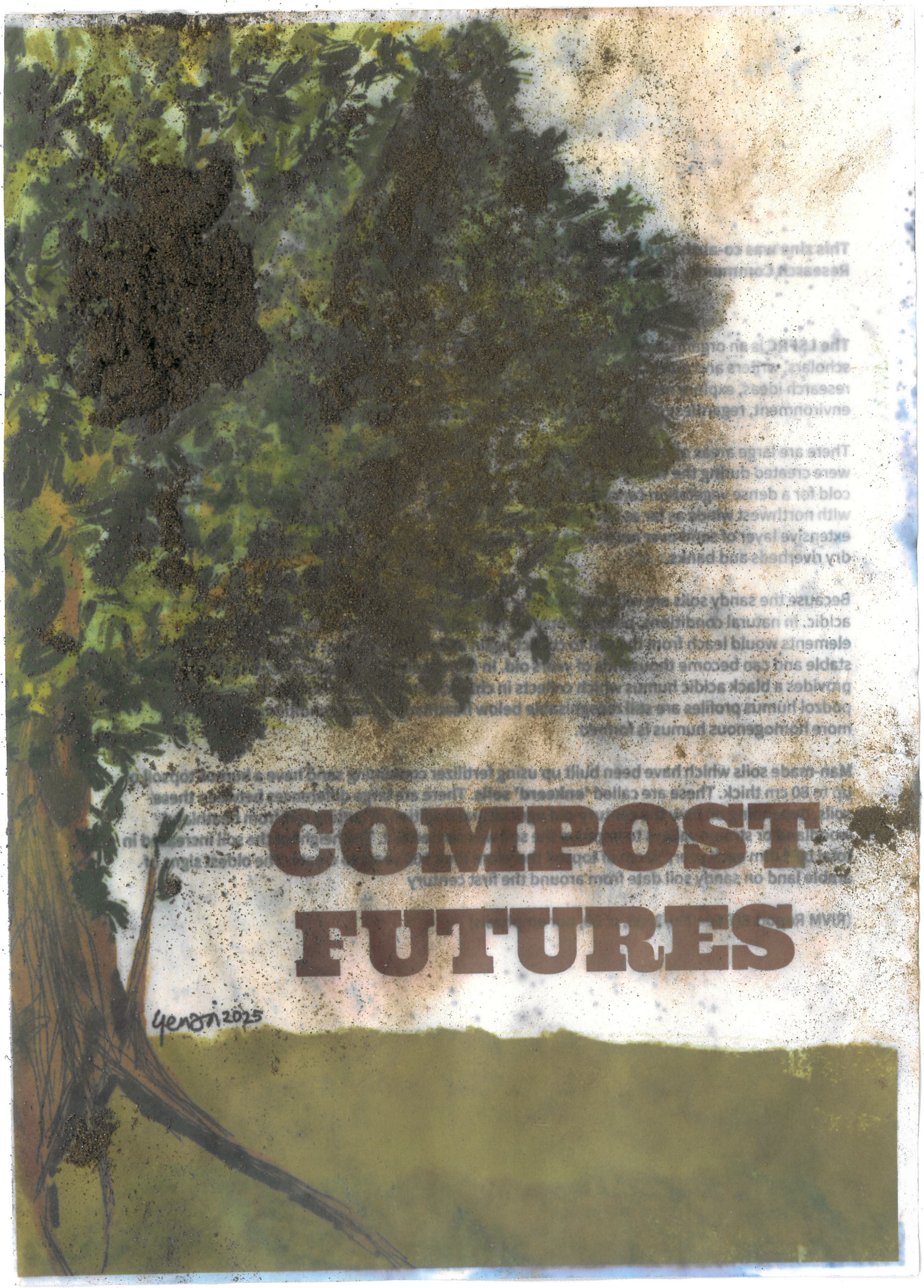

COMPOST
FUTURES
Yenan 2025

This zine was co-authored by the [illegible] of the Lowlands Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC), [illegible] soil life forms in the Netherlands.

