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Which to Become? Encountering Fungi in Australian Poetry

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Abstract

As a largely unexplored group of organisms, fungi are ecologically complex members of the Australian biota. Fungi represent non-human alterity and interstitiality—neither animal nor plant, beautiful yet evanescent, slimy and lethal, and eliding scientific categorisations. Donna Haraway's notion of "companion species" and Anna Tsing's "arts of inclusion" remind us that sensory entanglements are intrinsic to human-fungi relations. Drawing conceptually from Haraway and Tsing, this paper will examine examples of poetry from John Shaw Neilson, Jan Owen, Douglas Stewart, Geoffrey Dutton, Caroline Caddy, Michael Dransfield, Philip Hodgins, Jaime Grant and John Kinsella that represent sensory involvements with fungi based in smell, sound, taste and touch. For Stewart, the crimson fungus is archetypal of danger, ontologically ambivalent and warranting physical distance. For Caddy and Dransfield, fungi are nutriment around which social and personal events transpire, whereas for Kinsella, fungi express concisely—as part of an ecological milieu—nature's dynamic alterity.

[Keywords: Poetry, Australian, Fungi, John Shaw Neilson; Jan Owen; Douglas Stewart; Geoffrey Dutton; Caroline Caddy; Michael Dransfield; Philip Hodgins; Jaime Grant; John Kinsella; ecology]

I. Introduction: The Sporadic Nature of Fungi

Despite the poisonous purview of a handful, fungi offer one of our most sensuous engagements with the natural world. Whether pleasurable or poisonous, many commonplace encounters with wild fungi are bodily. Yet the 2012 Canberra and Melbourne "death cap" poisonings remind us starkly that human entanglements with the non-human world at times turn disastrous. The tragic headline "Woman Dies After Eating Death Cap Mushrooms" points to a sensory encounter gone horribly wrong. It further underscores fungi's uncanny capacity to "appear like" something else—an edible version, an animal, a plant—or to appear suddenly out of nowhere—after rain, humidity, fire, coolness. An article in *The Canberra Times* alludes to the sheer tenacity of fungi which, unlike other biological hazards, defy mere striking out: "Acting ACT Chief Health Officer Dr Andrew Pengilly said the mushrooms' spores could remain underground for long periods of time, meaning they could not be eradicated" (Anderson).

It could be argued that a defining attribute of fungi is sporadicity rather than periodicity. A mushroom's beingness is spore-driven and, consequently, *sporadic*. Etymologically, the term *sporadic* can be traced to the 1650s and derives from the Latin *sporadicus* for "scattered" and Greek *spora* for "a sowing." The biological term "spore," as we employ it now, entered into English usage in 1836 to mean "seed, a sowing" (Harper). The modern connotation of *sporadic* with discontinuous occurrence reflects the originary meanings of scattered and spore. Therefore fungi's primordial generative apparatus, the spore, lends itself to metaphors of elusivity and unpredictability—on the one hand, qualities that upend scientific precision and ontological cohesion—and resolute attachment to place—on the other hand, that which goes against the juggernaut of social and environmental "progress," especially in the worlds where fungi live out their sporadic lives (see Tsing "Worlding").

Additionally, the term *fungi* itself implies a dispersed category comprising single and multi-celled organisms—mildews, lichens, moulds, mushrooms and yeasts—that lack chlorophyll and absorb food from their environments (Fuhrer 7-8). Rather than confined to their

eponymous kingdom, fungi are distributed across the kingdoms Fungi, Straminipila and Protista. As sessile, largely silent and spore-bearing organisms, fungi were considered primitive plants by early natural scientists who observed that the more prominent types—mushrooms and puffballs—exhibit a distinctly botanical growth habit: a buried root structure, an aerial stem and a well-defined “head” or fruiting body. In 1766, the German botanist Otto von Münchhausen suggested a zoogenic theory of mycology in which “animalcules” or “little animals...move about in the water; and when one observes them further the next day they form clumps of hard weft and from these arise moulds or fungi” (cited in Ainsworth 23).

