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The Atlantic Crossing and the “New World”: The “odd political theology” of Modernity¹

Stephen Kelly*

School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

Abstract:

This essay assesses the continuing utility of the Atlantic Crossing and the discovery of the “New World” in Western conceptualisations of contemporary globalisation, which, following Heidegger, Arendt and Sloterdijk, it characterises as a reductive “world picture” designed to legitimise a Modernity defined by colonialism and its epistemological avatars. The essay reflects on the discovery of the Americas as a periodising trope that re-situates the medieval European past in the “present” of the fifteenth and sixteenth century “New World,” and explores the continuing valency of “new worlds” in the self-representations of the “Moderns.” Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk’s grand narrative of “terrestrial globalization,” the essay contests the virtuous alignment of translation, hospitality and mobility, contending that, in the context of a global migrant crisis and the ecological conditions of the “Anthropocene,” the terms function as shibboleths of neoliberalism. Alternative models of translation, drawn from the “Amerindian perspectivism” of anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, are assessed as a potentially radical alternative to the spent models of cultural encounter that accompany liberal humanist and postmodernist understandings of contemporary global mobility. The

*Email: s.p.kelly@qub.ac.uk

multiple ontologies proposed in the “epistemologies of the South” have the potential to revivify what are described as pre-modern conditions of epistemological, and hence ethical, humility.

Keywords: Translation; hospitality; mobility; colonialism; medievalism; discovery; world-picture; globalisation; [Peter Sloterdijk](#); [Eduardo Viveiros de Castro](#)

“People everywhere, under very different conditions, are asking themselves – where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we being taken? What have we lost? How to continue without a plausible vision of the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime?”

– John Berger, “Written in the Night: The Pain of Living in the Present World.”

“We think of ourselves as the Knights of the Holy Contact. This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We want mirrors.”

– Stanisław Lem, *Solaris*, 72.

Let us begin to address this issue’s exploration of the triad of translation, hospitality and mobility with two visions of the earth, one pre-modern, the other definitive of the specific regime of Modernity with which this essay is concerned. One attests to mastery, the other

to epistemological modesty. One is a cosmological dream, the other a cosmological vision. One is concerned with the earth, the other, by means of an endlessly fruitful metonymy, constantly re-inscribes the earth as a “new world.”

The most famous dream in medieval thought – the one to which writers from Macrobius to Dante and Chaucer endlessly returned – was that of Scipio, reported in Cicero’s *Republic*, where Scipio is lifted high above the surface of the earth and chastised by his grandfather and guide, Scipio Africanus – celebrated general of the Punic Wars, a hero of Rome – as he regards the globe below:

Again, I see you gazing at the region and abode of mortals. If it seems as small to you as it is, why not fix your attention on the heavens? [...] You see, Scipio, that the inhabited portions on earth are widely separated and narrow and that vast wastes lie between these inhabited spots [...] The earth’s inhabitants are so cut off that there can be no communication among different groups [...] But look closely; see how small is the portion allowed to you. The whole of the portion that you inhabit is narrow at the top and broad at the sides and is in truth a small island encircled by the sea, which you call the Atlantic, the Great Sea, or Ocean. [...] You surely see what narrow confines bound your ambitions. And how long will those who praise us now continue to do so?²

From the perspective of eternity – a perspective immediately equated with a space outside the domain of human affairs, “the heavens” – Scipio’s ambitions are belittled as both temporally and spatially irrelevant, a Stoical *topos* that would also become a leitmotif of Christian *humilitas*. Implicit, too, is the incommensurability of the peoples of the earth: the assumption that, while they live on the same globe, they occupy radically different *worlds*.

It is the existence of multiple worlds that enforces the “narrow confines” of Scipio’s ambition.

“Global” thinking long predates the discovery of the New World, but in its pre-modern iterations it is all the while hedged about with epistemological humility.³

According to philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, “As far as Western antiquity is concerned, we find the decisive symbol of integration [...] in the Homeric-Hesiodic image of the *oikumène* surrounded by the oceanic current, the visible human habitat that lies hidden within the limits of an all-encompassing divine secret.”⁴ From Hesiod’s *Insulae Fortunatae*, the Isles of the Blessed, to Thule, as imagined by Pytheas in his lost treatise *On the Ocean*; from Virgil’s *Ultima Thule*, described in the *Georgics* as the limit of the known world and therefore as the limit of human knowledge, to Ptolemy’s admission that Romans had understanding of little more than a quarter of the world, pre-modern humans recognised their place on a planetary surface, and practiced translation, hospitality, and mobility as modes of recognition, cultivating understanding both of the Other and the self.⁵ In delineating history as a literary form Herodotus may have sought to rescue memory by transmuting it into a new archival discourse of inscription, but he also introduced one of historiography’s central interests: ethnography. For ethnography, from the Greek ἔθνος, meaning nation, and γράφω, writing, provides historical writing with one of its key narrative preoccupations: the assessment of the consequences of events – acculturation, warfare, conquest, exchange or co-operation – on cultural identity and difference.

