

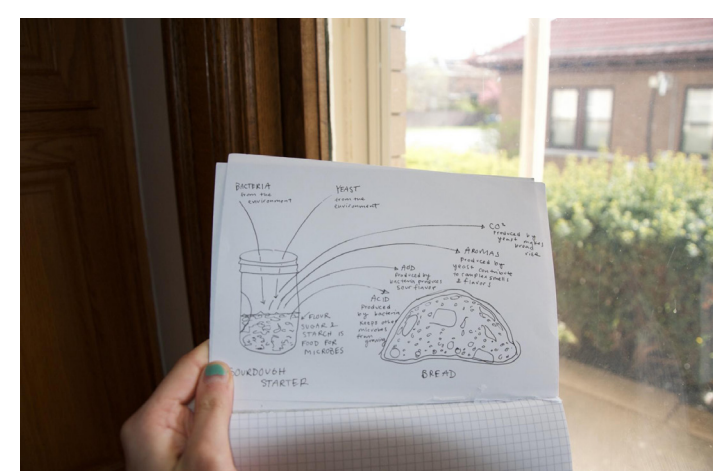
the bread between us by anna lublina

I, like many of you, slowed to a halt in March of 2020. Everything on my calendar suddenly wiped. I have to admit that I was relieved at first. This was the first instance in years that I was in possession of time—a rare and delightful commodity in my life! I had empty days that I could fill with TV shows, walks in the Greenwood cemetery, and... bread-baking. Yes, like many Americans, I too was summoned by the pandemic gods to join in baking sourdough bread!



Photo by Melissa Joy Livermore

This is not the first time sourdough has become popular in the US. According to Wikipedia, the revival began in 1970 upon the release of the Tassajara Bread Book. This book was written and compiled by “Kainei” Edward Espé Brown, an American Zen teacher at the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Bread practices and Zen practices: an odd pairing but one that makes sense. Baking bread has long been connected to time, breath, space, patience, and care — practices key in Zen Buddhism. Bread does not adapt to us. Instead, we must learn to wait for it to rise on its own time.



Drawing of sourdough science

Rock and water
Wind and tree
Bread dough rising
Vastly all
Are patient with me. [2]

I asked my dear friend Julian for some of his sourdough starter, and he walked his dog, Bill, over to my house to drop off a small tupperware of it. I wasn't simply interested in baking because I had the time—I was also stressed, and I needed an outlet. Like many of you, anxiety had begun to consume my life as sirens wailed through Brooklyn, and I wanted to feel like there was something I could control. As Ashley (food conservation specialist and Muncie resident) [3] said to me so articulately: “When uncertainty in the world spikes, so does food preservation and bread baking.” We were all hungry for stability. I looked for this in the sources of my food: in the land, air, water, and even in my own body.

Kneading the dough was harder than I expected. Tending to the sourdough was even harder. How was I supposed to remember to feed it everyday? It felt like a real partnership. I had to tend to its needs alongside my own. Our skin touched everyday; we fed each other; we became a part of each other. You may think I'm being poetic, but I'm not. Microbes from my body were a part of the ferment (sourdough),



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changing the microbial ecosystem. Sourdough is alive. It is a microbial culture of living and dying beings.

Long soft enzymes take hold
Find a home
Flour and water, warm, sweet
Saccharomyces cerevisiae
It's slow how it goes
Wild yeast finds us

In this home
Lactic acid bacteria
Rod shaped
In this home
A hand, a spoon, an interface
A drama ensues
A drama of digestion, decay, gas
A fungus kingdom
A leavening power

Sourdough is an ecology of creatures that includes me and you. Studies [4] show that an identical starter will change after being used just a few

times by a different person or in a different place. Kirk [5] pointed this out to me when I first begged to visit his flower farm outside of Muncie and take a bit of his 15 year old starter. Even though his sourdough is no longer his and has quite literally become mine, I was happy to take a little souvenir of his bread wisdom.[6]

This change in the sourdough's microbial ecosystem happens because the air is different, the flour is different, the surface is different, and the hands are different. In Korean, there is a phrase used to describe this, “son mat,” which literally means “hand taste.” Studies also show that the microbial cultures in the bread match the cultures on the bakers' bodies—which means that the sourdough becomes a part of our microbe too.

