

Remaining Between

Rebuilding higher education on ruined terrain

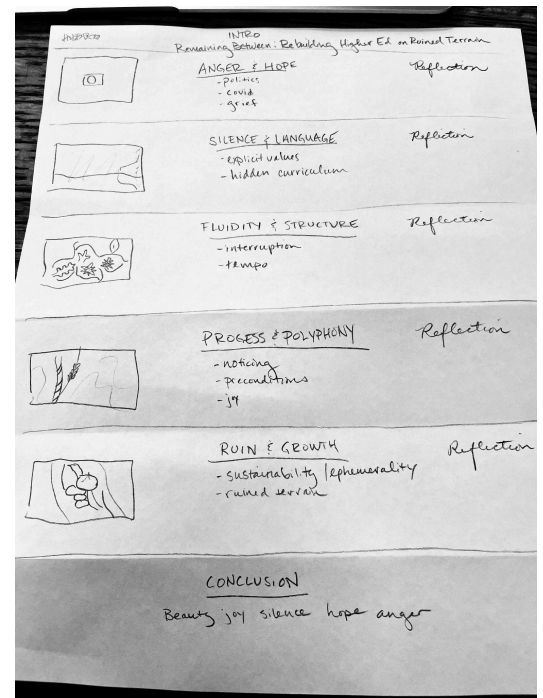
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Outline

1. Introduction: Mycelial Turnings
2. Between Silence and Expression
3. Between Anger and Hope
4. Between Ruin and Growth
5. Between Fluidity and Structure
6. Between Progress and Polyphony
7. Conclusion: Imagining Otherwise

The structural plan is for each chapter to start with a photograph—something I have taken, mainly nature photography, that illustrates the key tension in the chapter. The body of the chapter will follow. Each chapter will end with an interlude—a handwritten segment from process notes/freewriting I've been keeping along the way.

How I envision this looking (chapter order is still in flux):



Introduction: Mycelial Turnings



A wide variety of fungi species colonize a decaying log. We only see the fruiting bodies, but long before they appear, the mycelium spreads a hidden network within the wood. These fungi are saprophytes, consuming dead material and returning it to soil. Others work along with plant species, sharing nutrients and sustenance across species to support mutual thriving. And others are parasites that kill the host.

This is a book about higher education. It is a book about the nuts-and-bolts of administration and structures and processes. It is a book about imagination, joy, beauty. It is a book about grief, inequity, trauma, and silence. This book is about **the unspoken layers of higher education, and the possibilities that emerge from rupturing the silent norms of tacit values**. It is about what higher education claims to be, what it is, and what it could be. It is a book about anger and hope, and the ways in which they are deeply interwoven. If it feels surprising, intriguing to bring these things together, then this book is for you.

It started as a book about silence. However, the longer I sat with it, the more it became a book about *tensions*. Silence is interesting because it is in tension with language; because it can be used to signify something, or it can hold space as an absence of signifiers. Each time I sat with this thought, new ideas bubbled up, until I found myself not with a single topic, but with something I came to think of as a mycorrhizal network. In a forest, the mycorrhizal network is

the underground interconnected web of mycelia, roots, and soil—nearly invisible bits of growth and connection, piping nutrients through their nodes and branches and accepting nourishment in return, to foster a complex and interdependent ecosystem. I see this image as a metaphor for the interconnections that are necessary to sustain human ecosystems as well—whether that ecosystem is in higher education or elsewhere.

I realized that the tension between silence and language was one component of this network, but far from the whole thing. Instead, what came into focus as the foreground was the network itself. One of the important factors of a mycorrhizal network is interspecies connection, a kind of embodied ‘oddkin’ relationship[1] that enables fungus to transport minerals to plants and receive from them the sugars of photosynthesis. These nutrients are not exchanged in a one-to-one relationship, but rather **transported throughout the web according to greatest need**. Looking again to a space of higher education, what are the multiple spaces of interaction and exchange that enable flourishing? Not only scholarly exchange among faculty members, or between faculty and students, but in a much wider and deeper set of relationships that moves fluidly in, around, and through the inner workings of universities. Who are our oddkin? How are seemingly incommensurate values or attributes of higher education locked in relationship with one another? Why are these tensions often so hard to see? And what might become possible if we examine these underground happenings, and create conditions where growth can thrive?

I choose to hope that those of us interested in making higher ed a better place, a place imbued with curiosity and care, can collectively move in that direction. The university I care about—the university that is truly worth fighting for—welcomes and celebrates advancements in knowledge by all thinkers, those familiar with the academy and those who are not. This book is an exploration into what that might look like. Much of what results hinges on care—and I am not sure whether the structures of care I imagine can be institutionalized. Maybe they can’t; maybe these kinds of spaces will always exist on the margins, in the cracks, at the intersections.[2] But at the very least, I believe we can create the conditions that make it more likely that the community will thrive.

