"Scientists and artists know that the way to handle an immense topic is often through close attention to a small aspect of it, revealing the whole through the part. In the shape of a Finch’s beak we can see all of evolution. So through close, indeed loving, attention to a certain fascinating mushroom, the matsutake, Anna Lowenhaust Tsing discusses how the whole immense crisis of ecology came about and why it continues. Critical of simplistic reductionism, she offers clear analysis, and in place of panicked reaction considers possibilities of rational, humane, resourceful behavior. In a situation where urgency and enormity can overwhelm the mind, she gives us a real way to think about it. I’m very grateful to have this book as a guide through the coming years."
—URSULA K. LE GUIN

"It isn’t often that one discovers a book that is as once scholarly in the best sense and written with the flowing prose of a well-crafted novel. Speaking to issues of major concern, The Mushroom at the End of the World is a brilliant work, superbly conceived, and a delight to read."
—MARIYN STRATHERN
emeritus professor of social anthropology,
University of Cambridge

"This book uses the matsutake mushroom as a lens through which to examine contemporary environmental history, global commodity production, and science. With striking prose, penetrating intellect, and sustained creativity and originality, it links disparate topics in new and profound ways. Spanning an astonishing number of fields, this work is destined to be a classic."
—MICHAEL R. DOVE
Yale University

ANNA LOWENHAUPT TSING

THE MUSHROOM AT THE END OF THE WORLD
On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins

The Mushroom at the End of the World

Matsutake is the most valuable mushroom in the world—and a weed that grows in human-disturbed forests across the northern hemisphere. Through its ability to nurture trees, matsutake helps forests to grow in daunting places. It is also an edible delicacy in Japan, where it sometimes commands astronomical prices. In all its contradictions, matsutake offers insights into areas far beyond just mushrooms and addresses a crucial question: what manages to live in the ruins we have made? A tale of diversity within our damaged landscapes, The Mushroom at the End of the World follows one of the strangest commodity chains of our times to explore the unexpected corners of capitalism. Here, we witness the varied and peculiar worlds of matsutake commerce: the worlds of Japanese gourmets, capitalist traders, Hmong jungle fighters, industrial forests, Yi Chinese goat herders, Finnish nature guides, and more. These companions also lead us into fungal ecologies and forest histories to better understand the promise of cohabitation in a time of massive human destruction.

By investigating one of the world’s most sought-after fungi, The Mushroom at the End of the World presents an original examination into the relation between capitalist destruction and collaborative survival within multispecies landscapes, the prerequisite for continuing life on earth.
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5

Open Ticket, Oregon

In the middle of nowhere

—Official slogan of an aspiring matsutake town in Finland

One cold October night in the late 1990s, three Hmong American matsutake pickers huddled in their tent. Shivering, they brought their gas cooking stove inside to provide a little warmth. They went to sleep with the stove on. It went out. The next morning, all three were dead, asphyxiated by the fumes. Their deaths left the campground vulnerable, haunted by their ghosts. Ghosts can paralyze you, taking away your ability to move or speak. The Hmong pickers moved away, and the others soon moved too.

The U.S. Forest Service did not know about the ghosts. They wanted to rationalize the pickers' camping area, to make it accessible to police and emergency services, and easier for campground hosts to enforce rules and fees. In the early 1990s, Southeast Asian pickers had camped where they pleased, like everyone else who visits the national forests. But whites complained that Southeast Asians left too much litter. The Forest
Service responded by shunting the pickers to a lonely access road. At the
time of the deaths, the pickers were camped all along the road. But soon
afterward, the Forest Service built a great grid, with numbered camping
spaces, scattered portable toilets, and, after many complaints, a large
tank of water at the (rather distant) campground entrance.

The campsites had no amenities, but the pickers—escaping from the
ghosts—quickly made them their own. Mimicking the structure of the
refugee camps in Thailand where many had spent more than a decade,
they segregated themselves into ethnic groups: on one end, Mien and
then those Hmong willing to stay; half a mile away, Lao and then Khmer;
in an isolated hollow, way back, a few whites. The Southeast Asians built
structures of slim pine poles and tarps and put their tents inside, some-
times with the addition of wood stoves. As in rural Southeast Asia, pos-
sessions were hung from the rafters, and an enclosure gave privacy for dip
baths. In the center of the camp, a big tent sold hot bowls of pho. Eating
the food, listening to the music, and observing the material culture, I
thought I was in the hills of Southeast Asia, not the forests of Oregon.

The Forest Service’s idea about emergency access did not work out as
it imagined. A few years later, someone called emergency services in be-
half of a critically wounded picker. Regulations aimed only at the mush-
room camp required the ambulance to wait for police escort before en-
tering. The ambulance waited for hours. When the police finally showed
up, the man was dead. Emergency access had not been limited by ter-
rain but by discrimination.

This man, too, left a dangerous ghost, and no one slept near his
campsites except Oscar, a white man and one of the few local residents
to seek out Southeast Asians, who did it once, drunk, on a dare. Oscar’s
success in getting through the night led him to try picking mushrooms
on a nearby mountain, sacred to local Native Americans and the home
of their ghosts. But the Southeast Asians I knew stayed away from that
mountain. They knew about ghosts.

