

WHAT COULD SUSTAINABLE ACADEMIC CULTURES BE?

A TRAVELLING CONVERSATION

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CEMUS - the Centre for Environment and Development Studies is a transdisciplinary student-led education centre, which offers undergraduate and master's courses in the sustainable development field. The education model is based on collaboration between students and faculty, in which students are hired part-time as course coordinators. <http://www.cemus.uu.se/>

CEFO - The Center for Environment and Development Studies Research Forum is a transdisciplinary research forum open to researchers and PhD-students at Uppsala University, SLU and other universities in Sweden. CEFO activities focus on environment, development and sustainability studies. It collaborates with other universities and departments to enrich research education through its transdisciplinary Sustainability Seminars, PhD courses, workshops, lectures and field trips. CEFO was initiated by PhD-students, staff and students at CEMUS in 2002 as a research school between Uppsala University and Swedish Agricultural University (SLU). <https://climatechangeleadership.blog.uu.se/cefo/>

CCL- The Zennström Climate Change Leadership Initiative grew out of CEMUS, and works with projects that addresses the role of the university in addressing climate change as well as carbon budgets, together with the Zennström guest professors. <https://climatechangeleadership.blog.uu.se/>

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THE TRAVELING CONVERSATION

During the Spring of 2020, just when the Corona pandemic was starting to unfold, some of us at CEFO - The Center for Environment and Development Studies Research Forum, started talking about writing something together in a different way. Instead of everyone sitting together or working on the same document to come up with a single voiced narrative - the common approach to co-authoring - we wanted to try something new. If we had a different writing process, would it change the written outcome? How would *how we write* change *what we write*?

We came up with the idea of a "traveling conversation", inspired by a method witnessed at an Anticipation conference in Oslo recently. Everyone participating would get a common question, in our case "What are sustainable academic cultures?" One person, let's say A, would start by writing a response to this question, and then pass it on to another person, B. Then, B would write a piece responding both to the overarching question and to A's response. The third person C, however, will only receive the piece that B wrote, and write a response based on that. The following Person D will only receive what C wrote, and so on. The last person sends it back to A, which A writes a response to, and the circle is complete.

The rule was to keep the response short, around 1 page or 500 words, and then to write and forward your response quickly, within a week once it's passed on to you.

Why "sustainable academic cultures"? The exact question had lodged its way into our thoughts by way of a keynote talk topic one of our colleagues (Keri) was invited to give, but had already been floating around in different forms - given the nature of our academic work around climate change, this question proved persistent. As a topic with multiple layers, many ways to approach it, and with the inspiring Anticipation conference fresh in mind, it was a simple exchange between colleagues over coffee that pushed us to engage in this brief and rich writing venture - perhaps something that was not strictly "academic" could enable some generative ways of thinking!

And so here it is. The traveling conversation is now in your hands. We pass it on to you. What are sustainable academic cultures? What could it be and how could we foster such a culture? Let us know if you write a response.

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Lakin Anderson is a PhD candidate at the department of Business Studies at Uppsala University. His research inquires into the challenges and tensions faced by Norwegian climate researchers in organising their work and establishing identity. Lakin has been a teacher and facilitator in, among other things, sustainability, design, and research methods. He worked in education at CEMUS from 2013-2017.

Keri Facer is Professor of Educational and Social Futures at the University of Bristol, School of Education. She works on rethinking the relationship between formal educational institutions and wider society and is particularly concerned with the sorts of knowledge that may be needed to address contemporary environmental, economic, social and technological changes. She was the third visiting Zennström professor in Climate Change Leadership at Uppsala University (2019-2020).

A CULTURE THAT CARES?

I come from a place of thinking about sustainability and climate change in higher education (HE) and how education can support and enable learners to participate in a world characterised by complex sustainability challenges. Thus, my questioning leads me to the main question of how can universities be places that actively respond to these challenges? This piece is therefore situated around my thinking of Western higher education institutions and their academic cultures.

Care of earth, care of people, return of the surplus - Principles of Permaculture Ethics

My recent thinking around HE has been coloured by my interest in permaculture - permanent agriculture where social and economic, not just ecological, patterns are included in the equation - and in permaculture design principles. Could the principles and ethos behind them help to reimagine academic cultures? At first glance, these principles seem to offer generative ways to think upon what practices could be sustainable in HE academic culture. Permaculture design takes to heart that engaging in and with a complex world is inherently unpredictable. Uncertainty is a basic characteristic of life on our planet. As such, it seems like following a specific recipe or just choosing the right ingredients probably won't get us so far. Instead, we have to pay attention how things are connected.

