

“Oh no! My mentor’s a mushroom!”

An Academic Mycelia Honoring Dr. Bernadette Marie
Calafell, Performer and Mentor

Pablo Ramirez

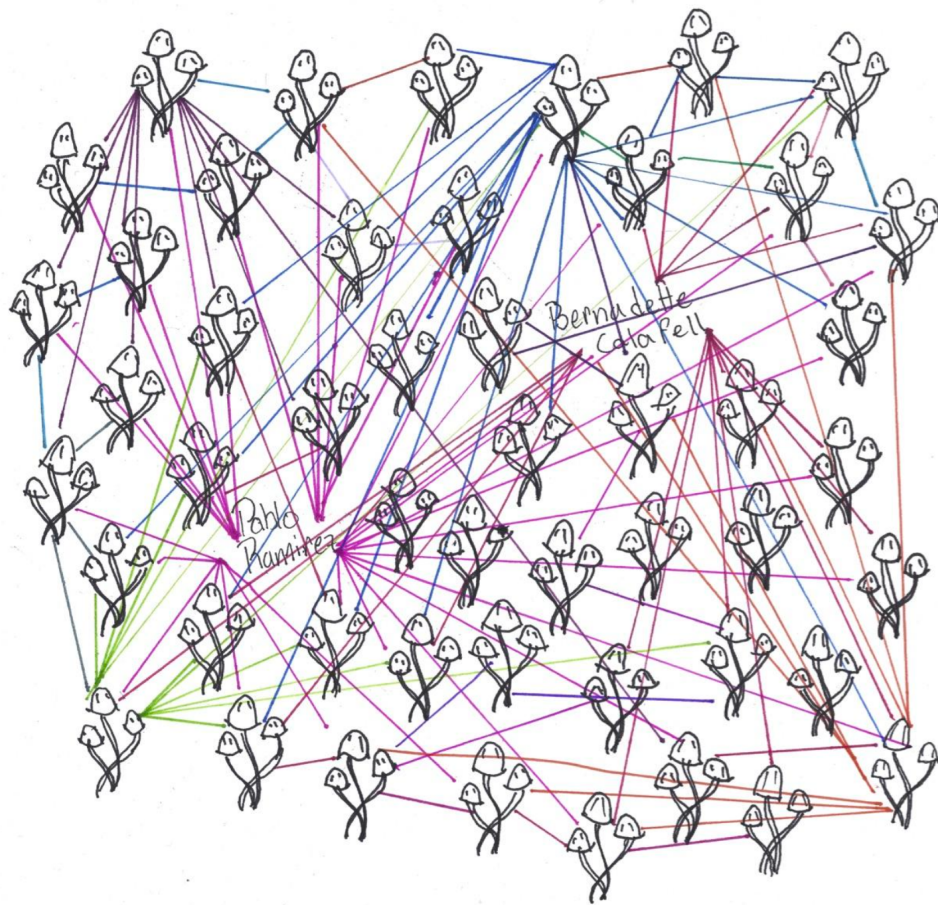
Figure 1. Academic Mycelium

Figure 1 serves as an artistic representation of my, Pablo Ramirez, academic mycelium. This is the fifth iteration of this collage because I kept remembering names to include in the project. It was late in the process when I realized that my academic mycelium will never fit on an 8 ½ by 11 in. sheet of white paper let alone multiple mycelia. Opting for a more symbolic representation of my academic mycelia, I removed most of the names, hence the mushrooms. A past iteration attempted to map out other folks' mycelia. I was overwhelmed by questions of mentorship and connection (Are they included if they've met even one time? Do they have to publish together? Did they attend school together? Who were their advisors? Do they share moments of learning? etc.). Eventually, I opted against that iteration. This fifth iteration considers mentorship as polysemic and almost ineffable. And while I am at the center of this mycelium, know that true mycelia have no center. I encourage you to be your own center for your own academic mycelium. Finally, if you see my academic mycelia and see yourself in it, then know that you indeed are.

Pablo Ramirez, Ph.D., was an emerging scholar of queer intercultural communication studies, latine studies, performance studies, and critical fat studies. His dissertation, *Learning to Love Fatboy: Embodied Reclamations of My fat Body*, drew on performance methods to explore what he termed “cultures of fatness” through embodied performances of fatness at the intersections of brownness and queerness in terms of relationality. Dr. Ramirez earned his M.A. from San Francisco State University in Performance Studies and posthumously earned his doctorate from Arizona State University in Critical/Cultural Communication and Performance Studies. He was and remains a beloved community member, mentor, teacher, and friend.

