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Book Review: The Mushroom at the End of the World (2015) by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing

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Abstrak

Artikel ini adalah resensi buku karya Dr. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing yang berjudul The Mushroom at the End of the World. Buku ini merupakan karya antropologi budaya yang diterbitkan pada tahun 2015 oleh Princeton University Press. Tsing adalah seorang antropolog budaya yang mengkhususkan diri di Asia Tenggara. Karyanya secara tematis berkaitan dengan budaya, marginalisasi, aktivisme lingkungan, gender, dan ekonomi politik. Saat ini, Tsing adalah profesor antropologi di University of California, Santa Cruz. The Mushroom at the End of the World adalah sebuah buku berbasis penelitian lapangan yang mencakup berbagai era sejarah, batas geografis, dan konteks budaya. Tsing bercita-cita untuk menjelaskan bagaimana umat manusia muncul dan bagaimana makhluk hidup lain membangun dunia mereka. Tsing menunjukkan bahwa tidak ada aspek kehidupan yang tidak layak diselidiki termasuk ketika ia menceritakan mengenai tanaman jamur dan korelasinya dengan banyak hal dalam kehidupan manusia

Kata Kunci: resensi buku; matsutake; jamur; Tsing;

Abstract

This article is a book review by Dr. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's The Mushroom at the End of the World. This book is a work of cultural anthropology published in 2015 by Princeton University Press. Tsing is a cultural anthropologist specializing in Southeast Asia. Her work is thematically related to culture, marginalization, environmental activism, gender, and political economy. Currently, Tsing is a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The Mushroom at the End of the World is a field research-based book that covers various historical eras, geographic boundaries, and cultural contexts. Tsing aspires to explain how humanity came into being and how other living things built their worlds. Tsing points out that there is no aspect of life that is not worth investigating, including when she talks about the mushroom plant and its correlation with many things in human life.

Keywords*: book review; matsutake; mushroom; Tsing*

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INTRODUCTION

The question of how an item is produced until it reaches the hands of a buyer/user/consumer has attracted the interest of many anthropologists in the last decade. The term global life of things—or what I translate as commodity life chain—is interesting because the tracking process will lead us to a more complex understanding of the commodity itself. She asks about the materialism-economic aspects of an item (such as the campaign "how much do your shoes cost?" to show the surplus value that is sucked from the workers) and looks at the more complex commodity relations.

The book Mushroom at the End of the World (from now on referred to as mushroom) by Anna Tsing more or less does this through one of the prima donna commodities from Japan: matsutake mushrooms. The adventures of matsutake mushrooms—from growing into the hands of tycoons as symbolic gifts of the elite—are far more complex than one might expect. It involves experts from mushroom research centers in China, Scandinavian countries, the United States, Japan; also related to pine forests that must exist even though they indicate "barren" forests; and immigrants and mushroom seekers from Southeast Asia in Oregon, United States, who are trying to bury a past of war and ethnic conflict. Lyrically written with short chapters, mushroom focuses on the concept of salvage capitalism. Salvage capitalism explains that the market not only produces goods through the addition of value alone but deprives them of spontaneous production from nature. There is a process of deepening capital and surplus-value in it. This process requires the brittleness or precarity situation of the components involved in the production, including the fungus.

Tsing tries to explain that nature is an essential part of life in this book. Humans are only one object that lives and must coexist with nature. Tsing explains that his connection to nature is emotional, rooted in response to vulnerability—visiting the forest and finding mushrooms showed him that "amidst the terror of uncertainty," there is still joy (1). She argues that this fear is systemic. Climate change is wreaking havoc worldwide, and many people cannot find work or economic success. She argues that mushrooms serve as "guides—if the controlled world we believe in has failed" (2).

After introducing his abstract subject, Tsing describes the concrete subject: Matsutake, "an aromatic wild mushroom highly prized in Japan" (2). She argues that extensive criticism of capitalism and its failures has been made; she was more interested in what matsutake might say about the possibilities of resilience and happiness in an

unstable and uncertain world. She cites as encouragement a pamphlet reminding readers that matsutake mushrooms continued to exist even after the United States military dropped the atomic bomb on Japan.

