A Poetic Mycology of the Senses

Four poems on mushrooms

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If fungi comprise "the forgotten kingdom", then poetry that takes fungi and the discipline of mycology as its subject matter could be – by association – the forgotten ecopoetry (or perhaps "mycopoetry"). As the third "f" in contemporary biodiversity conservation, languishing behind fauna and flora,[2] fungi occupy a comparably liminal and, possibly, marginal position in literary history and ecocritical studies.[3] In particular, fungi straddle a largely unnavigated terrain between the recent "human-animal studies"[4] and its literary counterpart "zoocriticism"[5] and the emergent "critical plant studies"[6] and its budding complement "vegetal ecocriticism".[7] As a consequence, even amongst ecocritics, fungi have been grouped into the latter category, mirroring a tendency in the history of the biological sciences to aggregate fungi and plants.[8] Yet, as neither plant nor animal – that is, existentially in-between the other two "f"s – fungi lack the powers of photosynthesis synonymous with green plants, and also proliferate through radically different mechanisms.[9] I, therefore, suggest that the ecocritical reading of mycotal poetry should be performed in the context of the unique otherness of these organisms.

In light (or in the dankness) of this, I ask in this article: What are the diverse ways in which human beings perceive fungi? What are the common figures of speech used to express the particular mycotal mode(s) of being? And more precisely: When does poetry shift away from hackneyed mushroom metaphors towards a curiosity for the complex lives and cultural meanings of fungi, as well as their irreplaceable ecological and social roles? In responding, I begin with a broad premise: by virtue of the ecologically and ontologically articulated modes fungi inhabit, to write of them is to write in a different way than of animals and plants. Indeed, despite the lack of parity between the kingdoms, fungi and particularly fleshy macrofungi or mushrooms, appear regularly in the North American, European, Australian and South African poetic canons.[10] However, in asking "when" such a shift occurs in poetry towards a view of fungi as relational and complex beings, I do not mean to undertake a historically focused analysis of mycotal writing throughout these traditions; such a project would be entirely out of my present scope. Instead, I do wish to know what the gestalt label "mushroom" signifies for these four somewhat disparate poets; the ways in which Dickinson, Plath, Oliver and Caddy correspondingly represent mushrooms in language; and some plausible reasons for the differing qualities they attribute to fungi and the manner in which they do so.

In my analysis of four poems generically (and plurally) titled "mushrooms" (or in Dickinson's case, the singular form, "mushroom"), I will take note of the recurrence of mycotal tropes, while considering the implications of such ways of regarding fungi for

broader cultural perceptions of the kingdom. Indeed, as we will see, in much poetry about fungi, mushrooms are linked symbolically with danger, decay and death, as well as stealth, sin and the supernatural. These attributes operate as stock tropes, reinforcing certain largely negative preconceptions about this much misunderstood, disregarded and "forgotten" group of beings. Accordingly, in my readings, I will be on the lookout for positive representations of human-fungus entanglements – sensory intimacies if you like – involving the apprehension of kingdom Fungi as a community of beings through the speaker's direct embodied experience. In these rare instances, the eating, tasting, smelling and touching of the delectable fruiting bodies of mushrooms leads to what Michel Serres calls "mingled bodies"[11] in which physical and intellectual distance between humans and fungi dissipates – along with human mistrust – if only fleetingly. Building on Serres and others, as part of this admittedly brief comparison, I will draw upon ecopoetic and multispecies theory in order to conceptualise the implications of these poems more generally for kingdom Fungi.

Theorising a poetic mycology of the senses

Through four poems on mushrooms, the notion of a "poetic mycology of the senses" will be forwarded and, to some extent, developed as a constructive lens for reading mycotally focused environmental writing. In particular, Scott Bryson's elaboration of the three features of ecopoetry, in conjunction with Scott Knickerbocker's productive notion of "sensuous poesis", will be used to explore the ecopoetic foundation for a poetic mycology. Bryson argues that ecopoetry bears three distinguishing attributes. To begin with, ecopoetry reflects "an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world"[12] or, in Timothy Morton's terms, reflects ecology as "thinking how all beings are interconnected, in as deep a way as possible."[13] Secondly, as Bryson goes on to state, ecopoetry expresses "an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature".[14] And thirdly, ecopoetry reveals an abiding suspicion of "hyperrationality and its resultant overreliance on technology".[15] Here, hyperrationality refers to the preponderance of deductive logic and analytical reasoning to the exclusion of other modes of knowledge-making, including sensory embodiment, intuition and interrelationships between species. The operative term in Bryson's analysis is "overreliance". Indeed, technological instruments, such as electron microscopes, can facilitate sensuous human encounters with fungi and their physiologies that would otherwise be impossible to the naked eye. However, "sensuous poesis" is multisensorial, combining the powers of vision with the nuances of tasting, smelling, touching and hearing.

