

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD

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It is widely held that a new image of the world—a colour photograph of the planet Earth rising beyond the shadow of the moon, as captured by a pair of American astronauts on the Apollo 8 mission of 1968—was one of the most influential forces propelling the rise of Western environmentalism in the late twentieth century. Seen from a distance, it has often been suggested, the earth came to appear both beautiful and frail, its value and needs best perceived—as if for the first time—as properties of a singular whole.

Could there be a global ecology, or any feeling for the importance of its perception and protection, without the circulation of such arresting images? Without a doubt, those of us who share these concerns depend upon such pictures of a whole. Two decades ago, as a high school senior and budding environmentalist in Los Angeles, it was another Apollo-era image of the whole earth that I cut out to place on the cover of an activist pamphlet—'Heal Our Dying Planet'—produced for circulation in local schools. While this globe on the front cover was cradled by a pair of hands, the back cover put forward another means of grasping the unity of the world, the lines famously attributed to Chief Seattle of the Squamish tribe in 1854: 'All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man does not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand of it.'

From the standpoint of critical environmental thought, however, both of these are deeply compromised images. Images like the former sustain the powerful regimes of technocratic environmental management that force the restraint and submission of many marginal communities worldwide in the name of shadowy threats to a collective future. And the latter exemplifies the ecological wisdom that native voices are so often expected to voice as a condition of their audible speech—even if, as was notoriously the case in the 1970s with these putative words of Chief Seattle, it took the work of a Hollywood screenwriter to invest these sentiments with the requisite form.

Given the power and the danger of such images, it is no surprise that critical work on environmental questions has so often sought to demystify, decode and pick apart the pictures of the world that orient and motivate ecological arguments and interventions. In particular, two ways of picturing ecological totality are often singled out for such criticism: images of the world as a coherent system of ordered relations and implications, and images of certain peoples or populations as living harmoniously within the space of such worlds. Our critical vocabularies call attention instead to ruptures, contradictions and forcible closures, insisting that ecological ensembles are themselves images of power: here again, as is so often the case, particular interests seem to masquerade as general concerns.

All of this is true, and has been, no doubt, important to say. But an essential question nevertheless persists: of what worlds, for what worlds, might we dream and hope? Should we turn our attentions to the shards of local life that remain behind when our pictures of the whole are broken down as symptom and ruse? Or should we focus instead on the forms of collective possibility that may be built up by putting together these disparate pieces, through the painstaking work of unifying difference? Both of these alternatives have served as enduring social, political and intellectual orientations, in the world of ecological action, and in the anthropology that has concerned itself with this domain. But have they led us to give up our concern for the whole too quickly?

There is at least one more picture of the world that we might excavate from the annals of anthropological ecology: an image of the whole as a field of becoming, a transformative flux in which we find things to be ever more than we thought they were. Arguably, this is the ontological horizon of ethnographic fieldwork, which unfolds in environments of unintended encounter and incipient change. But this implicit picture of the world we inhabit as anthropologists sometimes brushes up against other resonant theories and images of the world that also convey its emergent and transformative potential. Such images may inspire impatience, reverence, joy or dismay, depending on how one is

disposed to encounter them. However this may be, such images of the nature of the whole may be taken as some of our most valuable resources, sustaining more creative confrontations with the trials of the present. Anthropology encourages us to engage such alternative imaginations of the world with humility and care.

Here is one such picture of the contemporary world and its ecological fabric. I was immersed in fieldwork in rural south India in September 2001. For several days that month, grainy black-and-white coverage of the burning World Trade Center towers flooded Tamil television and print media. Farmers, labourers and herdsmen reacted to these images in vernacular moral idioms of judgment and condemnation, while I compulsively shared a photograph of my mother standing before the towers and the New York skyline, almost as if to insist upon the reality of that place. On the night of September 12th, Karupayi *amma* told me a story on the rooftop of her niece's house. She was an elderly wage labourer, and had spent the day weeding cabbages in a nearby field. Although we had spent many days together, recording her tales, proverbs and field songs, she never seemed to know or care whether it was Tiruppur or America to which I would carry these materials. Still, it was difficult to take this particular story as anything but an allegory for—another picture of—the nature of a larger world whose insistent images we all had to engage. Please tell me, I said.

There was a sparrow and a porcupine, she began. That porcupine said, 'Go gather up some bits of rice from the mortar stone. I'll go the river and catch some fish and come. We'll cook and eat.' When the sparrow went there, there was a woman grinding rice. *Koy koy koy*, the sparrow darted around, pecking at it. *Sadaar!* She hit and tossed the sparrow away. The sparrow died, was lying there dead.

Then what did that porcupine do? He went to the river, caught some fish and cleaned it off. His wife, the sparrow, went to glean some rice, but she's gone, he thought. He went to go look by the mortar stone. The woman had gone, but lying there all broken was the sparrow. '*Ayyoo*, my wife has died like this', the porcupine said. What did he do? He carried her, gathered up some firewood, set it alight, cremated her, collected all that ash, and mixed it into the river.

