

## Decolonizing the Indigenous. James Clifford's *Returns*

**Abstract:** In his Introduction to *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), James Clifford laments the absence, in Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies, of notions such as *decolonization* and *globalization*, indispensable epistemological tools for investigating our modern world reality. In linking decolonization and globalization with the question of *indigeneity*, and the figure of the 'native' and the 'wild man', Clifford presents his readers with the story of Ishi, *the last wild Indian*, 'discovered' in 1911 in a village in California and then exhibited in a museum until his death. The critical methodology adopted in this paper aims at generating a productive dialogue between Clifford's unflinching exposure of the colonial nature of modernity and its founding knowledges, anthropology included, and the theoretical insights of decolonial intellectuals of the 'Global South' such as Walter Dignolo, Madina Tlostanova, Aníbal Quijano, Fernando Coronil, Catherine Walsh, to name just a few, who interpret the modern world order as sustained by the 'coloniality of power'.

Keywords: *postcolonial studies, decolonial turn, coloniality of power, indigeneity, culture and anthropological realism*

In his Introduction to *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), the cultural anthropologist James Clifford laments the absence, in both Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies, of notions such as 'decolonization' and 'globalization' which are necessary keywords of critical theory today, as appropriate epistemological tools for a realistic account of the modern world-system. In linking decolonization and globalization together with the question of 'indigeneity', Clifford translates into new theoretical perspectives on current indigenous practices the decolonial questions raised by intellectuals such as Walter Dignolo, Madina Tlostanova, Aníbal Quijano, Fernando Coronil and Catherine Walsh, to name just a few. They all conceive of modernity as colonial modernity, insisting on the notion of 'coloniality of power'.

Since the colonization of the Americas, modernity cannot be dissociated from colonialism and forced slavery, which are at the basis of modern capitalism, together with racism, an extremely effective tool for shaping the new socio-historical identities ('indios' or 'negroes', for instance) that were of immediate utility for the emerging European capitalism, and that are still at work in contemporary national narratives. In *Returns*, questions of indigeneity and cultural translation conjure up the colonial nature implicit in modern social sciences like anthropology itself. This is especially addressed in the conclusive part of this essay, attentive to how Clifford relates the story of Ishi, 'the last wild Indian', who was found in 1911 in a small California town and exhibited for five years in a museum, until his death.

To acknowledge modernity in terms of its colonial constitution, is to register with decolonial thinkers that the notion of a supposedly debased, wild, brute, uncivilised native is the direct consequence of that formidable power structure called racism. As remarked in the first part of this essay (by recalling some pivotal issues raised by decolonial thinkers such as Quijano, Dignolo, Tlostanova), such a systematic and hierarchical organisation of different ethnicities based on people's physical traits is imbricated in the modern discipline of anthropology. The fundamental scope of the latter was the observation and classification of other peoples and cultures from a supposedly superior point of view. So, in its 'colonial' constitution, the modern construction of the 'wild' represents a crucial *topos* for both decolonial thought and cultural anthropology. It is here that the very notion of realism, so central to the premises of anthropological description and analysis, turns out to be situated within the racially constructed enunciation framework that decolonial thinkers contest.

James Clifford, in the wake of Cultural Studies theorists whose thought has largely informed his research (Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall), insists that the notion of realism, far from granting the ultimate access to ‘truth’, is rather the product of hegemonic views at work in the world. Engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue, this essay is essentially concerned with the decolonial quality of the epistemological enquiries that James Clifford has conducted, thus justifying the title “Decolonizing the Indigenous”. Attentive to the centrality of discursive formation in both Cultural Studies and Clifford’s work, I approach the question of how to narrate the ‘Other’ (the native, the indigenous, the ‘wild’). Through a decolonialising perspective, the essay addresses the fundamentally descriptive nature of anthropology, ultimately bordering on narratological, hence literary, questions. As Clifford has consistently demonstrated over decades of unceasing scholarly research, anthropology today can hardly survive as a viable form of intercultural analysis if it is not informed by decolonial practices of discourse.<sup>1</sup>

From his first works, James Clifford’s theoretical investigations have challenged different disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography, literature, social sciences, the figurative arts and visual culture, with the aim of interpreting historical reality as a complexity of particular contingencies; a sort of text to be interpreted through the lens of contextualization;<sup>2</sup> that is, investigating the different languages of Western knowledge. His critical reflections have cast doubts on the supposed scientific nature of ethnography and anthropology, to explain them above all as scriptural forms born in the wake of and along with European and Atlantic colonialism. From his famous 1986 collection, edited together with George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, to his disruptive classic, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988), James Clifford has retraced the vicissitudes of the discipline of anthropology as having as its pet topic the Other, showing its affinities with narrative creativity. These two works are followed by the last of the trilogy, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013).