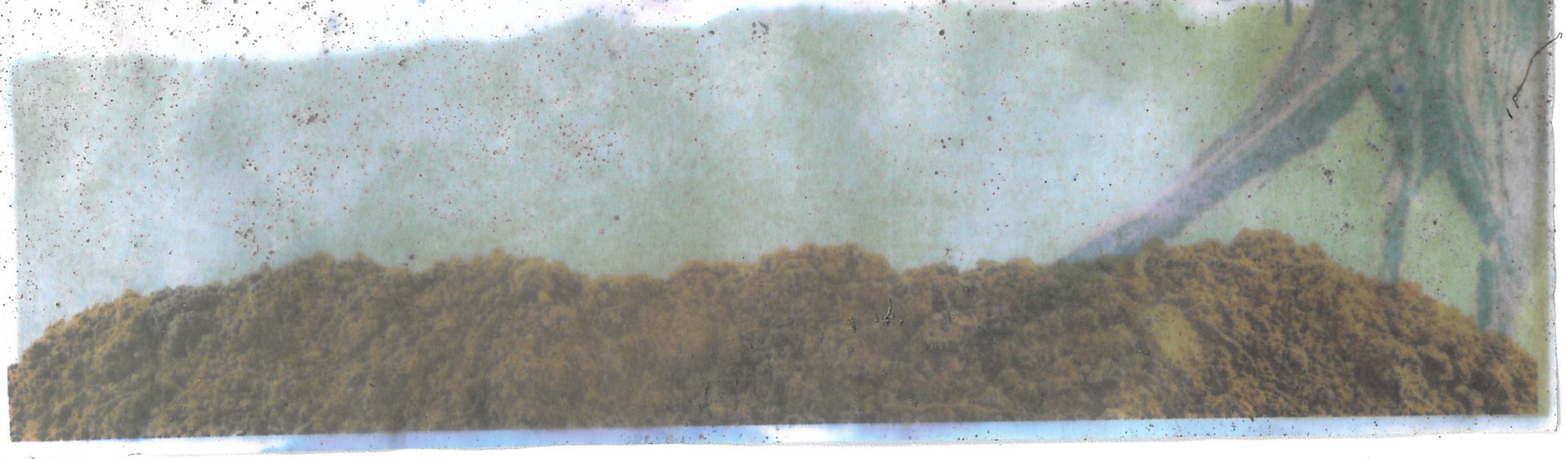
The LSFRC is an organisation [illegible] and fans, led by [illegible] early career scholars, writers and artists. [illegible] research community and a place for people to share research ideas, explore new [illegible] perspectives on science fiction in a friendly and welcoming environment, regardless of background, institutional affiliation or educational status.

There are large areas of sandy soil in the north, east and south of the Netherlands. These soils were created during the Würm ice age, between 70,000 and 10,000 [illegible] ago. As it was then too cold for a dense vegetation canopy, the large sand flats of the [illegible] (beggerbank) drifted with northwest winds as far as Germany. Large amounts of sand were transported to form an extensive layer of sand over northwest Europe. 15,000 years ago more sand was deposited from dry riverbeds and banks.

Because the sandy soils are relatively old, the lime has leached out and the soil has become more acidic. In natural conditions, podzol would be formed and dark, humus-like and unstable elements would leach from the soil to collect again in deeper horizons. The dark humus is then stable and can become thousands of years old. In dry conditions, forests (oaks, beech and pines) provides a black acidic humus which collects in characteristically thin horizons. These intact podzol humus profiles are still recognisable below heathland. In wet conditions a brown and more homogenous humus is formed.

Man-made soils which have been built up using fertilizer containing sand have a humus topsoil of up to 80 cm thick. These are called **'enkeerd' soils.** There are large differences between these soils, depending on how the century-old agricultural tradition of cutting turf from heathland, woodland or stream valleys to improve the soil was carried out. The height of the soil increased in total by 1 mm each year; 50 cm of topsoil therefore took 500 years to create. The oldest signs of arable land on sandy soil date from around the first century

(RIVM Report 607604009/2008, p. 60, our emphasis)



Compost Futures – Dear Science Fiction, Be Like Soil

BY MEGEN DE BRUIN-MOLÉ

LONDON SCIENCE FICTION RESEARCH COMMUNITY – JULY 2025

In a 2023 essay published on the website of US performance arts collective website *Rescripted*, Annalisa Dias threats the theatre sector to 'be like soil'. Taking the metaphor of 'rock bottom' in the context of an ever-underfunded arts sector, Dias asks what might happen if 'instead of dramaturgies of collapse, we looked to the earth and learned from natural processes of *decomposition*?'

Can we be like soil?
What might we re-compose
with the nutrients being released
into the system right now?

[...]

I long for a theater
that earnestly listens for the lessons
the earth has to teach us.
This is how we'll remember
That like mycelia, like the soil, like
interconnected forests and seas
We have always belonged to one
another.
This is how we'll find unexpected
pathways.
This is how we'll reconstitute the
world.

'Let us be like nutrient-rich soil (regenerative and moving always toward new life)', Dias writes. Regenerative, but also destructive, and deconstructive. In a compost heap, regeneration is achieved through rot.

I am interested in ideas of decomposition and compost, and interested in how or if they can apply to science fiction stories and research. This is because my academic work is about [illegible] in speculative fiction, cultural heritage, and colonial institutions like those Dias is writing about (the university, the museum, the gallery). But also because, in the face of colonialism, capitalism, and climate catastrophe, I am trying to figure what nutrients are being released from the decomposition of my own field and my own work. I am trying to learn how to re-compose without rebuilding, and how to listen and collaborate in ways institutions do not recognise as valuable.

