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Marginalia and the ethnosphere

Abstract:

There is no singular future out there waiting for us. The future is a contested and creative space in which individuals, communities and even civilisations explore the creative possibilities available to them in their traditions, their imaginaries and their choices. This provocation outlines some key drivers in the area of climate change, marginalisation and vulnerability. It does not seek to offer a coherent ‘narrative’ but rather to challenge the reader to think about the current global conditions under the banner of the new term ‘anthropocene’ and consider where resilience is to be found in our complex and uncertain world.

Biographical notes:

Dr Marcus Bussey is Senior Lecturer in History and Futures at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia where he is Deputy Head, School of Social Sciences. He is a futurist and researcher with the Arts Research in the Creative Humanity’s group and also a member of the university’s Sustainability Research Centre. He works on cultural processes that energise social transformation. He uses futures thinking to challenge the dominant beliefs and assumptions that constrain human responses to rapid cultural, social and technological change. He is currently focused on the role of anticipatory aesthetics as a process oriented approach to understanding and accessing human transformative potential.

Marcus has co-authored with Professor Richard Slaughter, *Futures Thinking for Social Foresight* (2005). He has also co-edited two books with Sohail Inayatullah and Ivana Milojević – *Neohumanist Educational Futures* (2006) and *Alternative Educational Futures* (2008). In addition, he has edited *Tantric Women Tell their Stories* (2007) and published a book of poetry *Clare and Francis* (2012). Marcus has held fellowships at Nanyang Technical University, Singapore and Tamkang University, Taiwan. Marcus is on the editorial boards for the *Journal of Futures Studies*, *Foresight*, and *On the Horizons*. His book of poetry *Clare and Francis* has just been translated into Bengali by Professor Meera Chakravorty and his poetry book *The Next Big Thing*, is coming out through Studera Press, New Delhi in August 2018.

Jacques Barcia is a journalist, science fiction writer and futurist. He holds a Master's in Design from the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE) and teaches Design

Futures at the Cesar School. Jacques's fiction has been featured in *Shine: An Anthology for Optimistic Science Fiction* and *The Apex Book of World Science Fiction*; and has appeared in magazines such as *Clarksworld* and *Electric Velocipede*. He is one of the co-founders of Futuring Today, a futures lab that blends foresight, design, and science fiction to explore our futures. Jacques also serves as the Futures Consultant for the Brazilian non-profit science and technology park, Porto Digital. He is a member of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) and a fellow at the Centre For Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies (CPPFS)

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Provocation

Marcus Bussey

Marginality means to be on the periphery, insignificant, or outside of the mainstream, but this does not necessarily mean to be a minority in terms of size. Marginalization has often been understood as an exclusion from power. Although holding a rather deterministic view of power, Morrison usefully points out; power lies with the few, who try to make you believe that their characteristics are universal (Morrison 1990).

Philip Mulligan, (1999 p. 650).

Global trends point towards anticipated shifts across the planet with marginalised minority ethnic identity being impacted by global processes.

1. There are between 6000 and 7000 languages currently spoken, and that between 50 and 90% of them will have become extinct by 2100 (see [ELCAT](#))
2. Indigenous (tribals, Americas, Australasia etc...) and provincial identities (Kurdish, Basque, etc...) are under pressure and being assimilated by dominant language groups such as English, Hindi, Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese (Paranjape 2007).
3. Economic, cultural and political (including military) marginalisation is at work in indigenous, tribal and provincial settings. Tourism for instance increases pressure on already marginal and tribal groups (Mulligan 1999), similarly economic and social marginalisation of tribal groups is alive and well in North East India (Das 2009).
4. Subcultures being re-defined by a range of penetrating media such as the mobile phone and movies from Hollywood, Bollywood and Hong Kong are eroding identity and reducing local variations (Paranjape 2007). Witness the standardisation in Englishes across the planet into large groups such as American English, Indian English, Australian English and Sino English
5. Climate change threatens vulnerable cultures by reducing marginal lands often occupied by marginalised peoples (Cometti 2015). Climate refugees will increase across the century and further reduce cultural diversity. For example island nations such as Kiribati and the Maldives are, of necessity exploring 'escape routes' in the face of projections of rapid sea level rise (McNamara 2015).

6. Cultural process is about encounter – to survive asymmetrical encounter requires creative and open-ended strategies; one way to think about these is as forms of ‘Indigenous Modernity’ (Ravindran 2015).

