

# Trees

*Social Life in Capitalist Ruins, FS 2020 Adrian Demleitner*

The following essay treats the three books *Land's End* by Tania Li and *Friction* as well as *Mushroom at the End of the World* by Anna Tsing in regards to their usage and application of the concept of tree. From the view of actor-network-theory trees are abundant actants in all three works but its presence is rather unreflected. The tree as a thing is taken as a given. This essay has a closer look at how the two authors work with trees and how this aids them to create their respective stories. As such the text is not interested at delving into the concept of tree but in a comparative study of the term and concept tree within the three books.

What is *tree* in regards of these three anthropological works? How does the application of tree aid in the conveying of these three research projects? How are tree displayed in the stories? And last but not least, how does the integration of tree reflect upon the different approaches and values of the researcher?

Dr. Kim D. Coder asks “[h]ow can we define the living entity which generates values we find alluring, essential, and an integral part of our culture and quality of life?” (see Coder 2017). He explains, how the indo-european word for tree, “*deru*”, was used specifically for oaks and via Greek expanded into the later European languages, whereas other trees were often just seen as forests and not individual trees.

The definition of a tree is no longer linked to a specific tree, but rather outlines a basic architecture of a plant that can be recognized by non-technical people. This architecture or structure includes variables of mass, height and longevity. Furthermore, current investigations in bio-sciences can't outline a clear cut definition of tree neither in biology nor in genetics of plants (see Ehrenberg 2018).

Although or rather because of being one of our oldest and most important companion-species, trees are a given fact of our daily life, seldom really reflected. We know a tree when we see one, but we have a hard time pinning it down to a clear definition. This becomes evident when we ask if a palm is a tree.

In my approach to reflect on the use of the term I went through every single instance of the term tree in all three books. As I did not have access to machine-readable issues of the books, the collected data might not be complete. Judging from the amount of instances found I can assume, that the text-recognition processing worked quite well. The instance was then codified, with a bit of linguistic context, like the sentence or paragraph it is embedded. I followed the following set of categorization.

- Kim Coder's four roles of trees in society
  - generators of goods and services
  - trees as raw material for physical products
  - ecological controllers and modifiers of site resources
  - symbols and focal points of cultural and psychological models
- Expressions of the overall theme of the tree in its captured context, such as *tree as political*, *tree as precarity* or *tree as dispute*

- The type of tree as well as its descriptors

The codified data then helped see commonalities and differences of and between the book as well as the linguistic strategies used to express the content of the research project and the stories thus presented.

To round up this introduction, it is important to quickly summarize what the respective authors tried to achieve in their books. This will help us to anchor their usage of tree within the larger stories presented.

## **Friction – Anna Tsing**

This book describes the cultural processes in which certain kinds of predatory business practices, on the one hand, and local empowerment struggles, on the other, came to characterize the rain-forests of Indonesia. (Tsing 2015, ix)

The book is a clear cut critique of capitalist practices and their impact on the lives and cultures of indigenous communities, quite often with a moral undertone. Her usage of “the rain-forests of Indonesia” as a placeholder or metaphor of the people of Indonesia is an interesting bit, that expands throughout the book. She is particularly interested in an exploration of global connections and their interactions with the local. She introduces the concept of friction and sub-aspects of this as a means to think through these interactions.

## **Land’s End – Tania Li**

With this book, I would like to do some more specific, political work, by challenging policies that promote the intensification of capitalist relations as a recipe for poverty reduction, and social movement agendas that render people like Kasar invisible or unrecognizable because they fail to fit the “alternative-development” niche. (Li 2014, 4)

Land’s End is, quite similar to Friction, a critique on capitalism, but with a focus on politics as well as policies. Tania Li works on these through the lenses of the conjuncture, which is an “attention to processes of capital accumulation with an emphasis on emergence, contradiction, contestation, agency, and struggle”. Marxist theory is a cornerstone of her analysis of the problems at hand. In opposition to Friction, capitalism is not something that just happens to people but said people have also a say in these processes, although quite often not conscious of the consequences.