The association of fungi with plants persists today where formal descriptions of fungi are subsumed within a Flora—a taxonomic catalogue of plants. The mycologist John Walker suggests that fungi, from both a scientific and cultural perspective, occupy a place of ontological ambiguity, taxonomic slippage and physical alterity: “With a view of the living world that permitted only plants or animals, fungi were considered as primitive plants and have remained so in most people’s minds to the present day” (Walker 1). Indeed, mycology, the study of fungi, has been recently termed a “neglected megascience.” Only 7% of the planet’s fungi have been taxonomically classified, whereas 90% of existing plants worldwide are estimated already known (Hawksworth 2). In Australia, there are an estimated 250,000 fungi species (Pascoe cited in May 346), 75% of which are undescribed. At the present rate of identification, it would take 1000 years to classify the remaining 188,000 species.

The first formally described Australian fungi was *Aseroë rubra*, named by the French botanist Jacques Labillardière (Fig. 1). In 1792 in Tasmania, Labillardière recorded a “new genus of mushroom, which grew from the middle of the mosses with which the ground was covered. The disposition of its rays made me name it *aseroe*” (cited in Parbery and Sheather 253). However, another 200 years passed before a biogeographical map of *A. rubra* would be produced (May 349). In the context of mycological neglect, May laments that “before the 1980s, fungi were almost completely overlooked in the planning of surveys and inventories of biota” (May 346). Other mycologists argue that fungi have been largely disregarded within the study of Australian ecology in favour of flora and fauna. Willis attributes the neglect to “antipathy to the group as a whole because a few species are highly poisonous” and the “ephemeral nature” of the characteristic fruiting bodies of many species (Willis in Fuhrer 5). Section II, Towards Poetic Mycologies, goes on to propose a reconsideration of fungi through an ecocritical position that recognises the alterity—linked to the sporadicity, ecology and corporeality—of these hard-to-categorise yet ecologically vital organisms.

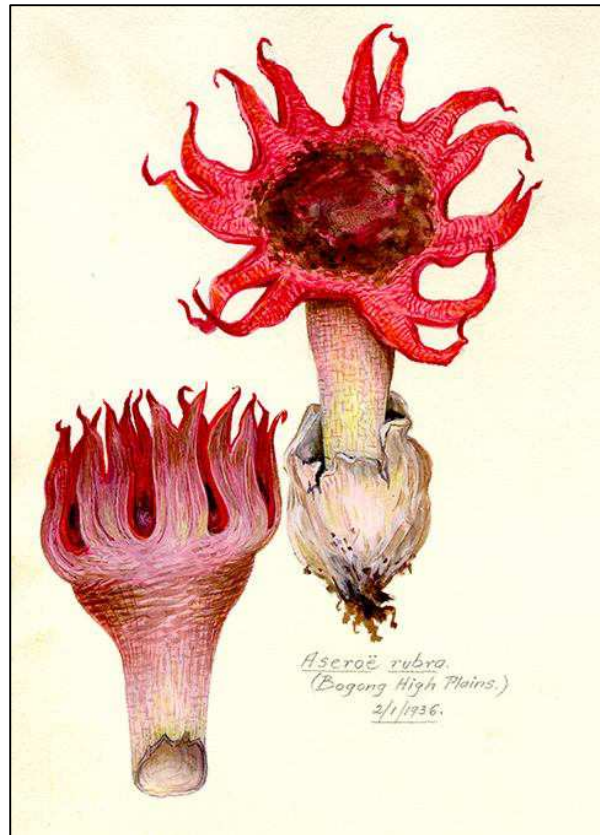


Fig 1. Malcolm Howie (1936) Starfish Fungus, *Aseroë rubra* (Bogong High Plains). Watercolour on Paper.¹

II. Towards Poetic Mycologies: Encountering Fungi as Companion Species

In Australian poetry and ecocriticism, do references to fungi occur only sporadically? What tones of regard express mycotal ecologies in poetry? What are the cultural meanings and sensory tones of engagement with fungi conveyed in Australian poetry? Considering these questions, this paper has a two-fold aim: (a) to examine the representations of fungi in key examples of Australian poetry from John Shaw Neilson to John Kinsella; and (b) to trace the spectrum of human sensory interactions with fungi as written by Australian poets. More broadly, this paper takes the position that human engagements with fungi—from the pleasure of delicacies to the toxicity of “death caps” and from the transcendence of psychoactive substances to the conservation of mycota—particularly bring to the fore questions of bodily encounters with the mycotal world. Specifically, the generic treatment of fungi in Australian poetry (as “mushrooms” or “fungi,” rather than concise genera and species in many instances) suggests a need to advance further ecocritical and ecohumanities models for understanding the layered meanings of fungi in Australian culture, including its representation in poetry. A poetic mycology recognises the interanimation of poetry and science—that “we cannot assess nonhuman agency without attention to the scientific storytelling through which we learn about actor networks” (Tsing “Worlding,” 50-51).

