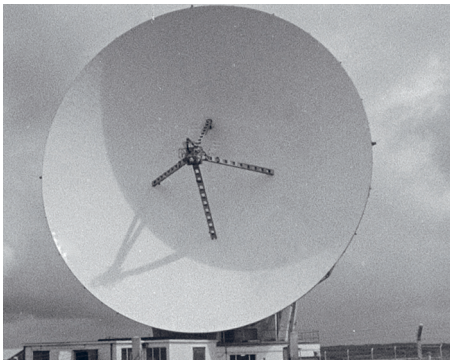
Planetary imagination



For the sources of these and subsequent stills from the South West Film and Television Archive see the notes on pages 92-93.

This publication brings together conversations recorded with Adom Getachew, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Shabaka Hutchings, between the summer of 2020 and the autumn of 2021. This was the time of the COVID pandemic and the conversations, all conducted online, took place in the thick of lockdown or in recent memory of it, and they informed my own growing preoccupation with the idea of 'planetarity', or the planetary which would also inform the first film installation I created for a museum context, *Planetary Imagination*, commissioned by The Box, Plymouth and the British Film Institute in 2022 and first exhibited at The Box in March 2023.

Stills for the installation, which are also included here, were sourced exclusively from the South West Film and Television Archive (SWFTA), which is housed at The Box. They brought together stories including an interview with science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, newsreel footage of South Asian refugees arriving in Somerset from Uganda in the early 1970s, and an interview with Elizabeth Prettejohn, the last resident of Hallsands, a village on the south coast of Devon that fell into the sea in January 1917.

Ashish Ghadiali

Adom Getachew is Neubauer Family Assistant Professor of Political Science and the College at the University of Chicago. In her first book *Worldmaking After Empire*[1], she challenges standard histories of decolonisation, which chart the story of a simple shift from empire to nation.1 Instead, she shows that supporters of decolonisation have always sought to create much more than nationalisms. They have engaged in a dynamic and rival system of revolutionary world-making, seeking an alternative system to replace the exploitative and hierarchical international system of empire, which is rooted in slavery and genocide. She charts this decolonial project from its literary roots, discusses the challenges it faced in the United Nations in the 1940s and 50s, and looks at the emergence of the New International Economic Order in the 1960s and 70s.

She identifies the problems that stemmed from the separation and later further divergence of the right of national self-determination and the human rights of the individual as enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The subsequent failure to resolve this contradiction undermined the vision of some anti-colonialists. As the 1973 global oil crisis took hold of the world economy, this created a political opportunity for the architects of neoliberalism to push back against the gains of the decolonial project and plant the seeds of a new world order. It has led to devastating levels of global inequality within states and across national borders, and has brought our planet to the brink of ecological catastrophe.

My sense, while reading this book, was of a twentieth century tradition now ripe to be reclaimed and revived. We will surely need to grasp the deep roots of our multiple crises if we are to be free of them and deliver a world to our children that is fit to inherit. It was for this reason that I was keen to invite Adom to explore the structure of the historical argument that she lays out in her book, and to uncover the lessons of this period for the anti-imperialist radicals of today.

1 et seq. see Notes on page 21

Worldmakers of the Black Atlantic

a conversation with Adom Getachew

Ashish Ghadiali *How did you come to be working on this material?*

Adom Getachew There are many origin stories I could tell about the book. One is that I grew up on the African continent. I was born in Ethiopia, and grew up there and then in Botswana until about High School, so I came to the United States fairly late. One thing about that childhood that I remember, especially in Botswana, was that I lived in a community of African expatriates —a kind of Pan-African community of friends. Obviously, at the time I didn't have the language for that, but I had friends who were Zimbabwean and Malawian and Ghanaian. I moved to the United States in 2001, just one month before 11 September, and so my whole time in the United States has been overshadowed by the resurgence of American imperialism. So one part of the motivation for the book is to try to think through that rise of American power in and against the kinds of politics of Pan-Africanism that I had experienced in that earlier moment. That's the biographical story.

From a more intellectual standpoint, I had noticed that a lot of other work on Black internationalism and Pan-Africanism focuses on the early twentieth century, especially the 1920s and 1930s, when there was a proliferation of black internationalist newspapers, organisations, periodicals, literary and cultural forms — and that narrative often ends around World War Two.

The inference is that those energies of Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism got absorbed into the creation of nation states.

So I wanted to think about what the afterlives of Pan-Africanism were, in the high point of decolonisation, after the Second World War. How did Pan-Africanism, or at least one version of Pan-Africanism, try to reshape the world?

Related to that was an attempt to make an intervention into how we tell the standard history of decolonisation during that thirty to forty year period after World War Two; we often think of this period as one of a gradual expansion of international society, when formerly colonial states in Asia and Africa and the Caribbean gradually got incorporated as sovereign equals of the international order. I wanted to question this story of progressive expansion, and to tell a more complicated story about what empire is: for example that empire had always included forms of subordinated inclusion and internal hierarchy within the international system, and that this was the real target of anti-colonial nationalists.

You talk about the importance of three books — Capitalism and Slavery *by Eric Williams,* The Black Jacobins *by C.L.R. James and* Black Reconstruction *by W.E.B. Du Bois — all published in the 1930s and early 1940s.*[2] *Is your argument that these three texts serve as a kind of literary forerunner of the decolonial movements that then took shape after the Second World War?*

What I focus on, in terms of the interwar period, is the fact that, especially by the 1930s, you begin to see an argument developing around a set of claims about the role of race in structuring the international order. One very specific insight, to do with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and connected to the status of Liberia and Haiti, is the recognition that even when a country is independent and ostensibly a member of the international community it is still subject to various forms of imperial domination.

The three books you mention zoom out from their specific local contexts to give us a historical account of the rise of the racialised world order; they share a story about new world slavery and the transatlantic slave trade as an originary moment of the modern world – that it is out of the experience of the transatlantic slave trade and new world slavery that you get the makings of capitalism and modernity in the west.

Du Bois and James both make the case that the colonial labour regimes of the twentieth century are in many ways marked by persisting structures of slavery. This would generate an argument by the 1940s that colonialism is slavery. These books also tell a story about black self-emancipation: abolition is not the story of humanitarian metropolitan actors, but is the story of the enslaved emancipating themselves. And James in particular, who writes *The Black Jacobins*, a history of the Haitian Revolution, as a way of foreshadowing very explicitly what he calls the African Revolution that he thinks is on the horizon.

So during this period, that's a new paradigm, a new position that's being articulated?

It's hard to claim that any one moment is where an idea emerges for the first time, because you can always see earlier versions, in this case various attempts to articulate the story of slavery as the foundation of the modern world, or to make a general argument that Europe's wealth is dependent on extraction and exploitation in the colonies. There are germs of that argument at least going back to the nineteenth century. I do think, though, that by the 1930s and 1940s, this set of arguments consolidates, especially for the Black Atlantic critics that I am discussing, and it generates a certain way of thinking about what the project of decolonisation should be.

Is that your phrase, Worldmaking?

It's a phrase others have used. But I use it in a specific way, to make the argument that that period of decolonisation wasn't just about the

formation of nation states and the project of nation building: it was a time when people really tried to think about how to remake the world, how to transform relations of hierarchy – the legal, political and economic hierarchies that structure the international order. So I discuss one moment of transformation –the emergence of a universal right of self-determination that's enshrined in the UN covenants–and the book also looks at other projects, such as the movement for regional federation and the campaign for a New International Economic Order. These are discussed as projects that were similarly pitched and pegged at the international level, or the level beyond the nation state.

Can you talk me through the precise connections? How did the literary or cultural contribution you describe come to have impact on the subsequent geopolitical processes of decolonisation that took shape in the years after the Second World War?

One of the interesting things about all the central figures of my book is that they are politicians as well as scholars, so that even as they are engaged in popular mobilisation and anticolonial movements or are in political power as prime ministers and presidents, they are still writing about politics and thinking things through. They are – as I guess we would call them now – scholar-activists.

Obviously, it's not only scholarship that facilitates or generates the politics of decolonisation. A number of things make the post-1945 moment an opportunity for anti-colonial politics to really take off. There is growing mass dissent in the colonies. In the late 1930s there were waves of strikes in the Caribbean and on the African continent. And these labour struggles became the occasion, in some cases very directly, for the emergence of nationalist parties – for instance the People's National Party of Jamaica emerges out of the 1938 labour strikes.

That party would be headed first by Norman Manley. And then in the 1970s, Michael Manley, his son, would become prime

minister as a member of the People's National Party. So, there is popular struggle on the ground that often begins as labour struggles but very soon is taken up as a kind of nationalist politics. Some of the leaders of decolonisation played a central role in leading those movements. Kwame Nkrumah, for instance, having studied in the United States and then joined George Padmore in London, where in 1945 he organised the Pan-African Congress, went back to Ghana to lead the nationalist movement and eventually became the first prime minister.

Then, as well as popular mobilisation and protest on the ground, there's a global conversation, just as there was after World War One, about what kind of world order should be brought about after another devastating war; and this conversation generated possibilities for intervening and using the international stage to begin to articulate arguments against racial hierarchy and colonialism. One central thread is that colonialism—especially in the black world but not just in the black world—was by now understood as a structure of extracting racialised labour. Racialised labour, clearly, refers to labour that's been deemed to be black, but more importantly it is labour that's subject to forms of extra-economic violence and coercion—historically connected to slavery but persisting long after slavery was formally abolished.

In 1945, the United Nations organisation met in San Francisco to finalise plans for the new UN organisation. A series of anti-colonial critics, including Du Bois, went to San Francisco in an attempt to secure the rights of colonised people within the UN; they were unsuccessful in 1945, but over the next decade and a half they carried on making the argument for the right to self-determination, and there was an important victory in 1960 when UN Resolution 1514, the UN Declaration of the Granting of Independence, was passed. This isn't Du Bois's direct victory, or the victory of those ideas from the interwar period. But you can see in the UN documents the ways in which those debates were

articulated as the basis of claiming – to justify the reason for – self-determination.

Can you tell me more about the relationship between this right of national self-determination and the arena of universal human rights that was being developed within the UN around this time?

In the founding documents of the UN, self-determination barely exists. It's mentioned twice in the UN Charter of 1945. But it's not named as a right, it's named as a principle, and it's named as a secondary principle that's subordinated to the goal of securing peace among nations. Self-determination, the word itself, does not appear in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948; in fact, as the Declaration of Human Rights was being drafted, Du Bois and the NAACP submitted an appeal to the world which charged the US with human rights violations.

However, as the number of independent Asian and African states in the General Assembly grew throughout the 1950s, there was an almost annual debate about the right to self-determination being included in the covenants on human rights. Because the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was not a binding document, between 1948 and 1960 a series of drafting committees drew up what would become the legally binding covenants. These are the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The victory in 1960 was a partial one however. For instance, the version of self-determination in the Declaration of the Granting of Independence tied self-determination to territorial integrity and reinforced sovereignty; and this generated a whole set of dilemmas about how the newly won sovereignty of third-world states was going to relate to the individual rights of new post-colonial citizens.

Beginning in the 1960s and certainly by the 1970s, liberal critics were making the argument that human rights were really about guarantees of the individual against the state. This was

very different from the way that third-world actors in the 1940s and 1950s had mobilised the language of human rights; they had made it the basis for the case for self-determination, and had made the argument that you needed independence or self-rule to secure human rights.

Samuel Moyn has written about the real take-off in the 1970s of what we know as the human rights movement – the rise of organisations like Amnesty International and other groups, focusing on human rights violations, and especially in the third world.[3] That coincided with the increasing deployment of human rights as a language for critiquing state power; and it also coincided with the rise of neoliberalism, and the deepening of international inequality both within states and among states. This language of human rights was often used as a critique of the newly independent countries.

Can you tell me more about the project of regional federation that emerged as a subsequent stage of this project of worldmaking?

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, both in the Caribbean and on the African continent, there were efforts to build regional federations—a West Indies Federation and a United States of Africa. Both of these were attempts to address what anti-colonial nationalists thought was a key dilemma of the postcolonial state. Namely, that the post-colonial state was a small state, often completely economically dependent on the global market and largely reliant on a single crop or a single commodity – such as cocoa in Ghana or bauxite in Jamaica. This made newly independent states subject to the arbitrary powers of the marketplace of the former metropolitan powers in such a way that independence was revealed as a completely meaningless and abstract category—a purely legal fiction—since they couldn't make plans for their political or economic futures.

This is what the imagination of federation was supposed to resolve. The regional federation project was an attempt to ask:

can we restructure our relationship with the international order, and especially with international markets, in such a way that we might be able to exercise meaningful independence? The vision was that by creating a larger internal market, you could have a consumer base, a market big enough to be more self-sufficient. But this also required regional economic planning that could restructure these economies so that they were producing the subsistence goods that the now larger internal market would actually need.

Critics of the federations project would always ask how countries within them could trade with each other when all of the Caribbean states produced the same thing—they all produced tropical goods. This is why Eric Williams and Kwame Nkrumah both argued for very strong federal states. They felt that with a federal state that was empowered to engage in economic planning, to engage in direct taxation, to be the dominant economic power within the region, you could gradually restructure these economies so that they were a unified market and produced goods that served the interests of the region and helped to enhance independence.

Why do you think the project for regional federations was defeated?

I argue that they were in part defeated because the vision of a highly centralised federal state became a source of a lot of anxiety on the part of other member states. In the African case, Nkrumah's plan for a United States of Africa never really got off the ground. It was very quickly criticised for having a vision that was too ambitious, and was too centralised to accommodate the independence and equality of all states.

Jamaican prime minister Norman Manley, though he was critical of the West Indian Federation (which was inaugurated in 1958), never fully rejected it. However, his domestic opposition, the Jamaican Labour Party, was highly critical of the federation

and, in ways very reminiscent of politics around the EU and Brexit, they began to make the argument that regional federation would eventually be a drain on Jamaica, which was the largest member of the federation. As a way of trying to appease this domestic opposition, Manley did two things. He argued for a more minimalist conception of the regional federation, and then he agreed to hold a referendum through which the Jamaican electorate could decide whether or not it wanted to be in the federation. The vote, in 1961, was in favour of exit from the federation, and this led to its collapse.