As the underlying foundation to Bryson's three attributes, human sensory embodiment in the material domain helps to make possible an ecocentric attitude, commitment to humility and scepticism in the face of hyperrationality. Through the aurality of contemporary American poetry, Knickerbocker augments Bryson's three-fold position through the term "sensuous poesis" as "the process of rematerialising language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature".[16] According to Bryson, sensuous poesis inverts the mirroring of the world in language (as pure representation) and rather inflects the immanent sensory potential of poetry to "enact, rather than merely represent, the immediate, embodied experience of nonhuman nature".[17] My sensory analysis of mycopoetry adds another dimension to Knickerbocker's notion of sensuous poesis in language. Moreover, the material exchange between mingled bodies involves human-mushroom interpenetration that disrupts aesthetic or linguistic distance and stanches negative moral attachments to mushrooms. In short, the interrogation of language is essential to understanding mushrooms and redefining human-fungus relationships.

In addition to the ecopoetic theory of Bryson and Knickerbocker, multispecies theory proffers another lens for comprehending what these poems reveal about human-fungus entanglements. Multispecies theory encompasses a body of writings by posthumanist scholars that sets out to decentre human subjectivity and to value the multiple subjectivities – animals, plants, insects and mushrooms – of the ecocultural world.[18] Entanglement is an integral notion within multispecies theory – one which implies a degree of sustained material reciprocity between the mingled organisms and their lifeworlds. The term "lifeworld" derives from the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl and describes a world experienced in common by all living beings: plants, animals, fungi and humans alike. For a lifeworld to exist and to lead to knowledge, the multiple senses must be engaged in a sustained way with one's "surroundings". One is necessarily entangled with one's lifeworld; one *is* one's lifeworld. Barad stresses that "entanglements are not a name for the interconnectedness of all being as one, but rather specific material relations of the ongoing differentiating of the world. Entanglements are relations of obligation – being bound to the other – enfolded traces of othering".[19] Moreover, Anna Tsing's "arts of inclusion"[20] and Donna Haraway's "companion species" offer practical means for articulating the multiple entanglements between humans and nonhumans of "significant otherness". Haraway highlights the co-constitutive sensory dimensions of companion species or "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."[21] Foregrounding the etymological linkage between *species* and *respect*, Haraway's term allows for the consideration of "which categories are in play and shaping one another in flesh and logic in constitutive encounterings".[22] Indeed, more so than flora and fauna (especially charismatic furry animals and venerable old trees), non-human otherness is exemplified in the third "f", kingdom Fungi: the slimy, stealthy, secretive, subversive and sinful. The task of rethinking fungi begins with critically regarding the categories employed to constitute them and the language used to do so.

In tandem with ecopoetic and multispecies theory, these four poems act as catalysts for a poetic mycology. Emily Dickinson's "Mushroom" (1874), Sylvia Plath's "Mushrooms" (1960), Mary Oliver's "Mushrooms" (1983) and Australian poet Caroline Caddy's "Mushrooms" (1989) exhibit different aspects of the notion – three of which I will highlight and develop. The first aspect refers to the representation of fungi in language through the commonplace tropes – such as physical decay and moral decrepitude – that are (often wrongly) applied to express mushroom beingness. The second articulates the degree to which the ecology of fungi factors into the ecopoem, demonstrating "the interdependent nature of the world", in Bryson's terms or entanglement as "specific material relations", in Barad's. The third and most prominent aspect I will touch on specifies how an ecopoem materialises human sensory embodiment through the interplay of the autocentric (smell, touch and taste) and allocentric senses (sight and hearing) in language.[23] Indeed, Dickinson, Plath, Oliver and Caddy's poems exhibit differing intensities of bodily interaction with fungi. Their poems collectively yield a continuum of human-fungus interaction – from the distanced and demonised mushroom of Dickinson to the sensuous edible species of Caddy that facilitate the reconciliation of a troubled mother-daughter relationship.

The elf of plants: Emily Dickinson's "Mushroom"

