

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

## **4** **Working the Edge**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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