This coincided with an economic crisis caused by the declining terms of trade, which began in the mid-1960s. The prices of primary goods and raw materials that post-colonial states were selling on the international market were seriously decreasing—they were producing more but getting less for their production, and this generated all sorts of dilemmas. As developmental states, they needed foreign currency to buy the capital goods that they required for industrialisation and modernisation, so the decline in the value of their exports undermined their capacity to engage in much needed projects of social transformation. This illuminates again, and in stark fashion, the ways in which the post-colonial states remained very dependent on the global market.

Out of the ashes of this project of regional federation, something new emerged—the campaign for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Can you tell me more about its genesis and significance?

The New International Economic Order began from the fact of the deep economic inequalities in international trade. Its proponents, which included Michael Manley, prime minister of Jamaica, and Julius Nyerere, president of Tanzania, argued that there was an international division of labour analogous to the division of labour between capital and labour within the

metropolitan countries. Nyerere, for instance, used to say that third-world states were the workers of the world, that they ought to form a trade union of the poor countries. It was from this kind of thinking that the New International Economic Order—I call it a welfare world—emerges. The aim was to address these inequalities through reforming trade terms and adopting measures of international redistribution, in a way that mirrored some of the social democratic policies adopted by European countries during the postwar period. But, obviously, the big difference, on the international stage, was that there was no coercive apparatus that could generate the kind of social democracy seen in the thirty years after World War Two in western Europe and the United States.

In the absence of that, they tried to use indirect mechanisms to generate a more equal redistribution on the international stage. These included everything from enabling collective bargaining on prices for commodities through bauxite associations and coffee associations, modelled on OPEC, to schemes of trying to shore up prices for commodity goods. There was commodity financing to make up for shortfalls in the prices that these goods fetched on the market. There was an attempt to assert third-world sovereignty through what's called the permanent sovereignty over natural resources—which gives states the rights of nationalisation, for instance. And finally there was an attempt to make an international body of rules that would regulate multinational corporations and constrain their power on the world stage.

These are the features of the NIEO that would emerge in the early 1970s.

They sound great. But it didn't last?

No, the NIEO was also defeated.

What happened?

Once the crisis of the 1970s—the oil shocks—hit, whatever bargaining power third-world states had accumulated began to wane very rapidly. This is also the moment of the first emergence of the neoliberal vision of the global order—that very explicitly rejected and countered this vision of the NIEO.

The third world coalition also really begins to fray in this period, because it was very clear that all of these states, even though they're talking about themselves as the trade unions of the poor, as the working class, have actually occupied very different positions in the global economy.

For the oil producing countries, the OPEC countries, this was a period of boom, but for most of the third world, which has to buy oil on the world market, this was a huge crisis, especially due to the hikes in food prices that took place on the back of the oil price increases.

As well as the oil producer/oil seller division, there is also a deep division between larger economies in the third world like India and Brazil, and the much smaller economies, like Jamaica. A more critical third-world Marxist would say that the NIEO proposals were better suited to larger countries than smaller countries.

And one final, internal, limit of this NIEO strategy—which goes back to the question of collective state rights versus individual rights—was the idea that the states could be seen as the working class, which of course very much obscures the internal hierarchy of class within each of these countries. This is a period in which many third-world states were actively undermining independent trade union activity and organising.

So, although you acknowledge the active opposition to the NIEO of the neoliberal project, your argument is really that this moment of decolonial internationalism collapsed from within?

When we say that the neo-liberals won in the 1970s, I think it's important to note that they were able to exploit internal

tensions, the contradictions of the decolonial project, in order to ideologically and discursively undermine that project. So, for example, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a US senator and ambassador to the UN wrote an essay called 'The United States in Opposition', which made the argument that the US should very vocally and actively stand in opposition to the NIEO, and that one of the strategies for that opposition should be to exploit the hypocrisy of third-world states: third-world states were making arguments for international equality, and making all these demands on American resources, but look at the forms of hierarchy and authoritarianism that they are engaged in within their own countries.

So the critique of postcolonial authoritarianism undermined the moral and political purchase of the vision of equality, and I think that's a really important point. There are lessons for the left here, for thinking about organising at the level of the national and the international. The battle of the 1970s took place on the terrain of ideology as well as the geopolitical and material.

Let's talk more about lessons for the left in all of this. I'm thinking particularly about the context of climate breakdown and the devastating legacy of colonialism and slavery, and its deep impact on the resilience of economies and communities in the global south that find themselves on the frontlines of climate breakdown and without the means to mitigate against its worst effects. What can we learn, in the face of this crisis, from this story of the rise and fall of the NIEO?

On the question of climate change, I think this story is an ambivalent one, because the NIEO, and many of these actors more generally, saw development or modernisation as requiring continuous economic growth. They believed that an expanding pie would allow more of the world's people to share in that wealth. So, in the sense of commitment to economic growth as a model or vision of how you might achieve equality, it's not the story that we can continue to tell ourselves. Expanded economic

growth has not only fuelled inequality: it has also generated the conditions of climate extinction.

My own view, though, is that, had versions of the NIEO been realised, they would have created the mechanisms and precedents by which we could address a phenomenon like climate change. At least part of the NIEO's vision was the idea of developing institutional mechanisms for the regulation of the global economy. And part of what we are experiencing right now is the absence of any form of institutional mechanisms by which even the conversations about climate change can happen at the level of the international. In that sense, maybe the institutional forms we would have inherited had they been successful might have helped to support and facilitate the kind of interventions we need to make now.

Perhaps the most important lesson of that period for climate change politics is the ways in which those figures thought about the connection between the domestic and the international. They insisted that we were living in one world, that is unequal and divided, and that the poorest were having to bear the burdens of the richest. This is obviously an analysis that fits very easily into the discussion about climate change. The people who create the greatest emissions don't suffer the burdens of climate catastrophe. Those world makers also insisted that there was no domestic solution to the question of inequality or the question of global economy; that any vision of transformation would have to have a domestic or nation-building component and a world-making component—that you have to work at the two levels simultaneously.

I think you said in an interview with Jacobin *that if this vision, this kind of decolonial internationalism, was to be replicated today, it probably wouldn't happen at the level of nation states. Where is the agency in the world order now that might allow these lessons to be applied?*

I think this is the hardest question about the contemporary period. On the one hand, I think there are very exciting forms of revived left politics in many parts of the world, and that's one place where it has to start. But it seems to me that the task right now is to think about how you might connect struggles, and how you might build bridges of exchange and solidarity that facilitate this way of thinking at both the domestic and the international level. It's really striking to me, as a student of the early twentieth century, that in that period, with much more limited forms of communication and mobility, actors then somehow had a more global perspective.

Do you see any kind of a role for the state in that task of internationalist transformation?

I think it's more dynamic when it's not happening at the state level. In this story I've been telling, these sets of actors, both by choice and by default, had to act through the form of the state. Their version of internationalism, ultimately, is an internationalism of nation states, but I don't imagine that we could limit ourselves to that right now, nor should we.

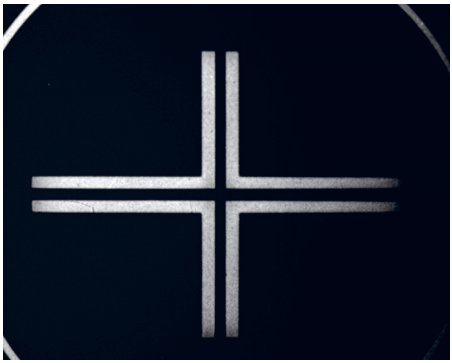
In the transition to the UN, there were forms of politics that these actors had been engaged in during the 1940s and 1950s that actually got narrowed by the contours of the state system. But it is very difficult. It feels like the scale of the problem we face and where we are in terms of our capacity on the left just don't seem adequate to the task of transformation. But the challenge is about connecting struggles. I don't think we can forego trying to intervene in the state system, given that we do inhabit a world of nation states. But certainly no form of left internationalism should ever limit itself to that realm.

Notes

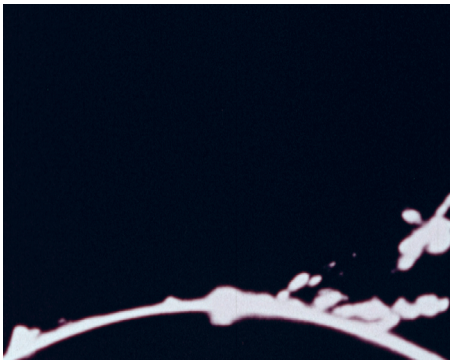
1 Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*, Princeton University Press 2019.

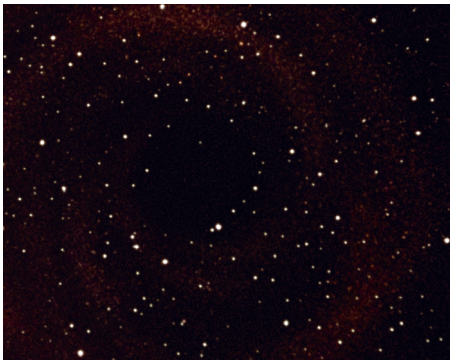
2 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, first published in 1944 by the University of North Carolina Press; C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, first published by Secker and Warburg in 1938; and W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, 1935.

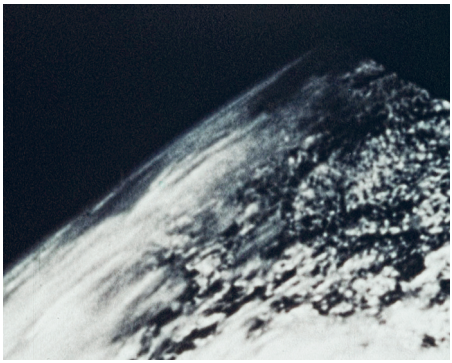
3 Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 2012; and *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*, Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 2018.

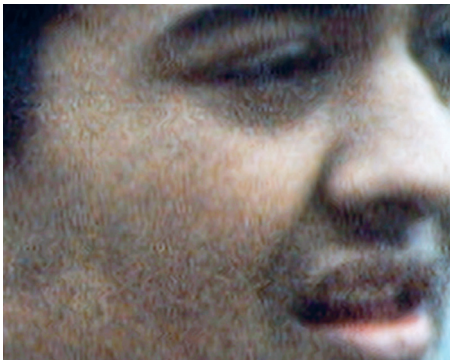



Mrs White, where do you come from?









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On the idea of the planetary

a conversation with Dipesh Chakrabaty

Ashish Ghadiali What is the concept of the planetary and, in terms of your intellectual trajectory, how did you come to it?

Dipesh Chakrabarty From the 1980s, and particularly from the 1990s, social scientists and humanist scholars, who've been studying colonialism, post-colonialism, questions of racial and other kinds of difference, have been focused on the global as a way of either understanding empires or understanding the local and understanding migration—understanding the global itself as an imperial arrangement, as Hardt and Negri would say.

For me, the planet as a category emerged from the interfacing of two concepts or two expressions: globalisation, of which the central category was globe and the phenomenon of global warming. Both use the word 'globe' but in quite different senses. It's really in exploring the differences between the 'globe' of globalisation and the 'globe' of global warming, that I felt in a way to rename that second globe the planet in order to make the distinction clearer between what I'm now calling the globe and the planet; once I made the distinction, I realised that in different contexts, both humans in general and purists in particular, have thought about the planet. It was not like I was the first person to use the word planet in planetarity, there have been other discussions of planetarity, but I developed my own under-

standing of it along particular lines. Really it was to indicate what happens to your thinking when you think about the process of globalisation and the process of global warming together, and the globe and the planet then for me became almost two vantage points from which to think about human history and the human condition in somewhat different ways.

What does happen to your thinking; what has happened to your thinking by holding those two distinct concepts?

First of all, I need to clarify that, even though I think of them as distinct concepts, they're not concepts opposed to each other. They don't constitute a binary opposition. So, it's not an either/or relationship. In fact, I argue that historically it's the intensification of the process of globalisation that creates the planetary perspective. So, in a way, the planet is an older entity historically than the global one but it becomes visible to us through an intensification, as we tunnel our way through globalisation, we see it. Whereas the object I'm calling planet existed before as an object of specialist knowledge, like geologists or earth systems scientists or astronomers or others who would have thought about it differently.

Going back to your question, what's the difference? There are many differences, but the key ones are these: the global makes me think of the story of how humans came to understand that the thing we live on is almost spherical and how we have made the sphere our domain of activity. It's a story of Europeans inventing the technology to make ships that could negotiate the deep oceans, so that they could then go to other peoples' land and take it or steal their bodies as labour or set up factories or set up trade connections. So, the global is fundamentally a story of how we created this world, that we converted the planet into a spherical human domain, at the centre of which are the stories of technology, empires, capitalism, inequality, those sorts of questions—and race is fundamental.

Some people now argue that the technology has become such a driver of human history that a) it connects us all over the world in different ways, and b) one might now conceptualise even the planet in terms of there being an ethosphere, the rocky surface of the planet, a biosphere where life occurs, an atmosphere, a troposphere, a pseudosphere; but they said we should also imagine a thin technosphere surrounding this planet. And they argue that without the technosphere, it would be impossible to sustain the lives of eight billion human beings or ten billion human beings. One of the calculations suggested if you took away all this technology that's developed over 500 years, the human population would crush to about ten or eleven million. So, their argument is that technology has become the pre-condition for biology.

Is that a position that you agree with?

It's a persuasive position. I'm not a technosphere specialist to be able to controvert the proposition in a way that somebody else studying technology and the history of it might, but clearly, if you include medicine in technology and public health as part of that technology, so if you include the invention of the microscope without which microbes would not have been seen, then clearly it makes sense to think of technology in that broad sense as supporting so many lives. Because the amazing thing about human population is that we were about 1.6 billion at 1900 and in 100 years we went up to six billion. Homo Sapiens has been around, they say, for 300,000 years. It took us almost that period to get to one billion, and then we suddenly jump to six billion and then to eight now, maybe nine or ten before we stabilise. And now humans live longer. I was recently reading something about colonial Calcutta and privileged people, wealthy people were dying at 39, 41, 49. Somebody who lived up to 60 was seen as having a very good constitution. So, if you think of the expanded longevity of the privileged alone, clearly public health, medical technology, all of these things have had something to do with it.

