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## Manimism: Worrying about the Relationship between Rationality and Animism

James Burton

### 1. Introduction

Much recent anthropological and theoretical work on non-Western animism, and the concept of animism generally, accords it an epistemological, ontological, ethical and/or cultural equivalence or superiority to modern Western thought in its most rationalist and dominant forms.<sup>1</sup> Two major trends in contemporary thought seem to come together in such work. On the one hand, there is a recognition of the need to ‘decolonise’ thought, which in this context begins with overturning the colonialist and primitivist biases underpinning the history of the anthropological study of animism. Beginning with the broad paradigm established by Edward Tylor,<sup>2</sup> this formerly dominant approach interpreted animism as an irrational, erroneous characteristic of uncivilised minds and cultures – an understanding that many now consider to be itself the product of erroneous thinking conditioned by colonialist cultural values and presumptions.

On the other hand, the kinds of work that have been dubbed ‘the new animism’<sup>3</sup> also participate in a long-running, multi-faceted effort to challenge the validity and efficacy of core, defining features of modern Western rationalism. Such studies call into question central pillars of rationalism such as

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Nurit Bird-David, ‘“Animism” Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology’, *Current Anthropology*, 40, S1 (Feb 1999), S67-91; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4, 3 (1998), 469-488; Tim Ingold, ‘Rethinking the Animate, Re-animating Thought’, *Ethnos*, 71, 1 (Mar 2006), 9-20; Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, London, Hurst (2005); and the wide range of approaches collected in Graham Harvey (ed), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Abingdon, Routledge (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, London, John Murray (1920 [1871]), 2 volumes.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, *Animism*, xxv.

Cartesian dualism,<sup>4</sup> objectivism,<sup>5</sup> the separation of nature and culture,<sup>6</sup> and/or a reliance on atomistic or otherwise non-relational ontological and epistemological frameworks.<sup>7</sup> These are contrasted against various elements of the animisms of indigenous non-Western cultural groups, usually taken to be based on a broader understanding of how and where life and living processes are to be found (which may include a principle that ‘everything’ is in some sense ‘alive’), and relational and processual modes of knowing and inhabiting the world, in which subjecthood or personhood is accorded to wide varieties of nonhuman and transhuman beings. Prominent among the bases these authors offer for seeking to use such animistic approaches to challenge and reform Western thought and rationalism (and culture generally) are the need to develop a better ethics of human-human and human-nonhuman coexistence,<sup>8</sup> the need for a radical shift in the way we think and respond to the threat of global ecological catastrophe,<sup>9</sup> and, generally, the need for better ways of adapting and dealing with the increasingly dynamic and turbulent demands of an ever-more technologically, ecologically, politically and culturally inter-connected and complex modern world.

To a large extent, these concerns with reforming mainstream Western thought, its dominant frameworks, assumptions and values, would seem to complement the aforementioned imperative to decolonise it. In this paper, I do not seek to reject this complementarity in the main, but to ask questions about whether it is always as strong as it may seem, and whether there might not be potential tensions and conflicts that could ultimately, in some contexts, produce deleterious effects, in various registers, that would be counter to the apparently well-intentioned moves to reform that are clustered in this area of contemporary thought. In short, while seeing a great deal of ethical, political,

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Kenneth Morrison, ‘Animism and a proposal for a post-Cartesian Anthropology’, in Harvey (ed), *Handbook*, 38-52; Alf Hornborg, ‘Technology as Fetish: Marx, Latour and the Cultural Foundations of Capitalism’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 31, 4 (Jul 2014), 119-140.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Alf Hornborg, ‘Animism, fetishism, and objectivism as strategies for knowing (or not knowing) the world’, *Ethnos*, 71, 1 (Mar 2006), 21-32.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard (2005); de Castro, ‘Cosmological Deixis’.

<sup>7</sup> The latter aspect is implicit or explicit in most works in this area but in particular, see Bird-David, ‘“Animism” Revisited’ and Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Abingdon, Routledge (2011).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Death and grief in a world of kin,’ and Douglas Ezzy, ‘Embodied morality and performed relationships’, both in Harvey (ed), *The Handbook*, 137-147 and 181-190 respectively.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Danny Naveh and Nurit Bird-David, ‘Animism, conservation and immediacy’, Stephen Harding, ‘Towards an animistic science of the Earth’ and Val Plumwood, ‘Nature in the active voice’, in Harvey (ed), *The Handbook*, 27-37, 373-384 and 441-453 respectively.

cultural and pragmatic value in these contemporary efforts to re-think and reengage with what are variously identified as key features of animism, I wish to explore certain *worries* about what else may be going on through and alongside some aspects of the shifts they advocate. I present these as ‘worries’ in recognition that a worry is not as absolute as a radical opposition or challenge, but that it may nevertheless produce effects and open up lines of inquiry worth considering; and also in recognition that a worry may be active, productive and not restricted to individual psychology; that is, in what could be considered an aspect of the generally animist character of human existence, it has always-already approached me before I approach it; I worry about something because *it* worries *me*.

From a decolonial perspective, it would indeed seem that this set of challenges and advocations of transformation or reform ought to be welcomed. Objectivism, rationalist divisions of subject and object, nature and culture, etc., are all facets of the scientific framework underpinning the cultural complex which Anibal Quijano refers to as ‘the European paradigm of modernity/rationality’<sup>10</sup> (references to rationality throughout this paper should be understood in reference to this formulation). This framework naturalised ‘the specific social discriminations which later were codified as “racial”, “ethnic”, “anthropological” or “national”,’ presenting them as ““objective”, “scientific”, categories... natural phenomena, not referring to the history of power’; this in turn forming the basis of ‘the main lines of exploitation and social domination on a global scale, the main lines of world power today.’<sup>11</sup> The recent approaches to animism cited above – which I will continue to refer to as representatives of ‘new animism’ for convenience – can be expected to have a collective decolonising force, in exposing the involvement of rationalist modes and categories in colonial bias and power, and in advocating, in various ways, moves within Western culture and thought beyond the paradigm of modernity/rationality. As Morrison summarises, ‘scholars have primitivized indigenous peoples

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<sup>10</sup> Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies* 21, 2-3 (Mar 2007), 168-178.

<sup>11</sup> Quijano, ‘Coloniality’, 168.

because they have depersonalized “nature”, have unwittingly spiritualized social realities, and have overlooked worlds of engaged being, relational ways of knowing and other-oriented valuing.<sup>12</sup>

Yet my worrying begins precisely with the apparent strength, and timing, of this convergence of the decolonising and reformist imperatives. Decolonial approaches only begin to have a significant impact on Anglophone/Western academia *after* it has already internalised the many critiques of rationalism and scientific reason coming from poststructuralism, theories of social construction and other spheres, which often are, but need not necessarily be sensitive to colonial history. Thus Hornborg is able to identify these conditions without any explicit reference to coloniality:

‘Surrounded by philosophers and sociologists of science announcing the end of Cartesian objectivism [...] anthropologists discussing animistic understandings of nature will now be excused for taking them more seriously than a generation ago.’<sup>13</sup> Even if this ‘taking more seriously’ serves *both* decolonial and reformist ends, there is still a subtle difference between overturning past colonial biases because they led to mistakes of understanding, and simply because they are colonialist. Certainly, one can be motivated by both imperatives simultaneously, but this does not mean that the potential difference is not worth worrying about.

