

Arboretum Again

Introduction to the 2019 edition

One of the biggest thrills I've experienced was when I spotted this book in the philosophy section of Ada's Technical Books in Seattle. "They get it!" I thought to myself. Or someone has a sense of humor. It makes me happy that this book is being reissued; this tells me some folks find it useful as well as sometimes being funny.

We know that correlation is not causation, but it's also true that there are times when unexpected similarities of patterns and initially dubious connections, often across disciplines, can enable us to think and imagine outside the typologies and categories that have developed over time. Although many of these cladograms might seem a bit far-fetched, they are often no less surprising than some of the discoveries and conjectures I have read about since this book first came out in 2006.

That time is a construct and it flows both backwards and forwards. That trees talk to one another through an underground network and that they protect one another. That religious children tend to be less kind and meaner to strangers. That music often does mirror cosmic relationships – or could it be the other way around?

These drawings came in a burst, a flood, and I can only think that something in my life, some context at that particular time, inspired me to think and explore by drawing at that moment. I have no idea what I might have been going through that drove my hand to move, but I seem

to have intuited that drawing was the tool best suited for the job.

These are a kind of visual glossolalia, an attempt to explore the world beyond logic. I see them as, paradoxically, a non-verbal language that uses words to break their own stranglehold on us.

We have a built-in urge to make sense of the world, to presume cause and effect and to endorse and internalise the categories that we have inherited. Some of the existing established connections we have inherited may be or might have been useful, and they stuck, but looking back it now seems that as I drew these I must have been at a place in my life when I was asking, "what if there's another way? What would it be like if the categories were not *those* ones, but some other organizational system? What might that be like? And then which one is true?"

Categories are a prison that condemns us to see things and each other in particular ways. Medicine and much of science used to be considered arts, but they were forcibly divorced, though as any mathematician or surgeon will tell you, deep down they are still arts. That separation may have had its uses but it also arrested the flow of many innovative ideas. This prison is one we have built ourselves, because it can be convenient and useful; at least it is at the moment each category and connection comes into being, but what might life be like on the outside?

—DB

New York, 2019

Why?

What are these drawings?

Why did I do them?

Will they be of interest to anyone else?

Of any use?

Do they need to be useful?

Well, I guess they're a lot of things. Faux science, automatic writing, self-analysis, satire and maybe even a serious attempt at finding connections where none were thought to exist. And an excuse to draw plant-like forms and diagrams.

They began a few years ago as instructions to myself in a little notebook—"draw an evolutionary tree on pleasure," or "draw a Venn diagram about relationships," for example. Commands to myself to make mental maps of imaginary territory. These accumulated over a few years until the impulse was spent. Maybe it was a sort of self-therapy that worked by allowing the hand to "say" what the voice could not.

Irrational logic—I've heard it called that. The application of logical scientific rigor and form to basically irrational premises. To proceed, carefully and deliberately, from nonsense, with a straight face, often arriving at a new kind of sense.

But how can nonsense ever emerge as sense? No matter how convoluted or folded, it will still always be nonsense, won't it?

I happen to believe that a lot of scientific and rational premises are irrational to begin with—that the work of much science and academic inquiry is, deep down, merely the elaborate justification of desire, bias, whim, and glory. I sense that to some extent the rational "thinking" areas of our brains are superrationalization engines. They provide us

with means and justifications for our more animal impulses. They allow us to justify them both to ourselves and then, when that has been accomplished, to others. "The hope that a mathematically unique solution will emerge [as an explanation of nature] is as faith-based as intelligent design," says Leonard Susskind, inventor of string theory.

This might not seem like a very optimistic perspective on intelligence, but even viewed this cynically, the result of centuries of this cerebral activity has produced a lot of beauty, pleasure, and magnificent, well, stuff.

I watched a nature documentary on my laptop with my daughter on a train today, and we saw creatures from the ocean's depths caught in the glow of deep-sea submersibles. Some of the creatures had never been seen before, or were not even thought possible. Things that spew time-delay fireworks, things that live where life was thought to be impossible, undersea "lakes", a fish on a kind of stalk. Well, we both agreed that they would have seemed preposterous, imaginary, and unbelievable, if the camera hadn't filmed them.