*Returns* comes symbolically at the end of a trajectory, where we find a scholar in the throes of a deep sense of disorientation: the West, as we knew it, is no longer the center of the world, and Eurocentrism is no longer the only perspective from which knowledge emanates. New York, which was, until a few decades ago, the symbol and heart of western modernity, is no longer the place from which the imposing power of the West radiates. As Clifford had recalled in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), in the 1940s New York had been the magical place where the father of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, was amazed by its “unexpected juxtapositions” and “delightful inconsistencies”: for example, the surreal experience of sitting, in the Public Library, next to a Native American with his feather headdress and buckskin jacket, taking notes with a Parker pen.<sup>3</sup> Strange eruption of an alterity into a modern, homogeneous world, which winks at difference. New York at the time still seemed compact: its exogenousness pointed to the composite nature of an open city, one that adorned itself with what was unusual, the ideal place to ‘collect’ findings and symbols of otherness. But this sense of compactness has now been shattered.

Clifford himself traces his professional and personal path, in his Introduction to *Returns*, recounting in it the “bumps” and landslides that have in the meantime been recorded in global history and Eurocentric epistemology over a thirty-year period. The idea of a globalized world, for example, had initially envisaged a totalising, one-way scenario managed from a single center as the source of

<sup>1</sup> This insistence on narrativity, discourse and enunciatory location has been largely discussed by postcolonial theorists, too. On this matter, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> On this issue, see Viviana Gravano, “Il critico come etnografo? Il posizionamento nella scrittura da Santa Fe ad Hal Foster”, *Art’O*, 24 (Autumn-Winter 2007).

<sup>3</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1988), 237.

knowledge-power. Instead, subsequent critical thought has not considered globalization as a novelty at all, since it arises from remote interactions, stemming from cultural and commercial exchanges of transcontinental import, from old and new migrations of people who have always ignored borders and distances, from clashes and encounters of viewpoints and knowledge that cannot be reduced to a single perspective on reality.<sup>4</sup>

It was precisely on the entry of new terms related to the concept of globalization – such as ‘local’, ‘global’, ‘glocal’ – in the 1990s that Clifford held his seminars at the History of Consciousness department of the University of California, Santa Cruz. With *Returns* other notions are also imposed: together with the term ‘globalization’, there is an insistence on terms such as ‘decolonization’ and ‘indigeneity’, considered essential for a realistic recognition of the current world-system.

The two notions of decolonization and globalization which are indeed pervading new socio-cultural and literary enquiries found their inspiration in sociologists like Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Madina Tlostanova, Fernando Coronil, Santiago Castro-Gómez, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, just to name a few, who remark on the colonial nature of the very notion of modernity, since the birth of the European notion of modernity dates back to the conquest of the Americas. Walter Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova have aptly suggested that in Europe modernity was associated to a sense of renewal and newness, as the term Renaissance testifies;<sup>5</sup> however, that same modernity was sustained, substantially, by the European colonization of an enormous, until then unknown territory, the Americas, and, symbolically, by the simultaneous colonization of time, which condemned the ‘non-modern’ to a long series of Middle Ages as the only temporality allowed to them, as opposed to the ‘luminous’, rational and progressive European trajectory, implied in the very idea of Renaissance.

