– BOOK REVIEWS ESSAY –

COLLABORATION AND CONTAMINATION:
NOTES ON THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FRONTIER

Christopher A. Howard[1]

Books Reviewed:

THE MUSHROOM AT THE END OF THE WORLD:
ON THE POSSIBILITY OF LIFE IN CAPITALIST RUINS
By Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015, 352 pp.
ISBN 1400873541, 9781400873548

ANTHROPOLOGIES AND FUTURES:
RESEARCHING EMERGING AND UNCERTAIN WORLDS
Edited by Sarah Pink, Juan Francisco Salazar, Andrew Irving, Johannes Sjöberg
London: Bloomsbury, 2017, 280 pp. ISBN 1474264891, 9781474264891

MAKING HOMES: ETHNOGRAPHY AND DESIGN
By Sarah Pink, Kerstin Leder Mackley, Roxana Morosanu, Val Mitchell,
and Tracy Bhamra.
London: Bloomsbury, 2017, 176 pp. ISBN 147423917X, 9781474239172

THE MUSHROOM AT THE END OF THE WORLD

What does it mean to live in capitalist ruins? Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is such a rich and expansive book that it is difficult to know where to begin. So, let us begin with the intriguing, Murakami Haruki-esque title. The mushroom at the center of Tsing's analysis is the matsutake, a wild mushroom that lives in human-disturbed forests. As a gourmet treat, especially popular in Japan, matsutake fetch some of the highest prices for mushrooms, and indeed of any edible commodity on earth. As both a product and by-product of intensive forestry and logging, Tsing guides us through how the matsutake trade illuminates the cracks in our global political economy. Over

the past thirty years or so, we learn, matsutake have become a global commodity, foraged in forests across the northern hemisphere and shipped fresh to Japan. Many matsutake foragers are displaced and disenfranchised cultural minorities, who live precarious lives in precarious environments. These include Cambodians and Laotians who dwell on the forest fringes of eastern Oregon, having been displaced by the US instigated conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s. As Tsing shows, the open-ended assemblages and entangled lifeways of matsutake commerce illustrates precarity as an earthwide condition.

Thus, while ostensibly about the global matsutake mushroom trade, Tsing's book is driven by two broader agendas. First, like other global ethnographies and 'ethnographies of things', it is a critique of the social and environmental consequences of capitalism. Not neoliberal, global or late capitalism, but capitalism as such. Tsing returns to the basic Marxist critique, with an alleged feminist perspective and informed by engaged ethnographic practice. Tsing reminds us that, fundamentally, capitalism is a system for generating profit via exploitation. Profit equals surplus value, which in turn makes new investments possible. These new investments, which can be in either people or things and often both, allow for further concentration and accumulation of wealth for those who control the means of production.

Early in the book, Tsing makes a strong case for the connection between the economy and the environment: 'The history of the human concentration of wealth is the history of making both humans and nonhumans into resources for investment' (p.5). As Marx observed, this abstraction results in alienation, a separation and modification of what was previously inextricably connected. 'Through alienation', writes Tsing, 'people and things become mobile assets; they can be removed from their life worlds in distance-defying transport to be exchanged with other assets from other lifeworlds, elsewhere' (p.5). This, she points out, is quite different from using parts of a lifeworld, for instance, in eating and being eaten, in which case multispecies environments remain in place. Yet the commodification of 'stand-alone assets', such as pine timber, matsutake mushrooms, rubber, corn or bananas, inspires landscape modifications and 'everything else becomes weeds or waste' (p.6). As Tsing points out, this is a story we know; 'It is the story of pioneers, progress, and the transformation of 'empty' spaces into industrial resource fields' (p.18). Yet the myth of progress via industrial transformation has in fact created damaged landscapes, precarious livelihoods and capitalist ruination. For Tsing, the Anthropocene begins not with our species, but with the advent of modern capitalism. *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is largely a critique of 'progress', illustrated by the global matsutake trade. The book is especially attentive to how modern progress has

depended on ever increasing global scalability and expansion, as if nature will always be there, providing abundant and infinite 'resources'. The realisation that nature is finite and even fragile calls for an 'alternative politics of more-than-human-entanglements' (p.135).

