 17)
[7] McNeeley et al., "Cottonwoods, Water, and People-Integrating Analysis of Tree Rings with Observations of Elders from the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Tribes of the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming." (page 5)
[8] Rettig, "Colorado Water History > Topic Breakout: Drought."

see the lateral roots from the cottonwood starting to poke through the eroding soil. This is the climate crisis. It is not elusive; you just need to know what to look for.

In addition to drought, there is another threat to populus deltoides that is concerning water. High Line Canal connects to Cherry Creek but does so downstream from the Cherry Creek Reservoir (construction completed in 1950). Cherry Creek Reservoir was built mainly to prevent spring snowmelt flooding Denver which, twice before the completion of the dam, caused intense property damage and personal injury[9]. Human intervention in natural waterways through water plants, dams, and reservoirs is essential to the survival of humans in an ever-expanding land development. These actions also cause direct harm to Colorado riparian ecosystems as the infrastructure we put in place to manage the river is preventing the natural systems of flooding and river channel migration[10]. In the case of the Elwha River in the Northwest, scientists learned how damaging dams can be, and how expensive they are to maintain with minimum benefit. They discovered crucial nutrients for riparian ecosystems that became trapped behind dam walls, essentially starving the river of replenishing sediments and aquatic life of microbial foods[11]. Both of these threats concerning water have a high-risk side-effect. When populus deltoides are without necessary water and are prone to more breakage and decay, they become fuel for a forest fire. As this wood is so dry and cannot be cleaned away naturally through spring flooding, the material continues to build up. In the event of a forest fire in a dying populus deltoides forest, the flames will quickly over-run the trees.[12]

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[9] "Castlewood Dam | Colorado Encyclopedia."
[10] McNeeley et al., "Cottonwoods, Water, and People-Integrating Analysis of Tree Rings with Observations of Elders from the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Tribes of the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming." (page 8)
[11] Gussman and Plumb, *Return of the River: The Largest Dam Removal in History*.
[12] Kanuckel and Stuever, "Quick Guide Series - Cottonwood Management: Ecology, Rehabilitation, Wildfire and Other Considerations." (page 3)

Lastly, colonizers introducing invasive, non-native species are threatening to wipe out populus deltoides in many regions. A Wyoming geological survey identified the Elaeagnus Angustifolia (Russian Olive) as a common non-native tree planted along rivers (I have identified these in the forest behind my childhood home). In their study, they observed that the non-native tree is a direct threat to populus deltoides forests. Starting with the roots, these trees root vertically, meaning they take from deeper water sources and do not provide any structural support for other plant life. The canopy of elaeagnus angustfolia is much shorter and thinner than the native trees; meaning they cannot provide the shade needed for other plants to hide from the sun and the river temperature is not maintained. Reproduction is one thing that the non-native tree is good at, after being introduced into an ecosystem, it can quickly become the dominant flora, pushing out the native species.[13]

Section 3: Deconstruction

During this research process, I began work on my largest branch which would become the trunk of my tree. I needed to remove the bugs living in the base of the branch as well as strip the branch of all the bark. This deconstruction was important to me because I wanted to experience every aspect of this tree as humans historically would have experienced it. At first, I was very gentle with the material, I did not want to do more harm after all it had suffered by human intervention already. Using the dull end of a butter knife I tried to separate the bark from the branch, clearing away the shreds of thin wooden fibers. I quickly realized that this tool would not be enough for me to achieve my task. I was at a standstill because I did not want to use more aggressive measures. I was faced with my grief, and feeling compassion for the non-human life, I grieved the cottonwood tree. I looked at

[13] McNeeley et al., "Cottonwoods, Water, and People-Integrating Analysis of Tree Rings with Observations of Elders from the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Tribes of the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming." (page 9-13)

the remainders of the tree that I would not be using, knowing that most people have no idea what lies between bark and wood as most people have never deconstructed a tree. "This remainder never has an autonomous reality, nor its place… It is through the subtraction of the remainder that reality is founded and gathers strength."[14] I questioned, "What have I lost?".

