Can the subaltern save us?

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ABSTRACT

A cursory review of diverse theories (postmodernism, posthumanism, postcolonialism, decolonial theory, and anthropology) that are concerned with the crisis of modernity and ecological destruction reveal not only how moderns often have turned to indigenous cosmologies and ontologies to find resolutions to this crisis, but also how confounding this process of recuperation has been. We observe moderns sometimes trying to appear as saviors of the subalterns because they intuit in the subalterns a revelation so powerful it will prevent the definite destruction of the world, or at least redeem the moderns from the sins of their ancestors. At other times, we find moderns giving a substantive importance to the concepts and ontologies developed by non-moderns as a way to imagine futurity for themselves. Instead of rescuing the subaltern, it is the subaltern that rescues them. There are also cases where indigenous ontologies and cosmologies are utilized in unstated forms as in posthumanism, revealing the colonial relationship to indigenous knowledges that modern theorists often have. This includes postcolonial and decolonial theorists from the south, which is my locus of enunciation. Indigenous intellectuals themselves are committed to rescue their ancestral knowledges to build futurity as they also believe that their cosmologies and ontologies are better suited to solve the problems of modernity. But in the indigenous projects, there are no absolute dividing lines or clear-cut dichotomies between indigenous and modern epistemologies. Here I argue that indigenous peoples have dealt for centuries with modern epistemologies. Indigenous theories must be taken more seriously, but also critically analyzed.

KEYWORDS

Subaltern; indigenous cosmologies and ontologies; modern epistemologies; postcolonialism; decolonialism

1. Introduction

The development of the atomic bomb by the US government and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made it clear in 1945 that terminating life on earth through the sciences and technologies of war was a real possibility. It is in this context that the Frankfurt School warned us of the excesses of the instrumental rationality of Western culture and the human domination of nature. It was WWII that also revealed that the natural course of natural history could be ended through human intervention. Today, almost 80
years later, we talk about the Anthropocene, a potentially new geological era in which “man-made” destructive forces make the earth uninhabitable for human life. Nuclear testing, chemical weapons, deforestation, desertification, the burning of fossil and biofuel, and the acidification of the oceans are not only altering the nature of nature but causing the sixth mass extinction of thousands of species that the world has experienced in the last 700 million years. The realization that life as we know it is coming to an end is forcing many around the world to question the philosophical and material foundations of the societies and cultures that have brought onto humanity the possibility of its finality. Given that Western civilization, modernity and development are considered responsible for this ultimate destruction of life, it is Western civilization’s main tenets that are brought to the dock.

But it is not solely ecological destruction that is causing the gloomy mood and uncertainty about the future. It is also the collapse of the liberal state, the widespread dispossession, dislocation and expendability of the world’s peoples by corporate capitalism and its war machine that is creating skepticism toward Western civilization’s capacity for securing life on the planet. The emergence of unprecedented pockets of intense human suffering even among Western moderns in the last decades (in particular the US) signals perhaps the extraordinariness of the moment. In the modern world, the zeitgeist is clearly dominated by a sense of imminent catastrophe. Moderns appear intimidated by their own creations and are witness bearers to the demise of their epistemic, ideological, structural, economic, political, cultural, and ethical apparatuses.

Faced with this apocalyptic scenario, modern scholars are scrambling for answers everywhere. A cursory review of diverse theories that are concerned with the crisis of modernity and ecological destruction reveals not only how moderns often have turned to indigenous cosmologies to find answers to these challenges, but also how deeply confounding this process of recuperation has been. We observe moderns sometimes trying to appear as saviors of the subaltern because they intuit in the subalterns a revelation so powerful it will prevent the definite destruction of the world, or at least redeem moderns from the sins of their ancestors. At other times, we find them giving a substantive importance to the concepts and ontologies developed by non-moderns as a way to imagine futurity for themselves. Instead of rescuing the subaltern, it is the subaltern that rescues them. In either case, moderns seek salvation from the subalterns whether to absolve themselves from history or to rescue the history of “Man (or the Father).”

Thirty years after Spivak’s question, (Spivak 1985) “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the current question seems to be: Can the subaltern save us?

