

Living (planet) versus dead (capital)

Sonal Jain

Abstract

After five centuries of global capitalist expansion, we are in the midst of the largest mass extinction of species in the last 65 million years; we are confronted by the climate crisis and the mass acidification of the oceans. The Anthropocene discourse posits humans as a geographical force, measured by significant changes humanity has had on the biosphere. Many, however, counter this arguing that it is not human impact but global capital that is responsible for the climate crisis. Caught in our collective addiction to consumption, growth, progress and infrastructure development based on a flawed economic model, we need a radical change in our way of being. In stark contrast to the techno-utopia of our post-industrial societies, we have amidst us in the present day and age many communities, people and cultures who see themselves as being subject to nature, rather than in control of it; their worldviews and knowledge systems are completely opposite to the Western civilisation, global capitalism and the modern education system. The living root bridges and trees in the Indian state of Meghalaya, firmly enmeshed within the culture and identity of the people who create them, are perfect examples of living in tune with nature rather than controlling it.

Author's profile

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The Wahmawlong living root bridge. Photo by Sonal Jain, 2020

Anthropocene versus Capitalocene

After five centuries of global capitalist expansion, we are in the midst of the largest mass extinction of species in the last 65 million years (the sixth mass extinction); we are confronted by the climate crisis and the mass acidification of the oceans. The small numbers of remaining rain forests worldwide are being cut down at the rate of an acre per second, 90 per cent of fish in the sea have been eaten, and 50 per cent animals have disappeared due to logging and agriculture.

The Anthropocene discourse posits humans as a geographical force, measured by significant changes humanity has had on the biosphere. Man has a domination of the earth. "1,000 years ago free-living animals made up 99 per cent of the biomass and human beings made up only 1 per cent. Today (fraction of time) human being and the animals we own as property make up 98 per cent of the bio mass and wild free-living animals make up only 2 per

cent. We have basically stolen the world, the earth from free-living animals". (Will Tuttle, environmental and ethics author, in the film, Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret)

However many like Jason W. Moore counter the Anthropocene position and argue that it is not human impact but global capital that is responsible for the climate crisis. It is the Capitalocene, understood as a system of power, profit and re/production in the web of life that is responsible for the changes on the earth's biosphere. Moore in his essay, The Capitalocene, Part I: On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis, says, "I situate the Anthropocene discourse within Green Thought's uneasy relationship to the Human/Nature binary, and its reluctance to consider human organisations – like capitalism – as part of nature."

Human versus Nature

Human/Nature binary is largely a result of the Cartesian dualism and similar thoughts. Rene Descartes, the first of the modern rationalists, laid the groundwork for debates developed during the European Enlightenment. He argued for a separation between the mind and body leading to a split between mind-nature and humans-animals. Mind became pure thought-incorporeal while body was reduced to pure matter. The ensuing Nature/Society divide was instrumental in the rise of capitalism as removed from its spirit matter and nature was reduced to its utilitarian function at the disposal of humanity. "This coupled with a new knowledge regime, a series of 'scientific revolutions'... made it possible to launch and sustain a process that threatens as all today: Putting the whole of nature to work for capital." (Jason W. Moore, The Rise of Cheap Nature)

Henceforth, "Some people became Humans, who were members of something called Civilisation, or Society, or both – as in Adam Smith's 'civilised society'" (Jason W. Moore, The Rise of Cheap Nature). With Nature becoming "mere matter" and a resource it was/is explored, surveyed, mapped and calculated. It became an easy target for exploitation and extractive energy, enabling colonialism and imperialism. Carbon industries, forestry, mining, agri-business, construction, mega-farming and mega-fishing are all ongoing and everyday processes for the accumulation of capital even today.

Civilisation versus civilisations

In stark contrast to the techno-utopia of our post-industrial societies, we have amidst us in the present day and age many communities, people and cultures who see themselves as

being subject to nature, rather than in control of it: People who live entirely from the land, growing and foraging for their needs. These are people and communities deemed savages, primitives, natives by the supposed civilised Western colonisers, and who were/are in need of education and refinement. The loot, plunder and absolute devastation of world's indigenous cultures, which continues to this day is largely unaccounted for. None of the data present can account for loss of languages, cultures and knowledge systems.

