

How Many Natures Can Nature Nurture? The Human, Multinaturalism and Variation.

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One or Many Humans

In her book *The Death of Nature*, the feminist historian of sciences Carolyn Merchant narrates the erasure of early-modern cosmovisions—organicism, vitalism, panpsychism—before the symbiosis between the natural sciences and mercantilism that started in the Renaissance.¹ To legitimize early capitalist resource extraction, it was necessary to exchange the image of a benevolent earth found in the period’s philosophies of nature for an energetically fertile-yet-pacified “nature”. This objectification was made possible by the mechanism of universal laws. For Merchant, nonetheless, such symbiosis would be insufficient without the invention of the “human,” understood, within the ontology of the moderns, as an ethical concept operating over that and those deemed natural: indigenous peoples, animals, and landscapes, but also the supernatural, such as spirits, all of whom were henceforth considered in the negative—as nonhumans. This triangulation between markets, sciences, and humanity defines to this day a form of colonialism one could call *humanist capitalism*.

The confrontation with the Amerindians in the sixteenth century was vital for imagining this new humanity. The period was dominated by an inquiry into the Indians’ soul, whether they had one or not—and, as suggested by Lévi-Strauss, on the Amerindian side most likely over the body of

¹ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper, 1980).

Europeans, which they did not trust.² Two exemplary events around this issue include Pope Paul III's 1537 bull *Sublimis Deus*, and consequently the Valladolid debate, which promulgated the rights and humanity of the "savages," even if on the wrong terms: property rights (to them an alien concept) and freedom of faith (even if not their own). "A New Humanity is discovered with the New World," writes anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, "the crucial problem was how to insert it in the divine economy, which implied inserting it in the genealogy of the peoples. To do so, there was no solution except that of continuity, of *opening a space* in the European cosmology."³ From the seventeenth century on, this spatial concern becomes increasingly temporal, shaping modernity's evolutionary progress. For Europeans, the savages, henceforth termed "primitives," confirmed humanity as a culturally and genetically evolving single species, coexistent in the same present yet separated by temporal degrees: "primitives" were the first humans from which modern civilization evolved.⁴

If the sixteenth century is indeed the century of humanity, it is so not, or not only, due to the philosophical inquiries of the "moderns," but more so because the Amerindians could only have been intensely reflecting on it as well.⁵ This period of great encounters was also one of misencounters, cosmologically speaking—for each side of the Atlantic was asking the question, though evidently not following the same conceptual ontology: what is humanity? The Amerindians had and have their own concept of humanity, rooted in specific cosmologies and subsequently reframed by the colonial encounter. However, for the last five centuries only one humanity has prevailed over all others: the humanity of the moderns, a humanity unthinkable without the separation between man and "nature," and which forces all others into that distinction.

² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955) 82-83, and *Race and History* (Paris: Unesco, 1978) 12—originally published in 1952. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro popularized Lévi-Strauss's anecdote in, *The Inconstancy of the Indian Soul: The Encounter of Catholics and Cannibals in 16th-Century Brazil* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2011).

³ Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, "Imagens de Índios do Brasil: O século XVI," *Estudos Avançados*, Vol. 4, 10 (São Paulo) 102. The emphasis is mine.

⁴ Hélène Clastres, "Primitivismo e ciência do homem no séc. XVII," *Discurso*, 13 (São Paulo: University of São Paulo, 1980).

⁵ I opt to bracket "moderns" so as to caution about overly framing sixteenth century Europeans within nineteenth century historicity and science. It is quite a challenge to inquire on how modern indeed were the Portuguese upon their arrival on the shores of Brazil, their caravels filled with Arabs and their Islamic knowledge.

Thus, while the moderns' historical humanity may be graspable for the Yanomami or Cashinawa of South America—presumably as graspable as our weak understanding of their animism—it remains altogether violent nonsense. Amerindian cosmogonies narrate how before this world began, everything was human yet simultaneously more- or other-than-human. The world was then inhabited by a proto-humanity: beings simultaneously animal, vegetal, and manlike. Their bodies were anthropomorphized yet prone to metamorphosis. Their logic would have been more additive-variable than binary-causal: the cumulative or iterative *and* rather than the binary *either/or*. When the previous world ended, this world began, and it was then that such common humanity differentiated into the many species, who henceforth ceased to see each other as human due to their many specific natures or bodies.⁶ Lévi-Strauss was perhaps the first to see in this a reverse-evolutionism—not a world that came to be occupied by humans, but a humanity bringing forth many worlds: “Tortoises and wild pigs that evolved from monkeys, monkeys from man, and tapirs and agoutis even from plants.”⁷

