

*Thirdness and the Agency of the Silent Other(s) in Ecological and Postcolonialist Discourse: the Agency and Vital Materiality of Ecological Objects in the Anthropocology.*

by Alexander I. Stingl and Sabrina M. Weiss

Summary:

Surely, “after colonialism”, “after orientalism”, “after occidentalism”, we have now reached a time in the sociological study of science and society which has been quite aptly named *postcolonial* and that finds itself poised against “mono-cultures of the mind” (Vandana Shiva). And just as adequately have postcolonial scholars problematized the dark side of bio-medical and techno-scientific commodification and governance. Our critique in this paper does not try to take anything away from these existing important and sophisticated contributions; instead we want to add an important argument that draws upon insights from the recent surge of a “New-” and “Vital Materialism” that builds upon the scholarship of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, William Connolly, Mel Y. Chen, Sara Ahmed, Vanita Seth, and Peng Chea.

We seek to enrich the current postcolonial science/society&political studies discourses on the conceptual politics of environment and nature by problematizing tacit assumptions about agency and vital materiality of ecologies and by arguing that original contexts and repertoires of culture were formed around actual practices that were more attuned to accounting for these kinds of agencies. Contemporary political critique within and from the wide field of postcolonial studies tends to adopt the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual transformation from “circumstance to environment” (Trevor Pearce) uncritically with regard to the agencies at play. It also re-reads cultural contexts and repertoires (including their historic origins) without an account for these agencies and vital materialities, substituting the vital material ecological dialectics that exist between human and non-human agencies with a reduction to flawed binary self-/non-self pattern; this permeates biological and ecological thought at all levels.

We propose a different approach, one that is intended to neither substitute nor denigrate current work in these fields but to add a different dimension.

In arguing that postcolonial science studies does not need to adopt nor critique the Western “science versus myth” or “high-tech versus low-tech” accounts of knowledge production and technological practice, we suggest a re-conceptualization based on a complementary reading of Ron Eglash's analog/digital-distinction: While “environmentalist discourses” problematize the digital dimension of ecological agency from the point of view of culture in a culture-nature divide wherein Nature is the context for cultural repertoires to be formed, an analog account radically reconstructs the agencies at play as contiguous vital materialities and material vitalities that include cultural contexts and repertoires dialectically entangled in the play of agencies. The digital dimension should not be abandoned because it serves an important purpose for bridging translocal expertise and lay audience communication. However, for research and policy action to be more than just “efficient governance”, to be genuinely efficacious and widely *affective* (and not merely *effective*), it is impossible to avoid the complexities of these agencies. Moreover, as we assume, original cultural contexts and repertoires can be reconstructed as having taken a more insightful analog account of these agencies represented in cultural practices as *animacies*. We are taking Mel Y. Chen's concept one step further into Postcolonial Science Studies and recent developments in sociological theory, by suggesting that *animacies* are already embodied and enacted in cultural contexts and repertoires as *silent Other(s)* in interactions between humans or humans/non-humans, which we can conceptualize in a (cultural) theory of agency and thirdness (Serres, Lindemann, Kockelman)

Thirdness is a key concept to bring into this discussion for three reasons. First, there is a notable turn from dyads to triads in modeling interactions and relationships that has been ongoing for decades but that recently has emerged into the collective consciousness, whether in constructions of facts by scientific communities (Fleck), linguistics (Peirce), or theories of multiplicity and “parasite” (Serres). This

represents, from a larger perspective, the rejection of absolute truths and recognizes instead the importance of Haraway's "situated knowledges" to the creation of shared objectivity. Second, the emergence of a third entity, such as in the idea of the parasite (or noise), requires an acknowledgment of *process* to interactions, that emergent vital materiality exists only as it moves through time. Third, the unexpected character of emergence, as with other complexity-based outputs like fractals, tends to represent unwanted incursions into sterile, planned systems. But by harnessing the uncertainty by setting up an environment intentionally to tend towards producing emergent Thirds, we have the potential to find novel ways to engage in discourse that has been heavily oppositional. In this discussion, the Third can be (and simultaneously is) a third party observer, the iterated intra-actions between subjects, the emerging discourse itself – by granting any of these with a type of agency, we can engage them as something productive and creative. When the negotiation of boundaries of *thirded* agents fail, it is because limitations of embodiment apply. For the human topography, this results in intersections with the world that are the renegotiated into orders of natural environments, the social environments, the cultural environments. These relations within the human ecology [the *Within*], are dialectical, interactive, *wechselwirkend* interaction, we are becoming less *analog* and more *digital*, we become more diffracted, more *parallactic*, more displaced. And with that, our ecology turns the letter N in Nature into the more emphasized capital N. The nature humans as bodies actually really live (as furniture) in and the Nature that they furnish (and are garnish for)–*anthropocology* – are two diffracted things (it is the diffraction itself that is *anthropocology*). The human ontologies, as historic ontologies, are therefore figuratively (furnishment) and literally (garnishment) *problematic*. That is because they are referring to conceptualizations for surrounding ecologies that construct emerging and developing environments in relations that eventually form the human point of view to mean that there is no human *bios* without human *zōē* or human *ethos*.