



Anthropology Book Forum

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Resurgent life: how to flourish with what's left

Review by Matthew D. Thompson

The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins

by Anna Lowenhapt Tsing
Princeton University Press, 2015

I had just settled in to begin reading *The Mushroom at the End of the World* when my wife looked up from her perch on the loveseat opposite mine. “Is it about mushrooms,” she asked, “or the end of the world?” As it happens, it’s about both.

In her latest book-length work Anna Tsing advances an anthropology that is a tangle of the human and the nonhuman, taking the matsutake mushroom as a polysemous metaphor for not just resilience but the resurgence of life in an inhospitable world. Simply put, as decomposers mushrooms play an important ecological role by translating death into life, and in a world beset by environmental catastrophe we would do well to learn their lessons. Through Tsing’s words the matsutake reveals itself to be more than a delicious ingredient in Japanese cooking, it becomes a generous teacher that offers not only iconoclastic perspective but something approaching wisdom.

The discipline of anthropology was in part born of the study of what came before European history, evidence of this pre-historic time could be found in the monumental architecture of ancient civilizations. While these ruins fascinated our pith-helmeted forbearers, in contemporary theory “ruin” has been reconfigured as good to think. Ruin illuminates our understanding of the present by reading it as a representation of past human activities, especially collective trauma. Traces of such destructive experiences persist in compelling ways. Tsing continues this reconceptualization, only here the ruins in question are whole ecologies disturbed by capitalism and war. We are all their inhabitants but so are myriad other nonhuman lifeforms. How will we all make do in a shattered environment? The author

suggests we might start by taking stock of what's left.

Ruination is one possible outcome of human interaction with the natural environment, particularly when it comes to capitalist forms of resource extraction. In this work as in Tsing's earlier monographs the specter of industrial logging looms large. The two ruined forests Tsing focuses on include U.S. Forest Service managed land in Oregon and satoyama or "peasant forests" in Japan, supplementing this is fieldwork in the logged-out forests of Yunnan, China, and the geologically young Lapland forests in northern Finland. With an explorer's curiosity Tsing notices that when an ecology is disturbed new ecologies can flourish. This is a lesson we learn from mushrooms, "The effect of industrial ruins on living things depends on which living things we follow" (Tsing 2015: 211).

Among the ruins of capitalism lies the theoretical centerpiece of the book: Tsing's engagement with the anthropology of value and the experience of precarious life under neoliberalism. Indeed, the life of an itinerant mushroom picker exemplifies making do with an uncertain economic future. It is an occupation that is literally the commodification of hunting and gathering. But this is not an ethnography that stops at the boundary of the human, we are invited to imagine worlds that include the perspective of the mushroom itself. Just as war and economic devastation makes people into refugees so too are the spores of fungi scattered to the wind. They grow and become strong by utilizing underground networks and forging partnerships with other lifeforms, and then, when conditions are right, they surge into view, popping up in unexpected places.

One of the many facets to Tsing's cultural critique of capitalism is "patchiness," referring to the overall incompleteness of capitalist hegemony. Interesting things happen on the margins of capitalism where, at different times and places, the matsutake appears as both commodity and gift, an alienated product of alienated labor and a thing fully imbued with social life. Starting not from Marx but Malinowski, Tsing observes that, "[the] kula reminds us that things as well as people are alienated under capitalism" and that "things are extensions of persons and persons are extensions of things" (Tsing 2015: 122). One reason why this interrogation of the boundary of commodity and gift works so well is because of matsutake's unique status in Japanese society. Perhaps an appropriate analog in an American context would be red roses? One can imagine an ethnographic study of red roses in the mode of *The Mushroom at the End of the World* following this lifeform from its growth, harvest and transformation into commodity, transport and consumption, and then retransformation into gift expressing social bonds.

The exception, however, is that roses can be grown in a plantation-like environment, matsutake are wild and impossible to domesticate.

Building off her creative work with notions of the gift and commodity, Tsing offers her most wide ranging expansion of Marx by reconfiguring and redeploying the concept of alienation in a multispecies context. Alienation promotes detachment and mobility, it disentangles the thing from its complex social world and makes it stand alone. Not only is this a necessary step in the translation of natural resources into assets that can be amassed into wealth, it reverberates throughout rationalized ways of knowing. This articulates the author's analysis of capitalism with science and technology studies. Whereas Marx elucidates how alienation strips away the social relations inherent in the production of commodities, so too, Tsing argues, does the science of biology compartmentalize lifeforms into discrete species isolated from the tangle of life. Just as alienation provides the foundation upon which wealth, and hence power, can be accumulated so too does science rely upon "scalability" to generalize and produce knowledge (and hence power).

