

Monstrous Mushrooms, Toxic Love and Queer Utopias in Jenny Hval's *Paradise Rot*

Hannah Pezzack

University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Embarking on a close reading of Jenny Hval's 2018 novel, *Paradise Rot*, this paper sets out to unveil the utopic potential rooted in reimagining the body not as a self-contained being but as an intricate network extending beyond the confines of the skin. It challenges prevailing Western epistemologies that isolate humans, hierarchically distancing them from non-humans such as plants and animals. By taking up the literary conventions of gothic horror, the analysis focuses on the peculiar, co-dependent relationship of *Paradise Rot*'s central characters: Carral and Johanna. As the women's unsettling love affair unfolds, they become a symbiotic and mycorrhizal entity akin to the sprouting mushrooms inhabiting their dilapidated house.

Exploring the metaphorical and tangible challenges posed by mushrooms, the paper underscores the interconnected, non-singular nature of fungal networks. Hval provocatively links the queerness of her main characters with fungi, both typically demonized as alien, contaminating, and freakish. This paper furthermore aligns these characteristics with queered figures from classic gothic horror, including the lesbian vampire and Susan Stryker's transgendered Frankenstein. Together, these monstrous entities disturb the boundaries between the "natural" and the supernatural, the human and the non-human, the living and the dead.

Marxists have drawn comparisons between the vampire's parasitic need to feed on blood and capitalism's exploitation of labor. Through the character of Carral, who I read as a femme vamp figure, I argue that vampires have redemptive qualities that illuminate our fundamental dependence on others to survive. Hval's novel illustrates the essential, confronting fact that we need one another, and more so than ever in precarious times. In the context of the climate crisis, neoliberal individualism, and ongoing economic instability, understanding our indebtedness to one another and our environments is crucial for planetary survival. Ties of care in late capitalist societies are complex, messy, and unequal, yet by recognizing our reliance on one another, we might, as scholar Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) argues, realize a utopia where one's dependence on others cannot, and need not, be concealed.

KEYWORDS

Disability, Queer, Eco-feminist, Ecosexuality, Eroticism, Environmental Humanities

INTRODUCTION

This paper embarks on a close reading of the 2018 novel *Paradise Rot* by Jenny Hval, addressing the utopic potential seeded in understanding the body not as a bounded, singular form, but as an interlaced network that extends beyond the skin. Prevailing Western thought regards human beings as hermetically sealed individuals that exist in a hierarchical relationship with non-humans (e.g., plants and animals). Hydro-feminist philosopher Astrida Neimanis expands on this,

denoting that ‘discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism’ (2013, 38) declare the human to be autonomous and separate from nature. But as I illustrate below, undoing this epistemology is imperative—we must come to understand that we are interlinked and entangled; we depend on, sustain, hold allegiance, and thereby are required to care for one another and the natural world. To quote the environmental humanities scholar Stacy Alaimo, we are ‘always already penetrated by substances and forces that can never be properly accounted—ethics and politics must proceed from there’ (2016, 7). If the boundaries of embodiment are contingent and permeable, then societies are no longer made of individuals, but rather interlinked, co-dependent entities. This realisation allows for a shift towards what Donna Haraway has called response-ability, or the recognition of our existing, irreducibly entangled, relations (2016, 125). Response-ability is a call to action; we are reliant on each other, and we must learn to act like it.

My analysis of *Paradise Rot* focuses on the lopsided, co-dependent relationship of its central characters, Carral and Johanna. In the throes of their disquieting love affair, the two become eerily intertwined and transform into a symbiotic, mycorrhizal entity akin to the sprouting mushrooms that inhabit their shared home. Gradually, Carral becomes disabled, losing the ability to look after herself and requiring Johanna’s care. The slow lapse of her health and autonomy is framed as deeply disturbing. However, taking up Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the abject, I propose that this horrifying depiction unsettles the notion that we are sovereign, independent beings. This paper further attends to the mushrooms which sprout in every crevice of the narrative of *Paradise Rot*, dissecting the metaphorical and material challenge that fungi pose to the idea of an individual. Rhizomic networks of mushrooms are vast and interconnected; they cannot be understood as singular beings. Hval makes an allegorical link between the queerness of her characters and fungi—both have been demonised as contaminating, threatening, strange, encroaching and non-human. Rather than arguing for reappraisal, I take up these ghastly, ghoulish qualities alongside queered figures from canonical gothic horror—including the lesbian vampire and Susan Stryker’s transgendered Frankenstein—to illuminate our fundamental more-than-human-ness. These monstrous creatures trouble the concept of the ‘natural’, unsettling binary between the living and the dead. Fetid, decaying substances—rotting apples, blood, urine and spoiled milk—thrive throughout Hval’s novel, binding bodies together through the chemical process of metabolic breakdown. In an increasingly precarious world on the brink of climate collapse and ongoing economic crises, these depictions of interlinked co-dependency are a matter of survival. Ties of care in late capitalist societies are complex, messy, and unequal. But we might, as disability scholar Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha puts it, dream of a utopia in which ‘one’s dependence on others cannot, and need not, be concealed’ (2018, 33). In the penultimate paragraphs of my analysis, drawing on the scholarship Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher’s formulation of

