

The Crab at the End of the World? On Invasive Species, Salvage Economies and the Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet

**Workshop with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, University of
California – Santa Cruz**

Organised by the Bruges Triennial and the Ghent Centre for Global Studies (Ghent University) in collaboration with Rotor.

The work of the Brussels-based research and design group Rotor, for this edition of the Bruges Triennial, takes as a point of departure the presence, in the world-famed Bruges canals, of a non-native fresh-water crab species, *Eriocheir sinensis* (Chinese mitten crab, CMC). Starting from that given, observed almost accidentally, Rotor presents, in one of the city's medieval landmarks, a micro-museum in which they try and unravel the entangled storylines to be drawn from *E. sinensis* in Bruges.

THE CHINESE MITTEN CRAB

The CMC is an alien species with a long track-record in Europe. The story of its introduction is well-rehearsed. Crab-larvae were accidentally shipped with the ballast-water of steamers from the Yangtse-river estuary to Germany, at the dawn of the 20th century. By the 1920s, the crab had spread all over the German and Dutch coasts and inland territories, in the 1930s it arrived in Belgium. It is now a well-established species in North-Western Europe. This notwithstanding, the crab was put on the 2016 list of Invasive Alien Species of Union Concern, an EU-list that entails compulsory, "lethal and non-lethal management measures", to be taken by member states, and puts an embargo on the commercial trade of the species. The Netherlands asked and obtained a derogation, and Dutch fishermen – who see the crustacean caught in the inland waters as a replacement stock for the dwindling eel populations – are now exporting it *en masse* to Hong Kong and China. The crab is considered a delicacy in Chinese cuisine. A black market of locally caught crabs is also thriving elsewhere in Europe among the Chinese-European community, especially in the fall months, when the crabs migrate downstream from their natural freshwater habitat to reproduce in the brackish waters of the estuaries, and can be caught more easily. But these catches in turn have their downsides, as the crabs, even if they live in European waters that are cleaner than they were by the mid-20th century, come in contact with sludges that were contaminated decades ago. The result is a potentially hazardous bio-accumulation of toxic chemicals (heavy metals, PCB's, ...) in bodies of these animals.

In China, 'the world's factory', the problem of river water pollution is even more acute today. The problem is such that almost all of the Chinese mitten crabs consumed in China and Hong Kong today originate from crab aquaculture, a recent form of culture that especially boomed the last decade. The natural cycle of the crab is recreated artificially, and crabs, fed with prepared food, grow to maturity in a confined space. Aquaculture production of the CMC in China grew from 3.000 Tons in 1989 to 800.000 Tons in 2014. Despite a recent track record, diseases and parasites have become a

major issue, affecting production and economic return of the Chinese mitten crab culture.

Managed or not, eaten or not eaten, held in captivity or roaming free, infested with pathogens or not, the mitten crab remains highly adapted to the mutilated landscapes of capitalism. The catadromous species breathes underwater and out of the water. An omnivore, it can live on any type of diet. Walking on the bottom of rivers and canals, the decapod migrates for hundreds of kilometres. With needle-sharp claws, it climbs effortlessly over dikes, sluices, bridges, even the façade of houses that happen to lay on their path. Whatever happens, it is likely to be around, keeping us company, for centuries to come.

WORKSHOP THEMES

The workshop with Anna Tsing will take complex stories of displaced species, such as the one researched by Rotor and others, as a point of departure to reflect upon a series of transdisciplinary themes:

- 1) Humans have been transforming ECOSYSTEMS through the – willing or unwilling – displacement of species for centuries. Such transformations, intensified under successive waves of capitalist globalization, play their part in what some consider to be an ongoing anthropogenic wave of species extinction. This situation poses us, humans, with ever new and unforeseen challenges and consequences. Ecosystem management strategies, such as the containment or eradication of invasive alien species might be judicious and prudent, but also have their limits – as the case of the mitten crab shows. Can we imagine a next step? One of co-habitation with alien species that thrive in these capitalist ruins – landscapes marked by decreasing biodiversity – and of which we may assume they are here to stay?
- 2) The ideal of the PLANTATION – a way of organising both human and non-human factors of production so that they can more easily be controlled, transferred and scaled up – has been central to the imperial spread of capitalism throughout the world. Still today, plantation-styled agro-industrial production is often advanced as a key solution to the problem of feeding a growing human population on the planet. According to estimates based on FAO-figures, we will soon reach the point where more seafood is produced from aquaculture than from fishing. When breeding plants and animals in artificially controlled environments is presented as offering the best promises in terms of efficiency and food safety, we are left with questions about the landscapes both in- and outside of the plantation. Are those outside gradually deemed unfit for food production? And what about the dangers of genetic erosion and disease vulnerability inside high-density monoculture plantations?
- 3) STORIES of displaced species highlight unlikely connections – marked by similitude and difference – between previously unrelated ecosystems – such as the river ecosystems of the Yangtze and the Scheldt. Through the transformative encounters that occur throughout species displacements, challenges and

opportunities emerge for the multi-species entanglements that make life possible. What is there to learn from these reverberating trajectories for present and future life in capitalist ruins? And how can their stories help us to make life graspable?

Participants to the workshop will explore these themes in the “more-than human landscapes” of capitalist agriculture, plantations and commodity chains in dialogue with anthropologist Anna Tsing. Food for thought will be gathered from selected presentations on ongoing research:

1. *Phytophthora infestans - transatlantic histories of the 19th century European potato famine*. Dieter Bruneel and Hanne Cottyn – Dept. of History, Ghent University
2. *Foc TR4 and the banana industry – from haunting fungus to a post-plantation?* Robin Thiers – Dept. of Conflict and Development Studies, Ghent University
3. *tbc*
4. *tbc*

RECOMMENDED READING

- ◆ A. L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015
- ◆ A. L. Tsing, H. A. Swanson, E. Gan & N. Bubandt, eds, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2017

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

We invite researchers from all backgrounds and disciplines – both Social Sciences & Humanities and Natural & Applied Sciences – as well as artists and other experts working on the abovementioned themes and questions, inspired by the work of Prof. Tsing, to participate in this workshop.

Please note that the number of places is limited.

You can apply by sending a short CV (max. 2 pages) and motivation (ca. 250 words) to Julie.Carlier@UGent.be.

The deadline for the submission of applications is April 30, 2018.

Contact:

dr. Julie Carlier

Coordinator Ghent Centre for Global Studies

Julie.Carlier@UGent.be

Ghent University – Dept. of Conflict and Development Studies

Universiteitstraat 8

9000 Gent

BELGIUM