In 1830, Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA, where she later died in 1886 at age fifty-five after a notably reclusive life. Ecocritics have observed the sensitivity to the environment that is integral to her poetic oeuvre,[24] as well as the revisionist qualities of her nature poetry in contrast to the largely masculinist Romantic

and Transcendentalist visions of nature preceding and contemporaneous with her. As Stein comments, "her nature poetry addresses and undermines the prevailing masculinist assumptions about women and nature espoused by the Romantic and Transcendentalist writers and by Puritan theologians of her day".[25] Dickinson's "Mushroom" (1874) evidences her astute perception of the natural world, evoking fungi as supernatural beings in its opening stanzas. Yet its conspicuous puritanical themes overshadow the environmental relationships of the mushroom (of course it is unlikely that Dickinson would have recognised the word "ecology" in the first place) and, furthermore, occlude any form of sensory involvement with the organism. In the poem, the mushroom is a dangerous Judas-faced entity lacking both moral consideration and capacity. Written by a middle-aged Dickinson, the version quoted here retains the idiosyncratic capitalisations of the author's original and includes revealing word choices that are altered in subsequent published versions.[26] As mycologist Nicholas Money argues, the majority of mycotal poetry – Dickinson's being no exception – levies connotations of danger, death and decay at fungi, linking them to witchcraft and the divine.[27] Money specifically observes Dickinson's use of the image of Judas in the final stanza, reiterating everyday negative symbolic associations between mushrooms, morality and religious institutions.[28] Hence, the poem's pejorative tone could directly reflect the Puritanical mood of nineteenth-century New England or, alternately, could be interpreted as a slightly veiled acerbic commentary by Dickinson on the moralisation of nature by American religious institutions of her era.

Associations between the supernatural world and mushrooms appear in the opening verses: "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants - | At Evening, it is not | At Morning, in a Truffled Hut | It stop opon [sic] a Spot | As if it tarried always" (ll. 1–5). An elf is an archetypal otherworldly being, used rather unsurprisingly by Dickinson, but it is also an ambivalent figure, a shape shifter, a changeling, transmogrifying through a timescale dramatically different to human temporality: "At Evening, it is not". Whereas the first stanza concerns the mushroom's supernatural qualities, the second turns to the brevity of the organism's lifespan, the spontaneity and erratic nature of its growth habits, and the unhuman biorhythm it manifests through its cryptic and furtive movements: "And yet it's [sic] whole Career | Is shorter than a Snake's Delay - | And fleeter than a Tare -" (ll. 6–8). Following Dickinson's assessment of the mushroom's occultism, manifested by its inhumanly mannerisms, the poem shifts in the third and fourth stanzas to a multitude of associations. These primarily serve to connect the mushroom to sorcery, deception, secrecy and evanescence, relegating it to a "surreptitious Scion" or, in other words, a fungus on the sly, an inferior plant or, worse yet, a biological poser for the vegetal.

Metaphors such as "Vegetation's Juggler" (l. 9), on one hand, characterise the mushroom as a circus act performer – a participant in something not legitimate, not real, definitely not categorisable. On the other, such a phrase suggests that fungi are shapeshifters existing outside of the visible – decomposing, connecting, transforming or, in other words, orchestrating the perceivable and familiar ecological forms of shrubs, trees, animals and soil. Read negatively, however, these tropes also conjure the trickster figure, the mesmeriser and the sleight-of-hand charlatan. Moreover, the phrase "Germ of Alibi" (l. 10) implies the microorganism theory of disease of the late nineteenth century, perhaps known by Dickinson at the time of writing, which would have implicated fungi with a multitude of afflictions and adverse states of health. Morally, the phrase connotes the evasion of responsibility for the committing of evil or criminal acts. The final stanza is even more condemning than the first four: "Had Nature any supple Face | Or could she one contemn - | Had Nature an Apostate - | That Mushroom - it is Him!" (ll. 17–20). An "Apostate" is someone who abandons his or her religion,

who defects from institutions of worship, who converts for the worst. The term is denoted in a later version of the poem as "Iscariot" or Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus with a notorious kiss and therefore became the archetypally deceptive and faithless persona in Christian doctrine.

While demonstrating canny observation of the natural world around her, Dickinson's poem unjustifiably excoriates "The Mushroom", projecting towards it a battery of unflattering associations. The mycotal tropes used by Dickinson personify the mushroom as incontrovertibly deceptive and evil – as a being culturally misunderstood for its perceived secrecy, stealth and sorcery. Additionally and perhaps most condemningly, the mushroom is not part of nature: "Had Nature any supple Face | Or could she one contemn" (ll. 17–18). The mushroom is nature possessed, in Dickinson's terms, much as a cancer is a plague on the body by the body. The tone is distanced – the speaker's relationship to the mushroom and also the reader's subsequent regard for the mushroom – and its relentless barrage of moral associations obscures the ecological dynamism of fungi, or in Morton's terms, ecology not as science per se, but rather as the ongoing consideration of "how all beings are interconnected, in as deep a way as possible." There is merely one multispecies allusion – "I feel as if the Grass was pleased | To have it intermit" (ll. 13–14) – hinting at an awareness of the interactions between the mushroom and its living environment. However, Dickinson's use of "surreptitious Scion" (in plant propagation, a living part used for grafting) aggregates fungi and plants, a conflation that obscures the unique *umwelt* of mushrooms and relegates them to imperfect plants, perpetuating a long-standing bias that degrades fungi as failed flora. An alternate, ecological reading of "surreptitious Scion" would acknowledge the mycorrhizal associations between fungi and plants in which fungi symbiotically extend the reach of the grasses.

