INTERVIEW WITH ANNA TSING

Professor Anna Tsing visited Finland in October 2015 to deliver the keynote lecture of the biennial conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society which had the theme, 'Landscapes, Sociality, and Materiality'. She is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Santa Cruz, California, and the Nils Bohr Professor at Aarhus University, Denmark, where she leads the 'Living in the Anthropocene' research project. She is the author of such books as *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1993), *Friction* (2004), and *Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015).

In connection with the conference and her lecture entitled 'The Buck, the Bull, and the Dream of the Stag: Some unexpected weeds of the Anthropocene', Professor Tsing granted the following interview, discussing her own research career, ethnographic writing, multispecies research, and the Anthropocene. The interview was conducted by Maija Lassila.

Maija Lassila (ML): Going back to the beginning stages of your career, you first travelled to Meratus Mountains in 1979; your book, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*, was the result of that period. In that you present powerful descriptions of individuals—like the Meratus woman, Uma Adang—who act in the margins, on the peripheries of state rule, and create their own answers to state and bureaucratic authority. How would you describe the influence of these profound early meetings and friendships on the later development of your thought and research career later—in your need to write *Friction*, for example?

Anna Tsing (AT): In hindsight, I was lucky. I was able to conduct almost two years of intensive fieldwork. Now very few doctoral students are willing to take that much time or able to find funding for it. Long fieldwork really helps: there is time to improve one's language skills, even if you are not a quick language learner, as I am not. There is time to get to know people and watch plans both come into being and come undone. There is time to become a different person—a person who knows how to work with local categories as well as one's initial ones.

The experience of fieldwork, while full of disappointments and terrors as well as intense pleasures, left me with a clear appreciation of this method for anthropology. Students often come to me hungry to produce theory before they have done fieldwork. I do my best to encourage them to instead make theory emerge from their fieldwork insights.

As for hints of *Friction*—the importance of contingencies and conjunctures in steering new directions was already there in my thinking. Sometimes I tell my own trajectory as a story of contingencies. I wanted to do research in China to get to know my relatives, but, thwarted, I ended up in Indonesia, still longing to meet imagined relatives. Surely this influenced my interest in individual encounters. Surely it influenced my attention to far-reaching and fragmented worlds, rather than coherent systems. My interest in marginality grew out of an articulation between Meratus concerns and my own life experience.

When I came back from the field, anthropology was in an exciting moment. There

was a whole new emphasis on experimental kinds of work as well as openings to write in a different way. The charge had been made that ethnography was boring. We changed ethnographic writing by bringing more of our experiences into it. In the process, we developed reflexive styles that allowed anthropologists to consider how materials and methods are made together. This might be considered a form of what feminist scholars have called 'strong objectivity', that is, empiricism in which the situated knowledge produced by our methods is right up front.

ML: You have a very fascinating way of writing that must have influenced many anthropologists over the years, and young anthropologists now are inspired by your way of writing. Do you think that anthropologists were more afraid to bring these personal perspectives to their writing in the past?

AT: Writing in anthropology keeps changing. In the United States in the first part of the 20th century, there was a big flowering of humanistic anthropology, with anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir writing poetry and other creative genres, and combining them with anthropology. Then, in the middle of the 20th century—partly because of WWII and its aftermath—that kind of anthropological play disappeared. Anthropologists turned to structural descriptions of society as well as questions of development. Theory became more explicit as new approaches competed. Politics entered the field more directly by the 1960s. By the time I entered graduate school, the earlier interest in writing had dried up. (Of course, there were important exceptions.)

When I read histories of anthropology in the 20th century, one of the things that impresses me is just how few professional anthropologists there were, compared to today. Today, there are so many anthropologists, and perhaps it is not surprising that there are many ways of doing anthropology. On the one hand, there are ethnographers who refuse reflexivity. There are experiments in theory, too, that shun ethnographic writing altogether. On the other hand, experiments from art-and-science to poetry-and-anthropology also flourish.

My own favorite ethnographers take their writing really seriously—and I hope their works provide inspiration for younger scholars. Ethnographic writing formed a component of an undergraduate course I taught last term. Among other things, I taught Svetlana Alexievich's amazing *Chernobyl Prayer*, Renato Rosaldo's moving *The Day of Shelly's Death*, Jean Brigg's classic *Never in Anger*, and Zora Neale Hurston's autobiographical *Dust Tracks on a Road*. These are just some of the many books that inspire my own writing.