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Notes

1. I've been asked to write about Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell's influence in the "field as a researcher and performer." I have also been given the opportunity to write about my personal experience with Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell's mentorship. (*BREATHE*) I am standing at the precipice. This feels like a herculean or even Sisyphean task. My heart races with the ever-growing worry that I might in some way ruin a journal of established, intelligent folx with utter nonsense. At this time, Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell and I have shared but one short module and a handful of personal conversations. One might look upon our relationship and question it. "That's not mentorship!" ThAt'S nOt MeNtOrShIp! (*BREATHE*) Pardon me, I am only slightly jesting. Let's hit that rewind button for a second, because I think my struggle is how I am defining mentorship. Is it based on how many classes I've taken with someone? Or conversations had? Or is there a threshold of how many minutes we have been in physical space with one another? Something that I have yet to meet? Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell might argue that, "[m]entoring, as a critical site, is where we actually blend our theory and practice. It is an embodied practice of theory. It is a political theoretical act that is an entity itself outside of our scholarship, service, and teaching. It is a strategy for survival," or something like that (p. 438, 2007). Survival... (*BREATHE*) How have I/we survived the academy or otherwise? How have we survived together? How have we survived because of one another?

2. My relationship to mushrooms has always been a distant one. Yet, it is a topping I enjoy partaking in quite frequently. But that's not to say that I am well-versed in fungus. In actuality, I know very little but what I do know is that mushrooms come to a head from a network of underground roots called the mycelium. Each head of mushroom then creates spores that ride the wind to later create more mycelia and more mushrooms. It's a never ending whirlpool of a cycle. I wouldn't even be able to tell you how accurate that is either. I don't really know much about fungus outside of what I've seen in popular media.

When I was young, I was obsessed with the Lemony Snicket series *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. In Book Twelve, *The Grim Grotto*, our beloved trio travel alongside yet another orphan, to use Snicket's voice, in hopes of finding the elusive *Sugarbowl*. However, Fiona Widdershins was quite adept at the study of fungi and considered herself a skilled mycologist. The inciting incident of this book revolves

around a dangerous fungi named *The Medusoid Mycelium* whose spores can grow in people’s throats causing them to suffocate. In the 2018 film, *Annihilation*, Lena and her team set to cross into a ‘mysterious phenomenon’ that has ‘mutated landscapes and creatures’ one of which is a fungus-skeleton hybrid that is fused to the wall of a pool. Concurrently, Polly, Seth, Dennis, and Lacey encounter a spike-like fungus that infects warm bodies, kills them, and uses their corpses to infect more bodies (*Splinter*, 2008). Even Alice eats mushrooms to grow and shrink in size when visiting Wonderland. In most of these instances, the fungus is monstrous and enacts a type of transformation of those that are infected by it or consume it. Fungus thus becomes an appropriate metaphor for understanding and theorizing mentorship. On one hand, we balance rhetorics of ‘infection’ (Calafell ‘infects students with critical theories,’) and expressions of connectedness via the mycelium (“I also know that I am not alone.”) (p. 112, 2012).

An academic family tree comes heavy with the weight of the academy and personal experiences with family. A normative understanding of academic family trees fervently dismisses queered, classed and raced definitions of family. Instead, an Academic Mycelium operates much like Deleuze y Guatarri’s (1979; as cited in Bennett & Posteraro, p. 26, 2019) theories on rhizomes. They question hierarchies and binaries because of its inherent nature; they exist without a singular center. They also permit us to see how everything is multiple and interrelated.

3. “Oh fuck! It’s this! This...weird plant thing.”

“The mushroom?”

“Yes, mushroom, sorry. That’s what’s been making them act like that.”

“I don’t understand — ”

“It works like an infection,”

“How can a mushroom be an infection?”

“This mushroom — ”

“I don’t think it’s the mushroom”

“Listen! What do we know about them?”

“Well, they all seem to act in the same way,”

“Right! What else?”

“Well, it’s kinda like they’re acting as one,”

"There! See! They all got like infected with this thing,"

"The mushroom?"

"Fungus! Fungus is connected. They share a mycelium or... I don't know!"

"Well, I don't know either!"

"We have to kill them, y'know—"

"What?! No. I can't... That's my little brother out there."