Except for the recent work of anthropologist Anna Tsing (“Worlding”; “Arts”), fungi have received little serious attention in ecocriticism, ecocultural studies, the environmental humanities and other interdisciplines concerned with critiquing culture-nature and science-humanities binaries. Whilst the pop cultural lexicon includes *mycophiles* (fungi lovers) and *mycophobes* (fungi haters), the study of fungi and human culture is normally the specialised domain of ethnomycology (see, for example, Kalotas; Trappe et al.). Yet, in the Australian context, fungi appear in the works of visual artists as diverse as botanical illustrator Ellis Rowan (1847–1922), Warlpiri painter Betsy Napangardi (1940–2008) and Western Australian illustrator Katrina Syme (1947–). Moreover, significant fungi-based Australian cultural phenomena include truffle festivals (Mundaring Truffle Festival 2011), the traditional uses of desert truffles (Trappe et al.) and “magic” mushroom hunting in rural parts of Australia (Smith), to name a few.

In this regard, the notion of “companion species” points to critical possibilities for researching human-fungi encounters as expressed in various cultural materials, such as poetry. Importantly, the concept also prompts deeper awareness amongst embodied participants—truffle, death cap and magic mushroom seekers alike—of actor networks involving fungi. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway describes “companion species” as including not only furry domestic animals but also wild floral, faunal and mycotal species, those of “significant otherness” (Haraway 165), those which, like fungi, are distinguished by their alterity. Through the lens of companion species, the alterity of fungi could prompt a willingness to *live with* and a mycologically informed *curiosity for*. Haraway comments on the sensory and co-constitutive dimensions of companion species: “I have tried to live inside the many tones of regard/respect/seeing each other/looking back at/meeting/optic-haptic encounter. Species and respect are in optic/haptic/affective/cognitive touch: they are at table together; they are messmates, companions, in company, *cum panis*” (Haraway 164). Considering the etymological connection between *species* and *respect*, the term *companion species* “includes animal and human as categories, and much more besides: and we would be ill advised to assume which categories are in play and shaping one another in flesh and logic in constitutive encounterings” (Haraway 164). Hence, the notion of companion species implies “coshapings all the way down, in all sorts of temporalities and corporealities” and “a kind of encountering worthy of regard” (Haraway 164).

In comparable terms to Haraway, Anna Tsing advocates “arts of inclusion” marked by “passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied” (Tsing “Arts” 19). Tsing (19)

proposes a “vernacular science, that is, knowledge production in which ordinary people can participate.” In the networked context of matsutake (*Tricholoma matsutake*) science, vernacular mycology mobilises human senses in response to the objects of study towards an appreciation of “their colours, tastes, and smells, and their promise of a livelihood in the woods” (Tsing “Arts” 6). Extending Haraway and Tsing, Section III will analyse, through the lens of multispecies theory, a set of Australian poems that emphasise fungi and their smells. Relationships of “regard/respect/seeing each other/looking back at/meeting/optic-haptic encounter” are crucial to “arts of inclusion” and the experiencing of mycota as “messmates,” in Haraway’s terms. Multispecies theory, hence, allows ecocritics to interrogate writers and works on fungi. Does the “significant otherness” of fungi merit standing away, or do poets engage with fungi and their environments through close sensory and ecological encounter? How do we negotiate sensory interaction with a grouping of life that can at once be highly delectable and deadly toxic?

III. Poetic Mycologies of Smell: Almost Animal, Almost Kin?

Returning to Haraway’s haptic phrase “coshapings all the way down” and its implications for a poetic mycology of the senses, Section III examines selected poems from Douglas Stewart (1913–1985), Jan Owen (1940–) and Jaime Grant (1949–). Owen’s “Fungus,” Stewart’s “The Fungus,” Grant’s “Farmer Picking Mushrooms” and “Mushrooms after Rain” call into question optic-*olfactory*-haptic “coshapings,” particularly through the shared emphasis of their works on the repugnant odours of fungi. Their poetry exhibits grappling with mycotal alterity and

underscores the view of fungi as potentially harmful, morally ambiguous and physically decaying.



