

A Meander in the Mycosphere

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KEY WORDS

fungi, environmental justice, aesthesis, photography, metaphor

Environmentally-themed conferences are taking place all around the world as I type. More often than not, discussions occur within the confines of soporific seminar rooms, far from the actual environments discussed. As part of the *Environmental Justice, "Collapse" and the Question of Evidence* Workshop held in Switzerland in September 2015, I proposed a foray through local nature reserves as a way of enriching conversations – both through multisensory engagement and the catalyzing effect of movement, of walking. Multi-sensory perception – or aesthesis – enables us to consider the environment not as an inert background to discussions, but as intrinsic to dynamic and creative thinking.¹ *In situ* discussions expose the spaces-in-between, reminding us that issues of environmental justice extend beyond *Homo sapiens*. They also foster opportunity to explore the intersections of wonder and understanding.

In taking advantage of the “natural” surrounds and autumn season, I overlaid another theme as we wandered and wondered: *Environmental Justice for Unregarded Others*, focusing on the literal and symbolic significance of fungi. These occupants of the interstices are largely unregarded because they slip through the net of environmental justice, as well as concepts of nature, biodiversity and conservation, overshadowed by *Homo sapiens* and other charismatic fauna. Fungi provide the connective fibre between all kingdoms through intimate underground alliances, underpinning almost every terrestrial ecosystem on the planet. How can we be serious about environmental justice for all life including *Homo sapiens* when an entire kingdom of organisms and their interactions are overlooked? How can we begin to talk about evidence and what Rob Nixon refers to as the hushed havoc and injurious invisibility of environmental violence if we are not attuned to the ancient yet modern mode of appreciation, of aesthesis?²

Slow wandering opens opportunity for exuberant interactions while connecting with environments, landscapes, weather and other species. It allows for a heightening of perception and sensitivity to nuance. Movement itself is a catalyst.³ As anthropologist Tim Ingold notes, “Locomotion, not cognition, is the starting point for the study of perceptual activity.”⁴ The richest experiences often arise from serendipitous opportunities and unexpected encounters; through sensate engagement, rather than detached speculation. Given the diversity of workshop participants’ disciplines, Karen Barad’s optical metaphor of diffraction as a methodology that augments insights from multiple disciplines seemed fitting. Such an approach acknowledges entanglements by reading insights through one another diffractively, allowing for changes in meaning in different contexts and opening up new meanings, enabling a more subtle vision.⁵ As well as examining the entangled nature of difference, most critically, it also links values and responsibility and hence possibilities for making a difference in issues of environmental justice.

¹ John Ryan, "Towards Intimate Relations: Gesture and Contact Between Plants and People," *Philosophy Activism Nature* 9 (2012): 29-36.

² Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³ Much as been written about the benefits and synergies of walking and thinking in stimulating ideas. A few recent titles include: Frédéric Gros, *A philosophy of Walking* (London: Verso: 2014); Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta Books, 2007); Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London; Penguin Books, 2013); Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2002).

⁴ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007).

The foray was not defined by a “goal” or “objective” or desired outcomes. Rather, it was about being open to the unforeseen. To the questions not yet formulated. It is a process that begins not with logic but with not knowing, informed by intuition and responsiveness.⁶ How might evidence exist in other forms, in processes, in ways previously unimagined? How can evidence be experienced, narrated and represented in ways that transcend disciplines, allow multiple translations, and re-examine existing knowledge frameworks in a rapidly changing world?

Thinking and sensing with fungi provided another way to reimagine conference themes, for example, of collapse, evidence, justice, aesthesis and semiotics, translating them into other contexts and scales. The following photo essay offers an impression of the mycosphere of our foray. The images are visual metaphors. They are not meant to be understood in any way other than how the viewer chooses. They are intended to inspire rather than necessarily inform, to newly inflect these themes. A single word accompanying each image prompts the viewer. For example, emerging sporebodies (mushrooms) play with the idea of what constitutes evidence, providing just a hint of their clandestine activities in the subterrain. A log being decomposed and recycled by unseen fungi, challenges concepts of collapse, as something that regenerates life. Mushroom caps lightly dusted with spores remind us that knowing is also sensorial.

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BIOGRAPHY

Alison Pouliot is a Ph.D. student at Australian National University. As a freshwater ecologist, she endeavors to understand the processes that shape and transform ecosystems; as an environmental photographer, she aspires to capture their intricacies and obscurities in documenting environmental change. Shifting to the terrestrial subterrain, her current research addresses the disconnect between the diversity and ecological significance of fungi and the lack of attention to their conservation.

⁶ Margaret Somerville, " 'Waiting in the Chaotic Place of Unknowing': Articulating Postmodern Emergence," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 21, no. 3 (May-June 2008): 209-220.



