A further spur for worry here arises from what seems to be an ongoing tension in some ‘new animist’ approaches between gestures towards eroding and gestures towards retaining the difference between Western rationality and what is sometimes referred to as ‘indigenous’ animism. This is perhaps inevitable, given the twin dangers of fetishisation and appropriation that these approaches must try to avoid; and also given that a predominantly rationalist paradigm continues to shape the conditions of the majority of academic knowledge production. The various new animist accounts can be understood as restricted in part by the compromises of having to ‘translate’ animism into terms that are at least

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<sup>12</sup> Morrison, ‘Animism and a proposal’, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Hornborg, ‘Animism, fetishism and objectivism’, 27.

understandable within a more rationalist framework, using terms that attempt to speak to both sides, such as ‘relational epistemology’ and indeed ‘animism’ itself. In so doing, these approaches describe what they consider to be animism within a framework that, if their implications were to be followed all the way, arguably ought itself to be changed or abandoned. We may certainly understand them as bold gestures that are part of what is nevertheless a necessarily slow, multi-directional process of reform or transformation. Yet on the other hand, if we recognise that this process of translation into rationalist terms is in a sense what ethnographic anthropology has always done, then it is also possible to identify here as much a *continuity* as a contribution to a radical break – which would be reason enough for at least an inkling of worry to creep in. Are we confronted with necessary, pragmatic compromise as part of a decolonising reform, or limited compromises that might slow down and could even undermine such a reform?

Further exacerbating this worry is the possibility – suggested by many contemporary thinkers of animism – that Western rationality may *already*, in some sense be and have been animist, despite its self-projections to the contrary. If there is cause to worry that apparent moves to transform mainstream Western rationality might equally well have the function of *conserving* something under the pressure of change, does the prospect of a ‘becoming-animist’ of Western thought not potentially raise the possibility of a retention or resurfacing of its largely suppressed, ongoing animist elements, as woven into (rather than counters to) its colonial rationality?

Plenty of recent reflections on animism attribute it – or some of its characteristics – to modernist (rationalist) thought. Ingold, for example, suggests that the ‘real animists’ are the moderns who dream of finding life on Mars, and with them, the ethnologists of the nineteenth century who ‘projected’ their belief in an ‘animating principle’ onto ‘the savages of their acquaintance’.<sup>14</sup> Marx’s commodity fetishism may suggest that the whole of capitalist culture has something like an animist character, as

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<sup>14</sup> Ingold, ‘Rethinking the Animate’, 10.

Hornborg elaborates,<sup>15</sup> not to mention notions of ‘techno-animism’ informed by Actor-Network Theory as discussed, for example, in the context of aspects of modern Japanese culture.<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, Ingold and Hornborg are both making a distinction between something like a truly relational animism ‘proper’ and a twisted or bastardised modern Western version of it. And yet, I cannot help worrying – becoming animated, if you like – when confronted with the possibility that the thing to which we are attempting to ‘return’ has been there all along, affecting and contributing to the modernist-rationalist modes ostensibly responsible for its repression, and conceivably even at work in factors promoting a reengagement. If, as the many tensions within and among different contemporary versions of this call for a return, rediscovery, or ‘re-animation’<sup>17</sup> would suggest, there is not after all such an easy distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ versions of this animism (i.e. between the relational way of inhabiting the world attributed to indigenous non-Western animists and a supposedly corrupted modernist self-projection of animism as a set of beliefs about where life exists), then how can we be sure whether a move is towards one rather than the other?

In this paper I pursue this notion of an animism specific to Western modernity/rationality, and these worries about how it might relate to apparent moves in the direction of a Western recovery or reengagement with nonmodern animism. Drawing in particular on Sylvia Wynter’s account of ‘Man’ as the constructed figure around which colonial modernity has built and extended itself, I cannot help conceiving of this modern Western form of (quasi-)animistic animation as ‘Manimism’. The location of Man at the heart of European thought and culture is enabled and maintained by a faith or belief in the reality and validity of this figure as representing and epitomising humans in general. I will argue that this belief, along with its accompanying praxes, should itself be understood as a particular form of animism embedded within mainstream rationality, hence the admittedly awkward-sounding –

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<sup>15</sup> Hornborg, ‘Animism, fetishism and objectivism’; Hornborg, ‘Technology as Fetish’. Cf. Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Machinic Animism’, in Anselme Franke (ed), *Animism* vol. 1, Berlin, Sternberg (2010), 97-110. Among a number of cultural theorists who highlight the religious or cultish qualities of capitalism, the work of Walter Benjamin in particular could be read as an exposition of the animistic character of modern capitalist culture.

<sup>16</sup> Timo Kaerlein, ‘The Social Robot as Fetish? Conceptual Affordances and Risks of Neo-Animistic Theory’, *International Journal of Social Robotics*, 7 (2015), 361-370.

<sup>17</sup> Ingold, ‘Rethinking the Animate’.

though perhaps not wholly inappropriately so – coinage of the term ‘Manimism’ to refer to it. In the following section, I summarise in a little more detail some of the shifts in thinking represented by new animism, and the attribution and place of error or erroneous judgement within them, in order to highlight some of the salient tensions I have alluded to above. In the third section, I elaborate further on the notion of Western rationality *as* animist according to its own terms under the rubric of Manimism; this forms the basis for a final section in which I return to the worries I have begun to articulate above, around the possibility of a survival of Man and Manimism in and through the multi-faceted project of reforming or reanimating Western rationality, of which new animism is one particular strand.

## 2. Old and New Animisms: (Re)locating Error

In light of the ‘new’ approaches, it might be argued that the essential element in early conceptions of animism does not consist in the presumed belief in ‘spiritual beings’, the extension of notions of the souls or spirits of humans to encompass other animals, plants and objects, or the notion of an underlying animating force that potentially infuses all things, despite these all being frequently cited defining characteristics.<sup>18</sup> While one or more of these is likely to be found in any given discussion, the essential element is arguably, from a new animist perspective, earlier thinkers’ assumption and assertion that in these facets of their outlook/worldview, those dubbed animists are *in error*. From Tylor to Emile Durkheim to Stewart Guthrie, thinkers of animism present it as a mistake – whether of education, perception or interpretation, and no matter how understandable and even ‘logical’ a mistake it may be.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Stringer, ‘Building on belief: defining animism in Tylor and contemporary society,’ in Harvey (ed) *The Handbook*, 63-72, at 65.

<sup>19</sup> See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London, Allen and Unwin (1915) (e.g. 239); Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, New York, Oxford UP (1993).



It is this assertion and presupposition that recent critical reappraisals of animism call into question, leading some, as noted above, to identify its implication that there is an objective, rationally knowable difference between the animate and the inanimate as *itself* animist on its own terms. However, whether or not they go this far, such reappraisals seem simultaneously to want to move in opposing directions. On the one hand, they gesture towards eroding the difference between the outlooks of animism and Western rationality, either seeing animism as a general human trait, or identifying Western modernity as having some animist elements. On the other hand, they maintain or reassert the difference, suggesting that Western modernity has lost or suppressed its animism but can regain it with the right openness to encounters with non-Western animism(s). This need not be seen as a fatal contradiction, but it is significant in that similar tensions and oscillations can also be taken to characterise the older approaches to animism that the more recent reappraisals supposedly seek to invert or surpass.

Let's consider a particular example of a so-called new animist approach. Bird-David's account of the animistic practices and beliefs of the hunter-gatherer Nayaka of southern India shares with other contemporary approaches the ascription of a 'relational epistemology'<sup>20</sup> to its ethnographic referent: this she defines as a way of 'knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatednesses, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer.'<sup>21</sup> When Nayaka people attribute 'personhood' to trees, objects, and so on, they do so as a function of particular sets of relations they already have with these entities as aspects of their dynamic environments. In apparent contrast to the previously dominant anthropological view that these attributions are the result of confusion or 'a mistaken strategic guess', Bird-David argues that they form part of a useful practical knowledge that offers a set of valuable skills for adequately being-in-the-world.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bird-David, "'Animism' revisited".

<sup>21</sup> Bird-David, "'Animism' revisited", 69.

<sup>22</sup> Bird-David, "'Animism' revisited", 68.