The global is a story about what human beings have done, to each other as well as to the planet, to nature. It's a human-centric story, but what happens through the intensification of globalisation, and part of the story of that intensification which interests me a great deal is the Cold War, the competition in space and the interest in the state of the atmosphere. There is a rise of atmospheric sciences, both in the Soviet Union just before and after the war, and in the US. This has to do partly with the explosion of nuclear bombs: people were interested in the radiation fallout and measuring that, partly to do with the competition in space which had military implications and partly to do with the interest in the Soviet Union. The Americans also had an interest in weaponising weather, in experimenting with droughts, floods, if you could cause these things in your enemy's state.

NASA was very much a part of this. In 1960, the British chemist James Lovelock, the Gaia man, joined Carl Sagan's unit and worked there from, I think, 1961 to 1966, and one of their projects was to find out if Mars could be made inhabitable for humans, if Mars could be colonised or not. That led to a very interesting question among scientists, mostly not biologists but then, of course, biologists joined them, like Lynn Margulis, Carl Sagan's wife. One question that came up was, so what is life and how does a planet become friendly to life? And the only planet they could study to answer this question, even though they were applying the question to another planet, was this planet because we don't know of any other planet empirically that sustained life over such a long period of time. They began to look at life on earth and this question of what sustains life on earth as a way of thinking about what might sustain life on Mars. So, in a way, Earth became part of a comparative study of planets. If you can think of something called comparative planetology, then this question arose: why is this the Goldilocks planet? Venus is so hot, Mars is so cold, but we seem to be just right. And when you

investigate that question, you realise that, in a way, different forms of life play their role in maintaining complex life. One of the things that they talked about a lot is the nature of our atmosphere and the fact that we survive because oxygen is 21% of the atmosphere. People who died in the pandemic did so because of breathing problems, they didn't get enough oxygen. We are oxygen-breathing animals, the atmosphere is critical. And they worked out that the atmosphere has maintained oxygen roughly at that level to sustain oxygen breathing animals or even plants or creatures for 375 million years.

So clearly, this atmosphere that we depend on so critically wasn't created with us in view, it was created by different forms of life. It's still maintained by different forms of life like planktons, fungi or bacteria or plants, forms of life that humans normally have considered inferior forms of life. And it's amazing to see that they keep supplying the air with fresh oxygen, because oxygen chemically is very reactive—it doesn't stay as oxygen. You have to keep supplying the air with oxygen. For instance, if we heated up the planet so much that the average temperature of the sea is warmed by an extra six degrees Celsius, the planktons would die, the phytoplanktons, which would be shutting off the source of the oxygen for ourselves. And to get to this, technology was critical to the story of space exploration, satellite data, but also through ancient air bubbles getting to know that the carbon dioxide concentration in the air is now the highest it's been in 800,000 years and the only way you could reach the bubbles was by boring into polar icecaps because you get this trapped air, ancient air, but how do you bore the icecaps? With the same technology that the oil companies use. So, you can see the technology that's helped to create global warming has also been used in finding out data about ancient air.

That's why I say that it's the intensification of globalisation that led to this realisation that there are processes that we might think of as planetary, which are both geological and biological in

nature, and that work in tandem to keep life going, which doesn't mean that it's eternally stable because it lurches from one condition to another. It goes through extinctions of major forms of life, but you suddenly realise that there is this entity which is active, dynamic, almost systemic. And NASA created a committee called Earth System Science in 1983. So, it's this earth as system that I call the planet and the point is that the planet in its construction—and these are both human constructions, humans have thought up these categories—but the global is a category too, in which the humans are central because it's all about what humans do to each other and what they do to nature. The planet, the earth system, is a category which then decentres humans because in the story of geology and in the story of the evolution of life, humans come so late that you can't make humans the centre of the story.

So, fundamentally, the difference that you're describing is one of perspective?

I'm not a scientist. I read geologists and biologists and earth system scientists as kind of fellow historians who work with different archives, different methods. What I take from them are the conclusions on which they have provisionally agreed in spite of all the internal debates, and I take that to then create two perspectival vantage points. One is human centric, the other decentres humans. One asks questions exclusively about humans and what they do to each other. The other actually tells the same story about humans but decentring them. It also tells the story of how the planet works. And the scales of time are very different, the global is 500 years old, the planetary is as old as the age of the earth and you have to remember that oxygen was toxic for the first creatures. Oxygen did not become an important part of the earth's atmosphere until two billion years ago, and so many creatures, the nitrogen-fixing bacteria, had to either die or dive underground. Sometimes scientists call that oxygenation event

the oxygen holocaust. If you looked at the story of the oxygen in the air from our point of view, it's a blessing; but if you look at it from the point of view of bacteria that subsisted mainly on nitrogen, it was a holocaust. It is about perspective.

And for you that relativity, what does that breed in terms of temperament?

The first experience was, honestly, surprise and shock because in the story we tell under the rubric of globalisation, whether we tell a story about racism, struggle against racism, struggle for socialism, struggle for human rights, struggle for democracy—and I was a historian completely of that stable, I was not trained to be a scientist, I did some undergraduate science... the experience was, first of all, recognition that we have taken the world for granted, that the everyday given-ness of the world, you wake up and this tree stands in the same place and the mountains stand in the same place, this realisation that to take this as given, to take the world as given as it seems to me was fine so long as humans themselves had not become a geological force, capable of changing the landscape of this planet.

Let me explain it this way. Take an artefact as common as a tourist guidebook, then what will it do? It will tell generations of tourist travellers, let's say since the coming of Thomas Cook, so over the last hundred-something years, it has told people to go and visit the same sites again and again, go to that beach, that mountain's beautiful, because in human terms we take all that to be stable. But when your timescale expands, you suddenly realise how restless this planet is and all that you take to be stable is very unstable and when you remember the instability of it, of mountains for instance, you remember it today because of the crisis that this attitude of taking it for granted has produced. My example of that is the Himalayas. There are so many projects, India alone has more than a thousand projects of blasting the mountains, either to create dams or bridges or roads or whatever,

that all the nations that possess the Himalayas—China and India in the main—are carrying out, and the kind of problems that they're producing for human beings today, landslides, avalanches, those crises remind you that the Himalayas are a young mountain range. It's growing every year because the Indian plate hits the Asian plate. It reminds you of all this geology, the crisis reminds you that you have to keep in mind that it's a very active mountain and if you keep blasting it, then your blast can multiply or act in sync with the instability of the mountain because of its youth.

In my book I quote Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein has a wonderful saying; humans look at a building and say how old is it? Why don't we ever ask it of a mountain? That's because when we think of a mountain, for our purposes, it doesn't matter, it's always there. It's that kind of scale of shift that the globe and the planet does, and I suddenly began to see that unless we realise our geological agency and the geomorphological role we play that is changing the landscape of the planet, we won't realise the depth of the predicament that we're in, that goes by the name of climate change or global warming. It's a profound predicament that human beings have fallen into. That's why I say that the human condition has changed.

What do you mean when you say that the human condition has changed? And what can this awareness that you're describing point us towards in terms of tackling the climate crisis?

In terms of the human condition changing, one easy way of describing that would be to go to Hannah Arendt's book, *The Human Condition*, which was written in the shadow of the Russian Sputnik going up. Arendt ends the book thinking of the Sputnik. What does it mean that human beings are looking at space? The first in human history, desiring to be somewhere else and she actually says, now we have a guarantee that the species won't go extinct, even though we might suffer from alienation

because we're earthlings. So, just in the way that when migrants travel—where's your family from?

Gujarat.

So, your family travelled obviously in a generation earlier to yours as you have a pukka English accent, and in my family I'm the first-generation migrant. And every migrant family goes through the experience, or most do, of seeing their children lose their language. The first-generation experiences that. There's a sense of loss involved with it, but we think of it as a trade-off. We think England doesn't feel like my country, but my child will be better able to adjust to it and maybe my child will have a better life than I did. And there are these small pains that parental generations endure and think of as trade-offs we have made.

Similarly, Hannah Arendt was thinking human species will be making a trade-off, we'll miss the earth, but we'll survive. Whereas today the question has become an existential question, will we survive? Because in taking the world for granted with our scale of technology, what we're also doing is hastening species extinction. Some people say there might be the sixth great extinction in 300 to 600 years' time. Some people argue that we're already in the first phase of it because 300 to 600 years is nothing in geological time, it's a moment. And the experience of every extinction is that when the extinction happens, the dominant species may not go totally extinct. It might mutate. Dinosaurs survived as birds, the avian dinosaurs, but it doesn't dominate anymore. So, instead of the moment of the Sputnik when Hannah Arendt thinks, I can think of it as a trade-off, I think now we're in a moment where there are no trade-offs. Elon Musk might go to Mars, but I don't think the solution actually exists because it's not obvious that Mars is habitable, or will be. That's why I say the predicament is deep because the global expansion of humanity, for all the internal inequalities and battles and racism and class warfare and casteism and all of those things that have

marked it, have also spoken to certain human notions of welfare, wellbeing, flourishing. If you look at the number of humans who consume, purchase consumer gadgets, if you think of them as the global consuming middle class; so again, interestingly, we reached the figure one billion in 1986 or 1985 and it took 21 years to add the second billion. Then it took nine years to add the third billion and seven to add the fourth. So, you can see that, not only are more people living better but they're doing so faster and faster, and all this has an impact on other forms of life.

The pandemic is an example of what this kind of expansive, extractive, human flourishing does to the planet. It destroys the habitats of wildlife. Most animals know to avoid humans, so when we get diseases from them today, we get them because we force them to come close to us because we force them to lose their habitats. 70% or 75% of the new infectious diseases of the last 20 years have been zoonotic, have come from wild animals and the destruction of forests has a lot to do with it. In a way, what's happened over the last 200 years, humans have lived so well or as well as they've ever done before and if you could bracket the climate crisis and then the pandemic, then a thinker like Steve Pinker from Harvard would say, fantastic, our intelligence will solve our problems. We're a very clever species, technology will solve all problems, don't worry about this, we're doing better and better. But if you're not a Steve Pinker, and if you take these other crises seriously and what earth system scientists are writing about history, then you realise that we are in a deep, deep predicament because you can't ignore the question of human wellbeing but at the same time, you can't afford this cost that we're currently paying to live well.

It sounds to me like you're describing in macro terms a moment of crisis and in a language that we can grasp the nature of the crisis that we're in. It sounds to me as though this is also coming out of an experience of crisis. You talk about your own training. I know that by

background, you're a Marxist historian, and as you've articulated, this is terrain that is far from your background. I'd love you to tell me the story of the moment of that rupture.

Personally speaking, the rupture happened in 2003. I was not a student of climate science before then, and if you ask what made me go to this side, it was a very personal experience: I went to Australia at the end of 1976. I was born in Calcutta. I'd grown up in Calcutta. I didn't belong to a family that dreamt of sending their children overseas. I had a very middle-class family. My parents' dream for me would have been to have a good job, own a car, be affluent, but to be in Calcutta and look after them and live with them; and part of that was my desire too, but other things happened. So, I went to Australia to do my PhD and went to a city that couldn't have been more different from Calcutta: Canberra. Calcutta was so many millions of people, Canberra had 200,000 people. Calcutta was chaotic, ramshackle, trams and Canberra was picture-postcard clean, squeaky clean, the sky was a wonderful blue.

The wonderful thing about Canberra was what Australians call the bush, nature or hills where you could go hiking, it runs through the entire city. The city is built around it, the suburbs are built around these mountains. Almost every suburb has a mountain at the back, a hill, and you can go for a walk in the morning and it's beautiful and there are nature spots. My Australian friends were all into the outdoors, so they helped me discover something that I'd never discovered in my Bengali life in Calcutta, something called nature, outdoors nature. Nature that I loved in Calcutta was in poetry, on screen, but not something that I'd actually experienced. Then, in 2003, a horrendous fire burned about 300 houses in Canberra, killed quite a few people, destroyed all the nature spots and killed a lot of the birds and the animals. Canberra had beautiful birds, it was like a bird sanctuary, and I felt totally bereft.

I had moved to Chicago in 1995. ANU offered me a series of visiting positions for about 20 years. I used to go back to Canberra every year and then I would drive to a waterfall, I'd go to these spots and take friends, take visitors. Leaving Chicago in the summer was like my journey into nature and to see all that burned down and look like scenes out of *Mad Max* always gave me a deep, deep sense of loss and bereavement and grief. And people were scared of what was going to happen. There was a huge drought in Australia, there was water scarcity, water was rationed, you couldn't water your garden and I saw Australians being scared. They were saying, maybe the land is too dry and do we have to go somewhere else to live? Do we have to become a water importing nation? And that increased worries about security and war. I saw a white, relatively affluent nation become totally scared and it became, eventually in 2007, an electoral issue that brought Kevin Rudd as the Prime Minister in Australia signing the Kyoto Protocol, which they hadn't done then but I'm still talking about 2003.

Australia has a good number of excellent environmental historians and when you go to Australia, it's very hard to ignore knowledge about the land. It just comes to you. I knew that Australia had cyclical wildfires because the gum trees need fires to regenerate themselves, so there had been prehistoric fires. I went to my friends and I asked, but why were these fires so bad? And they said, this is not an ordinary drought, this is climate change and I said, what's climate change? And then I began to read up and what blew me away was the statement by many scientists that humans had become a geological agent. I'd grown up on EP Thompson and the social history of the 1960s, Subaltern Studies where we talked about looking at women as the agents of their histories, peasants as the agents of their histories. Now, that word 'agent' meant your capacity for autonomy, your capacity to project yourself programmatically out of yourself onto the world to do something. But a geological agent, the word 'agent' has a

very different meaning. It means almost a Newtonian force and I thought, wow, these are the same words, two different meanings.

So, that's how I came into it. I couldn't help thinking through the consequences of this realisation as a historian and I wrote up whatever I felt, thinking about these consequences. I wrote in my mother tongue actually, in Bengali, first because I'd promised an old teacher of mine in Calcutta that I'd write something for his magazine every year. So, I submitted this essay and he published it and my friends in Subaltern Studies were there and said we don't think about these things, it's interesting but not our problem. It kind of sank without a trace.

