

***Indigenous Cosmopolitics:
Dialogues about the Reconstitution of Worlds***
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This seminar will convene an interdisciplinary and international group of scholars to discuss comparatively the innovative possibilities, for scholarship and politics, that might emerge at the crossroads of two major processes that, while taking place in radically different social contexts and geographical regions, enact seemingly coincidental conceptual-political proposals: indigenous social movements and the philosophical production generated by studies of science and technology. I explain some initial coincidences below.

The first process: indigenous mobilizations making extraordinary claims proliferate throughout the planet: in Africa, the Americas and also Australia, India, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea. In the context of expanding extractive industries, increasing demand for energy, growing markets, and a global environmental crisis many indigenous claims contradict economic growth and technological progress associated with the control of nature (or the transformation of natural resources), and assert that these “objects” are engulfed by notions of nature or resources, but they are not only such: they are also other-than-human persons, social beings participating in world-making relations among themselves and with humans. Crucial to understanding the significance of these movements is to avoid reducing their demands to ‘cultural beliefs,’ for the indigenous questioning of nature makes a crucial conceptual point: the field of action from which they enact their demands is ontological difference—*it is not culture*. Thus the conflict between these movements and the otherwise magnificent technologies is not one of multiculturalism; it belongs to the field of ontological politics. The technologies threaten indigenous worlds and offer a different *one* where ‘nature’ becomes an object to be controlled whether for profit or for conservation.

The second process: a significant number of theoretical proposals have emerged that critically interrogate the universality of the modern divide between Nature and Culture. Coinciding with indigenous claims, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians from the field of science studies argue that the divide reflects a specifically Euro-modern epistemic regime, the result of an equally specific distribution of ontological differences in the world (Haraway, 1991; Strathern, 2004 [1991]; Latour 1993; Mol 2002; Law 2004; Stengers 1997; Schaffer 1998). This is a powerful interrogation; it ‘provincializes’ (cf. Chakrabarty, 2000) the nature-culture divide—which Latour (1993) called the Modern Constitution—for it asserts that the view of one nature and many cultures makes a Euro-modern world, which is merely one world among others, not a universe. Other worlds may not distribute differences along the nature-culture divide; while these worlds have *become historically interconnected with the modern world*, the interconnection does not result in a singularly shared world.¹ Rather, epistemic and ontological multiplicity persists, and these are not different words for ‘culture’ simply because not every world uses culture (or nature) to explain differences among beings.

If, separately, each of these conceptual-political processes has important implications, their convergence promises epoch-making consequences. The new Ecuadorian Constitution is perhaps one of the most visible examples of this possibility. Issued in 2008 and resulting from the collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous politicians, one of its articles reads: “*Nature or Pachamama where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution.*” This law produces significant innovations: juxtaposing indigenous and non-indigenous worlds it creates a complex entity, one that is both, inanimate Nature *and* a sentient being (Pachamama); additionally it makes this Nature-Pachamama a stakeholder in the politics and policies of the State. Blurring the divide between Nature and Culture, the Ecuadorian Constitution becomes a document for more than one world, not for a modern world only. Inscribed in this document on a par with Nature, Pachamama is no longer a ‘cultural belief.’ In Ecuador, the political order of things whereby there

¹ Different from relativism that equates radical differences with incommunicability, from the perspective of this proposal communication across worlds (or the constitution of a common world) remains a possibility—and a *political one at that*.

are many cultures and one universal nature has become constitutionally but one form of enacting the world among others.