Bird-David's 'revisiting' of indigenous animism presents it as an equally valid way of understanding and living to that of the 'objectivist modernist approach' that is 'authoritative' in modern Western society. Both, she suggests, have 'limitations' and 'strengths' and can profit from integration.<sup>23</sup> But the difference, the division between them, remains: 'in the indigenous culture, another sense of personhood is ascribed to what in Western terms are inanimate objects.'<sup>24</sup> This sits in tension with not only gestures towards the epistemological equivalence of the two sides, but with her recurrent suggestions that animism *may* be a general human trait. Responding to peers' queries about this tension, she seeks to clarify, but in a way that effectively simply restates the tension: 'My intention was to present Nayaka animistic practices as a specific cultural expression of a relational epistemology, itself a general human experience.'<sup>25</sup>

The presence of this tension, between the notion of animism as universal and accounts of its cultural particularity, does not mark a radical departure from Tylor's approach. On the contrary, such a tension can be argued to run throughout *Primitive Culture*, as he seeks to contribute to the larger late nineteenth-century project of ethnography – namely, that of understanding of 'the uniformity which so largely pervades civilization' through investigations of its numerous 'various grades'.<sup>26</sup> This is couched within the general motivating framework for investigations of so-called primitive mentality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whether in anthropology, psychology, psychoanalytic theory, sociology or philosophy, in that it is geared towards a better understanding of 'our' present and future: 'Not merely as a matter of curious research, but as an important practical guide to the understanding of the present and the shaping of the future, the investigation into the origin and early development of civilization must be pushed on zealously.'<sup>27</sup> Hence the series of tensions and negotiations between the general role of animism in shaping 'civilised' culture, and the specificity of its various 'savage' forms, the notion of animism as the hallmark of pre-modern,

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<sup>23</sup> Bird-David, "'Animism' revisited", 78.

<sup>24</sup> Naveh and Bird-David, 'Animism, conservation and immediacy', 28.

<sup>25</sup> Bird-David, "'Animism' revisited", 87.

<sup>26</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture* vol 1, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture* vol 1, 24.

uncivilized cultures, and the repeated finding that ‘item after item of the life of the lower races [*sic*] passes into analogous proceedings of the higher, in forms not too far changed to recognized, and sometimes hardly changed at all.’<sup>28</sup>

This remains a current within subsequent studies of animism. A few decades later, Durkheim’s work on religion seeks to show how aspects of animist outlooks form ‘the foundation of the human intelligence’,<sup>29</sup> suggesting that ‘there is no abyss’ between ‘religious’ and ‘scientific’ thought, and that they are ‘made up of the same elements, though inequally and differently developed’; religious thinking may use ‘logical mechanisms with a certain awkwardness, but it ignores none of them.’<sup>30</sup> A century after Tylor, Guthrie is still seeking to account for the ‘survival’ of animism in modern ‘rational’ culture without diminishing the latter, by arguing that animism is ‘a thread of interpretation that runs throughout perception’ and thus embodies a ‘mistake’ that ‘must occasionally [be] incurred by any animal that perceives.’<sup>31</sup> Guthrie addresses animism as an intrinsic aspect or product of the relationship between perception and environment – on the basis that perceiving organisms have a fundamental interest in discerning living forms that may affect them. This argument casts animism as an entirely *reasonable*, if not inevitable aspect of human existence, without equating it with Western rationality *per se*. The animistic attribution of life to a stone, or human-like agency to a tree, remains for Guthrie an error that a rational mind is necessarily capable of making, but which can always ultimately be corrected *through* rational interpretation, given enough empirical data.

Does the status of animism as error hold up as a marker of the difference between ‘old’ and ‘new’ approaches to animism? Or does the extent to which earlier thinkers qualified what they had identified as the erroneous outlook of animists, negate the notion of there being a radical break or gap between ‘old’ and ‘new’? Tylor and Durkheim take pains to emphasise the validity of what they identify as

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<sup>28</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture* vol 1, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 20

<sup>30</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 239.

<sup>31</sup> Guthrie, *Faces*, 61.

animism on its own terms, and as being just as reasonable as any modern rationalist perspective: ‘primitive’ animism, for Tylor, is a direct response to ‘the facts of daily experience’, resulting in ‘a broad philosophy of nature, early and crude indeed, but thoughtful, consistent, and quite really and seriously meant.’<sup>32</sup> For Durkheim, though the reasons with which the religious justify their beliefs ‘may be, and generally are, erroneous’, it can still be said that all religions ‘are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence.’<sup>33</sup>

The crucial element that shifts or gets reversed in the move from ‘old’ to ‘new’ approaches is, then, arguably not the notion of animism as error, which was already multiply qualified in early anthropological accounts, but the hierarchical understanding of cultures that was attached to it. The problem with Tylor wrongly identifying animism as an error, for Bird-David, is that this means he fails to appreciate that it is the result of ‘human socially biased cognitive skills’ that are operative in all societies and cultures to greater and lesser extents.<sup>34</sup> This in itself would seem fairly close to the kinds of Tylorian statement cited above. But the implication is that he is held back by the old anthropological/modernist approach which located different cultural groups within an evolutionary progression, with white Westerners at its peak. The salient difference, it would seem, is that while Tylor and Bird-David both negotiate the tension between the presumed universality of animism and the cultural specificity of animisms, for the former the overarching question is how modern rationality managed to free itself from some of the traps of animism, and how it might do so further in the future; whereas for Bird-David and other new animists, the question is how modern rationality might regain some of the animist qualities it has foolishly lost. On the one hand, the universality of animism is to be escaped, on the other, embraced and recovered.

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<sup>32</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture* vol 1, 285.

<sup>33</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Bird-David, “‘Animism’ revisited”, 69.

Yet even as this situates one approach as colonialist, the other anti-colonialist, it also implies that they are underpinned by a shared understanding that their approaches are in the interests of Western thought and culture, in a manner that complements the interests of humanity in general (rather than opposing them). Bird-David suggests that ‘the most intriguing question is why and how the modernist project estranged itself from the tendency to animate things, if it is indeed universal.’<sup>35</sup> But we might equally ask, if animism is universal, whether and to what extent such an estrangement did indeed take place. Did ‘the modernist project’ ever really leave behind the animistic and animating qualities of whatever it takes to have preceded it, any more than scientific rationality really left behind self-interest as its claims to objectivist neutrality endlessly suggest? If there is even a possibility here that it did not, it seems inevitable that we should ask what roles something like animism might have been playing *within* and *alongside* the project of modernity/rationality, and even in the calls for a ‘return’ to animism themselves.

Following this line does not mean denying that there is a difference between, for example, the way the Nayaka animate according to Bird-David, and the ways modern rationality may display animistic traits. Certainly, there is a general sense in which animisms celebrated by ‘new animism’ seem to be predisposed to find or expect life, whereas the dominant modes of Western modernity/rationality can be said to be orchestrated around a notion of the world/matter as primarily (and primordially) inanimate. Still, these seemingly oppositional tendencies can be identified as equally constituting means of differentiating between different levels of animation – between how, why and where life is and is not manifest. In a much-discussed anecdote that is often cited in ‘new’ approaches to animism, Irving Hallowell, during his fieldwork with the Ojibwa, a cultural group indigenous to northern Canada, sought to get a better understanding of their understanding of animation: ‘Since stones are

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<sup>35</sup> Bird-David, “‘Animism’ revisited”, 79.

grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are *all* the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, “No! But *some* are.”<sup>36</sup>

For some, including Hallowell, this indicates a basic difference between the outlooks of conventional Westerners and the Ojibwa: ‘Whereas we should never expect a stone to manifest animate properties of any kind under any circumstances, the Ojibwa recognize, *a priori*, potentialities for animation in certain classes of objects under certain circumstances.’<sup>37</sup> Yet there seems to be an implicit false opposition between the first and the second statements in this sentence. A classic modernist scientific view might indeed presume that a stone will never display living qualities – though to observe that such expectations are not always met we need only consider Ernst Haeckel’s drawings of *radiolaria* and his comparisons between such microorganisms and crystals, or explorer William John Burchell’s discovery that a ‘curiously shaped pebble’ he picked up in South America was in fact a plant.<sup>38</sup> Yet even without such exceptions, the presumption that stones are inanimate is by no means incompatible with the view attributed to the Ojibwa, who see ‘potentialities for animation in certain classes of objects under certain circumstances.’ Is this not also a viable description of a certain kind of mainstream scientific understanding? Both perspectives are, at root, concerned with where and how life is manifest, designating what is *more* and what is *less* alive, or what is alive *in a different way to something else*.