Fig 2. Earthstar Fungus (*Geastrum saccatum*). Photo.²

“Fungus” dwells on mycotal in-betweenness in the poem’s opening line “Something dead and rotting, I thought” (Owen, l. 1) as the living organism is wrenched from its autumn earth “with a stink and a puff of spore-/dust, black smut from the open cup’s/ brown leather” (ll. 4–6) (Fig. 2). According to Owen’s account, the fungus in question is a gasteromycete or puff-ball (Fuhrer 93). To the observer’s eyes, the dislodged fungus appears as a hodgepodge of “scraps/ failed petals, neither flower nor mould” (ll. 6–7) and peculiarly emits “an obscene/ smell almost animal, almost kin” (ll. 9–10). Owen’s fungus is existentially ambiguous (is it even alive?) and taxonomically failed from the outset (if not a flower, animal or mould, then what?). As with many species of fungi, its odour is evocative,

repugnant and animalistic all at once, that is, quintessentially uncanny—is this possibly a human smell? Nevertheless, Owen’s narrative is distinctly embodied throughout; she enumerates the possible folkloric uses of the fungus “for warts, whitlows, and falling hair” (l. 12) and assigns names to it with nefarious connotations—ghoul, foul, witch, stench and death. When science at last intervenes in the building uncertainty of the poem, we learn the name of the *unnamed* fungus: Earth-star, *Geastrum indicum*.

Owen reaches equipoise with the fungus through her physical gestures coupled to scientific knowledge. However, Douglas Stewart's poem of comparable title, "The Fungus," opens with "Leave it alone. Don't touch it! Oh, but don't touch it/ That crimson is nature's warning, those specks that blotch it" (Stewart 165, ll. 1-2) (Fig. 3). Count out Haraway's optic-haptic dyad, but for good reason; the fungus Stewart warns against is not the lovely earthstar but the poisonous fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*). Writing in the 1930s, the South Australian mycologist John Burton Cleland (18) published one of the earliest commentaries on the negative effects of ingesting fly agaric: "This toadstool has a bright scarlet cap covered with broad white warts, and cannot be readily mistaken for one of the edible kinds... There is usually some giddiness, with confusion of ideas, and occasionally hallucinations. Delirium, violent convulsions, and loss of consciousness may follow." The distinctive alliance of visual features—"crimson" and "specks"—indicates the identity of the fungus: *A. muscaria*. Cleland argues that the species has been "almost certainly introduced" to Australia (Cleland 48).



Fig 3. Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*).
Photo.³

As in Owen's work, smell is the prominent sensory faculty as "reek" and "leathery stench of corruption and poison" (l. 3) register. Chemically, the active principle, muscarin, is a complex ammonia, producing a urine-like odor in the toadstool (Cleland 18). Stewart's visual and olfactory consternation culminates in the animalisation of the fungus, as evident in phrases such as "with gaping throat and tentacles wavering out" (l. 5), "crimson tentacles" (l. 10) and "down that throat" (l. 10). Other zoocentric tropes include "white like the egg of a snake" (l. 8) in reference to its emerging pileus or cap. Although the whiteness of its shell could symbolise purity (and by extension taxonomic cooperation), the fungus is inherently "secret and black" (l. 11), "evil and beautiful" (l. 12) and primordially of "the oldest ocean" (l. 12). By the poem's closing, Stewart's moralisations condense around an inability to come to terms (literally) with the fungus. Existing in a state between cephalopod (octopus) and plant (flower), the *in-betweenness* of the fungus is taxonomic, linguistic, moral and metaphysical. The crimson toadstool is archetypal of danger, ontologically uncooked, ecological irrelevant (where was the *Fungi of Australia* that gains mention in Owens' poem?) and beckons, through its outward appearance and repugnant odour, to distance ourselves completely: "Now like a deep-sea octopus, now like a flower/ And does not know itself which to become" (ll. 14–15). Haraway's admonition is appropriate: "We would be ill advised to assume which categories are in play and shaping one another in flesh and logic" (164). When considered ecologically as a decomposer, the noxious *Amanita muscaria* is more the messmate than we could initially imagine from Stewart's representation.