Postcapitalist Desire, I attend to the ‘trippy-ness’ of *Paradise Rot*—the psychedelic passages where Carral’s flesh shimmers and melts into Johanna’s—as a speculative hauntology; a fleeting horizon in which the hierarchical boundaries between human and nature, self and other are momentarily obliterated. These sections of the novel, where Carral literally becomes Johanna and the borders between the two women dissolve, offer a glimpse into Piepzna-Samarasinha’s utopic vision of utter dependency, where one’s reliance on others is exposed. As I surmise, we—humans and non-humans—exist in transcorporeal relationships with one another, indebted to one another for survival. In the paragraph below, I will provide a brief outline the plot of *Paradise Rot*, the short novel by the multi-disciplinary artist, musician and writer, Jenny Hval.¹

Partly based on Hval’s biographical experiences, *Paradise Rot*’s protagonist, Johanna, is a Norwegian exchange student who arrives in Aybourne, a gloomy, fictionalized beach town in Australia. She struggles to find a place to live and eventually takes up residence in an old brewery with Carral, a waiflike woman working as an office temp. Soon after Johanna moves in, Carral begins sneaking into her bed at night, although it is unclear if she is awake during these hallucinatory, increasingly sexual encounters. As their erotic entanglement intensifies, Carral becomes chronically sick and somnambulist, as if she were being vampirically drained of life. *Paradise Rot* depicts their infatuation as an ambivalent experience, simultaneously toxic and intoxicating. The brewery is disused but doesn’t seem to have stopped fermenting. Everything in the building is rotting. Mushrooms sprout from the grout, decomposing apples and insects overflow in the kitchen rubbish bin. The skeletal walls and half-built mezzanine platforms that segment the former warehouse into rooms are paper-thin, and Johanna can hear Carral breathing, urinating, and having sex with their neighbor Pym. Over time, the two women melt into each other, becoming translucent and indistinguishable. Their relationship turns ambiguous; Carral no longer seems to want sex but needs to be continually looked after, held, and fed. In a state akin to chemical dependency, Johanna finds it more and more difficult to be away from her. In the words of critic Elvia Wilk in her piece on eco-erotics for *Granta* magazine: ‘Their desire does not flow but oozes between them, threatening to submerge Johanna. She struggles against the urge to become part of the damp house with its fungal occupants and its compost heap’ (2020).

In my analysis, I regard *Paradise Rot* as a hybrid literary form that utilizes the conventions of gothic literature to narrate an eco-erotic, vampiric queer love story. Carral’s nocturnal wanderings bear a striking resemblance to the activities of Carmilla, the main character of the eponymous 1872 novella by Sheridan Le Fanu. An early example of vampire-fiction and considered to be the canonical lesbian vampire, Carmilla preys upon her sleeping lover, entering her bed chamber in a series of hallucinatory and haunting guises. In *Skin Shows*, an expansive study of gothic film

