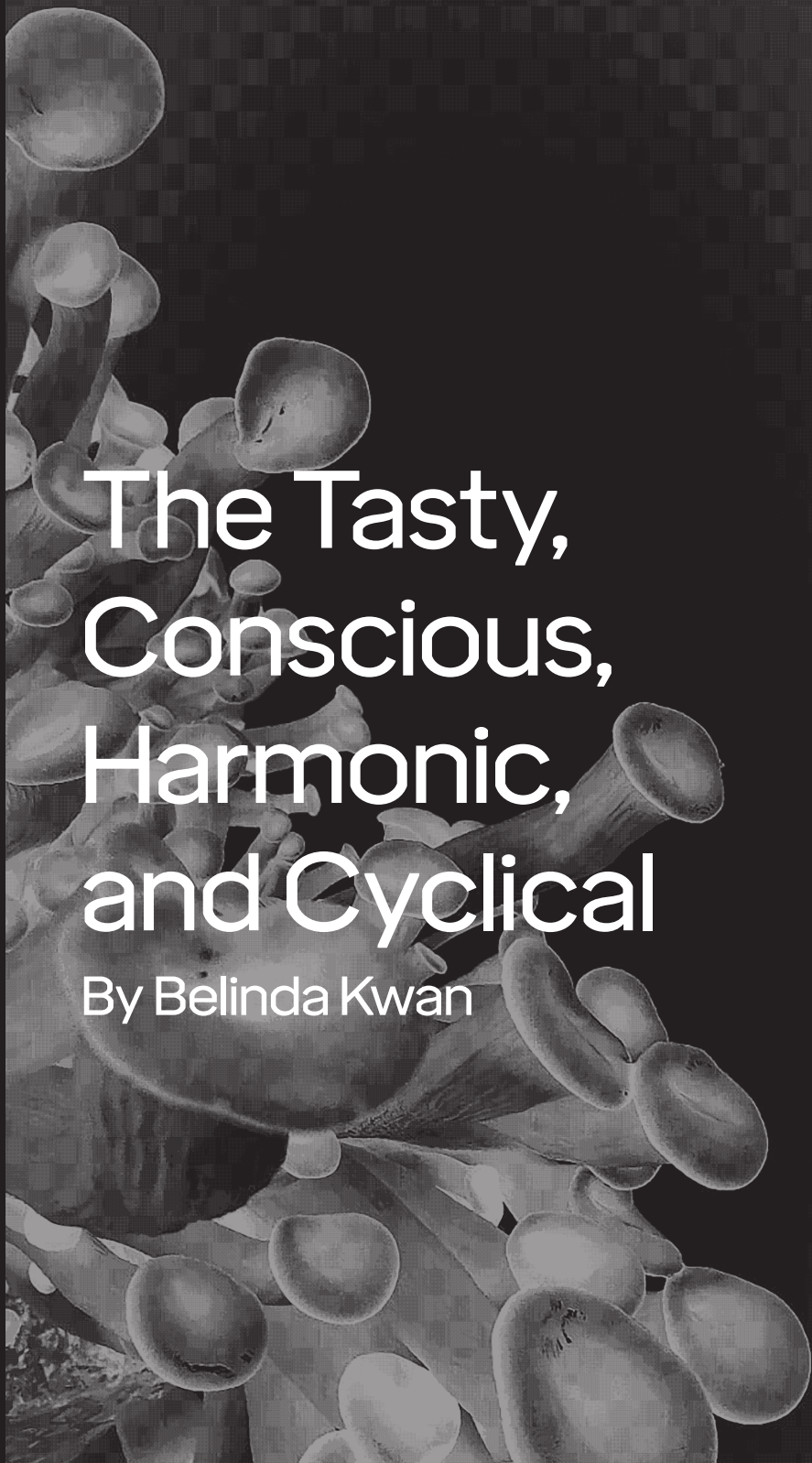



Of Uncertain Origin & Latent Possibility:

The Tasty, Conscious, Harmonic, and Cyclical

By Belinda Kwan





Of Uncertain Origin & Latent Possibility:

The Tasty, Conscious, Harmonic, and Cyclical

By Belinda Kwan



Mushrooms have captured the interest of humans for millennia; evidence of their presence in the homo sapiens diet dates back as early as the Upper Paleolithic period.¹ Prized for their nutritional-medicinal-psychedelic virtues, the fleshy organisms epitomize human foraging, cultivation, and culture through the ages. The chronology here is striking. But timelines of mushroom existence range far past the primate: the evolutionary cycles of fungi proliferate on a beyond-human scale, pushing the limits of what we can know and imagine. Taking a linguistic approach on the matter, lexicographer Robert Barnhart once noted the term “mushroom” was “of uncertain origin”²

—a pertinent observation for an entity of such diverse and adaptive biology. The m-word demonstrates how etymological and vernacular vagueness sometimes signals connotative potential rather than a lexical dead end. A case in point: though mushrooms are technically reproductive structures of fungi, the signifier-variable *m* is used to denote adjacent and loosely associated aspects of the fungal superstructure, and more, across various contexts. In this regard, the “mushroom” is anything but restricted by its nebulous genealogy; referential multitudes and myriad semantic forms emerge from its ambiguity. Through this modus operandi, fungal life figuratively and literally rouses non-linear threads of creation and revival.

