

DE-COLONIZING KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE: A DIALOGIC ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE LATIN AMERICAN MODERNITY/ COLONIALITY/DECOLONIALITY RESEARCH PROGRAM AND ACTOR NETWORK THEORY

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Introduction

This paper takes various analyses of modernity as a point of departure in order to explore what could be called decolonizing ethnographies of social movements' decolonizing practices. To this end, the paper seeks to establish a conversation between two novel frameworks for the critical analysis of modernity: actor-network theory (ANT), and the Latin American Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality perspective (MCD). While the first one is well known to anthropology, the latter is still largely unknown in the North American academy, despite the fact that its contributions, as I hope to show, offer a very constructive and useful set of insights for anthropology. My contentions are, first, that both ANT and MCD contribute in specific ways to de-colonial thinking and practice; second, that despite differences and tensions between the two frameworks they are largely complementary and have much to offer each other; and third, that the set of inquiries broached by these frameworks, when mutually reconfigured as ANT/MCD, offer a set of enabling, concrete, and perhaps unique contributions to thinking about modernity, ethnography, and the relation between academic knowledge and political practice. The paper is also written in the context of the growing field of the anthropology of social movements, although this will remain largely in the background and will not be discussed as such in the paper.

My own up-close encounter with both ANT and MCD took place somewhat simultaneously upon beginning my graduate studies in Anthropology at UNC-CH. I found the two frameworks to be making important contributions to the project of decolonizing knowledges and practices within the social sciences and providing hopeful terms of engagement with social movements. While I found both to be of considerable relevance for my research interests, I came across hardly any work that draws upon both frameworks and that makes use of the insights that each provides. Upon further reflection, it became evident to me the extent to which each framework has to offer the other as well as how effectively each of MCD and ANT, reveals, as I will argue, the blind spots inherent within the other framework. In short, I contend that putting them in dialogue is an effort which offers great potential. This entails exploring the complementarities and tensions, the practical and concrete implications for theory and ethnography, as well as the remaining challenges for both, considered separately and together.¹

Part I of the paper provides a very cursory discussion of the anthropology of modernity; no more than this short presentation can be done within the scope of this paper that also includes a contextualization of my project within the world anthropologies project, or WAN. Part II looks first at actor-network theory, highlighting what I call ethnography of ontological encounters; if modernity exists among 'other ontologies', as some ANT authors would argue, it makes sense to carry this insight into the ethnography of this multiplicity. I then go on to present some of the main aspects of the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality research program, this time highlighting the different understandings of modernity offered by this framework and the articulations of a project of decoloniality that, in these authors' claim, goes beyond the lingering eurocentrism in all critical analyses of modernity that continue to see modernity as an intra-European phenomenon. In Part III, I set the two frameworks into dialogue,

including a discussion of the implications for ethnography and for decolonizing the academy. I finally state what I believe are remaining problems within both frameworks from the perspective of a decolonial project, and suggest ways in which these problems can be addressed by relocating both frameworks within modernity and by shifting some of the frameworks' epistemological and political implications, especially in terms of refusing to decode subaltern knowledges as a provisional phase that would allow for concretely changing the terms of the conversation between those of us engaging with the ANT/MCD frameworks and subaltern groups or movements.

I. A brief note on the anthropology of modernity

The analysis of modernity has been a legitimate, and increasingly salient, project within anthropology since at least the late 1980s. Generally speaking, this project has had two broad sides to it; the first one is the examination of modernity itself as a set of practices, symbols, and discourses. Rabinow's statement is well known in this respect:

“We need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal (this includes epistemology and economics); make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world” (Rabinow 1986: 241).

This has been a fruitful research area for anthropology, particularly in terms of ethnographies of many aspects of modernity, from planning to development, from the economy to science, from notions of the individual to those of rationality, from particular technologies to the networks they enable. In recent years, it has been implicated in the rapid rise of science and technology studies. Besides the ethnographic analysis of practices, these works have often engaged with philosophical and sociological discourses of modernity, from Foucault to Habermas, from Castells or Giddens to Latour and, more recently, authors such as Hardt and Negri. It is fair to say, however, that as a whole this trend has remained within what could be called, in the language of MCD, intra-European analyses of modernity, even if aiming in some cases to making visible what lies “beyond modernity” (Dussel 2002).

More directly applicable to my interest is the second set of anthropological inquiries; these could be called, following Appadurai (1996), ethnographies of “modernity at large” (see Kahn 2001; Escobar 2003 for reviews of this trend). These have been geared towards examining how modernity is necessarily localized, interrogated and contested by different actors world wide. The overall question could be said to be: what is the status of modernity in times of globalization? What emerges from these investigations is a view of modernity as plural –what some authors call “alternative modernities.” In other words, this anthropology of modernity has focused on both modernity abroad and on people's engagement with it. This approach has been important in grounding the understanding of modernity in ethnographic cases. As Kahn (2001) put it in a review of a set of these works, taken as a whole they have pluralized and relativized the accepted understanding of modernity as a dominant and homogenous process. Most discuss alternative modernities (with hybrid, multiple, local, etc. as other qualifiers) as emerging in the dynamic encounter between dominant (usually Western) and non-dominant (e.g. local, non-Western, regional) practices, knowledges or rationalities (e.g., Gupta 1998; Arce and Long 2000). There is no unified conception in these works, however, on what exactly constitutes modernity. Kahn is right in saying that stating that modernity is plural, and then showing ethnographically the ways in which it is localized, has limitations in terms of theory. As Ribeiro well says in his commentary to Kahn, “modernity is subject to indigenization, but this does not amount to saying that it is a native category” (2001: 669). In the last instance, the limits of pluralizing modernity lie in the fact that it ends up reducing all social practice to being a manifestation of a European experience, no matter how qualified. Englund and Leach (2000) make a related argument in their critique of the ethnographic accounts of multiple modernities; they argue that these works re-introduce a (intra-European) metanarrative of modernity in

the analysis. The result tends to be a relativism and pluralization of modernity that reflects the ethnographer's own assumptions. As I will try to show, it is possible to escape the either/or approach to the question of whether modernity is singular or plural. This is the kind of trap that MCD and ANT work to avoid. While I refer to modernity in the singular in the course of this paper, I conceptualize of modernity as *more than one and less than many*. Modernity as multiple in this sense need not signify several fragmented, relativized modernities, nor does it have to reinscribe the same dominant modernist metanarrative. It could rather denote a set of embodied situated knowledges and practices that are grounded in a common logic, that of coloniality.

