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Jaws, old dwellings, and a mermaid: Meditations of a shark anthropologist on multimodality

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Abstract

Situated between the liminality of loss of loved ones and his own identity, in this récit, a shark anthropologist meditates on the path of multimodality. This personal narrative takes the readers among the high waves of Southern oceans of New Zealand and calm ponds of West Bengal India, piercing Antarctic chill and warm nights of Kolkata, and sparkle of light on a shark skin and the visions of a mermaid he felt was awaiting him beyond the ocean. It is a meditation on the philosophical and sensory intricacies of imagined and real images and their effect on identity, and argues for the significance of multimodality in communication. Here, multimodality is not just a method but a way of being, travelling between the artistic and operational modes of creativity; depression and the ever-awake spirit, and love and the stoic ocean of loss.
“Surrounding the ethnographic narrative and analyses... are the artistic, personal, reflective, often vulnerable, thoughts and experiences of Raj as he undertakes the journey of PhD research; friendships, isolation, comraderies, loneliness, and all the other chaos and confusion of a deeply moving and often non-linear life experience that he found in Bluff. Histories of childhood in India, artistic imaginings, and personal revelations move and spread across the pages offering one a sense of the experience, the mental landscapes, and the emotional processes this research experience fostered... they act to make the intellectual contribution more real, more visceral and more convincing... On many levels, this book feels like a multi-modal sensorium”—Agustin Fuentes, (Aich, In press).
It is 3.15 am. As I read through this forward for my book, written by one of my academic idols, I am sitting on the foggy blue terrace of my father’s house in the outskirts of the city (Sonarpur, Kolkata, West Bengal, India). I can hear foxes by that old shrine where a tiger was hunted 100 years ago; the full moon creates abstract figures of shadow and light who look at me as silent souls. With a cup of coffee, I start contemplating why Fuentes called it multimodal. What is multimodal? Is it merely another word of multimedium, where you put audio and video with writing? Or is it a way of being? Of conceptualizing? Of creating? Why does it matter? To make sense of this, I started contemplating the last few months of completing the book, and my journey through multimodality.

This book was based on a PhD at the last point of South Island New Zealand—Bluff, where I explored the effects of humans and white sharks encountering each other through cage diving—on the sharks, the people, the local community, and the environment—and how all these actors were related in an agentive network of interaction. But there was also the effect of this book on the writer (and the mental state of the writer on the book), which I did not consider for a long time. My expedition took me to the waters of the Foveaux Strait, one of the most turbulent stretches of water on the planet, 1600 km from Antarctica. Three years into my PhD, one day, on a rainy afternoon, I found myself again mashing up tuna in the chum barrel. The mashed-up tuna was put out into the ocean to create a scent corridor to attract the sharks. Wet, smelly, and almost seasick, it had just occurred to me that I could not express this experience merely through journal articles, it had to be a book. That evening, after coming back to my cottage, as I started compiling the journey of the reader I further realized that it could not be a mere ethnographic presentation of the white shark expedition but had to evolve into much more, as Fuentes so eloquently puts it.

Multimodality became a vision of writing. I was still grieving my house, which was being demolished back in Kolkata, the walls of which gave me my identity until I left when I was 31. So, the book became a letter of love for my sharks and my old house. I could see the old Tree of Sorrow in my yard. I could hear the voices of my grandad calling me, the songs of my grandma singing beyond the reaches of the deepest sky. As I travelled deeper in the book, it was painted by the stories and sensations of my life in the liminal diametric existence: travelling between my frost-bitten subantarctic fingers and sweaty Kolkata shoulders; stories of our boat in 7-meter waves and calm evening ponds of West Bengal; from hunger with one meal a day during fieldwork, to a little Bengali pot belly from all my mother’s cooking.

Then there was the multi-modality in the ever-going conundrum between my operational and artistic creativity and their effects on communication. Communication, for me, takes two forms: inter-communication (communication with others) and intra-communication (communication within the two sides of our own brain, the artistic and the operational). There is knowledge and emotion that cannot be communicated to others and ourselves through only verbal communication and which hence has to be expressed through art, abstract and sensory expressions. That is why we resonate with classical music and abstract paintings—because
something is communicated that we cannot always put our fingers on in words, but we know we ‘feel something’.

Multimodality is important because otherwise much is lost in translation when one is trying to communicate something, verbally, that was not perceived and imagined verbally, and the other way around. This dichotomy of existence has always been a part of my life, ever negotiating between the analytic and artistic sides. Although, it is also true that this conundrum shaped the lucidity of my writing, and the exploration and expression of various sensations through paintings and, eventually, a documentary. For the first time in my life, everything I had learned from being a painter, a musician, an actor, a martial artist, an academic, and god knows what else—my mental, emotional, intellectual, and sexual energy—converged into just this. However, perhaps unconsciously, something else got entangled in it—my depression.

Diagnostically I have had dysthymia, an underlying depression and sense of loss in whatever I was doing, although I have had manic depressive traits. I travelled from these multi-modes of existence, which affected my work and my perception. This was further exaggerated because my fieldwork in New Zealand was completed by 2019. The plan was to come to India to write the last bit of my PhD before returning to New Zealand. But Covid happened, and my PhD came back with resubmission orders. I pushed through the challenges but after I was awarded my PhD, I got the news: New Zealand had closed its doors for me and this globetrotting adventurer-academic image I had created, bit by bit, in the seven years since leaving my old dwellings shattered in front of my eyes.