In *Fluid Futures*, Steven Shaviro defines speculation in terms of testing "daring hypotheses", and a greater openness to risk and uncertainty' (Stengers 2018a in Shaviro 2024). Must this daring and radical openness always be in service of innovation and generation? Can it also be a tool of regeneration, degeneration, and decay? Can it include the uncertainty of entrusting our stories and imaginings to unknown or nonhuman agents? This zine is an attempt to test these questions through practice, as a kind of creative and collaborative research.

DECOMPOSITION AS SPECULATION

For Ester Toribio Roura, compost 'is a speculative tool of ecological thinking that explores ways of activating discussions of care, both between humans, and between humans and other-than-humans (Roura 2022). As a speculative tool, compost reveals how 'it matters what matters we use to tell stories' (Roura 2022). Compost is speculative in this case because it 'questions how humans relate with the other-than-human and the ecologies we all co-form'. Crucially, this questioning does not have an answer that can be neatly understood or enacted by humans alone. It is an answer that must be practiced by and in the ecologies that we are.

Roura draws her own understanding of what speculative tools can do from Donna Haraway's composting of 'science fact and speculative fabulation' into one acronym: 'SF' (Haraway 2016, 3). For Haraway the first steps towards a multispecies recuperation and regeneration involve paying heed to 'real stories that are also speculative fabulations and speculative realisms. These are stories in which multispecies players, who are enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference, redo ways of living and dying attuned to still possible finite flourishing, still possible recuperation' in the face of genocide, apocalypse, decay (Haraway 2016, 10).

I am interested in ideas of decomposition and compost, and interested in how or if they can apply to science fiction stories and research. This is because my academic work is about trash in speculative fictions, cultural heritage, and colonial institutions like those Dias is writing about (the university, the museum, the gallery). But also because, in the face of colonialism, capitalism, and climate catastrophe, I am trying to figure what nutrients are being released from the decomposition of my own field and my own work. I am trying to learn how to re-compose without rebuilding, and how to listen and collaborate in ways institutions do not recognise as valuable.

In Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis' thinking, composting is a citational practice that draws knowledge from 'arrangement of correspondences' and 'quality ingredients', allowing these ingredients agency in the process of decomposition (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018, 34-35). I compost these ideas into this essay. I compost them into the soil, where animals and insects and microbes will digest them further. This will be difficult and complex work for them: paper is a 'poorly biodegradable organic waste' (Yen and Brune 2007 in Yuan et al. 2012). It takes other kinds of organic waste in combination to speed up this process. What does this say about the quality of the work we are asking these microbes to collaborate with us on? What does it say about the futures of the work we are trying to do, and the ways of dreaming, creating, and writing an open, undefined future we might need to explore, together?

WORKS COMPOSTED

- Dias, A. (2023) Decomposition Instead of Collapse – Dear Theatre, Be Like Soil, *Rescripted*. Available at: https://rescripted.org/2023/08/04/decomposition-instead-of-collapse-dear-theatre-be-like-soil/ (Accessed: 5 June 2025).
- French, K.B., Sanchez, A. and Ullom, E. (2020) 'Composting Settler Colonial Distortions: Cultivating Critical Land-Based Family History', *Genealogy*, 4(3), p. 84. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy4030084.
- Furszyfer Del Rio, D.D. et al. (2022) 'Decarbonizing the pulp and paper industry: A critical and systematic review of sociotechnical developments and policy options', *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 167, p. 112706. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rser.2022.112706.
- Hamilton, J.M. and Neimanis, A. (2018) 'Composting Feminisms and Environmental Humanities', *Environmental Humanities*, 10(2), pp. 501–527. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156859.
- Haraway, D.J. (2016) *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Pau, B., Morgan, H. and Fleming, C. (2024) '"Unnatural" Nature: The Queerness of Compost'. *Filet*, London, 19 July. Available at: https://www.outsavvy.com/event/20852/queer-compost.
- Roura, E.T. (2022) 'Towards an Epistemological Shift: An attempt at a Compost Manifesto', *Prospectives*. Available at: https://journal.b-pro.org/article/towards-an-epistemological-shift-an-attempt-at-a-compost-manifesto-12/.
- Yen, H. and Brune, D. (2007) 'Anaerobic co-digestion of algal sludge and waste paper to produce methane', *Bioresource Technology*, 98(1), pp. 130–134. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biortech.2005.11.010.
- Yuan, X. et al. (2012) 'Effect of pretreatment by a microbial consortium on methane production of waste paper and cardboard', *Bioresource Technology*, 118, pp. 281–288. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biortech.2012.05.058.