Oregon’s center of matsutake commerce in the first decade of the
twenty-first century was a place not marked on any map, “in the middle
of nowhere.” Everyone in the trade knew where it was, but it wasn’t a
town or a recreation site; it was officially invisible. Buyers had estab-
lished a cluster of tents along the highway, and every evening pickers,
buyers, and field agents gathered there, turning it into a theater of lively
surprise and action. Because the place is self-consciously off the map, I
decided to make up a name to protect people’s privacy, and to add some
characters from the up-and-coming matsutake trading spot down the
road. My composite field site is “Open Ticket, Oregon.”

“Open ticket” is actually the name of a mushroom-buying practice.
In the evening after returning from the woods, pickers sell their mush-
rooms for the buyer’s price per pound, adjusted in relation to the mush-
room’s size and maturity, its “grade.” Most wild mushrooms carry a sta-
ble price. But the price of matsutake shoots up and down. Within the
night, the price may easily shift by $10 per pound or more. Within the
season, price shifts are much greater. Between 2004 and 2008, prices
shifted between $2 and $60 per pound for the best mushrooms—and
this range is nothing compared with earlier years. “Open ticket” means
that a picker may return to the buying for the difference between the origi-
inal price paid and a higher price offered on the same night. Buyers—
who earn a commission based on the poundage they buy—offer open
ticket to entice pickers to sell early in the evening, rather than waiting to
see if prices will rise. Open ticket is testimony to the unspoken power of
pickers to negotiate buying conditions. It also illustrates the strategies
of buyers, who continually try to put each other out of business. Open
ticket is a practice of making and affirming freedom for both pickers
and buyers. It seems an apt name for a site of freedom’s performance.

For what is exchanged every evening is not just mushrooms and
money. Pickers, buyers, and field agents are engaged in dramatic enact-
ments of freedom, as they separately understand it, and they exchange
these, encouraging each other, along with their trophies: money and
mushrooms. Sometimes, indeed, it seemed to me that the really impor-
tant exchange was the freedom, with the mushroom-and-money troph-
ies as extensions—proofs, as it were—of the performance. After all, it
was the feeling of freedom, galvanizing “mushroom fever,” that ener-
gized buyers to put on their best shows and pressed pickers to get up the
next dawn to search for mushrooms again.

But what is this freedom about which pickers spoke? The more I
asked about it, the more unfamiliar it became to me. This is not the
freedom imagined by economists, who use that term to talk about the regularities of individual rational choice. Nor is it political liberalism. This mushroomers' freedom is irregular and outside rationalization; it is performative, communally varied, and effervescent. It has something to do with the rowdy cosmopolitanism of the place; freedom emerges from open-ended cultural interplay, full of potential conflict and misunderstanding. I think it exists only in relation to ghosts. Freedom is the negotiation of ghosts on a haunted landscape; it does not exercise the haunting but works to survive and negotiate it with flair.

Open Ticket is haunted by many ghosts: not only the "green" ghosts of pickers who died untimely deaths; not only the Native American communities removed by U.S. laws and armies; not only the stumps of great trees cut down by reckless loggers, never to be replaced; not only the haunting memories of war that will not seem to go away; but also the ghostly appearance of forms of power—held in abeyance—that enter the everyday work of picking and buying. Some kinds of power are there, but not there; this haunting is a place from which to begin to understand this multiply culturally layered enactment of freedom. Consider these absences that make Open Ticket what it is:

Open Ticket is far from the concentration of power; it is the opposite of a city. It is missing social order. As Seng, a Lao picker, put it, "Buddha is not here." Pickers are selfish and greedy, he said; he was impatient to return to the temple where things were properly arranged. But, meanwhile, Dara, a Khmer teenager, explained that this is the only place she can grow away from the violence of gangs. Yet Thong is a (former) Lao gang member; I think he is getting away from warrants for his arrest. Open Ticket is a hodgepodge of flights from the city. White Vietnam vets told me they wanted to be away from crowds, which sparked flashbacks from the war and uncontrollable panic attacks. Hmong and Mien told me they were disappointed in America, which had promised them freedom but instead crowded them into tiny urban apartments; only in the mountains could they find the freedom they remembered from Southeast Asia. Mien in particular hoped to reconstitute a remembered village life in the matsutake forest. Matsutake picking was a time to see dispersed friends and to be away from the constraints of crowded families.

Nai Tong, a Mien grandmother, explained that her daughter called her every day to beg her to come home to take care of the grandchildren. But she calmly repeated that she had at least to make up the money for her picking permit; she could not go back yet. The important bits were left unsaid in those calls: Escaping from apartment life, she had the freedom of the hills. The money was less important than the freedom.

Matsutake picking is not the city, although haunted by it. Picking is also not labor—or even "work." Sai, a Lao picker, explained that "work" means obeying your boss, doing what he tells you to. In contrast, matsutake picking is "searching." It is looking for your fortune, not doing your job. When a white campground owner, sympathetic to the pickers, talked to me about how the pickers deserved more because they work so hard, getting up at dawn and staying through sun and snow, something nagged at me about her view. I had never heard a picker talk like that. No pickers I met imagined the money they gained from matsutake as a return on their labor. Even Nai Tong's time babysitting was more akin to work than mushroom picking.