The Ecuadorian Constitution is not an isolated event. In May 2010 representatives from around the globe gathered in Cochabamba, Bolivia for the first World Peoples Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. Called by Bolivian President Evo Morales in the wake of the United Nations Summit in Copenhagen, he summoned “the peoples of the world, social movements and Mother Earth's defenders” to gather for a People’s Summit. The conference captured popular sentiment, ballooning from an expected 5,000 participants to well over 30,000 from over 140 countries. A political act that straddled indigenous and non-indigenous worlds, the conference issued a proposal for a Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, which would recognize it as a living being. These claims, which defy the terms under which we habitually pose the question of difference, namely (and at the risk of repetition) those of nature and culture, will be proposed for their recognition by the General Assembly of the United Nations. ²

Inspired by these events and heeding the urgent call to take their significance seriously, this Sawyer seminar is an invitation to think at the limits of the modern nature/culture divide and rethink the very idea of a singular, shared world ruled by singular politics. Indigenous claims are not only a matter of political economy or political ecology. For the important point is that indigenous movements’ denial of a singular nature challenges the notion of a singular shared world itself, i.e. what we know as a universe. This challenge proposes intriguing questions:

What happens to the notion of ‘environmental crisis’ if we do not assume a singular shared world constituted by the division between nature and culture?

How do notions like political ecology and political economy change when we introduce the notion of ontological politics—a politics across different worlds?

How do we rethink the political when worlds are multiple, and what would the ontological pluralization of politics entail? How do we make political agreements and manage disagreements across ontological difference?

These questions require that we position the ontological divide between Nature and Culture as *one possibility* among a host of ontologies (or worlds) that conceive entities and their relations in very different ways ³. The world as we *know* it, and the tools that we deploy to do so, are all historical results of colonization: of the ways in which the nature-culture divide has been superimposed onto, and made invisible, other worlds. Knowing the world otherwise requires other tools, and this starts by positioning the world we know in relation with others worlds. Undoubtedly this poses a philosophical-political question that defies the terms in which problems/solutions are currently thought.

Taking up these questions brings us to the title of this seminar: the reconstitution of the world as we know it through a politics of the cosmos, or a cosmopolitics. This is a term proposed by philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers. Different from cosmopolitanism—the Kantian extension of universal hospitality to include heterogeneous peoples in an already known common world—the cosmopolitical refers to “the unknown constituted by... multiple divergent worlds and ... the articulations of which they would eventually be capable” (Stengers, 2005: 995). The cosmopolitical summons us to think that what to us are (*and will continue to be*) mountains, rivers, glaciers, trees, and other “natural forms” are *also* beings that compose worlds where the non-human and human (or nature and culture) divide is not “constitutional” of them. Different from both universalism and relativism, a politics of the cosmos implies that articulations among these worlds may exist—and are indeed political—but they do not imply assimilation, let alone the erasure

² <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/programa/> (accessed 1/28/11)

³ Different from the Heideggerian notion of ontology as a mode of *human* being-in-the-world, in the above statement ontology refers to the practices that enact differences among beings in a world, and the relations that connect and disconnect them. Heterogeneous practices of distribution of difference and the ensuing relations make heterogeneous worlds.

of difference. The cosmopolitical finds its empirical reference in the slogan “a world where many worlds fit” initiated by the Mexican Zapatistas, and later taken up by the World Social Forum. *How can we re-think the West through the cosmopolitical? And the relations between the West and the rest?* Or, using a concrete example once again: what would a cosmopolitical response from the United Nations to the proposal for a Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth be?