© Cristina Diamant

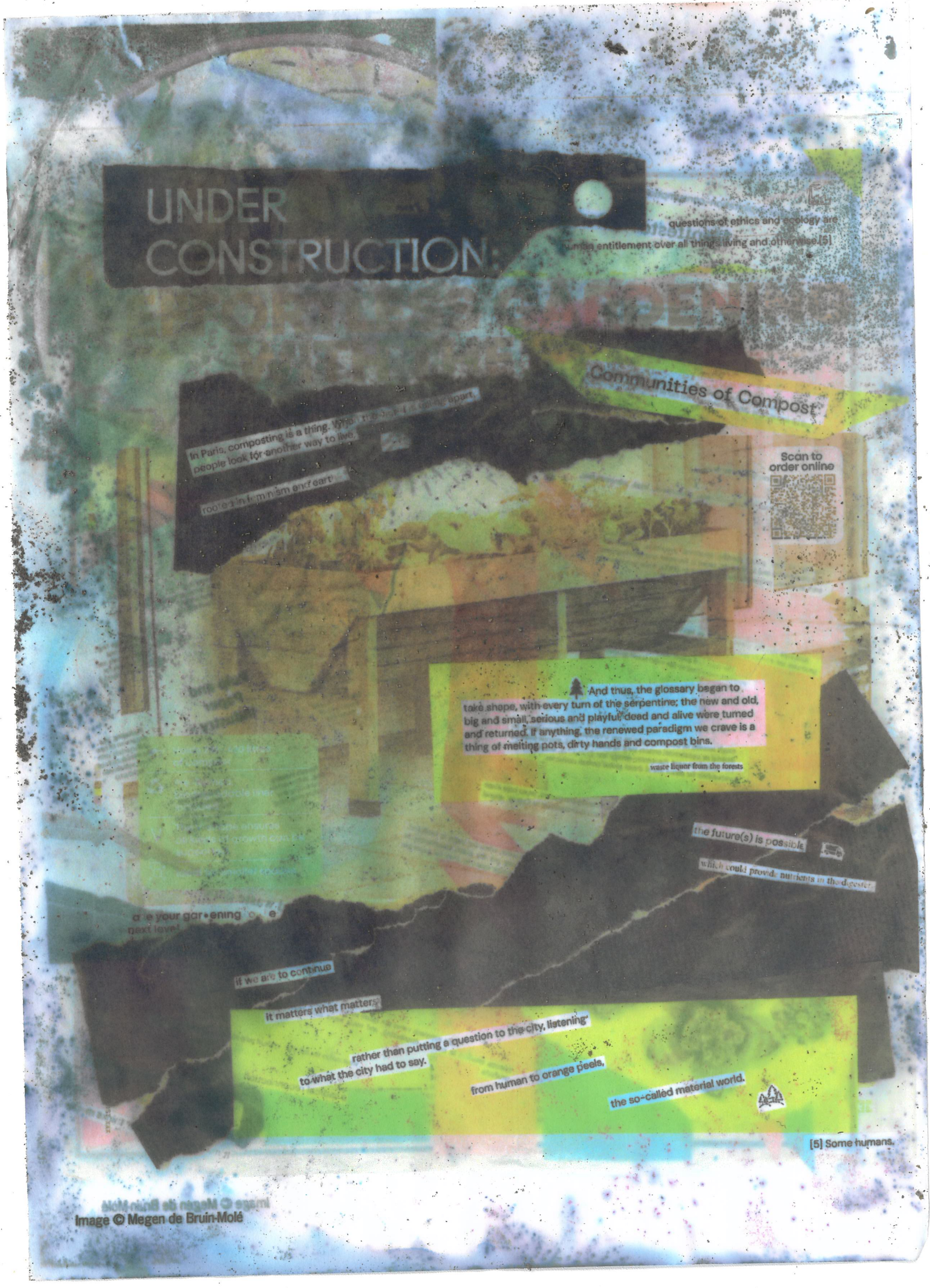