Appealing to the MCD framework, and building on these trends, Escobar (2003) raises the question of whether it is still possible to think about alternatives *to* modernity. I find it useful to borrow Escobar's analytic concepts of development, alternative development and alternatives to development, and his extension to modernity. In his view, today's social movements in Latin America must hold in tension three co-existing projects: alternative development, focused on the satisfaction of needs and the well-being of the population; alternative modernities, building on the counter-tendencies effected on development interventions by local groups; and alternatives to modernity, as a more radical and visionary project of redefining and reconstructing local and regional worlds from the perspective of practices of cultural, economic, and ecological difference. In the context of this paper, I use the notions of modernity, alternative modernity and alternatives to modernity as an analytic tool to clarify where do ANT and MCD fit in relation to other critical projects. Accordingly, whereas critical intellectual projects such as Cultural Studies, World-Systems analysis or post-colonial studies might be conceived as advocating alternative modernities, ANT and MCD might be situated within the domain of projects working towards alternatives to modernity —although of course the divide between the different projects is by no means neat and clear.

This paper will address how these processes manifest themselves in the context of the academy, and what implications this has in terms of how one can engage these processes. In other words, is it possible to produce decolonizing ethnographies of social movements' decolonizing practices? In this respect, my project has also been influenced by, and resonates with, the World Anthropologies Network (WAN) project.² Building on anthropological critiques of dominant anthropologies as nodes of expert knowledge production that exclude —or at least make invisible— other ways of doing anthropology world wide, WAN is envisioned as an effort towards creating conditions of possibility for pluralizing anthropology and, more generally, for *de-colonizing expertise* (see, e.g., Ribeiro and Escobar, eds. 2006; see also www.ram-wan.org). The end result is a transformation of the conditions of conversability among anthropologies of the world; paraphrasing one of the slogans of MCD (“worlds and knowledges otherwise”), this aim has been stated as “other anthropologies and anthropology otherwise” (Restrepo and Escobar 2005).

Anthropology is in an advantageous position in relating to these developments. On the one hand, the critique of the discipline's earlier association with colonialism, the subsequent self-reflexivity, the long history of engagement with modernity's 'Others', the ethnographic focus on practices of difference, as well as some of the recent transformations within the discipline (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Fabian 1983, Marcus and Fischer 1986) —all of these point to the significance and insights which ethnography and anthropology have to offer to these projects. On the other hand, the frameworks I am considering also offer much in terms of challenges as well as insights from which the discipline of anthropology can benefit significantly.

II. Two critical frameworks on modernity: Initiating a conversation

a) Actor-Network Theory: *More than one and less than many*

In *We have never been Modern* (1993), Latour argues against the prevailing nature-culture divide, a divide which he sees as foundational to Modernity. As he defines the concept, 'Modern' indicates “not a period,

but a form of the passage of time; a way of interpreting a set of situations by attempting to extract from them the distinction between facts and values, states of the world and representations, rationality and irrationality [...]” (2004: 244). He points out that while the distinction was installed within the realm of the scientific method, in practice moderns have never maintained such an unambiguous distinction. Instead, what has taken place is a proliferation of hybrids between nature and culture, so that non-modern practices have never been displaced.

The divide between the subject and the object is another central characteristic of modernity which by means of “*purification* creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; and that of nonhumans on the other” (Latour 1993:10). Actor-network theory allows for the possibility of overcoming this divide by reformulating the status of both objects and subjects, which are decentered and recast as actors (Law, 2002). In effect, ANT allows us to engage with the phenomena we are researching not as being an object in the sense of being relegated to the domain of the natural (something out there to be examined) but rather in terms of actor-networks constituted by both humans and non-humans. Moreover, as researchers, we are constitutive of, rather than detached from, the actor-networks with which we engage, as modernity stipulates.

Contesting modernist tenets, ANT redefines the notion of ‘the social’. In this regard, Latour introduces a useful distinction between the ‘sociology of the social’ and the ‘sociology of associations’. The first functions in accordance with the assumption that there is a specific social context, that is, a certain domain of reality; this approach has become common sense (2005:4). The second approach questions precisely that which the first takes for granted; ‘reality’ instead of being ‘out there’ is the set of phenomena or associations that have become stabilized. In this way, Latour redefines sociology not as the ‘science of the social’, but as the *tracing of associations*; in this sense ‘social’ becomes not a quality of things but rather a “type of connection between things that are not themselves social” (2005: 5).

Latour tries to make social connections traceable by rendering the “social world as flat as possible in order to ensure that the establishment of any new link is clearly visible” (2005:16). As Latour argues, context bestows upon the social a three-dimensional shape; subsequently; he makes a case in favor of an alternative *flat* topography in which context is not considered in the process of re-tracing associations (2005:171). This is because “actors themselves make everything, including their own frames, their own theories, their own contexts, their own metaphysics, even their own ontologies” (2005:147). Thus, a flattened topography would allow following the actors themselves. This process, as Latour explains, involves trying “to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish” (2005: 12). A central process through which associations get established is translation which Latour defines as “a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting” (2005: 108).

“[A]ctors are always engaged in the business of mapping the ‘social context’ in which they are placed [...] This is why it is so important not to define in advance what sort of social aggregates could provide the context for all these maps. Group delineation is not only one of the occupations of social scientist, but also the very constant task of the actors themselves. Actors do the sociology for the sociologists and sociologists learn from the actors what makes up their set of associations.” (Latour 2005: 32).

