



QUEER AS

EMBRACING THE TRANSFORMATIVE
METAPHOR OF MUSHROOMINESS.

*Words by Jonathan Feakins.
Photography by Nasrah Omar.*

MUSHROOMS

Mushroom knife in hand, Susy Langsdale scoured the ground with a practiced eye; even after leading multiple foraging walks, the fungus aficionado never stopped being surprised at the colorful, varied bodies fruiting from the ground. One day, in a small cluster, they spotted a golden chanterelle—a smooth-capped, edible variety smelling faintly of apricot.

“The underground space is such a transy gender affirming space even in the real world,” they’d later post on their Instagram, @queer.as.fungi, with a close-up of the chanterelle’s lovingly photographed amber folds. The caption continued:

I’ve been thinking a lot about the amazing informal trans systems of care in the form of WhatsApp group chats, trans mentors and discord and FB groups, helping people to navigate the mazelike world of trans healthcare. We shouldn’t need them to figure out access to healthcare, but sadly we do ATM and so thank god for them! Think these systems of care are the golden underground and feel proud and in awe of trans communities for finding a way even if it’s tough and murky. ... Trans people are the golden chanterelles of humanity.

Langsdale joins a budding contingent of marginalized mycophiles who have embraced mushrooms as a multifaceted metaphor for their own resiliency and liberation. Blurring the boundary between plant and

animal, interweaving itself with other organisms in largely unseen and unappreciated ways, these nerds of decay believe fungus can double as a mascot for the queer experience. (Langsdale once repurposed old Harry Potter novels as a medium for growing oyster mushrooms to transform the legacy of J.K. Rowling into something more digestible for their genderqueer body.)

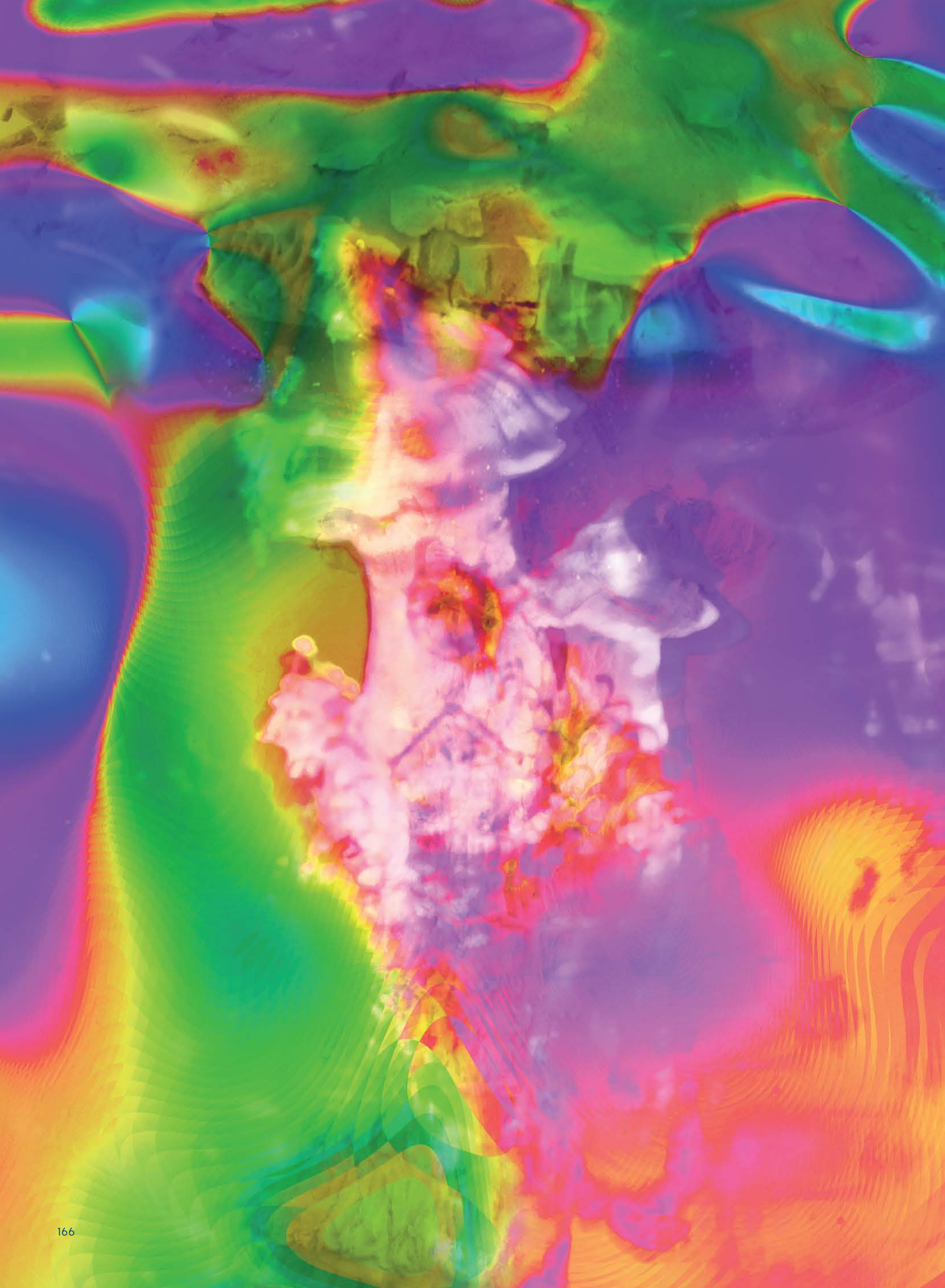
Langsdale is not the first to opine on the tangled, symbolic undercurrents of symbiotic toadstools. In early 2020, mycologist Patricia Ononiwu Kaishian published “The Science Underground: Mycology as a Queer Discipline.” “We argue,” she wrote, “that mycology relies upon queer methodologies for knowledge acquisition given both the nonbinary, cryptic, and subversive biological nature of fungi as well as society’s determination that fungi are perverse and unworthy of formal investigation.”

