General

Developing a Sense of Taking Part

Interview with Fiji-Based Poet and Philosopher Sudesh Mishra on Indigenous Cosmologies as Sources of Inspiration

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Climate change seems intangible – nowhere and everywhere at the same time. It is entangled with everything and everyone. Against this backdrop, the challenge is to grasp its causes in the interconnections between ecosystems and communal, state and global structures. Ultimately, possibilities must be explored to tackle climate change from within such interconnections. In the following interview, Fiji-based poet and philosopher Sudesh Mishra shares his thoughts on indigenous cosmologies as sources of inspiration vis-à-vis environmental havoc.



Sudesh Mishra at the More World conference, 10 October 2019, 'performing' the interview, with Clara Mayer (Germany's main representative of the Fridays for Future movement) and Abiol Lual Deng, the moderator). – Photo by Norman Posselt / berlinergazette.de

Krystian Woznicki: In a recent paper you write: 'If modernity defines itself through a process whereby it relationally relegates to areas of darkness what is, in fact,

constitutively necessary to it, then it is time to shine a light on these dark areas in order to transform the "death drive" driving surplus accumulation.'[1] Speaking of relegating to areas of darkness what is, in fact, constitutively necessary to neoliberal modernity, I would like to focus on an aspect that you repeatedly address in your work: the fact that humans lack a sense of taking part, something you call 'human apartness'. In my view, this lack is constitutive of the neoliberal subject that has been established as decoupled from others, even decoupled from the rest of the world, if not from the world as such. Could you say more about this problem?

Sudesh Mishra: At some point in our very brief history, we decided to stop thinking of ourselves as being a participatory component in an ever-changing assemblage – or, more precisely, zoē-assemblage – that includes other entities on the planet, organic and inorganic forms: frogs, trees, rain, stones, fish, light, bacteria, dust, etc.[2] In fact, we started to sequester ourselves from our planetary others (who are not our others in the first instance) by drawing a line between the zoē status of non-human life-forms and that of our own. We started to conceive of ourselves as being surplus to zoē. In short, we turned ourselves into a distinct biopolitical species whose zoē status was disremembered. It is this consciousness of our apartness as biopolitical actors that gave rise to a uniquely human hubris.

Here my thinking revolves around an egregious human disability, that is, our self-conscious understanding of the apartness of our consciousness from the moment of being which, incidentally, can never be decoupled from the dynamic of becoming. Gilles Deleuze made this point eloquently and repeatedly. I am not sure when this happened, but it did happen (as I show in my examples from Ovid, Aristotle and the Old Testament) and became progressively naturalized. We started to believe in a fallacy. Surplus accumulation and neoliberal modernity thrive on the fallacy of human apartness (and I'll explore this ruse shortly) because everything around us becomes subject to an extractive logic which sustains the commodity form: extraction, conversion, fetishism, accumulation and reproduction. The sorry yet marvelous thing is that our seeing is a type of blindness. We have failed to acknowledge that which is not in hiding, has never been concealed, but which we ourselves have hidden in plain sight. I speak of our being as it transits through the space-time that is life, that is, as it becomes existentially. What is this becoming being if not a more-than-human assemblage that is also, at the same time, a less-than-human assemblage? For are we ever not a dynamic assemblage inclusive of non-human beings and things?

These questions articulate challenges that all of us need to confront. It seems important that you are able to develop such a thinking of the world from Fiji where you work as the Head of the School of Language, Arts and Media at University of the South Pacific.

Yes, as we are communicating, I am sitting in a chair, my fingers on the keyboard, steely spectacles on my nose, my eyes on the black-and-white screen, palm-heels on my wooden desk, shod feet on the tiled floor, the ceiling fan overhead blowing wind through my hair and collar, I hear birds singing in the trees, I reach for a sheet of paper, I inhale the stench of a stink bug, etc. I am never a separate subject in this moment's assemblage; in fact, my very being is momentarily composed of assorted beings and things (chair, keyboard, steel, screen, wood, shoes, fanned air, cotton, birdsong, paper and bug aroma), and the repertoire of this assemblage is forever changing since the dynamic of becoming knows no rest. So, hearing a knock on the door, I put my hand on the knob and become the door even as the door's becoming me.

We are never not an assemblage inclusive of non-human entities in our daily becoming, but somehow we have persuaded ourselves otherwise. Simply put, the moment I remember that the door is becoming me and I the door, my relation to the door and to

myself changes radically. If as an assemblage I am simultaneously more than human and less than human, I must by extension treat all elements in the assemblage, organic as well as inorganic, as I'd treat myself since these are never sequestered from me. Extend this principle to the planet and subject-object relations collapse completely, as do value hierarchies that are foundational to humanity as well as modernity. Human is the problem and the problem ultimately human.