So, extrapolating from Mother Nature, if you can draw a relationship, it can exist. The world keeps opening up, unfolding, and just when we expect it to be closed—to be a sealed sensible box—it shows us something completely surprising. In fact, the result and possibly unacknowledged aim of science may be to know how much it is that we don't know, rather than what we do think we know. What we think we know we probably aren't really sure of anyway. At least if we can get a sense of what we don't know, we won't be guilty of the hubris

of thinking we know any of it. Science's job is to map our ignorance.

Some of the typologies I've drawn on—wine descriptions, East Village clubs and bars, medieval war machines—are terms that are possibly obscure. Therefore I've written some paragraphs that might give a hint as to what these names, classifications, typographies and categories refer to; these explanations will either illuminate my intentions or simply annoy.

Lawrence Weschler, in his recent book *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences* begins to ask where these connections come from. He asks if the similarities in the branching structures of neurons, trees and genealogies mean that we have a predisposition towards making things fit these structures. Do we see that which we are? Is that both the limit and form of our perception? Do we rule out other ways of mapping and organizing as a result? And if this is true, how does a structural pattern evolve to become a way of seeing and thinking?

I think these connections go even further. I see recent news photos that (unintentionally?) mimic Caravaggios, others that look exactly like images from *Star Wars*, the body attitudes of the Loas of Vodou or of classical Greek sculpture. Postures, poses and perspectives keep recurring over and over. As if Jung's archetypes—characters, relationships and stories imbedded in our thoughts—unconsciously urge us not only to psychologically label situations and relationships, but also to gravitate towards certain images and specific angles in our image choices. The picture editor in our heads. I don't think every photojournalist, for example, has a childhood memory of classical

art that they once saw on a school trip that they use as an unconscious reference, though some might. I think rather the journalists and the classical artists are more likely drawing on the same deep internal sources. Here indeed is intelligent design.

By that I don't mean a far-off divine intelligence; I mean that the mental structures themselves, the trees and branches that predispose us to see things in certain ways, evolved over millions of years, are self-replicating and "intelligent."

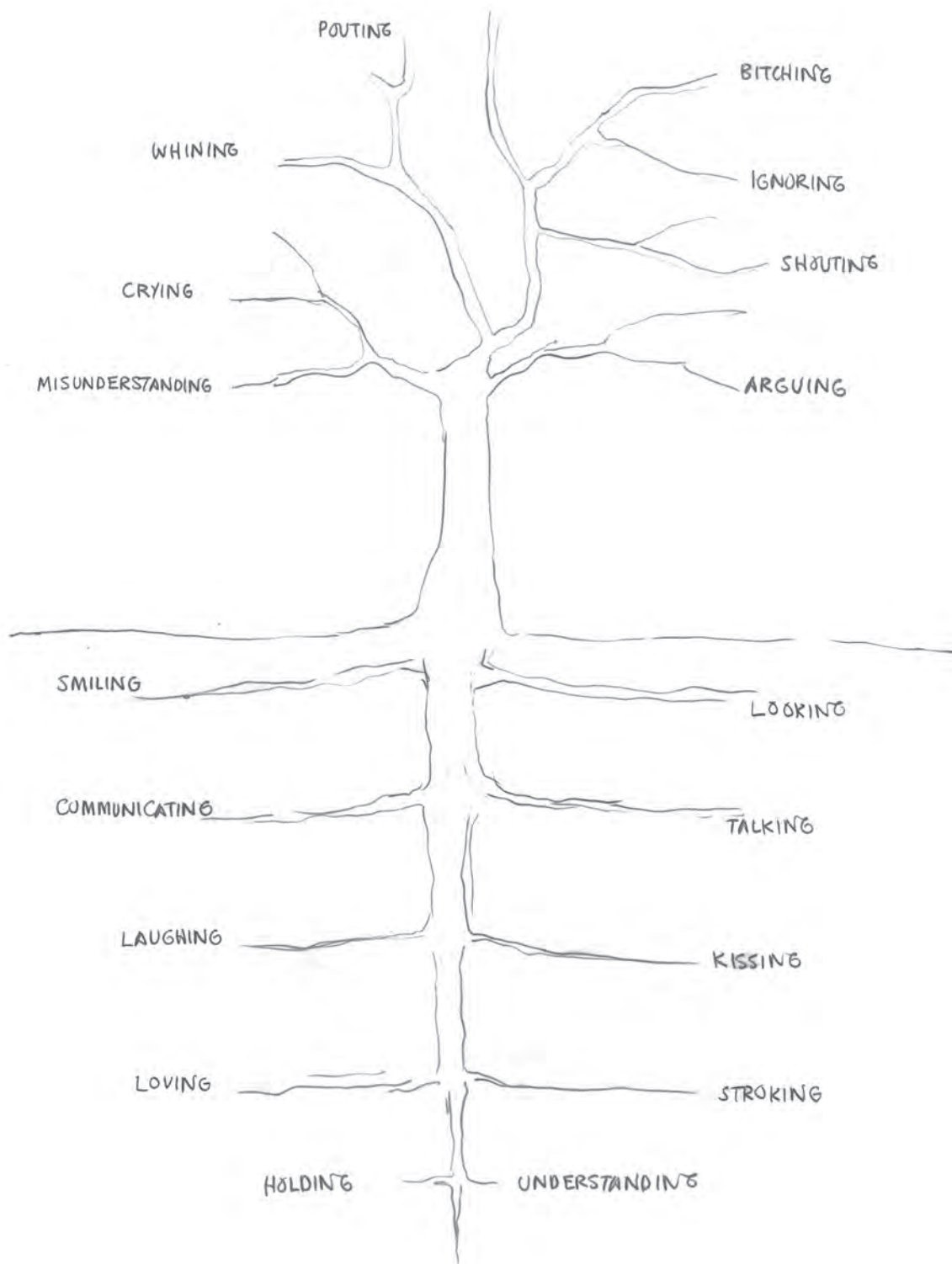
So, here I am pencil in hand, poking around in the dark—wait, is it a pencil or a flashlight? ...that's it! The pencil *is* a flashlight, and it roughly illuminates a tiny part of the above "intelligence." Maybe just enough to get it all wrong, but the puzzle pieces are us—we can recognize familiar pieces of ourselves, and so they are scary, fascinating and lovable.

