

The Mushroom at the End of the World

*On the Possibility of Life in
Capitalist Ruins*

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*Elusive life, Oregon.
Matsutake caps emerge
in the ruin of an
industrial forest.*

Prologue Autumn Aroma

Takamato ridge, crowded with expanding caps,
filling up, thriving—
the wonder of autumn aroma.

*—From the eighth-century Japanese poetry collection
Man-nyo Shu*

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR WORLD STARTS TO FALL apart? I go for a walk, and if I'm really lucky, I find mushrooms. Mushrooms pull me back into my senses, not just—like flowers—through their riotous colors and smells but because they pop up unexpectedly, reminding me of the good fortune of just happening to be there. Then I know that there are still pleasures amidst the terrors of indeterminacy.

Terrors, of course, there are, and not just for me. The world's climate is going haywire, and industrial progress has proved much more deadly to life on earth than anyone imagined a century ago. The economy is


no longer a source of growth or optimism; any of our jobs could disappear with the next economic crisis. And it's not just that I might fear a spurt of new disasters: I find myself without the handrails of stories that tell where everyone is going and, also, why. Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious—even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined. In contrast to the mid-twentieth century, when poets and philosophers of the global north felt caged by too much stability, now many of us, north and south, confront the condition of trouble without end.

This book tells of my travels with mushrooms to explore indeterminacy and the conditions of precarity, that is, life without the promise of stability. I've read that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, thousands of Siberians, suddenly deprived of state guarantees, ran to the woods to collect mushrooms.¹ These are not the mushrooms I follow, but they make my point: the uncontrolled lives of mushrooms are a gift—and a guide—when the controlled world we thought we had fails.

While I can't offer you mushrooms, I hope you will follow me to savor the "autumn aroma" praised in the poem that begins my prologue. This is the smell of matsutake, a group of aromatic wild mushrooms much valued in Japan. Matsutake is loved as a marker of the autumn season. The smell evokes sadness in the loss of summer's easy riches, but it also calls up the sharp intensity and heightened sensibilities of autumn. Such sensibilities will be needed for the end of global progress's easy summer: the autumn aroma leads me into common life without guarantees. This book is not a critique of the dreams of modernization and progress that offered a vision of stability in the twentieth century; many analysts before me have dissected those dreams. Instead, I address the imaginative challenge of living without those handrails, which once made us think we knew, collectively, where we were going. If we open ourselves to their fungal attractions, matsutake can catapult us into the curiosity that seems to me the first requirement of collaborative survival in precarious times.

Here's how a radical pamphlet put the challenge:

The spectre that many try not to see is a simple realisation—the world will not be "saved." . . . If we don't believe in a global revolutionary future, we must live (as we in fact always had to) in the present.²



When Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945, it is said, the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom.³

Grasping the atom was the culmination of human dreams of controlling nature. It was also the beginning of those dreams' undoing. The bomb at Hiroshima changed things. Suddenly, we became aware that humans could destroy the livability of the planet—whether intentionally or otherwise. This awareness only increased as we learned about pollution, mass extinction, and climate change. One half of current precarity is the fate of the earth: what kinds of human disturbances can we live with? Despite talk of sustainability, how much chance do we have for passing a habitable environment to our multispecies descendants?

Hiroshima's bomb also opened the door to the other half of today's precarity: the surprising contradictions of postwar development. After the war, the promises of modernization, backed by American bombs, seemed bright. Everyone was to benefit. The direction of the future was well known; but is it now? On the one hand, no place in the world is untouched by that global political economy built from the postwar development apparatus. On the other, even as the promises of development still beckon, we seem to have lost the means. Modernization was supposed to fill the world—both communist and capitalist—with jobs, and not just any jobs but "standard employment" with stable wages and benefits. Such jobs are now quite rare; most people depend on much more irregular livelihoods. The irony of our times, then, is that everyone depends on capitalism but almost no one has what we used to call a "regular job."

To live with precarity requires more than railing at those who put us here (although that seems useful too, and I'm not against it). We might look around to notice this strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours. This is where mushrooms help. Matsutake's willingness to emerge in blasted landscapes allows us to explore the ruin that has become our collective home.