Interestingly, non-moderns, in particular, indigenous peoples that were almost wiped out in the beginning of the modern era, seem to be revitalized by this modern malaise. They are designing their own projects for reconstructing and reformulating their ancestral knowledges to build futurity (Lander 2011). Indigenous Andean intellectuals, for instance, believe that the crisis of modernity can only be resolved by appealing to “another memory

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1Throughout this text, I will use “Man” in Sylvia Wynter’s terms. Wynter uses the term Man to refer to the hierarchy of humanness that the West has created in their quest for global domination. See Katherine McKitterick 2015. The term refers also to the fraternal fellowship of white, European men, such that European men come to stand for Man as human or the universal Man. This configuration of humanness means that when European men talk about humans what is meant is a special kind of Human that refers only to themselves. Those outside of the Human or the Fanonian “zone of Being” are excluded and represent the sub-human or non-human (Ibid.). As such non-Europeans cannot represent the Human.
of language, other names, visions and lived experiences that come from other times, other societies, other historical horizons.” (My translation. Quintanilla Coro and Prada Alcoreza 2014). In their view, the transcendence of modernity is intrinsically an indigenous project, and indigenous epistemologies are indispensable for a world that is being devastated by the ecological crisis and the crisis of capitalism.

Indigenous ways of worlding or making and inhabiting worlds are arguably alternatives to modernity. However, the relationship between moderns (non-indigenous peoples) and indigenous peoples has been fraught with epistemic and ontological violence since 1492. So, what is different today that we can eschew the obstacles that prevented us from learning from indigenous peoples in the past, and that makes it possible today to project our futures with their knowledges and ways of life?

A partial answer to this question is the recognition that indigenous peoples have always had and are today effectively producing knowledges and practices alternative to modernity. Still another possible answer, seldom recognized by moderns, is that indigenous knowledges and ways of making worlds are the last frontier for moderns. In what follows, I reflect upon the assumptions and the political implications of moderns attempting to find ecological and economic salvation among the indigenous peoples. I do so by looking at how five narratives of modern scholars writing about the crises of modernity (postmodernism, posthumanism, postcolonialism, decolonial theory, and anthropology) engage that frontier in order to find salvation in those very indigenous worlds that modernity has tried to extirpate. I find Rosi Braidotti’s feminist intervention in the debate particularly interesting as she serves as a counterpoint to this tendency of moderns. Braidotti does not explicitly seek salvation in indigenous cosmologies and epistemologies. For her salvation still lies within the technoworld of modern Europeans. But indigenous cosmologies are underneath her posthumanist narrative, in an unacknowledged form, thus appearing unintelligible to the reader. Once we scratch beneath the surface, we are led to suspect that the posthumanist world imagined by moderns such as Braidotti might still be a colonial world.

2. The Quest for redemption: postmodernism

Modernity and its offspring “development” have undergone successive indictments in the last decades. After WWII and the Frankfurt School that still relied heavily on Marxism and psychoanalysis for its critique of modernity, and just before the downfall of socialism in the Soviet Union and its satellites toward the end of the twentieth century, elite scholars in the West manifested great skepticism about the main goals of the Enlightenment project. At this point, the promise of the Enlightenment to end human suffering through science, technology and secularism was no longer certain. Scientific positivism, the inevitability of human progress, and the access to Truth in capital letters were seriously questioned by a group of scholars referred to as postmodernists. Postmodernists are said to have produced the “linguistic turn” in Western social theory by focusing on the role of text and language in the construction of reality. Postmodernists were perhaps the first ones in the West to postulate the artificiality of subjectivity, knowledge and reality, and perhaps most importantly their internal connections to power. Their questioning of reality and representation, and their critiques of the metanarratives of the West, called not only for the decentering of Western stories of the world and its dynamics, but pointed to the existence
of subjugated knowledges. Postmodernism signaled a crisis of modernity by shaking its main pillars: binary thinking, hierarchy between the modern and the non-modern, and the linear conception of time.

But as some decolonial theorists have indicated, the postmodern critique of modernity was a critique of modernity from within, an inside job still incapable of fully grasping its underside, namely, colonialism. Implied with this was that the West remained blind to its colonial conditions of possibility. (Mignolo 2000) From this perspective, the non-modern appeared only to be obscured underneath the dialogues of postmodern scholars. The presence of non-moderns was rather more in their absence/silence. This had the perverse effect of tacitly reconstituting the centrality of the Western “Man”.