Commentary

This commentary is a provocation. Its goal is to offer stimulus for creative reflection on the possible, probable and plausible futures before us. I like to think that it also suggests that there is still enough scope to explore a range of preferred futures in which human agency is retained within the parameters of any given context. As a provocation coherence has taken second place to stimulus. So, to begin, as Lewis and Maslin point out as they work towards a definition of the Anthropocene:

Human activity is now global and is the dominant cause of most contemporary environmental change. The impacts of human activity will probably be observable in the geological stratigraphic record for millions of years into the future, which suggests that a new epoch has begun (2015 p. 171).

Given the way power and security are concentrated in the hands of dominant economic, ethnic, political and linguistic groups it is clear that these environmental changes will impact those at the margin more severely than those of us at the centre. I follow Gilles Deleuze, however, in recognising that the peripheries of a system offer greater opportunities for creative disturbance/resistance:

...the closer one gets to the periphery of the system, the more subjects find themselves caught in a kind of temptation: whether to submit oneself to signifiers, to obey the orders of the bureaucrat and follow the interpretation of the high priest—or rather to be carried off elsewhere, the beyond, on a crazy vector, a tangent of deterritorialization—to follow a line of escape, to set off as a nomad, to emit what Guattari just called a-signifying particles (2006 p. 15).

Marginalia are, for me, the scrawls found in the margins of societies and their cultures where the bureaucrat and high priest have the least influence. This is where creative ideas can be found, this is where new formations of social and environmental (even ecological) creativity take place (Bussey 2017). In a world of diminishing returns, as understood by our complex global civilisation, I look to the margins for clues for the alternative futures we may one day experience. The next couple of paragraphs summarise some of the elements that will play out both centre stage and in the margins of our world, as we enter a period of great change – a period some scientists are calling the Anthropocene (Lewis and Maslin 2015).

Thinking about ecological and human systems will always emphasise the importance of diversity (Levin 1998). There has been much written over the years about the loss of diversity in modern human and natural systems (Berry 1990; Carson 2002; Ostler 2005). As noted above, the planet’s ethnosphere is stressed by globalising forces that diminish diversity and increasingly marginalise minority cultures and peoples (Nandy 2007; Wright 2006). Humans are impacting natural systems and reducing their resilience. In addition, economics and globalisation are also drastically affecting minority cultures. Such challenges are leaving deep scars on the planetary system and the psyches of many of its peoples. The Anthropocene is now being described as a geological event (Haraway 2015; McNeill 2016), whilst globalisation is compressing ethnic and cultural expression in ways that challenge us to respond creatively to the erosion of cultural and ethnic diversity (Muecke 2004) and the speeding up of complex systems that are converging in surprisingly rapid, creative and uncertain ways (Christian 2008).

Research, such as that presented above, is clear on the impact of global cultural imperialism and its attendant economic imperialism (Das 2009). Those cultures with less power are at risk

of losing their identity (Northrup 2005; Paranjape 2007). Yet, the local is the site for human expression, so we may see key losses in the area of language and custom but not so in the general level of identity with minority cultures (Tuan 1995). Hybridity and cultural evolution are key here (De Landa 2000). No culture is clean or pure despite the rhetoric. All cultures evolve and demonstrate resilience. Nonetheless, entire cultures have disappeared in the past (Diamond 2005). Yet many have left traces in the physical and cultural landscapes of those who followed after them. Such reflections lead me to wonder what does the future hold for peoples on the margin? I am inclined to look not to the powerful to address these issues but, like Stephen Castles in the final quotation, to look to ordinary folk to manage their worlds and forge meaningful futures for themselves and their communities.

Any attempt to forecast likely future patterns of migration and settlement needs to take account of the great economic and social transformations of our epoch, as well as the way in which ordinary people cope with these shifts, and in so doing often subvert the plans of the mighty (Castles 2002 p. 1146).

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Creative Response

‘Scatter them abroad upon the face of all the Earth’

Jacques Barcia

Past the wall, over the waves. The village stood tall as an acrobat balanced on thin stilts sunk knee-deep into the sea. Storeys and storeys. A tower of planks, scraps of metal and less-than-perfect biobricks. Last time Maria came to Vila Candeias one still could see rooftops just a metre or so below. Now, crossing the bridge, she could barely distinguish between drowned memories and shadows underwater. Reefs made of brick and mortar. Grandma had a name for it. A sigh, a snap with the tongue and something that sounded like "ma". She'd never explain what it meant. Maybe because even she couldn't translate it. But she could feel it. And so did Maria. And so did the other three hundred and fifty two people who spoke Maré. A language to be felt. Unwritten like all languages in the mid-point of this century. And almost drowned as well.