Herodotus was motivated by the fascination of tales told to him of other peoples and other places, and his *Histories* is driven by a curiosity about his neighbours, far and wide. And while classical writers often snidely dismissed the cultural practices of their neighbours – Herodotus had little affection for the Persians, inaugurating a dialectic of civilisation and

barbarism which echoes fatefully to this day – most did so, appropriately, with a circumspect recognition of their own specific place on earth. Later writers, too, recognised cultural encounter as an invitation to negotiation and self-reflection: *The Meadows of Gold* by Abu'l-Hasan Ali al-Mas'udi (c. 895–956) prefigures the more famous *Travels* of Ibn Battuta (c. 1304–1368) by rehearsing the customs of Muslim and non-Muslim civilisations against the exempla of his highly sophisticated Baghdadi culture. In the Christian tradition, the *Travels* of Marco Polo (1254–1324) and the fictive *Travels* of John Mandeville, written in the mid- to late fourteenth century, assessed the Christian *oikoumene* comparatively; often, in Mandeville, cultural, and specifically religious, difference is used to chastise the laxity of his readers. Wonder in such texts works just as readily to chronicle self-recognition and epistemological diffidence, rather than only performing, as is usually assumed, the reflexive exoticisation of non-Christian Others.

Let us turn to our second vision, which achieved representational fullness on December 7th, 1972, in the form of a photograph of the Earth taken by Apollo 17 astronaut Harrison Schmitt, at a distance of around 45,000 kilometres from the planet's surface. If initially reminiscent of Scipio's dream, the so-called "Blue Marble" picture completes a project begun with the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. It represents, in other words, the completion of the instrumentalisation of the world begun by the Spanish and Portuguese colonisers of the New World. "In the Modern Ages," says Sloterdijk, "the task of designing the new image of the world no longer fell to the metaphysicists, but rather to the geographers and seafarers."⁶ Sloterdijk recalls and extends Martin Heidegger's famous claim about a constituting gesture of Modernity, the reduction of the earth to "world-picture": "The world-picture does not change from an earlier medieval to a modern one; rather, that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of

modernity.”⁷ As Heidegger suggests, “whenever we have a world-picture, an essential decision occurs concerning what is, in its entirety.” In other words, representation assumes the technical capacity to present the totality of all that is known as a single image: the image of the world, mapped; or the planet, caught in the blackness of space. In the Modern Age, it is, according to Heidegger, science that enables the reduction of plural phenomena to a single representation. Under the authority of science, says Heidegger, “Nature and history become the objects of a representing that explains.”⁸ As Heidegger’s student Hannah Arendt would later put it, “We have come to our present capacity to ‘conquer space’ through our new ability to handle nature from a point in the universe outside the earth.”⁹

Such a gesture can be seen in the recent scientific articulation of the “Anthropocene.” In January 2016, University of Leicester scientists announced that the physical conditions for the commencement of a long-theorised period of geological history had been met: the “Anthropocene” – an historical period “marked by the spread of materials such as aluminium, concrete, plastic, fly ash and fallout from nuclear testing across the planet, coincident with elevated greenhouse gas emissions and unprecedented trans-global species invasions”¹⁰ – brought about the end of the Holocene, a generally benign preceding period of 11,700 years in which the conditions for sophisticated human societies emerged. The Leicester scientists surmised that the Anthropocene commenced in 1950.¹¹ But what is at stake in the scientific designation of the Anthropocene? In keeping with the politics of a “representing that explains” the idea of the Anthropocene reduces all human activity to a single, *global*, intentionality. As Naomi Klein has pointed out, the flattening of causation in terms of “human impact” ignores the fact that the conditions

described by geologists and climatologists are, in fact, the products of *particular* humans in distinct places – and times:

[W]e are told we have altered the earth so much and on such a planetary scale that we are now living in the Anthropocene – the age of humans. These ways of explaining our current circumstances have a very specific, if unspoken meaning: that humans are a single type, that human nature can be essentialised to the traits that created this crisis. In this way, the systems that certain humans created, and other humans powerfully resisted, are completely let off the hook. Capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy – those sorts of system. Diagnoses like this erase the very existence of human systems that organised life differently.¹²

The essentialism Klein detects in current understandings of the Anthropocene is the outworking of the mentality that reduced the world to representation. Again, echoing Heidegger on the scientism of the world-picture, Sloterdijk argues that with the discovery of the New World, “Truth was now no longer understood as that which showed itself from within itself, as in the sense of the Greek *physis* [...] or Christian revelation [...] With the dawn of the Modern Age [...] research could and had to exist as an organised theft of hiddenness. Nothing else could have been meant when the Renaissance was presented as the age of ‘the discovery of the world and man.’”¹³

The Politics of “Discovery”

According to historian David Wootton in his recent, magisterial book *The Invention of Science*, “the title page of Johannes Stradanus’s *New Discoveries* (*Nova reperta*, c.1591) summarizes the knowledge that marks off the modern world from the ancient. Pride of

place is given to the discovery of America and the invention of the compass, with, between them, the printing press. Also present are gunpowder, the clock, silk weaving, distillation and the saddle with stirrups.”¹⁴ The discovery of the New World is equated precisely by Stradanus with technological invention. The further implication, not noted by Wootton, is that the New World itself has a *technical* function: to legitimise the superiority of European culture. “Before Columbus discovered America in 1492,” says Wootton, “there was no clear-cut and well-established idea of discovery; the idea of discovery is [...] a precondition for the invention of science.”¹⁵

“Having discovered a new land, he had no word to describe what he had done,” Wootton notes of Columbus. That Columbus and his immediate successors encountered a “New World” for which they had neither appropriate names nor taxonomies is central to the role the discovery of the New World has come to play in foundation myths of Western Modernity. Which is not to say that the arrival in European culture of the Americas was not a momentous event. According to Anthony Pagden, “for all Europeans, the events of October 1492 constituted a ‘discovery’”:

Something of which they had had no prior knowledge had suddenly presented itself to their gaze. A “New World” had now to be incorporated into their cosmographical, geographical and, ultimately, anthropological understanding. The term “discovery” – and its Romance analogues “descubrimiento”, “scoperta”, “descobrimiento”, “découverte” – all derive from a late ecclesiastical Latin word “disco-operio”, meaning to uncover, to reveal, to expose to the gaze.¹⁶

While Pagden records how Europeans objectified the Americas in their choice of terms to describe the New World – and hence recognises the epistemology at work that would

underpin subsequent ethnographic description and colonial exploitation – Wootton presses the etymological novelty of discovery further. It amounts to an epistemic break that births the very possibility of science:

Discoveries are moments in an historical process that is intended to be irreversible [...] The concept of discovery brings with it a new sense of time as linear rather than cyclical. If the discovery of America was a happy accident, it gave rise to another even more remarkable accident – the discovery of discovery. I say “more remarkable”, for it is discovery itself which has transformed our world, in a way that simply locating a new land mass could never do.¹⁷

Here, “discovery” is obliged by Wootton to perform an extraordinary metaphysical role: the sundering of the *integumentum* of the medieval nescience that had sent Columbus across the Atlantic in search of China. The rhetorical manoeuvre performed by Wootton to provide historiographical support to contemporary texts that he might otherwise have been expected to treat with more scepticism is predicated on a constant refrain, supported by very little evidence, about the nature of medieval Europe as pre-scientific – as wedded, in fact, wholly and wilfully to its own ignorance. Of the pre-Columbian discovery of the Azores, Wootton comments, “no one thought of them as [discoveries]; no one bothered to record the event, for the simple reason that no one was very interested [...] The governing assumption was that there was no such thing as new knowledge. It was very uncommon before 1492 for anyone to want to say anything of the sort, because the governing assumption was that there was ‘nothing new under the sun’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9).”¹⁸ We do not discover who “no one” or “anyone” might be presumed to be, even by association. In Wootton’s account of the Middle Ages, “the very possibility of new knowledge came to be doubted, and it was

assumed that all that needed to be known was to be found in Aristotle and the rich tradition of commentary upon his texts.”¹⁹ The early Renaissance fares little better: “Before Columbus the primary objective of Renaissance intellectuals was to recover the lost culture of the past, not to establish new knowledge of their own.”²⁰ All in all, then, “religion, Latin literature and Aristotelian philosophy all concurred: there was no such thing as new knowledge”²¹ because “the idea of discovery simply could not take hold in a culture so preoccupied with Biblical chronology and liturgical repetition on the one hand, and secular ideas of rebirth, recurrence and reinterpretation on the other.”²² Here, the crossing of the Atlantic has come to represent in the historiography of the “Moderns” (as Bruno Latour refers to them²³) a rupture with preceding cultures, whether of medieval Christianity or classical Greece and Rome. But the crossing of the Atlantic is, as we shall see, a cut which paradoxically inaugurates: “Modernity” emerges in the translation of the Middle Ages from the “Old” to the New World.

For Wootton, the Middle Ages are forced to play their customary role as the benighted phase of clerical tyranny from which a secularising Modernity must wrest its liberty.²⁴ The repeated assertion in Wootton’s account of discovery, across such a closely argued range of pages, of pejorative claims about the Middle Ages speaks to an unconscious anxiety about the historiographical credibility of his Whiggish narrative. Everything that is not labelled discovery is “symptomatic of this backward orientation of orthodox culture”; here is the presentation of the Middle Ages as, in Lee Patterson’s term, a “millennium of middleness,” temporally-disorientated, a hiatus or interregnum.²⁵ For Wootton, the medieval attachment to ignorance expresses the implicit hegemony of the Church, which, as mythographers of science know well, is by definition antithetical to science: “Within a backward-looking culture the crucial distinction was not between old

knowledge and new knowledge but between what was generally known and what was known only by a privileged few who had obtained access to secret wisdom.”²⁶ The “privileged few” were, of course, clerics, or clerically-supported schoolmen, whose interest was in the supposedly interminable secondary task of explication and commentary. Wootton gives short shrift to anything approaching scientific thought in the Middle Ages, precisely because he has absorbed the equation of science with Modernity – he cannot see beyond its “world-picture”; its material expressions in a technologically accelerated civilisation are self-evidently good.²⁷ But his account of the history of science rests on an extremely insecure conception of the inaugurating power of novelty. Novelty, too, had to be invented, or rather retro-fitted, by figures such as Vespucci. And for Columbus, the discovery of the New World had less to do with novelty, and everything to do with a divinely-sanctioned expectation.