Emily [7] told me that when she exchanged cake [8] and bread with her neighbors this year, it was a way of exchanging touch. She's technically right. Her body was a part of that bread's microbiome and when her friend ate it, their microflora were united, mixed, a yeasty, bacterial hug.



Kirk Robey at his home outside Muncie



Photo by Melissa Joy Livermore

So what kind of a relationship are we developing in relation to bread? Scott Shershaw calls it the “love of an alien.” [9] Bread, dough, sourdough, and the microbial ecosystems of bacteria and yeast cultures are a world of decay and decomposition, an “Other” that we cultivate and that cultivates us. At the same time, bread might be considered what Donna Haraway calls a “companion species.” [10] She uses this term to mostly talk about dogs but if we dissect the root of the word “companion,” we will find that it derives from the Latin cum panis, meaning “with” (cum) “bread” (panis). Bread is at the heart of “with-ness.”

Breaking bread. Sharing the body of Christ. Bread brings people together, but, importantly, it also needs people to care for it. Landscapes need this too. A few weeks ago, I went to Minnetrista to meet with James, the horticulture specialist there. [11] I asked him a lot about heritage ecosystems (that is, ecosystems of native plants) in Indiana. He responded that for him “heritage” is about a sense of place — it's about things that invoke a feeling of comfort and home, not necessarily what plants are native to Indiana. In his landscape design and community projects, he focuses on the plants that one might call “companion species” — tomatoes, tulips, basil — the plants we nurture and, in turn, nurture us. This approach helps cultivate a love between people and plants. I asked him what the ecological future of Muncie looks like, and he responded that what



Photo by Melissa Joy Livermore

Muncie's ecology needs most is people. Just like my newly beloved bread ecosystem, all our ecosystems need people to care for them.

In Muncie, this is a sentiment I have heard over and over again. Muncie's ecosystem needs more people. Funnily, we normally we think of people as the reason our ecosystems are dying: monoculture is destroying soil, [12] pollution from industry is destroying our air, development is overtaking our natural areas and displacing (ultimately killing) the other species we share this world with. That is all true. But now, in 2021, we are learning how to live in a dying world. [13] And we need people to imagine that new kind of living.

Even though I came here to study the baking culture, the first thing I did in Muncie was find the famous wetlands. Now I visit the John Caddock Wetland Nature Reserve and Red-tail Nature Preserve every few days. They are my favorite places here, second only to the White River. [14] Everytime I leave the Plyspace building for a walk, I find myself at the river. I am drawn to the beauty and vibrant sociality [15] of the river—even as I feel the painful ways it divides this city up across socio-economic lines.

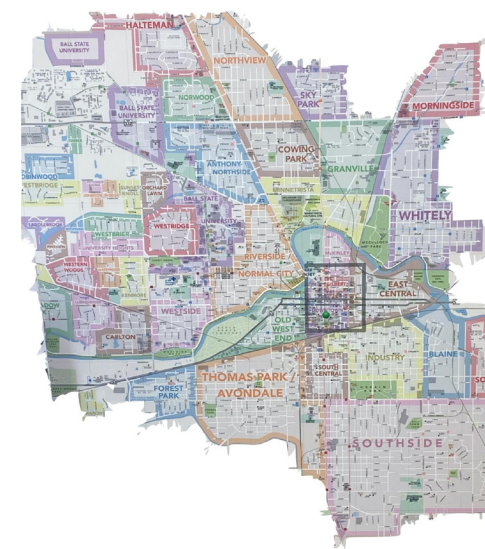
Since arriving in Muncie, I've become obsessed with the idea of borders between ecosystems: the river bank, where the forest and the ocean meet, between the tall grasses and wet soil beneath the Ash trees; [16] where the dough and my skin touch; the place in time where I can't remember the word in English so I say it in Russian; the railroad that separates one neighborhood from another. The spaces between ecologies are not gaps—they are a space of mingling. Borders are the healthiest ecosystems in the world because they are the most diverse. This reality doesn't quite square with the image of walls I see when I think of a border. Maybe the better image is a bridge. Border ecologies are bridges from one culture to another.

