Is it true that we're actually living in separate universes?

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> More than a straightforward multiplication of the many, then, pluralism animates the politics of a world that persistently resists the assaults that would turn it into a single order, risking its own unfolding and refolding into an irreducible and insistent pluriverse.
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> —Martin Savransky, *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds* (2021, 9)

It's a hot steamy day in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and I'm walking around to kill time until a scheduled interview with an environmental organization. Once I entered the building, a breeze of icy, crisp air from air conditioning. Finally, I feel like I can breathe. Then I think to myself, isn't this kind of air conditioning (ab)use really bad for the environment? A few minutes later, the personnel walks in smiling, saying that they are so happy to talk with me and that they "couldn't miss this opportunity." As we talk, they tell me that the people with whom they interact don't believe in climate change. They have witnessed so much of extreme weather whilst living here, but many believe that it has always been this way. After the meeting, I step outside and notice a gigantic church, with jaw-dropping art-deco architecture. It is hard to resist the feeling of awe looking at it. So much of what seems to be quite grand and magnificent, in this region, is built through the oil industry. Then I ask myself: "Is it true that we're actually living in separate universes?"

The question of, "Who has the right to bust someone else's (reality) bubble, and how do we justify it?" is one of the key themes of Savransky (2021)'s *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*. Recounting the narrative of the anthropologist Harry West and his book "Ethnographic Sorcery", Savransky discusses "runaway metaphysics" that escape the possibilities conditioned by the Western modernity. The Muedans of Mueda Plateau in post-colonial Mozambique, whenever lion is seen in a village, speculate that it is a sorcerer who transformed themselves (into a lion) to take a revenge on their rivals. While West applies a theory of "symbolic anthropology" to explain this phenomenon—proposing that these lions can be culturally understood as a "symbol" of social predation, nobility, and power, one of the Muedans, after having carefully listened to West's analysis, petitions: "These lions… they aren't symbols, they are real". By stating so, Savransky argues, the Muedan was making real of another world existing in this world, "[a] world in which sorcery-lions are not symbols, but may instead be as real as symbols—as real as everything else" (31).

Savransky engages with other similar examples all around the world, but the one that particularly came home to me was the Buddhist priest's acknowledging and living with ghosts in the aftermath of the 2011 Great Tsunami in Tōhoku. The locals started confessing to the priest about their lived experiences with ghosts, presumed to be the lost souls of the victims who weren't quite yet ready to depart the physical world. Growing up in the 90s in a nearby part of the "atlas", under the continuing presence of plural religions, mythologies, and "superstitions", the idea of "different worlds within this world", to me, wasn't just an abstract virtue of "tolerance" represented in Western philosophy, but an actually existing reality that my generation of Korean modernity performed.

I think that what my book tried to convey could be interpreted in a similar vein—especially concerning how we are to navigate these plural worlds and reality bubbles, and whether the reality of climate disfiguration gives some of us the legitimacy to be deterministic or forceful upon others. By interacting with government planners, landscape architects and environmentalists, what became clear to me was not only the fact that these practitioners were translating different languages across diverse social bubbles, but also the enlarging gulf between academicians' world (who search for the authoritative objectivity) and practitioners' world (who make come true of intersubjective realities). It is in this perspective that I address the reviewers' thoughtful and extremely generous engagement with my book.

Dr Rivera correctly points out that "a deeper investigation of histories of racism and colonialism are needed to understand when finding common ground is particularly fraught… how can commonalities be found when one group fundamentally denies another the right to exist and thrive"? This question is especially pertinent to the case of Tulsa, Oklahoma, where its thriving existence of "Black Wall Street" (Greenwood District) was ravaged by the White supremacy (Parshina-Kottas et al. 24 May 2021) as well as the twentieth century top-down urban renewal (Goodwin 2020), notably highway networks. I have expressed the difficulty of addressing this fraught situation in the present book (Jon 2021, 161); Rivera is right that the book's conceptual framework does not directly address this. If I could expand on the background of my failure, however, I would say that I wasn't able to find, at this moment of my academic career, effective ways of liaising between two polarising realities: one on the persistence of gentrification in the guise of green urbanism, the other on the stories of market possibly playing a role in emancipatory politics of socially marginalised groups. As Fraser (2018, 74) insightfully notes, in her generative critique of Polanyi:

> But "society" is hardly so virtuous, and Polanyi's reification of it encourages us to overlook its nasty aspects, including sexism, racism, homophobia, and exclusionary provincialism. Nor is "stability" an unmitigated good. Polanyi's formula underestimates the emancipatory role of marketisation in destabilising traditional oppressions. And it fails to validate the inherently destabilising yet undeniably emancipatory character of struggles against such oppressions.