Scholars such as Valerie Flint and Stephen Greenblatt have provided exhaustive analyses of the conceptual world of Christopher Columbus.²⁸ The Italian’s reliance on texts such as Pierre d’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi* (printed c. 1480–1483), not to mention Mandeville and Polo’s *Travels*, produced febrile speculation, in an explicitly commercial sense, regarding the opportunities afforded by the discovery of a new passage to the Indies. Flint’s study, in particular, demonstrates how embedded Columbus was in an intellectual world before the clefts of modern historiography could be discerned. By the time Columbus had established himself in the “New World,” he had synthesised a complex rationale for his “discovery” which repeated the fusion of time and space evident in Christian eschatology. Christian thinkers had re-encoded it in the ethic they had pirated from Roman imperialism: *translatio studii et imperii*. In the account of his fourth voyage, between 1502–1504,

Columbus, despite professed “reticence,” recognises in the substance of gold an equivalence between his traversal of the Atlantic and a destiny prefigured in Scripture:

Concerning the other things of which I have refrained from speaking I have given the reasons for my reticence. I have not stated the sixth part of what I have learnt in all that I have said and written, nor do I swear to it, nor do I claim to have reached the fountainhead. The Genoese, Venetians and all other people who have pearls, precious stones and other valuables take them to the ends of the world to sell and turn into gold. Gold is most excellent. Gold constitutes treasure, and anyone who has it can do whatever he likes in the world.²⁹

The exegetical key to this passage is provided by the biblical significance of gold:

Solomon was brought 666 talents of gold from a single expedition, in addition to what he received from merchants and sailors and his payments from Arabia. With this gold he made 200 lances and 300 shields, and the overlay of his throne, which was of solid gold adorned with precious stones; also many other objects and great vessels inlaid with jewels. Josephus writes of this in his chronicle of Antiquities, and it is also mentioned in the Book of Chronicles and in the Book of Kings.

Josephus believes that this gold came from Aurea. If this is so, the goldfields of Aurea are in my opinion the same as these of Veragua, which, as I have said, extend twenty days’ journey westwards, and are everywhere the same distance from the Pole and the Equator.³⁰

“Columbus was less an intense observer than an intense reader of signs,” says Greenblatt.³¹ He had spent a life fervently translating one land into another, so his decision here to equate

Aurea with the “New World” territory of Veragua should not surprise. But he presses the implications to what are, for him, their logical extension:

Solomon bought all this gold, precious stones and silver, but your Majesties may send orders for them to be collected at your pleasure. David, in his will, left 3,000 talents of gold from the Indies to Solomon to help in the building of the Temple, and according to Josephus it came from these same lands. Jerusalem and Mount Sion shall be rebuilt by Christian hands; whose they are to be is said by David in Psalm 14. Abbot Joachim said that this builder would come from Spain, St Jerome showed the holy woman how it was to be done. Some time ago the Emperor of Cathay sent for some scholars to instruct him in the Christian faith.

Evangelisation, for Columbus, had a material synonym: gold. But, how could the mission begun by the Apostles and spread across the known world be completed in the Americas; and by whom? “Who will offer himself for this task?” Columbus asks his Spanish patrons. “If Our Lord will bring me back to Spain, I pledge myself in God’s name to convey that man here in safety.”³² Or, as we might translate Columbus’s question: *who will recognise me for what I am, the Christophorus?* As Sloterdijk points out,

Columbus himself [...] was no longer content in later years to view himself only as the seaman, the conquistador of a new world and its cartographer; rather, he had become convinced that he was an apostle called by the will of God to bring salvation across the water. Encouraged by his incomparable success, he made his first name Christophorus, ‘Christ-bearer’, into his religion, and turned his Hispanicized paternal name Colón, ‘settler’, into his existential maxim – a successful psychological stylization phenomenon that still casts light on the modern

entrepreneurial world and its autogenous religions as a whole. In *The Book of Prophecies* of 1502, he interpreted himself as a nautical messiah whose coming had been foretold since ancient times.³³

In these early years of the “discovery” of the Americas, figures such as Columbus, or indeed his apologist Bartolomeo de Las Casas, recognise little discontinuity, at the cosmic scale, between the “novelty” of the New World and the Christian narrative of evangelisation that had set as its divinely-ordained goal the conversion of the whole world.³⁴ As Sloterdijk has it, “the Christophorus was not the last to place the Modern Age in the service of the Middle Ages.”³⁵

Translating the Present: Modernity’s Hidden Twin

Rather than novelty or discovery – tropes that emerged later as a means of justifying the exploitation of the continent’s resources, and which came to be synonymous with the West’s self-admiring historiography of global accession – the European colonisation of the Americas staged a temporal dislocation that translated the Middle Ages from the Old World into the New. As we have seen with Columbus, discovery was continuous with prior explanatory models; as Greenblatt has demonstrated, a sophisticated medieval poetics of wonder provided the operative interpretative strategy for the worlds Columbus and his crew encountered. “Is it possible to colonize a region of history, as it is to colonize a region of geography?” ask John Dagenais and Margaret Rich Greer. “The history of ‘The Middle Ages’ begins,” they assert, “at the precise moment when European imperial and colonial expansion begins.”³⁶ Implicit in Sloterdijk’s formulation, Columbus carries time, temporality itself, across the Atlantic in his guise as Christophorus, the “Christ-bearer.” The

so-called Modern Age is thus born alongside a hidden twin. The newly-invented Middle Ages are deposited in the Americas, clothing native civilisations in a garb of regressive wonder that had been developed in centuries of ethnographic dreaming. Consider the notorious characterisation of the Irish by Gerald of Wales. “They are a wild and inhospitable people,” said Gerald in his *Topographia Hibernica*, written in 1187. “They live on beasts only, and they live like beasts. They have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living [...] They normally went around naked, but would cover themselves with skins when it was vital to protect themselves from the weather.”³⁷ The cultural superiority of their British neighbours is predicated on the proximity of the Irish to their animals, and their distance from the technologies of farming. And, of course, nakedness is a trope that appears throughout medieval literature, from the Alexander Romance to texts such as Polo’s *Travels*; nakedness as an index of civilisation – indeed, of humanity – would have a powerful influence on the first transatlantic seafarers.³⁸