At the heart of permaculture design is the idea that 'when we design to meet our needs, we should do so in a way that supports the ecosystem as a whole'¹. Long-term sustainability thus comes about by building and maintaining beneficial relationships which one must consciously design depending on our context. And we are all designers. So, as a designer in an unpredictable world, what is the first thing we do?

Slow down. Notice the landscape in which you are interacting. *Observe.* What are the patterns in space where different systems or media meet and where cooperative relationships are forged and resources exchanged? *Use your edge.* What are the patterns in time? What other forms of time besides linear time do we notice? *Share the abundance.* In what ways does sharing surplus help us to rethink our relationships 'in times that are

¹ <http://www.learnpermaculture.com/blog/73-permaculture-design-pm-1>

deeply antiecological, and in many ways anticollective'²? *Use your energy where you can affect most change.* Where can I contribute most?

At its core, these design practices are underpinned by an ethos of care. This is not a mere application of theory into practice. Care is doing. Care is everything that *is* done, not just something that we do. A permaculture care ethics means that 'we are in relations of mutual care'³. As speculative ethicist Maria Puig de la Bellacasa puts it, rather than aiming for a moral disposition this is a vision for the everyday mundane doings of 'maintenance and repair' that sustain life.



How then is permaculture generative for thinking about academic culture? In an academic world overrun by the logic of productionism and its respective linear temporality, a permaculture care ethos entails 'making time' to get involved in a diversity of timelines (remember we have *slow down* and *observe*?). This disrupts the restless and efficient anthropocentric temporalities of technology, allowing 'unproductive' and slow experiences that have been marginalized by this dominant futuristic drive to be seen⁴. A sustainable [academic] culture notices diverse temporalities, the ones involved in relations of mutual care. *What academia is thought to be affects the ways in which it is cared for, and vice versa, modes of care have effects in what academia becomes* (altered from p.170). If

² Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p.165

³ Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p.161

⁴ Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p.177

we start to observe, slow down, use our edge, what would that mean for how we teach, how we research, how we engage with communities, how we engage with each other?

There is something in these principles that points strongly to a culture that is *regenerative*, leaving something better than you find it, supporting the emergence of cultures that care. *Modes of care have effects in what academia becomes*, and thus acknowledging the relationships of care in which we find ourselves can start to generate caring participation, or *regenerative collective caring*, in the world of academia.

SLOW DOWN AND CARE

What are sustainable academic cultures? Sanna asks. *Ah, this is such a good question,* I think to myself on a Thursday evening past 6 pm. I had just discussed with one of my supervisors this week that it's important to try to focus on my dissertation project, to try to cut out everything else. *Nothing is worth it if you break down with stress and overwork,* she said. I had asked her strategies for dealing with stress, since I haven't been able to sleep very well this semester. It still feels like I am trying to adjust back into my usual rhythm in my Swedish academic life, even two months after coming back from my three-month stay in Japan. I was happy to be able to discuss my vulnerable sides with her (as well as with my other supervisor, which gave similar advice), and I thought their advice was wise. It's really important not to overload myself.

And here I am again, agreeing to give some thought on a writing project "for fun."

To try not to do other things than my research –this seemingly simple act, why is it so difficult?

And then I again, I hear myself reply, *But this is fine because it is a fun thing.* In reality, everything that I sign up for outside of my dissertation, I do so because I either think it's important or it's fun, or both. I agreed to teach again on a course this semester at my department called Sustainable Development and Globalization. I love facilitating learning. But it does take more time than the compensation you get. And it has been more stressful than working as a Course Coordinator at CEMUS (the student-led education centre, The Centre for Environment & Development Studies) – although it's not clear to me why exactly. More responsibility, yes, because you are the "teacher," a seeming expert on something (while most times you are not). Perhaps more so, less support. There is no support structure in the same way that encourages you to try new things, helps you prepare, reflect, and try again. I feel slightly alone in this.⁵

⁵ Students are recruited as Course Coordinators at CEMUS to design and facilitate undergraduate and Master's courses with support from CEMUS staff and a working group consisting of researchers. Read more about the CEMUS model at: <https://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/article/igniting-a-learning-revolution-student-run-higher-education-for-sustainable-development/>

I look back at Sanna's piece. Two phrases jump out: Slow down and Care. Inspired by permaculture, she writes: If we start to observe, slow down, use our edge, what would that mean for how we teach, how we research, how we engage with communities, how we engage with each other? She points to regenerative collective caring in academia – what might this look like in practice?

