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The Mushroom at the End of the World – Week 3 Reflection

In this week’s reading, it was really interesting to realize different spectrums of assemblages being affected by a small fungus, Matsutake. It belongs to many assemblages, brining so many different values and emerging properties into numerous cultures and locations. Even in Tsing’s composite field site, “Open Ticket, Oregon” (Tsing 75), is a “hodgepodge of flights from the city” (Tsing 76), many different ethnicities emerge to fulfill their satisfaction of acquiring freedom. Even though the Matsutake sales happening in Japan have “no connections to pickers” (Tsing 126), it doesn’t really matter to them since “money [is] less important than the freedom” to the pickers (Tsing 77). Even though Matsutake is what connects different individuals from various cultures in this magnificently large assemblage across the world, it was interesting to realize that the value of Matsutake is not mutual among the crowd—everybody approaches it with a different purpose.

To the pickers selling in the Open Ticket, Matsutake hunting is “energized by freedom” (Tsing 86), and money is considered to be “trophies of the chase” (Tsing 81). Different individuals, ranging from Cambodian field agent to Hmong elders with hunting experience, Matsutake brings freedom in many different ways. The whole collecting and trading phenomena is described as a “performance of freedom: freedom to search wherever one pleases—holding propriety, labor, and property at arm’s length; freedom to bring one’s mushrooms to any buyer, and for the buyers, to any field agent; freedom to put the other buyers out of business; freedom to make a killing or lose it all” (Tsing 82).

Tsing also asserts the direct relationship between the political causes and precarious life. Coercive assimilation, which can be observed through Tsing’s empathy with some of the Japanese American farmers in the Open Ticket, is one effect branched out from the war. The Southeast Asian refugees Tsing has interacted with “have become citizens in a moment of neoliberal multiculturalism” (Tsing 100). However, some of the other Southeast Asian groups Tsing has interacted with have “assimilate[d] too, in a different mode” (Tsing 101) with a “different relationship to American citizenship” (Tsing 102). It was interesting to observe that “no one in Open Ticket [thinks] immigration [as] erasing one’s past to become an American” (Tsing 103), the willingness to oppose integration and carry on their own values, “without contamination from others” (Tsing 106) is also what constitutes as freedom.

Salvage accumulation is another topic Tsing mentions in the readings. After Matsutake mushrooms are handpicked and gathered by the pickers, they eventually enter the Japanese commodity chain. The relationship between the foragers and the mushrooms “does not involve alienation” (Tsing 121), since their values are different in the hands of the pickers. In other world, however, Matsutake is used to “build relationships—[which] becomes extensions of the person” (Tsing 123). The process of the Matsutake mushrooms translating into capital commodity shows that “we follow salvage rhythms, whether of the market for scrap or of the entangled histories of foraging for Matsutake mushrooms” (131). How are we contributing to the unregularized coordination of salvage as an individual—what kind of rhythm does our lifestyle hold?