Owen and Stewart employ the severe-sounding term *fungus* in a pejorative sense over the more ecologically sensitive *fungi* or popular *mushroom*. The heavy-handed *fungus* also figures into Jaime Grant's mushroom poetry. Although tangentially concerning fungi themselves, Grant's "Farmer Picking Mushrooms" (*The Refinery* 57) concludes with "I've found no mushrooms/ Footprints ran through my garden. Her lover's/ breath breeds in her like a fungus" (ll. 16–18) (Fig. 4). Clearly, Grant's mushrooms signify infidelity—in the dual senses of being kept in the dark and then seeing the truth. Like Stewart, the fungus is implicated in secrecy and decay, specifically evident in "breath breeds in her like a fungus" (l. 18). Owen emphasises

bodily interaction with fungi; Stewart, bodily protection from. Here Grant conveys a tone of vindication in the final line and hope for the restoration of the speaker's fractured body/psyche—the chasing away of dreams that “pushed their roots/ down through my sleep” (ll. 10–11). The fungus represents the fragmentation of the pastoral idyll and the intrusion of rot into the warmth of the lungs, into domestic and marital enclosure. Whereas the title “Farmer Picking Mushrooms” evokes communion with a nature idyll, the poem's brooding tension unravels any final realisation of harmony.



Fig 4. *Pleurotopsis longinqua*. Photo.⁴

Similarly, Grant's “Mushrooms after Rain” (*Skywriting* 60-64) notes, towards the middle of the poem, the pungency of mushrooms, but with an air of respect: “Their rank/ scent tainted the air/ and yet there/ was something beautiful/ in those skulls” (ll.76–80). Mycotal ambiguities form a central focus of the poem, which freely associates a number of fungi-related memories and sensory impressions in short choppy stanzas: the binary of “innocent and sinister” (l. 43), the zoomorphism of “new-laid birds' eggs;/ human sex/ organ” (ll. 57–59) and the mushrooms themselves “which spilled an ink-/ like powder over the sink,/ the dust of regeneration./ Having to clean/ this stuff/ one could not think enough/ of its heedless will/ to survival” (ll. 85–92). In the final analysis, however, Grant comes to accept the alterity, ambiguity and perniciousness of fungi more gracefully than Stewart and Owen. Despite their intrusions, mushrooms are “a mystery,/ as sourceless as the rain/ which began to fall again” (ll. 116–118) and “a life-wish like my/ own, strong/ as a beating/ heart” (ll. 94–97). In the latter phrase's intimation of bodily empathy between human beings and fungi, we find a nascent foundation for a companion species view of fungi.

IV. Poetic Mycologies of Sound: Shyly and Styly as Mushrooms?

The works of Owen, Stewart and Grant place emphasis on the smell of fungi. In further developing the notion of poetic mycologies, Section IV will analyse selected works of John Shaw Neilson (1872–1942), Philip Hodgins (1959–1995) and Geoffrey Dutton (1922–1998). This section will examine the interconnections between fungi, rural environments and human sense experience, particularly in relation to the aural lifeworlds of fungi. Some of the earliest references to fungi in Australian poetry occur in the works of Neilson, the South Australian itinerant rural labourer and poet. Labelled “the roadmender,” Neilson spent the majority of his life constructing roadways and working in the bush where he undoubtedly encountered various mycotal forms. The opening lines of Neilson's pastoral “May” link the animation of fungi to the season's coolness. Neilson represents mushrooms as reclusive harbingers of autumnal beauty; Australian May is a soporific time after the heat and dryness of summer in which movement slows for some, except for mushrooms enlivened by coolness. The poem opens with a mycological quatrain that positions the mushrooms in an auditory milieu: “Shyly the silver-hatted mushrooms make/ Soft entrance through,/ And undelivered lovers, half awake,/ Hear noises in the dew” (Neilson 26, ll. 1-4).