The Amerindian world remains to this day a repository of potencies owing to that original dispersal. There, humanity is not a fixed, scientific category, nor an immutable essence or the exceptionality of one species: mankind. It is a trans-specific *culture*, common to all yet variable between bodies and instances. This has been widely noted as a defining characteristic of animism. For such collectives, however, animism does not mean that everything is regarded as human all the time and by everyone. Each being sees *itself* as human but not necessarily every other thing, though the possibility of seeing other things as oneself, that is, as human, is always a possibility. In fact, in a world of inconstancy, where appearances are deceiving and every body conceals a potential humanity, the only permanence might be that of possibility. This possibility of exchanging perspectives, and through such exchange accessing the humanity in other bodies, forms the basis for Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's and Tânia Stoltze Lima's theory of animist perspectivism, which has animated Amerindian anthropology for the past two decades.

⁶ For an introduction to the theme see, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski, *Há mundo por vir? Ensaio sobre os medos e os fins* (São Paulo: Cultura e Barbárie, 2014).

⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Jealous Potter* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) 6. In this book, on this matter, Lévi-Strauss refers in particular Waiwai and Cashinawa myths.

Humanity from the Perspective of Predators

Perspectivism complicates a simplistic view of animism that says everything is human. If you ask an Amazonian hunter if the jaguar or giant ant-eater is human, the hunter may well answer you that it is not: face to face with a jaguar, you run.⁸ This does not mean that the jaguar or ant-eater are not human. According to perspectivism, human refers to an embodied position in space but also in relation to others at a specific time. For example, Aparecida Vilaça has shown how among the Wari', in Rondônia, humanity varies depending on the position of predator and prey.⁹ Face to face with a predator, it is the ambiguous hunter/prey relation that risks making the animal human at that instance and puts the hunter at risk of losing his humanity. Furthermore, Vilaça shows how predation affects the care and digestion or not of bodies after hunting or upon death, to the extent that one could possibly speak of humanity relating also to a phase in the metabolic process of bodily metamorphosis.

Humanity “is not the principal ontological axis” for animist collectives, at least not as among the moderns.¹⁰ While for the moderns what is at stake is the concept’s rigidity (around which their cosmos is organized), for Amerindians it is its malleability. What is at stake is not the confirmation of interiority (a soul) but of exteriority (bodies): the ontological dynamics of bodies as they appear before others.¹¹ For it is not only myths that define ontologies, but also a “forest of mirrors” where nothing is what it seems. This emphasis on the nature of bodies-in-relation, that is in

⁸ The jaguar and the large ant-eater are two prominent predators in several Amerindian myths and frequently oppose each other. Among the Ticuna, for example, a mythic fight between the two animals is expressed in the constellations and agricultural seasons; while Kaingang cosmogonies tell of how the giant ant-eater was created in opposition to the jaguar.

⁹ “Among the Wari’, the term *wari’*, which signifies we, people, human being, is defined primarily in opposition to game animals, and more broadly contrasts with foods in a general sense, all of which are defined as *karawa*. Nevertheless, the very same animals hunted and eaten by the Wari’ are also considered human, especially since they themselves can act as predators and eaters – the core meaning of the term *wari’*. (...) In sum, while – as in the Jivaro case – the definition of we, person, is contextual, in the Wari’ case we can observe the potential for a complete over-lapping of the two categories. All – or almost all – prey animals can be people, depending primarily on their ways of acting.” Aparecida Vilaça, “Chronically Unstable Bodies: Reflections on Amazonian Corporalities,” *Royal Anthropological Institute*, 11 (2005) 445-464.

¹⁰ I take this quote from Marilyn Strathern’s work on Melanesia, with which many ethnographic comparisons have been made to Amerindian animism. Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things* (London: Athlone Press, 1999) 252-53. Cited in Aparecida Vilaça, *Chronically Unstable Bodies: Reflections on Amazonian Corporalities*, 452.

¹¹ See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Inconstancy of the Indian Soul: The Encounter of Catholics and Cannibals in 16th-Century Brazil*.

perspective, rather than on doubting others' souls or cultures has led Viveiros de Castro to suggest that *somatism* might be a more appropriate term than animism to describe such cosmologies.¹²

For Viveiros de Castro, the anthropological concept of “multinaturalism” marks the frontier between cosmologies—Amerindian animism and modern naturalism—where nature ceases to be a stable unity in order to unfold as perpetual *variation*. On the one hand, we have an absolutist, naturalist ontology, whose sciences will in due time clear all blind spots in the study of a single Nature. On the other hand, there lies an animist (or somatist) ontology, fertile in blind spots, where difference is unsurpassable but always generative, and equivocations between perspectives foundational in negotiating a multinatural world. But let us not be misguided by Viveiros de Castro's simple yet strategic dualisms. More important is how multinaturalism is neither “theirs nor ours” but conceptualized *in between* modernist and Amerindian ideas about nature. Who is to say that Amerindians do not believe in Nature? Better to say: what they definitely don't agree on is the stability of nature, in other words, its enclosure.