Then I came back to America and I was then on the editorial board of this journal called *Critical Inquiry in the Humanities* and the editor came to me and said, we're short of articles, do you have something you can give to us? And so I wrote it up in English and added more footnotes and made it more academic than the Bengali article and people were immediately interested—in Europe, Turkey, China, Latin America. So many languages the article got translated into and then, while I got a lot of appreciation, I also ran into a maelstrom of criticism, with people saying, what's this got to do with history, why is he interested in species? This is all about capitalism. I had spoken about capitalism and its role and I'd said that capitalism is the rabbit hole through which we fell into this predicament. So, I hadn't ignored capitalism, I even said that climate change will increase inequalities, exacerbate them, but then I'd also said that we have to talk about the deep history, the history of us as a species and our relationship to other species, and many Marxists took umbrage at that and they thought that to talk about species was to sidestep the question of who was responsible for greenhouse gas emissions. Obviously the rich people and the rich nations were. So, I got intellectually pummeled. But I still didn't give up because I thought there's something about this exposure to deep history that these guys are not acknowledging.

So, in arguing my position, I eventually came to the globe-planet distinction. Other people helped me, Catherine Malabou, the French philosopher, wrote a very good critique of my article and there was the Harvard historian Dan Smail's book, *On Deep History and the Brain*. In her critique Catherine Malabou was saying the two words—globe and globalisation—don't mean the same thing. So those things kind of acted as the first sparks of ignition, but eventually I developed this idea of the planet, mainly by reading into earth systems science. The planet is very much what they call the earth system. Bruno Latour and Tim Lenton following James Lovelock call it Gaia. (There are interesting differences between earth systems and Gaia.)

Has the pushback from the orthodox left let up now that the climate crisis has been mainstreamed in a way that it wasn't in 2003?

Well, as the crisis gets deeper, it also becomes more urgent in a practical sense. And as Michael Mann, the climate scientist, says in his book, if you really think that we have to get rid of capitalism in order to deal with the climate problem, then the climate problem is not urgent enough for you because we don't know when we'll be rid of capitalism but this problem is here. Also, now that the book is out and I've had some discussions, it's also clear that some people are seeing more of my point, that I was not denying the role of capitalism or the role of inequalities. I also find that in the social sciences or in the humanities there are two kinds of deeply personal relationships to knowledge. Some people, once they come to an understanding of the world that they're comfortable with, basically want the world to go on affirming the understanding they've reached, and that's a deeply personal thing. I'm not blaming them, I'm not belittling them. I'm saying your relationship to the knowledge you have is a deeply personal relationship. So, every time something happens, they go back and work on their Marxism. They might tinker with it but their project really is to update Marxism.

Whereas, for whatever reason temperamentally, I love it when the world ambushes me and shows some holes in my understanding because I feel psychologically, and again I'm not defending myself, I'm just sharing my temperament, but if you told me to live with the same understanding for the remaining years of my life, I would feel imprisoned. I would find that to be a trap, because I operate from the assumption that nobody gets it right. We never fully understand it– 'it' meaning everything else, everything that's around you, including yourself, your body, everything. I think, therefore, understanding is a constant struggle and one has to be open and be positive about the moments when your understanding breaks down; and for me 2003 was a moment like that.

You talk about race, caste and class in terms of the body, in terms of the planetary body in your book. Are you attempting to bridge the language of the planetary and relation?

A massive amount of help came to me from personal discussion with Rohith Vemula, who himself was a very interested reader of Carl Sagan. So, he himself had a scientific cosmological perspective in which he knew that his own body, which the Brahmins felt disgusted about, was actually made up, like the Brahmin's body, of ancient molecules. He said, I'm made of ancient stardust, the glory of ancient stardust.

One of the fascinating things that people study and talk about—my friend, Julia Adeney Thomas, was the first to bring it to our attention—is the whole question of the human body and the microbiome inside your body and the fact that your body is a kind of a nodal point for zillions of microbes. Microbes make up the majority of forms of life by weight of numbers. So, I wanted to bring that knowledge to bear upon the very humanistic knowledge of inequality, caste and race. Caste and race are not the same thing, but they're connected in particular ways. So, I was trying to do that in that chapter, but also trying to recognise

the Indian practice of untouchability, as a very perverse way of recognising the connection between human bodies and the world of bacteria, the world of death and dead bodies. So, Dalits produced disgust in the Brahmins, structurally, because they deal with either faeces, which is about bacteria and stuff, waste products, or dead products of life and, in a way, in consigning that task, relegating that task to a particular group of humans, it's like the Brahmins have this absurd attempt to separate ourselves from everything that is inside the body and outside. There's a peculiar perverse recognition of the connectivity and the point in my book is that we're becoming aware of this connectivity over the last 30-40 years, medically and in every other way. If you have an ulcer, nobody's going to blame you, people are going to treat the microbiome for it. We have known for a while, but we don't know how to politicise it.

So, in the political world, you still think of a Lockean 'person', you think of people as culpable. But we're becoming aware of this connectivity and Latour and Isabelle Stengers and Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway—these are all people trying to give us a language to bring this within the fold of the political. It hasn't happened yet and it's damn difficult to do because the political has come out of very human constructions, of time-space relationships, and the political itself is so human-centric that we don't know how to make that which is not human-centric also political.

You've mentioned Vemula but you also write about Tagore. I was particularly interested to understand more from you about the significance of Tagore.

Tagore, as you know, was a highly privileged person. By caste the family were Brahmins. They didn't acknowledge caste and also because the family had had some marital transactions with Muslims, they were called Pirali Brahmins—'Pirali' was added to the Brahmin category. But he was a clearly high-status person

and he was engaged in this debate where he had once claimed that, while the sea did not know about him, he knew about the sea, intimately. He was acknowledging the sense of connection but in a poetic cosmological register. And Rohith Vemula, coming from his experience of being treated as Dalit, comes to a cosmological perspective through Carl Sagan and his readings into scientific cosmology, but they're both using cosmology to dissolve the humanistic ego in them. They're acknowledging a bigger connectivity and trying to situate themselves as part of the connectivity. So I was saying, in that chapter of my book, that Tagore is registering on a poetic note with his connectivity. Vemula is registering it on an emancipatory note, that I want to be emancipated, but they're both pointing to a connectivity which we're now increasingly recognising as factually true.

Your microbiome even has a role in producing the chemicals that produce the feelings you feel. So, as Bruno Latour says jokingly, you think you're craving chocolate—it's actually your microbiome wanting some chocolate. We're becoming aware of these things. But we still don't know how to bring it into the political. People are trying. People are trying to extend human notions of rights, but it's not unproblematic. It creates other problems of who becomes the spokesperson. If you give human notions of rights to fish or animals or to rocks and stones, do you legislatively create permanent minorities, because they can't vote?

There are all kinds of political theoretical problems. We're at a fascinating moment in human history, where the knowledge of our connectivity is accumulating, increasing. Even the pandemic is a peculiar, negative way of finding it out. If you look at the pandemic, the crisis it produced was a very human political crisis, a problem of management. Should it be globally managed? Should it be nationally managed? These are all crises of sovereignty, the crisis of biopower that Foucault talked about. But at the same time, it's true that your body and my body has become

an evolutionary pathway for the virus, and it's true medically that every time we've tried to deal with viruses and bacteria, the very means we have invented to deal with them have produced new evolutionary pathways for them because that's how you get antibiotic resistant bacteria.

There is a history of life unfolding and we're at the interface of biopower which contributes to human welfare and life in general, what Giorgio Agamben would call 'zoe', the 'bare' of productive life. The pandemic is right at this interface. And the fact that we've become the evolutionary pathway —new variants—means we're in the middle of an event in the history of life. But our political discourse is really about management, and that shows the limit of the political and how the planetary and the deep historical constitutes a limit at the moment to our political imagination, and that's what Bruno Latour and others were trying to break down.

So, where does it point us?

The difference between Latour's position and mine would be that, in my reading, Latour, for instance in his book on *Politics of Nature*, designs a space—the parliament of things or whatever—where we want to be, and my point is to say that I totally agree with the vision of this space. I don't know how to get there. And that partly is a historical task that has to be created through our arguments, through our discussion of particular projects in particular places. I don't think there's a grand highway that's going to open up. Human beings will get there because we are a species that eventually learns. We may not learn immediately, we learn through suffering, we learn through having lost. But we learn, it's not that we don't learn. Sometimes in our terms, the learning happens at a glacial pace. We'll get there but at the moment I sometimes, respectfully, think of Latour's text as Thomas More's *Utopia* for our times. We do need these visionaries.

But my project is really to map out the predicament, to understand the shift in the human condition from Hannah Arendt. If you think of ourselves as partaking differentially of the human condition, the changed human condition, if we acknowledge that, then we can still go on arguing about the differences, our political differences. So, in various ways, it's a question of where do you find the ground for coming together, without giving up on the differences that you want to fight for?

In the book I say I'm trying to produce a new philosophical anthropology. At the end of chapter one I say, following Kant, that I'm not trying to solve the problem, I'm not trying to create policy and I'm not an activist in this book. I'm not thinking as an activist. Nor am I going into the question of what we can get from religion, although I touch on that in the last chapter a little bit in terms of spirituality and reverence. I'm really trying to understand the shift in the human condition, and it seems to me that the more we acknowledge the depth of this predicament, then the more we acknowledge our desire to flourish, and I don't make little of that desire. At the same time, how do we flourish as human beings without creating this problem for ourselves? And there we have to acknowledge what kind of connections we had that become innate, that we have become a dominant species—and there's another way to come to the same problem.

I raise the question that if we're a minority form of life and let's say the microbes are the majority forms of life, but we're in a situation where we dominate the hell out of them because we make other life forms go extinct and stuff, then if you thought about it politically in purely human terms, then it's a bit like South Africa in apartheid times when a small white minority dominated the huge black majority. Or if you look at the way we gain knowledge about bacteria and viruses and some of these little things, you'll find that we gain knowledge about them in order to control them, in order to defeat them, in order to manage them. If bacteria and viruses were human beings, then

you'd call it colonial knowledge but they're not human beings. I'm not saying that the knowledge is unnecessary, but you can see the problem that if similar things were happening between human beings, we could easily politicise them. You could easily say we need to develop minoritarian forms of thinking or this is not the way to know our people, just to manage them, that's orientalism. But that's exactly what we do with respect to other forms of life.

So, if you say we have to extend these categories to that domain, then I'll say fine but I'm again coming back to my proposition, that you're at the limit of the political in dealing with these things. I'm still trying to think my way through the question of how to develop minoritarian forms of thinking at a species level, at a human level. What would it mean? I'm trying to learn from people who have thought about minoritarian forms of thinking intrahumanly.

Is that what you're working on next?

Working would be glorifying, but I'm thinking about it, yes. I'm not working on a big project, but I'm trying to think my way through some of these problems and the problems that the book ends with—and giving lectures. I'm just trying to take my thinking a step forward.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs is a writer, independent scholar, poet, activist and educator, and between 2017 and 2019 was Winton Chair in the Liberal Arts in the department of Theatre, Art and Dance at the University of Minnesota. At the time of this interview, in the summer of 2021, she was the author of three books of poetry that comprise a triptych, engaging with the works of Black feminist scholars. Those books are *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, *M Archive: After the End of the World* and *Dub: Finding Ceremony*, all published by Duke University Press. Alexis had also recently authored a brilliant work of non-fiction called *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, published by A.K. Press, which was what brought us together and where we started our conversation. Her most recent publication, *The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde: Biography as Ceremony*, was published in the US by Farrar, Straus and Giroux and by Penguin in the UK.

Lesson on liberation

a conversation with Alexis Pauline Gumbs

Ashish Ghadiali *We've been corresponding for a while and I don't think we ever named your locations. Where have you been writing?*

Alexis Pauline Gumbs I've mostly been here in Durham, North Carolina. I had a Fellowship at the National Humanities Centre which is also here in Durham this past year. So I've mostly been here writing while we've been corresponding, but I did get to go to Anguilla, which is an ancestral home of mine and a spiritual place for me, and I just got back from there a week ago. There was a really beautiful miraculous declaration by the Anguilla Literary Festival. It's a wonderful festival which values and brings together writers from all over the world and all over the region of the Caribbean. I think there's a certain pride in writers who are from Anguilla or who are Anguillian granddaughters like me. It means a lot to me.

Shall we talk about seals? I feel like seals are possibly what brought us together.

Yeah, let's talk about seals. It's interesting because I first started researching and writing about marine mammals because of whale songs. I was listening to whales and that's actually what led me; in fact I went to the Aquarium of the Pacific and they had this digital archive of different whale sounds and songs that were really amazing. But when I was there, I started to buy these

guidebooks about marine mammals. Of course, seals are marine mammals. And I wrote about marine mammals for a long time, but the first time I decided to share something that I wrote about marine mammals, which ended up being the first post of the collection of posts that became *Undrowned*, was about the hooded seal. Mothering is an important research focus and dynamic in the world that I study and I think there was something about—that first piece was right before Mothers' Day—and it was about how fat-rich the milk of seal mothers is and that a hooded seal could travel the whole world. They have what they need in this profound way that has to do with that adaptation, that particular adaptation, not unique to hooded seals but among seals, of this profound offering in the first few weeks of a seal's life, and there was something about that that was important.

Sometimes they call hooded seals vagrant juveniles but they can be anywhere on the planet, they have that capacity because of fat and they get that initial fat from this transfer with their mothers. I thought that there's something about that that I need to remember, that I have what I need, or that whatever the offerings have been from those people who've nurtured me, they might actually be more than I think they are, especially if I have outstanding expectations or I'm like, but what about now, or what if our relationship isn't ideal now or living into some kind of narrative now, what would it mean to actually focus on the fat and the capacity and the transfer?

A lot of the writing I ended up doing about seals does look at that. It looks at the mothering relationships of seals and especially the perspective of young seals becoming seals and learning to adapt. To me there's an intimacy to each of the pieces about seals. I wrote about my father in terms of a Caribbean monk seal, learning about the extinct Caribbean monk seal and then how tied-in the blubber of seals, in particular, is to the plantation economy in the Caribbean. That was so important for me to be able to understand.