Tsing describes one of her trips to the Oregon forest, where she became disoriented, lost, and unsuccessful in her search for matsutake. She was rescued by a Laotian Mien family, an uncle, and nephew, who introduced her to mushrooms. She describes the odor and taste, which are divisive. Tsing recalls being taken aback. She argues that her disorientation was motivated not only by sensory perception but also by a broader curiosity. She considered how an anthropologist and two Laotian men ended up together in an Oregon forest. "To my faulty common sense," she declares, "we all appeared miraculously out of time and place—as if plucked from a fairy tale." I was taken aback and intrigued; I could not stop myself from exploring. This book is my attempt to entice you into the labyrinth I discovered" (16).

In Oregon, Forest Service management is frequently viewed as a government intrusion, even though the majority of the land is either under their jurisdiction or the jurisdiction of timber companies. Employees at the agency emphasized that many of their renewal efforts failed and that environmentalist goal were difficult to reconcile with the ongoing pressure to produce timber for a market. Pine and fir trees thrive in the Cascade region, of which Oregon is apart due to the aftermath of a volcanic eruption and its effect on soil quality. While matsutake now coexists with lodgepole pine, this tree was not present in much of the region's early history. Ponderosa pines, which were much more significant, were responsible for much of the early forestry boom, and it turned out that they could not be easily replanted after cutting due to the absence of Indigenous forestry practices. Periodic forest fires favored ponderosas, but US Forest policy prohibited such practices, and ponderosas established themselves in their place.

Tsing's choice of words reflects her intellectual quest to question rather than assume constantly. Her common sense is "flawed" rather than reliable, and the consternation she describes is also infused with magic. She intends to "draw" the reader into the "maze," but she does not position herself as the guide—she has not solved the riddle, only come to appreciate it.

Tsing's objective is to reintroduce a view of nature that is more complicated than the "passive and mechanical" framework established by the European Enlightenment in the 18th century (Location 122). Her alternative is a "entanglements" framework (127),

which she argues is more appropriate for a contemporary era of ecological devastation that also includes marginalized voices. This contrasts with the Enlightenment's prioritization of white men's experiences. Nature is not an object, and its complexity has long been underestimated.

Tsing regards her work as iconoclastic and more suited to comprehending the world in its current state. This preface introduces both the work and the author's intellectual stance. Tsing's objective is to reintroduce a view of nature that is more complicated than the "passive and mechanical" framework established by the European Enlightenment in the 18th century (Location 122). Her alternative is a "entanglements" framework (127), which she argues is more appropriate for a contemporary era of ecological devastation that also includes marginalized voices. This contrasts with the Enlightenment's prioritization of white men's experiences. Nature is not an object, and its complexity has long been underestimated. Tsing regards her work as iconoclastic and more suited to comprehending the world in its current state.

MATSUTAKE

Tsing divides this book into four chapters, and each chapter has 3 to 7 subsections. Tsing slips one part in each chapter, which she calls the interlude. The chapters in this book are 1. What's Left, 2. After Progress, 3. Disturbed Beginnings, and 4. In the Middle of Things.

Tsing describes one of her trips to the Oregon forest, where she became disoriented, lost, and unsuccessful in her search for matsutake. Matsutake is not only a Japanese cultural icon. Additionally, it is a marker of modernity that dates back to 18th-century Japanese poetry—the century traditional mining began. Matsutake can only be found in human-affected forests (pp. 3-4). Matsutake mushrooms thrive among the trees that have been felled, as do the pine trees that populate the damaged forests.

In post-World War II Japan, legend has it that this mushroom was the first to grow following the bombing of Hiroshima (p. 4). However, matsutake is not always in demand. This fungus became increasingly challenging to locate in the 1970s, as the environmental damage caused by the pine forest ecosystem became more severe. This era is characterized by the global trade in matsutake mushrooms and collaboration between mushroom markets in countries from Sweden to Laos to the United States.

When lost, Tsing was rescued by a Laotian Mien family, an uncle, and nephew, who introduced her to mushrooms. She describes the odor and taste, which are divisive. Tsing

recalls being taken back. She argues that her disorientation was motivated not only by sensory perception but also by a broader curiosity. She considered how an anthropologist and two Laotian men ended up together in an Oregon forest. "To my faulty common sense," she declares, "we all appeared miraculously out of time and place—as if plucked from a fairy tale." I was taken back and intrigued; I could not stop myself from exploring.

