

Dandelion roots: a trans ecology of Covid-19 vulnerabilities

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Abstract

During the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic I kept a graphic diary, titled Dandelion Roots. The format was simple: in a single black and white line drawing on a square of paper I would document something encountered (during periods of lockdown, this would normally be on my daily allotted walk). Overlaid on the same page, I would arrange words in an attempt to articulate whatever was on my mind: reflections on gender, identity, ecology, and relationality. The tight format forced me to distil what were often complex internal dialogues. Though posted online and via social media, the work was not conceived as a set of definitive statements but as a way of sharing my thinking process. By documenting seemingly inconsequential everyday encounters alongside critical reflection, I attempted to work the material and the discursive together. Here I was not necessarily seeking coherence but rather contextualising my thinking process within a wider relational ecology, allowing word and image to form relationships of their own. Working matter and discourse, body and mind together was a consciously trans (queer, feminist) strategy: trans experience offers an insight into the inseparability of these domains (Berlin and Brice, 2022; Clare, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic imposed conditions of isolation (and for some, extreme exposure), while also foregrounding an existential condition of inter-dependence (Malatino, 2022; Pieri, 2022; Pienaar et al., 2021). It thereby highlighted a paradox: that vulnerability is simultaneously a condition of susceptibility to harm and a necessary condition of possibility for meaningful relation (Brice, 2020, 2023). Vulnerability is a product of inequity and injustice, yet without vulnerability, transformative social change may not be possible. This interested me because it chimed with an apparent paradox of gender transition: that of becoming more fully realised through becoming more vulnerable. I handed in a PhD thesis at the very start of lockdown, amid a freeze on academic hires in the UK. The project filled a hiatus and provided a space in which to continue reflecting on this question of vulnerability, and on the politics of nature and ecologies of identity; themes that define my practice as geographer and artist.

Keywords

Transgender, Vulnerability, Queer ecology, Graphic methods, Autoethnography

Published version

Brice, S. (2024) 'Dandelion Roots: A Trans Ecology of COVID-19 Vulnerabilities', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 667–670. DOI: [10.1215/23289252-11421142](https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-11421142).

