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Environmental Citizenship and Leadership (ENVS 479)

08 April 2020

Let the Campus Rot: Decomposition in the Time of COVID-19

The tree fell on February 23rd, 2020. In retrospect, it seemed like a simpler time: before hand sanitizer dispensers, cancelled spring break plans, closed campuses, fearful emails, stay-home orders, online classes, shuttered businesses, social distancing, and face masks in grocery stores; before U.S. hospitals hit capacities and people began to die close to home; before most of us realized that the COVID-19 pandemic would change our lives. But on February 23rd, a disruption of a different sort shook Whitman College's campus. High winds, wet soils, and damaged roots caused a 60-year-old Engelmann spruce to unexpectedly fall between Penrose Library and Ankeny Field. You could perhaps call it an omen, foreshadowing that everything we believe to be certain is always susceptible to change. The tree was there one day and whisked away by chainsaws and hands the next, leaving behind a scar of bare soil where it once towered. There are many clear, practical reasons why Whitman removed the fallen tree. I ask of us here not pragmatism but imagination: what if this tremendous organism had been allowed to persist – and ultimately, decompose – where it fell?

I propose that we let the campus rot, and I do so without any pejorative intent. In many ways, we are socialized to link rotting to death, exclusion, waste, disease, and – maybe most damningly amidst the dictates of production – passivity. Contrary to these conditionings, decomposition offers life, community, opportunity, health, and an active course to pursue. The paradoxical, revitalizing properties of compost are nothing new to those bearing the name of

Whitman, as Walt once wrote: “Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.”¹ In the wake of February 23rd, I realized that Whitman’s campus lacks visible evidence of decomposition, the constant turning of life into death into life into death, matter into matter. I offer the imaginary of the left-to-rot Engelmann spruce, representing decomposition of Whitman’s physical landscape, as an entry point to consider what it means to adopt a decompositional mindset for the self. A log in my backyard, Donna Haraway, Revel Rapp, and Leah Penniman are my guides in this exploration of multispecies flourishing, political landscapes, and collective healing of people and the land. We embark on a collaborative, imaginative effort to unearth what decomposition can teach us all about living and dying in the time of COVID-19.

Quarantined in Walla Walla and still clad in my pajamas, I sink into a plastic lawn chair and ponder a chunk of wood that juts out through overgrown weeds and unmowed grass. When the spruce fell on February 23rd, it took mere hours for 60 feet of trunk to be chopped into bite-sized pieces and carried away by scavengers like myself, hungry ants at the family picnic. That is how this log and I came to cohabitate. An imperfect cylinder nine inches in diameter and just over a foot tall, the log oozes not-yet-dry sap from chainsaw scars, growing sticky again in the cloud-covered sun. I dare not touch it for fear that the sap will render my hands unwashable. Even barred by such anxieties from the full tactile experience, I can see its former splendor in the lichen-studded palette that blends between bark and core. Its colors recreate a vision of what it was and what it could have been; curved wood cracks like wrinkles of a smile as my companion whispers its tale in my ear.

¹ Walt Whitman, “This Compost,” in *Leaves of Grass* (Self-published, 1855).

We imagine together: 60 years and 60 feet of roots, wood, bark, and leaves stretching east-west across sidewalk and lawn, parallel to the ground it once inhabited perpendicularly. The spruce returned home and restored whole; or, in this imaginary, never left and never severed. Nestled in its new earthly orientation, the tree rots. The elements, earthworms, fungi, students, bacteria, and more work their magic. In days and months and years, spruce churns into soil. A flow of inevitable corpses and excreted byproducts feed nutrients into the accumulating humus. Simultaneously, novel niches erupt with life of all forms: beetles and spiders squat in hovels hammered by Northern Flickers; sophomores study on moss pillows and dance with ornate epiphytes that dot the upper branches; gilled cones and umbrellas betray in bright advertisement the miles of hyphal highways and backroads that crisscross below. At this confluence of fresh death and crisp life, the tree is revealed as a site of “multispecies flourishing.”²

