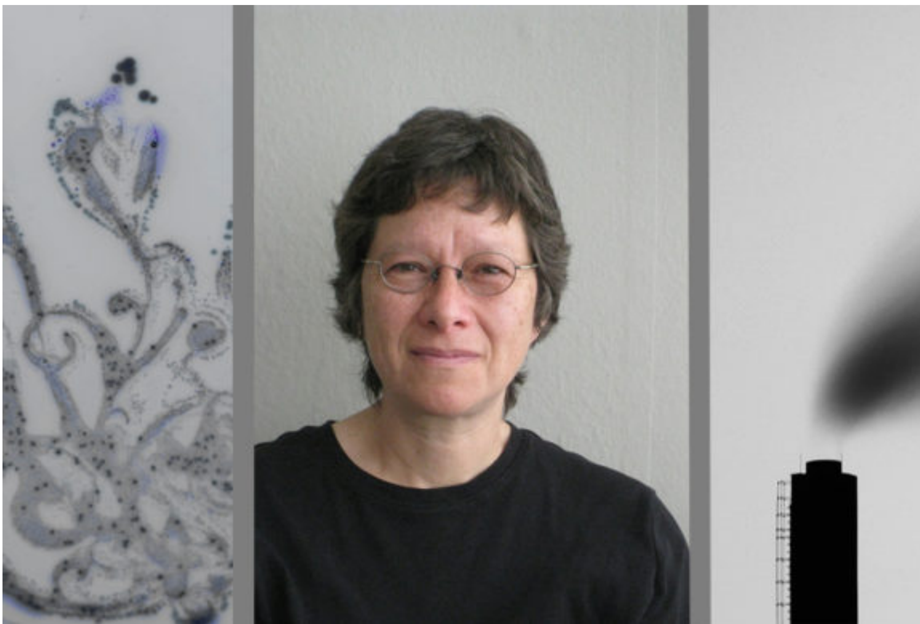


The Best of End Times: A Conversation with Anna Tsing

By: Charles Carlin
Posted on: September 19, 2017

The Anthropocene—the name given to the understanding that humans are altering our planet on a geologic scale—holds many meanings. For some, it is a call to actively and consciously manage and manipulate Earth. Others see it as proof we must defend the planet from humans as much as possible. Anthropologist Anna Tsing, meanwhile, has gone on a hunt for "arts of living" in this complex and unstable world.

Tsing edited the volume *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017)

Edge Effects is a digital m
produced by graduate stu
Center for Culture, Histor
Environment (CHE), a res
within the Nelson Institut
Environmental Studies at
University of Wisconsin–M

Subscribe below to receiv
Effects posts by email. Vis
for Culture, History, and E
to receive updates about
and events.

Email Address

Subscribe

TOP POSTS – 30 DAYS

We Are the Seventh Ge
Conversation with Winc
by Patty Loew

The Case for Ecological
Reparations: A Convers
Jason W. Moore
by Stepha Velednitsky

The Best of End Times:
Conversation with Anna
by Charles Carlin

When We Repealed Day
Saving Time
by Kate Wersan

The Immigrants Who Su

with Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt. When considering what will emerge from the ecological devastation unfolding around the world, they are far from optimistic. But they're not elegiac. Instead, they curate a journey through ways of knowing our world that includes biologists working on the microbial scale, poets grappling with questions of meaning, and historians tracing the living legacy of nuclear energy gone wrong. Each essay offers a way of describing and understanding the "entanglement" that defines life on earth.

I spoke on the phone with Anna Tsing about this wild book, working across disciplinary boundaries, and finding one's way through the tangle of troubles and creativity of the Anthropocene.