In his essay *Traduction/Trabesion: Notes on ANT*, John Law presents the ethnographic account by Madeleine Akrich of a process of technology transfer; how a briquette making machine makes it from Sweden to Nicaragua. Law examines how the process of transfer involves translation. He then proceeds to apply this to ANT. He points to the similarities as well as the differences between ANT of the 1980s in Paris and ANT of the 1990s in Melbourne, San Diego, Lancaster, etc.. Law then asserts that instead of a unified set of principles, when discussing ANT we are dealing with an array of diverse

practices. “What happened to the briquette making machine is also what happened to actor-network [theory]. It has passed from one place to another. From one network to another. And it has changed, become diverse”. Madeleine Akrich’s use and translation of ANT to examine the changes the briquette went through, “has also transformed [ANT], changed it. She has put it into a different place, a different set of networks, where it does other kinds of work” (Law 1997).

In *The Body Multiple*, Anne-Marie Mol looks at how a particular disease, atherosclerosis, is *being done* through different practices. In this regard she advocates a shift from an epistemological to a praxiographic inquiry into reality. For her “the practicalities of doing disease are part of the story, it is a story about practices. A praxiography.” She is concerned with how objects are *enacted* in practice (Mol 2002: 32). Her conclusion, and stronger claim, is that ‘different enactments of a disease entail different ontologies.’³ They each do the body differently’ (Mol 2002: 176). “If atherosclerosis is a thick vessel wall here (under the microscope), it is pain when walking there (in the consulting room), and an important cause of death in the Dutch population yet a little further along (in the computers of the department of epidemiology).”

By foregrounding practices, performances and enactments, something happens: Reality multiplies. Amidst this ontological multiplicity and the consequent “permanent possibility of alternative configurations” (Mol 2002: 164), Mol is specifically concerned with exploring *modes of coexisting*.

“When investigators start to discover a variety of orders- modes of ordering, logics, frames, styles, repertoires, discourses [...] this raises theoretical and practical questions. In particular, the discovery of multiplicity suggests that we are no longer living in the modern world, located within a single episteme. Instead, we discover that we are living in different worlds. These are not worlds —that great trope of modernity— that belong on the one hand to the past and on the other to the present. Instead, we discover that we are living in two or more neighbouring worlds, worlds that overlap and coexist. Multiplicity is thus about coexistences at a single moment” (Law and Mol 2002: 8).

The ethnography of ontological encounters

ANT creates the conditions of possibility of performing ethnography as non-modern practice. Thereby, I want to underline the inherently performative character of ANT. Taking a seminar on Critical Performance Ethnography simultaneously while taking a Following Actor-Networks seminar last semester allowed me to explore more fully the interconnections between the two. Markussen defines Performativity as “a theory of how things —identities and other discursive effects— come into being”. She explains that “all research is performative in the sense that it helps enact the real. However, performativity is not only a theory, but also a deconstructive practice” (Markussen 2005: 329). Performativity thus entails both a theory and a method. It is a theory about emergence as well as an emergent methodology which entails destabilizing established certainties. In this sense, performance ethnography, I would argue, resonates with ANT’s project of recapturing the ‘surprise of seeing the social unravel’ (Latour 2005).

Subsequently, in her discussion of performativity as emergent methodology, Markussen points out to the *ontological encounters* that practicing performance ethnography entails; these are “encounters in which the terms of the real are allowed to shift” (2005: 341). This implies the recognition that research and reality co-produce each other. Moreover, practicing performativity, the author asserts, “requires an openness within the research process to the possibility that researchers and their practices themselves must alter” (2005: 329).

In *Critical Ethnography* (2005), Soyini Madison further reconfigures ethnography as a performance of possibility. This allows for research practices which open up a diversity of ontological possibilities. Madison writes: “In a performance of possibilities, the possible suggests a movement culminating in creation and change. It is the active, creative work that weaves the list of the mind with being mindful of

life, of merging the text with the world, of critically traversing the margin and the center, and of opening more and different paths of enlivening relations and spaces” (Madison 2005: 172).

This co-performative approach to methodology embodies many aspects of Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia as advocated in *The Dialogic Imagination*, in the manner in which it incorporates a multiplicity of voices, genres and languages, as well as its dialogic aspect. It is through this dialogical encounter that, I want to argue, the different actors are more fully present. For as Bakhtin writes, “I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness... Separation, dissociation, enclosure within the self is a main reason for the loss of one’s self” (1984:287).

The different texts and the manner in which they are juxtaposed, may be seen as representing particular “points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words” as Bakhtin maintains. “As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. As such they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people [...] As such, these languages live a real life; they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia. Therefore they are all able to enter into the unitary plane of the novel” (Bakhtin 1981:292), or, as is the case here, the ethnography.

In addition, this dialogical ethnographic practice allows for an escape out of the trappings of ‘the ethnographic present’ that have so weighed down ethnography. Madison (2005) writes:

“The Other inscribed as a static, unchanging, and enduring imprint in the ethnographic present is dislodged by a dialogic, critical ethnography. Dialogue moves from ethnographic present to ethnographic presence [...] This conversation with the Other, brought forth through dialogue, reveals itself as a lively, changing being through time and no longer an artifact captured in the ethnographer’s monologue, immobile and forever stagnant” (2005: 10).

However, following this account of ANT one might be left with several questions: how does ANT account for differences among actors? How does ANT address questions of power and violence, history and hegemony? As I conceive of it, ANT deals with these questions performatively. By flattening the landscape, by emphasizing the need to relinquish any assumptions one might carry about the phenomena we are engaging with; by not taking any group or network as predetermined but rather looking at groups as in continuous process of formation; always re-tracing the actor-network’s outlines and constitutive elements. In this mode of engagement, I find that ANT is addressing such questions of power, domination, and difference through the flat topography approach. To put it differently, ANT’s performance entails a process through which modernist logic, categories and power/knowledge hierarchies are suspended. They are deprived of the authority bestowed upon them by modernity. Thereby, ANT addresses the question of power precisely by negating its function.

