

Songs From The Compost
Amelia Groom

The word *lichen* has speculated roots in the Proto-Indo-European *leigh*, meaning 'to lick'. Perhaps because of the way it grows over tree and stone surfaces, reaching out and latching on like a many-tongued sprawl.

If you were in New Zealand last year, there's a chance you saw adult humans lying down on the pavement licking lichen. It was a trend. They weren't studying etymology; they were trying to access the reported Viagra-like properties of a particular sort of lichen, which is known scientifically as 'xanthoparmelia scabrosa', and which grows abundantly on asphalt pavement in parts of NZ. Locals would complain that the lichen caused slipperiness on the roads during wet weather. Then rumours about the lichen's aphrodisiac powers started circulating, and media outlets picked up on its more affectionate, unofficial name, 'sexy pavement lichen'.

Like most lichen, sexy pavement lichen is extremely difficult to scrape off, so it invited people to go down on it, to get onto the ground with it and put their faces up amongst it and lick the same surface that it licks. The only problem: *xanthoparmelia scabrosa* also carries potentially toxic levels of heavy metals. Copper, lead, zinc – these are essential components of our partly mineral bodies, but they can be poisonous in excess. So lichenologists were worried about the humans on the ground. Dr Allison Knight told one local news service that while the lichen does contain a chemical that is ‘somewhat analogous to Viagra’, she did not recommend ‘going out and licking the footpath.’¹

The Online Etymology Dictionary, by the way, connects the word *lichen* with two other words: *lecherous* and *cunnilingus*. It’s a tangled root system: the *lingus* in *cunnilingus* is not just the tongue that licks, it’s also the tongue that speaks; the *lingua* of linguistics, *lingo*, language.

Eglė Budvytytė’s many-tongued songs were made for *Mutating Bodies, Imploding Stars*, an ongoing project which began last year when she was a resident at Nida Art Colony. She spent a lot of time

in the surrounding forests, where the entangled forms of life and death and nonlife are often covered with incredible varieties of lichen. Endlessly mottled grey-greens; powdery yellows; intricate orange lace; tendrils draped around like casually ostentatious feather boas.

As composite organisms arising from a relationship between fungi and algae or cyanobacteria, lichens straddle multiple classificatory kingdoms. They exist as symbiotic collaborations, with characteristics that do not belong to any of their individual components.

In the 19th century, when a Swiss botanist first hypothesised that lichens are not autonomous organisms, the scientific community vehemently rejected his ideas.² There was also a lot of initial resistance to the evolutionary theory of ‘symbiogenesis’, which the biologist Lynn Margulis began championing in the 1960s.³ According to Margulis, symbiosis was more than a marginal subfield of biology; it was the driving force of all evolutionary novelty and complexity. As the lichenized voices in Budvytytė’s songs know, “we have never been pure, we have never been clean”.

In 2009, Margulis appeared in a public debate with Richard Dawkins, the neo-Darwinist who first became famous with a book that emphasized ‘selfishness’ as a core evolutionary principal. In the audio recording of their exchange, there’s a brief moment that’s particularly illuminating. Dawkins is responding to Margulis’s ideas, and he doesn’t sound very happy. “Take the standard story for ordinary animals,” he implores, “what’s *wrong* with that? It’s highly plausible, it’s economical, it’s parsimonious, *why on earth* would you want to *drag in* ‘symbiogenesis’?!” She responds by laughing and saying, gently, “because it’s there.”⁴

Symbiotic relationality isn’t *dragged in* as an unnecessary complication of an otherwise perfectly neat (‘economical’) picture. Its complexity is *already there* – and to knowingly exclude it would amount to an ideological distortion (think of the joyless desperation with which a certain Mr. Peterson has tried to make *lobsters* prove, once and for all, that hierarchical and competitive social dominance is ahistorically ‘natural’).