Matsutake are wild mushrooms that live in human-disturbed forests. Like rats, raccoons, and cockroaches, they are willing to put up with

some of the environmental messes humans have made. Yet they are not pests; they are valuable gourmet treats—at least in Japan, where high prices sometimes make matsutake the most valuable mushroom on earth. Through their ability to nurture trees, matsutake help forests grow in daunting places. To follow matsutake guides us to possibilities of coexistence within environmental disturbance. This is not an excuse for further damage. Still, matsutake show one kind of collaborative survival.

Matsutake also illuminate the cracks in the global political economy. For the past thirty years, 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. In the U.S. Pacific Northwest, for example, most commercial matsutake foragers are refugees from Laos and Cambodia. Because of high prices, matsutake make a substantial contribution to livelihood wherever they are picked, and even encourage cultural revitalizations.

Matsutake commerce, however, hardly leads to twentieth-century development dreams. Most of the mushroom foragers I spoke with have terrible stories to tell of displacement and loss. Commercial foraging is a better than usual way of getting by for those with no other way to make a living. But what kind of economy is this anyway? Mushroom foragers work for themselves; no companies hire them. There are no wages and no benefits; pickers merely sell the mushrooms they find. Some years there are no mushrooms, and pickers are left with their expenses. Commercial wild-mushroom picking is an exemplification of precarious livelihood, without security.

This book takes up the story of precarious livelihoods and precarious environments through tracking matsutake commerce and ecology. In each case, I find myself surrounded by patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs. I argue that only an appreciation of current precarity as an earthwide condition allows us to notice this—the situation of our world. As long as authoritative analysis requires assumptions of growth, experts don't see the heterogeneity of space and time, even where it is obvious to ordinary participants and observers. Yet theories of heterogeneity are still in their

infancy. To appreciate the patchy unpredictability associated with our current condition, we need to reopen our imaginations. The point of this book is to help that process along—with mushrooms.

About commerce: Contemporary commerce works within the constraints and possibilities of capitalism. Yet, following in the footsteps of Marx, twentieth-century students of capitalism internalized progress to see only one powerful current at a time, ignoring the rest. This book shows how it is possible to study capitalism without this crippling assumption—by combining close attention to the world, in all its precarity, with questions about how wealth is amassed. How might capitalism look without assuming progress? It might look patchy: *the concentration of wealth is possible because value produced in unplanned patches is appropriated for capital.*

About ecology: For humanists, assumptions of progressive human mastery have encouraged a view of nature as a romantic space of anti-modernity.⁴ Yet for twentieth-century scientists, progress also unself-consciously framed the study of landscapes. Assumptions about expansion slipped into the formulation of population biology. New developments in ecology make it possible to think quite differently by introducing cross-species interactions and disturbance histories. In this time of diminished expectations, I look for *disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest.*

While I refuse to reduce either economy or ecology to the other, there is one connection between economy and environment that seems important to introduce up front: the history of the human concentration of wealth through making both humans and nonhumans into resources for investment. This history has inspired investors to imbue both people and things with alienation, that is, the ability to stand alone, as if the entanglements of living did not matter.⁵ Through alienation, 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 life worlds, elsewhere.⁶ This is quite different from merely using others as part of a life world—for example, in eating and being eaten. In that case, multispecies living spaces remain in place. Alienation obviates living-space entanglement. The dream of alienation inspires landscape modification in which only one stand-alone asset matters;

everything else becomes weeds or waste. Here, attending to living-space entanglements seems inefficient, and perhaps archaic. 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.

Global landscapes today are strewn with this kind of ruin. Still, these places can be lively despite announcements of their death; abandoned asset fields sometimes yield new multispecies and multicultural life. In a global state of precarity, we don't have choices other than looking for life in this ruin.

Our first step is to bring back curiosity. Unencumbered by the simplifications of progress narratives, the knots and pulses of patchiness are there to explore. Matsutake are a place to begin: However much I learn, they take me by surprise.