The village still had the gate and the square, just as the picture in her memory. Wo, hmm and smile was the word for it. More than home, more than family. Not just belonging. Neurocrawler stats danced around her and she could feel the word. Community for the Maré people meant everything plus one. A nation of immigrants. No. A nation of refugees, displaced and dislodged, sent to a distant land. Distant from each and every land. Her people only had the identity they built for themselves along the decades following the collapse. No words were capable of describing their ties because there weren't words in any language for that. And if there were, they were long gone. Dead as the cultures who once spoke them. But they still lived in that village somehow. In fragments, vocables, phonemes, whistles and labial consonants. The words and the things and the difference in them. Maré was a nation of nations and Maria was there to guard it.

But first she had to convince Grandma to share her secret.

"Hey! I can feel you, Maria." The snaps and hisses and the sound of that voice in her head made her smile. Albano and Maria had had something back in the day, but now they were just friends. Very close friends. So much that sometimes she felt sorry she had to use him for the rescue mission. She synched to him once in a month, but managed to meet his sim every week. Just like Maria, Albano had more access to assets and had connections to people beyond the wall. So he had bandwidth, AIs and storage to spread himself over the web. But contrary to Maria, Albano chose to stay in Candeias. "Hurry up so I can see you. For real, I mean."

"I should have sined you for not picking me up on the wall." She could see him standing across the square, brown skinned, jeans and flip-flops. He had his back against a red coral wall, next to a tall, tattooed-faced man, and she noticed they both saw her coming and smiled. A boy crossed their path, running ahead of his tutors, playing with jellyfish sims dancing in midair. She heard that family say something she couldn't understand. "How are you doing, my friend?" Her words carried the sound of laughter with "kabr" for suffix and fingers changing shapes close to the chest. By the time she got to him, the tall man had gone.

"Struggling. I'm afraid we have two or three years left. Did you see the wall?"

"Yeah. They're growing another layer. Have you talked to the city council?"

Albano's tongue clicked hard and his fist stabbed the air. "DotGov told them it'd be better to relocate us to the mainland. Can you believe that? Bastards could grow us a wall or a proper island for no cost. Remember Ahmad? His grandparents built islands from sand and towed icebergs to the desert like fifty years ago. People are growing cities on Mars, Maria. On Mars. And they want to relocate us."

"Again," Maria sighed. "Where to?"

"Oh, several places, for a change. To Serra Negra, away from the shore, but also to the other side of the damn world. To Lagos and Kuala Lumpur. And to the Shenzhen wall."

That was a disaster. Albano's words and gestures, eye-rolls and antics said he wouldn't leave, the villagers wouldn't leave, they'd fight for their place. But it also said he knew the sea was on the rise again and relocation was the protocol for them climate refugees. Problem is few places have climate stability these days. And no stable place is safe for immigrants. Global weirding. Or, as Maria calls it, the climate geopolitics of the anthropoinsane. A third diaspora would completely disrupt their language. No language, no identity, no culture. And it was not just the Maré people at risk. But the spirits of whole cultures embedded in decades of forced cultural fusion and mutation.

"But you won't stay, will you, Maria?" So much poison in that guttural hum.

"Don't hate me, please. I'm not a fighter. I'm a scholar. A researcher. And an activist."

"It's your job, right? You told me your grant depends on this mission."

Maria hand-gestured with fury and candour. "You know the truth. Yes, I need the grant, but I think I can save our people. I'm this close from cataloguing our language. This close. And if I do that and show it to the right people I can prove our language holds close to a third of all the languages that died after the collapse. We're literally world heritage, Albano. We can even convince the damn AI mainlanders to call the mayor to spend their precious tech with us for a change." An open hand, something close to a moan and the sound "malich". "Will you help me?"

"I didn't sim you, right? I'm here. I'll help you. But Janaína says it's her words and her feelings. I convinced her to see you, which is better than last time, huh? But she hasn't changed her mind."

"Of course she hasn't. But I'll steal her words if I need."

Albano laughed so hard other Maré words were very unnecessary. "Good luck with that. But be careful not to get your words stolen instead. Come on. She's praying in the terreiro. Been there for several weeks."

