ASA 2015 Conference Proposal
The Book as Art in Appalachia
Panelists: Dr. Chris Dockery, Frank Brannon, Jeff Marley, Robert Gipe, Forrest Johnson

Abstract: (Full text, unabbreviated)

Four artists whose work spins on a common narrative axis of Appalachian themed word and image will be featured in this session. Three works were created using letterpress and hand bookbinding. The fourth work is a hand-illustrated novel.

Chris Dockery’s project “Farm School” tells the story of a generation, a region, and a unique educational moment in Appalachian history through a series of hand printed, hand bound, illustrated artists books. Capturing the lived experience of elders in the communities of Polk County, Tennessee and Cherokee County, North Carolina, the research expands our understanding of Appalachian education and social work before public education was introduced to the area. The project appropriately merged Dockery’s interdisciplinary work in visual arts, art education and Appalachian Studies and expanded the scholarship on rural education. Utilizing an arts based research methodology, the research introduces the Lynn Bachman Memorial School and Home to the growing body of literature related to Appalachian Settlement Schools. Three elders were interviewed, an archives of historical and artistic images of the Bachman school was generated, and a limited edition of artists’ books that utilize the heirloom craft of letterpress, photo transfer, and German book binding technique was created.

Frank Brannon and Jeff Marley’s work features remnants of an art installation, which remained in an outdoor setting for four months that have been reinterpreted as an artist book. The collaborative project between two Appalachian artists considers the understanding and value of place as it relates to two different cultures in western North Carolina. The first of three outdoor installations, entitled “Unega nole Gigage/White and Red,” was placed in a mountainous setting for four months between the towns of Sylva, North Carolina, and Cherokee, North Carolina. Using traditional book arts disciplines of hand papermaking and printing, the original installation was produced from hand processed okra stem paper and letterpress printed text. A global positioning system (GPS) was used to produce printed imagery, and two performances accompanied the project while it was subjected to the elements. The performances are an activation of the space as both book and sacred space. The space/location celebrates the land, while the book is a record of the events, albeit a temporal one. The remnants of the installation were then brought indoors to be reinterpreted and bound as an artist book. The collaborators on the project, one from each community, will describe in this session the impetus, evolution and result of the work.

Robert Gipe will discuss and read from Trampoline, his 2015 illustrated novel about a young girl growing up in the eastern Kentucky coalfields caught between a grandmother who is fighting stripmining and a mother sliding into addiction. Trampoline includes 200 drawings by Gipe are integrated into the text.
Forrest Johnson will present “An Elegy for Ira H./ Exit from Appalachia” a letterpress printed sculpture that is a collaboration between the poet and book artist, Frank Brannon, both of whom, although a generation apart, grew up along the eastern border of Tennessee and Kentucky. While recognizable as a “book,” this piece does not follow the normal conventions of book format. Rather, it could be interpreted that the form evolved from intimacy with the text, the subject of the text, and knowledge of each other as artists. The shape reflects both the poem’s invocation of water and also each artist’s departures from ideas about the Appalachian region, those held by people within and those held by people outside it. The poems, selected from an unpublished manuscript “Elegy for Ira H./Exit from Appalachia” explore ideas of regional memory, landscape, ancestry and problems of representation. The “pages” and binding are of handmade cotton rag paper using traditional hand papermaking techniques. Both artists set the metal printing type for the poems, printed the text, and bound the work, allowing for the rare opportunity, especially for a poet, to handle a project from first draft to final printed product. This talk will highlight corollaries between process and product, poem and book, personal experience and regional contexts. The broader objective is to question how the shape of this book parallels who we are as individuals (rather than stereotyped images).

Contact Information & Presenter Bios:

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Chris Dockery is a native of Western North Carolina and an Associate Professor at the University of North Georgia where she teaches bookarts, letterpress and coordinates the art education program. She is the Teaching Fellow for the Georgia Appalachian Studies Center at UNG where she works with students on the design and implementation of arts based research projects relevant to issues of Appalachia. Chris is also the proprietor of Hounddog Democratic Press in Clarkesville, Georgia.

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Frank Brannon, a native of Tennessee, currently lives near Dillsboro, North Carolina. He is a graduate of the M.F.A. in the Book Arts Program at the University of Alabama and is
proprietor of SpeakEasy Press. A member of the Southern Highland Craft Guild, Frank is a printmaking instructor with Southwestern Community College in western North Carolina and an adjunct book arts instructor with Western Carolina University.

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Jeff Marley received his BFA in Studio Art: Painting & Drawing from Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, NC in 2005 and his MFA in Visual Art from Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier, VT in 2013. He is the 2013 Sequoyah National Research Center Art Fellow and received the 2013 President's Service Award at Southwestern Community College. He is currently the Heritage Arts Department Chair at Southwestern Community College.

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Robert Gipe is the director of the Appalachian Program at Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College in Cumberland, Kentucky. He is one of the executive producers of the community performance project Higher Ground and the author of the novel Trampoline (Ohio University Press, 2015).

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Forrest Johnson is a fifth generation native of rural southeastern Kentucky. For college, he moved to Asheville, North Carolina, where he earned two degrees studying literature and also the outdoors. He continued his studies in New England earning his MA in English Language and Literature from Boston College in 2008. Currently, he paints and writes, and also teaches writing at a small private school near Asheville.