



# DiGeSt

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## What are you reading?

**Tsing, A. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.**

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**Tsing, A. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.**

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing opens her book by discussing the enlightenment paradigm that relegated nature as passive background and resources for humans to extract and profit from. She states that previously it was mainly non-western storytellers who explored the realm of interconnection between all beings, human and non-human alike. This notion of ‘interspecies entanglement’ has become a growing topic within contemporary biological research thus destabilising modernist assumptions that place humans at the forefront of knowledge and perceived value (Tsing, 2015, p. vii). She emphasises the relation within our present condition of precarity: ‘[i]n this time of diminished expectations: I look for disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest’ (*Ibid.*, p. 5). Thus she uncovers the contingencies of disturbance histories without falling back on capitalist notions of value extraction. She weaves together a multi-layered narrative of the Matsutake mushroom industry across supply-chain networks, national identities, government bureaucracy, and official and unofficial labour markets into an ecology of late-capitalist precarity. The fragility of the Matsutake ecosystem — one that is easily disrupted by human manipulation and thus impossible to scale into mass production — parallels the volatility of the Matsutake market based on an intricate balance of itinerant labour and informal sales practices. Tsing also points out how notions of freedom transpose across cultural backgrounds, mutating within the contexts and specificities of the precarious migrant workers.

Throughout the book, one of the main concepts Tsing discusses is ‘alienation’— a process in which humans and nonhumans are turned into resources. It is part of a process of mass-scale commodification that pushes humans and non-human entities away from our mutual interdependency towards networks of exchangeability. As Tsing explains, ‘[s]uch techniques have segregated humans and policed identities, obscuring collaborative survival’ (*Ibid.*, p. 19). This then turns alienated people and things into mobile assets, and thus exchangeable and transposable across global scales. She states: “[t]he dream of alienation inspires landscape modification in which only one stand-alone asset matters; everything else becomes weeds or waste” (*Ibid.*, p. 6). Tsing positions alienation as a fundamentally extractionist logic that reinforces individual identity as a means to more easily manage hierarchies of capitalist control by obscuring the networks of entanglement between all beings. To me, the tracing of alienation within commodification procedures is key to making sense of contemporary logics of cybernetic resource flow and how they dispossess vital interspecies entanglements.

My favourite chapter of the book is “From Gifts to Commodities— and Back”. In this chapter, Tsing analyses the perceived value of the mushrooms, in terms of capital but also more personal affective reception and how this value shifts during the process of commodification. When the mushrooms are first harvested, they are seen by their foragers as trophies of the hunt, as they cross into further pairs of hands during processing — and thus further away from their origin — they become increasingly alienated. She also theorises that the mushrooms become part of the pickers themselves through identification— thus the materiality of the mushrooms extends to the pickers through their interaction. The interest in the product Matsutake pickers cultivate through their work fits within a specific logic of value, however, further along in the process of the mushroom sale, warehouse sorters check the mushrooms again for quality and market specifications, and their disinterested labour translates them back into the logic of the alienated commodity, seen as only commercial goods. Traders then ship the valuable mushrooms to Japan where they are commonly given as gifts, creating new relations through social exchange. The interpersonal value of the mushroom as gift constitutes another counter-capitalist logic of value. Whereas most objects we buy and sell are separated from those who made them, existing as stand-alone objects and thus having no relation to personal networks of production. Tsing’s close reading of

translations of value within the process of alienation across the supply chain shows the complexity of objects within social practice and how these are strategically cultivated or severed to maintain capitalist function.

This tracing of the translation and mistranslation of value and signification regarding material objects is something that resonates deeply with my research. The detailed analysis of all the steps of production – picking, sale, warehouse sorting, and finally marketing and consumption in Japan – highlights the complex network of meaning-making that imprints onto our relationship with objects. My research primarily explores the aesthetics of the everyday and the political undercurrents our interactions with everyday objects transmit. Tsing’s analysis illustrates one process of how our discourses of value and visibility mediate the objects that fill our everyday lives. In turn, she exposes how the accumulation of layers of meaningful contamination within those objects can interrupt the hegemonic dynamics of capitalist logic. Following the potential for objects to speak through and against inherently capitalist processes like commodity fetishism, creating resistant forms of signification is an exciting possibility for me.

Tsing’s multifaceted tracing of the Matsutake mushroom is an example of analysis that pays particular attention to the specificities of entangled life in their open-ended complexity. By drawing her attention to third nature, which she describes as ‘what manages to live beyond capitalism,’ she opens up new possibilities of existence beyond the logic of capitalism (*Ibid.*, p. viii). To do this, she encourages us to practice the art of noticing and to remain critical of presumptions of the future being as a linear progression ahead. Instead, we should shift our focus to the ongoing connections we cultivate together with other helping beings.

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**Sarah Postema-Toews** is a research master's student studying Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests include materiality, ecocriticism, the aesthetics of the everyday, and the aesthetics of resistance. She is currently working on her thesis which analyses how everyday objects become politicised through activism.