In this manner, ANT is tackling the repercussions of modernity and in so doing; this framework strives to unstitch the landscape constituted by modernity. Although a powerful tool for doing so, ANT still falls short. By not addressing how these categories came into being and not accounting for the processes with which the dominant knowledge hierarchies were established, ANT is at a disadvantage. For how can we adequately examine, trace and understand the actor-networks we are engaging with, without accounting for the processes by means of which other knowledges have been systematically subalternized for centuries. Without understanding the historical processes through which actors and knowledges are subalternized, it might be difficult to even perceive them as actors. This is precisely what MCD can contribute; the understanding of coloniality and how it operates as a constitutive element of modernity. To sum, while ANT addresses power structures by rendering them obsolete through practice, MCD is looking at how these very power structures came into being.

b) The modernity/coloniality/decoloniality research program

According to the MCD program, Modernity is a project rather than a particular historic moment. This project starts in the sixteenth century. As Escobar explains,

“The conquest and colonization of America is the formative moment in the creation of Europe’s Other; the point of origin of the capitalist world system, enabled by gold and silver from America; the origin of Europe’s own concept of modernity (and of the first, Iberian, modernity, later eclipsed with the apogee of the second modernity); the initiation point of Occidentalism as the overarching imaginary and self-definition of the modern/colonial world system (which subalternized peripheral knowledge and created, in the eighteenth century, Orientalism as Other [...]) Finally, with the Conquest and colonization, Latin America and the Caribbean emerged as ‘the first periphery’ of European Modernity” (Escobar 2003: 60).

This is the moment of the crystallization of binaries such as subject/object, self/other, nature/culture into a system of hierarchical classification of people and nature. This hierarchization, effected through domination, is the other constitutive underside of modernity, namely coloniality.⁴ As Mignolo asserts, ‘there is no modernity without coloniality’ which accounts for the coinage of the modernity/coloniality concept. Modernity presents a rhetoric of salvation, while hiding coloniality, which is the logic of oppression and exploitation; although historically, modernity has been markedly successful in hiding this darker side. However, just as coloniality is constitutive of modernity, so is decoloniality. Decoloniality refers to the processes through which the subaltern resist the rules and racialized hierarchies within which they are confined, defying the logic of coloniality which casts them as inferior or not quite human. De-colonial thinking is distinct from other critical projects; as Mignolo points out, ‘decolonial thinking is an-other critical theory’, an attitude that takes root at the colonies and ex-colonies in accordance with ‘an-other epistemology’ (Mignolo In press 2006). Escobar characterizes it as “think[ing] theory through/from the political praxis of subaltern groups” (2003: 38). In contrast to the ‘hegemonic modern epistemology... put in place from the perspective of a white male body, located in Christian Europe and the US’ (p. 10), the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality research program, as Mignolo writes, is concerned with ‘the de-colonization of knowledge and of being which means, the de-colonization of the economy and of authority’ (p. 10). It is an intellectual framework concerned with examining the *rhetoric of modernity/ logic of coloniality* (p. 3). And it is being conceived of, as Mignolo argues, from the perspective of the subaltern, or the *damnés*⁵ as referred to by Mignolo, ‘turning and returning the gaze’ (2006: 7). In sum, MCD is a framework from the Latin American periphery of the modern colonial world system; in that sense “Latin America itself becomes a perspective that can be practiced from many spaces, if it is done from counter-hegemonic perspectives that challenge the very assumption of Latin America as fully constituted object of study, previous to, and outside of, the often imperialistic discourses that construct it” (Escobar 2003: 44).

In a way, ANT espouses both at the idea that modernity/coloniality is a set of processes/practices, a verb rather than a noun. That being the case, ANT contributes to complicating modernity/coloniality/decoloniality, challenging its theorized singularity and re-framing it within the terrain of a flat ontology. Pointing out to the centrality of performativity in addressing questions of complexity, Law and Mol write, “The argument is that knowing, the words of knowing, and the texts do not describe a preexisting world, they are rather part of a practice of handling, intervening in, the world and thereby of enacting one of its versions —up to bringing it into being” (2002: 19).

Modernity/coloniality/decoloniality might then be different things in different places at different times requiring to be approached not in the singular but as a set of situated, embodied practices that produce entities in an originally flattened topography. For as long as we maintain an understanding of de-coloniality in terms of singularity, we remain locked in the logic of coloniality and western epistemology.

“Here is the point: walking, as Michel de Certeau has noted, is a mode of covering space that gives no overview, it immerses the walker in a landscape or a townscape. As we walk, we may encounter a variety of comforting-or stunning- sights and situations, and then we can bring these together instead or leave them separate, as they would be on a map, removed from one another. We may juxtapose them in a way we sometimes do after a journey, by telling stories or showing pictures. The picture of a large landscape is printed so that it has the same size as that of a plate filled with food, and the story about driving through the landscape is no bigger or smaller than the story about eating the meal. Other differences abound [...] There are, then, modes of ...aligning elements without necessarily turning them into a comprehensive system or a complete overview. These are some of the ways of describing the world while keeping it open...to list rather than classify; to tell about cases rather than present illustrative representatives; to walk and tell stories about this rather than seek to make maps.” (Law and Mol 2002: 16-17).

This perspective might be enacted in the context of a flat topography, as argued by Latour. So it seems that having a good pair of shoes might be an important factor in engaging with a good epistemological practice.

While ANT (as theory as well as method) is an exceptionally suitable tool for mapping other worlds/ multiple ontologies, MCD framework offers critical insights which lead to an even more profound understanding and account of the ethnographic encounter. This enriched view would be based on the understanding that the concept of coloniality brings of how the processes of subalternization of other worlds/knowledges have been undertaken for the past five centuries, and the expansion of ANT's conceptualization of modernity to encompass coloniality as well as decoloniality as two constitutive elements of modernity. This results in an ANT account much more apt in attending to questions of power and more responsive to tracing actors that might have otherwise been overlooked not because they are not part of the network but because they have been subjected to processes that render them invisible.