Students of anthropologist Johannes Fabian will recognise the ethnographic logic being enacted here (it was already at work in Gerald’s representation of Ireland): a periodising rupture is manufactured in which the savage and mysterious inhabitants of the Americas are shown to exist in a condition that Europeans have surpassed, rather than the present in which Europeans confidently plant their flags and crosses.³⁹ This amounts to a disorientating projection of a European past into a newly discovered space of alterity. As Kathleen Davis puts it:

The construction of a “medieval” period characterized by irrational superstition was fully involved with the identification of colonial subjects as irrational and superstitious, and this process bore concrete effects upon colonized peoples through the systems of rule that it generated and legitimized. The idea of a superstitious

Middle Ages, in other words, did not preexist the “superstitious” colonial subject upon which it became mapped; rather, they emerged together, each simultaneously making possible and verifying the other.⁴⁰

In a singular gesture of both spatial and temporality mobility, the American present was translated by Europeans into a developmentally regressive “medieval” past: as the Europeans explorers and colonists committed genocide in America, their scholarly counterparts practiced epistemicide in Europe, using the discovery of the New World to dispense with their own now “primitive” intellectual traditions.

“Colonization of the past,” remark Dagenais and Greer, “is an indispensable companion of empire.”⁴¹ Stephen Greenblatt reminds us of Protestant Jean de Léry’s perception of the uncanny echoes of Catholic Eucharistic theology in the ritual practices of the Tupî tribe of Brazil:

In the 1585 edition of the *History of a Voyage*, Léry added to his account a description taken from Jean Bodin’s *De La dimonomanie des sorciers* (1578) of a witches’ sabbath [...] Léry evidently felt he had found in Bodin’s account the European ritual that most closely resembled the astonishing scene he had witnessed more than twenty years earlier, a resemblance that transcended the immense cultural and geographical distance he himself continually remarks: “I have concluded,” Lery writes, “that they have the same master: that is, the Brazilian women and the witches over here were guided by the same spirit of Satan; neither the distance between the places nor the long passage over the sea keeps the father of lies from working both here and there on those who are handed over to him by the just judgment of God.”⁴²

The globalisation effected by the discovery of the Americas is thus underwritten by a vertiginous historical consciousness that presents and re-presents cultural encounter in a series of disordered repetitions. The discovery of the “New World” plays a key role in Modernity’s temporally-disorientated imagination, which continued, long after the subjection of the continent to European power, to be rehearsed and replayed across a range of ethnographic and literary modes.

The “New World”, new worlds

Léry, arguably the father of French anthropology, was studied and admired by its greatest twentieth century exponent. In his brilliant *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Claude Levi-Strauss re-enacts the European conquest of the Americas in a way that ironises colonial possession, but which also unthinkingly reasserts the modes of historical supersession favoured by the Moderns:

At Dakar, we had said goodbye to the Old World and, without sighting the Cape Verde islands, had reached the fateful latitude seven degrees north, where in 1498, during his third voyage, Columbus, who was heading in the right direction for the discovery of Brazil, changed course toward the north-west. [...] When we got to the far side of the oceanic depths, would all the marvels seen by the old navigators still be there to greet us? The four hundred years which had elapsed since then could never wipe out the tremendous time-gap which kept the New World outside the commotions of history [...] I was soon to learn that, although South America was no longer an Eden before the Fall, thanks to its aura of mystery, it still remained a golden age.⁴³

Here are the Americas as a trope for Lévi-Strauss's own disenchantment-to-come: a prelapsarian stage, populated by "marvels," bathed in an "aura of mystery," soon to be subject to the panopticism of the structuralist's gaze:

That is America [...] The whole scene exists as a unique and global entity.

Surrounding one overwhelmingly on all sides is not the inexhaustible diversity of beings and things, but a single, awe-inspiring presence: the New World.⁴⁴

And yet throughout his account of his approach to the coast of the Tropics, Lévi-Strauss cannot resist rehearsing historiographical narratives that site the Atlantic as a teleological stage of cultural development; a second beginning, a second Fall:

A continent barely touched by man lay exposed to men whose greed could no longer be satisfied by their own continent. Everything would be called into question by this second sin: God, morality and law. In simultaneous yet contradictory fashion, everything would be verified in practice and revoked in principle: the Garden of Eden, the Golden Age of antiquity, the Fountain of Youth, Atlantis, the Hesperides, the Islands of the Blessed, would be found to be true [...] Never had humanity experienced such a harrowing test, and it will never experience such another, unless, some day, millions of miles from our own world, we discover some other globe, inhabited by thinking beings.⁴⁵

How curious, this turn to the cosmos, in search of other, newer worlds! There is no little irony in the fact that the rhetoric of Atlantic discovery receives new life in the twentieth century, but this time projected outwards, into the universe. Science fiction, of

course, has been an anthropological laboratory since its inception. The Russian brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky are best known for their novel *Roadside Picnic* (1972), adapted by Andrei Tarkovsky as *Stalker* (1979), but their 1964 novel, *Hard to Be a God*, released in a second film adaptation in 2013 (after a fourteen-year production that saw its director Andrei German die before its completion), speaks intriguingly to the concerns of this essay. In both novel and film, a group of scientists set out to a new world arrested – inevitably, unsurprisingly – in the Middle Ages. The narrator informs us that a “Renaissance movement” has been suppressed, and the scientist-explorers find themselves struggling to bring the powers of post-medieval rationality to bear on the quintessentially medieval savagery of the planet’s culture. In order to admire our Modernity, we require the medieval to be re-staged, and re-situated.