Although the convergence between indigenous arguments in defense of their territories and recent scholarly theoretical proposals may seem strange, it should not be unexpected. The philosophical critique of the nature-culture divide emerged as a response to innovations in the biological sciences that blurred the modern frontiers between the human and the technological *and* seemingly had increasing powers to intervene in the production of life. This extra-ordinary intervention that peopled reality with phenomena previously only imagined as fiction—concretely as science fiction—fueled the field of bio-ethics. The novel technological achievements of engineering parallel those of the biological sciences. Their consequences (pollution, deforestation, leveling of mountains, diversion of rivers, and global warming indeed) have also provoked critical ethics (and very powerfully geo-ethics and eco-ethics) and spurred environmental commentary. However, much of these *translate* indigenous arguments into environmental or ecological terms—e.g. the Indian as possessor of ancient ecological wisdom—that transpire within the nature-culture divide. As can be surmised by now, the problem persists: the environmentalist framework remains within the same divide. Conflicts between environmentalist and indigenous peoples are not uncommon. Moreover, they are usually understood by the former as emerging from indigenous cultural beliefs trumping scientific environmental knowledge of nature. The provincialization of the nature-culture divide may stimulate debates about environmental ethics and its colonizing possibility. The specification of the nature-culture divide as a modern colonial proposal instills in political ecology (and political economy) the reminder that indigenous arguments to safeguard the transformation of their territories represent an ontological challenge to the very fields and the categories hegemonically used to understand conflicts. These conflicts are neither environmental, nor economic, and not even ecological. When worlds meet the conflicts transpire also in the still unrecognized field of political ontology.

Thematic Threads

The provincialization of the nature-culture divide has theoretical reverberations, for it questions a number of correlated conceptual divides: mind-body, subject-object, representer-represented, historical-ahistorical, among others. While these concepts continue to carry historical and political import, the epistemic critique leveled jointly by indigenous and scholarly claims also renders them *insufficient* to grasp events that (as we can acknowledge after such critique) occur *outside* the purview of the ontological divide between humans and non-humans.

Participating in this critique, and at the crossroads of both scholarly and indigenous claims, this seminar is an invitation for epistemic-political reflection that questions the centrality of the human subject, and mainly, the subject-object mode of relationality that followed the nature -culture divide and founded liberal and socialist political projects. These are some of the questions that follow:

Once we lift the subject-object mode of relationality from the center of the epistemic stage, what other ‘modes of relation’ are made visible?

How is the world (as we know it) reconstituted when rather than seen as the effect of subjects acting on objects, it is seen as resulting from relations? How does a focus on ‘worlds of relations’—rather than of subjects and objects—reconstitute the world as we know it?

How does a notion such as ‘worlds of relations’ (where entities emerge from relations, rather than pre-existing them) affect the notion of representation, based as this latter is on the division between ‘representer’ (subject) and ‘represented’ (object)?

In the next section I unpack these questions into the specific concepts that will be discussed in each seminar session.

Cases to be Compared

The implementation of the nature-culture divide has been, and continues to be an uneven event throughout the planet. The same can be said about the practices that have unfolded in adherence or in opposition to it, and about those that escape its domain. Thus, discussion of the above questions requires a geo-political comparative approach.

The seminar will have the Americas (from the Arctic to Patagonia) and Central and Southern Africa as central geographical foci because in different historical moments (the 16th and 19th century respectively) these two regions were constituted as the antithesis of an unfolding modernity. However, considering the contribution they can make to the discussion, we will also include cases from Australia, Papua New Guinea, and New Zealand.

Below is a tentative list of the categories and processes to be discussed. The entries are intended to unpack the questions listed earlier, and their discussion should reflect the conceptual transformations that follow the interrogation of the nature-culture divide. Drawing from the aforementioned regions and the categories presented below, the seminar sessions will bring together both the analysis of empirical cases and theoretical critique without presuming that the former illustrates the latter or one-to-one correspondence between them. On the contrary, emphasis will be placed on the potential synergy between the two. Similarly, one of the methodological contentions of the seminar is that concepts are interconnected; hence their separation into sessions is only an organizational device. A critical presence of in-house participants will assure conceptual interconnection.

