

Naturecultural Permutations

An Ethnographic Fiction

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Abstract

The greedy and unstoppable bulldozer of runaway globalisation has led to unprecedented economic growth in the world since the 1990s, but at a cost. Local realities, practices and knowledges are being smothered, and ecosystems worldwide are becoming more homogeneous, less unique, less diverse. This story can be told in many ways, and the author studies it using tools from globalisation theory, anthropology and biosemiotics to understand the loss of biological and cultural diversity simultaneously, seeing them as two sides of the same coin.

This ethnographic fiction tells a version of this story from the perspective of Tommy, a research fellow at the Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Study (STIAS), who grapples with the issue and its paradoxes through his encounters with the Stellenbosch botanical garden, the fraught and conflictual realities of post-apartheid South Africa and—not least—a younger fellow at the Institute with whom he develops an uneasy relationship. Through her personal war against boundaries and purity, Serenity (formerly known as Karin) challenges Tommy’s views on diversity, arguing that mixing and volatility can be a creative force in promoting new forms of diversity. The celebration of tradition and uncontaminated ecosystems can resemble apartheid, and Serenity prefers “staying with the trouble”, as Donna Haraway puts it. The dilemmas remain unsolved, but Tommy grudgingly has to concede that Serenity, who has reinvented herself as a coloured woman, may represent a healthy and realistic form of contamination that builds bridges rather than blowing them up.

For the first few hundred million years of our history, the story of life on the planet was one of ever-growing complexity. Evolution leads to a constant increase in biological diversity: think of the tree of life, continually taking species down ever smaller, more specialised branches, new niches evolving in cracks and not least in the root system, for it is easy to forget that trees grow downwards as much as upwards. A comparable riot of creativity is evident in the much shorter cultural history of our species. Especially during the last 60,000 years, cultures and social forms have fanned out, specialised, adapted to local circumstances, diversified in extraordinarily diverse ways, ranging from small family-based foraging communities to empires. As a result, across the human journey there have been ever more forms of religion, art and self-expression, more systems of social and economic organisation, more approaches to family and social life, and not least, more solutions to the challenges facing human societies.

For the first time in history, this tendency is being reversed. The range of alternatives is rapidly narrowed down in both nature and culture, and this should be a cause of concern for anyone who

wishes humanity to thrive beyond the twenty-first century.

According to some linguists, three quarters of the languages spoken in 2020 may be extinct by the middle of this century. At the same time, 10,000 natural species die every year. These two kinds of loss are comparable, entwined and form part of a massive global process of homogenisation. A world of many small differences is fast being replaced by a world of just a few major ones. The rainforest is giving way to the plantation, local solutions to one-size-fits-all standards.

Tommy saved the file, closed his laptop, washed the empty cup, said goodbye to his wife, who was already deeply immersed in her work, and got on his bike, which he rode to work every day in the warm sunshine of the Cape summer, feeling as though he had died in the barren and colourless landscape of Northern Europe before rebirth in Paradise. In its first years of existence, the Institute had bought comfortable, expensive bicycles for fellows to borrow, since it was located on the outskirts of town, too far to walk from the centre, but too close to drive or Uber. Within a few months, the first generation of bicycles had all been stolen. South Africa is neither the most equal nor the least criminal country in the world, prosperous Stellenbosch being no exception, in spite of clinging uncomfortably to an identity as a town of Dutch respectability. When the bikes were eventually replaced, the institute wisely opted for the least glamorous models they could find. Tommy's was a rickety, gearless ladies' bike equipped with a basket for groceries below the handlebars. He had come to grow fond of it and named it Granma.

I

How much complexity can you squeeze into a city block, how much contamination, how much conviviality? Asking himself this question, the first association Tommy came up with was Gorbachev's vision of the European House, in which the Soviet federation should be a natural member. When the legendary last leader of the Soviet Union spoke of the European House, what he had in mind was one of those dilapidated and unwieldy blocks of flats in Moscow, the smell of dog urine, boiled cabbage and cheap tobacco lingering in the stairwell since the local liquor of preference, vodka, has no smell of its own; with tenants ranging from policewomen doubling as single mothers, construction workers from one of the Stan republics, Chechen activists masquerading as waiters and family fathers, poets and peddlers, rock musicians and pensioners, singles, doubles and families, all thrown together in a shared physical structure, greeting each other politely but locking the door upon accessing their flat. A loose confederation, one could say, of people aware of their mutual differences and dependencies, wise cosmopolitans thriving in an urban space spewing out diversity with the same regularity as the power station in the next suburb spewed out black smoke. And this was decades before Steven Vertovec had invented the concept of superdiversity to designate the many forms of difference generated in the urban ecology of a city such as twenty-first-century schizoid London,^[1] adding a dimension to Paul Gilroy's evocative and hopeful exploration of conviviality as a pared-down, realistic and feasible recipe for living together while respecting differences and privacy.^[2]

And yet, could it not be said that this kind of difference was only skin-deep? Weren't those diverse city people all shaped by a modern mindset, committed to waged work and traffic lights, instant noodles at the end of the month and guitar lessons for the son or daughter, depending not on kinship connections but on their individual, competitively marketable skills for success in life? Weren't they all marinated in the Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism? Yes and no. They were contaminated and standardised by the English language, the monetisation of everyday life, the pressure to conform in an

educational system and to follow laws that were not their own nor even written by their own kind. But at the same time, they worshipped and celebrated annual rituals and auspicious moments in different ways. More fundamentally, some lived for their families and kin groups while others had left theirs behind. In reality, the Brexit house had more in common with Gorbachev's European House than their Prime Minister with the Russian first name, famous for his lies even in the depths of his own party, was prepared to admit. The Brexit house that Boris built was a country house, financed, in its time, by slave labour, vines climbing its brick exterior, green lawns, rosebeds and fountains framing the handsome mansion—Boris Johnson knew next to nothing about everyday life in Hackney, and far less about the chaos he had unleashed with his lies.

Entering the gate, nondescript and almost invisible from van Riebeeck Street, Tommy felt almost like C.S. Lewis's quartet of children upon entering the magic kingdom of Narnia through a secret passage at the back of a magical closet.^[3] The urban hum of cars, voices and machinery disappeared the moment he locked Granma to the bicycle stand, as if by magic replaced by chirping birds and rustling leaves. He gave fifteen rand to a sleepy attendant and entered the shady lushness of the Stellenbosch botanical garden.

Tommy could use a bit of shade, his arrival having coincided with the height of summer, and following an unpleasant, if ultimately harmless bout of skin cancer in Australia some years back, he had made it a habit of covering whatever he could—from balding head to hairy shins—but lacking a serviceable burqa he inevitably exposed some body parts, although the garden succeeded in casting a hundred shades of green onto the paths. This season, even the Karoo had been blessed with copious summer rain around Christmas. Tiny streams ran parallel to the footpaths, and even the thirstiest shrubs were now in an expansive mood, stretching optimistically towards the sunlight. Examining the rectangular placards breaking up the symphony of colours and shapes, he realised that he had stumbled into a complexity of life that easily exceeded anything dreamed up by Gorbachev or Vertovec.