Even Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972), seemingly one of science fiction cinema’s most sophisticated engagements with ideas of alterity – “the sublime alterity of the Solaris ocean is one of cinema’s great images of the unknown,” according to Mark Fisher⁴⁶ – rehearses a narrative of Atlantic discovery which literalises global consciousness. Psychologist Kris Kelvin travels to a space station above the ocean planet Solaris, which scientists have come to speculate may in fact be sentient. Communication with the station has ceased. He arrives to find the station in turmoil, populated not just by its crew but by materialisations of people the crew have left behind, or lost, on earth. Soon Kelvin’s dead wife, a suicide, appears on the station. He quickly attempts to banish her manifestation, putting her in a capsule, but each time his wife returns, each time with a little more understanding of her ambiguous ontological status. Eventually, she attempts to kill herself again, but fails. Kelvin is presented in a state of exhausted delirium as the film enters its final sequence. We have returned, it seems, to where the film began (in distinction from its source, Stanisław

Lem's 1961 novel): to the countryside setting of Kelvin's father's house, but there is something uncanny now about his baptismally water-sodden home. Kelvin falls to his knees, imploring his father for – what? forgiveness? recognition? The camera climbs slowly into space, revealing his father's home as an island on the seething surface of Solaris. The sequence implies that Kelvin has achieved an encounter with the absolute Other, but Tarkovsky domesticates the scene by posing his actors in the style of Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1667, now in the Hermitage Museum in Russia). This, then, is no encounter with the Other, but a return to the consolations of the self. According to Neil Easterbrook, science fiction can sponsor a "critical reflectiveness that opens us to the other, replaces notions of duty with notions of answerability, and leaves us always and everywhere subject to the obligations of ethics."⁴⁷ But new worlds are always first confined by the horizons of our own representations.

If, like its source, the 2000 novella "Story of Your Life" by American author Ted Chiang, the 2016 science fiction film *Arrival* is ultimately concerned with philosophical determinism, its initial premise is predicated on the centrality of translation to any form of authentic encounter with the Other. In both novella and film, the achievement of competency in the languages of the "Heptapod" aliens effects a transformation in the self-understanding of the protagonist, linguist Dr Louise Banks. A speculative outworking of the largely-discredited Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, *Arrival* presents translation as an inevitably benign instrument in the encounter with the culturally Other. In speculative fictions regarding the encounter between the self and the alien, translation is typically presented in its neoliberal mode: as a transparent means by which a broadly Western-humanist account of the world is universalised as the basis of politics and ethics.

Beyond the narcissisms of equivalence

A similar translation project was performed in the colonisation of the New World. As Sloterdijk comments, “whether one leans towards pessimistic or optimistic theories of translation, bilingualism or plurilingualism performed one of the most important canopy functions during terrestrial globalization.”⁴⁸ Anthony Pagden is more explicit:

“Language is an instrument of empire”, as the Spanish grammarian Antonio de Nebrija had told Queen Isabella, in that same *annus mirabilis* of 1492. To conquer and, above all to convert, to transform cultures into some semblance of your own, relied in the first instance upon speech [...] The struggle for political and cultural control in America was also, at a crucial level, a struggle for linguistic supremacy.⁴⁹

Contrary to contemporary neoliberal pieties that present translation as a mode of hospitality and as a salve to the injuries inflicted of colonialism and globalisation, translation is itself an instrument of epistemicide, as hegemonic languages uproot linguistic traditions in pursuit of a wishfully global ethics of cultural mobility.⁵⁰ But can translation be conceived in other ways?

The “epistemologies of the South,” most often associated with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, assert the essential localism of knowledge-making practices and recall my opening claims regarding the epistemological humility of pre-modern cultures.⁵¹ But it is the anthropological theory of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro that has, in my view, the potential to unlock a model of translation that evades its submission to the logics of neoliberal globalisation. Viveiros de Castro’s conception of what he terms “Amerindian perspectivism” proceeds from “not a plurality of views of a single world, but a single view of different worlds.” His fieldwork with the Brazilian Araweté and Tupî tribes, whose

cultures proceed from radically alien ontologies, convinces him that the Western account of alterity simply transfigures the so-called others into actions of the Western imagination in which they lack a speaking part. Doubling this subjective phantasmagoria with the familiar appeal to the dialectic of the objective production of the Other by the colonial system simply piles insult upon injury, by proceeding as if every “European” discourse on peoples of non-European tradition(s) serves only to illumine our “representations of the other,” and even thereby making a certain a certain theoretical postcolonialism the ultimate stage of ethnocentrism. By always seeing the Same in the Other, by thinking that under the mask of the other it is always just “us” contemplating ourselves, we end up contenting ourselves with a mere shortcut to the goal and an interest only in what “interests us” – ourselves.⁵²

Indeed, the Western proclivity for representation – for world-pictures – is at the heart of Viveiros de Castro’s critique:

my problem with the concept of representation is the ontological poverty that this concept implies – a poverty characteristic of modernity. The Cartesian rupture with the medieval scholastics produced a radical simplification of our ontology [...] Modernity started with it: with the massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions – that is, questions of representation [...] The simplification of ontology accordingly led to an enormous complication of epistemology.