This idea of a temporal classification and opposition is also central for the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, who traces back to the 17th century the European edification of a system of colonial power, what Quijano defines as *patrón de poder*, ‘coloniality of power’, which is based on the hierarchical classification of people made possible by the invention of the racial system. With the colonization of the Americas, peoples as culturally different as the Aztecs, Maya, Incas, Quechua, etc., became just ‘indios’; in Africa, the Ashanti, Yoruba, Zulu, Congo, Bacongo, etc., became just ‘negroes’. The classification of these new socio-historical identities was of immediate utility for the emerging European capitalism: the whites were the masters; the blacks were a free work force; the indios were home servants.<sup>6</sup> The colonial link between race and work, which is implicit in the ‘coloniality of power’, explains why colonialism is at the basis of capitalism, as the Venezuelan scholar Fernando Coronil insists, and not just some historical detail which happened overseas.<sup>7</sup> The coloniality of power has also informed modern Western knowledge and its disciplines: based on an evolutionist view of time and history, “non-Europeans occupied the lowest grade of an imaginary chain that goes from ‘primitive’ to ‘civilized’, from ‘irrational’ to ‘rational’, from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’, from ‘magical-mythical’ to ‘scientific’”; the non-European could hardly aspire to become Europeanized or ‘modernized’.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, one of the most famous European literary descriptions of an indigenous epitomizes the epistemological violence implicit in the coloniality of power. This is the description that Robinson

<sup>4</sup> On the mobile and migratory configurations of cultures, see Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello, *La questione mediterranea* (Milano: Mondadori, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Walter Mignolo and Marina Tlostanova, “Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9 (2006), 205-221.

<sup>6</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America” (2000), *International Sociology*, 15.2 (2000), 215-232.

<sup>7</sup> Fernando Coronil, “Naturaleza del poscolonialismo: del eurocentrismo al globocentrismo”, in Edgardo Lander, ed., *La colonialidad del saber: Eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000), 87-111.

<sup>8</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality of Power”, 225.

Crusoe (in Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel of the same name) gives of Friday, beginning with the portrayal of the young Indian as a boy with a well-knit physique, refined and robust features, in an attempt to make it understood that he is not an African but an Amerindian. However, he is still a 'wild', a 'cannibal', and as such has attributes indicative of the animalistic and brute inferiority of the native he has just encountered.<sup>9</sup> Friday is primitive, relegated to the dawn of an alleged temporal axis that leads from the primitive to the modern, albeit finding himself before Robinson in the same time fraction, in the mid 1600s. He is ignorant, though perfectly capable, with his knowledge and all his skills, of living freely in his territory; childlike, but the paternalism of the white, civilized, male, preferably English European will help him grow. He is unequivocally cannibal, and here the civilized Englishman will intervene to wean him from the horrible custom of eating human flesh. Linguistically he is handicapped, barely able to stammer a crude English after his more than ten years of living with Robinson. He is naked, a symptom of bestiality which in addition to the lack of values of civilized life also denotes a sexual promiscuity. He is by nature a slave, since the native can be easily expropriated from the territory where he has always lived freely. He is irrational, if not stupid: Robinson will catch Friday intent on begging the rifle not to kill him, having somehow mistaken it for a fearsome deity.

When on the threshold of the contemporary world Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) shows us the brute natives of the Congo river forests, that is the indigenous, he does so by asking himself about the practicability of those terms which were then the unshakable dogmas of the imperialist system. Primitive, cannibal, naked, slave, these are terms that, back then, should have aptly described the indigenous; yet, in Conrad's eyes referred to a single profound truth: expropriation, aggravated murder and heinous large-scale pillage, as Marlow comments in the opening pages of the novel.<sup>10</sup> In the dense fog that hangs over the steamer that goes upriver, there is the blurred vision of the European who proceeds in the lie of a great civilizing mission.

Questioning those very terms that had previously shaken Conrad's imperialistic certainties (brute, cannibal, inhuman) and investigating the kind of epistemological system that Western anthropology relies on (that is, its truth regime, as Michel Foucault would have it), Clifford resumed Conrad's uncertain prose, so clouded and hallucinated, to find, in *The Predicament of Culture*, the hesitation and authorial crisis that fills the diaries of the Polish anthropologist Malinowski, grappling with the natives of the Trobriand islands in the Pacific. It was that hesitation, for Clifford, which definitively belied the seeming scientific nature of anthropology to reveal its vulnerability. The perverse game, the tension between disputed forces, was exposed, and one could not ignore it. An anthropologist can only start from an intimate certainty of strength and epistemological mastery if he is to forge ahead in his job of writing about the other. At the cost of his capitulation. As Malinowski's diaries testify, in their ultimate bewilderment.