But perhaps something far more pernicious was occurring. The voluntary abdication of the centrality of the West that postmodernism offered to the rest of us enabled the white, Western “Man” to give up his status as the Human and find a seat next to his non-modern counterpart, since now his truth appeared as one among many others. This postured equalizing allowed the Western “Man” to disentangle himself from Western colonial history (which was just a bad history book), relieving himself from the responsibility for the destruction of other worlds. This explains why subjugated knowledges of the non-modern world never really made it into the postmodern canon. Nonetheless, their phantasmagorical appearance would serve to absolve the Western “Man” from history’s indictments. Postmodernism would imagine a palimpsest of cultures whereby Western culture would be forever innocent. There was still a future for the West, perhaps even a resurgence if it could only tolerate difference. Even in his ghostly appearance, the non-modern became the vital lifeline for the West.

By the end of the 90s, postmodernism began losing its charm for Western academics, though. It subsisted mainly inside other iterations of it, such as within postcolonial criticism and globalization theories that reveled on themes of difference and culture. These were later translated into neoliberal and multicultural rhetoric and policy. Multicultural discourses embedded in neoliberal policies were in particular harmful as they sought to socially de-structure subaltern projects of autonomy and decolonization by trying to encapsulate them within the logic of market fundamentalism, national narratives of belonging and citizenship, and the legal recognition of minority rights. What began as a recognition of difference within postmodernism became under neoliberalism and multiculturalism the state-sanctioned cultural recognition of the subaltern to blunt the challenges that these discourses and policies posed to the imperial project. (Kymlikca 2012)

2 Most postmodern theorists did not occupy themselves with coloniality or with institutions such as the gold and silver mines, the plantation, the ship, the reservation or the “pueblo de indios” of the Spanish colonization. Their main concern is modernity confined to the boundaries of Europe as if the colony did not exist. This is clearly the case of Foucault (1971, 1972) and many of his followers at the end of the 20th C. Other postmodernists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1989), are primarily concerned with the metanarratives of modernity that he believes create unitary wholes without difference. In his eagerness to debunk this undeserving central authority of Western narratives, Lyotard was willing to throw out the window all the ideologies that had defined the West, for instance, ideas of progress, liberation, and scientific knowledge. Instead he would favor local narratives or smaller stories of everyday life. Similarly, all the objections against the autonomous subject that postmodernists such as Derrida (1991) summoned, were meant to reveal the social, historical, and discursive construction of the Subject contained in these metanarratives. To the extent we are all socially and discursively constructed as subjects there are no essential beings or subjects and as such no essential differences exist between us (we must assume between the Western Man and the Western woman, and in consequence we must conclude between the colonizer and colonized, etc.) Any attempt to be a subject reproduces the society that one wants to challenge.
3. Posthumanism

Most recently, in the posthumanist turn of feminist philosophy, we find Rosi Braidotti (2013a, 2013b), a materialist who distances herself from the linguistic frame of postmodernism. We re-encounter the death of “Man” (the European man) in his categorization as the exclusive, universal, unitary representative of the Human, the Anthropos. (Braidotti 2017, 51) In Braidotti’s work, we are also confronted with the predicament of the Anthropocene. At issue is not only the demise of the Human, the end of human exceptionalism and the extinction of the planet, but also the end of the humanities. The humanities, now lacking the central figure of the Human, have allegedly entered their final phase as they have also been incapable of adjusting to the advancements of science and technology. In addition, to complicate matters more, the voices of those previously deemed non-humans (the colonized indigenous peoples/the subaltern) help fuel the crisis of the humanities. The humanities appear now as a seemingly unending list of new studies.

Braidotti thus sees herself engaged in multiple missions. First, she wants to give the Anthropocene a new and affirmative spin in which instead of meaning the extinction of human life, moderns get the opportunity to re-exist. They may leave behind their past mistakes as they develop a new ethics of affirmation that allows an existence in relation with their Others (the colonized), the non-human. In this case, the non-humans consist of animals, plants, bacteria, in short, matter, and technology, which in her terms seems to be an uncontainable force and, in fact, a welcome new member of 

The zoe includes modern and non-modern peoples, the non-human and even machines that in her view appear to have acquired a life and a mind of their own and surpassed the thinking capacities of the posthuman. Recognizing the zoe in all living matter leads us to recognize that all living matter is self-organizing, creative, intelligent, and that thinking is no longer the monopoly of the Human (posthuman); rather all matter thinks. Secondly, she wants to reformulate the mission of the humanities as a project that not only is in synch with the advancements of science and technology but is based on the slogan: “We are in this together but, we are not one and the same.”

