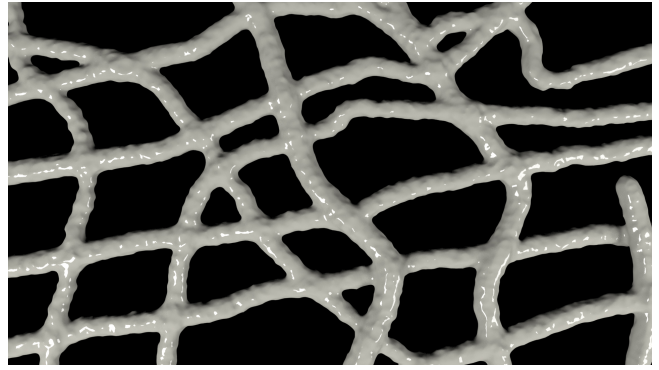


Mycorrhizal Listening

Diana Policarpo

Originally presented as a looped 15-channel electroacoustic score synchronised with two digital animations, light and sound sculptures, *Death Grip* (2019) is a critical revision of the violence enacted against women and non-human bodies in the backdrop of capitalist dispossession. Situated in the Himalayan regions of Northern India and Western Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan where the caterpillar fungus species *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, colloquially known as Cordyceps, occurs in high altitudes, this video narrates the growth of economic markets through advances in the seizure of land and speed of extinction, whilst folding magic, mystical and animist practices into a narrative of healing and economic progress. Listed as an endangered species in 1999, the parasitical fungus is considered the most expensive biological commodity to date.

On view: 27 Oct – 10 Nov 2020



Diana Policarpo, *Death Grip*, 2019. Still from digital animation (HD, 16:9, colour). Courtesy of the artist and EDP Foundation.

Transcript

Neither tales of progress or ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival.

The story is sticky, it is dreams and hallucinations and pain and an endless hunting. Or a sense of; the bodies of the women on the ground. Their bodies searching slicked in mud, hands pleating grass to check. Hope is wasted energy, they are frantic, twisted, lips close to ground as though breathing for it. The hands of the young girls are creased by mud, gaining new texture, shaped by the knife they hold, primed for digging. The geography of the mountain is restless.

We are all given an identity we did not choose, gender is moved by the lungs, ground up by the mouth, chewed down then spoken. But identity, place, memory and ecology are biographical. It is the presence of the past, present and future.

I dream about the women on the mountain; crowds of flesh and material crawling with no sense of what part of them is a body or what part of any body belongs to them. A small girl is swallowed by the mass, becomes part of the ground they search upon. At first you can hear her calling but it's not for mother or for help and is quickly dissolved into the sounds of the others as they sing their successes; a muted, impersonal sound. Their breathing will slow as they crawl higher, their blood thickening in

their veins, making them heavy, their movements ugly, out of synch with their intent. A mother notices her absent child whose body is now the red dust beneath them. A wail vibrates over the mass making their backs arch and causing them to crawl as though an insect prickling in defence. They move at once, together. The ground is unsettled and forced into the air where it hovers as a cloud over them.

It is a stiff climb up the mountain. One hand on an improvised walking stick, the other meeting thigh with every step. I can hear the others breathing beside me. Our breathing becomes discipline, application, a strangulating regulation of the spiritual collective. With every step I can feel a stitch catch. Could this be a merciless punishment to the body that observes the destruction of ritual.

Tibetan monks were one of the first to voice danger. The hunt was no spiritual quest, it was a contagion, leaving people in conflict with their geography, dissolving the practice of ritual and disrupting mythology. The harvesting of cordyceps would upset spirits of the mountain and Earth, causing death and bad luck in the family of the collector.

I can't feel any side effects although, even if I do feel them, I can't find any information about what the eating of the infected caterpillar might do. I eat the entire body, which I know to be illegal in some parts of Nepal. The eyes crunch, unlike the rest of the body. It tastes earthy and sticks in my teeth. I wonder whether potency is lost if the entire body is not digested at once. My dreams are still disturbed and anxiety does not wane. But I feel I am able to live divided, now performing two lives, one of work and another as an observer.

She bleeds on the second day so has to be sent back. My tongue is so coarse in my mouth that I expect to choke but instead it rolls by my cheeks, coating my palette with pine, and I am,

somehow, swallowing. I can barely split my teeth to say goodbye.

