

Learning from the “Least of These:”

Haraway’s “Making Kin,” Filipino Indigenous “Kapwa,” and Other Holistic (and Subversive) Ways of Knowing

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Abstract

In this essay, I highlight cultural and communicative resources for survivance outside those in modernity, i.e., in the more-than-human agents in the natural world and in those cultures and traditions that have not (yet) severed their connection to that world. Invoking British mythologist Martin Shaw’s dictum that in times of cultural crises, we should seek genius not in the center, but on the edge, I argue that if we look for lessons from past cultures (and civilizations) that have undergone collapse, all the more we must strive to learn from those cultures that have been able to sustain themselves and their ways of living for millennia sans the trappings of, and dependence on, our modern industrial “civilization.” In this essay, I explore Filipino Indigenous epistemologies as a way of recuperating forms of abjected knowledges and subjectivities (or ways of being) precluded in the totalizing discourse of modernity. Although Donna Haraway’s notions of “making kin,” “tentacular thinking,” and multispecies practices of “being and becoming-with,” along with new materialist understandings of object animacy and scientific discoveries affirming multispecies intelligence, are acknowledged as helpful references, the ultimate “seeing” will be grounded in the author’s own tutelage to ways of knowing resonant among still land-taught Indigenous communities in her home country, the Philippines. The notion of kapwa (shared being or the self-in-the-other) will be explored as a radically different way of “being-with” both human and more-than-human kin in hopes of opening the canon of what counts for knowledge and communication beyond the legacy of modern Enlightenment rationality.

Keywords: *modernity, cultural logic, survivance, Indigenous, Philippines, new materialism, making kin, tentacular thinking, kapwa, mari-it, the Holy in Nature*

Introduction: “This is Not Our First Holocaust”

The key question I grapple within this study is this: In a world fast careening to the precipice of collapse, our highly technologized lifeway in the modern world continuing to wreak havoc on the Earth’s ecosystems and raising questions of ultimacy having to do with the long-term viability of our invented industrial way of life, where might we look to for resources of renewal, survivance, and transformation? Note that “survivance” here, a word that has become important in Native American studies, is one first coined by Anishinaabe cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor (1999) to denote an active sense of presence, not mere survival or reaction, a way of

life capable of nourishing Indigenous ways of knowing and being and ensuring their continuance and thriving.

I tackle this question as an intercultural communication scholar whose alterity – as a historically colonized, Westernized, and forcibly atomized Filipina subject – has compelled a wrestling of the issue from a place, not of shock or surprise, but of uncanny knowing, i.e., from the experience of a cultural holocaust (growing up in the aftermath of U.S.’s colonial occupation of my country for half a century) that, in my lifetime, has never not been ongoing. As Mary Louise Pratt (1994) notes ruefully, “Under conquest, social and cultural formations undergo long-term, often

permanent states of crisis that cannot be resolved by either conqueror or conquered” (26). The word is that we have never been here before, never before faced a calamity so planetary in scope, so catastrophic in proportion, and so far-reaching in scale and magnitude that it behooves us to wrap our heads around the likelihood of it, even including our own species extinction. Everywhere we turn, the reports and predictions grow more dire each day—from the latest IPCC report in August 2021 (United Nations 2021) issuing a virtual Code Red for human-driven global warming to countless scientific studies portentously marking the irreversible reaching of what climate scientists call “tipping points” and the triggering of “positive feedback loops” believed to radically undermine the Earth’s delicate ecosystem balance.

The saying that we have never been here before may be true for us modernized humans, but for Indigenous folks all around the globe, what is going on, far from being their first holocaust, is merely an iteration of the irruption into their world of the genocidal logic of historic colonization beginning in 1492 – bringing untold destruction, suffering, and the near total annihilation of their delicately balanced lifeworld, a terror that has never really abated, but continues to be perpetrated as we speak, only now garbed in the sanitized rhetoric of “progress,” “modernization,” “development,” “advancement,” “betterment,” etc.

Modernity: A Terrorizing Cultural Logic

In his article “Delinking,” Walter D. Mignolo (2007) references modernity as fomenting an “exclusionary and totalitarian notion of Totality,” (“Totality” in caps in the original), i.e., “a Totality that negates, excludes, [and] occludes the difference and the possibilities of other totalities” (451). Within its monopolistic oeuvre, it forecloses on the possibility of there being other ways of human *being*. As a universalized worldview, it sets up standards for who counts and who doesn’t as worthwhile subjects, (re-)producing all who fail to submit to its cultural logic (of unitary coherence, rationalism, individualism, utilitarianism, and unbridled accumulation) as “misfits,” “inferior beings,” “primitives,” “savages,” etc. whose destiny is to “vanish,” capitulate, or otherwise be supplanted by purportedly superior, “more evolved” human beings (Mendoza 2019).