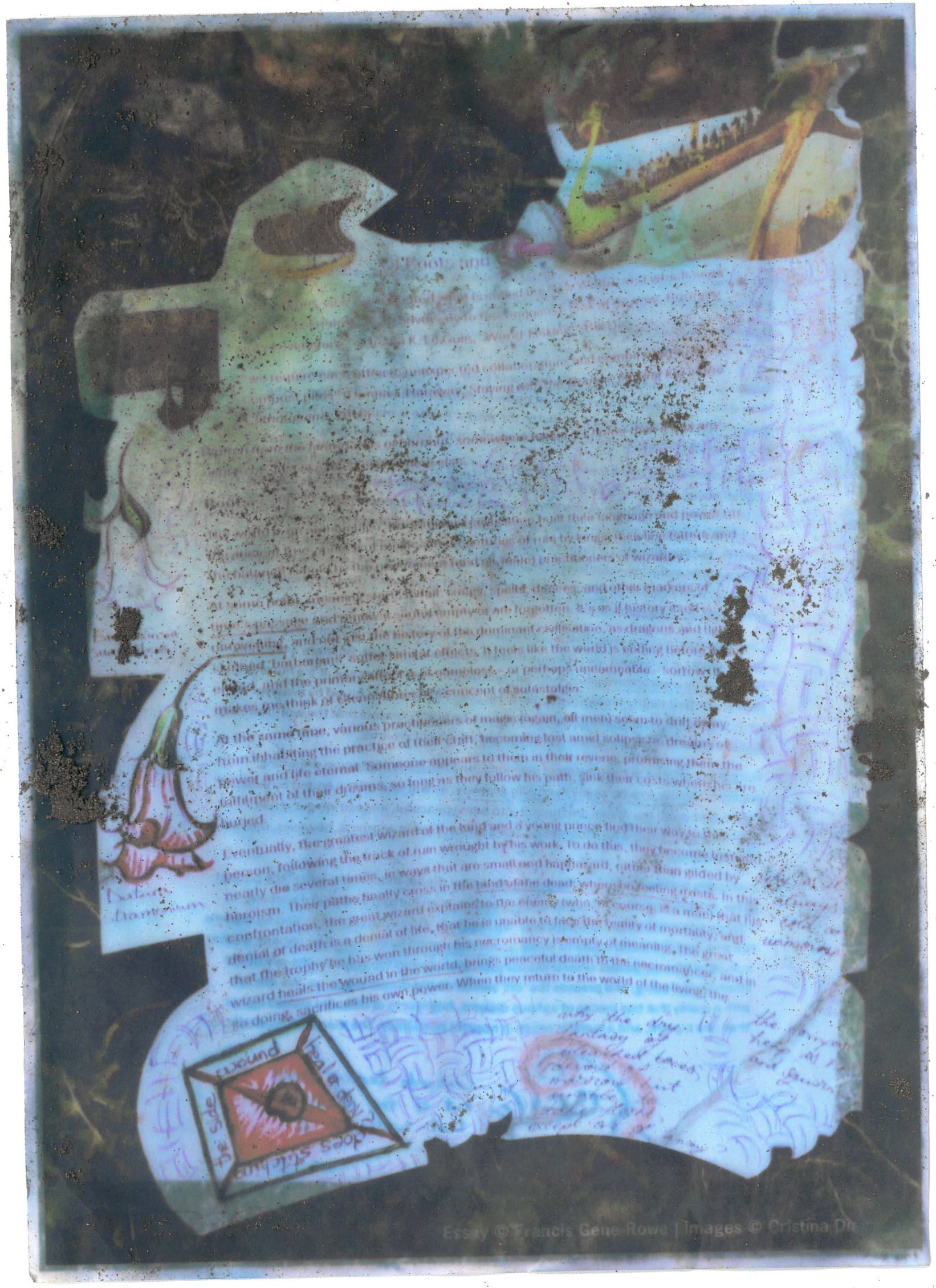