I am not trying to argue for identity between these two broad perspectives. Just because both non-Western and Western outlooks as invoked in these discussions discriminate between the animate and the inanimate, attributing life to some places, objects, entities and not others, this does not in any sense mean they are the same. The thesis would simply be that they are *both* animisms, residing,

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<sup>36</sup> Irving Hallowell, ‘Ojibwa ontology, behaviour, and world view’, in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, New York, Octagon Books (1960), 19-52, at 24.

<sup>37</sup> Hallowell, ‘Ojibwa Ontology’, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Ernst Haeckel, *Kristallseelen: Studien über das anorganische Leben* [‘Crystal Souls: Studies of Inorganic Life’], Leipzig, Kroner (1917); Susan Buchanan, *Burchell’s Travels: The Life, Art and Journeys of William John Burchell 1781-1863*, Cape Town, Penguin (2015), ‘Introduction’.

indeed, among a ‘diversity of animisms... each... with its local status, history, and structure’.<sup>39</sup> But the implications of this might be significant: attending to the effects of each *as* animism, would mean something different to distinguishing between animism and rationality (taken to be ‘non-animist’). Indeed, we would expect it to have particular implications for how we think about and go about seeking to bring these different animisms together, especially given the extent to which one has had the oppression of the other as one of its defining purposes for centuries.

Furthermore, I would suggest, if there is a particular mode of (something like) animism accompanying and perhaps helping direct the course of modernity/rationality, its most significant elements would be found not in the fact that it makes distinctions between animate and inanimate matter, but in that it presumes a subject capable of making this distinction – of, effectively, possessing privileged access to objective truth/reality. For in every rationalist judgment or expression, it can be argued that there is not only an implied understanding of where animation does or does not reside; there is also an implicit confirmation of the belief that there exists a being capable of making that distinction, absolutely and objectively.

In the following section, I propose the figure – or perhaps, following Bird-David, ‘superperson’ – of Man as this invented-yet-real entity, beginning to consider the ways it might function as a core focal-point of an animism bound up with rationality. The elevation of this culturally particular figure to a position whereby it is taken to represent the human subject in general is the irrational core of rationality, and the primary manifestation of its animistic character, in ways that, I will suggest, arguably qualify as such under both ‘old’ and ‘new’ paradigms. As Quijano writes, ‘nothing is less rational [...] than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnies should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnies is called Western Europe’.<sup>40</sup> The fourth and final

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<sup>39</sup> Bird-David, “‘Animism’ revisited”, 79.

<sup>40</sup> Quijano, ‘Coloniality’, 177.

section of the paper then comes back to the question of how this ‘Manimism’ might relate to contemporary, rationalised calls to ‘return’ to animism.

### 3. Manimism

The notion of ‘Man’ as a constructed Western version of the human embedded in the major sociocultural structures of global domination, starting with coloniality, patriarchy and capitalism, appears both in passing and as a central concern among a wide range of critical thinkers.<sup>41</sup> Such authors’ accounts of Man may be more or less concerned with establishing it as a clearly defined analytic category or object, may emphasise varying aspects and differ on certain details; but they can be said to share the broad position that what has historically been used in dominant cultural discourses as a term for ‘the human’ or ‘humanity’ can in fact be taken to refer to an imagined figure with the biological and social traits most privileged by those discourses: masculinity, physical prowess, whiteness, heteronormativity, social success and wealth, ‘civilised’ values...

Decolonial thought, starting with the coincidence of the European colonisation of the New World with the birth of capitalism and the Renaissance reinvention of the human, exposes the ways such an idealised conception of the human functions within the processes of colonisation and coloniality. For Quijano, colonial domination ‘consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination, in a sense, it is a part of it.’<sup>42</sup> Following the violent destruction of lives, physical structures and objects, colonisation continues through the

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Michel Foucault’s account of the historically constructed nature of ‘man’ in *The Order of Things*, London, Routledge (2002 [1966]); Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3, 3 (Fall 2003), 257-337; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity (2013), especially Chapter 1; Joanna Zylińska, *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press (2018).

<sup>42</sup> Quijano, ‘Coloniality’, 169.



repression of local knowledge and belief systems, and the establishment of European systems as a seductive replacement for what has been lost:

The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual. It was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers' own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural.<sup>43</sup>

This colonisation of the imagination of course simultaneously operates internally to modern European culture and thought. Wynter's approach to the colonial struggle for the imagination identifies the emergence of modern colonial power with what she refers to as the production of a new 'descriptive statement' of the human, a term she takes from Gregory Bateson. Preceding Foucault's 'invention' of man in the eighteenth century (which may correspond to what Wynter terms 'Man2'), the emergence of Wynter's Man (in its first phase, 'Man1') gradually enabled Renaissance humanists to begin to escape the power of the Church, which had been 'supernaturally legitimated' by its previously dominant descriptive statement, based on sin. The new descriptive statement would only come to be fully 'performatively enacted' through colonialism and Quijano's 'coloniality of power.'<sup>44</sup> Where the conception of the True Christian Self had enabled Western peoples to see themselves 'as one religious genre of the human' among others,<sup>45</sup> the new, partially secularised conception of 'Man as the Rational Self and political subject of the state' could not but see itself as universal and ideal.<sup>46</sup> This restricted the capacity, in the Western imagination, to conceive of alternative modes of being human, such that encounters with humans not fitting the new descriptive statement resulted in their treatment as non- or less-than-human: 'as Man, [Europeans] would now not only come to overrepresent their

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<sup>43</sup> Quijano, 'Coloniality', 169.

<sup>44</sup> Wynter, 'Unsettling', 263.

<sup>45</sup> Wynter, 'Unsettling', 281-2.

<sup>46</sup> Wynter, 'Unsettling', 281.

conception of the human ... [but] invent, label and institutionalize the indigenous peoples of the Americas as well as the transported enslaved Black Africans as the physical referent of the projected irrational/subrational Human Other to its civic-humanist, rational self-conception.<sup>47</sup> In short, the gestures widely celebrated by moderns as progressive moves towards greater democracy and equality (partially focused around challenges to the elitism and authority of Church and royalty) were also those that, by imposing 'a provincialism as universalism', established the structures of colonisation and coloniality that have conditioned the global distribution of power ever since.<sup>48</sup>

Wynter's use of Bateson's term 'descriptive statement' is somewhat unusual, especially given that Bateson's usage already requires us to adopt a non-traditional, systemic or cybernetic way of thinking; but understanding its role may be of great help in elaborating this process by which something apparently 'progressive' is able to conserve something that would seem to be its opposite, even according to its own broad system of values. Bateson's cybernetic approach is concerned with (complex) self-correcting systems, which may include phenomena that from traditional disciplinary perspectives would seldom be seen to belong to the same class, such as biological organisms, structures of human social organisation, and 'the processes of civilization.' The salient feature of these systems considered as a class is that 'always in such systems changes occur to conserve the truth of some descriptive statement, some component of the status quo.'<sup>49</sup>

In these terms, the general figure/image/idea of Man that has dominated colonial modernity/rationality can be considered the descriptive statement that is conserved while other components (religion, science, culture, etc) make changes to maintain it, in response to elements that would disturb it. These elements are manifold, requiring continual self-correction at various systemic levels. The conception of Man itself may be altered, locally, temporarily, where this helps conserve its essential or dominant

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<sup>47</sup> Wynter, 'Unsettling', 281-2.