Which is to say that the world of practitioners may be a bit more complex than the sanitised solutions proposed by academicians (including myself), notably our common propositions of expanding "state" or "government" as the panacea for all social ills. How could we talk about "social justice" when the morality of "the social" remains under-debated (Lake 2017)?

For instance, Sai Balakrishnan (2021) shows that, in the development processes of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in western Maharashtra, India, unexpected countermovements occur along the complex politics intersecting class and caste. While dominate-caste landowners (i.e. agrarian propertied class) demanded their fertile agricultural lands to be protected (against SEZ), an Adivasi Group (Thakkars; a less dominant caste group) were eager for their lands to be commodified by turning them into a SEZ—since such transactions would give them an immediate social status (e.g., the owners of a high-demand market asset) and negotiating power vis-a-vis the dominant caste and bureaucrats. As Balakrishnan put it: "Less anticipated by Polanyi, … was the possibility that non-propertied and working classes might themselves become drivers or at least proponents of land commodification." (Balakrishnan 2021, 105); "Certain Adivasis, such as the younger generation Khed Adivasis, are willing to commodify their land both to escape caste-ridden agrarian moral economies of control and out of the desire to enjoy the city life and its imagined freedom from caste hierarchy" (122).

I would respond to Dr Denman's critical comment on my description of Atlantis SEZ through a related angle. What is unsaid in his commentary is the fact that the initial establishment of the City of Atlantis (in 1975) itself has been the act of apartheid politics and racialisation of Blackness. Simply put, it is not just the market, but the *social ideology* of White supremacy, that has instigated this spatial segregation in the first place. As I noted in the book, the logics of market were then introduced to purportedly "relieve" the consequences of such institutional racism, which continues to this day—seeing the distribution of economic opportunities as the ticket out of this heavily segregated society. Indeed, one could ask: doesn't this incur another epistemic injustice problem in propagating the Western ways of being in the world—e.g., stable career, fixed accommodation, taxable income that have nothing to do with other non-Western cultural hegemonies (Simone 2018)? From the perspectives of practitioners, however, the story may be told in a different way. The Atlantis SEZ, as I've experienced in person, could be considered an experimental space of doing "something" when not a lot of commotion was happening otherwise[1]; it prioritises opportunities for already-existing local small businesses (in response to the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act, 2003 (Act 53 of 2003), as amended by the

[1] As I discuss in the book in detail, it is 45 km away from Cape Town—built intentionally further away from the White space by the apartheid government. Since the beginning of the post-apartheid era, it has become more and more isolated, as the very development of this new town was funded through the apartheid regime's motivation for spatial segregation.

BBBEE Amendment Act, 2013 (Act 45 of 2013)), provides digital education programs in collaboration with local schools, directs funding for community development programmes on food security and water management. Who am I to say, an academic who makes career out of writing about their practices, let alone having physically nothing at stake in either the "success" or "failure" of their professional endeavours (as opposed to them continuing to live with the consequences of their decision-makings), that their initiative is doomed from its conception due to its acquiescence to market forces?