The extreme compactness of the gardens was astonishing. It was just the size of a city block, but it had a spacious picnic area, greenhouses, a small shop and a café-restaurant called, of all things, Katjiepiering—he consulted Afrikaans in Google Translate and was promptly informed that it could be translated as “kitten saucer”. So it was a place where young cats could lick milk with their tiny pink tongues, even if everybody by now knew that cow's milk was not appropriate food for cats.

The exuberant botanical diversity that had been crammed into such a small space by generations of caring university botanists and gardeners was nothing if not extraordinary. He walked past trees from Malaya in symbiosis with creepers from South America, humble but endemic and rare ericas nestling in the shade of huge Californian redwoods; fragile banana plants, expansive perennials with enormous leaves, dwarfed baobabs labelled African bonsai, a pondful of water lilies and a large, unidentified tree hosting a flock of noisy birds. This mindboggling tour across the terrestrial universe and through the microclimates of the Western Cape took him less than ten minutes, and he soon found himself on a chair at Katjiepiering, sticking the orange insulin pen into his stomach (four units should do) before ordering carrot cake and a pot of tea.

It cannot be understood as anything but a serendipitous coincidence that Tommy should have been brought to the Stellenbosch botanical gardens at this particular moment in his life itinerary. Truth be told, he had not given the history of biodiversity in the Western Cape much thought before arriving in early

January, blessed with the company of his wife and life companion for the first couple of months. He had chosen to spend part of his sabbatical in South Africa to read and write about the loss of diversity in an era of overheated globalisation, but none of the places he had planned to write about were South African. The material he himself had stashed away harked from the far north of Europe, the Indian Ocean and Australia, and he had good secondary sources on plantations in Malaysia, McDonald's in Taiwan, struggles for cultural survival in the Andes, language death in Papua and accumulation by dispossession in West Africa. Indeed, it was pure serendipity that had brought him to this particular place, a fraught corner of Africa and the world, where diversity and its adversaries flourished and fought. Had it not been for Oscar, he would not even have been aware that the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) existed, and he felt lucky to have had his loosely conceptualised project accepted by the board. STIAS, which sought to attract the finest minds it could get from across the world and beyond stiffened, conventional disciplinary boundaries of faculties and disciplines, had been founded and was still largely funded by the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation, so it stood to reason that there was always a perceptible sprinkling of Swedes among the fellows, but far fewer Danes, Finns and Norwegians. Tommy was lucky enough to have several good Swedish friends, and had been told about STIAS by Oscar, his comrade in arms for more than thirty years, a collaborator and discussion partner, they had worked together on fundamentalism and ambivalence, transgressions of boundaries and creolisation, flexibility and rigidity, fiction and fact. And more recently, Oscar had sharpened his gaze to delve into the potential fusion of conviviality and contamination, a great conceptual pair.^[4] While Tommy might himself be the more wide-ranging social scientist, Oscar was an accomplished novelist, now exploring new territories wedged between known lands, and his impressive book on contaminations had partly been written during a STIAS stay.

What could Tommy bring to this project? Throughout his life, he had circled around questions about boundaries and their transgression through mixing, creolisation, alternatives to ethnic and national identities, more recently adding other conceptualisations of race and gender and mobilising intersectionality jargon to wedge components apart before reassembling them. In his working life, he had recently led a largish project on the acceleration of acceleration in the twenty-first century, the phenomenon he spoke of as overheating, referring to an increase in intensity and speed that was not checked by a thermostat or a governor.^[5] In plain language, overheating effects were ultimately caused by growth capitalism, and he had seen the same pattern repeat itself in the size of container ships, which had trebled only since the turn of the century, in the epidemic spread of the smartphone, not to mention Covid-19, in the explosive growth in the global mining industry and so on. But his team had also looked at overheated identities from Britain to Hungary, Indigenous groups being overrun and bullied into submission by states and corporations, and, almost inevitably, they had looked at waste, the frightening growth of plastic pollution in the ocean and, finally, the scary thing most people identified with the term overheating, which was climate change.

The cafeteria, a miracle of serenity and fragrant cakes, could easily be missed, even in this tiny space, but following the meandering footpaths, absentmindedly reading the placards in three languages, he always got there in the end. Ironically, the Katjeepering introduced itself on the web by stating that it was located “[i]n the shade of an age-old red-flowering gum tree (*Corymbia ficifolia*)”, and that this is where “you can experience true Boland hospitality”. Boland was a network of vocational colleges, and the connection with the cafe and the botanical garden remained unclear. As to the tree, this particular species of eucalyptus was endemic to the south-western tip of Western Australia, which had a climate similar to that of the south-western tip of Africa, so why not, one might have asked a few decades ago.

When the tree was brought over and planted in the early years of the last century, when the Stellenbosch Botanical Garden was new and needy, nobody did. Ecologists do take exception to the “why not” question now, and this is what piqued his curiosity this afternoon. Ordering another pot of tea—not the rough and earthy rooibos, but the fragrant Darjeeling from the lower reaches of the Indian Himalayas, plantations still reeking of nostalgia for the Raj—he started to take notes about the rise of botanical nativism, framed by the lush and wondrous microcosm that surrounded him, a cosmopolitan crossroads of mutual enrichment with their origins in dozens of places, from the Mediterranean to the Amazon, but rooted and flourishing between Neethling and van Riebeeck, a short walk from upmarket restaurants, hip coffeeshops and whitewashed university buildings where apartheid was developed as a conceptual framework for South African politics in the 1930s, before being brutally and swiftly implemented, with Germanic efficiency, in the 1940s—an ideology and practice of purity and boundaries, quite the opposite of the oecumenical spirit in which the gardens were created, where the assumption seemed to have been that encounters between botanical cultures were healthy and led to mutual enrichment. But the intellectual architects of apartheid—Eiselen, Verwoerd, Coertze—saw themselves as being committed to diversity and performers of a kind of salvage anthropology by saving Bantu peoples from being contaminated and confused by unchecked contact with a superior civilisation to which they would never achieve full access. A celebration of diversity could, paradoxically, be coopted by hierarchical xenophobes and biocentric antihumanists. The road to enlightenment was crooked and dusty, not to say muddy. Ethnocentric cultural relativism was not a contradiction in terms.

All was not good. It was in the nineteenth century that racial science truly came into its own, and encounters between people of different hues and histories were increasingly associated with impurity and pollution, nowhere more consistently than in Protestant colonies such as the Cape. The enforced movement of people and plants was a means to enrich neither botany nor culture, but the empire. Biodiversity was an unintended consequence, as would be its later loss when introduced plants began to outcompete endemic species.

Botanical gardens were developed in the tropics as a means to acclimatisation and acculturation. They helped Europeans feel more at home—apple trees to harvest, rabbits to hunt and trout to fish—and boosted agricultural expansion of a select number of profitable crops.