And since Clifford's anthropology posits itself above all as a reflection on the statute of anthropology as a discipline, that is as a meta-anthropological reflection, Malinowski's hesitation, in his diaries, becomes for Clifford a point of crucial importance for the notion of realism, and what realism means in the social sciences. In the famous *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), Clifford, George Marcus, Paul Rabinow and other scholars look at ethnography primarily as a field in which social history, interpretive anthropology, travel writing, discourse theories and textual criticism intersect. The result is a profound awareness of the impossibility for the West to continue to portray non-Westerners in the name of an undisputed authority. Cultural representation revealed itself as a contingent and contestable process, subject to the rules of allegorical models and rhetorical tropes.

---

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 202.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 20.

The epistemological and political crisis of anthropology consists precisely in this awareness.<sup>11</sup> Here the comment by scholar José David Saldívar on the idea of realism can be useful. Resuming Louis Althusser's elaborations on ideology, Saldívar comments that 'realism' is not a trusted mirror of the world, but instead is the hegemonic way in which ideology expresses reality:

the ideologically hegemonic way to conceive and express our relationship to the natural and social worlds around us. In other words ... realism functions ideologically: it offers itself as neutral reflection of the world when it is but one way to *conjure* the world.<sup>12</sup>

Given, therefore, the ideological nature of realism, Clifford's question is how to make this sense of reality specific in one's own writing, in one's own speech, in one's own demonstrating and narrating. But here the anthropologist feels he can offer only attempts and failures, certainly no effective models.<sup>13</sup>

In incorporating the challenge posed to the social sciences by the 'decolonial turn', Clifford registers a sort of suspension, an epistemological disorientation, a sense of narrative impossibility that emerges from the numerous declarations of incompleteness scattered throughout the pages of his book:

There is simply no place of historical hindsight from which to sort out and impose a unified functional structure on these discrepant stories. It's a tangled and unfinished historical reality that I find I can't represent in a seamless way ... I find myself imagining a tangle of historicities rather than a progressively aligned common History – however 'combined and uneven' its development ... My admittedly ad hoc, undertheorized solution is to always be juxtaposing histories – to always be working with more than one.<sup>14</sup>

Discrepant but interconnected historicities therefore do not make possible a single interpretation, an unequivocal narrative, but rather shatter the cognitive and organizational parameters necessary for reliable narration.

Clifford bears these reflections in mind in facing once again a figure dear to the anthropological discipline but also to a great deal of European and Eurocentric literature: that of the 'native', the wild. Here the native in question is the famous Ishi, the last 'wild man' discovered in 1911 in a village in California.

With Ishi emerges, as with so many 'wild men' who for centuries have crowded the pages of white knowledge, once again that aporia which for anthropology – colonial science – has remained unsolvable: the 'wild', who has always been the 'Other' object in contrast with the white observer/researcher of European ancestry, is one with the territory in which s/he is 'discovered'; s/he is native to this area; s/he is by no means 'other' with regard to it. He is the 'Alter/Native' whom the Chicana theorist Alicia Gaspar de Alba speaks of in stressing the paradox experienced by those who have been expropriated from their own territories. Gaspar de Alba uses this concept in particular referring to the U.S.-Mexican border and to the Chicano identity: in this specific case, she explains, what very clearly emerges is how

---

<sup>11</sup> James Clifford et al., eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: California U.P., 1986). The essays in this text were drawn from seminar discussions that took place in April 1984 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the SAR (School of American Research – today School of Advanced Research) Center, strictly limited to ten participants (a group of ethnographers, a literary critic and a historian of anthropology).

<sup>12</sup> José David Saldívar, *Trans-Americanities: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2012), 101.

<sup>13</sup> James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2013), 211.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-210.

the ‘Alter/Nativity’ of the Chicano identity involves being simultaneously ‘Other’ than and ‘Native’ to the U.S. Southwest.<sup>15</sup>

An anthropologist who calls into doubt and revises his conceptual foundations takes a stance of continuous and open dialogue with historicity. Edward Said spoke of ‘worldliness’, falling into the world and its circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, even the question posed by the issue of indigeneity draws with it questions of historicity such as that of decolonization and globalization: the consolidated epistemological terrain, writes Clifford, has become bumpy, full of pot-holes, tremors, interruptions, slipperiness, loss of meaning: as an anthropologist, Clifford confesses that the ground has been swiped from under his feet.

