

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. 376 pages.

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Anna Tsing's *Friction* is an original, highly readable, and insightful study of global processes of development and resistance. *Friction*, through its multi-sited methodology, is global in visionary scope. Yet it is ethnographically anchored in the complex specifics of Kalimantan's "frontier" forests and in the lives of those being affected by rapid transformations of Indonesian Borneo's landscapes throughout the 1980s and 90s under the pressures of capitalist interests. The book provides a portrait of painful change and measured hope for local communities and individuals grappling with the pace and intensification of landscape transformation. It also provides a broad and multidimensional framework for understanding globalization. Tsing proposes that we understand the ostensibly universalizing thrusts of global capitalism, and apparent state collusions with it, as a set of diverging interests and perspectives, which give rise, out of their "friction," to paradoxical "global understandings," or universalisms. But in so doing, as in the logic of the Hegelian spirit, the conditions of resistance or contingency that allow for the emergence of universalisms become obscured. Tsing does not explicitly locate her argument about global knowledge and the various "frictions" that produce it through the Hegelian dialectical legacy that I have invoked above, but it is worth mentioning the theoretical parallelism in her framing, so as to find her work resonant with other critical theoretical traditions.

One might, for instance, find in her argument an ethnographic parallel to the more philosophically dense reading of Marx and Heidegger that the influential postcolonial critic Dipesh Chakrabarty¹ has produced. Specifically, Tsing argues that "Capitalism spreads as producers, distributors, and consumers strive to universalize categories of capital, money, and commodity fetishism ... The cultural specificity of capitalist forms arises from the necessity of bringing capitalist universals into action through worldly encounters" (p. 4). That is, as Chakrabarty has also argued, the universal only becomes so insofar as it meets local resistance to its apparently alien character. Through "worldly encounters" we witness the appropriation and/or the translation of the alien into something that is either national, local, or both. For instance, international speculators are attracted to the promises of the Borneo frontier, either for timber or gold, but their aspirations are realized only when mediated through the nationalized and local discourses of development, local autonomy, and even, ironically, conservation. These discourses and interests do not blend neatly into one another (as theorized by earlier world-systems theorists) she argues, but rather, the tensions and contradictions, or frictions themselves, generate contingent universals, as oxymoronic as that sounds, and colossal erasures, which dramatically alter the lives of the weaker segments of society. Tsing tells us that "those who claim to be in touch with the universal are badly out of touch with seeing the limits and exclusions of their knowledge" (p. 8). While this statement may be taken as recognizing a methodological and epistemological limit to universal knowledge, it is also diagnostic of those who

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

would claim it. Tsing suggests throughout the book that such claims always buttress insecure footings where power, status, and resources are at stake. That is, the claim produces a silencing effect, which forecloses someone's claim to knowledge, power, and resources, and, thus, always has palpable material and social effects. In this case, the book focuses on how these frictions have influenced Indonesia's development politics at the expense of the Meratus Dayaks. Though it reports moments of hope and limited empowerment, by and large the book offers a harsh critique of those forces that have disenfranchised the Dayaks from their land and/or turned their land into the "savage frontier."

When Tsing returned during the late 1990s to Kalimantan to follow up on her research with the Meratus Dayak community she had been studying for many years, she found that gold mining had led to widespread mercury pollution of the streams, the fresh-water sources. Moreover, the deregulation of the so-called development "frontier"—a place prized for its unlimited resources in the development discourses of the state—had led to collaborations among the army, bandits, gangsters, corporations, and government. The very image of the "frontier," Tsing argues, was used for the purposes of producing a two-fold fantasy. On the one hand, there were fantasies of "El Dorado," or a place of unimaginable riches that could be tapped or discovered by intrepid souls or hardened men, who could weather the elements of the jungle and wild nature. On the other hand, the "savagery" of the frontier was invoked in order to dehumanize the local communities that inhabited these spaces, and to desensitize migrants and corporations, not to mention citizens in Jakarta, to the human cost of forest clearing, mining, and resettlement. Tsing suggests that by "bringing old forms of savagery to life in the contemporary landscape ... nature goes wild (p. 29)." This universal notion or fantasy of the frontier, in turn, is built upon the frictions generated by the processes of deregulation, which effectively made the landscape an "interstitial zone" within international boundaries. The "trauma of transformation" is described and felt by both the Meratus Dayaks and by the devastated anthropologist herself, but is largely obscured or silenced by the representational power of the "frontier" in developmental discourses of the state, which, in turn, is semi-allied to diverse multinational interests.