Sound induces the human-fungi encounter with “noises in the dew” (l. 3) as the emergent organisms “make/ Soft entrance through” (ll. 1-2) the wet autumn earth. Neilson’s evocation of mycotal sound is curious considering the silence of fungi to most of our ears. The mushroom’s subtle, though sonic, progress through the earth symbolises the poet’s broader investigation of nature’s autumnal physis, of the dream-like articulations “faint as a widow mourning with soft eyes” (l. 7) of the earth at this time of year. The groggy interstitiality between summer and autumn is further apparent in “dim is the day and beautiful” (l. 11) and “undelivered lovers, half awake” (l. 3). By the concluding couplet, the silver-hatted mushrooms (perhaps *Amanita umbrinella*) or their more sanguine-coloured cousins (perhaps *Amanita xanthocephala*) return again to the scene: “Delightful in grave greenery they rise/ Red oranges in May” (ll. 15-16).

For Neilson, the sun and the mushrooms are interconnected symbols of autumnal physis, when the typically lucid Australian sunlight becomes diffuse as winter nears. “The Scent o’ the Lover” (Neilson 79) also opens with a mycological quatrain: “I saw the mushrooms hoping/ In the cool June:/ It is the scent o’ the lover/ Sweetens the tune” (ll. 1-4). Like “May,” “The Scent” expresses the autumnal sensuality of the mushrooms’ lifeworld. The beginning quatrain alludes to four senses—vision (“saw”), touch (“cool”), smell (“scent”) and taste (“sweetens”)—where the imminence of seasonal and thus metaphysical change is linked to the mushrooms’ “hoping.” We go on to learn that “Love is the loud season:/ Tears fall too soon:/ It is the scent o’ the lover/ Sweetens the moon” (ll. 21-24), returning to the interplay between smell, taste and sound.

In contrast to the sensuous and particularly acoustic pastoralism of Neilson’s mycology, Philip Hodgins’ poetry “with its clear-sighted realism...is determinedly non-Pastoral” (Taylor 111). Born in 1959, Philip Hodgins died at age thirty-six of leukemia. The majority of his poetry addresses commonplace rural occurrences or what Fitter (quoted in Taylor 113) terms the “quotidian...which favours routine activity and typical experience over images of the mythical, remote and awesome.” However quotidian, the poem “Pregnant Cow” from his collection *Animal Warmth* evokes an environment of bodily repose—a warm comfort contrasting acutely to the “frosty paddock” of the morning discovery. In beautiful directness, the poem conveys the birthing of a calf accompanied by the emergence of fungi: “Her swollen belly was a hammock,/ somewhere to sleep, a nice warm bath./ This morning in the frosty paddock/ I found some mushrooms, and a calf” (Hodgins, ll. 1-4). Hodgins associates mushrooms with natal mysteries—birth as sudden emergence from a state of deep senescence. In keeping with Hodgins’ quotidianism, “Pregnant Cow” concerns routine interactions between domestic animals and farmers; the mushrooms appear as sporadic intrusions in the farming scene, discovered casually—that is—“found.” Like Neilson’s fungi, Hodgins’ mushrooms are peripherally related to the scene’s tension where the “regard/respect/seeing” of the poem is centred—as in farming life itself—on the calf, rather than the mushrooms; on domesticated rather than on wild companion species.

In the pastoral mycology of Geoffrey Dutton, we find focused attention to mushrooms and their agency. Born at South Australia’s oldest stud sheep station, Dutton (1922–1998) published over fifty books of biography, criticism and poetry (Kinsella “Biographical” 405). Like Neilson and Hodgins, a considerable portion of Dutton’s work concerns rural life and natural history. Like the previous examples in this section, “Mushrooms” (Dutton 182-83) quickly positions fungi in a farming context: “Mushrooms. They’re sharing a paddock by the river/ With a thousand sheep and twenty temporary crows” (ll. 1–2) and, later, “fast-farmed by sun and rain” (l. 8). The mushrooms’ sly and sudden nature is the subject of subsequent lines: “They stick up white, as bold as bones/ Soft as feathers under, those pink vanes/ Around a fat column, secret to the earth” (ll. 3–5). Through a kind of linguistic gymnastics comparable to Grant’s

“Mushrooms after Rain,” Dutton implicates mushrooms metaphorically with rotteness, with “flies and footrot” (l.14) infesting the farming scene. However, the poem shifts markedly from predictable mycological tropes; ultimately the wild mushrooms “pop up clean” (l. 22), unlike the sheep “that need to be nurtured, like seedlings” (l. 25). By the end, Dutton likens the mushrooms to a “no man’s crop, where already some vanes/ Are blackening, maggots beginning to nuzzle at life” (ll. 33-34). Whereas Hodgins correlates the appearance of mushrooms and the birthing of the calf, implying some synchrony between fungi and farming life, Dutton valorises the autopoiesis of mushrooms in contrast to the feeble dependency of sheep on culture/nurture. Here, the self-sustaining or agentic “nature” of mushrooms—shy, sly, silent and wild companion species—is a far better exemplar of purity than the resource-intensive “nurture” of the pastoral and its inevitable rot, from Dutton’s perspective.