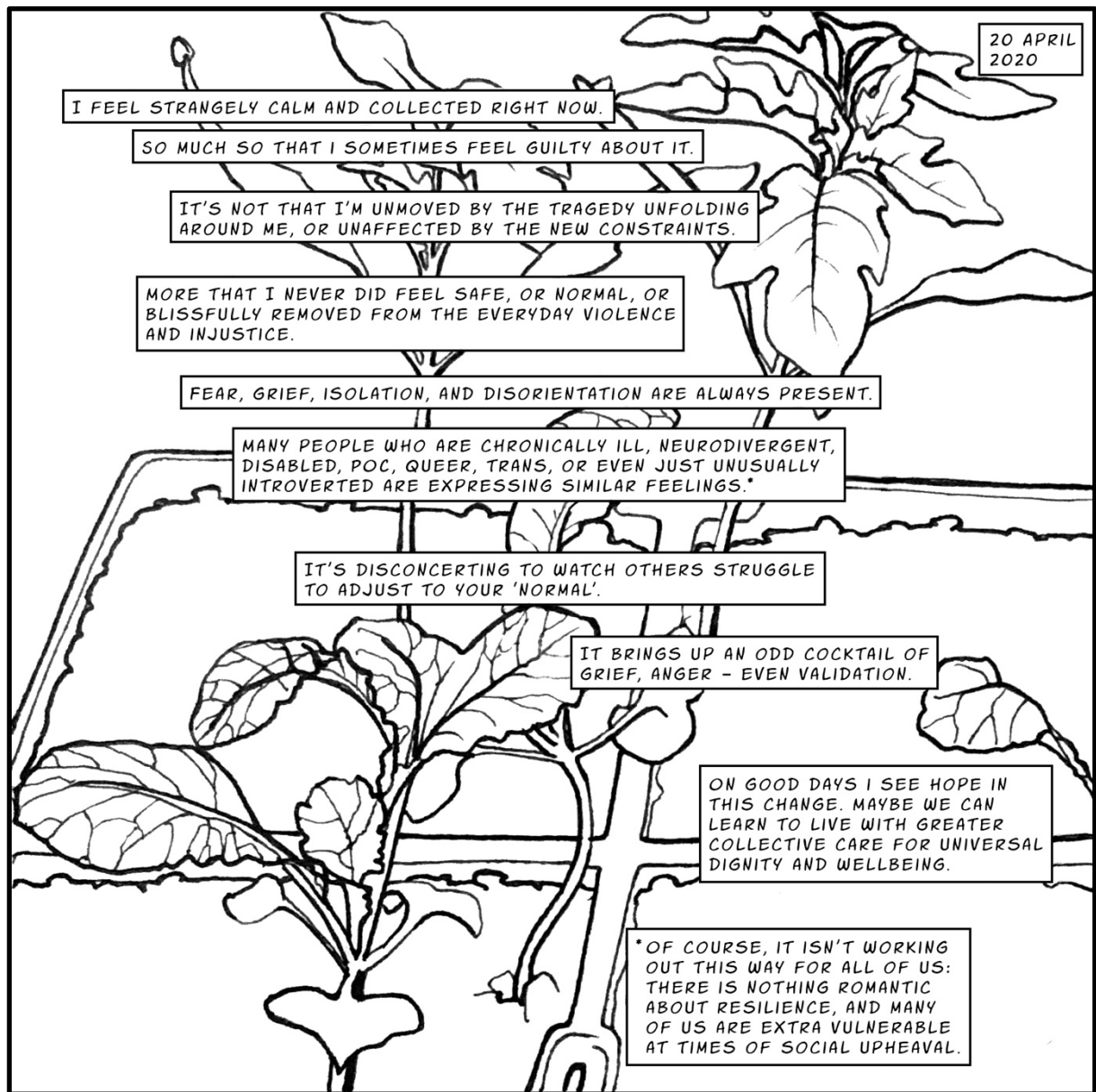


Figure 1: 'Dandelion Roots', Sage Brice, 20 April 2020. Pen on paper, 16 x 16 cm, digitally edited and typeset in Komika Slim.

Alt text

A line drawing of tomato and red mustard seedlings growing in compost in a plastic tray. The image is a close up and emphasises the contrast between the organic shapes of the seedlings and the rectilinear planting tray. Text is superimposed over the drawing in boxes, in a comic-book style font. The text reads: "I feel strangely calm and collected right now. So much so that I sometimes feel guilty about it. It's not that I'm unmoved by the tragedy unfolding around me, or unaffected by the new constraints. More that I never did feel safe, or normal, or blissfully removed from the everyday violence and injustice. Fear, grief, isolation, and disorientation are always present. Many people who are chronically ill, neurodivergent, disabled, POC, queer, trans, or even just unusually introverted are expressing similar feelings (footnote at this point). It's disconcerting to watch others struggle to adjust to your 'normal'. It brings up an odd cocktail of grief, anger – even validation. On good days I see hope in this change. Maybe we can learn to live with greater collective care for universal dignity and wellbeing." The footnote reads "of course, it isn't working out this way for all of us: there is nothing romantic about resilience, and many of us are extra vulnerable at times of social upheaval."