There were madder schemes at work than the establishment of colonial botanical gardens like this miniature one. Tommy relieved himself in the basic but clean toilet, as we say in Europe, before ordering another pot of Darjeeling. Revelling at the varied greenery above his head and noticing the presence of American grey squirrels in the garden, his thoughts drifted to the ambition of the American Acclimatisation Society, founded in 1871, to introduce to the United States all species of birds mentioned in Shakespeare’s plays. Unfortunately for American ecosystems, the starling was mentioned once in the Bard’s oeuvre, but that was enough for the prolific and adaptable European bird to drive local species to the brink of oblivion and wreak havoc in American orchards. “Intentionality has its limitations,” he jotted down in his notebook; “all deliberate effects lead to unintentional side effects, and you are unlikely to find out until it is too late.” He had known this forever, but it still felt comforting to write it out in longhand again.

Botanical gardens, now cherished tourist attractions, did a lot of good and little harm, at least within their boundaries. But they were just small cogs in a larger and more boisterous imperial machinery that took it for granted that the land belonged to humans and not vice versa, and where humans came in two

flavours: colonial servants and colonial subjects. So the larger wheels spinning dense tapestries in the great factory of expansion, growth and secular progress—where only humans could be endowed with rights because brutes and beasts were mute, unable to represent themselves, so they had to be represented, usually by technocrats, engineers and profiteers—consisted of the introduction of new useful plants. Wheat, cattle, coffee and sugar, maize, potatoes, sheep, cotton and cocoa began to travel across the planet on a large scale during colonialism, helped in the nineteenth century by the steamship, in the twentieth by the aeroplane. Many of these animals and plants would supplant local floras and faunas, but few cared at the time, as there was so much wild space out there anyway, nature was still culture's adversary and there was no profit to be made from prairie grass. Thinking about that part of the world, Tommy couldn't help reflecting on the deliberate marginalisation, or in some cases extermination, of Indigenous peoples—as was the case with the Plains Indians of the American Midwest after the replacement of bison with cattle and cereals.

In all fairness, the story was more complicated than this. It should not be reduced to a familiar tale of noble savages fighting cynical greed and firepower. Sioux tribes had acquired horses quite recently, and had become inveterate bison hunters not long before the settler colonists chased them off their land. Other tribes had been sedentary farmers before the conquest and the arrival of horses. Yet, he concluded, this complexity did not detract from the fact that, like other ecosystems turned into profit-making machines, the Midwest was also simplified and homogenised after the arrival of the state and market economy. Indigenous groups would never have sought to control and tame nature, with or without horses and guns. Why should they? They were not descendants of Descartes. The horses were their companions, the bison their equals.

II

Unlike Tommy, Serenity was no anthropologist but a postcolonial literary scholar, yet they could trace their ancestry to the same European region and could easily make conversation in their closely related vernaculars. She was perhaps a couple of decades younger than him, and this was her first extended trip outside the secluded, safe spaces of North Atlantic academia and its associated tourist circuit. Her name had been Karin until last week.

Over lunch, a mere hour after completing her metamorphosis by turning her hair into a black and frizzy riot, Serenity told the handful of people sharing her table that after arriving in this racialised, unequal country, it had not taken her long to realise that she despised herself for being a white woman, and so she had decided to take on the challenge.

Serenity was unaware of the Rachel Dolezal affair, but even intimate knowledge of it would in all likelihood not have made her change her mind. Rachel Dolezal had been a student activist in the USA in the early 2000s, even chairing an African-American student association for some time. With her kinky hair and olive skin—because of rape and inequality going back to slavery, many American blacks aren't very black anyway—she was accepted as a slave descendant until her parents, who were of Central European origin, blew her cover. What had shocked Tommy was her perseverance after having been exposed as a fraud, in continuing to represent herself as someone who could identify sufficiently with the suffering inflicted on African-Americans and even had been victim of racist hate crimes. The frizzy-haired woman with the Czech name did her best to appropriate a tragic history that was not her own. It did not seem right.

It's never too late to have an unhappy childhood, or the opposite, if you set your mind to it. Although Dolezal was extreme, there were many other cases of people posing as members of suffering minorities, whereas they had in fact led bland middle-class lives until they were roused from their slumber and became awake, or woke. You had Aboriginal politicians in Australia who were pale and from a Melbourne suburb, people demanding Holocaust respect because their uncle was Jewish, and there were pale, blond academics from furnished, bookshelved homes claiming métis identity in Canada. Each to their taste, he might shrug, but what hurt was the anti-intellectualism of this attitude and the impossibility of raising the incongruity between the assumed identity and the lived reality without risking being cancelled by the new thought police. The inevitable conclusion, that you had to be one to know one, could lead to the conclusion that nobody seemed to be entitled to study anyone who did not belong to their own named group. He had made light of this tendency at the outset, remarking sarcastically that of course, nobody except the Catholic Church was entitled to write its history, and that it was time to impose a ban on pale-skinned North Atlantic academics who sought to expose the horrors of slavery. The laughter got stuck in his throat when he came to realise that this postmodern identity game was deadly serious to some of its incumbents, and that there was a real risk of this idle party game being conflated with the legitimate demands for recognition and equality voiced by people who had in fact been exploited and continued to be downtrodden owing to their colour, religion or simply cultural habitus, and whose scars ran so deep that they could not be removed.

When Karin had first arrived at STIAS a few weeks earlier, she had carried herself with the air of a cultural tourist from Europe, all bangles and batiks, blonde hair, clear skin and a fashionably slim body, adding a small trinket to her repertoire every few days; a woven hat, a scarf, a pair of sandals. She was an excellent scholar, of course, with a degree from SOAS in London and a permanent position at a good Swedish university. It was only during the last week that her transformation had taken place visibly. She had made an effort to darken her skin by natural means, but clearly also with some chemical assistance, in a quaint reversal of common practice in Africa. She began to emulate the dress code of black women she observed in town in order to rid herself of the northern cultural tourist habitus; and today, she had finally dyed and permed her hair.

Tommy was wary about and around Karin, and later, Serenity. On the one hand, she had to be admired for her transgressions, stubbornly challenging Mary Douglas, the queen of purity, danger and boundaries, the stiff-upper-lipped Jane Marple of social anthropology.^[6] Serenity celebrated the dissolution of boundaries as a recipe for liberation, flexibility and diversity. Up to a point she was right, since it was only through difference that complementarity could be achieved. But was this the kind of diversity that Tommy was looking for, or was it simply similarity masquerading as difference in order to titillate the bored palates of the jaded, cosmopolitan, well-travelled upper middle classes?