Donna Haraway prescribes such collective fermentation as a means of “staying with the trouble,” a recuperative process that “requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles.”³ Her metaphor is made literal in the decompositional writhing, thriving, and reviving of the spruce. Within this community of interdependent “companion species,” birds and beetles and fungi and first-years are “relentlessly becoming-with.”⁴ They render each other capable in ways impossible when apart. Forming these “lines of inventive connection,” according to Haraway, is a “practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present.”⁵ To stay with the trouble, to make oddkin and companion species, and to innovate connectivity means to exist within and

² Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

stumble through the pleasures and discontents of the palpable, dynamic now. Removal of the spruce symbolizes attempts to clear away present realities to preserve some imaginary of what the present should be. This action seeks to withdraw from or obscure the troubles we face. My counter-imaginary of the rotting tree as a site of multispecies flourishing recovers the vibrant life and active community that could be cultivated through acceptance of decomposition, not as a nuisance but as an integral part of Whitman's landscape.

However, Haraway makes clear that staying with the trouble in the present does not mean ignoring the entanglings of the past; rather, "multispecies storytelling is about recuperation in complex histories that are as full of dying as living, as full of endings, even genocides, as beginnings."⁶ Beyond affirming ecological cycles of interdependence, the fluidity of matter evoked by the imaginary of the decomposing spruce also serves a deeply political purpose in its rejection of the ongoing projects of settler colonialism that are enacted through Whitman's physical landscape. The land that Whitman sits on today was settled through historic and ongoing acts of physical and cultural violence against indigenous people of the region. This violence is reproduced by the landscaping of the college, which involves "concealing and rebranding the history... to immerse students in a space where they can relax, study and most importantly, not be 'bothered' by the outside."⁷ I quote not from an institutional mission statement, but from the observations of alumna Revel Rapp, whose 2018 thesis scrutinizes the politics of Whitman's landscape in articulation with settler colonialism. The maintenance of Whitman's campus – with all its planting, pruning, and uprooting of undesirables – seeks to disembed the college from social, political, economic, and ecological contexts, thereby falsely

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ Revel [Kyla] Rapp, "Naturalizing Whiteness: The Politics of Landscape at Whitman College," (Undergraduate thesis, Whitman College, 2018), 10.

naturalizing it's claim to the land as permanent. Trees are a perfect example. Synthesizing quotes from former-Landscaping Supervisor Bob Biles and the scholarship of botanical decolonization, Rapp asserts that the "long lifespans" of trees "afford a sense of permanence and belonging reminiscent of colonists who planted trees to naturalize the existence of whites in the new world."^{8,9} Thus, when the fallen spruce was planted in the 1960s it became an unwitting accomplice in maintaining Whitman's illusions of permanence and detachment. Likewise, its unceremonious removal rapidly erased evidence that the campus is, in reality, transitory in nature and entangled in larger processes. The imaginary of the tree actively rotting in the middle of the otherwise stagnant campus opposes such erasure, tangibly confronting individuals and institutions to reckon with realities of space and power at Whitman. In this, decomposition becomes a political act.

The decolonizing potential of decomposition is twofold: it can challenge socio-political narratives (as described above), and it can contribute to repair of the land itself. The dual processes are naturally linked through theories of environmental justice that posit health of people and health of environment as co-constituted. Leah Penniman teaches about the importance of decomposition in cultivating anti-colonial soil: "We explained that the restoration of organic matter to soil was part of healing from colonialism."¹⁰ She traces how the displacement and exploitation of indigenous people and people of color is linked to land-use practices that deplete the soil of essential matter and nutrients; the extraction of profit from land comes at the expense of humans and nonhumans alike.¹¹ To heal from such generational trauma

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Tomaž Mastnak, Julia Elyachar, and Tom Boellstorff, "Botanical decolonization: Rethinking native plants," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, volume 32 (2014): 363-380.

¹⁰ Leah Penniman, *Farming While Black* (Hartford: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018), 87.

¹¹ Ibid., 87-88.

takes time. “Restoring organic matter is a slow process,” Penniman writes, “taking at least a decade to heal and only a year or two to undo.”¹² Although Whitman’s campus appears green and lush, characteristics perceived as proxies of health, the soils of Ankeny Field may well lack the robustness and fertility yielded by the generational mixing of the living and the dead. As the rotting spruce gifts its essential atoms, molecules, and organs back to the soil, the ground will swell, sustaining those who will continue to walk this earth long into the future.