*Enter the Multinatural World,
Where Nature and Humanity Cannot Be Thought Separately*

My effort to tentatively summarize, crudely I'm afraid, this complex set of socio-cosmologies is not to hang on to humanism, especially not that of the moderns. It is to suggest that exiting modernity's naturalist mononature implies changing the meaning of humanity. The terms cannot be thought separately. One would do well to stop for a moment before accelerating into the future in the desire for the posthuman. Messianic ideas of futurity, including its posthuman and postnatural frameworks, imply more often than not transcendence, and are mostly very much narrow in their scope as to what the variations of multinaturalist might mean.

It is true that something weird is happening at the heart of the modern naturalist schema. Weird

¹² Eduardo Viveiros de Castro recently formulated this as such in his keynote lecture for the symposium *Em Torno do Pensamento de Eduardo Viveiros de Castro*, SESC Ipiranga, October 2015.

enough for moderns to claim they are becoming animists. But are the moderns becoming “technoanimist” (for lack of a better term) simply because of capitalism’s inner transformations? This is a question indigenous, environmentalists, artists, and academics involved in cosmopolitical struggles must ask themselves. Capitalism too is pushing for hybridity and the corruption of its own segregationist, philosophical walls. The problem is that there is no contradiction between the end of the modern cosmology and the endurance of the destruction wrought by the modern world, that is, of capitalism. This is why faith in hybrids alone will not do.

Capitalism today may perhaps be better described by the formula: *the naturalization of the social and the socialization of nature*. When contemporary capitalism chooses an energy resource over people who happen to live near its extraction site, is it not socializing such material (by inserting it into an elected economy) while simultaneously disposing of the population in the given territory? In her efforts to dismantle the politics of cultural recognition in late liberalism, Elizabeth Povinelli points to a pluralism of differences that is policed by yet another formula that helps further frame what is at stake: *cultural inclusion only if ontological exclusion*. That is, you are free to believe that the monkey or the bat or the mountain or the river are people with agency as long as they do not enter here as agents—after all “we” need to mine such and such a mountain, experiment with such and such macaque in the laboratory.

Philippe Descola gives us such an example when discussing the apparent break with the primacy of mind as exclusive to mankind in cognition theories, such as those of Francisco Varela on embodied cognition and James Gibson’s affordance theory. In both cases, cognition is not reduced to mind; rather, we find subject- and world-making processes arising from either relational emergences between body and environment, or a continuity of corporealities that escape mind. To define personhood beyond Cartesian dualism is of extreme interest, allowing for a greater acknowledgment of other concepts of body, such as in animism. However, Descola warns that “this effacement of ontological discrimination that is based on the criterion of the mind leads to a

new exclusion, for it concerns only one category of existing beings, those lucky enough to have at their disposition a body capable of perception and movement.”¹³

Descola exemplifies this problem via computational intelligence. It is as if in trying to escape their discriminatory primacy of mind over body, the moderns took a dramatic, even tragicomic U-turn, only to arrive at the same place of exclusion. For anti-mentalists, such as Varela and Gibson, while mindless beings were once excluded from the community of humans for not *really* having a mind, much less a soul, now with embodied cognition computerized minds can't really be human, “not because they lack intentionality or consciousness of the self, which is the classic argument developed by the philosophy of mind, but because they are, as it were, purely minds, and it is the body, not some neuronal or electronic processor, that is home to the kind of memory of the experience of self that constitutes subjectivity.”¹⁴

One could call this U-turn a *Cartesian loop*—from Descartes's automaton to the Turing test, as well as most science-fiction-based android theory, Cartesianism still holds and encloses the imaginary about the subjectivity of emerging entities. For animals, we say: “you don't have a mind;” for computers (or spirits, for that matter): “you don't have a body.”

There Is No Such Thing as Capitalist Animism

Both animist/somatist and modern worlds have a politics of visibility; their own specific “distributions of the sensible.”¹⁵ Not everything that enters an animist system's field of vision exhibits humanity underneath its body. Perspectivist animism is not a free-for-all, coexistent and harmonious. There, too, exists a negotiated geometry of socio-ontological frontiers bounding or breaking societies apart. In these social natures, as well, certain animals, plants, and spirits remain outside the ontological divide: what can or cannot be eaten or hunted, for example. Yet, and this

¹³ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013) 187-188.

