

In the beginning we all resemble fish...<sup>1</sup>

1

Abtu and Anet, a sacred pair of identical fish, swam before the boat of Ra, acting as his navigators on an endless course.<sup>2</sup> During daylight hours they sailed from east to west and, by night, they accompanied the Sun god into the Duat – the “realm of the dead”<sup>3</sup> – swimming across the underworld from west to east. As a common ancestor, the fish is emblematic of both foetus and corpse: a circuit of life and death, as expressed in ancient Egyptian mythology, which places the fish as a device of directionality: as a protective figure and a mechanism to control the light of the Earth.

This symbolic narrative is one among several to transgress dominant geopolitical conceptions of the Eastern and the Western Hemispheres as consolidated in European Enlightenment principles. Innately linking cardinal extremes to the perpetuating cycle of night and day, we may apply this cosmogenic agency of “the Great Fish of the Abyss” as a new kind of asymmetrical concept<sup>4</sup> to conceive a radical politics of place. I'd like to, rather naively, consider the so-called Global South as just such a place – where pilot fish composite “locality” through an encircling motion, whereby any perception of an origin is contingent upon circulatory flows of thought-models, materialities of liberation and civilisational intersections, rather than a pact of unilateral sovereignty. Such a reading of affects may allow us to refuse the dominant vector of modernity as Eurocentric pyramidal form, from “First” to “Fourth World”.

When the Global South replaced “Third World” framing with the eventual collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the alliances across decolonised states gave way to a new cartographic affiliation.

<sup>1</sup> A reference to Tiktaalik, the land-walking fish from the late Devonian Period. See: Neil Shubin, *Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5-Billion-Year History of the Human Body* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (New York: Vintage, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Eva von Dassow, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff, *Writing Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak evokes the algorithmic globe when calling for a “displacement of globalization

into planetarity”, in *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Walter D Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom”, in *Theory, Culture & Society* vol 26, no 7-8 (2009).

<sup>8</sup> Wan Kamal Mujani et al, “Observatories in Islamic History”, in *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences*, vol 6 (8) (2012).

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Avner Ben-Zaken, “The Revolving Planets and the Revolving Clocks: Circulating Mechanical Objects in the Mediterranean”, in *History of Science*, vol 49, issue 2 (2011).

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Emilie Savage-Smith and Andrea PA Belloli, *Islamicate Celestial Globes: Their History, Construction and Use* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

This categorisation bound together the Southern Hemisphere – yet also re-cast it as an ungrounded site of “unprocessed data”.<sup>5</sup> For, while world-historical processes recalibrated the North-South divide through the drives of neoliberalism, the Post-Soviet era has entailed an ontology of corporatisation – putting governments in the service of big business – and therein maintaining a settler-savage dichotomy fortified by the geo-efficiency of an algorithmic globe.<sup>6</sup> Exploitative pursuits ensue in the western imaginary, by way of envisioning the “rise” of this mass of the world as an exponential market (read: dump) – to rescue the promised glory of consumer capitalism.

In order to re-align with the Global South, not simply as an economic and geopolitical category but also as a cultural paradigm, we may first be required to disfigure it through epistemic disobedience,<sup>7</sup> to reflect instead upon its role as an agent in the migrations of people and forms, in the cultures of cartography and in altering planetary practices.

2

The astronomical and cartographic traditions of the medieval Islamic world advanced a sensibility to realise the Earth as complex machine and wondrous (*Aja'ib*) being. The observatory held a vital place within imperial courts since the Abbasid Dynasty (750-1517) as a place of study concerning celestial objects, spaces in between these objects and the universe as a whole.<sup>8</sup> The governance of land and the onset of the Modern Age were thus intrinsically linked to knowledge of the celestial skies. The observatory as geo-cosmic apparatus may be said to perform a historical mobilisation of the Global South not simply as an axis of statecraft, but rather as reterritorialisation at a planetary scale.

Located near the River Tigris, the Banu Musa brothers studied Ursa Major (or the Great Bear) from their home turned observatory as early as 863 AD.<sup>9</sup> The

Seljuk Sultan, Malik Shah, invited the Persian polymath, poet and mystic Omar Khayyám to build an observatory in Isfahan and act as his trusted advisor. Khayyám's development of calendric time, solving of cubic equations and proposals towards a non-Euclidean geometry were thus enfolded into a poetics of administration. When writing his quatrains, (*Rubáiyát*) on facets of human life, the elements – "And that inverted bowl we call the sky" – and faith, he sought out a harmonics between the Earth's clay and the sovereign's rule. In 1574, the Ottoman scientist Taqi al-Din Muhammad Ibn Ma'ruf built an observatory in Istanbul on the invitation of Sultan Murad III.<sup>10</sup> Here, relations between the terrestrial and celestial globes were exposed in measuring the longitudes and latitudes of the Earth. Taqi al-Din imported European instruments while broadening perceptions on a mechanistic worldview in his treatise, "Al-Turuq alsaniyya fi al-alat al-ruhaniyya" (The Sublime Methods of Spiritual Machines).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the movement of a holistic knowledge consistently transcended hemispheres upon the back of imperial regimes – forwarding a globalism that claimed Eurasia as a "common" civilisational ground.