Dickinson's poem is representative of the gamut of symbolic meanings attributed to mushrooms, especially those of the poem's historical moment. It falls short of offering a poetic mycology of the senses in the three interlinked dimensions I propose: linguistic, ecological and sensorial. In sum, although there are elements of sensuous poesis, there is little indication of human-fungus entanglement through intimacy and entanglement of any sort. In the final analysis, Dickinson's "mushroom" is generic (although it assumes problematic "faces" throughout the poem). It is indistinguishable from the masses, "fleeter than a Tare" (l. 8) and representative of collusion – a defeated object associated with the figure of Judas as a focus of moralisation and proselytising. Despite the singular form of the noun, the mushroom is neither an individual (in the sense that an animal is an individual) nor a collective (in the sense that an individual fruiting body is part of a vast underground network or mycelium). Hence, what is missing in Dickinson's rendering of the mycotal is a sensory, ecological and imaginative interest in mushrooms for their own sake (apart from their religious and supernatural faces), one which closes the human-fungus yawn wrenched open by continuous misunderstanding and inappropriate moral attribution. Admittedly, my diachronic reading, beginning with Dickinson's poem, is not meant to show a progression of "bad" to "good" mycotal poetry but rather to demonstrate the shedding of certain symbolic attachments and the subsequent re-envisioning of fungi for what they are and for what they can be.

Earless and eyeless: Sylvia Plath's "Mushrooms"

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, and died in 1963 at the age of thirty-one. Although conventionally interpreted by literary critics as an intensely interior and distraught confessional poet,[29] Plath's poetry has been viewed for its environmental consciousness in Tracy Brain's full-length study of the poet's

worldliness – specifically in response to the pesticide toxicity brought to widespread attention by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.[30] Normally thought to exhibit painful introversion, Plath's verse seen in a different light expresses the relational, multispecies and corporeal ethos at the core of posthumanism and multispecies theory. Similarly, Knickerbocker argues that Plath "expresses the ecological idea that death is often linked to alienation from one's environment and fellow creatures, whereas life requires interaction with one's environment and other beings".[31] However, Knickerbocker's statement suggests a binary between death and life that does not hold well in the context of fungi. Indeed, as saprophytes, detritivores and decomposers, fungi are intrinsically linked to death and even thrive under conditions of decay. Fungi allow us to realise that both life *and death* require "interaction with one's environment and other beings" and that embodiment in the world is a condition of life within death and death within life. Rather than one-dimensionally death-obsessive, Plath's poetry reflects this complexity as a "desire for sensuous embodiment"[32] through direct experience and acute awareness of nature. Her poetry manifests the notion of sensuous poesis, as Knickerbocker goes on to say, in that Plath's "intense imaginative capacities were not simply a matter of artistic intention but were also a nearly bodily compulsion".[33]

In "Mushrooms" (1960), she grants an imaginative perspective to fungi, personifying them, giving them intentionality and allowing them to speak for themselves as a collective. As Knickerbocker also cogently observes of the interwoven imaginative and material dimensions of the poem, "Plath's use of first-person plural is not merely a poetic flight of fancy; it expresses an ecological verity"[34] – the underground mycelium of mushrooms that constitutes a single organism in its communalism. Unlike Dickinson's demonised archetypal mushroom with Judas facelessness, Plath's mushrooms comprise an interconnected being not existing in isolation but rather, to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy's term, as "being singular plural".[35] Interpreted through the lens of environmental embodiment and Knickerbocker's sensuous poesis, Plath's "Mushrooms" and other poems from her oeuvre narrate a process of human absorption into nature whereby one's body is subsumed within the materiality of ecology. As Edward Butscher comments appositely, the poem shoves "her consciousness directly into the eye of nature itself".[36]

Plath's poem begins with the human perceptions of mushrooms that are commonplace to other mycotal writings, including quietness, stealth and sudden appearance from nowhere or so it seems: "Overnight, very | Whitely, discreetly, | Very quietly" (ll. 1–3).[37] Yet, the fungal form adumbrated by Plath, despite its otherness, is conspicuously human: "Our toes, ours noses | Take hold on the loam, | Acquire the air" (ll. 4–6). These mushrooms, courtesy of her environmental imagination, have recognisable appendages as well as an animal-like capacity for respiration. Their anthropomorphic attributes are reiterated in "Soft fists insist on | Heaving the needles, | The leafy bedding | Even the paving" (ll. 10–13). As such, the mushrooms' corporeality opens up the possibility of bodily empathy between kingdom fungi and human beings. That "Nobody sees us, | Stops us, betrays us" (ll. 7–8) invokes again the slyness and abruptness of their arrival—the particular timescale of their movements that contrasts starkly to mammalian motion. Despite an incomprehensible temporal rhythm, the dynamism of the mushrooms is celebrated in the poem as they physically tousle the leaf litter and subvert the pavement, pushing upward with their "Soft fists" (l. 10) as "Our hammers, our rams" (l. 14).