and literature, Jack Halberstam follows the well-trodden path² of identifying the erotic figure of the vampire as the embodiment of anxieties surrounding ‘perverse and dangerous sexuality’ (1995, 14). In *Carmilla*, queerness is construed as a dark and deadly—albeit titillating—threat. However, Halberstam takes this observation further, arguing that Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* coalesced around Victorian anti-Semitism and xenophobia. The Transylvanian Count is an illegal immigrant who is smuggled into London; a Jewish wanderer, a creature that will ‘not rest until it has feasted upon the vital fluids of women and children, drained them of health, and seduced them into a growing legion of perverts and parasites’ (Halberstam 1995, 99). In other words, vampires are awarded not only an allegorical relation to perversity but in fact, gestate all forms of deviance. In my reading of *Paradise Rot*, I hold onto the demonized status of vampires and take seriously their role as malignant beings that sink their teeth into what it means to be alive, (un)dead, consumed, cared for, and desired. In much the same way, mushrooms hold an uncanny relation to the notion of liveliness—by devouring the dead and decaying, and obsecrating prevailing taxonomies between plant, animal, and mineral entities. Moreover, as I will illustrate, getting up close and personal with metabolic breakdown of rot reveals what Haraway names as ‘*oddkin*... unexpected collaborations and combinations’ that spore in ‘hot compost piles’ (2016, 151). This paper henceforth takes up Haraway’s embrace of the compost—the uncanniness of putrefying matter and bodies that are unnervingly invaded to analyse the devouring desire depicted in *Paradise Rot*. Despite its unsettling tone, I will argue that the novel imagines a utopian way of living, loving and dying well together, one that does not shy away from the complexities of care and dependency.

THE FEMME VAMP AND OTHER QUEER MONSTROSITIES

Attempting to rehabilitate the vampire into a ‘queer feminine version,’ Sophie Lewis asserts that far from being derogatory, the femme-vamp is a utopian monstrosity. She is a celebration of the most loathed tropes of femininity: ‘thirsty, needy, dependent, sensuous, vulnerable, constantly multiplying creature full of unnatural appetites’ (2021). Here, Lewis is echoing Susan Stryker’s seminal 1994 text, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix.’ Originally delivered as a performance piece, the monologue reclaims Frankenstein’s monster, thereby challenging popular transphobic readings of the infamous character:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Like the

monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist (1994, 245).

While not explicitly named, Stryker is evoking psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva's concept of *the abject*. Developed in her essay, 'Powers of Horror,' 'abjection' literally means 'to cast out,' yet with reference to marginalized subjects, the term encompasses an interactive process where the boundaries of the self are defined against that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between... the composite' (1982, 4). In Kristeva's words, abjection 'disturbs identity, system, order' (1982,4), formulating a kind of borderline uncertainty—ambiguous, horrifying, and polluting. Transgendered bodies defy the borders of systemic order by refusing to adhere to clear definitions of sex and gender—so the abject serves as a cleaving point, pathologizing and psychologizing trans subjectivity. Stryker, with razor-sharp directness, turns the pitchfork onto her cis-gender assailants, beseeching them to put their 'own bodies out on the examining table' (Barad 2015, 392). Unsettling the fabrication of so-called 'natural' bodies she states:

... the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both... Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself (Stryker 1994, 240).

Abjection, according to Kristeva, 'draws me toward the place where meaning collapses' (1982, 2). It is in this liminal space where the subject experiences a crisis of meaning in which transformation is possible, where the difference between internal and external becomes unclear. Henceforth, when Stryker declares 'I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster' (1994, 240), she is taking up abjection as a political strategy—a tool with which to further challenge and problematize conventions of socially constructed, naturalized categories of gender. Stryker's powerful piece deals specifically with transexual subjectivity, but I wish to take up her embrace of the monstrous, the post-natural and the abject—her affirmation of her 'egalitarian relationship with non-human material Being' (1994, 240)—to address the way that Hval depicts femininity, queerness, and disability. These forms of embodiment have long been excluded from 'what counts as fully human' (1994, 245). But rather than attempting to reappraise them according to an ethics dependent on a 'human figure and a human voice as articulators of an ethical demand,' (Zylinska

2021, 118), I argue that Hval proposes a radical allegiance with the inhuman—with mushrooms, rot, and bodily fluids, vectors of disease and decay. As a work of horror, by embracing the monstrosity of queerness, femme-vamps and fungi, *Paradise Rot* upsets the ‘naturalness’ of the sovereign, un-penetrated, un-enterable body, challenging its salience as the established norm. We are, rather disturbingly albeit truthfully, infected by one another, ruptured by our relations and thereby collectively and cooperatively responsible for each other.