Tom, a white field agent who had spent years as a picker, was particularly clear about rejecting labor. He had been an employee of a big timber company, but one day he put his equipment in his locker, walked out the door, and never looked back. He moved his family into the woods and earned from what the land would give him. He has gathered cones for seed companies and trapped beaver for skins. He has picked all kinds of mushrooms—not to eat but to sell, and he has taken his skills into the buying scene. Tom tells me how liberals have ruined American society; men no longer know how to be men. The best answer is to reject what liberals think of as "standard employment."

Tom goes to great lengths to explain to me that the buyers he works with are not employees but independent businessmen. Even though he gives them large amounts of cash every day to buy mushrooms, they can sell to any field agent—and I know they do. It's an all cash business, too, without contracts, so if a buyer decides to abscond with his cash, he says, there is nothing he can do about it. (Amazingly, buyers who abscond often come back to deal with another field agent.) But the scales he lends buyers for weighing mushrooms, he points out, are his; he could call the police about the scales. He tells the story of a recent buyer who absconded with several thousand dollars—but made the mistake of taking the scale. Tom drove down the road in the direction he believed the buyer took, and, sure enough, there was the scale abandoned
by the side of the road. The cash was gone of course; but that was the risk of independent business.

Pickers bring many kinds of cultural heritage to their rejection of labor. Mad Jim celebrates his Native American ancestors in matsutake picking. After many jobs, he said, he was working as a bartender on the coast. A Native woman walked in with a $20 bill; shocked, he asked where she got it. "Picking mushrooms," she told him. Jim went out the next day. It wasn't easy to learn; he crawled through the brush; he followed animals. Now he knows how to stalk the dunes for the matsutake buried deep in the sand. He knows where to look under tangled rhododendron roots in the mountains. He has never gone back to wage work.

Lao-Su works in a Wal-Mart warehouse in California when he is not picking matsutake, making $11.50 an hour. To get that pay rate, however, he had to agree to work without medical benefits. When he hurt his back on the job and was unable to lift merchandise, he was given a long leave to recover. While he hopes the company will take him back, he says he gets more money from matsutake picking than from Wal-Mart anyway, despite the fact that the mushroom season is only two months long. Besides, he and his wife look forward to joining the vibrant Mien community in Open Ticket every year. They consider it a vacation; on weekends, their children and grandchildren sometimes come up to join them in picking.

Matsutake picking is not "labor," but it is haunted by labor. So, too, property: Matsutake pickers act as if the forest was an extensive commons. The land is not officially a commons. It is mainly national forest, with some adjacent private land, all fully protected by the state. But the pickers do their best to ignore questions of property. White pickers are particularly aggrieved by federal property and do their best to thwart restrictions on using it. Southeast Asian pickers are generally warmer to government, expressing wishes that it would do more. Unlike white pickers, many of whom are proud of picking without a permit, most Southeast Asians register with the Forest Service for permission to pick. However, the fact that law enforcement tends to single out Asians for infractions even without evidence—as one Khmer buyer put it, "driving while being Asian"—makes it seem less worth the effort to stay within the law. Not many do.

Vast lands without boundary markers makes staying in approved picking zones quite difficult, as I found from my own experience. Once, a sheriff staked out my car to catch me without a permit when I returned with mushrooms. Even as an avid reader of maps, I had been unable to tell whether this place was on or off limits.1 I was lucky; I was just at the border. But it wasn't marked. Once, too, after I had pleaded with a Lao family for days to take me picking, they agreed, if I would drive. We chugged through forest on unmarked dirt roads for what seemed hours before they told me we had arrived at the place they wanted to pick. When I pulled over, they asked me why I wasn't trying to hide the car. Only then did I realize that we were surely trespassing.

The fines are steep. During my fieldwork, the fine for picking in a national park was $2,000 on the first offense. But law enforcement is thin on the ground, and the roads and trails are many. The national forest is crisscrossed with abandoned logging roads; these make it possible for pickers to travel across extensive forestland. Young men, too, are willing to hike many miles, looking for the most isolated mushroom patches—perhaps on forbidden lands, perhaps not. When the mushrooms get to the buyers, no one asks.2

But what is "public property" if not an oxymoron? Certainly, the Forest Service has trouble with it in these times. Legislation requires that public forests be thinned for fire protection for a square mile around private inholdings; this requires a lot of public funds to save a few private assets.3 Meanwhile, private timber companies do that thinning, making further profits from public forests. And, while logging is allowed within Late Successional Reserves, pickers are forbidden—because no one has found funds for an environmental impact assessment. If pickers have trouble sorting out which kinds of lands are off-limits, they are not alone in their confusion. The difference between the two kinds of confusion is also instructive. The Forest Service is asked to uphold property, even if it means neglecting the public. The pickers do their best to hold property in abeyance as they pursue a commons haunted by the possibility of their own exclusion.