Then at dawn, the next day, an elephant came to drink from the river. The elephant asked, 'What is it, water? You always flow so well, so clearly, but why are you flowing so muddled now?' Then the water said, 'Didn't you hear that story? With the sparrow dead, and the porcupine shaving his head, I'm flowing all muddled. Why don't you go break a tusk!'

What did that elephant do? It went and butted up against a pipal tree. Then the pipal tree asked, 'What, elephant? You're always so good when you come to me. Why, today, do you come so troubled?' Then the elephant said, 'Didn't you hear that story? With the sparrow dead, the porcupine shaving his head, and the river water muddled, I broke a tusk. Why don't you just dry up, you pipal tree!'

Then that pipal tree withered and dried up. But in that tree many cranes would come to nest. A crane asked, 'What, pipal tree? You're always so nice and cool. Why are you like this today, all dried up?' Then that pipal tree said, 'Didn't you hear that story? With the sparrow dead, the porcupine shaving his head, the river water muddled, and the elephant breaking a tusk, I'm all dried up. Why don't you just go blind and go!'

Then what did that crane do? It went down along the bank to sit. There was someone ploughing with his bulls. He asked, 'What, crane? You usually sit in such a lively way. Why are you sitting with such worry today?' Then that crane said, 'Didn't you hear that story? With the sparrow dead, the

porcupine shaving his head, the river water muddled, the elephant breaking a tusk, and the pipal tree gone dry, I've gone blind. Why don't you mess up your ploughing all *kundakka mundakka!*'

What did he do? He messed up his ploughing all *kundakka mundakka*. Then his daughter came to bring him some rice. 'What, father, you're messing up your plough all over the place,' she said. Then he said, 'Daughter, didn't you hear that story? With the sparrow dead, the porcupine shaving his head, the river water muddled, the elephant breaking a tusk, the pipal tree gone dry, and the crane gone blind, I've messed up my ploughing all *kundakka mundakka*. Why don't you just break your pot and go home, girl!'

She threw down that pot where she'd brought the rice and went home. Then her mother asked, 'What, daughter, the pot is missing, where's that pot?' 'Then you didn't hear that story?' the girl said. 'With the sparrow dead, the porcupine shaving his head, the river water muddled, the elephant breaking a tusk, the pipal tree gone dry, the crane gone blind, and the ploughing messed up all *kundakka mundakka*, I dropped that pot and broke it.'

Then this schoolboy, what did he do? He gathered up his things and came. 'What, ma, you haven't cooked yet?' he asked. 'So you didn't hear that story?' she said. 'With the sparrow dead, the porcupine shaving his head, the river water muddled, the elephant breaking a tusk, the pipal tree gone dry, the crane gone blind, and the ploughing messed up all *kundakka mundakka*, your sister dropped that pot and broke it. Why don't you just burn all your books?'

He burned them all, all the books, the books that he was studying. Then it was time to go to school. All the boys were studying, but he was just sitting there. The teacher yelled at him. 'Hey, why are you just sitting there? Where are all your books?' The boy said, 'Sir, didn't you hear that story? With the sparrow dead, the porcupine shaving his head, the river water muddled, the elephant breaking a tusk, the pipal tree gone dry, the crane gone blind, my father's ploughing messed up, and my sister breaking the pot, my mother made no rice and told me to burn all the books. I burned them all. And you, sir, why don't you set alight the whole school?'

Then the teacher set alight the whole school. All the children were crying and wailing. All the people came running. Then the police came, caught him and took him away, that teacher. They locked him up in jail. So this whole story came to be placed on the teacher's head. And that's how the story ended. Just a small story.

'Is that all?' I asked immediately with a laugh, as soon as she spoke these last few words. I was disappointed with the abrupt ending, and the peremptory injustice of its finality. And yet, somehow, the tale itself has lingered stubbornly with me for a decade now.

Consider the picture of the whole that the story sketches in narrative form. This is an animate and articulate world, with diverse living beings speaking and acting together. They share a kinship founded on acts of care, the attentions with which one kind of being looks over into the life of another. And yet, we also see that there is something precarious about these relations, for they are easily turned against themselves, made to convey a far darker burden. These words and relations are bearers of affective force, dispersing currents of both hope and despair through the channels of an inhabited universe. They sustain the workings of a moral ecology, with the consequences of feeling and action enduring far beyond the span and life of individual dispositions and deeds. These consequences build unexpectedly as an expression of the world itself, cascading as a story that is already there to be told, and yet opening continually into unexpected lines of development. Even in the

darkness of this tale, in other words, we may detect a love of the world and its potential for growth.

The moral of the tale therefore lies not at the point of its closure—for indeed, to whom could responsibility be ascribed for the loss of the school?—but instead in the vertiginous course of its unfolding. And here is a lesson of some significance. Love of the world as it is—and not as it once was—is one of the most difficult challenges faced in contemporary ecological action. And anthropology itself has also been undertaken far too often as a postlapsarian endeavour, a reckoning of losses in the wake of an irreversible fall. Both ecology and anthropology, however, can be imagined and engaged instead as a process of becoming with the world and its accidents of consequence. Seen in this way, they may be understood to share a question that is ethical in nature: what kind of images and imaginations of the world and its others can we *live* with as terrestrial companions?

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