MUSHROOM FLESH, RANCID ROT AND ENTANGLED BODIES

One day, while taking a bath, Johanna notices ‘deep yellow, almost black’ mushroom cap sprouting on the tiled wall. (Hval 2018, 130). She rubs it over her naked body, and it leaves a trail of slime—its fungal flesh has the same spongy, wet texture as Carral’s touch. Lying intertwined in bed, Johanna can feel ‘little sprouts appear... where she’d breathed’ (Hval 2018, 103). Feverish and catatonic, Carral herself seems to be decomposing—her concave chest has ‘collapsed in on itself,’ as if ‘she was rotten too’ (Hval 2018, 53). When Johanna attempts to trim the tufts of grass intruding along the living room skirting board and ‘wash away the crawling maggots’ on the kitchen counter, Carral ‘cuddles up’ (Hval 2018, 102) against her, removing the sponge from her hand. Johanna recounts the strange encounter with the mushroom in the bathtub to Carral, who immediately jumps to its defense: ‘*Don’t get rid of it.* She looked serious... Later that night when she came over and breathed on my neck again, I felt the same soft skin melt against mine as I’d felt earlier, touching the mushroom cap. I didn’t move but let her envelop me’ (Hval 2018, 102-5). Embodying the ‘rot’ of the novel’s title, the women crumble and putrefy: ‘With every inhalation her belly, chest, and whole body swelled and collapsed, like a white, slippery dough left to rise... I stroked her arms, her thighs, her belly. Together we filled each other to the brim and lay there slumped in an all-consuming doze, like gorged snakes’ (Hval 2018, 75). For Haraway, embracing the productive disintegration of the compost heap is a rich literal and metaphorical site where ‘critters – human and not – *become-with* each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding’ (2016, 97). Haraway magnifies the processes of decay as the weaving, writhing dynamics of life. Instead of positing a human subject that is separate from the world, she acknowledges ‘*the prior existence of relations* of clusters of matter and energy that temporarily stabilize for us humans into entities – on a molecular, cellular and social level’ (Zylinska 2021, 116). The ‘compostist’ episteme is therefore a challenge to human exceptionalism—the ‘*de facto* masculinist subject that disinterestedly looks at the world as his possession and playground’ (Zylinska 2021, 116). Together, in the wet, lively mush, we are consumed, infected, and interlinked on an intrinsic, chemical level. This has crucial

ramifications for the way in which we are responsible for and implicated in each other's survival—a tenet that Hval expresses via the symbiotic romance between the women and the non-human, ecological entities that occupy their dilapidated home.

In *Paradise Rot*, everything seems to be decomposing. Johanna's first encounter with the alienness of Australia is through its dairy-heavy cuisine which, to her Norwegian palette, tastes rancid. Yoghurt congeals in her stomach and nauseatingly, when she orders a cup of tea at a local café, the waitress pours a dollop of cloying milk in the cup 'without asking, so much that the tea was completely white' (Hval 2018, 5). In her essay on rancid butter, Hannah Landecker revels in butyric acid—the molecule that not only gives spoiled food an unpleasant odor, but also exists within all living organisms: 'following butyric acid's path, we travel not just between individual animals or insects, or animals and their habitats or foods, but deep inside, to relations that constitute the very insides and outsides that make us think that there are individuals' (2020, 127).

Within the body, butyrate has a diverse number of fates: 'it can be excreted in feces or be used immediately as an energy source by the human epithelial cells lining the colon,' but perhaps more crucially, 'microbial metabolites modulate the very interface of inside and outside that is the gut,' as well as the 'blood-brain barrier permeability, a condition that is generally regarded as deleterious for brain health' (Landecker 2020, 130). Travelling between entities via microscopic exchanges, beads of sweat, fermented foods, and bloodsucking parasites, Landecker demonstrates butyrate's essential function in metabolizing the barrier integrity of the cells that comprise our organs—liver, brain and kidneys. Conversely, it is this tight animal-microbe link—the lively circulation of butyrate—that constitutes our existence as (relatively) stable, bounded beings. Evidentially, much like the flimsy plasterboard of the renovated brewery in *Paradise Rot* or the spoiled, fatty yogurt and milk that turns Johanna's butyrate-full belly, the borders between subjects exist not as rigid walls, but cell-thick boundaries, vulnerable to rupture.

