

ON GLOBALIZATION AND “LIVING IN RUINS”: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNA TSING

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The problem of climate change on the global level, and the rising ecological struggles in the local areas rendered the question of environment a primary one for the citizens in Turkey. With the unexpected weather conditions and water shortage in the urban areas, climate change became one of the most popular conversation topics in the everyday encounters. In addition to that, the struggles of citizens against the privatization of rivers for the sake of hydropower production, destruction of forests for powerplants, concretion of last green spaces in the urban areas made the ecological struggle a mundane practice of citizenship in Turkey. As the crowded, noisy cities with traffic become unsustainable as livable spaces, it is time to rethink the conditions of livability. Anna Tsing is an anthropologist who analyzes creative and destructive interactions between humans and nature. In her studies, Tsing analyzes the ways nature is constructed, represented and claimed by different actors in a critical manner. As a group in the Feminist Approaches collective, we read Tsing’s *Friction* where she analyzes the livelihoods in the rainforests of Indonesia. This interview is on the central concepts she used in her book. During the interview, we also talked about her last book on *matsutake*, a special mushroom and the recent program she started in Aarhus University, namely “Living in the Anthropocene: Discovering the Potential of Unintended Design on Anthropogenic Landscapes.” Tsing also shared her thoughts on the differences and similarities between feminist studies and studies on women with us. We hope our readers enjoy this conversation.

Frictionⁱ, which is also the name of your book, is a central concept of your study. You define friction as “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection” in the worldly encounter of universal and the particular. Could you tell us the story behind this concept?

I started working on that project at a time when people thought globalization was like a liquid that flooded over the world, changing everyone into the same thing. Scholars helped spread this popular idea. Globalization operated like an oil coating the world, dissolving everything as it flowed. Meanwhile, “big theory” discarded difference and heterogeneity. You could call this masculinist theory, theory in which difference doesn’t matter. The term friction responded to the liquid metaphor of this big theory, which was so popular at that time. In contrast, friction catches up the particular and the heterogeneous. The term friction here does not refer to “conflict” but rather to the heat and light that results when you rub together surfaces. Even a

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“universal” dream, that is, a dream understood to be universal by its advocates, spreads only as it takes hold in relation to particular issues. In the bookⁱⁱ, I tackle wealth, nature, and freedom as universal dreams; each gains traction through its engagement with particular situations. Global feminism would be another example. Global feminism is a dream with hopes for universality, but it only makes sense in relation to the struggles that matter to particular people. That’s what gives it the traction to make it seem interesting to people like you. Even the most universal dream has its particular instantiations; it comes to life through the friction of different histories coming together.

Here is one example from the research that led to the book *Friction*. I was really surprised by the fact that Indonesian “nature lovers” in the 1990s were eager participants in a celebration of nature sponsored by Marlboro cigarettes. Even environmental activists used it as a way of recruiting members for their cause. From the perspective of an American, their attendance seemed to me quite odd. So I followed the threads that led to that version of “nature loving.” I learned about the history of Marlboro and how it came to Indonesia at that time; it was very new in the spread of American consumer culture there. I also learned about the ways Indonesian youth were drawn to “nature loving,” including the circumstances that drew them to cosmopolitan consumer culture. By studying the particular histories that came together here, I could appreciate the “friction” in which nature loving as a conjunction of environmentalism and consumer culture was possible.

This story that globalization is like an oil spreading everywhere has little space for resistance as well. The concept of friction however seems to be more open to possibilities of resistance.

Indeed, friction helps us focus on what kinds of resistance might matter in a particular place. During the period of the research for this book, I saw a radical change in what kinds of acts were possible against state power, for example. When I first came to do my research, the Indonesian regime called the New Orderⁱⁱⁱ was in power. One of its effects was to make us all imagine that the apparatus of state power could never change. Everyday acts of refusal were possible, but it hardly seemed possible to change anything structurally. Even the idea of “politics” was contaminated. In the 1980s, the word *politik*, from the English “politics,” meant conspiracy. *Politik* was whispered in corners; it was all secrets and lies. Then suddenly in the 1990s, this sense of political immobility began to change. I remember when I first saw students wearing tee-shirts on which was written, “I am not afraid of politics.” Everyone began to talk about what was possible, including changing the government, not just the personnel, but also the very form of

government itself. It was a very exciting time, and all kinds of alternative politics came into existence—changing the political atmosphere not only with the fall of the New Order in 1998 but for at least a decade beyond.