Freedom/haunting: two sides of the same experience. Conjuring a future full of pasts, a ghost-ridden freedom is both a way to move on and a way to remember. In its fever, picking escapes the separation of persons and things so dear to industrial production. The mushrooms
are not yet alienated commodities; they are effects of the pickers’ freedom. Yet this scene only exists because the two-sided experience has purchase in a strange sort of commerce. Buyers translate freedom trophies into trade through dramatic performances of “free market competition.” Thus market freedom enters freedom’s jumble, making the holding in abeyance of concentrated power, labor, property, and alienation seem strong and effective.

It’s time to get back to the buying in Open Ticket. It’s late afternoon, and some of the white field agents are sitting around joking. They accuse each other of lying and call each other “vultures” and “Wile E. Coyote.” They are right. They agree to open at the price of $12 a pound for number one mushrooms, but almost no one does. The minute the tents open, the competition is on. The field agents call their buyers to offer opening prices—perhaps $12 or even $15 if they agreed on $10. It is up to the buyers to report back about what is happening in the buying tents. Pickers come in and ask about the prices. But the price is a secret—unless you are a regular seller, or, alternatively, you are already showing your mushrooms. Other buyers send their friends, disguised as pickers, to find the price, so it is nothing to tell just anyone. Then, when a buyer wants to raise prices, to beat the competition, he or she is supposed to call the field agent. If not, the buyer will have to pay the price difference from his or her commission—but this is a tactic many are willing to try.

Soon enough, calls ricochet between pickers, buyers, and field agents. The prices are shifting. “It’s dangerous!” one field agent would tell me as he stalked around the buying area, watching the scene. He could not talk to me during the buying; it demanded his full attention. Barking commands into his cell phone, each tried to stay ahead—and to trip up the others. Meanwhile, field agents are on the phone to their bulking companies and exporters, learning how high they can go. It’s exciting and exacting work to put the others out of business as well as one can.

“Imagine the time before cell phones!” one field agent reminisced. Everyone lined up at the two public phone booths, trying to get through as the prices changed. Even now, every field agent surveys the buying field like a general on an old-fashioned battlefield, his phone, like a field radio, constantly at his ear. He sends out spies. He must react quickly. If he raises the price at the right time, his buyers will get the best mushrooms. Better yet, he might push a competitor to raise the price too high, forcing him to buy too many mushrooms, and, if all goes really right, to close down for a few days. There are all kinds of tricks. If the price spikes, a buyer can get pickers to take his mushrooms to sell to other buyers: Better the money than the mushrooms. There will be rude laughter for days, fuel for another round of calling the others liars—and yet, no one goes out of business despite all these efforts. This is a performance of competition—not a necessity of business. The point is the drama.

Let’s say it’s dark now, and pickers are lined up to sell at a buying tent. They have picked this buyer not only because of his prices, but because they know he is a skilled sorter. Sorting is just as important as basic prices, because a buyer assigns a grade to each mushroom, and the price depends on the grade. And what an art sorting is! Sorting is an eye-catching, rapid-fire dance of the arms with the legs held still. White men make it look like juggling; Lao women—the other champion buyers—make it look like Royal Lao dancing. A good sorter knows a lot about the mushrooms just from touching them. Matsutake with insect larvae will spoil the batch before it arrives in Japan; it is essential that the buyer refuse them. But only an inexperienced buyer cuts into the mushroom to look for larvae. Good buyers know from the feel. They can also smell the provenance of the mushroom: its host tree; the region it comes from; other plants, such as rhododendron, which affect the size and shape. Everyone enjoys watching a good buyer sort. It is a public performance full of prowess. Sometimes pickers photographed the sorting. Sometimes they also photograph their best mushrooms, or the money, especially when it is hundred dollar bills. These are trophies of the chase.

Buyers try to assemble “crews,” that is, loyal pickers, but pickers do not feel the obligation to continue selling to any buyer. So buyers court pickers, using ties of kinship, language, and ethnicity, or special bonuses. Buyers offer pickers food and coffee—or, sometimes, stronger beverages, such as alcoholic tonics laced with herbs and scorpions. Pickers sit around eating and drinking outside buyers’ tents; where they share common war experiences with the buyers, the camaraderie may last until late at night. But such groups are evanescent; all it takes is a rumor of a
high price or a special deal, and pickers are off to another tent, another circle. Yet the prices are not so different. Might performance be part of the point? Competition and independence mean freedom for all.

Sometimes pickers have been known to wait, sitting in their pickup trucks with their mushrooms, because they are dissatisfied with everyone's prices. But they must sell before the evening is over; they cannot keep the mushrooms. Waiting too is part of the performance of freedom: freedom to search wherever one pleases—holding propriety, labor, and property at arm's length; freedom to bring one's mushrooms to any buyer, and for the buyers, to any field agent; freedom to make the other buyers out of business; freedom to make a killing or lose it all.

Once I told an economist about this buying scene, and he was excited, telling me this was the true and basic form of capitalism, without the pollution of powerful interests and inequalities. This was real capitalism, he said, where the playing field was level, as it should be. But is Open Ticket's picking and buying capitalism? The problem is that there isn't any capital. There is a lot of money changing hands, but it slips away, never forming an investment. The only accumulation is happening downstream, in Vancouver, Tokyo, and Kobe, where exporters and importers use the matsutake trade to build their firms. Open Ticket's mushrooms join streams of capital there, but they are not procured in what seems to me a capitalist formation.