To Johanna, the idea of being permeable is unsettling and she obsesses over 'growing a thicker skin' (Hval 2018, 34) to fortify herself against her leaky, sensorially overwhelming new home. At university she is completing an undergraduate degree in Biology and so, to distract herself from her disorientating surroundings, Johanna dives into her course textbooks: 'I liked what I read... *the world of the living is a hierarchy where each level in the biological chain feeds off of the level below*' (Hval 2018, 52). Yet throughout the story, these orderly classifications are continually subverted—the strict delineations between the living and dead, human and non-human, dreaming and wakefulness—are repeatedly put into jeopardy. The brewery is disturbingly animate—it moans, breathes, shudders and shakes. Placing her hand against the wall, Johanna

feels a ‘beating in there, like a tiny heart’ (Hval 2018, 121). Embodiment in the novel becomes more and more diffuse, subverting the limits of the skin. In this way, Hval’s speculative, sci-fi prose becomes a way to access the intrinsically entwined relations between people, things and their environments. While Johanna’s textbook might place the world into an organized, systematic order, as is exemplified by the case of transgressive butyric acid or rhizomatic, sporing mushrooms, it cannot be contained or delineated neatly.

PRECARITY, SOLIDARITY, CONTAMINATION

Apparently forgotten about by refuse collectors, the brewery is situated in the post-industrial district of Ayborne—a strange part of town disconnected from the rest of the city, populated by empty warehouses. When the girls try to clean, no one comes to pick up the mounting piles of rubbish:

The compost was still beneath the stairs. The stench of rotten fruit had spread through the entire flat. It felt like the brewery had been transformed into a big wet tank that was waiting for Carral and I to decompose within it: a rotten, reeking Garden of Eden. The apples were in the bin where we’d left them, mouldy and collapsed. Flies with long legs buzzed around a torn dark-red Bloody Ploughman. The Honeygold next to it had its peel intact, like a shriveled urine-coloured pearl (Hval 2018, 130).

There is no mention of other people living nearby, aside from Pym—an out-of-work poet who occupies the downstairs apartment—but the reader is informed that the area is being steadily gentrified: ‘The whole of the Hawthorn district was abandoned for years... Until they realised they could renovate the old factories’ (Hval 2018, 42). Hval’s characters live a peripheral, uncertain existence—their landlord has vanished, despite the ramshackle interior which is dire need of repair. Johanna, who speaks English imperfectly, struggles to adapt to life in Australia and mid-way through the plot, Carral’s temporary job contract is suddenly terminated.

Hval’s depiction of tenuous unemployment and less-than-ideal living conditions characterizes Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s evaluation that precarity—meaning ‘life without the promise of stability’—is the defining ‘condition of our time’ (2015, 77). In her book on the livelihood of matsutake mushrooms, Tsing traces the interlocking material and socioeconomic networks of foraging, labor, and consumption that are woven into the pre-existing fungal ecologies binding ‘roots and mineral soils, long before producing mushrooms’ (2015, vii). Tsing’s view of precarity encompasses not only the instability of post-industrial, capitalist economies—the increasing insecurity of the job and housing markets—but also environmental threats on the level of species

extinction, extreme weather patterns and the erosion of whole ecosystems. As such, ‘thinking through precarity’ has deep, ethical implications:

Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. We can’t rely on the status quo; everything is in flux, including our ability to survive. Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. A precarious world is a world without teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible (Tsing 2015, 20).

This proposal for a non-normative ethics of responsibility entails recognizing our entanglements, including co-species interdependences, to understand one’s status as already invaded, or to use Tsing’s phrase—‘contaminated.’ Such an acknowledgement allows for life-sustaining collaborations to flourish. Existing tenuously on the outskirts of society, in the ruins of a bearably habitable building, Carral and Johanna form an uneasy covalent bond together with their strange, non-human roommates.

Originating from the Latin *contaminare*—meaning ‘to touch together,’ ‘corrupt,’ or ‘defile’—contamination is often framed as the invasion of an undesirable element which effectively alters, spoils, harms, or destroys lifeforms. Hval’s portrayal of Johanna’s uncomfortable encounters with fetid substances—from spores to saltwater, to spit and blood—underscores the negative connotation implicit in contamination. But whether we like it or not, it is a material reality that our ‘entanglements with others precedes the emergence of the human sense of self’—the standalone subject is ‘always, already multiple, strange and strange-to-itself’ (Zylinska 2021, 117-8). Indeed, this is the estranging affect that the abject offers and which, in the context of Hval’s appropriation of gothic horror, is transformative. In the words of Halberstam, ‘the monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognise and celebrate our own monstrosities’ (1995, 27). Over the course of the novel, Johanna is consumed by the fear that Carral has penetrated her, gotten under her skin and inseminated her with ‘something that wouldn’t become a proper foetus, but something much worse: a blackened, dead, and rotten fruit’ (Havl 2018, 99). In this passage, Hval presents contamination via a queered, de-naturalized vision of pregnancy that bleeds into anxieties surrounding losing control of oneself, dependency and femininity.