"This book is my attempt to entice you into the labyrinth I discovered" (16). Tsing's choice of words reflects her intellectual quest to question rather than assume constantly. Her common sense is "flawed" rather than reliable. The consternation she describes is also infused with magic. She intends to "draw" the reader into the "maze." However, she does not position herself as the guide—she has not solved the riddle, only come to appreciate it.

Tsing describes how she discovered matsutake while looking for a new research project centered on a "culturally colorful global commodity" (57). She met a mycologist, a mushroom specialist, who told her about mushroom buying camps in Oregon. She was surprised to discover that visiting one reminded her of fieldwork in Southeast Asia, with various foods available and various languages spoken, including Khmer and Lao. None of the mushroom pickers who came to the camp to sell their wares had any direct ties to Japan, despite being aware that the mushrooms would be sold there. Rather than that, Tsing writes, they created fictitious Japanese landscapes and were unsure how to evaluate them. They had their matsutake world: a patchwork of practices and meanings that linked them as matsutake suppliers—but did not inform the mushrooms' subsequent passage (60).

Tsing notes that this chasm between fantasy and reality became a focal point of her research. How did these two facets of the mushroom trade function in such a way that they made analytical sense as "part of that global economy we call capitalism" (60)? As it befits her dislike of binaries, Tsing emphasizes that the nation-state's boundaries may lose relevance at specific points in economic life while still structuring others.

The issue is that this collaboration is not without cost. Therein lies a shadowy history; imperialism and the description Tsing made of mushroom pickers in one of the world's most giant mushroom producing regions, Oregon, a state on America's west coast zone. Oregon mushroom pickers sell their mushrooms to buyers before shipping them to collectors. Buyers employ an "open ticket" system, in which the picker is entitled

to additional money if the initial price she uses increases. For instance, if the picker sells mushrooms for 15 dollars per five kilograms on Wednesday morning and 25 dollars per five kilograms on Wednesday, the picker is entitled to an excess of ten dollars. They perceive this process as a source of economic liberty for both pickers and buyers competing with other buyers (p. 75).

Pickers have a limited understanding of Japan's massive and affluent matsutake market. These pickers, according to Tsing's recordings, "have their own fantasies about Japan that they also do not necessarily understand." Their matsutake world is inseparable from all of that: a living practice that comprehends the products for which they supply" (p. 58). Oregon pickers are unaware of what happened to the mushroom boxes following that. Thus, there is an incompatibility between the segmentation of the mushroom market in America and Japan, which generates its own diversity but remains a component of the global economy known as capitalism (p.58).

Immigrants from Southeast Asia, such as Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, work as mushroom pickers. Tsing goes into greater detail when she discusses these mushroom-picking immigrants. She then moved on to a discussion of America's bloody history of indiscriminately bombing workers' countries of origin. Indeed, not all Southeast Asian immigrants seek employment in this field. Additionally, there are a few Japanese-American communities in Oregon that prefer restaurants.

Japanese-Americans' disconnection from the collective memory of Oregon's matsutake mushrooms is not without reason. This occurrence cannot be traced back to the Pacific War. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1943, the Japanese-American community suppressed cultural memories out of anti-Japanese fear. Not only were they detained in concentration camps, but their property and land (used for gardening) were looted during this period. They are then fearful of being "Japanese." This was accommodated by the United States' Protestant-Evangelical spirit and assimilationist politics. The Japanese eventually abandoned their language and culture to become "America"; matsutake was reduced to small and limited fragments selected for family events or as so-called "relative gifts" (pp. 103-105).

On the other hand, working as mushroom pickers gives new meaning to those who plan positively—a sentiment shared by white pickers, most of whom are the Middle East and even Vietnam veterans. The fungus's growth and the meager market mechanism (pp.

79–80) are both healing wounds and/or reawakening memories of the land they once inhabited.