Contra Denman's claim that there is a tension between pragmatism and experimentalism, experimentalism is at the very center of Dewey's pragmatism, building directly on his rejection of foundational premises and essentialised categories and his idea of "truth" as that which stands the experimental test of what works (Lake 2016). This is what's radical about pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism: its faith in a plethora of intersubjectively-experienced-worlds that exist within "the" world. Pragmatism, as a philosophy, is preoccupied with "the perspective of social agents", i.e. how they navigate expressing their burgeoning pluralities in response to the existence of old descriptions that try to tame them (Rorty 2021). As I have noted elsewhere (Jon 2020, 2022), such unwavering commitment to pluralism can be connected to critical Black thought (Fraser 1998; Collins 2011, 2012), particularly with regard to addressing whether radically plural epistemologies are given an equal right to flourish under their concurrent conditions of existence in relation to one another. It is not surprising therefore Sylvia Wynter (1995) finds the neopragmatist Rorty (1989)'s concept of "truth of solidarities" useful, when she discusses the need for generating new re-descriptions of "being human" that exceeds and escapes the boundaries of marginalisation.

In the context of this present book, however, my use of philosophical pragmatism was much more modest: I wanted to talk about the small, banal, everyday life-stories of urban practitioners, particularly with regard to what it feels like to pursue "something (collectively) meaningful" (in this book's case, environmentalism) when the political currents are laid against it. In today's culture where so much of "the political" is requested to be of something that is argumentatively glitzy and sensational, the everyday politics of our social relations and moral behaviour towards "the other"—humans and nonhumans—rest unexamined. A political project of poststructuralism that pays attention to the terms and relations of governmentality, as Cruikshank (1999) noted, must involve everyone: everyone, including us academics, who are active subjects of politicising "knowledge". Do we still embody, in our tacit pursuit of conceptual purity, the legacy of enlightenment where anything that is "useful" is dismissed as "menial" and unworthy of intellectual debate (Dewey 1925)? Is there a hierarchy of importance in ranking whose "subversiveness" should matter more (than others)? Who can claim the moral superiority of their "practising subversiveness" over others'? When Denman poignantly asks, "what of the political experimentation by those targeted and repressed by normativity, even that normative

order arises from the complexity of urban life?", whose "reality bubble", under the current episteme, is deemed more "legitimate", "deeper", or more "serious" than others, and on what grounds do we legislate such an order? Denman is right that my book falls short in answering those questions.

But the good news, for a pragmatist, is that these bubbles are never to remain absolute, as their interactions with one another—topological and communicative—allow the possibility of "sewing" different realities together "with a thousand little stitches" (Rorty 2021, 141). On this on-going constitution of "bubbles", I hope to resist the temptations of simplifying dualisms—such as urban/rural—that Rivera's commentary may evoke. Through problematic situations, or the indeterminacy of unexpected juxtapositions that these situations manifest, the urban question and the agrarian question can be placed in relation to one another, both taking part in the on-going production of "scale" (Roy 2016). Implying that scale is simply given rather than produced, a return to the caricaturing of "hinterland" as opposed to "the urban" could ignore the whole discussion of the politics of scale from the early 2000, informed by Lefebvre who holds that the urban is everywhere—that "the city" isn't just about jurisdictional boundaries (see Gandy 2022's critique of Angelo and Wachsmuth). The reality bubbles I tried to invoke in my book were not intended to be reducible to the over-simplified, dualistic categories: in different conditions of environmental governance, whether this be water pollution or waste management, what matters is connected-communities of people, places, and things that together *share* a particular epistemic concern, which then *reassembles* their ontologies of social life, i.e. their own "reality bubble" that surfaces through the transactional encounters between tangible materialities and discursive imaginations.

If it's true that we are living in separate universes, where the "realness" of the sorcery lions in Mueda Plateau or the ghosts in Tōhoku is to be adjudicated by those who are affected by (or have been living with) them, would you trust me if I tell you that the perspectives that I've encountered on the road in writing this book—of those who don't believe in climate change, or of those who believe that market would bring them something that their state couldn't—did not seem "delusional" in the context of each of their respective habitats? Pluralism and multiplicity of pragmatism, in thinking of "moral progress as a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things" (Rorty 2021, 135), offer a space of open debates for all reality bubbles alike. After all, busting someone else's reality bubble may require "proposals which … generatively hold out a hand to our impoverished imaginations and insist on the possibility of proffering a response in relay and return, of wagering that world-monification is not the obligatory starting point for an experiment in other ways of composing togetherness" (Savransky 2021, 127). I would like to sincerely thank Dr Danielle Rivera and Dr Derek Denman who have carved such an indulgent space for this experimental book.

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