

## AS WE SIT IN THE IN-BETWEEN

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## THE AGE OF NUMBERS

This is the age of numbers, big and small. Some big numbers are unimaginably big: by 2025, it is estimated that we will generate 463 exabytes of data every day. (An exabyte is 2 to the 60th power bytes.) We are approaching the rate at which the volume of human knowledge will double every 12 hours. Just to put that in perspective, at the turn of the twentieth century, human knowledge was doubling every 100 years. The really big numbers are made up of tiny numbers; binary digits of 1's and 0's. Some numbers are getting smaller, like the years we have left before we can reverse climate breakdown.

Other numbers need to become smaller: from 4°C to 1.5°C or even 0°C. Then there are two small numbers that are gigantic numbers: 4 and 6 – the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Mass Extinction. This is the age of numbers, when species die out at 100 to 1,000 the speed of the normal extinction rate, when 69% of wildlife populations disappears in 52 years. This is the age of infinite possibilities in tension with the only one viable (literally) path for the human species: appreciating that we are all in this together so that we may reverse climate breakdown.

## WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

No matter our backgrounds, no matter how we identify, where we find ourselves in this moment, we are all in this together. Despite some still denying climate breakdown, while others are too far removed from the scientific discourse because they have more pressing needs to survive in the right now, we are all in this together. Climate breakdown is the one thing that today connects all humans to all other living things. It is our collective story, written every time we experience extreme climate events as well as banal ones – and it feels like what was once extreme is now banal. It's our collective story, yet too often the voices of the Global North monopolise the mic and we can't hear those of the Global South. Their extremes are too often whispers in the media.

This sense that we are all in this together won't only come from information at our disposal. We have all the information we need. We have too much information. For this first time in history, we have a problem of information over-abundance rather than scarcity. An ideas-informed society is made up of individuals who sift through ideas, not by looking for some objective standard – there is none – or waving everything off as relativism – that is a trick of prestidigitation – but by responding to conditions through the ideas. Ideas are not Platonic ideals, they are unfinished pieces of clay that we manipulate together no tricks allowed. We are all in this together even when past ideas have cultivated separateness. To give a new twist to Albert Einstein's quote, the ideas that have led us to the brink of climate breakdown will not reverse it. In the twenty-first century, an ideas-informed society is a society with new ideas and new ways of living them, together.

## FUGITIVES AND SANCTUARY

This is a time of change, non-linear change. It always has been, really, but this is one of those rare liminal moments in history when what we thought we knew no longer holds. What was heads is tails and tails is heads, and both at once. Rather than fight to keep the familiar, we must flee, flee so we can find a place to sit, far away.

This flight from the familiar, this escape from the dominant narrative is also the story of the fugitive. These times require from us the courage to escape the pull, to be fugitives and provide sanctuary to other fugitives.<sup>i</sup> These times require us to find sanity by dispelling the illusion that what is has always been, by breaking the effigy of staticness. This is the time to write many narratives, fleeing from any dominance.

In sanctuary there is the opportunity to sit and imagine. The imagining we have in the now, born of the experiences of the past, channels the energy to bring about the futures. Past, present and future entangled into one as the discourse we employ places boundaries on what might emerge. This draws on the idea of complementarity in quantum physics: the worlds are full of prob-abilities, but which will be realized dependent on how we measure them (*measure* in its etymological sense of ascertaining dimensions, limiting). We are more than responsible for our choices, as the existentialists had us believe, operating as separate beings con-demned to be free.<sup>ii</sup> We are response-able for the cuts we make in the universe to create the assemblages of which we are part, within which we intra-act with the worlds, within which we are not the solid in the centre but the liquid that swirls in the non-permanent container through which, in that moment, we choose to regard reality. In other words, our ethics are the ways in which we decide what matters and what doesn't, what to respond to and what not to ignore. Our ethics are what we leave out, not what we leave in.

When we become conscious of what we leave out, why we leave out, we nurture the soil for an ideas-informed society to thrive. When we cultivate our response-ability, we appreciate that we are all in this together and ideas are no longer things we come up with in our heads, but embodied fields within which we all find ourselves. Post-truth has no place in our communion. We don't all have to agree, but we come to care, because we are all in this together. Information emerges as the in-formation of a collective.

Because these are times for urgency and for slowing down, together.