The Western civilisation, global capitalism and the modern education system are in radical conflict with the indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems. The mind-body dualism, which gives human life its implicit worth, based on a qualitative distinction between the relationship to the animal life rather than the mind-spirit is what Western reason erected its empire on. Prior to the rise of Judeo-Christian values 2000 years ago, there existed multiple belief systems with many gods and earth spirits, such as paganism, animism, and (the various forms of) Hinduism among other eastern religions. They generally considered the sacred to be found throughout nature, and humanity as thoroughly enmeshed within it, as is the case with most indigenous worldviews. "The Anthropocene argument relies on the construction of humanity as a collective actor", (Zalasiewicz et al. 2011; On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature). This assigns responsibility of global climate change to humanity as a whole versus capital and empire, and it denies the existence of multiplicity and the plurality of human "civilisations".

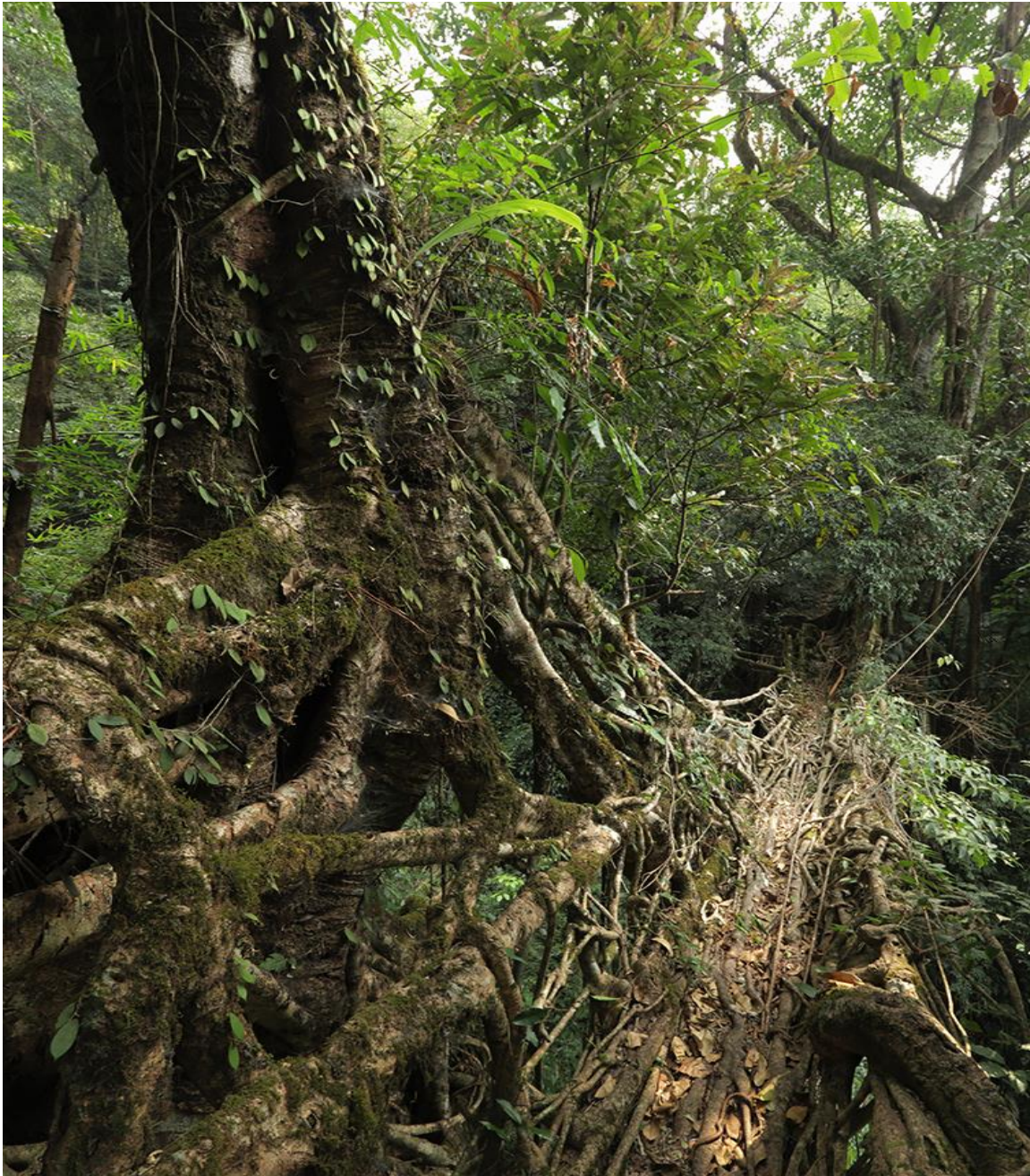
In the dense subtropical humid broadleaf forests on the steep valleys leading from the Shillong Plateau to the Bangladesh floodplain live indigenous Khasi and Jaintia people. Meghalaya in India is one of the wettest places in the world. Incessant rainfall and high levels of humidity is an integral part of life, and people live in an effortless synergy with it. Out of the living roots of the *Ficus elastica* (India rubber) trees are woven these organisms/structures that look more like they are from an Avatar or a Lord of the Rings film rather than something that is part of our contemporary reality.