V. Poetic Mycologies of Taste: We Made Soup

Neilson, Hodgins and Dutton represent fungi as part of aural farming landscapes, whereas Owen, Dutton and Grant emphasise, among other qualities, the repulsive olfactory registers of fungus. For the latter poets, the human-fungi encounter is distanced and the mushrooms exist only within the context of rural realities, not as agentic organisms in their own right. However, through an emphasis on taste, Section V will compare the poetic mycologies of Caroline Caddy (1944–), Michael Dransfield (1948–1973) and John Kinsella (1963–). Each of these poets evidences embodied and sensory interaction with fungi. I argue that through the sense of taste linked to mycological knowledge, the possibility of mushrooms as companion species is most fully actualised, reflecting Tsing’s notion of “scientific storytelling through which we learn about actor networks” (Tsing “Worlding” 50-51).

Although Michael Dransfield passed away at the age of twenty-four, he left behind a considerable body of work, some of which deals with his intoxication (Kinsella “Biographical” 404). “I do this i do that” (Dransfield 163) is about the psychotropic genus of mushroom *Psilocybe* (Fig. 5). Cleland (13) observes that the species is “known to occur in rich pastures, and especially on or near cow or horse dung...flesh white, becoming blue when cut.” Along with an obvious emphasis on the psychotropic affordance of the species, Dransfield exhibits astute awareness of its mycotal ecology: “mushrooms grow best, this kind, where/ cowshit lies under conifers. gather/ at any time of day. when cut/ should be some blue visible. otherwise/ don’t eat them” (ll. 3–7). A recipe for psychedelic stew, Dransfield’s poem provides strict directions on the sensible use of *Psilocybe*: “chop fine/ cook up into small soup./ eat two days running, then leave off/ for a week. smoke instead” (ll. 7–10). Here, Dransfield engages directly with the alterity of the species—a poisonous, nutritive or psychoactive substance, depending on its preparation—through the empirical observation of a naturalist. Dransfield counters Cleland’s assertion that “many species of this genus are poisonous and cause severe mental disturbance. It is unwise to eat any” (Cleland 13). Thus, “I do this i do that” manifests Haraway’s “optic-haptic encounter” through sensory intimacy with a companion



Fig 5. *Psilocybe cyanescens*. Krzysztof Blachnicki. Photo.⁵

species. Whereas Stewart's fungus is death-dealing and his aesthetics consequently distanced, Dransfield's mushrooms are transcendental and his aesthetics physically interactive.

Caroline Caddy was born in Western Australia, but lived in the USA and Japan during her childhood (Kinsella "Biographical" 401). Her most recent collection, *Esperance: New and Selected Poems*, features a variety of ecological poems, such as "Stirling Ranges" and "Karri Trees," about the South-West region of WA where she lives. "Mushrooms" from her collection *Beach Plastic* centres around the strained relationship between a mother and teenage daughter. In the poem's third section, the speaker sends her daughter out mushrooming: "Navigating the seas of your boredom/ I sent you out to look for mushrooms/ You returned feet wet skirt held/ hem to waist" (Caddy, ll. 63-66). Upon the daughter's return, the two find renewed understanding for one another through the sensuality of the wild mushrooms occupying the domestic setting:

I smelled them before you opened your skirt—
not rank that often comes with size
but redolent
our words came out like inspired praise.
They were
bowls for thick-lipped giants shepherd pies
mosques and edible turbans.
They had the feel of gruyere and some
with strips of grass tied over them
were obscure Japanese packages.
We made soup
wiped their photocopies from plates tables—
everywhere they touched us. (Caddy, ll. 88-100)

Instead of following Stewart's ethos of "Leave it alone. Don't touch it! Oh, but don't touch it," Caddy's poem invokes the sense of smell and the gradations between "rank" and "redolent." Rather than a fear of and distance towards, familiarity and comfort with wild mushrooms marks the passage's tone. Caddy's haptic metaphors imply interactions based on nourishment: "the feel of gruyere" (l. 95). The making of soup is an act of conciliation between mother and daughter, as well as an embodied engagement between human beings and wild companion species. In the final analysis, Caddy's passage represents intimate sensory opening to fungi—"everywhere they touched us" (l. 100)—combined carefully with the empirical experience of a naturalist or wild-crafter, comparable to Dransfield.