## **Mushroom at the End of the World – Anna Tsing**

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. (Tsing 2017, 2)

This book takes up the story of precarious livelihoods and precarious environments through tracking matsutake commerce and ecology. (Tsing 2017, 5)

While the first two books were similar in their aspirations and approaches, this book feels much

closer to the life of people in precare situations, while the critique and analysis of capitalism is more implicit. The author's approach is to analyze the global chain of matsutake mushroom trade, its interconnections and its multispecies aspects. That means there is also a focus on the relations between species and the implications on their lives as well as the method of analysis. Throughout the book there are notions of hope and hopelessness which make the book feel less like an anthropological work and more like a philosophical inquiry into a world in which the negative consequences of capitalism can't be stopped.

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Throughout the coding and extraction process, many different cases of the usage of tree came up. In the following I try to focus on the most prolific ones, those that stand exemplary for the three different books and are indicative of the stories presented.

## **Friction**

Friction deals by far with the largest variety of trees. The most common mentions of tree are fruit tree as well as honey tree and can be categorized as sustenance for the locals. Tsing often uses the local names of trees which aids in positioning the reader within the life-worlds that are described. Examples are the damar, alaran or dandali trees. The amount of different trees help populating the book as lively but make it messier and thus harder to concentrate on whats before one's eyes.

The strongest application of tree is in the linguistic differentiation how trees are painted either in the context of the indigenous usage or the extractive processes. Natives use tree as harmonious sustenance while extractive business use trees as capitalistic raw material. The two sides are often painted in utopian and harmonious language on one hand and dystopian on the other.

House posts resprouted into trees. Forest trees grew back from old swiddens. Fruits and rattans were planted in the growing forest. Forest giants were cleaned and claimed for their potential for attracting honeybees. People read the landscape for its social as well as its natural stories. (Tsing 2015, xi)

On one side, endless rows of silent symmetry, biopower applied to trees; on the other side, wild loggers, miners and villagers in the raucous, sped-up time of looting. (Tsing 2015, 30)

Plans were set in motion to save the environment in the process of destroying it. Tree plantations were introduced to restore deforested and degraded land. Only then was the landscape deforested and degraded to make way for the restorative tree plantations. (Tsing 2015, 32)

This differentiation is continued in how trees are described and related to by the local communities compared to how extractive projects make them abstract, hiding them within statistics and maps. This opposites are used by Tsing to further her telling of how trees are essential to the indigenous people but have to be severed from human experience in order to

make them into resources.

Quite often, trees are described on their own terms and not in relationship to people or are explicitly positioned as non-human people. These two aspects lead to an understanding of trees in quasi active participants in the indigenous communities.

Collective harvests of fruits, honey, and starch, in contrast, gather friends and neighbors who may or may not be kin, and who come to the base of the tree following the tree claimants who announce the harvest. These trees, and the charismatic individuals who draw harvesters to their bases, become social as well as geographic focal points in group formation. (Tsing 2015, 257)

An interesting pattern that emerged throughout the book is the usage of tree as cognition, that is, tree as an aid in communication and memory holding. I will take this up again, towards the end of this text.

## Land's End

The trees in Land's End are very often directly linked to economic concepts like assets, cash, enterprise or investment through their linguistic application. The choice of trees included in the book is then also limited and much more focused. The most common trees are generally called crop trees as well as cacao, palm, clove and coconut. In fact, the usage of the concept of tree crops is excessively applied. As such, trees are usually labeled but not described in depth, except where necessary to explain an effect on economic issues like disease or drought.

The usage of tree is much more precise in Land's End and doesn't seem to need a concrete description. Tree is used most commonly as a placeholder for a resource in economic theory. As such, Tania Li talks quite often about the material conditions of trees such as age, sturdiness, permanence as well as the tree-landscape. These economical relations and terms are dominant.