III. MCD and ANT through the eyes of MCD / ANT: Challenges and Opportunities

In the previous part of the paper, I outlined some basic themes through which the conversation between ANT and MCD can be made manifest. I also argued that the two frameworks have much to offer each other as well proposing significant contributions for ethnographic practices. In the next section, I will turn the gaze of decoloniality towards the two frameworks themselves and sketch some of the implications, challenges and possibilities which emerge from the above discussion for our own practices and modes of engagement with subaltern knowledges and worlds.

I start by examining the situatedness of the two frameworks within the academy; looking at the implications of this positionality on the geo-politics of the knowledges that ANT and MCD produce. I try to answer the question of how to escape repeating practices through which other knowledges are subalternized. After looking at the loci of enunciation of these knowledges and who their interlocutors are, I infer that there is a need to recognize both frameworks as modernist inscribed, i.e. operating within the framework of modernity. This move would allow for engaging more directly in the process of decolonizing the academy which has historically been one of the key sites where modernist knowledge has been envisioned and constituted. Next, I look at what does changing the terms of the conversation, a central theme advocated by MCD, entail concretely in terms of our research practices and modes of engagement with subaltern knowledges. I consider what the practice of listening to silences and refusing to decode might offer. In the final section, I will present some reasons why we need to move beyond decolonial thinking and what poetry has to contribute in this regard.

“A place on the map is also a place in history” (Adrienne Rich)

As situatedness and embodiment are central themes that emerge from the preceding conversation, I will now look at ANT and MCD specifically in these terms. I will be addressing the following questions: Who are the ANT and MCD advocates? Where they are speaking from? What actor-networks are they part of? Who are they speaking to? What are they trying to achieve?

The sites from which knowledges are produced are central to our understanding of those knowledges, hence the concept of the geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo 2003). Accordingly, the first step towards situating ANT and MCD is to look at their loci of enunciation. Both frameworks are predominantly produced within the institutional sites of the western academy. Therefore, the university and its role in the production of the modernity/coloniality project needs to be addressed.

Mignolo (2003) examines the history of the university culminating with the emergence of the corporate university in the post World War II period, which displaced the preceding Kantian-Humboldtian university. Since the Renaissance, the history of the European university has been inscribed within the macro-narrative of Western Civilization. Mignolo describes the relationship of ‘epistemic dependency’ that accompanies economic dependency; this entails the ‘cultural, intellectual, scientific in the larger sense of the word and technological, as well as related to the natural and social sciences, and [the epistemic dependency] manifests itself at the level of the disciplines.’(2003: 110).

The site of production of theory is thus the initial factor to be considered when following the ANT and MCD theories. Referring to Rich’s conceptualization of *Location*, Clifford (1989) writes

“‘Location,’ here, is not a matter of finding a stable ‘home’ or of discovering a common experience. Rather it is a matter of being aware of the difference that makes a difference in concrete situations, of recognizing the various inscriptions, ‘places,’ or ‘histories’ that both empower and inhibit the construction of theoretical categories like ‘woman,’ ‘patriarchy,’ or “colonization,” categories essential to political action as well as to serious comparative knowledge. “Location” is thus, concretely, a series of locations and encounters, travel within diverse, but limited spaces. Location, for Adrienne Rich, is a dynamic awareness of discrepant attachments-as a woman, a white middle-class writer, a lesbian, a Jew” (1989:179).

According to the MCD program, decolonial thinking is not just an analytic concept but is rather an effort imbued with political implications, it is a project that entails an-other thinking, changing the terms and not only the content of the conversation (Mignolo In press 2006). I find it useful to differentiate between two distinct and significant connotations that changing the *terms* of the conversation entails. One the one hand, *terms* refers to the terminology and language used, particularly contesting the use of logocentric language, the second use of *terms* demands changing the very conditions, i.e. power dynamics and structures within which the conversation is taking place. So I am speaking of changing the terms and the *terms* of the conversation. In this regard, Fanon is arguing for changing the content and the terms (terminology and form) as well as for changing the conditions of the conversation altogether. Fanon calls for a ‘liberating transformation of the everyday’ (Gordon 42). A process which involves forcefully rejecting the dominating Western values, a rejection that emerges from the embodied situated experience of the colonized. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1966) writes:

“The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the native mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him. In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of

breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values. In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these values, insult them, and vomit them up" (1966: 43).

In the process of situating MCD and ANT, we need to recognize the extent to which the subjectivities of those of us who ascribe to those frameworks and projects are framed by the *rhetoric of modernity/ logic of coloniality*; to identify how/where/to what extent have our own subjectivities been molded by modernist epistemologies, and subsequently engage in an effort of internal decolonization. This entails an ongoing practice of self-interrogation which undermines the naturalization of modernist epistemologies by the participants of the both ANT and MCD projects. As Fanon points out, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (Fanon 1967:17-18).

This thorough interrogation would signify a situated move towards redefining the current coloniality of power. It might be argued that only after such a process is undertaken it might become possible to re-engage in a conversation with the modernist paradigm in accordance with different and more equitable conditions —thus changing the terms of the conversation. Otherwise, the danger might be that although discursively and analytically, the MCD program is advocating alternatives to modernity, by not radically interrogating our own subjectivities, we are leaving room for modernist categories to re-emerge through the back door and become manifest whether in the manner in which de-coloniality gets cast as just an other object of study or by means of processes through which an alternative hierarchization of subaltern knowledges becomes enacted in the process of decolonial theorizing. As Foucault puts it:

"The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are, is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (1984: 50)

A central theme which emerges from the above discussion is how to escape repeating practices through which other knowledges are subalternized. Here, it is worth pointing out to the danger of reassigning the theory/practice or knowledge/experience binary between the modern and the non-modern. If the MCD program is to assume the role of translator/ interpreter of de-colonial knowledges elsewhere, then there is risk of reproducing knowledge hierarchies. In this regard, there is need to caution against the MCD group assuming a position in which we may be perceived as granting recognition to other knowledges and thus validating their existence, while in the process reproducing new power/ knowledge structures in accordance with which we, as participants in the group, still enjoy the power and are in position of authority to name such knowledges. This argument is clearly captured in *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, where Lewis makes a strong case against getting locked in what he calls the *dialectics of recognition* (Lewis 1995)

