**Graphic story pitch**

My story is going to be based on excerpts from two chapters (5 and 6) of Anna Tsing’s (2015) book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.*

The story, based on the ethnographic work of Tsing tracing the routes of a peculiar commodity, the matsutake mushroom from Japan known for its distinctive taste and high value, will be set in a remote pine forest in Oregon, US, and will centre around mushroom pickers foraging in the woods as a means of sustenance. A distinguishing feature of matsutake is that it only grows in environments that have been damaged by human activity, where it helps nurture the landscape. As such it is a fitting metaphor for imaginaries of life on the peripheries of capitalism. My aim with the story is to explore what motivates mushroom pickers coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds to take on such a precarious form of living. The central trope of my story is that all of the characters have been differentially affected by experiences of war and vulnerability and have engaged with loss and hardship in heterogeneous ways, therefore, for all these pickers in the forests, matsutake foraging represents as much of an economic opportunity as a symbol of freedom. I would like to have four characters, all of whom are from different ethnic backgrounds, and have different experiences of war and displacement that had led them to pursue lifestyles alternative to the common domain – I am still developing their backstories by combining characters from the book, but here are the four types of foragers I had in mind:

* a White American war veteran
* a Hmong veteran/refugee from Vietnam
* a Lao refugee from Vietnam
* a Cambodian refugee escaping the civil war and Khmer Rouge regime

Each of them would have one page in which I would like to present an image of them while foraging, and, by outlining their backgrounds and how they ended up in this forest in Oregon, I would focus on what freedom means for each of them, and how their understandings and expectations of freedom is informed by their past life experiences. So the narrative hook that in my imaginations would provide a common ground and pull the strands together is this idea that the desire for freedom is enacted through mushroom picking, and a tension would ideally be created by the juxtaposition of both foragers’ past and present, and the open-endedness and variability of their engagements with freedom. Here is a short excerpt from the book that I think captures my intent:

“This mushroomers’ freedom is irregular and outside rationalization; it is performative, communally varied, and effervescent. It has something to do with the rowdy cosmopolitanism of the place; freedom emerges from open-ended cultural interplay, full of potential conflict and misunderstanding. I think it exists only in relation to ghosts. Freedom is the negotiation of ghosts on a haunted landscape; it does not exorcise the haunting but works to survive and negotiate it with flair.” (Tsing 2015:78)

As for my idea of presentation, I plan to rely heavily on a botanical imagery, however, I think I would prefer not to do it in a herbarium-style format, but find a slightly different way to emphasise the multiple layers on which these understandings of freedom operate. I would like to experiment with different shapes, textures and frames to represent, as well as intertwine the past and present. Because the piece is also saturated with memories of loss and grief, I would like to add visual elements to that create a slightly mystical, haunted environment.

COMMENTS:

This is a very good start for the comic, the decision to connect them around the act of picking is a very useful narrative device and the 4 back characters work. Given that the connections between all of them is this act, can it be used graphically and repeated to create a structure for their personal stories?

Speaking of the characters, we wonder if there is a way either to condense a few characters or to choose characters that offer a more diverse background (especially the similarities between the Hmong and Lao migrants may be hard to tell apart).

Will the characters interact? Is the story build around their person reflections? Does it have a narrative voice?

On the concept of freedom, how does it enter into their stories? Who tells this? The ghost you are referring to? The mushroom? The characters themselves? How?

For each of them, is freedom something they think they have achieved with this work? Is it the same for all of them?

The next step for you should be to divide the story in ACTs and think a bit about who (or what) the narrative voice is and the structure.