This is not a book about Japan, but the reader needs to know something about matsutake in Japan to proceed.⁷ Matsutake first appears in Japan's written record in the eighth-century poem that starts this prologue. Already then, the mushroom is praised for its aromatic marking of the autumn season. The mushroom became common around Nara and Kyoto, where people had deforested the mountains for wood to build temples and to fuel iron forges. Indeed, human disturbance allowed *Tricholoma matsutake* to emerge in Japan. This is because its most common host is red pine (*Pinus densiflora*), which germinates in the sunlight and mineral soils left by human deforestation. When forests in Japan are allowed to grow back, without human disturbance, broadleaf trees shade out pines, preventing their further germination.

As red pine spread with deforestation across Japan, matsutake became a valued gift, presented beautifully in a box of ferns. Aristocrats were honored by it. By the Edo period (1603–1868), well-to-do commoners, such as urban merchants, also enjoyed matsutake. The mushroom joined the celebration of the four seasons as a marker of autumn. Outings to pick matsutake in the fall were an equivalent of cherry-blossom

viewing parties in the spring. Matsutake became a popular subject for poetry.

The sound of a temple bell is heard in the cedar forest at dusk,
The autumn aroma drifts on the roads below.

—AKEMI TACHIBANA (1812–1868)⁸

As in other Japanese nature poetry, seasonal referents helped build a mood. Matsutake joined older signs of the fall season, such as the sound of deer crying or the harvest moon. The coming bareness of winter touched autumn with an incipient loneliness, at the edge of nostalgia, and the poem above offers that mood. Matsutake was an elite pleasure, a sign of the privilege to live within the artful reconstruction of nature for refined tastes.⁹ For this reason, when peasants preparing for elite outings sometimes “planted” matsutake (i.e., stuck mushrooms artfully in the ground because naturally occurring matsutake were not available), no one objected. Matsutake had become an element of an ideal seasonality, appreciated not only in poetry but also in all the arts, from tea ceremony to theater.

The moving cloud fades away, and I smell the aroma of the
mushroom.

—KOI NAGATA (1900–1997)¹⁰

The Edo period was ended by the Meiji Restoration—and Japan's rapid modernization. Deforestation proceeded apace, privileging pine and matsutake. In the Kyoto area, *matsutake* became a generic term for “mushroom.” In the early twentieth century, matsutake were particularly common. In the mid-1950s, however, the situation began to change. Peasant woodlands were cut down for timber plantations, paved for suburban development, or abandoned by peasants moving to the city. Fossil fuel replaced firewood and charcoal; farmers no longer used the remaining woodlands, which grew up in dense thickets of broadleaf trees. Hill-sides that had once been covered by matsutake were now too shady for pine ecologies. Shade-stressed pines were killed by an invasive nematode. By the mid-1970s, matsutake had become rare across Japan.

This was the time, however, of Japan's rapid economic development, and matsutake were in demand as exquisitely expensive gifts, perks, and bribes. The price of matsutake skyrocketed. The knowledge that matsutake grew in other parts of the world suddenly became relevant. Japanese travelers and residents abroad began to send matsutake to Japan; as importers emerged to funnel the international matsutake trade, non-Japanese pickers rushed in. At first it seemed that there were a plethora of colors and kinds that might appropriately be considered matsutake—because they had the smell. Scientific names proliferated as matsutake in forests across the northern hemisphere suddenly rose from neglect. In the past twenty years, names have been consolidated. All across Eurasia, most matsutake are now *Tricholoma matsutake*.¹¹ In North America, *T. matsutake* seems to be found only in the east, and in the mountains of Mexico. In western North America, the local matsutake is considered another species, *T. magnivelare*.¹² Some scientists, however, think the generic term “matsutake” is the best way to identify these aromatic mushrooms, since the dynamics of speciation are still unclear.¹³ I follow that practice except where I am discussing questions of classification.

Japanese have figured out ways of ranking matsutake from different parts of the world, and ranks are reflected in prices. My eyes were first opened to such rankings when one Japanese importer explained: “Matsutake are like people. American mushrooms are white because the people are white. Chinese mushrooms are black, because the people are black. Japanese people and mushrooms are nicely in between.” Not everyone has the same rankings, but this stark example can stand in for the many forms of classification and valuation that structure the global trade.

Meanwhile, people in Japan worry about the loss of the peasant woodlands that have been the source of so much seasonal beauty, from spring blossoms to bright autumn leaves. Starting in the 1970s, volunteer groups mobilized to restore these woodlands. Wanting their work to matter beyond passive aesthetics, the groups looked for ways restored woodlands might benefit human livelihood. The high price of matsutake made it an ideal product of woodland restoration.