My grief challenged me to rethink all I had learned so far. I knew more about the cottonwood tree than I ever did before; the roots creating a foundation for other plants to grow, the canopy providing shelter for various forms of life, and the stars representing its death. I looked at the elements of the tree that I was able to deconstruct so far and saw the trunk as a skeleton, the soft thin wooden fibers as muscle sinew, and the bark as skin. I started to understand the dead thing in my hands as a living organism with biological systems to keep it alive and it fulfilled a specific role in its ecosystem – the cottonwood tree naturally supports other life just by existing. In the wake of dead limbs and dried roots, the riparian community will grieve for the cottonwood tree. I thought back to, "What would the tree wish for?" Any human who portrayed these characteristics, I imagine, would want their death to mean something to the people they love. In death, this tree could speak louder than it ever had in life. It could finally say how much suffering it and its community faced. It could ask us to re-evaluate how much of that suffering was a direct result of human action or inaction. If the tree wanted to stand in memorial to all that died before and advocate for all that are still alive, I would need to get the hand scythe.

Section 4: Climate Grief & Art's Role

The artwork of Antti Laitinen was an early inspiration for the uncanny darkness that I wanted to convey within my work. In Laitinen's video *Fall and*

[14] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. (page 143)

Rise (2019) (figure 3) a pine tree is spotlit in a vignette frame with other pine trees spaced generously around it. Suddenly the tree collapses, as if the trunk turned to jelly, it folds onto itself as it falls; after a brief moment, the tree starts to rise again. Now it is clear that there is a cable that is threaded through the trunk which has been cut in sections, as the cable goes taught the tree stands straight up once again.[15] This video represents the futility of attempting to salvage some "ideal" nature and clarifies for me that once dead, nothing can be brought back to life. I find that this and other of Laitinen's artwork highlight human hubris in grand gestures of discombobulated assemblages of natural materials. While he attempts to piece a tree back together, he is pointing out how impossible such a task is. Grief can be like *Fall & Rise*, at one moment you are fine, then you are sad or angry, then you realize why you are feeling this way and the feelings get more intense until you have to do something about it.

Psychologists Sarahs Edwards and Linda Buzzell have been working in the field of grief specifically as it presents in cases of climate grief (the feeling of loss/sadness/hopelessness associated with the constant destruction of our planet and the suffering of all life as a result of that destruction). In their research they developed stages of climate grief that stand apart from the traditional stages of grief we are familiar with: Denial – Semiconsciousness – Awakening – Shock – Despair – Empowerment. Denial is the denial of the climate crisis. Semiconsciousness is the sense that something is wrong but that feeling is often disenfranchised by an over-culture that does not accurately portray the effects of the climate crisis[16]. Awakening is an event or moment when it becomes clear the climate crisis is a genuine threat to humanity. Shock relates to Awakening and references the surprise of

[15] Laitinen, *Fall and Rise*.
[16] Pihkala, "Ecological Sorrow."

action or inaction taken by world leaders to address the crisis. Despair is the signifier of depression and eco-anxiety. Empowerment is the realization of agency and is often associated with eco-activism.[17] Edwards and Buzzell state that these stages fluctuate and often come in waves based on current events and levels of engagement, which explains the feelings of Despair found in climate activists. All humans have experienced climate grief, either after a natural disaster, at learning of a newly extinct species, or even more generally, witnessing the extreme weather in their hometown. "The ecological crisis is very real, but people are also shaped by various social constructions of it: people are impacted by how others frame this crisis."[18]

When the over-culture is silent, Art has the responsibility to speak. This is supported by every artistic movement that aims to represent social and political issues – eco-art is no different. The thesis work of Gabryella Pulsinelli expresses that "art can be employed to create a space in which nature is regarded as an important entity and to start a conversation with the viewer about ways to protect nature from the counited destruction"[19] There is an important distinction in Pulsinelli's thesis, she underscores that art is not solely responsible for changing the tides in the climate crisis and that art cannot create empathy in people who have not experienced nature.[20] The work of Amy Hoagland, *Reflections on the Future* (2021-ongoing) (figures 4-5) is a perfect example of art giving space to grieve and challenges Pulsinelli's claim that art cannot replace an experience of nature. Hoagland partnered with schools in Boulder, Colorado one year after the most devastating forest fire the county had ever seen. The community was greatly affected by the fire and felt the loss of their homes, possessions, and natural spaces that surrounded them. Hoagland brought community members to a