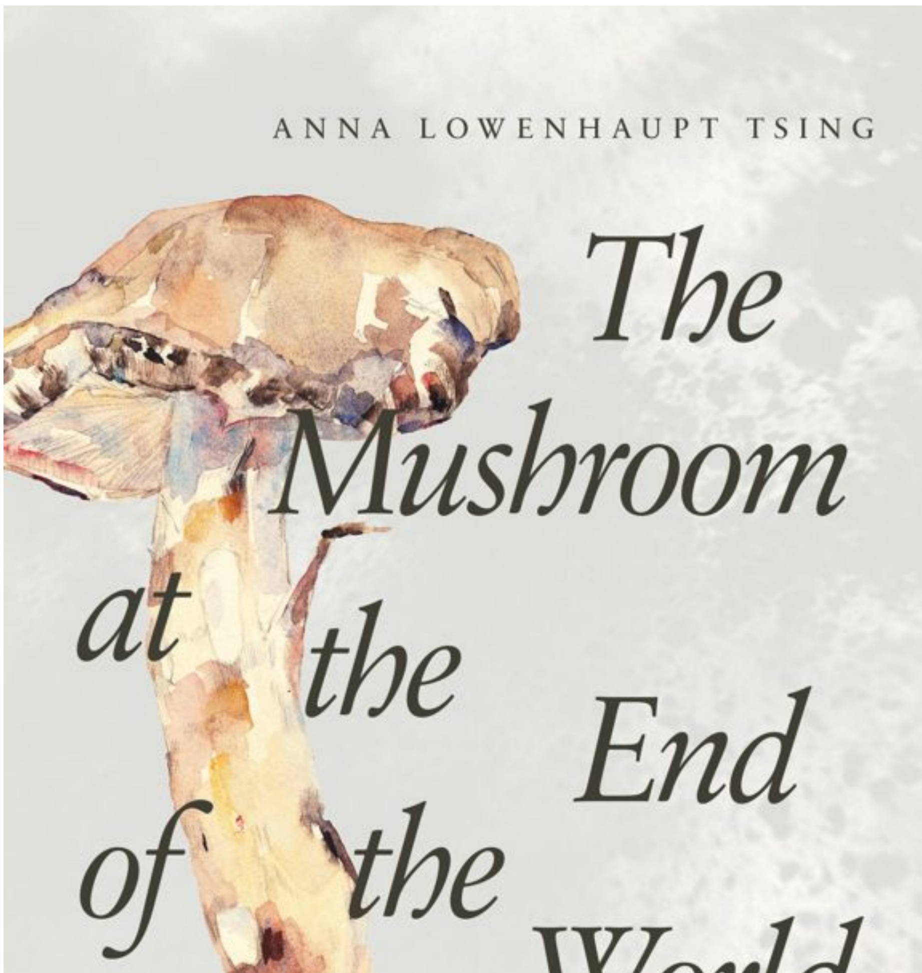
Stream or download our conversation here. Interview highlights, edited for clarity, follow.

00:00 00:00

Podcast: Play in new window | Download

Subscribe: Apple Podcasts | Android | Google Play | Stitcher | TuneIn | RSS

Charlie Carlin: What has led you to your interest in the Anthropocene and ambitious transdisciplinary projects like this one?



Smithsonian's Fish Colle
by Jessica George

TOP POSTS – ALL TIME

The Flint Water Crisis: A Edition Environment an Roundtable
by Christopher Sellers

Davis Island: A Confede Shrine, Submerged
by Brian Hamilton

The Anthropocene: The and Pitfalls of an Epoch
by Rob Nixon

Why Edge Effects?
by William Cronon

Biosphere 2: Why an Ec Ecological Experiment S 25 Years Later
by Peder Anker

EDGE EFFECTS RSS

RSS - Posts

EDGE EFFECTS ON TWI

My Tweets

Anna Tsing: For a number of years, I was doing research on matsutake mushrooms that resulted in the book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. One of the most exciting things about that research was the real joy I saw not only with pickers but also with scientists working on fungi, with social managers of the forests, and all kinds of people who were involved in mushrooms. It gave me a sense that when you have an object of such charisma and pleasure as fungi, disciplinary divides stop being quite as important as they are, perhaps, in the classroom.

The other project to tell your listeners about is the Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene group that I've had the pleasure to co-direct with Nils Bubandt. We are in our fourth year of a project funded by the Danish National Research Foundation. It allows us to experiment with collaborations across disciplines. We have ecologists and biologists on our team, as well as anthropologists, art historians, artists, philosophers, and various folks from the humanities and the arts. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* was our first big effort to see if we could conjure up together some of the kinds of pleasures and commonalities that I had seen in my mushroom research.