Part of the work of *Undrowned* was to understand how colonialism and enslavement impacted multiple beings and multiple species at the same time, and that actually I want to be in kinship with all of that and I want to be in solidarity and honouring with all of that resistance, and also the loss and also the depth of what there still is to be reckoned with. I never grew up thinking about the extinction of the Caribbean monk seal as one of the horrific outcomes of enslavement and colonialism in the Caribbean but, in fact, that is a part of it and without that piece of it, the other pieces of it would not have been possible.

Could you unpack that a little bit more? What's the significance in your research and writing of the Caribbean monk seal?

The Caribbean monk seal, the scientific community agrees, is an extinct species of seal. The closest relative to it is another monk seal, the Hawaiian monk seal, and they also are endangered right now. In my research, what I learned was that the reason that Caribbean monk seals are extinct is because right at the beginning of colonialism, when Christopher Columbus and his crew arrived in the Caribbean, they hunted monk seals. They were easy prey, the story goes, because they were curious, because they weren't afraid and running away from some people who may not have been super great hunters in the conditions that they were in, they were the easiest to catch.

Across the Caribbean a plantation economy was being set up and, in particular, the sugar cane plantations that are still operating in some areas of the Caribbean. The oil from the blubber of the monk seal was used to lubricate the continually moving parts of that, because in order for a sugar cane refinery to function, there has to be this heat and it has to be constantly moving; so either human beings or oxen in certain cases are pushing this circle. There's a fire under it and there's this vat of the sugar that's being melted into molasses but if it crystalizes and sticks to the thing, it's all over. It has to be able to

continuously turn, which is part of the horrific labour conditions that exist in sugar processing to this very moment, but it's also part of this need for lubrication.

And so that blubber, that source of oil was what they used and there was a constant need for that, and it was absolutely not sustainable in terms of the population of Caribbean monk seals on any island and is what led to them being so severely endangered. By the time scientists started naming endangered species, it's possible that the Caribbean monk seal was actually already extinct. It's one of the earliest but also lasting impacts of the extraction of the Caribbean landscape and environment for profit.

You've spoken and written about the connection between that story and your dad, can you say a bit more about that?

This is what happened with every single study of marine mammals that I was able to engage. There was something drawing me in and I had to figure out what that was. Sylvia Wynter talks about the need for socio-poetics, a way to just have a 'we' that needs no 'other'; and of course, I feel my otherness from Caribbean monk seals and not having the same experience as a Caribbean monk seal did and yet there was something familiar. What do I know about that form of being that is curious, that is actually vulnerable to harm because of how other people relate to and take advantage of their curiosity, their presence, their refusal to just hide, which is part of what the dynamic was with the Caribbean monk seal?

I realised my father, and not only my father as a curious person, which he definitely was, not only my father as somebody who really valued self-expression and didn't hide who he was or what he thought, but also my father as somebody who died of preventable prostate cancer, metastasised, as a result of a healthcare system that functions in a way that is horrifically similar to the plantation sugar economy that impacted the

Caribbean monk seals. And then, of course, just the word 'monk' and thinking about my father as a reflective person, as somewhat of a loner. He's a person like me also who was a poet, he was this type of person and an ascetic in certain ways, he was a minimalist in terms of he really didn't keep many things or collect things, and he also lived in a way that economically made him part of the huge sacrifice of, in particular, the United States lack of a healthcare system or anti-health system or just sickness and sacrifice system, I don't know what we would call it.

So, I realised that my gratitude and my connection to this extinct Caribbean monk seal and my desire for them to not really be extinct—people sometimes think they saw or identified one and maybe there still are Caribbean monk seals—I hope so, but it's very unlikely and it feels so similar to me, to my impossible hope to be able to just see my father again, to talk to him one more time, to think him in a different way than I was ever able to think him during his life. And what that forces me to do is to really touch the part of me that feels this loss, that continues to be melancholic about this, to refuse that this can be possible, even though of course I know it is and it's not only possible, it's routine and it's very common.

I think that because the entire project of learning from marine mammals and starting to consider myself a marine mammal apprentice was about acknowledging the depth of emotion that's impacting me all the time, the real effort it takes to breathe in the circumstances that I'm in, with the intersecting systems of oppression that we face, that there's a way that I would not usually admit to the fact that this also is a common thing, but just as a daughter whose father passed away of a preventable illness, relatively young in his life, I hold an impossible hope. I want to see him again. I rage against the systems that resulted in his death and I have a vow that includes the Caribbean monk seal and includes my father. It includes so many people to really be part of creating what destroys and outlives these systems that

have caused so much harm and are continuing to cause harm. And there's an aspect of my intellectual work, and even my work as a poet, that usually functions to remove all that emotional reality that's going on inside of me, but it's important.

It was my father's death that made me realise I had to do something different and I had to be honest about what I was feeling and make space to feel it, as opposed to avoiding or sanitising it or transmuting it into a form where it was no longer embodied for me. There were no longer aspects of it that are impossible to explain.

So, when did that happen?

He passed away in 2016.

A lot of the books that we've talked about have come since then, right?

Exactly. In fact, the same month that he passed is when my first book, *Spill*, came out. He had read it already, so it's all in that time period.

Can you talk more about your process? That journey beyond self, beyond species is actually taking me deeper and deeper into my own inner world and my own emotional space.

I love that you ask it that way because I know it wouldn't have been possible to write anything that came after *Spill* without writing *Spill*, or to write *Undrowned* without having the experience of that triptych. I think that my poetic process is always about an understanding that there's something I need to learn and I don't quite know what it even is that I need to learn, and that it's very possible for there to be aspects of it that are non-linear and that, like I was saying before, are impossible to explain.

And with *Spill*, really I made a decision to engage the entire triptych because Hortense Spillers, M. Jacqui Alexander and

Sylvia Wynter are theorists who I've been learning from my entire intellectual career, some have been direct mentors to me and some have been authors of the works of theory that have changed my life and my thinking. And there is something that each of them do with form that is not normative within academic publishing, that is something that I noticed connected the three of them for me and attracted me to all three of them. And then also my relationship to their work, there was a lot of excess to it, like when I would read Hortense Spillers, absolutely the arguments that she was making and the points that she was making and the things that she was bringing into conversation so resonated with me and are the parts of the foundation of which any intellectual work I've ever done is built upon, and there was something else, there was something about the way that she would phrase what she said. There was something poetic about her work that was giving me access to something beyond just what she was explaining with that poetics and I wanted to give myself space to explore what it is that I'm so drawn to that I can't even explain why I'm drawn to it, or what is so valuable about it to me?

And so, my literal process was going to those places, those turns of phrase or those particular things that she would do inside a sentence or multiple sentences or two words, different moments in her essays, and I just wrote those quotes down. And then every morning, I would open this notebook that I'd written them all down in and I would choose one, not in the order that I wrote them in, but I would choose one each day and start the day writing, very open to where it would take me. And I think that as much as I needed to engage her work in particular and then to engage M. Jacqui's work in particular and then to engage Sylvia Wynter's work in particular, I also needed the rigour of, first of all, Alexis sit here and write every day, and second of all, be open to what comes through—that it may not even make any sense to me; that same day when I read back over, I may not even know

what or why and not feel like I have to know that. Being open enough that you can go beyond what makes sense to you and see what happens.

I think what's important about that process, the process of *Undrowned* also, is that I value that. I really value my own learning. I value my writing as a way to learn and I never know while I'm writing which aspects of that I am going to then realise should be shared with other people or should be published. Which is different when writing a biography of Audre Lorde because I'm specifically writing in order to share with people a way of looking at her life; but with those previous books, I didn't know I was going to share anything about these marine mammals with other people, it's just that when I got to the hooded seal, I realised I'm not the only person who needs to think about this today.

And that was a huge shift because with the triptych, I didn't share anything from those with anyone until I was completely finished. Maybe I read out loud to my partner and asked, what do you think is going on? But I wouldn't share it until I had written the whole thing and then I had reflected back over it, and then I had done this whole process to think about the things in relationship to each other and how would I want to order it, and even in that case, I shared it with some people not even thinking. I shared it with my editor at Duke Press, not even thinking I was late on the book. They thought I was writing about letters between Black feminists and I told them, well I haven't done that, but this is what I have been doing and they said it was something they would want to send to readers.

I emphasise that because I think that freedom is a practice and I think that just like everything else, our creativity, our process of learning, our intellectual process can be colonised by these forms and before we even get anywhere near a printing press. I think that, as someone who wrote for a teen newspaper when I was young and has loved the idea of print and has read voraciously

and loved having access to the things I've been able to read, there was a time where before I would even sit down to write, I was narrowing my sense of what people could and couldn't receive. And that's fine if I'm just trying to explain something or I'm trying to do something specific in that way, but for this triptych, and also *Undrowned*, I had to sit there and be free. I had to be free enough to not know what was going on. I had to be free enough to not impose a use value on my time sitting there or whatever I wrote. I had to be present in a way that was very important.

So, the depth of presence that I experience in the process of what became *Undrowned* benefitted from every morning before that when I sat. And, in particular, being open to marine mammals in that way came through the process that happened in *Dub* when I was writing with Sylvia Wynter's work every day, that had me understand somewhere in that process that what I'm doing is ancestral listening, and then I realised when I listen to whales, it's still ancestral listening. How can that be? What does that mean? That really was the bridge to *Undrowned* because I continued to listen to whales in a particular way that said this is an important connection and there's something for me to learn here, and then that expanded, as I talked about earlier, to all other marine mammals that I got to pay attention to and a species barrier around me that said, no, the ancestors I need to listen to aren't only the dehumanised human ancestors and it's bigger than that and it's more expansive than that but that also means there's so much to learn, that also means there's so much guidance, support and possibilities that had been unimaginable to me.

That moment that you talk about in Dub*, of realising that the ancestors that you were hearing weren't the ancestors you had visualised before, can you describe that?*

There's a particular passage—and each passage represents one day of me sitting there, I never append them or anything like

that—and there's a particular passage in *Ethno or Socio Poetics*, which I referenced earlier, where Sylvia Wynter talks about the possibility of a 'we' that needs no 'other'. She says, 'but who are "we"?' So that day I was working with, but who are we? And I wrote from there and the passage says, 'if you gather them, they would be everyone. Gather them.' And it starts to go through this process of I have to gather all the ancestors, including the enslaving ancestors, including the abusive men who are my ancestors, all of the ancestors who I disidentify with in this lifetime. And then there is this moment where it's like, 'gather them more, gather them still.' So, there's this depth that happens and I start to realise that some of these ancestors are... 'if you gather them, they would not fit on this island, they would spill back into the ocean whence they came. When you gather them, they will have fins and claws and names you do not know. Gather them anyway. Some will look you in the eye. Some are too microscopic to see. If you don't gather them all, you will never be free.'

So, this is something that I'm writing, receiving—fins and claws, microscopic organisms—I wasn't thinking about that but in that process of sincerely asking 'who are we?' which is a question that Sylvia prompts us to ask and never to oversimplify because there's a violence in this oversimplifying of the 'we' that has been used for colonialism—because if we are only the white people of the European nations, it doesn't matter what we do to the enslaved people, to the indigenous folks wherever we go. So, that 'we' if it's not being held to account for what's happening, that 'we' is the cause of the harm that I'm trying to remember and relate to differently.

So, when I'm asking that for myself, I think yeah, 'we' and then I think oh, we are also the people I disidentify with. 'We' is not bound by the human, when I'm honestly answering this question and I felt like also receiving these instructions, realising, Alexis, you are going to reproduce the violence that you're seeking to respond from if you insist on this species limitation of

the 'we' in this moment, in this moment of writing and that was the moment, and I knew that I had to be accountable to that. I think it's significant that the ocean is so key to what that was, because I was thinking about the people on the ships, but I was thinking about the people who made those ships and I was thinking about the people who ran those ships and then everyone in the ocean. Who's in the ocean?

There's so many levels of organisms and part of the structure and the illustrations of *Dub* ended up really drawing on the coral and the conch, the different organisms that are part of that ocean but also have intimate relationships along these ancestry lines that I was revisiting and realising okay, these are also the relations, these are also the relatives. And one of the things that Sylvia Wynter is challenging us to do is to relate to each other and our environments without the mediation of capitalist violence, colonialist hierarchy, or definitions of what it is to be human, and that is what was happening in that creative process with me. So in Anguilla, we're trying to avoid burr grass—in Anguilla, we call it that, there's different names for those seeds that stick to you, and in *Dub* I call it burr grass because that's what we call it—and they've been accompanying us the whole time and what a teacher also to learn about what it means to persist, what it means to stay, what it means to be tenacious in diaspora, they're literal seeds.

So, I think if I had to put it to a moment, I think that day was the day that I saw the limitation that I could have imposed and now I get to lean into what I need to learn in order to live this other possibility.

So, the day is a day where you're sitting still, reading and writing. It's funny because what I was anticipating is a moment of you out on a boat…

…in the middle of the ocean.

Yeah, and actually the realisation that what you're talking about is interior, right?

It's deeply interior. Now, I do feel that I was near the ocean when I wrote on this particular day. When it says they would fill this whole island, actually, in this moment I wonder was that island Anguilla that I was saying they would fill this whole island? Because I did write a significant part of *Dub* in Anguilla, but it could have been this whole continent that I was thinking about because the depth of it would not fit on one continent in terms of the gathering that I felt was being demanded. But no, I was sitting like I'm sitting now, in front of my computer, that's where I was sitting.

I think the other thing about this practice of writing first thing during a day is that it's almost like I receive a structure for being in the rest of the day. So often, like I said, I give myself the space to not know and just be, and then I move into my life and it's okay, I almost feel prepared by that writing, to listen to this person in a particular way, or to pay attention to these plants that are here, or this work of art that I get to engage with in a different way. Sometimes it's uncanny. There have been times where I'm sitting there and something I wrote about that morning happens but that morning I didn't know that was what I was writing about. So, in a way, the moment of receiving happens when I'm sitting by myself first thing in the morning, usually when it's still dark. Usually nobody else is awake or anywhere around me like in the whole city, people are mostly still asleep, that's when that part happens.

But in another way, it is outside of time and it's important that it's daily because it's like what does it mean that this happens on this exact day? And I feel ready for it to mean what it comes to mean to me because, say, on this morning I said gather them all, you'll never be free. So yes, it's almost like I'm preparing to be in relationship in the part of my life where I'm not sitting

somewhere writing, during the part of my life when I am sitting somewhere writing.