The tender and supple aerial roots of the trees are given direction and support and intertwined with each other. With this technique they build dreamscapes like surreal bridges that help in getting across monsoon-swollen rivers and deep ravines that characterise the area, platforms on tree overlooking luscious verdant valleys, ladders to climb up steep rocks and massive boulders and swings that sway silently in the dense forests.

The process of making the bridges begins with a planting of the trees on either sides of a stream. Once the tree is mature its aerial roots are inserted into hollowed out areca nut or bamboo trunks giving them the necessary direction and protection. They are supported by bamboo bridges as they slowly grow in strength. Later, stones are inserted into the gaps and

then still handrails and steps made from the same roots are added. The bridges are made and maintained by individuals, families or by communities. The length of the bridges can vary from 2m to 52.7m. (Ludwig, F., Middleton, W., Gallenmüller, F. et al. Living bridges using aerial roots of *Ficus elastic* – an interdisciplinary perspective. Sci Rep9,12226 (2019).

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The Wahmawlong living root bridge. Photo by Sonal Jain, 2020

Sitting on the intricate weave of the handrails of thick roots of 300-year-old Wahmawlong living root bridge and listening to MorningStar Khongthaw, a 24-year-oldman working on the

regeneration of these structures, talk about the ways of the forest over a background of singing birds and buzzing insects is as enchanting now as was my first encounter with these magical forests and these structures many years ago. MorningStar tells me that these bridges are a part of an intricate network of ancient forest paths that lead all the way down into Bangladesh. Due to the physical proximity, the villagers here share ancient ties with the plains people of Bangladesh. National boundaries notwithstanding, weekly village markets still exist with cross border trade happening. They are more familiar with Bangladesh than with the state capital, Shillong.

The root we sit on provides nice little niches to perch oneself on. There is a waterfall on one side and a deep ravine on the other. The continuous shrill whistle of the cicadas resounds in the entire valley. MorningStar tells me how a man named Sngap made this bridge. The reason was that his wife's village was on the other side of the mountainside and with the bridge he could go more easily to his wife. MorningStar points out small shallow cuts on the barks of the ficus trees, forming a pattern. These cuts are made to collect the sap from the tree bark that is used to make latex. On the trees are also manmade homes for the honeybees, from which wild honey is collected. Villagers forage bay leaves, broom grass, ginger and chillies from the forest. The area for the foraging of the broom grass is divided among the families with the only markers being trees and rocks. Asked about any cases of dispute or theft happening in this division, MorningStar replies that the people here are very honest and there has never been any kind of difficulty.

Geoengineering versus living architecture

Geoengineering hailed as a saviour for the ecological messes humanity is creating works in a myopic way, providing a solution to a problem only to create a new one. In contrast to this, the living root bridges are a perfect example of a holistic and locally adapted ecological approach to problem solving. Given that the average annual rainfall in some areas of Meghalaya is as high as 12,000 mm (470 in), making it the wettest place on earth, the living root bridges are a marvel in innovation. Very quickly into the monsoons, it is practically impossible to even walk on the slippery surfaces of the stone, steps and paths going up and down these steep mountains. In these conditions, the living root bridges prove very efficient, as they don't gather moss and are easy to walk on. The humidity in the dense forests eats into most materials. The roots of these bridges are alive and grow only stronger with time. There is a qualitative observation and understanding of the climate, geography and the biological life and characteristics of the same, which has no substitute in quantitative data

methods. Communities over generations have acquired intimate place-based knowledge through an everyday interaction with the land.



The Wahmawlong living root bridge. Photo by Sonal Jain, 2020

The many interdependencies and interconnectedness of society to the forest/nature are a given. The knowledge of making the bridges is handed down by one generation to the next with a living continuity. Many existing bridges are made by ancestors going back even five generations. It is an evolutionary design process to meet the “needs of locally adapted, place-based communities within the limits of their local environment”(Daniel Christian Wahl).

The ingenious and non-intrusive/non-destructive manner in which the roots are adapted demonstrate how, “Many traditional cultures prove that it is possible to sustain locally adapted, place-based communities for centuries and even millennia through prudent and ecologically and socially responsible resource management and sustainable ways to meet human needs within the limits and opportunities set by the natural conditions of their particular region” (Daniel Christian Wahl, A Sense of Place). It is part of an inventive life giving and life-affirming matrix that humans and the natural world work collaboratively on.

