



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Helda

TSING, ANNA LOWENHAUPT. The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins

Mölkänen, Jenni Elina

Finnish Anthropological Society

2016-12-29

Mölkänen, J E 2016, 'TSING, ANNA LOWENHAUPT. The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins', *Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 75-76. < <http://journal.fi/suomenantropologi/article/view/60341> >

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/298614>

cc_by_nc

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

TSING, ANNA LOWENHAUPT. *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 352 p. ISBN: 978-0-691-16275-1 (hardcover).

Anna Tsing's latest book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, explores, as its title suggests, the possibilities of life in capitalist ruins, in spaces abandoned for asset production (p. 6). The focus of the book is on assemblages, open-ended gatherings of potential histories of the making of humans and non-humans, polyphonic with multiple rhythms that occur the most strongly in the peripheries of capitalist production (p. 22–24). Seeking for *matsutake* mushrooms takes the reader for a walk with US veterans, Hmong, Lao, Cambodian pickers in Oregon US, Finnish nature guides in the north of the country near the Russian border and Japanese 'forest disturbers' in Kyoto in different blasted landscapes that are full of life again, thanks to human-non-human collaborations.

The new book continues the themes Tsing discussed in her earlier works: *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1993), that discussed the ways of life of people at the margins of the state; and *Friction* (2005), that introduced a term that has become a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up our contemporary world. However, in her new book, there is an emphasis on the collaboration and co-living of different species, human and non-humans.

Matsutake are a metaphorical reminder of inter-species collaboration and human dependence of nature (p. 257). They flourish in collaboration with other species, especially with pines: 'If you want *Matsutake* in Japan, you must have pine, if you want pine, you must have human disturbance' (p. 151), states a Japanese forest-research-service restorer in Satoyama, a peasant landscape that combines rice agriculture

and water management. On the other hand, in the US *matsutake* flourish together with ponderosa, fir and lodgepole that have created denser thickets of life after fire prevention exercises by the US forest service (p. 30).

Freedom in multispecies' collaborations is not individual rational political choice but performative actions that assemble through different entanglements of histories, politics and economics. In the field site 'Open Ticket' (pseudonym) in Oregon each group of people perform their freedom differently: vets enact trauma, Khmer heal war wounds, Hmong remember fighting landscapes and Lao approach the limits of what is possible (p. 94). For these different people with different histories mushroom picking is not work, not labor, but 'searching', 'freedom as spirit' (p. 126). However, picking as freedom requires imagination of forest as commons. This way mushrooms are not alienated commodities but the effects of pickers' freedom: trophies of their freedom (p. 80). Thus *matsutake* mushrooms gain their value through their connection with freedom (p. 126). However, Tsing essentially points out that capitalism and freedom, searching and selling, are constantly intertwined: salvage, taking advantages of value produced without capitalist production, is an essential element of capitalism (p. 63).

Capitalism, although promising stable jobs and constant progress, has created uncertain conditions, ruins. Unlike a standardizing, homogenizing, white European and North American male trajectory of progress embedding assumptions what it means to be human, ruin refers to precarity, the

condition of being vulnerable to others and unpredictable encounters (p. 20–21). In Tsing’s use, capitalism is ‘patchy’, drawing one world-making project into another (p. 62). Tsing shows how *matsutake* travel from the Oregon forests after being carefully collected by the pickers, through sensuous sorting out and through careful relationships established and maintained by importers who know their clients in Japan where *matsutake* end up as relationship-builders and gifts (p. 125). Tsing shows that it is difficult to make a clear division between processes of capitalism and gifting, observing them as constantly mingled and messy. Gifts and commodities, capitalism and the freedom of mushroom hunting are constantly being joined like different patches, distanced from each other or forming an entanglement from which different lines can take different directions, continue together or form a knot.

Precarity in the ruins incorporates the arts of noticing, of working with what is available. In contrast to the unified capitalist rhythm standardized by modern scientific classifications, foragers’ knowledge about the mushroom is not based on finished stable classifications but on searching with the senses, following *matsutake* activity lines (you see, the mushroom moves while it grows) and, with a slow rhythm or dance, treating different beings as subjects rather than objects (p. 243).

Changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival, in conditions of precarity (p. 28). I can’t help thinking that that is exactly how present-day, flexible, neoliberal economies seek to work: through a regime of flexible accumulation and production aiming at rapid problem solving, fast and highly specialized responses and adaptability of skills to special purposes (Harvey 1989: 155), thereby creating flexible

bodies (Martin 1992) and even flexible crops and commodities (Borras et al. 2016). However, in the ruins that Tsing describes, the emphasis is on attentive and caring collaboration and not on the accumulation of economic wealth and freedom is created in collaboration with different species in disturbed and contaminated landscapes.

The publisher can really be congratulated. Rarely can one immerse oneself into an academic work with informative and sensuous pictures and figures that set a pace and allow the reader to explore the senses of smelling, grabbing, searching and walking. Tsing’s book is not a conclusive analysis of post-capitalist processes but an outline for living sensuously, creatively and freely with each other.

REFERENCES

Borras Jr., Saturnino M., Jennifer C. Franco, S. Ryan Isakson, Les Levidow and Pietje Vervest 2016. The Rise of Flex Crops and Commodities: Implications for Research. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 43 (1): 93–115.

Harvey, David 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into Origins of Cultural Change*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

Martin, Emily 1992. The End of the Body? *American Ethnologist*, 19 (1): 121–140.

Tsing, Anna Lowenthaupt 1993. *In the Realm of The Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-Of-The-Way Place*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tsing, Anna Lowenthaupt, 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

JENNI MÖLKÄNEN
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
jenni.molkanen@helsinki.fi