An effective use of this "wild savagery" image was manifested when Dayaks attacked Madurese migrants in a series of gruesome incidents. Media (both international and national) reports cited the revival of "tribal" ways, and noted that the chaos of Kalimantan was not so much a result of the development policies of deregulation and deforestation and strip mining, but rather, because "tribes will be tribes" (pp. 42–43). Clearing the forests, reaching into the heart of darkness, becomes not only an economic responsibility for the New Order, but a moral imperative, given the purported Dayak propensity for violence. Tsing's arguments about the frontier fantasy in development discourse are well taken and presented in a compelling manner. It would have been helpful, perhaps, to have developed this idea more from an ethnographic vantage point. That is, we hear little from the imaginaries of Borneans, Javanese, or others who fantasize about the Dayaks, Madurese, or the so-called savage frontier more broadly. Aside from learning that the Madurese reportedly "smell different," and that their odor allows for identification before an attack by Dayaks, we do not learn enough about the specific fantasy that shapes such violence. Indeed, this book does not take us into individual or cultural imaginaries in the manner that

Tsing's previous and highly engaging book, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1993), did. That is to say, we are not offered a phenomenological, psychological, or even a cultural elaboration of fantasy but, rather, a structural "friction" is put forth as a premise that produces the resonance of fantasy, with its material effects. With this, we end up with a suggestive and allusive understanding of the frontier, but one that is necessarily fragmented and partial, by the author's design. Some readers will be disappointed with the less ethnographically intimate approach. Tsing wishes, however, to attune the reader's sensitivities to the chaos of an imploding Kalimantan, not to reconstruct Dayak understandings of these changes, as was the case in *Diamond Queen*. Thankfully, however, we do meet the memorable medium-priestess Uma Adang again, the protagonist from the previous book.

From Uma Adang one hopes to hear prophecy about a Dayak cultural and political revival, or about an understanding of the situation that the Meratus people find themselves in. One expects, in short, to hear a voice of resistance. Rather, we hear, much to Tsing's disappointment, that "Kalimantan is sick" (p. 47). The sickness stems from the felling of trees, a loss accelerated by the sale of Dayak's ancestral lands by Dayaks themselves for profit. Adang tells Tsing that "every tree is coming down" (p. 25). And, thus, in response to the gift that Tsing had brought to her old mentor, the Dayak elder laments sarcastically, "better you had brought me a bomb, so I could blow this place up" (p. 25).

The sense of loss that Adang expresses is not merely territorial, but rather, points to the insidious manner in which variegated "localisms" act as competing discourses. In Tsing's prior book, Adang led a revivalist movement among the Meratus Dayaks that suggested agency at the margins. Now, in the present book, the complicity of local Dayaks in the cutting of forests and the emergence of class differences in the villages among local heads points to a new phase, and one that is traumatically experienced by Adang as a betrayal. Tsing carefully demonstrates that the privatization process, which does indeed lead to internal differences among the Dayaks, cannot be described in binary terms. Some who are paid to cut forests are also invested heavily in the plantation industry, an investment that produces a discourse of forest restoration, rational land use, and local empowerment, not to mention notions of a return to partial local autonomy (albeit in modified, privatized form) for Dayak villagers.