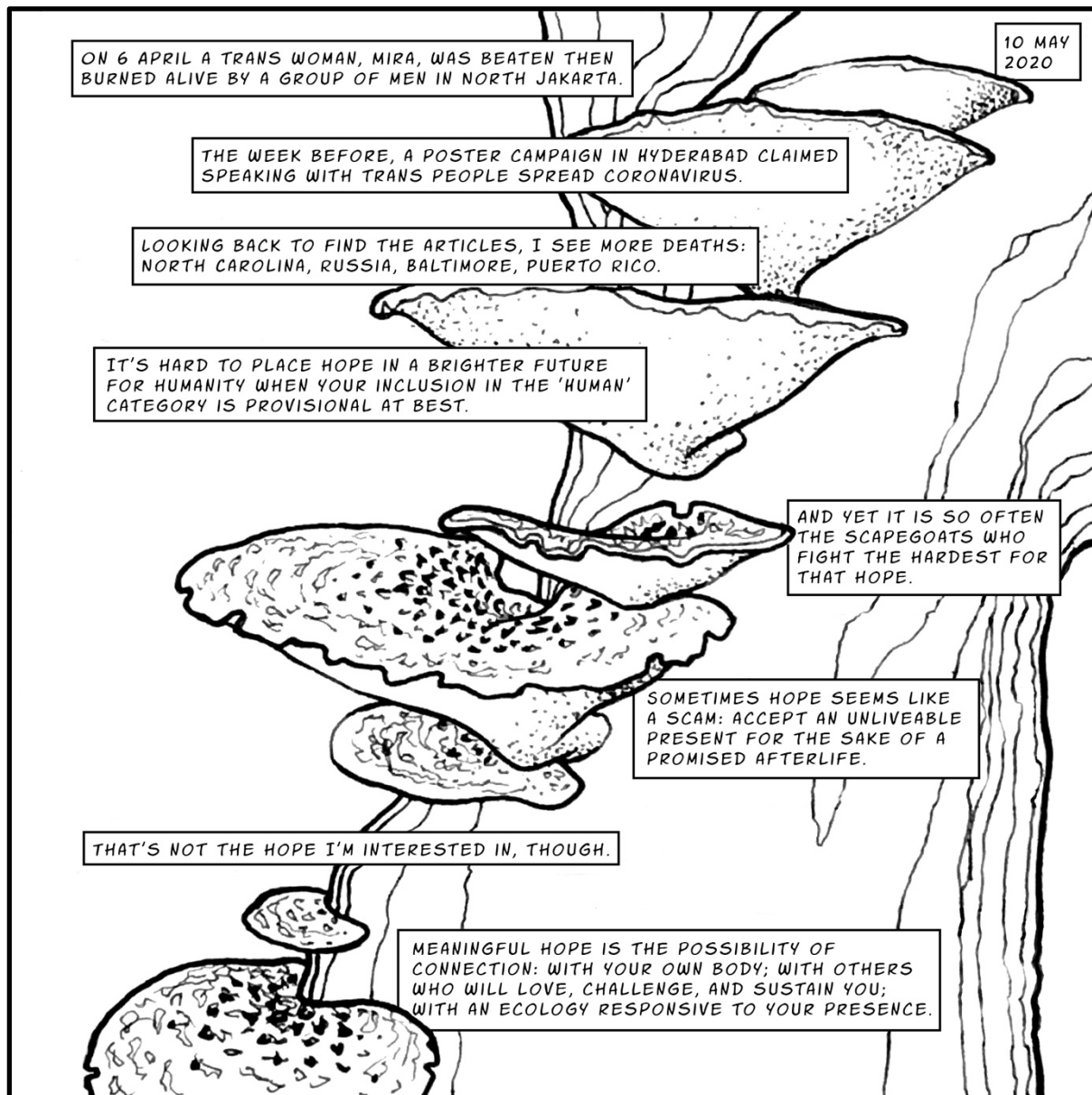


Figure 2: 'Dandelion Roots', Sage Brice, 10 May 2020. Pen on paper, 16 x 16 cm, digitally edited and typeset in Komika Slim.

Alt text

A line drawing of bracket mushrooms (*Polyporus squamosus*/Dryad's Saddle) growing up the side of a tree. Text is superimposed over the drawing in boxes, in a comic-book style font. The text reads: "On 6 April a trans woman, Mira, was beaten then burned alive by a group of men in North Jakarta. The week before, a poster campaign in Hyderabad claimed speaking with trans people spread coronavirus. Looking back to find the articles, I see more deaths: North Carolina, Russia, Baltimore, Puerto Rico. It's hard to place hope in a brighter future for humanity when your inclusion in the 'Human' category is provisional at best. And yet it is so often the scapegoats who fight the hardest for that hope. Sometimes hope seems like a scam: accept an unliveable present for the sake of a promised afterlife. That's not the hope I'm interested in, though. Meaningful hope is the possibility of connection: with your own body; with others who will love, challenge, and sustain you; with an ecology responsive to your presence."

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Citation on deposit: Brice, S. (2024). Dandelion Roots A Trans Ecology of COVID-19 Vulnerabilities. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 11(4), 667-670. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-11421142>

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