ML: In terms of the environmental focus, were you already thinking of the environmental themes that come up in *Friction* back in the 1980s and when writing *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*? How did you end up writing *Friction*?

AT: It was the fieldwork that brought me to the environment. The plants and animals around me impressed me in a whole new way. I had been raised in cities, and I had never lived entirely off the land. The first time I went to gather firewood in the Meratus Mountains, I came back with all the wrong kinds of wood. Everyone laughed—and they taught me how different woods burn, some slow and steady, some bright and fast, some never moving beyond a smolder. I learned the difference between noxious and useful

weeds, the places to find delicious snails and insect larvae, and many other skills for living as one participant in a teeming tropical forest.

There were also new ways to see forests. I had thought of forests as wild places, but I learned to see their anthropogenic becoming, as shifting cultivation continually created new secondary forest, which grew up in increasingly mature patches. Meratus would look out over a hillside and see those patches of regrowth and remember biographical and community events in relation to the dynamics of succession. This was forest with human as well as nonhuman history.

And then, part way through my first fieldwork years, I became aware of the effects of industrial logging, which had just hit the Meratus area. One day the mountain stream beside our house overflowed its banks with surging red water while hurling battering-ram-like tree trunks that smashed everything in their paths. The logging area was far upstream, beyond the area we knew well. But when it sent its angry waters at us, I knew things would not stay the same. Before long, many communities in the region were engulfed in logging disputes and consequences.

I went home eager to pursue enough environmental studies to come back prepared. Still, I first thought I could limit my new fieldwork to the amazing ways Meratus forest-and-village landscapes were brought into being. When I came back for more fieldwork, however, the logging issues had only intensified. I couldn't do a forest-and-village study; the logging problem seized my Meratus friends—and me. I found myself investigating at many different scales, as logging requires. The fieldwork that became *Friction* got re-designed over and over again in relation to what was happening. A misinformed person has written on the Wikipedia page that purports to describe my work that *Friction* is not based on serious fieldwork. (Kind reader, please change this.) But the repeated stays that led to *Friction* were fieldwork in the strong sense. My research object came into being through fieldwork.

ML: In *Friction* you describe the immense forest destruction in South Kalimantan by logging companies in the mid-1990s. Both in your descriptions of frontiers and how different people meet and encounter each other in those frontiers, there is a messiness and an awkwardness present. How and why did you begin to focus on messiness, awkwardness, marginality, and frontiers in your research?

AT: Frontiers were the program the Indonesian state and multinational capital imposed on Kalimantan—and that program was intended to be messy. It might be described as a program to make earlier forms of ecological and social coordination impossible, to take away place names and characteristics, to replace forests and fields with mud. The point was to grab resources—to amass wealth through complete disregard for the livability, human and not human, of the places from which wealth was stolen.

I would contrast that imposed messiness with the everyday awkwardness and excess of all social relations. Attention to that everyday excess is also important in my analysis of 'friction'. I started on that theme in *Diamond Queen* when I was thinking about the role of the state in Meratus communities. Rather than contrasting two kinds of social orders ('state' and 'non-state'), I followed how Meratus leaders made use of a self-consciously marginal position within the nation to build their constituencies. This was excess to state logics rather than a segregated alternative.

ML: Do you think that messiness is present in all social interaction?

AT: Messiness is important to understand both the imposition of orderly disorder, as in Kalimantan frontiers, and the ways ordinary people navigate power, as in the example of Meratus leaders aping (and thus messing with) state rhetoric. Perhaps one way to understand it is through the work of translation. Translation can be a technology of colonial rule; it can impose power—as, for example, in enforcing religious conversion. At the same time, translation can create room for maneuver as new meanings and materials are brought into hegemonic formations. Both these aspects are possible because of the ways that translation betrays the original, making room for extra stuff. And translation is a regular part of all our lives, brought into play every time we act on our relations with others. It's also what makes 'friction' possible. Messiness gets inside articulations, which work through their equivocations. New identities and trajectories are formed in the process, for better or worse.