Among several instruments conceived to enhance an exterior vision of the planetary horizon, seamless celestial globes were produced in metal workshops at Kashmir, Lahore and some in other parts of the Islamic world around the 16th Century.<sup>12</sup> These cosmic spheres crafted from metal maintained a hollow inside. The earth system was hence engineered as a singular round upon which cosmological inscriptions were drafted as a skin of multi-lingual commentary. One of the most striking models was devised in the Emperor Shah Jahan's Mughal court (1628–1658). The massive bronze orb – inlaid with silver stars and constellations plotted as human-animal figures – was cast through a *cire perdue* (lost wax) process by the astronomer, metallurgist and artisan Muhammad Salih Tahtawi.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Quincy Jones, quoted in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> "The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World", available at: [exhibitions.nypl.org](http://exhibitions.nypl.org)

<sup>17</sup> Ketaki Sheth, *A Certain Grace, The Sidi: Indians of African Descent* (New Delhi: Photoink, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> This position draws upon the work of Elizabeth A Povinelli, more specifically her address to radical alterity and social commensuration in "Radical Worlds: The Anthropology of Incommensurability and Inconceivability" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol 30 (2001).

<sup>20</sup> Rupert Watson, *The African Baobab* (Cape Town: Struik Publishers, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Tim Ingold develops the notion of "meshwork" through the space-time relations asserted by Henri Lefebvre. See: *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Marc Augé and John Howe, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Erik Swyngedouw, *Civic City Cahier 5: Designing the Postpolitical City and the Insurgent Polis* (London: Bedford Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Jerry Brotton, *Trading Territories: Mapping the Early Modern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Ayssar Arida, *Quantum City* (Routledge, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Spivak, *op cit.*

When the earlier seamed – halved and re-joined – spheres encountered the bewildering potential of a seamless globe, an exceptional projection came into view. While the seams had discerned hemispheres and celestial quadrants through the labours of soldering together pieces of metal, the seamless celestial globe reckons an abstracted mode of being held-apart-together in the computing of interstellar temporality. The re-inscription of space in late capitalism resonates with the seamless celestial globe as a falsely unified sphere.<sup>14</sup> Experimental practices of global production have given way to systemic production of the Globe as a signature of power and swelling data grid.

3

*The times are always contained in the rhythm.*<sup>15</sup>

When the Global South is considered a diasporic body and a rhythm, it is gesturally emplaced in the microcosm of lives that remain unbound (even at the cost of life itself), and the macrocosmic shifts of tectonic plates that rhythmically splinter land-ocean territories (such that a portion of Florida once resided in Africa). Migratory populations and terrains continually invert the North-South divide through the cultivation of a porosity that remains incongruous to the unyielding diagrams of a legitimised nation-space. Between 2005 and 2011, across cities and forests, the contemporary photographer Ketaki Sheth traced the lives of a fragmented community, the Sidi, Indians of African descent who have lived in parts of the subcontinent over several centuries.

Through a series of black and white studies, Sheth builds a narrative of travel, friendship, cultural appropriation and diasporic lineage. Two sisters pose amid a painted wedding tent. A street scene in Jampur – where a goat has climbed upon the boundary wall of a stone house. At Ratanpur – inside the shrine of Sidi saint Bawa Gor, sunlight enters diagonally through a trellised window. Aminaben

smiles broadly while smoking her cigarette in Surendranagar. Seth's photographic "document" maps a people's history, and processes of place-making crafted over generations. The African diaspora began its journey in the Indian Ocean over a millennium ago, intrinsically tying itself to the Indian subcontinent and extending migratory passage into South East Asia as far as Japan. This movement of African peoples took place far earlier than diasporic spread in the Atlantic World. The long established trade between India and East Africa led to the entry of travellers, slave-soldiers, traders, pearl divers and pilgrims in lateen-rigged ships called *dhow*s, impelled by seasonal winds.<sup>16</sup>

Between the 9th and 17th centuries, through Arab-led armies and Portuguese colonialists, African presence in the Indian Ocean grew significantly, with several cases of individuals entering the ruling aristocracy through military service and even establishing independent kingdoms across pockets of India.<sup>17</sup>

Today, the Sidi have been enfranchised as a scheduled tribe within the Indian state, with a large number living under conditions of destitution. Anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani has noted that rather than asserting their relationality to a singular point of origin outside of the community's "place-making" history, it is through the domain of language that the presence of Kiswahili enters in the shape of words that have brokered a bond with the west Indian language, Gujarati. Further, gestural markers of an "elsewhere" appear across certain exorcism rituals, and the Sidi's Goma music<sup>18</sup> – with its polyrhythmic percussive beats, call-and-response singing and winding dance moves – remains aligned with the Ngoma style of Bantu-speaking East African peoples.