The concept of friction points us to conjunctions in which what counts changes. We think we know what politics is—and then it changes.

When you analyze a situation in the book you provide various perspectives simultaneously. This is also related to your research methodology as a multi-sited ethnography. Can you elaborate more on your reasons for choosing a multi-sited approach?

One of the amazing freedoms of anthropology, compared to other disciplines, is that we are allowed to do some unfocused research before we are quite sure what we are studying. That way, we come into our research objects, and even our methods, during the study. As an ethnographer I am particularly dedicated to what you might call “bumbling around,” trying to figure out what it is that people are trying to tell me that is important. The research object gets formulated within the research experience; that’s the key to the method. It isn’t a question of studying one site or ten sites as much as trying to work with the people that you are studying to figure out what it is that you are studying. As I do research, people say some strange things to me and I think, “What are they talking about?”. It is in that process that one figures out the research object and the method to learn about it.

Here is how I came to *Friction*. I had wanted to study the making of landscapes. I had been impressed during my earlier fieldwork in the Meratus Mountains at the deep knowledge of landscape history of people in this area. They were teaching me to look at “nature” in a completely different way than I was used to. They showed me community histories, histories of people, that were also histories of vegetation; people and vegetation made history together. I started my study thinking about this. But the first thing I ran into is people wanting to talk to me about logging companies and the felling of the forest. Corporate deforestation had changed the landscape completely. I came in wanting to study landscape knowledge, and they said, “This landscape is disappearing.” I thought, “Ok, they are right; this is the really important thing. What is it I would need to know to understand this deforestation?”. You can’t study corporate deforestation in just one place. Corporate deforestation is initiated in global centers and operated from regional nodes even as it shapes the places where the trees are. I needed many kinds of knowledge to tell this story.

The chapter that is really the genesis of the book is the last one. People kept telling me about an important event that had happened some years before. As they described it, I realized that I had heard about it before—but entirely differently. The event gathered Indonesian national activists, regional activists, and residents of the forest. By chance, I knew people in each of these groups, and they each had told me about this same event. They were all talking about the same event—yet I barely recognized it. This discrepancy, and its importance for thinking with “friction,” inspired the organization of the book. The book grew around it like a seed germinating and turning into a plant.

In my first book, *In The Realm of the Diamond Queen*, I asked how influences from the world, the nation, and the region shaped a small place in the Meratus Mountains. At that time, the idea that local cultures were also involved in global discussions was new. Soon, it became accepted. Yet the idea that global centers were also locally particular was still anathema. In *Friction*, I tried to turn that around to ask how the global is always particularistic. It isn't that I wanted to compare site A and site B, which is sometimes what people mean by multi-sited. Instead, I offered an “ethnography of global connection,” showing the particularity of all things global. The multisitedness emerged out a study of things that counted as global, such as corporate deforestation. Rather than starting with sites and saying, “How we can build something bigger?”, I asked, “What is this thing that they are talking about when they say ‘freedom’ or ‘wealth’ or ‘nature’?” What you need to know about those things happens in particular encounters. Sites congeal out of moments of friction, as formerly separate trajectories overlap and coalesce into something new.

Your study avoids romanticizing the forest dwellers. It depicts their lives in their ordinariness. It also mentions how they contribute to destroying their own livelihoods. In most of the critical work however scholars tend to narrate local people as resisting, revolutionary subjects. When you think of both approaches what are the limits and possibilities of each do you think?

I think that there are dangers on both sides. There are scholars who romanticize too much, and there are also scholars who are so afraid to romanticize that they cannot engage with what is happening. Since you asked about romanticizing, let me start there. The problem arises when outsiders want the people they discuss to fulfill a goal of the outsiders so badly that those outsiders cannot properly describe what is going on. In one famous case, activists wanted local people to embody the spirit of the land. They wanted them to be exemplars of sustainable living through small-scale farming. But in fact these people were wage laborers. Advocacy could not

make headway with the problems of wage labor as long as it could not even admit this form of livelihood.