In the mushroom book, I've argued that capitalism too is messy. This seems to have sowed confusion among readers, some of whom see this as a condemnation of capitalism and others as an endorsement. Actually, the acknowledgement of messiness is neither. My horror comes from elsewhere: from the callous amassment of wealth by elites and the concomitant destruction of life worlds. Messiness is just how it works—not as an extra, an ornament, but rather as a central principle of the articulation process through which non-capitalist value forms are translated and tapped for capitalism.

ML: In your latest projects on multispecies worlds, and in the Matsutake Worlds Research Group, you have focused on *more-than-human landscapes*, on landscapes and the world made of multi-species connections and histories, of *human nature as an interspecies relationship*. What drove you to this multi-species research? In your research in South Kalimantan, were you already thinking of the landscape that was described to you there as a multi-species place?

AT: Perhaps this is a good time to admit that the matsutake project began for me as commodity chain research and only later enlarged into a project that was also on interspecies relations. Of course, I was intrigued by the relations of the mushroom itself from the first. But following around pickers, mycologists, and forest managers threw me into the lives of fungi and trees with a force I had not first imagined. Mushrooms turn out to be charismatic! Getting to know them carried me along into the worlds they have been making. Meanwhile, the public sphere around me—in and out of the academy—was being transformed by the force of concerns about environmental degradation. As with all my research, the matsutake project changed in relation to my interlocutors.

I see this transformation in the work of many anthropologists today. Researchers who were recently writing about political economy, witchcraft, ethnicity, religion, or the state are suddenly rethinking these topics through interspecies relations. I'm hoping this is not just an attempt to jump on a trend but rather a realization that life on earth is changing. As I see it, livability as we have known it has been threatened, and all kinds of human—and more-than-human—endeavors will experience the

consequences. Of course, other anthropologists are arguing that multispecies anthropology is a distraction from serious critical inquiry. But I think these critics are not paying attention to changes in what we all will have to do to stay alive, as well as changes in the academy.

ML: Yes, it seems that multispecies research has really started to flourish in recent times, and also in all the multidisciplinary projects that are going on.

AT: Exciting new things are happening across many disciplines. For example, in the natural sciences, the new biology called 'eco-evo-devo' (ecological, evolutionary, developmental) has sparked attention to interspecies relations. Biologists have noticed that organisms cannot develop, that is, cannot become 'themselves', without other species. Biologists in this field have become important collaborators for anthropologists; we too like to think 'in relation'. There are also the beginnings of a new critical landscape ecology in which ecologists and anthropologists have much to say to each other. As landscapes are threatened by the ever-expanding wrecking ball of industrial civilization, it's really important to think across humanities-sciences lines. One aspect of the excitement now is that it is coming from many disciplines. And also, from the arts; artists have been a key part of making interdisciplinary conversation happen.

'Anthropocene' is a word that has sparked interdisciplinary conversation. As many critics have pointed out, there are flaws in how Anthropocene gets conceptualized. But they might agree that it has incited a rather extraordinary multidisciplinary conversation. Artists were the first outside of the natural sciences to bring the idea of the Anthropocene to public attention; artists helped draw in social scientists and humanists. For example, the HKW in Berlin[1] has been sponsoring big conferences that bring together professionals as varied as geochemists, anthropologists, and artists. Their work has been influential in encouraging multidisciplinary conversations.

ML: And even if these different disciplines do not have so much in common with each other, and the interactions are messy, maybe it still leads to something?

AT: I think so. I think it is still being explored. The example I gave in the conference, during the questions after my talk, was about an article by geographers in the journal *Nature*.[2] What was cool about the article was that it combined discussion of global CO2 levels, on the one hand, and world systems theory, on the other. It mixed up conventions from the natural and social sciences. The Anthropocene discussion is requiring natural scientists to read what historians and social scientists are writing, and vice versa. That's new and exciting.

ML: Do you think that the concept of the Anthropocene and the research around it will have some profound impact on how science and different disciplines develop and are organized?

AT: It could. I fear that when anthropologists get wind of a 'hot' topic, they write a whole flurry of superficial articles on it. Then, of course, people get bored with it quickly. It won't make any difference at all, because everyone will just be waiting for the next round of fashion. This has already begun to happen, and the chances are very good that it will finish the discussion. But one can hold out a small hope that the impact could be more profound. Considering the topics that were present in the conference here, such as landscape, materiality and sociality,

discussion of the Anthropocene could make an interesting difference in how we understand the materials that we are writing about, human and not-human.