[17] Buzzell and Chalquist, *Ecotherapy*.
[18] Pihkala, "The Process of Eco-Anxiety and Ecological Grief."
[19] Pulsinelli, "THE ROLE OF ART IN CREATING EMPATHY FOR NATURE." (page 18)
[20] Pulsinelli, "THE ROLE OF ART IN CREATING EMPATHY FOR NATURE." (page 32)

site that had been burned, and with them, created etchings of several trees that perished. These etchings were then carved into mirrors and permanently installed onto the stumps of the burnt trees.[21] Her work focused on community engagement and created a moment for remembrance, giving a voice to the disenfranchised climate grief while also Empowering the community to have agency in the climate crisis discourse.

Art is a means of expressing emotions beyond the use of words, artists choose the materials and processes, and the audience will bring the story. My work is an emotional response to the Anthropocene (the epoch in which humanity is the leading contributor to the global climate crisis – the parent to climate grief). During the opening night of the BFA Thesis show, I had the opportunity to talk to so many people about my work. There were many compliments and recognition of the labor involved, but there were also conversations of grief. Older women remember the cottonwood trees that left twigs for them to break and reveal a star. These women reminisced, saddened by the death of the trees they were once familiar with. Others had stories of cottonwoods but did not know about the stars hidden within. Once I pointed it out in my tree, I got the sense that I was bringing a sense of Empowerment to my audience, as Hoagland accomplished in her work.

Section 5: Simulation

I found the branch for the trunk of my tree about a year before I started this work, it broke off a tree in my current neighborhood after one of the worst windstorms I ever saw (minus tornados). I was getting the mail and when I passed by it, I had a call to bring it home with me. If this branch had fallen across the street in the High Line Canal it would have decomposed naturally, but since it fell between two townhomes (figure 2), it would

[21] Hoagland, *Reflections on the Future*.

likely have been thrown away or turned to mulch. I feel like I rescued the branch from that fate, but in doing so I also participated in *taking* it, and by keeping it in my backyard, I *owned* it. Ownership of land and nature is a Colonizer's concept, a means to an end in which humans can live in harmony with other humans instead of in harmony with the land.

The term "Manifest Destiny" came about in 1845 when journalist John Louis O'Sullivan claimed that it is man's God-given right to rule dominion over the natural world for the betterment of mankind. Land ownership became an American's right through the Monroe Doctrine (or Doctrine of Discovery) in which colonizers could take land as personal property if it was not being used by those of Christian faith.[22] The concept of Manifest Destiny and the law of land ownership essentially built the Western mindset of *man over nature* and "culture is increasingly seizing the opportunity to simulate the crucial powers that were assigned to nature's domain"[23] for the benefit of all mankind. This mindset was made more popular as it was dispersed through the art of early Western landscape painters, like Thomas Cole. *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1936) (figure 6) presents exaggerated curves of the river that create unrealistic representations of point bars and river migration. Cole went on to operate the Hudson River School of Arts and this mindset persisted through his teachings.[24] This perpetual desire to control, harness, and alter nature to meet the needs of colonizers creates an over-culture in which "the ideal nature exists in our head before we step into nature."[25]

I erected this branch onto a steel base which is cold and industrious. This reminded me of early advertising for mortuaries, in which they would have

[22] Miller, "THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY."
[23] Halley, Peter "Nature and Culture" referenced in: Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000*. (page 1041-1042)
[24] Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*.
[25] Wadstein MacLeod, Kristina Chapter 5 of *ARTISTIC VISIONS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE NORTH*.