To ensure that our modes of engagement do not re-enact the very *epistemic violence* (Spivak 1988) that we are working to undermine, it might be necessary to acknowledge *the difference that makes a difference* (Clifford 1989); to unmask the power structures that still characterize our engagement with other knowledges/epistemologies while working actively towards transforming those structures and thereby the terms of the conversation. Otherwise, we run the risk of practicing what Bourdieu (1990) terms 'strategies of condescension', strategies by means of which:

"[...] agents occupying a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance which does not thereby cease to exist, thus ensuring they gain the profits of recognition accorded to a purely symbolic negation of distance. In short, one can use the objective distances so as to have advantages of proximity and the

advantages of distance, that is, the distance and the recognition of distance that is ensured by the symbolic negation of distance” (1990: 127-8).

Thus, there is urgent need to recognize the power and privileges present in the loci of enunciation of the MCD and ANT frameworks; the need for incessant self-reflexivity by those of us engaging with *other knowledges*; to be constantly on guard against being involved in the reproduction of new hierarchies; to avoid falling into the draw of representing, explaining or speaking on behalf of the subaltern.

Relocating MCD within the space of modernity

After examining ANT and MCD’s locus of enunciation, the next step would involve interrogating who their interlocutors are; who are these two theoretical frameworks speaking to? It is my observation that most of the texts I came across from each of ANT and MCD perspectives are geared primarily towards a western/modern academic audience. And although MCD is clearly inspired by subaltern contributions towards the project of decolonial thinking, however, most of these encounters still take place within the medium of western epistemologies. The work of Ali Shariati (1980), may be taken as an example. Shariati’s writings were among the most influential in theorizing for the Iranian Revolution. Yet Shariati’s analysis, while presenting a critique of Western hegemony from the perspective of Islam, is framed predominantly in reference to the dominant Western epistemology; largely lacking the positivity of his own location. So while changing the content, he is still using the language of modernity.

Mignolo points out that MCD program “looks at modernity from the perspective of coloniality” (In press 2006: 19). He argues that in contrast to world-systems analysis embedded within European genealogies of thought, MCD (as exemplified by Dussel and Quijano) is working towards the ‘continuation of an-other genealogy of thought’ (20), one that is emerging from the *colonial wound* of the subaltern and that sees its pillars to be intellectuals such as Jose Carlos Matiategui, Frantz Fanon and Fausto Reynaga (In press 2006). While I am not questioning the extent to which MCD program is articulated with decolonial projects initiated by subaltern groups and struggles, however instead of foregrounding associations and upholding genealogies with and within ‘subaltern epistemologies’, perhaps we need to consider the possibility of relocating this project into the realm of modernity as a strategy to work more deeply in and against it. To unveil mechanisms through which the myth of modernity attains its claims to universality. One of the central contributions that the MCD program offers is its unmasking of the process through which coloniality functions to discredit and disqualify knowledges that do not correspond to modernist logic. With this in mind, one can question the usefulness of advocating of MCD program as ‘an-other epistemology’ when this move would only be a factor that serves, according to the logic of coloniality, to disqualify the validity of our analysis. Whereas, if this *epistemic break* is recognized as taking place within the discursive sphere of the modernist project, then this move could be of greater potency and consequence for the project of decolonizing knowledge and being. Especially when, as I argue, the MCD program is (discursively) still a modernist inscribed project.

This break could be seen as reverberating in Latour’s *We have never been modern*; Latour’s use of terminology for his title is noteworthy. He situates his voice within modernity; it is modernity seeing itself as a myth. Dussel’s notion of *exteriority* (2002) points in the same direction; it ‘refers to an outside that is precisely constituted as difference by a hegemonic discourse’ (Escobar 2003:39). Yet in terms of framing, the adoption of the concept of an outside assumes that the gaze is still modern-based. Escobar’s *Worlds and Knowledges otherwise*, is also a performance of this rupture. His essay is not addressing, as I see it, those inhabiting other worlds, but instead it is signaling an epistemic break from within the Modernity/coloniality project towards enacting alternatives to modernity. These illustrations by members affiliated with each of ANT and MCD reveal a practice of dislodging; an enactment of a rupture from within modernity’s project as it made to realize its fallacy.

ANT and MCD frameworks are also in an advantageous position to contribute to the process of decolonizing the academy, the place within which both frameworks are predominantly situated, and the site of production of hegemonic modern epistemology. Both projects are located at a great juncture which allows them to unmask the mechanisms through which the rhetoric of modernity/logic of coloniality manifests itself and through which other knowledges are systematically subalternized. Santos identifies this epistemological move as *sociology of absences* through which he calls for theorizing processes through which hegemonic epistemology and rationality produce non-existences (2004:238). This effort is already considered by ANT and MCD participants; as Escobar points out, ‘the group seeks to make a decisive intervention into the very discursivity of the modern sciences in order to craft another space for the production of knowledge—an other way of thinking, un *paradigma otro*’ (2003:32).

While it has been a central concern among those of us who identify with either or both frameworks (and are members of the Social Movements Working Group, UNC-CH) to acknowledge social movements and subaltern groups with whom we engage as knowledge producers, the arguments presented in this paper give us a reason to pause and reflect upon. As Hage (2000) cautions: “In much the same way... as the tolerance/intolerance divide mystifies the more important divide between holding the power to tolerate and not holding it, the distinction between valuing negatively/ valuing positively mystifies the deeper division between holding the power to value (negatively or positively) and not holding it” (2000: 121).