CARE WORK

In the next section of this paper, I circle back to the figure of the vampire, which Halberstam defines as ‘the idle and dependent other, an organism that lives to feed and feeds to live’ (1995, 27). This reading draws on the Marxist rendering of the vampire as a symbol for capital—a parasite that embodies the capitalist’s ‘boundless thirst for surplus labour.’³ Not working itself, the vampire instead preys on the labour of others. In *Paradise Rot*, the increasingly sickly Carral stays at home after becoming unemployed, making Johanna ‘go to the shop and to the post office to pay our rent and electricity’ (Hval 2018, 103). Taking up the role of the nurturing mother, Johanna feeds, comforts, and bathes Carral’s ‘moist and milky’ body (Hval 2018, 103). In her reparative reading of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Katie Stone proposes that the vampire can be understood as a representation of not only of the ‘indolent capitalist but also of all those who are unable to, or refuse to, perform the work demanded by capital,’ including, but not limited to, children and disabled people (2021, 297). She interprets the vampire’s leech-like dependence according to Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s notion of competing needs and messy interdependencies—what she names ‘care webs’ (2018, 33). In capitalist societies, care (as a form of feminised, reproductive labour) is simultaneously neglected and devalued despite being an essential tenant for survival. When placed in this framework, Carral’s vampirism functions as an acknowledgement of the ‘violence involved in unevenly distributed, individualised care work’ (Stone 2021, 302). Indeed, in the penultimate chapter, the sole burden of care becomes too much for Johanna to bear. Her decision to escape is written out in the form of a poem:

Carral and Jo,
Carral and Jo together:
A black, dead and rotten fruit.
Afterwards Carral rests on my shoulder blade, hipbone, femoral neck, backside of my
knee.
[...]
I have to leave (Hval 2018, 140).

With ‘Carral and Jo’ as same-sexed parents and their putrefied baby, the ‘rotten fruit,’ Hval presents a queered and corrupted vision of the family unit. In *Full Surrogacy Now*, Sophie Lewis notes how frequently the language of parasitism is deployed in discussions of gestation. And yet the violent hunger of children is not regarded as monstrous precisely because the labor it relies upon takes place within the domestic sphere. Following Lewis, naturalizing the work of gestation is to ‘ironically... *devalue* that ideological shibboleth ‘the mother-foetus bond’ (2019, 9). In her view, pregnancy and care must be rendered strange to (re)stress the endurance, struggle, and labor

entailed. Indeed, articulating pregnancy and care ‘as work in the first instance will be key to abolishing them (as work) in the long run’ (Lewis 2019, 42). Via her posthuman theorization of care, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa conclusively adds:

... a politics of speculative thinking also is a commitment to seek what other worlds could be in the making through caring while staying with the trouble of our own complicities and implications. Feminist visions of care emphasize the ethico-political significance of doings of care that make the substrate of everyday life, not as a separate cosy realm where ‘nice’ relations can thrive (de la Bellacasa 2017, 204).

In other words, when envisioning care in more-than-human worlds, it is essential not to fall into the trope of a romantic equilibrium in which exchanges of all kinds are characterized by ‘non-innocent’ positionings, imbalances, complex tensions and contradictory ambivalences. Facing up to this reality of our dependent, multi-implicated selves is confronting, even terrifying. But because the labor of care and caring is obscured and devalued, it remains hidden. Exposing the truth of our dependence, as Hval does, is thus essential; we can come to realize our allegiance to one another and regard these ties as an inherent, composite part of existence.