Today, only an estimated 350 million Indigenous Peoples remain out of a total global population of 7.8 billion, with such land-based peoples having to fight for survival and the

continuance of their sacred lifeways and traditions amidst our modern culture’s unrelenting assault on their territories. Interestingly, their territories are now the only remaining places in the world that have “resources” still left that can still be exploited, mined, logged, fished, and commodified. But seemingly not for long. The terror that haunts them daily is captured in the discourse of those such as the likes of former CEO of the Louisiana Pacific timber corporation, Harry Merlow, who boasted shamelessly: “We log to infinity. Because we need it all; it’s ours. It’s out there, and we need it all; now... We don’t log to a ten-inch top, or an eight-inch top or even a six-inch top. We log to infinity” (in Chase 1995, 305).

It is beyond the scope of this writing, but where my own cultural awakening (cf. Mendoza 2005/2006) – facilitated through my encounter with the differing subjectivity and land-rooted cultures of our Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines decades ago that pulled me outside of my default bodily comportment and intellectual and communicative habituation – has led me is into a deep interrogation of the foundations and epistemological oeuvre of our now globalized system of modern industrial culture. This is one whose very condition of possibility is nothing short of the enslavement of other humans and our more-than-human kin (Nikiforuk 2012); the domination of the natural world and its conversion into a mere backdrop for the human drama which “we” deem the “real deal;” the enclosure of the commons and the invention of private ownership; the creation and normalization of violent hierarchies and standing armies; and the subjugation of all life to the logic of the market. Its singular hallmark is that of rapacious conquest, short-term profit, unbridled accumulation, supremacist ideologies, and coercive assimilation, virtually disallowing co-existence, mutuality, and collective thriving. To live by its logic without interrogation of its ontological and epistemological vision would constitute a gross analytic cataract, precluding genuine seeing and the possibility of consideration of alternative cultural visioning and imaginations of a different future.

Learning from the “Least of These:”

Contemporary Subversions, Yes, but Before then, Ancient Wisdom

British mythologist Martin Shaw (2016) notes that “[w]hen a culture is in crisis, genius comes not from the center, but from the edge” (n. p.). And here, I would like to argue that if we are to learn from the lessons of past cultures (and

civilizations) that have undergone collapse, we must likewise learn from those cultures that have sustained themselves in place for millennia without ruining their land bases, i.e., Indigenous Peoples around the world that I refer to in this paper as—in the world’s eyes—the “least of these.” In my current focus on that other world that alone constitutes something other than the cultural dictates of modernity, I have noticed in the scholarly literature a beginning opening to an alternative logic emerging in the discourses of the mainstream disciplines. I note, for instance, that it is no longer just Indigenous Peoples who know that we live in a sentient, animate universe but that both scientists and humanistic thinkers themselves are discovering (belatedly) that “we are part of a living, breathing, expanding and contracting, creative and mysterious universe” (Williams 1988, v) with an intelligence that demands listening and paying attention to, and that “[i]f we are to flourish,” as Terry Tempest Williams (1988) argues in her Preface to eco-theologian Thomas Berry’s book, *The Dream of the Earth*, “we must see ourselves as part of the journey of the universe” (iii).

Whether in the humanities, the social sciences, or the biological and other natural science disciplines, publications on “animate earth” (Abram 2010), “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010), “plant intelligence” (Buhner 2014), “how forests think” (Kohn 2013), “making kin” and “tentacular thinking,” (Haraway 2016) now abound, challenging the previously dominant mechanistic models such as the notion of the natural world being nothing more than a lifeless machine, wound up like a clock, indifferent to human disposition. Across the disciplines, a rethinking of human and nature relations is giving rise to new frameworks of understanding requiring a different ethic of relation with the Earth grounded in co-thriving, reciprocity, and Earth-responsibility. Theories on the so-called “new materialism” are also now catching up and reluctantly conceding agency not just to nature beings but to the material objects that saturate our commodity world. As one publication remarked,

This is a tectonic philosophical shift. Max Weber once described the modern era as the “progressive disenchantment of the world.” A century later, a cohort of philosophers of science is offering an analytic and politicized re-enchantment of the world. (Rosiek and Snyder 2020, 1152)

One scholar of consequence in this regard is feminist cyborg theorist Donna Haraway, who, in her book *Cyborg Manifesto*,

encourages the breaking down of boundaries between human and animal, animal-human and machine, and physical and non-physical realities. In what has become a controversial meme, “make kin, not babies,” taken from a chapter in yet another one of her books, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), she argues that it is high time that we learned “to belong in the same category with each other in such a way that has consequences” as she articulates in an interview (Paulson 2019, n. p.) In her characteristic word-smithing inventiveness, she declares,

We have a mammalian job to do, with our biotic and abiotic sympoietic collaborators, colaborers. We need to make kin symchthonically, sympoetically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with – become-with, compose-with – the earth-bound. (Haraway 2016, 102)

That we have failed in this kinship-making endeavor, in her estimation, is what has allowed us humans to overrun the planet, depriving our more-than-human kin of their wildlife habitat, driving their extinction rate to 1,000 times the normal. It should concern us, for example, that the pre-industrial human global population was only 1.5 billion. Today, we are counting 7.8 billion (with that number predicted to reach 11 billion by 2100). This indecent statistic, in Haraway’s estimation, is also what has led to the loss of what she calls *refugia*, places of refuge that formerly allowed for the recuperation of nature and replenishment of rich cultural and biological diversity in the aftermath of such ecological decimations as desertification, soil erosion, and mass die-offs and collapse of biodiverse species populations.