<sup>48</sup> Quijano, 'Coloniality', 177.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory Bateson, 'Conscious Purpose versus Nature' in Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press (2000 [1972]), 432-445, at 435.

status ('the truth of [its] descriptive statement'), or indeed at a larger level where/when a major disturbance threatens (hence Wynter's account of the shift from 'Man1' to 'Man2' under pressure from the increasing cultural dominance of evolutionary biology over religion in the eighteenth century, as discussed below). The fact that the general shape of the figure of Man is conserved by these ongoing changes at various levels means that it can constantly vary and be in flux, manifesting different forms or faces in different contexts, and yet allow these to maintain the same overall structure or 'truth' of the hegemony of Man. This can be considered a synecdochal reflection of the way the historical (mis)usage of the term 'Man' (*l'Homme*, etc) in place of 'person' or 'human' or some other term can have more or fewer patriarchal or colonial or otherwise oppressive/normative implications depending on the context, while these different contexts remain simultaneously latent within each such (mis)usage.

This is one of the senses in which Man is animated. It is worth noting here that Hornborg identifies Bateson as a 'scientific animist' who attempted to introduce a relational, subject-subject thinking into Western academic discourse in a manner that it is still trying to fully grasp.<sup>50</sup> One might also argue, from a cybernetic perspective, that there is a literal animation here, in that Man becomes a dynamic yet more-or-less constant element conserved within and as the function of a self-correcting system or set of such systems (the largest perhaps being Quijano's modernity/rationality complex, or as Bateson puts it 'the processes of civilization'); this would have equivalent status to other such complex self-correcting systems (e.g. an individual's physiological and neurological constitution), which are more-or-less, in a certain cybernetic mode, all that life fundamentally *is*. But we can also consider the (overlapping) sense in which Man is animated by 'Manimists'; that is, by those who 'place faith' in this descriptive statement – where 'placing faith' might involve a statement of belief, but might equally indicate any action which, consciously or not, confirms the existence of Man – and thus help to conserve it through all manner of behaviour. I mentioned above that Wynter talks of the new

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<sup>50</sup> Hornborg, 'Animism, Fetishism and Objectivism', 26. Cf. Ingold's discussion of the similarity between Hallowell's observations about the non-separation of self and environment and Bateson's ecology of mind and, later, Andy Clark and David Chalmers' 'extended mind'; Ingold, *Being Alive*, 236.

descriptive statement being ‘performatively enacted’ through coloniality: this is how Man comes to affect the world, to intervene in and transform it, rather than simply representing a part of it. The collective assent – or blindness – to ‘the culture and class-specific relativity of our present mode of being human’<sup>51</sup> is what gives it life.

Durkheim’s reflections on how religion may be considered a function of the experience of society – which he places at the base of his account of animism – could be lifted and directly applied here to explain the immanent likelihood of the emergence of Manimism in modernity:

In a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers. In fact, a god is, first of all, a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend.<sup>52</sup>

Society, not (for example) naivety or lack of understanding, is presented here as the one necessary prerequisite for the elementary formation of religion; and just because a particular group rejects the metaphysics of a given established religion such as Christianity, this does not mean that elementary religious (i.e. animist) forms are not still present and/or coming into being at the same time. As identification and affiliation with Man comes to entail benefits that, in turn, cause individuals to act and express themselves in Manimist ways, confidence and a sense of superiority enhance those benefits. Thus the Manimist accrues advantages and privileges in a manner similar to the ‘believer’ within a religion-dominated society: ‘a god is not merely an authority upon whom we depend; it is a force upon which our strength relies. The man who has obeyed his god and who, for this reason,

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<sup>51</sup> Wynter, ‘*Unsettling*’, 282.

<sup>52</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 206.

believes the god is with him, approaches the world with confidence and with the feeling of an increased energy.’<sup>53</sup>

The whole of the modernity/rationality complex itself comprises intertwining living, social, psychological and biological systems, as well as material and immaterial structures: these systems, themselves alive, confer life on Man as they conserve him as a communicative expression reverberating back through those systems. Man is an imagined and animated figure – conceived and described first by humanists like Pico della Mirandola and Ginés de Sepúlveda, later by natural history and evolutionary biology – belonging to and having a dominant influence on the Western cultural imaginary, which constitutes his animation, the means by which his ‘affordances’, in James Gibson’s sense, are manifest.<sup>54</sup> This dominance is sustained by both belief and behaviour, in practices that may be material, discursive, symbolic and otherwise, which repeatedly reaffirm and thus *conserve* his status as representative image of the human: he is animated by a set of systems that are themselves animate.

On the local level of colonial struggle, Manimism is evident in the multiplicity of acts – which, again, may be linguistic, expressive, violent, affective, physical, ritual etc – which render this or that individual more or less human, more or less worthy, more or less ‘alive’ than others. Maria Lugones’ decolonial feminism details how notions of gender and sexuality intersect with the colonial framework to produce a range of what we might call categories of ‘personhood’ with variable qualities and degrees of life: the male coloniser as dignified, fully human, the female coloniser as his still-human inversion, the colonised not-human-as-not-man and the colonised not-human-as-not-

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<sup>53</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 209.

<sup>54</sup> Gibson’s ‘Theory of Affordances’ can be considered another instance of Hornborg’s scientific animism. For Gibson, elements of an environment are perceived and valued by an animal when they ‘afford’ it something; perception and value are, in fact, immediately given in the affordance; and the ‘complementarity between animal and environment’ means that neither exists independently of the other, such that sets of affordances are the locus of their animation. Applied to Manimism, we might say that Man exists and is reaffirmed each time he affords something, enables something. Every invocation of the validity of subject/object rationality, or the division of nature and culture, would thus constitute a form of animation of the very kind that such invocations are designed to expel.

woman.<sup>55</sup> These abstract categories would correspond to a variety of animate, imaginary, other-than-human persons in the lived colonial experience. The same Manimism is evident in, for example, Sepúlveda's argument that Amerindians are 'natural slaves' in contrast to Europeans as non-slave by nature rather than circumstance, and his distinction between 'homunculi' and 'true humans.'<sup>56</sup>

Considered in this context, the nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists and sociologists who labelled certain non-Western groups animist, providing descriptions of what made them so, were in fact themselves exhibiting a form of animism. This is not just because, as Ingold suggests, their belief in an 'animating principle that may be lodged in the interior of physical objects' makes them animists according to the very definition by which they seek to locate 'animistic beliefs lurking within the minds of other cultures.'<sup>57</sup> There is animism too in the imaginary figure that comes to life as a result of this conviction that it is possible to determine/identify animatedness objectively; and because of this, these rational modern animists are animists of a particular kind, one which preserves itself at the expense of others – one which may, indeed, have *arisen* out of the need to subjugate others. The Manimist outlook sees other people's attribution of personhood to animals, stones and trees as an error, while denying its own animistic nature. In short, regardless of who is conscious of what, the overall 'behaviour' of Manimism demonstrates that it is engaged in a struggle against competing animisms, rather than in its self-conceived struggle for self-improvement towards a more enlightened, more rational and more civilised worldview.

Ingold suggests that moderns are animists in the restricted sense that they themselves invented and projected onto others – that is, in the 'old' animist sense of erroneous belief in the animate nature of entities that do not materially, objectively exist. This definition/description can be strategically applied to Man(imism) – strategically in that, regardless of the possibility of having access to a

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<sup>55</sup> Maria Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism', *Hypatia*, 25, 4 (Fall 2010), 742-59.

<sup>56</sup> See Wynter, 'Unsettling', 264.

<sup>57</sup> Ingold, 'Rethinking the Animate', 10-11.

presumed objective viewpoint, it can be recognised that it would be politically and ethically preferable to expose the constructedness of Man, its place in the colonialist imposition of provincial values and ideals as universal.