MAKING STRANGE

Described on the back cover blurb by feminist writer and critic Chris Kraus as a ‘work of quiet horror,’ there are notably few instances of true jump scare fright in *Paradise Rot*. When Carral—paralyzed by her illness—wets the bed, Johanna’s response is one of detached acceptance: ‘So I lay there for a while as the pee soaked into my mattress, the smell of urine intensifying’ (Hval 2018, 97). The incident even seems to catalyze further intimacy: ‘I continued to stroke Carral’s body, first her cheek, puffy and wet, and then her hand. Then I was braver, stroking her naked back, letting my fingers walk her ribs like rungs on a ladder up to her throat’ (Hval 2018, 97). Dependency, states Piepzna-Samarasinha, is configured as profane because it embodies the ‘deepest fate-worse-than-death fear’ of those who are able (at least temporarily) to conceal their dependence on others (2018, 33). But it is also tantalizing—it is ‘what you want the most but can’t even let yourself speak [of] – a vision of absolute vulnerability in which one’s dependence on others cannot, and need not, be concealed’ (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 33). And it is precisely this wavering dichotomy between chemical enticement and toxic fear that personifies the nature of Johanna and Carral’s undefined, co-dependent relationship. Facing up to the reality of relying on others for survival is terrifying, but it is a truth that cannot be ignored—without Johanna to

sustain her, Carral cannot exist; her frail body must be tended to and looked after, fed, washed, and protected.

For Lewis, the uncanny realisation of our multi-faceted, overlapping reliance on each other opens up potential for radical kinship—what she names the *gestational commune*:

To an extent, bodies are always leaky, parasited, and nonunitary, as the vital and varied flora of bacteria in every body, not just gestating ones, demonstrates. In the accounts of earthly life given by biologists such as Lynn Margulis, we are all revealed to be disconcertingly pregnant, multiply-pregnant with myriad entities, bacteria, viruses, and more, some of whom are even simultaneously gestating us (or rather, providing some crucial developmental functions on our behalf) (2019, 162).

Lewis is primarily concerned with the abolition of the family unit and the formation of radical, new bonds that are not based solely in blood (or even same species) relation. She utilizes the term ‘surrogacy’ to connote ‘the very actual but also utopian fact that we are the makers of one another, and we can learn to act like it’ (2019, 162). Ostensibly, Johanna knows that Carral cannot get her pregnant, but she is plagued by recurrent, terrifying nightmares that envision what will happen to her once Carral has penetrated her. She is haunted by the dream of a decomposing fetus that oozes out of her vagina while she sits on the toilet. Yet, as Lewis points out, we are always already impregnated by flora and bacteria; we are always already more-than-human bodies. But Johanna’s anxiety clarifies how difficult it is to grasp our multiplicitous, penetrated selves in the face of disdain towards ontological impurity. Philosopher of science Justin E. H. Smith offers the following summative insight into the way that ‘multiple’ bodies have been demonized by Western thought:

Mainstream philosophy and science at least since Aristotle have held to the view that each living body, under normal circumstances, should be inhabited by no more than one... sharing bodily space is abnormal, a sign of pathology... It was this prejudice against mutualism that delayed by several years widespread recognition of the true nature of lichen: not a moss, not some low liverwort, but an intrication of two very different kinds of being, of fungus and algae, the former hosting the latter, as near as we can make out (2019, 58).

Taking up lichen as his cornerstone case study, biologist Scott F. Gilbert argues that rather than ‘individuals’ we should instead talk about ‘holobionts’ (2020, 47)—composite organisms *becoming-through* multiple cooperative processes. Thinking-with lichen—the ‘yellow

moss patches' (Hval 2018, 102) that invade the bare cement floor of the brewery in *Paradise Rot*—can henceforth trouble anthropocentric attachment to the myth of self-sufficient solo-selfhood. Through this, multi-sentient species and bodies (be they pregnant or fungal) that are occupied by many-selves, can begin to be rehabilitated and recognized. Being 'invaded' by foreign entities is not so much alien and abnormal as it is an ordinary fact of life on Earth.

TILL DEATH DO US PART: DISABILITY, LOVE AND HALLUCINOGENS

In a statement that juxtaposes Carral's ghoulish proximity to death; her zombified, nocturnal wanderings, with the vibrancy of their sexual encounters, Johanna reiterates her scientific knowledge: 'All natural objects belong to one of two primary categories: The non-living and the living' (Hval 2018, 25). But fungi (like vampires), assert researchers Patricia Kaishian and Hasmik Djoulakian, have long problematized this distinction. Most fungi are decomposers called *saprotrophs* that mulch up dead and dying things with parasitic vigor. *Mycophobia*, as an overlapping social and scientific discourse, has rendered perceptions of fungi as 'poisonous, agents of disease, degenerate, freaky gross and weird' (Kaishian and Djoulakian 2020, 9). Merlin Sheldrake adds that fungi, as vast, inter-connecting systems hidden under the forest floor, throw our concept of individuality into question. In his book *Entangled Life*, Sheldrake illustrates how ingesting psychedelic mushrooms can—at least briefly, during the duration of a 'trip'—offer a way to re-think of ourselves as part of a dynamic network, embedded in a filigree of relationships (2020, 101). Much like the mycorrhizal lattice, the compound psilocybin branches out into the web of our neurotransmitters, stimulating the flow of carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus, connecting and reconnecting regions of our brains. In the words of Kaishian and Djoulakian: 'Psychedelic mushrooms take people to a vulnerable site of deconstruction... where what was once seen as static and inert is suddenly pulsing and humming with animacy' (2020, 18).