This brings us to the second agenda of the book, which is to expand the conceptual scope, vocabulary and methodological framework of anthropology as a discipline. Like the two volumes reviewed below, Tsing seeks to expand and politicise the ethnographic frontier. The book is highly ambitious. It is also highly impressive and might very well be Tsing's magnum opus. *The Mushroom at the End of the World* was written over the course of almost fifteen years, with fieldwork conducted in sites as far afield as Japan, China, Oregon and Finland. Although the book is a meta-critique of capitalism and a lament for the anthropogenic disturbance that has ushered in the Anthropocene, it is also a labour of love. Tsing is a self-confessed mushroom lover, hunter and connoisseur; and a member of a like-paletted sub-culture. The growth and survival of mushrooms, like every other species, depend on livable collaborations.

Tsing defines collaboration as working across difference, which leads to contamination, both of which are necessary for survival. Within her analysis of the complex ecologies that allow matsutake mushrooms to grow in disturbed environments, Tsing is simultaneously advancing the post-human argument that *we have never been only human* (see Haraway 2008; Howard 2017; Pyyhtinen and Tamminen 2011). The author notes that human evolution is 'always polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaboration' (p.29). Analogy and metaphor are key aspects of the book; the investigation of one of the world's most sought-after fungi is simultaneously an examination of both broader capitalist destruction and collaborative survival within multispecies landscapes, which is the prerequisite for life on earth. The implicit message is that human beings are products of and depend on collaboration and contamination for our survival and evolution, and, like matsutake mushrooms and other species, we are living in and adapting to damaged environments. The message is also that collaboration and contamination are prerequisites for ethnography, which can no longer be taken as a human qua human endeavor.

The Mushroom at the End of the World is a deeply rewarding, if challenging, read. As anyone familiar with her work knows, Tsing is a powerful, at times luminous, writer and here she is at the top of her game. The book is also a beautiful bound volume, illustrated by artful photos and drawings. Although the book's sheer breadth can be daunting and the way the chapters jump across contexts

can be slightly disorienting, the beauty is the manifold learning opportunities it presents. Following the matsutake trail, the reader learns about everything from mushroom ecology and the evolution of pine trees to Japanese gift giving practices, the history of Oregon forestry, South East Asian conflicts and subsequent migrations, forestry practices in Finland and Chinese market culture. All of this is interesting in itself, though what is being cultivated behind the scenes is a capacity to make hidden connections, to see the complexity and real effects of our global entanglements. This is a deeply important capacity if we are to exit the progress traps laid by industrial capitalism. While seeing connections and understanding the deep flaws of capitalism is needed, thinking and acting otherwise about our uncertain and emerging futures is the logical next step.

ANTHROPOLOGIES AND FUTURES

Anthropologies and Futures begins rather unlike any anthropological volume I've come across: with a manifesto. Specifically, it begins with a 'futures anthropology manifesto', which we learn was co-produced by dozens of anthropologists during the European Association of Social Anthropologies (EASA) conference, held in Tallinn, Estonia in 2014. The ten-point manifesto was intended as 'a starting point for collaborative work of a network of engaged, creative and bold practitioners' (p.1). In many ways the manifesto reflects some of the key shifts that sociocultural anthropology has been undergoing over the past two decades or so. The first point, for instance, captures the increasingly interventionist and quasi-activist stance many working anthropologists are now taking; 'We are critical ethnographers engaged in confronting and intervening in the challenges of contested and controversial futures' (p.1). The next point is about being 'stubbornly transdisciplinary and transnational' and willing to 'break boundaries and network without fear of incapacity or contamination' (p.2). A third point embraces the methodological challenges of properly situating (post) human beings in broader ecologies and technological entanglements.