And so I return to precarity and living in our messes. But living seems to have gotten more crowded, not only with Japanese aesthetics and eco-

logical histories, but also with international relations and capitalist trading practices. This is the stuff for stories in the book that follows. For the moment, it seems important to appreciate the mushroom.

Oh, matsutake:
The excitement before finding them.

—YAMAGUCHI SODO (1642–1716)¹⁴

I FIRST HEARD OF MATSUTAKE FROM MYCOLOGIST David Arora, who studied matsutake camps in Oregon between 1993 and 1998. I was looking for a culturally colorful global commodity, and Arora's stories of matsutake intrigued me. He told me of the buyers set up tents by the side of the highway to buy mushrooms at night. "They have nothing to do all day, so they'll have plenty of time to talk to you," he ventured.

And there the buyers were—but so much more! In the big camp, I seemed to have stepped into rural Southeast Asia. Mien wearing sarongs boiled water in kerosene cans over stone tripods and hung strips of game and fish over the stove to dry. Hmong all the way from North Carolina brought home-canned bamboo shoots for sale. Lao noodle tents sold not only *pho* but also the most authentic *laap* I had eaten in the United States, all raw blood, chilies, and intestines. Lao karaoke blared from battery-powered speakers. I even met a Cham picker, although he did not speak Cham, which I thought perhaps I could manage from its closeness to Malay. Mocking my linguistic limitations, a Khmer teenager wearing grunge boasted that he spoke four languages: Khmer, Lao, English, and Ebonics. Local Native Americans sometimes

came to sell their mushrooms. There were also both whites and Latinos, although most avoided the official camp, staying in the woods alone or in small groups. And visitors: A Sacramento Filipino followed Mien friends up here one year, although he said he never got the point. A Portland Korean thought maybe he might join.

Yet there was something not at all cosmopolitan about the scene as well: A rift separated these pickers and buyers from shops and consumers in Japan. Everyone knew that the mushrooms (except for a small percentage bought for Japanese American markets) were going to Japan. Every buyer and bulker longed to sell directly to Japan—but none had any idea how. Misconceptions about the matsutake trade both in Japan and in other supply sites proliferated. White pickers swore that the value of the mushrooms in Japan was as an aphrodisiac. (While matsutake in Japan do have phallic connotations, no one eats them as a drug.) Some complained about the Chinese Red Army, which, they said, drafted people to pick, which depressed global prices. (Pickers in China are independent, just as in Oregon.) When someone discovered extremely high prices in Tokyo on the Internet, no one realized that these prices referred to *Japanese* matsutake. One exceptional bulker, of Chinese origin and fluent in Japanese, whispered to me about these misunderstandings—but he was an outsider. Except for this man, Oregon pickers, buyers, and bulkers were completely in the dark about the Japanese side of the trade. They made up fantasy landscapes of Japan, and they did not know how to assess them. They had their own matsutake world: a patch of practices and meanings that brought them together as matsutake suppliers—but did not inform the mushrooms' further passage.

This rift between U.S. and Japanese segments of the commodity chain guided my search. Different processes for making and accessing value characterized each segment. Given this diversity, what makes this part of that global economy we call capitalism?

*Capitalist edge effects.
Oregon. Pickers line up to
sell matsutake to a
roadside buyer. Precarious
livelihoods show
themselves at the edges of
capitalist governance.
Precarity is that here and
now in which pasts may
not lead to futures.*



4 Working the Edge

IT MAY SEEM ODD TO WANT TO TACKLE CAPITALISM with a theory that stresses ephemeral assemblages and multidirectional histories. After all, the global economy has been the centerpiece of progress, and even radical critics have described its forward-looking motion as filling up the world. Like a giant bulldozer, capitalism appears to flatten the earth to its specifications. But all this only raises the stakes for asking what else is going on—not in some protected enclave, but rather everywhere, both inside and out.