But Manimism also displays traits that would seem to conform to the ‘new’ approach to animism exhibited variously by Ingold, Bird-David and others, in which it becomes a kind of relational field structuring the ‘lifeworld’ of Manimists, to the extent that they demonstrate themselves as such. The life of Man, like life in general in the accounts of such authors, becomes relational, not simply a property manifest in certain things, entities, individuals, but only, rather, appearing as such by virtue of the fact that it is always-already prior to them. Man animates the world of Manimists, just as Ingold suggests that ‘animacy’, for those people described by Western anthropologists as animists, is in fact ‘the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence.’<sup>58</sup> For this reason, we need not understand every individual displaying Manimist traits as consciously projecting prejudiced, oppressive ideas out into the world: nor is it necessary in principle that they manifest any of the core defining traits of Man (even if in practice a large majority will have fallen within categories such as ‘white’, ‘capitalist’, ‘heteronormative’ – not to mention ‘male’); rather, to the extent that individuals or collective agencies identify with these qualities of Man, and assent to the Manimist ideal, they are active participants in a structure in which Man, humans, trees, animals, buildings, objects, systems are always-already intertwined ahead of their individual arrival within that structure (or, to use Ingold’s term, ‘meshwork’).<sup>59</sup>

One of the fundamental blind spots of Western rationality as Manimism, then, in terms of its self-conception, self-projection and self-differentiation from others, lies in its denial of its own self-

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<sup>58</sup> Ingold, ‘Rethinking the Animate’, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Ingold, ‘Rethinking the Animate’, 13.

interestedness – which is more-or-less inseparable from, though not the same as its presentation of its own values and characteristics as universal (this difference allows it to make all manner of self-evading acrobatic leaps of thought). Even as it identifies rational behaviour with self-interest across numerous fields and contexts, from evolutionary biology to economics, the rational/modern/Manimist outlook nevertheless repeatedly attempts to cast aspects of its own self-interested behaviour as based purely on the basis of objective values informed by scientifically disinterested reasoning. Thus colonisation is undertaken not in order to conquer, steal, and enslave, but to save, on the basis of the objective fact that non-Christian souls are damned. Thus white men discover that white men are superior in intelligence to women and people of other races, not because this will give them a more privileged status, but, by a circular logic, simply because they have the heightened capacity needed to discover and appreciate this. Thus despite *homo economicus* coming to be understood as the fundamental actor within mainstream twentieth-century economics, ‘development’ is presented as undertaken for the benefit of formerly occupied people and societies rather than those colonial powers enacting and enforcing it.

In such ways Manimism is arguably most at pains to deny and disguise the fundamentally animistic character of what it promotes as ‘pure’ rationality; but equally, from a perspective that *begins* with a recognition of its Manimist character, it may be precisely in such denials that it is most evident.

#### 4. Worrying

Perhaps a majority of those working within critically-oriented fields across the humanities, cultural studies, and social sciences today would take for granted the aptness of some version of the statement that ‘Man’ is a historical and politically infused fabrication, part of a nexus of constructed ‘truths’ integral to modern global structures of power. Such is, arguably, the general thrust of the different bodies of thought often collected under the umbrella of ‘poststructuralism’, and also arguably a



crucial condition for the emergence of approaches and research projects constituting what are often now referred to as the ‘posthumanities’.<sup>60</sup>

But if something seems obvious, there are certain kinds of context where this should be a cause not for complacency, but rather for more careful attention – and perhaps worry. This would especially be so in a set of circumstances where that which is taken as obvious had been relatively obscure until not so long ago. Moreover, stating, and even consciously believing that one rejects racism, homophobia or exploitation, do not necessarily correspond to equivalent actions and effects in terms of the behaviour of the biological, psychological and social systems that enable such statements.

Bateson notes that ‘people are self-corrective systems’, and that, just as the physiology and neurology of an organism (including a human one) work to neutralise the effects of disturbances to its ongoing stability (which are all somewhere on a spectrum of threats to its survival), people will almost automatically work to neutralise information that disturbs the balance of their world(s). A disturbance that is more obvious or recurrent would presumably be subjected to more extensive and practised processes of neutralisation than most others: ‘if the obvious is not of a kind that they can easily assimilate without internal disturbance, their self-corrective mechanisms work to sidetrack it, to hide it, even to the extent of shutting the eyes if necessary, or shutting off various parts of the process of perception.’<sup>61</sup> An implication of this would be that, when confronted with something we consider obviously wrong that was nevertheless easily and widely accepted in the relatively recent past, rather than reacting with astonishment, we would do well to question what is *now* being side-tracked in this very set of appearances; that is, in the very notion that ‘we’, or some self-correcting system of which ‘we’ are a part, have/has radically moved beyond that former, erroneous position.

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<sup>60</sup> See Rosi Braidotti, ‘A Theoretical Framework for the Posthumanities’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 36, 6 (2018), 31-61.

<sup>61</sup> Bateson, ‘Conscious Purpose’, 435.

To the extent that they *both* attribute to their perceived forerunners an outlook that they take to be an obvious error in *something like the same degree* that those forerunners took it to be obviously correct, it may be worth applying this kind of questioning to both the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ approaches to animism. Tylor and other nineteenth century anthropologists, in collaboration with biologists, archaeologists and others, were telling the story of the rise of Man in such a way as to demonstrate how far they had come in leaving the error of animism behind, along with other uncivilised ways; while residual uncertainty could/can be glimpsed lurking within their simultaneous efforts to understand these ways as determining aspects of their evolutionary ancestry. When proponents of ‘new’ approaches to or reappraisals of animism come along, they, in turn, suggest that it was the Western thinkers who were themselves in error. This has perhaps not yet reached the stage where it is taken as ‘obvious’, though there are certainly indications that it has been moving this way, e.g. in statements such as Hornborg’s that ‘the Cartesian view of nature is obviously counterintuitive, even to the most ingrained modernist.’<sup>62</sup> Indeed, in response to comments on her research made by Hornborg and others, Bird-David too recognises that the critique of mainstream Western rationality is nothing new, even within the academic sphere, and that, on the contrary, it is a necessary condition for her approach: ‘Relational epistemology has of course been expressed in many other specific cultural-historical ways, notably in scholarly critiques of Cartesian objectivism going back two centuries. [...] far from ignoring these traditions, I could not have written the paper without them.’<sup>63</sup>

This confirmation is significant in a number of ways. To begin with, it recognises that the inversion of values and modes of thinking that was necessary to enable the ‘new’ approach, already had a long-established presence within modern Western culture and thought, even if it was for the most part restricted to relatively marginal – but nonetheless high-cultural – spheres. A visiting extra-terrestrial anthropologist might well infer from this that such critical traditions were either complementary to or

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<sup>62</sup> Hornborg, ‘Animism, Fetishism and Objectivism’, 24. Cf. Bateson, ‘Conscious Purpose’, 443: ‘But that arrogant scientific philosophy is now obsolete, and in its place there is the discovery that man is only a part of larger systems and that the part can never control the whole.’

<sup>63</sup> Bird-David, ‘“Animism” revisited’, 87.

ineffective in challenging Manimism/rationality: according to rationality's own claims and criteria, if rationalists were deeply wrong about something, having it raised in a clear and logical way ought to have led to its correction; the fact that this has not taken place might well lead her to ask whether the 'new animism' was in fact yet another facet or component of Manimism, given that (as she would have observed) self-denial is integral to Manimism's constitution.

By confirming that her paper *depends* upon critical traditions *internal* to modern Western scholarship and thought, Bird-David implies that, in some sense, the 'revisiting' of animism is undertaken for the benefit of Western culture, and is quite in tune with one of its recognisable existing strands. This does not preclude it (or them) from also having an anti- or decolonial critical potential, but it is at least cause enough for worry about the other possible functions this revisiting/reappraisal may be serving.

As noted in the previous section, Wynter differentiates two major historical phases in the emergence of what she terms 'the central overrepresentation of Man', focused around what she refers to simply as Man1 and Man2. In broad terms, the invention of Man1 by Renaissance humanism begins a secularising process that is completed with a turn to the biological sciences as the basis of Man2, now understood in wholly biocentric terms. She writes of the 'paradox' whereby the more developed descriptive statement of Man2 'must ensure the functioning of strategic mechanisms that can repress all knowledge of the fact that its biocentric descriptive statement is a descriptive statement.'<sup>64</sup> This appears to be a partial reformulating of Bateson's account of how changes in and to a self-correcting system may function not to upset the validity of a descriptive statement, but to conserve it in the face of disturbances.