On both counts, Tsing shows how mushrooms subvert this inclination. Not only do they produce a "theory of nonscalability," they show how at the margins the distinction between gift and commodity in capitalism breaks down. To make this point Tsing follows Mintz's history of the sugar plantation as a case study. The plantation provides a formula for scalability and model for industrialization: workers, like ecologies, are merely replaceable parts. By envisioning more and more of the world as if it were plantation, capitalism conceived of utilitarianism and progress as growth. Matsutake resist all of this as they only flourish in contaminated environments, their reliance on complex networks blurring the boundaries of discrete definitions of species. As such mushrooms are the ultimate scavenger, flourishing in a damaged world by making do with what's left and upending modernist notions of biology including definitions of group, individual, and competition.

All of this is culminates in a theory of salvage capitalism, or "taking advantage of value produced without capitalist control" (Tsing 2015: 63) where "unregulated production is translated in the commodity chain" (2015: 65). Tsing argues that modernist theories of capital are constrained in the way they conceptualize time and space, privileging industry and other sites in the heart of empire. Thus, per Marx, "factory owners concentrate wealth by paying workers less than the value of the goods the workers produce each day" (2015: 62). However, salvage capitalism and Tsing's attentions to sites at

the margins show us formations where, “living things made within ecological processes are coopted for the concentration of wealth” (2015: 63). Sites of ongoing salvage operations are “pericapitalist,” they scoop up wild values in a process Tsing calls “translation.” She writes, “Capitalism is a translation machine for producing capital from all kinds of livelihoods, human and not human” (2015: 133).

In the story of the matsutake mushroom this “translation” happens several times from American mountain range to Japanese kitchen. The author contends that in Oregon the commercial pickers and the field agents they sell to do not experience their labor as alienated, instead they feel rewarded by a sense of “freedom,” variously defined, perceiving their acquisition of cash more like the acquiring of a trophy, and standing in contrast to their experience of traditional wage labor. At this stage the mushroom is still as if a gift, bound up in networks of social relationships and complex histories. It is translated into a commodity by wage laborers, the employees of exporters who buy the mushrooms in bulk from field agents, who in a warehouse setting sort them by quality. Now proper commodities, the exporters endeavor not to sell their mushrooms to the highest bidder, but rather match the right mushrooms with the right buyers, foregoing market pressures and instead relying on their social networks and knowledge of Japanese culture. Thus, the matsutake becomes again as if a gift and less like a pure commodity. Finally, in Japan, the matsutake commands premium retail prices, a consummate commodity once again where shoppers delight in buying them not for themselves but to give to friends and family as gifts.

One can imagine this theory of salvage capitalism as being of great utility for anthropologies of human relationships with nature, critiquing environmentalisms of the use-value of nature, human reproduction and the nation-state, gender and racial formations under capitalism, and the monetization of big data just to name a few. It is perhaps the most significant contribution of the work under review. To this reviewer Tsing’s “salvage capitalism” resonates most profoundly with Yúdice’s *The Expediency of Culture* (2004) where “culture” becomes a resource to be invested in and exploited as a wellspring of profit and hegemony. But whereas Yúdice writes about contemporary political forms and neoliberal governmental programs from a cultural studies standpoint, Tsing is more expansive historically and carries the argument into nonhuman worlds.

The Mushroom at the End of the World is more than just theory of the anthropology of value. One of the successes of this book is the way Tsing balances thinking through mushrooms and the sensual

experiences of mushrooming. Speaking as an avid mushroom enthusiast I was pleased with how Tsing periodically dipped into descriptions of tastes and smells, the thrill of the hunt, and the joy that fungi bring to those who love them. Among her many ethnographic encounters with diverse Southeast Asian commercial mushroom pickers and Japanese American heritage pickers in Oregon, as well as satoyama tenders and mushroom scientists in Japan, Tsing finds the matsutake to be a mushroom that opens the memory and invites storytelling. Along the way, the reader is treated to ghost stories, tales of escape from angry land owners, and nostalgic remanences of home.

On these mushrooming adventures in Oregon, Tsing is surprised to find that the commercial pickers, Hmong, Mein, and Lao, have essentially reconstituted Southeast Asian villages in the forests of the American Pacific Northwest. Add to these white men, many of whom self-identify as veterans of the Vietnam War, and histories of violence figure prominently as people are torn from one corner of the world only to be scattered to the wind, landing in another. Their varied paths to America's west coast and economic precarity prompt Tsing to reflect on the divergent immigrant experiences of recent immigrants from Southeast Asia represented in the commercial pickers, and how they diverge from those of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans who immigrated generations ago and whose American experience is much closer to Tsing's own. The different histories of these immigrant groups are, among other things, embodied in different relationships to the matsutake mushroom.