¹⁴ Ibid. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro also touches on this issue in a similar vein in *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*, HAU Masterclass Series, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 119-120.

¹⁵ See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).

is the point, this outside is other to our outside; it is a non-negative, non-repressive outside. One could accordingly twist Viveiros de Castro's words when he says, "in a world where every thing is human, humanity is an entirely different thing," and instead suggest, "in a world where every thing is human, the nonhuman is also an entirely different thing."¹⁶

Acknowledging the agency of nonhumans does not make one animist. Animism is simply the anthropological word given to a belief in humanity other than that to which the moderns have been faithful. Thinking the animation of things usually perceived as immobile and nonpolitical greatly differs to "anthropologies" of nature and culture formulated by people who see everything as a potential everyone, that is, as persons. That is hardly at stake with the moderns.

Capitalism is built on an objectivity that extracts profit from the inscription and policing of difference at the heart of the social. This is the only difference that really counts under humanist capitalism, regardless if between humans or nonhumans, species, class, race, or gender. Descola writes that capitalist naturalism is "a negation of what a human embodies, and not, as in animism, a recognition of the position of exteriority that must be assimilated if one is to be fully oneself. *Naturalism is destructive rather than predatory* in its behavior toward certain categories of both humans and nonhumans."¹⁷ If all beings actualized themselves mutually, as in perspectivist multinaturalism, instead of dominating over every other, there would no longer be an outside to profit from within social relations. This is why any type of capitalist animism will always be delusional, for it would no longer be capitalist. This doesn't mean that reframing animation isn't a good place to start. But doing so implies understanding that the end of the capitalist world is not a multicultural issue but a multinaturalist one.

Variationism, or Thinking Thought In-Between

¹⁶ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Some Reflections on the Notion of Species in History and Anthropology," *émisférica*, vol.1, 1 (2013).

¹⁷ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, 397. Emphasis is mine.

My aim then is not so much a polemic of the “human” but rather to suggest that while we need to invent new terms no longer tied to old categories, we must also allow common terms to explode and vary. I am talking about the openness and variability of the human, as a concept, and correlatedly of nature. Despite their radically different meanings “here and there,” these are common terms, shared by different societies. To simply confront this difference by way of cultural relativism may not be enough, but there is something to be said about thinking the inner, worldly, multiplicity of concepts: not that each socio-cosmology has its own “nature,” but that nature (or culture, for that matter) must be thought in between the concepts “here and there.” While the variations of multinaturalism may refer as much to the social operations specific cosmologies as to the concept’s emergence at the frontier between cosmologies, why not think through comparison a methodology for action (scientific, philosophical, artistic, or otherwise)? What I am asking is to consider a *variationism of thought*, as philosopher Patrice Maniglier suggests.¹⁸ Perhaps this is simply anthropologizing concepts and practices.

Indeed, the moderns are the only ones in this one world who live exclusively in their own world. They are the only egotists in the entirety of the planetary story. Most other peoples live in multiple worlds. They *have to* live in multiple worlds for the simple fact that they must do so in order to survive. They must exist *in-between*. In their worlds *and* in that of the moderns, simultaneously. This is not romanticizing the Indian—why should they now bear the burden of finding solutions to our destruction? In trying to debunk technoanimism, as in avoiding the prescription of multinaturalism to “them,” I hope to have made this clear. This is simply having the clarity to see that other people already practice this variationism. It is about time for the moderns to start living like all the others.

I would like to close with an artwork, *Fronteiras Verticais, Pico da Neblina* (2015) by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles. The documentation of this performance piece, which took the artist up a sacred mountain in Yanomami territory, includes a testimony by a Yanomami chief in which, while talking to an anthropologist, the chief commits not really a gaffe but perhaps a

¹⁸ Patrice Maniglier, “Dionysos Anthropologue (Homage à Eduardo Viveiros de Castro),” paper delivered at the symposium *Em Torno do Pensamento de Eduardo Viveiros de Castro*.

fortunate equivocation. The chief says, “You, *geologist*, know only an infinitesimal part of what the Yanomami world is!” This confusion between geologist and anthropologist is simply what it is, a gaffe, I am aware, but it also reflects back on the cosmological narrowness of our scientific thought. Can we not see in this equivocation a variation of what anthropology might mean in-between? That for the Yanomami, anthropology could very well be geology? How different would anthropology be if the division between the body of the earth and the human body were nonexistent? This is a bizarre accusation that the moderns are only now beginning to confront, but one which speaks to (and perhaps allows one to better grasp) the geological cosmogonies of the Yanomami, for whom the world is conceived as an accumulation of earth layers fallen from the sky. Geology as the other-self of anthropology, and vice-versa.