For Viveiros de Castro, anthropology is the discipline *par excellence* that has been “plagued since its inception by epistemological angst. The most Kantian of all disciplines, anthropology seems to believe that its paramount task is to explain how it comes to know (to represent) its object – an object also defined as knowledge (or representation? Is it

possible to know it? Is it decent to know it? Do we really know it, or do we only see ourselves as through a glass, darkly?”⁵³

Viveiros de Castro continues: “A veritable anthropology, as Patrice Maniglier has put it, ‘returns to us an image in which we are unrecognizable to ourselves’ since what every experience of another culture offers us is an occasion to experiment with our own.” In such a practice of cultural encounter, translation plays a key role – but not as traditionally thought:

In this case, translation becomes an operation of differentiation—a production of difference—that connects the two discourses to the precise extent to which they are not saying the same thing, in so far as they point to discordant exteriorities beyond the equivocal homonyms between them [...] The identity between the “beer” of the jaguar and the “beer” of humans [in Araweté society] is *posed only the better to see the difference* between jaguars and humans (my emphasis).⁵⁴

In his promotion of a “multinaturalism” in which myriad conceptions of nature imply multiple worlds, Viveiros de Castro poses complex questions for our understanding of encounter – whether cultural or historical. His goal to develop a “theory/practice of the permanent decolonization of thought”⁵⁵ is a manifesto for a practice of translation after the narcissisms of equivalence, in which the task of the translator is to unfold the ontological alterity of the Other, rather than domesticate difference in forms of representation. What forms of hospitality, what modes of mobility, could be supported by such a model of translation?

Neoliberal globalisation: co-opting hope

The question is moot, for contemporary global events reassert the singular allure of Modernity's world-picture, albeit with ironic, and tragic, consequences. The seafarers who replaced, according to Sloterdijk, the metaphysicians of an earlier age have become agents of translation, mobility and hospitality of a particular kind. The historical imagination underwriting the Atlantic Crossing and the globalisation of goods and peoples it enabled – which oscillates so disorientatingly, so productively, between a superseded past and futures predicated on discovery – equates the globe with a “New World” of boundless resources and unending futurity. This, then, is capitalism's most pernicious gesture: it co-opts hope.

Consider Tunisian Mohammed Ali Malek, as he hurriedly corralled women, children and men onto dinghies on the coast of Libya on a star-filled night in April 2015. Translation, mobility, hospitality, whispered on the beach of Garabulli as promises of a new life, of safety, prosperity and freedom, were offered to these exhausted refugees as a constellation of hope. As dawn broke, even as Malek brandished a stick to hurry his ill-fated passengers onto the ship that was supposed to carry them to Italy, trepidation must have mixed with relief among the exhausted migrants, who had each paid \$1,600 for the privilege. Whatever the challenges that lay ahead, at least they would be in Europe, where their predicament would be understood, pitied. In Europe, the West, there was a *new world*, where they could achieve the opportunities described by the smugglers and promised by the advertisements paid for by multinationals on billboards in the impoverished cities of Libya, Senegal and Somalia.

Malek, of course, was no seaman, and quickly the twenty-seven metre-long trawler onto which he had, incredibly, packed seven hundred people experienced difficulties. “According to the survivors, it quickly became evident that he had little experience commanding a boat. They claim he did not know how to read a compass and that he asked

for help from the migrants huddled on the deck”.⁵⁶ In an age when global events produce a cascade of morbid alignments, there is no little irony in the fact that it should be a paragon of global capitalism, a container ship – and worse, a Portuguese vessel at that – that brought Malek’s brief career as people smuggler to an end. The overcrowded fishing boat careened into the King Jacob, a 9,528-ton, one hundred and forty metre-long cargo ship – a descendent of the Portuguese naus and caravels that had returned booty from the New World – and quickly sank. Twenty-eight people survived, including, of course, Malek. The rest drowned.

In the context of the current global migrant crisis, not to mention the unfolding ecological catastrophe that is in part responsible for it, translation, mobility, and hospitality have become shibboleths of the neoliberal order. If there is a theoretical legitimacy in constellating these three terms, there is arguably also a moral and political naivety, a gross solipsism, in doing so at the present time. “Westerners loved globalization until *les autres* could reach us as easily as we could reach them,” said Bruno Latour in 2004 – long before Brexit or the displacement of millions by the so-called “Arab Spring”.⁵⁷ After centuries of what Sloterdijk has called “one-sidedness in action”, there is no little irony in the fact that the world-picture produced by the Atlantic Crossing finds itself shattering “in the ports, royal courts, and ambitions of Europe” in which it was first rapaciously imagined.⁵⁸

Notes

¹This “odd political theology,” says Bruno Latour, issues from “some strange politico-religious urge to ‘replace’ the world as it is with another world that is transcendent as an ideal [...] Through what extraordinarily perverse mechanism has transcendence been

transformed into the abandonment and condemnation of *this* world?” Latour, “Introduction: Let’s Touch Base!” *Reset Modernity!* 11. This article contributes a partial response to a question Latour’s own recent work has been addressing in myriad ways.