“Fungal biology, to me, intuitively activated this sense of belonging that was slippery and difficult to find ... in human spaces,” Kaishian would later share in a May 2023 podcast. “What I found in mushrooms was this way of being that kind of slipped through the airspace in the soil; it was a way of being multiple things at once.”

This tender affinity for identity-bending spores has roots that stretch back across time and continents. Like mushrooms after a hard rain, fungal empathy crops up in unexpected places. Fifty years ago, a mycologist in New Zealand took to the botanical journal, *TAXON*, to publish a minor clarification in nomenclature: her own. “Mr

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The FAQ section of the zine *Gay Plants* says: “Why plants? ... Because there are no humans who can teach us these things. There is just nobody gay enough.” Read it online at gayplants.noblogs.org.







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G. F. Laundon of the Plant Health & Diagnostic Station, Levin, New Zealand has changed sex as from the 22nd Jan. 1977,” read the posting, “and is now known as Miss Gillian Laundon. She continues her work in plant pathology, mycology and nomenclature.” Laundon would go on to make a name for herself in New Zealand’s trans rights organizations (a movement forever in debt to whakawāhine—Māori trans women—who embodied their own Polynesian tradition of queerness).

While she may not have known it at the time, Laundon wasn’t the first trans person who had blossomed inside the cozy world of midcentury mycology: Elke Mackenzie—a trailblazer in the research of Antarctic lichen, who in 1953 became the director of Harvard University’s Farlow Herbarium of Cryptogamic Botany—legally transitioned in 1971; shortly thereafter, Harvard pushed Mackenzie into early retirement.

In her work on the Japanese polymath Minakata Kumagusu, historian Eiko Honda reveals the story of a naturalist scholar who adored unorthodox, nonbinary slime molds just as much as his male lovers. In letters to his paramours, Kumagusu intertwined his words with ink doodles of the fungi that had also captured his heart. Honda describes these writings, quoting from the letters:

“They are so desirable,” Kumagusu told Hanjirō. His research into these microbes became inseparable from his intimate dialogues with his lover. He continued: “The other day I wrote on and on asking you to kindly collect algae and lichens [in the Kii region].

What I would love for you to also look for are fungi.” As he looked through the microscope to examine the microbes he had gathered in a land far away from Kii, his affective human nature appeared to be in symbiosis with the curious microcosmos that irresistibly attracted his attention.

The multiplicitous biome of fungi continues to provide ample inspiration. In March 2023, meanwhile, a new performance took shape at St. Margaret’s House in London. The brainchild of artists Nina Scott and Dan de la Motte, *Be More Mushroom* advertised itself as “A play for children and grown-ups celebrating what fungi can teach us about who we are.” Over the course of multiple nights, Scott and others regaled the audience with “Mx. Split Gil, a burlesque star with 23,000 genders,” a truffle-eating boar puppet, and visions of a subterranean cabaret bar known, compellingly and enchantingly, as “Chanterelle’s.”

More often than not, the fungi opted to communicate through song:

I am not an I
But a we, an us, a them
In-between, obscene
Deviant

I am not an I
But islands inhabited
With sparks
Question marks
Asking, “Why? But why?
But why? But why? But ...”

Try to categorize
My multiplicities
While I multiply
My multiplicities

In the essay “Queerness and Mycology: Going Beyond the Binary,” mycologist Jehoshua Sharma connects the consumerist commodification of fungi with that of queer culture, which is “also facing the reality of its simultaneous self discovery and current commodification on its journey toward societal integration.”