There has been a lot of criticism in anthropology of romanticizing, and not enough criticism of fear of romanticizing, so let me turn to that. Many anthropologists are so afraid of being called romantics that they also cannot describe the local situation. Instead, they turn to discussions of knowledge in and for itself; that way, they do not have to deal with the dilemmas of local people at all. What we get is a very brilliant form of scholarship that has little purchase with the world. This seems a sad retreat.

When working with indigenous communities, it seems key to me to work as well as possible with spokespeople for whatever mobilizations are going on. I don't want to make a career out of saying that people's representations of themselves are wrong. There was a while in anthropology when scholars were so afraid of stereotypes that they made it sound like everybody just invented all of their own ideas about culture all the time. Indigenous spokespeople felt really offended that anthropologists were spending all their time debunking them. There is a more collaborative way to work.

Let me focus on the environment for a minute. Anthropologists are accused of romanticism if they point out that traditional ways people deal with other living beings are more sustainable than multinational capitalism. But it is often a useful reading of the situation, and I think we should not be so afraid of being called names that we neglect to speak out about that. Many scholars criticize such statements as "romantic." They show us lack of consensus on environmental issues. To admit that the world is in trouble, to them, is just another "apocalyptic" pronouncement. But we all use tropes—and sometimes it's worthwhile to explore worn tropes to get at something important about the world. That's what we call politics.

Another central concept in your work is frontier. You take frontier as a process that creates objects and subjects. Can you tell us more about this concept?

I like how you put it: the frontier makes objects and subjects. The frontier is a place of capitalism gone wild. Capitalism and violence go together to turn living landscapes into private assets. State, land grabs and wars facilitate the frontier. But even before state governance practices arrive, the subjects the frontier makes advance the project of state power and turn the land into property. In this transformation, both assets and ruins emerge. The frontier's objects and subjects are shaped within this process of ruination.

In *Friction* I was fascinated by frontiers—those spreading patches of ruination that change both humans and nonhumans across the land. I was fascinated—but also deeply discouraged. When it was time to come up with a new research project, I was hoping for something that could bring me into new life as well as ruins. I began to ask about “living in ruins”: What emerges from those resource frontiers? The dilemma that we have today is that frontier-making has engulfed more and more of the world. Privatization and the mining of assets spread to the most remote corners, leaving ruins. We don’t know what can live in these ruins. On the space of abandoned resource grabs, we find strange juxtapositions of old and new materials. We find all kinds of crazy, unexpected interactions going on. This seemed to me the beginning of an ethnographic set of questions.

For the last decade then, I have been doing research on “living in ruins.” I’ve focused on a particular wild mushroom that grows in disturbed landscapes without rich nutrition for plants. As frontiers spread, nutrient-poor forests such as these may be the result of human activities—as well as what grows back despite them. Because this “living-in-ruins” mushroom has a high value as a gourmet food in Japan, all kinds of people have gone into the woods across the northern hemisphere to search for this mushroom, to sell it to commercial buyers who export to Japan. Many of these people are displaced and disenfranchised minority groups—themselves survivors of the process of making frontiers. I have a new book coming out in 2015 with Princeton University Press entitled *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

The new book continues my concern with frontier making as an ecological, cultural, and political-economic process. One site for the research is a former industrial forest in the northwest United States. In the stunted forest left by logging, this valuable wild mushroom grows. Refugees from Cambodia and Laos, mostly those living in California, come to this area to pick the mushrooms during the autumn months. These are people displaced by wars and unable to find what we used to think of as “standard employment.” But in a world of ruins, work at the periphery of the capitalist system becomes exemplary. Many people live in ruins and must find a living scavenging from the remains. So too with other life forms. Human and not human, we are living in the remains of frontier violence. Our best way to know this dilemma, I would argue, is to pay attention to the friction in which new possibilities, as well as terrors, are produced from these ruins.

The mushroom I have been studying is also exported from Turkey, and perhaps you've heard of it. In the United States, we follow the Japanese name: *matsutake*. Turkey is an important export site for this mushroom, which grows in Turkey's cedar forests.

