

**ANNA LOWENHAUPT TSING (2015)**  
***THE MUSHROOM AT THE END OF THE WORLD:***  
***ON THE POSSIBILITY OF LIFE IN CAPITALIST***  
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In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing narrates the political economy of the matsutake mushroom as an imaginative case study for the precarious nature of environments and livelihoods. Tsing generates an examination of the multiple, unexpected and inter-related ecologies that are enabled by the social and power relations that constitute the production, distribution and consumption of the matsutake mushroom.

According to a story recounted by matsutake traders, a mushroom was ‘the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape’ following the destruction of Hiroshima in 1945 due to the detonation of the atomic bomb (3). Tsing elaborates on the concept of *disturbance based ecologies*:

When its singular asset can no longer be produced, a place can be abandoned. The timber has been cut; the oil has run out; the plantation soil no longer supports crops. The search for assets resumes elsewhere. Thus, simplification for alienation produces ruins, spaces of abandonment for asset production. (6)

The matsutake is a lowly mushroom that emerges from the remains of ruined landscapes, foraged by precarious migrant workers. Yet once it has navigated the commodity chain it becomes a highly sought after, luxurious delicacy. However, matsutake are unusual compared to other raw materials because their value increases through the act of gifting rather than engaging in traditional, capitalist goods exchange. In gathering and participating in the political economy generated by the matsutake, Tsing acknowledges

the subjective role of chance encounters, luck and experience. Tsing draws attention to how matsutake move through a chain of grassroots artisanal, seasonal workers, arbiters of taste, traders, producers, via multiples cultural linkages and simultaneous histories. The arc of the book follows the matsutake mushroom through unexpected disciplinary terrain. Although Tsing's introduction to the mushroom begins with an apocryphal account of the matsutake as the first living thing to emerge following the destruction of the landscape at Hiroshima in 1945, she quickly rationalizes and justifiably argues for the matsutake as a nexus for exploring current socio-political conditions amidst blasted landscapes. These distressed and blasted landscapes are a pre-condition to contemporary life, be it within economic, socio-political, geo-political, aesthetic or physical realms.

Matsutake oscillate between being a rigorously quantified, strictly monetized commodity and an ephemeral item for barter-trade whose value is based on the cultural knowledge and experience of experienced matsutake assessors and sorters. Tsing argues that the political economy of commercial mushroom picking exemplifies the general condition of precarity in contemporary life (109). The prevalence of precarious life today is seen as a failure of the promises of Modernity. Yet the matsutake manages to move in and out of the commodity chain cycle, the standardization of labour and the corporatization of commodities at various times. Mechanization cannot obtain matsutake nor can it determine the commercial viability of a matsutake. It's value and viability is wholly determined by deploying five human senses, in addition, the pickers and sorters lived experience and storytelling adds value to the mushroom. Oral histories and the performance of identity play strongly (and unusually) into the lifecycle of the matsutake as a commodity. This is not, generally, reproducible within traditional food sorting mechanisation. Tsing describes this in a lively section in the Chapter titled 'Open Ticket, Oregon' in which she elaborates on the picking, sorting and capitalist exchange of the matsutake. The sheer ephemerality of the scent of the matsutake (Tsing describes the experienced sorters assessing the mushroom's provenance only obtainable through scent) is the element that at once allows the mushroom to be assessed as an economic commodity and where the mushrooms fall on the scale of average specimen to exotic delicacy. Tsing's lively exploration of the political economy of the matsutake deflates pervasive capitalist emphasis on never ending progress towards an unattainable pinnacle.

The ideology of progress emerged following WWII, and has failed to take into account the limits of our biosphere. Upon a more broadly accepted realization that the biosphere does in fact have limits, that the atmosphere can only hold so much CO<sub>2</sub> and by acknowledging the finite character of Nature, we have come to realize that raw materials are not in fact 'an infinite bequest from Nature to humankind' (62). Through the matsutake, Tsing interrogates how capitalism might appear without assuming progress (5). Modernization and industrialization were supposed to provide steady jobs with good wages and associated benefits. The post-war notion of progress, so deeply embedded in mainstream discourse, was supposed to ensure fair wages and stable jobs, but in fact it has produced precarious societies. Tsing maintains that precariousness is now a standard condition and instead of security, uncertainty now transcends social conditions, economics and ecologies. Tsing uses the political economy of the matsutake as a case study to examine the fate of the earth due, and associated precarious social, economic and ecological conditions. Rather than fulfilling the promises progress made, Tsing emphasizes how in the knowledge based, post-industrial era, progress has fostered irregular livelihoods (3). Furthermore, she claims that somewhere along the way 'progress stopped making sense' (25).