<sup>i</sup>Terms and notions I take from Bayo Akomolafe.

<sup>ii</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism Is a Humanism'.

Back to the 4 and the 6: the collapse of spacetime and matter no longer belongs to the realm of theoretical physics. It has become our everyday reality emerging from technology and species extinction, connected, among other things, by climate breakdown. This moment that exists here with all of us is between the 4th and 6th, between an Industrial Revolution that blurs the line between life and technology, and mass extinctions that draw lines between life and death. We find sanctuary in between blurred and fresh lines. It is here that we can witness the stories of our connections and relationships, of the fluidity of who we are, of who *we* are as relational becomings – no longer distinguished or distinguishable as individuals or as categories, but rather as possibilities (probabilities?), as events that are, were and have yet to become. Let us sit in this space, in this moment, and find ways to rework the suffering into affirmative becomings, into regenerative ecologies.

As we sit here, we discover we now have the power of teleportation, we can even be in several places at once. Our experience of quantum superposition is the new reality. How else would you describe logging onto a Zoom call where your face and voice appear on four continents at the same time? You are in an office in Buenos Aires, a living room in Leeds, a café in Yokohama and a park in Minneapolis. All at once. When we are in many places at once, we must make sure that we don't get lost or that we don't get caught in the paradox of travelling vast distances but remaining trapped in the smallest of echo chambers. An ideas-informed society is one of refuge from the noise, not from the plurality of voices and the listening of open hearts.

#### THE NEW VISTAS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

There is no distinction between the digital world and the real world. We have a symbiotic relationship with digital technology: we have come to depend on it for recommendations, directions, collaboration, creations, information, communication, flirtations, dissemination, procurement, alimentation, relaxation and incarnation. The next time you sit on a bus, a train, in a waiting room or at a coffee shop, note how many shoulders are hunched, necks long, eyes

captives of the screen. Those embodied subjects you see are immersed in the digital reality that is simply reality. There is nothing not real about the marks we leave through our interactions – nay our intra-actions – with our devices: information exchange and knowledge production in different forms. More to the point, how is my conversation with you on Zoom, perhaps separated by an ocean and half a continent, not real even if your face and voice come to me in reconstructed 1's and 0's? How is my ability to share my reaction to your words with a funny little yellow face drawing not expressive? How is the music Siri selects for you thanks to its algorithm not somehow a part of you?

We have the power of teleportation and we will need it, because the age of transportation is ending. Leave that to the second half of the previous millennium. Trade, travel and traffic will have to be reconceptualised, reengineered and relived. The planet cannot sustain the carbon byproducts of a neoliberal globalised order, or rather, the kind of planet we want cannot, for the planet will outlive all homo sapiens no matter how we respond to *our* crisis of climate, not the planet's. We are not trying to save the planet, we are trying to save ourselves and perhaps even millions of non-human species; this is a noble enough endeavour. We may have the power to teleport, but so do events many thousands of kilometres away. They land on our doorsteps as floods, fires and pandemics.

## CONFRONTING CHOICES

As spacetime melts away, we draw new maps as we notice the new landscapes in the gap between the 4th and the 6th. We notice that we are entangled in these landscapes and that we shift along with them, that the maps we use are as useful as they are useless. The map is not the territory, in the words of Alfred Korzybski, and we realize that when we give primacy to relationships and not to entities, the markings on the map – those representations – will always be secondary.<sup>iii</sup> How can you capture the flow of a river? How can you observe it when you are the river?

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<sup>iii</sup>Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*.

As we start to come down from this vantage point, we ask ourselves what we might find in the valley below, what this might mean for us, not as individuals nor as humans, but as members of the biocollective – every living thing that has an interest in the healthfulness of the planet. We find that we now live in the strangeness of the new reality, one that has infinite perspectives as we abandon the self, that representation that we held dear, and turn to the interconnectedness of all things. When we live in the in-between, in between the 4th and the 6th, in between moments and epochs, in between what is ‘you’ and what is ‘I’, we become because we no longer hold onto the static being. We appreciate that society is not the sum of individual parts but the networks that connect, the information that travels between us, which is dynamic and responsive.