Along with the recession or intermediaries, these pickers exist. These middlemen or intermediaries are the final stop before the mushrooms reach the exporters' arena. In American parlance, the middle class is despised. "Yellow fever," a code for anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese sentiment following the massive migration of the Chinese people following Mao Zedong's ascension, or following the Pearl Harbor flood, was the cause. However, according to Tsing, Matsutake transformed the collector into a unique little narrative

CAPITALISM

Mushroom's focus on salvage capitalism was mentioned at the outset. This is referred to as "capitalist value creation from a non-capitalist value regime" by Tsing (p. 128). Contemporary capitalism appears to be less concerned with homogenizing all production lines, as Tsing argues in his book. Rather than that, it creates space for non-capitalist modes of production to grow and develop, eventually running independently of what the Hmong and Mien ethnic groups have. In short, what saved capitalism was not domination, but omission, because these non-capitalists assisted in the market's development.

Tsing's argument centers on the concept of salvage accumulation because she wishes to demonstrate the possibility of living under capitalism without justifying capitalism itself. There are spaces that capitalism cannot penetrate, and it remains because it depends on non-capitalists for survival. People organize in this non-capitalist space, and forests and mushrooms live as they please, alienated from or even unconcerned with the frenetic market.

Tsing was able to decipher capitalism's most critical mechanism through this concept: translation. Capitalism, according to Tsing, is a translator machine that generates capital from various forms of life (p. 133). However, nothing is perfect or precise, just like a translation. This process is dotted with anomalies, from mushrooms that continue to grow unaffected by technological advancements (matsutake mushrooms, for example, cannot be grown synthetically) to an open ticket system in the heart of the Oregon forest.

However, Tsing believes that this translation process must pass through two critical stages: alienation and accumulation (p. 133). Alienation implies possessing an

item and dragging it to an infinite exchange rate. As a result of alienation, accumulation occurs, and accumulation transforms ownership into power (ownership into power) because the sum of all values seized in an item becomes power overvalue.

Tsing begins his analysis of capitalism with "the contingencies of encounters" (p. 142). The encounters resulting from an event (Southeast Asian immigrants and matsutake, North Korean and Japanese mushroom researchers) cannot be regarded as purely linear consequences, as they are not merely repetitive. The convergence of numerous events to promote a more effective process (mushroom trade) creates a new space for comprehending how things can change and how the entire production chain can change.

Additionally, Tsing's approach above can lead us to narratives of life that continue to grow, albeit not indefinitely, and to the emergence of new things under the occult banner of capitalism. These intricate human and non-human narratives are about fusion, transformation, and dissolution. What is clear, Tsing stated, is that she never ceased living (p.158). Tsing also reminds us that alienation can occur in the absence of solid institutions by tracing the encounters due to a commodity such as a matsutake. Tsing refers to this as a process enabled by latent commons (p. 255).

Tsing concludes her work by interspersing anecdotes from her research sites, "recouping moments when I caught glimpses of the kinds of boundary confusions that mark the edges of alienation—and thus, perhaps, latent commons" (278). Thus, her final quest is to locate the points at which capitalism collides with a more collectivist reality, even as it continues to exist in evidence. She introduces another research subject, "Matsiman" (the first part of his name is slang for the matsutake mushroom; thus, he is "mushroom man"). He makes a concerted effort to live outside capitalist structures, a lifestyle that necessitates constant vigilance and a commitment to what Tsing refers to as "arts of noticing" (279). This is precisely what she has done for the majority of her work: observing people, forests, mushrooms, and academic disciplines in order to uncover the possibilities that may await humanity in an increasingly uncertain world. Perhaps all mushroom hunters are anthropologists in this estimation—or perhaps all social science requires patience, fortitude, and a willingness to examine what others have discarded.

CLOSING STATEMENT

This book proposes a new method. Human beings are frail creatures. Anna coined the term "multispecies world." Humans are not the center of the universe; without trees,

we would be unable to breathe oxygen, and without bacteria, we would be unable to digest food. Humans are inextricably linked to non-human elements such as water, plants, and animals in a multispecies world. In times of environmental crisis, one way to observe ruins is through the art of noticing, observing human subjects' attachment to non-human objects and species, and the changes that have occurred due to environmental degradation.

I give the book The Mushroom at the End of the World an enthusiastic recommendation. Without a doubt, his methodological contributions are indisputable. Moreover, the methodological contribution encourages us to rethink our assumptions about knowing things. Tsing observes that the devil occasionally appears in the often-overlooked details of the grand narrative, both in the jargon of development/development, utopia, and revolution.

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