Navigating without the allocentric senses of hearing and sight – indeed they are "Perfectly voiceless" (l. 16) – the mushrooms' dynamism is distinctively tactile as they heave, shoulder, nudge and shove their way upward. They burst forth, pry open doors, widen crannies, shoulder through holes and heave the needles – active phrases that

convey their enervated activities. On the whole, Plath's poem expresses convincingly the plurality of the mushrooms – "So many of us! So many of us!" (ll. 23–24) – that "In spite of ourselves. | Our kind multiplies" (ll. 29–30). From the first-person plural perspective (indicated by "our," "us" and "we"), there is a prevailing sense of mushrooms constituting an ecological community – mushrooms as a singular mushroom in dynamic relation to its plurality, as the collective voice of many heaving upward bodily together in overwhelming profusion. Furthermore, their dynamism is also the juxtaposition of "hard" attributes and forms ("We are shelves, we are | Tables…") (ll. 25–26) and soft, malleable qualities (we are meek, | We are edible) (ll. 26–27), the latter importantly signifying the potential for humans to eat these kinds without consequence.

The enigmatic final tercet recalls Dickinson's biblical reference in "Had Nature an Apostate - | That Mushroom - it is Him!". Plath concludes: "We shall by morning | Inherit the earth. | Our foot's in the door" (ll. 31–33). However, the conspicuous allusion to the Book of Matthew, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth", operates in a manner that affirms mycotal being and is ultimately undergirded by the tenacious embodied presence of the mushrooms themselves, animatedly prying open yet another human-constructed space: "Our foot's in the door" (l. 33). If ever mushrooms were relegated to a forgotten kingdom, inhabiting a haunted position within the Western cultural imagination, their meekness, silence and discretion (in the opening tercet) culminate over the poem's timeframe in a dynamic force (in the final two tercets) that overcomes their merely being overlooked or inadvertently stepped on, as the final line intimates. Of course, the poem's emphasis on multiplicity could have gone the direction of pathogenic excess, but a feeling of awe and reverence lingers. Although the species identity is not revealed, we accept that they are mushrooms, maybe the common edible field variety. It could be that "mushrooms", for Plath, is a composite signifier standing in for different kinds of fungi, both edible and poisonous, subterranean "fists" and tree-borne "shelves" and "tables".

The generalisability of the term, therefore, works positively in the poem, allowing the diversity of kingdom fungi to be voiced imaginatively (and cacophonously) in chorus. The generic appellation "mushrooms," as a gestalt category generated at the margin of human awareness, on "crumbs of shadow" (l. 20), becomes, by the poem's end, a vociferous and inescapable concerto. In contrast to Dickinson's mushroom, Plath distinguishes her perspective on the mycotal world by celebrating mushrooms for their tenacious qualities or, in Money's terms, "the steady, inconspicuous development of the fungus before its glorious fruiting as a metaphor for patience and self-possession, assertiveness, and activism"[38] and, I add, intentionality. Indeed, we see in the poem the overturning of the stock pejorative associations between mushrooms, social parasitism and rapacious growth towards a poetic mycology of the senses from the mushrooms' point-of-view. In its equating of "a certain segment of animal or vegetable [or mycotal] life with human existence,"[39] "Mushrooms" carries the multispecies momentum towards decentred human subjectivity rather than pernicious solipsism.

Flocks of glitterers: Mary Oliver's "Mushrooms"

Born in 1935 in rural Ohio, USA, Mary Oliver settled in Provincetown, Massachusetts, later in life where much of her poetry is set. Reflecting her immense curiosity for the world, many of Oliver's essays and poems address themes of ecological interdependence, intimacy with nonhumans and the immediacy of direct experience. In his reading of Oliver's "pragmatic mysticism" and the relational attributes of her work, Laird Christensen observes that "traditional distinctions between mortality and immortality quickly break down in Oliver's poems as the material elements of each

being are transformed into the elements of other bodies".[40] In terms of human-nature entanglement, Oliver's poetry exhibits a "continual reintegration of [the] individual into the whole [that] denies any abiding sense of discrete identity,"[41] and thereby decentres human subjectivity by placing the activities of people within a material ecological community marked by cycles of growth and decay, life and death. Oliver's poem opens with the ecologically founded emergence of mushrooms – demystifying their sudden arrival, attributed as we found in Dickinson's poem, to the workings of the supernatural rather than habitat processes: "Rain, and then | the cool pursed | lips of the wind | draw them | out of the ground" (ll. 1–5).[42] Instead, in the poem, the convergence of elements – moisture, temperature, wind and earth – galvanises the appearance of mushrooms, nonetheless death-evoking for Oliver. As in many of Oliver's ecopoems, the materiality of the mushrooms in their milieux becomes an ecological force with considerable physical momentum and apparent dynamism: "red and yellow skulls | pummeling upward | through leaves, | through grasses, | through sand…" (ll. 6–10).