Maria knew. She had tried to sim Grandma, had tried to talk to her, but reality was dimmed inside the terreiro. Only true words were allowed in the temple, she said. No simulation, no neural hitchhike, only the words and their keepers.

"How many do you have?" Albano asked. The terreiro was on the fourth level, halfway towards the center of the village. Many first floor alleys had seawater sprouting from between the wooden planks paving the streets. The smell of salt and fish gave way to ozone as they climbed plastic bottle stairs to the upper levels. As the sound of waves crashing against the village echoed, the wind whistling from the east spoke to her. But it wasn't the wind. It's the watchers in the towers. The word meant in one or two hours clouds would cover the sun and the storm du jour would hit the village. And the storm could become an anonymous cyclone. They didn't name the storms anymore.

"A little over nine hundred thousand words."

"Wow. That's a lot. How many are there?"

Truth was she didn't know. Last time, she estimated there were one million, three hundred thousand words in the Maré vocabulary. But sometimes neurocrawlers suggested there could be three hundred thousand more. Other times, even less than what she had catalogued before. At first she thought it could be some dimmed reality leak or bugs messing with the neural network. But then she noticed a pattern. Words disappeared during summer weeks and new words seemed to flourish during storms - only to vanish again. Most of the time very few people repeated those words, so there weren't enough registers to save and catalogue their full spectrum. Not enough voices or accents to capture all the roots and place them in a linguistic tree.

Alleys and staircases, wood houses, crashing waves and sim vendors turned into a silent, wide patio as they reached the fourth level. The terreiro was one of the few things in the village that looked rock solid in spite of its organic shape bioprinted with chitin and corals. It was a small, bright red house, like the larynx of an orator with white vocal chords as entryways. A temple to the words of the Maré and the ghosts of dead idioms.

Albano stopped as soon as they entered the patio. One had to keep words to himself when in sacred soil, a silent mourning for those who lost their voice to the storms, to the heat, to thirst and the raising seas, but most importantly to progress and abundance and the ways of humankind. Only five people had permission to get inside the temple on common days, so he waved to Maria "good luck, I'll be right here" as she crossed past the chords and into the throat. She knew he'd stay. She was counting on it.

Open mouth in a big "O", breath out of the depths of her guts, eyes closed, and a very low sound. She praised the ancestor languages and asked for permission to come inside.

"Come in." Plain English. Her tone was obviously neutral. Disdainful. Grandma - best known as Janaína, Mãe das Palavras, psychopomp of lost words - sat on the bench closest to the centre of the terreiro, her back to the main entrance. Maria smelled the tobacco before she could see the pipe or the smoke, and noticed there were actual paper books spread over the altar on the other side of the room. "You don't need permission to enter your house or your terreiro. Not from me and not from the spirits."

Plain English. "But you wouldn't have me last time I came to the village."

"Two completely different things. You can come in, pray, meditate, write and chant to the words whenever you want. But me? Maybe I have more important things to do."

Maria strode to the inner circle and faced Janaína. The smoke was like a shroud over that round, granny face. But the woman refused to age. It's like her wrinkles had escaped from her cheeks and tried to hide on her collar, her forearms and hands. But the walking stick resting on her lap reminded Maria of Janaína's frailty and authority. She could feel the neurocrawlers planted in Albano's head sneak into the temple, beneath the dimmed reality wall and into Janaína's mind. "What have I done to you?"

"To me? Oh, nothing. Nothing at all."

"I'm not obliged to stay in the village. I'm useful away from the community."

"I'm not saying you're not useful or that you're obliged to anything. I'm saying that I have work to do. Very important work. And maybe I didn't have time for a researcher from the mainland." Janaína sucked deep from her pipe, white smoke leaking between dark lips. "I would've had time for my granddaughter, though."

Maria knew there's no gain in arguing with Candeias' matriarch. Woman was stubborn as a donkey and

smarter than everyone else. In fact, Janaína was probably the most intelligent person she'd ever met. If she did have the huge vocabulary Maria thought she had, her mental capacities should be studied. And because she was brilliant, Maria couldn't believe her Grandma was acting out of prejudice or bitterness. There was something the priestess was not telling.

"I'm not here to fight you." Shh, snap and a short giggle. Maria sat on the bench, looking at her Grandma. "I'm here because I can help."

"I know about the grant." Janaína kept smoking.

