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What Are You Reading?

Alex S. Taylor and Daniela K. Rosner

Specs

Focus: The messy intersections of technology and social life; feminist figurings of materiality and their lessons for HCI and technology design

Base:

Alex: City University of London, London, UK

Daniela: University of Washington, Seattle, WA

Alex Taylor: Daniela and I wanted to try something different for this issue. We wanted to read something together that might helpfully disorient ourselves and perhaps the readers a little. We settled on two books: Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) and Sarah Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). The first is an extraordinary examination of one of the world's most rarified mushrooms and its travels across capitalist supply chains and histories of multispecies cohabitation. The second is a feminist treatise that weaves together ideas from scholarship on gender and race with personal meditations on everyday feminist encounters.

Although quite different in scope and investigating topics conventionally outside of HCI, both books explore feminist figurings of materialism that Daniela and I have been reading alongside our HCI and design work for some time. Put together, we hoped the convergences and divergences might make for something engaging, if unconventional, for an *Interactions* reader.

Daniela Rosner: Before reading Tsing's book, I never thought much about mushrooms as more than something delicious (or deadly!) to consume, and certainly not as an object for feminist world-making. But as with Ahmed's focus on feminism, reading Tsing's account of the matsutake mushroom is a deeply personal tale of noticing—noticing the pungent smell, noticing the hidden creatures of the forest, noticing the layered and divergent paths of commodity chains. For Ahmed, noticing is a political act, drawing forth and realizing exclusions and omissions. What is it that people learn not to notice? In learning and unlearning across difference, Ahmed promises opportunities for listening anew. Together Tsing and Ahmed reveal how the impulse to notice can take multiple forms. Bodies, both living and dead, become tools for “show[ing] us how to look around rather than ahead” (Tsing).

Have these forms of noticing infected your work? What did you find?

AT: I agree! *Noticing* is thoroughly enlivened in these exhilarating and moving texts. I was delighted with Tsing's insistence on following the stories, of choosing to turn away from the usual modes of scholarly accounting, and, instead, stay with the noticed details of trails spun by mushrooms. Also, I was touched by Ahmed's attention to revisiting her own profound encounters with violence, (un)happiness, and self-discovery, and responding by daring to "get in the way." Between them, *such shifts in scale!* But together they invite, as you say, a care for paying attention and asking questions about "how to live better."

Certainly, attention to details has been central in my studies of how lives entangle with technologies. This has always been the starting point for the ethnographies that channel my research. And yet, troublingly, I've separated this eye for detail from the worlds I bring with such noticings. As you say, Ahmed and Tsing show how noticing has its politics: that, by "merely" noticing, we are always already entangled in a politics of the personal and structural together, where injustices, inequities, and violence are immanent. For me, this shows a commitment to much more than the details; by paying attention to the troubled conditions in which we are implicated, these books are making space for reparative methods—for making possible other, more bearable worlds.

What I'm curious to hear is whether these ideas of what I'm beginning to think of as "resistances and reparations" resonate with you, and, importantly, if you see them coming through in your design research.

DR: I like thinking of these as reparative methods—and, in this sense, I see their methods as invitations to reexamine our genealogies. The lineage of design we receive as HCI practitioners looks very different from the one I inherited as an undergraduate design student, which looks different from the one I now seek to recuperate in my recent work (exploring the practices of women who wove early forms of computing memory by hand). In these multiple trajectories, I see possibilities for reconfiguring what design is today. Design might not work toward progress or toward ruin but instead, after Tsing, it may help us think with "salvage rhythms." It might help us notice the uneven, contingent, and collective work required for change. "We have to shake the foundations," Ahmed writes. "But when we shake the foundations, it is harder to stay up." Does design call for the same willful commitment to keep going, "to keep coming up?"

Ahmed and Tsing don't speak directly to design, but I wonder if you see in their critiques and potentials—from “decentering human hubris” to “diversity work”—an opening for elaborating a different kind of technology design? Tsing writes, “To listen politically is to detect the traces of not-yet-articulated common agendas.” As we do this listening, this reparation and resistance, what not-yet-articulated common agendas might we find?

AT: There's so much to say in response to this, so let me limit my answer to what I see to be our contemporaneous obsession with the numbers, counting, and simulacrum of the marketplace. As I see it, measurement and market rationalities have become preeminent players in technology design. They enact a logic that masks how—in the way Tsing shows so compellingly—labor and capital is strewn together through heterogeneous flows, disturbances, and indeed ruin. The messiness of a lived life. And amidst this powerful and singular logic there remain so few possibilities to resist, to “shake the foundations” and “keep coming up.”

Tsing and Ahmed show that we need, urgently, to find ways to act together, to make more possible. Inspired by Ahmed's language, I come away wanting to *build an army* in which we are not afraid of *putting our bodies into it*. All around us, there are ideologies, structures, methods, norms, and practices that seek to smooth things over and reduce the ways in which we are counted, really counted, as being “alive with a world.” What we need are ways to keep pushing, resisting, and being “sensational.” We need our noticings to be noticed!

DR: So maybe, then, this call to arms shakes up the problem-solving heritage of HCI? For good reasons, we, as HCI scholars, tend to frame design as a *means* of accomplishing *ends*. But are we also seeking out *too-easy resolutions*? These texts, by contrast, *encourage creative listening*, in Tsing's terms. They show that what is at stake in making and inhabiting unpredictable encounters is our accountability to those who lose out—to the things that lie outside our immediate view, to the bacteria that make the soil in which many designers mine, to the “users” subjected to patriarchal legacies of innovation work. Tsing and Ahmed ask readers to struggle against—to take in and work together across difference.

Alex Taylor joins the lively HCID centre at the City University of London ready to rekindle an academic curiosity and nourish a new generation “to shake the foundations.” ast@microsoft.com

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