There is a growing conviction that engendering forms of collective existence beyond, alongside and despite the crippled, yet lasting hegemony of neoliberal modernity is an urgent intellectual and political priority. In this context I wonder how indigenous cosmologies can offer a different approach to how humans can relate not only to each other but to the world as a whole?

I think the moment you treat a singular life, mine or yours, as an ever-changing zoē-assemblage, you cease normalizing human exclusivity, which, as I said, is a downright fallacy and a key justification for extractive practices that underpin surplus accumulation. Anthropocentric thinking has always been based on the sorcery of metamorphosis where non-human entities are measured on the normative scale of becoming human. So hierarchies arise once you have a norm that governs forms of value attribution. What was recognized about colonial forms of value attribution where the colonized subject is perpetually and perfidiously in the process of becoming human has its genesis in the taxonomic isolation of entities – animals, plants, rock, minerals, etc. – for the purpose of value attribution with the human as the default norm. Hierarchical thinking is founded on our general disregard for the assemblage in which we are an element among others.

Ovid, for instance, cannot think in terms of assemblages because each act of mythical transformation devalues the human norm. When I turned to pre-Christian iTaukei cosmologies, I was gratified as I came across examples where the human was not the norm; in fact, normative humanity becomes the source and cause of narrative disorder and anxiety. In the legend entitled 'The Great Flood', the desire to attribute normative value to the human causes the great serpent, Degei, to destroy the world in a deluge in order to initiate a new beginning. When Turukawa is killed by Degei's two sons, both human, because to them it was merely a hawk, their world is wiped out for daring to think of the zoē-assemblage as a domain of hierarchical value attribution informed by biological difference.

How can indigenous cosmologies 'remind homo sapiens that they are a participatory element' in the web of human and non-human relations and life forms that you call 'planetary assemblage' or 'zoë assemblage'?

I'll cite an instructive example I recently discussed in a paper. In 'The Woman who Emptied the Sea' we are given a compelling account of a woman who evolves a sense of taking part in an ecological assemblage. The woman in question is from inland Lovoni. After resolving to cook her food in saltwater, she walks down to the coast for the first time in her life. Upon catching sight of the sea in flood-tide, she marvels at the large quantity of brine in the lagoon, fills up her gourd and proceeds to return home. By the time she scales the mountaintop, however, it is ebb tide and the woman, alarmed by the diminished sea, retraces her steps and empties her gourd into the lagoon. She does so because of an innate understanding that she is just one element in the general assemblage. Between the surplus sea of the flood tide and the deficit sea of the ebb tide, the act of putting back is the balancing gesture of a woman who, in a moment of supreme epiphany, senses value not in terms of independent units but in relation to the whole planetary assemblage. She has a sense of taking part in the assemblage, not of being apart from it. In contrast, we are only just learning how to return carbon dioxide to the rocks from which they have been so catastrophically extracted.

What ideas and impulses from indigenous cosmologies can be mobilized as a starting point for developing a sense of taking part?

I want to mention two concepts that are critical to iTaukei culture. The first is vanua and the second tabu. In a simple sense vanua means lands, but once you interrogate the idea as it functions in practice you begin to understand that it cannot be decoupled from genealogical ties binding the dead to the quick to the unborn, ethical oversight of land and sea resources, communal bonds, spiritual custodianship and a duty of care to whatever or whoever inhabits the vanua. So vanua is another term for a complex assemblage. Tabu, which is the practical application of a sacred interdiction, is very much linked to vanua since it is the vanua, here meaning the collective volition of a community achieved through consensus, which sanctions the imposition of the protective tabu on a reef system, a mangrove estuary or a forest grove. The observation of tabu, which may be in place for many years, is future-directed and grounded in a philosophy that thinks of the vanua as an irreducible assemblage.

Taking a recomposed notion of the human as a 'participatory element in the planetary assemblage' as a starting point, I wonder how indigenous practices, in concert with scientific knowledge, could offer a pragmatic response to the climate-related crisis generated by modernity?

This notion I stumbled upon while revisiting theories proposed by the scholars Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno; in short, the Frankfurt School. For both Bloch and Adorno the archaic is coterminous with the modern since the former is constitutively necessary to the latter. Bloch, in fact, thinks of the archaic as an impeded future or, if you like, as a possibility that persists inside the duration of the modern. He poses the following questions: What would happen if an archaic practice were to join hands with the technological-scientific present? Would it open up a vista into an impeded future, impeded exactly by the reckless present of surplus accumulation? Many of us around the planet are revisiting this important question by taking seriously these so-called archaic indigenous practices. In Fiji, for instance, as early as the 1990s, academics from my university taught indigenous communities how to scientifically account for marine life and to lift or impose the tabu in accordance with data analysis. The results stunned all and sundry. Science, in short, sanctioned an indigenous conservation practice, which is now enjoying a revival throughout the Fijian archipelago. The marriage of the non-synchronous tabu with synchronous scientific knowledge might indeed inform the future-forging resurrection of an unfinished past. Science and technology should be deployed around extant indigenous practices that conceive of life in terms of an assemblage without regard to anthropocentric hierarchies and values.