The forest here is conceived as a sacred living being and not just a natural resource. Its offerings are used judiciously without depleting and destroying the forests. The Law Kyntang are the sacred groves inhabited by protective deity/spirits called U Ryngkew U Basa. They are revered by the people. These are today rich bio-diversity hotspots as cutting anything, killing any animal or even taking even a fallen leave from it premise is taboo, based on a belief that the protective deity will turn maleficent if one does. There are rituals and ceremonies that are performed in spot with megaliths called Mawbynna in order to maintain personal and local equilibrium.

In the last few years, the once completely obscure living root bridges have received worldwide attention. One of these bridges, the Riwai Root Bridge near Mawlynnong village, is in danger of collapse under pressure of the sheer number of tourists treading upon it. There is also an interest of the state government with projects aimed at preservation and regeneration. According to MorningStar, this too has been counter-productive as such projects are insensitive to the social-community aspect of the bridges. A concrete bridge, concrete footpaths with metal railing and other such structures have been built in close proximity of the root bridges. Riwai Root Bridge and the Umshiang Double Decker Bridge have both borne the brunt of the recent surge in unsustainable tourism and a ‘false modernity’. A healthy local eco-system has been reduced to a mere tourist spectacle and selfie point.



The Wahmawlong living root bridge. Photo by Sonal Jain, 2020

Empiricism versus myth

Empiricism, Merleau Ponty complains, robs sense experience of all mystery by reducing it to physicochemical processes and causal relationships of stimulus and response. The task of a

phenomenology of perception is accordingly to rediscover that “vital communication with the world” (Merleau Ponty). While if one lives in synergetic co-existence with other living/spiritual beings who are sacred, one is in regular communication with them. Like, in a local myth the ‘puri’ are beautiful feminine creatures who live in streams and rivers. Some men get enchanted by them and go and live with them and their purioffspring temporarily in the watery realms. These stories are not something limited to yesteryear and distant villages. They, among numerous others local myths, persist even in cities like Shillong despite mass conversion to Christianity and the pervasive forces of capitalism and globalisation. A contemporary poet from Shillong, Jobeth Ann Warjri interprets the “abnormal” behaviour of a young boy in her neighbourhood in this poem:

İohPuri
They say he stole into the sacred groves,
They say he sprouted golden wings
To soar the clear skies,
Webbed feet to swim in the blue pool.
But, by noontime,
Thunder clouds
From beyond the rainbow descended.
They say, “He is bewitched.”

The indigenous knowledge, coded into stories, songs, dances, rituals and place, integrates the people with the natural world, one that is living, intelligent and sacred. They become one integral, inter-connected eco-system where one cannot be dissociated from the other. Living root bridges and trees are firmly enmeshed within the culture and identity of the people who create them. They are part of the oral and the material knowledge system that has evolved over hundreds of years: One that draws from a wealth of knowledge collected, stored and passed down orally and materially over generations. Oral cultures “memorise the vast amounts of practical information they needed to survive” (Lynne Kelly, The Memory Code). Kelly further postulates how oral societies are able to store vast quantities of knowledge to memory without it degrading over time through associating memory with a location or place, known as loci in Latin. The living root bridges too, like ceremonial sites and landscape, are memory spaces. In ancient times, MorningStar’s ancestors, the War Khasis, won a war against the Jaintia people and their chief picked a sampling of the ficus tree from the river there in order to commemorate this victory. He planted it in their village Rangthylliang. There are now 22 living root bridges here. These trees are thus sacred to the people here and they believe that deities, protectors of the village live in the big ficus trees and the people give them an offering during the festivals. There is a taboo on burning or cutting the tree.

For the Warjri clan too the ficus tree has a special significance. Jobeth: “Diengjri is the ‘Rubber tree’ in Khasi. According to clan lore, the Warjris’ ancestress was an old woman who sat under a rubber tree and, by doing so, received protection from a plague that ravaged the village of Nongjri.” In a poem titled Origin, she writes:

*...I have left you, Diengjri of my origin,
only to find your offerings of legend
pealing with laughter
from my body.*

The origin myth of the Khasi people too refers to a tree. God in a bid to create a link between the kingdom of Man on the earth and the kingdom of God in the Heavens planted on the sacred mountain Lum Sohpetbneng – the Mount of Heaven’s Navel, a divine tree to serve as a golden ladder.