In order to commit to that kind of practice, what happens the night before that? How do you prepare yourself in order to be receptive the next day?

It definitely starts the night before. So, I don't stay up particularly late. Some people may still be awake when I wake up to write because people have different sleep cycles but for me, going to sleep is important. The other thing that happens, I talked about writing down the phrases in the notebook from Hortense Spillers and then M. Jacqui Alexander and then from Sylvia Wynter. Part of it has been that to know what process I'm in, all I'm doing is trying to learn something and I have a sense and I just try my intuition on. This is an archive of my learning, these phrases from Hortense Spillers, this is an archive of my learning. I'm going to engage it every day until I run out of them. By the time I run out of them, I've re-read M. Jacqui Alexander and I've written it down, so I prepare in that way because it doesn't work for me to just wake up and be like, ah, what would be a good thing—because I'm asleep, let alone that I'm an air sign and my mind might go in any direction.

So, that's part of the discipline, that I've already decided and so with the marine mammals, I was working with the guidebooks and I'd open a guidebook and I'd say okay, so the hooded seal and then allow that to lead my process. But, of course, the book is already sitting there, I know what I'm doing. I've been writing with photos, like childhood photos, photo albums that my mother left with me when she migrated to London which is where she now lives. I know that I'm going through them backwards and I'm writing particularly about pictures that my dad and I are both in. So, there's a decision that I've made that when I sit here in the morning, I'm just fulfilling that decision. I'm not deciding what to do, and that's very important for my

process and yes, I do wake up really early in the morning and that is a result of good advice from one of my favourite writers and someone who has mentored me since I was a teenager, Asha Bandele. She created an early morning writing process because she was a mum, raising her kid by herself, so she needed to figure out what was the time that she could really have to herself.

And I'd also say in terms of doing the same thing every day in a particular way, which does not work for every person, it's very grounding for me to do that, especially because of other aspects of my life. I don't work for an institution that requires me to be on a particular schedule. I have lived in many places. I have travelled a lot and the practice is what grounds me. The practice is the actual ground of my living that allows me to be present where I am, but I'm also a daughter of parents who believe in—my mum would say operational practices—like daily practices. My mum has her scripture reading that she does every morning. My dad would take a picture of the sunrise and the sunset at a particular period of his life, and so there is a resonance too.

And also, maybe that's just my learning style. There's something I need to learn, the way I learn is like 300 days at a time. I have to do it 300 times to stay in it, for it to really hold in a particular way and I love that, I feel really held by that and there are so many things, like a study of poems that I've written about the sky out of this particular window during this time of non-travel; I shared them with my one friend who lived in a different time zone, but I don't know if that's something that I'm ever going to want to publish. A lot of this practice, I guess just understanding that this practice is for the way I want to live and for what I believe writing makes possible in my life as a life that is interconnected with all life. That's the value of it and sometimes I realise that there's value in sharing an artefact of that experience. So, *Spill* and *M Archive* and *Dub* and *Undrowned* are artefacts of a particular experience that I was having.

You've been working on the Audre Lorde biography. Are you done? It felt like you were deep diving, there'd be long stretches and there was an auto response on your email, I just had an image of you with a scuba tank on about 40m below...

Yeah, that's what it felt like. So, no, it's not done but a draft is done. It's interesting because what's behind me as we talk is the post-it note map of the biography. It's always right here. So, it's a deep dive. What's amazing is that right now the part that I'm revising is about a deep dive. So, in the early 1970s Audre Lorde went to the Caribbean for the first time. She went to Barbados to see if she could learn more about her father who had passed away. He was young, he passed away 20 years before that. So, she went to Barbados and she was looking to see if she could find birth records for him, which she never found. What she took with her was a book of her friend, Adrienne Rich, called *Diving into the Wreck*, and what I have since learned from my own deep diving but didn't know before, is that under Barbados is the Barbados accretionary prism which is a meeting of three tectonic plates. It's an archive, if you take a core sample of it, of geological time. So, in the Barbados accretionary prism, there's Saharan sand, there's Amazonian river silt, there's the geological world meeting itself basically as a rock prism that is underneath Barbados.

So you're learning something about this biography and the approach that I'm taking by the fact that this is relevant at all—but this is part of what I feel like I'm experiencing as a Lordean guide to the universe. As if she's saying follow me, and then I have to learn about geology. Now, the thing is she loved geology and she collected stones and she was really fascinated by geology itself. I've never seen her write about the Barbados accretionary prism, but I needed to know about it in terms of this. When she's diving into her own heritage, which is how she thinks about this trip that she's taking to Barbados, and she's really trying to unearth who her father was because he was quiet, he never talked about

his childhood, he had a very difficult childhood, was the sense that she got, and because of my research I've seen some of what the factors of that were. What does it mean?

Now, when you research the Barbados accretionary prism you can learn more about it. If you start to read scholarly articles about it, you'll find that many of those articles are written by petroleum scientists. A lot of geology is written by petroleum scientists at this point because the funding of trying to find more sources for oil is larger than the funding of all the other parts of geology that are, of course, in my opinion more important. But that accretionary prism is very studied, sampled, written about because there's this question of, are there fossil fuels that can be extracted from it? What would be the impact? Although not enough about what really would be the impact if you drilled for oil there. And, of course, there's 200 shipwrecked boats around Barbados too.

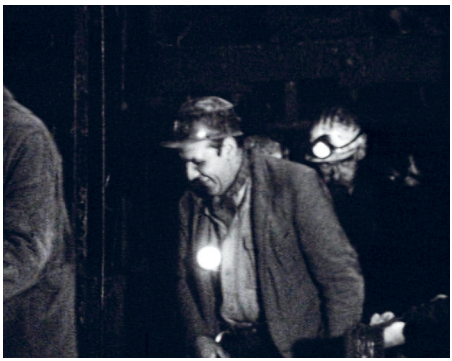
I'm in the process of talking about all of these things at the same time and I'm in my revision process of how it can be shareable beyond just the depth of experience it's offering me. But one of the things that it definitely connects to in Audre Lorde's life is that when she moved to Saint Croix and decided that she was going to live the rest of her life in the Caribbean, she started to specifically write about and use all her platforms to talk about oil drilling and Hess Corporation's impact in Saint Croix and the environmental risks of it and the extractive relationship of US corporations to Saint Croix as a colony.

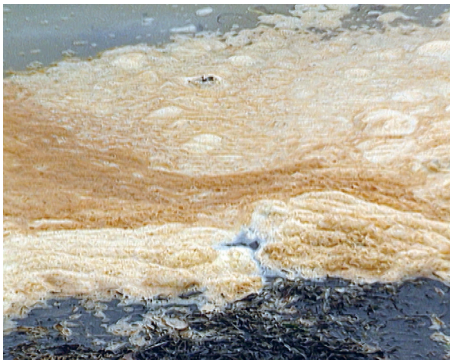
That's the part I'm revising today so that's part of where my brain is coming into this conversation, which is a long way of saying, you said you had the sense I was on a deep dive and I'm saying in fact, yes, very much so.

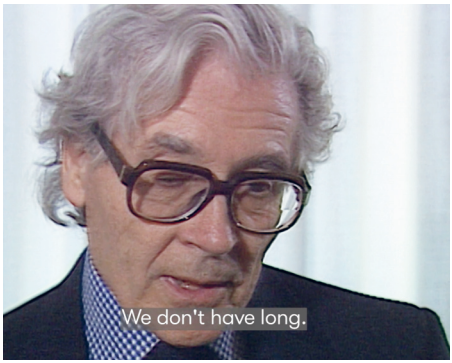
I think that what you're on right now is just so profound because the stories that you keep telling are ones of quests for relational depth, intimacy, like this questing after those most intimate relationships,

and yet what's turning out to be the pathway to that is this profound but expansive engagement with the planet, which just seems to be such a leading edge of what is being revealed in this moment through artists. I'm just really grateful for your work and for your time right now in sharing and I'm really looking forward to more.

Thank you for your openness and intimacy with the seals, with the ocean and with the possibility of what this time of reflection can be. I think that there's something actually prismatic about your approach to it and I really admire that and I really value and feel very good about the fact that there was a way for me to be involved.



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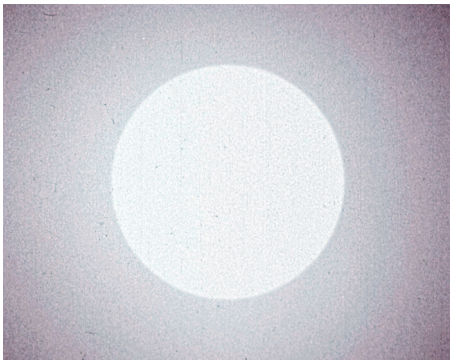


No, I'm not afraid of nothing.

In the summer of 2021, I spoke to Shabaka Hutchings, a leading light of the UK jazz scene and at the time a member of Sons of Kemet, The Comet is Coming, and Shabaka and the Ancestors. With The Comet is Coming, he was winner of the Mercury Music Prize in 2016 with *Channel the Spirits* and a nominee with the Sons of Kemet with *Your Queen is a Reptile* in 2018.

Transcendence

a conversation with Shabaka Hutchings

Ashish Ghadiali *For me, this conversation has been nearly two years in the pipeline. I remember in May or early June 2019, you were doing a gig with Sons of Kemet at Somerset House.*

Shabaka Hutchings Oh yeah...

I'd been talking on climate at a community event in Devon, where I live. I talk about race and climate, race and ecology. And I remember getting on the train thinking, this is a hard slog, it's really hard to get this story across to people that are thinking about the environmental crisis through a particular prism. I remember getting to your gig and just being in another world. Obviously, the music, but also the kind of euphoria of being in a crowd and singing that we're not going to take this country back, we're going to take this country forward, or the euphoria of that moment that you put up the slide of Boris Johnson's quote about piccaninnies...

Yeah.

It just created so much heat on the floor. Then you said this thing that knocked me out a bit. You were talking about unity and you were talking about the land and you were talking about this land, the nation of Britain and something that pre-dated the church. I remember waking up the next morning and just thinking, what was

he talking about actually? So, I got in touch with your agent and we started planning an interview, which was going to happen at different stages for different publications, but I'm very happy it's now happening during my residency at UCL's Sarah Parker Remond Centre; it seems a very fitting platform to have this conversation. So, long intro, that's the question, what were you talking about, what is the unity of Britain that pre-dates the church?

Well, I wouldn't say the unity, it's actually the opposite of that; it's the disunity of Britain that pre-dates the church because, in some way, the codification that the church introduced was enforced. The church was a system that strove to eliminate all other factions of belief, so the kind of traditional paganism, the beliefs that are closer to African ontologies. The Catholic church, throughout hundreds of years of struggle, managed to wipe out even the knowledge of those indigenous forms of Britain. So it's the multiplicity that was once in Britain that's been erased.

It goes to a point that I've been thinking about a lot recently, which is to do with Black History Month, or Black history in general, in that it's not so much that we need the Black history, it's that we need the better white history, to realise that our histories are actually joined in ways that are rarely known because of forces that have chosen to make unity where, from certain angles, from certain ways of looking at history, there's just more multiplicity than we would realise. Even looking at the factions of Christianity, like say Gnostics, who believe there could be a direct link between the believer and the supreme source of energy, that you didn't need the intermediary of necessarily the prophet, or the priest, or the preacher, that you could get a one-to-one. They were really at odds with the Catholic church who really believe that you need a go-between, you need someone who can interpret the message. The Gnostics' message was closer to traditional African ontologies, that would suggest

that actually the source of energy and power stems from within and then is contained within, and stems out to have a universal connection between all beings. Whereas the general ontology of the Catholic church would suggest that the Word is given to a third party, a prophet, or the Word is given to an intermediary who then dispels it to the masses.

So, that's what I was trying to allude to, the fact that there are ways of interpreting our relationship to the land, to this land, Britain, that are unknown to the native inhabitants. And what does it mean to live under empire? What people are given is a really fun children's story that's all about waving flags and having a great time and ruling the waves; whereas to live under empire is to live under propaganda, the propaganda of empire. By its definition, an empire is a place that propels and perpetuates itself through propaganda, through sharing a myth of its greatness, and that myth has to exclude stories that don't subscribe to the form of greatness that it would like everyone to believe.

So, for you, that connection between the church and empire is really clear. How did you get to the point where the church was the thing that you were identifying as the kind of root of that?

Well, I wasn't really identifying the church specifically as the root of it. I was really bringing the idea of the church as an example of the fact that there are different ways of seeing the culture of Britain, but the way that we see is stemmed from the church, which has been the dominant force from this land. It's been a force, historically, that has shaped the way that the nation has seen its narrative and its relationship to others.

At what point in your development and journey did that become apparent to you?

That's an interesting one, actually. Definitely reading Marimba Ani's book, *Yurugu*, where she does go into great depth about what the history of the church was in forming the mental

procedures that end up in colonial mind states. I read that in 2019 and reread it during the lockdown. I was going to church when I was younger in Barbados, maybe up to the age where I could say I didn't want to go anymore, but when I was going, I did read a lot of it. I kind of engrossed myself in it, just in terms of seeing what the thing is, and religion and spirituality in general has always been a topic that has been fascinating to me for a long time, because it really is to do with the way that people see reality, how people perceive their relationship as individuals to a collective. And this is actually the root of it all; how you consider, on a cosmological level, your position as an individual in relation to the external, whether that external is another in terms of another culture, or another as in nature.

It's not universal how we make these relations. In many cultures, the relationship between human and nature is one where nature is the subject and man is the object, and you have to almost like prostrate yourself before nature, which is the dominant force. Whereas, in the West, by and large, in the kind of dominant manifestations of the culture, nature is seen as the object which is acted upon and humans are seen as the subject, and our job in the dominant paradigm of the West is to control and utilise nature for the purpose of profit.

So, we've started off talking about that through the prism of a relationship with the land of Britain but then, when you're talking about the church you're talking about your experience in Barbados. How does that picture that you're describing become more complex, in terms of the geographies of your own life—London, Birmingham, Barbados — how have those different locations fed into this understanding in different ways?