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<sup>64</sup> Wynter, 'Unsettling', 326.

When the religious beliefs and thinking that sustained the privileged position of Man1 came under threat from scientific scepticism, empiricism and other rationalist modes, a reform took place, such that these same rationalist modes became the hallmarks of an emergent Man2. Key elements of the Manimist descriptive statement – human exceptionalism, the superiority of men over women, of whites over non-whites, and so on – were conserved, despite what seems to have been a radical challenge to the religion that had hitherto been tasked with its conservation. Man went from having a privileged status among God's creations to having a privileged status as the pinnacle of evolution – now strengthened by having shed the increasingly onerous burden of religious association.

Man2 thus incorporates and retools the kinds of threat that were beginning to undermine Man1, turning the scientific critiques of the religious beliefs and thinking that sustained it into the hallmarks of a reformed and informed Man2. In what ways, we might ask, might current moves in global but especially Western culture and thought towards critiquing and moving beyond the confines of Western modernity/rationality (manifest in atomism, objectivism, subject/object and nature/culture thinking, etc) similarly contribute to the conservation of Man and Manimism? Might the gestures towards the prospect of the end of Man2, as implicitly raised by 'new' approaches to animism, among many other sites, not turn out to be intimations of an emergent Man3?

It is no coincidence that many Western reappraisals of animism draw on existing elements of modern thought which, apparently independently, emphasise ontological, epistemological and metaphysical characteristics taken to epitomise indigenous animisms, such as processual and relational understandings of nature, or those which de-anthropomorphise notions of subjectivity and attribute it to nonhuman phenomena and forms. Gilles Deleuze appears repeatedly as a representative of immanent, process-based and relational modes of thinking. Attempts to move beyond substantive divides between nature and culture developed within or in proximity to the broad sphere of anthropological thinking likewise often build on previous movements *within* modern Western

thought,<sup>65</sup> and are preceded by major philosophical projects such as Alfred North Whitehead's critique of the 'bifurcation of nature' and Baruch Spinoza's monism. Indeed, Harding identifies a current of precursory and modern scientific animism running from Thales of Miletus via Goethe to Bateson.<sup>66</sup> In other words, 'new animism' complements an ongoing general tendency towards non-mystical attempts to think beyond rationality's core principles and paradigms, also arguably manifest in diverse sites from cybernetic and systems thinking to Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of the transindividual to Karen Barad's agential realism, all themselves, of course, building on older lines of thought.

If such thinkers can be said to anticipate and offer something like an animistic outlook within modern thought, as an alternative to the dominant modes of rationality, there are also plenty of instances in which Western thinkers expose the dependence of various aspects of the paradigm of modernity/rationality on elements, phenomena or ways of thinking to which it has constitutively opposed itself – effectively exposing its (self-denying) Animism. Deleuze's *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, for example, argues that David Hume's scepticism exposes the impossibility of absolutely rational judgement, highlighting the dependence of even the most seemingly rational thinking on affective experience.<sup>67</sup> The whole of Derridean deconstruction could be understood, in a parallel manner, as an exposition of the ways culturally/scientifically privileged 'rational' categories (e.g. speech, reason, the masculine) are in fact only made possible by, and dependent upon, those binary-oppositional categories that a hegemonic mainstream perspective has historically positioned as their inferior opposites (e.g. writing, madness, the feminine). In some cases, such attempts to expose the self-contradicting nature of rationality even make direct references to animism, as in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightenment as situating itself on a trajectory towards becoming myth despite its apparent aim to leave myth behind. They write that, if 'the disenchantment of the world

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<sup>65</sup> E.g. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP (1993 [1991]; Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*.

<sup>66</sup> Harding, 'Towards an animistic science', 374-6.

<sup>67</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Nature*, New York, Columbia UP (1991 [1953]).

means the extirpation of animism',<sup>68</sup> this goal will not be achieved by 'the endless process of enlightenment', according to which 'with ineluctable necessity, every definite theoretical view is subjected to the annihilating criticism that it is only a belief, until even the concepts of mind, truth, and, indeed, enlightenment itself have been reduced to animist magic.'<sup>69</sup>

If, then, there are identifiable traditions or, patterns of resurgence of both scientific animism and critiques of the irrational nature of rationalism running back through Western thought, surely it is a good thing that their effects are now reaching an increasingly broad range of fields of knowledge? Surely, if a field such as anthropology, with such explicit roots in colonialism and a formative historical attachment to the paradigm of Darwinian evolution, has been able to overturn some of its key hierarchies and make possible an appreciation of the value of previously denigrated non-Western approaches, this is to be welcomed? The fact that this overturning is not yet complete, that residual prejudices, partial exoticisations and internal tensions remain, does not mean it has failed to make progress – just as we do not reject legislation granting voting rights to women, or decriminalising male homosexuality, on the basis that sexism and homophobia remain endemic to the cultures that enacted that legislation.

Yet, on the other hand, we could also interpret the gradually increasing impact of 'scientific animism' or critiques of the inherently (M)animist nature of modern rationality as registers of the level and type of disturbances affecting those self-correcting systems, in Bateson's terms, that resist them. Using the above analogy, suffrage or legalisation of rights only takes place when the level and/or form of disturbance (sense of guilt, violent uprising, popular dissatisfaction, material problems with resources, capacity etc) reaches a point where it is in the system's interests to make a more radical change, absorbing the critique, internalising it and eventually projecting it outward, so as to emerge

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<sup>68</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cummings, London, Verso (1997 [1944]), 2.

<sup>69</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic*, 7.

strengthened. Those working within (e.g. academic, political, cultural) paradigms conditioned by the colonial interests of European powers may well have felt intimations of a threat to colonial hegemony in the nineteenth century. This may have had many forms, depending on context and personalities involved: e.g. the bureaucratic unmanageability of empires spanning the globe; the negative effects of popular sentiment, both in the centre and the periphery; a burgeoning sense of the irrational nature of the argument for white/European/male/modern superiority. But economically, pragmatically, ethically, none of these would have reached the level of the kinds of disturbance that colonial interests would come to pose to their colonisers in the course of the twentieth century, with the sacrifices made by imperial populations in global conflicts, the rise of anti-colonial movements, and the growing awareness and condemnation of colonisation and racism within the mainstream of the colonial powers themselves.

Thus by the time Bird-David is revisiting animism, the level and kind of disturbance has dramatically changed. Manimism can no longer rely on violent means of suppressing dissent, or on scholarly or rhetorical dismissals of challenges to Western hegemony as mystifying or irrational: these remain among its tools or weapons, and new ones to accompany them are continually being invented (the production and false attribution of 'fake news' arguably being some of the most effective recently). But from around the mid-twentieth century onwards, material conditions have shifted to such an extent that it increasingly becomes necessary (or at least, more efficacious) for modernity/rationality to begin absorbing the anticolonial challenges to its hegemony, rather than suppressing them.

Wynter suggests that the first significant challenges to the dominance of Man occurred through 'the multiple anticolonial social-protest movements and intellectual challenges of the period to which we give the name, "The Sixties."' <sup>70</sup> This first real moment of genuine headway in the struggle to displace

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<sup>70</sup> Wynter, 'Unsettling', 262.