By “We are in this together, but we are not one and the same,” Braidotti recognizes that there are power differences between the modern and the non-modern that cannot be written off. The missing people (as she likes to call the silenced colonized others, but also women), who are able to think otherwise, get to be recognized finally as knowing subjects (although she never mentions their works with the exception of postcolonial scholars, who for her are akin to postmodernists). She introduces a caveat nevertheless: all must give up identity politics and resist the temptation of competing for recognition or of thinking that they have the monopoly on pain. With this caveat, Braidotti uses a similar ruse of postmoderns before her, but in reverse order. Like them, Braidotti positions the Other, the colonized, the indigenous on an equal footing with the ex-human, the colonizer, the European. In this manner, she effectively disappears with a sleight of the hand the power differences she just recognized. The posthumanism of Braidotti does not differ very much from those of her postmodern predecessors. She is also never able to leave Europe and, like them, she deflects the attention away from the West’s responsibility for the destruction of the world of the Others. In the case of Braidotti, it is not that the voices of the Others are phantasmagorically present. Rather they seem to form part of the edifice of her
theory, but in an unstated form. As Necthaval (2015) and Arias (2017) have pointed out, her theoretical ruminations are reminiscent of Eastern philosophies (Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist). They remind us also of Amerindian indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies that for the last three to four thousand years have not distinguished between the human and the non-human and have not erected species hierarchies. Braidotti seems to be oblivious to this.

Instead what we see is the backdoor of the Human open again as we follow her with her fascination with technology, (also rationality and secularism). We must take for granted that this is the monopoly of the ex-human as the missing people are still living without dignity. It is the central role that technology plays in the theory that reveals the European face of the posthuman subject. The posthuman is the post-European, a redone European. Posthumanity is the preserve of the European. It is the European that has learned to digest others, a European that has outdone himself through his formidable technological advancement and his epistemic prowess of learning to build knowledge with the knowledge of others (the colonized, animals, plants, fungi etc. and machines).

### 4. Postcolonialism

As we know, postcolonialism emerged under the influence of postmodern perspectives, but was developed largely by intellectuals of the non-modern world living in the metropole. Interestingly, a central concern for postcolonial critics is the impossibility of subalterns (an equivalent to the indigenes) to be heard on their own terms, not only from within Western canons, but presumably within their own non-modern traditions. Therefore, the postcolonial project was set up to locate and re-establish the voice of the subalterns of the colony. Spivak (1985) warned postcolonial critics of their futile attempt to grant collective speech to subalterns, as they would ironically also reinscribe and co-opt the voice of the subalterns in much the same way the Western colonizer had done. Cultural solidarity amidst a panoply of voices of heterogeneous subalterns, as well as speaking for the subalterns, seemed self-defeating strategies. But what was the importance of breaking the silence of the subaltern for postcolonial critics? Was the subaltern the repository of an unspoken truth that had redemptive powers? For whom?

The savior rhetoric of the West that rescues the downtrodden non-modern from other non-moderns seems to have been inverted here. The postcolonial critic appears as a stand-in or an impostor for the postmodern critic searching salvation in the silenced subaltern Other. A short-lived version of this experiment was the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group that would attempt to do the same (Moreiras 2001; Rodriguez 2001). It would take the literary genre of *testimonio* (testimony) (Beverley 2006) as the way of articulating the voice of the subaltern. Like their predecessors, they too failed as ventriloquists and disbanded soon after.

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3 Postcolonial criticism had a boom in US academia in the 80s with prominent scholars such as Edward Said (1994), Gayatri Spivak (1985), Homi Bhabha (2004), Franz Fanon (2004) and Amilcar Cabral (1979).

4 The Latin American Subaltern Studies Groups was founded in the US in 1992 by US and Latin American scholars residing in the US. Some of the founding members of this group were John Beverley (2006), Ileana Rodriguez (2001), and Alberto Moreiras (2001).
Interesting here is the backlash against the “audacity” of an indigenous woman (Rigoberta Menchú) to try to make her words present through a testimonio written by a mestizo-criollo scholar from Venezuela. The book became an instant success within Anglo academia in the context of postmodernism of that time. Nonetheless, a few years into the debate, David Stoll, an U.S. American anthropologist, would attack the veracity and authenticity of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonio in an apparent attempt to return her to silence and discredit her. (Stoll 1999) Menchú’s testimonio was subjected to unending intrigues that put in question the events she described as well as the moral integrity of the author who had gathered her testimony. Burgos-Debray not only kept the royalties of the first years of circulation of the book, but took sides with David Stoll, once he had launched his diatribe against Rigoberta Menchú. This was an emblematic case of the intolerance and inability of the Anglo academy to listen to the voice of the Other.