Night after night, I stayed awake till the morning light emerged, afraid to close my eyes, in fear of my subconscious desolation coming to haunt me in the darkness when my guards were down. One such early morning, after staying up all night, I had a lucid dream. I was somewhere in the vast marine wilderness, no land in sight, the ocean dark. Suddenly, the water lit up with bronze sparkles. I was afraid but, out of the crimson darkness, a beautiful mermaid appeared. She came close to me; her brown eyes looked at me; she kissed me, softly, and held my hand. In her thousand-year-old language, she told me she loved me and we started swimming together towards the light. When I woke up, I knew that I knew her and this was not just a figment of my imagination—she was the love of my life, awaiting me beyond the ocean. This image came visiting me again and again; she became part of my existence. All through the day, I awaited her arrival. My nights and days were divided into the muddy Kolkata Garden tending to some aubergine plants, and the blue wilderness in my mind. The scientist part of my mind resented this overindulgence in the dream. Regardless of whether she was, objectively, real or not, to all my senses she was as real as the stars in this night sky. Then came the second wave of Covid, and I lost six people in one and a half months, including my uncle and grandma, and the depression came flooding in like the breaking of a dam. This depression became scattered in the pages of the book as sensitive connecting tendons. It shaped the emotion of the language, the longing to be with the loved one I had never met. This love for an unmet beloved was also apparent in the cage diving boat; for, in many cases, the people who came to see the sharks had
never seen them before. This depression also gave a certain colour to the documentary, thus shifting it from just another ‘shark film’ to a visual meditation.

The multimodal existence morphed into greediness. I longed to be with the mermaid physically, instead of cherishing what I had. I started to sing about her, paint her, and talk to her in my mind, doing all I could to be with her. Similarly, I felt I needed to put everything I could in the book to make it as ‘complete’ and deep as possible, especially since I could not hold the readers’ hands and take them to the shores of New Zealand. The epistemological difference in the creation of art and knowledge often comes down to the fact that art leaves space for the audience to colour it with their own vision; alternatively, positivistic knowledge holds the paradigm of objectivity. This multimodal expression was intensified by my state of being: my phobia of sharks and yet my existential need to be with them; the grey-golden texture of their skin and the weathered plaster of my father’s house; the imagined touch of my mermaid’s lips and the plastic sheet they used to wrap my uncle’s corpse outside the Covid ward. The ocean of my dreamscape started to get moody. I was severed from her touch; the harder I tried to hold on to her, large waves took me further and further away. All I could do was try to stay afloat and call for her—but she did not answer. I was left in the vast, empty ocean till the unforgiving, stoic waves finally drowned me and, for months, every night, I would wake up gasping for air and her.

Multimodality is confusing, and intentionally so, ever travelling the line between knowledge systems and philosophical world views from objective to relativistic. Now that I read this book, the sharks are more than sharks; they are, maybe, the symbol of eternal love, and maybe that is why there was this emptiness burning within me. When I found my love, I felt complete; finally, it meant that all that I was and all my modes of existence were made meaningful. The book is a love story: love for people, for art, knowledge, the land, water, and individuals who came in various forms with fins, and glasses, and everything in between, and it tries to express love in all its guises. But does this multimodal presentation create the ability to transcend, taking us to the shores of New Zealand and to the sharks? If it does, then why am I left here? More than the idea for me it creates the longing. Are things and people merely the image of their physical presence, or a dynamic change of energy that has subjective resonance and thus can never be simulated? So, is any communication, including multimodal creations, communication of the truth? Or because of the subjectivity of all, is it merely a vessel for the other’s imagination? For even if you and I were submerged in the ocean, with awake senses looking at an 18-foot great white shark in front of us—would we experience the same thing?

It is 4.45 am now. My old house is gone, as are the songs of my grandma, my white sharks, and perhaps my perceived identity. I stand here on this terrace that I have no connection with. All this place resonates to me is the image of a beautiful mermaid who was never here. I can smell the dew on the pink flowers in the garden, the crows are starting their journey for their day, and the fog has been ignited in vermilion light. For me, multimodality is a state of being, and often tragically so. But I cannot help but imagine that maybe, instead of this multimodal exploration, all I needed to do was write articles, and that would have been enough for me to get a job, to leave India and go in search of my mermaid. But this is the only path I know, or I would have always been haunted by the knowledge that I could have done more. Maybe the biggest tragedy
is that I am cursed by the limited periphery of only my own singular vision. Maybe multimodality is merely a wish to be ‘one’—one with my love, in their sensation and perception—and my failing is I cannot see through their eyes and see the beauty they have seen in the depths of the abyss, surrounded by iridescent light. The work is finished—the book and the website for this book and expedition have bloomed with words, a documentary, photographs, poetry, and video recitation. Maybe multimodality can express sensations and knowledge that cannot be shared otherwise, be it with others or to oneself. Maybe it can inspire others to take their journey and encourage their artistic and intellectual side into a unified source of creation. Maybe it will help demystify the experience of cage diving and white sharks... I am not sure. But here I stand, a single entity, heartbroken and in mourning again. Was my mermaid merely a figment of my imagination? Or was she real, evidence of some memory deep within me which my consciousness does not have access to anymore? All I know is now, wherever I look, there is emptiness. Even the identity and image of myself that I was crying for is pointless without her—her image, and perhaps this image somewhere in the recesses of my memory and dreams, saved my life. In the end, all knowledge and expressions are incomplete, travelling between images of things that exist, that we wish existed, that we fear don’t. Out there, in the vastness of time and the ocean, our lovers swim further and further away; we create images of them in various forms and modes in the hope that others know and we remember.

References


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