Throughout *Paradise Rot* Hval toys with the tropes of a psychedelic experience—time dilates; shadows shift and transmogrify, blossoming into surreal shapes and unidentifiable creatures. At the crux of the novel, when Johanna tries to escape, the house comes to life: 'the chandelier trembles, and the glass stalactites are dripping...' (Hval 2018, 142). It's as if Carral has grown roots; long sinuous tendons that wrap around her ankles. Later, when she returns to Norway and thinks back on the brewery, it exists in her memory like a mirage, and Carral is nowhere to be found. Johanna searches for her name in the phonebook, but she has vanished: 'swallowed by the fog' (Hval 2018, 148). Akin to the ego-obsecrating effect of psilocybin, the interconnectedness that the women share is short-lived, followed by a bewildering comedown. But, supposes Fredric

Jameson, it is precisely this fleetingness that defines glimpsing at alterity: ‘From time to time, like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays of light from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces are possible’ (2009, 52). Mark Fisher, in his posthumously transcribed *Postcapitalist Desire* lectures, takes up this quote to grapple with how to resist ‘psychic privatisation’ (2020, 14)—the way that neoliberal capitalism has cast our inner lives as wholly our own, completely independent from anyone else. Nonetheless, Fisher is keen to emphasize that while psychoactive substances might ‘loosen up the human mind to a certain degree,’ their ability to birth radical new epistemologies is muted due to fact that a chemical high is ‘all too temporary’ (2020, 14). However, as I have demonstrated, by stressing the material basis of one’s being—it’s cell-level porosity and inherent co-constitutionality—it is possible to begin to undo the formulation of the stagnant, self-sufficient human subject. In *Paradise Rot*, Carral—with her sporing, fermenting, oozing, rupturing body that continually enters Johanna—unnervingly confronts the reader with their own ontological permeability. Like the mysterious damp stain in Carral’s pulp-erotica novel which throbs lustily when Johanna places her finger on it, the women seep out of the page and into the realm of our own intrinsically unbounded corporeality.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the women’s relationship falls apart. Johanna, with reference to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667)—an epic poem narrating Satan’s fall from Heaven and Man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden—is cast out of the putrefying house. Her recollections of the brewery are dreamlike and she is haunted by lustful memories of Carral. Throughout the novel, Johanna’s conflicted longing for Carral’s body, contrasted by her anxious trepidation generates a surplus affect—one that reveals the fear of being undone by desire; of being overwhelmed. Their fungal infatuation—the thrall of an intoxicating romance—challenges the very notion of being autonomous and in control. On an inextricable interpersonal, chemical, and ecological level, the pair are intertwined and transformed by their encounter. In the final passages of the book, Johanna remarks that she feels as if she has left a part of herself behind in Australia. Although this vision of absolute dependency is depicted as terrifying, it is also imbued with love and longing; a vision of utopia where one’s complex reliance on others—to be loved, nurtured, actualized, cared for and constituted—is no longer denied.

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¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into Jenny Hval's full oeuvre, but vampires, pregnancy, feminism, nature, queer love and gothic iconography are all leitmotifs throughout her writing and music—one particular example being the 2016 album *Blood Bitch* featuring the track 'Female Vampire,' a sinisterly uplifting song about necrophiliac orgy amongst a group of undead friends.

² See for example: Craft, Christopher. 'Kiss Me with those Red Lips: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's Dracula.' 1984. *Representations*, 1 (8): 107-133, Davison, Carol Margaret. ed. *Bram Stoker's Dracula: Sucking Through the Century, 1897-1997*. 1997. Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, and Patrick O'Malley. 2006. *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance and Victorian Gothic Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ In volume 1 of *Das Kapital* Karl Marx defines capital as 'dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.'