After the Berlin wall fell in 1990, there was a long green strip of land left. [17] After years as a space between walls, it was left uncared for but also free from the ills of monoculture agriculture. It had become a refuge for deer and thousands of other plants and animal species. Today, it remains an ecological treasure, a border that does not divide but instead houses diversity.

For me, bread is a border ecology and a bridge. In my time here in Muncie, I tried to find bridges in the community through bread. It is something that is (usually) politically neutral (even though, of course, we know that neutrality doesn't exist). Still, bread felt like an area where we could practice “with-ness” in a place that holds many divides. I collected recipes, stories, and sourdough starter from community members all over the city. I tried many of their recipes and distributed them to various friends and acquaintances made over my time here. I tried to create a baking exchange with folks from North Muncie, South Muncie, Whitely, Ball State.

Unfortunately, the bread exchange never came to fruition. I discovered that connecting people across borders is difficult. In natural ecosystems or in sourdough cultures, coexistence, mutualism, and diversity feel so easy. Why is it so hard for humans? Even when diversity has been proven to be so healthy?

A lot of people here are trying to make bridges towards a healthier, vibrant, and more diverse future. I recently spoke with creative designer and entrepreneur, Jaelin. He has big dreams for his



Map from Muncie Map Co.

sustainable streetwear brand, No Rivals, [18] and for the underground hip hop community in Muncie. As a part of the brand, Jaelin organizes community events and represents various artists and musicians on the No Rivals label. He is creating a platform for people of all kinds to self-express while providing an example of the kinds of innovation possible here in Muncie. I was so excited to imagine parents and grandparents, conservatives, religious people, students, etc., all together, dancing and imagining at his events. He is not the only one. Jacqueline at the Ross Center is cultivating programming that is so rich—

and culturally diverse—that it draws students from all over the city to the Southside of Muncie. Minnetrista delivers free plants and gardening tools across the city, connecting folks through gardening stories. Moth hosts the Muncie Maker's Market, where food and art vendors from all over the city bring in customers from equally diverse corners. Yvonne from the Human Rights Commission organizes community policing workshops for the entire community so that citizens and police can get to know each other and lessen the potential for dehumanization. She has been working tirelessly for 14 years making Muncie a more loving place for queer people and people of color.



Photo by Melissa Joy Livermore

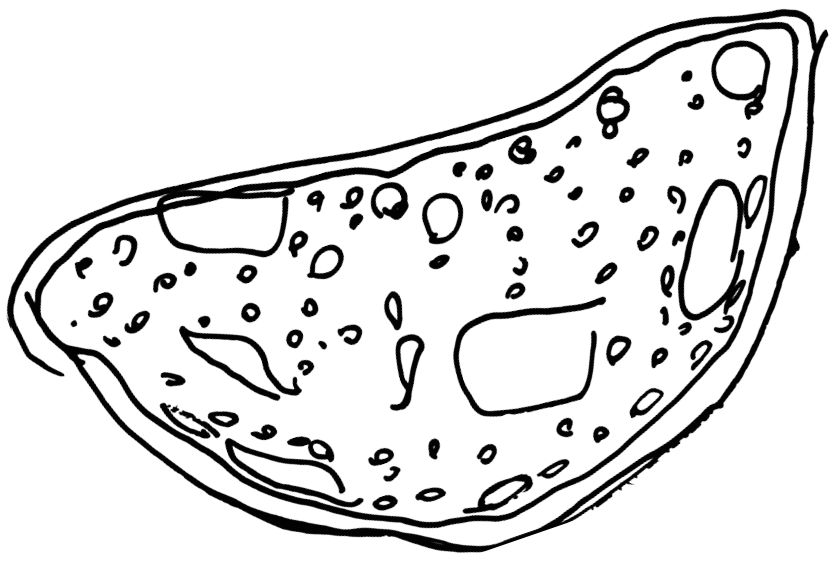
Not only do we need bridges between neighborhoods and different ecosystems, we need bridges across time. I have spoken with so many people imagining new and diverse futures for Muncie. It has almost been overwhelming to hear all the visions for this place: a bookstore with a performance space for readings [19], a queer bakery [20], traveling truck bed gardens [21], a warehouse supporting a collection of local artisan businesses [22], music venues, a strong political left, reparations for the Black community [23], an expanded and diversified arts scene, the de-normalization of conversion therapy and other harmful practices, and more. These are all bridges towards the future.