So far so good, though some of the later points struck me as less worthy aspirations, such as manifesto point nine: 'We may be epistemologically filthy, improvisational and undisciplined' (p.2). Given the battle for relevance and legitimacy that the humanities and social sciences continue to fight for under neoliberal regimes, such posturing does not seem helpful. Yet this is a book by and for anthropologists, unlikely to be read by the unacquainted. The manifesto is ambitious and intentionally provocative, though not all chapters are equally radical. In chapter one, the editors refer to anthropology in the singular rather than in the plural, a choice intended to consolidate the principles and ideals of the manifesto and see the field of Futures Anthropology develop. Another

reason is to differentiate the project from those concerned with the future of anthropology as a discipline, which is nevertheless a concern they share. Futures are in the plural to signify the contingent horizon of possibilities that contemporary societies and the Earth systems that house them now face.

Following the manifesto, editors Sarah Pink and Juan Francisco Salazar set the agenda for the volume, which is a 'renewed, open and future-focused approach to understanding the present, anticipating the unknown, and intervening in the world' (p.3). Viewed as a collective action, they seek to derail what they describe as mainstream sociocultural anthropology's insularity and disciplinary isolation; tendencies that hinder the capacity for participation and intervention in the 'major world worldmaking activities of our times' (p.3). They aim to bring the discipline onto the futures research scene, which, as they correctly note, has been on track for a late arrival. Sociology, geography, demography, economics, political science, design, environmental science, science and technology studies (STS), and literary and media studies all have amassing futures literatures. Futures thinking and planning extends far beyond the academe, however, and is on the contemporary agenda of states, corporations, cities, NGOs, communities and individuals. And for good reason. The future can no longer be taken as a given, but could take on a number of forms, some much friendlier than others. Despite being unpredictable, uncertain and ultimately unknowable (including unknown unknowns), many now hold the future to be a better guide for deciding what to do in the present than what happened in the past (Urry 2016, 17).

As Urry (2016, 33) observes, the 'global optimism' of the late twentieth century promised a progressive, open future. This bright future would be led by the 'west', who having 'won' the Cold War, 'set about making the rest of the world into a utopia of borderlessness, global consumerism and choice, with food, products, bodies, places, services, friends, family and experiences set out for display, purchase and use' (Urry 2016, 33). This optimistic utopic globalisation based upon the rapidly increasing movement of money, people, ideas, images, information and objects coincided with the rise of the internet in the 1990s. Yet Urry chronicles a striking change in the 'structure of feeling' or *Zeitgeist* within the affluent North early in the new millennium. A turn to long-term catastrophism is reflected in a vast number of social and natural science texts from 2003 onwards, in films, literature and art exhibitions, and the establishment of research centers and programmes concerned with the potential collapse of human societies (Urry 2016, 37).

Predications of catastrophic futures have arisen from the realisation that human activity is on the verge of passing certain thresholds or tipping points,

discussed by Rockström *et al.* (2009) as 'planetary boundaries'. The prospect of irreversible environmental change is strongly suggested by the hypothesis that the Earth has left the Holocene and entered the Anthropocene – the 'time of Man'. Anthropogenic activity, particularly since the Industrial Revolution, is seen to be altering the planet on a scale comparable with some major events of the pre-historic past and are now seen as permanent, even on a geological time-scale (Crutzen and Steffen 2003; Steffen *et al.* 2011; Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2010).

Curiously, only two chapters of *Anthropologies and Futures* take an explicit environmental focus. In chapter ten, Salazar reflects on his many years of short-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Antarctic Peninsula. Specifically, he discusses the making of his documentary film, *Nightfall on Gaia* (2015)[2], which represents a creative approach to researching futures anthropologically and engaging with an anthropology of extreme environments. Salazar's research and film explore human activities and habitation in Antarctic and how this fragile environment may shape the future of the planet. This entails speculating 'how Antarctica can be thought of not only as a laboratory for science, but as a laboratory for thinking alternative ways of living in the Anthropocene' (Salazar 2017, 152). Speculation, as distinct from predication or anticipation, is central to Salazar's research. Building on Donna Haraway's (2011) notion of 'speculative fabulation', Salazar's speculative approach aims to bring together the factual, fictional and fabulated. As a mode of enquiry and experimentation with actualities and potentialities, speculation is taken as a process of worlding. By making and organising knowledge about the Antarctic through ethnographic fieldwork and creative film practice, Salazar hopes to open new ways of thinking, feeling and acting on/in Antarctica.