Absorbed in our imaginary, I stand with the fallen tree. Per social distancing guidelines, I am the only human being within six feet. I am the only human being on the entirety of campus, as far as I can tell. But the tangy scent of pine, the ritual drumbeat of termites marching below, and the ephemeral swishes of bat wings in the dusk sky do not shy away from me. They mumber: I am here. Less than two months have passed since the tree fell, but in my imagination I can fast-forward and rewind, watching woody tissues melt away and regrow, species come and go with the passing of the seasons. I know that I am one of those species. Decades, then centuries fly by and soil accumulates around my ankles. The bricks of Memorial crumble, tennis court fences rust, and the library windows I studied by for hundreds of hours dissipate back into sand. I glimpse blips in the human existence: pandemics, droughts, wars, fires, genocides, and – often – love. The spruce persists, beyond form and function, endlessly becoming anew. The soil is rising, an unstoppable tide. I feel the detritivores welcome me into their earthen home.

I open my eyes and the imagination falters. Before me sits a log, unimpressive in stature and ambition. It is not all that I dreamed it could be. It is not a fallen titan turned fantasyland of decay, flourishing, and anticolonial healing on Whitman’s campus. But it is here with me now. I reach out my hand to touch its bark, permitting sap to coat my fingers. It will not wash off easily.

¹² Ibid., 88.

Many things do not. With sticky fingers and a global pandemic on my hands, I ponder the story that the log has shared with me.

We are destined to decompose. In fact, the log and are doing it right now. But decomposition is more than an endpoint. It is an ongoing, physical process and an intentional, improvable mindset. It is not akin to giving up or sitting still on your couch until you begin to fester; such actions and mindsets suggest withdrawal from the whole and resignation to a bleak future. To decompose is to accept one's self as inherently interconnected with multiple scales of time, space, and being. The individual must become with the whole. Multispecies communities and collective actions are essential in this moment. Thus, decomposition requires humility. Or rather, humusility. We are but clay made human destined to be soil once more. I invoke the higher power of compost: not a rational, anthropogenic god but the pantheon of companion species with whom we are ceaselessly squirming. As Haraway puts it, "I am a compostist, not a posthumanist."¹³ We must reimagine ourselves as more than individuals and more than humans in the face of a virus that unmistakably threatens both.

Decomposition gives perspective. As a friend reminded me recently: "it may be useful to distinguish between inconvenience and suffering. Know that the displacement you've experienced is temporary, while the hardships and sufferings of others is a permanent state of daily existence."¹⁴ Personally, COVID-19 has deprived me of in-person classes and a ceremony where I walk across a stage and people cheer for me. These trivialities are nothing compared to the centuries of colonial and racial trauma that Rapp and Penniman speak of revealing and repairing. In decomposition, I am reminded that all do not weather the storms of the world in the same way. Crisis does not create inequity from nothing but amplifies preexisting injustice to the

¹³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 97.

¹⁴ Keith Raether, email message to author, March 20, 2020.

extreme. Though fear and uncertainty may be consuming much of our attention and energy in this moment, it is more crucial than ever to recognize and act against the legacies of colonialism, racism, and xenophobia, those plagues of distinctly human origin. In turbulent soils tainted with violence and hate, we must focus our collective energies of healing and recovery on those who are truly suffering.

Ultimately, decomposition is a reminder that change is inevitable. Even when a global crisis, a physical structure, or a system of thought seems so dominant and enduring that we struggle to envision a future without it, nothing escapes entropy. The requisite scales of time may be daunting or comforting, depending on your perspective, but rest assured we need not imagine change merely beyond our lifespans. Decomposition can necessitate immense patience, but it can also be nurtured to speed its advances. A diverse, determined, multispecies collective can transform two tons of hardwood into humus. Whatever seeds are lying around will inevitably take root and begin to grow.

Pulling my sap-touched hand away, I remain connected to the log. I thank it for all that it has taught me. In the time of COVID-19, I choose to practice a mindset of decomposition, cultivating daily the humility to flourish with others, the perspective to challenge injustice, the patience to heal old and new wounds, and the imagination to strive for a more vibrant future. The spruce may not be rotting on Whitman's campus, but this log and I make apt, if unlikely, companions in my backyard. For now, we will rot right here. We are motionless yet churning: learning to decompose together.

References

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