In *Staying With the Trouble*, Donna Haraway writes of paradox and tension: “Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.”[3] This tension between stirring things up and calming them down resonates. I am writing this in the context of massive and ongoing social upheaval. At the moment I sit down to draft this, the COVID-19 pandemic continues unabated, with an nth wave sweeping Europe and the United States. A crisis of leadership at every level has made this so much worse than it needed to be. The health crisis compounds with disparities in every domain: economic, educational, housing, and access to health care. Most of these inequities break along lines of race and ethnicity, with Black and Latinx [Latine?] communities suffering far more severe outcomes than other groups within the US. We are on the cusp of the next presidential election. Black Lives Matter protests have been renewed with fervor, and quelled with police violence. I hope that by the time this project sees fruition the situation is different, and better. [This is already dated; revise]

I am very, very angry. And yet, in the midst of this chaos, I see glimpses of hope.[4] I see examples of the ways a system can break, make seams visible—and therefore changeable. The COVID pandemic has thrown educational structures into disarray, with seemingly immutable policies and procedures shifting overnight in response to urgent public health concerns. These rapid changes have prompted crucial conversations not only about how graduate education is structured, but also about its value and purpose at a moment of significant upheaval. Matters of equity are tantamount to these discussions, as the scholarly community collectively grapples with questions of what we do, how, why, and for whom. Like health and policing, the higher education system is built in a way that maintains the status quo and reinforces inequality. This is especially apparent in labor structures: for example, underpaid adjuncts are far more likely to be women from minoritized communities, while tenured professors are more likely to be white men—even at an institution as diverse as CUNY, where I worked for seven years as an administrator, faculty member, and program director, and where this racialized and gendered hierarchy was palpable despite the institution's deep commitment to equity and higher education as a public good.

In the pages that follow I examine problematic elements of the status quo—such as prestige, power, and precarity—in hopes of revealing them as constructed elements of the system that can be imagined differently. But in order to be sustainable, a new approach to higher education must do more than simply take the inverse position in a dialectic. Instead, I will propose a new lens on the university that lives in the tensions, the spaces between, the liminal areas connecting values that on their own are neither good nor bad. Because form and function go hand in hand, I will also use the pages of this book to explore a different mode of scholarly engagement, one that makes room for silence, play, beauty, grief, polyphony. Silence intervenes, weaves through, punctuates—sometimes as an intrusion, sometimes as a pause. These interludes will touch on grief, trauma, beauty, rupture, interruption, fragmentation—but also joy, nuance, porosity, possibility.

I draw on the work of Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Clelia Rodríguez, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and other thinkers and writers who press on that silence as a bruise, finding its contours, shining light on the things that too many others cannot or will not see. So: How do we explore these silences to make them visible? **How many** acts of transgression does it take to change a norm? **How many** whisper networks, candid moments of advice, crowdsourced documents showing the things that aren't spoken aloud? Do these acts of transgression reinforce the norm of silence, or are they chipping away at it?

The book's structure hinges on tensions. Chapter by chapter, I will consider the relationships between seemingly divergent things: anger and hope; silence and expression; cohesion and interruption; progress and polyphony; sustainability and ephemerality; and ruin and growth. The book considers the higher ed landscape as it is now, both what we see and what we don't, while also offering a **speculative consideration of what higher education might look like if we adopted different value structures, different ways of making meaning**. The underlying focal point is one of joy, abundance, and sustenance. What might it mean to see hope not as wishful thinking, but as a discipline? My own hope is that even within a broken system, there may be

spaces of possibility for these imagined futures to emerge. And that in fact, it is the fractures in the system that make those alternate spaces possible.

I see this as an exercise in making space, in finding ways to ride in discomfort and liminality, to resist the resolution of drifting to one pole or the other. Just as musical dissonance can be physically uncomfortable, staying in this in-between place can be unsettling. But 'unsettling' is precisely a goal—what might come to the fore when we are unsettled, when we cannot find an easy place of rest and resolution? My hope is that this uncomfortable space is also a productive one; the kind of friction that makes movement possible [CITE AHMED AND/OR TSING on friction here].

Notes

[1] See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

[2] I am deeply inspired by the work of Natalie Loveless and Carrie Smith, "Attunement in the Cracks: Feminist Collaboration and the University as Broken Machine," *Feminist Formations* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2022).

[3] *Staying with the Trouble*, p.1.