It may be useful to think of my approach to frontiers, and living in ruins, as an outgrowth of feminist analyses of capitalism. Feminists have argued for the importance of diversity both *inside* capitalism and at its borders. We have shown that class formation depends on differences of gender, race, and nationality. These kinds of differences shape strategies of accumulation at the top as well as resistance at the bottom. Where classic political economy imagined just one kind of workers and one kind of capitalists, we have shown that such models require highly parochial expectations about white masculinity—which are built into the system only within a constitutive array of differences. Thinking from these differences allows a better understanding of capitalism.

My analysis of ecology is also indebted to feminist theory, in this case through feminist science studies. Here it is not the importance of difference and diversity in itself—something already strong in classical ecology—that forms the intervention. Feminist scholars have shown how encounters across difference create subjects and objects—among scientists as well as in ordinary life. My study of lively landscapes looks at the emergence of new assemblages in capitalist ruins. Trees are able to grow in the poor soils of the forests I studied because fungi, such as *matsutake*, were helping them. Fungi can dissolve rocks and sand, making their nutrients accessible for plants. So the whole gathering of plants and animals, including humans, emerges from the cross-species interactions that create the landscape as a scene of livability, however challenged. Plants, fungi, and human and nonhuman animals are participants in making such scenes, and as with human histories, the “friction” that brings their historical trajectories together matters.

Too often, when scholars study frontiers, whether in praise or criticism, they do not consider the question of livability at all. A frontier is a place for grabbing assets. Frontier denizens do not think about what they are leaving behind; they are attuned only to the next frontier, with its possibilities for enrichment. When the entrepreneurs leave, the ruins must sort themselves out as best they can. If we want to ask about livability, we have to consider what forms of interspecies alliances we can build to create worlds. We need all those plants, animals, and fungi to be part of it. It is not just because we eat them, although we need something to eat too. But the fungi are producing the nutrients that allow the plants to grow, and the plants are producing the nutrients that allow the animals to grow: these processes are wrapped up with each other in any

lively landscapes. This is what we see when we turn from the frontier as a space of violence to see what still lives there.

We wonder about the extent we can broaden the concept of frontier. During our discussions we occasionally came up with this question that if the frontier can be somewhere in the middle of the city or a village that we use for vacation. Is the wildness an essential part of the concept?

I don't know how far we can go. With any analytic tool, you use it when you are trying to see something from a particular angle. So it is not like we should create some boxes and say, "This box is a frontier and this box is not a frontier." Instead we might start with what we are looking for when we say "frontier." One of the uses of the term is for occasions when the state not working in the way that we expect. The state tells us that it represents law and order—and even proper governance according to the people's will. That's the state's own view of itself. But often we see other realities, for example, where companies create giant garbage heaps, pollute the rivers, release radioactivity—whether on purpose or because they create such cheap facilities that pollution leaks out of them. We then say, "Wait, why is this happening?", because we learned in elementary school that the state was protecting us. That's one place where, the concept of the frontier is useful. It allows us to see that the gap between our expectations of regulation and what actually happens on the ground. Wherever we experience that kind of a gap we might think with the category of the frontier.

I'm also stimulated by thinking through your example of villages as vacation spots for urban people. Frontier, as a concept, helps us see where life worlds become private assets. In the new book, I extend the concept of "alienation" to include living beings other than humans. Alienation removes living beings from the life worlds that sustain them. For humans and nonhumans, alienation is essential to capitalist discipline. When you plant a plantation, you only have one crop. All that crop's usual companion species are gone. To simplify a landscape through alienation is a way to force it to produce for capitalist schedules. For example, when American farmers sterilize the soil to kill all the soil bacteria, nematodes, and fungi, they create an artificial world for their crops in which the crop is asked to live alone. At least for a while, sometimes fantastic growth schedules result. But it also creates risky effects as plants without companion species are asked to navigate all the dangers of the world. In a vacation spot, it might be interesting to ask to what extent livable collaborations have been removed to facilitate tourism. To that extent, to me, the vacation spot might qualify as a frontier.