Tsing privileges an outlook based on Gilles Deleuze's concept *assemblage* rather than progress. For Tsing, the notion of assemblage incorporates many voices, multiple perspectives and a polyphonous consideration of the life-worlds of many species, some coming to prominence while others fading away. Multiplicities of species and temporalities are possible with the assemblage model proposed by Tsing. Matsutake realize this assemblage of a life-world because multiple ecological, biological and organic entities must converge in order for matsutake to grow. There appears to be no such thing as farming matsutake because they germinate underground and usually where deer have passed previously. As such they necessitate harvesting by hand digging below ground and around these deer tracks that often appear near the roots of a particular species of red pinetree. In addition, sufficient rainfall must have occurred to enable a good matsutake season. The game of chance does not end there, many transient components must also converge in the economic and commodified side of harvesting and selling the matsutake.

Tsing also cites the formulations of biosemiotician Jakob von Uexküll vis-à-vis the matsutake, namely how the matsutake

exemplify Uexküll's conception of the *umwelt*, an interdependent lifeworld which applies to human as well as non-human entities.

Another concept Tsing brings to the fore is *salvage*. According to Tsing, the term signals how living things made within ecological processes are co-opted for the concentration of wealth. As an example, Tsing cites Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) where raw materials (ivory, rubber, followed by rare earth minerals obtained through artisanal mining) possess monetary value that is procured through violence (Tsing 63). In effect humans and non-humans have become monetized into resources and commodities (5). And so unregulated production becomes part of the commodity chain, reimagined as progress (65). Tsing's concept of salvage translates violence and pollution into profit (64). In addition, the conversion of indigenous knowledge into capitalist monetary returns is called *salvage accumulation*. Tsing cites the indigenous people from Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific harpooning whales on the *Pequod* in *Moby Dick* (1851) as an example of salvage accumulation.

Tsing contends that the political economy of the matsutake is only partially based in capitalist logic. By understanding the atypical power structure of the political economy of the matsutake and by revealing its unusual ecological, and sometimes commodified life, Tsing qualifies the matsutake as a strange prism through which we develop an enmeshed, entangled, yet mutually dependent, future. For example, in Chapter 9 'From Gifts to Commodities and Back' Tsing explains the way matsutake oscillate back and forth between boundaries that are normally more rigid for items in the capitalist commodity chain. In typical Fordist capitalism, it is financially beneficial when workers are alienated from the overall economic project with which they are engaged. Items are also alienated from their origin. Rather than foster alienation within the capitalist paradigm, matsutake defy the limitations. They are an integral part of a gift economy that builds upon cultural and social value. Tsing establishes that fine matsutake are rarely purchased to eat, but rather in Japan matsutake are given primarily as gifts. Various converging random, yet ecologically dependant, forces must intersect organically in order for a matsutake to appear and come to market. As well, migrant and seasonal workers engaged in a counter-economy, living seasonally outside of typical capitalist machinations are a vital part of the matsutake lifecycle. As noted above, experienced sorters use their sense of smell to determine the provenance of the mushroom, and the ability to properly assess the

quality of a matsutake comes only with lived experience which is often passed down generationally. Matsutake are sometimes elevated as luxury items but they are rooted in counter-culture, migrant work and cultural diversity. Additionally, matsutake are not merely harvested in Japan, but they grow rather well in the Pacific Northwest where sorters and pickers embodying an array of ethnicities and nationalities who converge annually in temporary living arrangements to pick mushrooms.

Using the political economy of the matsutake, Tsing offers an optimistic view of possible ways forward while considering the precarious nature of the environment and the associated livelihood of humans and non-humans. Thus, an imaginative, unexpected view of the political economy of matsutake could open a pathway to interdisciplinary antidotes for global warming and climate change. The subtext throughout the book emphasizes that the pervasive and nearly inescapable late capitalist mode we find ourselves in has not succeeded in providing stable wages or secure employment. Nor has it resulted in material or immaterial socio-cultural benefits to the vast majority of people in either the Global North or South. Amidst the difficult journey to acknowledge these failings, including likely the irreversible destruction of the biosphere, or at the very least, humans' industrial and economic activity altering the biosphere so as to increase CO<sup>2</sup> levels in the atmosphere which in turn have cascading effects that will impede, prevent and annihilate biological life. Tsing proposes the unusual political economy of the matsutake as a model to forge new and different, inclusive yet unpredictable pathways into the future.