In the next few days, Tommy noticed that those who were most visibly disturbed by Serenity's new appearance were brown and black women. They may have thought that she was claiming a history of suffering that she had not earned, and that her apparent acts of solidarity were insulting. Her own display of uniqueness and difference was reversible, unlike indelible tattoos or filed teeth, or the kind of blackness that resided in the townships. Her identity as a pale European could be recovered within days. What did she know about everyday life in Kayamandi, where sex was a predatory activity and twelve-year-old girls had to walk several hundred metres on their own to go to the toilet in the evenings, after a frugal evening meal of maize porridge? Did she see the difference?

And did she contribute to diversity or the opposite? That was a different question. In his notebook, Tommy wrote: “There are two stories about encounters. One is that they lead to greater homogeneity; another that they lead to creativity and diversity. Can one be said to be the master narrative? And is there a third story?”

Tommy and Serenity spent months in the same institute, but never became friends. There was too much mutual wariness. Yet they often ended up at the same table at lunch. One late summer day in March, she spoke to the handful of fellows sharing her table, about the book she had been reading about mushrooms, more precisely the entanglements of humans and matsutake mushrooms. Tommy had also dipped into it, but it had irritated him. It was not a typical academic book. In many ways, it was a contaminated book about conviviality between fungi and sapiens. The chapters were short, sometimes meandering and imaginative, frustrating to a certain kind of reader, liberating to others. Follow the money, some of his interlocutors had told him during his fieldwork on extractive industries in Australia. In Anna Tsing’s research, the advice consisted in following the mushroom, and so she did, from Japan to Oregon and Finland, wherever matsutake are gathered—for they cannot be grown, just as the most valuable species of fish cannot be farmed— and in some of the places where they are being marketed and consumed.^[7] He felt pangs of annoyance while reading; the book seemed to be full of the hubris it allegedly criticised, written by an author who was always right, and he much preferred the down to earth work on Indonesian environmentalism that had originally made her name in academic anthropology, but, as George Marcus and Michael Fischer had announced already in the mid 1980s, we lived through an extended “experimental moment” in the history of anthropology, so why not?^[8] He couldn’t pinpoint it, but the disquiet would not leave him. In one instant, Tsing was a doomsday sayer and a prophet presiding over the self-inflicted death of modernity, the next moment a frivolous speculating thinker imagining “how happy it feels to fly with spores and to experience cosmopolitan excess”, but also offering the reader steamy and fragrant portions of food for thought about connections, science, the sensory apparatus of fungi, and not least about the assemblages—a favourite word, to which he, too, was partial—of collectors, mycologists, fungi, landscapes, markets, forests and well, supermarkets, but they did not figure here. But she then becomes, without forewarning, a literary essayist writing autoethnography: “To find a good mushroom, I need all my senses” and so on and so forth. Sometimes her literary language was good, at other times pockmarked with stuttering metaphors and questionable similes. He was fascinated and impressed but also queasy, irritated and ambivalent about that book, which had brought its author fame far beyond the seminar rooms and auditoriums of Santa Cruz. It was a book for the restless, a guide for the perplexed, a means, perhaps, to bring confusion to a higher level.

At the end of the day, he would still be happy to describe himself as an old-school, conventional social anthropologist if pressed, but he felt much less confident about that act of self-labelling than just a few years ago.

—Get the title? he asked.

—I suppose it refers to the Anthropocene and how this small and sort of modest little thing can tell us where we are going wrong in global capitalism and that you have to search in the recesses or below the radar to find signs of connections and resistance... really (she smiled) I haven’t thought much about the title as such, but it’s such a rich and dense book.

—It is indeed. But I think most readers don’t get the reference to Douglas Adams, the novelist who died in

his prime while he was doing his daily workout at a gym in California. God plays nasty tricks on us sometimes. Anyway, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* is the second installment in his *Hitchhiker* series.^[9] My favourite is *So Long and Thanks For All the Fish*, whose title refers to the message that the dolphins, who turn out to be a higher life form, leave for the humans before returning to their own planet.^[10] Really quite funny. Good for a laugh.

—Yeah... sounds funny!

—If I remember correctly, it is in the *Restaurant* volume that Deep Thought is built, a supercomputer that will answer that eternal question about the meaning of life.

—And the answer is 42?

He spontaneously high-fived her across the table. The American physicist chuckled, the Swedish philosopher blushed, and the Israeli theologian smiled benignly, but that was his default mode.

The food was brought by the silent, handsome, professional servers who never failed to add a celestial dimension to the oasis beneath the grapevines. Grilled salmon with a risotto and sautéed spinach, delicious but almost identical to a dish he might have cooked at home, confirming his conviction that important forms of cultural diversity were indeed shrinking.

—So... Tommy cleared his throat discreetly after the first mouthfuls.

—I've also read the mushroom book, most of it at any rate, and I'm not sure if it compares favourably with Douglas Adams. It's speculative, but you never feel sure if she is trying to redefine what academic research should look like or just having fun playing with different genres and pulling the reader's leg. At least Adams never pretended to contribute directly to the scientific understanding of the world, even if he became friends with smart scientists at Oxbridge.

—Yes, I suppose so.

She swallowed. When the sun lit her face, it was easy to see that she wasn't really black. Just below the suntan lurked a pale-skinned North European. And why wouldn't that be? One of the fastest evolutionary processes we know took place when sapiens began to colonise the northern regions. Dark-skinned people died quickly of deficiency diseases owing to a lack of Vitamin D. The selective pressure was ruthless in favouring those who were just a bit paler... and a bit paler still... and before you knew it, they were almost translucent, bluish-white, perfectly adapted to life in sun-deprived areas, with no business at all to migrate to Queensland, which they did, and as a result, the industrial city of Gladstone, Qld, has nearly as many skin cancer clinics as pubs.

She continued.

—But she stimulates our intellectual imagination, it's like a riot of colour, a painting by Kokoschka, or one of those Australian dot paintings where you discover something new every time you look. Very impressive to my mind, and she opens so many doors rather than closing every door except one.

He nodded while chewing a piece of doubtless farmed, probably Norwegian salmon transported by plane to the ends of the world.

—And of course, but I don't think I have to tell you about this, her message is serious. Growth capitalism has reached the end of its tether, it has to go, and we could learn from the mushrooms.

—This is where I draw the line, Tommy objected. Learn from the mushrooms? Give me a rough Marxist materialist or an even rougher evolutionary biologist any day, so that at least I know what I'm agreeing and disagreeing with! Honestly, Serenity, it's exactly this kind of formulation that makes me wonder what to make of this stuff. Perhaps I'm old-fashioned, but learning from mushrooms? What do they say, and how do they say it? I think I prefer good old human intentionality.

He hadn't addressed her by her new name before. Until very recently, even the STIAS website had presented her as Karin.

—I think you're just a conservative product of the Enlightenment, but that's fine.

She made a gesture in the air with her fork, meaning to signify a vague kind of indifferent tolerance, but he could feel the passive aggression underneath.

