

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780691162751 (cloth); ISBN: 9781400873548 (ebook)

How can I review a book that is, to use the author's own word, "patchy"? The word "review" implies comprehensiveness, fullness, finality. Yet to read Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is to experience irregularity, intermittence, a sense of the unfinished. This is deliberate. It is a book that "refuses to end" (p.287). Tsing writes in fits and starts—short chapters dotted with illustrations and epigraphs, poems and pictures. She wanders in and out of interludes, smelling, tracking, dancing. She has no ending, gracing us instead with an "anti-ending", a meandering through a selection of encounters and stories harvested from her years of fieldwork. In so doing, she echoes the "knots and pulses of patchiness" (p.6) demonstrated by and through the book's main protagonist: the matsutake mushroom, a pungent fungus beloved in Japan as a sign of autumn. In the review that follows, I attempt to synthesize some of these disparate tales. I know, however, that simplification of any kind is destined to exclude something. What follows, then, is a partial telling—an overview of my own situated encounter with the book. It is an encounter that continues to unfold.

Tsing uses matsutake to "illuminate the cracks in the global political economy" (p.4). Over the course of her narrative, she moves from the ruined industrial forests of Oregon's Cascade Mountains to the *satoyama* woodlands of Japan; from central Yunnan peasant forests in southwest China to the managed pine landscapes north of the Arctic Circle in Finland. We read the voices of (Cambodian, Chinese, Hmong, Lao, Japanese, Mien, White American) matsutake pickers, buyers, field agents, bulkers, importers, wholesalers, sellers, eaters, and researchers,

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

illuminating a global supply chain breathtaking in its assemblage of contaminated diversity, indeterminacy, and entangled precarity.

Matsutake are gathered in Oregon to be consumed in Japan. They are translated and transformed many times along that journey. Such global supply chains, says Tsing, are “translation machines” (p.x). They begin as trophies representing the peculiarly American concept of “freedom” for the matsutake pickers—freedom in the forest from war, wage labor, or government. They are bought, sorted, sorted again to “purify them as inventory” (p.127). Only in the few hours they spend as cargo in the bellies of aircraft, flying over the Pacific Ocean, are matsutake fully alienated, “torn from their lifeworlds to become objects of exchange” (p.121). Yet once they arrive in Japan, matsutake are once again embedded within webs of social relations. Wholesalers, self-described as “matchmakers” between mushroom and buyer, immediately enroll matsutake within entanglements of social exchange by assigning particular levels of quality to each mushroom. Sold to discerning buyers to be given as gifts, matsutake “signals serious commitment” (p.125): their value is “made in the act of giving” (p.126). The shifting meanings and values assigned to matsutake are (re)created, translated across spaces and contexts, the product of ever-changing and dynamic indeterminate encounters within assemblages.

Assemblage geographies have emerged over the past decade as part of the “material turn” within human geography, as a method to engage and investigate the “more-than-human”, the implications of their relations, and the outcomes that result (see Robbins and Marks 2010). For Tsing, assemblages are likewise a methodological tool to invigorate political economy as “sites for watching how political economy works”, sites which “drag political economy inside them” (p.23). Ever shifting, never static, assemblages are multispecies “world-making projects” (p.21). In constant flux, these assemblages fluctuate across time and space, producing divergent ways of

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

being for humans and non-humans alike. Unpredictable and indeterminate encounters transform us within these entanglements; we are “contaminated” by such encounters (p.27), resulting in “tangled landscapes” of “contaminated diversity” (p.33).

Through such indeterminate encounters, we disturb, and are disturbed. Ecologically, says Tsing, disturbance “is a change in environmental conditions that causes a pronounced change in an ecosystem” (p.160). Yet it would be a mistake to assume all disturbances are harmful or damaging. Disturbance is commonplace—the world is always already in the process of being disturbed. The key point, Tsing argues, is that disturbance reforms assemblages, and thus “realigns possibilities for transformative encounter” (p.152).

