

Think Like an Aspen Script

This entire piece is an auditory journey. All Nepali is spoken by Dr. Sweta Baniya. All English by Daniel Bird Tobin.

We hear the sound of creaking, cracking wood.

लहरो तान्दा पहरुो खस्छ

More creaking.

I want you to imagine the opening of a movie. The black fades away to reveal a majestically huge tree. Alone. In an almost desolate landscape. The trunk appears so big your arms wouldn't fit all the way around. It would tower over you with branches hanging in all directions.

You can make it whatever kind of tree you'd like. I know I am picturing one of the big live oaks that grow around where I'm from in Florida.

What are you seeing?

Would you like to change the type of tree?

Just make sure it is majestic.

Yet desolate and alone.

Finishing the image that fills the camera: the sky is kind of grey. Like how I imagine the sky in a Scandinavian Noir Mystery.

Perhaps there are a few grasses at the base of the tree. But otherwise very little vegetation other than the majestic, desolate tree.

The camera sits with this image pensively, and it slowly becomes apparent that something is off in the image. The grasses, the branches, the leaves (if your tree has leaves) all slightly droop to the right. Just as your brain starts to put the pieces together, the camera starts to slowly zoom out while also slowly roll to the left.

What seemed to be down was not actually down at all.

More creaking.

लहरो तान्दा पहरु खस्छ

What this camera move reveals is that your majestic, desolate tree is actually clinging with every fiber of its being to the side of an imposing, rocky hill. The trunk almost parallel to the ground. And it looks quite precarious.

The sound of wind picks up.

And we of course know what happens next.

More wind and creaking followed by a whole tree falling.

And the camera fades to black.

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When I used to be an archaeologist, I was trained that tree falls are some of the most magical things you can find while surveying. Suddenly a hidden history is revealed as the tree roots unearth a whole hill of dirt, soil, and treasure. And I use treasure not in the sense of Indiana Jones, but rather in the sense of knowledge and discovery.

Without disturbing anything or doing a single dig, the archaeologist might see pottery or tools of people from thousands of years ago embedded in the tree roots. Things that have been swallowed up by what came later are now suddenly brought forth and revealed.

लहरो तान्दा पहरु खस्छ

Of course, that is only one version of a tree fall.

Creaking returns.

The black fades away again and what we see now is devastation. Our majestic tree lies crashed and broken at the bottom of the hill, and in its fall it has brought half the mountain down with it. What had been an imposing hill, now has an enormous, craterous bite taken out of it. Rather than revealing the magical treasure of information to an archaeologist, this tree fall has revealed the underlying weakness in the tree and the way its roots have wormed into and weakened the very rock of the hill itself.

Now at this point you may be thinking, “Yes...but what is this movie about?” And like most things, this movie is just a metaphor for something else.

लहरो तान्दा पहरु खस्छ

The voice you keep hearing is the voice of Dr. Sweta Baniya. For those who don't speak Nepali, you'll have to wait a moment to know the translation of what she is saying. What you need to know now though is that her research examines what happens after a natural disaster. I want to be clear that the true *disaster* is not the tree falling, but rather the damage the tree has done to the hill over decades and decades. The natural disaster is simply the moment that reveals, that uncovers, that damage.

In particular Dr. Baniya has studied two recent events, the 2015 earthquake in Nepal and 2017's Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. In both instances the tree fell. After these extreme natural hazards, the seemingly powerful and majestic institutions collapsed revealing the damage caused by decades of autocratic rule, civil war, and political unrest in Nepal and colonialism and negligence in Puerto Rico. As seems to always happen, the most vulnerable communities were the ones most impacted.

More wind and creaking.

When I say the tree fell, I mean that after these two cataclysmic disasters, so many of the institutions and organizations that were supposedly in place to support and help simply could not or would not do their job. Reports emerged of the UN World Food Program distributing rotten food in Nepal and US governmental relief sitting unused in Puerto Rican ports due to stringent protocols and rules.

I won't go into all the failures because to me the real story of Dr. Baniya's work is what happened after the tree fell.

Wind and creaking followed by a whole tree falling.

लहरो तान्दा पहरु खस्छ

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Have you ever heard about aspens?

Aspens are a particular kind of tree that grows a bit differently than the way we normally think trees grow. When I see that live oak growing near where I'm from in Florida, I think of it as an individual organism. And the next live oak 10 feet away is a distinct and separate plant from the first one. This is not the case for aspens.

Instead, aspens grow in what are called "clonal colonies" where all the trunks in a forest are clones of each other that emerge from a single, connected root system. Each individual trunk may only live 80 years, but when it dies, a new shoot will emerge from the colony and the organism lives on. So, for an aspen, a tree fall is not some cataclysmic event, as each trunk is only one of possibly hundreds of trunks providing nutrients and strength. This resiliency means that unlike the majestic yet desolate live oak, the aspen can live on almost indefinitely. One particular colony in Utah is estimated to be over 80,000 years old. Humans have even given it a name. Pando.

More wind.

Picture in your mind the strength and resilience of Pando. And compare it to the desolation of our movie of a tree falling out of the rocky hillside.

लहरो तान्दा पहरुो खस्छ

Stronger wind.

When we consider Dr. Baniya's research, we see that when the majestic yet desolate live oak toppled over in the face of the Nepal Earthquake or Hurricane Maria, and institutions and governments faltered, that of course many people suffered and thousands died. But many, many survivors in these vulnerable communities refused to be passive victims waiting for the oak to come back. Instead they began, or perhaps began is not the right word, "accelerated a process that had been long underway" may be better? Yes, they "accelerated a process that had been long underway" of thinking like aspens rather than oaks. Rather than investing in and relying on the single majestic tree, after the disasters, people in both Puerto Rico and Nepal began to serve their communities by coming together across nations and timezones. Dr. Baniya calls this transnational coalition building. Through a border-defying root structure facilitated by social media and the internet, people began shooting up trunks all over the place and reaching out to support the most vulnerable in need.

Local disasters create global concerns and engagement. Like Aspen, people who belonged to Nepal and Puerto Rico and who cared about Nepal and Puerto Rico came together and engaged in disaster response. Examples of these aspen trunks abound in Dr. Baniya's research. Be it the group of tech-savvy activists in Nepal who created interactive maps for coordinating aid by compiling reams of local data into a usable form. Or the interviewee from Puerto Rico who used Facebook's Live feature to reach out to the Puerto Rican diaspora in the U.S., receive funds via cellphone transfer, and then buy relief materials to serve a rural community. People refused to

wait on help that may never come. They created their own aspen forest of mutual support and aid.

There is a need for intersectional scholarly work and praxis that helps in rethinking disaster response and reformulating practices that replace the injustices. The formation of transnational coalitions during a disaster is inevitable, and those coalitions help in disaster recovery. Identifying those people, those communities of aspens, might help in faster disaster recovery.

लहरो तान्दा पहरो खस्छ

So what does that Nepali phrase mean?

“While unrooting stems, the whole hill will collapse”

And I’m not one to contradict the wisdom of an old adage, but what the Nepali and Puerto Rican coalition builders have shown is that, maybe, if we all think like aspens rather than oaks, the whole hill doesn’t have to collapse. Particularly if we can embrace and empower disenfranchised voices before the disaster even arrives.

The wind returns.

Of course, sometimes we can create situations so precarious that even aspen can’t survive. Right now, Pando’s future is uncertain due to drought, disease, and human interference.

A whole tree falls.