Against the backdrop of what you have developed in our discussion so far, I wonder, if not only the devastations of climate change arise from a planetary web of interdependencies, but potentially also capacities to collectively counter global warming, then how can we progress from passive to active entanglement? How can we progress from the* everything and everyone is connected condition *as one that tends to paralyze us into a state of interconnectedness that enables new forms of cross-border cooperation?

These are significant questions. I think we all have to act alone and together at the same time, but obviously in different contexts (since we live in different climatic zones) and in different ways. Alone in the sense that we individually have an ethical, ecological and survivalist (for all species) duty of care to what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called 'our atmospheric commons'. So I must strive to do something real and specific about reducing my carbon footprint – care for the mangroves, get off the grid, cycle to work, grow carbon-absorbing ferns, give up meat, etc. If the unknown multitudes took action in solitude within

their specific contexts we would be acting together in service of the planetary assemblage. I was watching a Reuters report on the wood wide web: it seems that carbon-absorbing ectomycorrhizal fungi live in high altitude forests and form an underground communicative network. I like the idea of humanity as a carbon-absorbing fungal assemblage, each part working alone and yet together for a common planetary purpose.

How can we cultivate cooperative practices for the interplay between communal, state and global approaches adapting to climate change?

I think we need to identify the most cutting-edge ecological practices (including carbon-depleting ones) in every community, no matter where they are located, point out to state actors the benefits of these practices, and involve science and technology at the global level to aid, augment and deploy these practices. Adaptation is not an option for us in the tropics. We want specific actions taken to reverse the effects of climate change. We also need to address how the market economy has obliterated practices that were ecologically sound, and resurrect them globally. I recall reading about some plastic-eating bacterial enzyme and that scientists are investigating how they may be used to hasten the process of biodegradation. My first thought was that Fiji's vegetable vendors, not so long ago, sold their produce in woven coconut-leaf baskets. We have an abundance of coconut trees and harvesting their leaves sporadically does no harm to them. Someone wove the baskets locally – and so acquired a livelihood – and the practice was ecologically smart for the tropics. These baskets succumbed, without a whimper, to the plasticity of capitalism.

Krystian Woznicki is a critic and the co-founder of *Berliner Gazette*. His recently published book *Fugitive Belonging* (2018) blends writing and photography. Other publications include *A Field Guide to the Snowden Files* (with Magdalena Taube) (2017), *After the Planes: A Dialogue about Movement, Perception and Politics* (with Brian Massumi) (2017), *Wer hat Angst vor Gemeinschaft?* (with Jean-Luc Nancy) (2009) and *Abschalten. Paradiesproduktion, Massentourismus und Globalisierung* (2008).

Sudesh Mishra is a contemporary Fijian-Australian poet and academic. He was born in Fiji into an Indo-Fijian family. Coming to Australia to study he completed a PhD in English literature at Flinders University. He has published several volumes of poetry, the first of which, *Rahu* (means Rahu, the sun eclipse caused by the Asura in the Hindu mythology), received the Harri Jones Memorial Prize for Poetry in 1988. His writing commonly treats events in his home country, such as the 1987 coup, from an ironic perspective. In 2003 he received an Asialink Literature Residency at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His current research is taking new directions, in particular looking at Indigenous responses to modern ecological crises, such as climate change. He is Head of the School of Language, Arts and Media at University of the South Pacific. He was an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at Deakin University in Victoria, Australia and has taught literature at Stirling University in Scotland and University of the South Pacific, Suva campus.

The interview was conducted as part of Berliner Gazette's More World project. Check out the results from this project. In discussions, talks, performances, workshops, cooking and walking together, participants from more than 30 countries tried to find out how we can work together across borders to counter the climate crisis. The results include audios, videos, projects, and texts that can be found on this website: more-world.berlinergazette.de .

Footnotes

1. Sudesh Mishra, 'On Seeing a Bull's Skull in a Bicycle Seat: Innovative Archaism', *Contracampo: Brazilian Journal of Communication* 36, no. 13 (2017): 57.
2. Mishra, 'Zoē-assemblage: Immanent Life in the Age of the Anthropocene', in *Subject South: Contested Regimes of Subjectivity in the Global South,* ed. Gina Cebey, Josiah Nyanda and Sebasian Thies (London: Routledge, 2020).

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