Something told him that she had a point, but he was not prepared to pursue it. The mushroom fans were at the same time very close and very distant. He and they agreed about everything. Except some of the bricks-and-mortar things, the nuts and bolts without which everything would crumble. The nature-culture boundary had to go, we sapiens had to find our place in the ecosphere. Check. Communication is much more than verbal exchanges between speaking creatures. Check. Global capitalism—runaway overheated capitalism, as he called it—is a recipe for destruction, and the growth imperative, the state and the reliance on fossil energy spells our demise unless we change our ways very soon. Check. Anthropology has to move beyond anthropos and involve itself in the study of the more-than-human or *Umwelt* or ecosphere. Check.

Then it started to get tricky. Tommy was committed to a way of thinking about the world that respected reason and Kant, science and Darwin, logic and Bertrand Russell; he had no intention to relinquish reason and embrace the wilder implications of decolonial thought, which seemed to imply that all knowledges were equally valid as a matter of principle, or anything smacking of a dismissal of science because of its mottled history and demographic centre of gravity among middle-class white, male, North Atlantic people like himself. He rooted for people like Achille Mbembe, the Cameroonian at Wits who was probably Africa's most important philosopher. Mbembe wanted to postcolonialise, but not decolonialise. In his critique of black reason, he pleaded for a decentralisation of knowledge, but not a decentralisation of reason.^[1] As to himself, Tommy was a convert to biosemiotics, but he was not a relativist. But he couldn't quite make up his mind. Perhaps he should stay submerged in these murky waters of indecision and uncertainty a while still, to see if the world had changed, if only a little, when he emerged from that contaminated space.

Anna Tsing was exactly ten years older than Tommy. Could it be that she was ten years wiser as well? What he had lost in confidence in the last few weeks, he might have gained in openness.

III

Upon finishing his afternoon tea at the Katjepiering the next day, he discovered in himself a slightly more enlightened and confused state than the condition in which he had found himself when entering the garden that afternoon. The conversation with Serenity was spinning, *malgré lui*, in his skull, part of him wanting nothing to do with it, seeing it as a postmodern identity game with no real-world consequences, and at the same time she had ignited a wariness and uncertainty in him. The other day, by the coffee machine, she had mentioned that Scandinavian authorities hadn't listened to Sámi when they restricted the size of reindeer herds for the sake of sustainability. Well, he had murmured, perhaps they were right? No, she countered. Sámi knew perfectly well when and how to cull flocks. Their problem was not self-inflicted overgrazing, but infrastructure that reduced access to territory, as well as climate change, which was imposed from the outside. Well, actually, from the same people who now demanded that they get rid of most of their animals.

Tommy had nodded in agreement. She was right. Another day, also by the coffee machine, Serenity had spoken about how even well-intentioned European authors had been unable to describe genuinely different worlds from the inside. She mentioned a handful of white authors who had tried, and added a few non-European names; Abdulrazak Gurnah, Alexis Wright, even the transcultural Chimamanda Adichie, who did it more successfully but were rarely fully understood by their metropolitan readers.

He mentioned, almost as a fun fact, that Adichie had published juvenilia under the name Amanda Adichie, too shy or ashamed to flag a fully African name. It was Serenity's turn to shrug, as if to say exactly, that's what I meant. Decolonising the mind is a tough exercise. Not least for people like you and me.

He was getting somewhere, in other words. Resistance to the global dissemination of plants and animals could easily be seen as a conservative, even proto-xenophobic attitude, where conviviality could only succeed when there was no contamination. But really? he thought, unlocking his bike at the gate. Defending prairie grass against wheat and bison against imported Holstein cattle was not tantamount to a reactionary glorification of purity and boundaries. Or was it?

Back in the air-conditioned, spacious office at the institute the following morning, he began a systematic search for the academic debate, and although South Africa barely figured in his research proposal, it seemed inevitable that he should start here, for as someone had said over lunch the other day, "everything is at a time and in a place". Tommy's colleague Knut, who had studied the politics of apartheid in South Africa and was now writing about the colonial politics of trout, could feed him some, but he began with his own search, soon discovering an article by the most famous South African anthropologists alive, the Comaroffs, the formidable husband-and-wife team John and Jean, or probably more appropriately Jean and John; educated in Britain, with prestigious careers in the States and a lifelong engagement with their country of origin. They had written about the resurgence of witchcraft accusations after apartheid, the commodification of culture, postcolonial identities and economies. And now, well, actually a couple of decades ago, about "plant invaders", semi-obscurely published in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.^[12]

Like in other settler colonies, the botanical situation of South Africa was a mess, a mesh of the native and the foreign, and the two did mix quite often, like when the baboons on the outskirts of Stellenbosch

gorged on European apples and grapes before seeking refuge in tall Australian gum trees. It didn't seem to be a problem.

[E]xotic species spread beyond the confines of plantations and gardens—both spontaneously and through human effort—establishing themselves with great success among Cape Flora. Experts see this process as having gained ground through the twentieth century but, until quite recently, it evoked little interest among botanists, government, or the population at large; this despite the fact that disquiet had already been voiced in the late nineteenth century.^[13]

It was only in the 1960s that foreign species began to be seen as a potential ecological problem and a threat to biodiversity, and only just before the turn of the century that frenzy began to build around the threats to so-called pristine purity. As Jean and John pointed out—he knew them and they were on first-name terms, as academics tend to be, cleverly dodging intimations of rigid, invisible hierarchies of which everybody was aware anyway—alien vegetation, as it was now called, had long been an integral part of the ecosystem and the local economy, but only for the poor, who chopped down gnarly trees, selling the firewood, or who collected wild fruit and berries. The anthropologists had no fieldwork of their own on the matter, but quoted a newspaper columnist with their ear close to the ground, who spoke of the ethnic cleansing of the South African countryside. For centuries, they had written, people enjoyed the shade of oaks, the smell of roses—aliens all. Now, “floundering in the complacency of democracy”, they blame all evil on those very aliens. And this was at almost exactly the same time as the witchhunt after alleged Nigerian drug dealers and Zimbabwean migrant workers began, expressing the xenophobia of the victims having picked up the tricks of the trade from their oppressors. There was just one problem, he noticed, namely that the people who wanted foreigners out were not the same people who wanted to get rid of alien species. Conservationists in South Africa are usually white and affluent, and care little about the nationality of their Uber driver. That was what William Beinart said, the leading environmental historian in the country. William had just published a new edition of his book about the prickly pear.^[14] It is a cactus that rightly belongs in the Mexican semidesert, but had also become pretty widespread elsewhere, such as in the Eastern Cape. Conservationists wanted it out since it didn't belong, but poor people harvested it, sold prickly pear jam and preserves by the roadside, and even cooked porridge and brewed beer from it. Since it was a feral plant, the prickly pear was one of the few remaining resources that was not owned. Xhosa women could just go out in season and fill their bags. Getting rid of them in the name of ecological preservation? William was puzzled by the idea. That would have been a class act.