It reminds me of how slow scholarship, something that I advocate for, calls for self-care as warfare: "cultivating space to care for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students is, in fact, a political activity when we are situated in institutions that devalue and militate against such relations and practices."⁶



This is what we need. But, re-read: we also need to be *caring for ourselves*. How we can support each other, even if my friend-colleagues are ultimately rivals applying for same permanent positions in the future? How can we resist the temptation/pressure to overload ourselves when the world is burning?

The word count is over limit and the essay is unfinished, but I have to now close my computer. It's 7 pm. Time to stop working, even if it's fun.

⁶ p.1239 from Mountz, Alison, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Loyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, et al. 2015. "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University." ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies 14 (4): 1235-59.

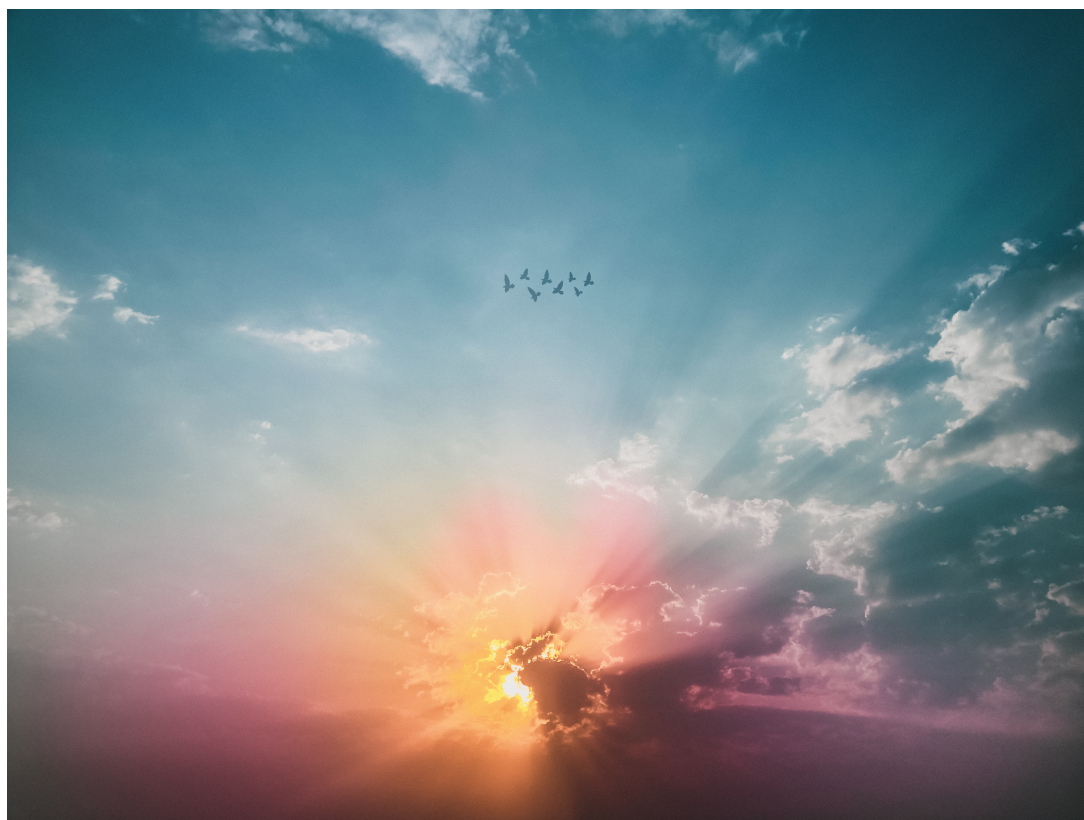
Isak Stoddard, March 2020

WORLD-MAKING CONVERSATIONS

Everything is a conversation, and it is the world we inhabit. – Tim Ingold

Outside my window, the day has begun. Sun reaching above the rooftops, attempting to burn through the hazy, diffuse clouds covering the vaulted sky this morning. In the distance, fir-trees dancing happily in the wind. A greeting from the edge of the forest.