Impressed by the rise of factories in the nineteenth century, Marx showed us forms of capitalism that required the rationalization of wage labor and raw materials. Most analysts have followed this precedent, imagining a factory-driven system with a coherent governance structure, built in cooperation with nation-states. Yet today—as then—much of the economy takes place in radically different scenes. Supply chains snake back and forth not only across continents but also across standards; it would be hard to identify a single rationality across the chain. Yet assets are still amassed for further investment. How does this work?

A supply chain is a particular kind of commodity chain: one in which lead firms direct commodity traffic.¹ Throughout this part, I explore the supply chain linking matsutake pickers in the forests of Oregon with those who eat the mushrooms in Japan. The chain is surprising and full of cultural variety. The factory work through which we know capitalism is mainly missing. But the chain illuminates something important about capitalism today: Amassing wealth is possible without rationalizing labor and raw materials. Instead, it requires acts of translation across varied social and political spaces, which, borrowing from ecologists' usage, I call "patches." Translation, in Shiho Satsuka's sense, is the drawing of one world-making project into another.² While the term draws attention to language, it can also refer to other forms of partial attunement. Translations across sites of difference *are* capitalism: they make it possible for investors to accumulate wealth.

How do mushrooms foraged as trophies of freedom become capitalist assets—and later, exemplary Japanese gifts? Answering this question requires attention to the unexpected assemblages of the chain's component links, as well as the translation processes that draw the links together into a transnational circuit.



Capitalism is a system for concentrating wealth, which makes possible new investments, which further concentrate wealth. This process is accumulation. Classic models take us to the factory: factory owners concentrate wealth by paying workers less than the value of the goods that the workers produce each day. Owners "accumulate" investment assets from this extra value.

Even in factories, however, there are other elements of accumulation. In the nineteenth century, when capitalism first became an object of inquiry, raw materials were imagined as an infinite bequest from Nature to Man. Raw materials can no longer be taken for granted. In our food procurement system, for example, capitalists exploit ecologies not only by reshaping them but also by taking advantage of their capacities. Even in industrial farms, farmers depend on life processes outside their control, such as photosynthesis and animal digestion. In capitalist farms, living things made within ecological processes are coopted for

the concentration of wealth. This is what I call "salvage," that is, taking advantage of value produced without capitalist control. Many capitalist raw materials (consider coal and oil) came into existence long before capitalism. Capitalists also cannot produce human life, the prerequisite of *labor*. "Salvage accumulation" is the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced. Salvage is not an ornament on ordinary capitalist processes; it is a feature of how capitalism works.³

Sites for salvage are simultaneously inside and outside capitalism; I call them "pericapitalist."⁴ All kinds of goods and services produced by pericapitalist activities, human and nonhuman, are salvaged for capitalist accumulation. If a peasant family produces a crop that enters capitalist food chains, capital accumulation is possible through salvaging the value created in peasant farming. Now that global supply chains have come to characterize world capitalism, we see this process everywhere. "Supply chains" are commodity chains that translate value to the benefit of dominant firms; translation between noncapitalist and capitalist value systems is what they do.

Salvage accumulation through global supply chains is not new, and some well-known earlier examples can clarify how it works. Consider the nineteenth-century ivory supply chain connecting central Africa and Europe as told in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*.⁵ The story turns around the narrator's discovery that the European trader he much admired has turned to savagery to procure his ivory. The savagery is a surprise because everyone expects the European presence in Africa to be a force for civilization and progress. Instead, civilization and progress turn out to be cover-ups and translation mechanisms for getting access to value procured through violence: classic salvage.

For a brighter view of supply-chain translation, consider Herman Melville's account of the nineteenth-century procurement of whale oil for Yankee investors.⁶ *Moby-Dick* tells of a ship of whalers whose rowdy cosmopolitanism contrasts sharply with our stereotypes of factory discipline; yet the oil they obtain from killing whales around the world enters a U.S.-based capitalist supply chain. Strangely, all the harpooners on the *Pequod* are unassimilated indigenous people from Asia, Africa, America, and the Pacific. The ship is unable to kill a single whale without the expertise of people who are completely untrained in U.S.

industrial discipline. But the products of this work must eventually be translated into capitalist value forms; the ship sails only because of capitalist financing. The conversion of indigenous knowledge into capitalist returns is salvage accumulation. So too is the conversion of whale life into investments.