CC: This book is organized around two central figures: monsters and ghosts. How did you arrive at these? Do you imagine that monsters and ghosts continue to live as enlivening or organizing figures in work that Aarhus does or in your own scholarship?

AT: One way of seeing it is that ghosts and monsters each show us as potentials for trans-disciplinary collaboration. Monsters take us into all the new work that biologists are doing on symbiosis and the ways that organisms are not that modernist figure of an individual that has to survive by itself, but are involved in all sorts of entanglements with other species and other individuals. That seems monstrous to us because we're used to an idea of individual organisms—humans and nonhumans—that may interact with others because they eat them or are eaten by them, not because they can't develop, they can't become who they are, without these other organisms. These are our monsters.

It also a way of understanding a pact that's beginning to open in collaborations between biologists and folks working in the humanities and social sciences who are also interested in dismantling this figure of the modern individual. All over the world people don't see themselves as individuals but as entangled in complicated ways. This common monstrosity—this common refusal of the modern individual—takes us

into a path for collaboration and into some really exciting new scholarship.

Similarly, the ghost figures take on ecologies of damage in which pasts are always there haunting presents. It's a haunting with all the things you can't leave behind, in contrast to that modernist dream that you can break from the past and everything will be new and shiny. These ghosts continue to remind us that pasts matter.

Our use of the term Anthropocene is to describe a time in which business as usual is likely to kill us.

These ghosts, too, open a door towards both a potential for transdisciplinary work and a set of some of the most exciting stories that need to be told in our times on both sides of the line between the humanities and the social sciences. So, yes, these figures help us.

The other thing to say about them is that they are an attempt to break down the lines between kinds of figurations that are seen as serious and scholarly and those that come out of vernacular traditions of understanding the world. We are trying to keep a playful spirit alive rather than trying to develop a formal classification system.

CC: The book strikes a challenging emotional tone, attending to the severity of this mass extinction we're living in, but also to the creative challenge and delight of getting to know, to describe, and to move forward in our world in a different way.

AT: Yes. We are trying on one hand to take the danger of the Anthropocene very seriously. Livability in its broadest sense—not just for humans, but for all of life on Earth—is being challenged by the industrial ecologies we've brought into being. On the other hand, rather than paralyzing our readers with fear, we are hoping, through the wonder of all these arrangements in the world, to mobilize a sense of activity and possibility within this very terrible time that we've created.

One of the essays that tries most directly to address that is Deborah Bird Rose's essay on shimmering. She talks about the possibility for the disintegration of one of the most important coordinations in Australian nature between the flying foxes and the eucalyptus trees that are pollinated by them all across the nature. This could break down merely because humans think flying foxes are pests and feel fine killing them. At the same time she wants to capture what she learned from aboriginal teachers about the beauty and the wonder of the shimmer of flowers and to remind us why there are flowers in the first place. They are so bright and beautiful precisely because they want to coordinate with pollinators. We get the benefits of this world created of shimmer.

A grey-headed flying fox feasting on eucalyptus pollen. Photo by Andrew Mercer, 2011.

CC: One of the things that this book doesn't do is spend a lot of time on just the level of concept. There isn't an essay specifically arguing what we should call our era or whether we should think about this as a "great Anthropocene." Each one of these essays is grounded in experience of the world. Could you talk about that choice of keeping the essays down to Earth, so to speak?

AT: It's actually an extremely important part of our conception. Our goal is to argue that the place to begin with these necessary transdisciplinary collaborations is in engagement with the details of the world rather than working out philosophy first and then trying to hammer it down into the world. We need to begin instead with ants or with lichens or with other ways of knowing the world—snake spirits and volcanoes—and to build out from them a sense of what is possible in terms of bringing scientists and humanists together and in making an intervention into the terrible hegemony of business as usual.

> *We're offering a kind of nature writing about damage, rather than an imagination of untouched plenty.*

It's not intended as a way of walking away from those dangers but indeed as engaging in the center of them. Our use of the term *Anthropocene* is to describe a time in which business as usual is likely to kill us. But our way of engaging that, then, is to begin with the concrete materiality of the world around us, and to argue that we need to start noticing it more.