I'm starting my second cup of Darjeeling & Earl Grey tea. Sitting at my writing desk, candle burning at my side. As I write, we are a few weeks into the pandemic now sweeping the world. I've been working from home for some time now. Perhaps this is a strange time to be writing about sustainable academic cultures. Or perhaps not.



As I read the essay by Sachiko, my mind travels back in time. I am somewhere in France, in the late 1960s. I think of the unusual collaboration and friendship that developed between philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guatarri. Felix would wake up

and write first thing in the morning. He would then send off his text to Gilles – unrevised and unpolished. Gilles would rework and rewrite it. Every Tuesday afternoon they would then meet to discuss the weeks' work⁷.

Guided by my mind's eye, I travel further back in time. On a dirt-road outside the town of Basel, a man is riding along on his horse. The year is 1501 and wave upon wave of the Black Plague is rolling in across Europe. Paris and other large cities are starting to empty. The man's name is Erasmus, and he is fleeing from the deathly shadow of the plague, but also seeking something – always seeking. But he is also embodying an ideal that he firmly believed in: that movement and new encounters was essential for anyone interested in learning about the world. Or creating the world, for that matter, as he believed that conversations is what makes the world come into being⁸.

Going further back in time. 450 years before the man known as Jesus of Nazareth was born. Athens, Greece – so called *Ancient* Greece. At the time however, it was of course just Greece (or Hellas rather) – in full colors, and most real. As a plague haunts the doorsteps of Athenians, Socrates is engaged in deep conversation with his teacher, Aspasia of Miletus. Their conversation is later retold by Plato⁹ in his *Symposium*, with Aspasia thinly disguised under the pseudonym of Diotima¹⁰. Socrates recounts:

'But how then, Diotima,' I said, 'are the lovers of wisdom, if they are neither the wise nor the foolish?'

'A child may answer that question,' she replied; 'they are those who are in a mean between the two; Love is one of them. For wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and Love is of the beautiful; and therefore Love is also a philosopher or lover of wisdom, and being a lover of wisdom is in a mean between the wise and the ignorant.'

Philosophers as lovers, as interpreters and intermediaries between the divine and the mortal – neither wise nor ignorant. For how many Doctors of Philosophy of today does this image hold true? What might this dialogue on love have to teach us about the times we

⁷ Thornton, E. (2018). *Two's a crowd*. Aeon magazine. <https://aeon.co/essays/a-creative-multiplicity-the-philosophy-of-deleuze-and-guattari>

⁸ Burton, N. (2016). p. 43, Gutenberg-Galaxens Nova – En essäberättelse om Erasmus av Rotterdam, humanismen och 1500-talets medierevolution. Albert Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm.

⁹ Plato. (385-370 BC). *Symposium*. Translated by J. Bowett. Project Gutenberg Ebook. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1600/1600-h/1600-h.htm>

¹⁰ D'Angour, A. (2019). *Socrates in love: how the ideas of this woman are at the root of Western philosophy*. The conversation. <http://theconversation.com/socrates-in-love-how-the-ideas-of-this-woman-are-at-the-root-of-western-philosophy-109593>

now live in... with another 'plague' at our doorstep and with climate change and species extinction looming heavily on the horizon?

I have not yet come to know such a thing as a sustainable academic culture. But perhaps these glimpses into the past could be thought of as fingers pointing at the moon, if not the moon itself. And with friendships and unusual rituals; movement and new encounters; and timely conversations about love – we might just get a little closer.

ENCOUNTERS IN PANDEMIC ACADEMIA

Throughout this pandemic we have focused on what's changing. But we should also notice what conspicuously hasn't. The parts of our social lives that were already aligned with the apparent 'new normal'.

Academic cultures vary. But the one I find myself in can feel as if it is a set of social arrangements in which people try to avoid getting close to each other, as if scared of what might happen in their encounters with others. Which is a shame, because any collaboration that is transformative means getting close enough to others to become changed in the process.



In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*¹¹, anthropologist Anna Tsing contrasts two different ways of understanding encounters. The first image of encounter is familiar to us, as it runs deep in the modern world. Its central concept is that of the self-contained entity, operating towards its own optimal ends. Tsing locates it in the great 'twin

¹¹ Tsing, A.L., 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

disciplines' of modern knowledge, population genetics and neoclassical economics. Their frameworks are similar: "at the heart of each is the self contained individual actor, out to maximize personal interest, whether for reproduction or wealth" (Tsing, 2015, p.28).