5. Latin American decolonial theories

At the end of the nineties, decolonial theories from Latin America started to take center stage and they were also accompanied by the project of restoring the voices of the indigenous peoples. Like postmodern and postcolonial theories before them, decolonial thinking was concerned at first with Eurocentrism and epistemic decolonization as a crucial domain of struggle towards transmodernity or alternatives to modernity. (Escobar 2015) The border thinking of the Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) was singled out by Walter Mignolo as the proper way of grasping a reality that had been largely denied by the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge. (Mignolo 2000, 6, 256) Border thinking was thinking both from the exteriority (outside) and from the lived experience of the colonized. Thus, tapping into indigenous epistemological traditions seemed crucial to enact decolonization not only for the indigenous peoples, but also for non-indigenous peoples, which in Latin America includes European descendants and mestizo-criollo folks. Interestingly, European descendants and mestizo-criollo folks appear in this narrative not as internal colonizers, but as “natural” allies of indigenous peoples. By making no distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous people, decolonial border thinkers would appear not only as co-authors but also as rescuers of a lost knowledge. As Kyle Powys Whyte, a Potawatomi scholar, has noted of North American allies of indigenous peoples, non-indigenous allies in the South can feel redeemed as they are now doing what their ancestors failed to do in the past. (Whyte 2017) They are thinking with indigenous peoples and not against them. Border thinking is in this way the lifeline of white and mestizo-criollo decolonial allies. It is arguably what allows the co-existence of two rather different worlds. It is no wonder that when leftist regimes in Ecuador and Bolivia introduced Buen Vivir and the rights of nature in their constitutions, both indigenous conceptions of the good life and the relationship to

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5Menchú’s testimonio was collected by Elizabeth Burgos-Debray in I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala. Verso, 1984. Burgos-Debray is a Venezuelan anthropologist and former wife of Regis Debray, a member of Mitterrand’s government between 1981–1995 in France. Before becoming a member of the French government, Debray was associated with Che Guevara and Salvador Allende of Chile.

6Some scholars think that Stoll’s later comments constitute a withdrawal of his criticisms. However, I suggest that scrutiny of this later document provides no evidence for such an evaluation.

7The modernity/coloniality group is considered the core group of Latin American decolonial theories. Founding members of this group are Walter Mignolo (2000), Anibal Quijano (2000) and Enrique Dussel (2006, 2011) among many others.
nature, these introductions were hailed as decolonial moments in which indigenous knowledges were finally encoded in the political, even though these conceptions were indexed in a modern/colonial, liberal political code (Dussel 2006, 2011).

Not to be left unmentioned are the attempts of indigenous intellectuals to salvage ancestral knowledges to counter the assaults of modernity and development. Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples, who have regrouped politically since the nineties across the continent, see themselves as engaged in a debate in which a new civilizational model should emerge that is based on non-capitalist, non-liberal, non-state and non-colonial practices rooted in their ancestral knowledges. The preservation and the extension to non-indigenous folks of communal forms of living, the unveiling of ontologically different ways of relating to humans and non-humans, and the recognition of their autonomy vis à vis the state are at the center of such new proposals. The motto here is the Zapatista idea of creating a world in which many worlds fit (“Enlace Zapatista” 1996).

But as recent experiences show us, such as the Buen Vivir policies and the incorporation of the rights of nature in the constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009), it is very difficult to reconcile indigenous proposals with existing political structures, even with those that claim to be re-founded on plurinationality and interculturality. Interculturality, as the possibility of dialogue between cultures, reaches its limits first and foremost at the level of the state. The state can bring into the fold of modernity and development indigenous cultural propositions that allegedly would have changed the state’s internal logic and functioning. A case in point is the so-called economy of extractivism of progressive regimes. The regimes of a mestizo-criollo such as President Correa in Ecuador and an Aymara indigenous president, Evo Morales in Bolivia, have not protected the rights of nature nor changed the modern exploitative relationship to nature. Instead, they continued the destruction of some indigenous communities. They have encroached on their territories with their extractivist mega-projects and caused extreme damage to the environment.