But there are clearly "market mechanisms" or are there? The whole point of competitive markets, according to economists, is to lower prices, forcing suppliers to procure goods in more efficient ways. But Open Ticket's buying competition has the explicit goal of raising prices. Everyone says so: pickers, buyers, bulkers. The purpose of playing with prices is to see if the price can be increased, so that everyone at Open Ticket benefits. Many seem to think that there is an ever-flowing spring of money in Japan, and the goal of competitive theater is to force open the pipes so that the money will flow to Open Ticket. Old timers all remember 1995, when the price of matsutake in Open Ticket rose briefly to $600 a pound in the hands of pickers. All you had to do was find one fat button, and you had $300! Even after that high, they say, in the 1990s a single picker could make several thousand dollars in one day. How might access to that flow of money be opened again? Open Ticket buyers and bulkers stake their bets on competition to raise prices.

It seems to me that there are two framing circumstances that allow this set of beliefs and practices to flourish. First, American businessmen have naturalized the expectation that the U.S. government will apply muscle in their behalf. As long as they perform "competition," the government will twist the arms of foreign business partners to make sure American companies get the prices and market share they want. Open Ticket matsutake trading is much too small and inconspicuous to get that kind of government attention. Still, it is within this national expectation that buyers and bulkers engage in competitive performances to get the Japanese to offer them the best prices. As long as they show themselves properly "American," they expect to succeed.

Second, Japanese traders are willing to put up with such displays as signs of what the importer I mentioned called "American psychology." Japanese traders expect to work in and around strange performances; if this is what brings in the goods, it should be encouraged. Later, exporters and importers can translate the exotic products of American freedom into Japanese inventory—and, through inventory, accumulation.

What is this "American psychology" then? There are too many people and histories in Open Ticket to plunge directly into the coherence through which we usually imagine "culture." The concept of assemblage—an open-ended entanglement of ways of being—is more useful. In an assemblage, varied trajectories gain a hold on each other, but indeterminacy matters. To learn about an assemblage, one unravels its knots. Open Ticket's performances of freedom require following histories that stretch far beyond Oregon but show how Open Ticket's entanglements might have come into being.
6 War Stories

In France they have two kinds, freedom and communist.
In the U.S. they just have one kind: freedom.

—Open Ticket Lao buyer, explaining why he came to the United States, not France

The freedom about which so many pickers and buyers speak has far-flung referents as well as local ones. In Open Ticket, most explain their commitments to freedom as stemming from terrifying and tragic experiences in the U.S.-Indochina War and the civil wars that followed. When pickers talk about what shaped their lives, including their mushroom picking, most talk about surviving war. They are willing to brave the considerable dangers of the matsutake forest because it extends their living survival of war, a form of haunted freedom that goes everywhere with them.

Yet engagements with war are culturally, nationally, and racially specific. The landscapes pickers construct vary with their legacies of
engagement with war. Some pickers wrap themselves in war stories without ever having lived through war. One Lao elder explained why even young Lao pickers wear camouflage: "These people weren't soldiers; they're just pretending to be soldiers." When I asked about the dangers of being invisible to white deer hunters, a Hmong picker evoked a different imaginary: "We wear camouflage so we can hide if we see the hunters first." If they saw him, hunters might hunt him, he implied. Pickers navigate the freedom of the forest through a maze of differences. Freedom as they described it is both an axis of commonality and a point from which communally specific agendas divide. Despite further differences within such agendas, a few portraits can suggest the varied ways the matsutake hunt is energized by freedom. This chapter extends my exploration of what pickers and buyers meant by freedom by turning to the stories they told about war.

Frontier romanticism runs high in the mountains and forests of the Pacific Northwest. It is common for whites to glorify Native Americans and identify with the settlers who tried to wipe them out. Self-sufficiency, rugged individualism, and the aesthetic force of white masculinity are points of pride. Many white mushroom pickers are advocates of U.S. conquest abroad, limited government, and white supremacy. Yet the rural northwest has also gathered hippies and iconoclasts. White veterans of the U.S.-Indochina War bring their war experiences into this rough and independent mix, adding a distinctive mixture of resentment and patriotism, trauma and threat. War memories are simultaneously disturbing and productive in forming this niche. War is damaging, they tell us, but it also makes men. Freedom can be found in war as well as against war.

Two white veterans suggest the range of how freedom is expressed. Alan felt lucky when an aggravated childhood injury caused him to be sent home from Indochina. For the next six months he served as a driver on an American base. One day he received orders to return to Vietnam. He drove his jeep back to the depot and walked out of the base, AWOL. He spent the next four years hiding in the Oregon mountains, where he gained a new goal: to live in the woods and never pay rent. Later, when the matsutake rush came, it suited him perfectly. Alan imagines himself as a gentle hippie who works against the combat culture of other vets. Once he went to Las Vegas and had a terrible flashback when surrounded by Asians at the casino. Life in the forest is his way of keeping clear of psychological danger.