There was more complexity. Those who yearned to keep the National Reserve on the Cape peninsula pure and chock-full of endemic fynbos plants might be shareholders in the wine business. They enjoyed the affordability of excellent South African beef and lamb, and now that war had broken out in Europe and famine was a looming threat in much of the continent, were pleased to notice that South Africa could produce all the food it required—from Mesoamerican maize to Anatolian pigs, Andean potatoes and European fruits. So when and under what circumstances do these foreign species come to be seen as a threat?, he wondered. In North America, immigration was still widely seen as a potential boost to society, as it was in most of the history of Canada and the USA, as well as in countries like Argentina, even if the dimensions of the sieve separating chaff from wheat had become narrower and the racial bias more visible. In Europe, immigration was mainly perceived as a problem. Being North American usually meant being the descendant of immigrants. Not so in Europe. In South Africa, one of the ongoing debates dealt with such questions. Afrikaners could, with some justification, see themselves as Africans.

They had lived in the Western Cape for hundreds of years, and some of the eastern tribes, like the Venda and Xhosa, may have arrived in their present homelands around the same time as the first Dutch colonies were built in the south-western corner. When does an immigrant stop being an immigrant, and when is an invasive species considered a natural part of the ecosystem? “The question is the same, even if it is usually raised by different people” he wrote, before adding “Erm, but what was the question?” There were so many clever people, the kinds of people he had spent his life with, who were full of answers but had forgotten the art of asking questions. He had a question about contamination, purity and boundaries, globalisation and conviviality, but he had been unable to formulate it so far. Yet lots of people seemed to have answered it already.

You couldn't blame everything on state control, capitalist growth imperatives and short-sighted, inconsiderate, testosterone-driven greed. All Anthropocene effects did not point back to the origins of the predatory state and the boundless greed of mercantile, plantation and industrial capitalism. Disruptions happened elsewhere, and humans had been insensitive to their surroundings in the past as well; just look at the way the first humans in the Americas ate their way down the continent, clubbing and spearing docile, tasty herbivores to extinction as they went. And look at how the Arabian peninsula was desertified. And what about the giant wombat in Australia? And looking at culture, how Roman ways of life became an ideal from Britannia to Dacia, and how Romance languages replaced the small, unique, local dialects that went before them—like so many 7-Elevens and Starbucks forcing the quaint and charming mum-and-dad shops out of business. So there had been flattening in the past. The difference with now, he reckoned, was the speed and comprehensiveness. Not just parts of the Earth, but the whole bluish marble was affected now, just as all of humanity had been affected by Covid. But then again, couldn't a flatter world be more conducive to conviviality than one defined through contrast and difference? He thought not, and often came dragging Durkheim's old distinction between organic and mechanical solidarity. Mechanical solidarity made people feel at ease with each other because they did the same thing, but in a complex society, an opposite mechanism operates. You feel at one with your teacher, your dentist, your shopkeeper and the neighbour's snotty kids because you each fill complementary niches, like jigsaw pieces in a five-million-pieces puzzle. A colleague of his in Belfast, Simon Harrison, had showed that contrary to what many think, even academic scholars, ethnic conflicts are not most vicious when they involve people who think they are fundamentally different. Quite the opposite, Harrison said, it was when people recognised their similarities and competed for the same scarce resources that conflict turned bitter and often violent.^[15] Harrison should know, considering where he lived and worked.

There was a lesson to be learned here, possibly from Hinduism, but surely from the exuberance of the rainforest. Eating and being eaten was part of the rainforest story—Kipling got many things right—but so were the mycorrhizomatic networks connecting trees, the wood wide web of the subterranean, the toucans fertilising the orchids, the dung beetles growing fat by eating the shit of other animals, and he could go on, but he was now in the Cape and couldn't help noticing the stately oak trees behind the Institute's own vineyard. (Telling people at home about his sojourn in South Africa, he rarely failed to mention that although there were many Institutes for Advanced Study in existence, not only was STIAS unique in being located outside the North Atlantic, it was probably also the only one with its own vineyard.) When Stellenbosch was founded by Governor Simon van der Stel, a man of impeccable Dutch respectability, he ordered his minions to plant oaks along the Eerste River and elsewhere—just as trout was introduced two centuries later, misguidedly and often unsuccessfully, to make English settlers feel at home—and even today the town was nicknamed Eikestad. Indeed, the oaks were still a defining trait of

the striking campus space; now old, majestic trees with perhaps just a couple of hundred years of lifetime left, but along the river oaks were gradually being replaced by endemic species. Almost from one day to the next, just as the glamorous act of cigarette smoking morphed into a vulgar and lowly activity, the very thought of encouraging non-native species had become anathema to the South African middle classes. Did this shift make the world more or less diverse? He couldn't tell, the question needed to be raised differently.

IV

Worried conservationists had been warning about the flattening effects of what we now call globalisation for a very long time. The influential scholar James Cowles Prichard said already in 1839, in an address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science:

Now, as the progress of colonization is so much extended of late years, and the obstacle of distance and physical difficulties are so much overcome, it may be calculated that these calamities, impending over the greater part of mankind, if we reckon by families and races, are to be accelerated in their progress; and it may happen that, in the course of another century, the aboriginal nations of most parts of the world will have ceased entirely to exist...^[16]

There was nothing new under the sun, except the catastrophic consequences of the ongoing, intensified extinction and flattening. Already when the biologist Charles Elton began to write about the impoverishment of ecosystems owing to species invasions, in the 1950s, there was a pedigree, and there were precursors.^[17] “And”, Tommy typed just before descending for lunch, lest he forgot, “just as there is something obviously sensible and important in the warnings about flattening and impoverishment of anything from soil quality to kinship systems, there is a continuous danger of glorifying purity and boundaries, and everybody knows where that could get us.”

Visually locating his favourite evolutionary biologist while descending the stairs, he came to think of some of those highly regarded conservationists, always with a natural science rather than humanities gaze, who wanted to fence off huge swathes of land to let nature recover without the interference of people and their filth. The obvious question was what they proposed to do about the people who were already there, who might have lived in and with nature for millennia without causing irreversible harm. To this question, they had no answer. Humans were statistics to them, or worse, vermin. He had spoken with a famous ecophilosopher many years ago about the future of the planet, it must have been in the 1980s, and the philosopher mused about the value of cultural diversity.

—You know..., he said with his customary aristocratic air, we could perfectly well have the desirable diversity on the planet with just fifty to a hundred million people.

Desirable? To whom? That man exuded a scary air of coldness.

Jonathan Kingdon was different. He was a treasured fellow at STIAS and should have ruled his own little kingdom at home, had the UK taken a different turn when it had the opportunity. Jonathan was all wrinkles, unruly white hair and a well-kempt white beard. He was just a few years older than his fellow student from Oxford, Richard Dawkins. And he was not just a highly regarded ecologist and evolutionary

thinker, but an artist and a man who loved people as much as he loved rare ericas and majestic elephants. At Makerere, his chair had been in the faculty of arts. Jonathan was born in the same year as Tommy's father, who had died in his mid-forties.