Well, it's just trying to find a place, trying to find a way of seeing my relationship to what's going on around me and it definitely wasn't coming from the church. I like using parables as metaphors and as myths and seeing what I can gain from

them. So, I've thought a lot about, for instance, the story of Adam and Eve, especially going on in my life and travelling through all of these different locations; for me, I keep coming back to that story as a real, interesting, almost prophetic tale of where we're at, as in you're able to access knowledge but with knowledge comes the certainty of death and the harshness, the progression towards death.

So, if you consider that knowledge is almost synonymous with progress, so to eat of the proverbial fruit of knowledge is to actually be able to progress, but to progress not towards enlightenment or vitality of life, it's to progress towards destruction. And that for me is the foundational story of the West's paradigm, in that there is more and more knowledge and there is greater understanding of the way that the world and the functions of nature are structured. But after all is said and done, it's progressing to a state of climate collapse, where we can't sustain ourselves. So, it's summed up in that one parable. For me, this is the important thing about these religious texts. It's that they contain elements—not of truth necessarily—but elements of consideration that could teach us about the mythical forms of what we're doing and how we've come to be in the state that we're in.

How does the geography of your life influence your understanding of those forms?

I don't know. It's like what it means to move, to be dislocated, as in to start life in, say, England and then move to Barbados and then move back to England, and then spend a lot of time in South Africa, is to not have a clear sense of continuity. And I don't mean that in a necessarily derogatory way, as in I'm not at odds to find my position. It just means that there may be certain things that are sometimes taken for granted in terms of cultural forms that I just haven't, if I'm honest and if I'm not talking in an academic way, I don't see myself as from anywhere.

I wouldn't say I'm from Barbados because I've just not spent enough time there, when all is said and done. I would say I'm British, in some senses, because the only way we can have agency is to actually be a part of the place that we're in. But then I'm British to a certain degree because I am also Barbadian and I am also African. It's just a kind of murky relation. So, I think with that murkiness comes a disregard for certain forms and structures, psychological forms and structures, that are maybe culturally taken as a given.

And I think that that dislocation has allowed me to look at certain aspects of society that are not necessarily unquestioned, but sometimes just taken with more weight than they need to be afforded or should be afforded, and just kind of see them as like weird and then try to find artistic ways of portraying that weirdness. For instance, calling the album Your Queen is a Reptile, as a way of springing that conversation, in terms of who are our leaders and why do we afford them the privilege of our gaze?

At a discursive level, it is a brilliant album title. I'd love to really understand that journey that you're describing and the way that the movement between places created a kind of iconoclastic approach to form. I'd love to understand that in terms of your musical idiom. When did you start? When did you first pick up an instrument?

In Barbados, when I was nine and it was just that someone had instruments in class. Who wants to play a recorder? And I just put my hand up and it progressed from there.

Can you tell me the story of that progression?

Yeah. So, I started with the clarinet. My mum was able to send me to music lessons in addition to what the school was providing and got me a decent instrument because she's a teacher, so she was able to get a school discount. And I'm an only child, so I just spent a lot of time on the instrument playing along to the radio and then playing in various calypso bands, reggae bands. And

because I started in Barbados, it had that kind of colonial education thing, which meant that you did the Associated Board of Music classical exams once a year. An adjudicator would come down from England and judge everybody. So, I did all of those exams before moving to England at 16.

This, I guess, is the first point of reflection. I knew I was never going to be a classical musician, even though I was playing the clarinet. I just liked playing the clarinet and the clarinet was an instrument of the classical idiom. So, I did my exams, but they weren't the most important thing. I did Grade 8 by the time I was 14, just because I liked chipping away at problems, problems to do with the instrument that I was studying. I subsequently realised that most people who dive into this area of study singularise the process. So, it's like if you're a classical musician who's doing those exams, you are classical, you immerse yourself in that culture and that's how you categorise yourself, you don't necessarily play jazz. Whereas for me it was just a thing to do, it didn't mean that I actually saw myself as that—which meant that I could then go and in the night-time play in a reggae band, play calypso music, listen to hip hop, be starting to delve into trying to learn about jazz music.

And that brings me to the point when I moved to England and met Soweto Kinch and Courtney Pine, and starting just hanging out with Soweto a lot in Birmingham, going to jam sessions and learning about the American form of jazz music and just trying to find my way through it. I went to Guildhall when I was 19, I did my A levels and then went to Guildhall and did a classical music degree on the clarinet. Again, not because I wanted to be a classical musician and I knew it was never even a thought that I would be a classical musician, but it was just because I wanted to learn that instrument. I was kind of obsessed with the clarinet.

Throughout that course, there were so many—this is a whole other area in terms of the academy and that European culture, hegemony and hierarchy in relation to other forms—but there

were already forces that were trying to get me off the course, or kind of put faults and barriers between what it was to be a jazz musician and what it was to be a classical musician. So, I even remember having a conversation with the head of woodwind and brass at the time, who said, 'what are you going to do about this jazz problem, because you know you can't play jazz music and classical music?' And that's a statement that I really thought about for a long time, about what does it mean to say that jazz music will destroy- actually, yeah, the words specifically were 'jazz music will destroy your classical chops, so what are you going to do about this problem?'

If you break it down, jazz music isn't jazz music. The jazz course is reflective of jazz music. Jazz music is reflective of the culture that jazz music comes from, and that culture is coming from the Black community of America. So, what that person was saying, whether they understood it or not, was, what are you going to do with your proximity to Black culture, which is going to destroy or damage what we're trying to cultivate in you, as a course that's perpetuating white cultural, European musical values. I didn't say it to him because it was only on reflection that I thought about this, but at the time, it was just kind of shocking. I thought that it was a really weird and specific way of seeing the relation between cultural forms, as in one is out to destroy the other. It's not the only way of seeing forms. Relations can be mutually beneficial. But to see the other as something that is coming to destroy you is something that's very specifically British or European, at least in this particular period of time. And that summed up a lot of things in the society for me. It's like I'm looking and thinking, well, if that's what he / they think about even just some music form, what does it mean when the cultural other comes in a physical body? That must be a real problem.

So, I finished the course. I didn't stop playing the classical course. What I told them was all you have to do is judge my exams at the end of every year, and if I don't do well enough,

then you can kick me off and I'll just join a jazz course, it's not a problem. They didn't kick me off because I did enough practice to get really good results and actually their music isn't that hard, it just takes practice. A lot of it is to do with mechanism. So, if you spend enough time getting those motor functions of your fingers down, then the emotional aspect will be there.

So, I did well and I finished the course. Then I left the classical world, apart from a specific project; I was a part of the BBC New Generation Artists Scheme, where they said you could do whatever you want to do at the BBC. The first thing I said was I wanted to write a piece for an orchestra. And I hadn't had any training to write for orchestra, but I just thought, it's just one of those things. I don't see any big mystique about this form, this cultural form called the orchestra, that's supposed to be the pinnacle of the musical achievement. So, I was like, I'll write for it even though I've got no training in it. And I've had certain things like this, so writing for string quartet, writing for orchestra, writing for brass group, just because I think it's one of my goals to just break down this mystique of cultural forms that are supposed to be so complex, and complicated, and revered, and actually say it's not more complex than other music. It's just a different vocabulary that you can learn and not necessarily with superhuman effort.

In my life outside of doing those things, I was just playing as much music as possible, so free improvisation, electronic music, jazz, reggae stuff, and then it's all kind of condensed itself down into the three main groups that I do now with the Sons of Kemet, The Comet is Coming, and Shabaka and the Ancestors; the last of which is a group that is a collaboration between myself and South African musicians, because I've spent quite a number of years going backwards and forwards between Britain and South Africa.

Is playing with three different groups important for this kind of movement between and the dislocation that you're talking about?

In retrospect it probably is but at the time of forming these groups, I didn't form them for the intellectual purpose of remedying the dislocation. They worked and so we continued them. This has actually been the practice throughout my whole musical life—if it works, you continue it. These are the bands that resonated from an artistic level and they resonated with audiences. So, we just kept them going and they've managed to just grow organically.

But what I have found throughout the years in playing in these different manifestations is that the music is about interpersonal relationships. What you hear as a listener is the sonic representation of these relations between myself and others, and they all just feed into each other. So, me spending a lot of time in the studio, or on tour with Sons of Kemet, affects the way that I see the relationship between myself and The Comet is Coming musically and otherwise, and I think that brings a certain, different type of energy to it that wouldn't be there if I was specialised in one group. Then when I go and play with South African musicians, that brings a whole other area, even just in terms of the stuff we talk about. The stuff that we talk about and the conversations we have, and the times we have as social beings, that informs the music.

And in general, in terms of the titles of the albums and the themes behind the albums, they don't stem from abstract ideas that we think would be cool to put on an album cover, it just stems from the stuff that we're talking about when we get together to play or rehearse or just to hang out. It's better to have broader relationships, and I think musically and just generally, socially. Again, if we look back to the idea of the cultural other coming to destroy, if you're looking at actually the kind of varying of cultural relationships as being something that is just, ultimately, beneficial, but you might have to search for that benefit, that the benefit might be subtle and it might be something that you've got to work for, then it puts a whole

different gist, a different tinge, on immersing yourself in different cultural ways of being, musically and otherwise.

How did the South Africa connection come about for you?

Initially, it's because my girlfriend was South African and we were doing the long distance. We started seeing each other when she was studying at SOAS, so for a year we were together there and then she moved back to South Africa to start a PhD, so then she was spending half the time in South Africa / Swaziland; six months in South Africa / Swaziland, six months in England. So, when she was in South Africa, I would just go over and spend two-three months at a time, once or twice a year and that happened for two to three years. So, I just found myself in South Africa hanging out, seeing what was happening in the musical community and just further understanding what the place is, because it is a complex place and actually it gets more complex the more you're there. Or at least from my perspective, it's that the more I've been there, the more I don't know, the more murky the relations.

I think that when you first have ideas of South Africa in terms of you understand its history from a basic level as in there was apartheid, there is an uneven society; there's this idea of, I don't know, for me, before going and spending time in South Africa, there's an idea of just struggle, that's all I could envision of the country. All I had in my head was the struggle and maybe some musical forms and at a very basic level, an idea of the politics. But I didn't know what that looked like on the ground, like what does that mean when that history that you can read in a textbook or see on a TV documentary, what does it mean when you're actually there in front of human beings for whom this history is reality, where they've got to deal with the ramifications of living within the society for better or worse.

For instance, in somewhere like Johannesburg, I feel like it's complex. There's a feeling of acknowledgement of the situation,

but also the struggle as large communities, to try to uplift themselves from the situation—and I'm talking on a kind of broad timespan scale—but then there's also that interpersonal level where you see your neighbour as a person, where that is actually the ultimate aim: to respond to your neighbour as a neighbour.

And that's maybe the complexity that I hadn't really appreciated, that after all the struggle, after all the historical narratives, then there is still, when you see a person, when you're in front of a person, as one human being to another, how do you treat them? And that's the end product, like how are you going to react to your neighbour? And just the ways that I've seen various people react, it's been really transformative in that it's possible to view someone outside of the prism of race, without discounting race as a part of the equation of what comprises the hierarchical boundaries that maybe separates you, if you're looking at it from that dimension.

Amazing. So, how's that reflected in what you were observing in what was going on musically there? What is going on in South Africa musically

Loads of stuff. Loads of creative musicians. That's the first thing I realised when I went there, that there's a whole world of creative music that I just had no idea about whatsoever. People in the jazz scene, so people that are maybe now more well-known; Nduduzo Makhathini, Mandla Mlangeni, a real great producer called Card On Spokes, who also goes by the name of Shane Cooper, an electronic musician and jazz bassist. And then there's the whole underground electronic scene, people like Spoek Mathambo. These names I hadn't heard before going there and, subsequently in years to come, they've become a lot more well-known, or at least in the circles that I'm in.

But going there it was just like, how I have not heard about all this stuff? And actually, it made me think about the limitations of the scene that I'm in, in terms of thinking that I know what's

happening in music and realising that the world is a larger place. And that's a good metaphor for kind of everything, realising that being in a metropole makes you think that you understand what culturally is vital in the world, where actually we aren't in the centre of the world, musically or socially, and there are cultures that are formulating real vital—I keep using the word vital because, for me, it's the most appropriate term—real vital relations between music and living.

One of the most different aspects of being around musicians in South Africa when I was there, and to England, is just the conversations were different. There was a lot more talk about music and healing, and music and spirituality, what it meant to be a musician outside of just the commercial exchange of I play sounds for you and you pay me money; like what it means to have a role in the society as a musician that is vital, that is necessary for people to live in a way that is sustainable spiritually and also just kind of healthy and joyful.

How does music heal?

It depends how deep you want to go. If you consider that we are, on a core level, comprised of vibrating molecules just as human beings, like when you go down to an atomic level, we are vibrating molecules and actually what separates us from specific individual bodies of matter from our surroundings, when you look at it from an atomic level, isn't much. When you consider down to the tiniest point, the core of our bodies, vibrating down, down, down to the smallest denomination that you can get, when you think about how that relates to the external, then there's not a lot separating us, and especially when you consider things that we can't see with our eyes in terms of energy, in terms of the vibration or energy force that go out of us.

The main thing about what music is, is music is a vibrational force being propelled outwards, using whatever means. So, we have the ability as musicians for altering the vibrations of the

people in our vicinities. And it sounds, just from the conversations I've had, that in many cultures, especially in Africa, there is an acknowledgement of this fact, that to alter the vibrational capacities of the people around us with music is a healing force, and if you understand how to do it, and actually when it's needed and what specifically is needed, then you can do a lot for your community, as one of the ways of healing.

People talk about your music as transcendent. I find it transcendent. It sounds like transcendence is an actual intention, is that right?

Yeah, not to necessarily make the audience transcend, but to make myself transcend.

What does that mean then for you? What are you transcending?

Well, if we take away the word transcend for a second, what I'm trying to do is to shift my focus, my orientation, shift my focus of mental vision not from what is around me but to the sound of a collective enterprise. So, when I am in my most kind of profound, deep musical experiences, that to the external listener would be described as transcendence, it's when I'm not thinking about the technicality of what I'm playing, I'm not thinking about the audience in front of me, or the situation that I'm in. All I'm involved in is the sound and how my contribution to that sound creates something that's greater than myself, that's more immersive than myself. That for me is one of the greatest experiences that one can have. And it doesn't require technical prowess. It just requires you to be a part of a communal endeavour of music making. Even if you're playing a cowbell on the first beat of every bar, it's the same thing, you're embarking on a collective experience.