Writing, and even more writing about the other, as already emerged in *Writing Culture* and *The Predicament of Culture*, is shown inexorably to be a field of contention. Delicate balances between forces vie for the scriptural space. Just as Robinson Crusoe, in describing Friday, takes for granted his own cultural superiority, so anthropology starts from an alleged and undisputed epistemological superiority. It is the writing of the stronger that grants itself the right to speak about the weaker. Michel de Certeau (*The Writing of History*, 1977) made the same point about history and historiography, in suggesting that the discovery of America had made that territory an immense, empty white sheet on which Europeans could write their version of the world.

Clifford, in *Returns*, dwells several times on the complicity of anthropology with Western colonialism and with the irreversible expansion of the global capitalist system. Nor does he hesitate to report Claude Lévi-Strauss’ cutting edge:

Anthropology is not a dispassionate science like astronomy, which springs from the contemplation of things at a distance. It is the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other, and during which millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered and their institutions and beliefs destroyed, whilst they themselves were ruthlessly killed, thrown into bondage, and contaminated by diseases they were unable to resist. Anthropology is the daughter of this era of violence: its capacity to assess more objectively the facts pertaining to the human condition reflects, on the epistemological level, a state of affairs in which one part of mankind treated the other as an object.<sup>17</sup>

To emphasize that here Lévi-Strauss refers to material and epistemological structures that have determined at least in the last three centuries European and North American anthropological research and its claim to objectivity, Clifford tries to clarify the very meaning of the verb he uses, ‘determined’, by echoing how Raymond Williams, in 1977, in *Marxism and Literature*, defined the term ‘determination’: the set of limits and constraints within which we find ourselves acting historically.<sup>18</sup>

In qualifying the anthropologist’s work with the definitive word with which Lévi-Strauss branded anthropological practice as a whole, Clifford turns his attention to Alfred Kroeber, a complex figure who emerges in the fourth chapter of *Returns*, with the hundred-page long tale of Ishi. Alfred Kroeber,

---

<sup>15</sup> Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]Framing the “Bad Woman”: Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause* (Austin: Texas U.P., 2014), xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Clifford resorts to the historicity of the anthropologist’s task, drawing on Gramsci’s phraseology as filtered through Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. In this vein, Clifford welcomes the sense of the ‘conjunctural,’ which, instead of the linearity of time (intended as an arrow towards forward progress), exposes the density of the present, the density of time as a field of forces that contend for hegemony or subordination.

<sup>17</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Scope of Anthropology”, *Current Anthropology*, 7.2 (1966), cit. in Clifford, *Returns*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> “a matter of pressures and limits, historical horizons within and against which people act with constrained freedom” (Ibid., 162). The idea of ‘determination’ (Williams) is simultaneously restated by Clifford as ‘articulation’, in Gramsci’s sense and in the revaluation made by Stuart Hall.

founder of the anthropology department at the world-famous University of Berkeley, California, in Clifford's words opposed but, at the same time, perpetuated the colonizer-colonized domain system.<sup>19</sup>

In 1911 Kroeber 'discovered' Ishi, the last *wild* Indian, in a small village in northern California, where Ishi had probably stopped on his way to a destination that remained forever unknown. Ishi was housed in the anthropological museum of San Francisco. He was dressed, fed, treated well and offered the chance to stay there as guardian of the museum. On Sundays, he put on a show for curious visitors: while sharpening flints to make arrow heads for his bow, he demonstrated how to fish with reed canes, though it seems he never wanted to take off his acquired clothes: 'playing' the part of what, in short, was a wild man living in a state of nature was tolerable only to a certain point. Ishi told many stories in his poorly deciphered language. He loved to tell stories. In the museum, he was shocked to see how many bones were kept. It must have seemed horrid and disrespectful to the human remains to whom ritual burial should be paid. Sometimes, Kroeber and his two friends, a doctor and an assistant anthropologist, prevailed on Ishi making him return to the places of his childhood and youth, places that were painful for him because linked to memories of being assaulted by whites who had certainly exterminated his and other communities. Ishi had to return to those places, and his white protectors, in those wild places, regained a certain childlike joyfulness in playing the game of living according to nature.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, after only five years, in 1916, Ishi died of tuberculosis. Apparently up to the last few months, when he was visibly debilitated by the disease, he was asked to pose in photos that were to portray him, bare-chested, as a wild Indian, ready to shoot his bow. Kroeber was in Europe when Ishi died, and ordered from afar, heartbroken and angry, that no autopsy should be performed. However, he later authorized donating Ishi's brain to medicine, so that it could draw its 'scientific' conclusions on that rare *specimen*. Kroeber had contributed enormously to creating the famous anthropology department at the University of California at Berkeley, thanks to the grants of the Hearst family, whose enormous wealth was based precisely on land-grabbing territories from Native American communities to turn them into mines. Irony and contradictions of history's snarls.