Before you conclude that salvage accumulation is archaic, let me turn to a contemporary example. Technological advances in managing inventory have energized today's global supply chains; inventory management allows lead firms to source their products from all kinds of economic arrangements, capitalist and otherwise. One firm that helped put such innovations in place is the retail giant Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart pioneered the required use of universal product codes (UPCs), the black-and-white bars that allow computers to know these products as inventory.⁷ The legibility of inventory, in turn, means that Wal-Mart is able to ignore the labor and environmental conditions through which its products are made: pericapitalist methods, including theft and violence, may be part of the production process. With a nod to Woody Guthrie, we might think about the contrast between production and accounting through the two sides of the UPC tag.⁸ One side of the tag, the side with the black-and-white bars, allows the product to be minutely tracked and assessed. The other side of the tag is blank, indexing Wal-Mart's total lack of concern with how the product is made, since value can be translated through accounting. Wal-Mart has become famous for forcing its suppliers to make products ever more cheaply, thus encouraging savage labor and destructive environmental practices.⁹ Savage and salvage are often twins: Salvage translates violence and pollution into profit.

As inventory moves increasingly under control, the requirement to control labor and raw materials recedes; supply chains make value from translating values produced in quite varied circumstances into capitalist inventory. One way of thinking about this is through scalability, the technical feat of creating expansion without the distortion of changing relations. The legibility of inventory allows scalable retail expansion for Wal-Mart without requiring that production be scalable. Production is left to the riotous diversity of nonscalability, with its relationally particular dreams and schemes. We know this best in "the race to the bottom": the role of global supply chains in promoting coerced labor, dangerous sweatshops, poisonous substitute ingredients, and irresponsible

environmental gouging and dumping. Where lead firms pressure suppliers to provide cheaper and cheaper products, such production conditions are predictable outcomes. As in *Heart of Darkness*, unregulated production is translated in the commodity chain, and even reimagined as progress. This is frightening. At the same time, as J. K. Gibson-Graham argue in their optimistic reach toward a "postcapitalist politics," economic diversity can be hopeful.¹⁰ Pericapitalist economic forms can be sites for rethinking the unquestioned authority of capitalism in our lives. At the very least, diversity offers a chance for multiple ways forward—not just one.

In her insightful comparison between the supply chains for French green beans (*haricots verts*) that link West Africa with France and East Africa with Great Britain, respectively, geographer Susanne Freidberg offers a sense of how supply chains, drawing variously on colonial and national histories, may encourage quite different economic forms.¹¹ French neocolonial schemes mobilize peasant cooperatives; British supermarket standards encourage expatriate scam operations.¹² Within and across differences such as these, there is room for building a politics to confront and navigate salvage accumulation. But following Gibson-Graham to call this politics "postcapitalist" seems to me premature. Through salvage accumulation, lives and products move back and forth between noncapitalist and capitalist forms; these forms shape each other and interpenetrate. The term "pericapitalist" acknowledges that those of us caught in such translations are never fully shielded from capitalism; pericapitalist spaces are unlikely platforms for a safe defense and recuperation.

At the same time, the more prominent critical alternative—shutting one's eyes to economic diversity—seems even more ridiculous in these times. Most critics of capitalism insist on the unity and homogeneity of the capitalist system; many, like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, argue that there is no longer a space outside of capitalism's empire.¹³ Everything is ruled by a singular capitalist logic. As for Gibson-Graham, this claim is an attempt to build a critical political position: the possibility of transcending capitalism. Critics who stress the uniformity of capitalism's hold on the world want to overcome it through a singular solidarity. But what blindsers this hope requires! Why not instead admit to economic diversity?