preserved corpses in the shop window to display their services. It also reminded me of Nature and Science Museums with display cases filled with replicated plants and animals. The first Natural History Museum, built in London, after much debate about the architecture and construction, needed to be filled. The building was organized to have diorama displays for the public, while the genuine artifacts would be in a study room for scholars because "Darwin thought stuffing skins and rebuilding skeletons as crowd-pleasing." (Yanni)[26] As such, the accuracy of these displays was not of the utmost importance; the sculptor used scientific sketches and took artistic liberties to create a model that would be more aesthetic and reiterate the glory of God's creation. I visited the Denver Nature and Science Museum to preview the existing simulations of cottonwoods in their Colorado Wildlife exhibit. I saw cottonwood trees with artificial trunks and plastic leaves unceremoniously stapled to the tips of branches. The twigs, however, were real; I recognized the shriveled veiny texture of twigs without water. I even saw the dark brown stars in some of the twigs that had broken, I am not sure if that was intentional or not. These dioramas attempt to create a believable simulation, "The Simulacra is a natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit. Simulations that are harmonious, optimistic and that aim for the restitution of the ideal institution of nature made in God's image."[27]

I conquered nature by removing the cottonwood from its resting place on the ground – eliminating the possibility of it decomposing back into its ecosystem. I deconstructed the trunk by peeling off the bark/skin and separating the wooden fiber/muscle sinew – disregarding the unwanted pieces. I broke each twig at each joint and re-articulated them. The brass serves to

[26] Yanni, "Divine Display or Secular Science."
[27] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. (page 121)

connect all of the pieces while also preventing them from touching or becoming whole – brass is a precious metal simulating the color and value of gold. (figure 7-9) Now in the gallery, I put this simulation on a pedestal, as if my tree surpasses the creations of nature. The audience must look up into the tree, simulating their experience of looking at a real tree outside. "Death is residual if it is not resolved in mourning, in the collective celebration of mourning."[28] The audience stands with their grief. The cottonwood stands with its grief. I stand with my grief. We are collectively mourning.

Section 6: Conclusion

In my final reflections on this work, I would be remiss if I did not mention the writings of Donna Haraway and her discourse on the Cthulucene. In her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* she introduces the term "becoming with" which expresses the need for people to abandon the anthropocentric view we have of the world and adopt a view that better aligns with natural systems. The chapters are separated by different animals or natural systems of species that, when fully understood by human beings, can enhance the human experience.[29] I found evidence of this 'becoming with' in other research I had already done, both the US Geological Survey and the Elwha River documentary discuss the marriage between scientific study and human compassion which transforms research into an Earth Story[30]. In Earth Stories, humans find reciprocity between man and nature, usually once we find a balance between science and compassion. Haraway argues that the Anthropocene needs to end and be replaced by the Cthulucene (which has other names as well) which demands that humanity 1) Take significant and immediate

[28] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. (page 146)
[29] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.
[30] Gussman and Plumb, *Return of the River: The Largest Dam Removal in History*.

action to minimize continued harm to the planet 2) Find ways to work with (become with) natural systems to continue progressing our human cultures in accordance with these natural systems.[31] Even Baudrillard comments on the necessary relationships between humanity and nature, "The trajectory animals have followed, from sacred defiance to ecological sentimentality, speaks loudly enough of the vulgarization of the status of man himself – it once again describes an unexpected reciprocity between the two."[32]