Not all war experience is so benign. When I first met Geoff I was overjoyed to find someone with so much knowledge about the forest. Telling me of the pleasures of his childhood in eastern Washington, he described the countryside with a passionate eye for detail. My enthusiasm to work with Geoff was transformed, however, when I talked with Tim, who explained that Geoff had served a long and difficult tour in Vietnam. Once, his group had jumped from a helicopter into an ambush. Many of the men were killed, and Geoff was shot through the neck but, miraculously, survived. When Geoff came home, he screamed so much at night that he could not stay home, and so he returned to the woods. But his war years were not over. Tim described a time when he and Geoff had surprised a group of Cambodian pickers on a mushroom patch Geoff thought of as one of his special places. Geoff had opened fire, and the Cambodians scrambled into the bushes to get away. Once Tim and Geoff shared a cabin, but Geoff spent the night brooding and sharpening his knife. "Do you know how many men I killed in Vietnam?" he asked Tim. "One more wouldn't make a bit of difference."

White pickers imagine themselves not only as violent vets but also as self-sufficient mountain men: loners, tough, and resourceful. One point of connection with those who did not fight is hunting. One white buyer, too old for Vietnam but a strong supporter of U.S. wars, explained that hunting, like war, builds character. We spoke of then Vice President Cheney, who had shot a friend while bird hunting; it was through the ordinariness of accidents such as this that hunting makes men, he said. Through hunting, even noncombatants can experience the forest landscape as a site for making freedom.

Cambodian refugees cannot easily join established Pacific Northwest legacies; they have had to make up their own histories of freedom in the United States. Such histories are guided not only by U.S. bombardment
and the subsequent terrors of the Khmer Rouge regime and civil war, but also by their moment of entry into the United States; the shutting down of the U.S. welfare state in the 1980s. No one offered Cambodians stable jobs with benefits. Like other Southeast Asian refugees, they had to make something from what they had—including their war experiences. The matsutake boom made forest foraging, with its opportunities for making a living through sheer intrepidity, an appealing option.

What then is freedom? One white field agent, extolling the pleasures of war, suggested I speak with Ven, a Cambodian who, the field agent said, would show me that even Asians love U.S. imperial war. Given that Ven spoke to me with this introduction, I was not surprised by his endorsement of American freedom as a military quest. Yet our conversation took turns that I don’t imagine the field agent would have expected, and yet it echoed other Cambodians in the forest. First, in the confusions of the Cambodian civil war, it was never quite clear on which side one was fighting. Where white vets imagined freedom on a starkly divided racial landscape, Cambodians told stories in which war bounced one from one side to the other without one’s knowledge. Second, where white vets sometimes took to the hills to live out war’s traumatic freedom, Cambodians offered a more optimistic vision of recovery in the forests of American freedom.

At the age of thirteen, Ven left his village to join an armed struggle. His goal was to repel Vietnamese invaders. He says he did not know the national affiliations of his group; he later found it to be a Khmer Rouge affiliate. Because of his youth, the commander befriend him and he was kept safe, close to the leaders. Later, however, the commander fell out of favor, and Ven became a political detainee. His group of detainees was sent to the jungle to fend for themselves. By chance, this turned out to be an area Ven knew from his fighting days. Where others saw empty jungle, he knew the concealed paths and forest resources. At this point in the story, I expected him to say that he escaped, especially since he was beaming with pride about his jungle knowledge. But no: He showed the group a hidden spring, without which they would not have had fresh water. Perhaps there was something empowering about this forest detention, even in its coercions. Returning to the forest draws from this spark—but only, he explained, in the safety of American imperial freedom.

Other Cambodians spoke about mushroom foraging as healing from war. One woman described how weak she was when she first came to the United States; her legs were so frail that she could hardly walk. Mushroom foraging has brought back her health. Her freedom, she explained, is freedom of motion.

Heng told me about his experiences in a Cambodian militia. He was the leader of thirty men. But while patrolling one day he stepped on a land mine, which blew off his leg. He begged his comrades to shoot him, since the life of a one-legged man in Cambodia was beyond what he imagined as human. Through luck, however, he was picked up by a UN mission and transported to Thailand. In the United States he gets along well on his artificial leg. Still, when he told his relatives that he would pick mushrooms in the forest, they scoffed. They refused to take him with them, since, they said, he would never be able to keep up. Finally, an aunt dropped him off at the base of a mountain, telling him to find his own way. He found mushrooms! Ever since, the matsutake harvest has been an affirmation of his mobility. Another of his buddies is missing the other leg, and he jokes that together in the mountains, they are “complete.”

The Oregon mountains are both a cure for and a connection to old habits and dreams. I was startled into seeing this one day when I asked Heng about deer hunters. I had been picking by myself that afternoon when suddenly shots rang out nearby. I was terrified; I didn’t know which way to run. I asked Heng about it later. “Don’t run!” he said. “To run shows that you are afraid. I would never run. That’s why I am a leader of men.” The woods are still full of war, and hunting is its reminder. The fact that almost all the hunters are white, and that they tend to be contemptuous of Asians, makes the parallels to war yet more apparent. This theme was even more consequential for Hmong pickers, who, unlike most Cambodians, identify as hunters as well as hunted.