¹ Robert C. Power et al., “Microremains from El Mirón Cave Human Dental Calculus Suggest a Mixed Plant–Animal Subsistence Economy during the Magdalenian in Northern Iberia,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 60 (August 2015): 39–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2015.04.003>.

² Robert K Barnhart and Sol Steinmetz, *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (Bronx, N.Y.: H.W. Wilson Co., 1988).

More recently, the mushroom and its mycelial plexus have become popular motifs for concepts of community, communication, and healing. This occurs in light of scientific findings that mycorrhizal networks, colloquially called the "Wood Wide Web," have been connecting individual plants for ages, transferring water, carbon, nitrogen, and other nutrients and materials between them.³ Remarkably, the studies found these connective structures allowed individual plants to communicate environmental risk and compatibility with one another, even when situated impressive distances apart.⁴ Informed by the cooperative wisdom of mycelium, SAHAR TE organizes *Incubator*, a mushroom-based microbiome within NICHOLAS FLEMING's Public Space design. Inviting several other artists to participate, Te's undertaking spores fertile modes of community care and growth.

The project commences with the mycological proficiency of TOSCA TERAN, whose guiding hand lays the groundwork. Long acquainted with mushrooms in her artistic practice, Teran establishes *Incubator's* practical stratum through her hands-on cultivation practice and ongoing, direct stewardship of the physical fungus installation. Her workshop, *Democratizing Mushroom Cultivation*, invites guests to partake in this applied knowledge, catalyzing the reach of *Incubator's* epistemic hyphae. More than a visual representation of the mushroom as an icon for communal activity and social ecology, the actual fungal growth within the exhibition constitutes real-time processes of interdependency and collaboration among the human and mycelial agents of this project.

To delve further into an understanding of mushroom-human affinities we



³ Jennifer Frazer, "Dying Trees Can Send Food to Neighbors of Different Species," *Scientific American*, May 2015.

⁴ *Ibid.*

might turn to Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark*, which draws parallels between the underground-aboveground ecosystems of fungi and progressive activism. She writes:

after a rain mushrooms appear on the surface of the earth as if from nowhere. Many do so from a sometimes vast underground fungus that remains invisible and largely unknown. What we call mushrooms mycologists call the fruiting body of the larger, less visible fungus. Uprisings and revolutions are often considered to be spontaneous, but less visible long-term organizing and groundwork—or underground work—often [lay] the foundation.⁵

Said reflection begs the question: in mushrooming models of community care and growth, what and where are the larger systems of mutual aid and exchange that ensure their emergence time after time? What share of the harvest is redirected to the cultivation of said support systems? Do those who enjoy the fruit give back to those who bore the fruit? Is it an exchange of mutual benefit?

Recurring encounters with these questions proliferate each time there is an attempt at community or mutual aid. This can be confusing, frustrating, immobilizing. But if we take mycelial propagation as a point of departure for our reciprocal relations, the many permutations of uncertainty and unanswered questions might not always be a bad thing. The many-threaded, outward drive of hyphae is hardly predictable, but their agency combined with the agency of their surrounding and preceding

elements lead the way to new growth and possibilities. To be clear, this is neither utopic nor ideal and offers no direct guarantee against violence or harm. What it does offer, however, are extended networks of hope and the continual bridging of survival and repair, opening new paths to renewal and flourishing contingent on previously established circuitries.

In lieu of narrative, orderly responses to such questions, I proceed as mycelium does: via several divergent but synergistic paths.



⁵ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, University of California Press, 2011, xv

The Tasty

With the world's current focus on illness, healing, and disease prevention, the recent popularity of concepts like *community, mutual aid, and care* comes as no surprise. These verbal stimulants are the salt and pepper of present-day vernacular. Consumed in excess, they register as thoughtless defaults—superficial and insipid to our mental palate. But even the most default and widely manufactured tastes are nothing without their deeper sensory histories and below-surface currents of activity—salt dependent on pungent, evolutionary oceans and sweat-drenched mining labour; black pepper on fragrant and flowering vines, centuries-long cultivation, and worldwide spice trade.