Tsing admirably examines the complexities of the "salvage frontier" within the plantation economy in Kalimantan. She describes how it becomes inflected with a discourse about rain-forest preservation, in part as a response to international conservation efforts and local activism, but also through collusions with big business interests. In this friction, "where making, saving, and destroying resources are utterly mixed up, where zones of conservation, production, and resource sacrifice overlap almost fully..." (p. 32), one sees another example of the universal discursive form (i.e., conservation) masking its more contentious parts by necessity. In one sense, though Tsing does not invoke resistance or world-systems literature, we might suggest that the problematic she raises has some analogues to that body of literature in that one is naturally led to see how complicity at one level (e.g., Dayak cooperation in the plantation economy, involving the sale of ancestral lands, etc.) masks higher levels of complicity at a structural level (dependency on wages, migrant labor competition, environmental and cultural transformation, etc.). Tsing, however, is not content with

reducing “global conjuring” to the machinations of power, which is where her sense of a more dynamic and unpredictable set of outcomes becomes possible.

One of the most memorable sections of *Friction* is Tsing’s account of the Bre-X gold-mining fiasco and scandal that played out like an adventure novel in the national and international press. Tsing argues that the drama of the Bre-X case, particularly the fantastic elements of it—which involved the “jungle” or frontier, violence, and madness in the imagination—helped sustain a “global conjuring” act, despite the failures of the Canadian company to find the amounts of gold it had hoped for. She suggests that foreign investment was stimulated by the spectacle of colonial fantasies of conquest and discovery, not to mention risk, virility, and violence. This fantastic or spectacular form of investment, transnational in nature, in turn, collided and colluded with Indonesian “franchise cronyism” in Suharto’s New Order and was, in turn, contingent upon actual “frontier culture” and resources in West Kalimantan. A convergence of circumstances allowed for Bre-X and others to operate freely in West Kalimantan. First off, transnational companies required the arrival of transregional migrant labor from other parts of Indonesia, such as that provided by the Javanese and Madurese. Second, the land had to be nationalized, thus dispossession of local land from Dayaks had to be done for the good of “national development.” Thirdly, an actual arrival of migrants had to displace local populations. The government of Indonesia awarded contracts and licenses as “magical tools for the national elite” to operate with a free hand in Kalimantan in the interest of “national pride” and “political stability” (p. 72). Here, as in the many other cases discussed in the book, the various actors—Bre-X, the government, the migrant laborers, the franchise capitalists, etc.—are not acting with the same set of interests. Rather, out of their contingent collaboration, they are producing what Tsing calls the “economy of appearances,” or the promise of miraculous growth out of the frontier. The Dayaks, though sometimes collaborators, are also marginalized victims in this economy, given their structural weakness vis-à-vis the other principal actors.

While it is true that much of the first half of *Friction* is devoted to the catastrophes that have befallen the Meratus Dayaks as a result of “an economy of appearances” associated with the lure of the “frontier,” there are also possible global collaborations, fraught though they are with divergent interests, that afford agency and hope for local peoples. It is to these “contingent collaborations” and to the possibilities that they present for the Dayaks that Tsing turns for much of the second half of *Friction*. Tsing offers numerous examples of local, national, and global collaborations that produce at least temporary semblances of unity out of the divergent scales of interest that are expressed by each constituency. Locating one such historic example of such a universal discursive formation, she analyzes how in 1955, at the Bandung conference, the spirit of high modernism took hold of the participants’ imaginations as it provided for an “axiom of unity” (p. 89). “Axioms of unity both need each other and hide each other;—generalization, with its particular exclusions and biases, is produced as the product of this interaction” (p. 90). One might, following Tsing’s lead, say that her theory of global knowledge is located firmly in a dialectical understanding of negation in the production of knowledge. Contingency is the source of self-certain knowledge, but one that must be negated or erased. That is due to the differential of power that exists in the appropriation of difference in the positing of knowledge itself. This then becomes the perennially vexing problem for Tsing as she grapples with the limited agency of

"contingent collaborations," whereby local actions and/or inscriptions of knowledge are circumscribed by forces of power that partially encompass their expression. I cannot work through all of her examples, but merely cite a couple here to illustrate the problematic she grapples with.