CONSPIRACY

My goal in bringing up Gibson-Graham and Hardt and Negri is not to dismiss them; indeed, I think they are perhaps the early twenty-first century's most trenchant anticapitalist critics. Furthermore, by setting out strongly contrasting goal posts between which we might think and play, they jointly do us an important service. Is capitalism a single, overarching system that conquers all, or one segregated economic form among many?¹⁴ Between these two positions, we might see how capitalist and noncapitalist forms interact in pericapitalist spaces. Gibson-Graham advise us, quite correctly I think, that what they call "noncapitalist" forms can be found everywhere in the midst of capitalist worlds—rather than just in archaic backwaters. But they see such forms as alternatives to capitalism. Instead, I would look for the noncapitalist elements on which capitalism depends. Thus, for example, when Jane Collins reports that workers in Mexican garment assembly factories are expected to know how to sew before they begin their jobs, *because they are women*, we are offered a glimpse of noncapitalist and capitalist economic forms working together.¹⁵ Women learn to sew growing up at home; salvage accumulation is the process that brings this skill into the factory to the benefit of owners. To understand capitalism (and not just its alternatives), then, we can't stay inside the logics of capitalists; we need an ethnographic eye to see the economic diversity through which accumulation is possible.

It takes concrete histories to make any concept come to life. And isn't mushroom collecting a place to look, after progress? The rifts and bridges of the Oregon-to-Japan matsutake commodity chain show capitalism achieved through economic diversity. Matsutake foraged and sold in pericapitalist performances become capitalist inventory as they are sent to Japan a day later. Such translation is the central problem of many global supply chains. Let me begin by describing the first part of the chain.¹⁶



Americans don't like middlemen, who, they say, just rip off value. But middlemen are consummate translators; their presence directs us to salvage accumulation. Consider the North American side of the commodity chain that brings matsutake from Oregon to Japan. (The Japanese side—with its many middlemen—will be considered later.) Independ-

dent foragers pick the mushrooms in national forests. They sell to independent buyers, who sell, in turn, to bulkers' field agents, who sell to other bulkers or to exporters, who sell and ship, at last, to importers in Japan. Why so many middlemen? The best answer may be a history.

Japanese traders began importing matsutake in the 1980s, when the scarcity of matsutake in Japan first became clear. Japan was bursting with investment capital, and matsutake were prime luxuries, equally suitable as perks, gifts, or bribes. American matsutake were still an expensive novelty in Tokyo, and restaurants competed to get some. Emerging matsutake traders in Japan were like other Japanese traders of that time, ready to use their capital to organize supply chains.

The mushrooms were expensive, so the incentives for suppliers were good. North American traders remember the 1990s as a time of extraordinary prices—and high-risk gambling. If a supplier was able to hit the Japanese markets correctly, the payoff was huge. But with an inconsistent and easy-to-spoil forest product and rapidly changing demand, the possibilities for total wipeout were also great. Everyone spoke of those days in casino metaphors. One Japanese trader compared the importers then to the Mafia in international ports after World War I: It was not just that the importers were gambling but that they were also catalyzing gambling—and keeping the gambling going.

Japanese importers needed local know-how, and they began through alliances with exporters. In the Pacific Northwest, the first exporters were Asian Canadians in Vancouver—and because of their precedent, most U.S. matsutake continue to be exported by their firms. These exporters were not interested only in matsutake. They shipped seafood, or cherries, or log homes to Japan; matsutake were added to those activities. Some—especially the Japanese immigrants—told me they added matsutake to sweeten long-term relations with importers. They were willing to ship matsutake at a loss, they said, to keep their relations intact.

Alliances between exporters and importers formed a basis for the transpacific trade. But the exporters—experts in fish, or fruit, or timber—knew nothing about how to get the mushrooms. In Japan, matsutake come to the market via an agricultural cooperative, or from individual farmers. In North America, matsutake are scattered across enormous national (U.S.) or commonwealth (Canadian) forests. This is where the small companies that I call "bulkiers" come in; bulkiers gather mushrooms

to sell to exporters. Bulklers' field agents buy mushrooms from "buyers" who buy from pickers. Field agents, like buyers, must know the terrain and the people likely to search it.

In the earliest days of the U.S. Pacific Northwest matsutake trade, most field agents, buyers, and pickers were white men who found solace in the mountains, such as Vietnam veterans, displaced loggers, and rural "traditionalists" who rejected liberal urban society. After 1989, an increasing number of refugees from Laos and Cambodia came to pick, and field agents had to stretch their abilities to work with Southeast Asians. Southeast Asians eventually became buyers, and a few became field agents. Working around each other, the whites and Southeast Asians found a common vocabulary in "freedom," which could mean many things dear to each group, even if they were not the same. Native Americans found resonance, but Latino pickers did not share the rhetoric of freedom. Despite this variation, the overlapping concerns of self-exiled whites and Southeast Asian refugees became the heartbeat of the trade; freedom brought out the matsutake.