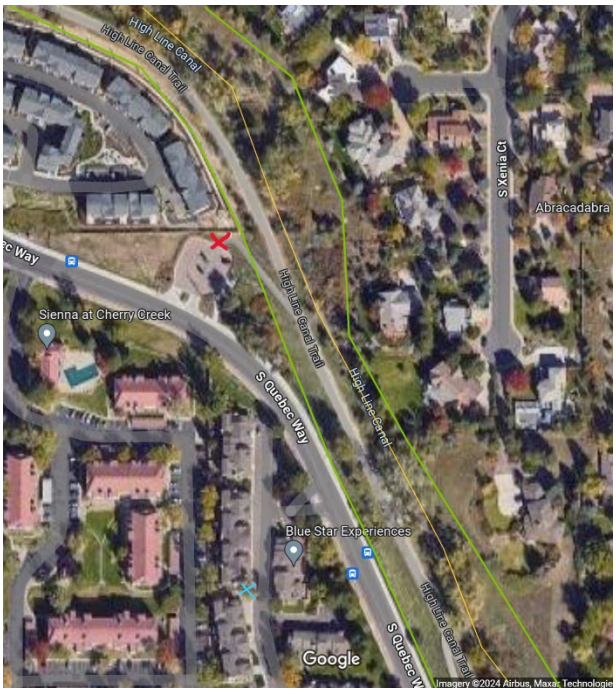
In my experiences with the cottonwood tree as a child, I learned that a tree could become a powerful symbol, embodying the feelings I imprinted onto it. In the grief of losing my family, I chose a new home surrounded by cottonwoods so that I could be reminded of my belonging – if not with a blood family, then with a chosen one. The unexpected intimacy of deconstructing, layer by layer, a branch that called to me on the street. The deep levels of understanding I gained both through handling the tree and by educating myself on its ecology are akin to learning about another person through hugs and deep conversations about their roots. I chose to take the last name Cottonwood to replace my father's name before I read Haraway's writing. The name is a signifier to me of belonging and it helps me remember times when my father was still my hero – those memories and feelings are worth naming. I have started the journey of 'becoming with' the Cottonwood Tree, and in the future, I hope to look back on this work as a reflection of my grief. I don't want to linger there too long; however, it is time to explore more Earth Stories as I deepen my relationships with the cottonwood tree and other non-human life.

[31] Gussman and Plumb, *Return of the River: The Largest Dam Removal in History*.
[32] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. (page 134)

Figure 1:

Caption: Google Maps Terrain Screenshot of the Cottonwood neighborhood in Parker, Colorado, and surrounding parks on either side of Cherry Creek. The "X" marks the neighborhood trail entrance that connects with the vast trail network along Cherry Creek through Denver. The green outline indicates all of the places where Cottonwood Trees grow, excluding within the housing developments.

Figure 2:



Caption: Google Maps Terrain Screenshot of the High Line Canal where I conducted first-hand research, made observations and collected material for this work. The red "x" marks the entrance to the trail, the blue "x" indicates the mother tree which provided the main branch for the trunk of my tree. The green outline indicates the places Cottonwood Trees grow, and the yellow line indicates the dried High Line Canal that can be walked in.

Figure 3:

Caption: Image obtained from artist's website. A still image from Antti Laitinen's *Fall and Rise* (2019) video. The image shows a pine tree that has collapsed and is being pulled back into a standing position – the trunk of the tree is cut in multiple places, making it impossible for the tree to stand on its own.

Figure 4:

Caption: Image obtained from artist's website *Reflections on the Future* (2021-current). A plywood board substrate is decorated with yellow and orange paper leaves. Each leaf was written by a community member involved with the Reflections on the Future project, contributors answered the prompt, "My hope for the future" as part of Hoagland's ongoing letter project.

Figure 5:

Caption: Image obtained from artist's website *Reflections on the Future* (2021-current). The image shows several tree stumps in an area that suffered burns during a forest fire. The stumps have been capped with a mirror which is etched with the tree rings of the stump beneath.

Figure 6:

Caption: Thomas Cole *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836). The painting depicts a Western Landscape from the perspective atop a hill looking down into a valley with a winding river.

Figure 7:

Caption: Kayli Cottonwood *What have we lost?* (2024) 9ft h x 5 ft w x 3 ft d installed at the CVA. Image of the full tree on the pedestal.

Figure 8:

Caption: Kayli Cottonwood *What have we lost?* (2024) installed at MSU Gallery 199. Close up image of the bark.

Figure 9:

Caption: Kayli Cottonwood *What have we lost?* (2024) installed at the CVA. Image of the tree from beneath, capturing how the audience sees the tree when they are up close looking upwards.

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