The next chapter, with a specific environmental focus, is Tony Knight's on the politics of rewilding in Europe. Based on fieldwork in the French Pyrenees, Knight explores the conflict between 'traditional' pastoralists and environmental conservationists resulting from the introduction of bears and wolves. While providing a fascinating account of this conflict, Knight aptly demonstrates that 'empirically and theoretically sound engagement with such macro-scenarios and their uncertain futures is quite realizable within our core ethnographic methodological framework' (2017, 84). 'Being there' with his informants, including their dwelt-in future realities, Knight shows how the conflict in the Pyrenees 'can potentially be seen as a microcosm of the much broader conflictive relationships between humans and nature that lie at the heart of the Anthropocene' (p. 84). By spending time understanding the perspectives and concerns of both the pastoralists and conservationists, Knight makes a strong case for how ethnographic research and anthropology can be an important facilitator

in future policy-making and planning. To take this type of research to another level, Knight envisages 'worldmaking laboratories' where implicated stakeholders would conduct 'co-worlding experiments to visualize a future-present that successfully sustains each of their distinctly different ontologies' (p. 97). As nice as this sounds, Knight recognises that overcoming the myriad 'ontological collisions' and frictions between groups with different values and interests in the Anthropocene is immensely complex, if not impossible. Thinking on the level of planetary politics, we soon arrive at a paradox of responsibility and collective action, as Bruno Latour suggested in his Gifford lectures:

> The Anthropocene, in spite of its name, is not a fantastic extension of anthropocentrism … [r]ather, it is the human as a *unified agency*, as one virtual political entity, as a universal concept that has to be broken down into many different people with contradictory interests, opposing cosmoses… (2013, 80–81, emphasis original).

Mitigating global environmental change and staying within the safe operating space of our planetary boundaries will require the largest act of human cooperation our species has ever attempted (Steffen *et al.* 2015). Yet, despite some steps forward, in 2018 we appear still far from the unified social and political body that is urgently required if we are to avoid catastrophic risks that threaten our very (co)existence.

In the afterword of *Anthropologies and Futures*, Paul Stoller cites a proverb from the Songhay of Niger and Mali that goes: 'If you walk forward while looking back, you'll eventually bump into a wall or fall off a cliff' (p. 244). This contrasts with the Māori proverb, ka mura, ka muri, which suggests the idea that we are walking through life backwards. We walk backwards into the future with our thoughts and intentions directed toward the coming generations, but with our eyes on the past. Also in the afterword, Stoller discusses the importance of five future-themes. The list begins with the inevitability of contingency, followed by the future necessity of humility, risk, negative capability and public anthropology. None of these are particularly surprising, except for the fourth – the need for negative capability. With this Stoller points to a concept originally proposed by the Romantic poet John Keats and further explored by John Dewey in his classic work, *Art and Experience* (1934). According to Dewey, people who can tolerate the existential contradictions of life have a well-developed 'negative capability', which allows them to be exceptionally creative and imaginative. To use Donna Haraway's term, these people are comfortable 'staying with the trouble' (2016). Stoller and others also refer to spaces of negative capability as 'the between', unformed, virtual spaces from which the creative responses required

for future-making may emerge. While Stoller's discussion here is brief, there is much to say about the place of negative capability in our times – times that are extending into a future that has already begun (Luhmann 1976).