For the over 50,000 Sidis, locality has acquired a functionality through communal mobility. Belonging is thus not defined as an *a priori* condition, but rather as an incommensurable

mode of "being in the world".<sup>19</sup> Take, for instance, the pre-historic Baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) – one of the oldest surviving species on the planet, even older than the continental divide.<sup>20</sup> As per Arabian legend, the incommensurability of the Baobab is cited thus, when plucked up by the devil: "its branches plunged into earth and its roots left in the air". The eerie upside-down appearance of this botanical, its fleshy water-retaining bark and longevity across transcontinental forays, was thus tied to a monstrosity of origins. Human crossings are frequently narrated through incommensurable echoes of alien "wildness" and homegrown "nativity".

However, far from being an epistemic genus, the migratory continuum comprising the Global South is a breathing meshwork<sup>21</sup> – a migrant tree of sorts. Journeying away from wars, ecological destruction, epidemic, unemployment and totalitarian governance are only some of the exigencies that demand human movement. The case for movement also lies in seeking immaterial infrastructures elsewhere: in love, knowledge, family and the inexplicable resolve to unleash a fresh start over again.

## 4

What might it mean to posture narratives of the Global South from the imaginary of a cosmopolitan city? As demands for re-politicisation of the city resonate across the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, there is a need to relocate our discussions on cultures of place and belonging into diversified urban futures, emblematised in the city as both storyteller and emblem of social infrastructures. This is not to cast the rural as a non-place,<sup>22</sup> but rather to negotiate the neoliberal pressures that gravitate bodies into city limits. It may be useful to engage here with political geographer Erik Swyngedouw's consideration of the dead polis becoming an insurgent polis,<sup>23</sup> where a grounding of "decoloniality" is transacted in contemporary

reverberations of dissent. The world-class city has been heralded as the panacea to all forms of underdevelopment in the southern world. However, under global capital, the systemic breakdown of the city as civic space is rampant across border zones. All around us, the swell of daily unrest and violence, and the riots and occupations of public squares, mark out an "insurgent polis", a space of political encounter and history-making.

In Bani Abidi's film and photo-based installation *Funland (Karachi Series II)*, presented at the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (2014), we encounter vignettes of the pre-historic port city, Karachi, suspended between contemporary violence, melancholia and cultural memory. The city as cipher is explored through scenes from an esoteric library with an eye to comparative religion brought under self-censorship. A popular cinema hall from the 1950s is set on fire by an enraged mob. An old-fashioned amusement park makes way for the construction of a skyscraper. A man stares out at the sea while seated amid rows of empty chairs, as though he were waiting for a film to begin. Abidi thus assembles encounters from urban topography as a map of conjecture, like rumours that never quite settle, but instead float as a collective whisper reimagining a city's multiple pasts. In this artist's work, the Global South is foregrounded as a spatial practice and lived experience. The city of her childhood is observed through an unstable lens where the act of documentation entwines with the tool of fiction to unleash narrative. *Funland (Karachi Series II)* reveals architectures of erosion where the everyday is an ultimate sublime.

It seems pertinent, then, to examine the condition of Global South through registers premised upon the city as its unit, instead of the nation-state. For it is via asynchronous histories of a cosmopolis that democracy surfaces as a messy and radical non-western encounter, rather than a pristine artefact manufactured from the ruins of Empire.

Before Mercator, the task of apprehending the lineaments of the natural world were undertaken as jagged schemes that enmeshed occidental and oriental trajectories of world making.<sup>24</sup> The clinical divisions of this world – as lines of possession – accompanied the Empire and its supremacist notion that the non-western world was possessed by a "lack of history". This set up a paradigm of elemental inferiority, which remains beyond measure, yet still operative as historical violence. As geographies of the colony grew denser and wider, the creation of indebtedness among the colonised populations gained ground. This false debt attests not just to extractions of material resources but also to the burden of debt that has been carried into the present by adapting the hegemonic historiography of Empire to causes of the nation-state.

In conclusion, I would suggest a mobilisation of the Global South as a quantum concept, read against the grain of determinisms propelled through a Cartesian mechanistic worldview and corpuscularian cosmology that subscribes divisions of mind and body, man and nature, society and space.<sup>25</sup> The ideological burden of hemispheres may then be pictured as unfixed particle waves – expanded to a politics of circulation, fractured belongings that perpetuate the interconnectedness of sub-human state machinery in the face of human defiance. In these times of anthropogenic dominance over the earth-system, it becomes ever more crucial to recognise the Global South as a potentially "new" mode of non-alignment, and as a processual resistance linked to democratisation, stirred by multi-located beings who forge a planetary collectivity.<sup>26</sup>

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