Therefore, unless the very conditions of the conversation change towards a more egalitarian mode that takes this unequal power into account, our efforts to make other knowledges visible then do not challenge the very power we maintain to make them invisible. While keeping in mind that he was operating within a modernist concern with valuing (that is a man-centered order), Heidegger’s argument on the discourse of value may be of relevance in this context as well:

“It is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as ‘a value’ what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object of man’s estimation [...] Every valuing, even when it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let things: be. Rather, valuing lets things: be valid—solely as the objects of its doing” (1978:226).

Listening to silences

The challenge becomes to re-configure our own frameworks and modes of engagement; so that we can replace *giving voice* (as practiced by committed intellectual traditions, participatory action research...) by *listening* (as inspired by the other kind of politics advocated and enacted by the Zapatistas in The Other Campaign and more generally by the turn of various social movements in Latin America towards non-representational politics). This learning to listen to/through the silences, rather than signaling to an end or closure of dialogue, might contribute to tangibly changing the terms of the conversation; which would create better conditions of possibility for the subaltern to be heard. As Saldana-Portillo (2002) writes, “silence does not eliminate differences. Rather, it makes it possible not only for differences to emerge, but also for a universal identification in difference to take place. Silence is the site on which alterity and universality converge” (Saldana-Portillo 2002:302).

For Spivak the subaltern cannot speak because “the ontology of the Western subject necessitates and creates the other: the silent subaltern” (1988:183). After 500 years of silencing and subalternization by the project of modernity/coloniality of its *Others*, it is worthwhile to explore the value of being quiet when working with subaltern groups towards decolonizing knowledges; a silence that forces us to listen.

One question I raise above pertains to the effects of ANT and MCD's engagement in politics of location with respect to decolonizing the academy. The second question relates to the value of restricting and acknowledging our limitations/constraints as well as allowing for silences. What would the consequences of marking out the 'territory of the unreadable, or the unknowable' be? (Saldana-Portille 2002:299). Is it important for us to learn to be quiet at moments where the inclination might be to make other knowledges visible and other voices heard? By refusing to decode, are we enacting a reconfiguration within the structures of knowledge production which would create conditions of existence of more equitable terms according to which the conversations between MCD / ANT and other subalternized knowledges can take place? Are we to believe *The Ethnographer* (Borges) who discovered that, "the secret is not as important as the paths that led [him] to it. Each person has to walk those paths himself" (1999:335)? If that is to be the case, what would happen to anthropology after the logic of decoding difference, which can be said to have been fundamental to the field since its inception?

First, it is important to clarify that the argument presented above conceives of refusing to decode as a provisional phase which might offer concrete possibilities for changing the terms of the conversation between researchers working through ANT/MCD frameworks and the other worlds and knowledges we are engaging with. In the meantime, what can those of us who are anthropologists do?

One possible answer is given by Latour (2004), who writes, "We need to add to anthropology the competencies of a much older calling, that of *diplomat*" (2004:212). By diplomacy, Latour is referring to a "Skill that makes it possible to get off a war footing by pursuing the experiment of the *collective* concerning the *common world* by modifying its essential requirements: the diplomat succeeds the anthropologist in the encounter with cultures." (2004:240). This revisioned anthropologist or *ecologist diplomat*, and in accordance with the etymology of oikos-logos, *speaks the language of dwellings*; she *articulates the collective* (2004:213).

Echoing the argument made above about the value of interrogating the modernist frameworks within which we are largely inscribed, Latour points out:

"By no longer claiming to speak in the name of nature, by no longer accepting the polite indifference of multiculturalism, the diplomat who follows in the wake of the anthropologist gives herself opportunities to succeed that were not open to her predecessors [...] The virtue of the diplomat [...] is that he imposes on the very ones who sent him this fundamental doubt about their own requirements" (2004: 215-216).

Beyond decolonial thinking: In search of the Simorgh

In the concluding comments of his essay on the Latin American MCD Research Program, Escobar (2003) warns against critical discourses on identity in Latin America which 'have been complicit with a modernist logic of alterization, and have thus amounted to counter-modernist proposals in the best of cases' (56). In trying to come up with a coherent set of characteristics that delineate decolonial thinking, there is a real danger that we might fall into the trap of 'postulating a foundational alterity and transcendental subject that would constitute a radical alternative in relation to an equally homogenized modern/European/North American Other'. This would re-inscribe difference as a project restricted to theorizing an alternative modernity rather than working towards fostering alternatives to modernity. It would also reinscribe the subject/object dichotomy, by trying to delineate the outline of what de-colonial thinking entails, by suggesting that decoloniality is something identifiable, out there, rather than approaching it as a process in a constant state of emergence.

In this regard, ANT might prove to be a very useful framework which would allow for 'ways of describing the world while keeping it open' (Marston 2006). The needed inoculation that would provide

for enacting a 'logic of the historical production of difference' rather than fall back on 'the counter-modernist logic of alterization' which Castro-Gomez (2002) elaborates. As Escobar writes, "It remains to be seen whether the [MCD] project will fully bypass the modernist logic of alterization... conceived as an epistemic decolonization, this project would certainly seem to go beyond a politics of representation based on identifying an exclusive space of enunciation 'of one's own' that is blind to its own constructedness" (Escobar 2003:57).

However, despite Escobar's warnings and optimism in this regard, I believe that there is an urgent need for both ANT and MCD advocates to consciously engage in an effort to more explicitly explore our situatedness as well as bring into visibility the role we play in the constructedness of the frameworks we are engaging and the knowledges these produce. How, by our own performance and engagement with decolonial thinking, we are taking part in what decolonial knowledge is; in its process of becoming; this requires awareness that de-colonial thinking as such does not pre-exist our own encounter with it/ theorizing of it/ or practicing it. Performativity is central in achieving this condition.

Of opposition. And the need to move beyond these categories

While those defined as non-modern have to grapple with modernity/coloniality global designs, "their agendas are themselves emergent rather than a reaction to other agencies. That is to say, their life projects are sociocultural in the widest sense [...]" (Blaser 2004:28). In other words, while modernity tries to impose itself, there are other trajectories, other ways of being in the world that mark a rupture, a crack, on modernity's pretensions of universality. These other ways of being signal alternatives to modernity.