Responding to the un/palatable dynamics of taste and consumption, the work of **MARK CLINTBERG** ferments umami analogies between the restaurant and mushroom as microcosms or meeting places of social, temporal, and material relations. Back of House, **CHRIS MENDOZA** compiles a series of mushroom recipes transmitted through oral history and exchange. These culinary transcriptions act as starters for more experimental courses of thinking around embodied knowledges, instruction, and poesis—à la mode de Fluxus. Returning to the underground, **MEECH BOAKYE** offers, in their lucid words, a "mycological letter/ritual/recipe/dream" that posits six feet under as a site of resurrection and a sanctum for the "celestial bloom of transness."

The Conscious

Genetic memory is a concept in psychology where a memory present at birth exists absent sensory experience, incorporated into the genome over time.⁶ A comparable sense of memory is shown to be present in the ecological memory and relocation decisions of mycelium, invigorating conversations around non-human cellular consciousness and extrasensory, distributed intelligence.⁷ Rather than attempting to forgo the anthropological for the mycological, the mindful for the mindless, or the centralized for the distributed, it's potentially interesting to combine or compound these varied methodologies. We need not always understand, know, or sense the underlying mechanisms that drive us, but it may also be valuable to return to them. Likewise, it may periodically be valuable to let loose our intentional shaping of memory and intelligence, and yield to a more distributed trust in the fruiting bodies within us, among us, and beyond us. The interplay of intentional and unintentional knowledge-sharing is palpable in **EMILY DICARLO's** *We need to speak in spores*, which invites the public to "think like fungi" through a series of collective outdoor activities and reflections. Teleporting us to another open-air dimension, **CRAIG FAHNER** takes mycorrhizal attention economies into WiFi airwaves, where mobile communication is facilitated through contribution rather than consumption.

⁶ Rodolfo R. Llinas, *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self*, MIT Press, 2002.

⁷ Yu Fukasawa, Melanie Savoury, and Lynne Boddy, "Ecological Memory and Relocation Decisions in Fungal Mycelial Networks: Responses to Quantity and Location of New Resources," *The ISME Journal* 14, no. 2 (February 2020): 380–88, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41396-019-0536-3>.

The Harmonic

As frequencies oscillate and travel, opportunities for harmonization arise. If the burrowing worm gives way to the earworm, what might the spring earshroom do for our concerted auditory experience? These electromagnetic questions unfold in two acts that, like mushrooms and their relationship to mycelium, compound durational process with ephemeral impact. Throughout the exhibition runtime, **MATT NISH-LAPIDUS** scavenges sonic humus within and without the installation. Using a custom computer system, he works audio compost into the *Incubator* soil. Meanwhile, **JP KING** delivers a layered performance lecture that harvests conversational fragments germane to the saprotrophic qualities of mushrooms. He reconstitutes these foraged morsels of dialogue into sound-based nourishment. In the coda, King and Nish-Lapidus synchronize through collaborative improvisation. Together, they dig into and replenish the myco-electronic biorhythms of sampling.

The Cyclical

Though insinuated by various works throughout *Incubator*, it's worthwhile to say this explicitly: cycles of plant and animal existence rely on the fungal processing of rotting organic matter. Again and again, fungi verify how the repeated stages of life and death are far from inert or independent from each other. Blurring non-fiction and fiction, prose and poetry, **MILES RUFELDS'** video essay *Two or Three Saprophytes* turns to fungal reclamation as an alternative model against post-industrial degradation and destruction. The film's heady conceptual notes kindle the cultural imagination, as the factual historical research conducted by Rufelds gestures toward the material consequences of systems and actions built on fantasia and ideology.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The ongoing and diverse nature of mycelial life means that even when fungal processes are at the height of activity, the hyphal knots that form mushrooms may not be available for prospective witnesses to examine or foragers to pick. In this regard, *Incubator* patiently stewards the gradual development of new ideas, discussions, and exchanges. Not yet revealed to the exhibition audience, the below-surface potential of the unannounced and forthcoming extends its reach.

References

Barnhart, Robert K. and Sol Steinmetz, *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (Bronx, N.Y.: H.W. Wilson Co., 1988).

Power, Robert C. et al. "Microremains from El Mirón Cave Human Dental Calculus Suggest a Mixed Plant–Animal Subsistence Economy during the Magdalenian in Northern Iberia." *Journal of Archaeological Science* 60 (August 2015): 39–46.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2015.04.003>.

Frazer, Jennifer. "Dying Trees Can Send Food to Neighbors of Different Species." *Scientific American*, May 2015.

Llinas, Rodolfo R. *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self*. MIT Press, 2002.

Fukasawa, Yu et al. "Ecological Memory and Relocation Decisions in Fungal Mycelial Networks: Responses to Quantity and Location of New Resources." *The ISME Journal* 14, no. 2 (February 2020): 380–88. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41396-019-0536-3>.

Images

Images are courtesy of Sahar Te, LF Documentation and the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington.



We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada