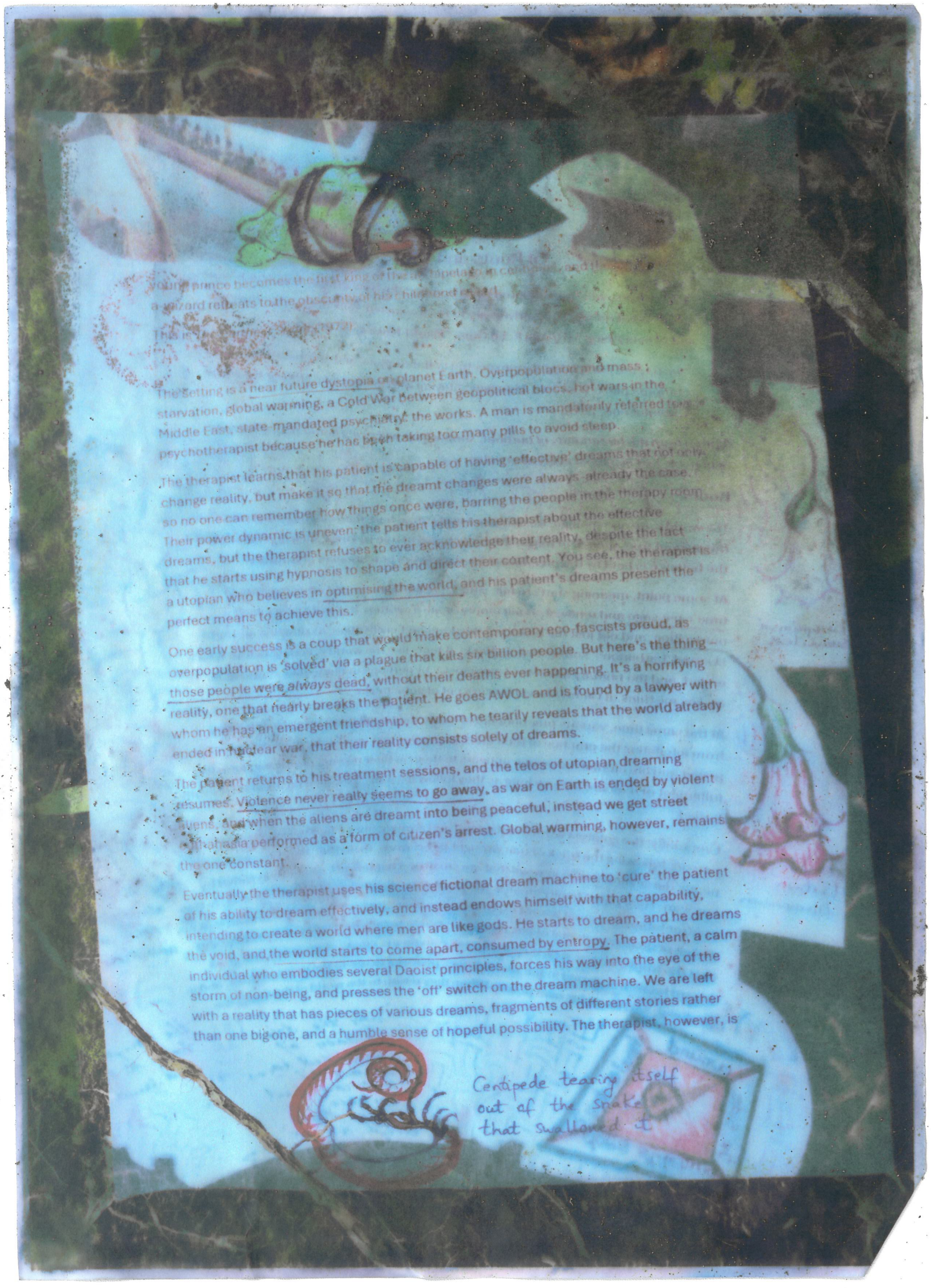
Image © Megen de Bruin-Molé



Image © Megen de Bruin-Molé



Essay © Francis Gene-Rowe | Images © Cristina Dr



young prince becomes the first king of the utopian continent and the
a wizard retreats to the obscurity of his hilltop school.
This is [illegible] (1972)

The setting is a near future dystopia on planet Earth. Overpopulation and mass starvation, global warming, a Cold War between geopolitical blocs, hot wars in the Middle East, state-mandated psychiatry: the works. A man is mandatorily referred to a psychotherapist because he has been taking too many pills to avoid sleep.

The therapist learns that his patient is capable of having 'effective' dreams that not only change reality, but make it so that the dreamt changes were always-already the case, so no one can remember how things once were, barring the people in the therapy room. Their power dynamic is uneven: the patient tells his therapist about the effective dreams, but the therapist refuses to ever acknowledge their reality, despite the fact that he starts using hypnosis to shape and direct their content. You see, the therapist is a utopian who believes in optimising the world, and his patient's dreams present the perfect means to achieve this.

One early success is a coup that would make contemporary eco-fascists proud, as overpopulation is 'solved' via a plague that kills six billion people. But here's the thing – those people were *always* dead, without their deaths ever happening. It's a horrifying reality, one that nearly breaks the patient. He goes AWOL and is found by a lawyer with whom he has an emergent friendship, to whom he tearily reveals that the world already ended in the nuclear war, that their reality consists solely of dreams.

The patient returns to his treatment sessions, and the telos of utopian dreaming resumes. Violence never really seems to go away, as war on Earth is ended by violent aliens, but when the aliens are dreamt into being peaceful, instead we get street euthanasia performed as a form of citizen's arrest. Global warming, however, remains the one constant.

Eventually the therapist uses his science fictional dream machine to 'cure' the patient of his ability to dream effectively, and instead endows himself with that capability, intending to create a world where men are like gods. He starts to dream, and he dreams the void, and the world starts to come apart, consumed by entropy. The patient, a calm individual who embodies several Daoist principles, forces his way into the eye of the storm of non-being, and presses the 'off' switch on the dream machine. We are left with a reality that has pieces of various dreams, fragments of different stories rather than one big one, and a humble sense of hopeful possibility. The therapist, however, is

Centipede tearing itself out of the snake that swallowed it







***

The world is an archipelagic exoplanet. It is being colonised by military personnel from Earth under the name of 'New Tahiti,' and they destroy its native biomes to export timber and grow Ohio-type corn monocultures. In their eyes, the planet is a new Eden – a rich, complex, collaborative, uncertain forestscape, in which it's impossible to see everything at once, are treated as obstacles to be ultimately [illegible] They're perpetrating all the other settler colonial classics: rape, murder, [illegible] uprooted and destroyed communities, ecocide, epistemicide.

There are two protagonists. One is a captain in the colonial military forces, [illegible] The other is one of the native humans originally [illegible] it's inhabited by humans. However, their short-statured, [illegible] fundamentally non-capitalist, non-coloniser worldview, culture, and history are taken as grounds for treating them as subhuman aliens. After all, as John Locke would say, they're not making correct use of the land. The native individual suffers extreme violence at the captain's hands, and it sets him on a course toward leading anti-colonial resistance. Through his perspective, we learn that the planet's indigenous civilisation approaches dreaming as a situated practice, one which continues into adulthood. For them, their colonisers' inability to combine dream and reality is insanity. Their word for world is forest, and their word for dream is roots.

Beyond leading the fight against the colonisers, the native becomes his civilisation's newest god: not a figure of worship or veneration, but one who translates dream into reality, a being who connects dream-time and world-time. To be a god is to create a new word and deed, to bring something from dream into the world. The deed that the new god brings into the world is murder, the underlying idea Death. Previously, those of his culture never killed each other, but once an idea of its associated act(s) have come into the world from dreams, you cannot put them back into dream – that would be insanity.

From one point of view, you could say that the new god has been contaminated by the language and violence of the captain. It cuts both ways though, and when the captain is finally captured by the god, "His brain was entirely occupied by the complex smells of rot and growth, dead leaves, decay, new shoots, fronds, flowers, and smells of night





[illegible] spring and rain." The god, however, does not kill the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

dreaming that erases what came before it. I don't think *The Farthest Shore* gets that far, and I think Le Guin understood this, hence her returns to Earthsea in works like *Tehanu* (1990) and *The Other Wind*. *Tehanu* reckons with patriarchy, while *The Other Wind* focuses on settler time and colonial history.

Worm: In "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986) Le Guin proscribes the "killer story" – that is, the story (patriarchal, racist, ableist, etc.) that hegemony tells about the world as if it is the world. That's the kind of story that the captain and the therapist are trying to tell, that they ultimately dash their egotism against. It's also what *Tehanu* sets out to unravel. There are throughlines – or perhaps crosspollinations – with Donna Haraway: "Species Man does not make history [...] Man plus Tool does not make history. That is the story of History human exceptionalists tell" (*Staying with the Trouble*). I would invoke another worm, Haraway's "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988), in which she positions situated feminist knowledge practices against the "god trick" or "conquering gaze from nowhere" that seeks to mark subjects and positions while remaining forever unmarked. Which is a huge part of what the therapist and the necromancer (and those who follow in his path) are trying to do.

> "The belief today is that everything *is potentially computable and predictable*. In the process, what is rejected is the fact that life itself is an open system, non-linear, and exponentially chaotic." (Achille Mbembe, "Bodies as Borders," 2019)

Related to these worms is an opposition to computability and calculability, to blueprint (supposed) utopianism. It overlaps with what Le Guin calls "yang" utopia in "A Non-Euclidean View." The opposition is particularly clear in *Lathe*, where the therapist's behaviourist worldview makes him unable to see the reality of people and small things, but the dreaming practices and forests of Earthsea and the exoplanet also sit in the space of patterning against totality.

Worm: In all of the books, death and violence recur, even if it seems that they have been repelled, defeated, or 'solved.' I think here about Mbembe's conception of necropolitics, in which "Terror and killing become the means of realising the already known telos of history" (*Necropolitics*, 2019). In a world governed by necropolitics, violence is *always* present, and subjecthood is defined in terms of "upholding the work of death" and subordinated to "impersonal logic and to the reign of calculability and instrumental rationality." So we might turn to the patient dreaming the genocide of six billion lives to 'fix' overpopulation, or wizardry's basis in (en)forcing borders between the living and the dead. A necropolitical history is one in which its constitutive violence cannot be truly removed from the picture, but is instead relocated elsewhere. What these novels tell us is that you cannot actually

organise forgetting from above to eradicate what's real. Sooner or later, there will be a confrontation and a reckoning, though it will only happen if people fight for it.

Billionaire Thinking

> "Here was someone who could not be a wayfarer, could not entangle, could not track the lines of living and dying, could not cultivate response-ability, could not make present to itself what it is doing, could not live in consequences or with consequence, could not compost." (*Staying with the Trouble*)

In the quotation above, Haraway is reflecting on Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Silicon Valley consciousness strikes me as resting on a comparable denial of the reality that we are compost.