Tsing offers examples. First in genetics, Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*, which puts forward the idea that evolution is 'fueled' by the "the ability of genes, organisms, or populations to look out for their own interests" (*ibid*, p.28). And second, in Neoclassical economics, the activities of economic man, '*homo economicus*', who makes a series of individual choices to pursue his best interests.

This idea of the self-contained actor has proved immensely productive in these fields and beyond. However, this idea allows us to overlook the contamination that is part of encounter. Individuals are immutable, "maximizing their interests, they use encounters-but remain unchanged in them" (p.29). Crucially, this also means that we can track individuals without paying attention to their entanglement with the world, Tsing argues. And this means that a single unit can stand in for any other.

The second image of encounter (and the one which Tsing develops in her book) sees individual beings or objects as inevitably changed by encounters with others. Through her study of mushroom pickers and the global supply chains they are part of, she shows how encounters inevitably lead to a mutual 'contamination' between people, plants, materials. In order to collaborate across difference, they intermingle, changing in the process. Contamination may result in many outcomes, some good or bad for us. But it is the foundation for true collaboration.

A sustainable academic culture might be one that sees the nature of encounters with others as transformative. This would be a culture in which we are open to this 'contamination' by others, and one that respects the vulnerability that entails and treats it with care rather than avoiding it altogether or perhaps worse, simulating it.

There are many reasons why this version of encounter may be difficult in our current modern university environment. Critical voices point to the dominance of publication metrics and educational audits that demand the public performance of excellence-what Marilyn Strathern¹² has called the 'tyranny of transparency'. They point to the management ideas of the 'knowledge economy' that govern researchers, leading them to satisfy the doctrines of competition, innovation and economic growth. Or to the increase of

¹² Strathern, M., 2000. The Tyranny of Transparency. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26(3), pp.309-321.

precarious, gig-economy contracts at universities in some countries and their warping effects on university culture. But there are also longer standing reasons, reasons inherent to the need for writing and careful thought that make the prospect of such collaboration challenging; isolation and the act of writing can go hand in hand.

Whatever the case, we must be careful not to end up in kind of *pandemic academia*. A culture in which we are self-contained entities living in fundamental isolation, and then, when venturing out for 'necessary' travel amongst our fellow inhabitants, weave our way through a series of shallow meetings, expertly avoiding the risk of contamination, seeking encounters for use-value only, and halting meaningful collaboration before it's born. As soon as the COVID 19 pandemic is over, I'll be seeking this other type of contamination wherever I can find it.

WORKING WITH IMPOSSIBILITY

Today, talking with a dear friend and close collaborator, we were discussing how the hell to work and what it means to try to work as an academic when faced with the all encompassing shitshow that is our current planetary situation – not just the pandemic, but the sheer unholy mess that is our economic, ecological, spiritually impoverished condition. Just having the conversation helped get me out of a funk I'd been in all week. Lakin is right, encounter matters. Above all, for me, conversation matters. Conversation is a place for crying and for laughter, for testing ideas, for human connection, for articulating and working out what on earth it is you think you think. Conversation is also the place where something new can emerge alongside relations of care, of love, of friendship. And conversation is precisely what we don't usually have time for in universities. We are all talk – and god this pandemic has made that apparent, words words words, meetings meetings meetings – but no conversation.

At the moment sustainable academic culture is an impossibility. Academic culture is not sustainable – at all. It depends on resource extraction to the point of exhaustion; on the sustained exploitation of people, in particular young people; on the elision of ideas with wealth, education with human capital, knowledge with 'intellectual property'. And those who resist this with a call for return to the good old days are equally tied up in defending prestige, status, salaries – a different form of extraction, equally unsustainable. It is not even sustainable in its own financialised terms – UK universities are facing a £3-4bn loss of income next year because they depend on flying international students around the world to sell them degrees at prices inflated three times above local students costs. There have been job losses – youngest and women hit hardest (there is no Titanic chivalry here) – anyone on temporary contracts, those on short term contracts, have gone. And the plan now is to move it all online. This is not sustainable, it is not even baseline ethical.

So let's unpick what the deeper desire is under this question. What is my desire in sitting down and trying to answer it?

So – I think what I am longing for is for cultural practices and institutions that harbour and defend curiosity about the world, integrity and honesty in witnessing what is happening, exploration of divergent views and experiences, careful and thoughtful reflection about how we should act, the ability to learn quickly as we go, and the opportunity to interrogate and work out who you are becoming. This – to me – is the work of a lifetime and the work of society.