Can you tell us about your current research?

I am currently co-directing a program at Aarhus University in Denmark, which we call Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene, or AURA. The Anthropocene is a term proposed by geologists to refer to a time in which human disturbance outpaces other forms of disturbance in shaping the surface of the earth. It is hard to find any place on earth unaffected by human activities. Our project argues that this is a time to work between natural science, social sciences, humanities, and arts to understand what it means to live on a human-disturbed earth. We try to make new forms of collaboration possible across these disciplinary lines both by talking together in various fora and also by engaging in fieldwork together.

Our object of study is anthropogenic landscapes, that is, landscapes shaped in part by human disturbance. We begin with the insight that humans never succeed in having their own way fully in shaping a landscape. All human projects are at the mercy of the projects of other organisms. We would not have the landscapes we know at all without plants and animals as well as fungi and bacteria. Our research watches the coordinations and interruptions across human and nonhuman projects. We are interested in “unintended design,” that is, the emergent result of multispecies projects of landscape making, as these may block or enable each other. In the process, we hope to develop new forms of attention that move beyond the enclosures of our disciplinary training.

The project is an extension of the “living in ruins” idea, which in turn extends the question of the frontier explored in *Friction*. And while it is not a project mainly about women, I do feel that this is a feminist project.

It sounds like there is a lot of biology in it.

Yes, there is a lot. I am asking readers, even those who are not themselves acquainted with any biology, to see plants, animals and fungi as part of making history together with us. You saw this spirit in *Friction* where I argued that history emerges from unpredictable conjunctures. In this book, I am trying to bring the plants and the fungi in as creating these histories that are also part of human history. We can't do human history without paying attention to nonhuman collaborators. To make this point I am forced to challenge the reading habits of my readers. It is not a technical book, but I want readers to expand their notion of what goes into making livable worlds.

Can we also say that this is about pushing the boundaries of social science?

That's completely correct. When we stop to think about it, the term "social science" is confusing. It makes us assume that "social" means human: only humans are social. Yet of course plants and animals are social also. They have lots of interactions with others; they can't live by themselves. If we thought about the social world broadly we would be including other beings. And indeed one goal in the new book is to argue that the kind of split we have lived with between the social sciences and natural sciences has hurt us. If we are interested in the livability in the world, particularly given the reorganization of landscapes for capital, we're going to have to pay attention on both sides. The modernist agenda took it for granted that humans could live alone and everything else could be put in a pot as a resource for us. The more we get to know ourselves the more we appreciate the problems with that idea. Perhaps you have heard that in our own bodies there are more bacteria than human cells. Ninety percent of our cells are bacteria, and we can't live without them. We can't digest any food without their help; we would not develop an immune system. So even without getting out of our own skins we have to get used to the fact that we're living with other species. Now we are beginning to let that enter our ideas of the social, and of the historical, and of the cultural. Other organisms are our collaborators, for better or for worse.

It is very difficult as a writer to know how to bring readers along. How do we tell stories in which humans aren't the only heroes? We are not used to such stories. To appreciate more-than-human histories, we have to stretch ourselves to learn how to read and tell stories in which there are all kinds of protagonists—not only humans.

Finally, shall we also talk about your approach to feminism as an anthropologist? Your current work as well as your previous work doesn't necessarily concentrate on women's lives per se but we can say that gender is always central to your analysis. What is a feminist work for you?

For feminists, difference and diversity are not something to be swept away in making an analysis, for the goal of making a clean structure. For a feminist analysis, as I see it, difference and diversity are part of the analysis. They have a constitutive role in making things work. Whether this involves women or not, all those kinds of entanglements across difference are part of a feminist analysis.

ⁱ Tsing uses the term to refer to diverse and conflicting social interactions in the contemporary world. Like the wheel which turns as a response to its interaction with the road and like the heat which only emerges when there are two sticks globalization spreads only through its encounters in the local areas (Tsing, *Friction*, 5). Tsing uses these metaphors to focus on these interactions and encounters.

ⁱⁱ Tsing refers to *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*.

ⁱⁱⁱ The period which starts when Indonesia's Second President Suharto came to the power in 1966.