In *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls for a need for a radical change in what counts as knowledge and a rejection of the assumptions common to epistemologies of the North (Western rationalist): “That authorship is individual, not collective; that knowledge must be linguistically expressed; and that knowledge is a ‘purely cognitive’ matter. Instead, we must accept the importance of oral traditions and non-linguistic practices and the fact that all knowledge is produced by embodied subjects.” This puts all indigenous practices back into the frame of knowledge where they belong.

Mechanistic versus vital materialism

What really changed with Descartes’ ontologically dualism, when he made a distinction between thinking substance, *res cogitans*, and extended substance, *res extensa*, the latter being a single but infinitely modifiable substance in extension, is that the vitality or implicit life force from matter was taken away. Matter becomes “inert stuff emptied of all immanent vitality... Because, moreover, matter is without value or internal qualities or significance, it is not forbidden for this subject to control the material domain that is, for Descartes, synonymous with nature (including animals, whose lack of a soul or self awareness renders them mere automata)” (Diana Coole, *The Inertia of Matter*).

The critical shift here was that nature went from being an organic whole: A cosmos with a living female earth at its centre, to dead and passive. Humans hence are flexibly taken in and out of the category of matter/nature. Indigenous Australians were legally considered animals by the Australian government and were categorised under the "Flora and Fauna Act" up until 1967.

Intrinsically empty of metaphysical purposes and devoid of animistic of human spirit and, “This is what sets it free for modernity’s secular or technoindustrial projects...” (Diana Coole); this is precisely what gives technocentrics’, including imperialists’, absolute faith in technology and industry and the firm belief that humans have control over nature; this is also what in the last few decades has led to the environmental/green movement in the embracing the new technologies, geoengineering and new forms of power premised on the Great Frontier. However this movement too, apart from being flawed in its very conception of the nature/society divide, has been co-opted by big corporations for profit motives and all in the guise of ‘sustainability’. It is in the name of sustainable fishing that 28 billion animals have been pulled out of the oceans just in the 2015. For every pound of fish caught there is 5 pounds of untargeted species trapped known as “by-kill”. Scientists predict that we may see fishless oceans by the year 2048.

Techno-utopias versus viroid dystopias

In its essence, capitalism is a system that promotes unlimited growth on a finite planet and this at the cost of even basic human health and well being. In her book *The Politics of “Life Itself”*, Rosi Braidotti calls capitalism an “all consuming entropic energy”, and reduces its participants into an endless self-propelling loop of production and consumption. Rosi goes on to say, “Capitalism has no built-in teleological purpose, historical logic, or structure but rather is a self-imploding system that will not stop at anything in order to fulfil its aim: Profit. This inherently self-destructive system feeds on and thus destroys the very conditions of its survival: It is omnivorous, and what it ultimately eats is the future itself.”

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic with a proposed vaccine that can potentially change the DNA structure of the human genome, one cannot but reflect on the biogenetic capitalism that is presenting itself to us not in the distant visions of a techno-utopian future but in the very present. The body is the direct site of potential profit and the subject of what Michel Foucault calls biopower (now more than ever). It is a systemic reduction by of the “subject” to what Agamben calls “bare life” which is that in you that the despotic force of power can kill: Body in its hands as disposable matter.

Multiple visions of cyborgs, humanoids, artificial intelligence and perfect humans abound: A future with immortality and near complete control over nature, life and death with biotechnology and eugenics. Here humans will exercise choice of what they want to be. Ansell Pearson, in his book *Viroid Life* counters this line of thought with the proposition that the true enemy of our times is the assumption that technological progress will bring about

human perfection, even the transcendence of the human. He vehemently challenges such post human thinking. I resonate Pearson's fear that in constructing a posthuman paradigm that makes the logic of capitalist biotechnology synonymous to that of human history, alternate stories of human pasts and human futures are being disabled and discredited, something imperialism and colonialism have already done so effectively in the past.

“Accumulating Extinction” versus “Life Itself”

The Anthropocene discourse tends to disavow differentiated responsibility for those geological changes and does not acknowledge the many different and diverse human civilisation, systems and knowledge. Many of which did not or do subscribe to capitalism. The urgency of our times is voiced very succinctly by Justin McBrien in *Accumulating Extinction, Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene* where he says, “The logic of accumulation is not capable of outrunning extinction because accumulation and extinction are the same process. They cannot be decoupled. But the human being can be decoupled from Capital. Capital is extinction. We are not.”

Caught in our collective addiction to consumption, growth, progress and infrastructure development based on a flawed economic model, we need a radical change in our way of being. We need to reintegrate ourselves with the living planet taking our cues from living root bridges, which boldly challenge the status quo. The need of the hour is what Rosi Braidotti calls “a post anthropocentric shift”, with actions and a system change that affirm Rosi's conception of “Life Itself.”

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