Aidan Walker (whose TikTok and YouTube accounts are worth following) notes of Peter Thiel's recent interview with Ross Douthat that Thiel has no interest in actually addressing Douthat, that Thiel is talking to himself as sole audience member. This comes across from Thiel's Leo Strauss-inspired riddling, an opaque form of (non)communicating that nonetheless exists in close relation to how Palantir makes individual data legible to state and non-state actors. Thiel's obscurantism is in the service of concrete, rigid violence.

Walker says that Thiel was lecturing his own reflection, and that there is no win condition for the sort of politics Thiel espouses: he would never be happy or able to declare himself content, that the journey and work were finally at an end. It reminds me a little of the profound discontent and emptiness that underpins Elon Musk's view of the world, as well as the 4chan-derived but increasingly mainstream theory of NPCs and main characters, where only a select few (all white men, of course) actually qualify as subjects with lives that matter. In billionaire thinking, there is no interest in reaching an-other, in exposing yourself to reciprocal contamination by the world. The 'audience of one' position is shared by Le Guin's antagonists – the necromancer, the therapist, the captain – as the consequences of their actions and beliefs leave them utterly alone, cut off from everything and everyone.

Walker argues that Thiel's riddling serves two purposes. Firstly, it's a way of couching dogwhistles in plausible deniability, of turning words against themselves, against communication. Its other quality is simple pretentiousness, acting as if what Thiel is saying has a depth to it that it does not, that his technocolonial violence is somehow profound. It isn't, though – it has no roots. I'm reminded of a passage in *Tehanu* about how the roots of (masculine, patriarchal, grandiose) wizardry are shallower and

ISBN 978-3-16-148410-0

9 783161 484100

"Backlash" is a fictitious country that only exists in the EAN (European Article Number) barcode system as a unique prefix of published books.

...subterranean to those of feminine, situated, practical) witchcraft, and also of how the gamified bag [illegible] in opposition to the killer story, the ascent of man, the god trick.

By rambling on how Greta Thunberg is the antichrist, and lamenting the West's supposed stagnation and loss of ambition, Thiel is staking a claim to the future, to a particular idea of what the future can/should/will be. The vision behind his words is of teleology, of a straight, self-predetermining line, maintaining a continuity of anything but itself. The worrying Lacanian therapist has us patient dream the death of billion disposable toxic, post-traumatised like NPCs, their mourning always already foreclosed, seems clown to this.

One of the key arenas governed by this logic we find in the [illegible] own world is Gaza and other sites of genocide, and it lies closest to the core of the fascist regime's thinking. Uncoincidentally, Palantir [illegible] is happening in Palestine, what is being done to Palestinians, and you [illegible] about its contribution to apartheid and ethnic cleansing in Ar[illegible]. "Explainer: The Role of AI in Israel's Genocidal Campaign Against Palestinians" (2024), available from the Institute for Palestine Studies' website.

I think that the story coming from Thiel's words is not quite the same killer story of classic technosolutionist sf – an imaginary that Musk draws more heavily on to fuel his bullshit – though they rest on similar rootlessnesses. The story Thiel is telling is ultimately extinctionist, a story against composting.

Lathe as Principle

> "To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven." (Zhuangzhi, quoted in *The Lathe of Heaven*)

> "I walk on the ground and the ground's walked on by me, I breathe the air and change it, I am entirely interconnected with the world." (*The Lathe of Heaven*)

Each of the books outlined in the Roots section ends in some form of distintegration of the scales – time/history, space/land, self/subjecthood, change/dream – that have governed the majority of their narrative. There's a sense of plurality, and also of open process rather than finality: a compost heap is a thing of becoming, not of conclusion. In "A Non-Euclidean View," Le Guin characterises "yin" utopia – which she favours over yang – as "dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical,

When filled with molasses, the tank leaked so badly that it was painted brown to hide the leakage.

The Great Molasses Flood





To under[illegible] every single living being on Earth speaks for itself, we have to get [illegible] epistemology that has been premised on the fact that humans are the only speaking entity, that what distinguishes us is that we mastered language and the others didn't. But we now have studies showing that plants speak, that forests speak: a de-monopolization of the faculty of speech, of language." (Mbembe, "How to Develop a Planetary Consciousness," 2022)

Much like sf, I both believe in and need hope, feel my need for it in the aching of my heart as catastrophes continue to unfold. To our compost heap, I give my heartbreak, my uncertainty, my hope, and my love for the future we must build in the now.

Francis Gene-Rowe
Tartu, Summer 2025

C.C.
Munster, Summer 2025

