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**The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins**, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2015, xii + 331 pp., £22.95 (hardback), 9780691162751

After the atomic bomb destroyed Hiroshima in 1945, the first form of life to return to the charred earth was apparently the matsutake mushroom. This pungent fungus, a delicacy in Japanese cuisine, is remarkable for its success in what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes as 'disturbance-based ecologies' (5). To put it another way, matsutake thrive among ruination, not just on the sites of such devastating events as Hiroshima, but also, particularly, under the ground of the slower violence of commercial logging. Tsing's extraordinary book provides an intimate account of the ecology of the matsutake and the work of the pickers, entrepreneurs and gourmets who bring it into the global economy. As such, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is about much more than mushrooms. This is a book, perhaps above all, about the experience of living in precarious times and about life at the edges or in the cracks of the world system of capitalism. Tsing, an anthropologist by training (though this is also much more than an anthropological study), follows the matsutake trade from Japan to the American West, to Finland, China and South-East Asia (via other locations along the way) to 'explore the ruin that has become our collective home' (3). While the green left, at the risk of over-simplification, might tend to see neo-liberalism as an unescapable, monolithic force that distorts everything to a 'singular capitalist logic' (65), Tsing is interested in putting 'unpredictable encounters at the centre of things' (20), examining the 'noncapitalist elements on which capitalism depends' (66) and positing 'an alternative politics of more-than-human entanglements' (135). If capitalism does have some of the qualities of a machine, crucially (and optimistically), this 'machine is not a total institution, which we spend our lives inside' (133). The result is a subtle, uplifting and affecting narrative that makes a significant contribution to the ecologically-oriented interrogation of discourses of capital currently ongoing with particular energy in the work of Jason Moore and in much postcolonial ecocriticism.

Central to Tsing's project in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is her extensive fieldwork among matsutake pickers in the tented village she dubs Open Ticket, Oregon. Matsutake are high-end goods; the trade between the forests of the U.S. Pacific Northwest, where the mushrooms thrive, and Japan, where the mushrooms are in short supply, is a sizeable business. Far from a coherently structured commercial operation, however, mushroom foraging is the territory of those described by Tsing as 'invisible interlopers' – 'disabled white veterans, Asian refugees, Native Americans, and undocumented Latinos' who exist in an often tense relationship with the state authority embodied by the forest service (18). Theirs is a world Tsing dubs 'pericapitalist'. To explain: clearly, the activity of matsutake foraging exists in close relation to capital accumulation – it is because of the mushrooms' market value that foragers are able to make a living and so to live in the forest. Ad hoc communities like Open Ticket might, then, be said to be determined by capital. But at the same time, equally clearly, the foragers' lives are not entirely assimilated into free market capitalism and nor are they reducible to the logics of capital. Tsing makes the point that large corporations often have little interest in the productive origins of the goods they profit from. Wal-Mart conceived the UPC tag or barcode in order to allow products to be 'minutely tracked and assessed' (64); crucially, Tsing observes, 'the other side of the tag is blank, indexing Wal-Mart's lack of concern with how the product is made' (64). This, of course, is deeply alarming. Theft, violence and all manner of environmental harms are facilitated by such abnegation of responsibility. At the same time, however, the pericapitalist economic practices that consequently emerge at capitalism's margins can operate, Tsing argues, as 'sites for rethinking the unquestioned authority of capitalism in our lives' (65). Another of the

book's useful coinages is the conception of the 'latent commons', unnoticed and elusive presences like the matsutake that 'bubble with unrealized possibilities' (255). This is one of Tsing's more complex and challenging ideas: latent commons 'are those mutualistic and nonantagonistic entanglements'; they 'move in law's interstices […] catalyzed by infraction, infection, inattention' (255). Most importantly, they are not subjectable to human regulation; although matsutake often appear in the wake of anthropogenic ecological damage, they cannot be controlled by humans. Tsing's project of 'thinking with mushrooms' (38) thus explores the limits and ambivalences of capitalism's commodification of the natural world. In the context of matsutake, the 'inability of capitalist forms of discipline to fully capture the world is especially obvious' (278).

Undeniably, a large part of the book's significance exists in its authoritative, but quirky account of economic history and theory. Mercifully, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* avoids a dry, abstracted version of its topic. To a significant extent, this is the result of a methodology that includes and privileges storytelling: 'To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a *method*. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge' (37, original emphasis). So, rather than a conventional academic monograph, Tsing gives us 'a riot of short chapters […] like the flushes of mushrooms that come up after a rain: an over-the-top bounty; a temptation to explore; an always too many' (viii). Between the main discursive and narrative chapters, Tsing includes interludes on 'Smelling', 'Tracking' and 'Dancing' which reveal this as a book that cultivates an environmental poetics alongside its socio-economic analysis. In 'Dancing', for instance, under the tutelage of an experienced picker, Tsing discovers the importance of touch in mushroom picking. To find the matsutake, a forager must feel the bumps in the forest floor that indicate the mushrooms' presence; 'think of sensing a heave', Tsing suggests, 'an effect like the inhalation of breath in the chest' (242). With flourishes like this, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is at many points as much nature writing as it is anthropology. And if this is a book of stories, the protagonists are certainly not all human. Tsing is interested in the 'world-building work of fungi' (139) through which they might be understood as more dynamic participants in the life of the planet than 'human bias' (155) conventionally allows. Although some readers might find the language of 'assemblages' and 'entanglements' that frequently sprouts in Tsing's prose a bit too clumsily fashionable, this is a remarkable and elegantly conceived book that well rewards close attention.

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