It did not occur to him to ask who actually owned the coconut trees, who was positioned to capture the benefit from increased productivity, or who would lose out. I explained to him what I had learned about the area thus far: that over the decades, ownership of the coconut trees had become concentrated in the hands of very few families as the owners had sold their trees to pay for weddings and cover debts. The people in the tiny huts under the trees were squatting on the land and had no right to cultivate long-term crops. Even if the old coconut trees were replaced by more productive ones, the poor would not benefit, and they might even be evicted if the landowners decided to plant more trees to maximize their profits. (Li 2014, 37)

Trees relationship to people are then usually described in terms of property as in *to own trees*, and by extension the focus is on what stands in which socio-economical relation to whom. The starkest differentiation in how trees are described is how tree as farm and tree as plantation point to self-empowered sustenance respectively to being in dependence to landowners. Quite often this difference is also linked to social contracts that are replaced by economical contracts.

When highlanders planted the new tree crops on patches of the inherited ulat, they excluded their kin from future use. They understood tree-planting as a permanent claim of individual ownership and argued that it had always been so: that was why people who

borrowed ulat weren't permitted to plant tree crops, only annuals. (Li 2014, 89)

This local political processes are contrasted by few instances in which trees are active agents in colonial processes or issues of class in the Marxist sense. A good example where these two lines come together is in the example of the Canadian develop agent.

[...] the managers of the Canadian development project I mentioned in the introduction concluded that promoting tree crops would be a good way to introduce highlanders to modern agriculture. (Li 2014, 107)

Last but not least, we find again the concept of tree as aid in cognition, but in a slightly different way. Despite giving names to a few participants the book has a more descriptive, neutral feel to it, which is also gained by the neutral description of the non-human actants.

## **Mushroom at the End of the World**

*Mushroom at the End of the World* differs in its scope from the previous two books. It introduces the concept of multispecies within a post-apocalyptic framing. Trees as living entities are much more present than in the other two books. For example, diseases or the damage done by parasites are described first in terms of biology and the suffering of the tree, unlike *Land's End*, where this process is described in its economic effects or loss of sustenance. Another difference is the descriptions of structures or landscapes emerging from trees like the Japanese irrau or the arboreal forest which can be interpreted as socio-material basics of tree-life-worlds. This was already done partially in *Friction*, but in a much more messy way.

The biology of trees takes up more space compared to the other two books. This is important to explain the multispecies ties between mushroom and tree but also between tree and landscape. This would actually not be necessary for the books larger project. In doing so, Tsing helps to display tree as an active agent, to which we can relate better on a biological level.

This fruiting habit resembles what for trees is called "masting," in which trees allocate resources for fruiting only sporadically — but then, triggered by long term cycles and environmental cues, fruit massively and all together across an area. (Tsing 2017, 174)

Furthermore, mast fruiting occurs in trees with mycorrhizal partners; the storage and expenditure necessary for masting appears to be coordinated between trees and their fungi. Fungi store carbohydrates for the future fruiting of trees. (Tsing 2017, 174)

Furthermore, trees are much more commonly described in their relationships to other non-human species, which of course includes the matsutake mushroom. In these relationships they are often either a host to other species or in need of them. This space given to trees furthers the understanding of them as active participants in the anthropological research done.

Without maintenance of the irrigation system, the frog population declines. And so many insects have evolved just to live with peasant trees! Konara oak (*Quercus serrata*) has at least eighty-five specialist butterflies that depend on it as food. (Tsing 2017, 182)

All overall plantations are still drawn as something negative, but the utopian painting of nature, to be found in *Friction*, has vanished and is replaced by an understanding that all is already

changed by human hand. The language involved is less moral, as it was in *Friction*, and of a more hopeless tone.

The lines have blurred. A natural forest in northern Finland looks a lot like an industrial tree plantation. The trees have become a modern resource, e, and the way to manage a resource is to stop its autonomous historical action. As long as trees make history, they threaten industrial governance. Cleaning the forest is part of the work of stopping this history. But since when do trees make history? (Tsing 2017, 167)

Combing the data and reading through the notes, one has the feeling that *Mushroom at the End of the World* could leave out the human element and be still be a valid book on its own term. It would be a short book telling the story of trees and mushrooms leaning towards explaining the biological foundations of their existence.