Take the matsutake mushroom. It grows only in forests that have experienced deep disturbance: human deforestation, glaciation, volcanic activity. Pines, the preferred host tree for matsutake, are privileged growers in marginal soils and ecosystems. However, this is due in large part to their relationship with the fungus, which makes nutrients available to pine trees in these inhospitable environments. One might therefore query which came first: the matsutake or the pine? But to ask such a highly reductionist question misses the contaminated encounters that also shape possibilities for matsutake. These are entanglements with human peasants, coppiced oaks, pine wilt nematodes, erosion, industrial loggers, Mount St. Helens, pumice stone, the U.S.-Indochina war, reindeer, Japanese internment camps, humus, and much more.

These disturbances and their resulting assemblages do not develop uniformly. Their inherent indeterminacy forbids it. The precariousities of matsutake are unending: if it will find an appropriate host, if they will survive together in disturbed and denuded soils, if the pine will be killed by the pine wilt nematode, if the *satoyama* peasant woodlands will be maintained, if the wholesaler can find the right buyer, if the mushroom pickers can harvest the forbidden forests. Such precarious livelihoods and landscapes are part and parcel of the “patchy unpredictability”

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

(p.5) of contemporary capitalism. It is this concept of patchiness which gets at the crux of Tsing's work. Patchiness, "a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life" (p.4), does not occur *despite* capitalism. Rather, capitalism *is* patchy. While capitalism appears to flatten things out to create homogenous conditions, to hold this view is to misapprehend the conditions within which capitalism operates by internalizing narratives of progress and modernity. Marxist scholars are as guilty of this "crippling assumption" of capitalist progress as anyone—the "assumption of growth" obscures heterogeneity, precarity, and indeterminacy (p.4-5).

So, asks Tsing, "[h]ow might capitalism look without assuming progress? It might look patchy: *the concentration of wealth is possible because value produced in unplanned patches is appropriated for capital*" (p.5). This process, in which capitalism translates between patches for the purposes of accumulation, gestures to what Tsing calls "salvage accumulation". Salvage is the cooption of living things and processes which take place outside the control of capitalism, allowing firms to "amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced" (p.63). Salvage accumulation, Tsing emphasizes, is nothing new—capitalism had nothing to do with the formation of oil and coal reserves, for example, yet benefits from them all the same. Supply chains enable salvage accumulation by translating between patches and assemblages. In but one example included by Tsing, the experiential knowledge of mushroom pickers in the Cascade Mountains, who know to look for elk and deer spoor, to feel the ground for hills and rifts, to dig near *Allotropia virgata*, is converted into capital along the matsutake supply chain. The indeterminate encounters instigated by disturbances within the patchy mosaic of matsutake assemblages provide the fodder for salvage accumulation.

It is at this point that I wish to diverge in order to illuminate some of the ways Tsing's book has contaminated and disturbed me. My reading of her work is its own indeterminate

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

encounter, shaped by a vast assemblage of other encounters which shape the context in which I read and understand: stopping to grade student papers; my dog's interruptions to be fed and go for a walk; attempting to read on a camping trip while ignoring the whine of mosquitos in my ear. Yet beyond this singular encounter are others, with deep implications. Academics are consummate translators. Through our research, we translate between non-human and human, concrete and abstract, application and theory. Latour (2004) describes the work of scientists as one of translation—we make the non-human knowable through acts of translation. Yet this project is inherently one of disturbance, as our presence ripples out to touch those we study and our chosen field sites in ways that can be beneficial and adverse, banal and profound. Likewise, we perform our own sort of salvage accumulation—extracting value from the conditions we study, conditions not of our own making, by harvesting the products and gifts of our research sites and participants. My insights here are by no means new, as the breadth of feminist and post-colonial scholarship, researchers, and methodologies before me can attest. However, I do hope they gesture how we can turn to our own indeterminate encounters for guidance, and even—dare I say it?—hope.

References

Latour B (2004) *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Robbins P and Marks B (2010) Assemblage geographies. In S Smith, R Pain, S Marston and J P Jones (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Social Geographies* (pp176-194). London: Sage

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Gretchen Sneegas
Department of Geography
University of Georgia
gsneegas@uga.edu

April 2016