Man lasted, however, ‘only for a brief hiatus before being coopted, reterritorialized’.<sup>71</sup> The next phase of the struggle against Man (waged by and on behalf of ‘humans’ in the most general conceivable sense) lies in the present and future. There are many dimensions and manifestations of this ‘coopting’ and ‘reterritorialization’ – too many to name, let alone define in any detail; but, to give a sense of their cultural breadth, they can be said to include, for example, the growth of managerialism, the logic(s) of neoliberalism, the translation of colonial relations into relations of ‘aid’ and ‘development’, accounts and images of the ‘reconstructed’ white male subject in popular media and culture, the ‘spin’ that accompanies most legislation overtly designed to improve equality, the use of human rights discourses to disguise efforts to preserve the privilege of Man, capitalist realism, environmentalist campaigns to preserve Man (epitomised by ‘Noah’s Ark’ projects) waged in the name of global humanity – and many more.

Should attempts to recognise non-Western instances of animism as valid, if not in some way superior, to Western rationality, be added to this list? I do not think the situation is that simple. Not only are these instances diverse in tone, argument, method and implication, but there are undeniably aspects of them that serve the goal of challenging what Quijano identifies as the inherent coloniality of modern power, and of engaging in what Wynter sees as the struggle to secure the well-being of ‘the human species itself’ against ‘the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human’.<sup>72</sup>

Acknowledging this, however, does not mean we should not also worry – in particular, about those aspects of any possible mechanism for the coopting/reterritorialization of Man’s challenges. The resurgence of Man(imism), its reestablishing itself through the internalisation and retooling of challenges to it, may also be at work across a plethora of apparent cultural and epistemological shifts:

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<sup>71</sup> Wynter, ‘Unsettling’, 262.

<sup>72</sup> Wynter, ‘Unsettling’, 260.



after all, the whole point of a disguise is that it is difficult to tell. It is thus at least worth asking, when confronted with a given phenomenon geared towards the reform of modernity/rationality, ‘what benefits is this particular shift bringing, and for whom and what? What kinds of disturbance is it compensating for or absorbing?’

In the context of studies of animism, there are many strands that could be followed in answering this question. We’ve already briefly considered one: at a certain point, the imperative to maintain coloniality for its historical benefits (e.g. in terms of sociocultural privilege, access to cheap labour and resources, the need to suppress both internal guilt and external retribution) is outweighed by the imperative to condemn and reform it – at least in those contexts in which it has come sufficiently into the public view.<sup>73</sup> In this context, a benefit of an increased openness to the kinds of research, argument and engagement that are referred to under the ‘new animist’ umbrella, serves Manimists by removing, or at least quelling, some of the more vocal and threatening critiques of its retained coloniality.

But there are other ways in which opening up to what, in various ways, are considered the defining attributes of a (non-Western) animist outlook might be of benefit to the broad range of global subjects who identify with Man, and thus also of benefit to the survival of Manimism. In particular, animism in various forms offers particular advantages in terms of adapting to or surviving in a dynamic, largely unpredictable environment. Ingold’s advocacy of a ‘reanimation’ of Western thought on the basis of a ‘rethinking of indigenous animism’ is not based purely on the notion that there is something inherently more ‘ethical’ or ‘fair’ about such an approach (although it might also include this). But a re-envisaging of life/organism-environment relations, under the influence of (non-Western) animism,

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<sup>73</sup> This leads to various political mechanisms and devices by which interested agents seek to ‘have it both ways’ – such as Nicholas De Genova’s conception of an ‘obscene of inclusion’, the collection of means to enable a continuing influx of migrant labour into states which simultaneously make ‘spectacles’ of the illegality of immigrants and publicise their efforts to police them in a ‘scene of exclusion’. Nicholas De Genova, ‘Spectacles of migrant “illegality”: the scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36, 7 (2013), 1180-98.

as ‘an unbounded entanglement of lines in fluid space,’ he argues, would open up a viable and desirable worldview from which Western rationalism has foolishly closed itself off.<sup>74</sup> This would serve many valuable purposes in the context of an increasingly dynamic, unpredictable environment populated with various human, nonhuman and transhuman agencies – which, for an increasing portion of the population, is the environment we all inhabit by virtue of the role of the Internet and digital media in our everyday lives. Worrying about this does not preclude its being a possible advantage of the adoption of perceived elements of animist thought: but we can be sensitive to when and how these adoptions occur, the extent to which they are depoliticised, fetishised and so on, and above all to the extent to which they are being mobilised to offer that advantage to Manimists, or humans generally.

Then there is the value of something like animist ways of thinking/being/inhabiting for bringing about the changes that many consider necessary for humans to have a chance of averting impending environmental catastrophe. There are plenty of arguments for the ways it may help in addressing the underlying human causes of climate change, such as Naveh and Bird-David’s suggestion that “‘primitive animism’”, once it is better understood in the way we suggest, can open another way of looking that can help us think about the environmental crisis<sup>75</sup>, or Anatoli Ignatov’s suggestion that a combining of Nietzschean perspectivism with African animism may result in ‘a new ethic of experiential environmentalism’.<sup>76</sup> As Linda Hogan writes, ‘animism, where every particle in the universe is alive, is implicit in all our work for future survival.’<sup>77</sup> Some of these, again, will complement moves towards dismantling or reforming Western paradigms with a politico-ethical thrust, yet this does not change the fact that they tend to be couched and conceived in terms of Western concerns, among which Manimism continues to thrive.

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<sup>74</sup> Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description* (Abingdon, 2011), 64; 75. Cf. Kenneth Morrison’s charge that ‘scholars have primitivized indigenous peoples because they have depersonalized ‘nature,’ have unwittingly spiritualized social realities, and have overlooked worlds of engaged being, relational ways of knowing and other-oriented valuing.’ Morrison, ‘Animism and a proposal’, 52.

<sup>75</sup> Naveh and Bird-David, ‘Animism, conservation and immediacy’, 37.

<sup>76</sup> Anatoli Ignatov, ‘The Earth as a Gift-Giving Ancestor: Nietzsche’s Perspectivism and African Animism’, *Political Theory*, 45, 1 (2017), 52–75.

<sup>77</sup> Linda Hogan, ‘We call it *tradition*’, in Harvey (ed), *Handbook*, 17-26, at 22.

While, from a critical perspective, such reform is immanently necessary, and to be encouraged despite being always-already too late, the timing may nevertheless be significant. At the least, it encourages me to worry that these changes are happening, or at least being talked of, when the modern/colonial complex most requires it – or finds itself least able to suppress critique: when, in the wake of the formal loss (and neo-colonial transformation) of its colonial interests, Manimist Eurocentrism finds itself increasingly unstable in a global culture with several economic and cultural power centres; when its hitherto relationship to its planetary environment appears to be on the verge of becoming an existential threat; when its technological environment is rapidly becoming a world of non-human intentional forces whose ways of being and interacting it barely understands. Under these powerful pressures, what if (I worry) all or at least some of these recognitions that modernity/rationality has been (M)animist in the ‘old’ sense whose terms it established, and the moves to challenge and transform this status quo with the help of ‘good’ animisms, amount in the end not to the decline of Manimism, but to its reform and resurgence in the guise of Man3? That is, might we not be observing Manimism adapting to changing conditions, in the process, perhaps, demonstrating itself to be a more ‘reconstructed’ worldview, with a more pluralistic, ecologically-sensitive, multi-naturalist descriptive statement, but one which, nevertheless, allows certain of the key features of Man to remain largely intact, and indeed to acquire a renewed resilience?

Taken en masse, these critiques and changes amount together to a re-tooling of Manimism to better fit its contemporary environments. Reconstructed Man3 bears its criticisms within itself proudly, so as to be more respectable within a globalised, supposedly postcolonial, maybe one day postcapitalist, postgender, posthuman world. It is better suited to its increasingly sophisticated and pervasive media environment, and stands a fighting chance of warding off its own physical destruction through ecological catastrophe. The adopting or reengagement with aspects of so-called animist outlooks is surely beneficial in all these ways, and worthwhile in a general ethical/political sense. But this needs to be done in such a way as to contribute not to the resurgence, but the overthrow of ‘Man’, not just in

words, but in actions, structures, principles, affective cultural values. The challenge is to make engagements with animism a part of this overthrowing, rather than allowing them to become new additions to Man's defensive armour.