In other words, this sort of ‘culture’ is a world I want to live in, not just an institution. So what I think I want to work towards right now is not the rescue of the university, or of academic cultures as we have them, but towards the seeding of a much wider set of cultural practices that defend these values strongly. The analogy is with the end of Buffy the Vampire Slayer – if you have not seen this, I recommend it – when she finally realises that her power is not to keep fighting vampires and killing demons, but to give all young women the power to do it¹³. Our job is not to rescue the university, but to create conditions for thoughtful cultures to grow.

So perhaps if our desire is for sustainable academic cultures – then it starts with a refusal – a refusal to accept the university as the exclusive place in which these practices of inquiry and integrity can take place. We have antecedents in this refusal – the trades union movement was an educational movement, the civil rights movement was an educational movement, the co-operative movement was an educational movement. This was an education in thinking, not indoctrination, in unlearning not acquisition of set truths, of critique and interrogation not rote acceptance. These movements worked through universities and schools and colleges, but not for them, they drew on insights from

¹³ Buffy final Episode: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chosen_\(Buffy_the_Vampire_Slayer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chosen_(Buffy_the_Vampire_Slayer))

universities and schools but contributed to the wider movement, they understood how to harness the power of disciplinary knowledge but did not think that that was all that circumscribed the world or the only game to play. These movements were, first and foremost, located in the worlds and struggles and matters of concern of the people. And this is where a truly sustainable academic culture must be based. We may then decide to use universities for what they can offer to nurture this, but our service and our allegiances are elsewhere.

Sanna Barrineau, June 2020

WEAVING, GUTS AND DARKNESS

Response to Keri's letter



Reading your reflection makes me think a lot of Vanessa and colleagues' **Bricks** and **Threads** cartography¹⁴; the bricks and threads stand for a set of ways of being, the **bricks** representing **fixed forms**, **linear time** ('things move forward'), and **self-worth depends on external validation**; **threads** emphasize **shape-shifting**, **layered time**, **everything is living**, and **self-worth is grounded in connection**. Knowledge under the metaphor of bricks is **layered** – **it can be discovered**, **accumulated and transmitted** – while knowledge in the threading metaphor is **interlacing** – **oriented towards relationality**, **it comes from many places and is earned**, **rather than being an entitlement**. The frustration I think you reflect on is with the brick sensibilities, a frustration that I share with you.

¹⁴ <https://decolonialfutures.net/portfolio/towards-braiding-1-bricks-and-threads/>

While I (unfortunately) haven't experienced the final episode of *Buffy*, I think I can appreciate the comparison - *Our job is not to rescue the university, but to create conditions for thoughtful cultures to grow*. In the university, there are a lot of people (and other creatures?) holding threads of myriad colors, lengths, passed down by different ancestors. But the university is also physically a pile of bricks, stacked neatly, carefully preserving and protecting its monocultures within. Bricks are heavy to move. Perhaps using the threads, we can begin to weave, finding the cervixes in the rock through which to thread our refusal of the exclusiveness of the academy. We braid allegiances - we do not erase differences, historical or systemic violences, contradictions or uncertainty. It is a mosaic. What would this do to the infrastructure of this place called the university?

Something else Vanessa also talks a lot about is our guts. And listening with our guts. Guts are also places where we build cultures, and the places that give us the sense that we are related to everything. Folks who practice fermentation understand that the bigger variety of bacterial cultures we cultivate in ourselves the healthier we are. So, if we think about sustainable academic cultures, we must prepare the ground for as much diversity as possible, *bringing the worlds and struggles and matters of concern of the people*. This is the foundation for thoughtful cultures to grow, putting all these into conversation. I can almost hear it now; the stories that emerge from these types of encounters, not words words words; the diverse ways of making sense that manifest.



I guess a lot of the Buffy series took place at night since that's when vampires are active in whatever ways vampires are active. Women must then be battling vampires in the dark, and hanging out there a bunch if they are going to become prolific slayers of demons. So, to just take one more metaphor (apologies!), what does being in the dark allow (besides all becoming kick-ass vampire slayers rather than sleeping and relying on heroes)? I think back to the Dark Futures talk in Oslo - being in the dark attunes us to the multiple senses to which we have access if we only would stop *just seeing*. Sitting with the darkness invites us to rediscover the power it imbues which we have ignored as a society. So maybe it involves listening with our guts, to realise that the future is full of fucking light.