“If I’m asked to draw a tree,” the poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant once said, “I will draw a forest, I will draw a jungle”.⁵ The tree drawn

in isolated self-sufficiency would be an obfuscation of what Glissant called *the poetics of relation*, in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other”.⁶

This is not an idea of ‘nature’ as a state of untainted, ahistorical immutability – nor as a promised return to Edenic innocence. It’s an encultured nature that is impurely entangled, and historically inscribed. During a visit to his native Martinique, Glissant spoke to the filmmaker Manthia Diawara about the small ‘creole gardens’ that were secretly maintained by enslaved communities on Caribbean plantations. In contrast with the coercive monoculturalism of the plantations, these clandestine gardens were sites of diverse multiplicities.

“They were able to grow dozens of different types of trees, different scents,” Glissant relates. “Coconuts, yams, oranges, pines, dachines, choutchines, sweet potatoes, cassava...”⁷ Cultivating these plants involved cultivating advanced knowledge about the ways in which different species will protect and nurture one another, so that the conditions for difference and mutually supportive growth could be held within a compressed space.

The part of a plant that performs photosynthesis is illuminated for us as it reaches towards the light, but this is only one feature of an expansive network of alliances. In the unilluminated ground, the roots are all tangled up with mycelial-bacterial-chemical-geological-informational transmissions, where individualism is unsustainable. Just as the fungal components in lichen bring nutrients to their photosynthesizing collaborators, subterranean fungi are also in relations with the rest of the forest, transferring sugars and messages – even producing acids that dissolve solid rock, allowing them to burrow tiny tunnels into stones and deliver the mineral density that trees need for their vertical reach.⁸

The wet and wormy underground has also been intimately involved with the *Songs From The Compost: Mutating Bodies, Imploding Stars* project. Budvytytė recently buried several pieces of cloth in the garden behind her studio in Amsterdam, inviting collaboration from the soil and its critters. These fabrics will be used in costumes for a film shoot back in the lichenous Lithuanian forests – and in a series of collaborative dance workshops for children in the region. After four to six weeks in the ground, the fabrics have accrued various

inscriptions of decomposition, giving rise to an array of ecological *archieropoietia* – pictures made ‘without hands’, beyond human authorship.

The voices in the *Mutating Bodies* songs are similarly unclean and composted. Singing through a vocal effects processor, Budvytytė multiplied her voice into a cyborgian chorus; the words are rotting, reverberating, mineralising, cracking, burrowing, bubbling with microorganisms. “I am a host, I’m being hosted,” they sing, in planetary symbiosis. “I am not your resource.”

Notes

- 1 See 'Please Don't Lick the Sexy Pavement Lichen' at <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2019/08/14/745287/please-dont-lick-the-sexy-pavement-lichen> (accessed 6 February 2020).
- 2 See Griffiths, David, 'Queer Theory for Lichen' in *UnderCurrents: A Journal of Critical Environmental Studies* (19; 2015) pp.36–45.
- 3 See Gilbert, Scott F. et al. "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals." *The Quarterly Review of Biology* (87.4; 2012) pp.325–341.
- 4 Audio excerpt included in John Feldman's documentary *Symbiotic Earth* (2017).
- 5 In Manthia Diawara's film *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation* (2009).
- 6 Glissant, Édouard, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997) p.11.
- 7 Diawara, Manthia, *Op. cit.*
- 8 See A. G. Jongmans et. al. "Rock-eating fungi" in *Nature: International Journal of Science* (389; October 1997) pp.682–683.

*Songs From The Compost:
Stones And Cyborgs*

(audio)

[Do use headphones or
external speakers when listening]



*Songs From The Compost:
Bacterias And Time*

(audio)

[Do use headphones or
external speakers when listening]



Colophon

Songs From The Compost

PDF artist book by Eglė Budvytytė

Introduction: Eglė Budvytytė

Essay: Amelia Groom

Graphic design: Goda Budvytytė

Text editing: Gemma Lloyd

Songs

Voice, melodies and lyrics: Eglė Budvytytė

Sound design: Steve Martin Snider

Images

Still frames from Eglė Budvytytė, *Songs From The Compost: Mutating Bodies, Imploding Stars*, 2020 (HD video)

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