We try to put that into practice in the essays by showing how these concrete engagements and particular stories can tell us more than a generalized statement. We think about extinction, say, through the story of how red knot birds fly five thousand miles to feast on the eggs of horseshoe crabs. Then, as the industry for medical testing has taken away all the horseshoe crabs, suddenly the birds are going to starve. That kind of a figure for understanding extinction might be better than whether or not the

Anthropocene is good or bad.

The ghost landscape of Pripyat, Ukraine, where the opening of an amusement park was canceled after the city was abandoned following the catastrophe at the nearby Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. Photo by Rob Armstrong, August 2011.

CC: While there is this new vocabulary of symbiosis and entanglement that moves through the book, there aren't a lot of mentions of words like *nature*, *wilderness*, *wildness*, *conservation*, or *preservation*. And of all the genres in the book, a genre that isn't readily apparent is nature writing—one that has traditionally crossed those boundaries between natural history, science writing, philosophy, and perhaps ethics. The language might not be immediately legible to what we would think of as more traditional environmentalist or conversation communities. I wonder what message or challenge or intervention this book has for them.

AT: That's a great question worth thinking through. In a broad sense, nature writing could be considered a style that makes experiences of environments and nonhumans accessible to people who haven't been explicity trained in some kind of scientific or scholarly knowledge base. In that broad sense, what we're doing *is* nature writing.

I think there is an interesting difference. Most classical examples of nature writing give us praise of the human experience within the magnificence of nature. This book asks how we experience the damage wrought by industrial civilization. We're offering a kind of nature writing about damage, rather than an imagination of untouched plenty. This is a kind of nature writing exploring radioactive chambers where you can see the radioactivity or noticing sewage-filled canyons where tomatoes are growing up in the midst of old tires. This is a kind of nature writing in which readers feel the pressures of extinction as well as the wonders of biodiversity. It's a different kind of nature writing, and I think we really need it.

Featured image: A detail of gut bacteria by Nicola Fawcett, August 2015; Anna Tsing; and a photo of a smokestack in Sweden by Eric Fosberg, July 2009.

Podcast music: "Gloves" by Julian Lynch. Used with permission.

Charles Carlin is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Geography at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a wilderness guide. He is interested in how ethics and the philosophy of subjectivity intersect with the messy realities of life. These interests come together in Charles' dissertation entitled, "The Therapeutics of Subjectivity: Nature, Ethics, and Ceremony in the American Wilderness." Wild places in America have been sites of vicious dispossession and exclusion, but they are also places where scholars, activists, and wanderers have developed radical ecological ethics and politics through stunning experiences with the more-than-human world. He last appeared in Edge Effects *with "The Ethics of Ceremony at Standing Rock." Charles lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with his wife and son. Website. Contact.*

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Niels Bohr Professor at Aarhus University, and Co-director of Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene (AURA). She is the author of three prize-winning books: In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place *(Princeton University Press, 1993),* Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection *(Princeton University Press, 2004), and* The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins *(Princeton University Press, 2015). In addition to the new edited collection* Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene *(University of Minnesota Press, 2017), she has co-edited* Communities and Conservation: Histories and Politics of Community-Based Natural Resources *(AltaMira Press, 2005),* Nature in the Global South: Environmental Projects in South and Southeast Asia *(Duke University Press, 2003), and several other volumes. She is also the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship.Website. Contact.*

Share this:

Tweet

Comments: 0
By: Charles Carlin
Categories: Commentary
Tags: Anthropocene, Interdisciplinarity, Interviews, Podcasts

LEAVE A COMMENT

Name *

Email *

Website

Submit Comment

Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

Notify me of new posts by email.

← The American Recycling Myth

Painting an Empire: Landscapes of Napoleon's Dreams in Haiti →

Contact Us

Edge Effects c/o CHE
Bradley Memorial Building Room 203
1225 Linden Dr., Madison WI 53706
608-890-2050
edgeeffects@nelson.wisc.edu

Copyright

Unless specified otherwis
is licensed under a Creati
Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial 4.0 Inter
License