Through shared concerns with freedom, the U.S. Pacific Northwest became one of the world's great matsutake exporting areas. Yet this way of life was segregated from the rest of the commodity chain. Bulklers and buyers longed to export matsutake directly to Japan but did not succeed. Neither buyers nor bulklers could get beyond the already difficult exchange with Canadian exporters of Asian origin, for whom English was not often a first language. They complained about unfair practices, but in fact they were useless at the cultural translation necessary for the making of inventory. For it is not just language that separates pickers, buyers, and bulklers in Oregon from Japanese traders; it is the conditions of production. Oregon mushrooms are contaminated with the cultural practices of "freedom."

The story of an exception makes the point. "Wei" first went to Japan from his native China to study music; when he found he could not make a living, he entered the Japanese vegetable import trade. He became fluent in Japanese, although still prickly about some features of life in Japan. When his company wanted someone to go to North America, he volunteered. This is how he became an idiosyncratic combination of field agent, bulker, and exporter. He goes to the matsutake area to watch the buying, just like other field agents, but he has a direct line

to Japan. Unlike the other field agents, he is constantly on the phone with Japanese traders, gauging opportunities and prices. He also talks to Japanese Canadian exporters, although he does not sell his mushrooms through them; because he can talk to them in Japanese, they constantly ask him to explain conditions in the field, including the behavior of the field agents whose mushrooms they buy. Meanwhile, the other field agents refuse to include him in their company and conspire against his buyers. He is not welcomed into their discussions, and, indeed, is shunned by the freedom-loving mountain men.

Unlike the other field agents, Wei pays his buyers a salary, rather than a commission. He demands the loyalty and discipline of employees, refusing them the freewheeling independence of the other buyers. He buys matsutake for particular shipments, with particular characteristics, rather than buying for the pleasure and prowess of free competition, as the others do. He is already making inventory in the buying tents. His difference highlights the distinctiveness of the freedom assemblage as a patch. ✓ Like software patch?

As international matsutake commerce entered the twenty-first century, regularization was afoot in Japan. Prices there stabilized as supply chains in many countries developed, as rankings of foreign matsutake congealed, and as perk-money in Japan diminished and the demand for matsutake became more specialized. The prices of Oregon matsutake in Japan became relatively stable—considering, of course, that matsutake is still a wild product with an irregular supply. However, this stability was not reflected in Oregon, where prices continued to roller-coaster, even if never returning to 1990s' highs. When I talked to Japanese importers about this discrepancy, they explained it as a matter of American "psychology." An importer who specialized in Oregon matsutake was thrilled to show me photographs from his visits and reminisce about his Wild West experiences in Oregon. White and Southeast Asian pickers and buyers, he explained, would not produce mushrooms without the excitement of what he called an "auction," and the more the price fluctuated, the better the buying. (In contrast, he said, Mexican pickers in Oregon were willing to accept a constant price, but the others dominated the trade.) His job was to facilitate American peculiarities; his company had a parallel specialist in Chinese matsutake, whose job was to accommodate Chinese quirks. By facilitating varied cultural economies, his

company could build its business through mushrooms from around the world.

It was this man's expectation of the necessity of cultural translation that first alerted me to the problem of salvage accumulation. In the 1970s, Americans expected the globalization of capital to mean the spread of U.S. business standards all over the world. In contrast, Japanese traders had become specialists in building international supply chains and using them as mechanisms of translation to bring goods into Japan without Japanese production facilities or employment standards. As long as these goods could be made into legible inventory in their transit to Japan, Japanese traders could use them to accumulate capital. By the end of the century, Japanese economic power had slipped, and twentieth-century Japanese business innovations were eclipsed by neoliberal reforms. But no one cares to reform the matsutake commodity chain; it is too small and too "Japanese." Here is a place, then, to look for the Japanese trading strategies that rocked the world. At their center is translation between diverse economies. Traders as translators become masters of salvage accumulation.

Before taking on translation, however, I need to visit the freedom assemblage.

Freedom . . .