Tsing spends quite a bit of time discussing the emergence of nature and conservation groups in Indonesia. These groups, and the individuals within them, are committed to sustainable forestry, and seek to collaborate with national, international, and local communities in realizing their vision of a more ecologically sound world. But there is much distinction and difference, Tsing discovered, among these conservation groups. Many, indeed, are inspired by international counterparts and have ideas about nature and conservation that are at odds with the land-use patterns and traditions of local peoples, whom they look down upon. In one example, Tsing illustrates the disgust that one hiker experiences upon discovering human feces within a jungle stream near a village. To some extent, nature lovers are cosmopolitans, who identify with international norms of ecology. In other instances, they are thrill seekers, interested more in the adventure of travel and exploration than in ecological commitments. They may be traveling to Borneo on a package tour, but do so as recreational consumers, not advocates for local communities and their forest or land rights. In yet other cases, the youth are allied to religious (Islam) or nationalist causes (Pemuda, or youth). Being in a nature club and going on organized excursions may be about "domesticating nationalism" (p. 130) or cultivating it. In general, as Tsing describes the nature movement(s), there are divergent interests at play. But as in the case of other sustainable forest management discourses, the opportunities for contingent collaborations with Meratus Dayaks exist, though they are fraught with complications and competing agendas.

If this is true for nature clubs and conservation discourses, what about attempts to produce a local dictionary of biodiversity? Surely this would empower Dayaks as would no other document. Together with Uma Adang, Anna Tsing became involved in the production of a biodiversity dictionary for local Dayaks. She reproduces parts of this dictionary in the margins of one chapter on purpose to indicate the status of Dayak terms within the global system of codified knowledge systems. More generally, while such a project has utility, and suggests a translatability that holds power for Dayaks and non-Dayaks, it speaks of a self-consciously "globalist" Dayak subject as it is self-consciously "localized" (p. 170). Moreover, the only sources of new "localism" apparently available to Meratus Dayaks come through the bureaucratization processes afforded through formal knowledge systems, such as science, biodiversity projects, sustainable forest management, etc. Following along this thematic, the book's concluding chapters examine how various "villages" became recognized, with varying success, by operating within the bureaucratic structures of the New Order. The naturalization of the notion of a "village" as the basic social unit in the New Order, though not fitting the social reality of the Meratus Dayaks, provided the framework for collaboration with outside forces and the "invention" of local culture. Tsing argues, with convincing case material, that the achievement of local rights and relative autonomy within the New Order among the Meratus Dayaks was, at least in some instances, achieved through a translocal, inherently modified version of what they were vis-à-vis the bureaucratized center. To paraphrase Arjun Appadurai, the

“production of locality” is more a “figure” than ethnographic locale.² Or, to reverse the gaze, we come full circle, and not only see that universal categories are produced out of friction and a silencing of these contingencies, but also that the particular, the local, and the culturally specific are now mediated necessarily by and through its fractious and “contingent collaborations” with translocal forces. That is the tragic and yet sometimes hopeful lesson of *Friction*.

This is important reading for most scholars of Indonesia and Borneo, including those who work in Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia. It will appeal to scholars in development studies who seek an “ethnographic” intervention and a fresh theoretical perspective. Tsing weaves a moving and insightful tale of destruction, despair, and hope, while also providing the reader with a palpable framework for understanding the structural parameters of Dayak dislocation. She manages to do this without utilizing conventional ethnographic tropes, settings, or the phenomenology of the ethnographic encounter in any sustained manner, which is also the book’s unavoidable weakness if read with these expectations. The reader, in that sense, can certainly feel the friction of global connection, but cannot “connect” at the level of empathy with particular people, their culture, and places in the manner that one experiences with more intimate ethnographic writing. Despite this difference in scale, this is an important, original, and unique ethnographic project that pushes the anthropology of development, activism, and the environment in exciting directions.

² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Global Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).