"C'mon, get it together! Your little brother is gone. It's fung-us! Or fung-them!"

I turn the television off. I clearly streamedit the wrong version of The Last of Us.

4. A moment from my Academic Mycelium: A beautiful individual who was kind to me well before we ever formally met instinctively moved to catch me as I stumbled and tripped over my sparkly-red-Dorothy-inspired-several-inches-high heels during a performance panel at WSCA in Seattle, WA. Luckily for me, there was a wall nearby with which I caught myself. Her instinct to catch me resonates and lives with me still. A moment plucked from time; a wisp of love; a moment of movement that is reflective of her mentorship now. The never-ending, and unconditional support that holds me up.

5. Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell is a "Feminist Killjoy," the "Monstruous Feminin[e]," and all about "love." Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell wraps herself in "yet[s]?", "soy[s]...?", and "(fill in the blank[s])?"; an abundance of interrogation point punctuations mark white papers. For some, a mark ruins the picture-perfect presentation of the material, in this case, paper; in this case, whiteness. But a mark is artistry in the everyday. It is a mark that one has lived. Has enacted on- and influenced—. For Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell that 'living' is "disrupting," "disrupting," "dialoguing," "honoring," and "hop[ing]." Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell is a "fabulous" "mentor...love[r]" that knows the dynamic and often times volatile nature of love. For her, it is a "battlefield."

6. Another moment from my Academic Mycelium: We were walking across campus to have lunch at the student union. We had just attended his research talk and I was still giddy from admiration. He was visiting our school but I'd known him for a while thanks to our shared connections in the mycelium. A reality of my body that I am still recognizing is that I move differently and exist in space differently. This makes taking the stairs difficult. I had to choose between letting everyone

know that taking a flight of stairs would leave me winded or taking the elevator. I chose to take the elevator. Almost everyone chose to take the stairs except for the visiting scholar. In a world where I am constantly watching people walk away from me, he stayed. And because he stayed, I survived. He survived with me.

7. I hope you're confused. If not confused, entertained. I am both confused and entertained. My work is artistic as I am an artist and an artist creates art, or so I hear. I wouldn't know. I'm not an artist. Who said that I was an artist? See, I told you that I was confused. It's difficult to make sense of what it is I am trying to do even in this process of doing, of "making, not faking," of discerning "twice-behaved behavior," (Turner; Schechner; as cited in Hamera, p. 4, 2018). So, is the process the performance? If performance is the method and theory of doing, then process is method, then performance!? Who knows, not me, I am not a performer. So, what am I doing here? What is this? Can you help me? Look, all I can really do is tell you what I've been taught. That is that a "[c]ollage is a demonstration of this process of the many becoming one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge on it," (Kuspit, p. 42; as cited in Kilgard, p. 4, 2009). As a performer, artist, scholar, I am simply trying to make sense of "two worlds," many worlds in fact, in a somewhat chaotic, non-linear way (p. 2). Why? Cause.

8. Mentorship can be ascribed to many metaphors and works and operates well within them.

9. Much like performance, mentorship engages the ephemeral and the atemporal. Like a ghostly remembrance of personal and professional relating, mentorship calls and recalls on our past memories/experiences. We sift through the lexicon of knowledge and wander aimlessly in the mi(d)st of remembrance. In addition, the act of mentorship exists in chronological order but is seldom understood in that sense or even named as such. We come to these moments of learning in times of need or emotional/spiritual/philosophical clarity. Grasping and holding on to them as we brave the process of learning and unlearning. Thus, in this movement, mentorship becomes a dance. However, I do not mean something incredibly structured like the waltz, or ballet; instead, I mean something fluid and emergent. Movement that is a response to and from the body; mine, yours, and ours. Movement that knows nothing about an 8-count but remains effortless and important.

10. A final moment from my Academic Mycelium:

“WHAT?! **** YES!”- This was my reaction to hearing that Dr. Bernadette Marie Calafell would be teaching a 1-unit course during summer. For the first few weeks of summer we engaged Chicanx Futurisms, Monstrosity, and Otherness. And I know that it is cliché to say that it was rejuvenating, but honestly? Facts. What struck me the most was the love that she put into our learning. It was but a sample of possible futures in this Latina’s life. And in thinking about futurisms and hopes, I come to a comforting fact. We survived. Together, in this utopia, we survived.

“I am here with you in this moment, but I am here with you in the future.” (Calafell, personal communication, 2023).

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