Although I have only been a part of the Muncie ecology for a short time, I have seen the way my differences—like bacteria— were difficult, embraced, and ultimately integrated into the ecosystem. We

are moving out of this pandemic into a world that is even more uncertain than it was before. Let us mingle within borders; let us find bridges; to that which has helped us for all of eternity: the plants, the water, the hands, the bread, the friends, and the neighbors. I can't wait to see how the cultures of Muncie continue to mingle, creating stronger ferments and rising, warm and teeming with life, into the future.

NOTES

- [1] Brown, Edward Espe. The Tassajara Bread Book. Chief Priest, Zen Center, 1970.
- [2] The Tassajara book begins with this poem by “Kainei” Edward Espé Brown.
- [3] Ashley works as a food conservation specialist at Minnetrista. Find out more here: <https://www.minnetrista.net/blog/blog/2013/03/07/food-preservation/ashley-introduces-herself-and-the-food-preservation-blog>.
- [4] Learn more about the research from Dunn Lab: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/11/12/665655220/sourdough-hands-how-bakers-and-bread-are-a-microbial-match>.
- [5] Kirk Robey is the Bread Science Instructor at Ivy Tech.
- [6] Seriously, I have never met someone with so much bread knowledge.
- [7] Emily Johnson is a History Professor at BSU.
- [8] Emily has taken on the challenge of making every cake in the “American Cake: From Colonial Gingerbread to Classic Layer, the Stories and Recipes Behind More Than 125 of Our Best-Loved Cakes,” in chronological order. She has made over 29 cakes to date.
- [9] “Bread Book” by Scott Shershaw, pages 3-16.
- [10] Read more in “The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness” by Donna Haraway.
- [11] Read more about James's work here: <https://www.minnetrista.net/blog/blog/2018/11/14/other-happenings/meet-our-horticulture-team>.
- [12] Indiana is suffering greatly because of Corn monoculture. Read more here: <https://www.harvestpublicmedia.org/post/can-midwest-farmers-fight-monoculture-and-grow-new-crops>.
- [13] Read more in Anna Tsing's “Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene” and The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.
- [14] I also love that Ben picks up trash every time he walks along the river—a DIY volunteer role.
- [15] This is where I meet the most people in Muncie! The most lit club in town.
- [16] Ash trees are dying everywhere in Indiana because of the invasive Emerald Ash Borer, learn more here: <http://indianaparksalliance.org/save-our-ash-trees/>.
- [17] Learn more about the “greenbelt” here: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/iron-curtain-green-belt-park> *Thank you to Devan Ward for directing me to this natural phenomenon.
- [18] Learn more about Jaelin's work here: <https://www.norivals.shop/about/>.
- [19] Ben Bascom's vision, English Professor at BSU.
- [20] Morgan Roddy's vision (The Queer Chocolatier).
- [21] James Edwards' vision.
- [22] The folks at the Common Market's vision.
- [23] Muncie Human Rights Commission's vision.



MY SCULPTURE
IS OVER MY
FLOWING
DOUGH