Yet by framing our arguments as decolonial thinking and using categories such as 'decolonial', 'non-modern', or 'trans-modern' aren't we also contributing to re-enacting modernity's universalist claims?

In order to escape from recreating another universalist modern imaginary by our own practices, we need to strive towards an enactment of a fracture; to break away from articulating other worlds against, and in relation to, a universalized modernist framework. This would lead to reinscribing the modernity/coloniality project in more transient (even if still dominant) terms while simultaneously foregrounding the contingent character of decolonial thinking; with an emphasis being made on moving beyond (rather than forward or ahead) what is merely 'decolonial'. We need to consolidate the conditions of possibility for the existence of ontologies that function in accordance with alternatives to modernity. ANT is a very useful tool for this purpose as it approaches modernity/coloniality as a phenomenon which needs to be traced and not something that exists somewhere out there.

In his critique of the dominant knowledge and representations of American Indians, Vine Deloria (1969), points out, "To be an Indian in modern American society is in a very real sense to be unreal and ahistorical". Deloria relays the story Alex Chasing Hawk, a council member of the Cheyenne River Sioux for thirty years, when asked at a Congressional hearing 'Just what do you Indians want?' To which Alex replied, "A leave-us-alone law!!" (1969:2). Thus, Deloria is speaking from the position of the unreal real, the embodiment of modernity's impossible. He concludes his chapter on *Indians Today: the Real and the Unreal* by asserting, "We need the public at large to drop the myths in which it has clothed us for so long. We need fewer and fewer "experts" on Indians. What we need is a cultural leave-us-alone agreement, in spirit and in fact" (1969:27)

In a similar vein, Fanon explains that any theorizing of the condition of black people in terms of Self/Other ends in failure because 'Otherness' assumes a degree of symmetry, whereas for black people, the struggle first entailed achieving the status of Otherness, of being regarded as human beings, of existing (Gordon 2005:40). Thus, Black people "are problematic beings, beings locked in what [Fanon] calls 'a zone of nonbeing' [...] [this 'zone'] could be limbo, which would place blacks

below whites but above creatures whose lots are worse; or it could simply mean the point of total absence” (2005 :4). The zone of nonbeing is undergoing a constant process of reconfiguration, just as the process of othering is an ongoing constantly reconstitutive category. This resulting condition of unreciprocity leads to a state of *epistemic closure*, which Gordon describes as “a moment of presumable complete knowledge of a phenomenon. Such presumed knowledge closes off efforts at further inquiry. The result is what we shall call perverse anonymity. Anonymity literally means to be nameless” (Gordon 2005: 26).

Poetry: naming the nameless so it can be thought

In order to overcome the limitations and restrictions of social science disciplines, which have historically been an instrument in the colonization of knowledge, Hayden White points out that fields such as anthropology, history, and political studies are inadequate in re-imagining the world otherwise, White (2005) cites domains like literature and poetry as some of the few remaining hopeful areas where this can still be achieved. Similarly, Audre Lorde argues for the centrality of poetry in allowing the conditions of possibility for *naming the nameless so it can be thought*. Her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” suggests that poetry is “illumination,” and a way to wed ideas and feeling:

“For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.”

In 1177, Farid ed-Din el-Attar, a dissident Persian Sufi poet, later murdered by the Mongols, wrote *Manteq at-Tair* (The Conference of the Birds) a poem recounting the story of the journey of a group of birds longing to know the Simorgh, a magnificent mythical being. Just 30 birds finally make it only to realize that the Simorgh is nothing but their own reflection. It is a 4500 line poem, so I will conclude with just a few lines:

There in the Simorgh's radiant fact they saw
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
They were the Simorgh and the journey's end
They see the Simorgh – at themselves they stare
And see a second Simorgh standing there;
They look at both and see the two are one,
That this is that, that this, the goal is won...

I am a mirror set before your eyes,
And all who come before my splendor see
Themselves, their own unique reality;
You came as thirty birds and therefore saw
These selfsame thirty birds, not less nor more;
If you had come as forty, forty would appear;...
And since you came as thirty birds, you see
These thirty birds when you discover Me,
The Simorgh, Truth's last flawless jewel, the light
In which you will be lost to mortal sight,
Dispersed to nothingness until once more
You find in Me the selves you were before...

Come you lost Atoms to your Centre draw,
 And be the Eternal Mirror that you saw:
 Rays that have wander'd into Darkness wide
 Return and back into your Sun subside...(Attar 1984)

Notes

¹ At the outset, I want to put forward a disclaimer. I want to recognize the limits within which my argument is inscribed. I do not claim that this paper examines MCD and ANT per se; rather for the scope of this paper, my analysis will be limited to looking at some of the main concepts and practices espoused by several advocates within each. Moreover, I want to make clear that the ANT and MCD I invoke and mobilize in the course of this paper, and my ethnographic work more generally, is a translation, my own. As Law (1997) points out, by enacting a specific theoretical framework in the course of my project, I am taking part in both translating as well as transforming the frameworks.

² This paper is part of a larger ethnographic project which engages with sites of encounter between social movements of the Arab World and Latin America in articulation with, and as an enactment of, WAN objectives as well as being envisioned as a contribution towards fostering South-South dialogue.

³ It is noteworthy to point out that while writing this essay, each time the word 'ontologies' was used it would be automatically underlined with a red line in the Microsoft word document I am using. The 'correct' options provided include: ontologism/ ontology's/ ontology/ anthologies/ ontologisms. Ontology in the plural does not exist as a legitimate term recognized by my software.

⁴ Quijano introduced the concept of coloniality (as distinct from colonialism) as operating in four interrelated domains: control of economy (labor, resources, product); control of authority (institutions, violence); control of gender and sexuality (sex, resources products) and control of intersubjectivity (knowledge, communication) (Quijano 2000:573).

⁵ In reference to Frantz Fanon's (1966) *Les Damnés de la Terre* (The Wretched of the Earth)

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