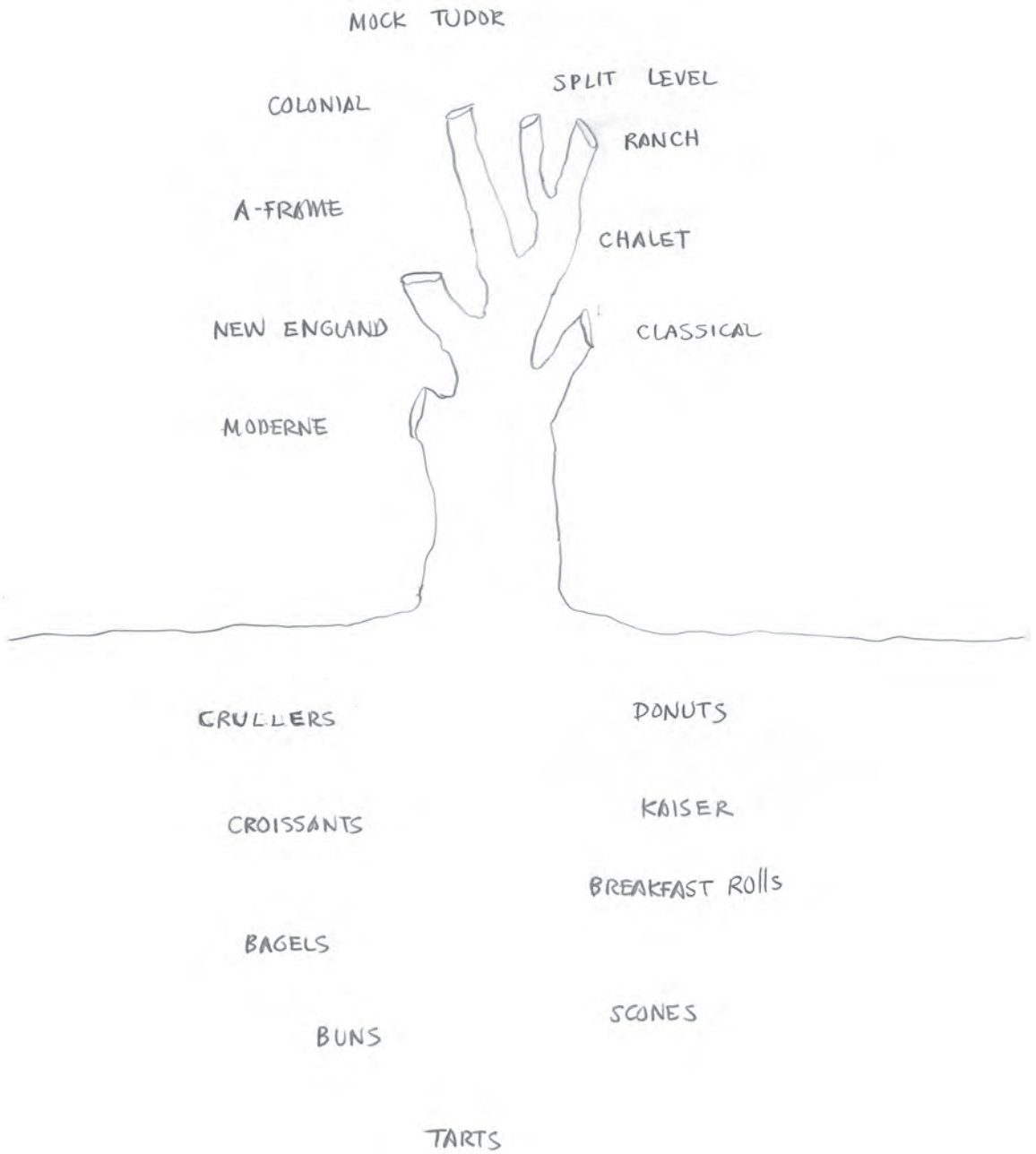
—DB

Manila and San Francisco, 2005

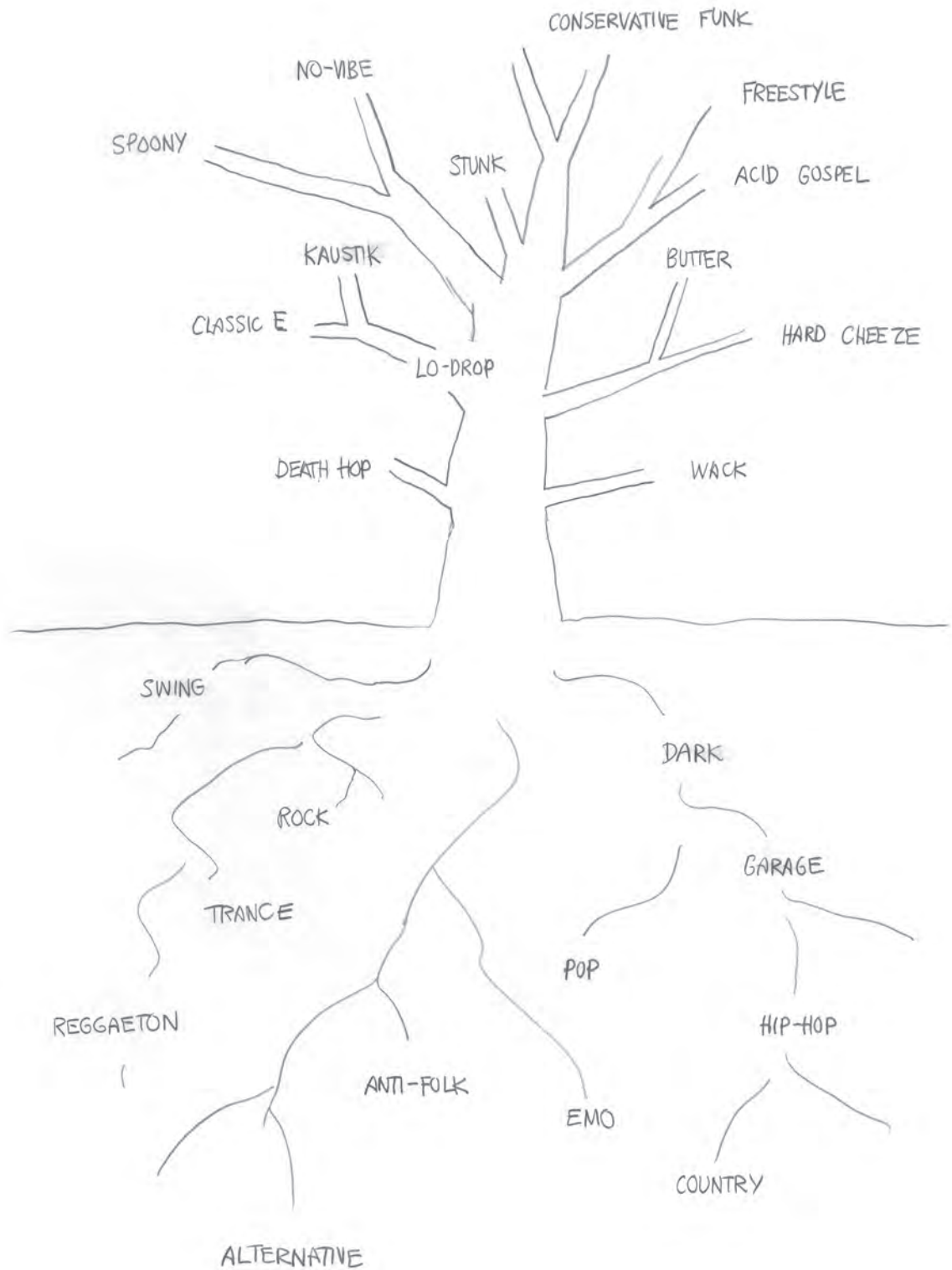