When we arrive in the valley we confront the choices we make – nay the responses we have – when faced with the enfolding of the digital and the physical into one reality, the understanding that there is no longer (has there ever been?) a difference between our inter/intra-actions with the digital and our interactions with the analogue. Both create assemblages, all of which are moveable and moving, both leave marks on us and the world, both are worldly. If the Fourth Industrial Revolution melds the digital and the analogue, what will be our response? Will we resist this as so many generations of resisters to technology have tried to hold back the flow? Or will we use our energy to direct the flow?

When we arrive in the valley we confront our responses concerning how to redirect our patterns of production, consumption and relations to bring about ways of organising that do not violate the planetary boundaries and maybe even move us towards life-affirming mindsets that are regenerative, where love for, of and with life fuse into one guiding star. What would it take to move towards this civilization? How will we reconsider humans and non-humans both as our kin? How will we gain a different appreciation of *we*? What will our society look like if we extend it to non-humans and the more-than-human? How will our ideas lead to new information?

When we can travel at fibre optic speeds, we extend our horizons into the infinite. There is nowhere in spacetime we cannot reach, so

long as there is a connection to data and someone has generated the code to gain access (in this case, I mean the software and hardware). Yet when temperatures rise at faster than geological speeds, we must narrow our horizons to the local. We recreate (bio-)regional economies of production and consumption and rekindle our relationships with life around us. In the gap between 4th and 6th, we sit in two spacetimes at once: the fantastically infinite and the primordially finite.

#### USING TECHNOLOGY TO HELP US NURTURE AND FLOURISH

Let's satisfy the wanderlust for people, places and ideas by taking advantage of digital technologies. Let's go to all these places at once and listen to voices from all over the world, sharing ourselves in festivals of exchange. Let's put on our headsets and walk through the halls of the Louvre as our physical bodies are left at home. Let's be the first people to have to grapple with the problem of overabundance of information rather than its scarcity.

Let's live the good life by appreciating all that is around us rather than seeking to fill it with all this stuff from far away. Let's grow food locally and become friends with our neighbours (all those life forms above and below land). Let's make things here and not way over there, and just make less of it. Let's have more conversations about what matters in this part of the world, always with an eye to the distant, but seldom do we physically displace ourselves.

We leave fewer footprints when we don't journey far with our physical bodies and journey farther with our digital ones.<sup>iv</sup> We can eat an apple grown in the orchard 5,000 m down the road while conversing with someone's digital form 5,000 km away. We can get to know the birds that fill our ears with song by stepping outside as well as stepping into the Metaverse. What we cannot do is keep up this pace of physical trade, travel and traffic nor the price paid by consumption, convenience and conspicuousness.

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<sup>iv</sup>Of course, we will have to build to figure out how sustainable data farming as the digital sector generates more greenhouse gases than the aviation sector.

We aren't looking for a techno-solution. There are none. We are looking for techno-means. We are looking to use technology in ways that help the biocollective thrive, without the hierarchy of progress, the values of shinier is better. Technology is a means –whether it's a pruner or a processor – to enrich, to care for, to nurture. Technology not just as a means to provide for our unfettered desires, rather one that allows us all to live well, as a biocollective. We respond to the world through love for the many worlds we inhabit, all connected in the web of life.

We aren't looking to live in caves huddled around a fire either. We find ways to feed the *we* and not the *I*, appreciating we are of nature, entangled within that web and that pulling on one strand of silk, it will be vibrate throughout. We live well, comfortably, with joy and satiation, not gluttony. We value relationships over things. We value the *we* and the *I* equally because they are the same. We value regeneration over extraction.

#### RIPPLES AND WAVES

What will it take for a world to emerge that is connected to the infinite and to the finite, this cosmologicalism in which we make use of our powers of teleportation to connect with those far away and self-organise to reconnect with those within touch? It will take courage, moral courage. It will take each one of us to make a ripple, so that the many ripples we each make amplify into a wave, and then a tsunami. It will take courage to tell another story, to create another narrative. It will take courage to stand up, stand out and stand alone. But we will not be alone. Our story is the stories of many, the stories of those who want to thrive, who want to find abundance not in things but in relationships, *with* interconnections.

We have the courage to be fugitives of a narrative of extraction and separation. We run, we hide, we find each other in between the 4th and the 6th, where spacetime collapses and we start anew, but not anew. We take what we can carry and no more, but we do not carry alone. We carry these stories with us and stay with the trouble.