During the U.S.-Indochina War, the Hmong became the front line of the U.S. invasion of Laos. Recruited by General Vang Pao, whole villages gave up agriculture to subsist on CIA airdrops of food. The men called in U.S. bombers, putting their bodies on the line so that Americans
could destroy the country from the skies. It is not surprising that this policy exacerbated tensions between the Lao targets of the bombing and the Hmong. Hmong refugees have done relatively well in the United States, but war memories run strong. The landscapes of wartime Laos are very much alive for Hmong refugees, and this shapes both the politics of freedom and freedom's everyday activities.

Consider the case of Hmong hunter and U.S. Army sharpshooter Chai Soua Vang. In November 2004, he climbed into a deer blind in a Wisconsin forest just as the white landowners were touring the property. The landowners confronted him, telling him to leave. It seemed they shouted racial epithets, and someone shot at him. In response, he shot eight of them with his semiautomatic rifle, killing six.

The story was news, and the main tenor in which it was told was outrage. CBS News quoted local Deputy Tim Zeigle, who said Vang was “chasing after [the landowners] and killing them. He hunted them down.” Hmong community spokesmen immediately took their distance from Vang and focused on saving the reputation of the Hmong people. Although younger Hmong spoke up against racism in the trial that followed Vang’s arrest, no one publicly suggested why Vang might have assumed a sharpshooter’s stance to eliminate his adversaries.

The Hmong I spoke with in Oregon all seemed to know, and to empathize, what Vang did appeared utterly familiar; he could have been a brother or a father. Although Vang was too young to have participated in the U.S.-Indochina War, his actions showed how well he was socialized in the landscapes of that war. There every man who was not a comrade was an enemy, and war meant to kill or be killed. The elder men of the Hmong community still live very much in the world of these battles; at Hmong gatherings, the logistics of particular battles—the topography, timing, and surprises—are the subject of men’s conversations. One Hmong elder whom I had asked about his life used the opportunity to tell me about how to throw back grenades and what to do if you are shot. The logistics of wartime survival were the substance of his life.

Hunting recalls the familiarity of Laos for Hmong in the United States. The Hmong elder explained his coming of age in Laos: as a boy, he had learned to hunt, and he used his hunting skills in jungle fighting. Now in the United States, he teaches his sons how to hunt. Hunting brings Hmong men into a world of tracking, survival, and manhood.

Hmong mushroom pickers are comfortable in the forest because of hunting. Hmong rarely get lost; they use the forest-navigation skills they know from hunting. The forest landscape reminds older men of Laos: Much is different, but there are wild hills and the necessity of keeping your wits about you. Such familiarity brings the older generation back to pick each year; like hunting, this is a chance to remember forest landscapes. Without the sounds and smells of the forest, the elder told me, a man dwindles. Mushroom picking layers together Laotian and Oregon, war and hunting. The landscapes of war-torn Laos suffice present experience. What seemed to me nonsequiturs shocked me into awareness of such layers: I asked about mushrooms, and Hmong pickers answered by telling me of Laos, of hunting, or of war.

Tou and his son Ger kindly took my assistant Luc and me for many a matsutake hunt. Ger was an exuberant teacher, but Tou was a quiet elder. As a result, I valued the things he said all the more. One afternoon after a long and pleasurable forage, Tou collapsed into the front seat of the car with a sigh. Luc translated from Hmong. “It’s just like Laos,” Tou said, telling us of his home. His next comment made no sense to me. “But it’s important to have insurance.” It took me the next half hour to figure out what he meant. He offered a story: A relative of his had gone back to Laos for a visit, and the hills had drawn him to the left one of his souls behind when he returned to the United States. He soon died as a result. Nostalgia can cause death, and then it’s important to have life insurance, because that allows the family to buy the oxen for a proper funeral. Tou was experiencing the nostalgia of a landscape made familiar by hiking and foraging. This is also the landscape of hunting—and of war.

As Buddhists, ethnic Lao tend to object to hunting. Instead, Lao are the businessmen of the mushroom camps. Most Southeast Asian mushroom buyers are Lao. In the campgrounds, Lao have opened noodle tents, gambling, karaoke, and barbecue shops. Many of the Lao pickers I met originated from or were displaced to Laotian cities. They are often lost in the woods. But they enjoy the risks of mushroom picking and explain it as an entrepreneurial sport.
I first started thinking about cultural engagements with war when I was hanging out with Lao pickers. Camouflage is popular among Lao men. Most are further covered by protective tattoos—some gained in the army, some in gangs, and some in martial arts. Lao rowdiness is the justification for Forest Service rules that disallow gunfire in the campgrounds. Compared with other picker groups, the Lao I met seemed less wounded by the actual moment of war—and yet more involved in its simulation in the forest. But what is a wound? U.S. bombing in Laos displaced 25 percent of the rural population, forcing fleeing refugees into cities—and, when possible, abroad. If Lao refugees in the United States have some characteristics of camp followers, is this not also a wound?