² Stahl, ed. and trans. *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, 74–75.

³ See Conrad, *What is Global History?*, 17–21. Interestingly, Conrad suggests implicitly that the pre-modern taste for reading the Other in terms of a writer’s own cultural identity is what defines such writing as “pre-global”; this essay makes an opposing case.

⁴ Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II*, 191.

⁵ On pre-modern speculation regarding the geography of the Western Atlantic in the Middle Ages, see Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America*, passim.

⁶ Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II*, 773.

⁷ Heidegger, “The Age of the World-Picture,” 130.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁹ Arendt, “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” 54.

¹⁰ University of Leicester, “The Anthropocene: Hard evidence for a human-driven Earth.” *Science Daily*, 7 January 2016.

¹¹ For a brilliant conceptual history of the Anthropocene, see Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, which appeared in English after this essay was completed.

¹² Klein, “Let Them Drown,” 12. Klein’s concerns find a more theoretical expression in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s increasingly influential essay, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” where Chakrabarty asserts that the Anthropocene, “calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities. We may provisionally call it a ‘negative universal history,’”

Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 222. Such a mode of historicising aligns with the concerns of the present essay.

¹³ Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II*, 864.

¹⁴ Wootton, *The Invention of Science*, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World*, 5.

¹⁷ Wootton, *The Invention of Science*, 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62-3. For alternative views, see Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind* and Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 74. It is interesting that, in his account of the cultural horizons of the early explorers, David Abulafia asserts that it is the “re-discovery of aspects of the classical past that stimulated radical new ideas about man’s place in the universe,” *The Discovery of Mankind*, 3 – which suggests the discovery of the Americas might be read, *contra* Wootton, according to other, less teleological, historiographical models.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²² *Ibid.*, 76.

²³ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. See especially 2.11.

²⁴ “The Middle Ages can only exist through typologies that define it as interval, as void of a meaning of its own,” Dagenais and Greer, “Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction,” 6.

²⁵ Patterson, “On the Margin,” 90.

²⁶ Wootton, *The Invention of Science*, 80.

²⁷ Wooton briefly entertains the notion that Robert Grosseteste (c. 1170–1253), one of the most extraordinary minds of the Middle Ages, might have pre-empted the scientific method (*The Invention of Science*, 320–321) in his theorisations of the nature of the globe and the workings of light, before dismissing the notion. It is to be regretted that he seems unfamiliar with the ground-breaking work of the cross-disciplinary “Ordered Universe” project led by Giles Gasper and Tom C.B. McLeish at the University of Durham: <https://ordered-universe.com>.

²⁸ Flint, *The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus*; Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*.

²⁹ Cohen, *The Four Voyages*, 220.

³⁰ Cohen, *The Four Voyages*, 221.

³¹ Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, 109.

³² Cohen, *The Four Voyages*, 221.

³³ Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 54.

³⁴ See Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, 92–96; 106–112. On the ethnographic continuity between the New World and the Old, see Smith’s discussion of the Sepulveda-De Las Casas debate in *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference*, 73–75.

³⁵ Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 160.

³⁶ Dagenais and Greer, “Decolonizing the Middle Ages,” 2.

³⁷ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, 101.

³⁸ See Metzler, “Perceptions of Hot Climate.”

³⁹ Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

⁴⁰ Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, 29.

⁴¹ Dagenais and Greer, “Decolonizing the Middle Ages,” 2.

⁴² Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, 30–31.

⁴³ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 73–74.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁶ Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 115.

⁴⁷ Easterbrook, “Ethics and Alterity,” 392.

⁴⁸ Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II*, 933.

⁴⁹ Pagden, *European Encounters*, 118.

⁵⁰ Consider Greenblatt: “mobility studies should identify and analyze the ‘contact zones’ where cultural goods are exchanged. Different societies constitute these zones differently, and their varied structures call forth a range of responses from wonder and delight to avidity and fear. Certain places are characteristically set apart from inter-cultural contact; others are deliberately made open, with the rules suspended that inhibit exchange elsewhere. A specialized group of ‘mobilizers’ – agents, go-betweens, translators, or intermediaries – often emerges to facilitate contact, and this group, along with the institutions that they serve, should form a key part of the analysis.” Greenblatt, “Cultural Mobility, A Manifesto,” 251. The role of translation in globalisation has been usefully assessed by Cronin in *Translation and Globalisation* and *Eco-translation*.

⁵¹ See de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*.

⁵² Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 40–41.

⁵³ Viveiros de Castro, “Supernature,” 293. For these reasons, Viveiros de Castro might thus take issue with the implicit liberal humanism of Chakrabarty’s response to the current global situation: “the questions of justice that follow from climate-change science require us to possess an ability that only the humanities can foster: the ability to see something

from another person's point of view. The ability, in other words, 'to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.'" Chakrabarty, "Humanities in the Anthropocene," 378.

⁵⁴ Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival," 20.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ BBC News, "Migrant tragedy." Accessed 28 June 2016.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36278529>.

⁵⁷ Latour, "Whose cosmos, which cosmopolitics?" 460.

⁵⁸ Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 10.

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Notes on contributor

Stephen Kelly is Head of English in the School of Arts, English and Languages at Queen's University Belfast and co-editor, with David Johnston, of *Betwixt and Between: Place and Cultural Translation* (2007). He has published variously on medieval literatures and cultures, the digital humanities, translation, and cultural theory.

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