6. Anthropology: the ontological turn

Another and often overlapping area of knowledge that has recently rediscovered ancestral knowledges, myths, and practices of Amerindians as profoundly questioning established assumptions of modernity and development is anthropology. From this perspective, Amerindian ontologies seem to hold the key to a whole new view of nature and culture that can save the world from modern monsters such as colonialism, capitalism, and climate change, and thus can help us build better futures. This has become known as the ontological turn. It has even been considered the salvation of anthropology, which

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8Buen Vivir or the sumaq kamaña in Aymara or sumak kawsay in Quechua translates as the good life, to know how to live, living well, living in community etc. It is an Andean philosophy that believes in the integrality of life and the need for harmony. Buen Vivir requires a respect for Mother Earth, the Pachamama. Because Buen Vivir recognizes different ways of living it also promotes interculturality and pluriversality. Core values of Buen Vivir are complementarity, reciprocity and solidarity. Spirituality is also central to Buen Vivir as is the search for equilibrium. Indigenous organizations in Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru have sought to incorporate these visions into national political constitutions. They were successful in constitutional processes that have been more democratic and participatory like in Ecuador and Bolivia during the first decade of the twenty-first century. After a decade of successive violations of the constitutions, we have become aware of some of the problems that arise when development and modernization are kept as the ulterior motives behind the adoption of Buen Vivir. See Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2012).
had in the recent past been reduced to be just a reflection of the concerns and obsessions of modern anthropologists.

The work of the Brazilian Eduardo Viveiros de Castro stands out in this renovation of anthropology. (2004, 2014, 2015) As some have noted, the ontological anthropology that Viveiros de Castro puts forward is, as he says, the story about the Amazonian Amerindian. In a journey of discovery through the seas of ethnography about Amazonia, Viveiros de Castro’s eye and deep (modern) sense can access the alter-concepts of nature and humanity of the isolated Amazonian Amerindian and offer them to the moderns to tackle their own modern problems. And what he sees is quite interesting. He finds another reality that does not differentiate human from non-humans; not only is no distinction made between humans and non-humans such as spirits, animals or trees, neither is animality or biology what humans share with animals or non-humans, rather it is ‘humanity’ (or their sociality) that they share with each other. In this reality, animals are former humans now with an animal body, having lost the biological attributes of the human body but not their ‘humanity’ or human sociality or personhood. What differs, then, is only their perspective of the world and of each other. He calls this Amerindian perspectivism. The caveat here is not that they see no difference between the bodies of animals and humans, but that animals, a jaguar, for instance, possesses his own perspective of the world and should be understood only from this perspective. Human-animals perceive themselves as social persons just as humans see themselves as persons. But the jaguar, a predatory human-animal, for instance, sees humans simply as prey, a delicious meal. Conversely, the human can perceive the jaguar as a predatory animal or as a spirit. In this cosmology, there will be variations in perspective whether you are a social being with a human body, or a predatory (human)animal like the jaguar, or a spirit; there will be multiple natures, but all of them are anthropomorphized in one “culture”. Viveiros de Castro calls this “multi-naturalism” in contrast to “multiculturalism.” His view contrasts with classical Western concepts of nature and culture that usually posit one nature that is interpreted by different cultures.

This multiplicity of “natures” not only transposes the distinction between nature and culture, but also the divide between subject and object as all agents are endowed with subjecthood and a perspective. This highly complex rendition of Amerindian ontology is considered an alternative to modern great divides between single nature and multiple cultures. It enables the recognition of ontological (non-human) rights of nature that modernity denies. Idelber Avelar, a Brazilian literary theorist, goes so far as to affirm that Amerindian anthropomorphism and perspectivism can be useful to slow down the Anthropocene, and gives the example of the rights of nature recognized in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, as mentioned earlier, as proof of the contributions of Amerindian ontologies. (Avelar 2013) So, in a nutshell, what we find in this new anthropology is the extraction of alter-concepts from the perceived radical alterity of the indigenes as a reminder for moderns that moderns too can create forms of thinking otherwise, if only they can emulate indigenous peoples. Here we encounter yet again non-modern concepts and worlds helping moderns cope with the world of destruction they have brought onto themselves. While no concern about the wreckage of the Amazonian world is foregrounded, it is to be assumed that it is precisely the wreckage that enables the forward thinking needed by moderns.
Another exponent of the ontological turn is the Argentinean anthropologist Mario Blaser\(^9\) (2013) who, like Viveiros de Castro, is engaged in uncovering other ways of being and of the “real” that indigenous peoples can offer moderns as solutions to the problems caused by modernity and development. Blaser is also concerned with the assumption that modernity encompasses all that there is, as if non-modern “reals” are a thing of the past and do not deserve to be taken seriously. Blaser’s point is that modernity was never able in the past or the present to eradicate alternative ontologies completely. These multiple ontologies still exist and come in conflict with Western ontological assumptions. Multiple ontologies taken seriously allow us to imagine the possibility of creating worlds free of the challenges of the Anthropocene, but, also and perhaps more specifically, they allow us to imagine the possibility of bringing to life the pluriverse, or a world where many worlds fit. By recognizing the existence of multiple ontologies, the modern misconception of the existence of only one world and multiple cultures is thus challenged.