"By the words. This has nothing to do with the grant. My job is to rescue lost languages, yes. I'm paid for that, yes. I wish my profession didn't exist, but someone has to catalogue and save these languages." Maria tied her locks high on her head. Outside, the clash of heavy clouds hit the temple's walls with might and fury. The storm was close.

"You're building an amusement park." Janaína stared at Maria as if waiting for some response. "That's your mission. You're turning your sacred duty - our sacred duty - into infotainment. That's how we called it when I was your age. Infotainment. Not experience. Not embodiment. Whatever the name, it's just something people will consume so they won't look uneducated, disconnected and lacking empathy during parties and simulations." Growl, smoke, red eyes and "mat". Maria never heard that word, but she could feel it squeezing her heart, stabbing her soul. It was rage and disappointment. Desecration. And a curse.

"It's not an amusement park. It's a museum." Maria stood and walked to the center of the terreiro, its white porcelain floor painted with red letters and red words from Yaté and Sokotri, Hawaiian and Kaixana, Cornish and Livonian. "It is an experience. We're building an immersive experience for people who can't even imagine how a world with seven thousand languages sounded like." Maria walked to the altar, cherished the books, flipped a paper page, glued the beacon and knelt, leaning her head against the marble table. "But there are so many pieces lacking. The sims. They are not working. We figured our missing words, whole languages, but we don't know how they sound in the mind. How they feel. What neurological and physiological responses they trigger. And that's why I need your help."

"You'll sell the most sacred jewel of your culture."

"I'll use it to save my culture. If you help me I can finish the puzzle, show to the world Maré must be preserved. They'll listen."

"You think your culture wants to be saved." Janaína dipped her finger into the pipe and shoved it in a pocket. Her walking stick hit the floor with a muffled thump and in seconds Grandma was on her feet. She walked with difficulty, but it was enough to let her come closer to Maria.

"Our culture is based on survival. Not on rescue. We're refugees. We were many, scattered abroad. People from the stable winds could've saved us a hundred years ago. Two hundred years ago. But no. They rather let the hurricanes wipe us from our ancestors lands, let the waves wash our homes and swallow our land. Or, even worse, stole from the sea and then built walls to stop the tides from reclaiming their space. And they put us right on those spaces that'd eventually be reclaimed by the sea, by the wind, by the sun. When we learned we're perpetually homeless, our ancestors built the ultimate home. Maré. Every word is a piece of history. Every word is a ship sailing back home. Our very nation is these words."

"To hell with your stupid pride." Hiss, mudras and her heel hitting the floor. Maria never heard that word but screamed it anyway. "You rather let your people die - and we will die - than put these words

somewhere people can experience them?" Her voice echoed inside the larynx room, while thunders announced the storm's arrival. She saw someone cross the room, a shadow, then disappear. A sim? Sims were blocked inside the temple. Maybe a defense protocol. Had Janaína caught the neurocrawlers? "You'll kill your people out of pride."

Janaína, Mãe das Palavras, and all her one point three million sons got face to face with Maria, the smell of tobacco mixed to the smell of ozone inhaled by the room. Grandma opened her mouth and Maria could swear thunder and waves came out of her throat. But not just sounds. Emotions. She felt goosebumps and nausea, anxiety and a terrible urge to flee. "We died long ago when our ancestor lost their land and their words. You can't save our words, Maria. And you can't steal them from me."

Fuck, thought Maria. Dimmed reality wouldn't let her check how many words the crawlers had taken from Janaína. One thousand? Two thousand? At this point, any vowel, even interjections would work. Whatever words she had taken would have to be enough. "Adia" fading out, and a click in the end. "Goodbye, Grandma."

As soon as she started to walk away, a tall, tattooed-faced man took shape in front of her. The sim lacked some polygons and billions of pixels, but was there, staring a menacing stare at Maria. She tried hard to run away, but her muscles wouldn't respond. She could feel neurocrawlers invading her thoughts.

"Words have power, Maria. Words have lives of their own." Janaína limped closer to her granddaughter and pressed a bony finger against her forehead. "And the spirits of lost words swim and dance in the ocean of our digital records. Like memories and dreams. Only a little harder to access." And out of the veil of dimmed reality, dozens of pixelated, defective sims emerged into the room. The spirits of dead languages approached Maria to bathe in the words oozing from her mind. A storm raged outside the terreiro, as if nature's unbalance could unleash one last act of revenge against humanity. "Words have the power of nations, Maria. And now we'll craft new words with your help."

Maria tried to whistle, tried to whisper, tried to say something. But words failed her.