1. Comparing Relations and Relational Worlds

An important contribution of studies that question the nature-culture divide indicates that relations are not established only among *pre-existing* subject(s) and/or object(s). Other relational modes exist. Anthropologists, geographers, and philosophers working in places as diverse as Papua New Guinea, the United States, France, and Bolivia, propose an alternative mode whereby *relations* bring about the entities in question. From this perspective the world results from relations, not from the action of subjects (collective or individual) upon objects (human or other-than-humans). Entities emerge from interactions, or rather intra-actions, as physicist and feminist studies scholar Karen Barad calls such world-making relations (Barad, 2007). Thus viewed, entities are never only singular: they are also intra-related. They are singular-plural (Nancy, 2000), “more than one less than many” (Strathern, 1994)—or fractal persons, in the pioneering work of Roy Wagner (1991).⁴ Rather than instilled in the individual entity who as such, then relates to another entity or a group of entities, the substance of the inherently related human or other-than-human is its/his/her co-emergence with others.

Along similar lines, these studies also propose the idea that relations not only connect: they also disconnect; rather than marking identity, they mark difference. Brazilian anthropologist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, working with the Cashinawa in the Amazonian rainforest, gives a good example. The word *txai* refers to one of the most important human relationships. However, instead of marking identity it marks difference; it identifies what we would translate as brother-in-law, a relation of affinity rather than co-sanguinity. Anthropologists are not the only ones working on these ideas. Political philosopher Jacques Rancière (1999) discusses a related idea as “disagreement” or the relation that, according to him, should underpin politics. Along similar lines, Isabelle Stengers (2000) proposes the notion of divergence, a relation that she contends communicates.

⁴ A “fractal person” is “never a unit standing in relation to an aggregate, or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit, but always an entity with relationships integrally implied” (Wagner 1991:163).

To discuss modes of relations theoretically and politically we would invite scholars working in the Andes, Brazil, Papua New Guinea, or New Zealand on conflicts around mining and market exchange.

2. *Relational Place-Making*

What is place—how does it emerge—from a relational condition? Or: how do we think place when it does not result from the action of humans upon nature, but instead reflects the relationship between humans and other-than-humans?

Anthropologists working in worlds where nature does not exist as object but, instead, mountains, rivers, or water bodies are beings that enact and/or are enacted through relations—among themselves and with humans—propose that place is a simultaneous temporal and spatial occurrence (Escobar, 2008; De la Cadena, 2010). The idea of relational place-making has also been important to geographers who have consequently introduced understandings of territories and territoriality in terms of “rooted networks,” “hybrid geographies” and “hybrid assemblages” (e.g. Thrift 2007; Whatmore 2002; Rocheleau and Roth 2007). Both anthropologists and geographers agree that, from this viewpoint, beings (human and other than human) are indistinguishable from place. Through relations, beings take place (emerging as time-space), which is, therefore, always underpinned by interconnectedness. As anthropologist Helen Verran concludes about her work in Australia, “in an Aboriginal way, the people and the land come into being together, and thus are deeply implicated in and by each other” (Verran 1998).

This Seminar session will count with the participation of anthropologists, literary scholars and geographers working on relational processes of place-making in oil producing territories in Alaska, the Amazon and Nigeria.

3. *Representation and Non-representation*

Representation is the current orthodox Western epistemic mode. It is also the device that subtends modern knowledge of nature as open to scrutiny and grants the scrutinizers the power to speak in its name, in other words to represent it (Strathern, 2005; Shapin, 1994; Stengers, 2000). Representation, as epistemic mode, implies an initial relation of separation between subject and object, between signifier and signified, which can then be either connected or disconnected in the process of scrutiny.

However, not all epistemic modes, and the worlds that they make, deploy this form of relation. When worlds emerge from relations, or when intra-action is the analytical tool, observations cannot be severed from those making them. An important consequence is that representation subsides as epistemic mode. Rather than *represented* the world is *enacted*: it is the material consequence of specific relationally performed agencies. The enacting mode—rather than representation—becomes epistemically primary (Verran, 1998;).