7. Conclusions: the subaltern rescues moderns?

It has not been my intention to reiterate the usual objections made to the theoretical practices that have been the focus here by calling them a romanticization or exoticization of indigenous cultures, or by pointing out that they homogenize such practices and make unsupportable generalizations. Nor am I saying that indigenous epistemologies and ontologies should not be taken seriously. I do want to emphasize the different manners in which the Other (indigenous peoples/the subalterns) inhabits the Western theoretical imagination. And I want to focus on how mestizo-criollo decolonial and postcolonial theorists equally seek to break with the knowledge traditions of the modern world at a time when modernity seems to be short of answers to solve the problems it has created. As I have said elsewhere (2012) inverting Vincent Capranzano’s (1990) metaphor of the “shadow dialogue,” the suppressed voices of the Other linger in the body and the margins of Western texts.\(^10\) They often reside in the gaping holes in the dialogues among Western theorists who, aware of their common historical situation, talk to each other as equals, yet silence the colonized Other on which their epistemic postures depend. They do so by either invalidating their epistemologies or misrecognizing them. This is a move reminiscent of the ways that the sign of woman disappears in phallogocentric discourses. The difference today is that moderns are attempting to overcome this habit of the mind. Yet I argue that their attempts are not always successful. In the theoretical discourses of postmodernism, we could see how the subalterns, or the indigenous peoples, remained the invisible Others even as they were invoked. They are either excluded from the conversation, or the dialogue is so indirect as to be unrecognizable. This is so even in Western feminist attempts to present more inclusive narratives, such as Braidotti’s. Braidotti’s posthumanism absorbs indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies without ever recognizing them. Here the rejection of the human and of *Anthropos*, and the anthropomorphizing of technology (or apotheosis),

\(^9\)See also the work of Marisol de la Cadena (2015) and Arturo Escobar (2008, 2014, 2015).  
\(^10\)Capranzano refers mainly to the shadow dialogue underneath ethnographic texts of western anthropologists, who more than telling a story of others, are constructing their own story through internal references or conversations among westerners that are hidden from the actual communicative exchange with those others. See Vincent Capranzano “On Dialogue” in Tulio Maranhão (1990).
works as a self-aggrandizement of the modern world which unwittingly reconstitutes the colonial norm.

Internal colonialism in Abya Yala, like vestigial caste systems in South Asia, create their own quandaries.\(^{11}\) In an attempt to change the paradigm and delink from modernity, decolonials (mestizo-criollos) and postcolonials want to recover the voice of the subalterns/indigenous by attributing an alterity to indigenous peoples/subalterns that can work like a wonder drug to the ailments of modernity. The ontological turn in anthropology, for instance, offers indigenous ontologies as a way to build possible futures, and thus perhaps even the salvation of the world. For Latin American white, mestizo-criollo scholars who do not see themselves as settlers, but as ‘natural’ allies of indigenous peoples, the mining of indigenous knowledges to solve the crisis of modernity, or fantasizing about a future based on the radical difference of indigenous peoples, could be interpreted as another form of extractivism. One could also surmise that the desire to emulate indigenous ontologies reiterates the imperial fantasy to appear as the savior of cultures that otherwise would be extinguished. These scholars also reveal the enormous power difference that still separates the modern and non-modern worlds in and outside the colony. Modern scholars are trying to bridge these differences in the rediscovery and exploration of the indigenous worlds of knowledge through rescuing them, instead of destroying them, as in the past. But they are not always successful. And as we have seen, these efforts are replete with ambiguity and contradictions.