Ishi's story was told, in 1961, in the book that Kroeber's second wife, Theodora Kroeber, wrote, her passionate classic *Ishi in Two Worlds*, which has since been compulsorily included in Californian secondary school curricula.

Ishi's story, as experienced by Alfred and Theodora Kroeber, would remain etched in their daughter, the then young writer Ursula Le Guin. Her novels – *The Word for World is Forest* (1976) and *Always Coming Home* (1985), to which Clifford devotes a detailed analysis – are dystopian visions inspired by feminism, ecology and pacifism, which, according to Clifford, continue to re-elaborate Ishi's story.<sup>21</sup>

Ishi's story did not end with his death. Clifford devotes a long discussion to the many studies, including films, which have succeeded one another on this story, providing very critical and harsh perspectives on Kroeber's ambiguous operation, in many ways qualifying it as colonial, in that Kroeber removed Ishi from his environment and his natural habits, relegated him to a museum, making him a sort of formidable museum artifact, gave his brain to medicine, in utter disregard of Ishi's horror towards the dissection of cadavers, an act that, for him, was a violation of their sacredness.

Lastly, the remains of Ishi have been re-exhumed, for a worthy burial in his place of origin by the indigenous communities, in the wake of the numerous repatriations of remains that from the 1990s to

---

<sup>19</sup> "both resisted and perpetuated a dominant settler-colonial system" (Ibid.)

<sup>20</sup> Clifford describes this happiness among men alone with the term 'homosociality', used by Eve Sedgwick in her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1985).

<sup>21</sup> On Ursula Le Guin, who died in 2018, a writer who always sought a new language for a feminist environmentalism, see Eleonora Federici, *Quando la fantascienza è donna: Dalle utopie femminili del secolo XIX all'età contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 2015), 96-113.

today are one of the symbolic demands most strongly advanced by indigenous peoples, for a just restitution together with their lands.

The request for stolen bones, objects of indigenous communities, exhibited in museums and other collections, is a claim to a past that serves indigenous communities to project themselves into a future. The indigenous communities, definitively considered to have disappeared or be destined to disappear in modernity (Ishi had been advertised as ‘the last wild Indian’), are making themselves felt even now, in the neoliberal globalized world, even claiming a market niche in the display and sale of ‘traditional’ products and handicrafts, a business that is fueling the economic power of those communities, which shrewdly exploit the so-called solidarity and ecological tourism sector.<sup>22</sup> The proliferation of cultural centers for the preservation of the ancient ‘traditions’ shrewdly sell and ‘produce’ the presumed authenticity which the engaged tourist or intellectual is looking for. From the icy lands of the Inuit communities of the Arctic, to the Native-American villages scattered everywhere in the United States, from the Lacandona forest in Chiapas and the Pacific Islands, from the Kanak in New Caledonia to the new Ladin mestizos, from the movements of the new Mayas to the Afro-Caribbean, the indigenous communities stage their ‘indigeneity’, with ‘performances’ of customs and behaviors that change according to whether the spectators are members of their own communities and family members, or are curious visitors and strangers, or representatives of the UN Council, or other dignitaries assigned to recognizing territorial and cultural rights. Returning to the past, staging the past and ancient traditions and languages, perhaps that have totally disappeared or have been abandoned over time, becomes a political and cultural strategy of survival and projection into the future. It is a process of ‘cultural invention’.

The past is a productive and generative reservoir in the present and for the future. There is no respect for that rational vision of linear, progressive development, which saw time as an arrow going from the past (what remains behind), towards a forward. And the native has not disappeared, as the white man wanted, but has survived in the present, also desiring the same commodities and comforts offered by economic well-being and technological progress. Facebook is an essential tool for many indigenous communities and movements; radio and internet programs recreate communities for those who have gone to live far away, even in other countries, after forced diasporas due to the lack of means of subsistence in their territories. Many have gone to live in the big cities, and from there live out their indigeneity, transforming themselves into new subjects that one scholar, with an unsettling oxymoron, has defined as ‘transnational indigenous’.