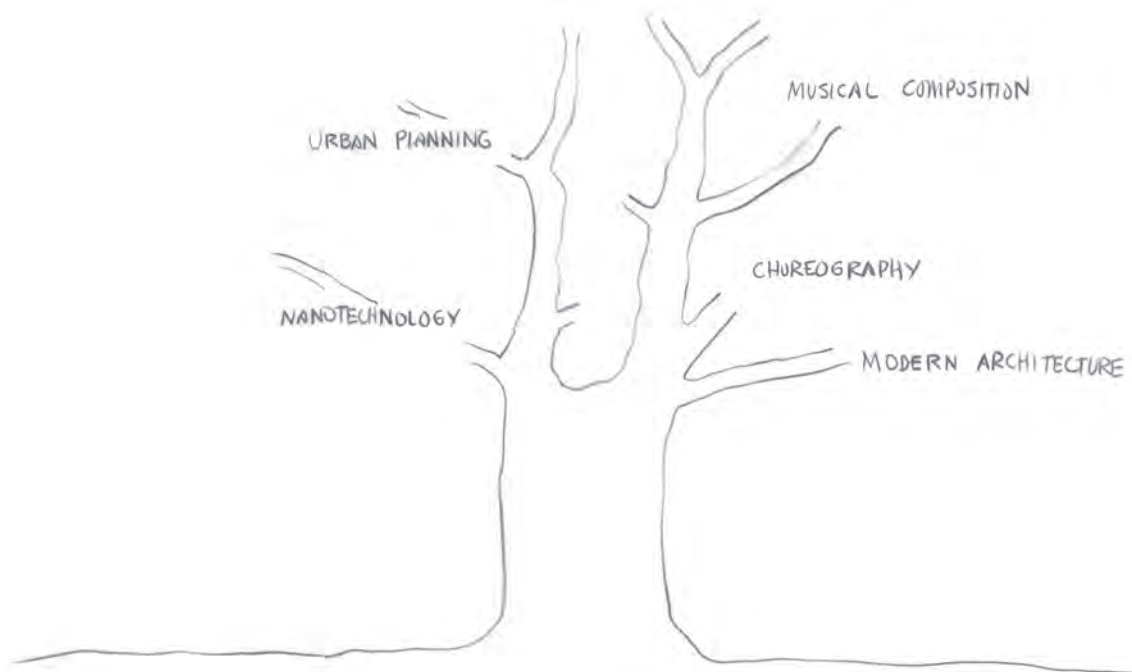
1. Psychological History





3. Music of the Future





DANDRUFF ON SHOULDERS

PIMPLE PATTERNS

STAR CONSTELLATIONS

GUM ON SIDEWALKS

MIGRATING BIRDS

SCHOOLS OF FISH

HAIR STUCK IN DRAINS

RANDOM SPILLS & STAINS

SUBATOMIC MOVEMENT