Like Dickinson and Plath before her, Oliver represents the habitus of mycotal being-in-the-world as closely in synch with time and sound: "astonishing | in their suddenness, | their quietude, | their wetness, they appear | on fall mornings…" (ll. 10–14). Yet, unlike Dickinson and Plath's poems, whilst some mushrooms are "packed with poison" (l. 17), others are "billowing | chunkily, and delicious" (l. 18–19). In Oliver's work, we are presented with a more equanimous picture of the fungi kingdom, as both death-dealer and life-giver. Through the physicality of walking amongst the flocks, the human capacity for discernment (and hence self-preservation) is fostered through close sensory interaction with mushrooms: "those who know | walk out to gather, choosing | the benign from flocks | of glitterers, sorcerers, | russulas, | panther caps, | shark-white death angels" (ll. 20–26). As such, Oliver's mushrooms are beyond the categories of moralisation (of attributing goodness or evil to them) and, instead, exist as corporeal beings, whether edible or poisonous or in-between; indeed, to skirt death in the field, one must become one who knows of their physical properties. As a linguistic tactic employed by other nature writers on fungi, the likening of mushrooms to supernatural figures – "glitterers, sorcerers" – rather than weakening human-fungi entanglements in Oliver's poem, instead exemplifies Haraway's linkage between *species* and *respect* or "seeing each other/looking back at/meeting/optic-haptic encounter". In contrast to Dickinson's othering of the mushroom, which brews Judeo-Christian-based contempt by the poem's conclusion, Oliver's othering breeds respectful knowing, leading to secure delectation – the discerning between "sugar" (l. 28) and "paralysis" (l. 29).

On the whole, an uncanny mixing defines Oliver's "Mushrooms" – its movements polarised by the presence throughout of predictable preternatural tropes on the one hand (e.g., "glitters, sorcerers") and, on the other, a more sophisticated and specific lexicon (familiar to many field mycologists) with nuanced symbolic meanings and social resonances (e.g., "russulas, | panther caps"). In short, Oliver's enumeration of names, such as death angels, narrows the identities of these mushrooms and provides a basis for differentiating the virulent from the innocuous amidst the plurality. Despite a somewhat contradictory trajectory through kingdom fungi, the poem resounds a clarion message that familiarity and intimacy – intrinsic to Haraway's notion of companion species – are fostered through respectful human-fungi interactions in which the dangerous potential of some species is recognised, learned and avoided. To state it differently, the intimate act of eating mushrooms – as experienced wild-crafters would know – necessitates the sensible ability to tell poisonous species from delicacies. The acquisition of knowledge about fungi, although represented in cryptic and cultish terms in the poem, is, therefore, based more firmly in the experience of the everyday material domain: the ground, the earth, the fields of rain. In their poisonousness, the russulas,

panther caps and death angels themselves are not implicated as morally culpable agents – in fact they are "being perfect" (l. 33), unlike Dickinson's reprehensible Judas-faceless mushroom. Instead, they follow the truth of their ecological cadences, receding "under the shining | fields of rain" (ll. 35–36), leaving the staggering down of humans, poisoned by the deadly toxic few, to human agency (choice, discretion, intelligence) alone.

Everywhere they touched us: Caroline Caddy's "Mushrooms"

The only non-American (and non-New Englander at that) poet of the four featured in this article, Caroline Caddy was born in Western Australia (WA) in 1944, but lived as a child in the United States and Japan.[43] Her most recent collection, *Esperance: New and Selected Poems* (2007), features a variety of ecologically conversant poems, such as "Stirling Ranges" and "Karri Trees", about the South Coast region near Albany, WA. "Mushrooms" from her earlier collection *Beach Plastic* (1989) is a five-part poem centring on the troubled relationship between a mother and teenage daughter. As with Plath and Oliver's examples, Caddy's poem emphasises embodied human-fungus interaction, most actualised through eating. There is an evocation of mushrooms as companion species through, to apply Tsing's term, an art of inclusion: the wild-crafting and preparation of edible species, involving the bringing of the mycotal other into a domestic setting where its symbolic and material dimensions become manifold, where it achieves ritualistic and spiritually cleansing status. Dispensing with the stock tropes we find in Dickinson that denigrate kingdom fungi, Caddy's perspective on mushrooms is compellingly corporeal and touchingly intimate: "We made soup | wiped their photocopies from plates [...] tables – | everywhere they touched us" (Sect. 3, ll. 36–38). Here, the notion of a poetic mycology of the senses reaches its apotheosis, in which palpable entanglement between the speaker and the still enigmatic but highly respected mushrooms occurs on multiple levels.