As an edited collection, the chapters of *Anthropologies and Futures* hold together somewhat loosely. As a whole, the book leans more to the speculative and experimental side of anthropology, which may appeal to some readers more than others. There is an emphasis on new mediums and avenues for storytelling, using digital technologies, film making, theatre and literary fiction techniques. While it is interesting to see new and emerging methods, these can also appear indulgent and more focused on the subject of documentation than the object in question. In this regard, Tsing's book is a much stronger example of experimental methods and writing, combined with rigorous scientific research and committed ethnographic practice. While the discussion here has so far been more on the meta and macro side of things, the last book under review turns to the micro environment of the home.

MAKING HOMES: ETHNOGRAPHY AND DESIGN

In its focus on our most intimate of spheres, *Making Homes,* by Pink *et al.* (2017) can be read as an ethnographically-informed, design-oriented extension of Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1958/2014). In the same way that Bachelard explored the lived experience of architecture, the authors set out to understand the home as the complex, non-linear, *all-too* yet *more-than-human* container that it is. To do so, they integrate theoretical insights and methodologies from design, anthropology, human geography, sociology and media and communication studies. Thus, like *Anthropologies and Futures* and *Mushroom at the End of the World*, the aim is to break out of disciplinary isolation. The result is an often-illuminating book which brings to the light the so easily overlooked, most banal aspects of life.

Home is where we sleep, eat, bath, dress, clean and wash in endless cycles of repetition. The homes we *inhabit* are places of *habit*. Our *routines* at home are also *routes* through architectural designs. This is all framed in a clear and useful way in *Making Homes*. The book is organised into six chapters, each with a clear thematic focus. The first chapter, 'Design, ethnography and homes' is an introduction to how design-thinking and ethnographic methods are a fruitful combination for researching the home. The focus here tends to be on how ethnography and other qualitative methods are useful for investigating the home. There is little discussion, however, of design-thinking and theory, which would have been helpful for those who are not very familiar with this

large, dynamic field.

Chapter two focuses on temporalities of the home. Temporality was an interesting choice; one might have expected space and place to come first. As the authors show, life inside the home follows spatiotemporal rhythms that are co-configured by inhabitants, the design of the home and broader sociocultural rhythms. They also observe the tendency for the home to be seen and experienced as an ongoing 'project'. This points to the fact that homes are continually being made and remade in numerous material, sensorial and imaginative ways. Being on a trajectory of change, there is often a future orientation to the home, which, materially, is a product of the past. Conceiving home as a *project* is a future *projection* of how it can be improved, and thus how the experience of dwelling can be enhanced:

> Designing for the home means designing for the material, sensory and emotional environment that is aspirational and coming into being and that is not always articulated verbally but might be felt or imagined in more corporeal ways. (p. 31)

As the authors observe, the coming into being of the home is now framed by rapid technological change. There is some interesting discussion later in the book about the digital materiality of future homes, which are likely to be data-using and data-producing environments. The Internet of Things (IOT), AI and machine learning will be a salient feature of future homes, which will be embedded in complex global networks. Illuminating as *Making Homes* is, it is also irritating at times. While home life has often been overlooked by social scientists, some of the observations are so utterly obvious they bore. For instance, how long can you imagine reading attentively about where in the home people hang their laundry? How much praise for their own documentary, 'Laundry Lives' (2015), does a reader have patience for? Having read a number of Sarah Pink's books and articles now, the self-promoting of Pink Inc. goes a bit too far. While the writing is as clear as it comes, it also falls prey to being flat and overly sterile, as if it was produced by an academic writing algorithm. These critiques aside, *Making Homes* could benefit readers looking for a starting point in understanding the home as a complex site, and how the home could be investigated ethnographically with an eye on improved design.

NOTES

1   Christopher A. Howard is an anthropologist with a research interest in the changing relations between humans, technology and environment. He is currently

Senior Research and Data Analyst at the New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) in Wellington, and Adjunct Lecturer in anthropology and geography at Chaminade University of Honolulu. He is the author of numerous articles, reviews, and the monograph, *Mobile Lifeworlds* (2016).

Email: christopher.howard@chaminade.edu

2   The full version of the film is available here: https://vimeo.com/117241386

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