Aboriginal art provides an example of enactment as epistemic mode: in many cases the paintings are narrations of a world order that includes the painter, thus making impossible the distinction between a subject that observes (and paints) and an object that is observed (and painted). Aboriginal paintings do not represent—they enact an order of things that includes the painter, and the place she occupies in the world. (Law and Benschop 1997.) Similarly, the paintings do not simply belong to its author; rather, since the author is part of the painting, the latter is connected to the collective to which the complex author-painting belong. (Myers 2004) And yet aboriginal paintings are also objects of art participating in the world of representations—*how do these worlds go together? What does the politics that ‘coordinates’ between representation and non-representation—that makes one or the other more, or less, visible—look like?*

Discussion in the field of Science Studies has provided rich material for the theorization of representation—this seminar session will compare the work of representation/non-representation in scientific and non-

scientific enactments of the world. Among the latter Aboriginal Australian painting or Andean relationships with historical documents would provide good theoretical material for discussion.

4. Property

Interrogations similar to the above can be extended to legal notions of rights and property; they are based on the division between nature and culture. Ever since Locke, right of property was granted to humans able to work the land, and this subject-object division was extended to understand and authorize property in general (Sundar, 2007). But what happens when land (or the Aboriginal painting discussed above) is not an object in relationship to a subject? And when both entities (land and human for example) *emerge from* relations rather than *pre-existing* the relations? Or when what we call “things” grant the possibility of being property? Consider the following example, which comes from ethnographic and legal work among the Innu, an indigenous group in the Peninsula of Labrador, Canada.

Among the Innu of the Labrador Peninsula in Canada, Nutshimit, often translated as 'the land,' is the Innu world. It is sustained by vital force through acts of giving. Thus, the animals—who are also persons—give themselves to hunters, hunters give the meat to their relatives, and everyone makes offerings and follows behaviors that keep the animal-persons happy. In this world, to speak of property is an equivocation, for the closest to owning something would be to retain something transitorily that will allow the constitution of a platform from which to launch more giving into Nutshimit. A legal suit between the Innu and Nalcor (the corporation constructing the dam) is currently being adjudicated, as the company is poised to construct large dams that will retain the flow of water to produce energy that will be consumed thousands of miles away from Nutshimit. Environmentalists have raised concerns about the negative effects of the dams: they say that levels of mercury in the river will increase, making the reproduction of wild life impossible. The Innu agree, but they also add that the flooding will kill animal-persons, thus threatening to unmake Nutshimit (Blaser, forthcoming).

How will the lawsuit reflect the connection between the Innu world and that of Nalcor? Can the Innu world inflect the notion of property deployed in the lawsuit? And vice-versa: how will the Canadian legal notion of property inflect life in the Innu World? In other words: the lawsuit will not only be the site of an ecological political conflict. More accurately one might say that a political ontological conflict will take place, where what will be at stake is the confrontation and/or collaboration between two partially connected worlds. Similarly the construction of the dams—the engineering process to occur—will have to negotiate local practices: how will engineering relate to local knowledge practices? How will the latter localize the former?

To discuss relational and non-relational notions of property and possession, as well as their intersection guests in this seminar session will be lawyers, cultural studies scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers working on legal cases about dam construction and/or “intellectual property” in Mozambique, Canada, Patagonia and Australia.

5. Modern Politics and Non-Representative Politics

Representation also undergirds the modern notion and practice of politics, liberal and socialist, democratic or totalitarian. The condition is different in the case of relational worlds where separation between the politician as subject that represents a ‘people’ or constituency that is represented is not possible. In these cases political leadership, even if individual, always entails inherent relationships with the collective that authorizes the leader. Therefore the latter is never only an individual. In such a mode, “people act as parties to enduring relationships and act from obligations to specific others—they’re always in a sense in transaction with them” (Strathern forthcoming: 109).