ML: And now when the sixth wave of extinction, climate change, and the whole environmental crisis touch every corner of the planet, it is something of a new period. Do you think that the environmental situation will affect our thinking at this time?

AT: There is indeed is a big set of challenges ahead for anthropologists. I agree that planetary problems are absolutely acute right now. But anthropologists might figure out a way that we can talk about them that doesn't obscure global inequalities and heterogeneities, as often happens when other disciplines talk about planetary problems. What can disappear are the kinds of things that anthropologists know about, such as the history of colonialism, of race, of religion, of class, of the state. We have worked on these problems. I think there's a huge challenge for anthropologists to address the Anthropocene in a way that brings those kinds of issues back into the story that's being told about planetary issues. We'll know more about planetary problems if we address them through anthropological approaches.

ML: And is the challenge in the larger discussion the way that Anthropocene is so much derived from the natural sciences?

AT: Geologists began the discussion of the Anthropocene, and geology has some special commitments to a planetary scale that would not apply to all of the natural sciences. Geology came into existence as a science through an embrace of universal planetary time. So when geologists introduced Anthropocene they wanted to have one moment where the Anthropocene started everywhere in the world and one set of planetary processes to explain it. On the one hand, this has gotten everybody to discuss it. On the other hand, it erases the differences from one place to another such as the different kinds of temporalities that were involved. It is up to anthropologists to bring heterogeneity back into the story.

ML: The Aarhus University Research program on the Anthropocene that you are leading takes into account the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts alike. How has this project been developing over the last couple of years? What kinds of collaborations and outcomes have you had?

AT: We've imagined a chance for natural scientists, artists, and social scientists to work together. Anthropology and biology have been at the heart of the project although we've also had philosophy, history, geology, and some other participants. We're looking at a new way to inspire collaboration, through common commitments to field-based observation—and curiosity about the world. In the 20th century, there were some really useless collaborations between the social and natural sciences, and we are trying to avoid their mistakes. Too often, social scientists were asked to reduce their questions to those uninteresting ones that could be accurately measured. The whole spirit of social inquiry disappeared. In contrast, some recent collaborations coming out of the humanities have asked scientists to focus only on their philosophies. That starting point risks having scientists neglect everything they find interesting. Our stimulus for collaboration is different than each of these. We aim for overlapping and intertwined questions about the world in which the prowess of both humanities

and science disciplinary training allows better description.

An example of this can be seen in our project fieldsite in central Jutland, where we ask: What grows up in ruined landscapes? The site was a brown coal mining area abandoned as sand piles and acid lakes. Both biologists and anthropologists go to this place to practice what I think of as 'arts of noticing'. We've shared notes on our methods—and we have formed some small research projects at the intersection of our interests in the place. In my lecture, I spoke of weeds. Other research projects have asked: What small water animals live in the lakes created by mining—and how have they changed since the lakes first came into being? How does the landfill site established in one part of the mining area cultivate methane-producing bacteria? How have landowners remade the site to encourage the kind of hunting they prefer?

In addition to our common field site, we have a 'slow seminar' where we work over common readings over a long period of time. The goal is to let people digest them, and to see if working through these readings together can give rise to common curiosities. For me, it's been very productive. One example is this: out of debates in the slow seminar, we started a 'feral atlas' to document and interrogate those non-human movements and transformations that occur on human engineered landscapes but are outside of human control.

ML: In your keynote lecture you talked about the weedy landscape, referring to the wild species as the auto re-wilders of the landscape. In what ways do you think that anthropology is especially suited to study these landscape connections where connections between all the different species and humans come together? And you also talked about noticing. Is noticing at the heart of this kind of research?

AT: The dynamics of weeds are a good example of the kind of problem anthropologists and ecologists might think about together. For natural scientists, the challenge is paying attention to the histories of living things, including humans. Sometimes the call for law-like generalizations stops scientists' attention to the particularities of historical change, which make a lot of difference in studying human-disturbed landscapes. For anthropologists, the challenge is noticing that there are other organisms that are key parts of our lives—and they don't always behave like resources.