After evocative depictions of cooking in Section 2, in the poem's Section 3, the speaker commands her daughter out of the house to go mushroom gathering: "Navigating the seas of your boredom | I sent you out to look for mushrooms. | You returned feet wet skirt held | hem to waist" (Sect. 3, ll. 1–4). The daughter's voluminous fungal findings affect her physical and emotional balance positively: "you leaned back from your impossible burden | grinning your if you believe it it won't be so | and if you don't | it might not be either grin | I was sure you filled your skirt | with sticks and litter" (Sect. 3, ll. 10–15). Through the fecundity of the mushroom harvest and the season of fungi, the two discover, if only momentarily, a renewed empathy for one another as the wild mushrooms co-occupy the domestic space. What follows is perhaps the most compelling example of sensuous poesis specific to the mycotal in which language enacts the immanent physical sensations of nonhuman nature:

> 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. (Sect. 3, ll. 26–35)

Gradations of smell fall between "rank" and "redolent", particularising the nuance of sensory experience. Rather than fearful distance, familiarity (literally in relation to the speaker's family) and human-fungus intimacy inflect the excerpt throughout. Caddy's haptic tropes signify interactions towards the attainment of human nourishment: "the feel of gruyere" (l. 33). The making of soup symbolises the reconciliation between mother and daughter, as well as an embodied entanglement between human beings and mycotal companion species. The third section of "Mushrooms", the most fungally focused, expresses uninhibited sensory openness to fungi – "everywhere they touched us" (l. 38) – combined exactingly with the practical expertise of a wild-crafter. Caddy's mycological imagination and material poetics conspire to liberate fungi from an obsolescent language that constrains these organisms with insinuations of the supernatural, sin, treachery and deceit. Individual mushrooms receive lucid and imaginative faces – "Russian domes", "photocopies from plates", "obscure Japanese packages" – that identify them within the plurality of their masses and their appellation: mushrooms.

Conclusion: The poetry of the forgotten Kingdom

As this brief foray through four mycopoems suggests, the signifier "mushrooms" is an ontological gestalt that can belie the sensory complexities and individual nuances of mushrooms and human-fungus interactions. It is through the autocentric senses of smell, taste and touch, in conjunction with practical, field-based knowledge of the Kingdom, that their radical otherness, bewildering diversity and vexing ecologies are made intimate and immediate. The dynamism of the poems of Plath and Oliver reflects the unique habitus of mushrooms, whereas Dickinson's earlier attempt appears mired in its own symbolic detritus and perhaps that of its time. In Oliver and Caddy's works in particular, a poetic mycology of the senses emerges through the striking combination of ecological sensitivity and bodily invocation – both fostered through the intimate act of eating mushrooms. Indeed, Caddy's is an exploration of consuming fungi and its social/family implications. In her poem, particularly the third section, we find the full (and exemplary) expression of a poetic mycology of the senses – interlinking linguistic forms, fungal field ecology and sensory experience – towards the creation of novel and surprising modes of language communicating human-fungus interactions in all their stickiness.

Finally, the criterion of edibility is only one facet of human-fungus relationships. In this context, Haraway's etymological connection between *respect* and *species* raises the notion of "deferential regard" that has been associated with the former term since the 1540s.[44] Learning to avoid potentially lethal fungi and to harvest edible kinds is both a matter of respect (for Other and self) and the preservation of one's life. Such learning is an ongoing pursuit in which respect for the agency of these organisms is tempered with care for self; it necessitates an entanglement (not necessarily a deference but an ethic of caution), one that comes as a result of prolonged attention to fungi in the field, concerted study of taxonomic knowledge and genuine regard for the successful survival mechanisms of these organisms. As Dickinson's poem implies through its use of the Judas metaphor, mushrooms – wrongly identified or imprudently trusted – can kill us or make us dreadfully sick. Yet, the dangerous properties of a few species should not negate the complexity and importance of the Kingdom as a whole. Indeed, emerging ecological knowledge of fungi reveal other horizons for a poetic mycology of the senses: for example, the multifaceted role fungi play in maintaining habitat processes, such as the transfer of ions between terrestrial and aquatic habitats.[45] These ecological perspectives will continue to mark the evolution of sensuous poesis founded in notions of science, embodiment, entanglement and respect.