For me, that transcendence is, essentially, the movement from the individual state to the collective state. Yeah, that's

probably what it means in its most basic form, when it's not about what I am feeling on an individual level, it's not about is my monitor at the right level, or am I playing the right notes, or how does my part fit in? It's about everything. Well, you'd have to start from those points. That's the thing. You have to start from the individual, technical level and then, as you go through that, I find that you can get to a point where the collectivity of the endeavour just supersedes everything. It rolls over all individual concerns and then becomes one collective form of music making, and that's when the real powerful stuff happens.

And for me, it doesn't stop at the stage, which is the reason why streaming concerts are, by definition, going to be lacking in some kind of spiritual power, because that communalism then flows into the audience, who respond to it with their bodies, and then that response feeds back to us, and then we get more energy and then we give back. So, then there is this kind of exchange of energy and musicality and that, for me, is the transcendence.

Why is technique part of that? Like, why not punk? If it's just about the individual to the collective, what is all the rest of it that you're bringing about?

Well, it depends what you call technique, and that's the thing. Sometimes we see technique within the prism of what the classical mentality, not necessarily the classical music but the classic mentality would want us to see technique as. Whereas there is a technique to playing punk, like if you spent enough time on your instrument, then you have a technique of playing it. Whether it's an orthodox technique or an unorthodox technique, it's still a technique.

For me, technique is just a way of being able to sustainably do something. For instance, if I play my saxophone with what I would consider to be the wrong technique, it means that when I'm about to go to that point of transcendence and going into the

communal space, then there might be elements that bring me back into the individual space. For instance, if my lip starts hurting because I'm not blowing through my diaphragm and I'm blowing on a surface level; or if my fingers are too flat as opposed to curved, or my wrist is at a wrong angle, it might mean that when I start really trying to concentrate and go into the sound, that a physical limitation brings me back into the individual. So, for me, that's really what technique is about, it's about being able to sustainably contribute to that communal endeavour.

And the same thing with tunes. All the other stuff about making tunes and having a set is just so that there can be a steady flow. The communal space is a space that you arrive at after journeying for a while and this for me is what our skill is as musicians, being able to structure that departure and journey and then bring everyone back safely. It's not just like boom, here is transcendence; it's not like you press a button and you just get transcendence. It's about creating that environment where yourself and the audience, is able to travel to that point where, hopefully, you get to it.

What's the moment? What happens in that liminal zone?

This is the thing; I think that you shouldn't be trying to describe it. To describe it, especially within the English language which really is, from what I know—obviously I only speak English so I can't say specifically that we don't have the right capacities for it—but just there are things that I don't have the words for. There are situations, musically, that when I've talked to people in South Africa, for instance, they'll talk and then they'll just say, sorry, I just need to speak Zulu right now. They'll talk to everyone else and they'll be like, you get what we mean? And then they might refer to a type of moment and I'll go, I get what you mean but there just isn't a word for it. I think that sometimes when you try to impose legibility on the spiritual, it devalues it.

So, I don't want to go too far into what that space is, because there's just something about it that just becomes profane. If you try to strip it away to what it is, it's a mysterious space and it's not a space that's replicated. It flies in the face of what we're supposed to be. We're supposed to be workers, maybe cultural workers, but we're supposed to be people that have a commodity and our commodity, say the way the media portrays me, my commodity is supposed to be that guy that brings transcendence. But it's not that. It's that there might be, if you're lucky, it might be that, but I just play my music and, hopefully, it gets to that stage but maybe not and no-one will know. The great thing is that the set has good music, so it might be that we don't have that state, that state where we actually move away from the limitations of the individual, but you'll still have a great time musically, it will still be something of value.

It's a tough one. I probably could break it down in a very intellectual way, but I just feel like it's not going to be of greater value if that type of experience is broken down because it's about a feeling, and the question is, is it worth depicting feelings in words? Not, is it worth it? It might be worth it, but what is the worth of it? Because it's not going to make the listener have that feeling any greater. It's not going to make you experience the feeling of transcendence any clearer and it might actually make you more self-aware in that state, which will be something that will take you away from the state, ultimately.

I feel like you are a big reader as well as a great listener, right?

Yeah.

Let's talk about influences. You've told us who your queens are, who are your prophets?

For me, the head would be Marimba Ani because her book, Yurugu, is foundational. It's the book that actually explains a lot of stuff that people have problems explaining in British society

about the root of the problem. I don't want to go into it in any more detail because it's incredibly complicated, but, yeah, Marimba Ani. I read a lot of Amos Wilson, Chancellor Williams, and bits of Stuart Hall.

Who have been your guides musically?

All the greats who you would probably think are great. So, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker. Then people like Don Byron, for instance, an American clarinet player, he's very, very eclectic. He's one of the people who first showed me how the clarinet can be used in a real eclectic way.

And in terms of music, a lot of the influence is asymmetrical. So, it might be that I listen to a Bjork record, so for instance, *Vespertine*, and I understand something about the power of sensitivity. And I know that, for instance, in making that record, one of the things that she was trying to do was to capture very small sounds, for instance, the sound of a flower blossoming and she used that as a metaphor, and then would boost it up to be a real big sound so it has a real distorted image, these kind of relational values. I really like that, not necessarily in terms of the idea of it but in terms of the feeling of the record. It's a real feeling of an exaggerated or a kind of grand intimacy, a real expansive intimacy. That has influenced me as much as any specific jazz, in terms of trying to get a real expansive, emotional palette in my music. People like Jimi Hendrix, Fela Kuti, just so much music...

The other thing I wanted to ask you about is the latest Sons of Kemet album, Black to the Future. *I'm interested practically. I understand that you recorded it in December 2019. So, I was curious to know what happened. What was lockdown like for you? Were you working on the album or was it shelved until things eased up a bit?*

I was just working on it all the way through lockdown. Actually, lockdown was great in that sense, in that we recorded it

starting in May 2019 and did another session in September, and normally what would have happened is I would have been on tour and just given the recordings to the producer, Dilip Harris, and I would have given him feedback while on the road, and he would have gotten down to editing it and stuff. But because I had so much time, it meant that I could listen and listen to what we had recorded.

How we did the recordings was we only did one or two takes for any given track but we recorded it for a really long time. So, any given track, even if it's a three-to-five-minute track, we might have recorded it for 20 to 30 minutes, just keep doing it around and around, keep playing the melodies, keep doing the solo. And the reason we did that was to get to that point where it alleviates that individual tension, because there is always a tension when the red light goes on, and it's like, okay now is the time to get that historical document. Whereas if you know that when the reels are rolling, that's not it, that's not the point that matters, you're going to be playing it again and again and again and, at some point in the future, someone else is going to take it and find the good bits. But it meant that during lockdown, I was able to listen and listen to all the stuff we've got and kind of carve a narrative from all the information that we had recorded into an album. So, yeah, that was really what the lockdown was for me, it was really forming the album together.

When you talk about a narrative, are you talking about the discursive narrative that runs through it, or are you talking about music as well?

The musical narrative, firstly, but for me, it all becomes the same thing, it all melds into the same pot, the musical narrative is the discursive narrative.

What was the thing that emerged from this process of really being able to listen more deeply and more intensely through 2020?

Well, what has emerged was just a clear idea of what it should be, what that arc was, and the arc in terms of the arc from the beginning to the end of the album, and the arc within each individual piece. Because if you'd heard what the tunes were before that process started, it was very unformed, it was a bunch of musical information that then gets whittled and whittled down into a specific more coherent form.

This thing of creating the future through music, it sounds like that was already there as a kind of objective. Did that emerge through that process?

What do you mean by creating the future through music?

It's a future orientated album, right? We started off this conversation talking about the kind of refrain in Sons of Kemet about not taking the country back but taking it forward. It seems to me that futurism pervades what you do. Is that right?

Yeah, I mean the one thing that we are certain of is that we are going into the future. That's a given of our life as human beings, we go forward. We go forward into the future, but then what that means, past that acknowledgement, is then where different cultural values, or different cultural ways of seeing cosmologies come into play—because if you think the future is something that's linear, that is just a kind of disconnect from the past, that you start from an unevolved state and you just go forward into a distant future that's unknown, then that's one specific way of looking at it.

If you're looking at it in a cyclical way, where you go forward into a future that's inexplicably linked to the past and actually repeats the past but in different manifestations and forms, then that's another, I guess, African form of seeing a relation to the future. And actually, the album, as a whole, is trying to suggest that we need to understand these African ways of considering the future and considering a cyclical relationship to it.

Amazing. Shabaka, I've really enjoyed talking to you. Thanks so much for your time.

It was a pleasure.

I hope it's a conversation to be continued.

Authorities cited in the four conversations

p40
Rohith Vemula (1989-2016) was a Dalit student and PhD candidate, suspended along with four others, after a complaint by the local unit of the Akhil Bharatatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). On January 17, 2016, Vemula hanged himself with a banner of the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) and left a note saying he felt his 'birth was his fatal accident'.

p40
Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was an Austrian philosopher who worked primarily in logic, the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language.

p40
Isabelle Stengers (b. 1949) is a Belgian philosopher, noted for her writing on the philosophy of science. Trained as a chemist, she has collaborated with Bruno Latour among others. An important element of her recent work consists of discussions with and translations of Donna Haraway's work. She has also written on chaos theory with Ilya Prigogine, the Russian-Belgian physical chemist and Nobel Laureate.

p40
Jane Bennett (b. 1957) is an American political theorist and philosopher. Her work considers ontological ideas about the relationship between humans and 'things', what she calls 'vital materialism'.

p40
Donna Haraway (b. 1944) is an American scholar in the field of science and technology studies. She has contributed to the intersection of information technology and feminist theory, and is a scholar in contemporary ecofeminism. Her work criticises anthropocentrism, emphasises the self-organizing powers of nonhuman processes, and explores dissonant relations between those processes and cultural practices, re-thinking sources of ethics.

p41
Bruno Latour (1947-2022) was a French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist known for his work in the field of science and technology studies. He is best-known for *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) and *Science in Action* (1987).

p41
Carl Sagan (1934-1996) was an American astronomer, planetary scientist and science communicator. His best known scientific contribution is research on the possibility of extraterrestrial life, including experimental demonstration of the production of amino acids from basic chemicals by exposure to light.

p42
Steven Pinker (b.1954) is a Canadian-American cognitive psychologist and psycholinguist. He is an advocate of evolutionary psychology and the computational theory of mind.

p44
Edward Palmer Thompson (1924-1993) was an English historian, writer, socialist and peace campaigner. He is known for his historical work on radical movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in particular *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

p48
Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was an Indian Bengali polymath of the Bengal Renaissance. In 1913, he became the first non-European to win a Nobel Prize. During the 1920s he advised his English protégé, Leonard Elmhirst, on creating an experiment in rural regeneration based on the Dartington Hall Estate in South Devon.

p50
Paul-Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French historian, philosopher, literary critic, political activist, and teacher. Foucault's theories primarily addressed the relationships between power, knowledge and liberty, and he analyzed how they are used as a form of social control through multiple institutions. His views on homophobia and racial prejudice, as well as other ideological doctrines have shaped research into critical theory and Marxism-Leninism alongside other topics.

p50
Giorgio Agamben (b.1942) is an Italian philosopher best known for his work investigating the concepts of the state of exception, form-of-life (borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein) and homo sacer. The concept of biopolitics (from Michel Foucault) informs many of his writings.

p51
Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) was an English lawyer, judge, social philosopher, author, statesman, theologian, and Renaissance humanist. In *Utopia*, (1516), he describes the political system of an imaginary island state.

p60
Sylvia Wynter (b.1928) is a Jamaican novelist, dramatist, critic and philosopher. Her work combines insights from the natural sciences, the humanities, art, and anti-colonial struggles in order to unsettle what she refers to as the 'over-representation of Man'.

p62
Hortense Spillers is an American literary critic and Black Feminist scholar. She is known for her essays on African-American literature, collected in *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (2003), and *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text* (1991).

p62
M. Jacqui Alexander is a writer, teacher, and activist, and creator and director of the Tobago Centre for the study and practice of indigenous spirituality. Her writing deals with a range of social justice subjects, including the effects of imperialism, colonialism, and enslavement.

p71
Adrienne Cecile Rich (1929-2012) was an American poet, essayist and feminist. She wrote in depth about 'white feminism' and the need for intersectionality within the feminist movement.

Stills from the moving archive

Archive works supplied for use in *Planetary Imagination* from the moving image collection of the South West Film and Television Archive Collection, The Box, Plymouth:

ref: 234395
'The Solar System' An insight into how the Solar System works. c.1970s

ref. 234404
'How We Know the Earth Moves' An insight into how and why the Earth spins on its axis and travels around the Sun. c1970s

ref. 70111
South Crofty tin mine. 1964

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Written In The Stars Rushes, shots of the moon. 06.11.90

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Helston Furry Day. 08.05.53

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Exteriors Devonport Dockyard. 10.03.71

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Goonhilly exteriors. 26.08.63

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Mayflower 70 celebrations in Plymouth. 1970.

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Wild About the West: Birds.

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Torcross Storms. 11.01.79

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Ugandan Asian refugees. 1972

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Sidmouth Folk Festival. 1970.

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Ugandan Asian refugees, Heathfield Camp. 31.01.73

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Tot of Rum, Avondale Arms. 12.03.71

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Interview with Arthur C. Clarke. 16.12.73

ref. 87632
Schoolchildren visiting the ruins of Hallsands. 17.01.78

ref. 18811 AA0512
Scientists meet in Cornwall, to discuss the future of mankind. 04.11.88

ref. 23114 AA5108
Pollution River Exe, Tiverton. 23.08.89

ref. 47861 AF4617
Wheal Jane mine pollution, river Fal. 16.01.92

ref. 16595 H2518
Queen Elizabeth II visiting Plymouth Hoe. 22.07.88

ref. 241090 N_446404
Ugandan Asian refugees at Heathfield Camp. 09.10.72

ref. 241091 N_446405
Ugandan Asian refugees at Houndstone Camp. 02.10.72

ref. 241239 N_446574
The Obby Oss at Padstow. 27.04.64

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