What anthropologists always do in fieldwork is noticing—and learning from what we notice. We notice human relations with each other, we notice spirits, we notice all kinds of things. We should start noticing the plants and animals around us too. In fact, there's a lot we can learn just by paying attention. That's one of the basic ideas that I'm trying to promote. I can't think of any better discipline to study these things. We're already good at studying things that are marginal or out of order. We have always been interested in kinds of people and institutions, belief systems, whatever, that are not the ones that are imagined to be at the center of the world. We notice things that might be beneath the notice of other social scientists because they are unfamiliar or peripheral to current political arrangements. Noticing relations between humans and non-humans is another part of that.

Maybe you can see a continuity with *Friction* here, in that the trajectories of weeds and auto re-wilders are coming together with human agendas in enactments of friction. Plants and animals are part of the story of friction: what comes together and creates a history.

ML: Coming back to the matsutake project, the mushrooms really grow in landscapes that are

disturbed by humans, even Hiroshima, where they grew after the catastrophe.

AT: Yes, but those landscapes are disturbed only to a certain extent. You are not going to get a mushroom to grow in the middle of this table, or a parking lot. This mushroom grows only with trees and so if the trees are destroyed you are not going to get mushrooms anymore. Now that we have such powerful tools of destruction, it is possible to block what I think of as 'resurgence', the post-disturbance revival of more-than-human livable ecologies.

At the same time, the mushroom shows me that humans are capable of living with other species. We don't have to hope for the death of all humans for anything else to stay alive. We need to look carefully at that history of humans' relations with other species during the last 12,000 years, the period geologists call the Holocene. During this period, many human communities have both tended crops and also allowed non-cultivated species to thrive. We didn't do it perfectly, and we caused a certain amount of extinction. But humans and non-humans lived together despite the agricultural systems, marine fisheries, and other kinds of human disturbances. We've had those disturbances without killing everything off. Matsutake is a creature that flourished during that set of disturbances. The fact that it happened to grow at Hiroshima is because not all the pine trees were killed. You can't give the mushroom too much credit; there were other survivors as well. If we are not careful with trees, we will lose fungi too.

ML: But somehow they are signs of hope?

AT: Yes, or at least the kinds of organisms that humans are capable of living with. We don't need pristine wilderness to get these mushrooms. They show us the kinds of anthropogenic environments worth working towards, good enough to foster collaborations with other species. If we take into account that trees and fungi need each other, maybe we won't be quite so anxious to wipe out all of the forest.

ML: But then, thinking about the sixth wave of extinction, there is a big experience of loss for many people on the planet. So how can we approach that loss?

AT: So far anthropologists have been slow in even noticing the loss. We have to get better at noticing loss. There's so much pressure on us to be optimistic—to imagine that humans, in their creativity, can accomplish anything—that we don't admit to loss. In an Anthropocene conference that I went to in September a geographer said we need to think harder about the relationship between catastrophe and mourning, and that stuck in my head. We always want to move on, away from loss. But maybe, *staying with* some of this catastrophe and mourning is useful for thinking about the damage around us, because we haven't done it very much in anthropology. We could look environmental bad news more directly in the face, and I want to try to do that too.

ML: This is maybe a too big question but what drives you on and what makes you want to continue with these topics?

AT: That's a really hard question. Even if it's not the answer to your question, what if I explain something I love about anthropology? We are asked to stay curious about the world and to immerse ourselves in the little details and then to use those details to ask really big questions.

That combination of the big questions and the curiosity about the particular details is something that continues to draw me.

ML: And finally, there are many anthropologists who are just starting out. What advice would you give to, for example, students who are thinking about their topic, or choosing their interests, or uncertain of how to progress?

AT: I'll follow up on the thing I just said. I would love to encourage students and young scholars to stay interested in the world. Sometimes anthropology gets very involuted and people just want to debate theoretical questions. I would like to tell young people that while that seems to be the smartest thing you could do right now, actually, in five years nobody is going to care about those little fights and debates about how to define a term, or what some theoretical point is. Five years is a very short time frame. Before you even get your degree nobody cares. But if you're curious about the world and you tie that ability to *know the world* to a set of big questions and theoretical points, then your work continues to matter. So I want to encourage students and young people to stay curious about the world even as they are asking theoretical questions.

NOTES

1 The Haus der Kulturen der Welt is Germany's national center for the presentation and discussion of international contemporary arts (see www.hkw.de).
2 Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin 2015. Defining the Anthropocene. *Nature* 519: 171–180.