In privileging the embodied aspects of human-mushroom encounters, the works of Caddy and Dransfield mark shifts in the representation of fungi in Australian poetry towards Tsing's notion of "arts of inclusion." The ontological ambivalence of Stewart's fungus and the pastoral mycologies of Hodgins and Dutton (in which fungi appear as sporadic members of a farming scene) are replaced by a sense of fungi as companion species closely interconnected to physical yearnings. The progression towards a poetic mycology of the senses is further manifested in the fungi-related works of Western Australian poet John Kinsella. Much of Kinsella's considerable body of writing deals with the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia (Taylor 113). Extending Terry Gifford's notion of anti-pastoralism, Kinsella has characterised his own poetry as poison pastoralism (see, for example, Haskell). Examples of Kinsella's mycological poetry include "Sub-Paradiso: Mushrooms" (Kinsella *Divine*) and "Mushrooming" (Kinsella *The Hierarchy*). However, I will focus on "Idyllatry" from his recent collection *Armour*.

The four-part “Idyllatry” begins with Part I, “*Laetiporus portentosus*,” the scientific name for the White Punk fungus: “It has weathered the storms, though its white/ punk posture has injected rot into the heart/ of the eucalypt” (ll. 1–3) (Fig. 6). Kinsella’s connotation of “rot” here



Fig 6. White Punk (*Laetiporus portentosus*). Photo⁶

differs to Stewart’s “leathery stench of corruption and poison” and Grant’s “in her lungs like a fungus.” “Idyllatry” reveals the poet’s mycological awareness of the fungi as an organism parasitising a host eucalypt and, conversely, being colonised by invertebrates as a host itself. Thus, Kinsella extends the sense of taste and the attainment of food—crucial to Dranfield and Caddy’s mycological representations—to an ecological community of taste comprising a chain of consumer species. Kinsella mentions Aboriginal ethnomycological knowledges in the closing lines of Part I: “and so the first people here carried

fire/ in its smouldering tinder” (ll. 13–14). The allusion to Aboriginal knowledges signifies spiritual reverence towards companion species, such as the White Punk—“a kind of encountering worthy of regard” (Haraway 164)—prevalent in *Armour* and exemplified in “halo we might walk beneath” (l. 12). Moreover, Kinsella’s upward focus on a species growing on trees inverts the perceptual mode of looking down at field mushrooms, dominant in Dutton’s poem, for example. The polypore fungi bear sublime and spiritual resonances, which turn one’s perspective upward rather than downward. Indeed, the Aboriginal use of *Laetiporus portentosus* to transport fire invokes an embodied aesthetic of fungi, aligned with Caddy’s “everywhere they touched us” (l. 100), one coupled to intimate human-fungi encounter and the cultural continuity of the smouldering heat source.

VI. Conclusion: Towards Poetic Mycologies of the Senses

Although not profuse by any means, references to fungi in Australian poetry reveal cultural attitudes towards and sensory interactions with the non-human world. In particular, the poetry of Kinsella, Caddy and Dransfield integrates knowledge of natural science and sensory experience of fungi, specifically through the faculties of taste and touch. I have suggested that these senses are the most generative of Haraway’s notion of “companion species” in relation to fungi and the actualisation of Tsing’s “arts of inclusion” through human-fungi sensory encounters. A poetic mycology of the senses combines poetic thought; attention to fungi in their ecological contexts; awareness of the interactions between fungi and their environments; and human experience of mycotal smells, sounds and tastes. The emphasis within multispecies theory on sensory conjunctions—for instance, Haraway’s “optic-haptic encounter”—provides an ecocritical lens for reading representations of fungi in Australian poetry, for further articulating cultural perceptions of fungi and for envisioning the more concerted conceptualisation of fungi as companion species. The reconsideration of the alterity, sporadicity, ecology and corporeality of fungi could instigate their further exploration and conservation—both in science and the humanities.

Notes

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