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All three books have not worked with a clear definition of what they mean by tree. Although a certain understanding of the concept arises throughout the book, a better explanation could have added depth. What Tsing does implicitly, decentering the human story by putting importance on non-human actants, I deem important to do explicitly. Li, by treating the non-human component as an economic resource, also tells a true story, but one in which human capitalism seem to be the actor. Her research project showed the involvement and free will of the indigenous communities, as opposed to the stories of Tsing, in which the people of the land are victims to abstract global extractive entities. Tsing on other hand leveled the ontological hierarchy between human and non-human and showed, how we're not the sole creators of our realities. This comparison boils down to having Marxist eco-political theory in the center versus decentering the human in a multi-species project.

This said, there is a clear difference between how trees are passive material in Li's retelling and how trees become active participants in Tsing's books. This becomes especially clear, when looking at the details in describing trees on their own terms. That is in stark contrast to *Land's End*. Humans are often painted in close relationships to trees and forest and how they enable different live worlds and cultures not just economic relationships.

To end this essay I want to return again to this one difference that, at least for me personally, exemplifies the stories told.

An important concept that crystallizes itself throughout the book is tree as extensions of cognition. This means, that trees are essential in keeping memory in place as well as function as hubs of social networks. I codified quite a few instances in Li's as well as Tsing's work as tree-as-cognition and tree-as-media, that is, tree's are used as externalized memory holders. In Li's work, this is mainly done through tree-as-media.

They hadn't cleared the do'at, but they had felled some trees in the middle and around the edges, clear signs of their intention. (Li 2014, 105)

Many people, not just Banio's group, had put their signs or initials on the trees and rocks,

staking out their claims. (Li 2014, 105)

Trees are used as the medium, onto which the people inscribe themselves. Trees are less active participants in social networks but passive recipients of messages that negotiate social and economical relations.

Tsing on the other hand leans more on the tree-as-cognition side, where trees become active participants in communities as quasi-people.

The forest is full of the markings of past communities, and these are also potential communities. An island of fruit trees in the forest marks a past swidden duster. (Tsing 2015, 198)

Many big trees also have names, that is, not only names for the kind of tree but also individual, personal names. Hillsides are commonly referred to in relation to the name of a big tree (Tsing 2015, 200)

This more personal connection becomes also evident in the authors use of tree in political struggles. Tsing makes much more intimate connection between individuals and trees, whereas Li relies on trees as socio-economic interlocutors.

The woman telling the story drives the message home. “When they came to cut down the forest,” she says, “the women came out and hugged the trees.” She reaches her arms out, miming the hugging of trees, and the other woman activist joins her, showing people how the women hugged the trees. (Tsing 2015, 230)

It wasn't the loss of the commons that provoked debate, it was the question of who exactly was entitled to plant trees where. (Li 2014, s.90)

All overall, the usage of tree is consistent with the goals of the books. Whereas Li stays true to Marxist-economic theory and proper categorization of the actants, Tsing is knee-deep into her multi-species project. It is still a very young and not very well formed theory at the time of her writing, but implicitly told in her story as well as the usage of the concept of tree. Writing about and with trees from an economic perspective always makes them a passive resource and writing about trees as non-human people makes it much harder to write about socio-economic relations.

To end with Kim Coder's categories we can say that Tania Li sees trees as *generators of goods and services* and *raw material for physical products*, while Anna Tsing is on the side of *ecological controllers and modifiers of site resources* and *symbols and focal points of cultural and psychological models*.

The initial questions can be seen as obvious. Nonetheless I deem it important that the terms and actants that are so ubiquitous in anthropological research need to be reflected upon. Especially if we work and write with terms and concepts that are ingrained into our daily habits. I want to end this text with one of my favorite quotes from a comrade of Anna Tsing.

“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; **it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with**; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.” - Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

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