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Contaminated Diversity in “Slow Disturbance”: Potential Collaborators for a Liveable Earth

Our time is the “anthropocene,” the age of human disturbance. The anthropocene is an era of mass extinction; we must not forget that. Yet the anthropocene is also an era of emergence. What has emerged? I use the term “contaminated diversity” to refer to cultural and biological ways of life that have developed in relation to the last few hundred years of widespread human disturbance. Contaminated diversity is collaborative adaptation to human-disturbed ecosystems. It emerges as the detritus of environmental destruction, imperial conquest, profit making, racism, and authoritarian rule—as well as creative becoming. It is not always pretty. But it is who we are and what we have as available working partners for a liveable earth.

“Slow disturbance” refers to anthropogenic ecosystems in which many other species can live. Slow disturbance landscapes are those that nurture interspecies collaborations. They are not untouched by the presence of humans, the ultimate weedy invader. Still, their biodiversity is comparatively high. I use the adjective “slow” in conversation with slow foods and slow cities; slowness is a dream to encourage, rather than a trait to objectify. In my current collaborative research on the world connected by matsutake mushrooms (a slow disturbance fungus much valued in Japan and foraged around the northern hemisphere), I have explored landscapes of interspecies collaboration involving humans and pine forests (see Satsuka and Hathaway, this volume). Matsutake landscapes are disturbed forests; they are also sites of multispecies life.

How might we work toward an earth of slow disturbance? Instead of merely cataloging diversity, we need to tell the histories in which diversity emerges—that is, acknowledge its lively and, thus, contaminated forms. Diversity is created in collaborative synergies; it is always becoming. Both indigenous people and migrants can participate in making slow disturbance patches. One useful direction in which to move “biocultural diversity” is to open it up to the contaminated diversity and slow disturbance regimes of people in many circumstances.

Biocultural diversity has usually been used as a term to recognize traditional ecological practices. Tradition is just one example, I argue, of the contaminated diversity that allows slow disturbance. There is a kinship here with other contaminated forms. But let me begin with a classic case.

Among Meratus Dayaks of the rainforests of Kalimantan, with whom I conducted fieldwork, biodiversity is nurtured through livelihood practices (Tsing 1994, 2005). It is not just that Meratus are blessed with a diverse environment, they encourage biodiversity through landscape management. First, Meratus diversify cultivated plants, developing many varieties for each crop. Second, they diversify landscape through long-rotation fire farming, creating patches of successional forest within old forest. Patches encourage biodiversity. Third, they encourage other species through semi-domestication, bringing plants and animals into their disturbance ecologies without the rigors of domestication. For example, they clean and prepare forest trees for migrating bees. They spread the seeds of wild fruits and encourage useful plants.

The diversity that thrives is that which adapts to Meratus disturbance practices. Things are confused when conservationists identify this suite of species as the “untouched” rainforest; they should not banish the people from the story. The gift of the term biocultural diversity is to make that evident. Yet it is not necessary to deny history (in search for tradition) to hold that gift. The plants and animals are part of a human disturbance regime; they have a contaminated history. While Meratus have had a long time to develop this set of practices, it would also be a mistake to imagine them holding a blueprint of timeless wisdom. Meratus were refugees from the Islamicization of South Kalimantan, itself a defensive reaction to European invasions starting five hundred years ago. They developed an alternative to capitalist modernity by working to stay out of its way. It is not that they never heard of colonialism or national development; they have tried, in their own way, to survive on the periphery of such formations. Their cultural integrity is as contaminated as their biological landscape, and this puts them into cosmopolitan kinship with the rest of us.

This kinship can lead us into sharply contrasting examples of contaminated diversity and slow disturbance. Bettina Stoetzer’s recent dissertation (2011) explores contaminated diversity in the city of Berlin. The rubble of collapsing buildings after World War II created “rubble ecologies” in the heart of the city; new weeds sprung up from the ruins of war. These weeds lead her into the metaphorical rubble ecologies of im-

migrant gardens and barbeque areas, as well as refugee camps in the forest. Contaminated cultural diversity becomes tied to contaminated biological diversity in these practices. Some of the time, slow disturbance is possible.

Between these two examples are the disturbed pine forests that produce matsutake mushrooms. One of my fieldwork sites is the ruins of industrial forests in Oregon. The big timber trees are gone. Small, crowded, diseased pines grow slowly on this pumice soil. This is surely contaminated diversity. Those who know it best are the pickers who come every autumn for matsutake. Most of the pickers are also survivors—of war. White veterans of the US-Indochina War share the woods, begrudgingly, with Southeast Asian refugees of the same war and the civil wars that followed. Other pickers were displaced by the end of industrial logging, by the decline in standard employment, and by the possibility of crossing borders to seek new lives. Many languages are spoken, including Hmong, Mien, Lao, Khmer, Cham, Akha, Mayan, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog, Japanese, Korean, and English. This small area of ruined forest must be one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse areas of the world—during matsutake season. But this is all contaminated diversity. The refugees reconstitute themselves as cultural groups in memory of war. Cultural identity here *is* the memory of war. So too, ecology here is the memory of logging. Contaminated diversity is everywhere; for better or worse, it is what we have. In accepting these limitations, this matsutake picking constitutes slow disturbance, allowing forest life to continue.

If we are looking for collaborative partners for a liveable earth, we must consider contaminated diversity and slow disturbance. This means telling histories of the cultural and biological synergies through which diversity continues to emerge, even in ruins.

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