Notes

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3. See N. Money (2011), *Mushroom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, pp. 134-135, for some literary discussion of mushrooms in poetry; and J. Ryan (2012), "Which to Become? Encountering Fungi in Australian Poetry", *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 4(2), pp. 132-143. The work of anthropologist Anna Tsing on matsutake mushrooms is located in the environmental humanities rather than literary studies or ecocriticism; see A. Tsing (2011), "Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom", *Australian Humanities Review* 50, pp. 5-21. Website: http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-May-2011/tsing.html (Accessed 25 April 2013).
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5. G.Huggan and H. Tiffin (2010), *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Routledge, New York, pp. 133-202.
6. M. Marder (2013), *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York.
7. J. Adamson and C. Sandilands (2013), "Vegetal Ecocriticism: The Question of 'The Plant'", Preconference Panel, Changing Nature: ASLE Tenth Biennial Conference, University of Kansas, Lawrence. Website: http://asle.ku.edu/Preconference/pdf/Vegetal_Ecocriticism_The_Question_of_ThePlant.pdf (Accessed 15 May 2013).
8. For example, Adamson and Sandilands (2013) refer to "floral, botanical, arboreal, fungal, and other *vegetal* discourses [emphasis added]".
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10. For Australia, see J. Ryan (2012). For North America, see J. Millar (2002), *Mycological Studies*, Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa; and R. Roehl and K. Chadwick (eds.) (2010), *Decomposition: An Anthology of Fungi-Inspired Poems*, Lost Horse Press, Sandpoint, ID.
11. M. Serres (2008), *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, Continuum, London.
12. J. Bryson (2002), "Introduction", in J. Bryson (ed.), *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, The University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, pp. 1-13; qtd from pp. 5-6.
13. T. Morton (2010), "The Dark Ecology of Elegy", in K. Weisman (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 251-271; qtd from p. 255.
14. J. Bryson (2002), p. 6.
15. J. Bryson (2002), p. 7.
16. S. Knickerbocker (2012), *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, p. 2.
17. S. Knickerbocker (2012), p. 17.
18. D. Haraway(2008), *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; T. Morton (2010); C. Wolfe (2010), *What Is Posthumanism?*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
19. K. Barad (2010), "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTimeEnfoldings, and Justice-to-Come", *Derrida Today*, 3(2), pp. 240-268; qtd. from p. 265.
20. A. Tsing (2011).
21. D. Haraway (2008), p. 164.
22. D. Haraway (2008), p. 164.
23. Although purporting an artificial binary, Porteous differentiates between autocentric (subject-centred) and allocentric (object-centred) senses. As the primary allocentric senses, vision and to some extent hearing are associated with cognition, detachment, distance and maturation. The autocentric senses of smell, touch and taste are physical, primitive, emotive, immediate, proximal and intrinsic to children. See J.D. Porteous (1996), *Environmental Aesthetics: Ideas, Politics and Planning*, Routledge, London, p. 31.
24. J. Felstiner (2009), *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems*, Yale University

Press, New Haven; R. Stein (1997), *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race*, The University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville; especially chapter 1.

25. R. Stein (1997), p. 25.
26. R.W. Franklin (ed.) (1999), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p. 520.
27. N. Money (2011), p. 136.
28. N. Money (2011), p. 134.
29. For example, D. Holbrook (1976), *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, University of London; The Athlone Press, London. Holbrook offers an existential reading of "Mushrooms" as a poem "which couldn't, however, have been written without the torment of experiencing a life without feeling alive" (p. 269).
30. T. Brain (2001), *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Pearson Education, Harlow, UK.
31. S. Knickerbocker (2012), p. 126.
32 S. Knickerbocker (2012), p. 127.
33. S. Knickerbocker (2012), p. 134.
34. S. Knickerbocker (2012), p. 135.
35. J-L. Nancy (2000), *Being Singular Plural*, R. Richardson (trans.), Stanford University Press, Stanford.
36. E. Butscher (1976), *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, The Seabury Press, New York, p. 244.
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38. N. Money (2011), p. 135.
39. E. Butscher (1976), p. 248.
40. L. Christensen (2002), "The Pragmatic Mysticism of Mary Oliver", in J. Bryson (ed.), *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, The University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, pp. 135-152; qtd. from p. 137.
41. L. Christensen (2002), p. 137.
42. M. Oliver (1992), "Mushrooms", in *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press, Boston, pp. 144-45; first published in *American Primitive* (1983).
43. J. Kinsella (2009), "Biographical Notes", in J. Kinsella (ed.), *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry*, Penguin Group, Camberwell, pp. 395-435; qtd. from p. 401.
44. D. Harper (2013), "Respect" in *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Website: www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=respect&searchmode=none (Accessed 15 May 2013).
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