The capitalist world-system, Clifford explains, is immensely powerful, yet it cannot claim a totally global reach. Nor can we still speak plausibly of a division of the world into centers and peripheries. Even the great theorist of capitalism as a world-system, Immanuel Wallerstein, had to recognize (in *Decline of American Power*, 2003) that political-economic elements, which could be considered absolutely central to modernity in the last five centuries, are no longer so, given the importance gained by other contingencies of political struggle that lead to a different political-economic configuration of the world.<sup>23</sup>

A serious ‘decolonial turn’ in the social sciences means, therefore, as sociologist Catherine Walsh suggested, also exposing oneself to the challenge posed by other discernments and cognitions, commonly considered to be ‘non-knowledge’, while at the same time admitting the limits and tendentiousness of epistemological perspectives that have always reproduced Eurocentric coordinates,

---

<sup>22</sup> For an extensive discussion of indigeneity in the contemporary debate, see Eva Gerharz et al., eds., *Indigeneity on the Move: Varying Manifestations of a Contested Concept* (New York: Berghahn, 2018). On indigeneity in the US-Southwest, see Cherríe Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings 2000-2010* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Clifford, *Returns*, 211.

complicit in a colonial modernity.<sup>24</sup> All this seems to be summed up in Clifford's comment on how we must necessarily admit that global power structures swipe the ground from under our feet.<sup>25</sup>

However, the ghost of an embarrassing question still remains: are anthropologists today still defensible figures within decolonial practices? Here I would conclude by quoting the Chicano theorist and performative artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who, in an interview, speaks of his project to exhibit certainly unusual and interesting specimens in Plexiglas showcases. These are not the classic 'monstrosities' that populated the European and American imagination with their circuses, museums, displays of creatures considered different from the model recognized as human.<sup>26</sup> This time what ends up under glass are specimens that have never been under observation. From the conversation between the artist and the curator Kaytie Johnson, for the genesis of their artistic project "El Border Curiosity Cabinet" (2002), Guillermo Gómez-Peña presents a *modus operandi* that is a sort of 'reverse anthropology' and in this reversal, which is unsettling and ironic, the artist proposes that specimens of 'authentic radical anthropologists' be exhibited. For example, Michael Taussig, or, why not, James Clifford himself:

Our *modus operandi* must be reverse anthropology. Yes – anthropologize Anglo tribes.... What about exhibiting in the opening a live 'chic New York curator' with his/her personal photo album containing staged images of cultural transvestitism.... I mean, photos of the curator on safari in the Third World in search of new talent and posing in local attire with the newly found primitives ... or, se me ocurre, having an 'authentic radical anthropologist' inside a Plexiglas box? Michael Taussig may do it. James Clifford might.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Walsh, "¿Son posibles unas ciencias sociales/culturales otras? Reflexiones entorno a las epistemologías decoloniales", *Nómadas*, 26 (2007), 102-113. The fundamentally colonial nature of the notion of modernity, which the Peruvian intellectual Aníbal Quijano defined as 'coloniality of power', was also expressed through its intellectual repertoires, disseminated through the disciplines taught in universities and other places of knowledge, such as schools, museums, libraries, the media, and so on.

<sup>25</sup> Clifford, *Returns*, 211-212.

<sup>26</sup> Museums, fairs, galleries, shows and exhibits can be considered a symptom of what Toni Bennett, in his study on the birth of the museum, inspired by Michel Foucault's thoughts on the surveillance and punishment power put in place by the social system, defines as 'exhibitionary complex'. See Marina De Chiara, *Oltre la gabbia: Ordine coloniale e arte di confine*, Second Edition (Milano: Meltemi, 2018), 52. Toni Bennett speaks of 'exhibitionary complex' in his *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London-New York: Routledge, 1995). On recent postcolonial museum theories and practices, see Iain Chambers et. al., eds., *The Ruined Archive* (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2014). The complex question of repatriating the remains of Native Americans and people of African descent still held in U.S. museums has been addressed in the webinar (co-sponsored by The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research) "Reclaiming the Ancestors: Indigenous and Black Perspectives on Repatriation, Human Rights, and Justice", <https://vimeo.com/449844367>, accessed 2 September 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Kaytie Johnson, "Borderabilia: Imagining a New Way of Presenting Art", *LatinArt.com: an Online Journal of Art and Culture* (December 2004), <http://www.latinart.com/transcript.cfm?id=62>, accessed 10 November 2020.