

BOOK REVIEW

***The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015, 331 pages incl. Notes and Index**

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Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing recounts in this book the history of the matsutake, an edible mycorrhizal mushroom with high commercial value in Japan. It commonly grows on the floor of pine forests in the Northern Hemisphere. Together with her fellow researchers from the Matsutake Worlds Research Group, the author sought the matsutake around the world visiting, speaking, learning, observing, picking, smelling, getting lost on beds of mycelium in the forests of Oregon (USA), Tamba (Japan), Yunnan (China), and Lapland (Finland).² In these exploits, she pieced together the supply chain of the matsutake mushroom which would end up in Japan, served in restaurants or offered as gifts; marvelled at the fitful explosion of mushroom colonies, and the structure of the groups of people living off them; collated the histories of forests in various places, emphasizing their multiple trajectory lines and conjectures; and pondered on the tensions, ambiguities, and forces of lives in common – of humans, and other entities.

Tsing's account of her trails across the world, following the strong aroma mushroom, is scripted in a very particular way. Her writing evokes, represents, and reconstructs the kind of history she advocates: multiple, irregular, uneven, spasmodic, conjectural. It comprises a sequence of vignettes that, just like the black and white photographs and the little drawings that illustrate them, capture fragments of life around the matsutake. Such is that of South-Asian refugee pickers living in camps at the border of heavily logged pine tree forests in Oregon, who devised an existence that resembles their former homeland village life (Chapter 5). Earning them a ghost-ridden freedom, haunted by panic-inducing crowds, suffocating apartment dwellings, and tedious industrial labour, it is performed as independent business, carried on in national parks used like

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² See Matsutake Worlds Research Group's website at <http://matsutakeworlds.org/>

extensive commons. One longer section of the book narrates trajectories of forests in Finland, Japan, and China as temporal nodes of transformations generated by the global commercial circuits of wood, and the radically different administration of their destruction, reconstruction, and conservation by human “disturbances” (Chapters 12 and 13).

Tsing records both intra- and inter-species collective living, that transgresses hierarchies of moral worth. Her ontological position follows closely Bruno Latour (1987) and Michel Callon’s (1986) Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as all ecologies evoked in the bits of stories and histories presented are rendered as companionships of vegetal, animal, human, and inanimate things, scaled or disordered, at times so intricately linked that attempting to identify a definitional border between them seems impossible. In the narrative of her pursuit, Tsing rehearses much of the relational, post-structuralist, and post-humanist tropes that have been in use by the critical and left leaning scholars in the past thirty years: objects are relational and processual; humans and things are bounded in entanglements which erupt in diverse patches of life; global capitalism is functioning through assemblages formed through acts of translation across diverse social and political ecologies, that do not require rationalized labour, raw materials, and scalable operations.

The matsutake in its ensemble - pine roots, nematodes, chemical secretions – is synecdochic to life in capitalism. Tsing summarizes her creeds about this life, which are as many dimensions of present day global capitalism, right at the beginning of the book, using italics. “[T]he concentration of wealth is possible because value produced in unplanned patches is appropriated for capital.” (p. 5). Thus, she looks for “disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest.” (p. 5). She investigates these unplanned patches, these ecologies. They are places of ruin, abandoned sites of capitalism led by progress. They are what is left after commodifiable resources have been found, produced, and extracted, in a process of asset accumulation by simplified alienation.

Tsing seems to find no hope for other order than capitalism, and goes to minute detail to show how even in abandoned ruins value is produced unexpectedly out of what capital deems to be waste and weed. To emphasize this, she introduced the term “salvage” accumulation. “In this ‘salvage’ capitalism, supply chains organize the translation process in which wildly diverse forms of work and nature are made commensurate - for capital.” (p. 43) “Salvage” refers to “pericapitalist” forms of activity, that escape organized capitalist commodity production, yet end up filling capitalist firms’ commodity inventories nonetheless. It comprises both the yield grown unplanned in places of industrial devastation, and the work

involved to find, make, move, or transform it, outside capitalist organized labour (see pp. 63-70). Salvage accumulation is primitive accumulation or “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003) in capitalist ruins.

What characterizes “salvage” in these processes is “freedom,” to which the author dedicates a three-chapter section. This is a worrying, bitter part to read. The stories of freedom are stories of devastation themselves, of ruined lives. They are the stories of war survivors and economic refugees, stories of trauma and displacement. The lives for whom freedom at the margins is the choice opted for or forced into are precarious lives. Precarity is as implacable in capitalist ruins as is the thrust of global capital. Tsing urges us to acknowledge the variety of forms surging in these holes of the capitalist blanket, and value them. Here is a longer fragment:

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. (p. 20)

To this, Tsing adds: “The only reason all this sounds odd is that most of us were raised on dreams of modernization and progress.” (p. 20) And the oppositions are drawn here in sharp lines: progress, and the positive categories of order it entails, are disdained as illusory and pernicious for thinking and making the world; precarity instead teaches us to “look around rather than ahead.” (p. 22) By so doing we can learn to notice other practical activities of making lives and the world-making projects they bring about.

Indeed, it does sound odd. But not because of the entreaty to think theoretically through the notion of precarity, which Tsing finds compelling by its double link to the natural world: as a state into which humans have brought nature; and as a metaphor for how to continue complex life-making in such a state. Not the metaphor is worrying and bitter here, but the naturalness of assuming the fate of precarity, of ultimate devastation, when theoretically and objectively one knows that other ways of sharing the world are still possible. So the reader finds herself here with a double lack. A lack of hope, despite the cheerfulness of the ethnography that brings matsutake mushroom and its worlds so skilfully into our rooms. And a lack of a proper critique of capitalism, despite meticulous description of its present workings. The aesthetics of this project is not matched with a politics of the main concepts it proposes. Disturbance, precarity, freedom at

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margins are seductive, they are not enraging. The proposition of consubstantiality of man and nature fails exactly at this point: while nature disturbs, thins, and erupts in one way, men do so in many. Disturbance, precarity, and freedom are overly domesticated in Tsing's work, and seem to fall on the same side of today's global capital, thriving upon the mass of over-flexible, diffused, crowdsourced, indeed precarious and seemingly free, labour.

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