[4] I am grateful to Rebecca Traister for articulating and helping me to make sense of this paradox, both in her book and through a panel we were both a part of in 2022. See Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018). This realization helped bring the underlying structure of the book into focus, as I discuss in chapter one.

Interlude

A mycelial network connecting these writers and ideas and thoughts. When I look at the list of writers informing this, I feel inspired, with a deep buzz in my brain. I know something is there. Jabès Blanchot Rodríguez Tsing Sharpe Haraway McKittrick Savoy. Joy beauty pain silence connection invisibility polyphony noticing imagining cultivating. How do these strands come together, what form are they looking for? What point am I trying to make?

What if I write one central essay with the core of my argument, direct and to the point. Either make that the middle, literally the core, or have it broken apart, like spores or seeds dispersing in order to grow. And then the pieces around it give different views on the same, like a prism, or offer nourishment to the argument.

So much time away from this project, so much has happened since the last time I wrote. What does my new professional role mean for how I approach this project? Thinking about a recent session with Liz in which we talked about the Caroline Shaw/Andrew Yee performance. The

significance of HOLDING TENSION — staying just in between the spaces of weirdness and beauty. What would it look like for my writing to hold that tension, too? I think that's part of what I'm trying to find—the right way to build something that makes intellectual sense, while at the same time keeping readers just a bit off-balance.

Proposed Photos

Chapter 1 (Between Silence and Expression): A foggy lake.



What is present but hidden? How is that kind of presence different from absence?

Chapter 2 (Between Anger and Hope): Ghost pipes.



Ghost pipes are an astonishing plant. Pure white, they have no chloroplasts and cannot photosynthesize. Instead, they rely entirely on the mycorrhizal network that connects fungi and other plant species for their nutrients. Plants that produce their own sugars provide these sugars to fungi in exchange for nutrients from the soil. The mycelia that connect fungi and sugar-producing plants are also connected to the roots of ghost pipes, and provide them with sugars as well. Ghost pipes essentially poach their nutrients from other organisms, but they do so passively, through the work and structures of fungi. They are dependent on a complete, robust ecosystem in order to survive; you could never plant a seed on its own and expect it to grow. They are implausible, fragile, beautiful; they make something out of nothing.

Chapter 3 (Between Ruin and Growth): Orange mushrooms and seed pod.



Bright orange mushroom caps explode brilliantly from a dead and decaying log. A seed pod rests on the log as well. What new life is waiting within and alongside the decay?

Chapter 4 (Between Fluidity and Structure): Ice and seed pods.



The ice won't last past the afternoon. The rhythm of seed pods and leaves falling, freezing, growing—that will repeat again and again and again. What can we see in the transitory? In the repetition?

Chapter 5 (Between Progress and Polyphony): Twining vine.



The delicate shoot and the sturdier vine grow on different time scales. And yet, from season after season of growth and death and regeneration, they have come to form one another's shapes.

Notes from discussion

- Needs greater specificity around broader ideas, more concreteness
 - Embodied, physical sensations - what can you see, feel, taste in care/flourishing
 - Evidence/research/stories is another route
 - Intersperse stories and examples of people who have ruptured the fabric, or of projects that failed, people who left - vignettes
- Structural questions
 - Keep the disfluency, keep the strangeness
 - Might not be able to maintain both fluency and strangeness, but maybe I don't need to decide now
- Focal points (Sujung's reflections)
 - Critical public intellectual
 - Mirror higher ed back to itself
 - Focus on people and lived experiences
- Hermit crab essay

- A nonfiction essay that takes the shape of something else (eg a personal narrative in the structure of a medical brochure)
- Wherever it deviates, wherever there's dissonance, that's where things are interesting
- Imagine a form it could possibly take -
 - a field guide to mushrooms
 - a map (pretending to take readers where these photos are taken) - to highlight where maps are NOT useful
 - A photo album
 - A handwritten journal
- Go weird!
- <https://themillions.com/2018/06/essays-strange-forms.html>
- <https://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/the-shared-space/>
- Where does tension come to life?
 - Stories, embodiment
 - fluid/disjointed does not necessarily map onto concrete/abstract - something can be disjointed but still concrete
 - Visible - to whom and why
- Would you read this?
 - Would want to know other cool things that others are doing
 - Feels like I'm writing to people who want to change the university
 - How to let people see and feel that they ALSO have that power -- it's not just others
 - Call to action for different actors at different levels
 - From Letitia:
<https://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/ask-dr-editor/break-bad-rule-s-how-to-change-language-norms-in-your-academic-field-individually-and-systemically/>
 - Cross-fertilizing
 - Everyone has their role but also institutional factors can be like climate change"

Other links/references

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The FORMS book is Caroline Levine: "Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network" (2015)