From white American veterans to Southeast Asian immigrants, the diverse groups she encounters experience mushroom picking as producing "freedom," but they define and experience that freedom differently. In these ethnographic encounters, Tsing finds that freedom is "performative, communally varied, and effervescent" (Tsing 2015: 76). To the commercial pickers mushrooming is not-work, it offers escape from many of the trappings of life in contemporary America and communion with the wild. For the Southeast Asian immigrants, it promises family reunion. Each day of mushrooming culminates in selling, where pickers try to play buyers off against each other to drive up prices. She writes, "This is a performance of competition—not a necessity of business. The point is the drama" (2015: 81). The pickers entertain themselves by taking photos of their best mushrooms and stacks of cash, especially one hundred dollar bills. This section of the book, the narratives of picking and selling in Oregon, were some of the book's most engaging, the stories are short, poignant, and gripping. But in their brevity, Tsing tries to fit too much into a small amount of text. Often the author falls into assertion and this reviewer was left feeling as if some of her conclusions outstripped what was in the evidence. It

is ironic that a work that so thoroughly critiques models of “scalability” in science would rely on what are essentially anecdotal experiences to make general claims.

Returning to the author’s twofold agenda of critiquing capitalism and science the concept of “assemblage,” borrowed from ecology, emerges as an important theoretical tool and organizing principle for the monograph. Assemblage, for Tsing, is a way to reconceptualize what is meant by community. She writes, “The question of how the varied species in a species assemblage influence each other—if at all—is never settled... [Assemblages] allow us to ask about communal affects without assuming them” (Tsing 2015: 22-23). To say multiple lifeforms live together in a community implies that they are interacting somehow: symbiosis, mutualism, predation, and parasitism all come to mind. Assemblage merely recognizes that they are situated together in the same time and place without intention.

Tsing takes this idea and runs asking, “If history without progress is indeterminate and multidirectional might assemblages show us its possibilities?” (Tsing 2015: 23). Complementing this are suggestions that the reader think of her work as if it were polyphonic music, which is itself a kind of sonic assemblage. In this expansive new definition capitalism itself is an assemblage, the diverse Southeast Asian peoples in the Oregon woods that are together but not one are assemblage, and disparate bits of the matsutake story that form the book—from bureaucratic histories of the U.S. National Forest Service, to Japanese internment camps, and a train ride through Finland—are assemblage too. Like a fugue or madrigal choir Tsing implores her audience to “notice” moments of harmony and discord when they happen to appear. Disparate elements come together in time and space and then diverge again.

This reviewer found the author’s appreciation of “noticing” and the analogies to fugue to be less compelling. From a literary standpoint, this theoretical but also stylistic aspect of Tsing’s monograph is a mixed bag. The odd juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated bits of information and the book’s free flowing structure makes it into something resembling a shaggy dog. To unpack this idiom, a shaggy dog is a longwinded joke that is all performance and no punchline. It wanders from one detail to the next until the listener realizes that the narrative itself is a practical joke and begs the teller to stop. Bringing this into an anthropological context, we might say that instead of a vulnerable observer now we have a vulnerable readership. In Tsing’s ethnographic assemblage, it is not the case that various

aspects of the text are related they are merely together. But if they are related (or not), then we are to “notice.”

The upshot of assemblage as writing technique is that, at least in this instance, Tsing has told the joke very well. The many facets and fragments of the matsutake’s story really do pull together and drift apart in illuminating ways. She successfully executes this by cutting against the grain of anthropology’s literary tradition. One could lovingly argue that anthropologists are masters of the long essay: we need to be to tell complex stories well. But many of Tsing’s chapters are only about ten pages and interspersed among them are interstitial passages of only about five pages. By choosing to write shorter chapters the author gives herself space to experiment, sometimes this pays off while at others it fall flat but never does the reader feel their time wasted. This makes *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, which piles on a variety of styles, perspectives, and scales, different than, say, the work of Studs Terkel, where the reader must wade through gobs of narrative much of it the same, to find the gem.

The Mushroom at the End of the World is well suited for use in a graduate seminar and will be an easy lift for talented undergraduates. Instructors will find productive grounds for their students in its discussion of value, commodities, gifts, and exchange. This book would also be a good fit for courses on ethnographic writing or contemporary cultural anthropology generally. Researchers will find this to be a work of great depth and, moving forward, one anticipates that “salvage capitalism” and Tsing’s multispecies redefinition of Marx’s alienation have the potential to become popular and effective theoretical tools. Moreover, I learned a great deal about landscape from this book and would recommend it to anyone interested in how the interactions among people and their environment change over time and how that dynamic fits into broad global flows. Finally, anyone who enjoys quality prose and engaging ethnography ought not hesitate that a work on a single mushroom species is too far afield. Tsing’s short chapters make it perfect for dipping into during a coffee break or deserving of a place on your nightstand. As this review is being written *The Mushroom at the End of the World* has been awarded the 2016 Gregory Bateson Book Prize and the 2016 Victor Turner Prize in ethnographic writing among many other recognitions, the praise is well deserved. This very creative and thought-proving book will speak to a wide audience.

References Cited

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