At the moment, well into his eighties, Kingdon was tinkering with revolutionary ideas about the origins of the biodiversity of the Western Cape, which is designated as a floral kingdom all by itself. He traced it back to the Chixculub event in Yucatán sixty-six million years ago, the time of the fifth and last mass extinction until the present. Crazy idea, but he pursued it doggedly and was clearly no fool. With his partner Laura Snook, Jonathan had been on a roadtrip during the weekend. This was the man who had captioned one of his art works "Survival needs diverse solutions". Over steaming plates of lamb, couscous and a tomato-and-garlic sauce, they spoke about the loss of diversity. There was no doubt that uninvited passengers in travellers' suitcases and ballast water, species which lost their habitat because of infrastructure or climate change, and species introduced by humans for the sake of usefulness contributed to flattening and simplification, but it was a greater moral transgression when the Homogenocene was introduced deliberately for the sake of narrow, short-term, selfish profit. The intellectual historian from Duke, whose STIAS project concerned the discourse on race from the eighteenth century to Franz Boas, listened and nodded, doubtless seeing connections with his own work. Serenity shrugged. Surely, some unexpected and creative mixing will come out of the mobility of all kinds of stuff, she might have said, but for once, she kept schtum. She might have noticed, like Tommy, that Jonathan was almost in tears when he described the orchards, vineyards and wheat fields in the well-watered valleys which had complemented the drier renosterveld with trees and grasses, birds and a variety of mammals, from lions to rhinos. Over the weekend, what Laura and Jonathan had seen was mainly generic industrial plantation agriculture. The cereal fields could have been anywhere, from New South Wales to Alberta and, well, the Ukraine. The vineyards were like replicas from Napa or the Loire valley. They were not like her, Serenity must have thought when she was still Karin. Like herself, the proliferating and productive South African agricultural sector was a product of transcontinental encounters, but with the opposite result. The maize farms in the Free State had replaced untidiness and low-yielding local grasses and cereals like sorghum with compact carbohydrates enabling fledgling populations on the verge of starvation to grow exponentially. But they were all the same, whether in Kenya, Mexico or Illinois, and they were stuck with little flexibility left. They were like uniformed soldiers marching to a distant battle, or anxious petit-bourgeois couples worried about their neighbour's slandering. Plantation trees even looked like soldiers standing in neat rows, waiting for orders. She saw herself as the opposite, she had once told Tommy. I am the opposite of a tree in an oilpalm plantation, she had exclaimed over wine at the Bali bistro one evening. No follow-up question was necessary, she was transparent and earnest.

—So, Jonathan said while they were waiting for the apple pie, we are running a huge risk. Think about all the options we lose, the genetic material which is lost before we even have the chance to map it, the beauty which our grandchildren will only know from films and stories. He shook his head sadly.

—Yes, Tommy said, licking the melting vanilla ice cream off his spoon, before launching into a diatribe which trickled uninvited out of his mouth. He went on.

—There is a global contagion, comparable to the cancerous proliferation of identical white plastic chairs across the known universe and the Covid-19 virus. No, I'm serious. The few remaining varieties of maize that are grown on a large scale, the Holstein landrace which now counts for over ninety per cent of all

North American cattle, the replacement of local knowledge with what they think of as universal knowledge, it's the same story, my friends, and we are all trying to deal with it in our way. Smartphones and McDonald's, theories about race that are frozen and homogeneous, a gay and lesbian culture that is the same in gay and lesbian clubs everywhere on the planet where they are not banned, like theme parks, non-places like airports, sugar plantations and zoos, nature and culture are being sucked up by the same vortex, sorry for talking too much...

He mixed the now sticky ice cream into the apple pie, pretty much as he would have done had it been in New York or Aarhus, scooping a spoonful of fragrant sweetness (cinnamon, vanilla) into his mouth.

Changing the subject slightly in a bid to lighten the mood, Jonathan rattled off one of his many apocryphal stories from his youth, this time about the time he tried to catch a hippo with a friend during their adolescence in Tanzania. Going out after nightfall with a bit of bait and a large jute sack, they must have been unaware of the mortal danger they exposed themselves to.

—Why on earth would you catch a hippo? Serenity asked, barely able to conceal her bemusement.

—We were planning to sell it to a zoo, Jonathan replied, adding that in the 1940s, wild animals were so abundant everywhere in East Africa that they were felt to be companions and neighbours to humans, so nobody saw any need to treat them with exaggerated reverence.

Drifting back to the office with a cup of tea, Tommy made a mental note building on the idea that all that existed in the world were differences. This was an insight he had gleaned from Gregory Bateson's sphinxlike, but poignant texts collected in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.^[18] Surely, differences continued to exist, but they were increasingly of the same kind, like a choir in which all voices sing the same notes. Like so many conference participants wearing name tags and speaking a mangled, unattractive version of English to each other, or a global chain of restaurants, or an American pig farm raising animals that were genetically identical to those raised in similar farms from China to Denmark.

He knew that there would be controversy and resistance to his perspective. Over here, Serenity would berate him for underestimating human creativity, agency and the freedom of choice that especially women and minorities had to claim. He might ask, rhetorically, what kind of choice was left for Vietnamese fishermen who had lost their livelihood to pollution, Chinese trawlers and infrastructural development, or how you could expect a mountain to take a decision about a mining project. Others would also have their say. Yes, they were bound to concede, biodiversity is decreasing, and it can be measured and counted. But cultural diversity? There was a large and lively literature on superdiversity—Tommy had contributed to it himself over the years—which showed how new cultural forms emerged out of encounters and frictions. But yet. He had been haunted for years by a quip formulated by the disillusioned cultural relativist Clifford Geertz back in the 1980s, where Geertz admitted that cultural difference would continue to exist since the French would never eat salted butter (which was empirically wrong), but that the good old days of cannibalism and widow-burning were gone forever.^[19] There was a case to be made about deep versus shallow cultural difference, a distinction no respectable anthropologist would touch with a four-foot pole, but Tommy was no longer obliged to be a respectable anthropologist. The good people at his home university would never fire him, and he could do pretty much as he liked.

The following week, Tommy struck up another conversation with Serenity in front of the coffee machine. Similarly to the situation on the Scandinavian peninsula, people at STIAS would barely have got to know each other had there not been a coffee machine in a semi-public part of the institute. So they had a good chat while sipping their drinks—she had an Americano, while he stuck to the Darjeeling. Coffee somehow didn't agree with him for the time being.

—Thank you for asking, she said, actually I went to a club in Cape Town on Saturday.

—On your own?

—No, I was with two friends from the University of the Western Cape.

Historically, UWC was a so-called coloured university, unlike the white, Cecil Rhodes-adorned University of Cape Town, and its reputation and identity lingered, nearly three decades after the official end of apartheid. He could not ask about the race of her friends, but knew that they were likely coloured, helping her transition into her new identity or just checking whether her new racial identity worked in a dimly lit, noisy environment full of drunk and randy students.