The Zapatista slogan *mandar obedeciendo*—to command obeying—illustrates political representation that is inherently relational. *What do non-representational politics look like? Pushed to the fringe by representational politics, how have they been nurtured?* A recent op-ed by Chinua Achebe illustrates a possible answer. The

Igbo, Nigerian citizens like him, are a democratic people, he says. Not only do they subject the king to checks and balances; they have created all kinds of titles that cost very much to acquire—either because they are expensive, or because they require significant emotional or political effort. In the end, the aspirant to titles becomes impoverished in the process and ends up with very little political or economic capital. So that individual begins again, and by the time his life is over, he has a lot of prestige, but very little power (Achebe, NYT, 1-15-11). That Nigeria is also a republican state begs the question: *What is the relation between representative politics and relational enactment of politics? What happens at the crossroads of non-representational politics and the state? How does a focus on modes of relationality pluralize 'politics' as we know it—and to what effect?*

Scholars working at the crossroads between indigenous politics and the state in Chiapas, Bolivia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe would be invited as speakers in this session.

6. *Making Singularity out of Multiplicity: a Sawyer Seminar Mini-Conference*

A common thread linking academic works that provincialize the nature-culture divide is that, contrary to a commonly held assumption, knowledge practices (scientific and non-scientific) do not work with *preexisting* realities 'out there.' Rather, they produce those realities. A further insight is that knowledge practices contribute to bringing diverse realities into being. Therefore, generating singularity across this multiplicity requires a particular set of conceptual and political-managerial procedures through which divergences are rendered invisible. The nature-culture divide is one of those procedures, but, as noted, it unfolds locally in manifold ways. *What are those local mechanisms through which multiple practices are rendered singular?* Some answers to this question can be found in ethnographic work in medical practices. For example, Anne Marie Mol (2002) shows how atherosclerosis emerges as different objects under the microscope of the pathologist, the interpretation of the clinician, and the graph of the radiologist, respectively. Her work also shows how this multiplicity is translated into a single 'disease' by selectively coordinating or discarding divergences.

In the above example, the process of coordinating or discarding divergences all happens in a Dutch hospital, where, ultimately, the general assumption is that atherosclerosis is a natural occurrence upon which multiple perspectives must converge. But then: How is singularity achieved across worlds of difference? Or, in other words: through what political processes is singularity achieved when the epistemic or ontological grounds for shared assumptions is partial, and on occasion inexistent? An example is once again in order: while the current escalation of violence in Uganda, and most specifically in the Acholi region, is interpreted as "post traumatic stress disorder" by bio-medics, peasants see it as a consequence of *cen*, a form of spiritual pollution resulting from dying badly (Yen, 2011). Faced with this complex reality, international pacification efforts resort both to drugs and local healers to control violence in the Acholi region—and yet: through what processes has 'post-traumatic stress disorder' been rendered similar to *cen*—or has it? Most intriguingly: how do international pacification efforts account for the effectiveness of *cen* vis-à-vis agencies of governance? How is the multiplicity housed by both concepts rendered singular?

The above examples illustrate the complex relation resulting from the dynamic between singularity and multiplicity in specific locations. They also intimate that adherence and opposition to the nature-culture divide are not mutually exclusive. They may be simultaneous events. Similarly, practices 'outside' the nature-culture divide (or any of its ensuing notions) can be partially within its purview. The 'worlds' to be compared are not disconnected; they are also connected and participate in some of the same institutions, most importantly the State. Marilyn Strathern has called this a condition of "partial connection"—a situation in which entities make an integrated circuit that is not a unit, and thus are "more than one less than many" (Strathern 2004 [1991]).

Two sets of questions result from the above argument: *a) What are the mechanisms through which singularity emerges from multiplicity in scientific practices? Are these mechanisms different in conditions when science*

encounters non-scientific practices? Or when representative politics encounters non-representative politics? b) What does a comparative method that considers conditions of "partial connection" look like?

The Sawyer Seminar will end with a small conference guided by the above questions, as well as by other concerns that will emerge throughout the discussions. Like in the rest of sessions, participants will include conceptual commentary and theoretical discussion emerging from the analysis of empirical cases.