Some Lao pickers grew up in army families. Sam’s father served in the Royal Lao Army; he was set to follow in his father’s footsteps by enlisting in the U.S. Army. The fall before his recruitment he joined some friends for a last hurrah—picking mushrooms. He made so much money that he called off his army plans. He even brought his parents to pick. He also discovered the pleasures of illegal picking one season when he made $3,000 in one day by trespassing on national park lands.

Like white pickers, the Lao I knew looked for out-of-bounds and hidden matsutake patches. (In contrast, Cambodian, Hmong, and Mien pickers more often used careful observation in well-known common spots.) Lao pickers also—again like whites—took pleasure in boasting of their forays outside the law and their ability to get out of scrapes. (Other pickers went outside the law more quietly.) As entrepreneurs, Lao were mediators, with all the pleasures and dangers of mediation. In my own inexperience, I found the entrepreneurial grasp of combat readiness a confusing set of juxtapositions. Yet I could tell it somehow worked as advocacy for high-risk enterprise.

Thong, a strong and handsome man in his mid-thirties, seemed to me a man of contradictions: a fighter, a fine dancer, a reflective thinker, a judgmental critic. Because of his strength, Thong picks in high, inaccessible places. He told of his encounter with a policeman who stopped him for speeding one night more than forty miles from the mushroom camp. He told the policeman to go ahead and impound his car; he would walk through the frozen night. The policeman gave in, he said, and let him go. When Thong said that mushroom pickers are in the forest to escape warrants, I thought he might be speaking for himself. So, too, until quite recently he was married. In the process of getting a divorce, he quit a well-paying job to pick mushrooms. At least, I believe he aimed to escape the obligations of child support. The contradictions multiply. He went out of his way to express contempt for pickers who abandon their children for the forest. He is not in touch with his children.

Meta thinks a lot about Buddhism. Meta spent two years in a monastery; returned to the world, he works to renounce material things. Mushroom picking is a way to do this work of renunciation. Most of his belongings are in his car. Money comes to him easily but disappears just as easily. He does not mire himself in possession. This does not mean he is ascetic in a Western sense. When he is drunk, he sings a tender tenor karaoke.

Only among Lao pickers did I meet children of mushroom pickers who, as adults, became mushroom pickers themselves. Paula first came picking with her parents, who later moved to Alaska. But she maintains her parents’ social networks in the Oregon forest, thus earning the room for maneuver claimed by much more seasoned pickers. Paula is daring. She and her husband arrived ready to pick ten days before the U.S. Forest Service opened the season. When the police caught them with mushrooms in their truck, her husband pretended that he couldn’t speak English, while Paula berated the officials. Paula is cute and looks like a child; she can get away with more sass than others. Still, I was surprised at the chutzpah she claimed. She said she dared the police to interfere with her activities. They asked her where she found the mushrooms. “Under green trees.” Where were these green trees? “All trees are green trees,” she insisted. Then she pulled out her cell phone and started calling her supporters.

What is freedom? U.S. immigration policy differentiates “political refugees” from “economically refugees,” granting asylum only to the former. This requires immigrants to endorse “freedom” as a condition of their entry. Southeast Asian Americans had the opportunity to learn such endorsements in refugee camps in Thailand, where many spent years preparing themselves for U.S. immigration. As the Lao buyer quoted at the beginning of this chapter quipped in explaining why he picked the United States rather than France: “In France they have two
kinds, freedom and communist. In the U.S. they just have one kind: freedom.” He went on to say that he prefers mushroom picking to a steady job with a good income—he has been a welder—because of the freedom.

Lao strategies for enacting freedom contrast sharply with those of the other picker group that vies for the title “most harassed by the law”: Latinos. Latino pickers tend to be undocumented migrants who fit mushroom foraging into a year-round schedule of outdoor work. During mushroom season many live hidden in the forest instead of in the legally required industrial camps and motels where identification and picking permits might be checked. Those I knew had multiple names, addresses, and papers. Mushroom arrests could lead not just to fines but also to loss of vehicles (for faulty papers) and deportation. Instead of sassing the law, Latino pickers tried to stay out of the way, and, if caught, juggle papers and sources of legitimation and support. In contrast, most Lao pickers, as refugees, are citizens and, embracing freedom, hustle for more room.

Contrasts such as these motivated my search to understand the cultural engagements with war that shape the practices of freedom of white veterans and Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao refugees. Veterans and refugees negotiate American citizenship through endorsing and enacting freedom. In this practice, militarism is internalized; it infuses the landscape; it inspires strategies of foraging and entrepreneurship.

Among commercial matsutake pickers in Oregon, freedom is a “boundary object,” that is, a shared concern that yet takes on many meanings and leads in varied directions. Pickers arrive every year to search out matsutake for Japanese-sponsored supply chains because of their overlapping yet diverging commitments to the freedom of the forest. Pickers’ war experiences motivate them to come back year after year to extend their living survival. White vets enact trauma; Khmer heal war wounds; Hmong remember fighting landscapes; Lao push the envelope. Each of these historical currents mobilizes the practice of picking mushrooms as the practice of freedom. Thus, without any corporate recruitment, training, or discipline, mountains of mushrooms are gathered and shipped to Japan.