—And what was it like? I mean, mainly music or other things?

—Dance. That's what I do when I go clubbing.

At that point, Tommy finally saw the real Serenity behind her conspicuously green eyes, permed and dyed hair, hysterically tanned skin and ostentatiously African dress, her true self behind her abandoned Scandinavian name. She had the rhythm and the sensitivity of a dancer. She belonged here, not in the cold and stiff peninsula of her birth. At this particular moment, she was, in fact, a coloured, creole, indeterminate, contaminated South African with her arms stretched out, inviting the universe to join her in dance. She must have prepared for this moment longer than he was aware. He would have hugged her, had he not been restricted by his own Scandinavian inhibitions. Instead, he spoke.

—You're an anomaly, aren't you? And that is why you're attracted to those theorists who refuse boundaries and experiment with all kinds of transgressions?

—Anomaly? Are we in Mary Douglas country now? Are we among those twisted creatures that don't fit in and all that jazz?

—Jazz it is. That's exactly what it is like. Imagine a world which resembles a John Coltrane improvisation more than a piano concerto by Mozart.

He came to think about one of the other younger fellows at STIAS, a toxicologist from Lagos. Her research dealt with freshwater pollution, and it was engaged research, aiming to reduce contamination. Some forms of contamination are scarcely conducive to conviviality or even life. They can be lethal. At the same time, this soft-spoken marine biologist wore colourful hijabs and answered to the name Dr. Bawa-Allah. Tommy had asked her whether her first language was Yoruba. Well, English and then Yoruba, she said. For fear of being mistaken as an ethnographer in the field, he did not pursue the question further. But he was aware of the fact that the Yoruba, one of the three largest ethnic groups in that

mindbogglingly complex colonial construction called Nigeria, did not base their identity on a shared religion. Many were Christian, but no less Yoruba for that. Both of these universalist religions of conversion were grafted onto a substratum of traditional beliefs and practices. Few Yoruba seemed to object. Contamination? Creolisation? Perhaps, but certainly conviviality. And chaotic, crazy Lagos was their city.

The political theorist Francis Fukuyama ended his ruminations on the origins of political order by claiming that everybody dreamed about “getting to Denmark”, a tidy, well-organised, healthy society with a low level of social conflict, a high standard of living, a smallish population, mainly belonging to a single ethnic group, most of whom were capable of enjoying their Carlsberg whenever the sun came out.^[20] But in his celebration of Denmark, Fukuyama missed out on the fact that it was also a ruthlessly conformist petit-bourgeois society in which Congolese food and Muslim hijabs were tolerated in the capital but not in the country as such. Suppose one could write a history of political order ending by encouraging people to “get to Yorubaland” instead? The art of improvisational survivalism cultivated to perfection in African cities entailed finding niches enabling survival without enforcing them onto others. The ecology of Denmark came across as a cool plantation compared to the chaotic exuberance of the African market town. A flash of holistic understanding enabled Tommy to see all of this in the green eyes of that irritating wokey hypocrite, suddenly transformed into a beacon of future diversities combining, as the evolutionary theorist Jacques Monod had put it, chance and necessity.^[21]

As had become his habit, he left the office early to visit the botanical garden and have his tea at Katjepiering. The server, a strapping Afrikaner boy in his early twenties, greeted him with a smile, asking if the professor would like the usual. An excellent representative of the new South Africa he was, embodying the hope not for a classless society but a colour-blind one. Then there was the other server on duty. She was more anomalous. Was she white or coloured? Coloured. Her brownness ran deeper than Serenity’s. The question would never have occurred to him unless he had been forced to contemplate Karin’s change of racial identity. Did she care? Probably. Racialising structures linger far longer and settle far deeper than law scholars and politicians are aware.

Neither of the two were visibly worried about purity, unlike the board of the botanical garden. Had it been created now, it would have been devoted entirely to endemic plants, as a form of salvage ecology. Would that have enhanced or reduced diversity? It was hard to tell. Foreign species often occupied niches left vacant or developed their own. Only a few were predatory and imperialistic, and they were usually introduced by humans keen to grow and thrive at the expense of everything else.

He whipped open his notebook. “At what time and place did foreign species begin to be seen as evil invaders to be conquered, evicted, killed?” he wrote. “Probably when the conquest of nature was more or less complete and the bison, sorghum and insect-friendly ditches had been razed, removed, flattened for the benefit of growth capitalism. Afterthoughts could then be allowed and philanthropists could begin to fund rewilding and conservation efforts. This quest for purity has an almost exact parallel in the new identity politics, that of culture and roots rather than rights and equality, a kind of difference multiculturalism which holds out a promise of ontological difference and therefore invincibility to modern science and western cultural imperialism.”

This kind of identity politics was tantamount to intellectual abdication, irrationalism and stupidity, but of course he couldn’t say so in so many words; that would effectively have destroyed his reputation and

left him to beg for crumbs in the realm of academic recognition, dishonoured and dishevelled. Instead he wrote: “Owing to the forces of globalisation, people all over the world become more similar in certain important ways. However, the more similar they become, the more different they strive to be. The paradox is that the more different they try to be, the more similar they become, since they all try to be different in the same ways.”

Postscript

I'm still collecting relationships, counting dancing molecules and connecting flickering dots. But I have to say something about boundaries. Mary Douglas and Fredrik Barth wrote pathbreaking texts about boundaries from really quite different epistemological positions, but they both insisted on the importance of borders or boundaries in the 1960s.^[22] People and ideas could cross boundaries, Barth told us, but the boundary as such remained intact. Douglas saw potential turmoil and social disorder in the transgression of boundaries, as in the anomaly—the neither–nor and both–and. Their perspectives should have been challenged far more than has been the case. More common than borders are frontiers, and being a fuzzy anomaly who doesn't fit in can be a privilege and a source of opportunity. Serenity may be on to the right path after all. And although we are our relations, it takes two somethings to make a difference, so without entities no relations are possible. According to Bateson, commenting on why artists painted outlines, William Blake once said that wise men saw outlines, and they therefore painted them.^[23] But then he soured, and the next day he would take a look at the same painting and mutter that mad men saw outlines that did not exist in reality.

The outlines change. This is where Barth and Douglas took the wrong turn, for different reasons but with similar outcomes. Boundaries continue to exist, but they can only be expressed through a kaleidoscope of shifting patterns. Purity is for fanatics and people whose potty-training was a tad strict. But total openness is entropy, it is conflating a high ceiling with sleeping in the open air. After working through the pros and increasingly cons of global standardisation, there has to be light at the end of the tunnel, and it reveals neither fencing, withdrawal or retrograde resentment. The only option in this contaminated world—I have come to admire even Tsing's latest work, but not to the extent that I adopt her entire vocabulary, and I, for one, take exception to the idea that we live on a “damaged planet”—we have to do better than that!—is some version of creolisation. It enhances diversity, accepts contamination, encourages conviviality and rejects purity and boundaries. TBC.

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