



Dance Exchange in Cassie Meador's
How To Lose a Mountain

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Dance Place
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Behind every product we use is a distance that has been traveled and a story that can be shared. These stories are often hidden or untold. In losing the stories behind the resources we use, we also lose the understanding of our connection to and impact on a place. *How To Lose a Mountain* is not only about tracing the sources of our resources and the distances they travel—it's about stories of where our stuff comes from. In that spirit, this companion program illuminates the stories behind the "stuff" of the stage work—the things that inspired the artists, the legends, legacies, and lore that helped to build the work.

The story of the walk, in Cassie's words

"In 2009, I spent two weeks in the rainforest of Guyana. I took one shower during my stay, my headlamp was my single source of light, and we stayed outdoors for the entire trip. Living in this way connects you directly to the resources that nature provides and to a sense that there are limits to what can be taken from a place without restoring it. Coming home, I realized I had little knowledge about the resources that created my way of life and I became curious about their origins. When I researched the source of the electricity I use, I was stunned to find out that my home was powered with coal mined through mountain top removal. I began to wonder, could I travel on foot to where those mountains once stood?"

So, in 2012, I walked out my front door and headed to the source of my home's energy. The 500-mile walk took about two months to complete, and, along with fellow dancers and collaborators from Dance Exchange, I made the journey by foot to the sources of power stopping at power plants, farms, towns, and schools along the way. As a way to engage with the communities, we developed *The Moving Field Guide*, an interactive experience that examines our relationship to place, led by artists, naturalists, and regional experts in history and ecology, in partnership with the US Forest Service.

On the final day of the walk, we traveled through a lightning storm. We made our way through a thick tree cover to a thin divide where green and grey met. A flat land stood before us, one that couldn't absorb the days rain or the shock of what had taken place there. It was an empty space, one that I'm not sure you could really even still call land. Stripped not only of its mountains, this was a place being stripped of the very life and culture that grows out of such mountains. There we stood in the presence of a ghostly summit. In this moment, the walk was ending yet I was left with a feeling far from completion. The work of covering miles on foot was, of course, complete, but a much greater distance stood before me."



The story of Kayford Mountain, in Cassie's words

"We walked on, day after day, through some of the oldest mountains on this earth; we drank from the streams, slept on the ground, and even slid down the side of the mountain into the briars. When our feet swelled and we could no longer move, we soaked our feet in the cold streams. We carried on, past surviving churches, and towns long extinct from the arrival and departure of progress. When I traveled through the mountains and towns of Appalachia, I was amazed at how so much beauty could exist in what is often an overlooked part of America.

At the end of our walk, we met a man named Larry Gibson and stood with him on the remaining 50 acres of his ancestral land.



Larry's patch of land, once the lowest point in the surrounding mountain range, now stood high and alone. His land, surrounded by mountain top removal sites, was saved because he used the resource of his own body to stand his ground on top of Kayford Mountain. It is one of the few places you can go and see such beauty pressing up against and confronting the destruction caused by mountaintop removal. Larry's fight was not simply for the land; it was for the health and very lives of the people in his community. When I met Larry, he invited me into his home to sit at his kitchen table with him. The walls of his small cabin were covered with photographs and articles, a kind of map or marker for his over 30 year fight to save Kayford Mountain. At the end of our conversation, Larry pounded his fist against the kitchen table, shook the floorboards with his feet, and told me that I had to make this dance, and convey the voice of the Mountain. There are reasons to ask questions and make new work all around us, and the time with Larry was a reminder that commissions can come from anywhere, not just from presenters or institutions. Sometimes it takes turning towards our communities, towards what unsettles us, what makes us question, or what is a cause for celebration."

For more about Larry's legacy and other resources for how you can get involved, visit www.mountainkeeper.org.

The story of the music in *How To Lose a Mountain*

Singing and songwriting have become a big part of this project. On the trail, the dancers made up songs to pass the time during the long days of walking. Collaborator Zeke Leonard brought us his story about a 10-mile banjo, an instrument he made using materials he had found within a 10-mile radius of his home. And the folk songs of Appalachia were a source of inspiration for sound designer Stowe Nelson. In the stage work, you'll see a piano that came to us, via the White House (or so they say). Last spring, Cassie found a 150-year old piano at an estate sale in Takoma Park. It's rumored that this instrument, which was in severe disrepair and buried underneath piles of stuff in the basement, lived in the White House during Abraham Lincoln's administration. The unmaking of the piano in its traditional form allowed us the opportunity to reimagine its purpose through a series of instruments crafted from her wood, and so her voice lives on.

The songs you'll hear, like the one below, were written by the performers to reflect on the journey and the story of the mountain. These songs were built using "found object" lyrics in the way that the instruments were made using found materials. Phrases are borrowed from articles and accounts of coal miners, and the tune is built on the bones of other older tunes.

Kayford Mile

This land has never born
Granddaddy cleared it with his hands
Drought and blight
and hail all night
too much hard luck to take a stand

This is where my family's from
It's all we've ever known
No where else that we can go
Too much hard luck to stay home

refrain:
It ain't perfect but it's a job
It'll help me feed my kids
and keep them warm
Keep me near granddaddy's land
so tomorrow morning early
I'm headed back up to Kayford

There's a protest in the town
There's a protest by the gates
Sharp words in all the papers
How much hard luck can I take



It all started with a deck of cards.

Playing cards are a part of Cassie Meador's past and family history. A Georgia native, Cassie's great-grandfather was playing cards when he lost an entire mountain in a poker bet. In one moment, the family's claim to acres of timber and arable land, all gone. Or at least that's how Cassie's grandmother tells it. This was one story that inspired Cassie to examine the loss of land, and what we're willing to risk and at what cost.

When Cassie decided to walk to the mountains of West Virginia to trace some of the resources that power her home, she was as interested in talking to folks in the towns she passed through as she was in reaching her destination. But sometimes you need a little something to get the stories flowing. How about a casual game of cards? Dance Exchange worked with designer Jenny Greer to develop our own series of beautifully illustrated playing cards to engage communities on the trail (and far beyond). Our cards are designed so that you can play games with them, and they also feature pictures and questions designed to get you thinking, talking, and telling stories. You can use the questions to think about your own life and experiences, to interview someone else, or to start a group conversation.

See more photos from the walk, hear songs, watch videos, and share your stories at 500miles500stories.com.