The question that is being posed today with the return of the indigenous is, rather, can the subaltern save us? What is striking is that indigenous cosmologies are read through an inverted lens whereby indigenous cultures save the modern world instead of the usual colonial savior rhetoric that posits the opposite relationship. Critics of modernity (postcolonial and decolonial critics included) not only seek salvation in the subaltern or the indigenous peoples, they often conceal their historical complicity in the destruction of indigenous worlds. They use indigenous ways of making worlds to redeem themselves from the sins of their ancestors and to rescue themselves from self-destruction. These theoretical propositions of moderns and non-moderns are thus problematic. They involve what native feminist Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call “settler moves to innocence.” Settler moves to innocence are the ways the descendants of the colonizers attempt to diminish their sense of guilt and complicity in the destruction of indigenous worlds, and to secure a settler futurity. (Tuck and Wayne Yang 2012) They can work as a way to divert our attention from our responsibility to the colonized others, and to inhibit the call for reparation that one could argue is still pertinent.

Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte (2017) reminds us of something which is crucial to our understanding of the predicament of the Anthropocene and the turn to indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies to save the world. The current dread of apocalyptic futures due to climate change is not new to indigenous peoples. Colonialism was and still is experienced as an apocalypse involving the extinction of their socio/natural/cultural habitats and the core of their spirit. Thus, many of their ways of coping with catastrophe must be traced to their attempts to survive colonialism, and not exclusively to a radical

\(^{11}\)Abya Yala supplants the term Latin America. It comes from the Kuna language and means “land of full maturity.” It is becoming the preferred term to refer to the region. Indigenous peoples of North America use the term Turtle Island to refer to their territories.
difference worthy of emulation by moderns worried about their collective future or the singularity of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, from the perspective of indigenous peoples, is not an entirely new era that begins in 1950 after WWII and the atomic bomb. For them, it began five hundred years ago and continues today.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies, even though they are to be taken seriously, are not beyond criticism. Indigenous knowledges have five hundred years of intermingling asymmetrically with modern epistemologies, and exist since then in tension with them. There are no indigenous absolute dividing lines or clear-cut dichotomies between indigenous and modern epistemologies because indigenous peoples have dealt for centuries with modern epistemologies. (Burman 2012) I have devoted more attention to the paradoxes and tensions that emerge when non-indigenous and modern peoples “borrow” indigenous principles to fix the problems of modernity, but much less to the problems that indigenous epistemologies and ontologies themselves may have. Indigenous feminists like Lorena Cabnal (2010), for instance, oppose the hetero-reality that Mayan cosmologies create, with their notions of the heterosexual complementary ordering of the cosmos and attempts to correct indigenous masculinist cosmological visions in order to build a communitarian feminist future. Andrew Canessa (2010), on the other hand, points to the masculinism present in Fausto Reinaga’s ouvre (1970). Reinaga is Bolivia’s greatest indigenous intellectual, though he cannot hide his antipathy toward mestiza women, or also his “profound ambivalence” toward indigenous women. According to Cannessa, the project of Reinaga is explicitly the redemption of the Indian man alone.

As in every debate, indigenous intellectuals do not have a monolithic position in their critiques of modernity or their attempts to salvage their ancestral knowledges. There are also important differences between indigenous critiques from Abya Yala and those from Turtle Island which I have not addressed here. These historical and colonial experiences are not identical nor are their political and theoretical propositions. Indigenous critiques of modernity need not only to be taken more seriously, they must also be examined more critically. The political experimentation that has taken place in Bolivia and Ecuador, that recognizes the rights of nature according to the indigenous demands and conceptions of Buen Vivir, has not prevented the continuation of an extractive economy that violates those very conceptions. This is just one instance in which we see the problems that emerge when indigenous principles are implemented in modern political institutions, such as the state. Nonetheless, there are other indigenous intellectuals in Peru and Bolivia that understand the realm of the political as already a modern conception that cannot confine the struggles of indigenous peoples who are seeking to transcend modernity with their own cultural, historical horizon. (Quintanilla Coro and Prada Alcoreza, 2014) These contradictions reveal not only the internal fissures that exist inside the indigenous intellectual camp, but also the permanent dangers that modern politics poses to indigenous struggles against the assaults of modernity and decolonization.

As we, non-indigenous, mestizxs, who are also decolonial feminist scholars, begin to examine indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies more carefully, new questions arise. For instance, is it possible to think outside of modernity, relying on archetypes of indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies? Can the indigenous critic escape modernity? (Quintanilla Coro and Prada Alcoreza, 2014, 27). Other crucial questions that need to be posed from a feminist perspective are: Can the civilizatory projects that mostly male
indigenous scholars (in Abya Yala) put forward withstand a decolonial and/or indigenous feminist critique? How are women and mestizxs positioned in the new indigenous civilizational model? As we can see, the conversation has just begun.

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