We had dreamt of shopadi, of blood spilling between our thighs and what it would mean and this is what it feels like: isolation, separation, and then focus. Although none of this is my own. I am alone, I am movement, I am doing the thing I thought I would never do.

Back in the forest, Shiva is angry. We take from his forest but we were not allowed here before. The yarshagunbu has scattered further, leading us across his land. It fears us and our mouths are numbed by its bitterness.

'The word for world is forest.' Giri calls to me. My fingers are long to hook and curl. My body is opened for more money. 'Fungus eating is generous and bizarre, it makes worlds for others.' They smile and we head further into the trees. I say the name again in my head again and again, shopadi.

Mushroom tracks are elusive but hungry. Their movement performs the future. Of our body. Of our economy. And they are constantly searching. For a body. It's ventriloquism really, the fungi moves the body and becomes it too. They stretch out, extending their body into the host's, manipulating its behaviour and, sometimes making them attract predators; manipulating their environment and our bodies. The fungi wants to be devoured and will take its host's body with it. For all these reasons they are parasites.

The bodies at the mountain camps are women. Children and men too, although not many of these. And the fungi spreads underground. And through the air. That's what's running things. 'If you could make the soil liquid and transparent and walk into the ground, you would find yourself surrounded by nets of hyphae.' Like a dance, a pattern of movements: the fungi create air flow by allowing their moisture to evaporate. Which cools them off.

Which uses up energy from heat. Cold air is dense, it flows and spreads out and the entire process creates water vapour. Which is lighter than air. So the spores can disperse.

Horizontally and vertically. The fungi create wind, manage their own transport system. Have crafted a way to get around and influence growth. To take over. A powerful contamination really. Experimental fluid mechanics.

The camp trade in cordyceps, swap fungi for food or sex for food when the hunt is poor. And the greatest hunters are female. It was their fingers and their wiriness. Cordyceps are where Nepalese money comes from. So the female body pays.

But all over Nepal people disappear too. The children of the hunters who are forced to sell sex at the camps because the cordyceps are more valuable and become pregnant. Their babies are denied citizenship because of a lack of a clear father. So they belong to nowhere.

Or the dalits. The untouchables. And the taboo of women who menstruate and threaten the purity of the cordyceps. Are banished. Back to the village until their impurity ceases. The contaminated contaminate. No touching of the house or of anything that might prohibit their collecting.

At least this was tradition. But the cordyceps have changed the economic base of Nepal and so have changed culture. People choose either cultural practice or income. As a younger generation flood the fields, searching, hunting, tradition and rules are broken. The young are not willing to keep up these orthodox ways.

The cordyceps graze in high altitude, moving further up the mountain as the environment has changed. In humans, high altitudes deplete the availability of oxygenated blood. The kidneys send warning signals to the spine, making the bone marrow produce more red blood cells.

This surge in oxygenated blood allows the body to perform at its peak, as though an athlete. Energy levels will rise. However, extended periods of time in high altitude causes the blood to thicken and become sticky with these extra cells, eventually slowing. Fainting is common as is dizziness, nausea, aching limbs, nosebleeds and vomiting. The body evacuates itself. Sufferers can experience problems with memory, exhaustion and a loss of clarity of thought. It makes sense then that the collectors become fanatic.

The collectors pick. But to collect in Nepal requires a licence or permit. It comes with cost to the government and at a cost to the female body. Grass with its own shadow hangs thick over the lives of young women, offering freedom, offering entrapment.

Credits

Concept, composition, voice-over:
Diana Policarpo

Text: Emmy Beber in collaboration with
Diana Policarpo

Sound Design: Edward Simpson in
collaboration with Diana Policarpo

Clarinet: Emmy Beber

Mastering: Brendan Feeney (Wave
Studios, London)

Video editing: Rúben Santiago

Video post-production: João Cáceres
Costa

Courtesy of EDP Foundation.

Read an interview with the artist about this work [here](#) (originally published in Revista Contemporânea #4 [Moving Image], print edition, 2019).

Cite this piece as:

Policarpo, Diana. 'Mycorrhizal Listening'. The Contemporary Journal 3 (November 03, 2020). [<https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/death-grip>].