But while I laud these ecologically-grounded perspectives such as that of Haraway’s and other contemporary scholars, what I am even more compelled by is the fact that our Indigenous kin all over the world have long lived by these understandings for millennia that modern science is only now catching on to. Among the *katutubo*, Indigenous communities in my home country, for example, making kin is just the norm, as exemplified by the notion of *kapwa* (shared being) (Mendoza and Perkinson 2003) or *pakikipagkapwa* (lit. “making kin-with” the other), and here, the “other” refers not only to human others but to all beings in nature. Their world is made up of a web of multispecies interrelationships where one’s well-being is intricately tied to the well-being of the whole that includes the land, the forests, the mountains, the waters, the rocks, and the entire community of life. As well, there is the concept of *mari-it* (Magos 1997; Nalangan 2018), places in the Wild watched

over by *taglugar*, (spirit guardians) and understood as off-limits to humans. Such spirit guardians (invariably known as *engkanto*) are believed to be the owners of the earth. Hence, “[h]umans must first ask their permission before cutting down their tree abodes, burning their mountains, or destroying their anthills” (Meñez, 1996, 64). For millennia, it is what has taught people to respect boundaries deemed to have been drawn by the Holy Wild herself, transgression of which has been known to lead to dire consequences such as physical illness, insanity, or even death.

This is now what I find myself being drawn to more and more in my work—the radicality of what the differing ethic of Indigenous life has to offer amidst the chaos spawned in our world by modern hubris, one signified by a sacredness of relation with living Earth and maintained through a ritual way of being evident in the observance of protocols of courtesy, asking for permission, and communicative expressions of utmost subtlety, beauty, and eloquence; their chanting, ornate mythic storytelling, dancing, beautiful grieving, etc.—ceremonially performed—understood to be the language taught to them by the Holy in Nature herself. Not taking anything without giving something back puts constraints on human acquisitiveness. And in this cosmological worldview, humans don’t reign supreme; Nature does. But, like all other beings, humans as well have an important part to play in keeping Life alive. As I noted in an essay reflecting on my first-hand encounters with some of our Indigenous communities:

I have glimpsed life-giving beauty—the building of a Manobo *tinandakan* hut using no nails, with each piece of bamboo, nipa, or rattan, sang to and praised before harvest until permission is granted; master builders still retaining memory of the old way of doing things; a people who co-exist and honor the crocodiles on their marshlands as the Spirit Guardians of the waters (in stark contrast to the town Mayor’s bloodlust upon capturing—and eventually killing—the crocodile Lolong, touted as the largest in the world); a woman Indigenous leader being ministered to in ceremony by Muslim *patutunong* healers so she could finally accept her calling to become a healer herself; native youth taking up the mantle of leadership in fighting corporate encroachment of their ancestral lands; the laughter of *Manangs* and *Manongs* as they told their stories, and the beautiful chanting of other elders in response.

It is these kinds of encounters—with our Indigenous Peoples and those working on the ground alongside them—that now serves as the homeward beacon for me. Just like native peoples everywhere else around the globe threatened by the relentless incursion of our extractive economy into their territories, our own Indigenous kin in the Philippine homeland struggle bravely to keep their beautiful ways of being alive amidst the assault. The grief (at their beleaguered condition) compels, but so does the grace, beauty, and courage of their spirit. (Mendoza 2020, 60-61)

As for the theoretical implications of this way of being for re-imagining how we in our field (intercultural communication) might do our work differently, I can only reference a piece I wrote recently (Mendoza, forthcoming) titled, “Theorizing at the End of the World: Transforming Critical Intercultural Communication,” which I ended with the following closing passage (and with this, I will end):

The archive opened up here (providing a glimpse of modernity’s ultimate “other”) [i.e., the Indigenous] presents a mirror, an alternative cultural logic of connection, cooperation, community, reciprocity, mutual thriving, and the embrace of limits that can guide us on a way forward. To point to its significance, I take inspiration from the words of Indian writer, Arundhati Roy (2012):

The first step towards reimagining a world gone terribly wrong would be to stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination . . . an imagination which has an altogether different understanding of what constitutes happiness and fulfillment . . . *who may look like the keepers of our past but who may really be the guides to our future.* (P. 214, emphasis added)

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